

# The Vampire 1061

## Chapter 1061: Brother In Law (Part One)

The fog in the Vale of Mists covered the Ancient Fortress like a soft, gray blanket, shrouding the tops of the towers in mist and turning the world beyond its walls into a dimly seen illusion. The sounds of horseshoes ringing on the flagstones of the courtyard were faint and muffled, and even the creak of the carriages and the clatter of their wheels sounded dull in the chill, wintry air.

Ashlynn kept the group that had assembled to meet the carriages small. Ignatious had already created a disturbance on more than one occasion by continuing to wear the robes of the Inquisition, and he was one of Nyrielle's progeny. While she was confident that she could intervene before anyone could do harm to themselves or the 'guests' arriving in Heila's carriage, given their unique identities, she'd ordered the courtyard cleared of anyone who didn't have a strong reason to be present.

Ollie stood beside her, wearing a fine, jade green tunic, embroidered with a cypress tree across his chest that matched his mark of the witch underneath his tunic. He'd chosen to leave his witch's hat and wand behind, wearing only his darksteel cleaver and Ice Fang as weapons.

He did this in part because he wanted to make it clear that he was present as Ashlynn's knight, and not a member of her coven, even though the two roles overlapped quite a bit. But he also did this because he didn't want to confuse the man who had protected his parents from becoming sacrificial scapegoats when Owain accused him of conspiring with the Eldritch in the wake of Ashlynn's infiltration of the Summer Villa.

Everything that had happened to Ollie afterward had been afterward, and the flame-haired knight didn't want Diarmuid thinking that he'd been wrong to speak up on behalf of Ollie's parents when he said there was no proof that the former kitchen boy had ever consorted with witches or 'demons.'

Ollie intended to set the record straight with Diarmuid when they had a chance to speak, he owed the man a tremendous debt, but for their first meeting, he wanted to do what he could to prevent the man from doubting himself. After all, just coming here would challenge Diarmuid's faith more than any struggle he'd faced before.

Standing behind the Mother of Trees and her Cypress Knight, Rosie Pyre gripped Sionid's hand and waited anxiously for the arrival of her husband, Tommin. Lady Ashlynn had asked her to say nothing and to wait until she'd had a chance to address the fallen Templar before speaking to him, but now that he was this close, she found herself torn between the desire to rush to the carriage to greet the man who

had loved her for many years, and the urge to flee this place before she had no choice but to confront the man he'd become.

"Remember, you can leave any time you want to, and no one will hold you back, not even him," Ashlynn said softly as she watched Heila's young squire, Emmie, hopping down from her place next to the carriage's driver as she rushed to put a step-stool in place before the carriage door.

"Am I that obvious, your Dominion?" Rosie said as her face heated in embarrassment.

"Only to someone who feels similar things," Ashlynn said, looking over her shoulder to give Sir Tommin's wife a reassuring smile. "I'd be lying if I said that there wasn't a part of me that wanted to leave now, so I can remember Loman the way he was when I last saw him, and that the things that happened since then never did."

"I need to do this," Ashlynn reminded the other woman. "Even if he wasn't my brother-in-law, he's still a Lothian lord, still Bors' son and Owain's brother, and still my prisoner in this war. I have a duty here, but you don't. If you want to go, you can go now. Even if you change your mind later, you don't have to face him when he's so fresh from the battle," she said.

Heila's letter had mentioned that Sir Tommin had barely spoken since he was taken prisoner, even when she tended his wounds. It might be a kindness to give the broken Templar time to heal before he had to face his wife and child.

"No," Rosie said resolutely, glancing to Sionid for support before she turned back to face Ashlynn.

"Thank you, your Dominion, but if I don't face him now, I'm afraid I never will. I, I need to see him... and I need to know if there's a part of him that still cares for me and Tonnis."

"You're brave, Rosie," Ashlynn said with a slight nod. "And strong. I'll let you know when it's time, but if you change your mind before then, I trust Sionid can guide you away. Remember, you're the one with the power to choose," she said firmly before turning back to face the carriage.

Heila was the first one out of the carriage, and it pained Ashlynn to see her closest friend looking so ragged and worn. Her simple brown dress was rumpled from sleeping in it in the carriage during the ride, and her hair under her wide-brimmed hat had lost its usual luster and the bounce of her soft curls.

Dark circles were visible under Heila's eyes, and she'd clearly faced more hardship in the past week than she had in the entire month before.

Her grass-green eyes, however, were bright and clear, and the smile of relief on her lips was genuine as she met Ashlynn and Ollie's gazes from across the courtyard. That one look was enough to tell Ashlynn that, for all she'd endured, both during the battle and after, Heila had returned home fatigued, but unbroken by the challenges she'd faced.

Once she was certain that Heila would be fine after a few days of rest, Ashlynn gave her lady-in-waiting a brief nod before she began walking toward the carriage with Ollie following at her side, half a step behind her.

Ollie's stride was even, and his posture remained relaxed, but his hand never moved far from the hilt of Ice Fang, and a faint, ice blue glow could be seen along the weapon's ivory hilt. Much like Ashlynn, he didn't feel like the men in the carriage posed any real threat to himself, or to Ashlynn, or else Heila would have warned them when she emerged from the carriage.

But Ashlynn was about to see her brother-in-law for the first time since Owain tried to beat her to death, and she was about to confront Sir Tommin for the first time since he'd helped to bury her alive. So when Ollie rested his hand on the hilt of the weapon that could help him conjure walls of ice and other barriers, it wasn't because he expected that he would need to protect Ashlynn from the clergymen in the carriage...

It was because he'd experienced the power of the storm Ashlynn conjured when she learned of Jocelynn's betrayal, and he knew how dangerous his liege lady could be when the power of the world responded to the anguish in her heart. If he had to make a move to protect anyone, it wouldn't be Ashlynn he was protecting, but the people who needed to be protected from her.

#### Chapter 1062: Brother In Law (Part Two)

Outside the second carriage, Hauke frowned as he felt the familiar power that Ollie had gathered in the blade carved from Frost Walker horn. But then, looking at the way Ollie glanced carefully over his shoulder at the figures of Rosie and Sionid, he realized the intention behind the gesture and made a similar move himself.

Both Hugo Huanrahan and Liam Dunn were surprised when Hauke's looming figure moved protectively in front of them, but both men wisely said nothing as they realized that a meeting between a powerful

witch like the Mother of Trees and three clergymen from a Church who considered her a heretic could easily become explosive.

At the same time, Kurtz moved in front of his daughter, Emmie, preventing her from returning to Heila's side after she'd set out a footstool for the second carriage. Without Dame Sybyll's gift of the Potence of Blood, he knew that he had no place getting involved in a confrontation between witches and the powerful sorcerers of the Church, but if that was true for the veteran champion of the arena, it was doubly true for his daughter who had only just begun her lessons in sorcery under Lady Heila's tutelage.

Unlike Heila, the next man to emerge from the first carriage was far from unbroken. Loman had once been a dashing young lord, close in age to Ashlynn herself, and the soft chestnut locks of his hair had combined with his refined features and gentle gaze to create an appearance that set countless hearts aflutter among the women of the Lothian Court.

When Ashlynn had first arrived in Lothian March, she'd heard no shortage of young ladies bemoaning his adherence to his position as a priest, and even a few who boldly claimed that they would tempt him to leave the Church for the chance to wed them. Those very same women would likely be horrified at the sight of the man who joined Heila on the flagstones of the courtyard.

Heila might not refer to her healing as a miracle, but the scars on Loman's face told a story that any healer would be horrified by. Dame Sybyll's strike hadn't just torn the skin of his face, she'd sliced through the muscles and tendons of the jaw, and without Heila's healing, the left side of Loman's face would likely have been frozen stiff or drooping and slack jawed with a tendency to drool.

As it stood, there was a clear difference in the range of expression on his face as his mouth opened wide in shock and his remaining eye stared at Ashlynn in disbelief. His jaw worked soundlessly and his lips parted several times, but no words emerged as he struggled to process the sight of the blonde woman in a simple green dress who couldn't possibly be alive, much less in a place like this.

"Hello, Brother-in-law," Ashlynn said softly as she stepped forward to wrap her arms gently around the one-armed priest, pulling him close in a soft embrace that contained all the warmth she could gather for a man she'd once hoped to consider a part of her family in the same way Jocelynn was.

Even if her marriage to Owain had worked out the way she and her parents hoped, there had always been an element of fear in her heart that Loman would be the one to discover her secret. Once they'd finally met and she'd heard his genuine passion for helping the common people of Lothian March, she'd

hoped that he would be like her parents, rising above the dogma of his faith to recognize Ashlynn for the woman she was.

She'd even spent several hours in the days before her wedding, hosting him for tea and speaking about the ways she hoped to help Lothian March as the next Marchioness. At the time, she felt like she'd at least found an ally she could work with, and one whose heart was open and eager to welcome his sister-in-law into his family.

Her simple hug contained all of the hopes she'd had for the relationship they'd started to form less than a year ago when she arrived in Lothian March, but it was also held back by everything that had unfolded since then. She couldn't cling tightly to a man who had sacrificed his own acolytes in an attempt to kill her friend Sybyll or the members of her coven who were as close to her as any member of her blood family.

Nor could she look at him without seeing all the ways that he resembled the man who had beaten her to the brink of death on what should have been the happiest night of her life.

Still, she had to try to reach out to him with all the love in her heart that she could muster. Not because he deserved it, but because if she didn't... If she allowed herself to close off her heart and turn completely away from Loman after the tragedies of a single battle, then how could she possibly face Jocelynn with anything but hatred in her heart.

"Ash-Ashlynn?" Loman finally managed to say in confusion as he pulled back from the embrace to look into the emerald eyes of the sister-in-law who should be dead. The last time he'd seen her, or at least, the last time he'd thought he saw her, had been the night that he ventured into the wilderness at the edge of the Vale of Mists along with Sir Tommin and Diarmuid to exhume her body.

He'd seen the battered, broken and torn flesh of her body, wrapped in a sheet from his brother's bed and beginning to decompose after weeks buried in a shallow grave. Her face had been so badly broken by a series of heavy blows for most people to recognize her, but the pale blonde hair and the remnants of her remaining beauty made it clear that the woman Sir Tommin had buried in the wilderness was his sister-in-law, Ashlynn Blackwell.

That battered, broken face had haunted him for months, accompanied by memories of her gentle laughter and kind, emerald green eyes that glittered in the sun when she spoke about helping his brother bring prosperity to the people of Lothian March. And yet, those very same eyes were looking at him now, from a distance of only inches away... and there could be no mistake about who she was.

"H-how?" Loman asked, unable to manage more than a single, stuttered word to voice his question. How was it possible? And why? Why here of all places, when he was supposed to be greeted by the mysterious demon-witch, the Mother of Trees?

He might be missing an eye, but even he could see that the only demons in the courtyard were Lady Heila and the others who had come with them. The knight standing beside Ashlynn was clearly human, as were the pair of attendants waiting near the gate... So just what was happening here?

"I'll explain soon," Ashlynn said as she pulled him to the side, making space for the other occupants of the carriage to exit. "But first, there's someone else I have to say hello to," she said as her voice turned cold and her emerald gaze hardened.

"Sir Tommin," Ashlynn said to the blind man who had yet to move from his seat in the carriage. "It's been a long time since you and Sir Broll left me in a shallow grave," she said. "We have unfinished business, you and I..."

#### Chapter 1063: A Hollow Templar

In the soft, golden light of the carriage's interior, Sir Tommin lifted his head for what felt like the first time in days. He had no idea how much time had passed since his duel with the Crimson Knight; it could have been two days or ten, and he had no way to be sure. Ever since the light of his own sword blinded him, he'd lived in a world of perpetual darkness and despair where he drifted between awake and asleep without regard to day or night.

Of course, neither the blindness nor his sleep brought him any peace from the horror of the Crimson Knight's strange, dark magic. 'Kiss of the Void: Hollow Faith.' If Tommin had to call it anything, he would call it a curse, and a far crueler one than any he'd ever heard described, even in the archives of the Temple in Lothian City that the High Priest had opened for him once he proved himself worthy of a Holy Light Blade.

Unlike a curse that wracked his body with pain or weakness, the Crimson Knight's curse had attacked the very core of his faith, and with it, his ability to wield the only weapon capable of harming her. But it hadn't attacked his faith with lies and deceit... it had shown him the truths he'd always been aware of, but chose to ignore, forcing him to confront the reality of the Church he'd given his life to.

It was the Church that sheltered him when he no longer felt safe at Owain Lothian's side, but that very same church had done nothing to protect the very same family that he'd hoped to protect by becoming a Templar in the first place.

The Church valued Tommin because he'd given up everything in his life to serve the Church, turning away from his wife and child, the village that the Marquis had entrusted to him to govern, and even the liege lord he'd sworn to defend with his life. He had nothing left but his faith, and that purity of purpose turned Tommin into one of the most powerful weapons the Church possessed in its centuries-long war against the demons.

But the Church's support ended at protecting their weapon. They didn't care about Tommin; they only cared about his ability to kill demons. Just like they only cared about Owain's ability to kill demons.

Owain Lothian was one of the most flawed men that Tommin knew, and the Curse forced him to confront his former lord's many flaws directly. Tommin knew that Owain was a womanizer who frequented brothels in the company of Sir Kaefin whenever the opportunity presented itself. He knew that Owain had a cruel, vindictive personality and that he lashed out at his own men whenever they failed to live up to his unrealistic expectations.

And he knew that Owain was capable of not only murdering his own wife, but sending his men to hide the evidence of his crime, and then resorting to grand conspiracies in order to keep his misdeeds concealed. And the Church that Tommin served was willing to play along with Owain's conspiracy for the same reason that it was willing to protect Tommin from Owain's retribution. Because Owain was very, very skilled at killing demons, and they wanted to use the Lothian Lord as one of their weapons in the upcoming Holy War.

There was nothing holy or righteous in the way the Church had treated Sir Tommin or Lord Owain, but the curse of Hollow Faith didn't stop at forcing him to look at the hypocrisy of his own situation. There had been rumors for years that powerful barons in Lothian March had engaged in unspeakable abuses of power. Ian Hanrahan wasn't alone in the number of women he'd defiled, or the number of his own people that he'd cheated out of their land or their lives.

Yet the Inquisition never moved against any of these mighty lords. So long as the Marquis was willing to overlook their indiscretions, the Church was happy to play along. Moreover, when the demons grew restless and desperate in the depths of winter, emerging from the depths of hidden caves, dark forests, or remote corners of the march, the Templars were never sent to the poorest of the villages who were in the greatest need of defenders.

Instead, people like Sir Tommin were sent to stand in ceremonial vigils, closest to the barons who were safest behind their town and castle walls, hidden in their mighty fortresses. Meanwhile, farmers with barely a gold sovereign to their name had to stand out in the dark and the cold to guard their herds and flocks from demons who prowled in the night.

The Church did a great deal of good in the world. Men like Loman had used the wealth of the Church to feed the hungry, and they used the power of their faith to heal the sick... But they did it in exchange for the worship and devotion of the people.

Only the rarest of people in the Church, compassionate, selfless people of pure faith like Confessor Eleanor, would walk out into the masses of humanity in search of those who needed help, and even she brought them back to the Church to receive aid. Everyone who needed help had to come to the Church, to worship at the altar of the Holy Lord of Light if they wished to receive the aid they so desperately needed.

So how then was the Church any different from a vampire? It fed off the worship of the people like a bloodthirsty fiend, draining the pockets of those who could fill their coffers and giving back only a fraction of what they received. And if all of that was true, and Sir Tommin had seen these things with his own eyes to know that they were, then what did that say about the righteousness of their mission?

Sybyll's curse had forced him to confront how empty his own faith truly was, or rather, how hollow the institution he prayed to had become. And when he did, it also forced him to confront the wickedness he'd enabled by failing to restrain Owain and refusing to bring the young lord's most problematic behavior to Lord Bors' attention.

If Tommin had spoken up, his family might never have been in danger. He might never have needed to forsake his oaths. He might never have needed to abandon his home. And above all else, the thing that had started his downward spiral might never have happened... Lord Owain might never have murdered Lady Ashlynn.

The thought had haunted him ever since his faith crumbled and his sword blinded him. How much tragedy could have been avoided if Lady Ashlynn hadn't died at Lord Owain's hands. If she'd really been a witch, then the Church should have been the ones to handle her, and if she was innocent...



If it really was just a simple birthmark, the way Inquisitor Diarmuid said it was, then she wouldn't have needed to die at all, and Tommin would still be enjoying the life of a respected knight, guarding his lord's family while raising his own.

So when he heard Lady Ashlynn's voice, clear and unmistakable even after all these months, it pierced through the malaise he'd sunken into like a ray of light peeking through the clouds. Even though he couldn't see her, he still raised his head for the first time in days, turning his head to face the direction her voice had come from.

He knew that voice well. He'd been at Lord Owain's side the entire time the presumptive Lothian heir had been courting her. He'd heard that voice when it was full of praise for Owain as he demonstrated his skill at the festival games in Blackwell Harbor, and he'd heard exuberant excitement in her voice when Owain presented her with the string of shells he'd won for his efforts.

He'd heard fear and uncertainty in her voice the first time she visited Lothian March, when she asked if they had enough guards to keep them safe on the long journey to the frontier and the seat of Lothian power. And he'd heard deep love and affection in her voice on the last night he'd seen her alive, when she spoke her vows to bind her life to Owain Lothian's, joining in his struggle as they strove to live a life worthy of reaching the heavenly shores.

But he'd never heard the cold, unforgiving tone she spoke with now, and her words landed on his heart like a blow from the Crimson Knight's axe...

"We have unfinished business, you and I..."

#### Chapter 1064: Unfinished Business

"Diarmuid," Tommin said slowly, turning his sightless eyes in the direction of the Inquisitor who had been helping him throughout the journey. When he spoke, his voice was raspy and cracked, and his mouth felt drier than a desert, but he licked his lips several times and made himself keep speaking despite the pain.

"Am I trapped in a nightmare?" Tommin asked. "Or is that," he started, swallowing heavily as he struggled to ask if the impossible was really happening. "Is that Lady Ashlynn's voice I hear?"

"This is real, Sir Tommin," Ashlynn called from outside the carriage before Diarmuid could offer any response. Not that Diarmuid was in any condition to respond to Tommin's question. The Inquisitor had been staring at Ashlynn in disbelief ever since she addressed Lord Loman as 'brother-in-law,' and he still wasn't sure that he believed his eyes, despite the truth in front of him.

"This is real, Sir Tommin," Ashlynn repeated when the wounded Templar didn't make a sound or a move in response to her statement. "And I'm no more dead now than I was the night that you and Sir Broll buried me."

"Now get out of here," she commanded as her patience began to wane. "If I can claw my way out of the grave you dumped me in, then you can get out of a carriage to face the woman you buried alive," she said, clenching a fist tightly as she fought to hold herself back from climbing into Heila's carriage to drag him out.

Standing beside her, Loman flinched as he heard the venom dripping from her voice, but more than that, he felt as though someone had carved out his guts to drop them on the flagstones at his feet. Alive? She'd still been alive when his brother ordered Sir Tommin and Sir Broll to dispose of her... her body?

He knew his brother was cruel, but he never imagined that Owain could have done something so vile... For her to survive that and crawl out of her own grave had to be some kind of miracle, or perhaps some kind of dark, demonic witchcraft, given where she currently was. But then his mind caught up with him as he tried to assemble the pieces of the puzzle that didn't fit together. If she'd crawled out of her own grave, then whose body had they found when Sir Tommin led him and Diarmuid to the place she'd been buried? The grave they found had been shallow, but it hadn't been empty.

"Let me help you, Sir Tommin," Diarmuid said softly inside the carriage as he reached out to take the blind Templar's arms, helping him to make his way toward the open door of the carriage.

Like Loman, Diarmuid didn't understand how Lady Ashlynn could be here and alive, but the why didn't matter. They were in the heart of the Vale of Mists, in the courtyard of the Ancient Fortress that belonged to the woman that Lady Heila referred to as the Harbinger of Death.

Now was not the time to ask questions; now was the time to follow Lady Ashlynn's instructions. Because, whatever other impossible things might be going on here, one thing was clear to Diarmuid above all others. Everyone in this courtyard, from the young knight at Lady Ashlynn's side to the Willow

Witch who had brought them here, every single one of them looked at Lady Ashlynn with a combination of adoration, respect... and a small trace of fear.

Diarmuid believed that he knew Lady Ashlynn better than anyone who had never met her could. He'd spent months interviewing her family, tutors, household servants, and anyone else who might have been able to offer up evidence to prove Owain Lothian's claim that she was a witch. He'd visited her family home, seen the vegetable garden she cultivated, and heard countless tales about how studious she was and how much she wanted to do good in the world.

Nothing he'd ever heard about her would lead a man to be afraid of her, but that was before Lord Owain tried to beat her to death, and Sir Tommin helped to bury her alive. For a woman who could survive those things... It would be surprising if she hadn't transformed into a person who should command both respect and fear.

"You must be Inquisitor Diarmuid," Ashlyn said politely, though her tone was still cold and her eyes were fixed on Sir Tommin as Diarmuid helped him to exit the carriage. "I appreciate you helping him, but Sir Tommin can stand on his own, can't you, Sir Tommin?"

Diarmuid was about to protest that he was only acting as Sir Tommin's guide when he was silenced by a subtle shake of the Templar's head. Tommin awkwardly patted Diarmuid's arm in thanks before standing up as straight and tall as he could, turning to face in the direction of Lady Ashlynn's voice as he struggled to find the words he so desperately needed to say.

"Lady Ashlynn," he said with great difficulty, licking his lips and swallowing heavily as he struggled against the dryness of his throat after more than a day of only drinking a few sips of water.

"I've done a great wrong," he continued as he carefully slid his left foot back, lowering himself down to one knee and bowing his head before her. "If, if I'd known you were alive, I never would have left you in the wilderness. We, Sir Broll and I, we should have taken you to the Church no matter what Lord Owain ordered," he said.

"Of course you should have," Ashlynn said, though her voice was thick with scorn rather than understanding. "Then you could have washed your hands of me and made everything that happened after that someone else's problem. You'd prefer to have the Church execute me as a witch instead of doing it yourself, wouldn't you?"

"No!" Tommin exclaimed, his head snapping up in shock as he denied her words. "No, if you aren't a witch, then the Church should have been able to prove your innocence. They would have protected you from Lord Owain the way that they... they way that they..." he tried to say, only to falter as he realized the lie he was about to tell on the Church's behalf.

He wanted to say that the Church would have protected her the way they'd protected him, but would they? Was Lady Ashlynn useful to them? Useful enough to support her against her demon-slaughtering husband? There was a time when Sir Tommin would have said that they would protect her, and he would have spoken with great conviction. But now... he could no longer bring himself to put his faith in the Church that seemed to blend faith with filth in equal measure.

"Oh," Ashlynn said simply, shaking her head as she looked down at the kneeling Templar. "So the Church would have protected me if I weren't a witch. But, Sir Tommin," she said slowly as she knelt down in front of him, reaching out to lay a hand on his rough, unshaven cheek. "The mark of the witch on my body is real," she said, speaking slowly so she could be certain that he heard every word.

"I may never have touched the power of the world before the night that Owain tried to kill me," she said. "But make no mistake, I am a witch. Knowing that, can you still say that you wouldn't have buried me alive in the woods? If you had known the mark was real, and that I'd never done anything to harm anyone, would you still have taken me to the Church?" Ashlynn asked.

"Tell me, Sir Tommin," she commanded in quiet words that were as sharp as steel. "If you'd known that I was alive, what would you have done that night?"

#### Chapter 1065: Uncomfortable Truths (Part One)

When Nyrielle took Thane and Zedya as her progeny, she bestowed the Voice of Command and the Mesmerizing Gaze on them. The gifts had many uses, among them, the ability to pry the truth from even the most unwilling of captives. Over the past several decades, both Nyrielle's Lord General and her handmaiden had used those gifts countless times to learn secrets that Nyrielle's enemies would never have imagined that they'd divulge.

But when it came to Marcel, the famed Black Merchant who served as Nyrielle's Master of Spies, she bestowed the Cloak of Darkness on him. It was a powerful gift that allowed the cunning merchant to travel farther through human lands than most of her progeny dared, and it made him as elusive as smoke on the rare occasions he'd ever been seen where he shouldn't be, but it did nothing to help him separate truth from falsehood or to open the lips of the unwilling.

To do that, he had to rely on a different set of vampiric gifts, along with lessons born of Nyrielle's centuries of experience observing people. Under her tutelage, Marcel sharpened his senses to an extreme, learning to hear the slightest irregularity in a person's heartbeat, to see the shifts not only in the direction of their gaze, but in the size of their pupils.

These and dozens of other physical tells became a guidebook to the human heart, and Marcel had memorized every word of it. After decades of practice, Marcel frequently only needed to ask a question in order to obtain an answer directly from the way a person's body reacted.

Ashlynn hadn't come nearly so far in applying those lessons to the enhanced senses she trained in Georg's kitchen when she became Nyrielle's Seneschal, but she'd begun to learn. She couldn't necessarily hear a person's heartbeat from several paces away, and as sharp as her gaze was, reading a man's pulse in his neck when he was as scruffy and unshaven as Sir Tommin had become in the days since his defeat was far too difficult for her.

So when Ashlynn knelt before Sir Tommin, placing a hand on his unshaven cheek, she wasn't doing it to be kind or gentle, nor was she doing it to intimidate him. She touched him because it let her feel the way his heart raced when she asked him what he would have done that fateful night if he'd known she was alive.

Like this, she could feel the muscles in his neck working as he swallowed several times, trying to organize his thoughts. By touching him, she brought herself to hear the catch in his breathing as he confronted the gap between the answer he wanted to give and the truth, and she could see the way his blinded eyes moved behind their lids, betraying the direction of their owners' thoughts even after they ceased to help him navigate the world.

Everyone gathered in the courtyard watched as Sir Tommin grappled with Ashlynn's question, but two of the men in the courtyard found themselves grappling with it themselves as her simple sounding question cut to the heart of their faith.

Loman's answer sprang to mind almost instantly, but, looking at his sister-in-law, returned from the dead and living in exile among the demons, he struggled to accept it. Exemplar Domas Onaitis had emphasized on more than one occasion that witches who were born with the mark of the witch needed to be captured alive if possible, and they must be brought to the Holy City to stand trial for their crimes.

Away from the Holy City, a witch like Lady Ashlynn should only be burned at the stake if there was no way to safely capture them. In truth, however, burning at the stake was reserved for those the Church

considered 'hedge witches', people without marks who learned the dark arts from demons and became a danger to their entire community.

So, when it came to Ashlynn, Loman's first thought was to do as his teacher had always instructed. If she had been born with a mark, she had to be brought to the Holy City to stand trial before the Saint and the Exemplars. What would happen after that point was none of his business, though Exemplar Domas had hinted that he would learn such things if he continued on his path to becoming an Exemplar himself one day.

But then, on the heels of that thought, came another thought that was deeply uncomfortable. Loman's one-eyed gaze moved from Ashlynn and Sir Tommin's kneeling figures to the stump of his left arm. Just days ago, that arm had raised the Bow of Stars, raining down the power of the Holy Lord of Light on demons and defenders alike while consuming the lives of faithful acolytes to unleash its devastating power.

Loman had never questioned the rituals that Exemplar Domas had taught him, just like he'd never questioned the Church's decree that a witch must be brought to the Holy City to stand trial for her crimes. The result of that unquestioning faith, however, had led to the death of several acolytes, and were it not for the horned witch Heila's miracle of healing during the battle, would likely have led to the deaths at least three times as many of Hanrahan's defenders as it did.

During his trial before Dame Sybyll's court, Loman had been forced to listen as Lord Jalal and Lady Heila described his miracle as 'sorcery', claiming that he'd been taught poorly and that he wasn't in control of the forces he used to fight back against the demons. They blamed his teacher for his ignorance and on that basis, argued that his life should be spared.

At the time, Loman protested the idea that his teacher would have hidden things from him that he should have known, or that his ritual had been designed in a way that it invited tragedies and demanded the deaths of the faithful.

Now, however, as he stood beside his sister-in-law, he found himself confronting a question he'd never asked before. What crimes had she committed before his brother tried to murder her? If, as she'd said, she'd never touched the power of witchcraft before her wedding night, then was she really a witch? And if he'd done as his faith demanded, bringing her to stand trial in the Holy City before the Saint and the assembled Exemplars, what would they have done with a woman like Ashlynn?

He didn't know, but for the first time in his life, he found that he couldn't plaster over his doubts with faith. As strong as his faith was, it had begun to crack, and those cracks were only growing wider now that he'd arrived in the Vale of Mists to find his sister-in-law waiting to welcome him with a gentle embrace.

His sister-in-law was a witch, and he was a priest, yet she'd still greeted him with warmth and love... In the face of that, could he still say that he was bound by his faith to take her prisoner and force her to stand trial? He knew what he would have done on the night of his brother's wedding. That night, he wouldn't have questioned the requirements of his faith. But today... Today he wasn't so sure.

#### Chapter 1066: Uncomfortable Truths (Part Two)

Ashlynn's question landed on Inquisitor Diarmuid in much the same way it fell on Loman, though the older man's response was substantially different.

Diarmuid couldn't deny what he would have done had he stood in Sir Tommin's shoes on the night that Owain attempted to murder his wife for bearing the mark of a witch. As an Inquisitor, his duty was clear, and if Ashlynn had been alive, and he'd known nothing of her beyond her name and station, he would have carried her away to the Church in the hopes of keeping her alive until they reached the Holy City.

A man who knew nothing, but possessed clear instructions and was vested with great power was one of the most dangerous men in the world, and Diarmuid was honest enough to admit that, on the night of Ashlynn's wedding to Owain Lothian, he had been just such a man.

At most, he would have taken Owain Lothian into custody along with Ashlynn Blackwell, and he would have been prepared to surrender Owain to the King's justice for the crime of attempted magnicide if the Church concluded that Ashlynn was an innocent woman. It would have infuriated Bors Lothian, and there were factions within the Church who would have been furious about the disruption to their plans to use the Lothians as the point of a spear in the coming Holy War, but it would have been the right thing to do based on what he would have known at the time.

His answer changed considerably, however, if he took into account everything he had learned about Ashlynn Blackwell during his months of investigation. She bore the mark of a witch, and the mark was genuine... But she wasn't a wicked woman. Confronted by the contradiction of a woman bearing the mark of a witch while simultaneously dedicating herself to ways to better her home County of Blackwell or later, her adopted home of Lothian March, he couldn't easily declare her guilt.

An Inquisitor sought truth, and if he blindly handed her over to his superiors, he would never unravel the truth of her existence. He wasn't about to say that he would have been capable of bringing her to a place like the Vale of Mists, but he certainly could have carried her away to somewhere safe and hidden where he could ask her questions in order to understand the truth of her existence.

And then... he didn't know. Part of him liked to think that he would have kept her secret, perhaps returning her to her home in Blackwell County. Another part of him felt that he would have faced his superiors, pleading her case and defending her innocence. There weren't any easy answers, but he liked to think that he would have started from trying to understand.

His answer today, however, would have shocked the man he'd been just weeks ago. There was a greater truth in the world to discover, and he'd started to see glimpses of that greater truth. Now he felt like he was walking into the darkness while carrying a flickering torch bearing the Holy Lord of Light's flame. If he wanted to shine a light on that greater truth, he needed to be willing to walk among the people he'd once called demons, and he would have to learn to listen to the answers they gave him.

The man he was today would have struggled with the decision Lady Ashlynn's question demanded, but Diarmuid wanted to believe that he would have carried her into the Vale of Mists in search of safety and answers to the many questions that plagued him since his first encounter with Lady Heila.

It was impossible to say for certain what he would have done in the situation Sir Tommin had been in. Surprise, panic, the presence of Sir Broll, the orders and expectations coming from Lord Owain all would have combined to influence his ability to make good decisions, but he hoped that he would have done better for the young woman than to dump her in a shallow grave and bury her alive.

Beside him, kneeling on the flagstones of the courtyard, Sir Tommin shivered in a way that had nothing to do with the cold, misty air. Lady Ashlynn's hand felt warm on his cheek, like the sun shining on a cold, dark world, but that warmth brought no comfort. Instead, it reminded him of the light of the world that he'd lost, and how empty and hollow he'd become in the days since his duel with the Crimson Knight.

He desperately wanted to return to that light, to a world that was filled with warmth and purpose. To a world where he could dedicate his sword to a worthy purpose and where his life had meaning. He wanted, more than anything, to stand with pride again as a knight, and so he gave Lady Ashlynn the answer that a knight should.

"If I'd known that you were alive," he said, licking his cracked lips and swallowing heavily to wet his parched throat. "Then I would have fought for you. A knight defends his lady, and you were my Lord's



wife. I, I would have fought for you," he said, using words that sounded proper even though there were many doubts in his heart.

After all, while it was true that a knight defends his lady, would he really have defended his lady against her own husband? He had fought at Sir Broll's side for years longer than he'd known Lady Ashlynn... If Broll had remained loyal to Owain's orders, would Tommin really have been able to raise his sword against his friend?

He doubted it. Still, the words he spoke were appropriate for any knight to speak, and he was a knight. No matter what had happened, he was still a knight, even if he no longer possessed the faith to be a Templar, and he clung to that identity as he spoke words that even he wasn't certain were true.

"I'm a knight," he repeated. "And a knight..."

-SMACK-

The sound of Ashlynn's hand slapping Sir Tommin's cheek echoed across the courtyard, sounding even louder than it should have in the muted quiet of the fog shrouded day. That sound was followed seconds later by the sound of Tommin's body falling heavily to the ground, sprawling in an undignified heap as her blow threw him off balance.

"Do not lie to me, Tommin," Ashlynn fumed, reaching out with one hand to grab a fistful of his tunic and standing up, dragging him to his feet as she did. With one hand gripping his tunic, she placed the other hand on his opposite cheek, ignoring the trickle of blood that spilled from his split lip as she glared at the trembling knight.

"Don't think that I won't know when you lie," she snarled at the shivering, blinded knight. "Can you really tell me, honestly and truthfully, that you would have fought Sir Broll to rescue me? That you would have defied Owain's orders to bury me?"

Standing just a few paces away from her, Loman's eye opened wide in surprise as the refined, almost petite woman that he'd once shared tea with let loose her fury on Sir Tommin. It wasn't just the sharp change in her demeanor that shocked him, however, or the way she turned so quickly to violence.

He'd seen men like his brother who were similarly quick to temper, and given what Tommin had done to her, he could hardly blame her for having a kettleful of pent up anger and resentment to take out on the man.

What shocked him more than that was the sheer physical power of her assault on the knight who had, until recently, been known as one of the strongest Templars in the whole of Lothian March, and a swordsman second only to Owain Lothian. Tommin stood head and shoulders taller than Lady Ashlynn, and he outweighed her by a considerable amount, yet in her hands, he looked no more formidable than a kitten scruffed by its mother... and one that was in just as much trouble as a disobedient child.

Just as he'd begun to doubt the Church's wisdom in declaring witches a danger to all mankind, and treating them as a threat that must be extinguished, he saw his first proof of the power his sister-in-law had come to possess since she began to use the powers of a witch, and once again, he found his heart filled with uncertainty and doubt.

Just how much had the kind, gentle Ashlynn changed? And how much of it was because she was a witch, a demon inherently predisposed to destruction, and how much was because of what his brother had done to her and everything she had suffered ever since? He didn't know, but for the first time since he'd seen his sister-in-law, now returned from the dead, he was afraid of the answer.

#### Chapter 1067: Uncomfortable Truths (Part Three)

"I'm told that you took 'Piety' and 'Righteousness' as two of your virtues when you became a knight," Ashlynn said as a faint, emerald green light began to shine in her eyes. The mist around her danced and swirled, caught in the eddies of her growing power as her resentment for everything Sir Tommin had done grew.

Nearby, Ollie's hand tightened on the hilt of Frost Fang and his feet shifted subtly into a fighting stance. At this distance, if Ashlynn wanted to claim Sir Tommin's life, no one could stop her, but Ollie never intended to make a move to protect the captive knight. Instead, watched the flowing patterns of energy swirling around her carefully and prepared to raise an icy barrier to shield the innocents nearby from getting caught in her fury if Sir Tommin's words continued to enrage her.

Already, he was looking at Diarmuid and wishing the man wasn't hovering so close to his blinded companion. Of everyone here, the Inquisitor was the most likely to be caught up in the fringes of Ashlynn's fury, and Ollie wasn't certain he could move quickly enough to protect Diarmuid if the Mother of Trees chose to use her tremendous power to strike down the man who had buried her alive.

"If you'd known I was a witch," Ashlynn said slowly, carefully enunciating each word. "Would you have acted like a knight protecting his lady? Or would you have done as your faith demands, serving your cause of 'righteousness' by slaying a witch?" Her voice dripped with scorn as she emphasized the word 'righteousness', and her fist tightened on his tunic, straining the heavy fabric so much that it began to tear in her grasp.

"Tell me, Tommin," Ashlynn spat as she fought to restrain herself from shaking the man like a cat would shake a rat. "Is 'Truth' one of your virtues? As a knight, can you live up to that one, or will you lie to me again?"

"F-forgive me. My Lady," Tommin stammered as his heart thundered in his chest like the hooves of a warhorse dashing away from certain death. "I did not mean to deceive..."

-SMACK-

Ashlynn's second slap echoed like thunder, followed by the sound of tearing fabric as the force of her blow landed so heavily on Tommin's face that the cloth in Ashlynn's fist tore free while the blinded knight fell heavily to the flagstones several paces away.

Tomin's head swam and his whole world tilted as though he were a drunkard, making it all but impossible for him to return to his feet. The pain in his jaw burned like fire and a ringing sound filled his ear, nearly drowning out the sound of Ashlynn's footsteps as she stalked toward the fallen Templar like a cat stalking its prey.

"Step back, and stay behind me," Ollie said softly as he took the opportunity to place himself between Ashlynn and Diarmuid. "This may be a little... intense," he said awkwardly as he tried and failed to come up with a brief way to explain his concerns to the Inquisitor in a way that didn't make Lady Ashlynn sound like a dangerous and deranged fiend.

"Is she going to...?" Diarmuid asked quietly, his voice trailing off as he didn't know exactly what he was trying to ask. Use witchcraft? Of course she would, she was a witch.

To her, it was likely no different from when a member of the Inquisition summoned Holy Flames to punish a heretic. Diarmuid himself had rarely found a reason to draw upon the power of Holy Flames, but since coming to Lothian March, he'd found many members of the Inquisition were much quicker to

do so after spending much of their lives fighting against the Eldritch or rooting out heresy on the frontier. Percivus in particular was nearly as skilled as the best Inquisitors in the Holy City when it came to the use of holy flame.

But what a witch might unleash when confronted with the man who buried her alive and then lied to her face that he would have protected her if he'd known she was alive at the time... Diarmuid had no idea.

"I don't know," Ollie said quietly. "I doubt it will be a storm again, but..."

In the time their whispered conversation had taken, Ashlynn had come to stand before the dazed and disoriented Sir Tommin who had managed to pull himself into an extremely subservient posture, kneeling on both knees with his hands pressed on the cool flagstones of the courtyard.

"I, I'm sorry, my Lady," Tommin said, speaking earnestly and from the heart. The shame that burned on his cheeks felt even hotter than the sting of Lady Ashlynn's slaps and the ache in his heart felt like it had become a pit that consumed his entire being. "I, I've failed you..."

The words he'd spoken had been the right words to say. The correct, knightly words. But was he really that knight? No, he wasn't, and he knew it. If Ashlynn had spoken up that night, if she'd pleaded for her life and confessed to bearing the mark of the witch... he never would have let her live.

He'd have struck her down alongside Sir Broll, and most likely, he'd have insisted on waiting out the storm so they could burn her body, break her bones and scatter the ashes the way Lord Owain had commanded. If she had risen up after the beating that Lord Owain had given her, he would have been too terrified of a witch rising from the grave, just as she had, to do anything less.

"I accept whatever punishment you wish to bestow on me, Lady Ashlynn," he said as hot tears streamed down his stinging cheeks. "Even if you wish to take my life for what I've done, I understand. I have nothing left," he said in a voice that was broken and frail. "So do with me as you wish..."

"You have nothing left?" Ashlynn said, raising a brow as glowered at the kneeling, broken knight. "Nothing at all that you would wish to live for? Then do you have any last words you want to offer before I claim your life?"

"I know that I have failed to meet my struggle," Tommin said as he raised his head, looking around for a moment before he realized that he'd lost all sense of direction and didn't know where Loman or Diarmuid stood. "I can only hope to atone for my failings in the next life," he said, lowering his head. "If one of my brothers in faith would hear my confession so that I can leave behind the burdens of this life, I would be grateful."

For a moment, no one moved. Loman shared a brief look, as if asking which of them would honor their fallen companion's request, but as soon as they saw the look of dark fury on Ashlynn's face, combined with Sir Ollie placing a hand on Diarmuid's shoulder to hold the man back, neither of them spoke up to volunteer.

"Well, Rosie?" Ashlynn asked as she turned to face the pair of women standing by the gate that had gone ignored this whole time as the tension between Ashlynn and Sir Tommin mounted. "He is your husband and the father of your child. Do you have anything you wish to say to him?"

#### Chapter 1068: Love's End (Part One)

By now, Loman felt like there wasn't much left that could shock him, and the fog that shrouded the Ancient Fortress had given everything happening in the courtyard a hazy, dreamlike quality. But when his sister-in-law called upon Sir Tommin's wife, he realized that he'd been wrong about ability to be surprised as he watched the simply dressed pair of women making their way across the courtyard to join Ashlynn and the fallen Templar.

Loman didn't recognize the woman with Rosie, but he'd seen Tommin's wife at a number of festivals and feasts in the years since his return from the Holy City, and the combination of her delicate features with long chestnut hair was striking enough to be instantly recognizable even if she'd abandoned the finery and jewels of a knight's wife for a simple, though incredibly well made, tunic and skirt.

"It's really her," he breathed, turning to look at the flame haired knight standing protectively near Diarmuid for an explanation. The young man, however, only shook his head, pressing a finger over his lips and gesturing for Loman to watch things unfold.

Rosie advanced slowly across the courtyard, clinging to Sionid's hand as if it was the only thing in the world keeping her on her feet.

"Don't let me go to him," she whispered, squeezing Sionid's hand to reassure herself that the constable's wife had a firm grip on her. "I don't know if I'm strong enough to hold myself back when he's suffering like this, but..."

"I won't let go," Sionid said gently. "Say the words you need to say, her Dominion will keep you safe. Pour it all out there."

"Rosie?" Tommin asked, turning to face the pair of women as he heard their approaching voices. Tears stained his cheeks and his eyes stared sightlessly at the women, feeling each muffled foot fall as though it was a blow from a hammer on the most tender part of his heart. "How? How are you here? You shouldn't be here..."

"I shouldn't be here?" Rosie said, stopping herself two paces short of Tommin's kneeling figure. "My husband has been gravely wounded in battle, he's lucky to be alive at all... If I shouldn't be here at his side, where else should I be?"

Looking at him now, broken, sobbing and wretched, there was very little left of the heroic figure she remembered from the past decade. The face was the same one that had smiled at her from inches away when she woke in the morning, and his lips were the same ones that told her that he wanted her face to be the first thing he saw every morning, but seeing him now...

It was like looking at a stranger, wearing a mask of her husband's face, and not the man she'd promised her life to. After her conversation with Constable Daithi and Sionid, she'd been prepared to see the man whose strong arms once held her close transformed into a raging, wounded beast.

She'd prepared herself for his rage and his hatred, to see a man who had never raised his voice at her in anger consumed by the darkness of his injuries and his failure. Even if she didn't think it was likely that he would allow himself to be overwhelmed by anger, she'd at least expected defiance.

She expected him to stand tall and proud as he always had, unflinching even in the face of certain death the way he'd been in so many of the stories his soldiers told about him when he wasn't present to hush them in a display of knightly humility.

But nothing could have prepared her to see her husband like this... A hollowed out, broken shell of a man that bore little resemblance to the knight who had won her heart.

"That's not what I meant," Tommin said as somehow, he found the strength to hold up his hand, reaching out for the woman who had captured his heart and held it gently in her hands for so many years. "They told me that you'd been poisoned. That Lord Owain schemed against you and Tonnis. Tonnis," he said, his voice cracking with a combination of emotion and strain. "Where is Tonnis? Is he here too?" Tommin asked, his head turning back and forth as his ears strained to hear any sound of his son's presence.

The last time he'd seen Tonnis, he'd told his son that he would have to step up sooner than most to become the man of the house. At the time, Tommin had presented the sword he'd carried into battle at Lord Owain's side to his young son, and he listened to Tonnis swear solemnly on the hilt of his father's blade that he would grow into a strong knight to protect his mother and the people of Hurel.

It was too much of a burden to place on a lad who should have been learning his letters and listening to his tutors, but Tommin had no choice. If he stayed, he'd only expose his family to more danger, and so he passed on his sword years before his son was strong enough to take it up, in the hopes that one day, Tonnis would grow into the kind of man who could wield the blade to keep his mother safe. And maybe, if he was as lucky as his father had been, to protect a family of his own.

If he was here now... If he was watching as his father crumbled before his eyes...

Tommin had thought that he'd lost everything before, but now, confronted by the idea that his son would bear witness to his final, most shameful moments, something deep in his heart cracked, exposing the last few remaining bits of pride that he had left.

Was this really how he was going to meet his end? Kneeling like a beggar before a woman who manhandled him as though he were a small child? But maybe... maybe if Rosie would take him back... if he could return to his family somehow, then perhaps there was still hope. Perhaps Lady Ashlynn wouldn't be cruel enough to execute him before his own wife and child.

There wasn't much faith left in Tommin's heart, but what little he had left, he placed into the hand he held out, hoping against hope that Rosie would take his hand so he didn't have to face the eternal darkness of the world alone, even if these were his final moments...

Chapter 1069: Love's End (Part Two)

"Tonnis is safe, but he isn't here," Rosie said, staring at her husband's outstretched hand and refusing to take it. "We're safe because her Dominion, Lady Ashlynn, sent two of her vampires to rescue us... Then she healed us. Lord Owain, he used Nightweaver Venom on your son and me. 'Spider Demon Poison,'" she added when she saw confusion on Tommin's face.

"Your master wanted us to suffer because you abandoned him. He wanted you to watch us suffering... but you never cared about us enough to know that we were sick," she said as a heat began to build within her chest that slowly overwhelmed the anguish of seeing him laid low like this.

In the time since Tommin had left Owain's service and turned away from his family to take the oath of a Templar, he hadn't written a single letter to his family. He hadn't visited Hurel village to check in on his people either, nor had he done anything to help his son prepare to take on the heavy responsibilities that would belong to him as the next knight of Hurel.

Tommin had acted as though his family no longer existed. Or perhaps it was better to say that he acted as though the Sir Tommin Pyre she'd married had fallen in battle, and Templar Tommin had nothing to do with the man he'd once been.

"But why?" Tommin asked, finally lowering his hand when he realized that Rosie would no longer reach out to him with comfort, even now in his final moments. "Why would Owain do something so vile to you... And to Tonnis? You'd done nothing to him. If he blamed anyone for anything, it should have been me! That's why I left. So he wouldn't harm you if he came to resent me..."

"I can explain," Hugo Hanrahan said, stepping out from behind Hauke's looming, protective figure in order to address the broken templar and his wife. His heart twisted in his chest as he watched the tragedy unfolding in front of him, but he couldn't let the victim of this tragedy bear the sole responsibility of explaining it to Tommin. Not when he had his own share of guilt for what had happened to her and her son.

"Lady Rosie," the young lord continued, bowing his head to the knight's wife and choosing his words with care. He wasn't blameless in this tragedy, but he wasn't about to fall on his sword for Owain Lothian either.

"When I served Lord Owain as his Steward, he commanded Sir Rain and me to purchase the Nightweaver Venom to be used on you and your son," Hugo explained. "He wanted you to suffer from a malady that the Church couldn't cure. He wanted your husband to feel betrayed by the Church the way he felt Sir Tommin had betrayed him."



"Once Sir Tommin proved he could wield a Holy Light Blade, it became impossible for Owain to move against him directly," Hugo continued as he turned to face the kneeling knight. "You were too well protected, Sir Tommin, and if the Church caught wind of Owain moving against one of their most holy Templars, they would not have hesitated to turn loose the Inquisition on him, son of a marquiss or not."

Standing to the side, Diarmuid drew a sharp breath of cold wintery air, letting it out slowly as the magnitude of Owain's cruelty and the complexity of his scheme struck him. The fact that Lady Ashlynn sent a pair of vampires to retrieve Sir Tommin's wife and child had already become a painful reminder that the enemies of the Church were fighting this war with more honor and compassion than the Church's greatest disciple in Lothian March had displayed.

Owain might be Lady Ashlynn's bitter enemy in a blood feud that would surely end with one of their deaths, and Sir Tommin, first as Owain's vassal and later as a representative of the Church had to be someone that Ashlynn wanted to see defeated and punished for what he'd done... yet she'd intervened to stop that feud from claiming the lives of Tommin's wife and child.

The fact that she'd tried already spoke volumes of her restraint in this war, but the fact that she'd succeeded in curing someone afflicted by Spider Demon Poison was even more impressive. Diarmuid knew very well how few healers within the Church could cleanse such a lethal poison, and for most of them, it would require the use of sacred rites similar to the one Loman had used to fight in the Battle of Hanrahan.

The Church could save someone who had been deeply poisoned by Spider Demon Venom, but the longer the poison had been left to fester, the more lives would be placed in jeopardy by the healing rite. For Sir Tommin, the church wouldn't have hesitated to risk the lives of dozens of acolytes... but for his family?

Even Diarmuid had to admit that the most the Church would have done was to ease Tonniss and Rosie's suffering. Moreover, there were those within the Church and the Inquisition who would have sent an Inquisitor to sit with Sir Tommin as he grieved, propping up his faith in the Church that was failing him while honing his anguish into yet another weapon pointed at the 'demons' whose only role in this tragedy was to be the source of the venom.

It was unlikely that Owain's scheme would have broken Tommin's faith completely... the Church would find a way to preserve a Templar who could wield a Holy Light Blade, and he might have been even more lethal after emerging from the tragedy, but the fact that Owain was willing to try said a great deal

about how intensely the young lord hated Sir Tommin... and how little he feared the Church behind the Templar.

"Your master couldn't hurt you," Rosie said bitterly. "But he could hurt us and make you watch. It's just, he was wrong. Because you never cared about us enough to even notice... So Tonnis and I were doomed to die, just to make you suffer, and you, you didn't even know we were sick."

"Even now, when Lady Ashlynn asked you for your last words," Rosie said with hot tears spilling down her cheeks. "You didn't leave any words for me. No words for Tonnis. You turned to your Church and your hateful Holy Lord of Light because that's all you care about!"

"You lied to me, Tommin," Rosie said, clinging to Sionid for support as she did as the other woman had suggested, pouring out her heart full of grievances. "You promised me the day we wed that we'd struggle together for the rest of our lives. You swore to me that you'd carry me forward so we reached the Heavenly Shores together."

"But now you've given up on even that!" Rosie cried. "Even if you thought we'd already died, you didn't care to struggle for us. Where did your faith go, Tommin? Your faith that was so important to you... Didn't you think that Tonnis and I would be waiting for you on the Heavenly Shores? Couldn't you have asked to spend the rest of this life struggling to reach us there?"

The force of her grievance clawed at Tommin like a physical thing, tearing at him with greater force than the claws of a demon, ripping open the scars of his broken faith and exposing them once again.

He remembered the day they'd stood in the great Temple in Lothian City, bathed in the light of dawn filtering through the stained glass windows and reflecting off the golden icons of the Church. Her chestnut hair sparkled in the light like spun gold, and Tommin thought himself the luckiest man in the world when he promised to be her sword and shield, to defend her from harm and lead their family on a path of duty and devotion to each other and to the Holy Lord of Light, until they reached the Heavenly Shores at the end of this life...

The only day more precious than that had been the day just a year later, when they held each other and their infant son Tonnis, promising to build a home filled with love for their fledgling family. He'd hoped to have another son or even a daughter, but following Owain into battle and guarding his liege lord left him with much less time for his family than he would have wished for... So what time he'd had, he'd poured into raising Tonnis up to be a good knight who could follow in his footsteps.

He'd promised to defend his home, to raise up his son, to protect his wife and family till his dying day... but here he knelt, ready to give up his life because everything he believed in, everything he cherished in this world no longer had anything to do with him. He'd given it all up for his faith, and he'd told himself that doing so would keep them safe, and he'd been so very, very wrong.

"So you tell me, why, Tommin?" Rosie sobbed softly as her shoulders shook and her strength faded. "Why is it that, even after everything you've done, it still hurts so much to see you like this? What happened to the brave man I loved, to the knight who kept me safe in his arms and held up the world on his shoulders?"

"Is there anything left of him in there?" Rosie asked mournfully. "Or did that man die long ago, and I was just too blind to notice?"

#### Chapter 1070: Too Little, Too Late

"Did that man die long ago, and I was just too blind to notice?"

Rosie's words crushed Tommin's heart, along with the few scraps of pride that had held him up when he learned that she and Tonnis were still alive. For a fleeting moment, he'd hoped that there might still be a place for him in this world... That he could find some scrap of the father that his son once admired, or a shred of the husband who had held Rosie in his arms with the gentleness that a priest would cradle a sacred relic.

"Rosie, I..." Tommin began, only to be cut off by a stern, sharp command.

"Enough," Ashlynn said, stepping between Rosie and Tommin before the fallen Templar could speak again. "I think we all know how hollow and empty your words have been tonight, Sir Tommin. Anything more would just hurt Lady Rosie more than you already have," she said, turning away from Tommin to take Rosie's free hand in both of hers.

Behind her, Tommin's body visibly deflated. His shoulders slumped and he nearly fell over as he clutched his head with his hands. He had so much that he wanted to say... things that he should have said years ago that he'd always put off until the next time he returned home from the battlefields, or things he'd never put into words because he felt they didn't need to be said between two people who loved each other as much as he and Rosie had.

Now, at the very end of his life, he'd finally realized that nothing should ever go unsaid. That the time to say things had been long ago, but Rosie would never hear those words and neither would Tonnis. He wanted to scream in rage at the injustice of it all. He wanted to yell and curse at Owain for hauling him off on so many 'adventures' to fight demons at the edges of the march, or in the dark, hidden enclaves within its interior that ordinary men didn't dare to venture into...

Blasphemous words hung unsaid on his tongue as he swallowed back a mouthful of bile when he realized that he could blame Owain for the time he was away from his family... but he couldn't blame his absent lord for the way he'd behaved toward his wife and child when they were home together... Just like he couldn't blame the Church for taking advantage of him when he offered himself up in exchange for protection from Owain's cruelty.

All of these decisions had been his and his alone, and no matter how much he wanted to say the things he should have said long ago, he'd squandered those opportunities all on his own, and no one was going to give him another one when he'd failed so often before.

"You were very brave to face him tonight," Ashlynn said as her fierce gaze turned gentle when she directed it toward Tommin's wife, ignoring the sobbing knight behind her to focus on the woman who had suffered from his neglect almost as much as Ashlynn herself had suffered from his blind obedience to his faith and Owain's orders.

"He knows now that you loved him," Ashlynn said reassuringly. "And that you and Tonnis are safe. It's more than he deserves after abandoning you to Owain's schemes," she said, reaching up to gently touch the other woman's tear stained cheeks.

"Your Dominion, I..." Rosie started, stopping herself when she saw Ashlynn shaking her head. "Thank you," she said as she turned to look at Tommin's broken, shattered figure where he knelt on the cold flagstones. "Thank you for letting me say goodbye."

"He owed you this much and more," Ashlynn said firmly, with emerald eyes that grew cold once again. "Now go, you shouldn't be here for what comes next. Sionid will see you back to the village."

"W-what should I tell Tonnis?" Rosie asked hesitantly. "He, he's sure to hear what happened to his father eventually, so..."

"Tell him that his father died fighting for what he believed in," Ashlynn said with a heavy sigh. "It's close enough to the truth, and Tonnis doesn't deserve to have his memories of a loving father tainted by the ugliness of his end. When he's old enough, when he's ready, you can tell him more if you wish," she said, giving the older woman's hands a final squeeze.

"When this war is over," Ashlynn continued. "Many of us will have to learn to set aside the hurts of old wars," she said, blinking back the moisture that gathered in the corner of her eyes as she thought of other hurts to put aside. "A soldier fights for his lord, and a knight fights for his virtues. Sir Tommin fought for his faith. No matter how misguided he may have been, there's still honor in that for Tonnis to learn from," Ashlynn said in a voice that held fragile hope for far more than Tommin's son.

"Now, go," Ashlynn said, stepping back and turning to face Sir Tommin. "We'll speak again soon, Lady Rosie," she promised over her shoulder as she took a deep breath, gathering emerald energy to her hand.

The air in the courtyard grew heavy as Sionid escorted Rosie into the depths of the ancient fortress, leading the soon to be widow away from the place where her husband was destined to die. Several eyes turned to follow her as she left, and it wasn't until her sobs had faded away with distance that anyone returned their gaze to Ashlynn and Sir Tommin at the center of the courtyard.

"Rosie is a kind woman," Ashlynn said as she knelt on the flagstones before Sir Tommin, placing a hand once again on his cheek and feeling his quiet, steady pulse beneath her fingers. "Kind, and brave, and she loved you with all her heart. You didn't deserve her," she said, speaking as though it was the greatest of crimes that he was guilty of.

"No, I didn't," Tommin said in a hoarse voice barely louder than a whisper. "She deserved much better than me. And you're right," he added, looking up at Ashlynn with sightless eyes and a face stained with tears. "Just knowing that she and Tonnis are safe and well is more than I deserved. Thank you," he said, speaking, perhaps for the first time, with deep, genuine emotion that flowed from his heart.

"Thank you for doing what I failed to do," he said. "Thank you for saving their lives and keeping them safe. I, I can face my end now," he said as he bowed his head, ready to receive the blow of an axe or sword...