

The Vampire 611

Chapter 611: Owain's Schemes

For the first time in months, perhaps for the first time since her family made the long journey to Lothian March for her sister's wedding, Jocelynn unburdened herself completely. Her cheek still stung from Isabell's slap, but Jocelynn rarely noticed as she poured out every secret she held deep in her heart. From Samira the imposter in the Summer Villa to Owain's intentions to prevent the Guild Masters from gaining significant merits in the Holy War to come, she left no detail out.

For her part, Isabell did her best to listen as calmly as she could, mentally taking notes for all the things she dared not commit to paper. Many of the schemes Jocelynn seemed to be aware of were things that Isabell and Master Tiernan had noticed already, but some of them were especially cruel.

"He wants to press my Lassian into service as a squire?" Isabell said in shock when Jocelynn mentioned how Owain had decided to keep the powerful engineer under his control once she revealed her formidable capabilities for waging war.

The words came out in a strangled whisper as Isabell's entire body went rigid. Her fingers curled into tight fists and her knuckles turned white as she fought to maintain her composure. Her heart pounded in her chest, and her vision went red in a way that it hadn't since the days she fought beside the Emerald King when someone attempted to capture Casquas to force her to abandon the king's side in that bloody civil war. When she finally spoke again, her voice had transformed into something hard and brittle, like ice about to crack.

"He's only fourteen. He isn't going to begin his apprenticeship for another two years and we've already made arrangements with the Undaunted Shipwrights for him." Her jaw clenched so tightly between sentences that Jocelynn could hear the faint grind of teeth. "Why does Lord Owain think he can just force my son into service like this?"

"Because this is the frontier," Jocelynn said, scooting back on her chair ever so slightly, as if to put additional room between herself and the cold fury radiating from the Guild Master. "If you become a knight, then your son becomes your heir," she added, as if it explained matters. "All knights in the frontier are expected to bear arms and serve in the March's forces during times of war. And a young man can be appointed a squire at thirteen."

"So he wants my son as a hostage," Isabell said darkly. She had known that coming here and participating in this Holy War would be dangerous, but she hadn't imagined that she'd need to defend

her family against her 'allies' as well as the demons arrayed against them. "And as soon as I summon my family to join me here, he intends to capture them."

"It's good that Issandra is beginning her apprenticeship in Blackwell City instead of following us here. Otherwise, I'm sure Owain would attempt to wed her to one of the pigs that follow him like lapdogs," she said, not bothering to hide her disdain for Owain's loyal retainers.

"He, he felt that your daughter, and, and Master Tiernan's youngest daughter," Jocelynn said slowly, unable to meet the furious engineer's gaze. "He felt that they should be offered as rewards to Lord Bastian Hanrahan or Sir Rian Aleese if they continued to support Owain's cause."

"Rewards?!" Isabell said, all but shouting, before she bit back her words and continued in a quieter, but only slightly restrained tone. "But he can't just decide who my children will marry," Isabell said incredulously. "It is a matter for each family to decide which traditions of marriage they will follow. That's been the law since the founding of the Kingdom," she protested.

"That's been the law for the common people of the kingdom," Jocelynn countered. "In the early days of the kingdom, there were too many settlers from too many different kingdoms across the sea. The founding laws are full of compromises to stop the dukes and counts from turning on each other after the First Crusade. But the law for nobles is different."

"Different how?" Isabell asked, frowning at the young woman. This sort of thing was part of the reason she refused to be awarded a title in the Emerald Kingdom. Relationships between people were matters of the heart, and even if an introduction was arranged between families, the couple themselves should be able to accept or reject the arrangement. "I understand that most noble families follow a tradition of arranging marriage, but are you saying the law actually requires it?"

"It's been the law ever since the Shield Breaker Rebellion," Jocelynn explained, looking helpless. "A liege lord has the right to dictate the marriages of his vassals and their children if he does so to foster peace and prosperity within his domain."

The Shield Breaker Rebellion had been one of the greatest tests of the Kingdom of Gaal in its early years, when the nobles stationed at the kingdom's borders had betrayed their oaths and allowed demon armies to march past them unchallenged, attacking the vulnerable interior of the kingdom. The border lords argued that they were suffering too greatly to protect the kingdom, without the support or recognition that their efforts demanded.

In the end, after years of fighting to purge the kingdom of invading demons and subdue the rebellious lords, the King issued a number of proclamations intended to prevent such an uprising from happening again. One of them had been a law allowing a lord to arrange marriages between his vassals and the king had wielded the law like a club, wedding the sons of border lords to the daughters of heartland nobles in an attempt to create ties that would once again bind together the kingdom in peace and prosperity.

"That law is ancient," Isabell said in disbelief. "The Shield Breaker Rebellion happened more than a hundred years ago, didn't it? Besides, there's been no rebellion in Lothian March, there's no need for this sort of arrangement here."

"It doesn't matter," Jocelynn said, shaking her head. "The law gives every lord the right to settle matters within his domain as long as it fosters 'peace and prosperity.' You and Master Tiernan are newcomers to Lothian March. Marrying your children and heirs to established families can be considered promoting the 'peace' of the March."

"You still don't understand Owain the way I do," Jocelynn added. "He wants to turn Lothian March into his 'sword and shield,' and he'll use any method he can find to make sure it behaves like weapons he can wield as he wishes. He, he isn't just making plans for settling you and the other Guild Masters," she said. "He wants to humble the Church as well, and bring down anyone who supports Loman for the throne. If an old law lets him do that..."

In truth, even Jocelynn had been surprised by the extent to which Owain was rooting around in ancient history to find methods to 'bring his vassals to heel.' It wasn't until she learned that Sir Hugo Hanrahan had been living a scholar's life in exile until his father needed a spare heir that she realized where Owain's knowledge of these ancient laws and traditions was coming from.

If Owain had taken a sudden interest in the laws and traditions of the kingdom because he was preparing to take up greater responsibilities, or if he was trying to find ways that he could use that knowledge to help win his father's favor and secure their future together, Jocelynn would have been proud to help him.

She knew less about the laws for governing than Ashlynn did, but she knew a great deal about the rules and traditions that governed commerce, taxes, and things that her father said a person must know to create a domain where even the common people lived prosperous lives. Surely, if she and Owain could

have found ways to win over the hearts of the common folk by lifting them up, Bors Lothian would have seen fit to approve their marriage and Owain's inheritance.

Instead, Owain seemed intent on dredging up every method he could to bend the March to his will, and that included controlling the lives and futures of the lords who ruled it. At first, Jocelynn had argued that going too far would provoke the very sort of rebellion that had created many of these old laws in the first place, but Owain's fury at the notion his lords would rebel against him had been so terrifying that Jocelynn never brought it up again.

"My father could have done any of these things years ago," Owain had said with a blaze in his eyes that shook Jocelynn to the core. "The fact that he was too timid, too afraid of his own lords to turn them into a force strong enough to crush the demons is the reason that he could never become a Duke. But I refuse to repeat my father's mistakes!"

Chapter 612: The Heart Desires, The Body Craves

"And this is the man that you love?" Isabell said, giving Jocelynn a piercing look. "Someone who treats the lives and futures of young girls like barrels of pickled fish to be bought and sold at market?"

"Are they really that different?" Jocelynn said bitterly. "Wasn't my sister sold to Owain's family in the name of an alliance? Am I any different?" she added darkly. "At least I can love the man my family wants an alliance with. I can, I can find happiness with him," she said though she grew less confident in her words as she went on. "Or, at least, I thought I could find happiness with him," she said in a very small voice.

"My lady," Isabell said, reaching out to pull the young woman into a tender embrace, as if she was her own daughter. "I had thought better of your father, the count, than to treat you like fish at market, but perhaps I misread him because he treated the guilds so well. I'm sorry," she said as she gently stroked Jocelynn's bright, golden hair.

"But my lady, this pain you're feeling," she added with a soft smile. "It's a good sign. It means you're starting to learn the difference between what the heart desires, and what the body craves."

"What the heart desires?" Jocelynn said, twisting in Isabell's embrace to look deeply into the other woman's steely eyes. "All my heart has ever desired was a life of happiness with Lord Owain. To bear his children, raise our family and share endless joyful days at his side. I want to see him rise to be the first Lothian Duke and for the whole of the kingdom to know his greatness. But now..."

"Now you are coming to learn that your body's cravings have misled your heart," Isabell said. "The body sees his handsome face and his sculpted physique and it begins to crave. Your body craves his touch, to be held gently by those strong arms, to hear his deep voice reduced to a whisper in your ear. Even now, your pulse quickens at the thought of it, doesn't it?" the older woman pointed out.

"But my lady," Isabell continued gently. "The body leads us astray. The heat we feel when the body craves leads our minds to imagine things that are not true, or worse, to ignore things that are. When our mind has been led astray by the body's cravings, our heart becomes tangled in desires that aren't real."

"You're saying that I only love Lord Owain because he's a handsome man?" Jocelynn said. Her heart beat faster in her chest and hot words of denial tried to surge from her lips but... if anyone knew about love, surely it was the woman who married one of the greatest poets on either side of the sea. Jocelynn might not want to admit it, but at the moment, she desperately wanted the other woman's help because the more Isabell spoke, the less Jocelynn's world made sense.

"If I don't love him, then why does this hurt so much?" Jocelynn asked as tears began to flow again from her seafoam colored eyes. "Why does it feel like something is tearing my heart in two when I think about losing Owain or that he might turn his affections to another woman? If This isn't love, then why... why do I crave him even when I can't see him?"

"Because you are young and you are infatuated by the first man who caught your eye in a way no other man ever had," Isabell said as she gently brushed Jocelynn's golden hair out of her face to look deeply into her eyes. "Because you are realizing that this love you invested so much of your heart in might never have been real. Or, if it was real, it only existed from you toward him and he has never felt for you as strongly as you feel for him."

"So I've been fooling myself all this time," she said bitterly. "And because I've been a fool, my sister... my sister..." she choked out before breaking down into another bout of sobs. "I'm such a fool!"

"Hush now," Isabell said gently as she pulled the young lady into a closer embrace. "Perhaps you've been a fool, but what young woman hasn't been a fool for a man with a charming smile and a large codpiece at some point in her life? You're learning an important lesson right now, my lady, and you'll be stronger and wiser once you've learned it."

"It doesn't matter if I'm stronger or wiser," Jocelynn said bitterly. "Ash is already dead and I don't even have a grave I can visit to.... To tell her that I... that I'm sorry. I'm so, so, so sorry..." she said as the tears fell from her eyes like rain from the sky.

"You might not be able to do anything for Ashlynn right now," Isabell said as she stroked the young woman's back. "But that doesn't mean you can't do anything to the man who took your sister from you," she added, pulling back enough to look at the young woman with a determined gaze. "If you truly feel sorry for what you've done, then instead of sitting here and wallowing in your own pain, use that pain to do something useful," she said.

"Lord Owain wants to turn Lothian March into a weapon in his hands that strikes as he pleases," Isabell said with an intense stare at the broken hearted young woman in her arms. "But you can turn your pain into a weapon that cuts him as deeply as he's cut you. You can strike back at him in your sister's place," she said. "But... are you willing to take that step? Or would you prefer to return to the lies your body tells you and the delusion that you can find happiness with a man who has already murdered one bride?"

"When you, when you put it, put it like that," Jocelynn said between ragged breaths as she fought to control her sobs. Her throat grew too tight to speak as her mind filled with sets of conflicting memories. Owain's dazzling smile and powerful arms that had once made her feel so safe when he held her close and fed her morsels of dinner during quiet moments shared together flashed before her eyes one moment, followed the very next moment by the merciless swing of his practice sword breaking a soldier's arm and the look of disdain on his face as he looked down on the man writhing in pain.

Memories of his whispered promises of their future together and the sons they would raise to rule over a new Lothian Duchy and Blackwell County clashed with his cold words about seeing her dead rather than married to his brother, Loman. She thought she knew him, and maybe, maybe she really did know him. She knew how great he could be and she had felt his gentle touch, heard his reassuring whispered words of affection and adoration on countless occasions.

For a brief, intense moment, her body rebelled against her mind's understanding, craving more of the soft touches that filled her stomach with butterflies and filled her most intimate regions with heat that craved an even deeper touch. Her heart lurching painfully at the thought of betraying him and losing those dreamy, happy moments when he made her feel like the most loved, most treasured, most desired woman in the entire world.

Screwing her eyes shut, she pressed a trembling hand against her chest, feeling the fluttering, chaotic beat of her heart beneath her palm. How could she still feel this pull toward him after everything she now understood?

But crashing behind that thought, like waves breaking on the shore, came a memory of her last conversation with Ashlynn, the night before Jocelynn's jealousy had condemned her sister to die.

"Owain might not be the best man in the world," Ashlynn had said with a smile that felt more fragile and forced than Jocelynn had realized back then. At the time, she'd thought that her sister didn't recognize how great of a man she was about to marry, that she didn't appreciate him. Now, however, she realized that her sister had seen the truth far too clearly.

"He may not be the best man in the world," Ashlynn repeated. "But at least this way I won't be lonely in a tower for the rest of my days. And you, Jocey," her sister said, holding her hands and looking at her with shining, loving emerald eyes that Owain had closed forever. "You will be able to find a much better man of your own one day, one who loves my little sister as much as she loves him."

Her sister had never once stopped wishing for the very best for Jocelynn. On the night of her wedding to a man she didn't love, she was filled with hope that her sister wouldn't share her fate and could instead find the kind of happiness that Ashlynn herself would never know. And when Jocelynn realized that, something hardened in her seafoam eyes, and the last lingering softness dissolved as she straightened her shoulders.

"The right choice, the only choice, is to hurt him. Hurt him like he hurt me and..." her voice grew steadier with each word, "...and light his bones aflame to light Ash's way to the heavenly shores." Her determination solidified like ice forming over water, hardening what had moments before been fluid and uncertain.

"But how?" she asked, growing uncertain again. "He has knights and soldiers, and more than a third of the March is loyal to him. He's the greatest swordsman in the whole March. I'm just a girl... a foolish girl who thought he loved her. What can I do against someone like him?"

"Even great men fall when they take danger close to their own breasts," Isabell said, heaving an inward sigh of relief that she'd been able to get through to the young woman. It was clear that Jocelynn had turned a corner, but she still felt very unstable. Far too unstable to trust with the knowledge that her sister was still alive. But even if she couldn't yet be trusted with the truth, there were still other things she could do to prepare the way for her sister's return.

"Now, listen carefully," Isabell said, looking directly into Jocelynn's red, puffy eyes that had only recently found a glimmer of the strength and determination they would need for the challenges to come.

"Because everything from here on out will be very, very dangerous..."

Chapter 613: Making Use of Men (Part One)

In the courtyard below Jocelynn's balcony, Sir Rian Aleese gulped heavily at a cup of water while relishing in the feeling of the cool autumn air and faint morning drizzle on his sweaty face. Leaning against a pillar opposite him, Lord Owain mopped lightly at his brow with a towel while Sir Hugo Hanrahan stood nearby holding another cup of cool water.

Faint clouds of steam rose from both armored men as they caught their breath after an intense practice session. New dings and scratches marred both men's practice armor along with the cracked remains of a wooden shield that had buckled under Owain's rain of heavy blows. Other than the three men, however, the courtyard was completely empty.

"It looks like you've lost your audience today, my Lord," Sir Rian said as he threw his empty wooden cup at a distracted looking Sir Hugo, forcing the hawk-nosed bastard to scramble to catch it without dropping the cup that was waiting for Lord Owain. "I haven't seen Lady Jocelynn miss one of our sessions since you moved our morning practice outside her chambers."

"Watch your tongue, Rian," Owain chastised, flinging a sweaty towel at the pot-bellied knight's flushed face. "I'm sure Lady Jocelynn is only interested in learning how real men fight. The tournaments she's seen growing up are little more than games of tag, fought by men who have never put their life on the line to slay demons. Now that she's seen how real men wage war, she can't get enough," he said with a wide, cocky grin.

"Clearly she's had enough of watching Sir Rian get beaten like a sand sack," Hugo teased, though he stood half behind Owain when he said it. "She rushed off her balcony as soon as you took the field. Maybe if you put your helm on instead of showing your face, she wouldn't have lost her appetite so quickly."

"Bastard!" Rian snapped, though there was no venom in his words and his muscles were still shaking too much after his bout with Owain to chase the scholarly Steward down for a friendly punch with an armored fist.

On horseback, with a lance in his hand or a spiked flail, Sir Rian had every confidence that he could fight Owain to a draw. The Aleese Barony bordered the Southern Steppe and the lands of the Horse Demons and even common soldiers in his father's lands learned to ride horses to fight against their incredibly mobile enemies. For all his bulk, Sir Rian had spent more years in the saddle than even Sir Owain and he'd killed more than a few demons of the nomadic horde that plagued Lothian March's southern border.

But on foot, wielding training weapons that were safe to use against the future Lothian Marquis, the heavy knight found himself struggling to keep up with the fleet footed young lord. He was constantly on the defense against Owain's powerful, two-handed sword strikes and by the end of the match, he'd flung his helmet across the courtyard, just for the relief of feeling the fresh air cooling his overheated head.

"You're spending too much time with that engineer," Rain chided, wishing he had something else he could throw at the dark-haired Steward. "Taking lessons in scolding like a woman."

"All right, enough," Owain said, holding up a hand and silencing both men. "Lady Jocelynn has done us a favor today by keeping Master Isabell occupied. That woman has been a buzzing gnat in my ear ever since we returned home, asking when she can meet with my father to finalize their grants of lands."

"So why don't you let her meet with Lord Bors?" Sir Rian asked. "He'll either give her what she wants or he won't. Why do you have to take the heat for it when you could just make it his problem?"

"Because I don't want to live with the consequences of my father's decision if he gives in to her foolish demands," Owain snapped before lowering his voice and striding across the courtyard to put an gauntleted hand on Rian's armored shoulder. "Until we crack the Vale's curtain walls and tear down their fortress, I need that woman alive. Otherwise, I'll have to beg the Church to use their Inquisitors to do the work and you can imagine the price they'll extract for the service."

"My Lord is worried that she won't survive the folly of trying to occupy the mouth of the Vale before it's been conquered," Sir Hugo said, holding out the cup of water for Owain to snatch from his hands. "Lord Bors might sign over the lands simply to secure the agreement with her guild, but it seems like Lord Owain has come to value Master Isabell's capabilities personally."

"If a person is useful, then put them to use," Owain said simply after gulping down half the cup of water. "Master Isabell is more useful than I imagined so I intend to wring what use I can from her aging bones before finding a time to bring our relationship to its natural conclusion," he said with a dark grin. "Have

we received word from the Black Merchant? I had hoped he would bring other relationships to their conclusion while we were out touring the countryside."

It had already been weeks since he sent Hugo and Rian with a chest of gold and jewels to purchase Spider Demon venom to use against three people he wanted to see suffering before they died, but as of yet, there had been no news and he was beginning to suspect that even the famed Black Merchant had met his match this time.

"There is news, my lord," Hugo said, reaching into a breast pocket and retrieving a small slip of paper that had arrived via carrier pigeon the night before. "Madame Pyre has sent a request to the temple asking if they can send a healer to see to her son. She didn't mention Sir Tommin in her request, but it's impossible that the Church isn't aware of their new Templar's former family."

"I would have thought the bitch would succumb before the pup," Owain said with a low chuckle. "Either way, remind me to invite Loman and his traitorous lapdog to join Lady Jocelynn and I for dinner in the coming weeks. I want to see Tommin's face before his brat dies."

"Of course, my lord," Hugo said, bowing deeply and swallowing in relief that he was able to deliver good news. Sir Tommin, as far as the Steward was aware, hadn't done anything more worse to Owain than leaving his service to answer the calling of his faith, and for this simple insult, Owain's former personal guard would watch his wife and child die slow, agonizing deaths as the Spider Demon venom tortured their bodies and their minds.

Of course, if Hugo knew that Sir Tommin was one of the two knights that Owain had commanded to dispose of Ashlynn's body after beating her to death, he might have seen the Templar's sudden surge of devotion in a different light. As is, however, he was still unaware of the events that had transpired on Owain's wedding night or the conspiracies that had unfolded afterward, leaving him with a view of his lord as a man who would seek horrifying retribution for even the smallest of slights.

The thought of what Owain would do to his Steward if he ever managed to fall into disfavor was enough to give even a brave man nightmares... and Sir Hugo was anything but a brave man.

Chapter 614: Making Use of Men (Part Two)

"Speaking of putting men to use," Owain said, turning back to Sir Rian and moving on to a topic that was objectively more important, even if he would prefer to hear more details about how the traitor's family was suffering under the effects of the Spider Demon venom. "How are those ship captains we brought

back from Blackwell City? Have you managed to break their pride yet and show them the error of their ways?"

"Those men have spines like the masts of their ships," Rian said, shaking his head slightly. "They won't break, but I've taken the wind out of their sails and run them thoroughly aground. I'd say they're almost ready, and the armorers have finished outfitting them as well."

Jocelynn's idea to recruit seasoned commanders from the merchant fleet of Blackwell Harbor had seemed viable on the surface, and Owain was desperate enough to gain the support of potential knights who could actually fight that he'd been willing to entertain Jocelynn's suggestion. While he was in Blackwell City, he'd entertained dozens of applications from interested captains and he'd personally duelled with several of them, selecting only the five best swordsmen to accompany them back to Lothian March.

The problems had started as soon as he tried to prepare them to fight as knights against the demon hordes they would soon go to war against.

All of the men were talented swordsmen, all of them were strong, fit, and capable, and every one of them had killed pirates and worse in the course of their storied careers. But none of them had ever fought in more than the lightest of armor. On the open sea, heavy armor could become a coffin, dragging a man to a watery grave if he was knocked overboard during a fierce battle, and these men avoided burdening themselves with as much fervor as they avoided reefs and shoals under the water's surface.

In Lothian March, however, Owain had no need for men who could fight aboard ships. He needed knights who could ride into battle wearing armor thick enough to resist the claws and horns of demons, and these men moved with the grace of a farmer's scarecrow when they donned a suit of plate over chain and their padded gambesons. They'd been so hopelessly incapable of fighting that Owain had handed them over to Sir Rian to break down until they were ready to be rebuilt in the form of proper knights.

"We're running out of time to prepare them," Owain said, scratching at the faint stubble that had sprouted on his chin since the night before. Already, some of the Eastern Barons were beginning to arrive in Lothian City at his father's invitation. The fact that his father brought Loman along to receive them only made matters worse in Owain's eyes.

Of course, it could have been excused as simple convenience. Two of those Barons had arrived to visit while Owain was still touring with Jocelynn and the Guild Masters in the countryside. But the most recent had arrived just last night, and still, Bors chose Loman to accompany him, telling Owain that he should focus on his own matters rather than becoming distracted by visits from vassals his father considered to be 'old friends'.

"Turn the captains over to me," Owain said after musing for a few minutes. "From now on, I intend to train them personally for two hours every morning, here in this courtyard," he announced.

With his father pulling in the older Barons, Owain felt an ever-growing pressure to demonstrate his dominance among the younger generation that would be the true leaders in the Holy War to come. By Midwinter's night, when the young knights of the march gathered in Lothian City to stand their ceremonial vigils, Owain wanted his batch of new recruits to stand equal to or greater than any of the old Baron's heirs in attendance.

Besides, if he made a show of training the men that Jocelynn had asked him to recruit, he was certain that she'd repay every hour he lavished on them with more of her own sweet indulgences. Lately, it had been all he could do to hold himself back from ravishing her when she sat in his lap during their meals or massaged his aching muscles after a strenuous workout, but the anticipation that their encounters built within him would only enhance the sense of victory when he finally conquered her body.

"Only two hours, my lord?" Sir Rian asked, pulling Owain out of his musings and returning his attention to the present. "I've been drilling them at least six hours a day. They won't wear out in just two hours, even if they have to wear full armor to train."

"Two hours of my personal instruction is already a luxury few others can receive," Owain said, waving an armored hand dismissively as if he couldn't be bothered to spend more time with these former captains. "Besides, they have other work to do. They might be failures as heavy cavalry, at least at the moment, but they are all disciplined and capable commanders. It's time to assemble troops to fight under their command."

"My lord," Hugo said, scratching his head in confusion. "The garrisons are already assigned to captains who have served your father for many years. Where, where would you like me to find the men to assign to these new captains?"

"The harvest is over," Owain said simply. "Press one hundred able-bodied men between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five from the surrounding farms. Their strong backs aren't needed for harvest, and with the rest of autumn and all of winter to train, they can be proper soldiers by spring."

"The local knights won't like you pressing their bondsmen," Sir Rian pointed out. "Especially not when they have to raise their own soldiers for the Holy War. They'll protest to your father if you don't send the men back to their farms for the spring planting."

"It doesn't matter," Owain said confidently. "It's just one hundred men. But, if it will ease the burden on some of my father's most loyal knights, then take a third of the men you press into service from the lands overseen by the Pyre family," he said, as though he'd just come up with something particularly clever.

"After all," Owain added. "It's not like Tommin's brat will live long enough to inherit his father's lands... There won't be anyone left in charge of his village come spring to complain about the unfairness of it all."

Finally, he thought as he watched his loyal retainers leaving to carry out his orders. Finally, things were starting to fall into place as he designed. Soon, the Black Merchant's assassin would strike at the Lothian family itself, and Owain would be able to set aside worries of his brother snatching his throne from him forever.

Then, all he needed to do was tidy up matters at the Summer Villa with the imposter masquerading as Ashlyn, and he would be able to move openly on her far more compliant younger sister.

The road to get her hadn't been easy, but soon... soon, he would have everything he desired in the palm of his hand, and then nothing would stop his rise.

Chapter 615: Promises Kept

In a dream, Ashlynn floated in the blissfully cool waters of a pond near the river Luath, staring up through the canopy of cedar and hemlock leaves that blocked out most of the stars, leaving only bright slivers of silvery moonlight to illuminate the tranquil forest around her.

"You see, my darling?" Nyrielle said from nearby as her lithe figure slid gracefully through the water with barely a ripple. "The hardest part is learning to relax, but once you do, you'll float as naturally as a leaf on the water."

For their first day spent sleeping together, Ashlynn had asked that they have 'nothing between them, in bed or in their dreams,' and Nyrielle had obliged when she pulled Ashlynn into a memory of her choosing to protect her lover's dreams.

Their night had ended with hot kisses and a bite on Ashlynn's thigh that would be hidden from view no matter what she chose to wear during the festival the following evening. After that, Ashlynn had wrapped herself around Nyrielle like a large spoon cupping a smaller one, holding her for the first time as the sun rose outside the castle.

At first, watching Nyrielle reminded Ashlynn of Jocelynn when she was very young and trying to stay up late for Midwinter's Night celebrations. No matter how much Nyrielle resisted the pull of sleep, her body betrayed her, slowly going still as sleep overwhelmed her as if she were a young child staying up past her bedtime.

Moments later, however, she let out a slow, shaky breath as if her body had truly died, giving up its last breath of life. A cold chill crept over her and her flesh began to lose its pale, alabaster luster as it became sunken, dull, and lifelessly gray. Even her glossy hair lost its softness and shine, turning brittle and straw-like where it brushed against Ashlynn's skin.

The moment Ashlynn felt it, she also felt the echo of Nyrielle's heartbeat within her chest grow quiet, until it became faint and distant, beating weakly less than once a minute. It was a sensation she'd felt countless times before, but now, while she watched her lover wither away, the sudden loss of strength in Nyrielle's heartbeat felt like a knife twisting in her own heart.

Nyrielle's greatest fear was that Ashlynn would be repulsed by what she became when the sun rose but Ashlynn realized there was something far more terrifying as she watched the transformation overcome Nyrielle. Her arms tightened instinctively as she refused to let go of the woman she loved and she had to fight every instinct she had to stop herself from reaching out to the forest beyond the fortress walls for the energy to save her lover's life.

The next instant, a different fear gripped her as she forced herself to relax her hold on Nyrielle's sleeping figure, afraid that her tight grip would hurt her suddenly fragile-looking lover. For a moment, Ashlynn held her breath, afraid to move in any way that might harm the sleeping vampire. It wasn't until nearly a

minute passed that Ashlynn was finally able to make her trembling muscles relax, pulling Nyrielle's emaciated figure into a soft, tender embrace.

"I'm not leaving you, my love," she whispered. "So don't you dare leave me," she added as she gently brushed Nyrielle's straw-like hair aside to bestow a tender kiss on her lover's leathery cheek.

How long Ashlynn spent alone in the darkness, cradling Nyrielle's fragile body and listening for the slow, steady, barely audible beat of her lover's heart, she couldn't say, but eventually, the darkness of sleep overtook her and with it, the sound of vast feathered wings, beating softly in the night as they carried her away to pleasant dreams.

"You're close, my darling," Nyrielle said when Ashlynn found herself standing beside a large pool under the silvery light of a full moon, underneath the canopy of soft green leaves and needles of the Vale's majestic trees. "I, I hope I didn't frighten you," she added softly as she stepped close to Ashlynn, wrapping her dark, feathered wings around her lover along with her arms and holding her close.

Even though the Nyrielle before her was as vibrant, healthy and strong as she was during the nights they spent together, for a moment, Ashlynn couldn't help but overlap the vision of the drained, helpless, corpse-like woman her lover had become when the sun rose and her body shivered with an echo of the fear she felt when Nyrielle's presence faded to next to nothing right before her eyes.

"You did frighten me," Ashlynn said softly as she rested her head on Nyrielle's chest, listening to her strong heartbeat and inhaling the familiar fragrance of lavender that clung to her, as if to reassure herself that the powerful vampire was still fine. "I felt you falling away and I was afraid that I would lose you," she said. "And then, you felt so fragile in my arms, I thought I might crush you if I clung to you too tightly."

"I'm sorry, my sweet," Nyrielle said, running her long, slender fingers through Ashlynn's soft, pale blonde hair. "Let me make it up to you. You wanted a night with nothing between us," she said, pulling back from Ashlynn to reveal her naked body, gleaming like a marble statue in the pale, silvery moonlight. "And I promised you once that I would teach you to swim. Isn't this the perfect way to honor both promises?"

"It is," Ashlynn said, realizing for the first time that she was just as naked in this dream as Nyrielle was. Unlike most nights she'd spent in the Vale of Mists, however, the night air was anything but cool against her skin, and the normally comforting mists of the Vale felt oppressive and warm, like a heavy, sodden blanket that reminded her of the hot summer nights in the Briar.

"I didn't realize the Vale got so warm in summer," Ashlynn said as she waded into the shallow end of the natural pool, relishing in the instant feeling of cool relief that washed over her as her toes sank into the soft, silty soil at the bottom of the pond.

"It rarely does," Nyrielle said as she joined Ashlynn in the pool, taking the young witch's hand in hers and guiding her out into water that was deep enough to lap gently at the swell of Ashlynn's full bosom.

"I remember this year because the heat was so unbearable for the people of the Vale," Nyrielle said as her eyes grew distant while memories washed over her. "The river downstream from here was filled with people escaping the heat, even after the sun had set. The streams and river all ran full that year, and the High Pass opened earlier than ever before and stayed open later than usual."

"Well, I think it's a perfect night for a swim," Ashlynn said, reaching down into the cool water to splash Nyrielle playfully and pull her lover out of her distant memories and back to the one she'd decided to share tonight.

For a moment, in a way that was likely only possible in dreams, countless drops of water hung suspended in the air while others glistened on Nyrielle's blemishless alabaster skin, making her look like a pale, dark-haired goddess of the night, bathed in moonlight reflected by jewel-like beads of water clinging to her soft, supple flesh.

It only lasted for a moment, but the sight of it took Ashlynn's breath away, leaving her momentarily entranced and completely unprepared for Nyrielle's retaliatory splash that left her sputtering and momentarily off-balance in the chest-deep water.

"I've got you," Nyrielle said, appearing behind Ashlynn with her arms wrapped around her lover, supporting her gently in the water. "And I'm never letting you go," she whispered as she nibbled gently on Ashlynn's tender ear lobe. "So relax, and let anything that troubles you drift away like leaves on the stream..."

For the two women, hours slipped by as the cool waters of the pool washed away their worries. Whether it was the intensity of the meeting where they began to set their plans in motion or fears and uncertainties of the war to come, none of that mattered as they splashed and laughed beneath the light of the silvery moon.

Soon, Ashlynn would wake, hours before Nyrielle would, to make her appearance among the people enjoying the festivities. She would transform herself once again into Lady Ashlynn, Seneschal of the Harbinger of Death and Mother of Trees, bearing half the weight of the Vale's struggle on her slender shoulders. But for now, she was simply Ashlynn, and the only challenge ahead of her was learning how to swim.

Chapter 616: Inviting Important Guests

Change had swept across the fortress city in the Vale of Mists, and countless streets and buildings were in the early stages of construction. On any other day, the sounds of stonemasons' chisels, carts groaning under the weight of materials, and workmen shouting instructions to each other would fill the air, but today, the city outside the fortress walls felt all but deserted.

Instead, it was the ancient fortress itself that bustled with energy as the courtyards and baileys of the fortress quickly filled with revelers from nearly every farm and village within the Vale, along with thousands more from lands across the mountains. Bright colorful tents lined the fields between the inner and outer walls of the fortress, and the air was filled with the sounds of children's laughter and bright, celebratory music.

"Don't get distracted, Emmie," Kurtz told his daughter as her feet slowed to a near stop while her eyes followed the colorful balls and streamers flying through the air between two talented jugglers. It wasn't the first time the former gladiator found himself prodding his daughter along but he had a hard time blaming her for getting caught up in the excitement of the festivities.

"You can come back and watch all you want when you've finished your task," he said, prodding her toward the gates leading into the fortress town that was in the process of reinventing itself. "You don't want to disappoint Lady Heila, now do you?"

"What? No, no, never," the young squire said, instantly turning a brilliant shade of crimson as she checked the pouch at her waist for at least the seventh time to ensure that the formally printed and sealed invitation was still there. "Let's go, Father," she said, grabbing his hand and tugging him along as if she hadn't been the one dawdling just moments earlier.

Ever since their arrival at the ancient fortress, Lady Heila had been completely occupied with the activities of Ashlynn's coven and had given her young squire only a handful of tasks to take care of while the Willow Witch watched over Sir Ollie's trial and tended to Lady Ashlynn's needs. Since that was the case, Emmie had spent countless hours exploring both the ancient fortress and the city around it.

To the young squire who had only known the High Fen for most of her life, everything in the Vale of Mists was strange, new and exciting, especially when the constant fog that clung to the fortress town made it feel like an adventure just to explore the next block over. Now, she skipped happily over the cobblestones of familiar streets in search of a sprawling two-story cottage that was home to her lady's family.

"This is it," a breathless Emmie announced when her cloven hooves finally came to a stop outside the ramshackle building in one of the oldest parts of town. Over the past hundred years, what had once been a simple cottage had been expanded several times, growing along with the family that dwelled there.

Neat rows of a vegetable garden to one side of the house stood in sharp contrast to the more haphazard structure of the home, but combined with the well-maintained fence around the yard and the freshly swept walkway to the front door, the home looked more comfortably lived in and cared for than slovenly or disorganized.

When Heila knocked on the door, a few minutes passed before it opened to reveal a gray-haired and gray-bearded man with horns grown so long with age that they looped completely back on themselves to point toward the sky.

"Mister Kaisan?" Emmie said, blinking in surprise at how worn Heila's father appeared. He even walked with a cane!

"Haha! Kaisan, rascal, you hear that?" the old man shouted into the house. "Your old man is still handsome enough for people to confuse the two of us!"

"Stop preening, dear," an aged woman's voice called from within the home. "You'll embarrass your poor son with people thinking he's grown as old as you. Who's visiting on the festival day? Invite them in, invite them in!"

"No, really, I don't need to visit," Emmie said, glancing briefly back toward the ancient fortress before returning her gaze to the old man in the doorway. "I, um, I have an invitation for Mister Kaisen and his family," she said, fumbling in the pouch at her waist to produce the thick, folded sheet of parchment bearing an impressive-looking wax seal.

"Move aside old man," a deep, hearty voice said as a younger man clapped his gray-bearded father on the shoulder and pulled him back from the doorway. Unlike the old man who answered the door, this gentleman bore a striking resemblance to Lady Heila with the same grass-green eyes and brown hair that spilled from his head in loose curls. His face bore a number of creases and laugh lines around his eyes, but he still stood straight and proud when he came to the door to greet their unexpected guest.

"You said you had an invitation for me, young lass?" Kaisen said, frowning when he saw the seal of the Castle Master on the folded piece of parchment. It had been years since he and his wife, Helga, had retired from service in the ancient fortress to care for their aging parents, but the glyph on the wax seal was one he would never mistake, even all these years later.

"There's a feast being held tonight to announce Lady Nyrielle's betrothal," Emmie said, bowing deeply as she presented the invitation. "Present this when you reach the gates so the staff can bring you and your family to the table for honored guests."

"Honored guests?" the gray-bearded man said, tugging on his beard in confusion. "Son, what nonsense have you been up to that you'd be invited as an honored guest?"

"Not me, da," Kaisen said, taking the parchment and prying it open with a neatly trimmed fingernail. "It looks like little Heila arranged a few seats for us. Poor thing is probably working herself to the bone during this celebration without even a minute to enjoy it," he said with a heavy sigh.

"She's always been a good one about taking care of us, Kai honey," a mature woman's voice said as a woman who greatly resembled her daughter reached out to take the invitation from Kaisen's hands. Her hair was much darker than Heila's, and her figure held the softness that had come from giving birth to several children, but her eyes held the same gentleness that her daughters did whenever the Willow Witch called upon healing magic to mend wounds and ease suffering.

"It must have cost her quite a few favors to find a place for us at this feast," Helga said. "Why don't we go, just the two of us, so we don't look like we're taking advantage. We shouldn't reject a gift like this, you know, dear," she said before her husband could make any sign of politely refusing.

"It's fine even if you bring the entire family," Kurtz said, stepping up beside his daughter who was clearly at a loss for words in front of her hero's parents. "I'm sure there won't be any problem, even if there are twenty of you."

"Twenty! Merciful Lady, I could never," Helga said. "But, if you're sure it won't be too much trouble," she said, turning to look at the grey-bearded man. "Father-in-law, are you up to an evening out? It's little Heila's hard work that's earned us a chance to see Lady Nyrielle's betrothal announcement first hand."

"Little lass," the old man said, looking past his son and daughter-in-law to the curiously dressed young girl who came with the invitation. The man behind her wore a broad-bladed short sword at his waist, balanced by a buckler on the opposite hip, and he moved in a way that suggested the weapons were as comfortable to him as well-worn boots.

The young girl, on the other hand, was dressed in a fine dress with lace trim at her wrists that made her look more like the servant of one of the vampires than a common errand girl from the castle. The impression the pair made was odd to say the least and the old man had learned years ago to pay attention to things that looked odd.

"Little lass," he repeated. "Do you have many of these invitations to deliver today?"

"Huh? No, just this one," she said, scratching her head in confusion. "I'm sorry," she added, flushing in sudden embarrassment. "I'm also supposed to tell you that Lady Heila is very sorry that she couldn't visit you when she returned to the Vale but she really does hope to see you all at the feast tonight."

"All right, all right," the gray-bearded old man said, placing a hand on his son's shoulders. "We'll have Pitar watch over the little ones tonight, he won't mind, and the rest of us will all come. That should be good, shouldn't it?"

"You will?" Emmie said, perking up instantly. "That will be perfect! Then, since you're coming to the feast, I'm sure Lady Heila will be very happy to see you all again," she said, dropping into a deep curtsey before saying her goodbyes and tugging on her father's hand so they could rush back to the festival. There were hours still before it grew dark and she would need to leave the fun and games to join Lady Heila at the banquet but she didn't want to waste any of them!

Meanwhile, on the porch, the grey-bearded old man frowned at the strange young messenger girl as she scampered away with her even stranger protector.

"Kaisen," he said after a minute. "You said that little Heila became the new Seneschal's personal maidservant, didn't you?"

"Yes," Kaisen said, puffing out his chest in pride. "Helga and I told her how proud we were when she visited before leaving the Vale for the summer. She was a bit nervous," he admitted. "But her mother and I both believe that she'll do just fine."

"Odd," the old man said, turning back toward the crackling warmth of the hearth in the cottage's great room. "Since when do they call maidservants 'Lady?'"

Chapter 617: Atop The Tower

As midday approached, Ashlynn slipped quietly from Nyrielle's bed, dressing by the light of the crystal lantern before leaving her lover to sleep away the remaining hours of the day.

"Sleep well, my love," she whispered from the door of the room before slipping out into the dark corridors beyond and returning to her own bedroom to freshen up and retrieve a small wooden box that clinked faintly when she picked it up.

Ascending the well worn spiral stairs at the end of the hallway, Ashlynn entered the large, round room that occupied the entire top floor of the tower. Previously, there had been little here other than storage for the residents of the tower, but Ashlynn had ordered several changes to be made as part of converting the tower to her coven's use.

Now, a large circular table dominated the center of the room, set low to the ground and surrounded by piles of pillows and soft blankets. The walls of the room were lined with simple bookshelves, many of them filled with texts taken from Nyrielle's collection but the amount of empty space on the shelves made it clear that Ashlynn expected to expand her coven's library over time.

The side of the tower that overlooked the fortress now hosted a small wood stove that kept the room pleasantly warm despite the autumn chill in the air and a tea kettle had already been set atop the stove, adding the faint aroma of jasmine and rosehips to the scent of woodsmoke in the room.

In time, Ashlynn intended to add overstuffed chairs along with a real hearth and several other simple comforts to the communal space she modeled after Amahle's home in the Briar. There would be dozens of differences, she was certain, she wanted her coven to make the space their own after all. But even

though the work had only just begun, it already felt like she had come home when she entered the room atop the tower and found her coven waiting there for her.

Heila looked the most comfortable, dressed in a simple tunic dress with a wide leather belt at her waist holding her Severing Knife and a coiled whip that never seemed to be far from her side these days. As soon as Ashlynn entered, the Willow Witch rose from the table to pour a fresh cup of tea, setting it on the table and gesturing for Ashlynn to join them.

"Do you need me to fetch you something to eat, Mother Ashlynn?" Heila asked when she got a close look at Ashlynn's pale complexion. She'd expected that Ashlynn would need a restorative meal after tending to Lady Nyrielle the night before and she'd even prepared a snack for when Ashlynn returned to her chambers before dawn, but even when the sun broke above the horizon, Ashlynn still hadn't returned.

"We'll get something soon enough," Ashlynn said as she set the wooden box down on the table with a heavy -CHINK- sound. "The tea will be more than enough for now, thank you."

"Are, are you sure that you're fine?" Hauke said, shifting uncomfortably on a soft cushion as he tried to emulate the others present. At Ashlynn's request, he'd dressed simply, draping himself in robes that were pale, icy blue and lacked any of the intricate patterns and embroidery that most of his wardrobe featured.

It wasn't the simplicity of his outfit that caused his discomfort, however, but the softness of the room's furnishings. In the High Pass, the only thing that was ever 'soft' was freshly fallen snow, and while it could be relaxing to lay on for idle moments, no one would suggest piling up snow in the great hall to use as a seat. He could have swept the cushions aside to sit directly on the stone floor if he wished, but as the only person present who wasn't a witch he felt uncomfortable doing anything that would make him stand out any further.

"I can help, I can help," Talauia said, fluttering over to sit next to Ashlynn and placing a hand on her forehead. "It's not fever but if you're sick, if you're sick I and brew something for you in just minutes, you just watch," she said, looking anxiously at Ashlynn's pale complexion.

Ever since the battle in the High Pass, there had been too many things that needed the help and care of a witch, including watching over Virve while the Oak Witch completed her transformation with the seed from the Ancient Oak and tending to Hauke's injured father, Ritchel. Now that she was finally getting to

spend time with Ashlynn again, her heart ached to see her friend in such a worn out and exhausted looking state.

"She's fine, she's tougher than you think," Virve said with a hearty laugh as she set down her delicate teacup. After years spent wearing armor and dressing mostly for fighting, very little of her wardrobe looked 'feminine' but for today's festivities, she'd made an exception, pulling out a patterned dress she'd taken a fancy to during their last visit to High Fen City.

The shimmering gray and silver tones of the dress were meant to invoke a sense of serpent scales, but to Virve, they reminded her of the deep, shifting fog of the Vale of Mists and the glitter of sunlight breaking through clouds after it rained. The cut was modest and even if the colors didn't exactly compliment the new russet and gold hue her fur had taken on, she liked it and that was all that mattered to her.

"Lady, I mean, Mother Ashlynn always looks a bit pale after Lady Nyrielle feeds from her," Virve explained. "A hearty meal with plenty of meat and she'll be fine in no time."

"I could go for a hearty meal," Ollie said as his stomach grumbled in agreement. Dressed in a loose fitting tunic and breeches tucked into soft leather boots, Ollie looked a little too well dressed to duck into the kitchens for a snack, even though he'd avoided the finery set aside for later this evening. But even if he'd been dressed as a kitchen boy again, he was certain that Georg would chase him out of the kitchens rather than let him have a preview of the evening's feast.

"I feel like I've been ravenous ever since my vigil," he added, looking slightly embarrassed at the sound his stomach had made. "Was it, was it like that for anyone else?"

"I stuffed myself so much I felt like I'd turned into a hog at a trough," Heila said, blushing faintly as she remembered how often she'd handed Jacques or Talauia an empty bowl, looking at them with pleading eyes for yet another portion of whatever delectable dish they'd prepared for the evening's communal meal. "I think it was half a moon before I felt back to normal."

"Well, since it sounds like everyone is more than ready for a meal, I won't keep you all here any longer," Ashlynn said with a mischievous smile and a twinkle in her emerald eyes. "The feast won't begin tonight until an hour after sunset. Between now and then, I've brought a challenge for each of you," she said, tapping the wooden box firmly enough that it emitted another -CHINK- sound.

"That is, if you're up to a challenge?" she asked with a wide smile as she looked around the table at some of the people who had become as close to her as her own blood kin. For a moment, she wished that Jocelynn could be here with them because the challenge she had in mind was exactly the sort of thing her younger sister would have adored. Since she wasn't, she would just have to do her best in her sister's place and make sure they had their own opportunity in the future to make up for missing this one...

Chapter 618: Ashlynn's Challenge

"Ugh, no, no challenges," Ollie said, shaking his head and waving both hands in front of himself in response to Ashlynn's cryptic words. "I just finished one set of trials, I don't need another one! Wait, I mean," he stammered looking for the right words. "I learned a lot in the last challenge you gave me and I'm still..."

"Just stop before you dig any deeper," Virve said, clapping a hand on his shoulder. "Mother Ashlynn wouldn't torment you after you passed your trial, and Sir Thane isn't here to teach you any lessons that require letting him punch you to make sure you understand the lesson," she chided.

"You let a vampire punch you?" Hauke said, blinking several times in surprise at the young human. He'd learned just how tough Ashlynn was in her first visit to the High Pass but he assumed that it was because she was Nyrielle's Seneschal. Were all humans actually so supernaturally strong, despite their smaller stature? "Was that, was that before, or after you became the Cypress Witch?"

"Before," Ollie said, rubbing his chest as he remembered the power Sir Thane's punch held. Each time he'd been hit, his vision swam and he felt like he was on the edge of losing consciousness until falling to the ground shocked him back to awareness. "He pulled his punches. It wasn't a contest of strength or anything. More like a lesson and a little pain to make sure I remembered it."

"It's a thing that knights do to each other," Ashlynn said, still confused by the ritual but willing to accept it because both Thane and Ollie felt it was an important part of becoming a knight. "But this challenge, even though it's difficult, is much, much easier to manage. It's more fun too, though it's not hard to be more fun than letting the Lord General punch you," she teased.

With a flick of her wrist, Ashlynn removed the lid from the box, revealing twelve bulging leather pouches roughly the size of a large plum and tied shut with a bright green silk ribbon. Reaching into the box, Ashlynn selected one of the pouches, bouncing it in her hand and producing a -CHINK- -CHINK- sound as she did.

"Each of these pouches holds fifty silver tails," Ashlynn said, smiling at the people around the table. "You each get two pouches. We're going to go down to the festival and our goal is to spend every last tail you have."

The money in the chest, six hundred silver tails in total, represented a sizeable portion of the money she'd made for herself while in High Fen City, though at least half of it had come from placing wagers on Heila's fights in the arena. Most of the wealth that Ashlynn secured went into Nyrielle's treasury to finance the work being done in the Vale, but now that the festival had arrived, she was glad that she'd kept some back for herself so that she could share it with the members of her coven.

"Tails?" Ollie asked, frowning at the unfamiliar term.

"Take a look," Ashlynn said, tossing the pouch in her hand. When he opened it, several large silver coins, stamped with the shape of a coiled serpent's tail. "The coins stamped in High Fen City are half again as heavy as the silver pennies used in the kingdom, and twice the weight of the ones used in the Vale so keep that in mind when you're spending them."

"Half again as heavy?" Ollie said, staring at the volume of coins in mild amazement. "My parents each received twenty silver pennies a year in wages... I only got ten. You, you want me to spend three years worth of my entire family's wages, in single afternoon?" Ollie asked in a voice that had dropped to a low whisper by the time he was done.

Since leaving the Summer Villa, he'd had little reason to think about money, though Sir Thane had provided him with a small pouch of silver coins in case Ollie wanted to purchase anything for himself from the market in the fortress town.

Since then, he'd spent less than three silver pennies on a handful of trinkets in the market and even then he felt like it was a luxurious indulgence to spend half a penny just for a new cloak pin or a set of cooking knives with handles shaped for his hands. To spend this much money all at once was all but unthinkable!

"I do," Ashlynn said gently as she began to pass two pouches to each person at the table. "First and most importantly, everyone here has been through a great deal recently. Whether it's been fleeing home, fighting deadly battles, facing trials and transformations," she said, meeting each of their eyes in turn.

"So much has happened in such a short time that I think all of us would benefit from an afternoon of pure joy and relaxation," she said firmly. "That's why I asked you all to dress casually for today. You don't need to be the Cypress Witch or the Willow Whip or Young Lord Hauke or anything else while we go to the festival. Just be yourself. Be a family out to enjoy the festival and each other's company for the afternoon."

"Even if you say that," Hauke said, shifting uncomfortably on the cushion. "We're all... distinct," he said, pointing at his iridescent horn. "People will know who we are."

"They'll know when we're up close," Virve corrected. "So a shopkeeper might recognize you, but the crowd won't swarm around us the way they would if we all dressed up and wore our fancy hats," she said with a toothy grin. "Still, we only have the afternoon to play. Isn't this a little much, Mother Ashlynn?"

"That's why I said it was a challenge," Ashlynn said. "But also, it's important to spend money during this festival," she added in a more serious tone. "We invited dozens of merchants in High Fen City to join us for the winter, setting up shop, plying their trade and selling their wares. If they don't see a return on the investment they've made by coming here, they'll leave when the pass clears in the spring."

While Ashlynn wanted to put aside concerns of politics and strategy to give her coven an afternoon of pure joy, she couldn't deny that her actions were also calculated to accomplish important things during the festival. And if her plans succeeded, then the festival itself would only be the beginning...

Chapter 619: The Wheel of Wealth

"Our people are too poor to buy many of the goods that the merchants from High Fen City brought with them," Heila said with a heavy sigh as she looked at the two pouches stuffed full of coins that Ashlynn had handed her.

She hadn't realized how poor the Vale of Mists had truly become until she reached High Fen City and learned about the vast differences between the living standards of the people in the Vale of Mists and the people of the High Fen. While it was true that the most common folk, the farmers, woodsmen, and laborers all lived very similar lives no matter where they were, many people in High Fen City enjoyed things that simply weren't a part of life in the Vale of Mists.

Heila's own wealth had grown exponentially after fighting in the arena in High Fen City, and the chest in her room contained just as many tails of silver as the pouches in her hands with several tails of gold as

well, but the gift Ashlynn was giving her felt far heavier in her small hands than just the value of the coins.

They were a reminder of a life and lifestyle that she had only briefly experienced on the far side of the mountains... and a style of life she wished she could share with her family and the other people of the Vale.

"You want us to spend this money so the merchants see hope in the Vale," Heila said, looking into Ashlynn's soft, emerald green eyes and smiling as understanding dawned on her. "You're hoping that if they see success early on, they'll work harder over the winter to find ways to make their business work here."

"That's part of it," Ashlynn agreed. "But I don't just want you to spend money on foreign merchants," she added. "Many of the merchants in the festival came from across the mountains, but the people running games and selling food, most of them are local to the Vale. The more you spend at their stalls, the more they have to spend elsewhere on the things they couldn't otherwise afford."

"But then, but then doesn't all of the money go to the foreign merchants anyway?" Talauia asked as her wings fluttered in agitation. "Then what's the point of spreading it around if they get all the money in the end?"

"Pride," Ollie said as he looked at Ashlynn in understanding. "Our people's pride has been ground down since Lady Nyrielle's army arrived. The merchants from across the mountains are wealthier, many of the warriors are mightier, and everyone knows that Lady Nyrielle had to go across the mountains for help because the Vale can't hope to win the next war fighting by itself."

"Don't misunderstand," he added quickly. "Everyone is grateful for the rescue, but their pride is also suffering, the same way the refugees felt beaten down when they had to leave their villages behind and rely on handouts just to have a meal every day. But when the village harvested its first crops and finished its first homes... It did a lot for everyone's pride," he said, remembering the transformation that had come over the villagers with each new success.

"Ollie has it right exactly," Ashlynn said as she stood up from the table. "Mistress Nyrielle has already asked the merchants from across the mountains to cut their prices in half for the festival," she said, surprising everyone in the room. "She's agreed to make up their losses personally from her own treasury so that her people have a chance to experience some of the goods from across the mountains that

they'd never have had the chance to own before. But even Mistress Nyrielle can't subsidize her people forever," she added.

"But if our own people have more money in their pockets, money they earned with their own labor during the festival," Ashlynn said. "Even if they have no time to shop during the festival, they'll be able to visit those merchants afterward when they open their own shops in town. My sister called it the Wheel of Wealth'," she said, wishing once again that her sister was here to help her return the Vale of Mists to the prosperity it once enjoyed.

"According to Jocey," Ashlynn explained. "The more often money changes hands, the faster the 'Wheel of Wealth' spins. The faster the wheel spins, the more prosperous people's lives are. Prosperity doesn't come from people acquiring vast amounts of silver and gold," she said. "It comes from having enough that you can part with it easily and receive things in return that enrich your life."

Of course, Ashlynn had simplified Jocelynn's explanation greatly. When her sister mentioned learning about it she described complex mathematical formulae used to measure how fast the 'Wheel of Wealth' was spinning, and ways that the merchant guilds would determine if the wheel was speeding up or slowing down. Bankers in Blackwell City might even adjust the rates at which they lent money based on the 'speed of the wheel,' but all of it quickly became more complicated than Ashlynn could follow.

While her father insisted that Ashlynn develop a lord's understanding of wealth and how a County or March managed it, the lessons she received focused far more on levying taxes and the management of a treasury than the lessons her sister received to understand the matters of merchants and how their use of wealth supported the rest of the County.

At times like this, Ashlynn was grateful for every scrap of conversation with her sister that she could recall, but she also missed her presence badly and wished she had a reliable family member by her side when she met with the Eldritch merchants who would become spinners of the Vale's Wheel of Wealth.

"So today, we're going to spend freely," Ollie said, now fully committed to Ashlynn's 'challenge.' "To make the wheel spin faster and bring prosperity to the Vale."

"It won't happen overnight," Ashlynn acknowledged as she saw everyone's enthusiasm rising more than it had at the simple idea of having a pouch full of silver to spend on having fun. Perhaps it shouldn't have been a surprise, after all, she'd chosen people for her coven who wanted to nurture growth in others, but she was still grateful to see their excitement growing at the idea of joining the afternoon's festivities. "So tonight, I think we can give the wheel a helpful spin!"

Chapter 620: A Final Day of Peace and Happiness Begins

Once her coven had agreed to take up Ashlynn's challenge, they wasted no time in addressing the most immediate concern for almost every member of the coven. Something to eat! Of course, deciding to enter the festival in search of food was easy, but deciding what to eat was a different challenge altogether.

Ropes with colorful streamers hanging from them sectioned off an area of the field between the inner and outer walls of the ancient fortress, clustering most of the people selling food into a single area where their cookfires could be more easily managed and any accidents could quickly be contained. On the grassy hillside beyond the ropes, people from all across the Vale and beyond sat on blankets or directly on the grass, sharing food they may have never eaten before and listening to music played by musicians with instruments that were as varied as the food.

When Ashlynn and her companions finally arrived, an intoxicating medley of savory scents and sweet aromas washed over them even before they reached the first stall. Standing behind wooden tables that were sometimes little more than slabs of lumber placed atop wooden crates, cooks from the Scaled Clan or the Glass Eyed Clan called out to passers by, offering samples of their spiced meats accompanied by a dizzying array of colorful sauces.

Elsewhere, a Golden Eyed hunter proudly proclaimed that his roasted meats had all come from game hunted within the past two days, promising a flavor still seeped in the thrill of the hunt. Across from him, a member of the Ancient Clan wore a blanket over his heavy cloak, huddling close to his cook fire as he plucked delicate, puffy pastries out of a giant pot filled with boiling oil.

Evidently, the cool, wet climate of the Vale disagreed with the poor man so much that he had enlisted the aid of a pair of young women from the Horned Clan to drizzle honey over the finished confections before selling them to passersby. Clearly, whatever he had agreed to pay for their help was worth far less than the discomfort of leaving the warm area immediately adjacent to his cook fire.

"So many choices, so many choices," Talauia said, fluttering up on her gossamer wings to survey the row after row of stalls selling food from what felt like half the clans of the Eldritch nations, even though she knew it was far less than that. "Look, look, they're making fish fritters, and, is that, is it, it is, it's boar's heart stew!" the Thistle Witch cried excitedly as she surveyed the offerings from across the mountains.

"Big Sister Heila," Virve said as she surveyed the offerings with her advantage of height. "You weren't with us when we entered a nation ruled by the Dark Feathered Clan," she said, pointing at a stall with what looked like several sausages hanging in nets. "

They are masters of fermenting meat and preserving sausage until the fat is sweet, succulent, and infused with spices. If you slice it thinly, it all but melts on your tongue," she said, licking her lips in memory at the flavorful delights she'd sampled while Nyrielle led them from one Eldritch nation to the next in search of allies.

"Is that mold?" Heila asked, pointing to some of the sausages that were covered by a powdery white substance. "I heard rumors that the Dark Feathered Clan ate carrion and rotting things..."

"Fermented isn't rotten," Virve insisted. "And you wash or cut away the mold before you eat the sausage. The moldy cheese is different, though," she added, pointing to wheels of blue-veined cheese that the shopkeeper was slicing into small wedges for his customers to go with the sausages. "That one, you eat the mold."

"Eat the mold?" Ollie said, blinking in surprise. "Don't you get sick doing that? I tried saving a bit of cheese that was moldy once," he added with an expression that said the memory was anything but pleasant. "Even after I cut away all the moldy bits, I still had the, um.... I had problems," he said awkwardly, realizing that mentioning the nature of his problems around a group of women probably wasn't polite, even if Ashlynn wanted him to treat them all like family. "For three days," he finished a bit lamely. "I never want to feel that way again."

"One of the benefits of becoming a witch, Ollie," Ashlynn said with a warm smile. "Your constitution is much better than it once was. I expect my Cypress Witch has an unshakable stomach, just as he has an unshakeable heart," she teased gently. "And if you don't, your big sister, Heila, will be more than happy to soothe what ails you."

"So, does that mean we're eating the moldy meat?" Hauke asked, looking at the shop with a furrowed brow. Frost Walkers were no strangers to fermented food, but mold was incredibly rare in the ice caves where they stored their food. If it would help him to fit in with the other members of the coven, he was willing to do almost anything, but somehow, the idea of eating food that had been left to grow mold sounded as appealing to him as it seemed to the young human.

"It means that if Virve wants to choose some fermented sausages for us, she's welcome to," Ashlynn said with a wide smile. "Virve, one of these days, I'm going to find something you won't eat, but I feel

like that's going to be a challenge. Everyone else," Ashlynn continued as she turned to the rest of the witches. "Spread out and find something that you like. Bring back enough portions to share among six... make that nine people," she said as she considered the appetites of her recently transformed witches and the young Frost Walker Lord.

"I'll find us a place to sit on the grass," she added as she looked around. "We can share everything and pick favorites. And Tala," Ashlynn said, calling out to the Thistle Witch who still hovered several feet above her head. "Where did you see someone selling fish fritters?"

Looking down from above, Talauia smiled brilliantly, flashing her wickedly pointed teeth before she descended to show Ashlynn the way. If Amahle could have been here now, watching Ashlynn step out like a true mother to her coven, effortlessly gathering people from different clans and backgrounds into a cozy family eager to share a meal together, she was certain that the Mother of Thorns would be proud of how far Ashlynn had come.

The Thistle Witch knew that the days ahead would be hard, but as long as this was the path that Ashlynn wanted to follow for her coven, Talauia was willing to do whatever she needed in order to keep them all safe. She was certain that the day would come when many people needed to shelter beneath the boughs of the forest Ashlynn and her coven would plant, but for those trees to grow to maturity, they had to be guarded fiercely while they were saplings.

When she had been little more than a sapling, even her father, the powerful High Lord, hadn't been able to protect her. Now that it was Talauia's turn to protect someone else, however, she would stop at nothing to make sure their enemies never survived threatening them!