

The Vampire 741

Chapter 741: The Earth Wept (Part Two)

"Why do I even care why you did what you did?"

Ashlynn's mournful cry drifted on the winds of the storm lost in the tempests of wind and rain to all but the most sensitive of ears. But to the person who loved Ashlynn the most deeply, the person who could feel an echo of Ashlynn's every anguished heartbeat within her own chest, the words were a cry that had to be answered.

"Because my darling Ashlynn is kinder and gentler than anyone deserves," Nyrielle said softly as she descended from the sky with a soft flutter of her dark, feathered wings. "Because you will suffer endlessly before you let your loved ones know even a bit of anguish," she added as she knelt in the mud beside Ashlynn, wrapping her arms around her lover and pulling her close enough to use her dark wings to shelter Ashlynn from the rain.

"No I won't," Ashlynn said, denying Nyrielle's words almost reflexively as she lashed herself with another bout of self loathing. "I forced Heila to fight to the death in the arena and I tormented Ollie with an impossible trial, and I..."

"That isn't inflicting suffering," Nyrielle interrupted gently as she stroked Ashlynn's damp hair. "That's helping your loved ones learn to face adversity. They both thank you for it and neither one of them resented you for it at the time. Don't let your pain twist your wisdom into a vision of cruelty, that isn't who you are," she said, pulling Ashlynn tightly to her chest.

For a moment, neither woman moved as the wind and rain raged around them, pattering against Nyrielle's wings loudly enough to drown out the small, choked off sobs that forced their way past Ashlynn's lips. Then, ever so slowly, the intensity of the rain began to fade, diminishing along with the fierceness of Ashlynn's cries as she drew strength from her lover's embrace.

"Why did it have to be Jocey?" Aslynn asked, turning a red, puffy eyed gaze to meet her lover's eyes. "It could have been anyone but her, even if it was my mother or father it wouldn't have felt like this so why...?"

"I don't know," Nyrielle said softly as she continued to stroke Ashlynn's hair. "You'll have to ask her yourself. At the point of a sword if you need to, or as her last words from the gallows if that's what you desire. But not tonight. Not like this."

"No, no, I can't wait," Ashlynn said, pushing back against Nyrielle with strength that would have been enough to overwhelm even a powerful knight like Sir Broll or Sir Rain but somehow still felt feeble against Nyrielle's unyielding embrace. "Let me go! I need to find her. I need to take her away from him and I need to..."

"You need to come home, my darling," Nyrielle said, placing a finger gently over Ashlynn's lips. "If you attack Owain like this, then I'm afraid that even he could overpower you. You aren't in control of yourself or your power right now," she added, as she gently turned Ashlynn's head in the direction of the burning tree. "If you truly insist, if you defy me when I sleep and run away from me again, you'll only hurt the ones who are close to you."

"Did I, did I do that?" Ashlynn asked, staring at the burning tree in horror. "Was that really because of me?"

"The energy of the world bends to the desires of a witch," Nyrielle quoted. "Didn't you tell me that? So how do you think the world responded to your desire to hurt someone who was closer to you than anyone but me? The storm you've gathered is very fierce, my darling and you nearly drove me from the skies with your fury."

"I, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," Ashlynn said, throwing her arms around Nyrielle's lithe figure and clinging to her tightly enough to crack the ribs of an ordinary person. "I never, never want to hurt you. Not even accidentally, I'm so..."

"Hush, my darling," Nyrielle whispered, placing her finger on Ashlynn's lips once again. "Come home with me. Spend the day with me and let me guard your dreams from the ghosts that would torment you while you sleep."

"Then what?" Ashlynn asked as her emerald eyes searched Nyrielle's face for the answers she so desperately needed. "I can't run away from this. I have to face it, I have to face her..."

"And you will, my love, you will," Nyrielle reassured her. "But first, you need to learn to fight through your pain. Tomorrow night, Thane will help you prepare to face Owain with a sword in hand and after that, I will entrust you to Sybyll's care," she said.

"You need to make your pain and fury serve you instead of becoming a slave to them," Nyrielle said as she collected Ashlynn's fallen hat before scooping her up off the cold, wet ground. "Thane and Sybyll can teach you how. Then, when you're ready, you can bring the fight to Owain's doorstep and take your sister back from him. Once you've heard what she has to say, you can decide what to do with her."

"What if... what if I'm not strong enough to do what needs to be done?" Ashlynn asked. "Owain will die by my hand but Jocey... I don't know if I can."

"If that's what your heart truly desires, then speak the words and I will do the deed," Nyrielle said. "But only when you're certain. But first, deal with Owain. Your mind and your heart have long been clear about him and once he's been dealt with, it won't be too late to hear the truth from your sister's lips."

"All right," Ashlynn said, sinking into Nyrielle's embrace as the vampire launched them both into the sky with a powerful flap of her dark wings. "Then, then for now, take me home," Ashlynn whispered as the power that had raged within her heart receded at last, leaving her drained and exhausted but safe in Nyrielle's arms.

Chapter 742: Demonic Storm

That night, a storm like none anyone living could recall savaged the western territories of Lothian March. From the northernmost edge of Dunn Barony to the southern edge of Hanrahan Barony and as far east as the Village of Maeril the storm stretched out its claws, leaving none unscathed.

In the small hamlet of Cal's Watch, lightning split the sky with a thunderous -CLACK- -BOOM- that shook the walls of houses, knocking dishes off shelves while more than a dozen farm dogs answered back, barking and howling at the noise of the night.

From his place atop the hamlet's watch tower, Ennis pulled his heavy wool cloak tight around his shoulders while tugging the hood down to keep it secure against the wind. The sounds of bleating sheep rose from the pens near the gate while the mooing of spooked cattle could be heard drifting on the wind from beyond the hamlet's palisade walls.

-CLACK- -BOOM-

Another peel of thunder shook the village while Ennis blinked rapidly to restore his vision after the blinding flash of light. Somewhere, out beyond the walls, he could swear he'd seen hunched figures moving through the darkness, but that was impossible, wasn't it? No one, not even horse thieves, would dare to venture out into a storm like this, would they?

-CLACK- -BOOM-

This time, the bolt of lightning fell farther away, but it was still enough for the sodden and shivering guardsman to see the shadowy figures of cows, clustering together in a low hollow that was somewhat sheltered from the winds. No strange shapes, no men skulking in the night, just cows, driven to seek what shelter could be found in their pasture.

In the morning, when the ranchers returned to survey the damage from the storm, they would find several broken fences and more than half their herds of cattle had run off during the night. Only Ennis, the lone watchmen with the misfortune to stand guard during the storm, thought anything different might have happened.

At the time, no one believed him when he spoke of shadowy figures moving in the night. Even his wife questioned whether he'd truly seen something or if he'd imagined it, especially when she found out he'd taken a bottle of strong wine up to the tower with him, even if he protested that he only took a few sips to ward off the chill of the night.

It wouldn't be until days later, when word of demon attacks at Kitcher's Fell and other hamlets reached them, and days of searching for the missing livestock yielded no results that they would come to believe.

"It was a storm sent by demons to conceal their wicked deeds," one rancher insisted.

"No, it was a blessing, a gift from the Holy Lord of Light to keep us all indoors while the demons attacked our herds," another countered. "If we'd been out there with the animals, we'd have been slaughtered like the soldiers in Kitcher's Fell!"

No one in the tiny hamlet could agree on the providence of the storm, but one thing they all realized was that the storm and the demons had come together, and they were lucky to have survived the night with nothing more than the loss of half their herds.

Elsewhere in Lothian March on the night of the storm, the unnatural tempest that had terrorized Cal's Watch showed no mercy as it swept across the frontier territories, its fury growing rather than diminishing as it raged through the night.

To the south, in Hanrahan Town, fierce winds buffeted Baron Hanrahan's stone fortress but they did little to disturb the sumptuous meal of roasted goose and autumn squash that he shared with his son Bastian and the knights who had arrived the day before with their autumn tithes on their way to the markets in Lothian City.

The people of Hanrahan Town, however, fared much worse as the intense winds ripped large swathes of thatch from their roofs, as if the hand of a giant demon had reached out to tear holes in their homes before flooding them with torrential rains. All across the town, some of the common folk hunkered down, placing buckets and pots under the holes or leaks in their roofs, while others ventured out into the wind and the rain, risking a fall from the top of their homes in order to save their homes from the downpour.

The following morning, when the light of day shone upon the small frontier town, Baron Hanrahan surveyed the damage from atop one of his fortress towers. Straw and thatch filled the streets, clogging the drains and flooding entire neighborhoods in water that stood several inches deep.

"Are you thinking about that Engineer, Father?" Bastian asked as he stood beside his father, wondering whether or not she'd been right that they should have had the people replace their thatched roofs with tiles. But even if they had, could the city drains have handled so much water all at once? Or would they have only averted one disaster to suffer another?

"That arrogant bitch?" Ian Hanrahan snarled. "No, I wasn't thinking about her at all. But can you imagine what would have happened if we listened to her? Instead of soft thatch in the streets, it would be shards of shattered tiles everywhere, and who knows how many injuries or even deaths. Don't waste your time pondering an arrogant woman's words."

"If she were here now, I'm sure she'd be shaking her finger under our noses and telling us how foolish we were without ever admitting the damage her nonsense could have caused," he said, crossing his arms over the swell of his belly as if to say that the topic was closed.

"No, instead of wasting time on that woman's nonsense," Baron Hanrahan continued. "I was thinking that we're lucky that the autumn tithes that had already arrived are safe in the fortress storehouses. Still, this is an opportunity, son," the baron said, clapping an arm around his son's shoulders.

"We'll report the storm damage to the Marquis and tell him that we've lost much of this year's tithe," he explained. "As soon as Sir Carwyn arrives with the tithe from Raek and Sir Agos brings the tithe from Yorund, instruct Steward Brun to withhold three parts in twenty instead of one. If the knights complain, tell them that we need their surplus to replenish our stores after the storm and that we will remember their support when their next tithe is due."

"So you intend to reduce their tithe in the spring and summer?" Bastian asked, blinking in surprise at his father's generosity.

"Of course not," the balding baron snorted. "I said we'd remember it, not that we'd repay them for it! You need to learn to use your words carefully, son," he said as he turned away from the sight of his damaged town.

His people weren't soft, weaklings like the ones who lived pampered lives in Blackwell County and the other long-settled territories. They were men of the frontier who knew how to endure hardship. Even with more than half the homes damaged by the storm, he was certain that his people would recover well before the first snows of winter fell.

So, rather than concerning himself with the damage of the storm, Baron Hanrahan set his mind to finding ways he could benefit from the bout of misfortune...

Chapter 743: Captive Knights (Part One)

In the morning, after a fitful, sleepless night spent listening to the howling winds and furious thunder of what may have been the worst storm he'd ever seen, Hugo Hanrahan splashed cold water on his face and confronted the undeniable fact that everything that had happened to him since leaving Maeril Village was real.

He really had met Lady Ashlynn in the middle of the forest near a shallow grave where Owain's men had buried her just half a year ago. He really had sat on a tribunal in those very same woods and he'd watched helplessly as Lady Ashlynn used Sir Rain's own sword to execute a traitor.

But those things had only been a precursor to the real horror he found himself in. He and Sir Rain had been invited to become 'guests' of Lady Ashlynn in the heart of the demon's territory. Invited by a woman who turned out to be a great witch like the infamous Evil Queen who nearly destroyed the Kingdom of Gaal in its infancy.

Now, as he stood in the small washroom that he shared with Sir Rain, Hugo wished more than anything that he'd never listened to his father when Baron Hanrahan told him that there was an 'opportunity' to serve at Owain's side now that he needed a new steward. When Owain lost both his personal guards and his steward in such a short period of time, there had been a few whispers that the young lord was cursed, but Hugo had dismissed that as the superstitious nonsense of people who had never been educated.

It was only after finding himself here, in the heart of the demon's fortress, that he understood that curses were very real and anyone who had ever been close to Owain was bound to suffer greatly.

Stepping outside the washroom, Hugo found Sir Rain slumped on one of the plush sofas in the sitting room that their bed chambers were connected to. It was clear that their quarters had been designed to accommodate larger groups, with four bed-chambers and a wash room adjoining a shared sitting and dining room, but in deference to their station, the pair of knights had been given the complete suite to themselves.

"Took you long enough," Sir Rain grouched from the sofa. "I thought you might have fallen in."

"I, I'm sorry," the hawk-nosed Steward said as he slumped into an overstuffed armchair. "I just... I'm struggling to believe that this is all real. Look at this place," he said, gesturing to the intricately carved wooden table, the well-made chairs and rugs, and the elegant tapestries hung on the walls. "This is supposed to be a demon castle, isn't it? But even Lord Owain doesn't live so well..."

"Hey, watch it!" Rain snapped, sitting up straighter on the sofa. "You think the demons don't know how to beguile people? They might be savages, but they're cunning too. We know they're primitives who dig their homes into the earth or spend their lives roving from place to place because they can't even figure out how to stack stones on top of each other to build a home," he said, thinking about the nomadic demons who ruled the Southern Steppe.

"We know they aren't really like this," he insisted. "So all of this, it's just a trap to make us lower our guard. Especially around those witches! So don't you dare fall for it," Rain said sharply. "You're a spineless coward at the best of times and half useless in a fight, but right now, you and I, we're all alone here, so you have to pull yourself together if we're going to resist these demons!"

"Resist?" Hugo laughed mirthlessly. "You think there's a way to resist this? You didn't see what this place looked like when we arrived because they had to carry you here. And you're lucky, you know," he added. "Sir Ollie insisted that you be carried. That witch woman, the one he called 'Virve', wanted to drag you by your feet if you didn't wake up."

"Hey, there's no need to..." Rain started to say, ready to berate the weaker man for mentioning the shameful way he'd fainted under the pressure of the demon witch's stare. A sharp knock at the door, however, spared him from having to defend his reputation.

"Sir Rain," a surprised but clearly excited voice called as soon as the door opened. "And Lord Hanrahan! Thank the Lord of Light. You're both here," a handsome, brown-haired individual said as he walked into the room, kneeling as soon as he laid eyes on Hugo.

The man's plain white tunic and simple brown breeches looked well-made, but they hung on the young knight's frame in a way that suggested they had been tailored for someone else. His bearing and his strong features, however, were something that neither man could mistake, especially when they'd seen him so recently.

"Sir Carwyn?" Hugo asked, standing up and staring in shock at encountering a familiar face in this demon-infested place. "What are you doing here?"

"You see? I told you that you had companions waiting for you," a short, horned woman wearing an elegant dress and a wide-brimmed witch's hat said as she followed Sir Carwyn into the room. "Your things will be brought to you once they've been cleaned. Well, everything except your weapons and armor, those were claimed as prizes by Captain Barsali. If you want them back, you'll have to come to an agreement with him."

"I, I understand," Carwyn said awkwardly as he rose to his feet and bowed at the diminutive witch. "Thank you, for your kindness, Lady Heila," he said awkwardly. "Without you, I might not have survived the night."

"It's good that you understand that," Heila said curtly. "But remember that I healed you because Captain Barsali was impressed by your courage and because Lady Ashlynn didn't want to see you suffer since, unlike some others, you neither served her husband or conspired against her."

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll allow the three of you some time to become reacquainted," Heila said as she turned to leave. "Sir Ollie will be here shortly to prepare a meal for you. We have some experience with humans who refuse to eat after they arrive," she said in a warning tone. "I hope you won't put yourselves through that unpleasantness. It always ends the same way, and the only person who suffers for it is you."

"We understand," Carwyn said awkwardly as he flexed his hand and shoulder, reminding himself that just a few hours ago, when they arrived at the fortress in the small hours of the morning, he hadn't been able to feel or move his fingers, much less move his legs. Already, these 'demons' had shown him great kindness in healing his wounds.

To refuse a meal would only have been insulting their generous treatment of a prisoner, but then, it wasn't surprising to learn that there were people who refused to eat 'demon food.'

"You, um, you mentioned a 'Sir Ollie,' Carwyn said awkwardly before the diminutive witch could leave. "Is he another of the serpent-knights who attacked my caravan? Or is he, um, a person with horns, like you?"

"Neither," Sir Rain said in a dark tone from the sofa. "He's human, or at least he used to be. Now, he's a witch, and if he's coming to cook for us, then we might as well just starve. After what he did to our men, there's no way I'm touching the food here!"

Chapter 744: Captive Knights (Part Two)

"You have that option," Heila said curtly when Sir Rain declared that he wouldn't touch Ollie's cooking. "And in three or four days, when you're too weak to stand and lying in your own filth because of it, we'll still send a nursemaid to care for you because Lady Ashlynn hasn't commanded your death."

"Until she does," Heila said, "you're our guest and you'll be treated like one," she finished, closing the door and leaving the knights alone before any of them could respond to her.

For a moment, silence hung awkwardly in the air as everyone stared at the door as if they were listening to the sounds of Heila's cloven hooves on the stone floors and waiting for the sounds of her presence to fade away before any of them spoke.

"I'm sorry, my lord," Carwyn said, turning back to Hugo Hanrahan and lowering his head. "I failed you and your father. The demons took my autumn tithe and everything else we were planning to bring to market, and they killed or captured all of my soldiers. As your vassal, I've failed in my duties," he said formally, lowering himself to one knee. "You can punish me as you see fit."

"None, none of that," Hugo said awkwardly as he rushed over to the young knight and helped him to stand. "We're all prisoners here. Do you think we would have fared any better if we fought back? These demons and witches... they're just, just too terrifying."

"Did you at least manage to take a few of them with you?" Sir Rain said from the sofa. "Baron Hanrahan might forgive you if you took a few trophies before you were captured."

"Just one," Carwynn admitted, shaking his shame when he thought about how poorly he'd performed in the battle. "I'm sure Sir Rain felled many more than I did before my lords were taken prisoner."

"Not at all," Hugo said with a slight smile as he watched his frequent tormentor squirm in discomfort. "The only time his sword drew blood was when Lady Ashlynn used it to execute a traitor. The first demon he saw, Sir Rain fainted dead away."

"Demon Witch!" Rain shouted, jumping to his feet as his face turned a brilliant shade of red. "Not just any demon, a claw demon and a witch. And what else was I supposed to do? She climbed into the carriage with us!"

The instant Rain started shouting, Sir Carwyn moved to place himself between Sir Hugo and the crimson-faced Sir Rain, his hand dropping instinctively to his waist before his mind caught up and he remembered that he'd lost his weapons when he was taken prisoner.

Still, even if Sir Rain was the son of Baron Aleese, he wasn't about to let the man berate his lord's son like this without taking a stand.

"All right, all right," Hugo said in hurried, placating tones. "Sir Carwyn, it's fine. Sir Rain and I are old friends, you don't need to be bothered by his hot words. Instead, I'd like to hear what happened to you and your men," he said, guiding the young knight to the room's dining table and gesturing for him to take a seat.

"I'm trying to understand what's happening, but I'm still missing a lot of information," Hugo explained as he took his own seat. "Can you help me to fill in the blanks?"

"Of course," Carwyn said. "It happened when we were a few hours away from my village..." he began, before slowly recounting the story of what had happened, including his strange duel with the serpentine demon-knight that Lady Heila referred to as Captain Barsali.

Throughout the entire explanation, Hugo sat patiently, asking questions to clarify and taking copious mental notes to understand what had happened to his father's vassal. By the end, what he'd heard deeply concerned him.

"Have you ever heard of anything like this, Sir Rain? Or seen it at the southern border?" Hugo asked. "Demons wearing armor like knights... if they're learning from us, and learning to fight like we do," he said, allowing his voice to trail off as soon as the implications were clear.

One of the greatest advantages the Kingdom of Gaal enjoyed in the fight against demons was its ability to field superior numbers, tightly coordinated under the command of heavily armored knights. While casualties among common soldiers might grow to stomach-churning numbers, the strength of a knight's armor and his superior position atop a mount with the ability to dash across the battlefield to convey orders or reinforce allies were all critical to the success of the kingdom's forces.

Now, if the demons were starting to fight like humans, with heavily armored knights of their own, combined with the power of a human witch and her coven... Perhaps more than just the Lothian March was in danger, and nothing short of the Church launching a Crusade could save the kingdom.

"I've never seen anything like a knight among the horse demons," Rain said, frowning at the way Hugo was acting like he was somehow suddenly in command. Just because the only other prisoner was one of Baron Hanrahan's vassals, the balance of power between them had shifted subtly, and Rain didn't like it one bit. "But these serpent demons can't ride horses. So what if they're heavily armored? Ride them down with lances and be done with it."

"That's a good way to lose a horse, Sir Rain," Carwyn countered. "Even though this 'Captain Barsali' didn't have feet or pike to set in the ground when I charged, I might as well have been charging directly onto the point of a pike, and for all it wore heavy armor, it moved with the speed of a snake. Truthfully, I've never heard of a demon so terrifying."

"So what are we supposed to do about it, Young Lord Hugo?" Rain jeered from the sofa, emphasizing the Steward's title. "Do we fight our way free of this mess? Become spies and try to escape like that Darragh fellow? Or give up, and wait out whatever it is the demons and witches have in mind for the march?"

"Because one way or another," Rain said, folding his arms over his chest. "When this is all over, Lord Owain will call us to count for whatever we've done. And I for one don't intend to place my neck in a hangman's noose at the end of all this!"

"Right now, we wait," Hugo said, refusing to rise to Sir Rain's bait. "Sir Ollie has treated us well so far. Let's find out what he has in mind when he comes to make a meal. I don't know about you, Sir Carwyn," he added, turning away from the belligerent Sir Rain to face the other knight. "But I think better on a full stomach, and I don't intend to make any decisions until I know more than I do now."

Chapter 745: Fellow Knights

Hugo and the other captive knights didn't have to wait long before a polite knock sounded at the door, followed by a dapper and refreshed looking Sir Ollie carrying a basket loaded with ingredients.

"Gentlemen, I hope you're hungry," Ollie said with a bright, guileless smile. "I know that some of you had a rough time of it last night so I brought plenty," he added, lifting up the overflowing basket as if to emphasize his words.

"Like I'd eat anything you put in front of us after you poisoned our men," Sir Rain spat. "Goes to show that you can dress a kitchen-boy up like a knight but that won't give him the common sense that the Lord of Light gave to squires and pages."

"Sir Rain," Carwyn said, frowning at the belligerent knight. "Remember that we're guests here."

"It's fine," Ollie said, raising a hand and shaking his head. "Sir Rain and Sir Hugo have every reason to mistrust me," he continued, setting the basket on the table and beginning to unpack it, laying fresh

carrots and onions, thick smoked bacon, close to a dozen hen's eggs and many more ingredients on the table.

"It's true that I poisoned the food we fed to their men the other night," Ollie explained. "The potion was simple, it caused no harm other than putting the men to sleep until we could bring them here, but it was still an underhanded and dishonest way to treat your men."

Ollie had agreed with the plan because it meant they wouldn't have to risk a fight. Between himself, Lady Ashlynn and Sir Marcell, they could have overpowered Owain's men easily. The risk that someone would get hurt in the process, especially people who were effectively bystanders like the Guild Masters or even Ollie's men from the village.

No, it had been safer for everyone to do things they way they had and the outcome likely wouldn't have been any different, but he could understand Sir Rain's resentment.

"This is exactly why I offered to come cook for you, here, in your own chambers, instead of asking Georg to prepare you one of his special meals," Ollie explained. "Maybe in time, you'll be willing to taste real Eldritch cooking prepared by a genuine master, but until then, I hope we can at least break bread together as knights. The rest can come later."

"You don't mind if we inspect your ingredients for poison, do you?" Hugo asked, looking carefully over the meat, eggs, vegetables and seasonings that Ollie had brought along. He didn't know anything about being a poison taster and he had no idea how they were supposed to check even if the flame-haired young knight agreed, but he didn't know how else he should proceed.

Between Sir Rain's belligerence and Sir Carwynn constantly looking at him for direction, the poor Steward felt like he had to do something to take control of the conversation. Something that indicated they wouldn't just roll over and accept what Ollie said as truth but at the same time, refrained from insulting their powerful host. After all, even if Sir Ollie said that he wanted this to be a meal together as knights, Hugo hadn't forgotten that the other man was also the Cypress Witch.

"Of course I don't mind," Ollie said warmly as he began to open jars, sliding them across the table one at a time. "This one is salt," he said, offering it up to Hugo to inspect and taste if he wished. "And this one is ground longpepper," he explained.

As Ollie presented each ingredient, Hugo made a show of carefully examining it. Some things, he simply looked at, holding it up to the light streaming in through the window as if he was looking for discolorations. Other things, those that were familiar to him like salt and longpepper, he pinched between his fingers before touching a tiny portion to his tongue.

At first, he felt like something of a fool doing it, but Sir Carwyn seemed to be visibly relieved to see his scholarly lord taking the lead in ensuring the safety of Sir Ollie's ingredients and the young knight who had come to cook for them didn't seem to take any offense at his actions. Whether that was because the young man accepted them as valid or he chose to protect Hugo's dignity, the scholarly knight didn't know, but he was thankful either way.

Under Ollie's patient explanations, the tension in the room slowly melted and by the time the scent of bacon sizzling on a pan hanging over the hearth filled the room, even Sir Rain's reticence began to melt. It wasn't until Ollie had piled up several plates of food and set them all on the table, however, that anyone said more than a few words to ask about his ingredients under the auspices of 'inspecting them for poison.'

"You were once a cook in Lord Owain's kitchens, weren't you?" Hugo asked delicately. Having only entered Owain's service after the incident where his predecessor died and Ollie fled the summer villa, neither he nor Sir Rain had any real memory of Ollie but the thin connection gave him something to latch onto in this strange, demonic fortress.

"Is this the sort of food you'd cook for Lord Owain?" Hugo asked, pointing at a grilled pancake formed of mashed potatoes and carrots blended with a copious amount of spices before it was fried in bacon fat. "It looks, unusual."

"This one is a bit of an experiment," Ollie admitted as he took a bite of his own potato pancake. "I learned it just recently from a member of the Scaled Clan visiting from High Fen City. It's better with the herb sauce they make but it's still very good on its own."

"I'll stick to normal food," Sir Rain said stubbornly, pushing the potato pancake to the side and reaching to the center of the table to dish himself an extra portion of bacon and soft scrambled eggs. "You're not going to trick me by serving up one of your witch's brews disguised as food."

"Sir Rain," Ollie said with a heavy sigh, holding up a hand before either of the other knights could intervene. He'd promised Ashlynn that he would take care of these men and more than that, he'd told

Marcel that he would get the answers from them that the vampire wanted without resorting to more forceful means.

Right now, Ashlynn was hurting and there was absolutely nothing Ollie could do to help her. But he could do this. He could tend to the captives they'd taken and he could get her the information she would need to plan the next stages of the war. When she was ready for it, he would show her that she didn't have to take so much on her own shoulders because she could rely on him and the rest of the coven in her absence.

But right now, Sir Rain's constant badgering and petty snipes were spoiling both the mood and his efforts and he was out of patience for it.

"Sir Rain, I've done my best to be polite," Ollie said, staring at the man with frigid eyes. "I've made allowances for the fact that you're captives here and you were deceived along the way. I've even done my best to treat you as your own man instead of an extension of Lord Owain's wickedness."

"But at some point, enough is enough," Ollie said as he rose to his feet. Taking a deep breath, he fought to keep himself calm as he uttered the words Thane had insisted he learn, even though he'd never thought he'd have a reason to use them.

"A knight can endure countless blows to his body, but his honor cannot be impugned," Ollie said formally. "Since you cannot accept my courtesy or hospitality in good faith and insist that I'm scheming against you, then prove your accusation by strength of arms or still your tongue."

"A duel?" Sir Rain said, nearly choking on his eggs as he stared at Ollie in shock. "You're challenging me to a duel of honor? You really are just a kitchen-boy with his head stuffed full of nonsense, aren't you?"

"Accept or refuse," Ollie said firmly, refusing to back down from the challenge now that he'd issued it. His heart thundered in his chest and his palms were slick with sweat but he held his ground, standing tall and proud on the spot where he'd issued his challenge.

"Well, since you're offering up your own head," Sir Rain said with a mocking sneer. "How can I refuse to claim it?"

Chapter 746: A Knight's First and Final Weapon

As much as Ollie wanted to settle things quickly and quietly, there were some things that were unavoidable. The room that the captive knights stayed in was under constant guard and while they had luxurious quarters, they were still prisoners. If Ollie wanted to take them to a courtyard to settle matters with Sir Rain, he needed to ensure that there were sufficient guards to watch over the men while he focused on his duel.

While Harrod was happy to fetch more men to stand guard for Sir Ollie, the young knight had failed to give any instructions about keeping things quiet. Because of his oversight, by the time Ollie and the captive knights arrived in a flagstone yard that Nyrielle's army used for training, the entire square was packed with soldiers who had come to watch. And from the sounds of the chatter when they arrived, the men were already placing bets, though the form of the bets seemed a bit odd.

"Two silver pennies says Sir Ollie ends it on the first blow," one man said, holding up two clawed fingers.

"Four silver tails says Sir Ollie kills the fool outright," another man added, jostling his way forward.

"I've got a silver penny that says the human won't even scratch Sir Ollie before the duel ends..."

The bets were as varied as the soldiers placing them, but no one seemed to have two bits of silver to rub together to wager that Ollie would lose.

"Where are the weapons, kitchen boy?" Sir Rain said, looking around the square and frowning. "Don't tell me that we're going to fight with those padded wooden sticks like children?"

"A knight's first weapon is his last weapon," Ollie said, taking a fighting stance in the middle of the square and holding up his fists. "When swords lay broken and armor torn asunder, a knight will fight with his bare hands until there is no life left in his body," he quoted. "Didn't you learn this from your teachers?"

"Foolish nonsense from men who have never known battle," Sir Rain spat as he squared off against Ollie, raising his own fists in a fighting stance that was more appropriate to brawling in bars than fighting a duel. "Did you learn that from Master Isabell's poet husband? It seems the sort of thing he'd say."

"I learned it from Lord General Thane," Ollie said, speaking loudly enough for the crowd to hear his words over the steady patter of the winter rain. "A knight who serves his lord or lady should be ready to defend them at all times, whether he is armed or not. You're Lord Owain's personal guard aren't you?"

"So what of it?" Sir Rain said. "You think I walk about unarmed when I'm protecting Lord Owain? You think yourself a knight but what kind of knight would ever be caught without his weapons? If you want to fight like knights, return my sword to me or fetch me another one. Then we'll see who the real knight is!"

"You don't understand," Ollie said. "You're Lord Owain's personal guard. My Lady killed your predecessor and if she wants your life, she'll come for it herself. I will not take your life today because it doesn't belong to me. But I will teach you a lesson about manners and how to behave like a knight."

"Damn it," Sir Rain hissed beneath his breath. He'd been hoping for a chance to get his weapons back, even if he couldn't get his armor. If he had a sword, he could kill a soldier and take their armor so long as they were close in size, but without a weapon, what was he supposed to do? How could he use this moment to fight his way out of this demon infested nightmare?

"Fine," Sir Rain said when he realized there was likely nothing that he could do to escape. "But no witchcraft! On your honor as a knight, Sir Ollie," he said, twisting the word 'sir' in his mouth until it sounded like an insult instead of an honorific.

"Of course, no witchcraft," Ollie agreed before scanning the crowd. Harrod stood close by Sir Hugo and Sir Carwyn but both men looked incredibly uncomfortable surrounded by the Eldritch soldiers of Lady Nyrielle's army. It didn't help that the men were excited, cheering and shouting to place wagers on the outcome of the duel.

What must this look like, Ollie wondered, to the men who had been born and raised to be proper knights? Would they look down on this as a savage spectacle? Would they think less of him, and by extension, Lady Ashlynn because of this? All because he couldn't hold it in when Sir Rain poked and prodded at him.

But whatever the two knights thought, he realized, Ashlynn wouldn't care. She would fight when she had to, she would stand up for her people if they needed her to, but she would be prouder of the fact that Ollie was standing up for himself. Once he realized that, everything else that weighed on his mind became much, much lighter and his path out of this moment became clearer.

"Sir Carwyn," Ollie shouted. "No one here is truly neutral but you are the least involved. Will you stand as witness and arbiter of our duel?"

"Me?" the captive knight said, blinking in surprise and pointing at himself as if there might be some other Sir Carwyn in the training yard. "I'm your prisoner. Why not one of these other men?"

"Because they aren't knights," Ollie said with a trace of a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. "But you are. And I heard that you fought an honorable duel with Captain Barsali," he added. "Since he called you an honorable champion and a respected foe, I'm willing to put my trust in you to keep matters fair."

"You say that," Carwyn said, striding forward from the crowd. "But if you break the rules and use witchcraft, what could I do to stop you? I'm not much of an arbiter if I can't break up the fight."

"Just say the word," Ollie said, locking eyes with Harrod through the rain. "The men here will pull me back if need be. But you're the one who decides when matters end."

"Fair enough, Sir Olle," Carwyn said, giving the young man a strange look. In his first encounter with demons, Captain Barsali had stopped the fight short of slaughtering his men because he demanded a duel. When he'd won, rather than slaughtering Carwyn's men, he'd brought them back to this fortress to receive healing and care. Carwyn himself wouldn't be walking now if not for the actions of the witch, Heila.

Now, for the second time, he was watching a demon, a witch who had once been human, insisting on a fair fight between knights. That same witch even ordered his men to restrain him if Carwyn judged the fight unfair.

Just what kind of world was this? The captive knight briefly wondered if he'd fallen into a bizarre world where everything he knew had been turned upside down. Sir Rain was illtempered and uncouth, hardly reflecting the ideals of his station. At the same time, the demons and witches treated him with the greatest respect and courtesy. Just what was going on here?

But no matter how much the strange situation gnawed at his mind, he forced himself to focus on the task at hand. Stepping forward, he placed a hand on each of the men's raised fists, looking from Ollie's

pale eyes to Sir Rain's dark gaze and then out over the crowd, ensuring that no one would interfere the moment he said the word.

Finally, after a deep breath, he released both men's hands and leaped backward, shouting at the top of his lungs.

"Fight!"

Chapter 747: A Knight's Pride (Part One)

As soon as Sir Carwyn gave the word, Rain charged in, rushing forward in a display of strength and power as he sought to overwhelm the younger, less experienced Ollie with powerful punches to the head.

To the average onlooker, Sir Rain moved like an experienced brawler, throwing two rapid punches almost directly at Ollie's nose before following up with a powerful hook to his temple. It was a lightning quick move filled with explosive power that had likely ended a number of bar fights in a single exchange.

To Ollie's eyes, however, Sir Rain's punches felt ordinary and slow. Compared to practicing with Sir Thane or learning how to move his hands quickly with knives from Sir Marcel, Sir Rain's punches could, at best, be called a little quick.

But even though his punches looked fast and strong, his movements held no guile or subterfuge. From the moment he raised his shoulder to punch, Ollie could see the movement and quickly stepped out of the way, slapping the burly knight's punches aside before they could come close to hitting him.

"Coward," Rain spat as Ollie ducked out of the way of another heavy punch. "Sissy. Are you here to fight or are you here to dance?" he taunted.

At this point, however, Ollie felt like he had a good understanding of his opponent's movements. Just as Marcel had taught him, a knife fighter had to get in close and exploit openings and weaknesses if he was going to cut or stab something vital. Until he was sure he could land a blow, he wouldn't make a move.

Sir Thane had taught him differently, including teaching Ollie how to take a blow in order to land one of his own. A knight should trust his armor, Thane had said, and use it to gain advantages in attack as well

as defense. Now that he had become the Cypress Witch and his body had become more durable, Ollie took Thane's lesson to heart, stepping forward the next time Sir Rain punched instead of retreating.

-SMACK-

A thick, meaty slapping sound filled the air as Ollie used his left hand to catch Sir Rain's next punch. His palm stung from the move but his fingers closed on the other man's hand like a vice, trapping it long enough for his right hand to deliver a powerful blow to the inside of Rain's forearm.

The crowd exploded in cheers but Ollie barely noticed them as he shoved Rain's hand away, stepping back and opening up the range between them again.

"Sone of a whore!" Sir Rain shouted, shaking his suddenly numb hand and desperately trying to force his fingers to curl back into a fist after they'd gone numb. Tingling pain shot up and down his arm, all the way from his elbow to the tips of his fingers, and for a moment, he couldn't do anything but move away from the young knight in the hopes there wouldn't be a follow up blow.

Ollie, however, stood there calmly, allowing the rain to soak his hair and tunic while he waited for Sir Rain to regain use of his arm.

He should have advanced on the other man. He should have put an end to it now. Marcel insisted that fights should end quickly and decisively because the longer they lasted, the more likely something would go wrong. Thane agreed with Marcel, adding that a knight should fight efficiently, winning the battle in front of himself before moving on to the next one and that 'toying' with an opponent was a sure fire way to arrive at the next battle winded and unable to fight.

But Ollie couldn't do it. Even as his mind screamed at him to end things now, even after his body had executed the technique that Thane told him would be like ripping a fang from a serpent's mouth, he couldn't bring himself to exploit his advantage after Sir Rain had pulled back.

This was a duel, a battle of honor between knights and he wanted to beat Rain fairly... he wanted to show him that he didn't have to resort to cheap and underhanded tricks in order to win.

"You really are a delusional fool, aren't you, boy?" Rain said, clenching his hand back into a fist and raising his arms to charge again. "I'll make you regret looking down on me!"

This time, Rain didn't bother with feints or anything fancy. Every punch he threw contained the full power of all of his muscles and half of his body weight as he flung himself forward like a charging, maddened bull.

Instantly, Ollie raised his forearms in front of his head and torso, crouching low as if he was hiding behind a shield, just the way Thane had taught him.

Pain flared in his forearms as they took the brunt of Sir Rain's assault, and each blow that landed sent a tingle through his arms followed by a dull ache only for the pain to flare more intensely when the next blow landed.

Opposite him, a dark grin appeared on Sir Rain's face as he finally felt himself gathering momentum. The flame haired youth may have landed a lucky blow but his refusal to follow up on his advantage would cost him everything as Rain ground him down, slowly trampling the youth the same way he would have trampled over footmen from the back of his warhorse.

The young witch might have started off with an advantage, but clearly he was far too young and far too naive to win in a real fight!

At the edge of the training yard, Hugo watched the fight with deeply conflicted feelings. He'd been Sir Rain's punching bag, and Lord Owain's, for so long now that part of him wanted to shout in joy when the young knight landed the first real blow of the duel. Finally, someone other than Lord Owain would put Rain in his place!

At the same time, the notion of rooting for his captor, a traitor to humanity and a witch no less, felt like a step too far. The lines should have been as bright and clear as day, scribed in gold polished so brightly that the Holy Lord of Light could see them from the heavens above. Sir Ollie, whatever he had once been, and whatever he might have become had he stayed in Lothian March, was a witch and a demon. He was a creature of pure evil with the power to plunge the world into darkness and chaos.

And yet, when he looked at the flame haired youth who had turtled up defensively under the fury of Sir Rain's assault, he couldn't help but wonder which of the men was the real knight, and which had become the villain of the story. Who had extended a hand and who had slapped it away?

But no matter how obvious it appeared, a pang of doubt held Hugo back. There were still too many missing pieces of the puzzle and still too much he didn't understand. On the surface, these demons appeared upright and honorable, but if half a year at Lord Owain's side had taught him anything it was that appearing upright and honorable and actually living a virtuous life were too very different things.

Chapter 748: A Knight's Pride (Part Two)

"Coward," Sir Rain mocked as he unleashed another powerful punch, aiming to circle around Ollie's guard and strike his head. As soon as he did, however, the instant he deviated from direct punches to the young knight's forearms, Ollie struck out at Sir Rain's arm, delivering a punishing blow of his own and forcing Sir Rain to back up and shake out his arm before rushing back in.

"Enough of this game, boy," Sir Rain spat as he shifted his focus, dropping low to pummel the young man's exposed stomach in the hopes of breaking his stance and knocking the wind out of him.

Still, Ollie measured his response, slapping the punches aside before delivering a pair of blows to Sir Rain's stomach and lower ribs. This time, however, as Sir Rain gasped for air, Ollie didn't step back. Instead, he stepped even closer in, raining down punch after punch on Sir Rain's chest and abdomen, as though he was pounding a sack of oats instead of a living, breathing knight.

The force of Ollie's blows stunned Sir Rain, and he struggled to draw breath or find the strength to shove the young man away from him. Finally, in a desperate bid to escape, he tucked his chin to his collar and charged forward, throwing his arms out wide in an attempt to wrestle the young knight to the ground.

For a moment, the crowd went silent as it looked like Sir Rain's desperate move might actually work, but when he slammed into Ollie, two things happened that he didn't expect. First, the young knight's feet didn't even move. Even though Sir Rain outweighed the flame-haired youth by at least one or two stone, he felt like he'd slammed into a tree instead of a man!

Second, while Ollie's feet didn't move, Sir Rain's did, sliding on the wet flagstones of the training yard and sending him crashing to the ground. Ollie barely had to touch him, shoving Rain's shoulders down as his feet began to slide in order to ensure that Rain fell too quickly to get his arms back under himself to break the fall.

-THUMP-

All across the training yard, the crowd held their breath, waiting to see if the fallen knight would rise. Ollie himself stepped back, raising his hands again in case Sir Rain made a move. After several heartbeats, however, the other man still hadn't moved a single muscle. Moreover, water pooling around his head began to turn a faint shade of pink as blood spilled from a wound to Sir Rain's head.

"Sir Ollie, victory!" Sir Carwyn shouted in a clear, ringing voice that broke the silence of the yard, unleashing a stream of wild cheers accompanied by excited shouts from those who had won a wager.

For Ollie, however, the moment felt... Hollow.

"Was he... was he really even a knight?" Ollie asked, staring at Sir Rain's unconscious figure lying unmoving on the ground. "Is this... is this really the sort of man who was good enough to protect Lord Owain?"

"I heard that Lord Owain's previous protector, Sir Tommin, has become a Templar who wields a Holy Light Blade," Sir Carwyn said as he stared down at the defeated knight, feeling similar doubts about how easily the other man had been defeated. "And I've seen Sir Rain fight from horseback in tournaments. Perhaps.... This was just the worst way for him to prove his strength."

"Maybe," Ollie said, looking down at the defeated knight before waving for Harrod and the soldiers near him to come and collect the fallen man. "But I can't help but feel like he was defeated before the fight even started. Maybe... maybe this is what he wanted. He was captured without even drawing his sword... Maybe he just needed to be able to say that he'd tried to fight back, even if he was doomed to lose."

"Sir Ollie is being generous," Hugo said as he joined the men in the center of the courtyard. "But I thank you for it. And thank you," he added, glancing at Sir Rain's unconscious figure as a group of soldiers carried him away. "For going easy on him. Even without weapons, I'm sure you could have killed him, so... thank you."

"I haven't heard that he's done anything personally to deserve death," Ollie said as he gestured for Hugo and Carwyn to join him in returning to their chambers. "Just serving Lord Owain isn't enough to earn a death sentence, so unless he's committed some kind of crime, I won't kill him."

"As for you, Sir Hugo Hanrahan," Ollie said, throwing an arm over the other man's shoulder. "Master Isabell and Sir Marcel have both said good things about you. That you're intelligent and that you think before you act. They've also said that you've been pressured unfairly by the people in Owain's inner circle."

"When the time comes," Ollie said in tones that he hoped were reassuring. "I'll do my best to speak well of you. My words may not count for much with Dame Sybyll, but I'll do what I can."

"Dame Sybyll?" Hugo asked, blinking in confusion at the title. Very few women were ever conferred with knighthood, and if there was one who was still alive, he was certain he'd have heard of her. But then, he'd never heard of Sir Ollie, so perhaps she was another member of Lady Ashlynn's coven.

"She's one of Lady Nyrielle's progeny," Ollie explained as they walked. "You would know her as the Crimson Knight of Airgead Mountain. And I'm sorry," he added in a tone that felt genuinely apologetic. "But I've already been told that your life belongs to her. So whether you live or die, it won't be up to me."

Ollie wished he had more that he could share with the scholarly knight. He seemed like a good man caught up in circumstances beyond his control. But as soon as he'd mentioned his name to Virve, she'd responded by saying that he shouldn't touch the knight until Sybyll returned because his life was already hers to claim.

Heila had said much the same thing, adding that Lady Nyrielle had recalled Dame Sybyll from Airgead Mountain to help Lady Ashlynn, but she hadn't said anything beyond that, leaving Ollie with more questions than answers.

"But if you can help me understand what Lord Owain has been up to," Ollie added as he looked into the wide, terrified eyes of the scholarly knight next to him. "Maybe she'll take that into consideration when she decides what to do with you."

In the darkness of Nyrielle's bed chamber, the Harbinger of Death's eyes fluttered open as she drew a deep, cleansing breath before exhaling the last of the cold, dead air that lay in her lungs during the day.

Next to her, Ashlynn started to move as well, stretching out her arms and legs like a cat waking from a nap in the sun. Her hair hung in knotted clumps and the ache of exhaustion clung to her body after the previous night's exertions, but at the moment, in the few breaths between asleep and awake, everything felt distant and fuzzy. It was as if the world beyond the bed she shared with Nyrielle was only a dream and this dark place was all that was real in the world.

"I'm sorry, my darling," Nyrielle said as her midnight eyes blazed in the darkness, casting a faint blueish light across the luxurious bedchamber. A heartbeat later, Ashlynn's eyes glowed a matching midnight blue as Nyrielle withdrew her power from her lover's mind.

"What, what happened?" Ashlynn asked, clutching her head as the events of the previous night suddenly became much clearer in her mind. Isabell, her outburst in her sitting room, the long walk through the forest at night in the middle of a furious rainstorm... all of it came back to her in a flood, as if Nyrielle had removed a dam holding her feelings at bay.

"If you're angry, please, let yourself be angry at me," Nyrielle said gently, reaching out to brush a lock of tangled blond hair out of Ashlynn's face only for her hand to freeze half way there, hanging in the air uncertainly, caught in the fear that her touch might upset Ashlynn. "Last night, I did something to you that I promised myself I wouldn't, but, forgive me, my darling, I didn't know what else to do."

"What, what did you do?" Ashlynn asked, scooting toward the edge of the bed and fumbling on her side table until she found the crystal lantern that Nyrielle had given her. Releasing a thread of power into the lantern, a soft, greenish blue light filled the room, revealing a look on Nyrielle's face that Ashlynn had never seen before. Guilt.

Desperately, Ashlynn prodded her mind, trying to think of what her lover could possibly have done to feel guilty about. She remembered falling to the earth and sobbing, shouting at the skies and pouring out her grievances as the storm raged around her. She remembered Nyrielle's arrival, descending from the skies on her dark, feathered wings before she carried Ashlynn away.

Was there something she'd said last night that she felt guilty about? But words alone couldn't make Nyrielle feel so... desolate, while she looked at Ashlynn. Something much worse must have happened for Nyrielle to feel this way, but what?

"You understand Zedya's mesmerizing gaze, Ashlynn," Nyrielle said, lowering her hand and clutching at the blankets. Ashlynn's confused, trembling emerald gaze felt like daggers to her heart and for a moment, she wondered if Ashlynn would ever forgive her for what she had done.

"None of my progeny possess gifts that I don't also possess," Nyrielle said, approaching the topic in a roundabout way. "I promised that I wouldn't use the Voice of Command or the Mesmerizing Gaze on you unless I absolutely had to, but last night, I broke that promise," she confessed.

Nyrielle bit her lower lip as her eyes searched Ashlynn's face for signs of how her lover felt. At this distance, looking was completely unnecessary as she could feel the confusion rippling through Ashlynn's heart as the echo of her lover's heart beat quivered in her chest. That confusion quickly mixed with fear as Ashlynn's emotions became turbulent and muddy, unclear to either of them.

"Why?" Ashlynn asked as her eyes brimmed with tears and her heart trembled at the sting of betrayal. "Why would you do that to me?"

"Because you ran away," Nyrielle said, forcing herself to meet Ashlynn's wounded gaze, even though she wanted nothing more than to hide from the accusation in the young woman's eyes. "Because you were hurting yourself. Because I was afraid that, while I slept, you would escape again."

"I, I trapped you here all day," Nyrielle confessed. "I clouded your mind enough that the pain of your sister's betrayal was distant and I carried you into memories of our best nights together. Dinners, dancing... other things," she said with a slightly awkward look. "I wanted to give you a night of peace before you had to confront your wounds again, but I also trapped you here and I, I distorted your mind."

"You crossed a line," Ashlynn said in a voice that cracked with the strain of the emotions swirling within her heart. "And now that you've done it, even if it was 'for my own good', how can I trust you? How can I trust my own feelings and memories if you'll use power like that on me?" Ashlynn asked.

"You can't," Nyrielle said flatly as she drew back away from Ashlynn, sliding to the edge of the bed before sliding out from underneath the blankets. For a moment, the subtle curve of her naked, alabaster back shone like a candle flame in the darkness before she fetched a dark robe from the bedside and wrapped it around her body as though it were a suit of armor.

"Ashlynn," Nyrielle said softly as she turned toward the door, unable to face the weight of Ashlynn's gaze. "I know you can't trust me right now, but I love you, more than anything. Even if you come to hate me for what I've done, I'll still love you. My heart can't feel anything else for you."

"But right now, I'm going to be forceful with you," she said, forcing herself to say the words. "Thane will come for you soon to help you prepare to face Owain with a sword in your hand. Sybyll will arrive tomorrow to help you more. Neither of them will allow you to leave the Vale until I give them permission. And," she started to say, swallowing heavily as a knot formed in her throat.

"And when the sun rises each day," Nyrielle said in a voice that sounded like she was driving nails into her own coffin. "They'll bring you back to me, to keep you through the day, just as I did today. I'm sorry, Ashlynn," she said. "I promised you the freedom to claim your revenge, and I'll make sure you have the chance to do so... but I can't let you throw your life away in the process."

"I, I need you too much for that, and I can't... I can't live in a world without you in it anymore," Nyrielle whispered. "So, even if you come to hate me for forcing you, it's better than losing you to your own grief and pain."

Chapter 750: Make It Up To Me

"Stop," Ashlynn said as soon as she realized that Nyrielle was planning to leave. "If you love me, if you really, really love me, then don't go. Just, just stay right there," she added as she screwed her eyes shut and clutched her head.

It had only been a few minutes since she woke, and already she felt like she'd been cast adrift at sea in the middle of a storm.

Jocelynn had betrayed her because she wanted to be with Owain. The pain of that discovery flared within her mind like a searing hot brand, and thinking of it provoked an answering fury and rage that demanded blood be spilled.

But Joceyllynn wasn't here, and neither was Owain. Nyrielle was though, and the way she'd betrayed Ashlynn, using the Mesmerizing Gaze to fill her mind with happiness and joy that her heart wasn't capable of feeling at the moment, just to keep her prisoner here.. It hurt. It hurt more than Ashlynn had thought that Nyrielle was capable of hurting her.

Owain would never have let Ashlynn have true freedom. He'd have bound her in chains of duty and obligation, hammered into place with violence and pain. Even worse, Jocelynn would help him, stabbing her sister in the back to weaken her or killing her because she was in the way.

But what Nyrielle had done... It was like binding her in the same soft, silk ropes that had come to be a part of their most intimate moments. It wasn't the first time that Nyrielle had threatened to take away her freedom. She'd said something similar in the High Pass when Ashlynn risked her life fighting the ancestral spirits possessing Hauke without using their bond to call on Nyrielle for help.

Only this time, Nyrielle had done it. She'd really used her power to keep Ashlynn from fleeing, and she promised to do it again.

Nyrielle had betrayed her trust and she knew it, she knew that Ashlynn couldn't accept being manipulated that way, but she did it anyway. The part of Ashlynn that was deeply wounded wanted to lash out, wanted to gather all of the power she could to strike out at Nyrielle with all of the hurt she felt from what Owain had done to her, what Jocelynn had done to her, and now, what Nyrielle had done to her as well.

Standing in the dark, Nyrielle stayed motionless, allowing the storm of emotion raging in Ashlynn's heart to batter her as a small, pathetic form of penance for the wrong she had done. And at the same time, she clung to Ashlynn's word 'stay', like it was a mighty tree that could hold her up even when she felt like collapsing to the floor.

Her Ashlynn wanted her to stay, so she would stay, all the way until the sun rose if she had to. Even that would be better than being told to 'go.'

"You promised me," Ashlynn said as she struggled against her darkest impulses, fighting to reason her way through Nyrielle's actions instead of just reacting to them. "You promised me that you'd protect me from my nightmares. That you'd keep me safe while I slept and give me peace until I could find it for myself. You promised me that, didn't you?" Ashlynn asked, opening her tear-filled eyes to stare at Nyrielle's figure in the cool, blue-green light of the crystal lantern.

"Of course I did," Nyrielle said softly. "But you know, and I know, that what I did goes beyond protecting your dreams. I never should have..."

"But you had to," Ashlynn interrupted as she flung back the blankets and crawled across the bed to reach Nyrielle's side. Her lover wasn't even defending herself, she wasn't trying to make up excuses for what she'd done, and she took all of the blame on herself. It should have been the right thing to do, but somehow, it left Ashlynn feeling even more distant and hurt than the betrayal itself.

Nyrielle hadn't just taken it upon herself to manipulate Ashlynn's mind to protect her from herself. She'd confessed her wrongs, judged herself guilty, and imposed a sentence that amounted to exile, all without giving Ashlynn a chance to come to understand it or to decide how she was going to move forward from here.

Nyrielle had made all of the decisions herself, probably before she even mesmerized Ashlynn and now she was standing there in the cold light of the lantern, looking desolate and alone in the exile she'd sentenced herself to.

"You flew out into the storm to rescue me," Ashlynn said, reaching out and capturing Nyrielle's ice-cold hand. "I wasn't avenging anything like that," she admitted as an embarrassed blush spread across her cheeks.

"I was lying in the mud and crying when you found me, and you brought me home safe and sound," she said as she pulled herself up into a sitting position with her legs dangling over the edge of the bed. Gently, she wrapped her arms around Nyrielle, pulling her lover back to the edge of the bed and pressing her body and head against Nyrielle's slender back.

"But then I betrayed your trust," Nyrielle said softly. She stood perfectly still, unwilling to respond to Ashlynn's comforting touch when she didn't feel like she deserved it. In her mind, what she had done was just as deep of a betrayal as Owain's violence had been, and it wasn't something that could be easily forgiven. "I..."

"You did what you thought you needed to," Ashlynn said, squeezing Nyrielle tightly enough that an ordinary person wouldn't have been able to breathe. "But you didn't lie to me about it. You didn't hide it. You knew I would hate you for betraying my trust, but you accepted my hatred if that was the price you had to pay to save me from myself," Ashlynn said as her hot tears began to soak into Nyrielle's silk robe.

"You can't just do that and walk away. You can't do that and act like it's okay for me to hate you," Ashlynn cried. "It's not fair. It's not fair to you, and it's not fair to me. You can't just wall yourself off from me and let me hate you when you're trying to protect me."

"If, if I'd gone all the way to Lothian City," Ashlynn whispered as she forced herself to imagine what would have happened if Nyrielle hadn't rescued her the night before. "If I weren't in control of myself and I had to fight the Lothian Army, the Church's Templars and Inquisitors, and the High Priest in the temple... I would have died last night," she said.

There was a reason that Ashlynn had orchestrated her plan to claim vengeance the way she had. Perhaps in a few years, when she had truly mastered her powers, she could stand against the might of the Church and the armies of the Kingdom of Gaal, but at the moment, she was still far short of possessing the power to storm Lothian City by herself.

"You betrayed me, Nyri," Ashlynn sobbed. "But you also saved me. So, instead of walking away from me... make it up to me. I can't do this alone," she said, pulling back and turning Nyrielle around to see her lover's tearstained face. "So help me. Help me when I need it most and don't ever walk away from me again!"

"You're so willful," Nyrielle said with a faint laugh as she finally allowed herself to move, reaching up to lay a slender hand over Ashlynn's arms that held her so tightly. "But when you say it like that, how can I ever deny you?"