

# The Vampire 701

## Chapter 701: Knight vs. Champion (Part One)

The skies overhead wore a blanket of gray clouds, casting a gloom over the stretch of country road as Carwyn took his place before the powerful demon-knight. A soft rain began to fall, as if the Holy Lord of Light himself couldn't bear to watch what was about to transpire as he hid himself away behind the darkening skies.

"You stand against Barsali," the flat tailed demon shouted as Carwyn took his position. "Champion of fifty battles, Leader of the Triplet Tails, and Captain serving Commander Tausau's Third Army!"

As the demon read off the list of impressive sounding titles, it shot a glare at the proud demon-knight as if it resented the spectacle it had been forced to participate in. Still, it delivered its lines loudly enough that even the soldiers behind Carwyn could hear them and by the time it ended, it was looking at Carwyn as if it hoped to see him waver.

"Name yourself, human!" the flat tailed demon commanded bitterly when he didn't see any sign of cowering or even fear from the young knight.

"I am Sir Carwyn Belvin," Carwyn shouted without bothering to raise his visor. Since the demon-knight had no intention showing even the minimal amount of courtesy to reveal the face behind the cage of his helm, Carwyn saw no reason to be polite as he continued his introduction. "Knight Protector of Raek Village, Slayer of Demons and Commander of Belvin's Hounds."

He had no great victories to boast of and it might be an exaggeration to call himself a 'slayer of demons' when he'd only fought the occasional stray demon in the wilderness and the one he'd killed today but Carwyn didn't care. He added the title as if it were a layer over his heart, guarding his courage even as his heart began to pound in his chest and sweat trickled down his back.

Every instinct in his body said that he should run far away, that he had no business facing such a powerful foe in single combat and that he should get as far away as he could before the fight began. But Carwyn refused to listen to his body's desire to flee just as much as he ignored the pain in his ribs and the aches in his arms.

His battle had finally found him and he refused to run from it!

The small demon took a moment to translate Carwyn's introduction, prompting the demon-knight Barsali to raise his strangely hooked sword and spear in the air, shouting in the demon's language and banging his weapons together before taking a fighting stance of his own.

"Fight!" the flat tailed demon shouted before it scampered backwards off the road.

Barsali wasted no time. As soon as he heard the command to fight he charged forward, slithering on his long tail in a rapid dash toward the waiting knight.

To Carwyn, the movements of the serpentine warrior were strange and unnatural as his charge seemed to wander from left to right, weaving side to side even as he charged. If human had tried to run in such a strange, zig-zagging fashion, they would have lost half their speed and could easily injure themselves in the attempts to move so chaotically, but from the serpent, it only seemed to make it faster!

Carwyn took a wide stance, hunkering down behind his shield and letting the chain of his flail rest over his shoulder. Only the top of his helm and the gap in his visor were visible above the top of his shield, completely concealing his weapon and giving him a chance to attack in any line without giving away his intentions.

It was a tactic that worked well against poorly trained brigands and bandits, but against an unpredictable foe like Barsali, at best, it put them on even footing. Desperately, Carwyn tried to read his foe's body language, trying to figure out if he would attack with the spear or the sword, from the right or the left.

A heartbeat later, the towering demon arrived before him, rearing up on its tail like a striking cobra, looming head and shoulders above the human knight. The spear in its hand thrust out as fast as lightning, slamming into Carwyn's shield and knocking him half a step backward with the force of its impact.

While one hand pushed forward with the spear, the other hand raised its strange hooked sword up high before slamming it down directly on the top of Carwyn's shield, digging deeply into the wooden frame of the shield and dragging it down.

"Aaaaa!" Carwyn shouted as he stepped to the right side, angling his shield to let the force of the blows slide past him as he lashed out with his flail. Much like the demon had targeted his shield instead of aiming for the man behind it, Carwyn aimed for the demon's spear, wrapping the chain of the flail around the spear's shaft before yanking hard to wrest the weapon out of its scaly hand.

The motion pulled both men closer together when his move failed to wrest the spear from the demon's hand, but Carwyn was already flowing into his next attack, dropping his weight low before thrusting upward with the lower tip of his triangular shield, slamming it directly into the serpentine demon's abdomen and freeing the shield from the demon's sword in the process.

Pain exploded in Carwyn's calf as the demon's armored tail slammed into his leg, trying to knock him from his feet, but the young knight had expected the blow from the demon's 'third weapon' this time and he refused to be knocked aside.

The demon was taller than him with greater reach from its spear and more power from its sword. It could fend him off with slaps from its powerful tail and play him like a fiddle if he tried to fight in the middle distance. That much had been clear even before they closed and it was only more clear now.

So, since the middle distance was no different from standing with one foot in his own grave, Carwyn pressed forward, clinging to Barsali's flanks like a hound with its teeth in a deer's haunches. His legs drove him forward and he used his shield like a battering ram, constantly pressing up against the powerful demon while his right hand struck out again and again, swinging from as many different angles as he could while he pressed his attack.

Hounds, like wolves, could pull down larger prey as long as they were tenacious enough and willing to take the beating that came from getting in close. Now, Carwyn embodied his family's emblem, lashing out again and again and again.

As many times as it took, as often as it took, he would hammer at this demon until nothing was left but bloody meat wrapped in dented armor!

Chapter 702: Knight vs. Champion (Part Two)

"Hit him! Hit him harder!"

"Alch'kta!"

"Make him run!"

"Nuwa kûne!"

"Tear him down!"

The sounds of Carwyn's men shouting blended with the cries of the other demon-knights as both sides cheered for their champion.

The constant blows raining down on Barsali's armor filled the air with the sounds of metal clanging on metal, but without the ability to spin the ball before he struck or the added momentum of a horse's charge, the weapon was too light to inflict serious damage through the demon's layers of armor.

For all that, even though it looked like he had an advantage at the moment, Carwyn felt like he'd become a prisoner of his own strategy. Sweat rolled down his brow as he realized that he had no method to retreat, and the tactics he would have used against a human fighter were all but worthless against the serpentine demon.

More than once, he'd lashed out at the thing's tail in an attempt to break its support the way he'd have broken a man's legs but the snake always seemed to slither just enough out of the way that he'd only scored a grazing blow or two.

Quickly, it became obvious that Barsali was trying to wait him out or exhaust him. The demon-knight rained blows down from its sword and spear, slamming into the young knight's shield in a chaotic, unpredictable rhythm that forced him to constantly change his stance if he didn't want to be knocked from his feet on the road that was growing slicker as the rain continued.

-CLACK- -CLANG!-

Carwyn's head rang with the force of a powerful blow as an overhand strike from the demon's sword skipped off the top of his shield before clipping the top of his helm. Blood mixed with the sweat pouring down the young knight's brow and his world went suddenly quiet, leaving him unable to hear anything but the rush of blood in his ears and the pounding of his own heart.

-CLACK- -THUNK-

The next instant, Barsali knocked his shield aside with the shaft of his spear before driving the but of the spear into Carwyn's chest, knocking the wind from his lungs and sending him staggering backwards several steps, stripping away all of the ground he'd gained and placing him firmly in the deadly middle distance where the demon-knight held all the advantages.

"No you don't!" Carwyn roared, whipping his right hand forward in an overhand throw that sent his flail spinning through the air directly at the demon's cage-like face guard.

It was a desperate move, one his father would have scolded him endlessly for, but without some kind of threat, he would never close the distance again. And so, he decisively threw his weapon at the demon's face, half a heartbeat before charging forward with his shield like a ram again. Only this time, his right hand dropped to the dagger at his waist, praying that its point would be sharp enough to find a gap in the demon-knight's armor.

Barsali moved with lightning speed, using both sword and spear to fend off the flying flail while twisting aside, out of the way of the weapon's path. Behind the cage of his plumed helm, a smile formed on the champion's face as he watched the young knight charge him with a slender dagger in his hand. Clearly, the young man was ready to stake his life on this final charge!

The serpentine demon flung its arms out wide, tossing aside both of its weapons as it laughed in glee. Slithering to the side, it thrust both of its scaled hands out in front of its chest, clutching the sides of the shield that was strapped to Carwyn's arm and lifting with all of its strength.

Carwyn felt a shiver of impact run through his arm when the demon clutched his shield, but all of his thoughts were focused on the tip of his dagger as he searched for a gap or seam in the demon's armor that he could exploit.

There! Between the top of its segmented breast plate and the skirt of mail that covered the upper portion of its tail, he thought. If he could just reach...

The tip of his dagger skittered along the links of mail as his feet left the surface of the road. The demon lifted him higher and higher off the ground, leaving Carwyn dangling from his own shield as he flailed

about with the dagger, succeeding only in spilling a few drops of blood when he pierced between the links in the mail before the attack became impossible as the serpentine demon drew him closer in.

Suddenly, a tight, constricting sensation enveloped Carwyn's legs. Too late, he realized an entirely different danger posed by the serpentine demon's tail as it twisted around his legs.

"AARRGGGG!!!!"

Carwyn screamed in pain as a tearing sensation enveloped his entire body. With its hands on his shield and its tail around his feet, the demon turned itself into a sort of living rack, pulling and stretching the knight as if it was going to tear him in two.

Swinging wildly with his dagger, the young knight cut desperately at the leather straps that bound his shield to his arm. Several of his wild swings missed, and a few pierced through his padded gambeson, piercing his arm and spilling his own blood, but he barely noticed as the pain intensified, feeling like the demon would rip his left arm out of his socket.

"Nëtsr'ka tašl!"

"Kedezlùx!"

The other demon-knights shouted their encouragement, raising their fists in the air and cheering on their brother as he seemed ready to claim his victory. On the opposite side, however, the humans had gone deathly quiet, their faces pale as they watched Carwyn's final moments of struggle with a growing sense of dread filling their bellies and hollowing out their hearts.

Finally, Carwyn's frantic efforts succeeded in cutting through the straps of his shield, freeing his arm and putting an end to the tearing pains that wracked his body. The relief was short-lived, however, as the ground rushed up to meet him, slamming into his back and knocking the wind from his lungs yet again.

This time, the demon-knight followed close, tossing the shield aside and dropping to the ground to grapple with the young knight before he could recover from the stunning shock of slamming into the ground.

One scaled hand seized his right wrist, pinning his dagger hand to the ground while the other scaled hand slipped under the bottom of his helm to clutch his throat, pressing down on his neck with the weight of the demon's body, making it all but impossible for the young knight to recover his breath.

"Ímrus! Ímrus ki pressui ršélk ylian!" the demon shouted from just inches away.

For the second time today, Carwyn stared up at the powerful demon with the green-plumed helm and felt his life slipping away. This time, there would be no reprieve. No second chance to fight, no divine intervention. This time, he really was about to die. But this time, he wasn't willing. If he was going to die, he was going to die fighting, anyway that he could!

Weakly, flailing with his left hand, Carwyn struggled to punch the demon with his gauntleted fist, slamming his armored hand into the demon's helm. The impact hurt his hand, perhaps more than it hurt the demon, but he didn't care as he lashed out again and again.

Frustratingly, as the edges of his vision began to grow dark, the demon turned away from him, yelling something at the flat tailed demon. The two seemed to argue as the serpentine demon completely disregarded Carwyn's feeble struggles before the flat tailed demon grudgingly spoke to the struggling knight.

"Stop fighting," the demon said bitterly. "If you stop now and surrender, he will spare your life."

For a moment, the words made no sense, and Carwyn lashed out again, delivering something that was more like an armored slap to the demon's helm than a real punch. Surrender? Wasn't he already defeated? Then... then what did it matter if he said the words or not?

With a heavy thump, his left arm dropped across his chest. Whether it was because he intended to surrender or because he no longer had the strength to raise it again was hard to say, but to Barsali, it was enough. Behind the cage of its helm, it smiled broadly, revealing wickedly sharp teeth that gleamed like polished porcelain daggers in the shadowed darkness of its helm.

He didn't know what it meant to have a demon smile at him like that. Whether it was a gloating smile that he'd fallen for its treacherous scheme or excitement that it had taken a living captive, he couldn't

say. Whatever it meant, as long as he could survive today, then he would cling to hope that he could find a way to escape from the demons in the future.

After all, he had too much to live for to let himself die here... so as long as he could cling to life, even if he had to cast aside his honor as a knight and surrender to a demon to do it... he was willing.

It was the last thought that Carwynn had before the darkness at the edge of his vision enveloped him, carrying him away to blessed unconsciousness and dreams of one day seeing Olwynna again.

### Chapter 703: What Happened Last Night?

Faint morning light filtered through heavy curtains and soft lace drapes, gently tugging at Isabell's consciousness as the needs of her body grew increasingly persistent in banishing sleep from her mind.

The bed she woke in was one of the largest she'd ever slept in and the most comfortable by far. The sheets were soft and silky and the blankets were fluffy with a weight to them that made it feel almost like she'd fallen asleep in Casquas' gentle embrace. The lace curtains that hung from the bed frame were intricately woven and dyed a pale blue that grew darker the further up the curtain she looked.

It would have been a glorious morning to wake up to, if not for the pounding headache that felt like horses stampeding across her skull and the pain in her eyes that felt like someone had stuffed fistfuls of coarse salt under her eyelids every time she blinked.

Isabell was no stranger to strong wine. Long years spent fighting to exist in a world where few women existed taught her that she had to keep up with the men dinking around her if she wanted to be taken seriously when they finally got down to business. It didn't matter if it was an evening with the lords of the Emerald Prince's army or a day of intense negotiations with the masters of other guilds, being able to hold her liquor was a skill that Isabell had honed over decades of her career as an engineer.

But when confronted by Ashlynn's strange thornberry wine, she felt like she'd become a young woman again, out for her first real drink with the adults. Only, the first time she'd spent a night out drinking, while she remembered the hangover being bad, her memories of that hangover felt pale in comparison to the pounding in her head that she felt now.

Slowly, cradling her head beneath a pillow as she struggled against the headache, Isabell tried to piece together the events of the night before that led her here. The carriage ride lasted for hours and at some



point, Tiernan, Isabell and Lady Ashlynn had fallen into discussions of their romantic partners over cups of wine that seemed to grow deeper instead of shallower as the night went on.

"Casquas has it so easy," Isabell had said as the carriage trundled down the road. The soft lighting in the carriage and the elegant carved woods combined with the plush upholstery in the carriage to make it feel more like they were sitting in an intimate private dining room at an upscale restaurant than in a cramped carriage riding through the dark of night.

It was an illusion that Isabell clung to as she prompted Ashlynn to refill her wooden cup with more of the strong thornberry wine as she told her tale of romantic woes.

"When his hair was dark, dark as mine, even or darker than dark," she said, carefully enunciating her words to avoid slurring as she spoke. "When his hair was dark, all the women of the royal court, they all called him 'suave' and 'dashing.'"

"Bet they called you beautifwool, bootiful, booty full, no, no, not that," Tiernan slurred next to her. The barrel-chested ironmonger had been slower about indulging in strong drink, but once he got going, he acted as though it was a matter of masculine pride to match the two women in the carriage cup for cup as the hours of the night slipped by.

"Enchanting! Enchancing is the world for you. You must have been, Imprancing," he said, pointing at her with a thick, sausage-like finger at Isabell as he clutched his cup of wine. "Or brilliant. Always so brilliant."

"They called me no such thing," Isabell said, drawing herself upright in a mocking imitation of a proper lady. "They called me, called me... nothing polite is what they called me," she said, breaking off in a fit of laughter and taking another drink of the fragrant, dry wine.

"But him, he was dashing and suave and dashing with his dark hair and soft, soft lips for kissing, and everyone was jealous when I was kissing him," she said, with an expression that wavered between affectionate and indignant. "But now, now his hair is gray, and they all, you know what they call him? Distinguished is the word they use, and refined," she humphed. "And still, the young girls are jealous when he kisses an 'old bat' like me! He's two years older than me, but I'm the old bat!"

"I don't think anyone is jealous when I'm kissing Nyri," Ashlynn said as she prodded her mind to try to think of what people looked like when Nyrielle kissed her in public, but when Nyrielle kissed her, she lost track of the people around her and she couldn't think of a single reaction, jealous or otherwise.

"Blood scares people so no one is jealous of my kisses. And I won't kiss Cacquas, no matter how soft his lips are, because my lips are her lips and her lips are mine," Ashlynn rambled. "So no one can know if his lips are softer than Nyri's because her lips are mine and you can't compare to his kisses at all," Ashlynn said as she struggled to refocus her gaze on Isabell.

"And if you tried, Nyri would bite you," she said with a firm nod. "Except she only bites me. But if you try to kiss her, I'm sure she definitely wouldn't bite what she couldn't because only she bites me."

"What does blood have to do with kissing? And why all the biting?" Isabell asked, blinking in confusion. "I think you're doing it wrong. Did your mother teach you to kiss a man before you married Owain? But you need to kiss a woman, not a man, but it should be the same except where it isn't the same at all, but you still shouldn't be bleeding!" the engineer insisted, tapping her cup on her knee for emphasis until a bit of the wine sloshed over her hand.

Ashlynn had given a confused and rambling explanation about Nyrielle's fangs and the feeling of having a vampire drink her blood, but most of it failed to penetrate Isabell's mind as the fog of strong alcohol grew as thick as the fog outside the carriage.

Isabell did her best to remember what had happened afterwards and whether or not Ashlynn had revealed anything important during their intoxicated carriage ride, but the memories slipped through her fingers like water, leaving her with more questions than answers as she pulled her head out from under the pillow and tried to figure out what she was supposed to do now that she was awake...

#### Chapter 704: A Helpful Guest

The room Isabell found herself in provided a few clues that brought a few memories from the previous evening back into focus. The stones of the walls were ancient and rounded over on the edges and corners, even if they had been freshly painted in tones of soft blues and subtle greens.

It was the proportions of the room, however, that drove home the point of where she currently found herself. The doorway was larger than it would have been in any human bedroom she'd ever seen, and the ceiling was taller as well. The whole place felt like it was sized for creatures that stood head and shoulders taller than even the largest knights and strongmen she'd ever known.

Dimly she remembered that, by the time they'd arrived at the ancient fortress in the Vale of Mists, Tiernan had succumbed to the strong drink and lay propped up in the corner of the carriage. His snores were deep and loud, resembling a lumberjack's two-man saw struggling to tear its way through soft wood as his chest rose and fell with deep, steady breaths.

Isabell and Ashlynn weren't far off, and the gray-haired guild master wanted to tear her hair out in frustration as she struggled to remember what had happened when they arrived. She remembered people waiting to receive them but she couldn't remember a single person's name or face. Only that Ashlynn had promised her they were safe and that they would help her to a room.

Clearly, that had happened, and whoever helped her into bed had also helped her to change into a soft, silk sleeping gown, but she had no memory of any of it. The thought sent a momentary shiver down her spine as she wondered who would have been responsible for helping her change. It couldn't have been Ashlynn, she was clearly too intoxicated to be of any help, but then, who would it have been?

For a moment, she wondered if Lady Ashlynn's vampire lover had been the one to help her into a fresh change of clothes before tucking her into bed. She discarded the notion almost immediately as ridiculous. A powerful vampire wouldn't waste her time putting a drunken stranger to bed, even if she was a friend of Ashlynn's.

More than that, after the way she'd heard Ashlynn speak last night, she doubted either woman wanted their partner gazing at other people in the nude. But no matter how much Isabell tried to remember, her mind found no answers as to who had helped her change.

"Does she even have any human women serving her?" Isabell wondered. "Maybe it was one of the other vampires... Zarya? She said that she was Lady Nyrielle's handmaiden after all..."

It was a mystery without answer and everything she came up with would only be a guess. When she realized why her mind was so stuck on the question, however, a frown formed on her face as she confronted the reality of her discomfort.

Having another woman help her into bed when she was too drunk to care for herself shouldn't be anything to worry over. In a castle as luxurious as this, she was certain that there were several servants trained in assisting ladies in dressing who would respect both her modesty and privacy. That clearly wasn't the issue she was struggling with.

It was the realization that she was trying to decide if it was better to be helped by a human vampire or a normal Eldritch woman that brought Isabell face to face with her own biases. As much as she'd tried to tell herself during the carriage ride that she would treat the Eldritch people the same as any other people, decades of stories from the Church and even the recent tales she'd heard in Lothian March still twisted her mind in ways that made it difficult to accept where she was.

Her rational mind, her engineer's mind, told her that everything Ashlynn had said about the Eldritch people was likely to be true. And so long as it was true, then the sooner she rejected what she had learned before as faulty, flawed information, the sooner she could adapt to being in a world that was vastly different than what she'd been told to expect.

And yet, no matter how much she bludgeoned her tired, aching mind to accept the new information as truth, she still found it unsettling to think that a vampire or Eldritch person had handled her in such a vulnerable state.

"I need to clear my head," Isabell said softly. "Sitting here stewing like this isn't helping me to sort things out."

Thankfully, a kind and helpful soul had left a bell on the table beside her bed, along with a cup of water and a note that read 'ring when you wake' written in a precise, delicate hand. Even better, whoever had helped her into bed had been thoughtful enough to leave her silver-rimmed spectacles next to the note.

For a moment, Isabell's hand hovered indecisively over the bell. She'd seen Ashlynn's handwriting before, and it wasn't this... delicate. The note had clearly been left by someone else. By one of the demons... no, one of the Eldritch, she corrected herself as she prodded her mind through the pain that felt like having her skull squeezed like a melon.

She remembered. She had been brought into the heart of the Vale of Mists, arriving just before dawn at a fortress with five towers that looked like a hand stretching out of a dark cliff. Ashlynn had told her that there weren't many humans in the vale and that she hoped to change that one day, but Isabell struggled to understand how.

Right now, however, all she could think was that if she rang that bell, whoever answered the call would likely be one of the Eldritch. She was about to come face to face with one of the creatures that humanity

had labeled 'demons' and fought against for hundreds of years... and she was wearing nothing but a sleeping gown.

Briefly, she considered searching for the clothing she'd arrived with but a quick glance around the bedchamber was enough for her to realize that her clothing had been taken away, leaving her with few options. She could attempt to search for her things, but the idea of wandering around in search of a change of clothes and potentially getting lost in the Eldritch fortress sounded like the kind of foolishness a much younger woman would attempt.

"Lady Ashlynn wouldn't have brought me here if it wasn't safe," Isabell reminded herself. She took a long swallow of water to calm her nerves and wet her mouth that felt like it had been filled with sand before reaching out and resolutely ringing the bell.

The sound was far too loud, and the pitch of the bell much too high for her, and the spike of pain in her ears left her cursing the 'helpfulness' of whoever had left the blasted bell and the note. It wasn't their fault that she was so badly hung over, but at the moment, she wasn't feeling entirely charitable, and she cursed anyway.

A few moments later, the door opened, revealing the diminutive figure of a stunning young woman with horns like a ram's and cloven hooves to match. She was dressed in luxurious brown silks, and her bodice was covered with coppery embroidery that resembled leaves dancing in the wind. The same pattern of embroidery spilled from one hip and ran all the way down the length of her skirts until it reached the hem that was just high enough above the floor to reveal her hooves.

"Good morning, Master Isabell," the elegantly dressed woman said, pausing to retrieve a silver goblet before striding across the floor to reach the engineer's bedside. "I imagine that your head hurts quite a bit after drinking so much of Auntie Amahle's thornberry wine," she said softly as she held out the goblet. "Drink this, and you'll be fine in just a few minutes time."

"Is this?" Isabell asked hesitantly as she looked at the faintly green contents of the cup. "Is this a witch's brew? Is it, is it safe?"

"We call them potions," the horned woman said with a light musical laugh. "And yes, it is. I brewed one for Master Tiernan and another for Lady Ashlynn as well," she said as she smiled at the gray-haired engineer.

"My name is Heila," she said, bowing slightly as she introduced herself. "I'm Lady Ashlynn's lady-in-waiting, and she asked me specifically to take care of you when you woke. I'm also the Willow Witch," she added gently as she extended the goblet toward Isabell. "And I promise, the things I brew for healing will only help you, never hurt."

"So please," Heila said. "Take a drink. Think of it as simple medicine. Once you're feeling better, we can talk about what comes next..."

## Chapter 705: Deconstructing Faith

Isabell thought she'd prepared herself during the carriage ride. She thought that she was ready to enter this world of Eldritch people and witchcraft. Last night, despite everything she'd seen, from the strange sham of a tribunal for the traitor to the calm, matter-of-fact way that Ashlynn had revealed the truth that Marcel was a vampire, she felt like she was ready to approach Ashlynn's world with an open mind.

Now, however, with an Eldritch woman in front of her, a witch no less, holding out a goblet of.. Of a potion that the woman insisted would help her, she found it difficult to make a move.

"Would it be easier if I left it for you and gave you time alone?" Heila asked, sensing the other woman's reluctance. "I won't take offense. I still remember how Lady Ashlynn was when she first woke up here. I looked after her then, and that's why she asked me to look after you now, but I won't force anything on you."

"No, it's fine," Isabell said, taking the goblet from the diminutive, horned woman's hand. Thinking of it as medicine helped, and when she remembered how often she'd told her children to drink their medicine down and how exasperated she felt when they whined and pleaded about the bitter taste of herbs, she found her resistance crumbling. After all, what kind of parent would she be if she didn't do as she told her children to?

Keeping the image of her children's faces as they pleaded not to drink their medicine firmly in mind, Isabell raised the cup to her lips and drank it all down, imagining herself to be setting an example, even if the person who needed the example set was herself.

The greenish liquid wasn't thick the way she'd expected, nor did it have the same bitter taste as the medicine prepared by the apothecaries she was used to visiting. Instead, it was light and sweet, like the juice of freshly squeezed cucumbers, with only a faint taste of fresh, minty herbs and the slightest hint of very weak wine.

"How long does it take to," she started to say, only to trail off in amazement as she felt a soothing coolness spreading through her body, from her throat and her stomach until it reached the top of her head and the tips of her toes.

The feeling of salt in her eyes and the tight, squeezing pain that gripped her head faded away like fog in a stiff breeze, leaving only the barest memory of discomfort behind. If she didn't know better, she would have thought she hadn't drunk a single drop last night, to say nothing of drinking Ashlynn's potent wine until she was close to blacking out.

"That, that is amazing," Isabel said, marveling as she stared at the goblet in disbelief. "It feels... fresh. Natural. Is all witchcraft like this? Does it require some kind of sacrifice to make it? 'One must suffer so another can heal?'" Isabell asked, thinking back over everything she'd heard from the Church about witchcraft over the years.

The potion didn't feel evil, it was completely the opposite. Or, not exactly opposite, she corrected herself. It didn't feel evil, but it didn't feel holy either. Natural really was the best word to describe what it felt like, as if it was simple and ordinary, formed of things grown in a garden instead of the result of 'demonic' or 'dark magic.'

Perhaps there was something insidious about having witchcraft feel like part of the natural, living world, but as Isabell struggled to think of the sweet-looking young woman in front of her as being somehow insidious. Rather, between what Ashlynn had said last night and the woman in front of her now, it was becoming easier and easier to regard the Church's teachings as suspect.

Isabell had never been particularly devout. Years of bloody civil war in the Emerald Kingdom had eroded her faith in a way that few people in the Kingdom of Gaal ever experienced. To her countrymen, fighting against the demons was natural and holy. It was a clash between those who were clearly good and 'creatures' that were 'twisted by their own evil.'

But Isabell had seen the horrors of wars fought over territory, resources, and tribute. When she returned to the Kingdom of Gaal from across the sea, and especially when she listened to men like Owain Lothian talk about the upcoming holy war, she didn't find the Kingdom's wars to be any different from what she'd experienced across the sea.

Owain wasn't a holy zealot, unable to restrain himself from slaying evil with his sword to protect his people. He was an ambitious lord, filled with a lust for conquest and a desire for the wealth and power that would come from expanding his lands. Perhaps there was some faith underlying all of that, but it was buried so deeply beneath the filth of his baser motives that it might as well not exist.

But despite her lack of faith, the only stories of witches and their craft that Isabell had ever heard were the ones the Church allowed to be told. Like building a defensive rampart on soft and shaky ground, Isabell's image of witchcraft was fragile and couldn't withstand direct confrontation with the truth.

She didn't believe that it required dark sacrifices to give witches their power, not really, but she had never heard any other explanations for the mystic forces witches wielded either. And so, rather than remain ignorant, she asked Heila directly for an explanation of how the pleasant-tasting potion worked.

"One must suffer so another can heal?" Heila asked, repeating Isabell's words back to her and blinking in confusion. "That isn't right at all. No one suffers for this. Something this minor, it barely takes any of the world's energy to complete it."

"I see," Isabell said as she sank briefly into thought. She hadn't seen much of the Eldritch world yet, but Ashlynn had told her more than once last night that the things she had been taught were so far from the truth that it was better to know nothing than to try to find kernels of truth in the Church's teachings about the Eldritch. She'd also said that Heila was her closest friend among the Eldritch people and that she trusted her lady-in-waiting with her life.

"Heila," Isabell asked as she regarded the diminutive horned woman. "I'm trying to understand, but everything I know about your people and about witches is... is probably a lie," she admitted with a heavy sigh. "Lady Ashlynn is someone I consider a good friend, and I don't want to do or say the wrong things when I'm her guest, but I need some help and a good many answers before I meet with her again. Can you help me?"

"Of course I can help you," Heila said, smiling brightly as she watched the older woman methodically thinking things through. Ashlynn had said that Isabell was one of the smartest, most reasonable people she knew. She was certain that, given time and the truth, Isabell would come to the right conclusions, but she would need to work some things out for herself before she felt confident in her conclusions.

Ashlynn's instructions had been very clear. Heila was to answer any questions she felt that Isabell was ready to hear the answers to, and she was to be as objective and truthful as possible. Heila would have



done much of that anyway, but Ashlynn had given her one additional instruction that had surprised the Willow Witch.

"She may ask about me," Ashlynn had said. "She's my friend. She's one of the only people in Blackwell City who was never overawed of my father, and when she spoke to me, she spoke to Ashlynn instead of speaking to the count's daughter."

"I treasure her friendship as much as I treasure yours," Ashlynn said. "So if she asks about me... be honest, even if I wouldn't. I hope you can be friends with her too, so don't hold back when she asks how things have been. You won't be betraying my confidence, you'll be helping me in a way that only someone who has been close to me all this time can."

Now, as Heila looked at Isabell's calm, curious presence, seeing the woman working to fit the pieces of information she had collected so far into a grander image of the truth, she understood why Ashlynn had made that request of her. Isabell, she realized, was like Sir Marcel, someone who needed to reason things out for herself from the facts instead of being told the conclusion.

Since that was the case, and because Isabell was clearly very important to Ashlynn, Heila would do her best to help the older woman understand in the hours they had before Ashlynn woke, and the topics they discussed would become much more serious.

"I can help you understand," Heila said with a warm smile. "But first, let me help you to freshen up and get something to eat as well. You're in for a treat because Georg has been expecting your arrival, and he's a great cook, even compared to the palace chefs in High Fen City..."

#### Chapter 706: Protect Her from Herself

The sitting room that Heila led Isabell to was like nothing the woman had ever seen. A crackling fire burned in a large granite hearth, filling the room with the faintest trace of cedar woodsmoke and enough warmth to forget that winter had nearly arrived outside.

The furnishings, from the plush sofas to the low table between them, were all crafted from the finest materials. Exquisite care and attention to detail had been lavished on each piece, with decorative carvings of intricate knot-like patterns on some and more organic, leaf and vine motifs on others.

The thing that truly took Isabell's breath away, however, was the sweeping view of the Vale of Mists provided by a wall of windows that was made almost entirely of glass. Not just any glass either, but large tiles of perfectly flat, perfectly clear glass that only barely distorted her view of the misty forest outside and the ancient fortress below.

"Your room faces east," Heila said, smiling as she watched the other woman stare out the window in amazement, not realizing that it was the engineering of the wall and the quality of glass that had actually captured the engineer's attention. "Sunrises are dull in the winter, but in the spring and summer, when the sun catches the mist, it's very pretty."

"And you think I'll be here come spring to watch the sun rise?" Isabell said, turning away from the window and raising an eyebrow at the diminutive witch.

"Lady Ashlynn hopes you will," Heila said politely. "And so do I. But right now, you're a guest, and a friend who is very important to her," Heila said as she strode across the room's thick, soft rug to open the doors of a large wardrobe. There were several outfits hanging there, but even with four or five changes of clothing, the wardrobe felt half empty, as if it was waiting for someone to finish moving in.

"Lady Ashlynn hated feeling like she didn't have any choices when she arrived here," Heila explained as she retrieved a pair of outfits from the wardrobe. "She felt like everything was taken away from her and she didn't have control of her life anymore."

"Ollie should arrive later today with your things, but until then, I have several options of dresses or tunics with skirts for you to choose from," Heila said as she laid out one elegant dress and another outfit that felt more practical. "And if you tell me what you'd prefer for breakfast, I'll send a message to Georg to make something special for you."

"I can see why she might have found this to be a bit much," Isabell said, crossing the room to look at the outfits that Heila had selected for her. Both were made of a soft, satin finished silk that was such a dark, inky black that Isabell wondered if the clothing had ever been washed or if it was brand new and prepared specifically for her.

The dress featured intricate silver embroidery down the sides and around the hem of the skirt. The patterns were precise and complex, and even though there was only enough embroidery to highlight the shape of the dress and break up the inky darkness of the fabric, it was clear that someone had spent hours or days on this dress alone.

The tunic and skirt felt more practical, with a few artistic touches of silver flowers embroidered along the shoulders and down one side of the skirt. Between them, Heila had selected a simple waist cinching belt of braided leather, combined with a pair of pouches and an impressive-looking silver hilted dagger.

"These are beautiful," Isabell said, picking up the knife and inspecting it briefly. She couldn't help but wonder if Ashlynn had left the elegant weapon for her in the hopes of making her feel safer here, even though the engineer was certain that the knife would be useless against a powerful witch like Heila. "The embroidery is very delicate," she added, running a finger over the neat, precise stitches that formed flowers on the tunic.

"Thank you," Heila said with a faintly rosy hue appearing on her cheeks. "I did my best."

"You did this? For me?" Isabell asked, blinking in surprise. Just how long had Ashlynn been preparing for her arrival?

"Mostly," Heila said, shuffling her hooves awkwardly under Isabell's scrutiny. "I think Ashlynn gave me the task to keep me occupied during Ollie's vigil. I, I didn't realize how nerve-wracking it must have been for her to watch over me during my trial until I was watching over Ollie for his. Having something to do, especially something that was for someone so important to her, it... It helped to keep me from fretting too much."

"You don't have to keep them after your things arrive," Heila added quickly. "Lady Ashlynn won't force anything on you. But she hopes that you'll choose to join her as an ally. I hope you will too," she added softly as she ran her fingers along the silver embroidery on the dress. "Lady Ashlynn... she needs more friends around her, and I hope... I hope that you can help the rest of us to keep her safe."

"Keep her safe?" Isabell asked, pausing as she held the tunic up against her chest as she measured the garment against her own body. "She's a powerful witch who's betrothed to an even more powerful vampire, surrounded by other witches and vampires and whole armies... What does she need to be kept safe from?"

"Herself," Heila said softly. "Even Lady Nyrielle can't protect Ashlynn from herself. But maybe, if there are enough of us who are close to her, then maybe it will be enough."

"Oh, Heila," Isabell said, setting the tunic down and kneeling on the ground next to the diminutive witch. She'd already reached out to her in exactly the same way she would have reached out to one of her own children years ago, before she caught herself, realizing she'd reacted as though the diminutive witch was a child because of her size.

Heila didn't refuse the gesture, however, and instead stepped closer, wrapping her arms around the engineer and feeling the same comfort and strength within her that she'd so often felt from her own mother.

"What is Ashlynn doing?" Isabell asked as she awkwardly returned the embrace. "What is happening that has you so worried for her?"

"She hurts," Heila said, blinking back the moisture that collected in the corners of her eyes. "What Owain did to her, what his knights did to her, and whoever betrayed her to Owain on the night of her wedding," she said with more heat in her voice than she'd intended. It was always a sore subject with the people who cared for Ashlynn, and there wasn't anyone in the Vale who didn't hate the thought of Ashlynn being married to anyone other than Lady Nyrielle.

"The things that happened to her," Heila continued after taking a deep breath and pulling back from Isabell's comforting embrace. "They're like hot irons, constantly poking her. She says it will all be fine once she puts an end to Owain's life and finds the person or people who betrayed her, but... She pushes herself so hard, and she takes on so much by herself," she said.

For a moment, Isabell was about to offer a bit of comforting, consoling advice to the clearly distraught young witch. After all, it was normal for young people Ashlynn's age to push themselves to their limits, and Ashlynn had always been someone who strived to do her best, whether it was mastering her studies or tending her gardens in Blackwell Manor.

Heila's next words, however, stilled her tongue before she could utter a word and sent a chill down the engineer's spine.

"She's nearly died three times already, and each time she comes a little bit closer to losing her life," Heila said, looking up at Isabell with a watery, grass green gaze. "Last time, we had to rush her back to the Vale to heal, and even with all her powers and the support of more than fifty trees, it still took several days for her to recover."

"Now that she's ready to go to war against the Lothians... I'm afraid she'll risk everything, just to escape the pain that even Auntie Amahle can't heal," Heila said. "So, please... can you help us keep her safe, even if we have to protect her from herself?"

#### Chapter 707: Ashlynn's Unraveling

"Can you help us keep her safe, even if we have to protect her from herself?"

Heila's anxious cry tore at Isabell's heart, tearing apart the image she'd started to rebuild in her mind of Ashlynn as a rising, powerful witch. After seeing her deal with the traitor, Darragh, last night, Isabell had been convinced that Ashlynn carried heavy scars, but that she was healing from her wounds.

War was a crucible, and people either emerged from it stronger or broken. Though if Isabell was honest with herself, even the ones who grew stronger lost things in the process... things that could never be recovered. The strength they gained from surviving their trials was never free.

In Ashlynn's case, seeing the way her eyes sparkled brightly when she talked about her vampire lover, or the praise in her voice when she spoke of her new friends and companions, it looked like she'd gained more than she'd lost. People like that, people who built lifelong bonds tested by the fires of war, gained more than they had lost, and usually found happiness after the war passed.

But from the way Heila spoke, Ashlynn hadn't emerged from her war at all. Even though she had survived Owain's attempt to murder her, even though she'd found a new home and a love that was mystical and magical...

She hadn't found victory or suffered defeat. She was still fighting, still locked in her war, even though Owain himself wasn't even aware she was alive. And as long as the fires of war still burned, she was still suffering from the heat of their flames.

"There's too much I don't know," Isabell said with a heavy sigh. "Tell me what you can and then we can talk about how I can help," she said. "But... I'm just one person. If Ashlynn is facing a crisis, then I can only help to nudge her a bit. You and Lady Nyrielle probably have a much better chance of influencing her than I do."

"That... there are limits," Heila said, looking down at her feet and trying to find the words to explain. "Before I tell you about what happened to Lady Ashlynn," she said after thinking for a few moments. "Maybe I should tell you about the Vale of Mists..."

For the next half hour, as Heila helped Isabell to freshen up and change into the dark tunic and skirts, she explained the history of the Vale from the perspective of the people who lived there. From the time before humans arrived to Cellach Lothian's slaughter of Lady Nyrielle's parents and every war since then, Isabell slowly came to understand how long the leaders in the Vale had been nursing their grudges against their human adversaries.

"So Lady Nyrielle won't rein Ashlynn in because she thinks that Ashlynn needs her vengeance in order to move on," Isabell said as she felt the weight of the Vale's history settling on her shoulders like a heavy blanket of fog that made everything harder to see clearly. "Sir Thane, Madame Zedya, Sir Marcel, Dame Sybyl... all of them joined Lady Nyrielle's cause because they were driven by powerful hurts and grudges."

"Most of them have had their revenge," Heila said as she began preparing tea for the older woman. "They think this is normal. Ignatious is different," she added with a faint blush. "He's trying to find ways to reach Ashlynn but, whenever they talk, things get wrapped up in faith and the Church, and they never really get to the heart of the matter."

"And there's no leaving it for later," Isabell said as she sipped the light, fragrant tea that Heila served her. "Owain Lothian has been pouring all of his family's wealth and power into preparing for this Holy War. Even if Ashlynn wanted to retreat to the Vale and live out a better life here than the one he would have given her, the war will come to her doorstep sooner or later."

"Do you think that Ashlynn wants to die in this war?" Isabell asked bluntly. "Is she taking these risks because she no longer values her own life? I've seen people like that before. They start giving away all of their treasures and repaying old debts because they don't expect to survive claiming their vengeance... and they're suffering so much that they don't want to survive it."

"I, I don't think so," Heila said, trembling slightly at the notion that Ashlynn might not want to survive her revenge. "She's preparing so many things for afterward... She's trying to rebuild the Vale of Mists, and she loves Lady Nyrielle. She talks to all of us about creating a life after the wars end, so I don't think she's given up hope or lost the will to live."

"But she's doing reckless things that could get her killed," Isabell observed. "She's taking on all of the risks herself. Is it because she is afraid of anyone else suffering the way she did?"

It made sense, at least to the part of Isabell's mind that could look at another person like a set of levers and gears that fit together in certain, specific ways. Ashlynn had lost as much as any war orphan that Isabell had ever known, but she also obtained tremendous power that none of the victims of war Isabell had ever seen could compare to.

If those victims had been given the powers Ashlynn received, the powers of witchcraft, the strength of becoming a Vampire's Seneschal, the military might of the Eldritch world... Isabell could imagine several of the broken women she'd met during the civil war deciding to use that power to place themselves on the Emerald Throne or at least carve out a small kingdom of their own.

A kingdom where they and the loved ones they still had would be safe from the horrors that had destroyed their own life.

"I don't know," Heila admitted. "Sometimes, I think that might be it. Other times, I think that Ashlynn is trying very hard to be the person she wants to be, and she's fighting against the parts of her that can't let go of the pain."

"She's been getting worse since we came back to the Vale," Heila added. "I think seeing everyone else come home to the Vale, everyone who reunited with their families when they got back... it reminded her that she can't see her own family. She misses her sister more than anything," Heila said. "And she hates that she can't charge into Lothian City to rescue her right away."

"Now that she's so close, she's fighting to hold herself back," Heila said softly. "But there are moments when she turns as dark and cold as Lady Nyrielle. When Ashlynn is at her best, she's like a cozy, warm blanket, and she wraps everyone up in her softness and makes them feel safe. But... but the blanket is starting to unravel and, and I don't think that even Ashlynn likes what's underneath it."

"I see," Isabell said in a very careful, very neutral tone.

During the carriage ride to meet with Ashlynn, Isabell had considered again and again how she would tell Ashlynn that it had been Jocelynn who betrayed her secret to Owain. She'd hoped to find that

Ashlynn was doing well and could understand that her sister had made the sort of petty mistake that young girls were prone to, even though it had had disastrous consequences.

Perhaps a bit naively, Isabell had thought that, since Ashlynn had survived her encounter with Owain, there was a path to reconciliation for the two sisters who clearly cared about each other a great deal. But, after watching Ashlynn execute Darragh for betraying her, the notion of the two sisters reconciling peacefully felt like a distant dream.

Unintentionally, Isabell found herself standing on the precipice of what might be the most important decision she had faced since leaving Blackwell County to come to the frontier. Should she reveal what she knew? Or keep the secret of Jocelynn's betrayal buried deep within her heart?

#### Chapter 708: A Breakfast Interlude

Isabell's musings were interrupted by a gentle knock at the door followed by the entrance of the largest man the engineer had ever seen. More shocking than his bulk, however, were the furry claws with which he carried a serving tray and the bearish face that smiled broadly when he entered her sitting room.

"Master Isabell," Heila said, standing to help take the tray from the pot bellied cook who looked like he'd come directly from the kitchens. "Let me introduce you to another of Ashlynn's good friends here. This is Georg, and he's the Master of Kitchens here."

"Master Georg," Isabell said as she struggled to suppress the bone-deep reflex to run from the 'claw demon' who came bearing her breakfast. She'd heard, of course, about the Clan of the Great Claw and that they stood head and shoulders taller than most men. She'd even noticed how the ancient fortress seemed to have been built for people who were larger than any human, with door frames that were extra wide and tall.

But hearing about the size, strength, and power of the bearish Eldritch people and being in the same room as one was a very different feeling!

"Master Isabell, I, um, I hope you don't mind that I've taken liberties to come in person," the tall chef said awkwardly as he gestured to the serving tray and two polished metal domes that covered the food underneath.



"I did exactly as you asked," he said, reaching out to pull the cover off the first plate, revealing a fairly simple and ordinary breakfast. "One boiled egg, warm bread with butter, and a slice of cooked ham," he said, listing off the components of the simple breakfast that Isabell had requested. His expression as he did, however, seemed deeply concerned.

"Is something the matter?" Isabell asked, looking at the bearish man and his drooping ears and wondering if she'd committed some kind of Eldritch sacrilege when she told Heila what she wanted for breakfast. The poor man looked like he'd been told to leave a puppy out in the rain for the night when he presented her breakfast!

"Master Isabell," Georg said as he shifted nervously from foot to foot. "I'm always delighted to make food that makes people happy. If you want something simple because it's what you prefer, then I'm happy to do that for you. But... I thought, perhaps you might not know about how food is made here in Lady Nyrielle's fortress," he said awkwardly.

"I learned from Sir Ollie and Lady Ashlynn that kitchens in human castles often cook in large batches and serve lavish meals to noblemen and women where people pick and choose from platters filled with dishes," he explained. "I thought, maybe you were trying to spare me some work by keeping your request simple."

"Are things not done that way here?" Isabell said, raising an eyebrow in surprise. "You can't mean to say that you prepare individual dishes for everyone in this entire castle! The work that would take..."

"Meals for the staff are like that," Georg admitted. "But cooking for vampires is different because they don't really need to eat to sustain themselves. Lady Nyrielle and her progeny prefer small morsels with unique flavors so they can enjoy tasting many different things without needing to gorge themselves."

"So that's why Marcel, I mean, Sir Marcel, always seemed like he was picking at his food without eating much," Isabell said as she recalled her meal with the man she hadn't known was a vampire until the night before.

"But, what does that have to do with me? I'm not a vampire and I'm really fine with a simple breakfast," she said, gesturing to the plain-looking plate with its boiled egg, bread, and cooked ham. In truth, it wasn't much different than what she would have eaten at home, though the bread looked softer and fluffier than she was accustomed to.

"But you're one of Lady Ashlynn's honored guests," Georg said, frowning slightly as he realized that the gray-haired woman didn't seem to understand what that meant in terms of her place in the ancient fortress. "I would put just as much effort into cooking for you as I would for Lady Heila, Captain Virve, or Sir Ollie," he said as he reached out to lift the dome off of a second plate.

The second plate had clearly been inspired by the first one, consisting of eggs, bread, and meat, but the similarities stopped as soon as they began.

"This is a sweet onion tart," Georg explained as he pointed at a puffed and flaky pastry topped by a golden brown onion and studded with morsels of melted, gooey cheese. "The onion is sliced thin so it shouldn't be overpowering, and the goat cheese has been aging since the spring in the cool caverns."

"The omelet is simple with butter and fresh herbs," he continued as he pointed to a pale yellow rolled omelet topped with a sprinkling of fresh dill. "And the grilled fish next to it is one of Lady Ashlynn's favorites, fresh trout from the river, grilled over hot coals and glazed in a mixture of maple syrup and dark vinegar."

"Ever since she's come here, Lady Ashlynn has asked if I can manage a fish dish for her at least every three or four days because she misses the sea. I thought, I thought you might as well," he said, lowering his ears so much that they were pressed flat against his head. "I'm sorry if it's a bit much, but..."

"But you wanted me to feel welcome," Isabell said, stepping forward to lay a hand gently on Georg's furry, muscular shoulder. "I'm sorry to have offended a fellow Master," she added with a smile that was equal parts appreciation of his craft and amazement at the softness of his golden-brown fur. "You must have thought I was looking down on you."

Instantly, Georg's ears perked up, and a bright smile formed on his face, revealing pointed teeth that looked like they could strip flesh from bone in a single bite. Yet, somehow, it was impossible to feel intimidated by the bearish chef, even when he revealed his sharp teeth and sharp claws.

"When Lady Ashlynn came here, she spent weeks in my kitchens," Georg said with a wide grin. "She was training her senses and preparing to pose as a kitchen girl, but she seemed like she enjoyed learning to cook while she was there. Sir Ollie still visits me in the kitchens to help with meals and have a chat from time to time," he said.

"I heard Lady Heila say that you're a Master Engineer," Georg continued warmly. "I don't know if you might have ideas for how my kitchen or my ovens can be made better, but I would be happy to hear your thoughts. Or, if you just want to talk to a 'fellow Master,'" he said, using Isabell's own term for him. "I'm happy to make a treat for you between meals if you need someone to talk to over a bit of pastry or a bowl of warm soup."

"I," Isabell started to say, only for her voice to catch in her throat as she saw the look of deep concern that lurked within Georg's invitation.

Heila had said it first, she realized. That Ashlynn hated the loss of control when she arrived, and that she didn't want Isabell to feel the same way she did. Now, as Georg stepped forward with his generous offer, she realized how incredibly lonely Ashlynn must have been when she arrived. Surrounded by strangers, none of whom were even human, and fighting from the beginning to strike back against Owain Lothian.

Now, just as Heila had said, the people around Ashlynn were stepping forward to give her a welcome that they hoped would be less stressful for her than the one Ashlynn had endured. From choices in her wardrobe and the way Marcel made sure she knew to pack her things for an extended stay when she left Lothian City to Georg's offer of cooking and the company of a fellow Master, the Eldritch people here were trying to smooth her journey into their world.

"Master Georg," Isabell said as she took his large, bearish hand in her own. "I'd very much enjoy the chance to spend time with you in your kitchen. I'm sure that Lady Ashlynn will have plans of her own for me, but as soon as I can make time, I promise to visit."

## Chapter 709: First Reports Arrive

While Isabell chatted with Heila and Georg, listening to both of her Eldritch hosts as they told stories about their time spent with Ashlynn while savoring both Georg's simple cooking and his more refined offerings, Ashlynn sat in a pile of cushions in the circular room at the top of her tower, enjoying a simple breakfast of her own as she prepared to face the day.

Heila's gift of a hangover potion had been like a gift from the heavenly shores, and Ashlynn promised herself that she would thank the diminutive witch properly for it as soon as she had the chance to do so. She also silently apologized to her close friend that she'd been too hungover to ask how Heila's evening had gone when she brought Ignatious home to properly meet her family.

Even though Ashlynn had only said a few words to Heila's parents at the betrothal celebration, the impression they left on her that night was good. She was certain that Ignatious had handled himself as a perfect gentleman, and even if he hadn't, his position as one of Nyrielle's progeny should have made up for any missteps or lingering fears about his past as an Inquisitor. The night had likely gone very well, but that didn't mean Ashlynn wasn't eager to hear the juicy details from her closest friend in the Vale.

Isabell's arrival, on the other hand, brought several different things to mind that she was eager to hear about, but she firmly made herself wait to press her friend for information. She had received reports from Marcel, and she was aware of many happenings in Lothian March, but the things Marcel could tell her couldn't match up with what Isabell knew.

After all, Marcel had never been able to come close to Jocelynn. He could only surmise from a distance and deduce from second-hand information. He had never spoken with her, either in Owain's presence or alone. But Isabell had, and Ashlynn wanted more than anything to ask for news of how her sister was doing.

But just as much as Ashlynn wanted to hear from Isabell, she was afraid of what the other woman might know. After all, Ashlynn was certain that Jocelynn knew who had betrayed her, and if Isabell had gained her sister's confidence, then Isabell might know as well.

The question had haunted her for months, and for months, Ashlynn had indulged in countless speculations and formed innumerable theories about who might have betrayed her and why. In the end, however, she was left with only two likely candidates... and Isabell's arrival might very well reveal which of them it had been.

She hoped that she was wrong. She wished, more than anything, that it had been someone who was a stranger to her. Someone her family trusted, perhaps, or even a random person who had glimpsed what they shouldn't while she was unaware, but Ashlynn knew how unlikely it was for such a person to gain Owain's trust.

When she took all of the unlikely options away, she was left with the only two people in her family who might have a reason to act against her... and she loved them both more than she could put into words. The thought that one of them had all but sentenced her to death was enough to freeze her heart and tie her stomach in knots so tight that it was impossible to eat.

"Mother Ashlynn," a deep, feminine voice called as Virve ascended the spiral stairs into the room atop the tower. "The first pigeons have arrived with reports from the raiding parties. Commander Bassinger

asked me to bring them to you," she said as she took a seat at the low, circular table in the center of the room.

"Would you like to hear them now?" Virve asked as she retrieved a rolled-up piece of parchment from the pouch at her waist. "Or should we wait until Ollie and Heila can join us?"

"Don't forget Hauke," Ashlynn said as she pushed thick porridge around her bowl with a wooden spoon. Virve's arrival was the perfect excuse to put off thoughts about her family, but the ghosts that haunted her refused to be shoved back into their box as easily as she wanted to, and her appetite would likely remain their captive for the rest of the morning.

"Hauke will be part of the coven once his seed arrives," Ashlynn said, placing a hand over her chest and feeling the faint pulse of magic from the most recent seed she'd placed there.

It hadn't been long since she'd presented Virve with the seed from the Ancient Oak, but time was too precious, and Ashlynn had decisively chosen the next seed she would nurture, even though she didn't yet know if the person she intended to bestow it on would accept it. The time to find that answer wasn't far off either.

"In general, we should include Hauke any time the coven gathers, and Talauia as well," Ashlynn said, taking a deep breath and trying to shake off the feeling of being surrounded by deep pits that her mind could fall into and worry endlessly. She had plenty of worries and twice as many unresolved questions and lingering doubts, but right now, she needed to focus on things that were more immediate.

"But they don't need to be here just to hear reports," she said as she managed to force her stomach to unknot itself enough to take a few sips of tea, even if it was no longer warm. "What's the news from our first raids?"

"The Mongrel Horde were the most successful," Virve said after giving Ashlynn a long, searching gaze. Clearly, her lady wasn't feeling well, but unless Ashlynn wanted to open up and share, Virve wasn't about to press. Sometimes, what a person needed most when they had troubles was a job to do, and if Ashlynn wanted to focus on the war instead of her other problems, Virve wasn't about to say that she shouldn't.

"There weren't any casualties among the horde, not even serious injuries," Virve continued as she unrolled the piece of parchment. "They met with scattered resistance in the Dunn Hamlets. They killed three of the Dunn's captains, one each in Kitcher's Fell, Sooner's Reach, and Horse Thief Lake. Otherwise, they only killed a few watchmen, shepherds, or ranchers. All of them report that they left living witnesses who saw them clearly enough to describe them."

That last bit was one of the most important parts of Ashlynn's plan to provoke Marquis Bors or Owain into rallying the eastern barons to join the brewing conflict. It wasn't enough to execute successful raids. They needed to give Baron Dunn something to truly be afraid of, and the twisted figures of the Mongrel Horde would be the stuff of nightmares to demon-fearing commoners.

"How about their main mission?" Ashlynn asked as she stood to prepare a fresh pot of tea. "Were they able to return with livestock?"

"Much more than you might think," Virve said as she checked over the notes from the messenger birds. The messages the birds carried were very short, but Commander Bassinger had fleshed out many of the details before sending the report over to Ashlynn.

"Evidently, Commander Tausau's Mongrels have practiced a form of sorcery that makes beasts passive and docile," Virve explained. "They used to use it so they could sneak past watch animals and herds to prey on farmers and common folk since High Lord Hamdi forced them to 'hunt' the people they fed from. But the sorcery they used worked well for keeping herds and flocks quiet and compliant while they led them away from farms."

"The numbers are all here," Virve said, tapping the roll of parchment with a claw. "But they took more than a hundred head of cattle, more than twice that of sheep, and a surprising number of egg-laying hens that they stuffed into sacks to carry away."

"That's good to hear," Ashlynn said, pouring a cup of fresh tea for herself and another one for Virve before she sat back down and asked the question that had been gnawing at her since Virve started her report by focusing on the Mongrel Horde. "You said the Horde did well. How about the raiders attacking the market-day caravans in Hanrahan Barony? The gladiators and the woodsmen?"

"They suffered losses," Virve said bluntly, not bothering to sugar coat the news at all. "But they also achieved a unique success, or at least, they've come very close to achieving it," she added. "There's something that one of the captains has asked for Lady Heila's help with..."

## Chapter 710: Making Adjustments (Part One)

Perhaps Virve could sense the gloom hanging over Ashlynn when she delivered her report. Perhaps that was why, as soon as she mentioned that there had been losses, she quickly mentioned that there had also been a unique success. But Ashlynn was unwilling to indulge herself in the opportunity to ignore pain by searching for joy.

"Start with the losses," she said as she swallowed heavily, wishing that her stomach would unknot itself and the feeling of impending dread would go back to whatever hole it had crawled out from. "How bad was it?"

"The worst losses came from the gladiators who followed Lady Heila," Virve said with a disparaging snort. She'd never approved of them as 'warriors' from the day Jacques had taken Heila to watch him fight an exhibition match in an arena that allowed wealthy patrons to select their own opponents. She had gained a small measure of respect for them after watching Heila's matches in the larger arena, but she still looked down on the people who treated combat as a sport.

"Some of them understand heavy armor and are accustomed to fighting in it," Virve explained. "For others, people who fought shirtless to display their physiques to the crowd or with minimal armor to increase their glory as 'fearless' champions, we offered to equip them the same way our own soldiers are equipped."

"I remember," Ashlynn said as she made another attempt to eat her cold porridge. Unfortunately, cooling had only made it thicker and less palatable, and she gave up before her spoon had made it half way to her mouth. "We spent a considerable sum in High Fen City to have armorers produce equipment for them. I take it that the lack of familiarity contributed to their problems?"

When Thane started teaching her how to fight with a sword, she'd worn armor out of a necessity to protect herself during their aggressive sparring sessions. It had also helped to strengthen her body during her blossoming period as she labored under the weight of tens of pounds of quilted fabric and heavy chainmail.

Ashlynn knew that fighting in armor was a skill of its own, and that it took time to gain proficiency with the heavier forms of armor that knights wore. That was part of the reason why she only invested in high quality, quilted gambesons for most soldiers. The armor would cushion blows from clubs and maces even if it couldn't prevent bruises and cracked or broken bones. It could also stop light cuts and would provide a measure of protection against arrows fired from a distance.

Combined with a sturdy helm and armored gauntlets to protect the hands, her soldiers wouldn't be invulnerable by any means, but it would make them significantly more difficult to seriously injure. But had she been wrong about how easy it would be to adapt to light armor? Was even that too much for the irregular fighters to master quickly?

"Worse than lack of familiarity," Virve said with a dark scowl. "Some of them left their armor behind entirely. Others wore only some of it. Of the eighty men who participated in this morning's raids, fourteen are dead, nine among the gladiators and five of the woodsmen or hunters who joined Commander Tausau's Third Army of irregular fighters."

The losses were staggering. Nearly one in five men had died in what should have been the easiest, safest battles of the entire war. They were striking at a completely unprepared enemy with overwhelming advantages... and they'd still suffered heavy losses.

Clutching her spoon firmly enough that the wood began to crack, Ashlynn took a deep breath and forcefully reminded herself that she had discussed this with both Nyrielle and Thane. These were 'safe' engagements, but they were also their least experienced warriors. The gladiators were better than the hunters in many ways, but they still lacked many of the skills a soldier relied on to survive combat in the frequently chaotic maelstrom of war.

Thane had estimated that they would lose as many as half of the irregulars over the course of the war. The survivors of the first several battles would quickly become veterans and losses would diminish rapidly, but the initial battles could prove... Expensive was the word Thane had used, but Ashlynn wondered if a better word was 'cruel.'

Cruel to throw irregular fighters into the heat of war without giving them the winter to train. Cruel because she didn't want to wait out the winter... because she couldn't wait any longer.

"How many of those losses can be attributed to arrogance?" Ashlynn asked as she closed her eyes and tried to keep herself composed. But as much as she tried, she couldn't keep a trace of cold fury out of her voice as she continued to speak.

"How many of these gladiators tried to fight individual duels for their honor and glory? How many left helms behind so the 'crowd' could see their faces?" Ashlynn said hotly. "And how many of their fellows



died or suffered injuries because they couldn't trust their comrades to hold the line instead of seeking glory?"

"We don't know for sure," Virve said. "The reports from the captains are inconsistent. Some mention how their men died, others only name the deceased. But of the ones we know about, half died in ways that following orders and wearing their armor would have prevented."

"Tell Commander Tausau to pass orders to his men when the sun sets," Ashlynn said as she turned her gaze to look out the southeast-facing windows, looking in the direction of Hanrahan Barony. "The Mongrel Horde can stay in the field, but I want them to double up and attack half as many targets."

They had originally planned to rush from one side of Dunn Barony to the other, attacking as many targets as they could in the first two nights before vanishing for a few days. They wanted to provoke the Dunns into raising the alarm but when they looked for enemies to hunt, Ashlynn wanted them to find nothing but mist.

Now, however, she was willing to give up some of the gains from casting a broader net if it meant that she could preserve more of her forces for the days to come. Even though the Mongrel Horde hadn't failed yet, she didn't want to see them become drunk on their own initial success and make mistakes on the second night.

"As to the men in Hanrahan Barony, bring them all home," Ashlynn said, lowering her brows and clenching the wooden spoon in her hand firmly enough that it snapped in two. The feeling of splintered wood biting into her hand jolted her out of the inward spiral that had begun to consume her thoughts but when she next spoke, her voice was still heavy with disapproval.