

## The Vampire 311

### Chapter 311: On Their Own

"So from here on out, we're 'on our own' unless something catastrophic happens," Ashlynn said, looking from Jacques to Talauia and receiving a nod from both of them.

"Jus' keep it simple, Auntie," Jacques said. "Ain't no need for nothing fancy. Get what you came for and we can get going home."

"That's right, that's right," Talauia added with a flutter of her wings as she stepped off the boat to hover in the air above them. "Pretend we're not even here," she added, fighting every reflex she had to not focus on the places where she could hear predators moving through the water or among the trees. This was Ashlynn and Heila's choice, their test, and she wouldn't be caught giving them any hints. She wouldn't, no matter how hard it was to resist.

"We understand," Ashlynn said with a smile before she turned to Heila. "Like Jacques said, our first goal is in the direction where the witch-moss glows. Heila, can you take us there?"

"Yes, my lady," Heila said with a nervous smile. Her grass-green eyes flickered around the boat, looking for any signs of disturbances on the water or anything lurking among the cypress knees that might pose a threat before she got to work.

From a small leather sheath at her waist, she withdrew an intricately carved wand, nearly ten inches in length. Building the wand had taken her an entire week, carving ancient glyphs into the tips of three soft and pliable willow branches given to her by the Ancient Willow. The hardest part had been tracing out the pattern for the glyphs, remembering that their positions would shift once she braided the three pieces of willow into her final wand and bound the ends with bands of silver.

Once she'd completed the wand, it quickly began to feel like it was a living part of her. With the slender wand held lightly between her fingers, she felt almost as though her arm had grown longer and her fingers could reach as far as her eyes could see to gather up the energy of the world and shape it as she desired.

"Like endless tides that never tire,

Let currents flow as I desire."

Heila's words were simple as was her intention but she wanted the practice of working with the wand now. When her last word spilled from her lips, it flowed across the inky black surface of the water, like a single ripple from a stone dropped into the depths below them, reaching out more than a hundred feet away before the ripple rebounded, flowing back towards them and lapping gently against the sides of their boat.

"That way," Heila whispered as she focused on the magic she'd gathered for her use and pointed with her wand in the direction of the glowing moss. It took a moment for the water to gather enough strength to move a boat that carried three people and all of the baskets they'd brought for collecting things. After a moment that was too short to draw a deep breath, the boat began to move as the currents of the waterway shifted at the Willow Witch's direction, gently moving them along the path through the water that Heila matched Heila's desires.

Ashlynn smiled at Heila's calm, controlled use of the abundant water energy in the Briar. While Ashlynn could have executed the same spell, Heila had already left her behind in the practice of subtle and gentle magics like this. If Ashlynn had attempted to do what Heila was currently doing with apparent ease, she had no doubt that the result would have been a shaky ride propelled by cresting waves that resembled to the ocean she'd grown up beside.

While it might seem wasteful to use witchcraft when they had a perfectly serviceable paddle, this was one of the strategies Ashlynn had developed to make up for the lack of Talauia or Jacques's thorny auras. By shifting the currents around their boat, they could manage a less obtrusive passage through the water and attract less attention than they would have by plunging a paddle constantly beneath the surface of the water.

Their progress was slow but steady as Heila gained experience and confidence navigating between the smaller islands and cypress knees that dotted the waterway. The further they went into the Deep Water region, the more Ashlynn strained her enhanced senses to the limit, peering into shadows and listening to every rustle of branches or ripple of water for anything that might pose a threat to them

Thankfully, though Ashlynn felt several times as if she was being stared at from places just out of sight, nothing made any moves against them before they reached their first destination.

The island Heila brought them to played host to more than a dozen mighty cypress trees, each more than a hundred years old with trunks more than five feet in diameter, though approaching within a

dozen feet of their trunks was only possible from one or two directions as the rest were blocked by piles of thorny blackberry vines that wrapped around the bulbous cypress knees as though they were the supports of a hedge fence.

"There," Ashlynn said, pointing at a cluster of pure white flowers on a lonely-looking magnolia tree on the opposite end of the island. "I count at least two dozen mature blossoms," she said as they ran the boat aground and set out across the small island on foot. "We should be able to take eight without doing much harm."

One of Amahle's most important lessons for the pair of newly minted witches had been that they should never take more than a third of any available flower or herb unless circumstances demanded an exception. Over-harvesting could quickly disrupt the native ecology with both immediate consequences like fewer herbs growing back the following year to things that were far more dire and less predictable without an in-depth understanding of how different parts of the ecosystem connected to each other.

Ashlynn had seen this herself when she followed the advice of an old text to plant a butterfly bush in her vegetable garden at Blackwell Manor. The bush grew quickly and produced flowers constantly, attracting not only butterflies but bees and other insects.

Jocelynn thought the plant was a nuisance and refused to visit her garden that summer, but by the end of the growing season, Ashlynn found that her harvests had been considerably more bountiful than the year before even though she did nothing different aside from planting the butterfly bush nearby.

Looking at the magnolia tree and the many buds that had yet to bloom, it was entirely possible that they could strip the tree bare of its current blossoms without harming anything. Or, if not bare, perhaps they could take half or even two-thirds. But without knowing for sure how that could affect the rest of the environment, Ashlynn wasn't willing to take risks driven by greed or lazy thinking. She was still a student and she had a long way to go before she felt she would be wise enough to disregard Amahle's advice.

"Ashlynn," Heila said, pausing as she looked around the island. "I don't think I can help much with the magnolia," she said, holding a hand out at the height of her head. The lowest blossoms on the magnolia tree were at least two feet above her head and many of them were even higher. "But I think that's Lizard's Tail growing among the blackberries by the water's edge. I'll collect those while you gather the magnolia blossoms?"

For a moment, Ashlynn considered telling Heila no, that they should stick together even if one of them was idle while the other worked. But, looking at the pale white Lizards Tails that grew deep in the

tangled blackberry vines, Ashlynn realized that she wouldn't be able to approach anywhere near as many of them as Heila would.

"I don't like splitting up in general," Ashlynn said as she thought through Heila's suggestion. "But it's not a very big island. Whistle if there's trouble, I think shouting would attract unwelcome attention," she said, looking around the island again.

The feeling of being watched had come and gone as they moved through the Deep Water region but here on the island, the feeling had returned again, even though she couldn't see anything.

"I don't like it either," Heila said. Adjusting her Hedge Hat and running her fingers over the different loops that were there to hold her harvest, Heila turned in the direction of the tangles of blackberries and the Lizard Tail blossoms she intended to take as her prize for braving the wicked thorns. "But if we split the work, we'll be done in half the time," she said hopefully.

Meanwhile, in the branches high above them, several pairs of black and yellow eyes turned to follow the women as they split up. A few pairs of eyes looked at the boat and the reptilian man waiting there in the company of a winged woman but most dismissed the pair as too far away to get in their way if they made a move.

By the time anyone could react to their presence, it would already be too late.

## Chapter 312: Danger From Above

Ashlynn was grateful that she'd left propriety behind, wearing a short pair of breeches that stopped above the knees and a sleeveless tunic along with her Hedge Hat as she calmbred over the branches of the magnolia tree to retrieve her fifth blossom.

Suddenly, a giggle spilled from her lips as she tried to imagine what her mother would think if she saw her eldest daughter with her legs bare to the knee, barefoot and climbing a tree to pick flowers..

The countess had already been slightly scandalized when Ashlynn took to wearing simple peasant skirts and tunics while rooting around in the dirt of her garden. If it weren't for the isolation imposed on her by her mark and the guilt her mother felt over keeping her confined so often, Ashlynn was certain that her mother would have forbidden her from returning to her garden the first time she'd seen her daughter covered in dirt.

Instead of banning her, however, her mother had sent out for simple skirts made of higher quality fabrics and commissioned a blacksmith to provide Ashlynn with the best gardening tools he could fashion, crafted to precisely fit her hands. She'd looked heartbroken at her daughter's joy at such practical gifts, but it had meant the world to the young Ashlynn.

"One day," Ashlynn promised herself. "I'll show you what I can do with the things I learned back then. I'll grow something special and make a potion just for you, Mother."

All thoughts about what she might concoct for her mother were interrupted by a piercing cry accompanied by the sound of wind fluttering through feathers.

Acting on instinct, honed by countless hours of Thane's demanding instruction, Ashlynn's hand dropped to her waist to retrieve her sword even as she turned to face the threat. Only it wasn't a sword that sat on her hip today but the slender, gnarled piece of Ancient Oak that she'd carved into a wand.

The combination of the quick turn and the awkward grab she made for her wand when her mind caught up to the fact that she'd left her sword behind cost her valuable seconds that she didn't have and left her so awkwardly off balance that she slipped off the branch she'd perched on, falling almost ten feet to the ground below.

For a moment, she felt like she was completely weightless as her arms and legs splayed out mid-air. In that moment, her eyes widened as she watched three birds with feathers of midnight blue and darker black dove through the space she had occupied just a second ago. Wind swirled around the birds and a cruel, calculating look flashed across their yellow eyes as they realized their prey had evaded their surprise attack.

The windstorm unleashed by the trio of birds tore through the branches of the magnolia tree, hewing slender branches from the tree like pruning knives and leaving deep gouges in the tree's soft bark.

"Witchcraft," Ashlynn said in shock as she recognised the source of power that the birds drew on. All other thoughts were driven from her mind an instant later as she slammed into the soft, sandy soil beneath the tree's branches. Bright bursts of light flared at the edges of her vision and for a moment, the world dimmed, turning the perpetual twilight of the Deep Water region momentarily into a dark, moonless night.

Pain exploded in her back, head, and chest when she bounced off the ground and the air was knocked out of her chest leaving her gasping and dazed for several precious seconds. In those seconds, she completely lost track of the birds who had recovered from their missed dive and were circling above for another one.

Even though she couldn't see the birds, Ashlynn was well aware of the fact that she couldn't stay still and try to recover, doing so would only make her an easy target. Instead, she kicked out with one foot, rolling across the ground like a log for a dozen paces until she managed to stagger to her feet.

Her chest burned as she gulped air, desperately trying to clear the fog that wrapped around her mind after her fall. Her right hand tightened on her wand and her eyes frantically searched the dark canopy above for any sign of where the deadly birds might come from next.

"Heila," she realized, turning in the direction that her diminutive friend had gone. There, hovering over the tangled blackberry vines, four more of the dark birds hovered. Their broad wings flapped aggressively and every time their wings beat, they unleashed a storm of blades formed of magic and wind, tearing away at the thorny vines that Heila dove beneath to escape the bird's attack.

Unfortunately for Ashlynn, the birds trying to cut a path to Heila weren't the same ones that had knocked her out of the magnolia tree. Another piercing cry split the air, heralding the return of the birds that seemed determined to flay the flesh from her body with their fierce blades of wind.

This time, Ashlynn swept her gnarled wand in a wide circle as words of power fell from her lips in a smooth, steady cadence.

"Cypress guardians, old and wise,

Let deadly harvest now arise.

Each needle blessed with battle's art,

From gentle green to poison dart."

Ever since her experience with Cecile in the trial presented by the Ancient Willow, the cypress tree had come to have a special place in Ashlynn's heart. The tree had a steady, reassuring strength that reminded her of the oak, but its needle-like leaves always gave her the feeling that, unlike the mighty oak, the cypress would fight back to protect those who sheltered under its branches.

Now, the towering cypress trees shook like hounds shaking off water, shedding hundreds of green needles and leaving them suspended in the air. Like glistening droplets of water, the green needles sharpened and their color darkened, taking on a sickly hue as the normally beneficial oils within the needle transformed into a potent toxin.

"Through air they fly at my command,

Like arrows loosed by nature's hand.

Strike deep and true, my wooden rain,

Leave none who face me free from pain!"

Ashlynn made a sweeping gesture with her wand, encompassing the birds diving toward her as well as the ones besieging Heila. At the same time, the torrent of wind surrounding the birds descended toward her, knocking aside dozens of the deadly needles as though they weren't even there.

Blades of wind as sharp as any knife danced across her skin, cutting through fabric like sheers and leaving several shallow cuts all over Ashlynn's arms and torso. Were it not for the strength she'd gained from her bond with Nyrielle, the wounds would have been countless times worse, perhaps even life-threatening. As is, even though the damage they did to her body wasn't serious, the amount of pain the wounds inflicted was difficult to ignore.

Still, pain was the last thing in the world that would stop Ashlynn from doing what needed to be done, especially when Heila was depending on her. While the birds had destroyed dozens of her deadly cypress needles, her spell had prepared hundreds more.

The swarm of needles followed the direction of her wand, shredding the wings of the first group of birds and piercing their lean bodies and slender necks until they resembled feathered pincushions. Ashlynn's assault didn't stop there as the remaining needles whistled through the air like a swarm of mosquitos thirsty for blood.

The quartet of birds harassing Heila had just enough time to realize something was coming and that they should abandon their attack before the first needles arrived. Two of the birds attempted to gain altitude, hoping to return to the cover of the branches above while the other two attempted to dive beneath the swarm, using the power of the wind they'd summoned to propel them even faster.

If Ashlynn had greater mastery of the spell she'd used, she could have split the swarm of needles, easily defeating the entire group. At the moment, however, she could only choose one of the groups and she decisively chose to strike at the ones diving toward the ground. Toward the ground meant toward Heila and she wouldn't allow any of them to threaten her family.

Already, Ashlynn's mind was racing for a way to deal with the two birds who escaped her cypress needle swarm when she heard Heila's voice, clear and strong as the Willow Witch charged out from behind a dense group of cypress knees.

"Get down here!" Heila snapped, following her command with two thundering cracks of impossibly long whips in her hands. The birds should have been much, much too high in the air for the diminutive witch to strike but when she cracked each whip, it grew longer in her hand, striking like a serpent uncoiling itself as it shot toward the birds.

With one crack of a whip, the first bird's neck shattered and the crack of the second whip that followed immediately behind it did exactly the same, wrapping around the bird's slender neck before a sharp tug of Heila's hand snapped the bird's neck, knocking it from the sky before it realized it was dead.

"My lady, you're hurt!" Heila exclaimed, ignoring the countless scratches across her body from diving into the blackberry branches as she looked at the deeper wounds on Ashlynn's body with eyes that were wide in horror.

She'd hunkered down behind the cypress knees to buy time to form both of her whips, but in that time, Ashlynn had...



"I'm fine," Ashlynn said, holding up a hand before Heila could panic. "Well, not fine, but I will be. Save your energy," she said before the diminutive witch could begin a healing incantation. "A little of your numbing paste and some bandages and I'll be all right until we get home. Can you do that for me?"

"Of course," Heila said, wiping moisture from her eyes. For a moment, as she hid behind the cypress knees, she'd been haunted by memories of cowering behind Hauke's ice shield while Ashlynn faced the Tuscans with Virve and Andrus.

But this time had been different. This time, she hadn't been cowering, she'd been preparing her counterattack. And, while she hadn't arrived at Ashlynn's side in time to fight by her side, this time, at least she'd joined the battle.

"My lady, please give me your arm," Heila said gently as she retrieved a small vial of medicinal paste from a pouch at her waste along with a cloth to clean the wound. "This may sting but it will go numb right after..."

Above her, Ashlynn smiled as she watched her horned companion's intense focus. Finally, the last of the doubts she had about giving Heila a seed of witchcraft and taking her into danger fell away.

This was the kind of woman that Heila was working so hard to become, and seeing her so capably moving from battle to attentive care... Ashlynn couldn't help but feel like she was finally seeing the woman that Heila was meant to be. One that she was glad to have as more than just a friend, but as a true member of her new family.

### Chapter 313: A Simple Morning

In the Vale of Mists, during the very small hours of the morning when the summer sun had yet to peak above the hills to the east and the sky was host to a myriad of colors from yellow-gold, to burning orange and pale, powder blue, Ollie made his way quietly downstairs from his luxurious quarters in one of the castle's five towers.

In the months since he arrived in the Vale of Mists, he'd slowly grown accustomed to the large feather mattress, the soft, silky sheets and the scent of freshly laundered linens that wrapped around him when he lay down every night. He'd even grown accustomed to the comfortable, well tailored clothing he was provided along with sturdy, well made boots.

Some things, however, were too much for the former kitchen boy to adjust to. The presence of Justus, who seemed to have been appointed as his personal servant, was easy to accept until the horned servant tried to do the things he saw as his duties. Ollie refused to receive help dressing himself and he only reluctantly accepted help with bathing and grooming.

Rather than taking Justus as a servant, Ollie tried to treat the other man as a friend and peer, only to be constantly rebuffed for being 'improperly casual.' Unlike Ashlynn's Heila, Justus seemed to have a much more rigid sense of propriety and his place in the castle's pecking order.

Which was why, hours before even his own attendant would be awake, Ollie slipped out of his room wearing the simplest clothing he currently owned and made his way to the castle's kitchens. When he arrived, he paused outside the doors, smelling the familiar scent of a freshly lit fire and listening to the soft, rhythmic sounds of knives on cutting blocks as the kitchen began to prepare for the day.

"Sir Ollie," Georg said with a wide smile on his bearish face. Ever since construction began on the village that folks had begun to refer to as 'Reunion', the castle's head cook had seen very little of the flame haired youth who Ashlynn brought to the vale and introduced as her friend.

"If you've come to steal hand pies for your ride to the village this morning, you're far too early," the pot bellied chef said. "I haven't even begun the filling yet, much less the pastry."

"That's actually why I came," Ollie said, rolling up the sleeves on his powder blue tunic. It might be one of his simplest shirts, lacking any embroidery or decorative details, but it was still very well made and clearly something that had no place in a busy, working kitchen. "Put me to work, chef. Whatever you could use a hand with."

For a moment, Georg blinked in surprise and confusion, his eyes opening wide before narrowing as he examined the young man before him. The look from the towering cook lasted long enough that Ollie was about to apologize for intruding and excuse himself from the kitchens when Georg finally spoke again.

"You're very handy with a knife," Georg said with a wide smile. "There's a large sack of carrots I need broken down for the hand pie filling. Dice them so they're the same size as the peas the little ones are taking from their pods," he said, pointing to a trio of young boys from the Horned Clan who clustered around a large wooden bowl as they slowly filled it with bright green peas.

Thinking back, it hadn't been that many years since he'd stood in a similar position in the kitchens of Lothian Manor. Neither of his parents served in the kitchens and when he started, he had no skills to speak of.

The head cook at the time had given him a small mallet and a large sack of walnuts to remove from their shells. Within an hour, he'd smashed his fingers so many times that he could barely hold nuts in place anymore, but he refused to give up, even though he had been convinced at the time that the cook wanted him to quit and go back to the stables with his father.

By contrast, these young boys who only had to shell peas had a much easier, and in Ollie's opinion, much more suitable task for people of their age, especially given their smaller figures and petite hands.

"Understood," Ollie said with a grin as he retrieved a knife and prepared to get to work. "Do you want the carrots peeled or scrubbed?" Ollie asked, hesitating for a moment before he began.

"Peeled," Georg said over his shoulder as he turned away to inspect the onions that another cook had prepared for him. "But save the trimmings for the stock pot."

"Understood," Ollie said, ducking his head slightly before he got to work.

For the next hour, Ollie followed Georg's instructions to the letter. Dicing carrots, rolling and cutting pastry dough, rubbing pans with lard, the list went on as he moved from one task to the next, helping in the kitchen wherever Georg felt he could use an extra pair of hands.

By the time he was done, soot from the cooking hearth had stained his powder blue tunic and sweat soaked the soft linen but Ollie wore a smile of genuine satisfaction on his face as he looked at the long rows of hand pies filling the stone oven, puffing up and turning a rich golden-brown.

"So," Georg said, dusting flour off his clawed hands before he leaned up against the wall next to Ollie, keeping his eyes on the pastries in the oven as they spoke. "I know you haven't been away from the kitchen so long that you miss cooking. I've heard nothing but praise from the men who have been helping you feed the refugees, no, excuse me, the villagers," he said, correcting himself.

"So, Sir Ollie, what is it that brought you down here before the first meals are even ready?" Georg asked, raising a bushy eyebrow at the young man.

"I guess you're right," Ollie said as he watched the young boys who had been shucking peas while they began hauling firewood to be placed next to the large ovens. They were too young yet to know when the fire had burned down enough that it needed more fuel without making things so hot in the ovens that the pastry would burn, but as long as the tasks were simple, they went about them with a kind of joyous dedication that Ollie couldn't help but look at nostalgically.

"You don't have to call me 'Sir Ollie' you know," he added. "I'm not a real knight until Lady Ashlynn comes back and decides whether or not I've earned the title. She might even be upset at me for some of the decisions that I've made," he said with a small, self deprecating chuckle.

"I won't claim to know Lady Ashlynn well," the cook said. "But in the time she worked in my kitchen, she struck me as someone who appreciates hard work done with honest intentions. I think that's part of why she liked it here when she was learning to master her senses."

"From what I can see, you've been working very hard with very honest intentions," Georg praised. They weren't empty words either. The cooks he'd sent to help Ollie had all returned with glowing praise not just for the different methods the young man brought to help feed an ever growing group of refugees, but the tireless dedication and personal touch he put into all of his work.

"So what is it exactly," Georg asked. "That makes you think that Lady Ashlynn wouldn't recognize you as a knight when everyone else around you already does?"

#### Chapter 314: What Makes a Knight?

Why did Ollie feel like he couldn't call himself a knight when so many people felt he'd already earned the title? It was something that had kept him awake long into the night more than once and recent events only made him more uncomfortable with the title that people seemed to use for him so easily.

"To everyone here," Ollie finally said after spending a minute gathering his thoughts. "Sir Thane is a knight because he is one of Lady Nyrielle's progeny. But that's not how Sir Thane became a knight at all. He was a knight even before he became a vampire."

"Sir Marcell wasn't a knight when he became a vampire," Georg pointed out, pausing to sniff the air before shaking his head.

At this point, he'd made more hand pies than he could count and there was a certain smell that accompanied a perfectly cooked hand pie, when the sauce of the filling had become so hot that it bubbled out over the holes poked in the top of the pastry and just a hint of the juices of the filling hit the hot stones of the oven. These pastries were close, but they weren't quite ready.

"My father told me that Sir Marcell was a special kind of human merchant when Lady Nyrielle took him in," the cook said, scratching his head as he tried to recall the words his father had used. "They say he served a 'Black Market' and that he had great skill at transporting merchandise that others would wish to seize if he was found with it. He was a dangerous kind of merchant."

"So that's why Old Nan called him the 'Black Merchant,'" Ollie said with a chuckle. He'd never imagined that the youthful looking vampire had been a smuggler, but after taking several lessons in fighting with knives from the former merchant, Ollie finally understood why the vampire talked about fighting in narrow alleys and unsavory bars as much as he did.

"But Sir Marcell is still a dangerous man," Ollie said, pushing off the wall when he saw Georg move toward the ovens and grabbing a towel to help pulling the long baking trays out of the oven, transferring the hot hand pies to a counter to cool. "He's qualified to call himself a knight even if he was never granted the title until he came to the Vale of Mists."

"So you think that Lady Ashlynn won't recognize you as a knight because you're not a dangerous man?" Georg asked as they returned to leaning against the cool stone wall to watch the hand pies cool. "Does a man need to be a warrior to be a knight?"

"Yes, he does," Ollie said, hanging his head low. "A man is only recognized as a true knight after demonstrating his skill at arms, either on the field of battle or in tournaments during times of peace." he explained. "Even then, a man wouldn't be considered a knight if all he had done was fight mock duels in competitions. Without putting his own life in jeopardy and fighting for just cause, a man can't be a real knight."

"Ah," Georg said, giving the flame haired young man a considering look. "This isn't about Lady Ashlynn. It's about the human Lord Dunn attacking the outlying villages, isn't it?"

Ollie's face burned at being seen through so clearly but he nodded as soon as Georg brought it up.

For a few weeks, everything had seemed calm while he worked with Old Nan to select a place to construct a new village. She'd proposed a location nestled alongside a stream that eventually fed the river Luath. While the reservoir formed by the dam they built in the first week wouldn't be full until next year, just the process of clearing land and building the dam had given the displaced refugees hope of a new life beginning in the Vale of Mists.

That hopeful air burst like the Heartwood Clan's original dam when word reached them that the young Lord Dunn had raised his banner and a small army to attack the partially evacuated outlying villages. Without the protection of the fortified walls of the Vale of Mists, few villages managed to resist the onslaught of soldiers determined to raise their villages to the ground and burn any villager they found, whether that villager was already dead or not.

The horror of the attack had sparked a second wave of refugees fleeing for safety and leaving nearly everything they owned behind in the hopes that the Dunn soldiers wouldn't chase them once they'd abandoned their villages.

"Milo left two days ago," Ollie said, his voice heavy and resigned. "He's going to escort refugees as far as the walls and then he'll go look for more. He's not the only one who left the construction of the village to help people make it here."

"Commander Bassinger departed two weeks ago," Georg said, rubbing his furry chin in thought. "He took quite a few soldiers with him."

"Even Harrod went with Commander Bassinger," Ollie said with a trace of bitterness coloring his words. Harrod had been the first Eldritch person he met and until recently, he'd served as Ollie's guard. It wasn't until the horned soldier left that Ollie realized how much he'd grown accustomed to the other man's company and the feeling of safety he had when the other man was around.

Spats of violence between the refugees as petty disagreements flared in a tense environment had become more rare since construction started and almost no one directed any of their discontent at Ollie, though there were always a few who felt that their needs should be prioritized ahead of others and blamed Ollie for his choices.

Yet none of those disagreements had escalated to the point where he needed a guard to protect him and so it had been hard to protest when Harrod left to join Commander Bassinger in fighting the Dunns. Now, with Milo's departure, there were very few people remaining in the Vale of Mists that he considered to be his friends and that made it even harder to stay behind while so many others left.

"But you have work to do here," Georg observed as he started to understand where Ollie was coming from. "You can't rush off to battle because you have to oversee the construction of the village. Do you think that you can't become a knight until you've fought in a battle? Are you upset because you're being denied a chance to earn your honor?" the bearish cook asked.

"That's not it, not exactly," Ollie said. "I, I don't belong on the battlefield yet, even if I could go. Marcell has been teaching me but the nights are so short that I haven't been able to practice much and I'm so tired by the time the sun sets that I'm barely making any progress."

"So you think that everyone is calling you a knight when you haven't done what you're supposed to do to earn it," Georg said with an understanding nod. "But, Ollie, don't you think that you're selling yourself a little short?"

"Huh? How so?" Ollie asked, wrinkling his brow in confusion.

"Here," Georg said, snatching a pair of cooling hand pies from the table and passing one over to Ollie before taking a tentative bite himself. "What do you think? Did they turn out well?"

"Hot," Ollie said, passing the hand pie back and forth between his hands and giving Georg's claws an envious glance. Grabbing a small wooden bowl, Ollie dropped the hot hand pie into the bowl and broke off a piece with a fork, blowing on it several times before taking a delicate bite.

Rich buttery pastry crumbled as soon as it touched his tongue, carrying with it a comforting blend of decadent, caramelized onions, a sweet burst of fresh pea and tender carrots, all swimming in a thick pork gravy.

"It's good," Ollie said around the mouthful of food, exhaling hot steam in several quick breaths before he finally managed to swallow the flavorful bite. "It's really good."

"Ollie, how much courage did it take to eat that?" Georg asked with a toothy grin on his face. "Was it hard?"

"Courage?" Ollie asked, tilting his head to the side in confusion and looking at the remainder of the steaming hot hand pie in his bowl. "It wasn't that hot."

"That's not what I meant," Georg said, placing a clawed hand on the young man's shoulder. "If last year's Ollie was standing here watching, the Ollie who hadn't met Lady Ashlynn yet, how much courage do you think he would see in you, watching you breaking bread with a 'Clawed Demon' as though it was an ordinary day?"

"If the Ollie of a year ago followed you to a village full of 'demons' and saw you giving orders to cooks, construction workers and soldiers alike," Georg added, giving Ollie's shoulder a firm squeeze. "How much courage do you think he would see in you?"

"But that isn't..." Ollie started only to stop when Georg placed a claw over his lips.

"War is coming, Sir Ollie," he said. "Even a simple cook like me knows it. But if you talk to me about bravery and fighting for a just cause, then it's hard not to call you a knight. The other humans who came back with you, they mostly keep to themselves, but not you. You try every day to help the people of the vale, whether they lived here all their lives or they just arrived."

"If that isn't having courage and fighting for just cause," Georg said. "Then I don't know what is."

## Chapter 315: Demonic Cruelty (Part One)

To the north of the River Luath, the Dunn Barony sprawled over a vast stretch of land that butted up against the western forests to the north of the Vale of Mists. Villages that had grown large enough to be called small towns dotted the landscape along with many other small villages and hamlets. All along the western border, dirt roads worn down by constant patrolling of soldiers on horseback connected the network of tiny settlements to Castle Dunn and its surrounding town.

What made the hamlets and villages of the Dunn Barrony unique, even in Lothian March, is that every single one of them, even if it was home to less than a hundred people, was surrounded by strong wooden walls and a wide, dry moat. Some had filled their moats with wooden stakes, while others had



lined them with stacked stones but every single settlement was prepared to be attacked by demons at any moment.

When Liam Dunn put out the call for men to join his banner, it wasn't just the glory of fighting demons or the riches a person could obtain by presenting a trophy taken from a slain demon that he used to entice people with. These small communities, tiny as they were, formed a vital part of his recruiting strategy.

A village should be overseen by a knight and this had been the custom in the Kingdom of Gaal and even in the old countries for hundreds of years. However, a baron was limited in how many knights could serve under his banner. For over a century, countless barons had chafed at their inability to expand their domains with the limited number of knights at their disposal. Many had watched vast areas within their domains remain wild, unable to be settled and tamed because they had exhausted their supply of minor lords to administer to new domains.

The Dunns had followed a different path. Instead of constructing one village and installing a knight to lord over it, they constructed a string of smaller hamlets and connected them with primitive roads. These hamlets were overseen, not by knights, but by Guard Captains and a small contingent of armed men who could defend the hamlet if it was ever attacked.

There was an unspoken promise between the Dunn family and these guard captains. One day, the shackles that held the Dunns back would fall away and they would assume a higher position. When that happened, many more knights would be needed and many of these hamlets would be allowed to grow into proper villages.

Of course, the Dunn family wasn't investing in all of those hamlets and guardsmen for nothing. Now that Liam Dunn had raised his banner in the name of conquering new land, offering men the chance to carve out a parcel of land for themselves and maybe, one day, a title, the trained soldiers of the Dunn family were able to form a strong core of a fighting force, supplemented with twice their number in irregular recruits.

Some of those irregulars were excellent fighters with good equipment who worked as mercenaries or merchant guards most of the time. Others were young men with hand-me-down weapons and armor and heads stuffed with tales of glory and valor that served them as well as cotton stuffed into their ears.

It was the latter type of irregular soldier that Guard Captain Jorg cursed as he limped through Liam Dunn's command camp in the wilderness. Bandages wrapped around his right thigh and knee, holding the arrow in place that had pierced his gambeson and breeches alike.

It had to be a miracle of some sort that it hadn't cut one of the large arteries in his leg or he would surely have bled out before he managed to make it back to camp. As is, the wound might still end his career as a soldier but as long as he reached the care of Lord Loman Lothian at least he would likely survive.

"Almost there, Captain," A soldier at his right side said as he helped his captain struggle through the bustling camp. "Lucky for us, Lord Loman is here. He'll patch you right up, good as new in no time."

"Pev," the captain said, shaking his head at the other soldier who'd accompanied him from their tiny hamlet to the north. "I can't go back out there with those fools. The next one who charges off after a demon and sets off one of their infernal traps is going to get us all killed. We won't be so lucky again."

No sooner had Jorg's group of professional soldiers and irregular recruits caught their first glimpse of a flat-tailed demon than one of the young fools had rushed forward, waving his ax and shouting that he would claim the gold sovereign for the demon's tail. Two other fools had chased after him, shouting boldly that they would be the ones to claim the prize.

Jorg's shouted orders to return to formation meant nothing to the hot-headed glory hounds and moments later they'd blundered into a fiendish trap that dropped half a dozen slender trees on them. The trees had trunks that were slender enough for a man to wrap his hands around, but Jorg and his men were immediately mired in a tangled sea of branches and leaves that made moving around impossible.

It was only after his men were pinned down that the rain of arrows began. The charging idiots were the first to suffer at the hands of the demons but by the time anyone had freed themselves from the primitive trap, half his men were sporting wounds from at least one arrow.

"We're just lucky the demon cared more about running away than finishing the job," Pev said, making a sign with his free hand to honor the Holy Lord of Light for protecting them from the demon archers. "If they'd had more time, we'd have been pincushions."

As he spoke, the two men reached one of the largest tents in Lord Liam's camp. Unlike the grand command tent at the center of camp which was draped in silks and displayed several colorful banners outside its entrance, this tent was simple and shaped in a long rectangle to hold as many people as possible.

"More wounded?" Loman Lothian said in a ragged, fatigued voice as he stood up from beside a rough cot and the pale-faced soldier lying atop it to look at the soldiers entering.

At most, the tent could hold forty men on simple cots made of canvas stretched across a wooden frame. Presently, more than half of those cots were full and Loman had been working from dawn until dusk in the summer heat just to keep enough cots free to receive a fresh batch of wounded soldiers at the start of the next day.

"I brought Captain Jorg back first," Pev said as he helped his captain to one of the open cots. "There are nine more making their way back here as fast as their wounds will allow.

"Nine more," Loman said, turning to the other lord in the room and looking at him with weary, exhausted eyes. "Lord Liam, is it always like this when you lead your men to fight the demons?"

"No, not even close," Liam said darkly as he watched Loman gather up his supplies and move to the injured captain's side to begin cutting away the bandages so he could remove the arrow. Liam had fought the demons before. He'd even conquered two demon villages, wresting a sizeable chunk of land from demon hands and allowing the establishment of four new hamlets.

But this time, something was different. The demons were inflicting cruel injuries instead of killing his men outright. Liam wasn't Owain, each death cut like a knife to his own flesh and his family paid a sizeable reward to the family of a fallen soldier who fought well on the battlefield. It was one of the reasons that people were so willing to fight for the Dunns whenever they raised their banner to purge the demons from the neighboring lands.

But now, the demon's new tactics weren't only merciless, they were cruel, inflicting all manner of wounds on his soldiers and then fleeing like ghosts without finishing anyone off. It should have been a blessing, but seeing the suffering in this bloody tent day after day, Liam wasn't so sure that it was. The demons were plotting something... and if his guesses were right, they were about to discover what that plot was.

## Chapter 316: Demonic Cruelty (Part Two)

"The first village we planned to attack was completely abandoned and I've never seen that happen before," the handsome heir of the Dunn family said as he joined Loman by the wounded captain's side. "Demons don't flee, even when they should. They all think that they can fight us off because we don't have any Inquisitors with us, but this time, everyone had already left long before we arrived."

"A moment, Lord Liam," Loman said, interrupting the young lord to tend to his patient. "Before I remove the arrow," Loman said to the wounded man as he reached into a pouch for a small bottle. "Would you like a sip of Essence of Poppy? It will dull the pain and cloud your mind but..."

"Never," the man spat fiercely before a horrified look flickered across his face as he realized who he'd spat at. "I'm sorry, my Lord Loman, I, I forgot myself. Please save it for those who are too injured to fight again. I do not wish to become a man who needs to escape into the poppy's fog."

"Then bite down on this," Loman said, passing the man a short stick wrapped in leather and soaked in strong willow bark tea. "This will hurt," he said.

When he first began treating the wounded, he had been tender and gentle with each soldier, treating them like the common people who came to the temple in Lothian City for healing and aid.

By the second day, he'd all but eliminated his pleasantries as his bedside manner became brisk and more efficient. He no longer asked people to think about a time they were happy or to imagine that the hand of their fellow soldier was the hand of a loved one for them to clutch. "Bite down, this will hurt," was all the warning he gave before he shoved forward on the arrow, pushing the barbed head all the way through the leg and removing it from the other side before he began his prayer.

"O Lord of Light who rules on high,

Whose mercy stretches 'cross the sky,

Let healing light mend his flesh and ease his pain,

Make whole the broken so he may walk again."

Pale golden light gathered around Loman like a halo, shining on his chestnut hair and making his white and gold robes appear radiant and far too pure for the dirty, bloody world in this field hospital. Then, as he pressed his glowing palms to the wound, the energy spilled from his hands into the wound.

Captain Jorg's teeth had bitten into the leather hard enough to leave an impression of his teeth in the wood beneath the leather with his eyes screwed so tightly shut that tears leaked from them. The instant Loman's hands touched the wound, however, the pain melted away like the aches of the body fading in a hot bath. Flesh moved like putty under Loman's gentle touch and within the span of a few minutes, not a trace of the wound remained.

"May the blessings of the Holy Lord of Light be upon you," Loman said in a shaky voice. "May you live virtuously from this day and wield your sword against the demons of darkness to repay the Holy Lord of Light for the gift of healing he has bestowed on you."

"Thank, thank you, my lord," Jorg said, reaching out with his fingers to gently touch the patch of pale skin where the wound had once been. Not a trace of the injury remained and his leg felt strong enough to run back to his injured men if he wanted to... or to chase down the idiots responsible for getting them caught in a trap.

"Don't thank me," Loman said humbly. "I'm nothing more than a vessel for the power of the Holy Lord of Light. Give your thanks to him."

"Lord Loman," Liam interrupted before the freshly healed soldier could say more. "You're tired. You should rest. Let my physician see to the wounded who arrive next. They can summon you if anything urgent requires your intervention."

"I think, I think I may need to do that," Loman said, pushing himself up off the cot only to stagger as his vision swam from the sudden movement. Thankfully, Liam was close by to catch the exhausted priest and help him out of the tent.

"Lord Loman," Liam said as he helped the young priest across the camp to his personal tent. "I'm worried that the demons are trying to wear us down by wounding so many of our men. Abandoning one village and leaving only the elderly and the infirm in the second village we attacked... I think they've gathered all of their capable fighters at the village ahead and now they're preparing a counterattack."

"Why do you think that, Lord Liam?" Loman asked as they walked. The light of the sun, the first he'd seen of it in what felt like days, was warm on his skin and seemed to breathe a bit of life into his body as if the Holy Lord of Light was helping him find the strength he needed even if it was for something as small as returning to his own bed for a nap before he returned to the tents.

"We have always had the advantage of numbers over the demons when we face their warriors in battle," Liam said confidently. "But now, they must think that half our men are wounded after so many days of their fiendish traps and cowardly archers picking away at our scouting parties and sentries."

"Any day now, I imagine they'll attack our camp in force," he said. His words might have been grim but both his tone and expression were eager. "Because of you, Lord Loman, they will be very, very wrong about the number of wounded men in our army. They think they've softened us up, but the truth is that you've turned their strategy completely against them."

"When the time comes, I'll make sure my father knows that this victory is one we owe to you and your efforts," Liam said with a wide grin.

"If we achieve victory here," Loman said with praise for the Holy Lord of Light upon his lips. At the last minute, however, he changed his mind. After all, he wasn't here just as a priest. He was here to prove that he could be the heir to the Lothian throne.

"If we achieve victory here," he said with more strength in his voice than he truly felt. "It will be because your men are disciplined and well-trained and because you possessed the vision to see through the demon's cruel plan. They wish to wear us down, but you have all the support I can offer to ensure that your men meet the enemy at their strongest."

"Together," Loman said, giving the other man's shoulder a squeeze before he stepped away to enter his tent. "This time, the Dunn family won't fight the demons alone."

"Together," Liam said, bowing slightly to the young Lothian Lord with a predatory smile on his face. As soon as the demons attacked his camp, he would spring his trap and pay them back a thousand times over for the wounds they had inflicted on his men. All he had to do was wait and strike when the opportunity came.

## Chapter 317: A Healer's Limits

As the moon climbed higher in the night sky, casting long shadows through the ancient forest outside the Vale of Mists, Commander Bassinger stood over the map in his command tent, glowering at it as if he could change the positions of soldiers or scraps of information through sheer force of will.

The tent itself bore little resemblance to the luxurious pavilions like the one used by Liam Dunn to coordinate his campaign. Bassinger's tent had simple canvas walls, weathered and patched in places, that had been deliberately covered in places with mud, twigs, and loose leaves to help it blend into the surrounding forest. The tent's peaked ceiling barely cleared the commander's bearlike frame, keeping the profile low enough that even the sharpest-eyed human scout would struggle to spot it among the dense underbrush in the hills to the north of the Vale of Mists.

While Loman Lothian collapsed into exhausted slumber in the human camp miles away, the commander's own forces had gathered to discuss what they had learned from the past several days spent harassing Liam Dunn's forces with everything from ambushes to primitive traps.

Several other men and women crowded into the command tent. Most came either from the Clan of the Great Claw or the Horned Clan. Much like Lennart, they were captains in Nyrielle's army and had served for well over a decade each, some of them twice that. Two figures stood out both for their lack of formal position and their membership in clans that had been long absent from the Vale of Mists.

"Well Milo," Bassinger's deep voice rumbled after several minutes as he looked at the the Heartwood archer. "You and your men have done a very difficult job this past week. It must have been hard on you."

"The hardest part is holding back, Commander," Milo said with a polite bow that hid his pursed lips and tight jaw. Again and again, they'd been given orders to inflict injuries only but kill no one and again and again, he and the other refugees from his village with the skill to build traps or fight had followed their orders.

It hadn't been easy, even when he realized that none of the men marching against them now had been in the raid on his village. It wasn't personal, these men weren't responsible for his brother's death, but they represented the same insatiable human greed and bloodthirst nonetheless.

More than once, that slight difference, the fact that these weren't the men who had killed his family and friends was the only thing that allowed him to aim for a leg when he could have sent an arrow through the human soldier's eye.

It had been even harder when he had to round on his own people to hold them back from claiming some measure of vengeance against the humans. More than once, he had to physically grab a friend and pull him away to prevent violence from escalating to killing.

"I know," Bassinger said, placing a heavy paw on the younger man's shoulder and meeting his dark, clouded gaze directly. "But this is war, not a single battle. Battles are brawls, wars are dances. Right now, we need to learn about our partner if we're going to take the lead."

"And just what have we learned?" The woman who spoke was the second person in the tent who hadn't come from the Vale of Mists originally. Dark hair flowed in waves down a face marked by crimson eyes that each held eight pupils and four, spider-like limbs protruded from her back, supporting most of her weight as she stood overlooking the map. On her shoulder, a long-legged spider the size of a man's palm perched, its dark, beady eyes surveying the room as though it were trying to remember everything that happened here tonight.

"My Tusi entered their camp days ago," the woman said, gently petting the furry spider with a slender finger. "You have the names of their commander, their priest, their captains. You know their intentions. Now, they've figured out that we're trying to systematically weaken them before assaulting the camp, so just what is it that's been so important to learn that you won't allow us to kill any of them?"

"Peace, Akshala," the bearish commander said, holding up his hands as if he wanted to surrender. "If the humans have concluded that we're going to attack them after weakening them, then they have misunderstood the dance from the very beginning," he said with a grin. "That's a very good thing for us."

"Then why?" Milo asked. He clenched his fists so tightly that his sharp claws bit into the palms of his hands even through his leather gloves. All these days, the men who followed him here had believed that they were softening the enemy for a critical strike, but if that wasn't the goal, then what was?

"Akshala," Commander Bassinger said, lowering his rumbling voice to the gentlest tone he could manage. "You said that Loman Lothian collapsed tonight after healing one man, and that the other wounded have been made to wait until morning?"



"That's right," the dark-haired woman from the Night Weaver Clan said, tapping one of her spider-like limbs in irritation. "Right now they have lost their support. If we attacked them this night, even the ones we didn't manage to slay might still die from their injuries."

"That would be a pointless victory," Bassinger said with a shake of his head. "And one we couldn't afford to win unless we were very careful to avoid the Lothian Priest. Most of you are young," Bassinger said, looking around the room at the faces that were as familiar to him as his own family as well as the two who weren't.

Many of them were older than he had been during the last war. When he first marched to war, it had been as a common soldier, fighting in the front ranks, tearing into Lothian soldiers with his fighting gauntlets and even his bare claws.

The captains serving him now had been too young then to have gained real battle experience and there was much that they didn't know. Or perhaps they'd forgotten because their days as a fresh recruit, when they soaked up stories of battle and glory like eager sponges, were too far in the past for them.

"Our target this entire time has been Loman Lothian," Bassinger said. "According to the reports gathered by Sir Marcell's spies, Loman is a rising star within the Church. He has been given power beyond what men his age should possess and he has the ear of the High Priest. Recently, he's been keeping company with Templars and Inquisitors and we've learned that a Holy Light Sword was granted to the Templar that serves as his personal guard."

"Now, what does that tell you about Loman Lothian?" the commander asked.

"If we kill him, it will only provoke the wrath of the Church," Milo said bitterly. "They will return with even more of their sorcerers, raining fire down on village after village until they vent their anger for killing their holy man. That's why you said we have to be careful not to kill him."

"You aren't wrong," Commander Bassinger said. "But you don't know the humans well enough to know what we've been afraid of."

"You think he has the same power as their High Priest?" one of the horned captains asked. "Is that why you've been targeting him?"

"Not a High Priest," Bassinger said grimly. "An Exemplar. They are the chosen of the human god, the true rulers of the human Church. It is said that Exemplars have power that rivals that of Witches, that they cannot be exhausted as long as they fight beneath the sun and stars."

"That's why I've asked you to pile up so many injuries on their soldiers," the commander explained. "I needed to see Loman Lothian's limits. Perhaps, one day, he may become an Exemplar. I confess, I do not know how a human priest becomes one and the Church may be protecting him because they see that potential in him. What I do know is that he doesn't have that power today."

"Humans with the power of Witches?" Akshala said with a derisive snort. "Fairy tales and folk legends. No one has seen a human with that sort of power on any battlefield anywhere. Someone is exaggerating the strength of enemies long dead to claim greater glory than they deserve."

Several of the captains shuffled uncomfortably at the accusation and a few even dropped their hands to their weapons only to still when their commander raised a hand and nodded in understanding.

"What little I know of Exemplars was told to me by Lady Nyrielle when I became her Commander," Bassinger said. "I understand that people from the outlying villages may have reason to doubt her words. I'm not asking you to put your trust in her. Instead, put your trust in the woman who told her that Exemplars should be treated much the same way we would treat a hostile Witch."

"Oh?" Akshala said, raising a sharply pointed eyebrow and looking at Bassinger with an intense, crimson gaze. "Which one of her progeny found this nugget of wisdom? Sir Thane? Or the Black Merchant, Sir Marcell?"

Even though her tone held a hint of mockery, seeing how many of the gathered captains still held their hands next to the hilts of weapons, she took at least a small step backward, using the titles the people of the vale used to refer to their human vampire overlords. She may not like her hosts, but as long as she was depending on them to protect the people of her village, there were limits to how much she could provoke them.

"I'm not privy to the details," Commander Bassinger said. "But it was a member of your clan who obtained the information," he said, shocking not only Akshala but everyone else gathered in the tent as well.

"The pronouncement that Exemplars resemble Witches came from the Mother of Thorns herself."

#### Chapter 318: I Know Where I Belong (Part One)

Commander Bassinger's revelation shocked everyone in the command tent. The number of people in this tent who understood the relationship between the Briar and the Vale of Mist could be counted on the claws of one hand, and even then, those few captains who had heard about Madame Zedya's lessons from the Mother of Thorns were among the oldest in the tent.

"Has the Mother of Thorns fought the human exemplars?" one of the younger captains asked, blinking several times as his mind struggled to think about how else a powerful Witch from across the mountains could know so much about their human enemies.

"Witches have their ways of knowing," Commander Bassinger said before he pointed a sharp claw at the furry spider on Akshala's shoulder. "She's also a member of the Night Weaver Clan for one, so perhaps a Witch as powerful as her is able to send her eight-legged spies even further away than Miss Akshala can. Perhaps she has other methods of knowing."

"I'm not one to question what Lady Nyrielle tells me, especially when it comes from such a reliable source," the bearish commander said. "The important thing is that Loman Lothian displays none of the traits of an Inquisitor or Exemplar. He seems to be an ordinary priest, though he is a talented and strong one compared to what we saw from priests in the last war."

"So, now that we have this information," Milo asked hesitantly. "What do we do with it?"

"For now, nothing," Bassinger said, tapping the map to draw everyone's attention to the notes written on small bits of paper there. "Our campaign of harassment served another goal. We bought time for Broken Rock Village to evacuate even the elderly. It now stands empty and ready for the next step in our campaign."

"For the next few days, Liam Dunn is expecting us to attack him and he's making preparations to receive that attack," the commander explained. "We, however, will move to Broken Rock Village and prepare to receive their attack. Most of the residents were from the Horned Clan," he mentioned, giving a few of his captains a look.

"The walls aren't tall enough to repel a human assault," one of them said, nodding with an understanding of the point his commander was about to raise. "They built their defenses to ward off wild beasts and to shelter their herds at night, not to resist human armies. They probably thought that it would be years before the Dunns penetrated so deeply into the wilderness, if ever."

"Exactly," Bassinger said. "Building a new, taller wall that would survive a serious assault will be too difficult and largely a waste of effort. However, we can dig a deep trench in front of it and set some stakes as well to break a charge. At the same time, we can prepare a method of retreat..."

As the night wore on, the bearish commander issued his orders, assigning tasks to each of his captains before sending them on their way. Akshala, as a volunteer spy without an official place in the chain of command, was one of the first to be dismissed, but even though Milo expected to be dismissed shortly after, the command never came. Eventually, while the last of the captains filed out of the tent into the cool night air, Commander Bassinger caught Milo's eye and gestured for him to remain behind.

The young archer's whiskers twitched in surprise, but he stayed in place as the previously crowded tent emptied and cool night air swept into the dimly lit space. When the last captain had departed and the sound of footsteps had faded, Bassinger took a seat on a wooden box filled with supplies and gestured for the shorter man to do the same. The formal atmosphere of their meeting melted away as the commander's posture relaxed.

"Milo," Bassinger said as he took a seat on a wooden box filled with supplies and gestured for the shorter man to do the same. "I wanted to talk to you alone about what comes next."

"You want me and the others from my village to booby trap the village," Milo guessed. "And to build sniper hides along your path of retreat so you can disengage when the fighting becomes too costly."

"Smart," Bassinger said, digging around in a nearby leather sack for a small cask of ale and a pair of wooden cups. After pouring a cup for himself and one for Milo, he took a deep swig of the pale brown liquid that smelled of fresh herbs and sharp alcohol before giving the young archer a very evaluating stare.

"You've done well with your kinsmen all through this campaign," Bassinger praised while Milo sipped cautiously at his ale. The foam tickled his nose and he wasn't entirely sure he liked the beverage but he was unwilling to be rude enough to reject the commander's offer. "It hasn't been long, but I'm old enough and I've seen enough warriors come and go to know a man who can lead when I see one. You have the gift, Milo."

"Thank you, Commander," Milo said, ducking his head while his tail swished in embarrassment. He didn't think he'd done well at all. He'd only barely kept the others from his village in line and he'd cursed himself several times for denying them a chance to claim even a single life in revenge for what had been done to their village. They'd done as they'd been told, but even now that he understood the reasons, it felt far too abstract and distant to feel any great pride over.

"I want you to join us," Bassinger said bluntly. "Not as a soldier, but as a captain, like the others from tonight's meeting. It would be good if more of your clansmen came with you, but even if none of them do, I would still offer you a position of leadership. If you think enough of your clansmen will join you, I wouldn't mind forming an entire unit under your command. We could use snipers and trappers that can operate as a unit in the war to come."

#### Chapter 319: I Know Where I Belong (Part Two)

"I want you to join us. Not as a soldier, but as a captain," Bassinger said, leaning forward on the wooden crate and holding his wooden cup of ale in both hands as he made his earnest request.

"Commander Bassinger," Milo said, his whiskers twitching in shock as he was momentarily stunned by the offer. "I, I'm sorry, but I can't" he said as soon as he recovered. "Perhaps there's someone else from my village, or one of the other Heartwood clan villages that's further away and didn't suffer like we did, but.... I can't do this."

"Why not?" The bearish commander asked, surprised by how quickly Milo had rejected his offer. "Is it because you've had enough of war? I thought that you and your clansmen still wanted a chance to wash away your hatred in Lothian blood. Have these few days changed your minds?"

"No, not at all," Milo said, his gaze growing sharp as his free hand curled into a tight fist. The hand holding the wooden cup remained perfectly steady. No matter how simply it had been carved, no one from his clan would ever lose control of themselves to the extent of harming the fruit of another woodworker's labor, but his tail thumped the ground several times in agitation.

"I hate them," he said. "I hate them more than I have words to describe. But there are more important things than hating the Lothians. I only came this time because... because several of us were hoping to spill Lothian blood and because we thought we might get to face Owan Lothian's men again to claim our vengeance. But they aren't here and we," he said, his tone turning bitter. "We have been denied our chance to take human lives in the war so far."

"You'll have that chance very soon," Commander Bassinger pointed out. "The humans leave their priests and healers in their well defended camps when they send their soldiers to raid a village. We won't have to be cautious about Loman Lothian anymore. You can kill to your heart's content as long as you follow my orders about where you stand and when you retreat."

"I, I appreciate your offer," Milo said after spending several moments sipping the foamy ale and organizing his thoughts. "And we'll fight under your command until it's time to return to the Vale. I'm not going to abandon you now just because we haven't been able to kill our enemy yet. I don't have to like it to understand that there's a bigger picture and we all have to play our parts. You don't have to worry, I'll play mine in the days to come."

"But after that, you'll leave the army?" Commander Bassinger asked, raising a bushy eyebrow at the young archer. "Why?"

"Because this isn't where I belong," Milo replied with a helpless shrug. "I'm sure I'll find a place to fight in the war to come. I don't intend to hide from it. Perhaps, if I'm lucky, I'll have a chance to kill the men who burned Lako to death with my own hands. Perhaps I won't. But, as I said, there are more important things than my hatred."

"Family?" Bassinger asked, scratching the fur on his cheek with a sharp claw. "I heard that Old Nan was doing better now that construction on a new village had begun. Or are you planning to start a family? If you need to wait until you've had a chance to father a child, I can give you some time," the bearish commander said.

It was something that he had seen many times in the war before. The more times men danced with death and lived, the hotter the fire in their loins burned to leave behind an heir who could continue their legacy if they failed to return one day. No man wanted to die childless, especially not one as recently married as he'd heard Milo was.

"Yes, family," Milo agreed with a nod. "But not like you think. It, it's Sir Ollie," he said a touch awkwardly. "I know he'll fight in the battles to come. I intend to be by his side when he does. I can't do that if I'm responsible for leading a unit of my own. He can't be here right now because he's taking care of my family, building our new home along with everyone else's new home," he said, hanging his head in guilt and shame.

"That was the last reason I came," Milo admitted. "Because Sir Ollie can't, then I can at least earn some honor for our village in his place. I owe him that and more."

"The lad means that much to you, does he?" Bassinger asked, leaning back in surprise. It hadn't been two months yet and already Milo looked like he would march to his death if the red haired human commanded it. To inspire that kind of loyalty so quickly was no easy feat. "Why? Why go so far for a human when humans burned down your village and killed your clansmen?"

"Because Sir Ollie isn't like those humans," Milo said. "Commander, you may know about our traditions, but you didn't grow up in a Heartwood burrow. You don't know what it meant for us to lose our homes and everything that made them precious to us."

"When Sir Ollie took me back to our village, the fires were still smoldering and in some places, the embers hadn't burned out," he said, his eyes growing distant as he remembered the horrifying devastation he'd returned to. "But Sir Ollie, he knelt in the ash with me and dug through the wreckage with his bare hands. Even if it meant he might burn himself, he was delicate, and he handled each carving we found like it was one of the sacred relics of his own Church."

"He brought my mother back from a place of darkness and depression and he's worked tirelessly every day to give us a new home in the Vale of Mists," Milo said, his tail hanging low on the ground. "He calls himself a coward," Milo said softly. "But he's the bravest man I know. He won't give up on us, even when we've given up on ourselves."

"I see," Bassinger said, swallowing the last of his ale and standing to place a heavy paw on the young man's shoulder. "In that case, it sounds like you know where you belong. I won't ask again."

The commander's eyes lingered on the map on the table for a moment, his expression thoughtful. When he turned back to Milo, there was a hint of challenge in his eyes as he considered the best way to motivate this reluctant soldier in the short period of time he would have him.

"Before you return to Sir Ollie's side though, let's make sure you and your clansmen have something to be proud of," he said, hoping that Milo would rise to the challenge. He'd already pushed them to their limits by forbidding them from taking any human lives in the campaign so far. Since he couldn't rely on a formal chain of command to keep Milo and his clansmen in line, he'd resort to other methods to encourage them to go along with his plans.

"Your people know more about traps and moving in concealment than any of my captains," Bassinger said, his voice full of praise. "You've done masterfully so far, but I've as good as placed a muzzle around your mouth and tied your tails to your backs. It's time to take the restraints off," he said, unrolling a more detailed sketch of the village and the area around it.

"Digging a trench and reinforcing the wooden palisade is a start and my men can manage that," the bearish commander said. "What I want to know is what we haven't thought of yet. We've bought at least two days of time before the Dunns poke their heads out of their fortified camp, maybe as many as five. What can you do in that amount of time?"

"You mentioned a path to retreat," Milo said, moving to stand over the map as his whiskers twitched in thought. "That means we have to make a path difficult for the humans to approach so they don't trap us in the village we want to flee..."

As he spoke, the two men grew more and more engaged, each suggesting ideas or refining the ones the other man had put forward. Inwardly, Commander Bassinger couldn't help but be a little jealous that he hadn't gotten to Milo before Ollie had. But perhaps, even if he had met the cunning young archer first, it wouldn't have mattered.

After all, while Bassinger might be a fearsome commander on the battlefield, Sir Ollie had conquered the hearts of the people who followed him. Compared to what Ollie had done, the loyalty Bassinger could buy by offering a chance to claim revenge seemed ephemeral and fleeting. But when that loyalty was directed to someone who showed as much promise as young Ollie did... it was hard for even the veteran commander to remain jealous for long.

## Chapter 320: A Visiting Lord

After weeks of travel, Owan Lothian had grown sick of the interior of his luxurious carriage. Even though it was spacious with seats upholstered in soft suede and the springs of the carriage were far better than those used on most carriages, nothing could turn the cramped interior of a wooden box into anything that felt 'comfortable' once you spent more than a dozen days confined to its interior all day long.

The Blackwell household staff had done their best with his carriage after he arrived last night. The dark maroon curtains had been laundered and the carpets washed and scrubbed. Scented oils had been applied to the upholstery, masking the smell of unwashed bodies that clung to the interior after weeks of travel and someone who hadn't spent weeks in the cramped interior might find it to be opulent.



Owain, however, was sick of it. If not for the fact that it would have diminished his image in the eyes of the locals, he would have ridden a horse himself just to feel the sea breeze of Blackwell harbor on his face and the warmth of the summer sun on his skin. Instead, once again, he was confined to his carriage as it navigated through the crowded streets of Blackwell City to the guildhall of the Fellowship of Wayfinders.

Staring out the window, Owain watched the bustle of the vibrant port city with a complicated expression. By rights, Lothian City should be wealthier and grander than any mere County city could possibly be. The reality, however, was a stark reminder that Lothian March was still very much on the 'frontier.' The iron-bound chest sitting on the floor in the center of the carriage represented the potential to change all that, but for now, it was only potential that had yet to be realized.

The greatest object of wealth on display in Lothian city didn't even belong to the mighty Lothian family, rather, it was the golden spires of the grand temple that the Lothians had built to gain the support of the Church which dominated the heart of the city with its golden roof and glittering stained glass windows.

But every time Owain had visited Blackwell City, he didn't have to look far to realize that the commoners of Ashlynn's hometown could live lives every bit as luxurious as his, perhaps even more so. And while only a few might enjoy such luxury, there were still many enjoying lives every bit as grand as the other occupants of his carriage.

"You're staring like a country bumpkin," Owain said, glaring at his new steward, Sir Hugo. Seeing the man look so much like a fish out of water triggered a festering wound in his heart as he compared the bookish bastard to his murdered predecessor. Sir Kaefin had been a real man who knew to be bold, even when traveling to unfamiliar lands. By comparison, his replacement was far, far too lacking.

"Ignore the trappings of wealth and remember that you are one of my knights when we meet with these merchants. You don't just represent yourself here, or me. You're the son of Baron Hanrahan," he reminded sharply. "So act like it."

Hugo withdrew his hand from the carriage's curtain as if burned, hunching his shoulders slightly as he turned away from the window. His hawk-like features that immediately gave away his parentage to anyone who knew his father only emphasized how ill at ease he looked in his fine clothing. The numbers and figures he'd spent all morning reviewing scattered in his mind under Owain's stern gaze.

"I'm sorry, my lord," he said, unconsciously touching the leather-bound ledger in his lap. He'd asked Owain to review his work before the meeting but the handsome young lord had only laughed, saying

that if Hugo couldn't even manage to handle the questions of a single merchant guildmaster then he had no business in Owain's retinue. Now, the pressure he felt under Owain's gaze grew even greater as it seemed that nothing he did would meet his new lord's demanding standards.

"You told me that there would be many ships in the harbor and that it was a crowded city but I failed to imagine something so... grand," he finished awkwardly. "Compared to you and your experience traveling the world, I'm far too limited in my experience," he added, hoping that a bit of flattery would smooth things over with Lord Owain.

"Bah, grow a spine, man," Sir Rian interrupted, delivering a sharp punch to Hugo's upper arm that made the slender steward wince. "A proper knight doesn't cower before sharp tongues. You fought demons in the wilderness and you lived to tell the tale, even if we had to dig you out of the mud after those beasts broke their dam."

"You still have 'battles to boast of'," the knight said, wrapping an arm around his slender companion's shoulders with a heavy slap on the back. "So puff up your chest and act like a war hero to these soft-skinned merchants who have never come within a hundred leagues of a demon."

The pot-bellied knight's 'friendly' gesture would surely leave another bruise to match the collection Hugo had accumulated since his elevation to Owain's service. Still, Hugo forced himself to hide the wince of pain that flickered across his face at Rian's touch and to put on a bolder expression, puffing up his chest as the other man suggested. After all, showing weakness would only invite more of Rian's particular brand of camaraderie. It was better to play along than provoke more 'lessons in knighthood' from the other man.

"I know, Rian," Hugo said, rubbing his arm while trying to mask his grimace as an appreciative smile. "This would be easier, my lord, if the Blackwells came with us to make introductions," he added, desperate to redirect the conversation to business matters where his expertise might shield him from further 'encouragement' from his fellow knight.

"Count Rhys?" Owain said with a snort. Whatever respect he might have had for the man's position and authority had fallen away while he was still courting Ashlynn when he learned that the count had never once fought in battle and had only fought a single duel while courting Ashlynn's mother.

The man might be a ruling nobleman, but he was no warrior and had achieved nothing that Owain felt worthy of respect beyond what he owed the man's title. Since the founding of Lothian March, there hadn't been a single Lothian Marquis who hadn't ridden into battle against the worst sorts of demons,

but it had been over a hundred years since any Blackwell Count had done the same. And yet, he was still expected to kneel before his father-in-law as if his title alone made him a greater man.

No, as far as Owain was concerned, the less he had to do with his inlaws on this trip, the better, and it seemed like the feeling was mutual. Besides, if he had to run to a soft lord from an old county who had never once faced a demon in battle for help with something as insipid as bringing a few merchant guilds to heel, then he might as well throw himself off a pier and never return to Lothian March. The shame of it would be more than he could bear.

He had made up his mind long ago that he would return from this trip with everything his father required of him and more. He didn't know what his brother Loman was up to, riding off to fight demons with Liam Dunn, but Owain sensed his father's hand in the move. It was clearly meant as a challenge and a reminder that his younger brother had done far more for the prosperity of Lothian City than Owain himself ever had.

If Owain failed here, his father might very well reconsider which Lothian son would inherit his throne. He didn't think his father would go through with it, or that his pious little brother would accept the throne even if it was offered. But a tiny voice at the back of his mind kept whispering about all the things that had gone since his disastrous marriage to the witch, Ashlynn Blackwell.

His father had been clear about things the last time. Owain couldn't afford any more failures. But this time, he wouldn't just avoid failures. He would seize these arrogant merchants by the balls if he had to, but one way or another, he would return with everything they required and more!