

The Vampire 521

Chapter 521: Five Blows From a Knight (Part One)

At the water's edge in the village he had worked so hard to bring to life, Ollie knelt in the soft, sodden soil, facing the least likely priest he'd ever met.

Across from him, Ignatious knelt in the mud, holding a golden emblem of a sun surrounded by waving flames as he prayed over the soon-to-be knight.

"Though his vigil begins in darkness,

And his feet have carried him far from home,

His heart was forged for greatness,

And his virtues are bound to his bones."

Ignatious's prayer wasn't proper according to any of the forms of the Church but the fallen Inquisitor didn't care what the Church considered proper. What mattered was that the words he spoke on Ollie's behalf were true, and after his conversation with the young man, he firmly believed every word he said.

"Though Faith is not among your virtues, Ollie," Ignatious said, tucking the emblem away and placing a firm hand on the flame-haired youth's shoulder. "I believe that you embody the heart of our faith more than many Templars I have known. It is godly to meet your struggle, and it is pious to turn first to yourself before you turn to others for help, but in this world, no one is cursed to struggle alone."

"This village is proof of your struggle and of your virtue," the fallen priest said, gesturing at the villagers watching in the distance. "Many of them would have succumbed to their struggle without your help, and many of them must have struggled to accept help from someone who looked like the enemy who drove them from their homes."

"I only did what needed doing," Ollie said, shaking his head at the vampire's praise. He'd heard several times that he had accomplished something that few people believed was possible, but Ollie struggled to see any great deed in what he had done.

"Others could have done better. I know that Lady Ashlynn wouldn't have struggled so much," he said, glancing beyond the priest to the witch who was preparing to take him into her coven.

"Seeds fall where the wind takes them, but only the ones who land where they can thrive grow into mighty trees, Ollie," Ashlynn said as she stepped forward to help the young man to his feet. "This was your place to thrive. Mine was somewhere else. Be proud of what you have done because you were in the place where you could help at a time when you were needed."

"Listen to Lady Ashlynn," Thane said with a warm laugh as he inspected the young man before him. Despite the chill night air, Ollie wore only a simple woolen tunic that hung to his shins, belted at his waist with a plain leather cord, with simple leather shoes on his feet. The tunic had been left undyed, kept free of any mark or sigil that would proclaim status or affiliation as the soon-to-be knight took on the appearance of a humble pilgrim.

"Humility is all well and good," Thane said, his voice growing stern as if he were an elder brother dispensing sage advice. "But a knight must know the limits of any virtue lest they turn into a vice."

"I understand," Ollie said, shaking his head as he turned to face the vampire knight. "Is it time for a reminder?"

"Cheeky brat," Thane said, reaching out to ruffle the young man's hair affectionately. He'd promised Ashlynn and Nyrielle that he would do his best to forge Ollie into a worthy knight during their absence, but he'd never expected that the young man would come so far so quickly, or that he'd come to admire the former kitchen boy in the process.

Ollie was unlike any of the spoiled scions of powerful lords who had come before him to learn the ways of a knight in the years before Nyrielle took him under her dark wing. He had none of their arrogance, nor any of their delusions that he was better or more talented than anyone else simply because of an accident of his birth.

Nor was he like the hardened mercenaries who earned their knighthoods with mountains of trophies taken from the bodies of the Eldritch people they slew. Those men thought that they were already among the strongest, greater than the soft knights who had been offered every opportunity when they had carved their bloody way to the top.

No, Ollie was a young man who dreamed of a future where he could do more for the people who mattered to him, and he put in twice the work that anyone asked of him. He never objected to a lesson, never argued that he didn't need to learn, and always followed a lesson with at least three useful questions.

The young man was so impressive that Thane had begun to consider taking the young man as one of his own progeny in a few years if he could survive the wars to come. Thane had seen first hand how Marcel suffered for becoming a vampire so young and the moments of life that were forever denied to him haunted the Black Merchant to this day, even if he pretended that they didn't.

Thane would never wish such a fate on Ollie, but that didn't mean he wouldn't take such a promising knight under his own wing if the opportunity was still present when he was old enough to withdraw from the mortal world. Instead, however, Ashlynn had opened an even more suitable path for the flame-haired youth, and though Thane felt a slight pang of sadness that he wouldn't be able to take in a young apprentice as his first progeny, he couldn't begrudge the young man for choosing the path that his liege lady offered.

"Yes, you scamp," Thane said, cracking his knuckles and looking at Ollie with a dark, teasing smile. "It's time for a reminder. But because I'm feeling generous," he added, lowering his hands to his side. "You may strike the first blow."

Standing off to the side, Heila frowned in confusion before she tugged at Ashlynn's sleeve, standing on the tips of her cloven hooves to whisper a question to her lady.

"What is this about striking a blow?" Heila asked, genuinely confused by the way the two men were acting as Ollie shook his arms loose and cracked his own knuckles before squaring off as if he were about to punch Sir Thane.

"The traditions of knights are the traditions of men," Ashlynn said, shaking her head as she watched Ollie throw a heavy punch that struck Thane solidly in the chest, though the blow didn't seem to bother the powerful vampire in the slightest. "This isn't one that I can understand, and every time I asked my father, he told me, 'If you were a man, you wouldn't have to ask.'"

"That, that makes no sense at all," Heila said, frowning as Ollie shook his hand out, wincing slightly in pain and cradling his injured hand. "Are they just going to stand there hitting each other? Ollie is still just human, for him to fight against Sir Thane..."

"It's not a fight," Ashlynn said, shaking her head as she watched Ollie settle into a relaxed, defenseless posture before Sir Thane. "It's the first lesson taught by a senior knight to a junior one on the night of his vigil," Ashlynn said. "And knights believe that important lessons are best learned through pain."

Chapter 522: Five Blows From a Knight (Part Two)

Standing before Thane, Ollie's cheeky smile had left his face as he flexed the fingers that still stung from striking the vampire knight's chest. If he didn't know better, he'd have thought that Thane was wearing armor under his tunic, but the truth was that the vampire before him had strengthened his body until even a sword swung by a common soldier had little chance of harming his alabaster flesh, much less a punch from a kitchen boy.

"Now it's time for a reminder," Thane said, wasting no time and striking out with the back of his hand, landing a blow on Ollie's chest that was so heavy that a meaty -THUMP- echoed across the still water of the pond and Ollie stumbled back for several steps before falling to his backside.

"This blow is a reminder," Thane said formally. "No matter how high you rise, without your horse, without your armor, without your weapons, without your title, without your soldiers, you are just a man like any other. A man who can be beaten until he falls. Remember this blow and remain humble, even when you have donned your armor and your weapons and sit high above the masses atop your steed."

"I will remember," Ollie said, pushing himself up off the ground and coming to stand before Thane again. His chest stung with what would likely become a spectacular bruise, but compared to the vampire's full strength, the blow he'd landed on the young man's chest could barely be considered a light tap.

No sooner had Ollie arrived before him than Thane struck out again with the opposite hand, landing a second blow on Ollie's chest with yet another resounding -THUMP- that was so loud, even the villagers in the distance winced at the sound of it.

This time, Ollie thought he'd prepared himself for the powerful slap, bracing himself against the impact and riding the force of the blow as Thane had once taught him, breathing out to reduce the pain of the strike. But it seemed like the vampire had anticipated all of those things and increased the strength of the blow to overwhelm the young man despite everything he had done.

"This blow is a reminder," Thane repeated. "It takes courage to stand again when you know you may be hurt for returning to the fray. Sometimes, your courage will win you the day, but whether you win or lose, your courage will bring you pain. Remember this lesson, and never lose the courage to rise again, no matter how badly you fall or how greatly you fear your adversary."

"I will remember," Ollie said stubbornly as he stood once again, staggering for a moment as he sucked in several deep, shuddering breaths before he returned to stand before the vampire once more.

"How many times is he going to do this?" Heila asked, fidgeting with the wand at her waist while her mind flipped rapidly through the healing incantations she'd learned that could be used on a person she couldn't touch. The healing wouldn't be as effective at a distance, but so long as no bones had been broken...

"Three more," Ashlynn said, interrupting the diminutive witch's thoughts. "He needs to bear the pain of these strikes until his vigil ends, to remind him of his virtues throughout the long night and day of his vigil. That's why they're called 'reminders.'"

-THUMP-

The third powerful blow struck Ollie, but this time, Thane struck Ollie's belly, knocking the wind from him and robbing him of the strength to stand. Rather than staggering back under the force of the blow, Ollie's knees buckled, slamming into the soft earth at Thane's feet as the powerful vampire towered over him.

"This blow is a reminder," Thane said for a third time. "All strength fades with time and with neglect. The day that you are satisfied that you are strong, when you cease in your discipline and your training, whatever strength you have will slip away and your body will fail you when you need your strength the most."

"Do not neglect the training of your body," Thane admonished as Ollie staggered to his feet. "Or the maintenance of your armor and the care and feeding of your horse. These things are all a part of your strength, and without your strength, your protection is worthless to the people who depend on you to keep them safe."

"I. Will. Remember," Ollie said, fighting to draw breath when his lungs seemed to have forgotten how to function and stars swam before his eyes.

Before the young man could stand up straight, Thane struck again, this time lashing out with a foot that struck behind Ollie's ankle, knocking him off balance and dropping him directly on his back.

The blow was so unexpected that Ollie didn't have time to prepare himself for it, and once again, the force of the impact, even on the soft soil, knocked the wind from his body and covered his vision in darkness until he could roll to his side and draw a ragged, shuddering breath.

"My lady," Heila cried, turning to look at Ashlynn with wide eyes. "Isn't this too much? He still has to receive his seed and..." Heila's voice trailed off as she saw Ashlynn looking on with an unflinching gaze, as though she was forcing herself not only to see every moment, but rooting herself to the ground rather than interceding.

Clearly, the Mother of Trees found no joy or even pride in the way her future witch endured this rite of passage, but equally, she had no intention of interrupting. Ollie had chosen this, and if she interceded now, it would only insult his conviction to become her knight.

"This blow is a reminder," Thane said, looking down at the shuddering young man on the ground as he fought to rise to his knees. Standing might be beyond Ollie at the moment, but if he couldn't stand, he would at least kneel.

"The world is filled with injustice, and your enemies may not fight you fairly," Thane advised once Ollie knelt before him. "No matter how much injustice you encounter in the world, you must never turn away from it, and you must never run from it. To be a knight is to stand for what is just even if everyone around you has fallen to cruelty, trickery, and deceit."

"I. Will remember," Ollie said, placing one foot on the ground and pressing off his knee with both hands as he straightened his back to stand before Thane once more.

Seeing the young man rise once again, a faint smile tugged at Thane's lips despite the solemnness of the mood. Balling up a fist, Thane took a half step forward, rooting himself to the ground and gathering his strength for what promised to be the most powerful blow he would land on the young man this evening.

Heila's heart leapt in her throat and she drew a breath to cry out, intending to say that Ollie couldn't withstand such a powerful blow, to protest that he was still just a human, not yet a witch to endure the power of a vampire's strength, but Thane's fist flashed out faster than she could speak, tearing through the air as he struck toward the center of Ollie's chest.

-THWAP-

The sound of Thane's strike was strangely high-pitched and sharp, and when Heila looked closely, she realized that the vampire knight's fist had done nothing more than strike the fabric of Ollie's tunic, leaving him completely unharmed despite the power and speed of his punch.

"This blow is a reminder," Thane said, tapping Ollie lightly with the back of his fingers before setting a hand on the young man's shoulder. "No matter how overwhelming the odds, no matter how fierce the foe, never give up hope. You may triumph when you were certain of defeat, you may find allies among your enemies, and you may find mercy where you expected only cruelty," Thane said.

"The world is often different from what it seems," Thane said with a smile that was matched by a wide, toothy grin on Ollie's face. "Hold on to your hopes and your dreams. Share them with others and fight to bring them to life. Even when it seems impossible, never lose hope."

"I will remember," Ollie said, his pale eyes shining as he looked at the most unlikely mentor a young knight could ever ask for. Never in his life had he dared to hope for a moment like this, and even though the first step had been wild and outlandish, following Ashlynn into the wilderness to escape the Summer Villa, every step since then had been one he took with his own two feet.

He had a dream, and tonight, he was about to step firmly onto a path that the kitchen boy he'd been a year ago wouldn't have dared to hope for. For the past several months, he'd been plagued by doubts. Doubts about whether or not he could keep the seemingly endless tide of refugees fed. Doubts about how he could bring so many different clans together to share one place. Doubts about whether or not he was even worthy of making the attempt.

But now, as he stood before Sir Thane, those doubts melted away one by one. He had done each and every one of those things to reach this moment. His challenges weren't over, and he still had doubts about the trial to come...

But he also had hope, and that was all he needed to keep moving forward toward his dreams.

Chapter 523: Ollie's Trial Begins

Ashlynn shook her head at the distinctly 'manly' display between Ollie and Thane. Try as she might, she couldn't understand why standing in place and allowing a friend to hit you was an important ritual, but the look on Ollie's face told her that even if she didn't understand, he did.

The moment shared between the old knight and the young one forged a bond unlike any other. It transformed Ollie from a simple kitchen boy into the latest link in a chain of proud knights stretching back to before the founding of the Kingdom of Gaal. Thane had once stood where Ollie did, receiving a painful lesson from his father and a reminder of his virtues. His father had once stood in the same place, receiving his lesson from the future Lothian Marquis who had in turn received a lesson from another knight...

The chain continued unbroken for generations, and even if Ashlynn couldn't understand the ritual, she could understand the significance of carrying on such an ancient tradition. And so, even though it was uncomfortable to watch, it warmed her heart to see that it meant so much to Ollie.

"Sir Ignatious," Ashlynn said, turning to look at the fallen Inquisitor. "It's time for everyone else to leave. Take the villagers away. What happens next belongs to witches alone."

"Your, your Dominion," Milo said, his tail drooping in anxiety when Ignatious approached him. "I thought that I would be allowed to stand with Ollie during his vigil. Do I, do I really need to go?"

"You care for him deeply, don't you?" Ashlynn said, smiling at the cloaked archer. While Heila hadn't hesitated to voice her concerns during Thane and Ollie's exchange, the Heartwood archer's tail had thumped the ground nervously each time the flame-haired youth was struck and his whiskers twitched with worry every time his human friend stood back up.

"I owe him more than a life can repay for what he's done for my family," Milo said, lowering his head and casting a glance at Ollie that was filled with deep emotion. "Standing with him during his vigil is a small way of showing my respect, and since he'll be defenseless while he faces the trial of the Cypress seed..."

"It's fine that you stand over him during his trial," Ashlynn said warmly, reaching out and resting a hand gently on Milo's shoulder. "But the ritual itself is a thing of witches. You can return once his trial has begun."

"We'll watch over him together," Heila added, stepping up beside Ashlynn. "I hope Ollie doesn't need as much time as I did," she said, looking anxiously at the tall young man. "But it will be good if we can take turns resting, and you can tell me all about him while we watch over him."

"I see," Milo said, bowing deeply to the Mother of Trees. "Then, I'll help Ign- Sir Ignatious to clear away the villagers," he offered. "It may be better if it comes from me."

Sitting in one of the remaining cedar trees within the village, Darragh frowned as one of the flat-tailed demons accompanied the strange Inquisitor and the vampire knight in dispersing the villagers. He'd hoped to use his vantage point in the tree to watch whatever was about to happen so he could bring it back as proof that Lady Ashlynn wasn't the Holy Lady that Eamon seemed to have become convinced she was.

Months ago, she'd briefly conjured light, demonstrating a sacred power to the frightened captives after Sir Broll's death and cementing herself in the older hunter's mind as a sacred figure. Darragh, however, wasn't so easily awed by the single demonstration, and everything he'd heard since then only did more to convince him that the 'miracle' she'd shown them wasn't as impressive as they'd thought it was at the time.

He never would have believed it then, but after six months spent living among the demons, he'd come to understand far more about their twisted world than he ever wanted to. They called Lady Ashlynn a Witch, and the flat-tailed demons seemed to have an extra level of reverence for the 'Mother of Trees.'

Now, she was about to perform some kind of ritual, and he wanted more than anything to be able to describe it in detail to the Owain Lothian and the priests of the Church when he managed to escape this place. That kind of information would be worth several gold sovereigns at least, and it would prove that she was a charlatan who used dark, demonic powers to masquerade as a holy woman.

Only, there was no way he could escape the sharp senses of the vampire who had come to chase people away, refusing to allow anyone to bear witness to whatever dark magic was about to unfold. So, rather than get himself in trouble trying to conceal himself when he knew it was pointless, Darragh gave up, dropping to the ground and slapping his hands together to brush off the faint layer of cedar bark and sap that clung to his hands after climbing the tree.

Tonight, he wouldn't be able to get his proof, he thought as he returned to the small cottage he shared with Eamon. But he'd been a hunter for more than enough years to develop his patience. Here in the Vale of Mists, the demons kept very few secrets from each other, sharing in a sense of unity that came from fighting a common foe.

After months of hunting for the refugees, they had accepted Darragh as 'one of them', at least enough that they rarely guarded their tongues around him when they spoke. Now that Lady Ashlynn had returned, he was certain that she would use her dark powers openly in this place that she thought of as 'safe' from prying eyes. All he had to do was listen to what the demons had to say about her, and sooner or later, he'd find his opportunity.

And once did, he thought with a dark smile on his lips, he'd finally cast off the zealot Eamon to escape from this place of darkness and demons, returning to Lothian City in triumph and earning his rewards for everything he'd suffered since following Sir Broll on that disastrous hunt.

Meanwhile, at the water's edge, Ollie and Virve stood in companionable silence while they watched Ashlynn and Heila making their preparations. Several stones had been gathered for the ritual, and the pair of witches were carefully placing them along the edges of a circle that Ashlynn had scribed in the soft soil.

"Virve," Ashlynn called out after the last stone was placed. Already, she could feel the power of the world gathering around the circle, flowing from the dark soil, the nearby trees, the water of the pond, the chill autumn air, and even from the cook fires that still burned in many of the homes of the village. Everything came together in this place, pensively waiting to be given shape and form under Ashlynn's command.

"You have the offerings from the carriage?" Ashlynn asked, looking at the five smaller circles spaced evenly around the perimeter of the large circle.

"I do," Virve said, nudging Ollie gently on the shoulder so as not to prod any of his tender wounds and bringing him along with her to retrieve a small wooden box. "A skin of water, a feather, a knot of wood, a candle and a polished stone," the bearish woman said, opening the box to show Ashlynn that the contents were all present.

"I can tell what you're thinking," Ashlynn said, reaching out to take Ollie's hand as he frowned at the contents of the box.

Ashlynn had told him that she had prepared offerings for this ritual in order to aid his transformation into the Cypriss Witch but when he looked at the contents of the box, most of them looked like odd trinkets or ordinary items. Only the dark feather and the polished stone seemed to hold any kind of special significance but what it was that made them special, he truly couldn't tell.

"These things may look ordinary," Ashlynn said, picking up the small waterskin and holding it carefully in both hands. "But people likely said the same of you. But just like you're no ordinary kitchen-boy, these things are more than they appear. Help me place them," she said, holding out the water skin for him to take. "And I'll explain what each of them is for."

"Tonight, you take your first step on the path of a witch," Ashlynn said with a smile. "Your hands should help to shape the ritual, don't you think?"

"I do," Ollie said, taking a shallow breath that still felt painful after the strikes he'd received from Sir Thane and trying to still his racing heart. Everything up to this point had been normal, even if Thane wasn't your average knight and Ignatious was a strange priest, the things they'd done with him followed the structure of things every knight had done on the evening of their vigil for hundreds of years.

This, however, was something entirely different that would transform him in more ways than one. After taking this step, he wouldn't just become a knight, but a witch and a member of Ashlynn's coven. The pressure felt mounted until he had the illusion that the whole of the world had gathered to hear his next words, weighing his decision to stop now and accept life as an ordinary knight or to continue forward and become something more. But Ollie had made his decision days ago, and even though he felt tremendous pressure, his next words spilled easily from his lips, setting his feet firmly on the path of the Cypress Witch.

"Just tell me what to do," Ollie said simply, holding the water skin and looking at the circle with eyes that were firm and determined to succeed, no matter what this trial demanded of him.

Chapter 524: Unique Offerings (Part One)

"A witch's power is drawn from the elements of the world," Ashlynn explained as Ollie held the waterskin. "I brought the water in that skin from the Briar, the home of the Mother of Thorns and a

place where many cypress trees grow," she explained. "That water has nourished cypress trees for hundreds of years, and now it will nourish you during your transformation."

"I thought that the Briar was far away," Ollie said, suddenly holding the waterskin far more gingerly, as if the waterskin were filled with precious, expensive wine. "You brought water all the way from there, just to use for me now?"

"It froze in the High Pass," Heila added with a slight smile. "And it broke the jug it was in. But Lady Ashlynn saved it and made sure she didn't lose a drop."

"Ah, hem," Ashlynn said, her face heating slightly in embarrassment. She'd treated it the same way that sailors treated fine wines when transporting them across the sea, packing it carefully in a box stuffed with straw, but she hadn't considered what would happen when they entered the oppressive cold of the High Pass. Thankfully, she noticed before they left the High Pass, and she was able to preserve it, or she would have had to choose something else to use for Ollie's ritual.

"You should place the waterskin in the circle closest to the pond," Ashlynn said, trying to move on from discussing her mistakes. She knew that she still had much to learn and stumbling over something so small was a good reminder of that, but this wasn't the time to dwell on those stumbles. Not when Ollie needed to have confidence going into the ritual.

"No words are necessary," Ashlynn added. "But please be respectful in your actions as you place it. None of these items is as simple as they seem, and even humble water can become a source of great power when it carries the desires and intentions of one person to nurture another."

"Can I, can I add a little bit of water from the pond to the waterskin?" Ollie asked. "This pond, it's only here because the Heartwood Clan built a dam over the stream. It nurtures the whole of the village and it's a treasure to the people who I protect. If it's all right, I'd like to add a bit of it to the ritual as well."

"Sir Ollie," Virve said with a complex look on her face. For Lady Ashlynn to go through so much effort in making arrangements for this ceremony, it didn't sit well with her to make adjustments at the last minute, especially when Ollie hadn't learned that much about witchcraft in the days since Lady Ashlynn offered to take him into her coven. "Witchcraft requires careful planning and delicate balance. I don't know if you should make changes or..."

"It's fine, Virve," Ashlynn said with a gentle touch on the bearish woman's arm. "When it's your turn, if something is important to you, we'll make adjustments as well. The elements of the world have no desires, no wants, or needs to command them. We have to supply our desires when we shape the energy of the world, and if Ollie desires it, then including the waters of this pond will only strengthen his bond to the working."

"Go ahead, Ollie," she said as she took the next item out of the box and waited for him to add a small cup's worth of water to the waterskin before he placed it in the stone circle closest to the pond.

"Thank you," Ollie said, already feeling more anchored to the energy that had begun to gather in the circle. "What's next?"

"This is a special kind of candle," Ashlynn said, conjuring a small flame to light the candle before placing it in his hands. "I asked Georg to make it using tallow from the kitchens, but only after the tallow had been used for cooking," she explained. "It isn't the best way to make a candle, but I wanted to bring flame from the kitchens to stand for your fire. I hope you don't mind my decision," she said, giving him a questioning look and wondering if he would want to add something else or make a change this time as well.

"No," Ollie said, taking the candle carefully and inhaling the unique scent of fat used for frying that had begun to emanate from the candle. It was a familiar, comforting scent that had accompanied him from the kitchens of Lothian Manor to the kitchens of the Summer Villa and even the Vale of Mists, and he couldn't think about anything better.

"The next one is my gift to you, Little Brother," Heila said, taking up a piece of polished marble from the box and presenting it to him. "The walls of the arena in High Fen City were damaged in one of my battles there. This is a piece of those walls. This bit of stone has seen the bravest champions to ever fight in the arena for hundreds of years," she explained as she pressed the polished stone into his hands.

"When you explained your virtues, I had the thought that, in addition to standing for the power of Earth, it could also represent your virtue of Courage," she said, holding his hand tightly until the stone began to carry a trace of the warmth of their bodies. "I, I hope it doesn't disrespect your traditions of knighthood," she added softly, searching his pale eyes for a sign of how he felt about the gift she'd chosen for him.

"No, it, it's perfect," Ollie said, clutching the stone tightly as his eyes grew misty. Ashlynn and Heila had told him that a coven was like family, but it wasn't until right now, as he witnessed the lengths that they had gone through to prepare for him, that he began to truly appreciate how much that meant.

For weeks and months, they'd prepared these things, thinking carefully about each and every offering they'd prepared, ensuring that they not only served their purpose in the ritual, but that they also reflected the things that were most important to him as well.

Ollie blinked away the moisture collecting in his eyes as he knelt to place Heila's stone gently in the center of the circle of stones that the diminutive witch pointed to. When he turned back to Ashlynn, however, he was stunned to realize that the object in her hands wasn't nearly as simple as he'd thought when he first glimpsed it within the box.

"Is that," he started, finding it difficult to speak around the lump that formed in his throat as he gazed at the object in Ashlynn's hands. "Who made that?"

Chapter 525: Unique Offerings (Part Two)

"If there had been more time," Ashlynn said apologetically as she held up the knotted piece of wood from the box. "I would have asked Juni or Milo to carve this into something more elaborate. This is a cypress knee, part of the barrier the cypress tree builds around itself to keep floods from washing it away," she explained as she turned the gnarled piece of wood over to reveal a carefully carved shield.

"I know you haven't chosen a crest yet," Ashlynn said. "But I hope that you'll stand as a shield at my side, helping me to protect the people who need a guardian the most. When Juni presented me with the hairpin," she said, touching the pinecone-shaped carving on the pin that had found its home in her hatband. "I asked her to carve this for you. Seeing your village, though," she added with a faint smile. "Perhaps she should have carved it into a strong wall that could protect an entire town instead."

"No," Ollie said, tracing his fingers gently along the carving and feeling the intense devotion that Juni had carved into the knot of wood when she shaped one side of it into a shield. A wall might protect the village, but from the way Milo's wife had shaped the shield, it was clear that she wanted to present something that would keep him safe.

To the displaced members of the Heartwood clan, Ollie had become more than just a protector of their village, he had almost become a member of the clan itself. During the summer campaign against Liam

Dunn and Loman Lothian, Juni had worried about Milo's safety, but she'd also been secretly grateful that Ollie hadn't been forced to join in the battles.

She knew that his time would come one day, and when it did, she would worry about both her husband and their young savior. So when the Mother of Trees asked her to carve an emblem of protection into a piece of wood for Ollie's ritual, she'd poured her heart and hopes for his safety into the small piece of cypress, hoping to shield the young man from any harm that would come his way.

"No," Ollie said thickly as he ran a thumb over the carving one last time before placing it in its circle of stones. "This is perfect."

"This is the last one," Ashlynn said, holding out a slender, dark feather that seemed to drink in the pale light of the waning moon and the distant, twinkling stars. "I hoped she might be able to be here to explain this herself, but Mistress Nyrielle has other matters to attend to tonight," she said.

For a moment, a wave of anxiety passed through her as she thought of the very similar ritual that Nyrielle was overseeing this night. If all went well, Lennart would die tonight, rising again as Zedya's first progeny. Ashlynn hoped that Nyrielle's continued absence didn't mean that something had gone wrong, but even if something had, there was nothing she could do to help with it now. All she could do was proceed with Ollie's ritual and, if something had gone wrong, she would do her best to comfort her lover afterward.

"This is one of Mistress Nyrielle's feathers," Ashlynn explained, her voice growing more solemn than it had with any of the other gifts. "It's common to use a feather from a bird to represent wind in this ritual, and Heila and I had collected feathers from birds who roosted in cypress trees for this purpose. Nyrielle's feather, however, carries something special."

"She called them the 'Winds of the Void'," Ashlynn said, setting the feather carefully in Ollie's hands so he could feel the trace of otherworldly energy that clung to the feather. "They blow from a place beyond death and bring with them the power of the grave."

"Why, why would I want to add something like that to my ritual?" Ollie said. His hand trembled as he held the feather, and he could feel an almost haunting chill wind flowing from the feather as it shook in his hand. "This is..."

"It's a reminder," Ashlynn said, stepping forward to steady his hand that held the feather. "A reminder that a man who has chosen to stand for Justice will one day be an executioner. When the time comes that you must slay men who threaten all that you hold dear, she wishes to give you the power to condemn them to the darkness of the void, so that they may never trouble the good people of this world again."

"She also wants you to know that she considers you to be part of her family," Ashlynn added, placing a hand gently on Ollie's bruised chest to feel his racing heartbeat. "You have a place within my family as a member of my coven, but with this, she is accepting you in her family, the same as her own progeny. She cannot give you the strength of a vampire the way she's done for me, but she can give you this."

For several moments, Ollie stared at the dark feather in his hands. For something that should be lighter than air, it suddenly felt heavier than his darksteel cleaver. Lady Nyrielle was right, and clearly Lady Ashlynn agreed with her.

So far, Ollie had managed to avoid needing to fight and kill, but once he became a knight and a witch, the day would come when he needed to spill blood and take lives. Even if he did nothing with the rest of his life other than rule over this already large village, there would come a day when he may need to sit in judgment over a criminal and claim a man's life as punishment for his crimes.

The feather was a reminder that he was taking on responsibility not only for protecting life, but ending life when it was necessary. The thought was uncomfortable but... Thane had often told him it was better for people who had the strength to take lives to be uncomfortable with it rather than becoming callus and numb to it. So long as it was an uncomfortable burden to carry, it was a sign that he understood that it shouldn't be done carelessly.

If Nyrielle's feather had felt light in his hand, it would have been a sign that he wasn't worthy to wield such power. As is, while it wasn't comfortable, he could accept it in the spirit that it was offered.

"I understand," Ollie said, nodding firmly at Ashlynn before carrying the feather to the final circle of stones that awaited it. The moment he did, the air itself seemed to grow heavy, and each of the offerings began to emit a faint, dark-greenish energy that carried the scent of damp earth, humid air, and tender young cypress needles.

"Good that you understand," Ashlynn said, gesturing to the larger circle of glowing stones. "Then it's time to enter the circle...."

Chapter 526: Within The Circle (Part One)

Power hummed in the air, ready and waiting to be shaped by the desires of the witches who had called it here. Wood, Earth, Water, Air and Fire, each one of them pulsed and swirled through the circle of stones, feeding and strengthening each other in a cycle that was as old as time itself.

As Ashlynn prepared to enter the circle, the echo of Nyrielle's heartbeat fluttered within her chest, surging with warmth and exultation, and quivering with the release of long-held tension. The feeling was so sharp and clear that it brought a shimmer of moisture to Ashlynn's eyes and a smile to her lips.

"Zedya has succeeded," Ashlynn said warmly, provoking answering smiles from Heila, Virve, and Ollie. "It's a good omen for our own work, but do not lose your focus," she cautioned, taking a deep breath to calm her heart and stepping across the boundary of the circle of stones to begin the formal ritual.

"In this circle, I name myself Ashlynn, the Mother of Trees," Ashlynn said, speaking in a slow and steady cadence. "My heart is strong, and the seed is grown. I've come to birth my heart's desire, to raise a witch and bring him home. He is my friend, my knight, and the second of my coven. This seed I've grown belongs to him alone."

As Ashlynn spoke, power rippled within the circle, creating the illusion that the stones had become the edges of a pool of deep water that rippled and danced around her ankles as she strode toward the center of the circle.

From the center of her chest, a pale jade green light began to glow, spilling ghostly seeds of light from the seed she'd carried for many months. Where the seeds fell in the deep pool of magical energy, the gnarled knees of a mighty cypress tree rose, creating a path that led to the center of the circle.

"In this circle, I name myself Heila, the Willow Witch," the diminutive witch intoned formally as she strode into the rippling pool of magic. "My blade is sharp, my hands are sure. I've come to witness a witch's birth, to lend my strength and power too. But the bond we forge," she added, looking between Ashlynn and Ollie, smiling widely as she recalled the time Amahle had said these words for her in the depths of the Briar. "It belongs to you."

In her hands, Heila carried Snow Fang, bringing with it a trace of chill, wintery energy that briefly filled the circle with a glittering flurry of silvery-green ghostly snowflakes. As the flakes fell, they seemed to

catch and gather on the branches of an unseen tree, rapidly accumulating until they formed the wide trunk and mighty branches of a cypress tree, sheltering everyone within the circle from the harshness of the world outside.

Now that the way had been prepared, both women turned to face Ollie, each of them extending a hand to welcome him into the circle of power that called out to the flame-haired youth like a siren song. The circle promised far more than just power to the young man.

Already, he could feel the warmth and familiarity of family flowing from the circle, as if he had returned to the servant's chambers he shared with his parents after a long day toiling in the kitchens.

"In this circle, I name myself Ollie. I enter with open hands and open heart," he said in a voice that rang out pure and strong, carrying across the waters of the pond and reaching the trees beyond. "I've come to receive a seed, to join the coven of the Mother of Trees, to become her Cypress Witch and her knight as well. My life is hers to command. Tonight, I've come to make this stand."

Striding into the circle, Ollie kept his head high and his back as straight as a sword, moving with the confident demeanor of a knight clad in armor despite the pain of the bruises Thane had left on his body just minutes ago.

The power rippling around his ankles felt like nothing he'd ever experienced before. Compared to the sorcery he had learned so far, entering the pool of energy felt like he'd stepped from a small bathing tub into a vast mountain lake, rippling with waves stirred by the wind, warmed by the fires of an ancient hot spring, with soft, yielding earth beneath his feet and sheltered by a mighty tree that connected all of those things together.

When he knelt at Ashlynn's feet, he felt himself sinking into the soft earth, as though he had taken root on that spot, just beneath the surface of the power that rippled within the circle. Slowly, with hands that felt stiff and heavy, like the branches of a mighty tree, Ollie unlaced his tunic, pulling it aside to reveal a pale, muscular chest marred by two fresh yellowish-purple bruises.

"This will hurt," Heila said, stepping between Ashlynn and Ollie, placing the tip of Snow Fang's sharp edge against his flesh. "If you need to, you can cry out," she added softly as she looked into his calm, pale eyes. "There's no shame in crying out. It doesn't make you any less of a man or a knight or anything."

"It's fine," Ollie said, smiling softly at his 'big sister.' Even kneeling, he was still taller than her, but at least he wasn't so much taller than her that she couldn't reach his chest with the knife. "I'm ready," he said firmly, trying to hold to the stoic strength of a knight in the face of the chill emanating from Heila's snow-white blade.

A bone-deep chill sliced through his skin, spilling blood that felt scalding hot following the cold touch of the blade. The combination of sharp pain, bitter chill, and hot blood left Ollie momentarily dizzy, his vision turning dark, the world growing unsteady. Moments later, however, Heila returned to him, this time standing behind him and bracing his shoulders to keep him from toppling over.

"Brace yourself," Ashlynn said, kneeling in the soft soil in front of the young man. At some point, Ollie realized, while he'd been overwhelmed by the pain of the wound Heila had placed in the center of his chest, Ashlynn had gained a matching one. Only, in addition to crimson blood flowing from her wound, a brilliant, almost blinding jade-green energy poured from the wound, casting stark shadows across the ground and pulsing with power more intense and concentrated than anything Ollie had ever felt before.

Chapter 527: Within The Circle (Part Two)

Reaching into the wound in her chest delicately, Ashlynn extracted a small, delicate seed that had grown seemingly hundreds of tiny roots. Gingerly, with her eyes closed tightly against the pain that felt as though she were pulling the bones out of her chest one by one, she tugged the seed free of her own heart.

As she did, her bow-shaped lips moved from one word to the next, her voice speaking in a steady rhythm to guide the energy toward the person who would come to bear the seed she'd nurtured all these months.

"By wood's deep strength and sentinel's stance,

Where guardian's shield and power advance,

This seed of might, forged firm and true,

Holds gifts of magic, from me to you.

Beside my heart it learned to stand,

With balanced powers at your command."

When Ashlynn chose the Cypress tree for Ollie, she didn't just choose any cypress seed. There were a number of varieties available in Amahle's vast library of seeds, and so Ashlynn chose the one that she felt would offer Ollie the greatest flexibility in choosing his path. Already, she felt like she'd taken far too firm a hand with him, tearing him away from the life he had known and the parents who loved him. When it came to his seed, though there were some things that she would decide for him, what she most wanted to give to Ollie was the ability to choose for himself how he would develop his witchcraft.

Where Heila's seed of witchcraft was anchored in the Willow's strengths of wood and water, Ollie's seed contained great power and strength of wood, but it kept the other elements in near-perfect balance.

While some cypress trees kept their needles evergreen year-round, Ollie's seed had come from a tree that turned flame red in the autumn, shedding its needles and growing them back fresh and even stronger the following spring. With needles that would dance and burn in the wind and roots that sank deep into water and soil, he could bridge between many forms of magic and find a path that belonged to him and him alone.

The seed contained everything Ashlynn wanted to give the young knight. The strength and might of wood to shield himself from harm, the cycle of rebirth and renewal that came each year to restore himself from the wounds he might suffer in the battles to come, and the infinite possibilities to go in any direction he chose, fighting where he believed it was right to make his stand and protecting any who were precious to him.

When she took that seed, containing all of the power and strength along with the hopes and cares she'd placed within it over the past several months, it seemed almost eager to reach out to Ollie, extending its roots toward the wound in his chest even before she could place the seed in his chest.

For Ollie, the pain of receiving the seed was greater than anything he'd ever felt in his life. Worse than accidental kitchen burns, and far, far worse than any injury he'd ever suffered when training with Thane and Marcel in the months since coming to the Vale of Mists.

The roots of the seed burrowed deep into his chest, like white hot awls, piercing into his flesh and twisting, writing ever deeper until they wrapped around his heart, pulling the seed into his flesh. The pain didn't stop there, however. Instead, each time his heart beat, he felt like the pain radiated outward, following the flow of his blood as it radiated out to every inch of his body.

The pain was so great that, no matter how stoic and strong he wanted to appear before his liege lady and 'big sister' Heila, he surrendered to the pain, throwing his head back and howling in agony.

"AAAAAAARRRRRRRGGGG!!!"

Standing outside the circle, Virve flinched at Ollie's cry, her claws unconsciously digging into the blankets she held, waiting for the ritual to end so she could help him rest.

The young man hadn't made a sound during Thane's powerful blows, not even when that third strike had knocked the wind from him had resulted in more than a grunt as he struggled to regain his breath. She'd seen seasoned soldiers cry out under less punishment than the heavy slaps handed out by the vampire knight, yet Ollie had stood tall and stoic through it all.

But this... this was different.

The veteran soldier's eyes remained fixed on the seed burrowing into Ollie's chest, her eyes trembling as she tried to imagine what it must feel like for the young man to roar in such agony. She'd endured arrow wounds, blade cuts, and once, a crushing blow that had cracked the bones of her forearm, leaving her in a brace for almost a year while it healed.

Pain had been her constant companion through decades of service, leaving a map of scars across her fur-covered body. Yet watching Ollie's face contort in agony, she wondered if any of her experiences would prepare her for what awaited her when her turn came.

Would the Oak seed feel different than this Cypress one? Would her years of learning to endure and push through pain during battle serve her any better? Or would she, too, be reduced to primal howls, limited to wailing like a newborn cub before the power of Lady Ashlynn's witchcraft?

"It's okay, Little Brother," Heila whispered, stroking his back gently with one hand while the other supported him, keeping him from toppling over as the seed spread its roots throughout his body. "Let it out," she said softly, releasing a spill of gentle silver-green energy from her hand on his back, numbing his body and easing the pain.

"Rrrrrggghhh," Ollie groaned through gritted teeth, screwing his eyes shut against the pain and trying to endure even as his heart began to race and strange energy began to flow through his body. At times, the energy was calm, like the still water of a pond in summer, and warm, like the flames of a cookfire. Other times, it was fierce, like the stinging winds of winter, howling from somewhere dark and terrifying, carrying with it the sounds of whispering voices whose words were too faint to understand.

But no matter how tightly he shut his eyes or covered his ears, there was no escape from the wave of forces tearing through his body, burrowing into his flesh and melding with his very bones as the roots of the seed spread within him.

"There's no shame in surrendering now," Heila said gently, reaching up to wipe sweat from his brow and pulling his forehead down to touch hers so she could ease the strain that tortured his mind. "The first part is over. Let me carry away the pain while you rest."

"By willow's touch where gentle branches sway,

Sweet rest and comfort wash all pains away."

Heila's lips trembled as she spoke, her mind consumed with the effort of easing Ollie's pain without disrupting the ritual, but slowly, as she held her 'little brother' close, the tremors wracking his body subsided and he slowly drifted off to sleep in her arms.

"Virve," Ashlynn said, pressing a hand to the wound on her own chest and releasing a steady stream of emerald magic to slow the flow of blood. "It's safe for you to enter the circle now," she explained as the ghostly cypress tree and the rippling pool of energy were drawn into Ollie's slumbering body, fueling the transformation taking place even now within him. "Help Heila, lay him down."

"Yes, my lady," Virve said, rushing forward with the soft blankets that Ashlynn had prepared for this night. Unintentionally, her claws had punctured the blankets in one or two places, leaving small holes as testaments to how anxious she'd been watching Ollie struggle through the ritual.

Ashlynn smiled softly while she focused on her own injuries. She watched Virve and Heila gently wrap the blanket around Ollie and ease him into a comfortable position to sleep. It wasn't the same as the way Heila had faced her own trial, but the differences weren't because Ashlynn looked down on Ollie's strength, or because she intended to baby him through this trial.

For Heila, lying out on a sandy island in the middle of the Briar might have been acceptable in the midst of the summer heat, but Ashlynn had no intention of making Ollie's trial any harder on him than it needed to be. The cold and damp of the Vale of Mists would quickly sap Ollie's strength if they didn't care for him while he faced the trials that Ashlynn had prepared.

And while knights like Sir Thane might see resisting the elements as a proper, knightly or perhaps a manly method of meeting their struggle during the vigil, when it came to the rituals of joining her coven, Ashlynn had a distinctly more 'motherly' approach.

Already, Ollie's eyes had fallen shut, and his mind had been drawn into the seed of witchcraft within his chest. The trials he would face there would be hard enough. From now until he emerged successfully, it would be Heila's job to care for him, as a big sister watching over her little brother.

She would have help, of course. Milo would be allowed to return in the morning, and Ashlynn was certain that others would come to stand with him as well. She herself would visit as often as she could, but unfortunately, they had too little time for her to spend every minute standing watchfully over the young man's trial.

She would stay with him until close to sunrise, and then, she would set things in motion for the next member of her coven. After all, it would be best for Virve and Ollie to complete their trials close together so they could grow and learn at the same time. All she had to do was visit the Ancient Oak, and hope that it didn't harbor any of the lingering dangers that had come along with the Ancient Willow.

If it did, then Virve's trial would be at least twice as hard as Ollie's... and if that were the case, then the veteran soldier's success was anything but guaranteed.

Chapter 528: Strip Off Your Armor

The moment Heila's witchcraft washed over him, carrying away the pain that tormented his mind and body, Ollie found himself falling into a deep darkness as the seed within his chest drew his mind into a world filled with power that felt young, vibrant, and full of potential.

At the same time, the place left him feeling anything but relaxed, as though the energy rippling through the darkness had yet to decide if it should yield and submit to Ollie's desires or turn on him and use him as soil in which to grow and strengthen itself.

"Hello, Ollie," a familiar, feminine voice called from the darkness.

Suddenly, a jade-green light blossomed in the darkness, shimmering from thousands of cypress needles in a strange, flooded forest. Ollie found himself standing barefoot and knee deep in the warm, still water with soft, silty soil squishing between his toes as he turned to face the woman who had spoken.

There, he found Lady Ashlynn, dressed in a scandalously short skirt and sleeveless tunic, wearing a witch's hat that seemed to hold half a garden's worth of twigs, flowers, leaves, and stalks of grass in neatly tied bundles. It looked strangely fitting for the odd place he found himself, and at the very least, it wouldn't become as heavy and sodden with water as his own heavy breaches and the padded gambeson that he found himself wearing in the oppressive heat of the flooded forest. But still, did she have to sit so... provocatively as she looked down on him from her perch above?

"So, these are cypress trees?" Ollie asked, turning his gaze away from Lady Ashlynn before his eyes could linger further on her soft, creamy thighs or slender calves and instead focusing on the strange trees and the labyrinth of gnarled wooden structures that grew around them. "They're... different from what I expected."

"Many things seem to be different from what you expected," Ashlynn said. "You've come here dressed for war, but where is the enemy you need your armor to fight? There are no beasts in the water here," she added, tossing a stone playfully into the water nearby and splashing the startled Ollie in the process. "Strip out of all that, you'll be more comfortable then."

"My, my lady," Ollie said with a pained expression on his face as he faced her, struggling to keep his eyes where they should be, particularly as he looked up at her from below. "It, it wouldn't be proper," he said lamely. "Not when you're dressed like that."

"Ollie," Ashlynn said, summoning a lightweight scarf and draping it across her legs as she regarded him from her seat on the cypress knee. "What is it that you think I'm asking you to do?"

"You, you're asking me to strip down, aren't you?" Ollie said, genuinely puzzled at her question. "I, I don't think that's right. What, what would Lady Nyrielle think if she knew I was looking at you when you're dressed like this? If she knew that I had stripped down when you were barely wearing anything at all? I, I don't want to make her angry, and I don't want to disrespect you. So, even if it's a little uncomfortable for me, I can endure like this..."

"Ollie," Ashlynn interrupted. "I'm not asking you to strip all that off just so you're naked here with me," she said, shaking her head in mild disappointment. "I'm asking you to strip all that off because, even though this is your vigil, you need to learn the lessons of a witch, and you can't do that while you're clinging to the armor of a knight."

"I know that the seed is painful," Ashlynn said gently. "And because of that, your defenses are up. That's why you're wearing your armor, even in this heat. But you need to put that down and open yourself up so you can learn. I have a tunic that you can change into if you'd like, and some shorts as well," she added, conjuring a neatly folded outfit of light cotton fabric that was favored by many among the ancient clan when working in the humid heat of the summer months.

"You're not going to watch, are you?" Ollie asked, shifting uncomfortably as he began to work at the buckles on his heavy, sodden armor. "You know, sometimes, I think you and Lady Heila forget that there's someone joining the coven who isn't a woman... Or are you doing this just to tease me?" Ollie asked, his face turning bright red as he forced himself to ask the question that had been weighing on him since Ashlynn and Heila had shown him the scars on their chests from where they carried seeds of witchcraft.

He understood now, after experiencing the pain of receiving a seed, why they might have some pride in such a scar. He was certain that he'd show his own scar to Sir Thane some day now that he understood what it might feel like to gain a scar in battle, but when it came to Ashlynn and Heila, they seemed to have no sensitivity to where those scars were located, or the effect that revealing them had on the poor young man who was joining their coven.

"We're not teasing you, Ollie," Ashlynn said a touch sadly as she felt Ollie's mind spiralling in several different directions. "But it seems like you've misunderstood something. Maybe it's because you don't have any siblings of your own? I only have my little sister, but Heila has several brothers and sisters. How guarded do you think we are about our bodies when we're around our own family? Do you think we hide everything away under layers of peticoats and shawls? In the comfort of our own homes?"

"But, but that's different," Ollie stammered. "Those are siblings that you grew up with from when you were young. Now, I, um, that is," he said awkwardly, searching for words that would explain his discomfort at being so close to such a beautiful woman, one that he respected so much, when she was wearing so little.

"But that's why I'm asking you to strip off your armor," Ashlynn said. "This isn't just about stripping off the literal armor you wear when you wade into battle. I'm asking you to strip away the walls you've built up that keep a kitchen boy separate from a noble lady. Or the heavy armor that keeps a knight kneeling at his liege lady's feet."

"Ollie," Ashlynn said gently. "Your trial and your lessons begin when you can set all that down, and look at me like part of your family. Heila and Virve, too. The way you look at Milo and Juni and the others in your village. Not as your Lady. Not as a woman. But as just Ashlynn, part of your family within the circle of our coven."

"I see," Ollie said, his face burning a deep shade of red as Ashlynn pointed directly at the source of his discomfort.

Unknowingly, he'd placed her on a sort of pedestal after their escape from the Summer Villa. In the months of her absence, he'd often looked up to her as a sort of ideal. She was brave and courageous, and in his mind, she had become like the great queens of legend, capable of charging into battle alongside her knights and inspiring everyone who glimpsed her beauty, on or off the battlefield.

But in the months that they'd been apart, while he'd driven himself harder and harder to be worthy of the trust she'd placed in him, he'd built up the image of Ashlynn in his mind more and more, until she became not only the perfect liege lady, but the most amazing and beautiful woman he'd ever known as well.

At some point, his thoughts of her had strayed somewhere they shouldn't have gone. Somewhere he knew was inappropriate, especially since she already had a great love in her life, and yet... his body was honest in its reactions, even if he wasn't honest with himself.

And when it came to moments like this, when she was trying to draw him closer into the family of her coven... rather than recognizing the way she'd lowered her guard around him, he'd lashed out because of his own discomfort seeing her so relaxed and open around him.

"I'm sorry," he said, tugging at the last of the buckles on his heavy, padded gambeson and dropping the sodden garment into the warm water around his ankles. "I, I thought that I understood when you said a coven is like family, but... I wasn't acting like family should."

"We all make mistakes, Ollie," Ashlynn said warmly, tossing the light cotton clothing to him. "And if my sister were here, joining our coven and watching you change," she added in a lightly teasing tone. "I think she'd be just as tongue-tied as you. I think she really will be taken by the sight of you," Ashlynn added playfully. "She's always had a soft spot for heroic knights."

"My Lady!" Ollie protested. "If you're my family, then she's my family, right? Please don't say those things!"

"This is this, and that is that," Ashlynn said with a light, musical laugh. "And it doesn't matter right now either way since she isn't here. But, now that you've shed your armor and lowered your defenses," she said, her voice growing more serious as she returned to Ollie's reaction to the trees.

"You said that the trees were different than what you expected," she reminded him. "Is that a good thing?" Ashlynn asked. "Or are you disappointed?"

Hearing her question, Ollie heaved a heavy sigh of relief. The beginning of the trial had already challenged him in a way he'd never expected, and he was afraid that she'd take the topic even further. But now, it seemed, they were headed for more expected ground and talking about cypress trees felt much, much safer than having a discussion about Ashlynn's little sister and her preferences in male companionship.

Now, however, as he returned his gaze to the towering trees that rose up out of the warm water around his feet, he tried to find a way to explain what he felt, seeing the trees that would soon become the defining element of his

Chapter 529: A Trial or a Lesson?

"They're different," Ollie said as he studied the thick, wide trunks of the trees. When Ashlynn had mentioned them as trees that grew walls around themselves, his mind had conjured something that was a bit more literal than the lumpy, gnarled knees of the cypress trees, but when he thought about how they must help the tree to anchor itself against even the worst of storms and how thick the trunks of the

trees themselves were, he realized that they truly were like giant sentinels, standing guard over the islands that dotted the flooded forest.

"Will they grow in the Vale of Mists? Can I plant them in the village?"

"They will, though they may not grow as large without your help," Ashlynn explained patiently. "Our winters will stunt their growth a bit. But they should thrive at the water's edge in your village. Or wherever else you'd like them to grow, so long as you're willing to nurture them. Are you willing to give of yourself or to sacrifice the growth of others to nurture these trees so far from home?"

"What?" Ollie said, turning back to look at Ashlynn with a face contorted in confusion. "Why would a person sacrifice the growth of others for these trees? Do I need them? As a source of power for my witchcraft?" he asked, trying to puzzle out why he would ever need to make sacrifices just to grow a stand of trees.

He had seen Ashlynn sacrifice trees to heal herself once before, but when she did, she didn't sacrifice trees that were still growing. Instead, she sacrificed the ones that were weak and dying, and in the end, she still gave back a portion of the energy she'd harvested to help new saplings take the place of fallen trees. Was that what she meant?

"What happens to the grassland when a farmer sets his plow to sow his seeds?" Ashlynn asked, refusing to give Ollie a direct answer. "Or when he looses his hounds upon the foxes to protect his chicken coop?"

"Some things die so that others can thrive," Ollie answered. "Is that all you mean? If I want to grow these trees, I'll have to sacrifice some of the cedars to make room for them?"

"It's more direct when you do it with witchcraft than when a woodsman does it with an ax," Ashlynn said. "But in a sense, yes. Given the power to not only decide who lives and who dies, but who struggles and who thrives, are you ready to make those choices?"

"I am," Ollie said resolutely and without a moment of hesitation. He'd prepared for this and discussed it many times with Sir Thane and even Sir Marcel as he took charge of the village. He'd slowly grown comfortable mediating the seemingly endless disputes that came from bringing so many different clans together in a single village, and he'd come to take solace in a piece of advice Marcel had given him.

"The best deals are often ones where no one is happy with the outcome, but everyone walks away with something they need," the Black Merchant had explained while Ollie recovered from the physical exertion of one of the stealthy vampire's knife-fighting lessons.

"The happier one side is, and the more aggrieved the other side is, the more lopsided the deal," Marcel said. "If you are strong and your opponent is weak, you may be able to strike such deals, but if you force a man who is only temporarily disadvantaged to accept a losing deal too often, then he will return to bite you when you can least afford it."

"So it's better to give up a little bit, to avoid making things too lopsided, even when you don't have to?" Ollie had asked.

"It's best if everyone gets what they need, even if they don't get everything they want," Marcel answered. "That way, everyone has a chance to keep moving forward. And if you balance it right, the things each side loses are things that hurt less to lose than the pain of not getting what they need. That way, even though there are losses, both businesses are able to thrive."

In the village, Ollie had been forced to navigate the needs of the Night Weaver Clan who wanted to preserve as many trees as possible to build their treehouse-like nests, next to the Horned Clan who wanted to clear cut space to establish clusters of huts for their sprawling families with seemingly dozens of children, and finding ways for them to assemble reasonable clusters around a smaller number of the largest trees in the village had been just one of the many places he'd navigated asking people to make sacrifices so that everyone had enough room to thrive.

"I am ready," Ollie repeated, looking at the vision of Ashlynn sitting on the cypress knee above him. "But, if I need help, if the decision is ever hard, then I'm not ashamed to ask for advice," he added. "I don't have all the answers yet, and if Sir Thane doesn't even after a hundred years, then I'm sure I never will. But I promise to listen and learn and to do my best," he said solemnly.

"That's a good start," Ashlynn said, stepping off of the cypress knee and into a flat-bottomed boat that Ollie could have sworn wasn't there before Ashlynn stepped into it. "Come with me," she said, holding out a hand to help him out of the knee-deep water and into the boat. "It's time for a lesson in gardening, the way witches garden."

"A lesson?" Ollie asked, frowning as Ashlynn began to use a pole to steer the boat through the winding waterways of the strangely flooded forest. "In gardening? But, I thought this was supposed to be a trial."

"You will be tested, Ollie," Ashlynn said as they approached a small island that resembled one of Amahle's gardens in the Briar, though this one was filled with vegetables that had wilted in the oppressive summer heat, and many of the garden beds were overgrown with weeds.

"But before you can pass a test, there are lessons you must learn, starting with this one," she said, gesturing to the garden. "A gardener could help the vegetables to thrive by pulling the weeds, building supports and shade, and all of the ordinary things that any person could do," she explained as she stepped into the garden and knelt beside a sad, shriveled plant bearing dark green and dull red peppers.

"But you can do something greater," she said, touching the base of a prickly thistle with one hand while gently cupping the pepper plant with another. Jade-green energy began to flow across her arms as the thistle slowly wilted, turning brown and dropping its seeds as the stalk became too weak to hold up the leaves and purple flower at the top of the long stalk. The peppers, on the other hand, grew plump and smooth under her hand as jade-green energy spilled down on the plant like a gentle rain.

"Let me ask you something, Ollie," Ashlynn said as she stood and brushed the thistle seeds from her short skirt. "You've worked hard to keep your villagers fed with only what you can grow in quickly planted gardens and first-year crops. I know the vale is plentiful and the other villages have helped, but has it been lean this year?"

"At times, it was very lean," Ollie admitted, staring at the pepper plant in wonder. Not only did the peppers look shiny and ripe, but several new peppers had formed, growing from buds into the tiny beginnings of what was sure to be an extra harvest for this little pepper plant. And all Ashlynn had sacrificed to create the abundance was a weed that would have been ripped out by a gardener anyway!

"Can you do this to the entire garden?" Ollie asked. Then, as he thought about the scale of Ashlynn's magic when she healed herself in the forest outside of Orava village, he swallowed heavily before asking something that seemed even more ridiculous. "Could you do this to an entire farm?"

"Of course," Ashlynn said with a smile. "Let me teach you how," she said, tapping the ground next to her and gesturing for Ollie to join her.

Of course, the trial that Ashlynn had prepared for Ollie wouldn't be as simple as learning how to weed a garden. There would be harder questions to follow as he came to understand the power of witchcraft. But just as she'd started her trial in the healer's tent, Ollie would begin with the place that he had the strongest convictions, providing food for the people he cared for.

Eventually, he would have to confront the limits of his new powers, just as she had. The question was, when he reached those limits and he had to choose, could he live with the consequences of those decisions?

Thus far, Ollie's life had been difficult, but he had yet to lose anything truly precious as a result of his actions. If Ollie was going to take up the mantle of the Cypress Witch, he had to be capable of transforming himself into a guardian that continued to stand, even the losses he couldn't prevent piled up around his feet like the water around the roots of a cypress tree.

"I believe in you, Ollie," the Ashlynn in his vision said as she began to teach him how to feel the energy within the plants of the garden. "And even if this is hard, I believe you'll grow even stronger once you've learned these lessons."

"Of course," Ollie said, cheerfully focusing on the cucumber plant surrounded by weeds, blissfully oblivious to the things that awaited him at the end of the trial. This wasn't what he'd expected his trial to be like, but as long as he could learn how to take care of the people who mattered to him, then he intended to learn as much as he could, eagerly anticipating the look on Milo, Juni and Old Nan's faces when he returned after becoming a witch.

Chapter 530: Needful Rest

In the stone circle outside the village, Ashlynn gently caressed Ollie's furrowed brow as she withdrew her energy from his body.

The spirit of the seed of witchcraft that she'd formed to test him would take the place that Cecile had taken in Heila's trial, shaping events and guiding the future witch through the challenges that would define his transformation from an ordinary person into a witch.

Though she had shaped the spirit and directed it to confront Ollie with impossible tasks that he was doomed to fail, she had no way of knowing what specifically the young knight would face. The trial would be shaped by his hopes, fears, strengths, and flaws. It would teach him things that he needed to

know and test him in ways he wasn't prepared for, but beyond that, Ashlynn couldn't say which of his inner demons he would be forced to face.

The sound of vast wings fluttering through the air above pulled her from her musings, filling her heart with warmth as Nyrielle descended from the sky outside the border of stones. Seconds after she landed, Thane and Ignatious emerged from the village, flowing soundlessly through the darkness to arrive at her side.

"Zedya succeeded?" Ashlynn asked as she left Ollie's side and the circle of stones, hoping to hear confirmation from Nyrielle's lips of what she'd already felt through their bond.

"She came closer to failure than I would have preferred," Nyrielle said, reaching out to take hold of Ashlynn's hands and relishing the feeling of warmth that radiated from them. For a moment, her midnight eyes flared wide, and her nose twitched as she inhaled Ashlynn's familiar evergreen scent mixed with the sweet metallic smell of fresh blood infused with the potent magical energy of the ritual.

The heady fragrance was like a perfect perfume that wrapped itself around Nyrielle in an intoxicating cloud, leaving her momentarily bewitched, staring hungrily at the young woman who had come to mean as much to her as life itself. Now, however, wasn't the time, no matter how much witnessing Zedya's feeding and Lennart's transformation had left her fangs craving a meal of their own.

"You can take a taste," Ashlynn said, caressing Nyrielle's cheek and leaning forward, bringing their soft lips together for a brief peck before she leaned in closer, whispering into her lover's ear. "I can see the hunger in your eyes. I'm not so weak from this that I can't give you a kiss."

"The way you push yourself," Nyrielle said, licking her lips as her fangs grew longer. "I don't know if I can trust your words."

"Then trust my body," Ashlynn said, pressing herself up against Nyrielle's lithe figure. "Feel the strength of my heartbeat," she whispered, wrapping her arms around the vampire's slender waist and clutching at the soft satin of the other woman's dress. "I won't rest if I think you're going hungry."

"This is a different hunger, my darling," Nyrielle said, pulling back from Ashlynn enough to look into her lover's limpid emerald eyes. "And tonight, if I sample your taste, I may not be able to hold myself back," she added, biting her lower lip in an effort to restrain herself from indulging in her lover's sweet taste.

"Oh, I, I'm sorry," Ashlynn said, her face heating with embarrassment as she pulled back from the vampire. "Do you need me to stand with you while you seek an offering from the villages? If helping Zedya and Lennart has left you at the edge..."

"I'm fine," Nyrielle said, smiling slightly at the flustered concern in Ashlynn's voice. "I will feed tonight, but not deeply. But first, I came to see young Ollie. Did my feather bring him any danger during your ritual?"

"None yet," Ashlynn said, leaning up against Nyrielle and luxuriating in her lover's comforting presence even as she turned back to the slumbering youth in the circle of stones. "I imagine his trail will take a dark turn the further it progresses, but... he needs to confront true darkness. It's better that it happens here instead of later on."

"From what Thane tells me," Nyrielle said, gently wrapping a dark, feathered wing around Ashlynn to shelter her from the chill autumn wind. "Your young friend has already walked into the darkness left in Owain Lothian's wake. He's been tempered more than you think."

"I know he has," Ashlynn said, her brows wrinkling and her lips tightening as she looked at the helpless seaming young man. "But walking through darkness and ruin left in someone else's wake is different than casting others into darkness and taking a life with your own hands. It's different than failing and watching others suffer for your failures," she added softly as ghosts of lives lost in the High Pass danced through her eyes.

"You've endured much to transform yourself so quickly from a blushing young bride into a powerful witch," Nyrielle said softly. "Do all of your witches have to undergo a tempering like yours?"

"If I do not temper them, then they break like brittle blades in the battles to come," Ashlynn said, thinking about the visions of unwinnable wars the Ancient Willow had presented her with when she prepared Heila's seed.

She had seen the tragedies the future could hold, and even if she had to be harsh with Ollie and Heila, she felt it was far better that she be the one to temper them within the bounds of reason, instead of leaving it to the wars her enemies would start to provide the proving grounds where they had to forge themselves into warriors as well as witches.

"Make space for rest," Nyrielle said, pulling Ashlynn into a tight embrace and tucking the shorter woman's head under her chin. "Let me take you home tonight. Thane and Ignatious can help Heila and Virve with any other work that remains. But you, you should come home now and rest, before you take up the transformation of your next witch."

"I should stay, though," Ashlynn said softly. "At least until near dawn. This is his trial but also his vigil."

"You have already done what you should," Nyrielle admonished, sliding her slender fingers under Ashlynn's hat and gently combing them through Ashlynn's soft, pale blonde hair. "Let Heila do her part, and Ollie's people in the village as well. Standing here with him on the first night of his transformation will do nothing for him. The only person who will benefit from it is you, and though it may comfort you to be here, it will diminish you in the days to come if you do not take your rest."

"You won't let me be willful this time, will you?" Ashlynn asked, looking up at Nyrielle through her lashes and pouting.

"I will indulge you as often as I can," Nyrielle said lightly. "But I've come to realize that if someone doesn't tell you 'no' when you take on too much, you will not stop yourself. Since no one but me in the whole of the Vale can tell you 'no', then it falls to me to care for you, even when you don't wish to care for yourself, my darling."

"Then, after you take me home, you'll go and feed?" Ashlynn said, clinging tightly to her lover and wishing she could at least offer a small bite to satisfy the vampire's hunger. But she understood that Nyrielle's refusal wasn't only rooted in her own doubts about resisting the hunger that would rise from such a feeding. She was also doing it to prevent Ashlynn from weakening herself further.

"All will be taken care of," Nyrielle said, gently stroking Ashlynn's hair. "But first, you should rest. You can begin again when you wake. I'll even tell Georg to make you something special so long as you rest until midday."

"You're back to bribing me with treats like I'm a child," Ashlynn teased, giving Nyrielle's waist a playful pinch. "But, since you insist, I'll go home with you to rest," she said, surrendering to Nyrielle's firm insistence. "But, if you have time after you feed, come lie with me until the sun rises?"

"Of course, my darling," Nyrielle said, scooping Ashlynn up in her arms and preparing to carry her away. "So long as you care for yourself, I will always indulge you, tonight and every night, for as long as I can call you mine."

"You can call me yours forever," Ashlynn whispered, snuggling up close against her lover's chest. "For as long as we both live, I will always be yours, and you will always be mine."