

The Vampire 571

Chapter 571: Ashlynn's Intervention

A sliver of the moon hung high in the sky as Ashlynn sat in the clearing at the edge of Ollie's village. Brilliant emerald energy flowed from her hand, gently raining on the flame-haired youth as tears spilled from his eyes and his face contorted in expressions of heartwrenching pain, grief, and occasional moments of rage.

Tonight marked the end of the seventh day of his vigil and the beginning of the eighth. Already, his pale skin had begun to darken, taking on the rough texture of cypress bark while his hands clawed at the dirt, as if he wanted to put down roots in the soft, damp soil near the village pond.

"Is this, is this what it was like for me?" Heila asked, hovering nearby as she watched Ashlynn tending to Ollie. They had been confident that the young man wouldn't need more than five or six days to pass his trial, but Ashlynn had left clear instructions just in case. If he failed to awaken on the seventh day, she was to be told immediately so she could offer whatever support she could in guiding him through the completion of his trial.

"He's bold and brave," Ashlynn said softly. Her eyes were closed, and her cheeks were wet with tears as she connected to the vision she'd created within the seed to guide Ollie through his trial. She'd thought, when she established the terms of his trial, that she'd created a safe path that it would be nearly impossible for the young man to fail, but she'd clearly underestimated his strength and determination.

The Ollie she remembered from their time at the Summer Villa was mischievous and bold enough to sneak into parts of the Villa he shouldn't have during banquets, just to peek at the knights in their fancy outfits and the beautiful ladies who might be dining with them.

At the same time, there was a timidity to him that had been beaten into what seemed like every fiber of his being, leaving him with stooped shoulders and a back that had bent from constantly bowing and scraping before Lord Owain and noblemen like him.

By the time Ashlynn left the Vale of Mists, Ollie had shown several signs of shaking off that timid, beaten down exterior, particularly when he joined with her and Thane to learn fighting arts, but what she'd seen had only been a glimmer of the man he would grow into under Thane and Marcel's steady tutelage.

"He can stop whenever he wishes," Ashlynn explained. "But he isn't satisfied, even though he's come further than I ever imagined when I designed his trial. He wants to do better, to live up to my expectations and the expectations of the rest of the coven."

"But he knows, doesn't he?" Heila said, her brows creased with worry as she knelt beside the young man. "He knows that we only want him to come back to us. He knows we'll miss him if he doesn't make it back, doesn't he?"

"This is a man's pride, big sister Heila," Virve's voice rumbled from where she stood guard nearby. Villagers had begun to gather at the edge of the village overlooking Ollie's trial since the dawn of the seventh day. In the beginning, many of them had thought that they would witness Ollie's awakening today, but as day gave way to night and the Mother of Trees arrived to personally tend to Ollie, a dark cloud of worry had begun to form over the crowd of onlookers.

"Ollie is different from you and me in too many ways," Virve continued as she flexed her claws, still adjusting to the power of the Ancient Oak that sang within her veins and the many other changes that spread through her body after she received the seed of the Ancient Oak. "You and I are Eldritch, but he is the only human after Lady Ashlynn. You and I received our seeds from Ancient Trees, but he's received a seed from a normal tree. He's also the only man in our coven. The pressure that places on him is tremendous."

"But none of those things matter," Heila said. "Mother Ashlynn nurtured his seed for months. It's just as strong as an Ancient Tree's seed, and he didn't have to face any of the... any of the complications that I did," she said quietly.

She'd meant to say 'Any of the challenges we did', but when she'd learned that the Ancient Oak had accepted Virve without giving her a trial, it left Heila uncertain about her own trial. Perhaps, if the previous Willow Witch hadn't meddled with her, trying to force her to become a witch that could only passively heal, her trial would have been as easy as Virve's had been.

"They do matter, though," Ashlynn said softly. "They matter to him. He's doubted himself for so long and been beaten down so much," she said as a fresh tear spilled down her cheek. "He's struggling to accept when he's done 'enough' and when he's become 'good enough.' I'm afraid," Ashlynn said, pausing as her voice caught in her throat. "I'm afraid that he may get caught in the trap of thinking he's never good enough to move forward from where he is."

"This is a man's pride," Virve said. "Sir Lennart was the same way when he and I were still recruits serving under Captain Bassinger. I hear that human families place even more burdens on the shoulders of their men. The oldest man must inherit his father's position, even if he is the youngest of all his father's children. Humans expect young men like Ollie to be ready for far too much, far too soon."

"Is there anything we can do?" Heila asked as she gently stroked Ollie's flame-red hair, only to snatch her hand back when she noticed the tiniest beginnings of flowers forming among his soft, flame-red locks. "I'm sure if Virve spoke to him, she could straighten him out."

"Ollie's trial is different than yours, Heila," Ashlynn said as she sank into the world within the seed of witchcraft. "Because there is no will from an Ancient Tree, the will within his seed is my own, so I can do more for him than I could in your trial. I'll try to speak to him. Maybe, if I can talk things through with him, I can help him understand how far he's already come..."

A solemn, pensive mood hung over the witches as they watched Ashlynn sinking deep into the magic of the world that bound her together with Ollie and the seed within his chest.

Sitting nearby, Milo clutched nervously at the figure of an armored knight he'd carefully carved from a piece of a red cedar's heartwood as he watched and waited for Ollie to emerge from his trial.

Lady Heila had already told him that they intended to cultivate cypress trees in the Vale of Mists for Ollie after he completed his trial, and once one had grown enough to harvest, Milo intended to carve something more fitting for the friend he'd chosen to follow.

For now, however, as he'd watched Ollie's face exhibit signs of tremendous strain and loss, he'd carved the simple knight out of the wood that was at hand in hopes that the figure could watch over his young friend and protect him from whatever was causing such heart-wrenching suffering.

Chapter 572: Humility And Hubris (Part One)

"So, even though you died," the vision of Ashlynn asked as she gazed at Ollie. "Isn't this an ending you can accept?"

For several minutes, Ollie said nothing as he tried to process everything Ashlynn had told him. He, Harrod and Milo, along with more than a hundred other soldiers, had died to save the villagers and perhaps even the Vale itself from the Inquisition's terrifying curse of the second sun. Owain, the leader

of the invading army, had escaped with most of his men, but the losses he'd suffered had been ruinous and the losses suffered by the Church had been even greater.

"Am I supposed to accept that the best I could hope for in this situation was to die a hero's death?" Ollie asked, looking at the vision of Ashlynn with a complicated gaze as he tried to sift through the simmering stew of emotions boiling within his chest.

Perhaps it would have been easier to accept if he'd arrived in time to prevent Milo and Harrod from dying... if he'd saved his close friends along with the villagers then, even if he failed to kill Owain, he could at least say that he had done right for his friends and for Old Nan.

But when he thought about it, in the instances where he'd focused completely on solving the crisis within the village, he'd lost Old Nan, and when he fought against the Lothians, he lost Milo and Harrod. It was like the trial was telling him that he would have to accept someone's death, one way or another.

"Was there really no way to save everyone who mattered?" Ollie asked. "Even if it cost my life, if I could have protected the people who mattered the most..."

"Of course there was a way," Ashlynn said, startling Ollie with how easily the words fell from her lips. "What would have happened if you had ordered them to remain here, perhaps with a dozen or so men, to keep the village safe if Owain attempted to send men to attack it while the battle was occurring."

"Lord Owain wouldn't do that," Ollie said. "There would have been no point to ordering them to protect the village other than to," he said before his voice trailed off as realization struck him. "There would have been no point other than keeping them away from danger. But, they wouldn't have wanted that. They would have resented me for keeping them safe that way," he said as he hung his head.

"It would have been worse for your men as well," Ashlynn pointed out. "They needed an experienced commander and while Harrod doesn't have much experience, he knows more about soldiering than most of the men did. And Milo was the deadliest archer on the battlefield. No one else could have fired an arrow through a target as small as the visor of a knight's helmet and he did it more than once."

"You might still have had victory," Ashlynn said. "But it might have cost you another twenty, thirty, or forty men to save those two. Would that have been easier to accept?"

"No!" Ollie said fiercely. "Of course that wouldn't have been better. But what if I had been better?" Ollie asked. "What if my protective amulets had been better, or if our ambush had been better, or if I'd sought Owain out in the very beginning, or..."

"Ollie," Ashlynn interrupted, stepping up close to the young man and placing a finger on his lips. "Think very carefully about the virtues you have chosen, and ask yourself if you've lived up to them in this trial. In this last battle, even though you were consumed by rage in your battle against Owain, did you keep your head about you through the rest of the battle, never straying from your just cause and hunting down the people responsible for tormenting your village?"

"Yes," Ollie said. Though he hadn't enjoyed holding back when he could have unleashed several more storms of cypress needles across the battlefield, he knew that the most important thing for him to do was to hunt down the Inquisitors, eliminating the threat they posed to both his army and the villages beyond. "As much as I wanted revenge, especially on Owain, I put justice first and fulfilled my mission."

"And did it take courage for you to repeat this trial over and over again, even though doing so meant facing terrible pain and grief, every time you tried again?" Ashlynn asked.

"It did," Ollie admitted. "Part of me wanted to give up after my second failure and the pain of my third failure was so bad that at first, I didn't even want to open my eyes, much less try again. It was hard to keep going, but I couldn't give up, not when you and everyone in the village is counting on me to succeed in this trial."

"Justice and Courage," Ashlynn said, ticking off two fingers on her hand as she spoke. "I don't think we need to mention your Strength, you've pushed yourself constantly to grow stronger and to shoulder greater burdens over the course of this trial."

"But did you notice," Ashlynn said as she looked deep into Ollie's pale eyes. "Did you see how often you gave the people around you Hope? Every time you came with a new idea, each time you stood next to them in the fields or when you distributed protective amulets to them, did you realize that you were also giving hope to the people who depended on you? Did you notice how much brighter their eyes were when you were around, or how much straighter their backs were after you visited them?"

"I, I didn't think of it that way," Ollie said as he struggled to recall the way the villagers had looked at him during the trial. It was hard to remember anything specific, but when he thought of his most recent experience and the shining look on Old Nan's face when she held the amulet he'd prepared just for

her... he couldn't deny that there had been more hope in her eyes than there had been in any of his previous attempts at the trial.

"I guess you're right," he said after a few minutes of thought. "I was too busy thinking of the next thing I needed to do to notice but... I guess I helped to keep their spirits up, even if it was just a little bit."

"Then, if you've done so well with your other virtues," Ashlynn asked. "Why is it that you're struggling so much with Humility here at the end? Where has this hubris come from, to think that you and you alone can produce the perfect happy ending where only the guilty people perish and none of the people you treasure suffer?"

Chapter 573: Humility or Hubris (Part Two)

"Huh?" Ollie said, struggling to understand the sudden leap that the conversation had taken. This whole time, he'd never said no to work that would help, no matter how simple or menial the task, he never once thought himself to be someone who was too important to roll up his sleeves and help the villagers with whatever they needed... so how had his behavior all the sudden become a demonstration of hubris?

"Ollie," the vision of Ashlynn said with a pained expression on her face. "I've wondered if you were courageous or stubborn for pressing on even in the face of an impossible task, but I like to think that you truly have a heart filled with the ability to confront your fears and overcome them each in time."

"But now, when you have achieved an outcome that saves the people you were charged to protect and the only people who fell in battle were men who agreed to shoulder the burden and the risk alongside you," she said.

"If you still can't accept the outcome of the battle because you believe that somehow, if you just work harder or learn more or try just one more time, you could do better... is that the humility of the Ollie I scrubbed pots with? Or is it the hubris of a witch growing drunk on their own power?" she asked, giving Ollie a piercing look that shook him to the depths of his being.

"I know this isn't the ending that you want," Ashlynn said, reaching out to hold his hands as gently and tenderly as she could. "Anyone would prefer to survive to fight another day instead of dying a heroic death alongside their closest friends. It isn't wrong to hope for better and to take what you've learned in this trial to fight for a better outcome in the real world."

"But what you've achieved this time," Ashlynn said, looking directly into his eyes. "Can you accept it as the very best outcome you can achieve with the skills you have developed so far? With everything you know and all that you've learned, can you accept this as the best outcome, not forever, but for right now?"

"What happens if I say that I can't?" Ollie asked. "What happens if I want to try again? Every time I've tried, I've learned so much that I do better the next time. So, if I take everything that I've learned from this time and I try again... If I can achieve a better outcome, isn't that even better?"

"Ollie," Ashlynn said softly as she stretched up to cup his cheek. "I would love for you to have that, but there is only so much time left for you to face this trial. Already, it's a precious gift from the world for you to experience months of time in mere days, learning and growing more in this period of transition and transformation than many people will ever learn over the course of years," she pointed out.

"If you want to try again, you can," she said, stepping back away from him. "I can reset the trial and allow you to face it again as many times as you wish. But Ollie," she added with a pained expression on her face. "From now on, I can't promise you that you will make it back from your trial, no matter the outcome. It might be better, and you could come out of the trial even stronger than you would now. It might be worse, and it would diminish your results, but you would still have a narrow window of escape..."

"Or I might become stuck here," Ollie realized. "What... what happens to me if I can't escape the trial?"

"Heila told you about Sister Holly, didn't she?" Ashlynn said, reminding the young witch of the member of Amahle's coven who had failed her trial, transforming into a giant holly bush that only contained a trace of the spirit of the woman she'd once been. "If you can't escape your trial, then your mind would dwell within the trial endlessly, attempting it again and again and again until you could finally accept the outcome. Only, but the time that happens..."

"There would be nothing left of me but a giant cypress tree," Ollie whispered, shuddering in horror at the thought of losing himself within the trial.

"As I said," Ashlynn prompted him when he seemed to fall into his own thoughts. "The choice is yours. You're right that you've done better every time, and you've learned more and grown stronger every time. If you face the trial again, you may come out even stronger than you would if you stopped now."

"Or I can accept this outcome," Ollie said. "Accept that the person I am right now could never protect everyone, but at the very least, I could protect the people who couldn't fight back... And if I had to die, at least my death would accomplish something in the end."

"Exactly," Ashlynn said. "The choice is yours."

"Can you answer a question for me?" Ollie asked. The decision should have been obvious, especially after the vision of Ashlynn had spelled things out so clearly for him, and yet... "The way you've been speaking. I could have stopped at any time. If I'd stopped after the first time, or the second time, even though I felt like I failed, would I still have passed the trial to become the Cypress Witch? Was all of this struggle pointless in the end?"

"Yes, and at the same time, no," Ashlynn said, refusing to give him a simple answer. "I told you that it's a lesson and it's a trial. You aren't only earning my approval during this time, you're also forming a bond with the seed of witchcraft within your chest, and through it, you're forging a bond with the energy of the world."

"If you'd stopped at the first opportunity, your seed wouldn't have grown as strong, and your connection to the power of the world would have been weaker," she explained. "You would have emerged as the Cypress Witch, but compared to Heila or Virve, you would have lagged far behind."

"And what about now?" Ollie asked. "Can I at least meet the standard of the rest of the coven? Or am I still lagging behind?"

"I can't tell you," the vision of Ashlynn said. "Virve's transformation has only just completed, but because she will bear an Ancient Seed, her strength would be greater than yours if you had stopped at the very beginning. Now, it's impossible to say where you will stand with regards to your siblings."

"You may have moved beyond both of them, or you may be somewhere behind, or roughly the same with differing aptitudes in different areas. It's unlikely you will be a better healer than Heila, but just as unlikely that she'll form a better shield than you will. Each of you will have places where one may be stronger than the other," she explained.

"Right now, the only person who can decide whether you have gained enough strength from this trial is you," she said. "The only person who can decide whether the risks of going further are worth it or not... is you."

"Thank you for telling me," Ollie said, reaching out for the first time since the end of the horrific battle to take Ashlynn's hand instead of her reaching out to him. "Thank you for letting me make the decision, even if you'd prefer to shield me from the risks," he said, taking a deep breath as he made his decision.

"I need to be stronger in order to be your Cypress Knight as well as your Cypress Witch," Ollie said firmly. "The vision of Owain taught me just how far behind your enemies I am, and he's only a well-trained human, without any of the terrifying powers of the Templars, the Inquisitors, or the other miracle workers of the Church. Compared to the people who threaten you, I'm far too lacking."

"If that's your decision," Ashlynn said softly, raising a hand as she prepared to reset the trial for what might be the final time. As much as she wanted to forcefully pull him back to the real world, this was a decision that he had the right to make for himself and both she and Ollie would need to live with the consequences of his decision. "Then..."

"I need to become stronger," Ollie said, capturing her hand in his before she could make a move. "But I'll need to grow stronger out there, in the real world, with my real friends and my siblings in the coven... even if I'm the weakest of them. If that's the case, I'll just have to grow stronger step by step alongside them. Because too many people are counting on me," he said softly. "And I can't let my pride get in the way of my duty to return to them. So, please," he said, holding tightly to Ashlynn's hands.

"Let this trial end, and take me home," he said. "I'm sure everyone's waiting for me to come back, and I shouldn't let them worry anymore."

Chapter 574: The Cypress Witch Awakens (Part One)

Standing among the crowd of villagers, Ignatious wore a troubled expression as he looked from the young man to the 'older brother' beside him. The pair of vampires had arrived in the village along with Lady Ashlynn, but even though the Mother of Trees had invited them down to stand at Ollie's side, Thane held back, saying that this was a moment for witches, even if it was also Ollie's vigil of knighthood.

"Why is it that you're the only one here who doesn't look worried?" Ignatious asked as he studied the calm, confident expression on Thane's deceptively youthful face.

"Because I know young Ollie better than anyone else here," Thane said, his amber eyes twinkling in the flickering light of the lanterns carried by the villagers. "I know him even better than Lady Ashlynn does, though that may change once he completes this trial of witchcraft."

"Don't look down on Ollie for growing up in the kitchens," Thane said confidently. "He grew up believing that knights embodied the greatest ideals a man could ever aspire to and that they were unstoppable champions, capable of achieving anything. He won't fall short of that ideal now that he's on the verge of becoming a knight himself."

"I was a woodcutter's son, you know," Ignatious reminded the vampire knight. "I know what it means to come from humble beginnings and to look up at lofty figures as though they were paragons of virtue. I used to think the same way about the priests who took in orphans and preached to the masses. That they were good and godly men, dedicated to the ideals of the Holy Lord of Light and willing to dedicate their lives to helping all of us meet our struggles."

Now, he knew better. The Church's charity never bled the treasury dry and never lifted the masses out of their daily struggles. It provided just enough support to sustain the faith in the masses, creating the illusion that the Church cared but that its power was limited and unable to overturn the life of struggle led by the common man.

In reality, Ignatious had seen the halls that had been covered in gold and the coffers filled with jewels in the vaults of the Holy City. He'd watched the commoners endure famine while the kitchens serving the Inquisition never lacked for meat or bread. Always, there was a reason for the excess and the unfairness, and Ignatious had believed in those excuses until Lady Nyrielle tore him away from the life he knew and forced him to see the world through different eyes.

"You and Ollie are different, though. You lost your ideals," Thane pointed out before placing a comforting hand on the younger vampire's shoulder. "And you experienced a greater struggle than a hundred men combined in order to find your way back to the ideals of your faith. You've come full circle in your journey."

"Ollie's feet are still planted firmly at the beginning of his journey," Thane said. "He still believes that knights are great champions of virtues, and he's willing to work as hard as it takes to become one of them. He never accepts that something is too hard or gives up because something is impossible because he believes that a knight could accomplish any of the tasks he's been set to, so if he wants to be a knight, then doing the impossible is the lowest bar he has to leap over."

"You're saying that he'll succeed, no matter how hard this trial is," Ignatious said. "Just because he believes that a knight could succeed at the trial? And because he is going to be a knight, he must be capable of doing it?"

"No," Thane said, shaking his head. "You're close, but what you're describing is the sort of self-delusion that affects the sons of countless noblemen and knights. They believe that they can do things because they are already knights," he said, adding extra emphasis to the word 'already.'

"Ollie isn't a knight yet, so he'll expend endless effort to achieve the impossible, because he thinks that a knight could succeed. Therefore, since he wants to be a knight, he has to work as hard and as long as it takes, because a real knight would never fail."

"That's... Naive," Ignatious said, returning his gaze to the struggling young man surrounded by the witches of his coven. "But also very pure. I pray that he'll be able to keep that purity in the days to come."

"If I know Ollie," Thane said with a smile. "He'll replace the capabilities of a knight with whatever he imagines a witch is capable of doing, and then he'll strive to be even greater, believing that he isn't good enough and that another witch would be capable of easily accomplishing the things that he struggles to achieve. It will be years before he realizes that he's walked further on his road than many witches will in their entire lives."

"This is a big part of what makes Ollie so extraordinary," Thane said. "While Mistress Nyrielle was away, Ollie dedicated every waking moment he had, and several that he didn't, to the challenges I put in front of him. Caring for the refugees and building this village would have been enough of a challenge for men twice his age, but he never stopped trying to do better for these people than he'd done before."

"During the summer, I only had a few hours of darkness each night to tend to the Vale, but every night, Ollie napped between dinner and sunset so that he could come visit me. For at least an hour every night, he came with his problems and his thoughts on how to solve them. He asked for advice and guidance, but he rarely asked me to tell him what to do."

"I can see why Lady Ashlynn believes he'll be a good witch," Ignatious said. He'd only spoken to the young man briefly before the start of his trial, but his impression of the young man was very good. Talking to his 'older brother', however, it sounded like Thane's estimation of the man was even higher.

"He's done well as a village leader, but that's different from being a knight, especially with the battles to come. Will he be ready for war?"

"Were you ready for war the first time you stepped on the battlefield?" Thane asked, raising an eyebrow at the fallen Inquisitor. "Was I? I don't think any of us are ever ready, but Ollie has been putting in the work. Marcel can only return to the Vale occasionally during the summer, but every time he did, Ollie sought him out to train with knives, honing his fighting skills. On nights that he didn't have questions for me, he asked me to be his opponent so he could learn to counter a swordsman."

"Ollie doesn't give up," Thane said in a tone filled with praise. "It's one of his greatest assets. That, and his ability to accept anyone into his heart, caring for such a wide range of people that..."

-CRACK-

A sudden, startlingly loud sound interrupted the vampire's musings, drawing all eyes to the flame-haired youth and the witches surrounding him.

Chapter 575: The Cypress Witch Awakens (Part Two)

The emerald green aura surrounding Ashlynn faded away while a brilliant, jade-green light began to spill from cracks forming in Ollie's bark-like skin. At first, the cracks were small, but they quickly spread across his entire body until he glowed with the light of a dozen lamps, shining brilliantly in the night.

"Lady Ashlynn," he said as his eyes fluttered open to find his head resting on her thighs while she looked down at him with puffy eyes and tear-stained cheeks. "I've made you worry," he said weakly. "I'm sorry I was so... stubborn."

"It's fine," Ashlynn said as she lifted him up into her arms, giving him a fierce hug that was quickly joined by Heila from the other side. "You're back now and everyone's here to welcome you home."

"Welcome home, Ollie," Heila said as she waved for Virve to join them in giving the young man a crushing hug from his coven-family.

"Ow, ow, that's enough, too much, too much," Ollie yelped as Virve gathered the entire coven into her powerful, furry arms, delivering a bear hug that lifted everyone momentarily off the ground."

-CRACK!-

For a moment, the entire coven froze, fearing that Virve had cracked Ollie's ribs in a moment of exuberance. A heartbeat later, more bark-like skin sloughed away and the jade-green glow that had emanated from Ollie's skin began to condense toward his left side.

"Ollie?" Virve asked, setting everyone down gently and looking at the pale skinned human with genuine concern. "I didn't hurt you, did I? I, I'm still adjusting to my new strength and..."

"No, no, not hurt," Ollie said quickly as he pulled the plain, undyed tunic over his head, removing it for the first time since his vigil began.

Several gasps rippled through the crowd of onlookers as they watched the jade-green energy gather just above Ollie's left hip, sinking into his skin before flowing upward over his ribs. The energy darkened as it grew and spread, taking on the shape of a mighty cypress tree, spreading its branches across his chest and around his back to cover one shoulder blade.

The energy also swept low across his waist, giving rise to two distinct cypress knees across his toned, sculpted waist, while two more emerged on his lower back. The energy didn't seem like it was done, however, as the 'branches' of the growing mark trembled, dropping needles that vanished when they reached his waist, leaving a series of watery ripples around the trunk and each of the cypress knees.

"Is this... is this my mark?" Ollie asked as his fingers lightly traced across the mark left on his skin. In some light, the pale greenish hue of the mark might be mistaken for a bruise, but given its size and shape, it was difficult to imagine that it was anything other than a mark bestowed by powerful magic.

"It is," Ashlynn said, lightly tracing her fingers across the firm, sculpted muscles that Ollie had earned through countless hours of labor and hard training under Thane and Marcel's guidance. Beneath his physical strength, she felt a deep, resonant power that reminded her of Jacques, Ignatious, and the powerful cult leader of the Flaming Cauldron.

"This isn't just your mark of the witch, Ollie," Ashlynn said, looking up into his eyes with a wide grin on her lips. "It's the mark of a very powerful witch. With this, as long as you work hard, I'm sure you'll be among the greatest Cypress Witches to ever live."

"Raise your arm up high, 'Big Brother Ollie," Virve said, taking his left hand in her large paw and lifting it high over his head to reveal his mark to the crowd watching from the edge of the village. "You've won a great victory today," she said. "So let your people come celebrate the newest Cypress Witch!"

"Milo!" Ollie shouted, spotting the cloaked archer hovering outside the circle where the coven gathered. Waving with his free hand, he beckoned to his hesitant friend, wanting nothing more than to reassure himself that the people he'd watched die in the last round of the nightmarish trial were still alive, safe, and unharmed.

"Get over here," Ollie said. "I haven't said it, but you're just as much a part of my family as Lady Ashlynn and the rest of the coven are," he said, wrapping an arm around the older man and pulling him into an awkward, sideways hug. "You and Old Nan both. And where's Harrod? He should be here too."

"Once you woke," Milo said, his whiskers twitching with joy while his tail thumped the soft ground excitedly. "I saw Harrod taking people to stoke the cook fires. We, we didn't know if you would wake today or not, but Lady Ashlynn said that we should believe in you. So if you don't mind, let us cook for you for once."

"We'll help," Ashlynn said, rolling up the loose, billowing sleeves of her dress. "Witches have a tradition of cooking for each other," she said, surprising the Heartwood archer, who didn't know what to say to the idea of the sacred Mother of Trees helping to cook a meal in their village. "And I still remember a thing or two from when Ollie and I slaved away in the Lothian kitchens together," she added with a wink at the flame-haired youth.

"I don't cook," Virve said, folding her muscular arms over her chest. "I'll learn," she quickly promised when she saw a dark look from the diminutive Willow Witch. "But for now, how about I help by carrying Ollie up the hill and fetching him a drink?"

"I can walk," Ollie protested, looking indignant at the notion of being carried like an invalid in front of so many of the villagers who admired him.

"No, you can't," Virve said firmly. "You've been leaning on me ever since I stood you upright," she added quietly. "Don't worry, no one will notice," she added with a wink before scooping him up and placing him on her shoulder, holding him as if he were a hero coming home to his people.

"Everyone," Virve shouted. "Sir Ollie hasn't had a meal in days, but more importantly, he hasn't had a drink! Who has strong wine for my big brother Ollie? Who wants to toast to the Cypress Witch!"

Instantly, a cheer resounded from among the villagers as the last of the tension finally broke. The crowd rushed forward, eagerly swarming around Virve as she carried Ollie up the hill and into the village. Several young children reached out, hoping to touch the newly awakened witch, even if all they could reach was one of his feet as he rode on Virve's shoulder.

Looking out over the crowd, Ollie couldn't help but grin as the shadow hanging over his heart from his last round of the trial began to fade. There were still ghosts that lurked deep within him, and he didn't think he would ever forget the things he'd witnessed in the trial. But instead of nightmares that haunted him, those images blended with the living, vibrant crowd around him to become a vision of something far more important.

He knew now what he was fighting for. No longer was he chasing a nebulous desire to become Lady Ashlynn's knight and protector. Now, he had a whole host of people who mattered to him even more than his own life. He'd heard stories of knights making noble sacrifices, and he'd always admired them, but now, surrounded by people who cheered just because he'd achieved a personal victory, he finally understood what it meant to be that kind of knight...

Chapter 576: Threads In The Wind

While Ollie joined the villagers in a celebration of his transformation into the youngest member of Ashlynn's coven, the youngest among Nyrielle's progeny was spending the evening in significantly more solitary pursuits.

The passing of the harvest festival ushered in the beginning of what should have been a quiet, restful winter for Lothian City. Across the frontier, villages checked their palisade walls, patched up their defenses, and prepared to weather not only the heavy snows of winter but also the attacks by demons who raided winter stores and poached from herds of livestock.

In a normal year, business at the Gilded Horns might turn busy as demon hunters filled their purses with gold by hunting down members of Eldritch Clans left so isolated that they had little choice but to become raiders and scavengers to survive a harsh winter. This year, however, the actions of the 'demons' had been strange as they abandoned their villages one after another, retreating behind the walls of the Vale of Mists and leaving the Gilded Horns far emptier than it might have otherwise been.

Sitting behind a plain wooden desk in an office beneath the cellars of the Gilded Horns, Marcel cared little for the way this year's events would impact the profits or losses he made on the luxurious restaurant that catered to the most wealthy among Lothian City's residents. At his age, he'd seen enough lean years and rich years that a single bad year for one of his many investments was of little concern.

The greater concern, in his mind, was the way information dried up when he lost half his patrons and the ability to ply the upper class of Lothian City with enough wine to loosen their tongues. It meant he needed to spend more time lurking on rooftops, skulking about the city's shadows and listening at chimneys and windows to gain a fraction of the information he could gather from one night spent observing the patrons of his restaurant.

The news he had been able to gather, collected painstakingly like catching loose threads on the wind, left him deeply uncomfortable. On his desk, dozens of slips of paper, each covered with his precise flowing handwriting, had been arranged in a way that made patterns easier to identify.

"Bors is getting ready to make a move," the dark-haired vampire muttered. "At least three of the eastern barons have made arrangements to visit Lothian City for Midwinter's Night vigils, and another is sending his heir to study with the Templars until the spring..."

The last bit had been the most concerning piece of news to reach Marcel's ears over the past several days. Midwinter's Night had long been an important holy day to the Templars and to the knights of the frontier with many of them standing ceremonial guard at the gates of temples or cities across the frontier. While Eldritch raids on Midwinter's Night were exceedingly rare, the ceremony still had special significance to the most pious of knights.

Seeing young knights or the heirs of barons visiting the temple in Lothian City to make a show of standing a Midwinter's Night Vigil wasn't news. Seeing three barons move personally with a fourth sending his heir for an entire season was something entirely different.

"Bors is making his support of Loman known," Marcel mused. "No wonder Owain is so nervous," he said, turning his gaze to three vials of Night Weaver venom sitting on the corner of his desk.

Those vials were the price he paid to gain access to Master Isabell and Master Tiernan before they left on their tour of the march. Three vials of venom that would slowly eat away at a person's body and

mind for months until only a drooling invalid remained, lingering on like a ghost that was neither living nor dead.

Of course, few people could care for someone in such a state, and death followed for most within weeks or months of the sickness reaching its final stage, but for the people Owain Lothian intended to use the venom on... who knew how long the young lord might choose to keep them alive.

A soft knock at the door interrupted the vampire's musings as the person he'd been waiting for finally arrived. The man who entered Marcel's small, private office only waited for a breath or two before opening the door, quickly entering the room and closing the door behind him as if he was afraid someone might see him entering.

Dark grey, midnight blue, and black clothing combined to make the man feel like a piece of the night come to life, and even though his movements were hurried, he didn't make a sound as he crossed the room to take a seat in the only other chair available.

"You sent for me, Great Uncle Marcel?" the man said, pulling back the cowl of his cloak to reveal a face remarkably similar to Marcel's, though the man lacked the vampire's perfect, alabaster complexion and he appeared to be at least a decade older than the young looking vampire behind the desk.

"I did, Hector," Marcel said with a warm smile. He'd never had sons of his own, but he'd dedicated much of his life to protecting his brother's children after a group of entitled young knights had struck his brother down for 'acting above his station.' Now, the boys who had been his nephews had long since become old men with children of their own, some of whom were all too happy to help Marcel as he brought ruin to the families responsible for his brother's death.

"The first is a piece of news that I've already shared with your cousin Jean," he began with a smile that was so wide it flashed a hint of sharpened fangs. "It seems like Mistress Nyrielle is willing to allow her progeny to make progeny of their own now. Zedya has taken a husband, a soldier named Lennart who has long been one of Mistress Nyrielle's protectors."

"When the time comes, maybe as soon as next year, I'll be able to bring you over," the vampire said, raising an inquisitive brow at his brother's descendant. "Assuming that's still something you desire?"

"I made up my mind about this a long time ago," Hector said smoothly, even though his heart was anything but calm at hearing the news. "You trained Jean and I to go where most men can't, to disappear into the crowd and to strike at enemies few men can reach. You warned us years ago that this wasn't a life that would allow us to build families of our own but..."

"I know," Marcel said with a sad smile on his pert lips. "You were barely old enough to be called men when I asked, but who else can I trust among humans if not my own kin? It's never been a fair deal for you or your cousin, but now I can finally pay you back for all the years you've given me."

"Even if you couldn't," Hector said, shaking his head at his youthful-looking 'Great Uncle.' "Jean and I have never regretted being your sharpest blades in the daylight and the night. Now that we can become one of your... progeny? We'll only be more useful to you and the family."

"I suppose that's true," Marcel said, turning his attention back to the vials on his desk. "But first, you have to survive the worst mission I've ever given you. Fail at this and I promise that at least one of your targets won't let you die a clean death."

"I still carry the Heart's Blight poison you gave me if I need to take my own life, Uncle," Hector said, tapping a spot on his tunic where he kept a concealed vial filled with deadly, fast-acting poison that hadn't left his person, even when he slept, for so many years that it felt like it had become part of his body. "I know the price of failure."

"Say that when you see who your targets are," Marcel said, pushing a folded sheet of paper across the desk. "This time, I'm afraid that there may be no coming back from the last name on that list... even if you succeed in poisoning him."

"Is it really that dangerous?" Hector asked, leaning forward to retrieve the folded paper. When he saw the list of names, however, his eyes went wide and he stared at Marcel in disbelief...

Chapter 577: Three Targets

Hector stared at the names on the slip of paper in shock for several minutes as he tried to understand why his Great Uncle would violate so many of their long-held rules by putting together this list of targets. What was even more puzzling was the cruel poison that he was being asked to use. It was one thing to target women and children, but to use such a horrific method...

"Great Uncle," Hector said slowly as he looked from the paper to Marcel's perfectly calm face. "Is this personal? Or professional?"

Over the decades since Marcel had taken over the family business, the vampire slowly carved sharp lines between different parts of his small commercial empire. Half of the business belonged entirely to his nephews and their descendants, and the only service they provided to Marcel and his Mistress was to act as a listening point, passively collecting information and functioning as places of safe haven when Marcel himself needed to travel.

Nestled alongside those businesses was a network of people whom Marcel employed to conduct 'personal business,' either for himself or for Mistress Nyrielle. He cared little for the profits and losses of those enterprises, so long as they provided opportunities to influence the human world and undermine their enemies, they served their purpose as tools of the Black Merchant.

However, there was a third branch of Marcel's business empire, one which provided not only a substantial source of funding for his operations but also served as a training ground for people who worked on 'personal business.' The 'professional services' that Marcel offered to a very exclusive list of clients included everything from smuggling to the sale of 'demon artifacts' and even assassination.

Hector and his cousin Jean both belonged to this arm of the family business, though they were unique in that they knew their employer's true identity. To anyone outside the family, Marcel was simply the Black Merchant, and even those who had met him in person believed that Marcel was only a mouthpiece for an older, wiser master who refused to be seen in public. But Hector knew full well who his employer was, and he knew Marcel's unspoken rules about the professional jobs they would and wouldn't take, and the three names on this list violated several of those rules.

"This is professional," Marcell said, leaning back in his chair and spinning a steel-tipped pen between his fingers. "And it's personal. The client is Owain Lothian, and he's the one who picked the poison and the targets. The chest of gold and jewels he sent along with his request must have set his personal accounts back by a number of years, and the favors he was willing to trade for your services are even more priceless."

"Lord Owain?" Hector said, blinking in surprise. "He wants us to use Spider Demon venom on a member of his own family? Why?"

"It doesn't matter why," Marcel said, shaking his head at the young man's question. Hector had grown into a very capable tool who was excellent at what he did, but in terms of his ability to analyze the situation beyond what was immediately in front of him, he was still far too lacking.

"What matters is that doing this weakens Mistress Nyrielle's enemies and Lady Ashlynn's enemies," the vampire explained. "It gives us a chance to fracture the Lothian family at a time when they're still consolidating their power to launch a Holy War. Besides, even if you succeed in your mission, the man may still survive. The Church is too invested in this Holy War to allow one of their partners to die easily. They may send one of their great healers to save such an important person."

"But you always told me that the Lothian family couldn't be touched," Hector said, frowning in confusion. "And if we use Spider Demon venom, it's certain to provoke them into lashing out at the Vale of Mists or kicking off one of their 'Great Hunts' to slaughter helpless villages. Why take the risk now?"

"Because it no longer matters whether we provoke them or not," Marcel said with a heavy sigh. "The Church does all of its thinking in the Holy City near the Royal Capital... or it takes its instructions from across the sea. The Church wants this Holy War to happen, so whether or not the Lothians are stirred up, the Church will push them forward."

"To us, the Lothians are like local kings," Marcell said, gesturing at a faded map pinned on the wall. "None of the dukes have sent men to fight alongside the Lothians for two generations. Other than a few fortune seekers, bastards, and mercenaries, all we've had to worry about is this one Marquis and his vassals."

"But the Church is different," Hector said as he began to see where his great-uncle was going. "We think of the Lothians as mighty rulers, but the Church sits above dozens of men like Marquis Bors. If a family like the Lothians falls because the Church pushed them into a war while the family was in turmoil, they'll just look for a new puppet to put in the Lothians' place."

"Exactly!" Marcel said, smiling brightly at the young man and flashing a hint of fangs. "Normally, the Lothians are untouchable because we don't want to provoke a sleeping bear, but in this case, the Church has provoked them for us. That means we can move more directly without as much fear of the consequences."

"But if I get caught..."

"If you get caught," Marcel said, his voice suddenly much closer than it had been a heartbeat before. Hector hadn't seen him move, he hadn't even registered a blur of motion, yet suddenly his great-uncle stood behind him, his cool hands resting on his shoulders with a firmness that shouldn't belong to such slender, delicate fingers.

For a moment, the vampire's presence enveloped him like a physical thing, summoning a set of warring desires in his heart as he felt Marcel's cool breath against the back of his neck. At the back of his mind, something primal urged him to flee, to run as far and as fast as he could before this deadly creature of the night could sink his fangs into him.

Another part of him, however, responded in exactly the opposite way, yearning to surrender to the darkness, to fall back into Marcel's embrace and submit completely. His heartbeat quickened, sounding thunderous in his ears as Marcel leaned closer, enveloping Hector in the scent of night air and the faintest trace of sweet-smelling, expensive perfume that momentarily clouded his mind.

"Then I lose a precious family member who matters to me far more than this mission is worth," Marcel continued, in a voice as soft as velvet that wrapped around Hector's mind like a warm embrace, instantly easing his fears and melting the tension from his shoulders.

"Vengeance is worthless if you can't savor a luxurious life while you dance on the graves of your enemies," Marcel said, sounding much older than someone with his youthful appearance should. "No matter how much we hate someone, no matter how much they deserve death, I won't throw your life away over something petty."

"I won't," Hector said, feeling suddenly awkward at his great-uncle's closeness and the clear affection in his voice when he spoke. At times like this, he had to remind himself that Marcel was three times his age and hardly the pretty young dandy that he appeared to be.

Still, when he stood so close, his presence was intense enough to overwhelm the senses and leave even the most womanizing of men wondering if they might be at least a little bent. Normally, Marcel contained his dark, seductive aura well, but clearly the thought of his beloved great-nephew coming to harm had disturbed him more than he let on for his power to radiate so intensely that it overwhelmed Hector in an instant.

"What, what about the other two? The woman and the child," Hector said, trying to hide his discomfort behind business. "Usually you won't accept a contract on women unless they've done something extraordinarily vile, and I've never seen you accept a contract for the life of a child."

"These two are different." Marcel said, returning to his desk and drawing a deep, calming breath as he realized that he'd allowed his agitation to affect Hector in ways that were sure to be uncomfortable for the young man. "They're the wife and child of Sir Tommin Pyre. He's one of two knights who buried Lady Ashlynn in a shallow grave after Owain Lothian tried to murder her," he said, stunning his great-nephew. "Sir Broll was the other knight that Lord Owain sent to clean up his mess and bury the evidence of his crime. Lady Ashlynn killed him personally last spring."

"So you're willing to take this job because Lady Ashlynn wants revenge on Sir Tommin?" Hector asked. "She wants his family to suffer before she has her revenge on Sir Tommin himself?"

"Lady Ashlynn doesn't even know about this yet," Marcel said, shaking his head. "I'll tell her in a few days at the banquet. Lord Owain wants these two to suffer before they die because he doubts that the Church will move to save them, even for a Templar as promising as Sir Tommin. Owain wants Tommin to feel like the Church he ran to has betrayed him, just like Owain feels like Tommin betrayed him."

"But if Lady Ashlynn doesn't want to kill Tommin's wife and child..." Hector began to ask, his voice trailing off as he raised an eyebrow at the vampire.

"The venom of the Nightweaver Clan is deadly to humans, and it resists the healing techniques of the Church because its power is rooted in darkness and the night," Marcel answered. "But Lady Ashlynn is the Mother of Trees. Purging their bodies of Nightweaver venom should be easy enough for her or the Willow Witch, Heila."

"That's why you can go ahead and poison them," Marcel said, his smile turning dark and predatory. "Lord Owain will consider our end of the bargain kept, but if the mother and child vanish later, that has nothing to do with us, does it? They may have to shelter in the Vale of Mists for a period of time, but if Lady Ashlynn wishes them to live, then they will live well in the Vale."

"And if Lady Ashlynn wishes them to die," Marcell concluded, sinking into the shadows of his office. "Then nothing in this world can save their lives."

Chapter 578: Married Life

Deep underground in the ancient fortress of the Vale of Mists, Nyrielle stood with inhuman stillness on a raised step while Zedya moved carefully around her with a needle and thread. The hearth in Nyrielle's

bedroom filled the space with uncommon warmth while dozens of oil lamps scattered about the luxurious room filled the space with their flickering golden glows.

"Will Lady Ashlynn be visiting you tonight, Mistress?" Zedya asked as she adjusted the lace accent draping over Nyrielle's slender hip before pinning the dark lace against the midnight blue silk of the dress.

"As much as I wish that she would, she's gone to visit Ollie's vigil tonight. Now that he's entering his eighth day, I don't expect to see her again until he passes his trial," Nyrielle said with a trace of audible disappointment in her voice that surprised even her. "Why do you ask?"

"Because you've lit a fire in the hearth," Zedya said simply as she circled around to Nyrielle's other hip to hang a matching piece of lace. "You don't require the warmth, and neither do I. You could have left the room cold and settled for lighting the lamps, but you didn't. You lit the hearth, so I assumed that you were warming your room to entertain Lady Ashlynn."

"Am I that obvious in my desires?" Nyrielle asked, turning ever so slightly so she could meet Zedya's gaze. "Do you think I've become foolish like a maiden since Ashlynn..."

"No," Zedya said before Nyrielle could even complete her thought. "No, Mistress, you haven't become foolish," she said, standing up straight so she could look directly into Nyrielle's midnight blue eyes. "You are happier, less restrained, and forgive me for saying it, but more driven than I have ever seen you before."

"None of that makes you foolish," she said as she returned to her work, adjusting the lace accents on Nyrielle's dress. "You have desires now that you didn't have before, and you act on those desires, even if it's something as simple as lighting the hearth in the hopes that Lady Ashlynn will visit your chambers tonight."

"Zedya, do you, do you mind answering a personal question? You don't have to if you don't want to," she added, her face heating slightly. "But I wanted to ask you something about Lennart and how the two of you are... adjusting, I suppose. To life together."

"Mistress, I have no secrets from you," Zedya said, smiling up at her suddenly awkward lady. "You can gaze through my eyes at any time, and I imagine you could do the same with Lenny's if you needed to. I've never expected to hold anything back from you."

"This is different," Nyrielle insisted. "What you do in your private time belongs to you alone, and I would never intentionally intrude on your time with Lennart. But, how is he adjusting to sleeping through the day? And are you, are you sharing a bed when you sleep for the day, or do you withdraw from each other until night falls?"

"Oh," Zedya said, her face heating slightly as a shy smile formed on her lips. "At the end of his first night as my progeny, we didn't want to be apart, so I brought him to my room and I held him through the coming of dawn. I had forgotten how frightening it was the first time I had to surrender to the abyss and take shelter in my memories," she said, her hands pausing in their work as her gaze grew distant.

"I told him to hang on to a happy memory as the sun rose, and he told me that I'd just given him the happiest memory of his life," she said, blushing with mild embarrassment as she thought of the memories she'd just finished creating with her husband on their wedding night. "When the sun set, I brought him to Kobir Village to feed for the first time."

If Lennart had been descended from Bardas the way Savis and Tausau were, he would have been brought somewhere to hunt people, and it was likely that the first person he fed on would die under his fangs. Nyrielle, however, enforced an entirely different tradition of voluntary offerings. For Lennart's first feeding, Zedya had carefully selected the nearest village settled by the Clan of the Great Claw, where she asked for a strong warrior who had made an offering in the past to serve as Lennart's first meal.

Between receiving an offering from someone who was young, strong, and experienced and having Zedya available to intervene if necessary, Lennart had been able to feed without harming anyone, taking one of the most important steps of his new life without the burden of an unfortunate accident.

Since then, Zedya spent at least half of her time each evening helping Lenny adjust to his new life. As a new vampire entering his blossoming period, now was a time of significant growth for the former captain of Nyrielle's personal guard, and with the approaching war, neither of them wanted to waste this precious time.

Still, at the end of each day, they reunited in Zedya's chambers at least an hour before dawn, taking time to enjoy each other's company and to savor the delights that any newlywed couple would.

"The first night, I held him until the sun rose," Zedya said with a dreamy, wistful smile. "But every night since then, he's wrapped me up in his arms like I'm an important treasure he has to protect. And every night, I wake up there in his arms," she said. "I never knew how good it would feel to wake with someone else at my side, but... Even though he's cold, he warms my heart more than any hearth."

"Zedya," Nyrielle said, softly biting her lower lip as she imagined the scene her long-time attendant described. "I'm happy for you. And a bit jealous as well," she admitted. "I, I haven't been willing to allow Ashlynn to stay with me until I fall asleep. I'm worried that she'll find it disturbing to see me reduced to little more than a corpse in our bed..."

"But you want her to be there with you," Zedya said, setting aside her needle and thread to take Nyrielle's hands in her own. For a moment, their roles of mistress and servant fell away as they became two women, one recently married and the other preparing to announce her betrothal.

"You want her to hold you as the abyss takes you for the day," Zedya said. "And you want her to be there holding you when you escape its clutches at nightfall. There's nothing wrong with wanting that for yourself, and I'm sure that Lady Ashlynn would understand."

"Do you think she could truly rest down here?" Nyrielle said, gesturing to the solid rock walls of the room that had been carved from the bedrock of the mountain itself. "It must be hard to feel nature here, where there are no windows and no fresh air. I feel like it isn't fair to her to ask her to lock herself away in a dark cave with me, even if it's only for part of the day..."

"So talk to her about it," Zedya advised. "If you'd like, I can look for plants that can be carried in here easily. We may have to rotate things in and out so they get enough light, but that would be a small price to pay if it makes your room more comfortable for Lady Ashlynn to join you..."

"And you don't think she'll be disturbed by what happens to me when the sun rises?" Nyrielle asked, still feeling doubtful about subjecting Ashlynn to the feeling of her lover 'dying' in her arms as the sun rose.

"I know that Lenny and I are different because we both fall to the abyss when the sun rises," Zedya said. "But I think, if I had offered to take him into my bed before he became my progeny, he'd still have stayed there to hold me through the day. I think if you ask her, Lady Ashlynn will be the same. You just have to decide when you want her to join you for the day."

"And since you're already keeping your room warm, even when she isn't here," Zedya said with a teasing twinkle in her amethyst eyes. "I'm sure that day isn't far off."

Chapter 579: Planning for Victory

The impromptu celebration thrown in honor of Ollie's transformation into the Cypress Witch lasted until the small hours of the morning when the earliest rays of dawn began to paint the mists of the vale in soft golden hues, and the frost that had collected on long grasses faded away as though it were a dream too delicate to survive the light of day.

While the villagers themselves seemed content to continue the festivities, Ashlynn insisted on bringing Ollie back to the ancient fortress, pointing out that even though he appeared to have been asleep for several days, the trial had actually been very exhausting for Ollie and what he needed most now was rest.

"How is the castle town so different already?" Ollie said, staring out the windows of the carriage as it rolled through the large gate in the wall that stood as the town's final line of defense against Lothian aggression.

The current wall protecting the city hardly seemed like a wall for the tiny castle town, standing thousands of paces away from the nearest building, but the new wall had been built atop the remains of the original city wall, at a time when Vale City had been a much larger settlement.

Now, however, the space between the town and the wall seemed to have been packed full of wagons, carts, and hundreds upon hundreds of tents. That alone shouldn't have been surprising given the size of the army that Nyrielle had brought back from across the mountains. What was surprising, however, at least to Ollie, was the amount of construction that was occurring, even in the chill and damp autumn of the Vale of Mists.

"This is Lady Ashlynn's doing," Heila said proudly, beaming from her seat beside the Mother of Trees. "She's trying to encourage people to settle here, and she hired more than a hundred architects and builders in High Fen City to spend a year here to expand the city."

"But, it's only been ten days since you returned to the city. This is a bit much, isn't it?" The young knight said, pointing out the window at several long, wide trenches that were marked off by long lengths of twine. "Are these supposed to be streets? Why are they digging such deep trenches?"

"For water and waste," Ashlynn said with a faint smile. It wasn't until she spent time among the Eldritch that she realized how cramped and foul human settlements like Lothian City or even her beloved Blackwell City had become with too many people creating too much waste in too small an area. "This is the system they use in High Fen City to keep trash and waste from piling up in the streets between market days."

"But the size of this all," Ollie said, still shocked at how many of these strange, trench-lined roads had been cleared in between the hundreds of tents. After helping to build a village for the refugees, he had a much better frame of reference for the transformation that was taking place before his eyes, but he still struggled to imagine needing as many new streets as Ashlynn seemed to be laying out in the castle town.

"Ollie," Ashlynn said, her mood turning slightly more serious. "We're about to fight the greatest war the Vale of Mists has seen since the days of the Second Crusade. It's no exaggeration to say that if we lose, it will be the end of the Vale of Mists as we know it, and anyone lucky enough to survive will be forced to flee across the mountains again, and this time, they may never return."

"But have you ever thought about what would happen if we won?" Ashlynn asked, raising an eyebrow at the young knight.

"If we win, then we win the right to keep our homes and our way of life," Ollie said, unconsciously using 'our homes' and 'our way of life', including himself with the people of the vale rather than setting himself as an outsider. "The Heartwood Clan can rebuild their dams, keep their burrows, and protect the spaces that contain all the memories and treasures of their ancestors. Everyone can have the space to raise their families in peace until the next war comes and we have to defend it again."

"Not this time," Ashlynn said, giving the young knight a bright smile. "This time, everything changes, whether we win or lose. This time isn't just about holding on to what we have, it's about retaking territory that was lost, driving the border between the Kingdom and the Vale further to the east for the first time in over a century."

"But we won't be like the Kingdom and the Church," Ashlynn promised. Her emerald eyes were firm and resolute as she gazed out the carriage windows, seeing a future for this place that was even grander than what it had been under High Lord Torbin's rule.

"We won't drive the humans from their lands when this ends," Ashlynn said. "It isn't the fault of the farmer or the bondsman that he was born on land usurped from the Eldritch people more than two generations before he was even born. He has no other place to 'return to' after we defeat his lords and masters. He has fields that he has tended his entire life, a business he built with his own two hands... He has a home and a life and a family here in these lands, and we cannot rip it away from him."

"So the humans get to keep the spoils of their murder and plunder?" Virve growled. "Just because they managed to hold on to it long enough to pass it down to a cub without blood on their claws, they get to keep what was stolen?"

"Yes," Ashlynn said directly. "It's the only way to stop the cycle of fighting that consumes too many lives and creates too many tragedies every generation. But there is a difference between the bondsman and the lord," she added.

"The lords are the ones who have fueled the endless wars," she explained in a voice that was fierce and determined. "They have commanded the slaughter of countless innocents, and steeped their families in blood for so long that the books of their family history are written entirely in blood. Those who gave the orders are the ones who will pay the price when the reckoning comes and we call all blood debts due," she promised.

"But what does that have to do with all this work in the city?" Ollie said, returning to the original topic before Virve's temper could flare up again. He didn't know her well, but somehow, since she received the seed of the Ancient Oak, she seemed more volatile than she'd been before.

It wasn't just her anger that seemed to simmer closer to the surface, she'd been far less restrained during the celebration in the village than he remembered the quiet guardsman being when they shared meals in the past. Even her fur had changed with the gray fur that had come from her advancing age shifting to shades of orange, deep crimson, and occasional flecks of bright gold, resembling flames flickering along her body.

Ashlynn seemed to be aware of the change in Virve as well, giving Ollie a brief nod of thanks before she picked up the topic they'd begun with, the changes sweeping across Vale City and the excessive amount of investment they seemed to be making in a city with such a meager population.

"It has everything to do with Vale City," Ashlynn said with a warm smile. "Not the Vale City of today, but the one we'll need after the wars have ended..."

Chapter 580: Ashlynn's Vision

"I intend for Vale City to be a place where the human and Eldritch worlds mix," Ashlynn said. "Like blending yellow and blue paints to make green, I intend for this city to become something unique where our two peoples can live together, side by side, learning the very best of what each people has to offer and becoming something greater than the sum of its parts," she said.

"Mother Ashlynn," Virve said awkwardly, trying to restrain her temper. The visions the Ancient Oak had given her of the Lothian's lumber yard where they hacked apart the trunk and limbs of a sacred Ancient Oak were still fresh in her mind and the thought of letting such savages into the homeland that her people had fought so long to defend filled her with a deep sense of unease.

"Do you really think we can bring humans into the Vale on this kind of scale?" Virve asked. "How long would it be before they bring their axes and saws to chop down everything we hold dear, remaking this place in their own image?"

"Little Sister," Heila said, interrupting for the first time since Virve's temper began to flare. As she spoke, a soothing aura that smelled faintly of willow-bark tea began to fill the carriage as Heila did her best to help the new witch calm her temper.

"Do you really think that Mother Ashlynn and Lady Nyrielle would let people get away with that?" Heila asked gently. "Maybe humans could do it to another city where they could eat away at our world, especially if one of their Templars or Inquisitors contested to become the next Eldritch Lord. But Lady Nyrielle and Mother Ashlynn won't wither away and leave the Vale behind when they grow old. They'll be here to protect it for as long as the Vale of Mists stands."

Suddenly, the carriage grew quiet as Heila reminded them of something that all of them knew but few of them spent much time thinking about. Even though they had become witches and would live decades longer than they would have without the seeds of witchcraft that Ashlynn had planted in each of their chests, all of them would eventually grow old and die. Ashlynn, however, would endure in this world as long as Lady Nyrielle did, and the Eldritch Lady of the Vale of Mists was already more than two centuries old.

"All of this," Ollie said as understanding dawned on him. "You aren't doing this for the world we'll live in after the war ends. You're thinking about the Vale of Mists when the children and grandchildren of the people who are alive now are living here... that's what you're having all of this built for, isn't it?"

"I don't know how long it will take," Ashlynn said quietly as the carriage finally trundled through the gates of the ancient fortress itself. "Some change, like the fall of the Vale of Mists in Cellach Lothian's era, comes suddenly. Others take years, decades, even generations. I don't know how to see that far in the future."

"But Nyri and I have been speaking since our reunion in High Fen City," she continued. "It does us no good to win yet another defensive victory in a string of endless wars. We need to put an end to this in a way that endures for generations to come."

"That's why she raised such a large and powerful army," Virve said as realization dawned on her. "Sir Savis and Sir Tausau's forces can both be considered elite soldiers, the likes of which few in the Vale of Mists could match, and there are others like the Sorcerers of Sundered Earth who even High Lords beyond the mountains know to fear."

"She doesn't intend to crush the Lothians at our borders... she intends to take the war to their doorstep," Virve said, silently impressed as she imagined the scale of it.

"Mistress Nyrielle knows her role well," Ashlynn said with a trace of sadness in her voice. "She knows more about bringing death to a people than almost anyone in the world, and she no longer intends to restrain herself in the war to come."

Previously, Nyrielle had been afraid that unleashing her full power would provoke the human Church into starting a crusade that she couldn't hope to win against. If she terrified the Church too much, the forces they would marshal against her would be far beyond what she and her handful of human progeny could hope to repel. But now that the war was coming anyway, she no longer saw a reason to restrain herself in bringing death to her human enemies.

"Mistress Nyrielle knows too much about death, but not enough about nurturing life," Ashlynn said softly. "That's why it's up to us to balance the power of death within the Vale of Mists. We can't just destroy our enemies, we have to build something else on top of the rubble of war... or none of it will be worth the sacrifices that so many people have made for so many years."

"That's why," she said, taking a moment to look at each of her witches in turn. "That's why I need your help, not just to win the war, but to transform the Vale of Mists into a place that people will want to live. We can't become a land of darkness and death with strength that makes the world fear us. We have to be a place of growth and prosperity where people will want to raise their children instead of a place they fear and fight to protect their children from."

"I know it will be hard to put down old hurts," Ashlynn said, leaning across the carriage to take one of Virve's massive paws in her hands. "And I won't ask you to forsake your vengeance. I intend to take my own as well," she said, her voice hardening as she spoke. "Owain Lothian will die a painful death, and so will the people who betrayed my family's trust to tell him about my mark."

"But after that," Ashlynn said as she gently stroked the Oak Witch's fur. "After we've reaped the lives of the people who are responsible for the tragedies that must be avenged... I hope that you and I can both put down the hatred in our hearts to build something for the future."

"I'll help," Heila said, reaching out to add her diminutive hands to Ashlyn's, clutching tightly at Virve's paw and looking at the taller witch with shining eyes. "I'm smaller and younger, but when it comes to healing, when you're ready, I can help, just like I helped Sir Ignatious," she said.

"I'll help too," Ollie said, adding his hands on top of Heila's. "I, I may not understand as much about vengeance and what everyone has suffered," he said, thinking back to his own recent trial. He'd gotten a taste of the pain that people like Milo, Old Nan, and the rest of the refugees had suffered, but in the end, it hadn't been real. He was able to wake from the nightmare of the trial, but the people who had actually suffered and lost loved ones could only continue living the lives they had.

"But I promise to help build a future for everyone," he said firmly. "One where sister Virve can rest and raise her children in peace after the fighting is done."

"Hey, brat!" Virve said, suddenly flustered by the attention. Reaching out with her free paw, she gave Ollie a gentle smack across his shoulders before giving him a slightly embarrassed look. "Whoever said I'd be raising children? Huh? Do you see me with a man to give me children? Or are you offering to be the father to these children you think I'm going to be raising in the future?"

"What? No, I, I didn't... wait!" Ollie said, taken off guard by the sudden change in Virve's tone.

Virve, however, responded with a hearty, body-shaking belly laugh that was soon followed by everyone else in the carriage. All of this talk of the future and forgiving the humans who were supposedly 'blameless' had placed a great weight on her heart, and she wasn't entirely sure she believed that things could work out as well in the end as Ashlynn believed...

But those problems belonged to a distant future, one that she might not even be alive to witness. Since that was the case, there was no reason to allow it to become a seed of discord in their newly forming little family. She could leave that worry to Mother Ashlynn. As long as she was able to avenge her father, extracting the blood debt owed to her by Bors Lothian, and as long as she could recover what remained of the butchered Ancient Oak... nothing else really mattered.

"Come now, Big Brother Ollie," Virve teased, smiling broadly at the awkward young knight as she stepped out of the carriage and held out her arms. "Let me carry you up to bed. But if you think I'm going to help you start siring children, you have another thing coming!"