

# The Vampire 791

## Chapter 791: Real Monsters

At the edge of the forest, Ashlynn stood next to Constable Daithi, silently watching the assault on the Summer Villa unfold. Captain Ipiktok's men had already broken the gate portcullis, but they were too large to easily batter down the inner gate on the far side of the gatehouse.

Rather than attempt to squeeze through, Ipiktok's team of Tuscans were hurling the ram at the inner gate before dragging it back with heavy chains, only to hurl it yet again. The inner gate wouldn't break as quickly as the portcullis had, but Ashlynn estimated that it would still only be a matter of minutes before the Golden Eyed skirmishers of the Black Wolf Brigade would charge through the gap. Already, they had gathered at the gate, ready to charge in as soon as there was a large enough break in the gate.

Suddenly, a deep anguished roar sounded from within the walls of the Villa, shaking the trees of the forest and startling several birds into flight.

All around Ashlynn, the red cedar trees began dropping needles in a slow, steady rain like tears sliding down their trunks. Around the trunks of nearby oaks, the acorns laying on the ground exploded in goutts of flame like hundreds of candles flickering to life before dying on the breeze. High above, the boughs of the towering hemlocks shook and trembled as if they were caught up in a storm that only the trees could feel.

"My, my lady," Daithi said, backing away from the nearby cedar tree that had begun to 'bleed' thick, resinous sap. "What's happening?" the confused constable said as he glanced at the men from Commander Bassinger's first army who had come to help bring the villa's servants back to the vale. Most of them were natives of the Vale of Mists but even they seemed spooked by the sudden outburst from the trees around them.

"Virve was right," Ashlynn said as she set a hand on her chest, feeling an outpouring of intense desires for violence, retribution and destruction from within her coven. "Sir Cathal must have had something to do with her father's death during the War of Inches..."

After so many years, Ashlynn and Virve both understood that her chances of finding the man responsible for her father's death were very small. At the same time, few people who weren't knights were capable of killing a member of the Clan of the Great Claw, which meant there was a chance that one of the surviving knights from that war would be the guilty party, or at least know who was.

Virve claimed the right to capture and question the knights who had fought beside Bors Lothian in that war in the hopes that she would find an answer one day, and Ashlynn freely granted it. After all, Ashlynn understood all too well the need to find answers to resolve the scars on her heart. But to see results so soon...

"Tell your men to gather around the hemlocks," Ashlynn said as she surrounded herself with a soft, nurturing green the shade of mint leaves. "Even if their boughs shake, they will not fall and they will keep you safe from anything... dangerous," she said softly, grateful that the force of Virve's emotions only affected the trees in the surrounding forest and not the weather itself.

If Virve's anger called down lightning and thunderstorms the way Ashlynn's had, she would have had to step in for Virve the way Nyrielle had stepped in for her. As is, however, she limited herself to protecting the soldiers while Virve fought to resolve the feelings in her heart with her own claws.

Inside the curtain wall, the frantic efforts to resist the battering ram slamming into the iron-bound wooden gate temporarily paused as all eyes turned to the gleaming figure of Sir Cathal in his armor and the roaring demon towering above him. Several people dropped their weapons in fear and the men who were pushing a wagon to block the gate slipped and fell when the sound of Virve's roar hit them like a physical blow.

"You MONSTERS!" Virve roared as golden flames danced in her eyes. "You savage beasts!"

She'd known for years that her father fell in the fighting on Airgead Mountain. He wasn't the only one who never came home from that pointless war but he was the only one who'd mattered to her. But even though she knew he fell, his body had never been found... and now she knew why. Because he'd been skinned as a rug to be trampled eternally beneath Lothian boots.

"Die!" Virve shouted as she lunged for the knight with darksteel tipped claws ready to tear him to pieces.

Sir Cathal had been waiting for the moment. He might not know who the tawny furred demon with the golden patches in his fur was, but he understood that the man was important to this witch. Important enough that learning his fate was certain to provoke rage, and when it did, he was ready.

Cathal raised his shield high, sliding his back foot back and widening his stance as though he were sitting astride his horse. The instant before the demon's claws reached him, he turned, angling his shield in the same way he'd angle it to deflect a lance while jousting.

-CLANG- -SCREEECH!-

The sound of Virve's claws grating off his shield could only be called quiet when compared to her scream of wounded rage and many of the soldiers watching covered their ears in pain. Sir Cathal, however, kept moving, following his deflection with a precisely aimed stab that would slide between the demon's ribs and penetrate her heart.

Or at least, it should have, even through the heavy gambeson the demon wore. But when the point of his arming sword pierced the green and blue checkered garment, it barely sank an inch into her flesh before it became stuck, like he'd stabbed through the bark of a tree only to encounter the solid wood underneath.

-CLANG!-

Another blow from Virve's claws bounced off his shield as Cathal staggered back, wrenching his sword free of the demon's flesh with his right hand while flexing the fingers of his left, confirming that his arm hadn't shattered under the force of the blows he'd absorbed so far. A thin rivulet of blood spilled from the wound he'd inflicted along her ribs, but it was far too little for such a powerful demon to even notice.

"Butchers, and murderers," Virve spat as she watched the veteran knight dance away. Rage had clouded her vision but she reigned it back in as she realized that fury and power alone wouldn't overcome a man wrapped in three layers of armor who had spent even more of his life on the battlefield than she had.

"Ancient Oak, burn and blaze,

Scorch my foe, till death's repaid!"

The golden flames flickering in Virve's eyes spread and grew, enveloping her body in an aura of flame that scorched the grass beneath her feet and blazed with the heat of a bonfire.

"So this is a witch's power," Sir Cathal whispered, backing up from the heat before forcing himself to stand firm. Yes, it really was a witch. The pointed hat wasn't just for decoration. But even witches could bleed, he'd seen it already...

He just needed to find a way to cut her down before she burned him to death, and before the gate gave way to usher in giants who would certainly finish the job of killing him if the witch didn't.

"BURN MONSTER!" Virve shouted as she waded forward once again, this time, with a tightly leashed fury that would only burn itself out when the knight before her had been burned beyond recognition.

Chapter 792: The Summer Villa Falls

-CLANG!-

-SCREEECH-

-CLANG- -CLANG-

At first, Virve had charged Sir Cathal in a fierce rush to tear him limb from limb, but the old knight was far too experienced for blind rage and superior strength to overwhelm him. Now, wreathed in the flames of her fury, her attacks were precise, controlled, and intended to slowly tear apart her opponent's defenses.

Virve tore long rents in Sir Cathal's shield, destroying the proud sigil and ripping through his bracers and the chain beneath them, until her darksteel claws tore flesh and spilled blood. Half a heartbeat after ripping through his flesh, the sound of meat sizzling filled the air along with the pungent aroma of burned flesh.

"Rarrgghh!" Cathal shouted, swinging his arming sword low at Virve's thighs, determined to extract some kind of price for the painful wound she'd inflicted on him. Once again, however, his arming sword only inflicted a shallow cut, made even less effective than his previous thrust because of the strange armor that seemed completely unaffected by the flames surrounding the witch.

The cold air of the winter morning did almost nothing to relieve the pressure of the heat emanating from the demon witch and sweat poured down his brow behind the visor of his helm as the temperature inside his armor rose like the inside of an oven.

-CLANK-

Cathal staggered backwards under the force of a heavy blow to his chest that caved in a portion of the breastplate like it had been struck by a blacksmith's hammer. Underneath the layers of armor, his chest heaved, laboring for breath that refused to come until bright spots danced across his vision.

-SWISH- -WOOSH-

The aging knight swung wildly, hitting nothing as he fell back, intending only to present enough of a threat to prevent the demon from advancing on him again, buying time to regain his breath and find a way to press an attack.

Her skin was as solid as an oak tree and her body burned with the heat of a bonfire. He'd fought claw demons before but none of them, not a single one, had ever made him feel as weak and feeble as this witch did.

"So, it really does take a Templar or an Inquisitor to slay a Great Witch," Cathal said. His shield arm hung useless at his side and the pain of his burns throbbed all the way to his shoulder. Only the slender arming sword held out in front of him like a lance prevented the demon from reaching out and finishing him off.

"I'm no great witch," Virve said as she glared at the battered knight. "She would have cleaved you in half by now. But I'm more than witch enough to kill you," she said as she took a menacing step forward.

"Mercy!" Cathal called, dropping to one knee and reversing his grip on his sword to plunge the tip of the blade into the soft soil beneath the grass. "I am defeated! I surrender, we all surrender," he shouted.

"It doesn't matter," Virve said as she took several steps toward him. "Whether you killed my father yourself or simply watched while Bors Lothian butchered him like a common animal, you will die for what you allowed to happen."

"Your father," he said numbly as he stared up into the blazing eyes of the burning witch. Perhaps, a distant corner of his mind thought, perhaps not even the Inquisitors or the Templars with Holy Flame Blades could dispatch such an unholy demon who wreathed herself in such a heretical flame. Perhaps, there really was nothing he could have done to win this day or even survive it.

"Then, then take my life," he said, releasing his sword and fumbling at the catches on his helm, stripping it off and baring his sweat soaked face to his enemy. "Take my life as payment for your father's death. Call off your men. Let me be the only one to die for what happened then. Most of these lads were just boys then..."

-CRASH-

-HAAOOOOOO!-

"Don't waste your breath on them," Virve said as she towered over the kneeling knight. "They'll die because my lady ordered their deaths. Your death has nothing to do with them. But you told me where I can find my father's body," she said as the flames wreathing her flared brighter. "For that, I'll let you say your final words."

Behind her, the men of the Black Wolf Brigade charged through a breach in the gate, wielding wickedly long knives that were shaped like fangs and slaughtering any soldier they could lay their hands on.

"I, I see," Cathal said, lowering his head. "Then, if you won't spare me, and you won't spare the men, I beg you to spare Lady Ashlynn. She carries a child in her belly and she comes from a far off county. She has never done anything to your people and..."

"That woman isn't Lady Ashlynn," Virve spat. "You've wasted your last words pleading for an imposter."

"Impost..." Cathal said, his eyes widening in surprise an instant before Virve's fist came crashing down on his unarmored head, silencing him forever.

"I will find you, father," Virve said, clenching a fist as she allowed the flames she had summoned to fade away. "Every tooth and claw, every scrap of fur, I will find you and I will bring you home," she promised as tears spilled from her eyes.

All around her, the fighting continued for several minutes until the last defending soldier in the bailey fell to the knives of the Black Wolf Brigade. At the same time, the curtain wall began to tremble and shake as Ipiktok's Tuscans used their battering ram to break open a breach in the wall that they could enter through.

Soon, the Villa itself would be destroyed, until there was nothing left on this hill but a smoldering ruin. But Virve had done all she needed to. Now, the rest of the work fell to Ollie inside the Villa and to Ashlynn outside. Virve already had what she had come for and far sooner than she had any right to expect.

The only question left in her heart was how much longer she would have to wait before she could bring her father home...

#### Chapter 793: Familiar Faces

While Virve charged the defenders on the wall, Ollie dashed for the manor, clutching his wounded side and gritting his teeth in pain as he ran. The wound might not be life threatening, but it was serious and left unattended, he was sure it would become much worse.

"By bark and leaf, and sap that flows,

Restore my flesh as sweet life grows."

The words that slipped from Ollie's lips as he ran were simple, and the healing they brought was rudimentary at best. The bleeding stopped as his skin and muscles knit back together, but the wound itself was still very tender, and if he pushed himself too hard, he could easily tear the flesh open again.

Heila could have done better, even with the little amount of time Ollie allowed himself to focus on healing, but he quickly shoved down thoughts about his own inadequacies to focus on the mission at hand. Once he reached the manor, he would need to be calm enough to project an air of confidence, or things could become complicated very quickly.

Entering the manor through a side door, Ollie's feet carried him almost automatically in the direction of the kitchens and the servants' wing of the manor. The stone walls of the Villa felt strangely warm, even on this cold, wintery morning, though after a few steps, he realized it wasn't the Villa that was warm... it was his memories of the days spent here that were warm.

The work in the Villa had always been hard, and there were never enough hands to get all of the work done, but at the time, he'd always felt excited to be selected as one of the servants who would spend the warm months of the year in the secluded summer villa. In the Lothian Manor, he was one of dozens of kitchen boys, and the Master of Kitchens rarely let him do any real cooking, but out here, he'd been one of a few, and he felt like he could stretch and grow in this place.

Of course, the Summer Villa wasn't very impressive compared to the grandeur of Lady Nyrielle's ancient fortress, and he learned more in a single day in Georg's kitchen than he might in an entire season in the Summer Villa. He couldn't deny that he had grown far beyond this place, and it felt... smaller now. Almost quaint compared to the life he'd been living. But still, it was the place where his journey had truly begun, and even if it would be the last time he would ever walk these halls, he couldn't deny that it felt... good to return, one last time.

As he rounded a corner, the sounds of scraping wood against stone filled the air, and Ollie blinked several times in surprise at the sight of two laborers and two maids struggling to drag one of the heavy banquet tables down the hall toward the manor's main entrance.

"You there," Ollie said, drawing himself up to his full height and relaxing his shoulders, assuming a commanding posture that Thane had drilled him on almost as much as his lessons on fighting in armor. "Drop the table, barricading the doors won't help you at all."

"Your, your lordship?" One of the burly men said, blinking in surprise to see an unfamiliar knight walking the halls of the villa. "But, your lordship, the demons..."

"A few tables stacked in front of the door won't save you from them," Ollie said confidently as he approached the group of servants. The maids, he recognized, or at least he thought he did. Tipfany was the shorter of the two with mousy brown hair tied in a tight braid, while Mina was an older woman, well into her thirties, who had been present at the Summer Villa every year that Ollie had been sent there.



"Tables won't save you, but I can. Tell me something," he said, trying to maintain the air of a knight who was accustomed to giving orders to subordinates instead of one who made requests of their friends and neighbors.

"I haven't ever seen the Villa staffed this late in the year," he said, speaking from experience. "How much of the staff is still here? Not the soldiers," he clarified. "Just the house staff."

"A dozen between the chamber and scullery maids," Tipfany said quickly, though her eyes kept darting from Ollie to the doors at the far end of the long hall where the sounds of battle could still be heard. "The stablehands, kitchen staff, and everyone else, um... two dozen more?" she said uncertainly.

"Three dozen or so people then," Ollie said as his mind began racing over the implications of bringing so many people back to the Vale. They had brought enough soldiers to ride herd on the soon-to-be captive servants, along with enough carts to transport them, but there were a few things they'd be short on with so many people in two.

"You two," he said, pointing at the pair of maids. "Go spread the word among the staff to join us in the kitchens as fast as they can come. I'll explain everything once you're all there."

"You two," he continued, turning to the burly men he didn't recognize without giving the women a chance to respond. "Go to the lower larder. Fetch two each, sacks of flour, casks of pork or beef, wheels of cheese, and baskets of tubers. Pile them up at the west service door, but do not go outside! Do you understand?"

Dealing with their past several groups of involuntary guests to the Vale had taught Ollie that, even if they prepared to feed their guests, they might not trust food provided by 'demons.' Once they reached the carts, he would have Constable Daithi to help reassure their new guests that they could trust the people of the Vale, but he still expected many of them to retain some reluctance.

If they brought their own food from the Villa, however, he should at least be able to get them a dinner when they camped for the night and a breakfast in the morning before they made it back to the Vale. After that... things would have to come with time.

"Y-yes, your lordship, we understand," Tipfany squeaked in a voice that was very small and timid.

Suddenly, a deep, anguished cry resounded from the bailey outside the manor. The scream was so loud and strong that the glass windows of the villa rattled, candles and lamps along the hallway flickered, and a rain of dust fell from the rafters overhead.

"Virve," Ollie whispered, dropping his hand to the hilt of Frost Fang and half turning to rush back to the battle in the bailey before he forced himself to stop. She'd pushed him away because if he didn't act quickly, the common people in the Villa might attempt to flee, and anyone entering the bailey ran the risk of getting caught up in the battle and losing their life before Ollie had a chance to save them

They hoped that the common folk would have the sense to hide or at least to remain in the fortified villa, but once panic set in...

Glancing back at the servants, he found both maids cowering under the heavy table they'd intended to use to barricade the door, and even the men looked uncertain, caught between a desire to protect the women near them and the intense fear brought on by Virve's bellows of rage and pain.

"Go," Ollie said, more sharply than he'd intended to. "Go quickly!"

"Your lordship," one of the burly men said. "Perhaps I should go with..."

"No," Ollie interrupted, shaking his head as he turned toward the kitchens. "They can fetch the staff, you need to fetch supplies, or everyone will be very cold and hungry tonight before we reach safety. So go, and come to the kitchens once you're done."

"Yes, your lordship," all four of them said moments before rushing off to complete the tasks Ollie had given them. It wasn't until several minutes later, as they were rushing to find the other servants in the manor, that Mina began to frown.

"Tipfany," the older maid said, looking at her frightened younger companion. "That knight... do you think he looked familiar?"

"You've served at the Villa more often than I have," the young woman said, failing to understand how the handsome young knight's identity could be important at the moment. He was already sweeping in

like a hero from a fairytale, rescuing them just as demons were about to destroy the villa. What more could they ask for? "You probably saw him at one of the banquets..."

"No, I think it's something else," Mina said, taking the stairs up to the second floor two at a time as they raced to alert the remaining staff, and hopefully Lady Ashlynn as well. "I don't think I've seen his coat of arms before... I'd remember someone with a pot on their shield, but..."

"But nothing, it's not important right now," Tipfany insisted before she began to shout. "Everyone! Everyone, come out! There's a knight come to rescue us! Run to the kitchens, help has come, so hurry!"

"I'll go get Lady Ashlynn," Mina said, putting aside the question of the red-haired knight's identity. Tipfany was right, they could ask their rescuer his name later, once they were all safe. For now, they had to escape the demons, or it wouldn't matter if he was one of the Royal Princes posing as a common knight. The most important thing was to follow his orders now and ask questions much, much later.

#### Chapter 794: Head Cook Otis

When Ollie reached the kitchens, he was momentarily taken aback by the sight that greeted him.

Clearly, Tipfany and Mina weren't the only ones with barricades on their mind, but Otis had gone a step further than tipping over his heavy oak worktable to block the doorway. From the looks of the people standing in the large kitchen, Otis had gathered a handful of his staff and armed them in what looked like an attempt to defend the kitchens at all costs.

Two large men who Ollie vaguely recognized as wood cutters responsible for keeping the kitchen hearths supplied with firewood stood behind the improvised barricade with large axes while two younger women who Ollie had never seen before held sharp filet knives in their hands as they crouched behind upturned iron pots.

It was Head Cook Otis himself, however, that gave Ollie the most pause. Barely healed burns were visible on the backs of his hands as he brandished a heavy cleaver in one hand and a burning torch in another. Those same burns seemed to extend even further, peaking out from the collar of his tunic and extending up the left side of his face almost to his ear.

The man Ollie had known before was kind, frequently flustered by the demands of important nobles, and always watched out for the servants who worked under him. He was a man who got by with what he had and did his best to help others when he could.

The version of Otis standing before him now, however, looked as if he'd been through more than just a single crucible. His eyes were firm as he stared at the door, and even though the woodsmen were both younger and stronger than the thickly built chef, he was the one who stood in front of the others with a grim determination that said that he expected to die.

"Otis!" Ollie cried, pushing aside the heavy, improvised barricade in his haste to reach his old friend. "Thank goodness you survived the fire," he said as he strode across the room to throw his arms around the startled cook in a fierce hug.

The sight of the scars from burns on his friend's body struck Ollie like a knife to the chest as he realized the price his friend had paid to help him and Lady Ashlynn escape the Villa after Sir Kaefin's death, and Ollie silently resolved to make sure Ashlynn heard about those wounds. Given everything he knew about her, he couldn't imagine that she would allow Otis to suffer any longer for the help he'd given them, and even if Ollie couldn't heal wounds that were that old, he was certain that Ashlynn or Heila could.

For a moment, Otis stood frozen in shock, holding his torch out away from the knight who had just shoved aside the table that had taken two strong men to move and blinking in confusion as he tried to understand who this man was to embrace him so fiercely. But when he pulled back and got a good look into the young man's pale eyes, recognition struck him like a bolt of lightning falling from clear skies.

"Ollie?" Otis asked in disbelief. "Ollie, is that really, really you?"

"Your lordship," one of the young girls said, rushing out from behind the pot and clutching Ollie's tabard. "Please don't punish him for forgetting his manners," she said as she dropped to one knee. "He, he's a good man who..."

"He's a good friend," Ollie said, pulling back from the embrace but holding on to Otis's shoulder as he glanced down at the frightened scullery maid. "Is she my replacement, Otis? Did you need two people just to cover for me leaving?" he teased.

"No, she's not yer replacement," Otis said, putting the cleaver in his hand down before smacking Ollie across the chest with the back of his hand. The familiar gesture was followed by a wince of pain as he felt the coat of mail underneath Ollie's tabard, and he hissed as he shook his wounded hand.

"Paella's a good girl who don't bring no trouble down on me," Otis said furiously, though the smile tugging at the corners of his lips and the twinkle in his eyes spoiled the effect. "An you didn'a jus' leave," the cook said. "Ye ran away wit' that murderous Lynnda woman 'an weren't never seen again! 'Course I needed new help. But how're ye here? An' why? There's demons out there!"

Outside, the distant sounds of battle had shifted and the cries of anguished, dying men seemed to have vanished completely. The crash of Ipiktok's battering ram against the stone curtain wall echoed across the bailey and could still be heard even here, but aside from that, the fighting seemed to have stopped entirely.

"I came here for you," Ollie said simply, as though it explained everything. "I came for all of you," he added as he bent down to help the young woman named Paella to her feet. "I can take you all away to safety," he promised.

"Constable Daithi, you remember him, don't you?" Ollie asked. "He was one of Sir Broll's men. He's waiting in the forest nearby with more of our men, ready to help bring you to safety. My village is only two days from here and I already ordered men to fetch supplies from the larder..."

"Village? Yer men?" Otis said, blinking in confusion. "But Ollie, er, Sir Ollie," he said uncertainly. "The demons..."

"Are mine to worry about," Ollie said firmly. "Right now, I need your help to make sure everyone gets out of here. Have the staff had their morning meal? I told Mina and Tipfany to bring everyone they could find here, but it's cold out there and we won't stop for the day until close to nightfall."

"It would help if everyone could get a bowl of porridge or something before we leave. Or anything they can take with them when we go," Ollie added as he glanced around the kitchen at the half-prepared meals that had been pushed aside when Otis barricaded his staff in the kitchen. "So long as they have a meal in their bellies for the journey, it will help."

"Porridge," Otis said in disbelief as he stared at the strange knight wearing Ollie's face. It was Ollie, he was sure of it. He looked like he'd done a bit of growing up and filling out, but those eyes and that voice were both unmistakable. But everything else about him had transformed so much that it left the balding cook wondering... Was this really Ollie?

But, no matter how much doubt gnawed at him, he just couldn't give in to it. Despite everything that had gone wrong on the day he set the kitchens on fire to help Ollie escape, here the lad was, back in the kitchens and come to rescue them from the most terrifying demons Otis had ever heard of. If that didn't earn the lad a bit of trust, then nothing would.

"Sure, porridge," Otis said as he tossed the burning torch in his hand onto the hearth. "We still have a pot. We still have bacon and bread and boiled hens' eggs for the soldiers too. Everyone can have breakfast!"

"That's the spirit," Ollie said, clapping the older man on the shoulder. "But I do have one other question that needs an answer," he said as his voice grew solemn. "Is 'Lady Ashlynn' still at the Villa? I need to make sure that she comes with us as well..."

#### Chapter 795: Charade's End

In the back corridors of the Summer Villa, used almost exclusively by servants, Samira crept slowly along the wall of a hallway that led to the kitchens.

Her legs burned with fatigue from all of the walking she'd done, and her back ached from the strain of supporting the weight of her belly. Just the number of times she'd climbed up and down stairs had already pushed her limits, but trying to remain quiet and undetected made every step more exhausting.

When she'd reached the store rooms near the kitchens, she was startled to find a pair of burly men already looting the place. Clearly, she wasn't the only one who was looking to run away in the confusion of the demon attack, but she hadn't imagined that there would be people stealing food when the battle had only just begun.

Owain had always said that real battles could last for hours and that he fought for half a day at a time. Fortresses like the Summer Villa were supposed to be even harder to attack with prolonged battles that could last for days, weeks, or even months. She knew that the Summer Villa wasn't a proper fortress, but there should still be a good deal of time before the walls fell and anyone was in enough danger to think of fleeing, shouldn't there?

She didn't know. All she knew was that if she went to the storerooms, she'd be discovered, and so she made her way to the kitchens instead. More than anything, she was afraid that the attack really would drag on for days. If it did, reinforcements from Lothian City could arrive before she had a chance to make her escape with Noomi, and if the Church came with those reinforcements, even if she managed to survive, Noomi and Saku were certain to die.

Her friend had nothing to do with this attack, but the Church wouldn't care. There was a captive demon in the dungeon, and there had been an unprecedented demon attack on the Summer Villa at the start of winter.

Those two facts would combine into a death sentence for her friend, and Owain would do nothing to save them. After all, while he might want to raise Saku as some kind of captive demon pet, he would never risk the ire of the Church over the lives of demon infant and his mother.

Now that she had almost reached the kitchens, however, she heard the sounds of many voices speaking at once, so many that it sounded like all of the servants had gathered in the kitchens at once!

"...only what fits in a single bag, treasured things that can't be replaced..."

"...see the giants over the walls? They're larger than a house and..."

"...will kill us before we get more than a league..."

"...Sir Cathal is still fighting against the demons and..."

"Everyone, quiet please," a clear, authoritative voice said, cutting through the noise and chatter to instantly silence the people in the kitchen. "We have a guest in the hall, and I think she should show herself in."

For a moment, Samira froze, standing perfectly still and holding her breath to avoid making even the slightest noise. But then, her mind caught up with her and she realized that it was pointless to hide or try to sneak away now that she'd been caught. Besides, even if she ran, what could she accomplish?

Since she couldn't run, she did her best to remember all of the lessons she'd received from Lady Jocelynn and Confessor Eleanor to impersonate a real noblewoman. She held her chin up ever so slightly and brushed off the dust that had collected on her dress and hair when the horrifying roar shook the castle before taking slow, deliberate steps into the kitchen.

"You see, Sir Ollie," Mina said, pointing to the doorway as soon as the elegantly dressed figure of a heavily pregnant woman appeared. "I told you she wasn't in her chambers when I checked. Lady Ashlynn used to wander around a lot when she just arrived. She was probably just taking a morning stroll when the demons attacked, weren't you, your ladyship?"

"That, that's right," Samira said awkwardly as she felt the weight of dozens of eyes falling on her, including the gaze of a handsome red-haired knight she'd never seen before. "I, I'm glad that you're all safe and gathered here," she said in her best impression of a concerned noblewoman.

"But this isn't the best place to hide for safety from the demons," she added, thinking quickly about how she could use her identity as 'Lady Ashlynn' to gain control of the situation. "The cellars below..."

"Enough, Samira," Ollie said, forcefully interrupting her. "The time for pretending is over. I've already spoken to 'Lynnda,'" he added when he saw the look of shock on her face as he used her real name. "You don't need to worry, I'm not here to hurt you for what you've done. I know that Owain forced your hand," he said with a scowl as he thought about all of the suffering Owain had wrought while appearing to the world as a perfect lord and knight.

"Everyone, we need to move quickly," Ollie said, turning away from the stunned-looking imposter to address the crowd. "Finish your food if you still have the appetite to do so, it's cold out there. You can return to your chambers to collect any personal treasures that cannot be replaced but do not burden yourselves. The people in my village were refugees themselves not that long ago, they'll know how to help you settle in once we arrive," he promised.

"Samira," Ollie said as he strode through the crowd to the wide-eyed woman who was still standing in the doorway. "Lynnda told me that you were wearing soft pads to make it look like you were with child. You don't need to pretend now, but I do need you to take me to the chambers you've been staying in. There are some things there that I need to retrieve."



"No, no, I can't," Samira said, shaking her head and backing away from the strange knight. "I'm not pretending. I'm with child. Please, you have to believe me," she said, wrapping her hands around her belly to protect her unborn child.

"Sir Ollie, it's true," Mina said quickly, stepping up to the young knight she'd been shocked to learn was the very same kitchen boy who had run away with the mysterious Lynnda half a year ago. "I've been helping Lady Ashlynn with her dressing in the morning and her bathing in the evening. She really is with child. I, I don't know where you heard she was someone pretending, but..."

"Samira," Ollie said, stopping where he stood and staring at the frightened woman who was backing away from him as if she were afraid he would beat her. It was the first time Ollie had ever seen someone look at him with wide-eyed fear and as soon as he saw the look in her eyes, words tried to burst past his lips, protesting that he wouldn't hurt her and that he wasn't like Owain...

But he couldn't say it. He knew they'd just be words, and when he thought about how the knights around Owain treated women... How Sir Kaefin had treated Ashlynn and all the rumors he'd heard about Sir Broll and Sir Rain, he couldn't blame her for being afraid of him.

Once again, he cursed Owain and his men for defiling what it meant to be a knight, twisting it into something that left common women afraid of what a strong knight might do to them when they should have seen knights as the greatest source of safety they could find.

"Samira," Ollie repeated softly. "Are you really with child? And," he said, swallowing heavily. "Is the child Owain's?"

"I, I really am with child," she said, hanging her head low and avoiding meeting Mina's gaze. "He, he isn't lying," she continued after taking a deep, shuddering breath. "My name is Samira. Lord Bors chose me to pretend to be Lady Ashlynn when she died on the night of her wedding," she admitted, giving the servants in the room a complicated look. "But, after that... Lord Owain he... he and I... we..."

No matter how much she tried, she couldn't make herself say it. She couldn't bring herself to admit how much she'd craved his touch in the beginning, or how much she'd come to fear him in the months since he left, when she came to understand the sort of man he really was. It was just too much to put into words.

"This," Ollie said hesitantly as he stared at the heavily pregnant woman. "This changes things..."

#### Chapter 796: Samira's Secret (Part One)

"So she wasn't really Lady Ashlynn?"

"Did you hear? Lady Ashlynn was murdered the night of her wedding..."

"Lord Owain forced himself on her?"

"I saw Lady Ashlynn at the wedding, I did. I were carrying dishes ta tha' lower tables. She looks like Lady Ashlynn did, I swear it!"

"Looks like her? Enough to pass her child off as Lord Owain's heir you think? Is that why he..."

"Shush now! This sort of thing, it gets a man killed for knowing. You don't know nothing and I don't know nothing either!"

The whispers that swept through the crowded kitchen were like a wildfire, spreading rapidly on the heels of Samira's shocking confession that not only wasn't she Lady Ashlynn, the real Ashlynn had been murdered the night of her wedding. And most shocking of all, Samira was carrying Lord Owain's child!

Suddenly it made sense why things had been so strange at the summer villa. If the imposter received visitors the way the real Lady Ashlynn would have, people would have found out she was a fake. But if Owain returned from the Summer Villa with a bouncing baby, maybe one with Lady Ashlynn's signature blond hair and Lord Owain's charming features... Everyone would believe the child was his proper heir!

But the secret they'd just heard was far, far too dangerous to know. Perhaps it was more dangerous than the demons outside the walls! After all, Sir Ollie seemed to have a plan for dealing with the demons, but how would he deal with the heir to the Lothian March if he disrupted Owain's plans?

Even a powerful knight like Sir Ollie appeared to have become would have to fear the consequences of knowing this secret, to say nothing of what would happen to common servants who knew!

"Everyone, quit yer yappin!" Otis yelled over the noise of the crowd. "Didn'a ye hear Sir Ollie? He said ta go an' fetch yer things! So go, git an' hurry back before the demons swallow us whole! Save tha' lords gossip for tha' lords and mind yer tongues."

"Otis is right," Ollie said as he shook off the shock. "We need to move quickly. The further we're able to go today, the safer we'll be," he explained. After all, he had no way of knowing if someone had sent a carrier pigeon or other messenger bird when the attack began.

Reinforcements could be on their way by the end of the day if the Church got word of things and he'd learned enough in the visions of his trial of witchcraft to have a healthy amount of fear for the things their priests and Inquisitors could do if they were truly determined to hunt down the demons who destroyed the villa. The sooner he could get these people behind the walls of the Vale, the better.

"Samira," Ollie said gently as he turned back to the pregnant woman as the servants began to file out of the kitchens, rushing to the common quarters they all shared to retrieve the few precious items they'd brought with them when they came to the Summer Villa.

"I promise, I won't hurt you," Ollie said gently. "But I still need to retrieve things from your chambers. I'd hoped you could show me where they were, but I think you should sit here in the kitchens with Otis and let me go fetch them."

"Ollie, what's so important tha' ye haf ta trouble her like this?" Otis asked, frowning at the youth who had, until recently, been one of his best kitchen helpers. "Lady Ash, er, Lady Samira, why don't'cha come 'ere and let me serve ye up a bit o' warm bread an' butter. Ye look pale an' sweaty from runnin' about..." he said gently.

"I, I'm not a lady," Samira said awkwardly, uncertain whether she should move to accept the cook's invitation or not "You don't have to be nice to me. You don't even have to take me with you when you escape," she added as she clutched at her heavy, long skirts. "Just help me pack up a bag of food. Some bread and cheese, a bit of meat, and I'll be on my way. You can pretend you never even saw me," she said.

Whatever Sir Ollie was planning, she clearly couldn't be part of it. She had to get back to Noomi to make their escape... And maybe run to the demons for help if she had to get away from Sir Ollie as well. But she couldn't stay here any longer.

Every minute she wasted was a minute that Noomi was alone in the dungeon, waiting for Samira to come back with supplies so they could make their escape. But if she was gone too long and Noomi came looking for her then... then things would be beyond bad in ways that she couldn't bring herself to contemplate.

"No, you can't go out there by yourself," Ollie said, shaking his head. "It's cold and there's nothing for leagues but fields and forest. With a child in your belly, even if you had food and water, you couldn't go far enough before you froze in the night. I won't let that happen to you," he insisted.

"No, really," Samira said, backing away from him once again. "I, I just need to... that is, I can't. I can't go with you. Because," she stammered, trying to find some kind of excuse she could give them. "Because Lord Owain will come hunting for me," she said, realizing that Ollie had likely misunderstood that Owain wanted her to have this child. It wasn't true, but if she could make him believe it, then maybe there was a chance.

"You heard what they all said," Samira continued, as she rubbed her belly. "I, I'm carrying Lord Owain's heir. He, he won't let me go, and if he finds out that you have me, he'll come for you. I'm sure he still hates you and Lynnda for what happened, so you don't want that and..."

"I'm not worried about Lord Owain," Ollie said, shaking his head. "Honestly, if he came for us, it would make someone very, very happy," he said before he paused. He'd been about to tell her that he would keep her safe and that she didn't need to worry about Owain hunting her but... could he really keep her safe? Not from Owain, but from Ashlynn.

Lady Ashlynn said that she didn't hold a grudge against Samira because she knew the other woman had simply been a pawn in Bors and Owain's schemes. Even Jocelynn had played along and helped to prop Samira up in her role as an impostor.

But it was one thing to bring along the woman who had been impersonating Ashlynn... it was another thing entirely to bring along the mother of Owain's child. As much as Ollie wanted to say that Ashlynn wouldn't hurt her, he'd felt the storm she caused when she lost control of herself. If this provoked her, she might hurt Samira before she even realized it, and once she did, it would be too late to think they should have done something different.

Given that, could he really risk bringing her along with them? But if he didn't, it was as good as sentencing her to die...

#### Chapter 797: Samira's Secret (Part Two)

"Even, even if you aren't afraid of Lord Owain," Samira said firmly when Ollie seemed to pause in thought. "I still can't go with you. You can take whatever it is you want from my chambers," she offered. After all, she had been planning to abandon nearly everything when she left anyway and none of it truly belonged to her. If he wanted any of it, he was welcome to it as long as she and Noomi could escape.

"I'll go hide in the dungeons beneath the villa," she said as she turned to leave. "Just, leave behind some food in the kitchens and I'll come for it after you're gone."

"Lady Samira, ye can'a do that!" Otis insisted, shocked that she would even contemplate something so dangerous instead of taking Ollie's offer to help them escape to the village he'd mentioned. "The demons will kill ye if they find ye! They'll cook ye in one of their great pots or those giants'll gobble ye up whole, or..."

"No they won't!" Samira shouted as a hot surge of anger bubbled up from her chest at the way Otis was repeating the same cruel lies about the Eldritch that she'd once believed herself. "They won't! They'll leave me alone, or maybe, maybe, maybe..." Samira said, repeating the last word several times as two thoughts collided in her mind.

How many times had she talked to Noomi about the day Owain had attacked the Heartwood Clan's village? How many times had Noomi cursed fate that the 'red-haired human' hadn't come earlier to convince her villagers to flee... early enough that she wouldn't have been too heavy with child to flee to the Vale of Mists.

The strange red haired human who told stories about how fierce Owain and his knights were. Who knew the kind of destruction that Owain was capable of and that he wouldn't give up on hunting for 'demons' until he'd spilled enough Eldritch blood to wash away the shame of what Lady Ashlynn had done at the Summer Villa.

"It's you," Samira said as she stared at Ollie in disbelief. "You're the one who warned Noomi's village about Lord Owain's attack. You, you're the one who convinced the Heartwood Clan to flee to the Vale of Mists. You, you aren't afraid of the 'demons' because... because you've already joined the Eldritch," she said with increasing certainty.

"That's why you can get us out safely," she said. "Because the Eldritch people attacking us aren't your enemies, they're your allies."

The more she spoke, the more confident she sounded and the more Otis felt like his stomach had fallen through a hole in the floor. But when he looked at the young man he thought he knew very well, hoping to see hot anger and denial on his face, he instead found a strange sort of smile.

"Ollie," Otis said as the sinking sensation in his stomach grew great enough that he felt the breakfast of bacon and boiled eggs that he'd eaten just minutes ago threatening to rebel in his stomach. "Ye didn'a, ye didn'a bring tha demons here ta kill us an' cook cook us, did ye? Yer not doin this just ta get at our treasures... are ye?"

It seemed incomprehensible. Utterly baffling and completely impossible. For the dutiful, helpful, and often too kind boy that he'd watched grow up in the kitchens to turn into some kind of heretical demon servant...

It couldn't be like that, Otis thought. But even though it shouldn't be like that, very little else made sense. After all Ollie had been very clear that before they fled, people should collect their treasures, and he kept insisting that Lady Samira tell him about the treasures in her chambers... So if he wasn't here to raid them with the demons, why else would he be so insistent on these things?

"It isn't like that, Otis," Ollie said gently as he tried to give his old friend a reassuring smile. "I want people to fetch their treasures because I've seen what happens when people have to flee without them. Sometimes, losing something small and precious leaves a hole in a person's heart that eats up their will to live. I don't want that to happen to people I consider friends. That's all," he said gently before he turned to face Samira.

"Madame Samira," Ollie said. "For you to know all that... and for you to call the Eldritch and the Heartwood Clan properly... I feel like you have another secret to share that's just as shocking as the child in your belly."

"You can trust me," he said, reaching into the pouch at his waist and pulling out a small figure of a knight, carved from a single piece of red cedar. "Milo of the Heartwood Clan carved this for me while I stood my vigil to become a knight," he explained as he held out the small figure that had been shaped by Milo's claws.

Originally, Milo had only meant for it to watch over Ollie during his vigil, and he promised to carve a better one out of cypress wood once there was a mature enough tree to harvest a branch from, but Ollie refused to accept a replacement. This was the knight that Milo had carved with all of his feelings of worry for his friend, and along with that worry, his desire to protect Ollie from harm that he couldn't hope to confront.

The carving was far too precious to be replaced, and Ollie had carried it on his body ever since he woke from his vigil. Now, he handed that carving to Samira, seeing confirmation of his suspicions when she reverently accepted the carving, clearly understanding its significance and the significance of Ollie's choice to carry it on his person.

"I took Heartwood as my surname to honor the friends I made in their clan," Ollie added as he held out his hand to take back the figure of a knight, returning it to its home in a pouch at his waist. "But it sounds like I'm not the only one with Heartwood friends," Ollie said with a reassuring smile. "So please, tell me what you're hiding, and I promise that I'll help you."

#### Chapter 798: Dreams of Peaceful Days

In the dim, dank dungeon, Noomi leaned up against the wall beneath the room's only window, inhaling the cool, fresh air and listening to the fading sounds of battle outside. At first, there had been loud bellows and trumpeting sounds unlike anything she'd ever heard, along with the sounds of heavy crashing and humans shouting orders.

Then, the sounds of humans shouting slowly faded away after an anguished roar unlike anything she'd ever heard shook the castle. Now, things seemed to be all but over and the only voices she heard shouting were speaking the old Eldritch tongue.

"Shhh, hush," she cooed as she gently rocked Saku in her arms. The blanket Samira had brought for him was the softest, warmest thing she'd been able to give her son since he was born and he'd begun to fuss and struggle to get free of the tight bundle she'd wrapped him in.

"Hush now, little Saku," she said softly. "It's cold outside, even colder than in here and you'll want all that cozy warm you have now when we go outside," she said as moisture collected in her dark eyes. Outside. For the first time in half a year, she would be able to go outside again.

"Just wait until mommy Samira comes for us," she whispered, trying to distract herself just as much as she was trying to comfort her little kit. "It may be hard to get there, but we'll make it to the Vale of Mists soon, I promise you."

"In the Vale, we'll find a lake to build our burrow by," she said. "The others from our village may have already found one, or built a dam to make one. You'll see, there will be so much fresh, clean water that you'll never run out of water to drink. You can even swim in it and catch fish to eat and we won't ever... won't ever run out of food again," she said as tears dripped onto Saku's blanket.

Already, she worried that her son was smaller and weaker than he should be because she'd had so little to give him when he began to wean. The human guards only gave her enough food to feed a human child but they didn't know how fast Eldritch children from the Heartwood Clan grew. Without Samira's help, Saku would have been so underfed that he might have become a runt his entire life.

"You'll see," Noomi said. "You'll have others of our clan to play with soon. But you have to play with Samira's little one too," she said as she gently stroked Saku's tiny face with the back of one claw. "If it's a boy, you can be rough with him and if it's a girl then you have to grow up strong to protect your sister because she won't have any claws of her own."

"You have to be nice to mommy Samira too," she said sternly. "She'll be all alone in the Vale. There aren't any humans there except the vampires, and they won't care about her. And when you grow up big and strong, if anyone ever gets angry at your mommy Samira, you have to stand up for her, because without her, we might never have made it."

When Noomi imagined the life they were about to run away to, she hoped that her people would be willing to let Samira live with them. Whatever hatred they had for humans, the captive woman who had been tricked into impersonating one of the human's great ladies had nothing to do with attacking their village.

Samira posed no threat to anyone and she liked to think that Old Nan would understand and would allow the human woman to live among them... but that was only if Old Nan was still alive and had survived to reach the Vale of Mists. If someone else was in charge, someone who had every reason in the world to hate the humans for what they had done, they might not welcome a human into their community.

But, if her clan couldn't accept Samira living among them, then she would find another stream or pond or lake to build their burrow on. She refused to leave her friend behind when they reached the safety of



the Vale. Samira had helped to protect her in this dangerous place of humans, so she would protect Samira in the Eldritch lands.

They had promised to raise their children together if they ever escaped this place. That they would let their children know each other as siblings, despite their differences. Because if she and Samira could become friends in a place like this, she was certain that their children would be even closer once they escaped this place.

But first, they had to escape. It had been more than half an hour since Samira left and now that the sounds of battle had all but stopped, Noomi began to worry that something had happened to her friend.

"I should have gone with her," she whispered as her tail drooped so low that it brushed against the ground. "If the humans found out she was going to free me... or if the Eldritch caught her and didn't know she was my friend... If anything happened to her, it's my fault for letting her go alone," she said anxiously.

"Saku," she said as she bounced him on her hip. "Just a little bit longer. We'll wait here a little bit longer, but if she doesn't come back soon, then, then we'll have to go looking for your mommy Samira. Maybe, maybe she just fell on the stairs somewhere, or she found so much food for us that she can't carry it all. We'll see her again soon, I promise."

It wasn't long after that when Noomi heard motion coming from the stairway leading to the dungeon. At first, her tail perked up and her whiskers twitched in excitement as she rushed toward the stairwell, but by the time she was halfway across the dungeon she realized that the footsteps she heard couldn't possibly belong to Samira.

Not only were the footsteps far too quick for the heavily pregnant woman, they were accompanied by the faint -CHINK CHINK- sound of human armor and the crisp, sharp impact of a soldier's boots on stone.

"No," she whispered as her entire body began to tremble in fright. She thought they'd won! She could still hear Eldritch voices outside the window so why, why was a human soldier coming for her? Was it some cruel survivor, rushing to kill her before someone could set her free? Or maybe to snatch Saku for Owain Lothian?

Was she going to die before she had a chance to be rescued?

"Hush now little Saku," Noomi whispered as she held him tight in one arm and flexed the claws of her free hand. "We're getting out of here today, I promise you..."

#### Chapter 799: Witch to the Rescue

Ollie struggled to force down a growing feeling of hatred and fury as he walked down the narrow steps leading to the cold cells of the Lothian dungeon.

He'd seen the cells before, many times. There wasn't an inch of the Villa he hadn't explored in the years past, whether it had been before the Lothian family arrived for the summer or after they left, there was always time to sneak into hidden places and secret areas where no one went.

The dungeons were one of the most neglected features of the Villa, and as far as Ollie knew, no one had used them since long before he was born. They were cold and drafty, even in summer, and water seeped in from the walls. There was only one tiny window that provided a whisper of fresh air and a glimpse of daylight in a place that was otherwise left as dark as a tomb.

As a younger man, he'd always found it a little spooky, but that had been when it was empty. Now, as he descended the steps, the smell of unemptied buckets of waste and unwashed bodies filled the air even before he entered the room, telling him everything he needed to know about the conditions Noomi and her infant son had been kept in.

"Stay back!" A rough, feminine voice called as the light from Ollie's lantern spilled into the darkness of the dungeon. "Stay away from me or, or I'll claw your face off and crush your bones," Noomi threatened, backing away from the doorway and turning her body to shield the baby in her arms with her body. "You know what 'demons' are capable of, don't you? So just move aside and let me go and... and you won't get hurt!"

When Ollie finally got a good look at her, Noomi's eyes were slightly sunken and her brown fur hung limp on her body, but when she held up a hand to protect herself, her claws were sharp, and there was no weakness in her posture. She might not know how to fight, but she was puffing herself up and threatening him with the fearsome reputation her clan had earned as if she were one of their greatest warriors.

"Noomi, it's Ollie," the young knight said, holding out one hand with his wrist facing upward and his hand bent back as far as it would go while his fingers splayed open as if he was holding an apple. "I visited your village in the spring," he continued. "I'm here as a friend."

"You're a friend?" Noomi asked, blinking in confusion. "Then, if you're a friend, where's Samira?" Noomi insisted as she started to back away from the young knight. He resembled the boy who had come to her village so long ago, but that boy hadn't been dressed like a human knight, and he didn't have the... presence that this young man did.

The boy in her memories had been earnest and uncertain when he followed the Black Merchant into their village, whereas this knight stood tall and proud, like a mighty tree that could hold up the weight of the world on his shoulders and provide shelter from any storm. So even though they looked similar, it was hard to believe they were the same man.

"Why isn't she here?" Noomi asked, stopping suddenly when her tail encountered the bars of her prison cell. "If you've harmed her..."

"I haven't harmed her, and I won't," Ollie insisted. "I swear it to you on my honor as the Cypress Witch. May the Mother of Trees strip me of my power if I've lied to you," he said, hoping that the Heartwood clan's reverence for the Mother of Trees would cut through the distrust that held her back.

"You, you're a witch?" Noomi said, unconsciously lowering herself to both knees with wide-open eyes as she realized why the young man felt like he had such a great presence. She felt as if she was standing in the presence of a great tree, one with roots that sank deep into the soil, surrounded by cool water and deep shade.

No one in her village had ever met a real witch before, but there were stories passed down from hundreds of years ago. Stories about the powerful witch who taught the Heartwood Clan how to feel a person's heart through the wood they shaped and even taught them powerful sorcery they could carve into the wood, though many of those secret spells had been lost in the long years since the Mother of Trees rescued their clan from disaster.

"You're a witch who serves the Mother of Trees," she whispered as her tail began to twitch, rapidly thumping the cold, stone ground behind her as her emotions threatened to overwhelm all sense of reason.

She knew, of course, that it wouldn't be the same Mother of Trees as before. A new person became the Mother of Trees every few centuries, but the Heartwood Clan had long held hope that one of the next great witches to bear the title would choose someone from their clan to join her coven. And now, now she was standing in the presence of someone who was part of that coven! She really had been rescued.

"I am," Ollie said, kneeling on the floor in front of her and extending his wrist. "I'm also a friend of Old Nan, Milo, and Juni. I won't hurt you, and I promise, I'll take you and your son to the Mother of Trees as soon as we leave this place. She's waiting for us just outside the walls. So, can you trust us?"

"Can you bring me to Samira?" Noomi asked hesitantly. "I won't feel right if I haven't seen her safe," she said. She had to make this man, this witch, understand that Samira didn't belong with the cruel humans of this castle. Now that her rescue had come, she had to do what she'd promised Samira she would and explain that she was a friend who needed to be rescued, too.

"Of course I'll bring you to her," Ollie said solemnly. "If you're willing, I'd like you to be present when we bring her to the Mother of Trees. I think that, if she sees the two of you together, it may help my lady to accept Samira and her child."

"Why would the mother of trees be worried about Samira's child?" Noomi asked with a frown. Surely the Great Witch who meant the most to the Heartwood Clan would be overflowing with gratitude for a woman who had protected the captured mother and child, wouldn't she?

"Is it because it's also a child of Owain Lothian?" Noomi asked as it occurred to her that they might see Samira as an enemy just because of the identity of her child's father. "I hate that man, more than anyone in the world," she said sharply as her tail thumped the ground furiously.

"But Samira and her child have nothing to do with him," Noomi pleaded. "The child won't inherit the father's wickedness, we'll see to that," she promised. "Samira and I, if you give us the chance, we'll raise them up right. You won't have to fear that they'll turn into some kind of monster that would threaten our people."

"Oh?" Ollie said, blinking in surprise at the fierceness and determination in her voice when she spoke of helping to raise the other woman's child. "You intend to stay with Samira, even after you escape? She said that you called her your Lady Jailor not that long ago."

"That was before, I knew she was a prisoner too," Noomi said. "But the past few months, we talked about breaking free. We said we'd build a burrow by a lake somewhere in the Vale if the others from my village would take us in. And if Old Nan and the others can't accept a human there, then we'll find a place to be by ourselves."

"She helped me when I didn't have enough to feed myself and Saku," Noomi said with dropping whiskers. "I haven't paid her back for saving us yet. So, if I can pay her back now, I will. If the Mother of Trees will be angry with her, then I'll beg for mercy for Samira," she said. "But what Owain Lothian did to Samira... It's not her fault. The Mother of Trees shouldn't blame her for it."

"It's not that simple," Ollie said with a heavy sigh. "The Mother of Trees is the real Ashlynn Blackwell, the woman that Samira was pretending to be. And Owain Lothian, he nearly killed Lady Ashlynn before she learned how to use her powers as the Mother of Trees. So, it's complicated."

"No, it isn't," Noomi insisted, standing up as straight as she could. "Samira was foolish when Owain Lothian took her, but she was just a serving girl in his castle. She couldn't have said 'no' if she wanted to, and she's learned what kind of man he is now. If I explain it, then the Mother of Trees will understand," she said with the same level of certainty she would have in saying that the sky was blue and water was wet.

"So take me to her," Noomi insisted. "Take me alone if it would be better, and I'll explain it to her myself. I, I promised Samira when the attack started that I would explain that she was my friend so she could be rescued too. If, if I have to explain that to the Mother of Trees herself, then I will."

"All right, I'll take you," Ollie said, smiling at the courage the young mother displayed. "I'll take you to Samira first, and then we'll all go together. Once she sees you and your little one and hears how Samira cared for you, I'm sure it will work out."

#### Chapter 800: The Meeting of Real and Fake (Part One)

It took less than an hour for the Summer Villa to fall completely. It wasn't a proper fortress, but it was still defended by a knight and dozens of soldiers, with a stout curtain wall and enough supplies to withstand a brief siege. Yet none of that had mattered in the face of the force Ashlynn had assembled to destroy the Summer Villa, and the treasured Lothian Estate fell before the sun had risen high enough in the sky to stop touching the hilltops in the east.

A few of Ashlynn's soldiers had been wounded in the battle, and each one of them trudged down the hill or was carried by their companions in order to receive healing from the Mother of Trees.

Ashlynn's face had gone white and pale as she stood over one of the Tuscans, who had taken several arrows to his legs along with more than half a dozen torches hurled by humans at his head and torso while he and the rest of Ipoktok's men assaulted the portcullis.

None of the wounds were life-threatening to such a large man, but the area they covered and the number of arrows was substantial, and Ashlynn felt the pain of each and every wound, compressed down to the size of her comparatively tiny body as she erased the burns and bloody puncture wounds from the injured soldier.

"Lady Ashlynn," Daithi said in a voice that was thick with a mixture of awe and worry. "Please, don't push yourself too hard."

The first time she healed a man before his eyes, he felt like he finally understood Eamon's deep, abiding reverence for the Mother of Trees. Broken ribs weren't an easy wound to live with and most soldiers would spend months recovering, the Golden Eyed soldier had bounded away from the healing with the energy of a new recruit.

It was only after she healed the third man that Daithi realized the price she was paying in pain and suffering as she erased the wounds.

"This isn't all that bad," Ashlynn said once she'd caught her breath. "I only feel the pain of their wounds for a few minutes, and the hemlocks supply the strength and nourishing energy to heal the wounds. Some of these trees have been here since before humans even set foot on this continent," she said, pointing at a towering tree nearby whose top vanished in the canopy above. "They have plenty of strength to offer for the few men who are injured."

"If you say so, my lady," Daithi said, sifting uncomfortably as he didn't know what else to say to this strange noblewoman who seemed to take it as a matter of course that she would suffer the pain of her soldier's injuries after a battle in order to heal them.

When he tried to think about men like Sir Broll or Lord Owain doing what she had just done, the image his mind conjured felt so fantastical that he nearly burst out laughing. Sir Broll would have told him to

'man up' and 'display his battle scars with pride.' Lord Owain would have berated him for getting injured in the first place. Neither man would have spent so much as a silver penny on a healer for their wounded men, much less suffered in their place.

"Constable," Ashlynn said, interrupting his thoughts. "It looks like we have company coming. Get your men ready. And remember, before we leave, I'm counting on you to send messages back to Owain. Many of our plans depend on him discovering what was done here, so make sure the messages you send are sufficiently alarming," she advised.

Originally, she had considered allowing survivors to escape in order to carry word of the attack, but frightened men were unreliable messengers. Instead, Daithi, who had once served Sir Broll under Owain's command, would pen a message warning of the attack by 'demons' and the destruction of the Villa before using the Villa's own carrier pigeons to send word to Owain.

"Yes, my Lady," Daithi said, relieved he could return to the men from Commander Bassinger's first army to do work he was more familiar with than keeping a powerful noblewoman company. There were dozens of carts that were narrow enough to navigate the rough trails through the wilderness, along with supplies for dozens of soldiers and refugees to camp in the wilderness as they made their way back to the Vale of Mists.

Now that the battle was over, all of those things needed to be made ready to receive their new guests, and they could begin hauling carts up the hill to receive the people fortunate enough to be spared from the slaughter the soldiers had suffered.

At the top of the hill, walking down from the crumbled section of the curtain wall, a very strange procession was making its way toward the place where Ashlynn and the men were concealing themselves within the forest. Ollie led the way, with Virve and Captain Ipiktok trailing behind them.

That alone was already unexpected. According to their plan, Ollie should have remained with the servants of the Summer Villa until they were ready to bring them out of the fortress, but he was leading the procession toward her instead. Compared to the second and third oddity, however, Ollie's presence seemed perfectly natural.

Nestled in Ipiktok's massive arms lay a member of the Heartwood clan. She looked as though she hadn't bathed in quite some time, yet she was dressed in an elegant blue gown trimmed in white seal fur. The dress didn't seem like it was sized for her, but it looked even more incongruous given her bedraggled state.

The other woman that Ipiktok carried, however, was immediately recognizable to Ashlynn. It had been over half a year since she'd seen Samira, but the combination of her blonde hair and attractive features was certain to make her striking even if she hadn't borne some resemblance to Ashlynn herself.

The question was, why? What was a member of the Heartwood clan doing here of all places, and why was Ipiktok carrying both women as though they were priceless vases that could shatter with the slightest bump?

"Ollie?" Ashlynn asked, pitching her voice to carry across the field as she walked out from under the tree cover, no longer able to restrain her curiosity. "Is something going on here?"