

The Vampire 501

Chapter 501: A Bank of Trust

It took nearly a minute before either guild master was able to speak after the shocking revelation that Owain had tried and failed to kill Lady Ashlynn Blackwell on the night of their wedding. For Tiernan, the struggle he faced played out across his face as hot anger warred with wisdom that said hasty responses would only lead to shoddy work in the end.

Master Isabell faced an entirely different struggle. Her methodical mind drew all the way back to the beginning and the letter she'd received from Lady Ashlynn with its cryptic warning and heartfelt plea to watch over Lady Jocelynn if she was able to. When viewed in light of what Marcel had just told them many things made more sense but there were still too many pieces missing for her to assemble a clear view of the puzzle.

"Mister Marcel," Isabell said carefully as she set aside her plate of fish. The dish smelled wonderful, but the conversation made it difficult to maintain any interest in the sumptuous feast the dark-haired youth had laid out before them.

"Do you have any proof to offer us? To accuse the heir to the Lothian March of attempted murder and a grand conspiracy to conceal that murder, you must have some proof to support your claims."

Though she asked for proof, Isabell didn't expect anything grand or even conclusive. If such wicked plots were easily exposed then they would have unraveled months ago. The fact that they hadn't was a sign that things were complex, murky, or that people with information 'disappeared' with enough frequency that those who held evidence of wrongdoing were reluctant to share it.

No, Isabell wasn't looking for proof, but she was looking for more information that would help her see the complete puzzle.

"You aren't ready for proof," Marcel said, shaking his head at the cautious engineer. "I've already given you a loan. The knowledge that Lord Owain attempted to murder Lady Ashlynn and that she has been living in hiding while he keeps an imposter in the Summer Villa to maintain appearances should already demonstrate the amount of trust I'm willing to extend to you on Lady Ashlynn's endorsement of your character alone," he said.

"Deeper secrets that would prove my words will cost you," the dark-eyed vampire said, leaning forward and resting his elbows on the table as he gestured at the pair with a blunt butter knife. "My bank of trust has limits on loans until you make deposits that demonstrate you can be trusted further. As guild masters, you should understand this well."

"You're treating this like you're making a loan on ore shipments," Tiernan said after taking a large swig of wine that drained half his goblet at once. "But you said Lady Ashlynn intends to seize Lothian March, like she's coming to collect on a lien against a mine. But these things aren't the same at all! If you're going to ask us to wade into something like this, the amount of trust you need to extend is much, much greater."

"Well, you're right about that," Marcel said, setting his knife down after buttering a soft roll that he began to tear into several small, bite-sized pieces. "But you're also very wrong. You're untested, untempered, and at least to me, largely unknown. The damage you can do if I've placed my trust wrongly is greater than you can imagine."

"So, instead of arguing about what you should and shouldn't be told," Marcel proposed. "Why don't we move on to what you can do to help Lady Ashlynn? Once you've made a few deposits in my bank of trust, I'm happy to reveal more to you."

"No, I want to know at least one thing more before we talk about any kind of cooperation," Master Isabell said, removing her silver rimmed spectacles to give the strange young man a very direct look. "Just tell me why. Why would Lord Owain try to murder Lady Ashlynn on her wedding night? If you can't tell me something that makes that make sense, then I can't put enough trust in you to cooperate with you."

"If that's all it takes," Marcel said with a smile as he popped a piece of buttered bread into his mouth. "On the night of her wedding to Owain Lothian, someone told the young lord that Lady Ashlynn bears the mark of the witch. Whether she was a witch or not, I'm sure you have a good understanding," he said in a tone that suggested the idea was preposterous. "But it is true that she possesses a birthmark in an area few would see. Make of that what you will, but it was enough for Owain to beat her nearly to death."

-CLANK-

The sound of dishes and silverware clattering as Tiernan's meaty fist slammed into the table momentarily startled everyone, and the smoldering rage burning in his eyes grew even hotter. He might

not have known Ashlynn well, but as a father of a girl just coming into the age to consider marriage, his blood boiled at the thought of a man so vile that he would lay hands on a woman the night she left the protection of her own flesh and blood!

"How did Lady Ashlynn get away from him?" Isabell asked, resting a hand gently on the powerful ironmonger's muscular shoulder while she focused on the details of Marcel's story. She wasn't without a slow-burning fury of her own, but getting lost in that anger would only cause her to miss important details, and right now, the young man's story still didn't entirely add up.

"She's not a strong woman. For all her sneaking about, she's not a trained swordswoman who could take on a knight like Owain. If she's not a witch," she asked suspiciously, "then how did she escape when Owain attacked her?"

"I think that Lady Ashlynn is stronger than you think," Marcel said with a light laugh. "But you've made an assumption in error. Lady Ashlynn didn't fight her way free of him. Sir Tommin and Sir Broll dumped her body in a shallow grave outside the march, at the edge of the Vale of Mists," he said. "Lady Ashlynn 'escaped' by clinging to life so hard that she crawled out of her own grave and wandered the darkness until she found help."

"That's also why the secret I've given you is greater than you may realize," Marcel added. "As far as the people of Lothian March are aware, Lady Ashlynn is either alive and pregnant with Owain's heir in the Summer Villa, or she's dead and buried in an unmarked grave in the wilderness."

"Within the whole of Lothian March, the number of people who know that she's alive and planning her return can be counted on the fingers of one hand," Marcel said, holding up one hand and wiggling his slender, dextrous fingers. "So, is that enough of a loan of trust to win your cooperation?"

Chapter 502: Too Many Sides (Part One)

"It's enough," Master Tiernan said, picking up a long carving knife and spearing a section of roast boar with enough violence to suggest that he wished it was Owain Lothian before him rather than a hunk of roasted meat.

"Tiernan," Master Isabell said, looking at him with a complex expression as her normally placid companion lost much of his composure. "There are still things we should consider. Perhaps we should discuss this privately tonight and return tomorrow," she said, casting a questioning glance at the dark-haired youth.

"No, we've heard enough," Tiernan said. "Already, I don't know how I can tolerate being in that conniving lordling's presence after what I've heard tonight. No, I want to hear what kind of help this young fellow wants from us. Maybe then I can feel like I'm doing something to wash this, this sickening feeling from my belly."

Already, the notion of crushing Owain Lothian's skull between a pair of his forging hammers or even with his bare hands had flickered through the normally gentle giant's mind, but he instantly shoved them down. Owan was a well trained and powerful knight and brute strength would never be enough to overcome him.

Moreover, if he attacked the Lothian heir, the retribution wouldn't be confined to him alone. He might be a powerful guild master in Blackwell County, but he was still a commonor and the crime of assaulting a nobelman carried a sentence that would punish his wife and children at the same time it punished him.

The consequences were simply too great to bear, whether he succeeded or not, so he could only swallow his rage and look for a more constructive way to work against the murderous lordling.

"What I hope you can do, right now, is actually very simple," Marcel said, clearing aside his plate filled with tiny morsels and fetching a rolled up map of Lothian March to lay out his request. "I'll be honest with you, you've arrived in Lothian March sooner than Lady Ashlynn and I expected when I helped her to deliver those letters," he began.

"This is good because it gives us time, but also dangerous for you because you've arrived before she can do much to ensure your safety," Marcel explained. "Right now, the very best thing that you can do is to serve as a wedge between a few factions and don't let anyone sweep you entirely into their camp."

"No need to worry about that," Isabell said, finally summoning enough appetite to select a small meat pie to nibble on while Marcel spoke. The buttery crust of the pastry broke into dozens of soft flakes as soon as she cut into it with a fork and the rich, earthy smell of fresh herbs and minced lamb helped to ground thoughts as she nibbled. "We have no intention of allying ourselves closely with Owain Lothian, even before all of this. We've always intended to stand where Lady Ashlynn stands."

"That's a good notion for later, once Lady Ashlynn makes her return," Marcel said, weighting down the corners of the map with a handful of serving utensils as he began to explain. "Owain's greatest support

comes from the barons to the south and west," he said, gesturing at the Hanrahan and Aleese baronies that bordered Airgead Mountain and the Southern Steppe respectively.

"He's popular in these territories because of the victories he's won against demons to the south, and he's taken on retainers from both families to solidify his position with the southern barons in the west," Marcel explained.

"So this is why he wants us going out to Hanrahan Barrony," Tiernan said around a mouthful of roasted meat. "He wants to butter up his allies a bit more by offering them 'fresh blood' and the money that comes with building out our lands."

"That's part of it, I'm sure," Marcel agreed. "But there's another problem to understand, north of the Liver Luath," he said, tapping the map on the opposite side of the river from Hanrahan Barrony, closer to the Vale of Mists. "The Dunn Barony has been chafing at the bit to become the Dunn County for ages and Baron Dunn has stood in opposition to Bors Lothian a number of times over the years, calling for more capable leadership against the demons," he said.

"Recently, Loman Lothian has thrown in with Baron Dunn's heir, Liam Dunn in a war against the villages outside the Vale of Mists," Marcel explained, pausing to make sure both guild masters were following along before he continued. "Loman also took in one of the knights who dumped Lady Ashlynn in a shallow grave, Sir Tommin, and inducted him into the Templars."

"Loman Lothian intends to contend for his father's throne," Isabell realized. "He'd actually leave the church for that? Why? Everything I'd heard about him said he was particularly devout. There was even a rumor some time ago that he'd been asked to take a pilgrimage to the Holy City to study under the Exemplars."

"That may have been true once," Marcell acknowledged. "But things seemed to have changed for Loman after Lady Ashlynn's 'death.' Since he has Sir Tommin at his side, I have to assume that he knows the truth of what happened to his sister-in-law. That may make him an ally, if he's standing in opposition to his brother Owain on some kind of principle of justice for Lady Ashlynn, but it also makes him an obstacle to her plans."

"How so?" Tiernan asked bluntly. "If he stops Owain from taking the throne, isn't that a good thing? Serves the wretch right if he loses the throne for what he did," he said.

"That might be true," Isabell said, pushing aside her half eaten meat pie to focus entirely on the conversation. "But not if Lady Ashlynn wants to seize control of Lothian March. Her only claim to the throne comes from her status as Lord Owain's legal wife. If the throne goes to Loman, then it skips around her entirely."

Suddenly Isabell realized why Lady Ashlynn had asked her to look after her sister if she was able to. It wasn't because Lady Ashlynn had given up on herself and was helplessly trapped, it was because she had waded so far into developing her counterattack that she was afraid her sister would suffer retribution if she failed.

But Lady Ashlynn had far too few allies to make such a move. She was walking on the edge of a knife, clinging to a marriage that some people might not even recognize in order to have claim to a throne that had passed from father to son for generations. If she was going to pull this off, then the margin for error was razor thin.

And the consequences for failure, she thought... the consequences for failure could end with all of their heads on the executioner's block!

Chapter 503: Too Many Sides (Part Two)

"Loman's faction is still very under-developed," Marcel said, his voice snapping Isabell out of her inwardly spiralling thoughts.

"The Church seems to be behind him, though the fact that an Inquisitor spent months digging around after Lady Ashlynn's 'death' and never took action against Owain suggests the Church isn't fully committed to either brother. Other than that," he added, tapping on Lothian City. "Loman's greatest popularity is with the common people close to home where he's been building support for years as a priest of the Church."

"So you want us to press for lands to the east of Lothian March," Isabell said, looking at the eastern baronies they'd passed through on their way to the city from Blackwell County. "To stop them from building their factions there."

"No, that wouldn't do you any good," Marcel said. "The old men hanging onto their baronies far from the active front lines value tradition. They're in Bors Lothian's camp, and even the young ones who have taken succeeded their fathers in the past few years still look to the Marquis for direction. They'll side with whomever Bors picks."

"So we're caught between two brothers, the father, and the Church," Tiernan said, frowning at the map. "But if we're not pushing for lands in the east, where do you want us to go?"

"Here," Marcel said, tapping the unclaimed region along the banks of the river Luath where only a few sparse hamlets dotted the lands closest to the ancient roadway leading into the Vale of Mists. "You wanted somewhere peaceful to rest, this region will give it to you."

"That's madness!" Tiernan sputtered, nearly spitting out his wine. "I haven't been here long, but I've heard stories about the Demon Lady of the Vale already. They say she skins men alive, bathing in their blood and devouring their flesh. Nothing that is built too close to the Vale is ever safe. These people living so close," he said, tapping on the scattered hamlets on the map. "They're gambling with their lives. What could be here that would be worth taking the risk?"

"Nothing," Marcel said with a slow smile at the way the locals had described Lady Nyrielle. Who would bathe in blood? It was such a waste, like bathing in wine, yet the myth persisted for decades without anyone ever questioning it. "There's nothing of value here right now, but it does three important things."

"First," Marcel said, raising a slender finger. "It pulls you away from the Hanrahans and second, it puts you closer to the Dunns. This should be enough for Liam Dunn to wonder if he can pull you into his camp, and if he doesn't, Loman should. Placing the two of you, and by extension, the agreement with the guilds of Blackwell City, in a place where your support must be contested for will keep both sides busy."

"I see," Isabell said, nodding slowly. So long as she removed the danger from the Vale of Mists, what Marcel was asking them to do wasn't that unreasonable. They were already intending to tour the countryside while negotiating for the lands that would form their domains as knights of Lothian March. Putting themselves squarely between the feuding brothers wasn't a move without risk, but it wasn't something that would put their lives in peril either.

As a favor to ask, Marcel seemed to be moving slowly with them. The request was small, but accepting it would be a notable deposit in his 'bank of trust.' Once they'd concluded matters there, they could discuss deeper cooperation and pry free more of the secrets he was holding back from them, or perhaps, they could secure a meeting with Lady Ashlynn and get away from the Black Merchant entirely. There was only one problem with the arrangement he proposed.

"What about the Vale of Mists?" Isabell asked. "If we're that close to the Vale when winter comes, won't we just be stretching our necks out for the Demon Lady of the Vale and her horde of demons to harvest like fish in the net?"

"Don't worry about the Vale," Marcel said cryptically. "I said that placing your lands here accomplished three things. My Mistress and Lady Ashlynn have plans for the Vale of Mists and I have no doubt that you'll both be of vital importance to them," he said with a smile that failed to be as reassuring as he hoped.

"More importantly, if you place your lands here, that will give you an excuse to travel to the border of the Vale of Mists frequently," the Black Merchant added. "And from there, it's much, much more convenient for you to meet with Lady Ashlynn directly."

"Why would that be more convenient?" Tiernan asked as his bushy brows lowered in confusion. "Unless..."

"Mister Marcel," Isabell said with a slight tremble in her voice. "The place that Lady Ashlynn has been hiding... Has she hidden herself in the Vale of Mist? Is she, is she living among the demons?" It seemed impossible but, if the person who betrayed Lady Ashlynn to Owain had spoken the truth, if Lady Ashlynn really was a witch...

"I can assure you," Marcel said, choosing his words with care. "Lady Ashlynn has been far from the Vale of Mists for quite some time now. That doesn't mean she's powerless to protect you from its dangers."

"I know it may be difficult to accept," Marcell said, as he saw the reluctance forming on their faces. "I can only ask you to trust me. But if you can succeed in securing lands here," he added, attacking one of the few vulnerabilities the pair possessed this early in forming their relationship. "I can promise you a meeting with Lady Ashlynn when you visit your lands."

"Truly?" Isabell asked with a healthy amount of skepticism as she placed her silver rimmed spectacles back on her nose, peering over the rims at the odd young man. "Then I suppose we're loaning each other trust," she said after a lengthy pause. "But if we do this and you fail to deliver, understand that we'll expose you for manipulating us into settling there. Even if the Lothians don't do anything about it, the Church and the Inquisition might become very curious about why a merchant is so interested in settling a group of freshly raised knights so close to the Vale of Mists," she warned.

"Of course," Marcel said, rolling up the map and smiling at his guests. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

Chapter 504: Change Arrives in the Vale of Mists

Five days after Ashlynn's arrival in Orava Village, an army the likes of which the Vale of Mists had never seen marched into the small town that surrounded the ancient fortress. Townspeople lined the roads despite the late hour, pressing up against each other for a glimpse of their long-absent Eldritch Lady. But despite their curiosity, the curtains of her dark carriage remained tightly shut, offering not even a peek of the powerful vampire or her Seneschal.

Even though they weren't able to see the Eldritch Lady of the Vale herself, the remainder of her army still made for an impressive sight. It had been decades since outsiders made a habit of visiting the Vale of Mists, and only a few people took up trades that required them to travel across the mountains where they might encounter other clans.

From Savis and his Golden Eyed Black Wolf Brigade to the shocking appearance of more than a dozen clanless vampires of Tausau's Mongrel Horde, each new group produced exclamations of shock and excitement from the crowd.

"She's done it again," an old man with hair that had turned as bone-white as his horns said, smiling as more and more soldiers marched into view. "Last time, she was gone for less than a month before she returned with forty-seven champions. This time, she was gone for half the year and returned with an army."

"Did you see her champions last time, Grandpa Gill?" a young boy with horns that barely peeked out of his tousled hair said as he clung to one of the brightly lit street lamps, hoping for a better view of the giants with shaggy wool and tusks that reached nearly to the ground. "Are these champions even stronger?"

"How old do you think I am, boy?" Old Gill said, rapping the young boy's thing with the handle of his cane. "I wasn't even born yet to see such a thing. But my father saw it. Forty-seven of Lady Nyrielle's progeny, storming into the Vale like the black wind of death. But this is different," he added.

"With this many people," the old man said. "Lady Nyrielle might even reconquer the villages outside the Vale, so all those newcomers could go home again."

"But what if they don't want to go home? Will they have to? Qebicq likes it here," he added with eyes that grew misty at the thought of his new friend leaving after they'd only just met. "He doesn't have to go away, does he?"

"Who knows," the old man said, looking out over the train of wagons that trailed after the soldiers of the army. An army's supply train would always be nearly as large as the army itself, but this looked like far more than a supply train. There were carts full of common folk, laborers, and tradesmen, and even carriages carrying wealthy merchants into the Vale of Mists for the first time in generations.

"Who knows what all of this will bring?" the old man said. "Maybe you'll have even more children to make friends with," he added, pointing at a few of the wagons rolling past. With this many strangers entering their small town, many of them coming with entire wagons full of their worldly possessions, it was clear that not everyone who came was planning for a short visit.

But how the Vale of Mists would change with a second influx of outsiders was anyone's guess, especially when these outsiders had never known the terror of humans with their Templars and Inquisitors who stormed into villages and burned them to the ground.

Would the newcomers respect the people of the Vale for the generations they'd spent holding back the tide of human aggression? Or would they see themselves as heroes who had come to liberate the weak and 'backwards' people of the Vale who had yet to return to the glory of their days as the home of High Lord Torbin?

The old man didn't know, and the only one who might be able to tell them had taken her carriage directly to the ancient fortress without uttering a word about her plans. Without that, the common folk in the street could only speculate.

Inside the ancient fortress, Nyrielle's dark carriage came to a rest at last before a small welcoming party led by a familiar dashing figure.

"Welcome home, Mistress Nyrielle," Thane said, taking a knee and placing a hand over his slowly beating heart. Despite the chill of the late autumn air, Thane wore his simple white tunic unlaced to his sternum, revealing the powerfully built chest beneath.

The former knight's amber eyes flashed with the barest hint of anticipation as the carriage doors opened to reveal both Nyrielle and Ashlynn, looking as though they were disappointed that their intimate carriage ride through the Vale from Orava village had finally come to an end.

"It's been hard on you this time, Thane," Nyrielle said with more warmth in her voice than her eldest human progeny was accustomed to hearing from her. "And I'm sorry to say it, but I need more from you still before you can take a well-deserved rest. We need to..."

"Thane," Ashlynn said, moving past Nyrielle with short, quick strides until she arrived beside the handsome vampire who had offered to be her 'big brother' in the Vale of Mists when she felt hopelessly lost after Owain's betrayal and everything that happened after that.

"Thank you," Ashlynn said with genuine feeling as she flung her arms around the startled vampire to give him a hug strong enough to be uncomfortable even to a knight with a vampire's enhanced physique. "Thank you for everything," she whispered.

They'd only spent two months together, but in that short amount of time, Thane had done more to shape her growth and development during her blossoming period than anyone else. More than that, he'd understood her needs in a way that Nyrielle wasn't yet capable of and helped her to feel like the Vale of Mists truly could be her new home.

Now, after so many months apart, the deep desire she held to see him again mingled with an overwhelming sense of gratitude for the lessons he'd given her during those days. Without his training, she'd have died to the Tuscans, or to the ancient ancestors, or... Or to Sir Kaefin at the Summer Villa, or Sir Broll during her escape... Without him and his patient guidance then, she wouldn't be standing here at all.

"Ah, hem," Nyrielle coughed from behind the pair. "Thane, I feel as though, when it comes to my darling Ashlynn, you're always stealing things from me. Or this time, is it my willful love who is stealing my progeny away?"

"We'll have time to catch up soon enough," Thane said, chuckling lightly at the way the normally refined and elegant Lady Ashlynn threw away all the trappings of station to treat him like the older brother he'd offered to be.

Placing his hands on Ashlynn's shoulders he gently withdrew from her embrace, resisting the urge to pat her head the way he would have treated his own sister in the years before her death. Ashlynn was Ashlynn and as much as she seemed ready to throw away decorum for familial comfort, the two of them hadn't spent enough time together to form their own language of comforting touches.

Forcing her to adopt the rituals he'd once used for someone else, while she might never know, would have been too disrespectful for both women, and so he held himself back and gripped her shoulders gently instead.

"I'm sure you have many stories to tell," he said simply. "And I can't wait to hear them. Or to see how much you've learned in the time you were away," he added with a challenging grin.

"I do have stories," Ashlynn said, smiling brightly at the vampire who held responsibility for overseeing the Vale in Nyrielle's absence. "And I'm sure you have stories too. But my love is right," she said, returning to Nyrielle's side. "There's still work to be done before we can relax."

"What are your orders, Mistress?" Thane asked, his face becoming cool and composed in a way that only vampires could manage with perfect stillness as he awaited Nyrielle's words.

"Send word throughout the Vale," Nyrielle said formally. "In eleven days, on the first night of the new moon, we will hold a welcoming festival for everyone who has come to the Vale, whether from beyond its walls or across the mountains."

"Every village is to attend the first night with as many people as may come," she said with a mischievous smile. "At midnight on the first night, I will have several announcements for our people. No one will want to miss the news we have to share."

"Your will, my hands," Thane said, bowing deeply. "Is there anything that I can tell them about what you intend to announce? The leaders in the villages will want some kind of indication so they know how to prepare."

"You're right," Nyrielle said, her midnight eyes twinkling in barely contained delight. "I made a promise to Ashlynn that I would give her a real wedding one day," Nyrielle said, turning to a startled Ashlynn and taking both of her hands in her own. "I cannot bear to leave you with the status of a servant before our people, my darling," the powerful vampire said, her cheeks heating in a rare moment of shyness.

"Your wedding is still yours to define as you wish," Nyrielle continued. "But if you will allow it, I will announce our betrothal before our people, along with the other announcements. They should know that you aren't simply the first among all who serve me, you are first in my heart, and I want the world to know it."

"Nyri," Ashlynn said, rushing forward to fling her arms around her lover in what felt like the tightest embrace of her life. Hot tears flowed down her cheeks, and her heart seemed to be racing along with the echo of Nyrielle's heartbeat in her chest, telling her in ways no words could just how anxious her lover was at this moment.

"Of course I'll allow it," Ashlynn said as she wiped tears from her eyes. "Because ever since we met, even before I knew it, my heart has only beat for you. And, and I also want the world to know that no one matters more to me than you."

Chapter 505: Siblings' Reunion

Moving with the silence that only vampires could manage, two figures appeared next to Thane, smiling brightly as they watched their Mistress proclaim her love to Lady Ashlynn. Zedya had seen firsthand how Nyrielle had changed over the months as her bond with Ashlynn grew deeper and Ignatious's heart glowed with a warmth it hadn't felt in decades at the sight of the two women's simple, joyful love for each other.

For a moment, the former Inquisitor's eyes drifted to the carriage that Heila had just emerged from, lingering on her diminutive figure and the warm smile that formed on her pert lips when the Willow Witch beheld the leader of her coven in the arms of her lover. On her face, he saw the simple joy of knowing someone you cared for deeply was happy, and for far too many years, it was one that he hadn't been able to conceive of. Now, however, thanks to Heila, his heart warmed when he returned his gaze to Mistress Nyrielle and Ashlynn as they grew increasingly oblivious of the people around them.

Standing between the two vampires, Thane could only smile at the transformation his Mistress had undergone since Lady Ashlynn's arrival. Love, it seemed, had the power to heal even the most wounded and walled-off hearts.

Eighty years ago, he'd never expected the woman who offered him the power to avenge his little-sister's death could care for people as anything more than tools. At the time, he'd accepted his status as little more than a blade in her hand. So long as they shared the same enemies, that was enough.

Decades later, however, he'd found himself searching for something greater that could reignite the passions in his life and restore a sense of purpose to the sword he wielded in Nyrielle's name. Now, it seemed he'd finally found a piece of the purpose he'd been lacking. If he accomplished nothing else, protecting the love he saw unfolding between Nyrielle and Ashlynn was a worthy mission for any knight, even one who had fallen as far as he had.

"I'll need your help spreading the word," he told his younger 'siblings' as he turned away from Nyrielle and Ashlynn. "For a festival with this kind of news, nearly everyone will want to offer a betrothal gift, and the preparations can't be lacking."

"I don't think the fortress has hosted a celebration like this since," Thane said, trying to think back through the decades before arriving at an uncomfortable answer. "Since before any of us became her progeny," he said. There had been celebrations over the years, but when he thought about the incidents that sparked them, they all followed great battles, and each of them blended celebration with mourning for the fallen.

Of course, the Vale of Mists still had its own celebrations to mark the seasons, but Nyrielle herself rarely participated, and none of them could match the scale of what this festival would demand.

"Should we call the others home?" Zedya asked. "There's time if we can send a fast enough messenger to Airgead Mountain and the Southern Steppe."

"Send messages," Thane said after a moment of hesitation. "But don't recall them. As important as this is, I'm sure that Mistress has her own plans for dealing with the Lord Jalal of Airgead Mountain and the High Lord Dirar of the Southern Steppe. If we pull back our support while the Lothians are building their strength at the borders, it might be misunderstood."

"Sybyll will be upset," Zedya warned, giving Thane a knowing look. "And Airgead Mountain isn't that far away. She could return in a matter of days now that the nights have grown so long, and return just as quickly. Surely Lord Jalal can do without his 'Crimson Knight' for a few days."

"You're pampering her too much," Thane laughed as he recalled the red haired woman who had become one of the keys to forcing Bors Lothian to give up his raids on Airgead Mountain more than twenty years ago. Ever since then, the bloodthirsty woman had been 'on loan' to the Eldritch Lord who ruled the valuable mountain in exchange for a trickle of its riches to support the Vale of Mists.

"But you always did have a soft spot for her," Thane added, setting a hand on Zedya's shoulder and giving it a gentle squeeze. "You can talk to Mistress about it tomorrow before we release the messenger birds. I know she won't recall Wolstan from the Southern Steppe for this, so I doubt she'll decide anything different for Sybyll," he said, feeling a slight pang at the dejected look that flickered across Zedya's face, reminding him of the years shortly after she'd become one of Nyrielle's progeny.

"But the day will come soon," Thane said, turning away from Zedya and slipping an arm around Ignatious's shoulders in a brotherly hug. The instant he touched the second eldest among Nyrielle's human progeny, Ignatious flinched, as though he expected violence from his 'big brother.'

In truth, the reaction wasn't completely unfounded. Thane and Ignatious's relationship had been 'incendiary' to say the least before Nyrielle had exiled the fallen Inquisitor across the mountains and under his loosely flowing shirt, Thane still bore scars from a few of the burns inflicted by his younger sibling.

If Thane followed the hug with a powerful punch or something worse, Ignatious wouldn't just have expected it, he felt that the attack was something he deserved for all the harm he'd caused in those days when he was consumed by rage at what Nyrielle had done to him. When seconds slipped past without any sign of hostility, however, he could only raise a dark brow at the older man in silent question at his unexpectedly gentle actions.

"Don't look at me like that," Thane said with a gentle smile. "Mistress's letter mentioned your return and that you helped her to defeat High Lord Hamdi. I won't hold the past against you," he said, gesturing in the direction of Ashlynn and Nyrielle, who had become completely lost in a world that belonged only to them. "When our future looks like that," Thane said, "I can't bring myself to care much for what came before."

"That's generous of you," Ignatious said a touch awkwardly. "But I still owe you an apology. The wounds I inflicted on you... do they still pain you?" If they did, if Thane had been suffering all this time because of him, Ignatious wanted to do whatever he could to make amends for the lingering hurts. He knew that he still had much to atone for before he could hold his head up high in the Vale of Mists and he intended to make a beginning of that work with Thane, no matter how difficult it might seem.

"Mistress Nyrielle borrowed the help of a Frost Walker sorcerer to quench the lingering heat of your flames long ago," Thane said, clapping the fallen priest on the back and gesturing for both of the younger vampires to accompany him into the fortress. "Leave the past buried where it belongs. The

night might be long, but the three of us have much to discuss if we're going to give Mistress Nyrielle and Lady Ashlynn the celebration they deserve," he said.

"So, from now on, just put your focus on the future we're building," Thane said warmly. "I'm starting to feel like it's one that we all want to see with our own

Chapter 506: A Coven Forms

The following day, pale sunlight filtered into the Vale of Mists through a thick fog that clung to the river valley, shrouding everything in a gray haze that made it difficult to see more than a few dozen feet ahead. The towering cedars of the Vale poked out of the fog as if they were stretching for a glimpse of the sun above the fog.

Sitting comfortably on her terrace overlooking the Vale, Ashlynn turned away from the sight of the Vale's natural beauty to focus on the small circle of people who had gathered to join her for a late lunch. Her face momentarily flushed as she recalled the way Nyrielle had kept her up late into the night when Ashlynn answered her lover's proposal with hot kisses and torn clothing.

Originally, the Mother of Trees had planned to host this gathering as a late breakfast, but even she couldn't pretend that it was still morning by the time Heila roused her with a hearty meal. Thankfully, the bite marks Nyrielle had left on her thigh weren't visible to her other guests, or her face would have turned red enough to match the wine in her goblet as she looked at her closest friends.

"I'm sorry for turning this into something that feels formal," Ashlynn told the group as she gestured to the artful arrangements of sweet and savory pastries, delicate sandwiches, and sliced cheeses that Georg had sent for their gathering. "I feel like we should have started in the kitchens today, cooking together the way a coven should, but since I slept so late..."

"It's fine, it's fine," Talauia said, fluttering her wings lightly in the misty air and reveling in the feeling of a cool mist against her delicate wings. The Briar was cloaked in its own fog but the fog of the Briar was thick, cloying and always left her feeling slightly sticky and sweaty. Here, the fog was both familiar and comforting after the harsh, frigid air of the High Pass, and at the same time, it was delightful and novel for someone who had spent most of her adult life in the oppressively humid swamp.

"Even Mother refused to cook whenever we visited other places," Talauia said, displaying her wickedly sharp teeth as she devoured a pastry stuffed with wilted spinach and soft cheese. "And you only just got home. Take some time, some time to settle in, before you start building your traditions."

"Besides," Heila added as she popped a dainty fruit tart into her mouth. "I missed the things that Georg can make with his whole kitchen. So this is a treat for us."

"I don't know," Virve said as she eyed the pile of sandwiches suspiciously and debated about how many of them she could take without feeling like she was depriving the others at the table. "I miss the stews and roasts he made in Orava village. Maybe I should just abstain for now and I can bother him later for something more substantial," she said, ultimately deciding to take only a handful of the small sandwiches and a few savory pastries.

"Just come to the kitchens with me afterward," Ollie said as he selected a handful of pastries for himself. The delicate, flaky layers that the bearish chef accomplished with practiced ease continued to amaze the former kitchen boy who already saw delicate pie crusts as an exacting skill. Perhaps one day he'd match Georg's delicate touch with food that resembled works of art, but that day was still far in the future.

"I'm preparing for my vigil tonight, and Sir Thane said that I should prepare myself with a hearty meal before my first watch begins," the future knight explained.

"And you're doing it, right? You're starting your trial of witchcraft tonight, aren't you?" Talauia asked directly.

"I am," Ollie said firmly, looking at Ashlynn with a smile that he couldn't contain despite the serious topic. "Knight and Witch. I'll be become both at the end of my vigil."

"Congratulations, Sir Ollie," Virve said, giving him a heartfelt bow from her seat across the table from him. She hadn't heard much since returning to the Vale of Mists, but Ollie's name resounded from the halls of the ancient fortress, and even Commander Bassinger praised him for his ability to inspire the loyalty of those who decided to follow the human youth.

"The Vale is welcoming two new witches into its ranks during the festival," Virve continued, looking at the witch she had sworn to protect. "Would you like me to arrange for a dedicated guard for Lady Heila and Sir Ollie as well?"

"Perhaps," Ashlynn said with a gleam in her emerald eyes. "But before that, Virve, I want you to consider whether we should present two new witches at the festival, or three. I've been considering this ever

since you agreed to become the leader of my guard," she said, reaching into a pouch at her waist and pulling out an oversized acorn that pulsed with the faintest trace of timeless energy.

"I told Ollie that the seed of an Ancient tree is not an easy thing for anyone to face," Ashlynn explained as all eyes around the table fell on the acorn resting on her palm. "Heila nearly failed in her trial against the Ancient Willow's seed, and I've made different arrangements for Ollie's seed."

"But Virve," she said, looking directly into the bearish woman's dark brown eyes. "You aren't like Ollie or Heila, or even me, for that matter. I think you stand a better chance of mastering this seed and it's power than anyone else I know, or at least, anyone else who might be eligible to join my coven," she added as she recalled the decision that Lennart had made as soon as Nyrielle's army set foot within the Vale of Mists.

"Me? A Witch?" Virve said, blinking several times and nearly dropping the delicate sandwich pinched between her claws. "Why?" the aging soldier asked in confusion as she tried to understand how she had suddenly received such an unbelievable offer.

"I don't mean any disrespect," she said quickly. "It's just that, other than the time we fought together against the Tuscans, I've never done anything for you to be worthy of this... this kind of honor. Lady Heila has dedicated her life to your service and Sir Ollie has..."

"This isn't a contest that someone can win with great deeds, Virve," Ashlynn said, interrupting the veteran soldier. "But if it was, then the lifetime of dedication you've shown Mistress Nyrielle is already enough, even if you hadn't helped protect Heila and I from the Tuscans or anything else that you did when you accompanied Mistress Nyrielle through the Eldritch nations."

"But Virve," Ashlynn said, setting the acorn on the table close enough that Virve could reach out and touch it if she wanted to. "The seeds of Ancient trees test a person in more ways than one. If you were a young person without a wealth of experience to draw on, the trial could quickly become overwhelming," she said with an apologetic look at Heila.

"But you have decades of experience," Ashlynn concluded. "You know who you are and you've honed your principles over long years of service. You're grounded in a way that others aren't, but you're also unguarded among the people you take responsibility for protecting."

"Even Captain Lennart can't just relax and have a meal with us," Heila pointed out. "But you do, and you always have. Even our first time in High Fen City, you could just relax and join us for a meal. That means more than you know," she said, her grass green eyes glittering with sincerity.

"A coven is family," the diminutive witch said. "I'm sure Mother Ashlynn would say it, but I'll say it for her. Even if someone was stronger or had more achievements, the thing that makes you worthy is the way you fit in as part of our little family. So you should accept this," she concluded.

"Exactly as Heila said," Ashlynn said. "So, what do you think, Virve? Will you make it official and join our little family? I can't think of a more worthy person to become my Oak Witch, but the choice is up to you."

"My Lady," Virve said with a voice that lacked all of its usual lightness and casual familiarity. "I still don't know that I'm worthy of this much of an honor," she said as one hand reached out, trembling slightly as she brushed the tip of a claw against the oversized Ancient acorn. "But I promise, I'll do my best to prove myself worthy in the years and battles to come."

"So long as you wish it," Virve said formally. "I'd be honored to be your Oak Witch."

Chapter 507: A Coven Is Family

"Little Sister, Virve!" Heila cried, dropping her pastry to fling her arms around the startled veteran soldier. "I knew it had to be you. If it was going to be anyone, it couldn't be anyone else but you, and I know you'll be the best Oak Witch ever."

"She will, she really will," Talauia said as her wings quivered behind her in unconcealed excitement. She hadn't known the bearish woman for very long, but what she'd seen of her had impressed the Thistle Witch, particularly when Virve offered herself up to Nyrielle to provide the strength the vampire needed to help Ashlynn heal.

This was a woman who would protect the Mother of Trees and the rest of her coven, no matter the cost to her personally. As far as Talauia was concerned, you couldn't ask for a better quality to form the heart of the Oak Witch.

"Congratulations, Virve," Ollie said awkwardly, extending a hand to shake Virve's in the same way that Thane had taught him to greet a fellow knight, grasping her muscular forearm firmly. "I guess we'll face our trials together."

"Not exactly," Ashlynn said, smiling at how readily everyone accepted Virve as a member of their small but growing family. "Virve, I have nurtured that seed for some time now, but I have yet to transform it into a seed of witchcraft for you. I can't do that until I give Ollie the seed of the Cypress tree that I've been nurturing for him."

"That's fine," Virve said as she struggled to calm her racing heart. At this point, she thought that she'd long ago lost the ability to become as flustered as a young girl seeing a man stripped to the fur for the first time, but clearly there were still things that could leave her head feeling as light as the clouds while her stomach danced around her spine and her knees lost the strength to stand.

For a moment, her eyes focused on the courtyards far below, where armored figures in the midnight blue of Nyrielle's forces mixed with the assortment of armor styles and colors worn by the army Nyrielle had brought across the mountains to face the mounting human threat. Turning that motley collection of warriors into a unified army would take months of dedicated practice and drill, and she didn't envy Commander Bassinger the task in the slightest.

"I could use some time to prepare anyway," she said, realizing that she wasn't much different from the soldiers below in some respects. Becoming the head of Lady Ashlynn's personal guard had already transformed her life in a number of subtle ways, but joining her coven and becoming the Oak Witch would completely transform her life in ways that she hadn't even begun to consider.

"So our young knight will keep the honor of being second," she said, clapping Ollie heavily on the back with a large paw. "And I can become everyone's 'little sister' next," the veteran soldier said with a wide, toothy grin on her lips and a twinkle in her dark brown eyes.

"Everyone, everyone, I have something to say," Talauia said, hovering over her seat and looking at the smiling faces of Ashlynn's coven. "A coven is a family, a family like no other family anywhere because it's a family that you choose, bound together with magic that's stronger than bonds of blood or bone."

"You don't know yet, you don't know because you can't feel it yet, but what Auntie Ashlynn is giving you, it's more than just a seed," the Thistle Witch said, turning her multifaceted purple eyes from Virve to Ollie before landing briefly on Heila. "Cousin Heila knows. Once you become a witch, you become a part of the world, and everything, everything you desire can be yours if you bend the world to your will."

"So, whatever you do, whatever you do, you can't let your heart become twisted," she said, clutching the back of her chair tightly enough that the sharpened points of her fingernails bit into the soft wood of the chair.

"But you have a family now, a family who understands what it's like now, a family that's strong enough... strong enough to... to..." she trailed off as moisture flooded her eyes and her throat tightened up too much for her to force out the words that she felt were so important to say to this new and forming coven.

"Tala," Ashlynn said, standing up and quickly crossing the terrace to wrap her arms around the hovering witch. Most of the witches in Amahle's coven had lost their birth families for one reason or another, and Talauia's loss hadn't been limited to her family, but her entire clan.

Worse, her clan had been slaughtered because the Fangs of Death, Shubnalu, coveted her strengths as an assassin. The scars she bore from those days had faded, but they would never heal, and moments like this, when a family was celebrating joyfully, had a way of poking at those old wounds and bringing old hurts back to the surface.

"Talauia is right," Ashlynn said as she held the Thistle Witch in a tender embrace. "We're a family bound together by root and branch, and we are stronger as a forest than we are as individuals," she said. "And we owe it to each other to create a space where we can watch over each other and support each other in times of need."

"A family needs a home," Heila agreed, nodding along with Ashlynn's words. "Does that mean you'll be finding a different space for us outside of the fortress? A place like the Briar?" the diminutive witch asked, thinking of how well the Mother of Thorn's defensive barriers protected the people of her coven.

At Heila's question, all eyes turned to Ashlynn. A home like the Briar... For Talauia, it seemed obvious that the Mother of Trees would rule over a domain as vast and as isolated as the vast swamp that bordered Crystal Lake. To be a Mother of the Earth was to be one of the most powerful people in the Eldritch world and if such a person wanted any peace in their life then a domain like the Briar was essential.

For the people who would actually be joining Ashlynn's coven, a home like the Briar was something hard to imagine. Virve had come closer than Ollie but neither of them had set foot in the vast swamp to

understand the sort of shelter that it provided for people seeking refuge from a hostile world. What they did know, however, is that they had built lives in the Vale of Mists, whether those had been short or long, and the notion of leaving that behind not only didn't sound right to them, it didn't sound like the Ashlynn they knew either.

"So will you? Will you create a forest somewhere hidden away like the Briar to keep your coven safe?" Talauia asked, pulling back from Ashlynn's embrace enough to ask the question directly. A coven was a family, and a family needed to be kept safe. But how exactly was Ashlynn planning to protect this precious little family of hers?

Chapter 508: A Family Home

"I won't be copying the Briar. Not exactly, at least" Ashlynn said, looking at the flustered witch in her arms and gently moving a lock of hair aside so she could meet her gaze directly. "But just like Big Sister Amahle shaped the Briar into a place to keep her coven safe, I intend to create a place where my coven is protected as well. It's just that we won't be relying on natural fortifications and witchcraft to keep us safe, at least not in the beginning."

Even though she had yet to explain her plans, the strength in her voice said volumes about her intentions. The tragedies Talauia had suffered had provided a powerful lesson, but it was one that the Thistle Witch feared would become lost once Ashlynn and Heila relaxed into their home in the Vale of mists.

Thankfully, it seemed like Ashlynn not only hadn't forgotten, she was already making moves to protect her people. That realization alone was enough to wrap the winged witch's heart in a layer of warmth that made her momentarily forget about the cool droplets of mist that gathered on her wings when they stopped their movement and gave her the strength she needed to clear the moisture from her multifaceted eyes.

Only when Ashlynn saw that the other woman's eyes no longer seemed haunted by the ghosts of her clan and the horrors of her escape did she relax her hug, setting the Thistle Witch back on her seat before pulling her own chair over to sit next to Talauia as she continued to explain what would happen next.

"I've given orders to the Castle Master that this entire tower is to be emptied for our use," Ashlynn explained. "This fortress has five towers, but by the start of the new year, no one who isn't a part of this coven will be able to enter this one without our express invitation."

"What about servants?" Ollie asked awkwardly. "Justus has taken a room on the floor below to be available when I need him. I, I tried to find a way to make different arrangements, the way you treated Heila," the young man said. "But, Justus has a very strict sense of propriety. He wants to stay within his station."

"We all wear many hats," Ashlynn said with a light laugh, tugging at the brim of her own comfortable traveling hat. "As a knight, you should have a valet of your own, and a page or squire, plus your men-at-arms. But all of these people belong to 'Sir Ollie the Knight', not to 'Ollie the Cypress Witch.'"

When she explained it that way, it made a certain kind of sense to Ollie, though it felt strange to think of 'Ollie the Knight' and 'Ollie the Witch' as different people. In his mind, he would become both a knight and a witch at the same time, in a ceremony that blended a knight's vigil with a witch's trial. Somehow, he'd expected that his life would continue in much the same way, walking some vaguely defined path between the two roles.

It was only when Ashlynn pointed out the different roles of people around him that he realized that 'Ollie the Knight' had a completely different set of expectations and responsibilities compared to 'Ollie the Witch.' Sometimes, those things would overlap, but for others, he would need to learn how to be clear on which 'hat' he was wearing at any given moment.

"This tower is for family," Ashlynn insisted as she saw understanding beginning to dawn. "I may change my mind years from now," she added. "Justus hasn't been your man for very long, and he may become part of our extended family in time. But when I say that this is for us, I really mean it. Even Thane and Zedya will need an invitation to enter here," she said, purposefully leaving Ignatious's name off the list as she gave Heila a meaningful glance.

"And Lady Nyrielle, too?" Heila teased back, giggling at the image of Ashlynn walling her lover out of one of the towers in her own fortress. "Will you make her ask for permission to enter here?"

"I wouldn't dream of it," Ashlynn said, waving her hands frantically to chase off the idea and instantly turning a bright shade of red. "It's her castle. I can keep everyone else out but... never her."

"I'm sure that's fine," Virve said, having regained enough of her composure to rejoin the conversation. "But, it's just the four of us," she said. "Plus, Madame Talauia, when she's staying over. Do we really need an entire tower for such a small group of witches?"

"Yes, you do, yes you do," Talauia said. "You need rooms for concocting with your cauldrons, and gardens for your herbs, and places to keep all of your books, and so many other things too. Mother Amahle, she keeps the entire Briar just for the five of us and occasional guests, and the Briar is bigger than all of High Fen City."

"Tala's right," Ashlynn said with a gentle smile as she watched the Thistle Witch latch onto safer topics like living quarters that didn't brush up against as many painful memories. "In time, I'll also be clear-cutting a section of the forest outside the walls and replanting it with special trees to better serve our needs. The tower is only a beginning, but for now, it will give us the space we need for everyone to grow into their powers over the winter while we prepare for what's to come," she said.

Ashlynn tried to keep her voice light, but at the mention of what was to come, a shadow seemed to fall across the fading sun, casting a moment of gloom over the gathering on Ashlynn's terrace.

All of them knew that the Lothians were gathering their forces for war in the near future, and this war would bring in countless soldiers from across the sea who sought glory in the Church's Holy War. It would be harder than anything the Vale had faced since Cellach Lothian succeeded in burning the fortress city to the ground and driving Lady Nyrielle from her home all those years ago.

Just thinking about the looming crisis made it difficult to put much weight behind thoughts of what to do years from now, when no one could say for certain that the Vale of Mists would still be standing by this time next year. But Ashlynn had no intention of surrendering the fight before it had even begun, and she had even less intention of letting worries about the coming conflict spoil the moments of joy that were still before them.

"But enough about that," Ashlynn said, clapping her hands as if to quash the gloom before it could settle over anyone's heart. "Ollie, Virve, I know you both need something more hearty before the night begins, so go, go visit Georg and see what he has in store for you to prepare for your vigil."

"And then," Ashlynn added, giving the soon-to-be knight a warm look. "Sir Ollie can show us around his village. Milo should have a space prepared for you by now, shouldn't he?"

"I'm sure he has," Ollie said, flushing with embarrassment. According to Thane, a Vigil was usually a solemn, private thing, but when Ashlynn explained the trial he would undergo as part of his vigil, as well as the consequences of failure, he decided he wanted to face his trial in the village he'd worked so hard to build.

If he succeeded, then the people he'd grown close to over the past several months would all be waiting to celebrate his victory. And if he failed... If he failed, then at least the tree that held what remained of his spirit would be able to watch over his people for generations to come.

Chapter 509: A New Kind of Village

Hours later, as the sun began to slip beneath the western mountains, a carriage bearing Ashlynn and her coven clattered along a recently built dirt road toward the newest village in the Vale of Mists.

"I know it's a bit rough," Ollie said as the carriage jostled its occupants while bouncing along the road. "Most of the roads connecting villages are designed more for carts than carriages, but with so much material to transport to the village, we needed to be at least able to have wagons coming along the road."

"Then will you let the forest grow back now that you're done building the village?" Heila asked, gazing out the carriage window at the clear-cut path that had been blazed through the cedar forest to make way for the dirt road. "It's a lot of work to maintain a road like this."

"I think we'll pave it," Ollie said, surprising both Heila and Virve with his simple declaration. There were plenty of old ruins of paved roads scattered across the Vale. Still, most of them dated to the days before the Vale of Mists fell to the Lothians, and they'd long ago become overgrown relics of an era that had ended.

"This village is different from the others in the Vale," Ollie explained. "You'll see when we get there, but the people aren't as separated from each other as the other villages in the Vale of Mists."

"You sound very proud of it," Ashlynn said, smiling as she looked at the young man Ollie had grown into while she and Heila were away in the Briar. During the months she and Heila had spent training, she'd occasionally regretted leaving Ollie in the Vale of Mists. If she'd understood about covens before she left, she might have brought him along with her, and then he could have benefited from Amahle's instruction as well.

But, seeing him now, Ashlynn was glad she had left him here. She never would have expected Sir Thane to suggest that Ollie take responsibility for building a village, but the things he'd learned and the ways

he'd grown as he rose to meet that challenge were things that accompanying her to the Briar could never have given him.

"I am proud," Ollie said in a tone that was neither boastful or humble. "Look, you can see the dam up ahead," he said, pointing to a large wooden dam that defined the southern slope of the hillside where an old creek had been blocked to create a large pond for the village. "The village is still set back a ways from the pond," the flame-haired youth explained. "Old Nan says that the pond will keep growing through the winter rains and the spring thaws. We won't have its full size until next summer, but we're already starting to stock the pond with trout," he grinned.

"You're trying to lure her to visit your village with fresh fish, aren't you?" Heila teased. "You know that won't work. The river Luath flows right by the castle. We won't ever run out of fish."

"But I'll still visit," Ashlynn said, looking from Ollie to the village that was slowly coming into view through the carriage windows. "As long as we're welcome, that is," she said, giving Ollie a concerned look.

The village was indeed different from any other village in the Vale of Mists and that started with the outer palisade wall. Most villages in the Vale of Mists, like Orava, made do with a simple wooden wall that served mostly to keep livestock from wandering away and to keep wild animals from wandering into the village. The Vale's real defenses, its layers of curtain walls, were at the mouth of the Vale along the river Luath to guard against a Lothian siege.

Ollie's village, however, was surrounded by a wide moat, and its wooden palisade wall stood atop a steeply sloped earth berm. Flat-topped wooden platforms were spaced evenly around the wall, offering firing platforms for archers or places for lookouts to watch in all directions. The only gap in the wall seemed to be at the edge of the village that butted up against the growing pond, and even there, preparations seemed to be under way to strengthen the village's defenses.

"Everyone here lost their homes, one way or another," Ollie explained. "I wanted to help the people who settled here feel secure about their new homes, so I asked Sir Thane how villages on the frontier were designed when they were worried about fending off attacks from Eldritch nations. This borrows a bit from those designs and a bit from Eldritch traditions as well," he explained.

"So you aren't trying to stand apart from the Vale," Virve said, frowning at the heavy fortifications. "But you are preparing for the outer walls to be breached in the war to come."

"I hope this wall is never needed," Ollie said firmly. "But, if I promise they'll be safe and I don't do anything to make them safe," he said, stressing the last three words. "I learned early on that words don't mean as much to people as actions do. Whether it was cooking meals or retrieving carvings or building this wall," he said. "They were all necessary steps to bring everyone together."

"It's a little like Crystal Lake City," Heila marveled as the carriage passed through the village gate, giving them their first look inside the oversized village that hid behind its imposing wall.

Far from the barren, clear-cut stretch of land that Ashlynn expected to find lurking behind a frontier-style wall, they instead found that many of the oldest cedar trees of the forest had been preserved, and in places that had been cleared to bare earth, neat rows of fruit trees had been planted, seemingly belonging to the village as a whole rather than in any one household's individual garden.

The late afternoon sun filtered through the branches of the mighty cedar trees, casting long dappled shadows across the village and giving the newly built structures a warm amber glow. As the carriage wheels rumbled over the hard-packed earth of the main path, the rich, woody scent of the trees mingled with woodsmoke that curled lazily from stone chimneys.

Somewhere nearby, meat sizzled over an open flame, its savory aroma making Virve's stomach rumble despite the hearty meal that Georg had treated her and Ollie to after the lighter lunch on Ashlynn's terrace.

"It wasn't that long of a carriage ride," Ollie said, raising an eyebrow at the veteran soldier who would soon become the Oak Witch. "Don't tell me that you're hungry again already!"

"A soldier never misses a chance to eat," Virve said, adopting the dignified posture of an experienced warrior lecturing a junior. "But even I know when to stop," she added. "And as good as it smells, Georg's roast tonight felt like it could sustain me for days."

"That's part of the point," Ashlynn said with a smile as the carriage approached the center of the village. "Even a normal knight's vigil lasts for a full night and day, from sunset to sunset. A hearty meal beforehand is tradition. But a witch's trial can last up to nine days, so Ollie will need the strength of that meal if he's to persevere through his trial."

"Ah, hem," Ollie said, his face turning red as the attention of everyone in the carriage returned to him. "We're just about to arrive."

Chapter 510: Ollie's People

A large communal hall dominated the center of the village, and a paved village square was ringed with small saplings that would one day grow into mighty shade trees. Beyond that square, streets flowed outward like the spokes of a wheel, gently bending with the curves of the land as they snaked their way between an eclectic mix of building styles.

Ashlynn had wondered if the different clans represented in this oversized village would segregate themselves into smaller communities, but that didn't seem to be the case at all. Instead, she found Heartwood Clan burrows built beneath the intertwined branches of the Night Weaver Clan's familiar tree houses and even a few simple cottages with thatched roofs that wouldn't have stood out in any human village along the frontier.

Light, musical laughter echoed between the buildings as a group of children, some with horns, others with wide, flat tails, and even a human child among them, darted between trees playing an elaborate game of chase and catch that involved throwing brightly colored leather balls while ducking and hiding behind anything that might protect them from their friend's sudden attacks.

Lanterns were being lit one by one as dusk deepened, each window adding another pool to the soft golden light that warmed the village and pressed back against the creeping chill of the late autumn air. Outside several of the burrows, members of the Heartwood clan sitting on their covered porches paused their carving to watch the carriage rolling through the village toward the center of the village.

As the carriage rolled to a stop in the village square, the cloaked figure of Milo emerged from the village hall, leading a party of nearly two dozen villagers ranging from young children to stoop-shouldered grandparents. But, as different as they were, one thing tied all of these disparate people together.

Each and every one of them regarded the carriage's arrival with a pensive eagerness. Some tails twitched, lightly thumping the ground in anticipation, while others stood up straighter on spider-like limbs, eager to be the first to glimpse the return of their village head and the important guests he brought with him.

Perhaps the most surprising of all, at least to Ashlynn, was the small cluster of humans standing toward the back of the crowd of Eldritch villagers. Dimly, she recognized a few of them as men she'd taken

prisoner after her duel to the death with Sir Broll, but seeing a woman and two young children in the group came as a surprise.

"Look, Bailey," Daithi said, scooping his young daughter up and placing her atop his shoulders as the doors to the carriage opened to reveal the flame-haired figure of Sir Ollie and, alongside him, the stunning figure of Lady Ashlynn Blackwell. "You see? I told you that Sir Ollie would return with a beautiful noblewoman."

"Papa," the bright-eyed young woman said as she squirmed in her father's grasp, leaning forward and stretching out a hand as if she could touch the distant woman with a presence that was so captivating she wanted to slip out of her father's grasp just so she could run up and hug the pretty lady. "Papa, is she a princess? Is that big green thing on her head a crown?"

"That," the former human soldier and member of Owain's guard said with a complex knot forming in his heart. Of course, he'd heard by now that Lady Ashlynn was a powerful witch. To the people of the Vale, it wasn't any kind of secret, and in fact, it was something they were proud of.

But to Daithi, who had grown up on stories of the evil queen and the witches that brought calamity to the fledgling Kingdom of Gaal, the hat that Lady Ashlynn wore was every bit as terrifying as the black and red banner that flew at the head of Nyrielle's army.

"She's not a princess, little bunny," Daithi said as he shook himself free of the captivating aura that seemed to surround Lady Ashlynn. "But she is a very special Lady, and you need to be very polite to her if you get to meet her, you understand?"

"Yes, Papa," the young girl said, squirming once again in her father's grasp. "Down, papa, down! We have to go see her to say hi!"

"We can follow the others," Daithi said, setting his daughter on the ground but maintaining a firm grip on her hand lest she dart out away from him. "But mind your manners," he cautioned. After all, Lady Ashlynn had been kind to them when she took them prisoner, but that had been before her husband, Owain, burned a village to the ground, and her brother-in-law, Loman, joined Liam Dunn to ravage the outlying Eldritch villages.

Now that more blood had been spilled and so many people had been displaced, would Lady Ashlynn still look kindly on the remaining humans in the Vale? Was she still the kind and gracious noblewoman that they'd met six months ago? Or had she become a terrifying witch, a force of destruction who would rend a man's body limb from limb for the slightest offense against the people she'd allied herself with?

He didn't know, but so long as Sir Ollie was at her side, he felt like Lady Ashlynn couldn't have fallen too far into darkness. After all, didn't Ollie say he'd been working so hard just to live up to her expectations? So, it should be safe to meet her with his daughter... shouldn't it?

Behind Daithi's family, another pair of humans watched Lady Ashlynn's arrival with distinctly different gazes.

In the months since her departure, Eamon's fervor had only grown hotter, and his eyes burned with the genuine passion of a dedicated zealot. In the beginning, all the scarred hunter could think about was how to snatch Lady Ashlynn away from the demons in order to reap the rewards that would come from returning a saintess to human lands.

As time went on, however, and he watched young Ollie's ascension among the Eldritch people, he began to realize that he'd been deeply misguided to think that he should tear her Holiness away from these people.

The Holy Lord of Light had seen fit to send her among these non-believers for a reason, and though he might not understand why, he didn't have to know why in order to make himself into a fitting implement for her to direct according to the Holy Lord of Light's will. All he needed to do was have faith, and Saintess Ashlynn would surely place his feet on a just path, filled with rewards both in this life and in the Heavenly Shores beyond.

Next to him, Darragh tried not to draw any attention to himself. He'd made it this far by clinging to Eamon's thigh, but as the months went on, he grew increasingly concerned that the other human captives had lost their way since coming to the Vale of Mists. Daithi, the man who was supposed to be the leader of Lord Owain's men among the captives, had even accepted the demon's offer to sneak his wife and children into the Vale, allowing him to settle in this village as though he were a demon himself!

Now, as he looked from Daithi's excited child to Eamon's burning gaze, Darragh finally admitted to himself that he was truly alone, not just in this village, but in the whole of the Vale of Mists. That made his chances of spirited Lady Ashlynn away from here less than one in a thousand, something so impossible that it didn't bear thinking on anymore.

But, that didn't mean he was ready to give up and join the locals. Everything he learned in the Vale of Mists would be valuable to Owain Lothian and his family when they planned their upcoming Holy War. All he had to do was collect as much useful information as possible before slipping away to inform Lord Owain.

And whatever this strange ceremony the villages were preparing for was, it seemed like just the sort of thing that Lord Owain, or perhaps the Church, would pay handsomely to learn about.