

The Vampire 1011

Chapter 1011: Roseen's Secret Revealed (Part Two)

"Fine," Roseen said, forcing down the fear that still lingered in her chest to come to Sybyll's side and slipping the pale-skinned woman's arm over her shoulder to help her toward the far end of the dungeon where a darksteel-lined box lay in wait for the vampire.

It helped a bit that Roseen was shorter than Sybyll, but what truly shocked Roseen was how frail the Crimson Knight felt when she leaned against the younger woman for support. Just hours ago, Roseen had witnessed the vampire hitting Head Priest Germot hard enough to launch him through the air and send him crashing into the table of refreshments.

"You really are weak," Roseen whispered as she helped the vampire along the narrow aisle between cells in the dungeon.

"I told ye, lass," Sybyll said with a chiding look. "It's good ta' be protective of yer friend, an' it's good to hold back yer trust until it's deserved, but sometimes, ye may get in yer own way," she said, sounding more like a woman of her actual age than the young woman she usually resembled.

"But I promised ye answers fer yer help, so let me give them to ye," Sybyll said when they reached the cell that held her daybed. To Roseen, the metal-lined box looked like a coffin, one that had been lined with luxurious padding and a pillow so the deceased could rest comfortably in death, but it was hard to see it as anything other than a coffin as the vampire knight lay down in it to rest.

"I saw two things t'night that struck me," Sybyll said, sighing in relief as she could finally lay down. "Tha' first were Cossot jumpin' up ta' send me away when I broke in ta' tha' great hall. Just a young slip of a girl but she had tha' courage ta' stand b'fore tha' Crimson Knight, an' she kept her wits about her enough ta' know tha' words she needed ta' say ta' send me away."

"She's always jumping out to do things," Roseen said, shaking her head at her friend's impulsiveness. "She doesn't think first, she just... does whatever 'feels right' and worries about problems afterward."

"It's not a bad thing ta' be a woman of action," Sybyll said with a light laugh. "Especially when ye were tha' person she jumped out ta' protect. She weren't standin' between me an' her father t'night. She stood between me an' you. An later on, when it were clear that I'd won the night, an' tha' safest place in tha' whole hall were standin' at my side, she made sure ye were right b'side her where it were safe."

"No, but, that's not it," Roseen protested. "She just didn't want to be alone..."

"She's protecting ye," Sybyll insisted. "It weren't an accident tha' I threw that insufferable priest at ye," she added. "I wanted ta' see wit' my own eyes if she would do it again, an' she did. Stood between ye an' him tha' whole time. She cares fer ye more an' anyone else in tha' hall."

"That's just because we're friends," Roseen said. "I'd do the same for her if I had to. I, I won't let her be picked on or bullied," she added as she gave the vampire a disapproving look. "Even if it's by you," she added, though if she was honest with herself, she might not have dared to make the same statement if Sybyll hadn't looked as weak and drained as she did at the moment.

"That's tha' second thing I saw t'night," Sybyll said with a gentle smile at the fiercely protective young woman. "Ye have no love of me. Ye don't admire me. Ye barely respect me," she said with a chuckle. "But ye served me all night long, an' ye were honest about why. Ye said ye'd follow Cossot in ta my service for her sake, not fer mine."

"Ye've loved her fer a long time," Sybyll said as she looked directly into the other woman's eyes, finding once again the cluster of glimmers that had caught her attention in the first place. "Not as a friend, but as a woman pining fer a lover. But have ye ever told her how ye feel?"

To Sybyll, it had been all too obvious. It was impossible to spend as much time in brothels as she had without seeing the sparks that flew when two people found something more than the base desires that turned men like Ian into beasts.

She'd seen the fear in a person's eyes that something had happened to their 'favorite' partner. She'd heard the excuses they made to find their way back into each other's arms again and again, or witnessed the way a woman looked nervously at the door while waiting for her 'regular' customer to come rushing to see her as soon as he received his wages for the day...

Sybyll knew very well how terrified of her the people of Hanrahan were at the beginning of the night, and that fear had only retreated when she told her story and revealed Ian's crimes; it hadn't gone away. Roseen was no different. She'd hidden under the tables along with all of the other women.

But when Cossot pulled her close, she clung to the other woman as fiercely as Sybyll had ever seen a woman cleave to the man she would go on to marry... even when Cossot had just killed a man and was still covered with his blood.

A lesser woman would have fled that instant. A lesser woman wouldn't have been able to embrace Cossot after what she'd done. A woman whose love was thin or whose heart was fickle would have allowed her revulsion to overcome her, but that wasn't what Roseen did at all.

Instead, Roseen's love compelled her to confront the powerful vampire who had set the entire chain of events in motion, and to Sybyll, that proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that she hadn't been wrong when she first saw the look in Roseen's eyes and heard her say that she wouldn't serve for Dame Sybyll's sake, but for Cossot's.

"Th-that's silly," Roseen stammered, suddenly blushing furiously as Sybyll looked deep into her eyes. "I, I couldn't. We, we're both women, so it isn't possible anyway, and, and..."

And how was it that in a single night, a vampire had discovered the secret that Roseen had only just admitted to herself?

Chapter 1012: Emerging From Darkness

"Ye think I don't know what it feels like ta' yearn fer tha' gentle touch of a woman who loves ye?" Sybyll said with a soft smile. "I've had me heart set on a pretty lass b'fore, an' we shared many a night b'neath tha' sheets entwined in each other's arms. It weren't meant ta' last fer me," Sybyll said sadly as her eyes shone with memories of the woman whose death at the hands of a customer had transformed her from a battered survivor into a merciless avenger.

"It weren't meant ta' be fer us," Sybyll repeated. "But after two hundred years, me Mistress finally found love in tha' arms of another woman, an' I've never seen her smile tha' way she does when her beloved is by her side," she said as she focused her gaze back on the young woman.

"So, I understand if ye havn'a told Cossot how ye feel," Sybyll said. "But ye needn't hide it anymore," she said as she reached for the lid of her daybed. "I can'a say she feels tha' same, but she cares fer ye enough ta' risk herself, just ta' keep ye safe. Ye should treasure that. So long as ye do, an' so long as ye wish ta' stay t'gether, I'll never pull ye apart," she said as she began to lower the lid of her daybed.

"Wait!" Roseen cried. "That's it? That's what you resisted the sun to say to me? It wasn't something more important?"

Inwardly, her heart trembled with dozens of feelings that her mind couldn't keep up with after the vampire exposed the secret she'd kept sealed away in her heart since she first realized how she felt about her closest friend.

It happened after Cossot came home from watching Lady Ashlynn's wedding to Lord Owain. She gushed about how beautiful and magical it was, how pretty Lady Ashlynn looked in her sparkling white dress adorned with pearls from the sea, and how handsome Lord Owain looked when he swore to be her husband to the end of his days.

But more than Cossot's wild fantasies about having a glamorous wedding of her own one day, it had been the praise her best friend heaped on Loman Lothian that truly shook Roseen's heart. Never before had she heard such an infatuated tone in Cossot's voice, as if she'd finally found a man who could move her heart in a way that the young men of Hanrahan Town simply couldn't.

That's when she realized that all the fantasies she'd had about becoming a spinster together with her best friend, who never seemed to care for love before, were doomed to be nothing but dreams. It wasn't that Cossot had no interest in men or in love... it was just that she had her sights set on better men than the ones she could find at home.

"Roseen," Sybyll said, giving the trembling young woman one last, surprisingly tender look. "Ye have a chance ta' find love, an' tha' rules have changed," she added cryptically. "Ye can find a love that can last forever. Ye just have ta be brave enough ta' try. It may not be meant ta' be," she added before the young woman's heart could soar free of her chest.

"But if it is, I promise to help ye both," she said as she retreated to the confines of her daybed. "Ye just have ta' have tha' courage ta' try," she said, before sealing herself away from the sun.

The -CLICK- of the daybed's locks sliding into place seemed far too loud in the suddenly quiet space of the dungeon, and Roseen felt like she jumped out of her own skin when she heard it. It took nearly a minute of standing still, drawing deep, steadying breaths, and letting them out as slowly as she could before her heart stopped thundering in her chest.

"Cossot..." she said softly when she finally overcame the shock of what Dame Sybyll had said. "I, I can't keep her waiting," she mumbled under her breath as she started walking toward the stairs leading out of the dungeon. With each step she took, her feet moved faster and faster, and by the time she reached the stairs, she was taking them two at a time in her haste to reach her friend's side.

She had no idea how to tell Cossot what she felt... or even if she ever would. Dame Sybyll made it sound so easy, but if Cossot rejected her, Roseen didn't know if she could bear it. It would be better to be her friend forever than try for something more and lose everything they had, or at least, that's what she'd told herself for the past several months.

But right now, none of that mattered. All that mattered was that Cossot was hurting after doing what Sybyll had tricked her into doing, and now more than ever, Cossot needed to have her friend at her side.

"Roseen?" a tender, young girl's voice said as Roseen burst into the hallway on the ground floor of the keep. "You must be Roseen, there's no one else down there but Dame Sybyll," the young horned woman continued as she gave a brief curtsy to the harried-looking young woman who had just emerged from the dungeons.

When Roseen looked at the diminutive demon, no, Eldritch woman, she reminded herself, she was surprised that she was even smaller than Lady Heila, though she looked very similar to the young woman's eyes. Clearly, she was younger, and her horns weren't as large as Lady Heila's, but if you'd said that she was Lady Heila's little sister, she wouldn't have suspected it was a lie.

"I'm Emmie," the young horned woman said, reaching out with a hand to pull the confused Roseen along. "I'm Lady Heila's squire, and she told me to wait for you so I can show you where Cossot is."

"Emmie? And you're a squire? I thought only knights had squires..." Roseen said as she stumbled along behind the impatient young woman. "You don't have to hold my hand," she said as the diminutive young woman led her into a crowd of people who were already hard at work repairing the damage to Hanrahan keep, sweeping away the debris of destroyed statues or cutting timber to length in order to build new doors to replace the ones that Dame Sybyll had shattered in the assault.

"Hmmf," Emmie snorted as she pulled Roseen up a flight of spiral stairs, refusing to let go of her despite the other woman's protest. "Lady Heila is a Champion of the Arena. She fought ten battles in ten days, defeating ten men at a time every day, and the men she fought were all worthy champions," she boasted. "Lady Heila is better than a knight, so why can't she have a squire?"

"But I thought she was a lady-in-waiting for the Mother of Trees," Roseen said in confusion. How did a lady-in-waiting become a 'Champion of the Arena'? Fighting a hundred men? All by herself? But then, she remembered the moment that Lady Heila had struck Head Priest Germot with her whip, dispelling the holy aura the priest had gathered and forcing him to submit...

It seemed like being a 'lady' meant very different things among the Eldritch people than it did among humans. And, from Dame Sybyll's words, the rules about what women could and couldn't do, even who they could and couldn't love, were very different as well.

"She is, and she's the Willow Witch too," Emmie said, interrupting Roseen's thoughts and puffing her chest out in pride as she led Roseen up to the third floor and down the corridor to the guest quarters where visiting noblemen would usually stay.

"This is our room," she said as she pulled Roseen into a luxuriously appointed sitting room. "Lady Heila is using that one," she said, pointing at a door that led to a room that would have a stunning view of the lake beyond the walls of Hanrahan Town. "Cossot said..."

"Roseen!" Cossot interrupted as she stepped out of one of the smaller rooms that shared the central sitting room. They hadn't been separated long, but it had been enough for Cossot to wash the blood and grime of the dungeon from her body and to change into a soft, silky-looking nightdress that made her look more like a young noblewoman preparing for bed than the simple merchant's daughter she actually was.

"I said you could share a room with me," Cossot said, taking hold of Roseen's hand and blushing slightly at the way her words sounded. "I, um, I didn't want to be alone," she added quietly, though she was half convinced that Emmie heard her anyway. The Eldritch all seemed to have keen senses.

"I understand," Roseen said, wrapping her arms around her friend, relieved to see that she seemed much less fragile than she had in the dungeon. The tightness with which her friend hugged her back made it clear that she wasn't completely recovered from her ordeal but...

Cossot seemed to be recovering more quickly with something to focus on beyond just what had happened in the dungeon, even if the way Dame Sybyll had gotten her there still made Roseen's stomach turn.

"I'll stay with you," Roseen said, squeezing Cossot back just as tightly as the other woman held her. "For as long as you want me with you, I'll never go away," she promised softly, coming as close to expressing her feelings as she dared.

"Thank you," Cossot whispered, hugging her friend fiercely before her grip finally loosened. "Let me help you wash up," she said as she led Roseen into the room that the two of them would share until they made their decisions about serving Dame Sybyll... and perhaps long after that as well.

As the sun rose outside the keep, neither of them knew what would happen in the days to come, but one thing was clear. Whatever came their way, they would face it together...

Chapter 1013: A Pensive Breakfast (Part One)

Deep within the Vale of Mists, in the quiet hour before dawn, what had started as a gathering of Ashlynn's coven to stand vigil over Isabell as she underwent the trial of her seed of witchcraft had turned into something much greater. And, to Ollie at least, something stranger than any morning he'd yet experienced since coming to the vale of mists.

"The trick is to watch the way drops of water dance on the surface of the pan after you've pulled it out of the fire," he explained to his attentive student as he dipped his fingers into a small cup of water before sprinkling several droplets across the surface of the cast-iron pan.

-HSSSSTTT-

"You see how the water turned into steam in an instant? That's too hot," he said, keeping most of his attention on the task. "If we drop butter into the pan when it's that hot, it will scorch and brown, and our eggs will come out dark and chewy. We need it to cool down more before we add anything to the pan."

"Can you do this with many kinds of cooking?" Nyrielle said, smiling at the young knight as he tended to his cooking tools with the same level of focus and seriousness that she'd seen Thane apply to his weapons. It was as if it was part of the nature of knights that she'd never appreciated, to treasure their tools and care for them as much as she had cared for her prized paintings or Zedya cared for her tapestries.

"Georg stays so close to the fire when he cooks," Nyrielle said, feeling more relaxed than she had during any of her lessons with the bearish Master of Kitchens. Georg said that temperature was one of the most important things to monitor, and he was constantly moving his pan on and off the flame to maintain the correct temperature, something that made Nyrielle nervous every time she tried to imitate his calm confidence around flames.

"But you're going to cook this entire dish after you've taken the pan off the flames," Nyrielle marveled, watching as Ollie sprinkled another set of droplets on the pan, watching them skitter and dance before he added a large knob of butter to the pan and began swirling it around. They were more than ten paces away from the bonfire that had sprung up in the midst of Ashlynn's gathering, and at this distance, Nyrielle didn't even think of the heat of the flames, yet Ollie insisted he wouldn't need to return the pan to the flames even once to finish his eggs.

"I never thought of doing this for anything other than eggs," Ollie admitted, shifting nervously as the vampire hovered over him, watching every detail of his cooking. He'd finally gotten used to thinking of Lady Ashlynn as family rather than seeing her as one of the most beautiful women he'd ever laid eyes on, and the bond he shared with her as a member of her coven helped with that, but he had no such immunity against Lady Nyrielle's charms, and her presence was... intense.

"The, um, the pan cools quickly once you pour in the eggs," he said, picking up a bowl of thoroughly beaten eggs and pouring them into the pan filled with lightly foaming butter before taking up a wooden spoon and stirring vigorously.

He did his best to focus on the eggs and his lesson because if he thought of Nyrielle's faintly floral scent drifting on the night air or the way her silky dress clung to her lithe figure then he was certain that he'd do or say something that would embarrass not only him, but Lady Ashlynn as well.

"If I were making this for a lord's breakfast, I'd add a bit of cream to make it richer, and a good cheese for melting," he continued as he reached into another bowl for a pinch of freshly picked and hand-torn herbs. "But keeping it simple lets you enjoy the eggs more, and the herbs help it to not feel as heavy."

"In Blackwell, we'd add shredded crab meat at this point," Ashlynn said as she joined the pair for their cooking demonstration. "A dash of spices, too. But simple is also good," she added with a smile as she wrapped her arms around Nyrielle. "Simple is probably best for eating before you go to bed or when you have to wake early."

"I'll add 'crab' to the list of things that Marcel needs to find a way to import from your home," Nyrielle said, as though it were a serious matter. "Can it be packed in salt or pickled? Would it still work in eggs if it were?"

"That... that might be tricky," Ollie admitted as he thought about using salted or pickled fish in a dish with eggs. "Look, our eggs are already done," he said as he scooped the light, fluffy, scrambled eggs into a large bowl. "See? Almost no time at all if you want them to be delicate. Is the bread ready, Ashlynn?" Ollie asked, grateful that she was occupying most of Lady Nyrielle's attention.

"It is, and so is the rest of breakfast," Ashlynn said with a smile. "Everyone pitched in a little bit, and Thane's slicing the bread for finger sandwiches now, so we can all eat a few bites together before sunrise."

Ashlynn had never intended to gather the leaders of the Vale of Mists in the space that she and her coven had been slowly preparing to become their Enchanted Grove, yet it had happened, seemingly all on its own.

Everyone knew the timing for Dame Sybyll's attacks on Hanrahan Town, along with the attacks to be carried out by Commander Tausau's Third Army, with the support of Commander Savis. While no one was worried that the human villages in Hanrahan Barony would put up much of a fight, everyone had some level of anxiety about the attack on Hanrahan Town itself.

Nyrielle had been the first one to arrive, stepping out of the evening fog almost as soon as the sun had set, much to the surprise of Virve and Ollie. She hadn't said anything when she arrived, but her appearance alone was enough to remind everyone about the stakes of the battle happening far to the south and east.

Everyone was as confident as they could be when they sent Dame Sybyll to reclaim her ancestral home, but of everyone present, only Nyrielle knew the terror of a Templar armed with a Holy Light Blade or the horror of an Inquisitor's flames when they were unleashed on one of her progeny.

Heila and Hauke had gone along to compensate for the risk that came with the trio from the Church, but none of them could say for certain what would happen once the battle began...

Chapter 1014: A Pensive Breakfast (Part Two)

Talauia was the next person to arrive at Ashlynn's camp, all but pulling the lumbering form of Ritchel along with her.

"Has it started, has it started yet?" the winged witch asked as she fluttered over to Ashlynn, slowing only when she realized that the Mother of Trees wasn't alone. Her wings hummed in the air, creating small whirlwinds of mist around her as she hovered closer to the witch and the powerful vampire, as her desire for even a scrap of news overwhelmed her near instinctive hesitation to approach a vampire as powerful as Nyrielle.

"I'm worried, worried about Heila," Talauia said as she hovered toward Ashlynn. "Can you see the battle from here? Are there trees close enough?"

"It's too far," Ashlynn said, shaking her head at the Thistle Witch. "The trees of the Vale will carry my sight, but if I wanted to see into Hanrahan Barony, I'd have to go at least as far as the summer villa," she confessed. "If I had already been to Hanrahan, and I'd been able to plant a seed there, then maybe I could reach that tree, but right now..."

"Right now," Ashlynn said with a heavy sigh, "the limit of my power lets me feel the direction that Heila has gone, along with a vague sense of how she is. I should know if she's badly injured, or... or if the worst happens," Ashlynn forced herself to say, even though she hated to think that she might have sent her closest friend to die in this battle.

Tragedies could happen even when all of the preparations had been made to prevent them, and if she didn't admit that, then she wasn't being honest about the risks she was taking with the decisions she was making. Heila should be fine. So far as they knew, the greatest threat was Sir Tommin and his Holy Light Blade, and Dame Sybyll felt confident in countering him. But there was always the possibility of the unexpected.

"It's the same for me," Nyrielle added. "Sybyll should be awake by now, but she isn't in any danger at the moment. I'll know if she's gravely injured, or if she touches the Void, but otherwise... I won't know whether or not she succeeds until the end."

"But you'll know, you'll know," Talauia said, seizing on the way Nyrielle phrased things at the end. "How will you know?"

"Because Sybyll is my Executioner," Nyrielle said with a light smile. "And because she's gone to kill her cousin, Ian Hanrahan. If all goes as I expect it will, then she'll capture him alive and torment him until dawn. But before she kills him, she'll touch the Void, and I'll feel it when she does. So long as I feel that touch sometime close to dawn, I'll know that she's succeeded."

"I envy you, old friend," Ritchel said in a deep, rumbling voice as he lowered himself to sit on a fallen log. "The battles you've spoken of against humans sound impossibly grand. Hundreds of warriors on either side? They make our battle in the High Pass feel like a minor scuffle. I've never taught Hauke how to fight in such a large battle..."

Ritchel still bore the scars of that 'scuffle' in the high pass, and he had yet to recover from the wounds that Talauia inflicted on him in the midst of that battle. Without regular care from the Thistle Witch and the infusion of strength that Nyrielle provided him with blood vitality crystals, he would have wasted away weeks ago.

But anyone who looked at the former Frost Walker lord could see that his poor health bothered him very little. As far as Ritchel was concerned, he should have died that night when the ancestral spirits possessed his son and tragedy unfolded. Instead, he'd received kindness, compassion, and healing from the very people his ancestors had betrayed. So, to Ritchel, every day he still lived was a gift, and one that he hoped would allow him to see both the High Pass and his son, Hauke, growing and prospering.

"He has Heila to guide him, and Dame Sybyll as well," Ashlynn said gently. "I believe in your son, Lord Ritchel. He's worked hard to learn as much as he can, and he's protected by the Runic Blade of Eternal Ice. Even an Inquisitor should struggle with him for an opponent."

"I can attest to that," a familiar voice called from the mist. The speaker made no sound as he glided forward across the freshly turned soil, stepping gracefully despite the mud that threatened to splatter his crimson robes.

"The sword your son carries withstood a clash with my Holy Flame Blade," Ignatious pointed out as he joined the group. "Even if young Hauke found himself face to face with Templar Tommin, his blade wouldn't lose out to the other man's weapon, and so far as we know, the Inquisitor who was sent has no weapon to match mine."

"Sir Ignatious," Ollie said, standing up from the cookfire where he'd been preparing a simple dinner to follow their day of work preparing the land of the Enchanted Grotto. "Did you come to pray for Heila? I can join you, if you'd like," the young knight offered politely.

Ollie might not be particularly devout, but Ignatious had come to the young knight's vigil and prayed with him before Ollie began his trial of witchcraft. It was part of the ceremony of becoming a knight that Ollie had thought he'd have to do without, but Ignatious had given him not only the prayers appropriate for the occasion, but some genuinely insightful guidance as well, and Ollie had never forgotten the favor the vampire had done for him that night.

"I came to pray for everyone's safety and success, not just Heila's," Ignatious said with a warm smile that never would have formed on his lips a year ago. But much had changed since Nyrielle came to free him from High Lord Hamdi's domain, not the least of which was the reawakening of his heart and the healing he experienced at Lady Heila's hands.

"But, if you want to say an extra prayer for Heila's safety tonight," Ignatious added as he wrapped an arm affectionately around the young knight's shoulders. "I won't complain," he said with a slight wink.

Over the course of the next hour, they were joined by several other figures, from Thane and Commander Bassinger to Zedya and Lennart, even Georg 'dropped by' with a basket full of sweet and savory hand pies, along with a small hand cart loaded to the brim with casks of wine and cider for everyone who would be staying up through the night.

By the time the sky began to fill with stars, Ashlynn and Nyrielle had taken a seat on the ground facing each other as each woman shut out the world around them to focus on the mystical connections that bound them to their coven or progeny. A faint emerald aura surrounded Ashlynn, swirling and dancing with the deep, midnight blue energy that rose from Nyrielle's alabaster flesh as they strained for the slightest hint of what might be happening in the battle.

"You're not going to offer to help?" Erkembalt asked, nudging Aspakos as the pair of sorcerers watched Ashlynn and Nyrielle's magic with eyes that perceived more than many of the people watching.

Seeing witchcraft blending with and reinforcing the sorcery of a vampire should have been one of the most impossible things in the world, yet for these two women, it seemed almost... natural. As if this was the way the world had always been meant to work, and every time the two men saw it, they felt like they were on the edge of learning something profound from the experience.

"There's no need," the broken beaked sorcerer said with a shake of his head. "If the fate of the world shifted, it shifted the night that Lady Ashlynn declared war on the people who wronged her. This battle

will change the destiny of many people, but in the scheme of things, it's a single point of light in a grand design that was already painted in the stars above. There are no secrets to pry from the heavens that would be worth the price I'd pay to know them."

"There you go again," the artificer said with a huff as he gulped down half his tankard of cider. "Making yourself sound mysterious and important. If you don't know and won't help, just say that," he huffed.

It wasn't long after that, however, before Nyrielle spoke, wincing as she felt an echo of the pain that wracked Sybyll's body more than a hundred leagues away.

"It has begun," she said in a voice that trembled more than anyone had heard in many years, if ever. "Despite the darksteel armor," she added in a whisper, "the Church has found a way to make Sybyll suffer..."

Chapter 1015: A Pensive Breakfast (Part Three)

For Sybyll to suffer enough that Nyrielle could feel her pain from more than a hundred leagues away meant that something extraordinary had happened. Sybyll's armor wasn't just incredibly heavy and impossibly strong; it was the work of artificers who were nearly as skilled as Erkembalt. More than that, it represented the pinnacle of the Vale of Mists' efforts to defend against the holy weapons of the Church.

If even Sybyll's armor was insufficient to protect against the effects of a Holy Light blade, then there was very little hope that a lesser armor would be sufficient to protect vampires like Thane, Lennart or any of the others who would take to the field in battle against the mightiest forces of the Church when the Holy War finally reached them, much less the forces of a Crusade.

"She'll be all right, won't she?" Ollie asked, leaning close enough to Thane to whisper to the vampire who had trained both him and Dame Sybyll. "Even if it's one of the Church's weapons..."

"Have faith in your senior," Thane said lightly, reaching out to ruffle Ollie's flame-red hair. "Pain won't stop her from claiming her vengeance, and she's not so proud that she won't fall back and seek help from Heila and Hauke if she has need to. Remember, she's stronger than I am and..."

"She's touched the Void," Nyrielle said with a predatory grin. "It seems that she has no patience for entertaining Sir Tommin or the Inquisitor."

When Nyrielle spoke, all eyes shifted to Ashlynn, wondering if she had been able to sense anything through her connection to Heila, but the Mother of Trees said nothing.

"If Heila suffers," Virve said as she passed a fresh tankard of cider to Lennart. "It likely means the worst has happened. She should be focused on healing the wounded instead of fighting at the front lines. But if even the healers are overrun..."

"I'm not so certain that she'll hold herself back," Zedya said as she snuggled into her husband's soft embrace, gently stroking his fur and taking comfort in his closeness. "Ever since Lady Ashlynn named Heila as her lady-in-waiting, she's been pushing herself. I think she's still ashamed of being helpless on the frozen lake when the Tuscans attacked you in the High Pass," she told Virve.

"She takes after her teachers," Lennart said, softly stroking Zedya's hair. "That includes you. You've never been shy about donning your gloves to fight at the front lines when it was needed, so why should she?"

"I should have gone with her," Virve growled, flexing her claws and allowing a trace of her greenish-gold energy to spill from her hand as she made a tight fist. "Ollie and I both could have gone. We weren't wounded that badly at the Summer Villa," she grumbled.

Ashlynn had been clear with both Virve and Ollie that she didn't intend to push any of them into back-to-back battles if she could prevent it. She wanted to preserve their strength for the battles to come, especially Ollie's.

The attack on the Summer Villa and the injury that Ollie sustained in that battle with the Lothian archers made it clear that the young knight still had much to learn about the battlefield, and even though Ashlynn acknowledged that Virve could have made the trip to the battle of Hanrahan along with Ipiktok and his men, she'd called her home instead.

"I need you to help Ollie learn from this battle and prepare for the next one," Ashlynn told Virve at the time, and the captain of her guard had accepted it as a reasonable answer at the time. But now, when she thought of the diminutive Willow Witch wading into a battle that was fierce enough to make even Dame Sybyll suffer, Virve found herself wishing that she'd argued more with the leader of her coven.

Time passed with agonizing slowness as everyone watched the Harbinger of Death and the Mother of Trees, hoping one of them would sense something that would mean all had gone according to plan. That news finally came more than an hour later when Nyrielle finally opened her eyes.

"Sybyll's suffering has eased," she said with a faint smile. "Your witches are truly remarkable, my darling Ashlynn," she said, looking deeply into her lover's emerald eyes as they opened. "I was worried that Sybyll would carry her wounds for the rest of her days..."

"I'm glad that Heila was able to help," Ashlynn said with a sigh of relief. She hadn't felt anything that resembled intense pain from her connection to Heila, though there had been a few moments of intense fear, followed by even more intense anger that worried her. In the end, however, it seemed like the diminutive Willow Witch had escaped relatively unscathed.

"Does that mean they've won?" Ollie asked, looking up from the late-night snack he'd been preparing in order to distract himself from the anxiety that gnawed at his stomach. He didn't think he could eat right now if he wanted to, but he found that having a familiar task to do helped, even if few people had the stomach to eat much while they waited for news.

"They've won or they've lost and retreated safely," Ashlynn speculated. "Dame Sybyll is... Relentless," she said, thinking of the intensity with which the Crimson Knight fought in their practice sessions leading up to this battle. Ashlynn hadn't been in the best state of mind at the time and she'd been more than a little... excessive in her use of power as she fought back against the powerful vampire, but Sybyll had never given ground easily.

"We'll know whether they've gained victory or suffered defeat close to dawn," Nyrielle reminded everyone. "Until then, I'm afraid that there's nothing we can know from here."

"I believe in them," Ashlynn said as she wrapped her arms around Nyrielle, holding her tight and drawing comfort from her cool touch. "Even if they've failed to seize Hanrahan Town, so long as they've survived to retreat, it's still our victory," she said, though she sounded more like she was trying to reassure herself than anyone else at the gathering.

Ashlynn didn't know what could have happened to make Heila so angry during the battle that she could feel echoes of her fury from more than a hundred leagues away, but she selfishly hoped that, if anyone had died, it hadn't been someone close to them.

If something had happened to Hauke, she was certain that there would have been an even more intense storm of emotions coloring their bond, but with no way of knowing for certain, she couldn't give Hauke's father the comforting reassurance she so desperately wanted to.

Chapter 1016: A Pensive Breakfast (Part Four)

Over the next several hours, many of the people who had gathered at the start of the evening drifted away, leaving behind only the vampires, witches, and Hauke's father, Ritchel, to pass the time until dawn.

Zedya brought out a half finished blanket that she intended to present to Samira when her child was born, along with a matching blanket that she'd already finished for Noomi's son, Saku. Both women had settled into Ollie's village in the days since their rescue from the Summer Villa, and Zedya had taken them under her protective wing in Ollie's absence.

Old Nan and the other villagers had given the pair of women something close to a heroes' welcome when Noomi returned from what should have been certain doom, and when they learned how Samira had helped to protect her and her infant son, the Heartwood clan had all but adopted the woman who bore a striking resemblance to Lady Ashlynn.

Other people found their own ways to pass the time through the long hours of the winter night while they awaited Nyrielle's word. Lennart happily accompanied Zedya in crafting, though the pipe he was carving was unlikely to see much use unless the newest vampire of the Vale found someone to bestow it on.

Virve and Thane retreated into the woods when the Oak Witch asked if Thane was willing to help her work through the restless energy that no quiet pursuit could dispel and not long after the sound of steel ringing on steel could be heard echoing through the night air as the pair lost themselves in the rhythms of practice.

The most surprising moment, however, had come when Nyrielle approached Ollie and asked for a cooking lesson from the young knight.

"But, weren't you learning from Georg?" Ollie asked, blinking in surprise when the powerful ruler of the Vale of Mists asked for his help to pass the time. "He's a much better cook than I am, especially when it comes to those refined, small bites he crafts for you."

"I like the things that Georg cooks," Nyrielle agreed with a brief look at Ashlynn where she was sitting in quiet prayer with Ignatious. "But you know how to cook in the kitchens of human noblemen. The sort of kitchens that would have cooked for my darling, Ashlynn," she said with a smile that made her midnight blue eyes seem like they held all the light of the stars in the night sky. "So I'd like to learn how to make the sort of dishes she would have grown up enjoying."

"Oh," Ollie said, blushing as he realized what Nyrielle's motive had been for learning to cook in the first place. "Well, I don't know about the home cooking in Blackwell County," he admitted. "Lady Ashlynn is always talking about the fish markets and how creative cooks had to be in order to adjust to what was available each day, but there are some basics that I think every lord in Gaal would have had on their tables at some point..."

That simple idea had prompted Ashlynn to fold Nyrielle's progeny into her coven's tradition of cooking a meal together, and over the course of the dwindling hours of the night, everyone had found something to help with as they assembled a breakfast to greet the dawn with.

The meal they assembled in the camp was simple, consisting of an assortment of toppings that could be spread on small pieces of toast and nibbled on by the vampires in attendance or piled high for the heartier eaters among them like Virve and Ritchel.

Whether it was Ollie's soft, buttery, scrambled eggs, or the delicately smoked smelt that Talauia and Ritchel had fished out of a nearby stream, there was something for everyone that not only filled the belly but soothed the worried mind with familiar, comforting flavors to greet the dawn.

"How did you catch so many of these tiny fish?" Ollie asked in surprise when he saw the number of smoked smelt filets, each no longer than his palm, that the Thistle Witch and Lord Ritchel had set out.

"He cheated, cheated shamelessly," Talauia accused, pouting at the diminished Frost Walker lord who didn't seem to have any guilt over what he'd done. "I thought you were supposed to be proud people, proud people and great hunters! How could you use such a shameless trick to win? I was winning you know, winning until you cheated," she proclaimed.

"My people aren't hunters like yours are," Ritchel said with a laugh. "I could never spear such tiny fish by throwing needles the way you do, even if I summoned needles of ice to do it with. But when it comes to

small fish like these, we need many of them to make a meal for anyone but the smallest of younglings," he said as he patted his furry belly.

"Still cheating, it's still cheating," Talauia said. "I won't challenge you to a contest again if you're going to cheat like that, I won't," she threatened.

Over the weeks that she'd spent tending to Ritchel's wounds, she'd mostly forgiven him for using sorcery to trap Ashlynn during the battle in the High Pass that no one had wanted to fight other than the ancestral spirits who possessed Hauke. It would be a stretch to call them friends at this point, but she'd hoped that a simple contest to see who could collect the most of the small fish from the stream would be a fun way to pass the time and take their minds off their worry over Heila and Hauke.

"But, what did he actually do?" Ollie asked, looking at the towering Frost Walker in confusion. "How did you 'cheat'?"

"It's a simple trick," Ritchel said with a deep, rolling chuckle, waving his hand as his horn glowed a dull violet. Suddenly, a thin layer of ice formed between the tips of his claws, catching and reflecting the firelight into dozens of dancing motes of light the way a crystal would.

"You can craft a lure that will attract dozens of these little fish," he explained to the young human witch. "Once they've gathered in a small enough area, all you have to do is freeze the water around them and then pluck the block of ice out of the stream."

"Cheating! It's cheating," Talauia huffed. "You might as well have used a net."

"Well, I think it's brilliant," Ollie said, wondering if he could create a similar effect with his witchcraft. Cypress knees created plenty of spaces in shallow waters where fish would gather, after all. If he took Talauia's idea and just used a net, he could probably scoop several fish out of a stream with ease, just by creating a spot in the stream where the water moved slowly past his 'knees.' He might even be able to do it just by standing in the water and convincing the fish that he was a tree himself...

While everyone was doing their best to focus on the meal without staring at Nyrielle and hoping for an announcement that Sybyll had touched the Void to execute her murderous cousin, Ashlynn suddenly leaped to her feet, turning toward the ritual circle that had been drawn in the earth days ago at the beginning of Isabell's trial of witchcraft.

Less than a dozen heartbeats after Ashlynn stood, the trees surrounding them began to bend and sway, as if they were caught in a fierce wind that failed to disturb the early morning mist that clung to the forest of the Vale. Here and there, towering Hemlock trees shed glittering needles, filling the air with a soft, pale green light that drifted in the direction of the ritual circle.

"She's finished?" Virve whispered, blinking in surprise as she rose to her feet, dropping her half finished toast and eggs in the process as she stared in the direction of the sleeping engineer. "Ollie took twice as long..."

"Ashlynn said it would be easier for her than it was for me," Ollie said as he set his breakfast down before rising to join Virve as they approached the waking witch. "But isn't this a little too fast?"

"YAAAAAAWWNNNN," Isabell said, stretching her body that hadn't moved in several days while she lay on the cold earth while her mind was drawn into the vivid visions that accompanied her trial of witchcraft.

"Is that... breakfast?" Isabell asked, raising a hand to brush silvery hair out of her eyes as she looked at the gathering of witches and vampires surrounding a bonfire just a few dozen paces away. "How did you know when I'd finish? How many days has it been?"

"Congratulations, my darling," Nyrielle said as she rose to stand with Ashlynn. "Your coven has gained another witch," she said with a relieved smile as she felt the tremor across the surface of the void that she'd been waiting for at last. "And your war has gained another victory," she said as her smile grew even wider.

For a moment, no one said anything as they processed Nyrielle's words, but then, Virve broke the silence with a thunderous roar of victory that echoed through the still morning air.

After an entire night of worry, they finally knew for certain that Dame Sybyll had claimed her vengeance, and with it, an entire barony had fallen to the Vale of Mists. And if that wasn't enough, Master Isabell had cleared her trial of witchcraft, days earlier than even the other members of her coven had expected.

Instantly the mood became joyous as Ashlynn strode forward to embrace the newest member of her coven.

By this time tomorrow, they would receive a detailed report from Sybyll and her forces and they could begin planning their next and final move against the Lothian forces... but for a moment, Ashlynn let herself set all of that aside to celebrate the victories at hand.

"Welcome to the coven, my Hemlock Witch," Ashlynn said formally as she embraced the friend who had come all the way from Blackwell County to join her here. "Welcome home."

Chapter 1017: Isabell's Rebirth (Part One)

As much as everyone might have wished to linger in order to celebrate Isabell's successful awakening as the Hemlock Witch, the approach of dawn called Nyrielle and her progeny to bed, forcing them to return to their chambers deep within the ancient keep just minutes after Isabell had awakened.

"I know you'll tend to your witch well today," Nyrielle said as she gently cupped Ashlynn's cheek. "But take time for yourself to rest before you do. I'm sure that Isabell could use some real sleep herself after her ordeal, so hurry back to your tower and your own bed for at least a few hours before you throw yourself back into caring for others."

"I will," Ashlynn promised, standing up on her tiptoes to give Nyrielle a brief peck on the lips. "Today, we all need to rest. Tomorrow, when word arrives from Hanrahan, we can worry about what comes next, but for now, I don't intend to do anything more strenuous than cooking a warm meal and having a quiet conversation with Isabell and the coven."

"Good," Nyrielle said with a twinkle in her eyes as she ran her slender fingers through Ashlynn's soft, pale hair, savoring the silky softness of her lover's tresses flowing through her hand. "If your sleep is troubled, come find me," she whispered softly as she bestowed a gentle kiss on Ashlynn's brow. "If you call out for me, I'll find you, even in dreams," she promised before melting away into the fading darkness and the mists of the Vale.

For several heartbeats, Ashlynn stood with her eyes closed, feeling the lingering touch of Nyrielle's hand on her cheek and the trace of her lover's lips on her brow before Isabell's voice brought her back to the present.

"Whatever reservations I had about your choice of companion," Isabell said with a warm smile on her lips. "Consider half of them to be wiped away. Even if she wasn't as beautiful as you said she was, just

the sight of you melting into her touch like that tells me most of what I need to know about her," she said affectionately.

"That's exactly how Casquas makes me feel," Isabell said, smiling brilliantly as a burden she hadn't realized she was carrying in her heart melted away. It didn't mean that she'd let go of all of her concerns. There were still elements of her younger friend's relationship with such an ancient being that troubled her, after all. But despite those concerns, it was clear that Nyrielle was every bit as deeply in love with Ashlynn as the young witch was with her vampire lover, and that was the most important thing.

"I told you, Isabell," Ashlynn said, blushing slightly as she realized how she must have looked to her coven. "There's nothing in the world that can come between Nyri and I, and nothing that can pull us apart. Not that people haven't tried," she said with a light chuckle. "But they were doomed to fail from the beginning."

"More importantly," she said as she looked the freshly awakened witch over. "How are you feeling? Do you need to rest here and take a meal before we hike back to the castle, or would you prefer to get out of the cold first?" Ashlynn asked.

The early morning air in the Vale was chilly, and anyone standing more than a few paces away from the bonfire could see their breath turning into frosty clouds when they exhaled. A soft, golden glow could be faintly seen kissing the tops of the trees around them, but it would be hours yet before the sun rose high enough overhead to provide any real warmth.

Even then, it was likely to be a day that hovered between rain mixed with hail and outright snow if the clouds gathering in the distance were to be believed. It certainly wasn't a day to remain outside if they didn't have a good reason to do so.

"If Sir Ollie can spread some of those soft eggs between two pieces of toast, with a few of those little fish," Isabell said, pointing at the dishes that were laid out around the bonfire. "I can eat while we walk. I'm too old to stay out in the... well, maybe I'm not anymore," she said, interrupting herself as she flexed her right elbow and wrist, feeling the lack of stiffness in the joints even after spending three days sleeping out in the elements.

In fact, her entire body felt rejuvenated, with none of the aches and pains that had begun to plague her in the years since she'd given birth to her children. Her knees weren't stiff, her hips no longer felt tight,

and despite having only just woken up, just a deep breath of the chill morning air was enough to chase the fatigue from her mind.

"I feel better than ever," Isabell confessed, moving slowly and inspecting herself as she took stock of the changes in her body. It wasn't just that the aches and pains of her body had melted away, or that she possessed the energy of a woman decades younger than she was.

There was a strength in her limbs and her core that had never been there before, and when she stood upon the earth, she felt an insistent pull, like invisible roots were trying to grow from the soles of her feet and burrow deep into the soil beneath her.

"I feel like I can almost touch something..." Isabell started, then, without finishing the thought, she bent down and began unlacing her boots with trembling fingers that felt both familiar and unfamiliar without the familiar wrinkles and the persistent dryness that had marked her hands after spending years washing ink or charcoal dust off of them after every session at a drafting table.

But more important than the state of her hands was the desire to cross the gap that left her feeling... incomplete and more disconnected from the earth than she wanted to be. Like she was meant to be something different, something more, but if she couldn't take root in the soil, then she would blow away on the wind...

Chapter 1018: Isabell's Rebirth (Part Two)

"Isabell?" Ashlynn asked lightly, as she watched her friend become absorbed in her task. It seemed as though her mind was finally catching up with the changes in her body, and she was beginning to reach out to the pulsing power of the world that surrounded them, but there was a fumbling unfamiliarity to it all that reminded Ashlynn of her own first night as a witch.

"Go slowly," Ashlynn cautioned as she stepped close to Isabell, kneeling in the soft, sodden soil to help her with her boots. "You're just like I was, you've never touched sorcery before your first brush with witchcraft. The real world is different from what you experienced in your visions, so go slowly and don't let it overwhelm you," she cautioned.

Heila, Virve and even Ollie had all received at least some training in sorcery before joining Ashlynn's coven. They knew what it felt like to sense the flow of energy coursing through their bodies and to reach out and give that energy purpose. But for Isabell, all of this was completely outside of her experience.

The only sorcery she'd ever seen had been the 'miracles' of the Church, and those were so steeped in superstition and ritual that it was impossible for a lay person to understand what was really happening. Now, however, Isabell found herself enveloped in the very same energies she'd always marveled at during high holy days.

"I just need to touch it," Isabell said, pulling off her first boot and peeling away her the thick wool sock within while Ashlynn worked to do the same with her other foot. "The earth, I need to feel it, I..." she trailed off as her bare feet finally pressed into the cold, damp soil.

The instant her skin made contact with the ground, Isabell gasped and her silvery eyes opened wide in amazement at the sensations coursing through her body. She'd thought that she understood what witchcraft was when the vision of Ashlynn guided her first fumbling attempts to channel the power of the world during her trial, but the sensations she felt in those visions paled in comparison to the reality of immersing herself in the strong, pulsing current of the forest around her.

For a moment, she sat completely still, overwhelmed by the surge of energy that flowed into her as soon as she opened herself up to the world around her. She was overcome by the strange sensation that everything around her was fresh and new, even as she realized that many of the trees around her were ancient, having grown from saplings long before she was ever born.

She could feel the forest around her, not just see it or hear it, but sense it in a way that even someone with as gifted a tongue as her husband the poet would struggle to describe.

The Hemlock trees surrounding them weren't just wood and needles anymore. She could sense the slow, patient life moving through their trunks, the way their roots spread through the earth like fingers grasping for purchase, holding their lofty crowns high above the shorter cedar, oak and lesser trees of the forest as they stretched toward the sky above, as if they could almost touch the clouds themselves.

"Oh," Isabell breathed, her eyes widening as tears began to form at the corners. "Oh, this is... I didn't know. I thought I knew after the trial, but... but it wasn't like this," she whispered as she listened to echoes of gentle breezes felt only by the highest of tree tops whispering in her ears, faintly tugging at her silvery hair with a wind that no one else could feel.

"What do you feel?" Ashlynn asked gently, placing a steadying hand on her friend's shoulder as she was overwhelmed by the feelings that came from her first true contact with the living, breathing, interconnected power of the world.

"Everything," Isabell whispered. "The trees, they're so old, Ashlynn. And they're singing, or maybe humming? It's not sound, it's..." she struggled to find words for sensations she'd never experienced before. "It's like each one has its own heartbeat, so slow I could never hear it before, but now..."

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, and when she did, she felt the forest breathe with her. Not in the vague, mystical sense that she'd understood when Ashlynn spoke of her connection to nature, but as an actual, tangible response. The trees around them swayed slightly, though there was no wind, like they were waving hello, somehow simultaneously greeting a new friend and welcoming an old one home, as if she had always been meant to be here among them.

"I don't know why I was afraid of this," she said after several minutes spent just listening to the sounds of the forest around her. "No, that's not true," she corrected herself, unwilling to accept saying something she knew wasn't true, no matter how caught up in the emotion of the moment she was.

"That's not right," she said as she looked deeply into Ashlynn's concerned emerald eyes. "I was afraid that I would never be the same after this, and that's true," she said, looking at her smooth, unwrinkled hand in wonder as she flexed her fingers. "If I had to give this feeling up... I think I'd sooner give up an arm than let go of a feeling this wonderful, and that scares me a bit..."

More than just a bit, she realized as she recalled images of desiccated, devastated landscapes that were a result of her blunders in the early stages of her trial. Her visions had extended across immensurable amounts of time, and within them, she had tremendous power at her fingertips to reshape the world according to her designs, to engineer a world where people could truly thrive.

But too often, the forces at her command spiralled out of control, leaving everything around her worse than when she'd begun.

Now, she could feel the trees around her, silently offering her their strength and expressing their willingness to bend to her desires. But she'd seen again and again in her visions the sort of calamity she could bring by over-indulging in the ability to bend nature to her desires.

And if she couldn't pull herself back from the brink of this feeling, then she was afraid that the disasters that faced in dreams would turn into nightmares that she would unleash upon the world...

Chapter 1019: Intoxicating Power

"Isabell?" Ashlynn prompted gently. "Its all right if you're a little bit frightened," she said in the most reassuring tone she could manage. "I've been frightened of myself more than once this past year. Just take your time," she suggested.

"Think about things that are familiar. You told me once how strong you felt when you learned how to use a crane with a counterweight," Ashlynn said, trying to think of something that might resonate with the master engineer. "Its the same now. You have all of that power at your fingertips to make something impossibly large move as you wish, but you have to work carefully or it will overbalance and fall apart."

"I, I think I understand," Isabell said, closing her silvery eyes as she tried to grasp hold of something that compared to the sensations she was feeling now.

When she took stock of herself, however, it wasn't something as abstract or intellectual as constructing engineering marvels that her mind latched on to. Instead, she realized that the feeling of power coursing through her body wasn't that dissimilar from how she felt when she indulged in strong wine.

There was a sort of floating invincibility that left her feeling like she was soaring above all of the problems she had faced during the day and she could sweep them aside with the wave of her hand and another gulp from the bottle...

But she knew all too well where over-indulging in strong drink would lead her, and in the end, no amount of wine could ever blot out the horrors that she'd seen or the screams she'd heard during the civil war in the Emerald Kingdom. Now, as she began to reorient herself to the world around her, she began to regard the power flowing through her in much the same way.

There was nothing wrong in touching it, or even enjoying it the way she still enjoyed strong drink... But it could never become her solution to every problem, and no matter how great she felt at the moment, there would always be a time to come down when the moment passed. And if she indulged too much in the power she felt, she was certain that the results would be a thousand times worse than any hangover she'd ever suffered through.

"I think I'm starting to adjust to it," Isabell said as she picked up one of her feet and began wiping the soil off of it before pulling a sock back on. Part of her wanted to stay barefoot, even if she had to hike all the way back to the ancient fortress while carrying her shoes, but the older, wiser part of her felt like it would be better to cut herself off early until Ashlynn could guide her in her first steps.

"How do I," she started as she stared at the smooth skin of her other foot and realized that the changes to her body extended far beyond her joints and hands. "How do I look?" Isabell asked as she raised a trembling hand to touch the smooth, unlined skin of her cheek. "How much of me changed?"

Her mind flashed back to the way Ashlynn had transformed when she lost control of her power on the night she learned that Jocelynn had been the one to betray her. At the time, Ashlynn no longer looked human as she became something... more. Something greater, like a primal force of nature in the process of shedding her human guise.

Ashlynn had warned her that she might experience some changes, but looking at her limbs and feeling the changes in every bone and sinew of her body, she realized that she'd greatly underestimated what 'some changes' could mean.

"You look younger," Virve said directly as she evaluated her new sister's appearance. "More like Ollie's big sister than someone who could be his mother. It was the same for me," she said as she gestured to her fur where not a single trace of gray remained after the autumn colors of gold and russet had taken hold. "Old wounds that ached for years, gone like they'd never been and I felt like I could run all day with the new recruits," she boasted.

"I didn't feel 'young' again," Virve added after thinking carefully for a moment. "I never felt so strong when I was young. Maybe it's the same for you. Not really younger but... better?"

"Young is definitely the wrong word for it," Ashlynn agreed as she took in the changes to her friend's appearance. "When we first met, much of your hair was still as dark as Nyri's, you only had a few streaks of gray that grew wider over the years," Ashlynn said as she reached out to gently run a finger through her friend's silvery hair. "If you were 'young' again, then your hair should be dark again, but it isn't."

"Instead, your hair and eyes are more silver than gray," Ashlynn explained. "It's more like you've been polished and refined than restored to the way you once looked. It gives the impression of youth, but I remember you ten years ago, and you didn't look like this then," she said. "But you need to be careful," she added with a suggestive wink. "I imagine Casquas will have a hard time keeping his hands off you when he sees you again."

"He would have a hard time keeping his hands to himself if I showed up splattered with drafting ink and smelling like a soldier's camp," Isabell said with a light laugh as she imagined her reunion with both her husband and her children.

There would be a great deal to explain, she was certain but she had no doubt that he would love her still. As much as she had changed, she was certain that she was still the same woman at the core. There was... more to her now, she supposed.

But all of that 'more' was just like renovating the defenses of a castle to add parapets and salley gates. She'd grown more capable, to be certain, but the foundation was still the same. As long as that was true, as long as she didn't allow the new additions to become so large that they dominated everything else about her, then she should be able to realize the dream that she'd only glimpsed in her visions.

Ashlynn had told her that becoming the Hemlock Witch would allow her to engineer a better future for herself, her loved ones, and the people she wished to serve... So long as she was able to keep her new power from overwhelming the person she'd spent more than forty years becoming, she was confident that she could make that dream a reality.

Chapter 1020: A Witch's Secrets

"What was it like for you, Sir Ollie?" Isabell asked, looking for another point of comparison from someone who hadn't been as old when the transformation occurred. "How much did you change when you became a witch?"

"You don't need to call me 'sir'," Ollie said, feeling awkward to be addressed so formally now that Isabell had joined the coven. "You're a lady yourself now, you know, at least in the Vale of Mists. Or is she going to be a knight, since that's the title the Lothians were going to give her when she came out here?" Ollie asked, turning to raise an eyebrow at Ashlynn.

"We can think about titles later," Ashlynn said, waving a hand as if it wasn't of much concern at the moment. "I told Sybyll when she left that she shouldn't claim the title of Baroness when she conquers Hanrahan because we'll bestow a more fitting title once we reorganize the Vale after the war," she explained.

"But Ollie's right," she added. "In the Vale of Mists, as a member of my coven, you stand above everyone but Nyrielle and me, and Thane, too, I suppose," she added quickly as she considered his new position as the Lord General of the Vale.

"You're equal to all of Nyrielle's progeny and every other member of the coven, so you can treat them like peers if you'd like, or family if you're comfortable with it," she said with a smile. "As for how Ollie changed since becoming a witch, I'll let him explain," she said with a nod at the flame-haired knight.

"I don't really think I changed all that much," Ollie said as he handed over Isabell's egg sandwich and a steaming mug of warmed cider. "The biggest change was my mark," he said, lifting the edge of his tunic to reveal a portion of the cypress tree-shaped mark that dominated his entire side, spreading across his abdomen and chest in the front and wrapping around all the way to the back of his body.

In the process, he revealed a firm, toned body that had grown even stronger since he connected to the power of the Cypress tree, but he'd hardly noticed the subtle ways in which his body had been refined by magic amidst the many changes of leaving adolescence behind. Rather, he attributed much of his enhanced physique to the training he'd received at the hands of Sir Thane and Sir Marcel, failing to recognize how much further those changes had gone in the days since he'd become the Cypress Witch.

"What about you?" Ollie asked as he lowered his tunic, concealing once again the physique that no amount of knightly training could ever have produced in such a short period of time. "Do you know where your mark is yet or what it looks like?" Ollie asked innocently.

"Ollie!" Ashlynn said sharply, reaching out to bop him on the back of the head. "Rude. She can share if she wants to, but you shouldn't go asking a woman to disrobe and reveal her mark, ever," she said sharply. "But especially not out here in the cold," she huffed as she recalled the time a Frost Walker had demanded to see her mark of the witch before letting her into the frozen fortress in the High Pass.

"Ollie, you should know what Mother Ashlynn did to the last person who asked to see her mark out in the open and the cold," Virve teased with a grin that showed all of the bearish witch's sharp teeth.

Ashlynn's display of dominance in humbling the Frost Walker Torsten outside the gates had become legendary among the soldiers of Nyrielle's personal guard. At the time, Ashlynn had relied entirely on the sorcery she'd learned from Nyrielle and the power of the vampire's gifts to leap into the air, grabbing the young frost walker's ear and twisting it to drag his head down to her level while scolding him to mind his manners.

No one who had seen the way she utterly humiliated the brash young Frost Walker would ever dream of asking her or any witch to see their mark, but then, Ollie hadn't been able to accompany Ashlynn on her journey through Eldritch lands, so he'd missed the 'helpful' lesson Ashlynn had given to friend and stranger alike.

"After all," Virve continued with a pointed look at the hilt of polished ivory that was visible at his waist. "You're using his horn as one of your blades."

"What?" Ollie gasped, nearly stumbling over his own feet as he backed away from Virve and felt for the hilt of Ice Fang at his hip. "That was him?" Ollie asked, swallowing heavily as he tried to imagine how upset Ashlynn must have been to rip the horn off the head of a Frost Walker.

"All right, enough," Ashlynn said, shaking her head at the antics of the two witches who were supposed to be Isabell's seniors. "Isabell, let's go back inside. We can talk more about your mark after you've had a chance to wash up and have a proper rest," she said before shooting a meaningful glance at Ollie and Virve.

"Once we've all had a chance to rest," she said firmly. The pair might be riding high on the feeling of a new witch joining the coven, but whatever surge of energy was sustaining them now was certain to be short-lived. Besides, she'd promised Nyrielle that she would take a real rest before doing anything else with her coven today, and she didn't intend to go back on her word.

"You don't need to show anyone else," Ashlynn added quickly as she turned back to Isabell. "But I'd like to see your mark for myself. The shape and structure of a witch's mark can reveal things about her power, and you should understand your own mark and what it will mean for you as you learn to use your powers."

"That would be a good thing, I think," Isabell said around a mouthful of egg and fish sandwich. It wasn't until she'd started eating that she realized how hungry she was, and even though the simple sandwich offered up everything she usually wanted to break her fast in the morning, she found herself eying the remnants in the pan and wondering if she could ask Ollie to make her another sandwich before they started hiking back to the castle.

"After that, if you wish to talk about your trial, you're welcome to share it with everyone," she said, hoping that it would help Isabell to find her footing with her fellow witches. "But whether you share or not is up to you," she added. "After all, a witch's secrets are her own."

"Thank you, Ashlynn," Isabell said, licking her fingers as she finished the last bites of the egg sandwich before looking at Ollie in surprise as he held out a second, already prepared sandwich for her.

"Witchcraft drains your body just as much as a hard day's work," Ollie said sheepishly as he offered up the second sandwich. "So, um, if you're a bit hungrier than usual, don't be surprised."

"Thank you, Ollie," she said, relaxing enough to drop the title and treating him as nothing more than the young gentleman he presented himself as. "I know a number of knights and lords who would have paid bags of silver for a cook like you who could make something this tasty in the middle of a camp," she said, gesturing to the simple setup around the bonfire. "I know Georg means well, but don't ever let him talk you into giving up simple pleasures like these," she praised, taking a large bite of her second sandwich. "It's very good."

"Just don't ask me to teach you how," Ollie said, blushing slightly in embarrassment as he remembered what it was like to teach Lady Nyrielle how to make the delicate, softly scrambled eggs. "I'll teach you other things if you really want to know," he added quickly lest she misunderstand. "It's just..."

"I do know how to cook, you know," Isabell chided. "I managed to raise up two children to the point of starting their apprenticeships after all," she said with a teasing smile. "But every cook needs their specialties, so don't worry that I'll go poaching yours. But don't expect to go stealing my fishcake recipe either!"

With that, the group of witches fell into light banter as they quickly packed away their camp, loading things up onto the hand cart that Georg had left behind and pulling it along with them as they made their way up the winding trail to the ancient fortress.

As they walked, Isabell carefully considered Ashlynn's offer of a chance to discuss her vision with the group. Perhaps for some witches, the visions confronted them on aspects of themselves that were deeply personal, so she could understand why many would want to keep them secret.

But when Isabell thought about the ways that Ashlynn was already working to transform the Vale of Mists, and soon the lands beyond it... She felt like she couldn't ignore the warnings she'd received from the Hemlock Seed. Some lessons were far too important to be kept to herself, and this certainly felt like one of them...