

## The Vampire 781

### Chapter 781: Ashlynn's Next Target

If anyone else had said what Thane just had about capturing the minds of a young lord and his escort and forcing them to march all the way to the Vale to be captured, there might have been some argument. After all, sorcery powerful enough to ensnare the mind of even one or two people was taxing enough that few sorcerers could maintain it for more than a few minutes.

But nearly everyone present had also been present when Thane demonstrated his ability to command Savis, and the memory of the lupine vampire all but whimpering as Thane commanded him to 'heel' was enough to convince everyone present that Nyrielle's greatest progeny really could accomplish this feat as effortlessly as he made it sound.

"None that would be affected by what you do tonight," Ashlynn said after a moment of thought. "Thank you, Thane," she said with a warm smile. "I know it isn't easy to do things this way, but the fewer people who lose their lives in this, the easier it will be to bring the march to heel when this war ends."

"I know," Thane said, smiling in pride as his 'little sister' worked through her plans. After hearing the news of her sister's treachery, he'd been worried that she'd lose focus on their larger goals in her haste to resolve matters with Jocelynn and Owain Lothian, but it seemed like he'd been worried for nothing.

"In that case, Marcel, I'll have another task for you," Ashlynn said. "But the timing won't be as critical. I just need you to obtain a few things for me that may be hard to find in winter."

"The whole of my little business empire is at your disposal," Marcel said, bowing in his chair with a flourish as he placed his hand over his heart. "If it can be found in the Kingdom of Gaal or even the hidden villages in Lothian, I'll find whatever it is that you require."

"Thank you Marcel," Ashlynn said before she turned to face the first of the commanders whose support she needed this evening. "Commander Savis," she said, addressing the white-furred vampire who commanded the Second Army of elite forces. "I need to borrow Captain Ipiktok and his men, along with twenty men from your Black Wolf Brigade," Ashlynn said as she glanced briefly at Ollie and Virve.

"My men are yours to command," Savis said, smiling widely enough to reveal his elongated fangs. "But if it's Ipiktok's Tuscans and the Black Wolf Brigade, you won't be taking many prisoners. The Black Wolves are trained for slaughter and the Tuscans aren't exactly... subtle in their methods."

"I know," Ashlynn said, meeting the Golden Eyed vampire's challenging gaze directly. Wherever she could, she was working hard to minimize casualties but for this plan, casualties were not only unavoidable, they were a necessary component of her plan. "Commander Bassinger, I'd like two dozen of your men as well, placed under the command of Constable Daithi," Ashlynn said as she glanced at Ollie.

"Daithi proved himself well, Ollie," Ashlynn said proudly as her expression briefly softened. "For this attack, I intend to slaughter soldiers but we can take servants captive and I think having the good constable with us will help to put their minds at ease, at least enough to prevent anyone from escaping that we don't want to get away."

"We even have a friend to rescue along the way," she added. "And our debt to Mister Otis for his help is long overdue."

"Otis?" Ollie said, blinking in surprise at the name he hadn't heard in more than half a year. "You intend to attack the Summer Villa," he realized as he thought about the cook who had set the kitchens on fire to cover for their escape after Ashlynn killed Sir Kaefin for attempting to force himself on her.

"For the past half a year, Owain has been maintaining a charade that I'm dutifully bearing his heir at the Summer Villa, and he's been keeping an imposter there to keep up appearances," Ashlynn said with a smile that grew darker and more predatory the longer it hung on her lips.

"According to Samira, the woman who's impersonating me, Owain's original plan was to have his 'wife' die in childbirth during the winter, allowing him to play the grieving widower while he married Jocelynn," she continued, her voice taking on a cold, bitter edge as she recalled the lookalike who Owain had convinced not only to participate in his charade but to warm his bed as well.

After meeting Samira, it was hard for Ashlynn to bear much resentment to the poor serving woman who had been lured into such a scandalous position. She was too simple and pure to be a true conspirator, rather, she was just another one of Owain's many victims in this whole sordid affair.

"But if 'demons' and witches attack the Summer Villa and slaughter his pregnant wife and unborn heir in a spectacular raid," Ashlynn said, allowing her voice to trail off suggestively.

"He'll be forced to respond immediately," Thane said, nodding as understanding dawned in his amber eyes. "He can't wait for spring or take time to properly prepare his forces. At the very least, he'll have to lead some kind of retaliatory strike like he did when he attacked the Heartwood clan after you killed Sir Kaefin and Sir Broll at the Summer Villa in the spring."

"It goes beyond that," Marcel said, tapping the table as he thought through the various forces who Ashlynn's assault on the Summer Villa would provoke. "Bors is clearly favoring Loman to inherit his throne, but he has yet to find a justification to strip Owain of his position as heir."

"Ye think Bors'll make a fuss o'er this ta strip Owain of his position?" Sybyll asked with a raised brow. "That he'll recall Loman ta put 'im on the throne?"

"Hardly," Marcel said, shaking his head. "You underestimate Bors' ruthlessness. He'll use this as an opportunity to send Owain to his death along with any of the knights or the young lords who have fallen into Owain's camp. To Bors', this will be a heavensent opportunity to clear the way for Loman's ascendancy."

"The Church won't be able to ignore this either," Ignatious pointed out. "To defend the Summer Villa through the winter while Lady Ashlynn is supposedly there, there must be a number of Templars and at least one priest stationed there, even if there isn't an Inquisitor. Those losses will have to be answered."

"Exactly," Ashlynn said with grim satisfaction. "The lords of the march will demand vengeance for such a brazen attack. The Church will call for immediate action against the 'demons' and witches who murdered a noble lady and her unborn child. Owain will have no choice but to march against us in winter, on our terms, with whatever forces Bors will allow him to bring to bear against us."

"And if he hesitates or suggests waiting for better conditions," Marcel added with an appreciative grin. "He'll look like a coward who doesn't care about avenging his own family. He's spent years building himself up as the 'hero' who will lead the march to greatness against the Eldritch, but if he can't even avenge his own wife, his support among the barons of the march will crumble and he knows it."

"Since he's fighting so hard to present the appearance that his pregnant wife is safely ensconced in their little fortress retreat," Ashlynn said, her smile turning predatory, "then let's see what he does when we force him to avenge her spectacular death!"

## Chapter 782: A Demonstration (Part One)

Ashlynn's plan to provoke the Lothians into exposing themselves made sense to everyone attending the meeting. Those who knew Ashlynn the best recognized the assault on the Summer Villa as an opportunity to strike back at Owain directly for what he had done.

The presence of an imposter masquerading as her for months on end must have worn away at Ashlynn like a sharp stone in her boot, and while removing it wouldn't resolve the suffering in her heart that Owain had placed there, it would at least function as a balm on her wounded soul.

The others at the table who didn't know Ashlynn as well could still follow the logic of the plan. Much like attacking the ancestral caves of the Frost Walkers or destroying the arena in High Fen City, even if those places didn't have strategic value, they were too sacred to their people to fail to avenge their destruction. Owain's deception had, in effect, created a new vulnerability, one that he had to treat as if it were real, even though the 'pregnant wife' residing there was an imposter.

There was one detail, however, that had gone unaddressed so far, and Sybyll spotted it quickly.

"What about little lord Loman?" the crimson-haired vampire asked. "If little lord Liam is too tempting a target to ignore, then what about Loman and the men with him?"

"I can attempt to snatch young lord Loman," Marcel offered. "But he's traveling with Sir Tommin and an Inquisitor named Diarmuid," he added, sounding hesitant for the first time since this evening's planning began. "I'd need help from Ignatious if I'm going to overcome an Inquisitor and a Templar with a Holy Light Blade."

"No, that won't be necessary," Ashlynn said, raising a hand before anyone else can speak. "Your powers of darkness are unmatched, but against Loman and others from the church, a direct confrontation is the worst thing you could attempt. Besides, I don't want to ambush Loman and his escort on the road. I want him to arrive in Hanrahan town before we deal with him."

"M'lady," Sybyll said, sitting up straight in her chair and looking at Ashlynn with wide-open crimson eyes. "Are ye..."

"Yes," Ashlynn said with a sharp nod of her head. "Nyri promised you a chance to deal with Hanrahan Barony long ago, and now it's time to fulfill her promise. I need you to wait, though, just long enough for Sir Thane to fetch Liam Dunn. I want you to take our guests with you when you visit Hanrahan Town."

"You're using Hanrahan Barony as a demonstration," Ollie said, glancing from Ashlynn to Thane and back again after he saw his mentor's subtle nod. "You're hoping that, if Liam Dunn and Rain Aleese see what happens to the Hanrahans, they'll be motivated to convince their fathers to surrender."

Thane referred to it as 'killing chickens to warn wolves.' The idea was that, if you struck hard enough and allowed your enemies to witness it and then escape, they would carry word of your strength and would choose to back down rather than press for a fight that they couldn't win.

They might be wrong, it was entirely possible that if the Dunns and the other barons unified their forces, they could become a significant threat to the Vale of Mists at this early stage. But they wouldn't know that. Instead, they'd be haunted by the memory of seeing Hanrahan fall, and no one would want to expose their own homes in order to send soldiers to support a unified effort to attack the Vale of Mists.

Which, Ollie thought, would only make any counterattack from Owain weaker as the barons wouldn't dare to pledge too much support to his campaign of retribution against the people responsible for 'murdering his pregnant wife.'

Ashlynn's plan, he realized, held layers within layers, and each of the pieces was connected together, cutting off Owain's ability to retreat and forcing him to place his neck into the noose she'd prepared for him.

"Exactly," Ashlynn said. "Dame Sybyll, I doubt that Baron Ian Hanrahan will pose any kind of threat to you, but facing Sir Tommin's Holy Light Blade along with Lord Loman and Inquisitor Diarmuid may be a bit much, even for you."

"Ye don'a hafta worry so much about me, m'lady," Sybyll said as she cracked her knuckles eagerly. "One Templar wit' a sword 'o light won't be the end o' me so easily."

"Still," Ashlynn said firmly. "I won't take risks we don't need to take. Heila and Hauke will accompany you," she said, looking at the two members of her coven. "Heila, keep Loman alive if you can, I trust you to restrain him and to heal our men if the battle for Hanrahan becomes fierce. Hauke, we have never

seen Frost Walker Ice Sorcery pitted directly against the Holy Flames of the Inquisition, but I have faith in your ability to counter their Inquisitor."

"Me?" Hauke said, pointing at himself and blinking in surprise. "But, but I'm not even a witch yet. How could I ever counter someone like Sir Ignatious?" Hauke asked, looking at the fallen Inquisitor sitting there in his red and gold robes. He might have been trapped within his own mind at the time, but he still vividly remembered the moment Ignatious had used his Holy Flame Blade to shatter the ice barrier constructed by his father and six other experienced sorcerers. Against that kind of power, what could he hope to do?

"You can do this, Hauke," Thane said confidently as he gave the young frost walker lord an appraising look. "You aren't facing an Exemplar, only an ordinary Inquisitor, and this one won't even have a Holy Flame Blade like the one brother Ignatious carries," he reminded the towering Frost Walker as if he could read the young man's thoughts. "And if push comes to shove, I'm told that you have a unique sword of your own to use as well."

"The Eternal Ice Blade," Hauke said with a nod, thinking of the sword that Eraric, the Frost Architect, had crafted for High Lord Ansgar during their battle against Ashlynn. The weapon had been powerful enough to shatter Ashlynn's darksteel falchion, and even a clash with a Holy Flame Blade had failed to destroy it.

"But I lost it when Lady Ashlynn defeated the ancestral spirits," he said, hanging his head low enough that the tip of his horn pointed toward the ground. "It's powerful, but it wasn't made for me. Even if I had it, I'm not sure that I could use it. Maybe," Hauk said with a heavy sigh. "Maybe someone else should go in my place."

#### Chapter 783: A Demonstration (Part Two)

"If it's too much for the young pup, I can take his place," Savis offered with a bloodthirsty grin. "Tausau can come with me so your lady-in-waiting can stay at your side," he added with a glance at Heila that held a significant amount of respect. He'd seen what she was capable of during her battle in the arena against the Cauldron of Flame and he'd learned that night to never underestimate the powers of a witch, even one as petite and young as Lady Heila.

Since coming to the Vale of Mists, Savis had abided by the customs of the Vale and he'd only fed on people who made willing offerings. The trust that Lady Nyrielle's people placed in vampires when they fed was astounding, but after the first time tasting the sweet, subtle flavors of blood given as a gift, the novelty had quickly worn off.

Savis, like all descendants of the Jaws of Death, lived for the hunt and his fangs longed to spill blood laced with the intoxicating flavor of fear.

"No, I have a different task in Hanrahan Barony for you and Commander Tausau," Ashlynn said with a slight shake of her head, immediately dashing Savis's hopes. "Hauke," she said, turning back to face the young Frost Walker lord. "I won't force you to do this, but..."

"I'll force him," Virve said, giving the young man a dark look. "I'll personally tie him up and hand him over to Dame Sybyll if that's what it takes to get him there, and if he comes running home, I'll chase his sorry ass back."

Virve's harsh words exploded in Hauke's ears like the crack of Heila's whip and for a moment, he didn't know what to say or how to respond, but Virve wasn't done with him yet.

"Mother Ashlynn needs you," Virve said in a calmer tone. "She needs you because you have a gift the rest of us don't. Heila is going to confront lord Loman, and don't forget, before this year, there were already rumors that Loman was talented enough to become an Exemplar. He might not be as powerful as a witch, but as a human miracle worker, he's not far off, but Heila isn't complaining at all."

"Virve," Heila said, reaching out to gently caress the fur of Virve's arm in a soothing gesture. "It's not Hauke's fault for being afraid of humans and their Miracle workers. He's never faced a threat like them before. He didn't grow up right next to them the way we did."

"No, Lady Heila," Hauke said as his horn began to shift from an uncertain pale lavender toward a more resolute shade of dark blue, like ice so thick and cold that even light couldn't escape its frozen depths. "Virve is right to shame me. Lady Ashlynn has done so much for me," he said, forcing himself to meet Ashlynn's emerald gaze.

"She could have killed me in the High Pass but she suffered horrible wounds in order to defeat the ancestors without killing me," he said. "She freed me from their curse, she's protecting my people and healing my father... Lady Ashlynn, I owe you more than I can ever repay," he said, lowering his horn until it pointed at the ground.

"Please forgive me," he said in a tone that had gained an icy firmness it had lacked just moments ago. "I'll protect Lady Heila and everyone else from the Inquisitor's flames. You can count on me."

"Good man!" Virve said, slapping the young lord heavily on the shoulder. "It's fine to be scared before you march to battle, we're all scared sometimes," she said. "Just remember that you have to march anyway, and you'll find out in no time that there's nothing left to be scared of."

"Really?" Hauke asked as he turned to face the veteran soldier. "So when does the fear go away?"

"About an hour after the last enemy is dead beneath your claws," Savis said with a dark, throaty chuckle. Looking at the young man, he could only shake his head at the way the young Frost Walker reminded him far too much of the young pups he'd trained to become the fiercest warriors of the Black Wolf Brigade, generation after generation.

"Good that you have companions who will drag you along with them if your courage ever falters," Savis said sagely, sounding more like the centuries old commander he was than the blood thirsty hunter he often conducted himself as. "Listen to Lady Heila and Dame Sybyll and you'll do fine."

"But Lady Ashlynn," Savis said, turning back toward the Mother of Trees and allowing his bloodlust to come back to the forefront. "You said that you had a different task for my little brother and I," he said with a grin that exposed his sharp teeth and wicked fangs. "I'd like to hear what it is you have in mind for us."

"In a moment," Ashlynn said, holding up a finger and keeping her gaze on Hauke. "Hauke, if you're certain that you're up to this, then I'll send orders to Artificer Erkembalt to return the Blade of Eternal Ice to you," she said with a complicated look on her face.

That was the sword that had shattered her darksteel falchion, and the weapon was so terrifyingly cold that she suffered frostbite along her fingers and arms just from clashing with the deadly blade. It wasn't a weapon she had fond memories of, and when Erkembalt asked to study it, she'd been only too willing to allow it to remain in his hands until it was needed. But now, the time had clearly come to return it to its rightful owner.

"You have some time before the attack on Hanrahan will begin," Ashlynn said. "I suggest practicing with the sword as much as you can. Powerful tools like Sir Ignatious's Holy Flame Blade aren't easy to command, even if you know something of the sorcery that shaped them in the first place. If you aren't convinced that you can master it enough to use it safely, it's better that you leave it behind."



"I understand, my lady," Hauke said in a voice that sounded much more determined than his racing, nervous heart felt. "I won't disappoint you."

"I know you won't, Hauke," Ashlynn said warmly before she turned to face Savis. The white-furred vampire looked so eager to hear what kind of plan Ashlynn had in mind for him that for a moment, she almost thought that his tail was wagging. But then, considering how she intended to use his talents, maybe the image wasn't entirely inappropriate.

After all, she knew how much violence one of High Lord Hamdi's progeny was capable of... But what she intended to use him for amounted to little more than tossing a dog a bone.

#### Chapter 784: A Demonstration (Part Three)

"There are six large villages in Hanrahan Barony," Ashlynn said as she looked from Commander Savis to Commander Tausau and back again. "Some of them sent their knights along with their tithes to Hanrahan town, but others are still defended by capable soldiers and their knights."

"Commander Savis," Ashlynn said after taking a deep breath before she gave the order she was certain the powerful warrior would object to. "Leave the elite soldiers of the second army with Dame Sybyll. She'll need them for the assault on Hanrahan Town. I want you to join with Commander Tausau and his third army of irregulars to seize the villages of Hanrahan Barony."

"All six villages?" Ollie asked before either commander could reply to her. "What about Raek Village? Sir Carwyn is already our prisoner, along with most of the soldiers from his village. It's only defended by his aging father and a few old soldiers who are keeping the watch while he was supposed to be taking their harvest to market."

"I know, Ollie," Ashlynn said with a reassuring smile as she reached out to place a hand on Ollie's forearm. "From what I've been told, Sir Carwyn is a good man, so he can be offered a choice. Sir Hugo, Sir Rain, and Lord Liam need to observe the assault on Hanrahan Town, but Sir Carwyn can return home so long as he surrenders his village to Captain Barsali and his men and allows them to occupy the village."

"That suits me fine," Sybyll said, giving a sharp look at Savis and Tausau. "The common folk shouldn't suffer for our hatred of their masters. Killin' knights and soldiers is one thing, but slaughtering common folk is the Lothian's way, not ours," she said, locking gazes with both vampire commanders.

"I'll hold my brother back if I have to," Tausau said, placing an undersized hand on the lupine vampire's shoulder. "We'll only spill the blood of people who fight back."

Ashlynn wasn't the only one present who was worried about Savis's bloodthirst. If not for the events since the betrothal banquet, Tausau would have approached Lady Nyrielle about extending the gift she'd given him to Savis days ago.

Time was a millstone for the hearts of all vampires, but the millstone wore away at different parts of them. For Tausau, he had been left with very little aside from his deep, almost fatherly affection for the Mongrel Horde and his enduring commitment to care for the Clanless. For Savis, time had left him with little beyond his cold, professional pride as a warrior and the deep well of a hunter's bloodlust that made him the greatest of Hamdi's progeny.

If he lost control of that bloodlust and slaughtered the people that Lady Ashlynn hoped to turn into her subjects at the end of this war...

"You don't have to remind me," Savis growled, flicking Tausau's hand off his shoulder with a swipe of his claws. "You think I'd stain my claws with the blood of farmers? It's beneath me and beneath the dignity of my men. We know you want to rule these lands when you're done," he added with a look that swept from Ashlynn to Sybyll and back again. "I promise not to spoil them."

"Barsali will want to keep that village, though," the white-furred vampire added. "He's already defeated its lord in single combat. By tradition, he can seize anything that belonged to Carywn, though I doubt he'll lay claim to the human's wife."

"We'll discuss the spoils later," Ashlynn said with a slight shake of her head. "I appreciate Captain Barsali's claim to Raek Village, but I want to teach the humans that we won't strip them of their lands if they surrender to us peacefully. I intend to use Sir Carwyn as a different sort of example."

"I'm sure there will be plenty of villages in need of a knight to rule over them after this is over," Thane added diplomatically. "Even if he doesn't lay claim to Raek, we can find a way to compensate Captain Barsali in the months to come. His victory has earned him that much and more."

"What about the first army?" Commander Bassinger asked when Savis seemed to accept Thane's proposal to compensate the man who had captured Sir Carwyn later. "Do you have need of us beyond taking captives at the Summer Villa?"

"I do," Ashlynn said with a nod. "Prepare your men to garrison Hanrahan Town and the villages of Hanrahan Barony once they've fallen to Dame Sybyll and the second and third armies," Ashlynn said.

The timing would be incredibly tight, depending on how quickly Owain was able to summon men to his banner and organize the forces under his command. Still, if she was able to pre-position Commander Bassinger's forces, she should be able to make use of the Eldritch forces' greater mobility to strike one final target before Owain was able to respond.

"Once Owain begins to assemble his army to avenge the destruction of the Summer Villa, we need to present him with a convenient enough target to strike in order to dictate the terms of our battle," Ashlynn said, looking over a map on the table before resting her finger on a village that lay directly between the Vale of Mists and Lothian City.

Each of her attacks served a different purpose in guiding Owain into her trap. She would raise the Summer Villa to the ground to force him to fight. She would capture Hanrahan Barony as a warning to the other barons that giving Owain too much support could cost them their own territory. And she would attack her final target to force Owain to bring the army he was able to assemble to a place of her choosing.

"Dame Sybyll will remain in Hanrahan Town to supervise the occupation of her barony," Ashlynn said with a nod at the crimson-haired vampire. "But Savis and Tausau will bring the third and fourth armies here, to strike at Maeril Village," she said as she tapped the map.

"This is where we'll make our stand against Owain Lothian and the trap we'll draw him into," Ashlynn said decisively. "This is where he'll fall."

Chapter 785: Returning to the Summer Villa

In the early morning light just before the sun broke over the eastern hills, Ashlynn stood at the edge of the forest with Ollie, Virve, and the looming figure of Captain Ipiktok. The air was chill enough to turn their breath into small white clouds and a layer of frost covered the tall, swaying grass of the hillside leading up to the Summer Villa.

The Villa itself was exactly as she remembered it and for a moment, Ashlynn and Ollie exchanged a brief look and a slight smile as they remembered the time they spent together in the kitchens here. Despite everything that had happened during Ashlynn's brief visit to this place half a year ago, something wonderful had begun here.

Now, as they gazed at the curtain wall that wrapped around the hilltop like a discarded scarf made of stone and the grand manor beyond it an entirely different set of feelings slowly took hold. Slowly, their expressions hardened as they counted the men moving up onto the walls, extinguishing watch fires and torches and preparing for a day spent staring nervously at the forest.

"I count twenty men on the walls," Ashlynn said, using vision keener than any human's to pick out the figures of men half hidden behind the crenellations. "Ten more from the night watch that just stood down. Likely at least another twenty within the walls."

"Who does the banner belong to?" Ollie asked, pointing to the dark green banner flying from the gatehouse towers.

"Sir Cathal Wynn," Ashlynn said as she examined the figure of a mounted knight beneath an apple tree that adorned the banner. "He was here the last time I was," she reminded Ollie. "He fought as one of Bors Lothian's captains during the War of Inches," Ashlynn added with a glance at Virve.

"Then his life belongs to me," Virve growled, flexing her hands in her darksteel fighting gauntlets. Were it not for the thick leather War Hat on her head, wrapped with a hatband studded with acorns, she wouldn't have looked different from any of Nyrielle's other guardsmen, dressed in her familiar armor and carrying the same weapons she had for decades as she protected the Eldritch Lady of the Vale.

Ollie, on the other hand, had changed considerably from the last time he'd been here. Like Ashlynn, he wore a coat of chain mail over a heavy, padded gambeson, but unlike the Mother of Trees, he wore a jade-green tabard over his armor, bearing the symbol of a large iron pot in front of a cypress tree.

Ashlynn had suggested he use his butcher's cleaver or a chef's knife as part of his sigil, but Ollie refused. He became a knight by feeding people and he never wanted to forget his days as nothing more than a kitchen boy, no matter how high he rose in the future. Besides, he'd said, the iron pot could be taken as a witch's cauldron just as easily, making it an emblem that represented both his past and his future.

"We'll occupy their attention while you hunt, Captain Virve," Ipoktok said in a deep, rumbling voice as he hefted the unfamiliar wooden shield on his arm. "This many men should pose no trouble with Her Dominion's plan."

"Good," Ashlynn said with a small nod as she pulled the brim of her own War Hat down lower. She wanted to rush forward with Owain and Virve but the opening act belonged to others and she had already done her part to support the initial attack on the fortified manor.

"It's time," Ashlynn said as she glimpsed the first rays of the sun peeking above the eastern hills. "Captain Ipiktok, charge when ready."

Set back just a hundred paces from the forest's edge, the rest of Ipiktok's men clustered around a giant cedar log that had been fashioned into a ram three feet in diameter and more than twenty paces long. The head of the ram had been capped with an iron cone with a rounded tip and heavy chains wrapped around the length of the ram to provide handles for Ipiktok's Tuscans.

When they arrived at the Summer Villa, Ashlynn had selected a tree carefully to serve as their battering ram before carefully withdrawing the tree's strength into the core that would become their ram. Branches withered and died and needles rained down on them until only this length of greatly strengthened wood remained.

She did the same thing to another tree, carefully shaping its exterior into ten massive wooden shields two inches thick and stronger than steel to defend the Tuscans from arrows while they charged the wall. She would have liked to provide Ipiktok's men with proper armor before using them to assault a fortress of any sort, but the smiths had yet to produce enough chain mail for even one of the giants, to say nothing of producing armor for ten of them.

Now, Ipiktok's men lifted their ram and advanced to the edge of the forest, followed closely by twenty lightly armored men of the Black Wolf Brigade. These men had traded out their old armor for thickly padded gambesons with a layer of small metal plates riveted over their torsos and backs. It wasn't as protective as a suit of chain, but for the elite skirmishers of Savis's second army, it was more than enough to give them an edge over the humans they'd be fighting.

"Shields and ram!" Ipiktok shouted as he took his place at the head of the column of giants preparing to charge. The walls ahead of them were thirty feet high, and his men would need to charge uphill to reach them, facing the arrows of the defenders the entire way, but as he held the chain handle of the ram, any doubts he might have had about breaching the gates fell away.

There was power beyond the strength of their muscles and the weight of the log that cried out when he lifted the ram from the ground. This wasn't just a fallen tree turned into a weapon. It was an engine of war that had been filled with Ashlynn's desire to tear down and destroy. Now that same desire pulsed within his heart as he lifted his trunk and let out a resounding trumpet blast like the herald of doom.

"CHARGE!" Ipoktok bellowed. "CHARGE AND DESTROY!"

#### Chapter 786: Crumbling Down

Guardsmen Nok huddled as close to the gate-house fire as he could, pulling his wool cloak closed with one hand while clutching a cup of warm, weak tea with the other.

Right now, more than anything, he wanted to return to his bunk in the barracks and wait for the sun to burn off the frigid fog that covered everything, even his rough beard, in a layer of frost. Or, if he couldn't return to his bunk, at least a trip down to the kitchens for a fresh roll and a bit of whatever kind of stew Head Cook Otis had put together to warm the bellies of the men who were forced to man the walls at this unholy hour of the morning.

Still, it would be at least an hour before the balding cook made his way to the top of the walls with a bag full of rolls and a pot filled with breakfast stew, and...

-HAAAAARRUUUUUMMMM-

A deep, resonant trumpet blast interrupted Nok's dreams of breakfast and startled him so badly that he nearly tripped over the hem of his winter cloak.

"What the bloody..." Nok shouted as he rushed to one of the arrow slits in the gatehouse to look in the direction of the strange sound.

"NŮV! NŮV NÎŠÂK!"

The sound of the shouted cry echoed across the fields between the curtain wall and the forest like the battle cry of a hundred men, resounding off the stone walls and tearing away the fog of drowsiness that clouded Nok's mind.

-HAAAAARRUUUUUUMMMM-

This time, the trumpet blast was louder, echoing from the trunks of ten giant demons as they charged out of the forest, emerging from the fog like creatures born from nightmares.

-THUMP- -THUMP- -THUMP- -THUMP-

The sounds of heavy feet falling in time as the giants charged shook the ground and for a moment, all Nok could do was stare numbly through the arrow slit as his mind struggled to imagine how massive these giant demons were. Ten feet tall? Fifteen? Twenty?

Rubbing his eyes, stared at the advancing demons, covered in layers of thick hides and furs with strange, flexible trunks, large ears that flapped in the wind and huge, curved ivory tusks that ended in wickedly sharp points tipped iron spikes and nails.

"Damn it, Nok! Sound the alarm," another guardsman shouted as he burst into the gatehouse. Seeing his companion staring numbly out the arrow slit, however, he stopped wasting his words on the idiot and grabbed the rope attached to the warning bell, ringing it as rapidly as he could.

"DEMONS!" the guardsman shouted. "GIANT DEMONS ATTACKING! DEMONS!"

"What, what are they carrying?" Nok asked, shaken loose from his horror enough to begin fumbling with the bow sitting next to the arrow slit, stringing it as quickly as he could and knocking over the bucket of arrows in his haste.

"Is that... is that a battering ram?" the other guardsman said when he arrived at the small gatehouse's other arrow slit and began to string his own bow. "Oh Holy Lord, have mercy on our souls," he said as he made a gesture over his heart to ward off evil. "Portcullis!"

As soon as he shouted the word, Nok dropped his bow and retrieved one of the heavy wooden mallets in the gatehouse, hammering away at the wooden block that held the winch supporting the heavy iron portcullis in place.

-Thock- -Thock- -Thock-

Both men hammered furiously at the blocks until finally, both wooden wedges flew free, releasing the heavy wooden winch and the thick iron chains that supported the iron portcullis. The winch spun like a child's toy under the weight, and the chains flapped dangerously when the iron-bound portcullis slammed to the ground, but both men heaved a momentary sigh of relief once it was in place.

"Aim for their... their knees," Nok said once he'd retrieved his bow and returned to the arrow slit, staring in horror at the giants who were rapidly closing the distance to the wall.

The heavy wooden shields the giants carried made it all but impossible to hit their heads or faces, and even their mammoth torsos were blocked by the oversized wooden shields. But they had to aim at something, and so the guardsman picked the knees as the only weak spot that might break their charge.

Arrows began to rain down from the walls as more and more men strung their bows. Some took up the instruction to aim for knees, others aimed at whatever they thought they could hit, if they aimed at all, and everyone fired as quickly as they could. It was as if the men on the wall were racing to empty their buckets of arrows before any of their neighbors could, firing again and again as fast as they could.

"Bliûs. Suy-âmsol qai!" the lead demon shouted, before the demons charging with him raised their trunks and pointed them at the walls as they ran.

-PRREEEEET!-



The sudden, high-pitched blast from their trunks wasn't just a simple war cry. Powerful sorcery flowed from their bodies as they charged, blasting out along with the trumpet blast and unleashing a fierce gust of wind.

Suddenly, the arrows that were sailing through the air seemed to pause mid-flight before they danced upward, turning back toward the men who had fired them as the winds swept the arrows aside. None of them threatened the men atop the wall, and even the farthest flung arrow only clattered harmlessly against the stones of the curtain wall.

"What, what do we do?" Nok said numbly as he fired another arrow, only to watch it blow harmlessly away on the wind. "How? How are we supposed to fight that?"

"Sir Cathal!" came a shout from outside the gatehouse. "Sir Cathal has arrived!"

"Great," Nok said as he leaned forward to aim down at the giants who had almost reached the gate. "But what's one knight supposed to do against a dozen giants?"

-CRUNCH- -CRUNCH-

The sound of the battering ram slamming into the portcullis felt like the sound of powerful jaws crunching through brittle bones, and the entire gatehouse shook with the force of each blow from the powerful ram.

-HAAAAARRUUUUUUMMMM-

The sound of the demon's trumpeting with their twisted trunks filled the gatehouse and the bow he'd clutched like his life depended on it dropped from Nok's fingers when he realized that he'd already exhausted the bucket of arrows and achieved nothing more than sinking several into the demon's wooden shields like push-pins on a cork board.

"We're doomed," he said as he sank to his knees. Beneath him, looking through the murder holes in the floor, he could see giant wooden splinters flying from the portcullis as the iron-capped battering ram crumpled the first line of defense like a sheet of parchment.

There were spears along the wall, ready to thrust down through those very murder holes at anyone who breached the portcullis while they struggled against the heavy wooden gate, but what was the point? Would giants even notice the prick of a spear? Or would they just hold their shields against the ceiling as they flooded into the courtyard?

What was the point? Nok wondered before his eyes landed on the door leading to the battlements atop the curtain wall.

"We should run," he told his companion as he stumbled back to his feet, fumbling with the heavy wooden bar across the door. "The sally gate!" Nok shouted as a glimmer of hope bloomed in his heart. "We can make it to the sally gate! Come with me," he said, heaving the bar aside and flinging the door open. "Before those giants tear down the gatehouse with us in it."

There was still hope, Nok realized. They just had to get to the small gate in the side of the wall where they could make an escape. Then, while the demons were busy fighting the fools who stayed to fight, they could flee to the forest and escape this nightmare.

There was still hope...

Or so he thought. When the door opened, however, he realized that there would be no quick escape, no matter what the demons did.

"Relight the watch fires!" Sir Cathal shouted in a clear, authoritative tone as he organized more than a dozen men standing on the walls outside the gatehouse. Some still held their bows and fired down at the giants with the battering rams, while others rushed to fetch more arrows from the storehouse below. And from the manor, even more soldiers were rushing to the wall, some still buckling their gambesons on even as they ran.

"Bring torches, blankets, anything we can ignite and hurl down on them!" Sir Cathal shouted before rounding on Nok when he heard the sound of the gatehouse door opening. "You there," "Spill the coals from the gatehouse fire through the murder-holes! Fill the gateway with smoke and let their feet find the coals when they breach the gates!"

"Y-yes, your lordship," Nok said, saluting weakly with his fist to his chest before he turned to walk back into the gatehouse. The old knight, it seemed, wasn't one to run away, and as long as he stood tall on the battlements, there would be no escape for any of them.

#### Chapter 787: A Desperate Gamble (Part One)

On the highest floor of the fortified manor, Samira glanced out the window again and shuddered in dread at the sight of the giant demons as they slammed their battering ram into the gates again.

A strange, deep trumpeting sound had woken her from her fitful sleep, only for Sir Cathal to burst into her room a few minutes later as the sound of a ringing bell began to fill the air.

"Bar your door, Lady Ashlynn," he said. "Demons are coming. We'll do our best to hold them off, but you may need to protect yourself..." That was all he'd said before he rushed out of the manor, pulling on his armor as he ran and shouting orders for the soldiers in the manor to follow him to the walls.

When Samira saw the strange demons from her window, she'd nearly fainted on the spot but she stubbornly clung to the windowsill until the feeling passed and she was able to think again.

Time was the most precious thing right now and she didn't have very much of it to waste. Moving as quickly as she could with her heavy, cumbersome belly, she stripped off her night dress and replaced it with one of the warmest dresses in her wardrobe.

In the beginning, when she'd just arrived at the Summer Villa, she'd worn many of Lady Ashlynn's old clothes as they were of a similar size and shape. As the months wore on and the child in her belly grew, however, she had set Ashlynn's old things aside in favor of looser fitting dresses that could accommodate her growth.

Owain hadn't visited the Summer Villa since he returned from Blackwell County, but his Steward, Sir Hugo, had sent several thoughtful packages to her that he claimed were gifts from Owain. Only Samira knew that the fine silk dresses and the warm fur cloaks that she was pulling on would never have been chosen by Lord Owain for her...

After all, these were clothes befitting a noblewoman of Lady Ashlynn's stature, the daughter of a count and wife of the next Marquis and Owain would never waste more money on his plaything imposter than he had to.

Once she was dressed and had a spare fur cloak and warm dress tucked under her arms, Samira collected a lantern and slipped out of her luxurious chambers, heading to the narrow servant's stairs at the back of the hall.

-HAAAAARRUUUUUUMMMM-

The sounds of battle outside had grown fiercer, and the strange trumpeting sounded even louder, echoing over the cracking of wood and shouted orders of men moving atop the curtain wall. Her heart hammered in her chest, urging her to take the steps two at a time, but she fought back against the urge, moving slowly and carefully as she all but waddled down the steps.

The little one in her belly kicked and fussed as if he too was afraid of the demons attacking the castle, and when Samira finally reached the ground floor, she paused to comfort her unborn child.

"Shh," she whispered as she gently stroked her belly. "Please don't fuss. Momma is going to keep you safe, I promise," she soothed, though whether she was comforting herself or her unborn child was difficult to say.

Once she'd caught her breath and her heart felt calmer in her chest, she peeked into the hallway outside the stairwell, sighing in relief when she didn't see anyone there. The guards had all rushed to the walls, and the servants... Who knew where the servants had gone in the midst of this crisis? She didn't know, but she doubted they were headed where she was.

Padding down the hall, she slipped into a small guard room at the top of another spiral stairway, searching through the drawers in the small table until she found an iron ring with several precisely forged keys.

"There!" Samira cried out in relief that the keys had been left here rather than staying with whichever of the guards was responsible for keeping watch over the dungeon's only occupants. "Now, if only they'd left a sword behind," she muttered as she searched around the small guard room.

There was no sword, but there was a heavy wooden cudgel, studded with small iron nubs that transformed it from a simple stick for keeping unruly prisoners in line into a deadly, if simple, weapon capable of cracking skulls and bones.

"You'll do," she thought as she retrieved the club and added to the bundle of things in her arms. It wasn't much to bet her life on, but it was better than nothing... and perhaps it was better than a sword would have been. She had never touched a sword in her life, but she'd used a stick to beat off insistent boys on more than one occasion. If she thought of it like that, it didn't seem like such a feeble tool to protect herself and her child with, after all.

In the depths of the dungeon beneath the Summer Villa, Noomi looked up in surprise when warm lantern light spilled into the dark, dank interior of her prison cell. At her side, nestled in the crook of her arm, her infant son Saku stirred weakly, turning his eyes away from the light and burying his face in his mother's bosom.

"Samira," Noomi said, blinking several times as her eyes adjusted to the bright light of Samira's lantern. "It's early, why are you here?" The cold and the wet of the dungeon, combined with her long imprisonment, had slowly sapped more and more of her strength, and she found herself sleeping later and later each day, if for no other reason than that it made the time slip by faster.

Now that she was awake, however, her ears perked up as she heard strange sounds drifting in through the window. There were shouts and crashes and the sounds of steel ringing against steel that tugged at the darkest of her memories of the day that Owain Lothian and his men had arrived in her village. The day humans had murdered her husband and dragged her to this wretched place in the hopes that they could twist her child into some kind of twisted slave or pet.

"Samira," Noomi repeated as her tail trembled anxiously. "What's happening out there?"

#### Chapter 788: A Desperate Gamble (Part Two)

"The villa," Samira said as she fumbled with the ring of keys, trying to find the right one to open the captive woman's cell. "The villa under attack. I, I don't know which 'clan' these giants are from but they're breaking down the gates and I don't think Sir Cathal can do anything to stop them," she said as she pulled the iron door to the cell open at last.

"Pass me Saku and put this on," she said as she entered the cell to set the dress and cloak next to the captive woman from the Heartwood clan. "I, I don't know if the dress will fit you, but it's loose and baggy enough for me," she said, gesturing to her distended belly. "And it's warm."

The dress was more than just warm. It was a breathtakingly beautiful dress made from layers of deep blue silk and trimmed with white seal fur in a way that gave the impression of cresting waves on the ocean shores.

For a moment, Noomi hesitated to touch it, reflexively flinching away from it in fear that she would stain such a beautiful garment with the filth of her unwashed body. But practicality asserted itself quickly enough as she clutched the beautiful fabric and felt greater warmth from it than almost anything she'd touched in weeks, if not months.

"You think we can escape?" Noomi said, using the cold, stone wall to support herself as she stood before passing her sleeping child over to Samira. Ever since the other woman had smuggled her a stick of firewood to carve into a weaning spoon for her infant son, she'd lowered her guard against the human she'd once called her 'lady jailor' and by now, she didn't feel the slightest hesitation in letting the other woman hold her son.

"We won't be able to run fast with you like that," Noomi pointed out, gesturing to Samira's belly. "Your child may come any day now. A month at most. Rushing about may bring him early," she warned.

"I, I know," Samira said as she wrapped Saku in a small, fur blanket against the chill in the air. It would be even colder once they were outside but at least it hadn't started to snow yet. "I, I won't lie to you. I think the de, er, the Eldritch people who are attacking the villa might capture us when we try to escape. If they do..."

"You want me to tell them that you're my friend," Noomi said as she stood, wrapping the fur trimmed cloak around her shoulders and twitching her whiskers at the human she'd never thought she'd apply a word like 'friend' to.

If Samira was right and the people attacking the villa really were from a friendly Eldritch nation that would see Noomi as one of their own rather than as another foe to defeat or prize to capture, then having a member of the Heartwood Clan claim friendship might just be enough to preserve Samira's life.

Of course, the reverse wasn't true at all. By letting Noomi out, Samira was taking a tremendous risk. If the humans won the battle, seeing her helping a 'demon' to escape would likely spell her doom. Just by coming here, Samira was not only giving Noomi a chance to escape, she was gambling that it would be safer to be with Noomi and the Eldritch than remaining locked safely in her own room and hoping that the humans would win.

"Saku might have starved without you adding to our meals," Noomi said as she held out her arms for her son, taking Saku gently back into her embrace and cooing to him softly before she continued speaking. "And I might have died of a broken heart without your company. We'll survive this together," she said as she reached out to take Samira's hand gently in her own.

"We will," Samira said, straining her ears as she tried to listen for sounds of the battle above them through the tiny window at the other end of the dungeon. There were shouts and cries, along with the occasional trumpet blast from one of the giants, but nothing was clear enough for her to know how the battle was progressing without being able to see it.

"Do you know anything about these Eldritch giants?" Samira asked as she turned back to her friend, surprised to see that the dress fit the Eldritch woman fairly well, though it bunched up around her tail and the hem dragged a bit on the floor. "The giants are taller than a man on horseback and they make these strange sounds like a horn blowing."

"I, I don't know," Noomi said. For a moment, she'd hoped that one of the Eldritch Lords, perhaps even the famed Eldritch Lady of the Vale of Mists had sent their forces to destroy the Lothian's fortified manor, but none of the Eldritch lords that she'd ever heard of sounded like this.

"Do they have white fur and shining horns like an icicle on their heads?" Noomi asked after thinking for a moment that the Frost Walkers of the High Pass might have found a reason to come this far, though she couldn't think of what it would be for them to leave their mountain peaks and come so far into the foothills.

"I didn't see any horns," Samira said. "But maybe. I couldn't see them well from my room. They were carrying large shields and a heavy battering ram. They've probably broken the gate by now. Are they friendly? Or are they enemies of your people?"

"I don't know," Noomi said as her tail lowered to the floor, trembling in uncertainty. "But whether they're friends or foes, we should get moving. If we're going to escape, we'll need supplies, at least for a few days if we're going to reach somewhere that will take us in."

Already, she was trying to think of how they could escape if they managed to get free from the Summer Villa. For two women, one pregnant and the other carrying an infant child, it would be impossible to get anywhere quickly. The Vale of Mists was probably their best hope. After all, there were people from her

village who had taken the red-haired human's warning and fled to the Vale for safety, so there might be people there who would take them in.

The question was whether or not they could manage the trek through the wilderness in the cold of approaching winter long enough to get there.

"No," Samira said, shaking her head. "You stay here, let me go. I can probably make it to the kitchens if I'm careful, or at least a storehouse. I'll come back with food so we can make a run for it if there's a chance," she insisted. "I just need you to stay here and wait for me to come back."

"Samira," Noomi said, frowning at her friend. "You can't go rushing about like this! You need my help to carry things. Let me come with you," she pleaded.

"No, please, you don't understand," Samira said, shaking her head fiercely. "The soldiers all went to the wall, but I don't know where the servants are. There was a servant girl here once, her name was Lynnda," she said, thinking of the dark-haired woman who had brought her dinner when she first arrived at the Summer Villa.

"Lynnda killed a knight with a knife and fled the villa," Samira explained. "She was just a servant girl, just like I was... but she still killed a knight with a knife. If one of the servants sees you and they don't understand..."

Dead was dead. She didn't say the words, but she saw the comprehension dawning on Noomi's face. If either of them were trained warriors, just having the soldiers diverted elsewhere would likely be enough for them to escape. But neither of them was a soldier, and a servant with a knife in their hand and a belly full of hatred for 'demons' could be enough to doom them both.

Even if Samira or Noomi managed to overcome anyone they encountered along the way, just the noise they made in the fight could draw attention and ruin their chances of escape. Instead, it would be better if Samira could gather the food they'd need to survive for a few days in the wilderness, even if it was more difficult for her to do it.

The alternative, having Noomi accompany her through the villa as they gathered what they'd need to run, was just too dangerous.



"All right," Noomi said reluctantly, giving Samira's hand a reassuring squeeze. "But if anyone threatens you," she said, holding up her sharpened claws that could peel away layers of the hardest wood as though they were sliding through butter. "You come as fast as you can and call for me. I'll come running. We'll get out of here together."

"Together," Samira promised before she turned back to the narrow stairs. In her hands, she clutched the iron-studded club while she waddled her way back up to the ground floor, hoping all the while that the servants were hiding somewhere sensible and not in the kitchens.

She only had one chance to escape, and she refused to let it slip through her fingers... Just as much as she refused to leave her friend Noomi behind.

Chapter 789: Back The Way We Left

-HAAAAARRUUUUUUMMMM-

-CRUNCH-

"Relight the watch fires! Bring torches..."

While Captain Ipiktok led the assault on the gate with his fellow Tuscans and the defenders rallied to repel them, two figures moved unobtrusively and unnoticed through the tall grass leading to the sally gate more than a hundred paces from the main gate.

"You have to teach me how you did that," Virve said in tones of genuine admiration when they reached the small side gate without so much as a stray arrow fired in their direction. "That isn't any kind of witchcraft that Lady Ashlynn has shared."

"It isn't witchcraft exactly," Ollie confessed as he inspected the gate that he and Ashlynn had escaped through just half a year ago. "The Heartwood clan are masters of concealing themselves in nature. They wear nets that catch branches and leaves to help blend in with their surroundings. For most of them, that's all there is too it, but a few of them learn a sort of sorcery that lets them move without attracting attention."

"I was curious, so Old Nan taught me," Ollie said with a smile. "This is just that, but blending with the power of the world. To anyone watching, we were just a ripple in the tall grass."

"It's still impressive," Virve said as she turned to look at the sally gate. "And I still want to learn. Right now though, tell me what you know about this gate," Virve said as she inspected the heavy iron-bound wooden doors. "This feels newly made."

"They probably replaced it after Lady Ashlynn and I escaped," Ollie said as he placed a hand on the wood of the door, feeling with senses that no ordinary human possessed to understand how the gate had been built. "The fittings should still be the same though," he muttered.

"Somewhere around my chest height there should be a heavy beam that slots into the stone of the corridor beyond the door and iron braces on the door," Ollie explained. "The doors open inward so they can be opened even if there's a crowd right outside the gate. There are also iron stops down here," he said as he slid his hands lower. "They fit into the stone floor and help to keep people from battering their way in."

"They've never tried to keep a witch out or they'd have made the whole thing out of iron," Virve said with a dark chuckle as she pulled on her darksteel fighting gauntlets and reached out to gather the power of the world.

"Ancient Oak, lend your might,

Unbreakable strength to win this fight."

Virve's invocation was simple but as soon as she spoke, soft golden light began to flow upward from the ground, climbing up her legs and wrapping around her torso and around her arms like vines covering a mighty tree. For a moment, the light grew bright enough that Ollie was afraid someone would notice but the men atop the wall were far too focused on their attempts to repel Ipiktok's men to pay any attention to a brief flash of light hundreds of paces away from the battle.

"This will be loud," Virve said as she raised her claws into a fighting posture. "Be ready to run as soon as I've torn a large enough opening."

"I'm ready," Ollie said, dropping one hand to the hilt of Ice Fang while the other rested on the hilt of his darksteel cleaver. "Do you need help?" he asked as he tapped the cleaver. "It isn't an ax but..."

Ollie's words caught in his throat the instant Virve lashed out with her claws, sheering through wood and iron alike and shredding six inches of solid timber as though it were a sheet of parchment. The sound of metal tearing produced a high-pitched screech that made Ollie cover his ears reflexively before Virve bellowed in fury at the still standing door.

"RAAAAAAWWWRRRR!!!!"

Virve's cry was one of pure, primal fury as she punched through the wood of the door, sending splinters flying before her hand gripped the heavy beam that barred their way.

"BREAK FOR ME!" Virve shouted. The muscles in her arm flexed and the sleeve of her armor strained before a loud -CRACK- split the air like a clap of thunder. A heartbeat later, the sounds of two pieces of the heavy beam clattering to the floor could be heard through the hole Virve had torn.

"RAAAA!" The Oak Witch shouted, lowering her shoulder and charging the gate, knocking one of the two wooden doors clean off its hinges and snapping the other one from the floor to the hole she'd already torn in it as the wood proved weaker than the iron door stop.

As soon as Virve crashed through the doorway, Ollie dashed behind her, charging into the dark corridor that would eventually lead them to the other side of the thick curtain wall.

The corridor leading to the sally gate had been built at a steep angle relative to the wall, allowing men on horseback to charge toward the gate and exit at a gallop if the situation called for it in order to mount a counterattack against an attacking army.

If there had been more knights stationed at the summer villa, the way there would have been if someone as important as Lady Ashlynn was really staying here, they might have had to worry about the defenders mounting just such a counter attack. Fortunately, without a group of bold knights to lead the charge, no one was making use of this side gate to launch any sort of offensive.

It took only a handful of heartbeats to rush the hundred paces of the narrow tunnel, but by the time they reached the other side it was obvious that their breakthrough at the far end had been seen.

"DEMONS IN THE BAILEY! DEMONS IN THE BAILEY!"

"They came from the Sally Gate!"

"Archers, loose!"

"Ice," Ollie snapped, drawing the blade carved from the horn of a Frost Walker with his left hand and holding it straight before him. "Form a wall before me!"

In an instant, the icy blade shimmered, surrounding itself with a frosty mist that rapidly expanded until it formed a cloud eight feet tall and half as wide. Arrows whistled through the mist, one of them slamming into Ollie's armored abdomen with a sharp -SHINK- sound as it spread the links of his chain mail before piercing the gambeson and his tunic beneath it, cutting half an inch into the muscular flesh beneath his armor.

A heartbeat later, the frosty mist turned solid, becoming a sheet of hazy ice nearly three inches thick. The arrow wound burned like a brand against his skin, and Ollie could feel warm blood trickling beneath his armor. When he glanced down at the wound, he could see the long shaft of the arrow protruding from the wound and the collar of the arrowhead where it was fitted to the shaft.

The arrowhead had punched through his jade green tabard and both layers of armor but it hadn't buried itself deeply, perhaps only an inch or so into the muscle of his abdomen. The wound was painful and bleeding, but his armor had done its work, and if he gritted his teeth, he could fight through the pain.

-CHIP- -CRACK-

The sound of arrows hitting the wall of ice echoed around him as pain flared in his abdomen where the arrow tried to cut deeper if he took too deep of a breath.

"Leave them to me!" Virve shouted as she reached for the arrow, tearing it free of his armor and giving Ollie a shove in the direction of the manor. "Go find your people, I'll clear the wall!"

"Virve," Ollie protested, staggering for a step but refusing to flee while arrows were still raining down on the cracking icy shield he'd erected. "There are..."

"There aren't enough to scare me," Virve said as golden energy began to dance in her eyes. "Now run while I draw their fire," she said, tapping him on the shoulder one last time before she dashed out from behind the crumbling wall of ice, bellowing like a mad woman as she charged toward the stairs leading to the top of the wall and the figure of the silver haired knight who was commanding the defenders.

Meanwhile, Ollie dashed for the manor, clutching his wound with one hand while he ran, heading for the kitchens and his old friend Otis...

#### Chapter 790: I Wouldn't Know

Arrows rained down around Virve as she charged, but at a range of one hundred paces, she had little to fear from the human defenders firing down at her from atop the wall.

Unlike Ollie, Virve had faced the attacks of archers before. Where Ollie stopped to raise a defensive barrier, Virve kept moving, dodging to the left and right or stopping suddenly to break the rhythm of her dash as she advanced on the stairs that led to the top of the wall.

Compared to the uncanny aim of the Glass Eyed Clan or the sudden ambush attacks of the Heartwood Clan's archers, the human defenders were merely adequate, rather than exceptional, and only an exceptional archer could have hit the evasive Oak Witch as she charged.

Her efforts to evade the archers didn't come without cost. In the time it took for her to cross fifty paces, five soldiers carrying shields and heavy, flagged maces had descended from the walls, spreading out to form a human barrier between Virve and the stairs.

"Hold!" Sir Cathal shouted from atop the stairs. "Hold the line! Archers, fall back to the far side of the gatehouse! Rally at the gate to fire on the giants when they breach the inner gate!"

At this point, Virve and Ollie had achieved their first mission. With the archers withdrawing from the walls, the men of the Black Wolf Brigade were free to dash across the open field and charge through the gate as soon as Captain Ipiktok's men broke through. Between the Tuscan Giants and the Golden Eyed elite skirmishers, the Summer Villa was certain to fall.

But Virve wasn't content to frighten her enemy into abandoning their posts. She had come for blood!

"RAAAAARRR!!!"

With a bellow so loud that it frightened the defenders into taking half a step back, Virve charged the center of the soldiers' formation, lashing out with darksteel claws. Empowered with the strength of Oak, the iron-bound and reinforced Sally Gate had shattered and splintered under her claws. When she attacked a simple shield with the same fury and force, the result was even more devastating.

-CRACK-

Splinters of wood flew through the air along with a spray of blood so hot that it steamed in the chill winter air. Virve's claws sank deep into the arm holding the shield, tearing through skin, muscle, and sinew until her fingers wrapped around the fragile bones of the arm.

Screams of pain and terror filled the air, but Virve barely noticed, moving almost by instinct as she tore the soldier's shield arm from its socket in her haste to clear the shield out of her way. Half a heartbeat later, the man's anguished cries cut off with a wet gurgle as Virve's other hand tore through his unprotected throat.

"Together!" one of the remaining soldiers shouted, charging forward with his shield like it was a battering ram, slamming into Virve's side before he brought his mace down on her lightly armored upper arm. When he did, however, it didn't feel like hitting a person or a beast. Instead, his mace landed with a dull -THUNK- as if he'd just struck a tree.

"F-f-fall back!" the man shouted, realizing his mistake too late as Virve rounded on him, snatching his mace and tearing it away from him along with the hand that held it. The next instant, the very last thing he saw was the head of his own mace filling his vision before darkness claimed him.

"Retreat!" Sir Cathal commanded sharply to the soldiers who were already stumbling over their own feet in their haste to escape the furious demon who tore limbs and spilled blood as though she intended to bathe in it.

"You cannot hope to face a witch like her, so retreat and leave her to me," the aging knight said as he slowly descended the stairs.

When Sir Cathal first heard the trumpet blast of the demon giants, he'd taken only enough time to belt on his gambeson and slip into his boots, carrying his coat of mail as he rushed to warn Lady Ashlynn before racing to the wall to take command. Since he'd arrived atop the wall, however, his page had brought the rest of his armor, helping him to don it even as he shouted orders to his men.

Now, as he approached the blood-soaked demon witch, he wondered if there had been any point to it. His shield, decorated with the sigil of a knight beneath an apple tree, was made of solid steel instead of the thin sheet of metal over wood and leather that the guardsmen used, but would that be enough to deflect her claws? Would the finely articulated plates over his arm spare him the fate of having a limb torn off?

It didn't matter, he thought as he stepped off the stone stairs and drew the slender arming sword from its scabbard at his waist. Whether he could stop a demon witch or not, he couldn't say, but it was clear that no one else stood a chance, which meant that he had to try.

Virve stood motionless as the knight descended, her chest heaving as she stared at the carnage around her. Blood dripped from her claws, falling silently onto the short grass of the bailey like crimson rain. The broken, mangled bodies of two soldiers had landed several feet away from her, but she paid them no mind as her eyes focused on the knight descending the stairs.

Slowly, with each deep breath she took, she withdrew the fury she'd unleashed when she tore through the soldiers. The rage didn't go away, instead, it simmered like one of Ollie's soups boiling in a pot beneath a lid, ready to boil over in an instant, but she clamped down on the feeling firmly. This was her first opportunity in years to find information about her father's fate in the War of Inches, and she refused to waste it!

"You're the one they call Sir Cathal Wynn?" Virve asked, standing her ground as she stared at the approaching knight. The other three guardsmen were rushing to join their companions near the main gate, but she paid them no mind as they fled. After all, there were any number of men who could reap their lives, but Sir Cathal's life belonged to her.

"You speak the King's tongue?" Cathal said in surprise, stopping to raise the visor of his helm as he stared at the blood-soaked witch. "Did you learn it from the young knight you bewitched? The one who ran off after you breached the walls?"

"Sir Ollie didn't have to teach me anything," Virve growled, flexing her claws as she fought to restrain herself. "I've spoken your tongue ever since I was a young cub. Since you understand me, answer my question. Are you the Cathal Wynn who fought beside Bors Lothian during the War of Inches?"

"I am," the gray-haired knight admitted. He didn't know if it was true that demons could smell falsehood on a man's breath, but he saw no reason to lie. "The war was long ago. Why bring it up now?"

"I want to know if you killed a man during that war," Virve said. "A man like me, with bright patches in his fur of soft gold on tawny brown. You'd have known him if you fought him."

"I'm sorry," Cathal said, shaking his head at the demon that he still struggled to believe he was conversing with. "I fought many of your kind during the War of Inches, and killed many of them. Truthfully, I couldn't tell the difference," he started to say, only to pause a moment later as her description of the slain claw demon tugged at a dim memory.

"You did see him," Virve said, narrowing her eyes as she saw the flicker of recognition pass across the old knight's face. "Tell me truthfully. Was it you who killed him or another man? Give me a name!"

"It... might have been me who killed him," Cathal said carefully. "Whether it was me or not, I cannot say, but I may have seen his body after a battle," he admitted. "Golden patches on tawny fur, and very large even for one of, of your people."

"You saw him and you know him," Virve said, clenching her fists as her body trembled in fury and frustration. "But you don't know if you killed him or not?"

"I don't," Cathal said with a deep sigh as he raised his shield. Whoever this demon had been and whatever his relationship to the witch before him was, the man's death clearly haunted her, even twenty years later. But what he had to say next... would likely be the last words he'd ever speak.



"I doubt anyone knows who killed him," Cathal said as he lowered the visor of his helm. "Because no one stepped forward to claim credit for the kill when Lord Bors ordered him to be skinned as a rug. The man you're looking for... all that's left of him lies before the hearth in the Marquis' trophy room."