

## The Vampire 681

### Chapter 681: Tribunal's Verdict (Part One)

Ashlynn's condemnation hung heavy in the damp autumn air, weighing down on everyone who heard the fierceness and venom in her voice. As gentle and mild as Ashlynn had been with Eamon and Daithi as they described their life in Sir Ollie's village, when she spoke of Darragh's treachery, it was as though she had become an Inquisitor condemning a heretic.

For a moment, the soft crackle and occasional pop of the campfire and the muffled sounds of horses shifting in the night were the only sounds that could be heard. Among the soldiers and servants watching, everyone held their breath following Ashlynn's pronouncement as they waited for the tribunal of knights to respond. Even Marcel, often one to fidget with a knife or fiddle with the bits of lace at the ends of his sleeves, had gone still as he focused his attention on the knights who served Owain Lothian.

"Lady Ashlynn," Sir Rain said awkwardly as he unconsciously flinched back from the venom dripping from her words. "I admit that this Darragh has broken his word. You took him into your domain, gave him shelter and an enviable life by all accounts. But does it really rise to the level of betrayal? At most, isn't he just a runaway?"

"Just a runaway?" Ashlynn said, raising a brow at the portly knight. "Even if that were all he'd done, it would still be a grave offense. But it wasn't as simple as running away now, was it? He tried to tell you that you were approaching a trap. He was a trusted man with knowledge about many secrets that cannot easily be shared. To run away with that knowledge and tell tales about what he had seen is much more serious, don't you think?"

"I, I suppose that it is," Rain said, swallowing a lump in his throat as he stared into the coldest pair of emerald eyes he'd ever seen in a woman's face. "But how can we know what he was going to say if we don't let him speak? I think we should hear from the man himself what he intended to tell us so we can judge his crime."

"Mang uum, mran u, emmmeee eeerm," Darragh mumbled into his gag, straining against Eamon's grip on him as he all but lunged toward his last hope to be heard.

"Constable Daithi, take out his gag so the tribunal can hear what he has to say," Sir Rain commanded imperiously, attempting to regain some of his stature by reminding people that he and the others on the wagons were noblemen with every right in the world to command the commoners around them. He might not be able to influence Lady Ashlynn, but he could still put her men in their place.



"Stay your hand, Constable," Ashlynn said, even though the man hadn't made the slightest movement to follow Sir Rain's order. "You should never let a traitor speak at his own trial," Ashlynn continued as though she were recounting sage wisdom. "He has nothing to be gained by telling the truth of his crimes and everything to gain by spreading lies or divulging secrets."

At the far edge of the camp, Isabell nodded along with Ashlynn's words though she wondered what had happened for the young Lady to acquire that particular piece of wisdom. In the Court of the Emerald King, during the height of the civil war, she'd seen many men and nobles turn traitor as the winds shifted and she'd seen the chaos ensue when a guilty man loudly shouted that another man was his co-conspirator.

The damage a known traitor could do when given a platform from which to spew lies and sow discord was tremendous. That was part of why, in the Kingdom of Gaal, men accused of high crimes were often questioned in the presence of Confessors or Inquisitors who had great abilities to see through truth and lies. But questioning was always done away from a trial.

"Besides," Ashlynn said, pulling Isabell's attention back to the proceedings. "We don't need to hear his words to know that he had more in mind than just fleeing," she said, looking from Eamon to Ollie before selecting the latter man to speak. "Sir Ollie, when Eamon noticed that Darragh was missing, what else did he discover?"

"Poison in the water," Ollie said, hanging his head low in shame. He'd vouched for all of the men who had come on this mission and even specifically sought out Eamon and Darragh in case they were needed in order to scout the area.

He'd never imagined something like this would come to pass because he'd firmly believed, perhaps naively, that both men had settled well into life in the village and that they were as happy there as people like Daithi, who asked that his family be brought to join him in the Vale of Mists. But he'd been blind to the serpent he'd taken into his own village, and if not for Marcel catching the man, who knows what kind of damage this man could have done.

"He used flat-leaf nettles to poison the drinking water," Ollie explained after a deep, shuddering breath as he raised his head to meet Ashlynn's calm, understanding gaze. "It causes a man's bowels to turn to jelly and his legs as well. If not for Eamon catching it, and Lady Ashlynn providing treatments to the men, everyone here would still be feeling the effects."



"It isn't deadly," Ollie added. "But he clearly knew what he was doing when he poisoned the water. He was making sure no one could chase him down."

"Sir Rain, I'm sure I don't have to tell you what would happen to footmen afflicted by such a condition," Ashlynn said in a calm, even tone. "But the men of Aleese Barony are famous across Lothian March for their cavalymen. You yourself have been a tournament champion with a lance in your hand for multiple years running," she praised, remembering the way he'd boasted of his accomplishments when they were introduced at the feast following her marriage to Owain.

"So could you explain to us," Ashlynn said, drawing Sir Rain skillfully into her own rhythm. "What would have happened to my men if they'd tried to ride horses to catch up to the escaping Mister Darragh?"

#### Chapter 682: Tribunal's Verdict (Part Two)

Color instantly drained from Sir Rain's face as he imagined the fate of such a soldier. Bad enough to try to hold onto your saddle when your bowels were in a twist and you felt like your gut would explode at any moment. It was undignified in the extreme but men had soiled themselves rather than stop to dismount and remove their armor when the army was on the move.

But this flatleaf nettle poison, if Sir Ollie and Lady Ashlynn were to be believed, was far worse than a simple case of the squirts, and the notion of inflicting such a fate on a man, any man, even your worst enemy, was one he shuddered to contemplate.

"With legs that go weak and his guts in a twist, your man can't grip the horse with his legs. He can't rise or fall in the saddle and has to suffer the bucking and bouncing of the horse's gait," Sir Rain explained, looking at Darragh with a new level of disgust.

"If the man is lucky, he'll fall from the horse," Rain said flatly. "He may break bones or crack his head in the fall but he'll probably survive. Sir Hugo's brother survived such a fall, but it took the efforts of a priest from the Church, praying over him for months, before he recovered his wits and his ability to speak without slurring his words like a drunkard."

"And what if the man isn't lucky?" Ollie asked. He was the son of a stablehand but Ollie's father had mostly talked to him about how to care for horses. Feeding them, grooming them, and mucking out their stalls were close to the limits of his father's knowledge.



It wasn't until he reached the Vale of Mists and began to receive lessons from Sir Thane that he began to understand the way knights thought of horses but he'd had very little time to learn more than the basics of staying atop a horse and guiding it gently with reins. Anything beyond that and he was truly out of his depth.

"If a man isn't lucky when he falls, his foot may become tangled in the stirrup," Sir Rain said darkly. "If that happens, and the horse bolts, then he'll be dragged for leagues. If he survives, his skin will be flayed from his body from being hauled along the road, his bones will be broken and his wits addled. It's the worst fate a cavalry man can suffer and men who survive it..." he explained, trailing off as he thought about the last time he'd seen one of his soldiers dragged by his own horse when he fell in battle against the Horse Demons of the Southern Steppe.

"If he survives, something breaks inside the man," Sir Rain said, glaring at the kneeling figure of Darragh. "Even if he walks again, he'll never ride again for the rest of his life."

"You see now why I don't think we need to hear what he has to say," Ashlynn said as she slowly walked closer to the kneeling figure of Darragh. Up close, she loomed over the man even though she wasn't that tall and his eyes widened in terror as he realized that she was about to bring this 'tribunal' to an end... an end that would almost certainly declare him guilty!

"Nrrrrr! Nrrrrrr! lllisshhhh! Eeessss aa lssssh! Aaaaaa eeeee! Aaaaa eeeee!" Darragh screamed, his eyes wide in terror and his pupils reduced to trembling pinpricks as he stared at the woman who was only slightly less powerful than the Demon Lady of the Vale herself.

"Sir Rain," Aslynn said formally in a voice that was sharper and more clipped than anything she'd said so far. "This man is accused of betraying his liege lady, his local lord, and his fellow soldiers. Guilty or innocent, what say you?"

"Guilty," Sir Rain said, staring down at the struggling man in contempt that only grew stronger when he saw the man's terror at Ashlynn's approach. A few minutes ago, he'd contemplated making an argument that this man should be returned to Lord Owain. After all, he was Owain's bondsman and it should be his lord who judges his crimes. Then he would have had an excuse to take the man away where he could question him to learn the secrets that Lady Ashlynn was so protective of.

That desire died the moment he learned what the man had done to his fellow soldiers and the danger he'd put them in. Sir Rain's morals might be a bit flexible, they had to be if he wanted to serve Owain Lothian personally, but even he had lines he wouldn't cross.



"And you, Sir Hugo? What say you?" Ashlynn asked, turning her attention to Owian's dark-haired steward.

"I can't call him innocent," Hugo said, looking at the man who gazed at him as if he was his only hope of salvation in this world. "But, even though horrible things could have happened, all of those disasters were prevented. His poisoning was clumsy and he was caught. His escape was thwarted, and any secrets he might have, he hasn't been able to tell them."

"To me, he might have attempted to betray his liege lady, his local lord and his companions," Hugo said. "But his attempts all failed and he caused no real harm. That should be a lesser crime of some sort... shouldn't it?" he said uncertainly.

"So you think that, because he failed and he was caught, his crime is less?" Ashlynn said, staring at Hugo with emerald eyes that were harder than diamonds and colder than ice. "You think he should be given some kind of lesser punishment?"

"I, I cannot say," Hugo said with great difficulty, finding Lady Ashlynn's fury even more frightening than her husband's. With Owain, the worst he needed to fear was usually harsh words or a 'personal lesson' on the training grounds. If he could endure the beating, then all was usually well.

But Lady Ashlynn, when he met her gaze, he felt like the whole weight of the world was sitting on his chest. The feeling was so intense that, had he not already been seated on the tailgate of the wagon, he would have fallen to his knees or his backside, just from the weight of her stare.

"If, if I could question him," Hugo stammered. "If I could understand his motives better. What he intended and why... I might, might be able to agree that he's an irredeemable traitor. But, with just this," he said, swallowing heavily. "With just this, I can't, can't call him guilty," he said, lowering his head and looking away from Lady Ashlynn when her piercing gaze became too much to bear.

He was certain that it wasn't the answer she wanted to hear. All of this felt more and more like a show, like she had already arrived at her decision before it even started and she was only using this moment to convince the people watching of the righteousness of her decision.



If he were really smart, or if he was cunning the way Lord Owain was, he would have used this moment to voice out his agreement. To firmly declare the man to be guilty just for the sake of getting on Lady Ashlynn's good side.

After all, she had said that their conduct during this tribunal would determine whether they became guests or captives, and Sir Rain had clearly decided to take the first step, trampling the accused traitor beneath his feet as he rode the momentum of the conversation to the destination that Lady Ashlynn clearly wanted him to reach.

But Hugo couldn't do it. Even to save his own skin, he couldn't do it. Maybe it was because he'd been treated as a commoner for much of his life, trampled beneath the feet of his nobleborn family until his father finally acknowledged him, just because he was afraid Bastian wouldn't recover from his injuries.

Or maybe it was because there were still far too many pieces of the puzzle that he hadn't seen yet to feel like he really understood what was happening here. And as long as he didn't understand, he couldn't bring himself to say anything, one way or another, about the trial taking place.

So he gave the only answer he could... and hoped that he could survive the consequences of giving it.

#### Chapter 683: Traitor's Only Reward (Part One)

"You know, there was a time that I might have agreed with you, Sir Hugo," Ashlynn said in a tone that could only be called gentle when compared to her voice moments ago. "But I've learned since then the consequences of ignoring warning signs and being blindsided by the treachery of people you should have been able to trust."

She'd thought long and hard about why someone had betrayed her to Owain. Puzzled for hours and even days over what someone could have hoped to gain from it. Had one of her family's servants thought that it would be a path to obtaining the favor of a powerful lord? Were they just looking for a purse full of gold?

In the end, she'd decided that it didn't matter. She'd nearly lost her life, not just from Owain's beating or Sir Broll's kicks to 'prove' that she was really dead, but from shovelful after shovelful of earth piling on top of her broken, battered body. Her life had changed forever, and for all the wonder that she'd found, she couldn't escape the pain and nightmares that haunted her to this day.



So to Ashlynn, it didn't matter why someone had betrayed her. She couldn't think of a single reason that would excuse subjecting someone to what she had suffered. And so, no matter why Darragh had chosen to betray them, it wouldn't change his fate one bit. There was no need to understand him because he'd crossed one of the few lines that she absolutely couldn't forgive.

"Sir Ollie?" Ashlynn asked, turning to the young knight with a complicated gaze as she forced him into the position of being the deciding voice. She'd hoped that both Rain and Hugo would agree that Darragh was guilty, sparing her young friend from the burden of casting a deciding vote. But now, Ollie would have to bear the responsibility for determining Darragh's fate...

"This man was one of your villagers," Ashlynn said slowly. "You know him better than any other nobleman here. What say you?"

"Guilty," Ollie said with much less hesitation than she had expected from the young knight. "I swore to take Justice as one of my virtues. I cannot call myself a knight who stands for justice if I refuse to call a guilty man guilty, just because he's one of my villagers or someone under my command."

"I, I wish I didn't have to say it," he added in a voice that felt smaller and more fragile than the one that had pronounced Darragh's guilt. "But I'm responsible for hundreds of people in my village. I can't let one put them all in danger when he's trying to do us harm. Maybe I could forgive running away, but I can't forgive poisoning the rest of us."

"Well done, Ollie," Ashlynn said quietly, stepping forward to place a hand on his shoulder and giving him a reassuring squeeze while her gaze momentarily softened. "I know that wasn't easy to say."

"Now," she said, turning to look out at the assembled audience and speaking in a clear, loud voice. "You have all heard the evidence against this man. You've heard how he was offered a good life and the freedom to enjoy it, and you've heard how he turned on the people who trusted him, poisoning his companions and fleeing into the night with malice in his heart and secrets on his lips."

Sitting in the flickering light of the campfire, the assembled soldiers and servants all nodded along with Ashlynn, with some even whispering about the fate the traitor was about to meet.



"He'll swing from a tree within the hour, mark my words," one man told his neighbor. "You think they'll shove 'im off a wagon to snap his neck or make him dance the hangman's jig till 'is eyes bug out an he can't breathe no more?"

"Nah, you heard what Sir Rain said 'bout men who's drug behind a horse. I say tie 'im up an let the horse drag him till his flesh is scraped to bones. He almost did it to 'is mates, he deserves it!"

Suggestion after suggestion spilled from their lips, and Ashlynn's enhanced hearing caught every depraved whisper, each one more gruesome than the last. For a moment, she let herself imagine inflicting some of those torturous deaths on Darragh, letting his final moments turn into agonizing torture so that he could understand that some lines should never be crossed.

But what would be the point? Darragh wasn't her great enemy, he wasn't even a serious threat. He needed to be dealt with, and dealt with without mercy, but that didn't mean she needed to let herself descend into cruelty or depravity just because he had betrayed her trust. There were very few people she would let herself inflict true suffering on before she ended their lives and Darragh... Darragh's deeds came nowhere close to earning him a place on that list.

"Sir Rain," Ashlynn said, holding an empty hand out in front of the portly knight. "I shattered my sword fighting in the High Pass and I'm still waiting for its replacement to be forged," she said, shocking the experienced cavalry man with the casual way she mentioned shattering a weapon. After all, he'd swung his sword from the back of a charging horse and clashed with the powerful forces of the Southern Steppe but he'd never once shattered a sword!

The audience of soldiers and servants, however, were stunned by something entirely different. After all, from the way Lady Ashlynn was acting, she intended to execute the traitor personally! Certainly, they'd all heard of lords that refused to use a headsman, choosing to swing the executioner's ax themselves when they sentenced someone to die.

But who had ever heard of a woman taking on the role of a headsman? Wasn't it tragic enough that she'd been forced to kill two men already? How could a woman like Lady Ashlynn ever become a proper wife and mother if she had to hold her children with hands stained with so much blood?

It just didn't make sense to them why she would want to do something as horrifying as taking another man's life when there were so many soldiers here and even knights who could swing the sword for her.



"If you can lend me your sword, Sir Rain," Ashlynn said, staring directly into the portly knight's dark, deeply set eyes. "I promise, I'll put an end to this quickly."

#### Chapter 684: Traitor's Only Reward (Part Two)

"I can kill this man for you, my lady," Sir Rain said, hopping off the tailgate of the wagon and drawing his sword. He'd already been shamed once tonight when Marcel snuck up behind him with a knife to his throat and another to his back.

Now that there was a bit of extremely dirty work to be done, the last thing he was going to do was let a woman like Lady Ashlynn dirty her hands with it when he was there to do a knight's duty. Even if he hadn't been a knight, he still had enough pride as a man to stop a woman from having to kill a man for his crimes. It was already bad enough that, as the most senior noble present, she had to be the one to pronounce the sentence, there really was no reason to make her do this part too.

"Step back and I'll take care of this," he offered, trying to sound both gentle and gentlemanly as he made the offer, as if he was relieving her of a great burden by taking it on himself.

"No," Ashlynn said, placing her open hand in front of him before he could take a step toward Darragh's kneeling figure. "All I need is your sword," she added, looking up at him with those frozen emerald eyes in a way that he was only finally beginning to recognize.

He had to remind himself that Lady Ashlynn had taken both Sir Kaefin and Sir Broll's life and this wasn't her first time killing a man. At first, he'd thought that she might have killed Sir Kaefin by accident in a struggle and fled the Summer Villa in a panic. By the accounts he'd heard tonight, she'd only defeated Sir Broll by some strange miracle that Eamon attributed to divine providence.

But when he looked at her now, he realized that her eyes were just as hard and cold as Lord Owain's... The two men she'd already admitted to killing weren't the only lives she'd taken and the man she was about to kill wouldn't be the last.

He'd been mistaken, he realized. He'd treated the real Ashlynn Blackwell like she was the giggling imposter he'd met when he visited the Summer Villa with Owain. He'd thought that she was a simple woman, enamored of tales of heroism the way her younger sister Jocelynn often was, and naive about the ways of the world.



The reality, however, was that as much as she might resemble her younger sister or the imposter in the Summer Villa, the real Ashlynn Blackwell was cut from an entirely different cloth. This was a woman who, according to the tale she told, had crawled out of her own grave and then snuck into the Summer Villa in order to find proof of her husband's infidelity and whatever else she'd been able to learn while she was there.

The more he'd heard tonight, and the simple fact that Lady Ashlynn was here and the woman in the Summer Villa was an impostor, was all the proof Sir Rain needed to understand that Owain still didn't trust him with all of his secrets. Sir Kaefin would have known a great deal, however, and that might very well be the real reason that Lady Ashlynn had killed him. And then, when Owain unleashed his soldiers and one of his best knights on her, she killed her way out, even spending an entire day evading the pursuit of her husband's personal huntsmen before killing that very knight in a trial by combat.

No, Lady Ashlynn might resemble her younger sister, but it would be the gravest mistake of his life to treat her like the two women were remotely the same.

All of that flashed through his mind in the instant that he met her frigid emerald gaze as she held out her hand, waiting for him to surrender her sword, and this time, Sir Rain couldn't summon the slightest objection to what she asked. Inwardly, however, he couldn't help but wonder... between her and her husband, which of the two was truly more deadly... and what would happen to the world if they ever reconciled their differences?

"Of course, my lady," Sir Rain said as he knelt formally before her, drawing his sword and offering her the hilt. "I should warn you, my lady, I use a heavy blade, and it's made for someone taller than you," he said. "If need be, I can still..."

"There's no need," Ashlynn said calmly as she accepted the sword from his hands, picking it up as if it weighed no more than a slender branch of wood rather than being a piece of steel nearly as long as a man was tall.

To Ashlynn, however, with the strength she'd gained from her bond with Nyrielle, it really was much lighter than the darksteel falchion she was accustomed to, and without the mystical 'weight' of a weapon like Ignatious's Holy Flame Blade, it really was light in her hands.

"Stand him up," Ashlynn said, drawing a deep breath as she came to stand before Darragh.



Still soaking wet from the river, his dark hair hung limp over his brow while his eyes were wide and shockingly white in the flickering firelight of the campfire. On a cold and moonless autumn night, the whole world felt distant, as if little existed beyond the circle of light that danced across the camp, casting deep, flickering shadows across the ground and across Darragh's body as Eamon and Daithi hauled him to his feet.

The young hunter's face had turned a red so deep and dark that it was nearly purple as he struggled against his bonds and shouted into the gag that kept his cries muffled and indistinct. The wet ropes that bound his feet and legs bit deeply into his flesh, and blood trickled between his hands as he made a last, futile attempt to escape his bonds. None of it, however, made the slightest bit of difference.

"Mister Darragh," Ashlynn said formally, speaking loudly enough that her voice silenced the onlookers who wanted to see and hear every moment of the spectacle that was about to unfold. "I do not know if the Holy Lord of Light offers any mercy to traitors. If he does and you find yourself walking the earth again, I pray that you remember this lesson."

"There is only one fate in this world for people who betray the ones closest to them," she said as her frozen eyes erupted with a blazing emerald glow. Hot fury spilled from her heart, filling her body with the strength of countless cedar trees as her long-suppressed bloodlust found a worthy target at last.

With a sudden surge of strength, she stabbed forward, wielding the large, two-handed blade as though it were a much lighter rapier, piercing Darragh's heart and pressing forward until her hand shivered with the impact of the cross guard against his chest and several feet of blade protruding from his back.

"If you're going to betray someone," Ashlynn said as Darragh's struggles stopped at last. "Then make sure you kill them and everyone who cares for them. Because if you don't, I promise you, vengeful ghosts will find you and you will never know a moment's peace until you they grant you the only reward a traitor deserves," she said, twisting the blade sharply as she watched the light fade from his eyes.

"This is the only fate that awaits people who betray their close ones," Ashlynn said loudly enough that everyone in the camp heard it. Placing her hand on Darragh's chest, she gave his lifeless body a firm shove, pulling back on the blade to rip it from his chest and allowing his body to fall to the bare earth in an undignified heap.

The audience of soldiers and servants stared, some of them in open-mouthed shock when they realized that Darragh had still been wearing his gambeson and Lady Ashlynn had pierced both the front and back of his armor cleanly, along with his entire body, with no less resistance than a knife piercing bread.



Others wondered if they'd actually witnessed a flicker of green light in her eyes before she struck or if they'd simply imagined it when her eyes caught the firelight of the campfire.

But at the edge of the shadows, Ashlynn's words echoed again and again through Isabell's mind as she clutched nervously at the dark fabric of her skirts.

If this was the only fate that awaited those who betrayed their close ones, then... what would happen when she found out that Jocelynn had been to tell Owain about her mark?

#### Chapter 685: Leaving Camp (Part One)

Silence filled the camp like a thick mist, hanging over everyone and stifling their will to be the first one to speak, or even to move, for fear of drawing Lady Ashlynn's attention. Darragh's blood covered the entire length of the longsword in Ashlynn's hand, but strangely, none of it had stained as much as the sleeves of her dress as she stood over the traitor's body.

"My Lady," Marcel said quietly, appearing beside her as though he'd stepped out of the dancing shadows cast by the camp fire. "We have some time still, but we should make preparations and depart soon," he reminded her.

"Depart?" Sir Rain said, blinking in surprise at the youthful merchant's statement. "It's the middle of the night. Shouldn't we camp here and move again when there's daylight?"

"You'll be staying until dawn," Ashlynn said, doing her best to shake off the thoughts that clung to her mind and shrouded her heart when she looked at Darragh's corpse. She'd thought it would feel the same as when she'd killed Sir Broll, or perhaps Sir Kaefin. But Broll died in a duel, and Kaefin... Kaefin's circumstances had been unique.

But executing Darragh didn't feel like either of those men, and he certainly didn't feel like the Tuscans she'd fought on the ice in the High Pass. There was no fight in Darragh. No struggle, not really. He was bound, gagged, and held by two other men. He had already been captured and he was no longer a threat to her... but he still needed to die.

Darragh was the first man she felt like she'd truly killed when she didn't have to. He could have been imprisoned in the Vale until after the war. He could have been exiled, sold to the arena in the High Fen to never see human lands again. He could have suffered so many other punishments but she'd chosen



the one that was the most definitive because she couldn't give him another chance to betray the people who were close to her.

It was a choice she made, and one that she would have to live with. Part of her felt that she should have been more disturbed by it, while another part, a part that had been shaped by conversations with Nyrielle, Amahle, and even High Lady Erna... That part of her reminded her that doing the right thing for the people she was responsible for didn't always allow her the luxury of making the decisions her heart might wish for. And if she truly thought about it, even her father might have agreed with the necessity of what she'd done.

"Almost everyone here will be staying until daybreak," Ashlynn said as she finally tore herself free of the thoughts that swirled through her head like a reed caught in the eddy of a river's current. "Sir Ollie, bring them to the castle when you're ready. They are to be treated as our guests," she said as she handed Sir Rain back his sword.

"Sir Rain, thank you," she said as he took the weapon. "Ollie will settle you in quarters befitting your station. In fact, Ollie, see if you can find them space near Ritchel's quarters. Talauia is still tending to him so she'll be nearby if they give you any trouble, and Hauke visits his father frequently. I'm sure he'll be curious about our new guests as well."

"I'll see to it," Ollie said, giving a formal salute with his fist to his chest in the human style rather than saluting as he would have in the vale, with his hand open to clutch his chest above his heart. "Gentlemen, I'm afraid we don't have much to offer in this camp for such a large group to stay overnight, but I promise to make it up to you with a good meal in the morning and a better one when we reach the fortress."

"Fortress?" Hugo asked, wrinkling his nose and furrowing his brows as he tried to remember anywhere that there could be a fortress in this part of the march, if they were even still within the borders of Lothian March.

The most he could think of were ancient relics that might have been constructed more than a hundred years ago during the crusade. It wasn't uncommon to build up a crude fort during a campaign that could then be rebuilt and fortified over time, but he couldn't imagine any such relics having survived until the modern era.

"You'll see when you arrive, Sir Hugo," Ashlynn called over her shoulder as she walked across the camp to Isabell and Tiernan's waiting figures. "In time, Sir Ollie may even give you a tour of his village. For



now, I suggest you fill your belly while the soup is still warm and get some rest. It's sure to be an early morning for you tomorrow."

Behind her, Ollie exchanged a brief look with Eamon and Daithi, making sure both men understood the burden that would fall on them without Lady Ashlynn and Sir Marcel's protection.

Neither man looked concerned, but still, they couldn't deny that they were outnumbered by more than two to one and every person that Owain's knights had brought with them was a soldier wearing armor and carrying weapons of war. There wasn't a single servant or wagon driver among them.

With Ashlynn and Sir Marcel here, numbers hardly mattered. Either of them could have killed every soldier here in less than a blink, including the knights. Now, however, the only person who could approach that power was Ollie and he wasn't entirely certain that he could handle everything by himself.

Decimating the soldiers was certainly within his ability, but Sir Rain gave him some pause as Ollie had never faced a knight in combat outside of the vision he experienced during his trial to become the Cypress witch. If push came to shove, he wasn't entirely confident he could achieve victory, and if he did, it would almost certainly require killing the other man as he doubted that he could make such an experienced knight submit and surrender.

"Eamon," Ollie said, shaking off speculation about what might happen and turning his mind to practical matters instead. "We're going to be short on space in the tents, so see if we can string up a tarp or two to help keep the mist off if it decides to rain. Daithi, talk to Sir Rain about getting their soldiers settled. I'd feel better if they would place their armor and weapons in one of the wagons tonight instead of keeping it close..."

Six months ago, Ollie wouldn't have thought of half of the things that needed doing tonight, but his time under Sir Thane, Commander Bassinger and even Marshal Jakob's tutelage had given him several new insights that helped him to take up the responsibilities Ashlynn had given him and he moved from one to the next smoothly as he organized the camp.

That was, of course, until Daithi raised a question that he felt only Lady Ashlynn could answer...

Chapter 686: Leaving Camp (Part Two)



When Ashlynn walked toward the edge of the camp where the Guild Masters stood, Isabell was still staring at Darragh's lifeless body as her mind replayed everything she had seen from Ashlynn from the very beginning of the 'tribunal' all the way to the execution of the traitor.

From the brooding look on Tiernan's face, it was clear that he'd also been troubled by what he'd seen, though it was difficult to say which moments in the impromptu trial had struck the muscular guild master the most. Unlike Isabell, he wasn't accustomed to violence, and even if he'd seen a public execution before, this one had been far more... personal than anything he'd ever witnessed in Blackwell County.

For Isabell, the show and spectacle that Ashlynn created as she drew the crowd into her rhythm had been completely overwhelmed by the cold efficiency with which the young lady had executed the traitor and her warning to everyone watching about the fate that awaited anyone who betrayed their close ones.

More than anything, the sight of the pained and coldly furious look in Ashlynn's eyes when she ran Darragh through was an image she couldn't get out of her mind and she kept replaying the moment over and over again, right up until Ashlynn startled her out of her thoughts when she addressed the pair of Guild Masters.

"Master Isabell, Master Tiernan," Ashlynn said politely forcing herself to maintain a certain amount of formality until they were out of sight of their 'guests.' "I'm sorry you had to witness something so ugly on the night we finally reunited. I'm sure you both have many questions," she said, wearing a smile that felt polite but slightly forced and more than a little tired. "If you'll come with me, Marcel should have the carriage ready for us momentarily."

"Ashlynn," Isabell said softly, deliberately refusing to match the young lady's formal tone. "You don't have to pretend with us. I know that must have been harder on you than it looked. If you need time to collect yourself before we go," she said, glancing at the large tent where Ashlynn had been waiting when they arrived.

"I can also be company for you if it would help," she offered, glancing apologetically at Master Tiernan. "We have time. The Lothians aren't expecting us back for several days. You don't need to rush on our behalf."



"No, you don't understand," Ashlynn said, shaking her head gently. "But you will. Come with me," she said, holding out a hand to Isabell and nodding for Master Tiernan to follow them. "If you want to rest during the ride, that's also fine," she added when she opened the door to her carriage.

Before she could enter, however, she was interrupted by the unexpected arrival of Constable Daithi, looking uncomfortable at having to interrupt her departure but clearly having decided that whatever weighed on him was important enough to come seek her out before she could depart.

"What is it, Constable?" Ashlynn asked, raising an eyebrow at the man who had been a captive just six months prior.

"My Lady," he said, dropping to one knee and bowing his head. "I'm sorry for interrupting but I wanted to ask about, about Darragh's body," he said, swallowing heavily.

The man had come to a tragic end, but people like Daithi and Eamon had known him for several years. They'd been close companions and faced their share of danger together. Now that he'd been convicted of treason, however, no one was certain what should be done with his remains.

Tradition dictated that traitors be staked out in the sun for the crows to feast upon, allowing the Holy Lord of Light to slowly cleanse them of their sins. No one was allowed to disturb the body or the process, and the traitors were often left in public places as a lesson to commoners about the consequences of betraying their liege lords.

If Lady Ashlynn commanded them to do the same, of course, none of her men would refuse. But here, at the edge of the Vale of Mists where countless beasts roamed the forest and the sun was rarely felt directly through the constant mists, no one felt entirely comfortable leaving him to rot.

"He was a friend of Eamon's, wasn't he?" Ashlynn said softly. "Let him to be the one to decide how his friend is to be buried. But Daithi," she added as she placed one foot on the step of the carriage and prepared to enter.

"Tell Eamon that I wouldn't mind if he chose to build a pyre for his old friend. I doubt that Darragh is bound for the heavenly shores, but that doesn't mean we can't light the way for him to find his next life. Maybe next time, he'll find himself in better circumstances than whatever drove him to... to this," she said softly.



"Thank you, my lady," Daithi said, bowing deeply in gratitude after he stood. "I'm sure that Eamon and the others will be happy with your judgment."

"Not my judgment," Ashlynn reminded him from the inside of the carriage. "The final decision is Eamon's. You make sure to tell him that."

"Yes, my lady," the constable said, giving a brief, Eldritch style salute before dashing back towards the camp, leaving Isabell and Tiernan standing in awe of the carriage that Ashlynn had just entered.

At first, neither Guild Master had noticed anything strange about the carriage. It looked wider than most, and taller as well, with larger wheels and greater length than most carriages they'd seen, but at the end of the day, most carriages could be described as boxes atop wheels and this one seemed no different.

It wasn't until Ashlynn opened the door that they stared in surprise at the opulence of the carriage's interior. The upholstery looked like a soft, velvety suede that had been dyed a deep forest green while gilded tacks secured the soft leather to the polished wooden frame beneath.

Four crystal lamps lit the interior, filling it with soft golden light that reflected off polished wood and brass fittings. Above, the ceiling of the carriage had been upholstered in dark, midnight blue velvet, set with hundreds of tiny gemstones in patterns that formed recognizable constellations of the night sky.

Several small compartments looked like they might hold a number of secrets and against the opposite wall of the carriage, a wooden panel looked like it could be unfolded along the brass tracks to provide a narrow table between the bench seats.

The interior was far more luxurious than anything the Guild Masters had ridden in, even when they traveled with Owain and the quality of craftsmanship and materials exceeded even the royal carriage of the Emerald Kingdom among the old countries.

The door of the carriage bore the same strange coat of arms as Isabell had seen flying on banners in the camp, a mighty tree with lavender growing at its base. Clearly, whoever the mysterious person was that was backing Lady Ashlynn didn't lack for wealth, even if they made little show of lending her the power she needed to remain safe in the wilderness so close to demons.



"Ashlynn," Isabell asked as she took her seat in the carriage next to Tiernan and facing the young noblewoman. "I have one question I need to ask before we go because it's been bothering me since we arrived," she said carefully.

"I don't recognize the coat of arms on this carriage and this," she said, gesturing to the luxurious decor that, now that she looked closer, also included several carvings of tree leaves or even entire trees, as if the person designing the carriage had a minor obsession. "Who does this carriage belong to? Who is it that's providing you with this support all the way out here at the edge of the frontier?"

"The first part is easy," Ashlynn said, closing the door and tapping lightly on the roof to signal Marcel that they were ready to leave. "The carriage is mine. It was a gift from High Lady Erna," she said with a slight smile. "She seemed almost offended at how simply I was traveling when we first met, so before I came home, she insisted on presenting this to me."

"As to who's supporting me," Ashlynn said as the carriage began to roll down the ancient roadway that, just seven months ago, had taken her all the way to the Vale of Mists. "Well, that's a bit more complicated..."

#### Chapter 687: Illuminating Carriage Ride (Part One)

Despite traveling by little more than lantern light in the thickening fog, the luxurious carriage moved swiftly through the night. The team of horses was exceptionally well trained, and Marcel was more at home in darkness than most people were in daylight.

More than that, the vampire expanded his Cloak of Darkness to encompass the team of horses, granting them the same vision in darkness that he enjoyed as a result of Nyrielle's gift. In the darkness of a moonless night, not even Thane could have driven at the speed with which the carriage under Marcel's control moved, and they would reach the ancient fortress with at least an hour to spare before sunrise.

Within the carriage, Ashlynn reached into a small compartment, retrieving three wooden cups that had been carved to resemble oak leaves folding over each other. After passing one to each of the guild masters, she poured herself a small measure of the deeply fragrant honeyed wine that had also come as a gift from Lady Erna before taking a small sip to buy herself some time to organize her thoughts.



"Some of the things I'm going to say may shock you," she warned Isabell and Tiernan. "You might want to prepare yourselves," she said, though in truth, she wasn't sure how anyone could prepare themselves for what she was about to say. "Just know that I consider you both to be good friends, and I don't intend to deceive you or hide things from you. You can ask questions and I'll do my best to answer them," she said.

"My Lady," Tiernan began, only to correct himself and address her in the same familiar tone that Isabell had used. After weeks of watching his every word when he was in the company of Owain Lothian and the frontier lords, it was refreshing to be called a friend and allowed to speak informally, but his shoulders carried far too much tension from tense negotiations to relax into informality as easily as Isabell seemed to. "Ashlynn. I don't know how much more you can shock us after the performance you just put on."

"I've seen your father do similar things at court," the burly ironmonger said while scratching the stubble on his chin with a thumb. "But I think even he would be impressed at how you juggled so many different audiences at once. By the end of it, you gave Owain's men a vision of a wonderful life in your village, the likes of which they would never find at the end of decades serving your husband."

"At the same time," he continued after taking a sip of the smooth, sweet wine. "You put the fear of the Holy Lord of Light so deeply into them that I think they'll burst into flames at the thought of betraying you. I don't remember you being so skilled at manipulating people's hearts like that, but it worked well on a crowd of commoners, and you bowled right over top of Sir Rain and Sir Hugo as well. If I didn't know better, I'd say you'd been taking lessons from an orator... or maybe a conman," he said, though it wasn't entirely clear if he meant the words as praise or not.

"I have been studying," Ashlynn said with a light smile, taking no offense at the strong man's words. Just like the banquet the night before had been intended to shape the hearts of the leaders among the Eldritch community in the Vale of Mists, tonight's tribunal had given her an opportunity to shape the hearts of the knights and soldiers who 'escorted' Isabell and Tiernan into the wilderness.

"I've had good teachers this past half year," Ashlynn added, staring briefly at her reflection in the cup of wine in her hand before taking a large swallow and pushing forward with the hardest part of what she had to say tonight. "But that's getting too far ahead. I need to start at the beginning, with why Owain tried to kill me and how I survived being buried alive."

Both Isabell and Tiernan sat up straighter in their seats as Ashlynn cut directly to the heart of one of the biggest secrets she held. While Isabell had heard from Jocelynn about the mark of the witch on



Ashlynn's body, she'd kept that knowledge to herself, refusing to speak of it even to Master Tiernan until she could speak with Ashlynn herself.

But while she knew why Owain had attacked her, she had no idea how the young lady had survived Owain's attempt to kill her, especially since she had never once done anything in Blackwell City to suggest she had mystical powers.

"Owain had a reason to try to kill me," Ashlynn said as she looked from Tiernan's weathered face that bore a number of small burn scars from years spent catching sparks in a foundry to Isabell's gentle, faintly lined visage that spoke of years spent both studying and raising her children. "I was born with the mark of the witch," Ashlynn said slowly. "And the night of my wedding, someone told him about it."

"Impossible!" Tiernan said, his face scrunching up in disgust. "You might have a mark, my lady," he said quickly. "But many children are born with marks. But you're a grown woman now. If you were really a witch, you'd never have been allowed to grow up. Who would tell such a wicked lie?" the ironmonger asked as his face began to turn a dark shade of red as the fury boiling in his belly threatened to boil over.

"My lady," he said, forgetting his attempts to be informal as fury consumed him. "Who is telling such slanderous tales? Tell me and I'll make sure they learn the error of their ways," he said, wrapping a meaty palm over his fist and cracking his knuckles. As a father, he would never let anyone slander his daughter like this, and the idea that someone had slandered Lady Ashlynn and spread such slander to her husband was almost as bad as a threat against his own family!

Isabell, however, had an entirely different reaction. In fact, the news didn't seem to shock her at all as she gave Ashlynn a long, evaluating look before taking a deep shuddering breath and forcing herself to ask the question that had consumed her ever since she put together Marcel's statement that Ashlynn had survived with Jocelynn's confession about the mark of the witch.

"And?" Isabell asked in a voice that felt flatter and more strained than any other time Ashlynn had heard her speak. "Are you a witch? Is that how you survived what Owain did to you?"

#### Chapter 688: Illuminating Carriage Ride (Part Two)

"And? Are you a witch?"



When Isabel spoke, she tried to keep her voice as calm and even as possible, but even she couldn't help but think of the children's tales she'd grown up with when it came to the horrors of a wicked witch who could destroy whole towns and armies all by themselves.

There was a reason, after all, why the Inquisition aggressively hunted people on the slightest suggestion that they might be a witch. After all, witches were one of the few threats the Kingdom of Gaal faced that could drive one of the Church's legendary Exemplars to make a move, though if there were records of battles between the Exemplars and Witches, Isabell had never seen them.

"Isabell, how could you say something like that?" Tiernan asked, twisting in his seat to stare at Isabell as if she'd transformed into a stranger. "Ashlynn couldn't be an evil..."

"I am," Ashlynn said, interrupting Tiernan before he could say anything more hurtful than what he'd started to say. "I was born this way and my parents have always known that I was different," she said slowly as she thought back to her earliest memories when her mother had explained to her again and again that no one could ever be permitted to see the mark on her hip.

"My parents thought as you did once," she said after taking a small sip of wine to steel her resolve. "They even thought the mark might be an ordinary one," she said as she turned to look out the window at the trees passing by in the darkness of the night. "You know, my mother has never had much luck bearing children. By the time I was born, she'd already been through more than one failure to conceive."

It wasn't until Ashlynn was old enough to experience her first moonflow that she'd learned from her mother just how miraculous her own birth had been to her parents. Her mother had described what it felt like to miss her monthly flow and to feel her heart begin to flutter with hope only for things to pass several weeks later with pains that twisted her womb and enough blood to fear that the Holy Lord of Light had torn away her ability to bear children.

But then, a few months later, she once again felt the signs of life stirring within her, only to feel it torn away again weeks later and to endure the cycle repeating all over again.

"When I was finally born, it was the happiest and saddest day of their lives," Ashlynn said softly. "They finally had a child, but she bore the mark of the witch. Just how tragic must it have been for them? But they refused to give me up," she said, biting her lip as a tear rolled down her face.



"At one point, my father, he, he tried to burn off my mark with a branding iron when I was still too young to understand. I'm sure it must have hurt horribly, but afterward the skin healed without a scar and the mark came back as clear as day..." she said, stumbling slightly over her words as she fought back against the flood of tears falling softly onto the lace that trimmed her bodice.

"I'm a witch," she said firmly, forcing down the sadness and staring directly into Tiernan's stunned gaze before turning her eyes to meet Isabell's. "If I weren't a witch, I would never have been able to pull myself out of the grave Owain's knights buried me in. If I weren't a witch, I wouldn't have survived even one hour of wandering through the cold rain and darkness of that night."

"And if I wasn't a witch..." she added slowly. "I would never have been rescued at the edge of the Vale of Mists."

"Rescued?" Isabell asked as her heart began to beat faster within her chest. She'd been preparing herself all this time for the possibility that Ashlynn was truly a witch, but imagining it as a possibility and hearing the other woman confess to it were two very different things.

Part of her mind was already galloping ahead, faster than the horses pulling the carriage, wondering if the coldness she'd seen in Ashlynn when she executed Darragh had been brought about by her witchcraft. She wondered if Ashlynn was slowly sliding into the cruelty, depravity, and madness that the Church so often spoke of when they preached about the danger of witches.

But another part of her clung fiercely to the feeling of Ashlynn's arms wrapped around her and the soft sobs that shook her body at the joy of their reunion. At that moment, she'd felt like a young woman who had endured too much and been too far from loved ones for far too long. There wasn't a single thing about her that seemed wicked, cruel, or inhumanly evil!

But an engineer's mind was the mind of a problem solver, and so she forced herself to set aside baseless speculations and focus instead on what Ashlynn was telling her. She could sift through the truth and lies of the Church's teaching later and consider them only when she'd heard everything that Ashlynn had to say, starting with her apparent rescue after escaping her own grave.

"I was rescued not far from here," Ashlynn explained, glancing briefly out the window before turning back to the guild masters. "By the vampire who rules over the Vale of Mists. You may have heard her called the 'Demon Lady of the Vale' by the people in Lothian March," she said with a faint smile tugging at the corners of her lips as she remembered that night.



"But to me, she's so much more than what people say," Ashlynn said as she wiped the tears from her eyes with a small silk handkerchief. "That night, she offered me a bond of blood, binding my life to hers in order to save my life. Given the choice between death and an eternal life with her... I chose life," she said as she gave the guild masters a gentle, reassuring smile that seemed to suggest she didn't regret her decision at all.

To Isabell and Tiernan, however, nothing could have prepared them for the shock of what they'd just heard. Sitting only a few feet away from Ashlynn, the two guild masters exchanged a look of wide-eyed shock and behind that, a small measure of fear along with a desperate hope that they'd somehow misunderstood.

Because if they hadn't, if they'd really heard Lady Ashlynn say what they thought she'd just said, then she wasn't just a witch, but a vampire as well!

#### Chapter 689: A Stronger Drink

Ashlynn's heart pounded in her chest as she watched the two guild masters struggle to process everything she'd told them. She knew that it would come as a shock, just as it had been a shock to Ollie when he'd learned that she was a witch. But unlike Ollie, she'd known Isabell for more than a decade and Master Tiernan almost as long, even though she didn't know the burly ironmonger quite as well.

For the two of them to learn something that fundamentally changed not only how they saw her, but how they understood their Count and Countess as well. The shame and the burden that the rulers of Blackwell County bore because Countess Maela struggled to bear children was something that even Isabell could only distantly understand, having never experienced the immense pressure placed on noblewomen to bear an heir to continue their husband's bloodline.

But the more the two guild masters examined their feelings, the more they felt like they understood the decision Ashlynn's parents had made. If it had been one of their own children who was born with the mark of the witch, could they have calmly brought the babe to the Inquisition to be inspected and judged? If the Inquisition declared their child an unholy demon, could they have calmly accepted that fate and surrendered their newborn babe to be burned at the stake?

Blood drained from Tiernan's face as he imagined what it must have been like for Count Rhys to hold a white hot brand to his only child's tender flesh. He knew all too well the kinds of wounds hot metal could inflict, and for a parent to be forced to do something so cruel in the hopes of saving their child from the suspicions of the Inquisition...



If it had been him, he didn't know if he could have done it. He'd sooner brand himself than see any of his little ones suffer such an agonizing wound. But to go through all that, to make what must have been one of the most agonizing decisions a father could ever make, only to have his efforts thwarted by incontrovertible proof that his child was a witch. It must have been absolutely soul-crushing.

"So, you're a vampire now?" Isabell asked, fighting against every instinct she had to pull back to the corner of the carriage and put as much distance between herself and Ashlynn as possible. Fear threatened to overwhelm her, but she knew, knew to the depths of her bones, that she couldn't let fear of what Lady Ashlynn had become overwhelm how she felt about the woman who had hugged her so fiercely when they reunited just an hour ago.

"Is that why we had to meet so close to the Vale of Mists?" Isabell asked after taking a sip of the sweet, honeyed wine to calm her nerves. "Because you can't go out in the daylight anymore?"

"What?" Ashlynn said, blinking in surprise before she broke out in laughter when she realized that Isabell had leaped to the same conclusion she'd leaped to when Nyrielle first offered to form a bond of blood with her. "No, no, I'm not a vampire," she said, waving her hand and giggling to dispel the notion. "I would have lost my powers as a witch if I became a vampire, and Nyri would never do that to me," she said.

"But then, if you're not a vampire," Tiernan said, blinking in surprise at Ashlynn's sudden burst of laughter. "Then why did we have to come out here in the dead of night? We're so far from everything, it can't just be because you wanted the cover of darkness for secrecy," he said.

"No, no, I'm not the one who's a vampire," Ashlynn said as she slowly regained control of her breathing. "Marcel is," she said, dropping another explosive revelation on them as though it was nothing. "There are other reasons for the timing," she added as she wondered how the first night of raids was currently unfolding in Dunn Barony. The attacks across such a wide area, followed in the morning by raids on Hanrahan caravans, would provide cover for the sudden disappearance of the guild masters and their escort, but it was still far too early to explain that to either of her friends in the carriage.

"Mostly it was because Marcel didn't trust anyone else to act as intermediary when he wasn't sure who Owain would have sent as your escort," Ashlynn explained. "He's very impressed with the two of you, you know, and if anything went wrong with our meeting tonight, I don't think he'd forgive himself if either of you were harmed."



For a moment, Isabell stared at Ashlynn in pure, speechless shock. She'd kept pace with the revelation that Ashlynn was a witch and even with the news that she had bound herself to a vampire in order to save her own life...

That much, at least, she could understand. But knowing that the man she and Tiernan had been meeting with, who they'd shared a private dinner with in a small private dining room where he was less than three paces away from them the entire evening...

It was just too much, even for an engineer's mind to process. Clutching tightly at the wooden cup in her hand, Isabell took a deep drink, tipping the cup all the way back as she drained it to the last drop before holding the empty cup out in front of Ashlynn.

"Ashlynn," she said with some difficulty as she fought to regain control of her racing heart and the maelstrom that swept up all of her thoughts into a jumbled mess. At this point, fear had given way to something else entirely as she realized that it was far, far too late to be afraid of things.

What use was there in being afraid of the bear when you were already sitting in its cave and preparing to share a meal? The time to be afraid, she realized, had come and gone weeks ago when she first met the 'Black Merchant' and allowed him to pull her into... into whatever was going on with the vampires and Lady Ashlynn.

"Do you have anything stronger than the sweet wine? I think... I think I could use a real drink before you say anything more."

"I do," Ashlynn said, smiling as she leaned over to the cupboard in the carriage that contained the first bottle of wine she'd selected. "Do you want to know what it is, or do you just want to drink it?" she asked, hesitating with her slender fingers hovering just above a simple glass bottle that bore no label.

"It's not some witch's brew, is it?" Tiernan asked suspiciously before his eyes widened as he realized what he'd just said. "That is, I didn't mean, I..." he stammered, trying to backpedal after realizing that he'd been too shocked to consider his words before he spoke.

"It is," Ashlynn said, pulling the bottle out and offering it to the burly man to inspect. "The witch who taught me over the summer is called the Mother of Thorns," she explained. "She makes wine from blackberries, raspberries, and other fruit that grows on plants with thorns. The flavor is unlike anything



I've tasted from vineyards in the Kingdom of Gaal, and it packs enough of a punch that even a big lug from the Ancient Clan like Jacques only drinks a cup or two at a sitting."

"Don't ask questions, Tiernan," Isabell said, holding out her hand toward the burly ironmonger as she impatiently gestured for him to hand it over. "It's fine if you don't need a drink, but at least give me the bottle while you make up your mind."

"Allow me," Ashlynn said, reaching across the carriage to retrieve the bottle. With one smooth motion and the slightest thread of power, she pulled the cork stopper from the bottle and poured just enough of the fragrant purplish liquid into her cup to reach up to the first knuckle of a person's finger if they touched the bottom of the cup.

Of course, she didn't need to use witchcraft to open the bottle, even though it was one of Amahle's personal concoctions, but she hoped that small, casual displays of power would help ease her two friends from Blackwell County into the world they were about to enter.

"Start with that," Ashlynn said as she took the cup from Tiernan's numb fingers and poured him an equal measure before pouring a small cup for herself as well. "We still have hours to go before we reach the castle, so let me start from the beginning, and I'll explain everything you need to know before we arrive."

"There won't be enough time to tell you everything," Ashlynn added. "But you'll have an easier time of your first day in the Vale of Mists than I did by far, I promise you..."

## Chapter 690: A Long Story (Part One)

Ashlynn was right, Isabell thought as she sipped the potent thornberry wine Ashlynn poured for her. The flavor was like nothing she'd ever tasted in the Kingdom of Gaal or in the old countries across the sea.

The wine was dry, exceptionally so, with very little sweetness while still possessing a strong flavor of berries picked on a hot summer day. More than just the incredibly dry, fruity flavor, however, there was a vibrant, herbaceous flavor to the wine, as if the berries had been mashed with garden herbs or something slightly lemony before they were set aside to ferment. When she finally swallowed the intensely flavorful wine, it left behind a faint, almost earthy taste like strongly brewed tea while the potent alcohol filled her throat and belly with a pleasantly warm sensation.



"That," Isabell said, staring at the cup in her hand in pleasant surprise. "That is amazing."

"There's no witchcraft to making it," Ashlynn offered when she saw Tiernan's reluctance as he stared at the cup in his hand. To Ashlynn, it looked almost as if the cup had engaged him in a contest of wills that he was presently losing.

"It's just berries, honey, water, lemon-thyme, and yeast," she said, hoping it would reassure the powerful ironmonger that there was nothing dangerous in the wine. She did, however, decide not to add that part of Amahle's secret was the fine silk mesh she wove using her own silk in order to produce a wine that was as crystal clear as pure spring water. That extra step alone vastly improved the final product, leaving it free of any of the sediment that could make lesser wines go cloudy and bitter if they weren't bottled with extraordinary care.

"So this witch," Isabell said, still struggling to process everything Ashlynn had said so far. There had been so many pieces of new information that Ashlynn mentioned casually that it was becoming difficult even for her to keep track of it all.

"This 'Mother of Thorns,' she taught you about making wine?" Isabell asked, less because she was curious about the wine than because she needed time to collect her thoughts and organize all of the random bits of information that she was certain would be important later.

"That and many other things," Ashlynn said as she sipped the heady wine that had become one of her favorite treats on the boiling hot summer nights in the depths of the Briar. She had to be careful about the amount of it she drank, but that was why she poured such small portions when Isabell asked for something stronger.

"But that's jumping ahead by quite a bit. Let me start from the beginning, and things should become clearer as we go," she said as she sat back on the plush suede cushions and started to tell her tale.

Ashlynn did her best to summarize things clearly, trying to find a balance between helping her friends understand the world she'd been thrust into and delving too much into things they would soon discover for themselves or could discuss at a later time. For now, she started with the basics, explaining who the Eldritch people really were, the differences between their clans and the many friends she'd made among them in the past several months.



By the time Ashlynn found herself explaining the wonders of High Fen City with its towering arena, breathtaking opera houses and the grandeur of High Lady Erna's palace, however, Isabell had begun to tease out a distinctly concerning thread in the way Ashlynn spoke about her vampire patron, particularly the way Ashlynn used a diminutive pet-name like 'Nyri' to refer to a two hundred year old vampire queen!

"Ashlynn," Isabell said, staring briefly at the bottom of her empty cup and trying to decide whether or not she should risk asking for a refill. Already, she felt more than a little light headed and the troubles of the world felt more distant and unreal than the story Ashlynn was telling, but she was still a ways off from reaching her limit.

"You said that you became a, what was the word you used? A Senshal for this vampire, Nyrielle?" Isabell asked, stumbling slightly over the unfamiliar title. "That you have the most authority among all of her servants? But you said it's more than being a castle mistress..."

"Seneschal," Ashlynn said, gently correcting her friend's slightly slurred pronunciation. "And yes, it's very different from being a castle mistress. It's more like... More like being a crown regent, I suppose," Ashlynn explained as she struggled to find a parallel in the Kingdom, even though nothing quite compared to her role as Nyrielle's Seneschal.

"When she sleeps during the day, I rule in her place," Ashlynn said, as though it was a simple, common sense arrangement for someone else to sit on the throne whenever the ruler took a nap. "There is no one in her entire domain other than her who can command me."

"Right, right," Isabell said, finally giving in and holding out her cup again. "Just the honeyed wine this time," she said, glancing at the floor in mild embarrassment as Ashlynn retrieved the first bottle to refill her cup.

She truly enjoyed the strange drink crafted by the mysterious 'Mother of Thorns' but if she didn't pace herself then she wouldn't be clear headed enough to understand what Ashlynn had been through and there were questions she desperately needed to ask.

"But, this is the thing I wanted to ask about," Isabell said after taking a sip of the sweet, honeyed wine. "You say you're her most important servant, but the way you talk about the things she showed you in this High Fen City, it sounds more like she's courting you than like you're serving her. So, so what is it really between you two? Are you her servant? Or, or is it, is it more than that?"



Sitting next to her, Tiernan nodded silently, cradling the empty cup in his hands as if he needed something to hold on to but didn't dare to drink any more tonight. He'd noticed the same things Isabell had, and he couldn't help but think of how Ashlynn's voice when she spoke of Nyrielle resembled his own daughter's voice whenever she talked about the most recent handsome young man she'd taken a fancy to.

More than that, some of the things Ashlynn mentioned, like the gifts of clothing and jewels or the night out to see an 'opera', whatever that was, were all things he might have done if he'd been a wealthier man when he was courting his wife.

He'd considered asking the very same question Isabell had several times now, and each time he firmly clamped his lips shut and refused to utter the slightest word. He was supposed to be her friend, not a proxy for her father, and Lady Ashlynn's love affairs should be her own business...

This didn't mean that he wasn't curious, only that he was more hesitant than Isabell to actually ask. After all, while there had always been rumors of certain ladies of the court having dalliances with each other or with their ladies in waiting, any whispers of such relationships belonged firmly in the realm of women's gossip. Men like him had no business sticking their noses in such scandalous relationships. But no matter what he thought, nothing could have prepared him for Ashlynn's next words.

"Nyrielle and I are betrothed," Ashlynn said, smiling brightly as though it was a normal, happy announcement and not a startling admission that could shake the very foundations of the Kingdom of Gaal if she'd said it at home!