

## The Vampire 851

### Chapter 851: Unwelcome News (Part Two)

The clouds outside seemed to grow even darker, and the light rain that had fallen all morning grew heavier, as if the sky was weeping on behalf of the two proud warriors who were too stoic to openly cry at the death of their fallen comrade.

"To Cathal," Gilander said, lifting his cup and spilling a few drops of wine on the floor. A few drops splattered on the fur rug at Bors' feet, but the Marquis paid it no mind as he returned the gesture, adding a few drops to the puddle in honor of their fallen friend.

"He was a good man," Bors said after taking another deep swallow. "Too upright for his own good sometimes, but a damn good man. I shouldn't have left him up at the Villa," Bors added darkly. "He deserved better than this."

"He died defending Lady Ashlynn," Gilander said after taking a heavy swallow of the strong wine for himself. The wine smelled rich and fruity, and it was sweet on the tongue, but like Bors, he barely noticed the flavor as his mind drifted back to the last time that he and Sir Cathal had spoken.

Sir Cathal had been livid at the death of Sir Kaefin at the hands of a serving girl and even more furious that Lord Owain sent Sir Broll to his death chasing after the girl, who, by all accounts, had been assaulted by Owain's own steward.

Cathal had even slapped Lord Owain in an attempt to make him see reason and focus on keeping knights back to protect Lady Ashlynn, but the young Lothian Lord had been too furious over his steward's death to prioritize the safety of his own wife.

That was why, when Lord Bors summoned Cathal back to Lothian Manor, he pleaded to be placed in charge of the defenses at the Summer Villa. Young heads, he'd said, were too hot and bent on chasing down demons and claiming trophies to properly focus on defending a fortress, even one as light as the Summer Villa. Instead, he felt that an older, cooler head was needed to keep Lady Ashlynn and her unborn child safe in the Villa.

He and Bors had argued for days, but in the end, the Lothian Marquis relented when Cathal pointed out that he'd already turned his village over to his son and that he only had a few years left where he could

serve as a knight. Even if it was a simple duty in the Summer Villa, he swore to do it well, and to return with the Lady Ashlynn and her child as soon as she was fit to travel.

"Do you want me to tell Madame Stella and his son, Ricklin?" Gilander asked after several silent minutes had passed while both men's minds wandered through their memories. "I can make the ride to Kaeral Village in three days if I leave tomorrow morning. Ricklin's a good man, he'll understand, but Stella," he said with a heavy sigh. "She should hear it from one of us who knew Cathal best."

Mentally, Gilander was already beginning to consider what he would say when he brought the news to Cathal's widow. Perhaps he should fetch Shandra and bring her along. Women were often better at consoling each other after all, and the important thing was to care for his late friend's widow.

"There aren't many of us left, Gil," Bors said as if he hadn't heard Gilander speak while he swirled the wine in his cup and stared at the aged, weary reflection of a man he once knew staring back at him. When exactly, he wondered, had he grown so old and tired? It seemed like age had come at him suddenly this winter, stripping away the years he thought he still had in a matter of weeks.

"There aren't many of us left," Bors repeated without looking up from the wine. "But I have something more important for you to do," he said as he looked up at one of the few remaining men to stand side by side with him in the thick of battle. Those men, he could trust. Those men, he would never doubt... It was just that there were so, so few of them left to do what must be done.

For the first time in many years, he wished that he'd been able to protect Pyrderi, the priest who had stood guard over him during the war of Inches. His nightmares were still haunted by visions of the Demon Lady of the Vale, descending from the sky on black feathered wings to strike down the priest who was supposed to keep him safe from her demonic clutches.

Pyrderi was the last man of the Church he felt like he could trust. Pyrderi would know what was wrong with his body, or at least, he'd be able to purify his flesh with his prayers. But the Demon Lady of the Vale had taken Pyrderi from him, and now, Bors found himself needing to scheme against his own physician, just to free himself from the noxious, poisonous concoctions the conniving scholar inflicted on him.

That Jocelynn had made sure Bors drank every last drop of the slender man's dubious cures was the greatest sign that he was in league with whatever demonic forces she answered to. Or perhaps Jocelynn was the witch supplying the poisons to a pawn she'd bewitched in the same way she'd ensnared his son's heart.

Either way, it was only men like Gilander that Bors felt he could truly trust. Men he had stood on the field of battle with. Men who had risked their lives with him and shed blood with him. Anyone else, even if they weren't in league with the demons, had far too many schemes lurking behind their eyes to be trusted these days.

"Speak the words, your Grace," Gilander said formally, bracing himself as he watched the Marquis' mood darken. "You know I'm your sword, and I'll go wherever you point me."

#### Chapter 852: Unwelcome News (Part Three)

"I can't let word of this get out yet," Bors said as he looked at the slips of parchment. "The man who received these messages is being kept under close guard, allowed to speak to no one until you retrieve him. Have him collect fresh birds from the coops and bring them with you to the Summer Villa."

"News like this... I can't leave unverified. I've never heard of demon giants or demon wolves," Bors said as he furrowed his brow in thought. "If we're lucky, the demons will have left bodies behind, but I doubt we'll be so fortunate. But if there are giants, there are footprints you can measure, and if there are wolves, you can count their tracks," he said.

"I have to know that the messages were genuine before I do anything," Bors said. After all, even though the slips of paper were real and the seals and words were real, that didn't mean they weren't forgeries. Cleaver, demonic forgeries that would force him to send out an army in winter, ready to be slaughtered by 'giants' and 'demon wolves.'

No, his enemy was clever, he thought. Clever enough to help Jocelynn pass herself off as his late wife in order to manipulate him. Clever enough to attack across the breadth of the frontier all at once. So clever, he thought, that it must be the Demon Lady of the Vale herself who was plotting against him. Perhaps she'd even taken Jocelynn as one of her minions when the young lady was visiting the Summer Villa in order to maintain the charade that Lady Ashlynn was still alive.

And if he was fighting against a puppet master like the Demon Lady of the Vale and her demon spawn, then she surely understood the cascade of events this raid would trigger. And that only became more true if he was right that Jocelynn was one of her demonic spawn.

Losing 'Lady Ashlynn' in a demon raid was both better and worse than their plans to announce that she had died in childbirth, but the timing was all wrong and his plans had been distorted by the demon raids.

Now, instead of a city that would briefly mourn a natural tragedy, he would need to deal with the fear and anger of his people, who would cry out for demon blood to avenge their lost lady. In the spring, that could have been a rallying cry to recruit soldiers, but in winter, it could all too easily turn into fear that paralyzed people into demanding safety for their own towns and villages. After all, if even Lord Owain's wife wasn't safe from the demon raids, then who was?

"I need to know what really happened, as much as you're able to learn," Bors said as he set down his empty goblet of wine with a hand that shook more than he wanted to admit. Part of him wanted to tell Gilander about the charade, that the 'Lady Ashlynn' in the Summer Villa had been a simple serving girl whose name Bors couldn't even recall.

He wanted to tell his old friend that he was afraid that the message was a fake and that the Summer Villa was a trap... but he couldn't make his lips move to speak the words.

"I need answers," he said instead. "And I need time to prepare."

"I understand, your Grace," the veteran knight said as he looked at his lord with worried eyes.

It was obvious from the strain in his voice that the news had come close to breaking him. It was kind of Lord Bors to share wine with him and drink to the fallen Sir Cathal, but Gilander hadn't forgotten that his liege lord had just lost a daughter-in-law and an unborn grandchild.

Perhaps Lord Bors was still holding on to some kind of hope, Gilander thought. With three copies of the message, it was unlikely that they were fake, and they all bore the correct seals and marks.

While it wasn't impossible to forge them, it would be very, very difficult. But if Bors wanted him to make sure, then Sir Gilander was more than willing to go, even if it was a futile mission that gave his lord time to come to grips with the truth of his loss.

"Take your best trackers," Bors added, his hoarse voice pulling Sir Gilander from his thoughts. "If anyone escaped this massacre, I want to know of it," he said firmly, all but confirming the knight's suspicions that Bors still clung to some hope for his daughter-in-law's survival.

"But remember," Bors said sternly. "We've already lost one knight chasing demons near the Summer Villa, and Broll was a good fighter even if he was an arrogant git. You and I, we aren't young men anymore, so watch yourself and come home in your saddle, not draped across it."

"And... if there's anything left of Cathal," he added after a long pause. "You bring him home, too. Even if it's just his armor. Stella deserves that much for all the times I've sent her husband away from her."

"I will," Gilander promised, pressing his fist to his chest in salute. "And if the Holy Lord of Light wills it, perhaps there will be survivors to bring home as well. Cathal is a good man," he said with a tip of his goblet. "Perhaps he traded his life for time enough for Lady Ashlynn to escape. There may still be hope, however small..."

He didn't believe it. Demons didn't take prisoners, and Lady Ashlynn's condition was said to be frail, even without being little more than a month away from giving birth. But once again, Bors hadn't mentioned her, as if he couldn't bring himself to consider that Gilander would need to bring home her remains as well.

So, rather than promising to do the same for Lady Ashlynn as he would for Sir Cathal, he offered up a thin shred of hope even though he knew he would have to quash that hope in a few short days.

"Of course," Bors said as he stared into the flames of the hearth, though his mind had already moved on to other topics. "There's always hope," he said softly. "Even if it's just a candle flame, flickering in the wind," he said as reflections of the flames danced in his eyes. "Sometimes, all it takes is a little flame to set everything ablaze..."

He still had hopes. Hopes that Loman would return from Hanrahan Barony covered in enough glory that he could easily stand up as the heir to the Lothian throne. Hopes that he could keep Owain occupied long enough that the Church could claim him for the Templars before he caused trouble.

And more than anything else at the moment, he hoped that the Inquisitor who would arrive soon would be able to burn the truth of his enemy's plans out of the whore from Blackwell county who dared to wear the face of his late wife in order to deceive him.

He needed answers about his enemy's plans, and he was increasingly certain that Jocelynn was involved in all of this. But as much as he hoped for answers, he hoped even more that she would resist giving them, and that he could gaze on a very different set of flames as the Inquisitor burned away her lies in order to discover the truth...

#### Chapter 853: Inquisitor Percivus

The short winter day had already come to an end when the guest that Bors had been waiting for finally arrived at his office. The gloomy rain had once again turned into a mix of fierce downpour with sudden bursts of hail that rattled off the windows like tapping demon claws, while bursts of cold wind in the chimney made the flames in the hearth roar and dance.

Bors himself sat behind his polished oak desk, yet another of the pieces carved from the demon's sacred tree, working his way through the pile of reports and administrative affairs that had built up during his days of bed rest.

The pain in his side made it impossible to sit comfortably or for long, but Bors refused to return to his chambers. Part of it came from a stubbornness as he clung to his work, making plans for the arrival of every baron in the march, along with at least twenty knights, in just ten day's time. It would be the first time the full Lothian Court had assembled during winter in more than a decade, and there were countless details to see to if he was to host all of the lords of the realm.

The other reason he avoided his chambers, however, was something he struggled to admit, even to himself. Isla's embroidery chair in his office remained empty, and he hadn't heard her voice all day long as he worked, but after days of mistaking the Blackwell girl for her, he didn't know how to face the spectre of his late wife when he returned to the rooms they'd shared for much of his life.

A knock at the door interrupted his brooding, followed by a footman's announcement that the guest he'd been waiting for had finally arrived.

Inquisitor Percivus walked into Bors' office with a posture that was perfectly straight and a gait that was neither hurried nor slow. The crimson and gold robes of his office fluttered lightly as he moved, and Bors nodded in subtle approval as he took in the man's appearance.

Percivus wasn't a young man, and if he hadn't taken up the oaths of the Church, he might have had children nearing adulthood by now. He was in the prime of his life with flame red hair worn short in the style of soldiers and the matching beard that he wore covered only his lips and chin, leaving his pale cheeks and strong jaw free of even the slightest trace of stubble.

"Your Grace," Percivus said, stopping precisely three paces short of the Marquis' desk and offering a slight bow. "It's been many years since I've been able to be of service to you," he said smoothly. "I'm glad for the opportunity to help you fight demons again."

"Oh?" Bors asked with a raised brow. "We've fought together before?" he asked, placing his elbows on the desk and leaning forward in sudden interest. "You look a bit young to have taken up arms for the War of Inches," he observed carefully.

"I was young, your Grace," the flame-haired inquisitor said with a nostalgic smile. "I was barely thirteen summers old at the start of the war, and I'd only spent a few years in the temple, but I was old enough to serve with the priests in the healing tents."

"I don't expect your Grace to remember me," he added. "But the day you were wounded, I assisted Pyrderi in changing your bandages. I was impressed that you never once cried out, and you never called for Essence of Poppy the way many wounded soldiers did. The strength of your resolve to fight demons was an inspiration to me then," he said without the slightest hint of false praise or obsequiousness in his voice.

Percivus was a man who didn't need to shower others with flattery, and he bowed down to no one outside of his own order unless he had genuine respect for them. As an Inquisitor, he was a peer to almost any lord, and there had been no need to give Marquis Bors even the slight bow that he had, but it wasn't Bors' title that he gave respect to. Rather, it was the man's accomplishments in the war against the demons of Airgead Mountain that had earned Percivus' enduring respect.

"I see, I see," Bors said with a warm smile as he gestured to one of the plush, overstuffed chairs near his desk. "I do remember you, hovering in the background while Pyrderi cleansed my wound. You were a good lad back then. Never flinched at the sight of blood, even in the hell of the healer's tents. Now look at you. Full-grown and ready to fight in the next war," he said with a touch of sorrow in his voice.

"I'm looking forward to it, your Grace," Percivus said when he took his seat. "I've heard that young lord Owain is a terror on the battlefield that carves a path through demons almost as well as you did in the last war. I'll admit to an unworthy amount of jealousy that a visitor from the Holy City like Diarmuid was the one to fight at your son's side in the spring, but the true battles are yet to come."

"No, no that's not true at all," Bors corrected as he tapped on his desk with a thick finger. "The true battle has arrived here, now, and it's insidious and filled with schemes," he said as a shadow passed behind his eyes.

"Percivus," Bors said in a grave tone. "I am surrounded by people who conspire with our enemies. There are demons attacking in winter, witches and their servants stalking our realm, perhaps even the spawn of the Demon Lady of the Vale," he said as his eyes blazed with fury and his body shook with the force of his feelings.

"I need to know that I can trust you," Bors said as he narrowed his eyes at the Inquisitor. "I need to know that you will ferret out the people who are conspiring against me and aiding the demons, and I need to know that you are willing to use whatever means are necessary to dig up the truth. Many men in your position bow down to noblemen and walk softly around women. I need to know that you don't have any such weaknesses!"

"Your Grace," Percivus said with a predatory smile as the flames of passion seemed to ignite in his hardened, hazel eyes. "My abbot sent me precisely because I have found heretics among the aristocracy before. Your Grace may remember Sir Nurin in Aleese Barony," he said helpfully, bringing up an incident from just a few years prior.

The demons of the Southern Steppe were known to be nomads who conducted raids on the villages of the barony nearly every summer, but there had been one village that never seemed to suffer casualties in the raids, even though they reported losses of cattle, sheep, and barley every year.

It had taken more than a month for Percivus to break Sir Nurin, but eventually the man confessed to his scheme. The heretical knight had met with the demons years ago and paid tribute to their Demon Lord each year in order to spare his people from the violence of the raids.

Sir Nurin broke because he thought that his confession would save the lives of his wife and child, but Percivus believed in burning heresy out completely. Nurin's eldest son had already begun to learn how to speak the demon's foul language in preparation for taking over his father's role in maintaining their



treasonous pact, and that fact alone was enough to see the entire family burned at the stake for their heresy.

Of course, Percivus hadn't stopped at the noblemen. There were farmers and ranchers who were guilty as well, and the Inquisitor didn't stop until every last person who had knowingly participated in the scheme was reduced to ash that blew away on the wind.

Baron Aleese had been furious that so many households had been devastated and dozens of people needed to be sent from neighboring villages to take over the farms of the families who had died in the purge, but that wasn't Percivus's problem. Where he found heretics, those heretics burned. As far as the Inquisitor was concerned, the Baron should count himself fortunate that it hadn't been necessary to set fire to the crops that had been grown expressly to fill demon bellies.

"I remember the man," Bors said with a dark, brooding look as he thought about the knight who had been willing to supply the Horse Lord's horde in order to save his own skin. "So you were the one to root out his treachery. Good, good," he said as he stood from his desk and extended a hand toward the Inquisitor.

"Then I leave the matter of Lady Jocelynn in your capable hands," Bors said. "Whatever names fall from her lips, I trust you'll follow every lead and put an end to this evil before winter's end!"

#### Chapter 854: A Place To Talk

The night outside Lothian Manor was oppressively dark as rain and hail pelted the cobblestone streets. The balls of hail were the size of small peas, and in some places, gusts of wind had piled them up against the edges of buildings or the fronts of shops before the rain could wash them away.

Few people moved through the streets at night, illuminated only by the light spilling from the windows of homes and businesses that hung a single lamp or placed a candle to burn through the night in keeping with the city's ordinance. Those people who did have business that pulled them into this abysmal weather wore heavy cloaks with hoods pulled over their heads, and they all walked with hurried steps to escape the cold and wet as quickly as they could.

One such figure leaned against the leeward side of a building, taking shelter from the gusting winds as his eyes searched the pools of light for a familiar figure and his less familiar companion. He'd already been standing in the cold for over an hour, but compared to a night watch at sea, this little bit of wind

and rain was far from enough to make him give up on spotting the two men who should be returning from the storehouses, assuming they hadn't already been captured.

"Dawnbreaker!" the hooded figure called when he finally spotted a pair of men approaching from the right direction. The shorter of the two wore a familiar cloak of waxed canvas popular among sailors rather than the taller figure's fur-lined cloak, and the polished bell-guard of his distinctive falchion peeked out from beneath his cloak as he walked.

"Blue Gull," Captain Albyn responded almost automatically, wondering why Devlin had chosen to call him by the name of his old ship in a place like this. In the bustling docks of Blackwell Harbor or virtually any other port in the Kingdom of Gaal, it was a common practice for captains to be known by the name of their ships, and prevented confusion in gatherings where many men could be addressed simply as 'captain', but they'd both sold their shares in their ships when they left the salt water behind for the frontier.

"What in the Six Seas are you doing lurking out here in the dead of night?" Albynn asked once they'd drawn close enough to speak without shouting over the wind.

"Walk and talk," Devlin said, throwing an arm around the other man's shoulder and turning him away from the road leading to Lothian Manor. "And if you've found one of your backroom bars with stiff drinks and dim lights, then take us there," he said quietly.

"Aye, I know a place," Albyn responded as he waved for Sir Elgon to follow them.

Lady Jocelynn had sent them out to source the non-perishable supplies they'd need for their escape, everything from tents and blankets to pans and cookstoves. There were countless things that would be needed to travel through the countryside for half a month or more in the depths of winter.

The two men had finished finding merchants who could provide most of what they required hours ago, but they'd chosen to take their evening meal in a tavern in the city in the hopes that the weather would improve before they had to make the long walk back to Lothian Manor. By the time they'd given up, it was well past sunset, and most of the town had closed up for the night.

Now, Albynn led the knight and his fellow captain through a twisting warren of back alleys, looking up from under his hood occasionally as he tracked their progress through streets that barely had enough light to avoid falling into a puddle.

"The place we're going," Albyn said quietly as they walked. "Don't use names and don't lower your hoods. Let me do the talking. And Lighthouse," he said directly to Sir Elgon, clearly referencing the prominent lighthouse in the coastal knight's crest. "Square your rings away now, and wrap your sword hilt."

"There's no hiding a knight," Albynn added as he took in the taller man's perfect posture and the fine doublet he wore under his expensive, fur-trimmed cloak. "But we don't have to announce your family with signets and crests," he said with a pointed look at the engraved pommel of the knight's sword.

"Where is it you're taking us?" Sir Elgon asked with a frown while he pulled out a pocket square and wrapped it around the pommel of his sword, tying it in a quick knot to conceal the distinctive coat of arms of a lighthouse flanked by a knight's lance.

"Somewhere that people don't use names," Albyn said as he led them to a stairway that descended beneath the street level. Hail had piled up on the well-worn stone steps, and their boots crunched loudly every time they took a step further into the darkness. "A place where men who want to drink away their sorrows without catching the attention of the city watch can go, and a lonely man can buy an hour with a woman that he intends to be rough with."

"Remember, say nothing," he hissed as he knocked on the heavy oak door at the base of the stairs. "And leave your virtues at the door. The women here might need rescuing, but you aren't the one to do it, and now isn't the time."

A few heartbeats after Albyn's knock, the door opened just wide enough for a grimy hand with rough, bitten nails to appear in the spill of light that only felt bright because of the deep darkness of the night. A few snips of polished tin fell from Albyn's hand into the other man's hand before the door opened fully to reveal a dimly lit room that reeked of alcohol and less savory things, cloaked in a thick haze of pipe smoke.

"Give us a booth to ourselves," Albyn told the wiry, gap-toothed man who opened the door fully once he received their payment. "And three flagons of ail stout enough to stand a fork in," he added as he walked into the room with a swagger that was distinctly different from his usual bearing.

"This way, sirs," the wiry man said as he led them across a floor covered with straw that was at least two months old and starting to rot.

The room wasn't very large as alehouses went, with less than half a dozen small tables in the center of the room and a row of booths along one wall opposite the bar at the far end. Each booth had room enough for four to six men on bench seats with tall wooden walls to separate it from its neighbors, while a single candle burning in the center of the table provided the only illumination for the booth.

Two of the other booths were already occupied, and in one of those booths, a woman with cold, empty eyes laughed and giggled between two rough men as their hands roamed under her skirt and blouse. At the bar, another woman perched on a man's lap, pouring cheap wine into the man's goblet with one hand while the other roamed around the waistband of his trousers.

Sir Elgon stiffened at the sight, and his sword-hand clenched into a fist when he noticed the dark bruise on the woman's cheek and the slightly paler finger-shaped bruises on her forearm, but he firmly reminded himself of Albyn's warning, even as he swore to do something about this place as soon as the crisis of the moment passed.

Once the men were seated, Devlin clearly wanted to speak, but he held his tongue at Albyn's gesture until the wiry man returned to their table with three large flagons of a dark ale topped by a thick head of foam. It wasn't until the man had returned to his stool near the door to the alehouse that Albyn broke the silence.

"All right, Blue Gull," Albyn said. "This place is as safe a spot to talk as any you'll find in this city, barring the expensive ones like the Gilded Horns," he added. "So speak, what happened that has you so nervous?"

"An Inquisitor has taken La- er, our lady, to the dungeons below the manor," Devlin said, stumbling slightly over his words as he remembered Albyn's warning not to use names in this place.

"We expected that she'd be questioned," Sir Elgon said, frowning at the former ship captain. "But she's done nothing. She should be free in a matter of hours once the Inquisitor verifies the truth of her testimony."

"If we were home, maybe it would work like that," Devlin agreed. "But the guards at her room overheard the Inquisitor saying that she'd be in his care 'all winter long', and that there was 'plenty of time to get the facts out.'"

"But it's worse than that," he added in a hushed tone barely above a whisper. "This Inquisitor, he's not just taking our lady. He's taken the Confessor, the lord's physician, the head cook, and half a dozen other people as well. He's even had the other ladies who had tea with our lady confined to their chambers."

The orders from the Inquisitor had been as shocking as the presence of more than a dozen temple guards, sweeping through Lothian Manor and placing shackles on more than half a dozen highly placed servants on the Marquis's staff. The entire manor had erupted into whispers and rumors, which had only grown louder when the Inquisitor posted a list of people who were 'called to answer the questions of the Inquisition.'

"Dawnbreaker, Lighthouse," Devlin said as he met both men's eyes. "The Inquisitor posted a list of names, and you're both on it. If you go anywhere near the manor, you'll land in a cell next to our lady, or worse..."

#### Chapter 855: In Need Of An Ally (Part One)

Sir Elgon stared at Captain Devlin in shock, momentarily unable to believe that the Inquisition had set its sights on him and Captain Albyn.

He knew that Lady Jocelynn was innocent. She hadn't done anything wrong her entire life, much less anything that would draw the ire of the Inquisition. She'd even received healing from Confessor Eleanor just the night before. That alone should have been enough to prove her innocence.

But not only had the Inquisitor rejected that evidence, he had broken with traditions that called for the Inquisition to respect people of noble birth and he'd thrown Lady Jocelynn in the dungeon. Worse, it seemed like the Inquisitor was determined to round up anyone remotely associated with their lady in an effort to find some 'conspiracy' that didn't exist.

Except that there was a conspiracy, he realized. He and Albyn were out there this very night, conspiring to help her escape from Bors Lothian and the Marquis' plans for their lady. But that was a very different thing from an accusation that she was a witch or otherwise in league with demons!

"Thank you, Blue Gull," Albyn said, speaking calmly, as if the sword of the Inquisition wasn't looming over his neck. "You took a risk to find us and let us know. You've done your part and more," he said as his mind raced over the possibilities, trying to navigate through the countless hazards to chart a course forward.

"Now, you should finish your drink and go," the former captain of the Dawnbreaker said. "You can't tell what you don't know. Lighthouse and I will take it from here."

"I'm not abandoning you," Devlin said firmly, struggling to keep his voice low in the dimly lit, smoke filled alehouse. "We came all this way to help our ladies through the war ahead. Now that the frontier is turning on our own, you think they won't come after me when they can't find you? We stand together or we hang together, and I for one don't intend to dance from a hangmen's rope."

"Blue Gull is right," Sir Elgon said as he shook off the feeling of impending doom that swirled around him along with the pipesmoke that filled the room. "We need to stand together or we'll be picked off one by one."

"That doesn't change the fact that Blue Gull should go," Albyn insisted as he idly rotated his flagon of dark ale on the table. "Right now, you need to look like a loyalist to the locals. You tell them that you saw us on horses headed for the North Gate if they ask, but if they don't come to you then you keep your head down and your ears open."

"You want me to be a man inside for you," Devlin said, nodding as comprehension dawned. "But with you two missing, it won't be long before they come for the rest of us. A few days at most."

"A few days is all we need," Albyn said, turning over several ideas in his mind and discarding each of them in turn until he was left with only the most viable solution. It made his stomach turn to consider and Lady Jocelynn might despise him for it, but if it worked to free her from the clutches of the Inquisition then he didn't mind if she hated him for the rest of her days.

"Now, you really should go," Albyn insisted, raising his voice slightly as raucous laughter erupted from one of the other booths, followed by the sound of a hand slapping flesh and a woman's pained, flirtatious giggle. With a quick move, Albyn placed a hand on Sir Elgon's forearm, pinning him to the table before he could get them into trouble with the booth next door while he continued speaking to Delvin."

If you've got any coin on you that you can spare, I'll take it," Albyn added before he shot Sir Elgon a warning look. "Let that soothe your conscience if it's bothering you," he offered to his old friend.

"Scoundrel," Devlin said with a light chuckle as he fetched a small coinpurse from the pouch at his waist and dropped it on the rough hewn table, nearly knocking over the cheap, sooty candle in the process. "I thought we'd need money to run and here you are, tossing me overboard to lighten your load. That should put some wind in your sails, whatever your plans are."

The sound of coins dropping onto the table drew the attention of a few of the alehouse's patrons, including a woman at the bar whose blouse was barely laced closed in a scandalous display of her generous assets. One glare from Sir Elgon, combined with a hand dropping to the hilt of his sword, was more than enough for people to return their gazes to their cups or their own companions for the evening.

"It'll help," Albyn agreed as he opened the coinpurse and inspected the collection of silver pennies mixed with a few gold sovereigns. "Here," he said, tossing a pair of pennies back to the other captain. "Head south of Market Street to Cedar street and follow it toward the river until you spot the Prancing Doe. Spend the night there."

"Is that another of your hidey holes?" Devlin asked with a raised brow. He was certain that Albyn knew of more places to hide, perhaps even places that would rent out a room without asking many questions, but he sincerely hoped that wherever his old friend was sending him didn't carry this place's distinctive odor of cheap ale mixed with the fluids that spilled from a man who consumed too much of the swill.

"Do I need a secret knock to get in?" Devlin asked in a tone that was only half teasing. "Or enough soap to mop the deck with?"

It wasn't that Devlin didn't trust Albyn to stash him somewhere that would escape the notice of the Inquisition or the city watch. Albyn had evaded manhunts on a much larger scale than anything they were facing right now and he knew better than most how to make himself scarce.

No, what Devlin worried about was that Albyn's notions of 'good places to hide' could include anything from a mortuary to the midden heaps filled with raw sewage. So even though the 'Prancing Doe' sounded like a reasonable enough place to lay low, for all Devlin knew, he was being sent to hide in a slaughterhouse among the hanging carcasses of yesterday's hunt.

Chapter 856: In Need Of An Ally (Part Two)

"No, you don't need any secret knocks or code words, it's just a common brothel," Albyn said, laughing this time with a bit of genuine mirth at the anxious expression on his friend's face before his voice became serious. "One far more reputable than this place. A penny for the room and the wine, and another for the girl. Then you've a place to hide away the night and an excuse for where you snuck off to if anyone asks."

"Give me back another penny," Devlin said, holding out his hand and pointedly ignoring the disapproving look from Sir Elgon. "I don't want to break Anna's heart, so I'll take your filthy advice, but I intend to be too drunk to get it up with some random girl. I'd rather her tell the story of me needing to sleep off a bottle of wine than do something I can't take back."

"I'm sure Anna would understand if it kept you alive," Albyn countered as he tossed a pair of silver pennies and a handful of tin snips across the table for the other sailor. "Keep the rest so the girl can pick your pocket when you pass out. It'll buy her silence better than anything else."

"Al-er, Dawnbreaker," Sir Elgon said awkwardly as he watched the two former captains planning a sordid alibi for a man whom he'd heard described as a loyal family man just this morning. "Why do I get the feeling that this isn't the first time you've had to do something like this?"

"Because it isn't," Devlin said, meeting the knight's gaze with serious eyes. "If we all live long enough, you should ask Dawnbreaker here to tell you what he did to earn his pardon from our lord back home. For now, trust him. He knows more about escaping pursuit than anyone I know, and even if his methods are a bit... low," he said after carefully selecting a word. "He has a knack for making the best of the worst winds fate can blow a man's way."

"Enough flattery," Albyn said. "You're stalling. Go find yourself a pretty woman for the night and don't stagger back to the manor until at least noon. By then, it should be too late for anything you know to interfere with my plans."

"And what exactly are your plans?" Sir Elgon asked cautiously after Devlin made his exit. "You're acting like you've had this all planned out since before Blue Gull found us," he said in a voice that contained a hint of wariness and a hint of suspicion.

"One of the first lessons a pirate captain learns," Albyn said with a wry smile tugging at the corners of his lips. "Know where the shoals and the shallows are. Learn how to sail the dangerous waters that more sensible ships won't pursue you for. Learn the draft of your ship to the handsbreadth and keep the best charts up here," he said, tapping his temple lightly.



"When danger finds you," the former pirate continued. "You don't escape because you have a plan ready to go. You escape because you know a dozen routes to safety and which one the tides favor at the moment you need it. This isn't any different, but I'd be lying if I said I was confident in how well I can navigate in waters this troubled," he said.

"So tell me what you're thinking," Elgon said quietly as his eyes roved over the smoky common room, as if to ensure that no one was close enough to listen to them. "Two minds can consider what one can't. Don't act like you have to do this by yourself."

"If you say so," Albyn said as he gulped down the last of his thick, dark ale. "But I've already arrived at the destination. We just need to hire someone who can smuggle us out of the city, and that fellow by the door should be a good man to give us an introduction to the person we need."

Albyn had heard whispers of a 'Black Merchant' known to trade in things that were difficult or even forbidden to obtain. Whether this merchant was involved in other dark business or not, anyone who could smuggle goods into a city likely had a way to send people and goods out of the city as well.

The former pirate didn't expect the famed Black Merchant to have anything to do with a place as lowly and seedy as the alehouse where they currently sat, but it was likely that the people who ran the establishment here could at least make an introduction. Even if he couldn't reach the Black Merchant himself, so long as he was able to enlist the services of the man's smuggling operation, it would be enough for the two fugitives to make their escape.

"Out of the city?" Elgon said, blinking in surprise. "You intend to go to Lady A-, er, to the older sister? She's with child right now, if we drag her into this..."

"No, not her," Albyn interrupted. "I wouldn't mind if they thought we were running off to where she is, that's why I told Blue Gull to say we'd taken horses to the North Gate if anyone managed to press him for information. You're correct that we need an ally, and you're just as correct that we can't run to the older sister."

Albyn had considered making a run for the Summer Villa in the hopes that Lady Ashlynn could intercede on her younger sister's behalf, but her frail state and her advanced pregnancy made it impossible for her to come back to Lothian City until after she'd given birth. Given that, there was very little she could do

from so far away, and so Albyn had moved down the list of potential allies for the next person who could help.

"We need to make our way to Hurel Village," Albyn said. "Compared to fetching our lady's older sister, fetching her brother-in-law nets us a much more useful ally. After all, he's been watching over our lady ever since she came here, and he's one of the few people with the authority to stand up to his father."

"You can't be serious," Sir Elgon said with open-mouthed shock. Anyone with the common sense that the Holy Lord of Light gave to mules could tell that there was a great deal of tension between Lord Bors and his eldest son. If they brought him in as a means of influencing Jocelynn's matter, it was as good as throwing a bucket of oil on a fire in the hopes of snuffing it out.

"Shouldn't we seek out his younger brother in Hanrahan Town?" Elgon countered. "He has more sway with the Church than his brother does, and there's another Inquisitor with him who's from the Holy City. If anyone can get this new Inquisitor to back off..."

"It won't work," Albyn interrupted. "We'd just find ourselves accused of interfering with the younger brother's mission against the demons. That's why we speak to the brother-in-law. He has the authority as the heir to oppose his father and enough motivation to protect his sister-in-law. He may not have sway with the Church, but..."

"But we don't have many safe harbors to seek out, do we?" Elgon asked rhetorically. "All right. I'm on board. How can I help?"

"Right now, you can't," Albyn said bluntly. "Just follow my lead. But once we reach our lady's brother-in-law, I'll be counting on you to do the talking. After all," he said with a self-deprecating smile. "I'm still just a commoner, but you're a proper knight. So think carefully on the words you'll use," he advised. "Because it's going to be up to you to convince the man to make a move against his own father on behalf of his wife's family."

## Chapter 857: Isabell's Trail Begins

While events in Lothian City continued to spiral out of control, a very different series of events was unfolding outside of the ancient fortress in the area that had recently been devastated by Ashlynn's training.

In a way, the ritual that would transform her from an ordinary person into the next Hemlock Witch was Isabell's first real encounter with witchcraft. Certainly, she'd experienced Ashlynn's power firsthand, and she'd seen other minor demonstrations of power since her arrival in the Vale of Mists, including Heila's healing salve, though Isabell had been too injured at the time to observe closely.

But this time, things felt very different. When she watched Ashlynn use her power to create a flat and level piece of ground amidst the churned earth, Isabell had only thought that it must be useful to be able to manipulate the earth so easily instead of needing a team of men with tools to spend a whole day leveling and smoothing the earth.

It was what happened after that, however, that felt strange and... disconcerting. Ashlynn had told her to think of the formal words she'd need to speak as little different from the formal oaths that knights took when they swore themselves to their lord, and to treat the magic circle and offerings as little more than decorations.

It was obvious that the young Mother of Trees was trying to put her at ease, especially when she mentioned the process of 'planting' a seed of witchcraft in her.

"This is the part of the ritual that has no comparison in the mundane world," Ashlynn said when she'd explained it to Isabell. "There will be pain," she said bluntly. "You don't have to endure it. You can cry out if you want, or you can bite down on a leather wrapped stick if you'd prefer. But there is no potion or salve that we can give you that will stop the pain."

"I've borne two children, my lady," Isabell said confidently. "I understand what pain is. Something to bite down on will be plenty, don't worry."

Ashlynn hadn't been as confident as Isabell and she'd exchanged uncertain looks with both Virve and Ollie, but none of them were mothers who had experienced childbirth to compare the pain of the transformation to. In the end, Isabell held onto her confidence as the increasingly strange ritual unfolded around her, tight up until the moment when Ashlynn cut into her chest and placed the seed of witchcraft there.

It was only then, after it was far too late to have second thoughts or regrets, that Isabell realized how badly she'd underestimated the pain involved in becoming a witch. Childbirth had been agonizing, but it had also been concentrated on a small portion of her body.

When the seed entered her chest, however, its roots rapidly spread to the rest of her body, enveloping her in a ripping, tearing agony that made it feel as if her whole body was being torn apart, from the tips of her toes to the ends of her fingers and every square inch in between. She felt like a piece of parchment in the hands of a child who kept ripping and tearing at the pieces until they grew smaller and smaller and smaller, leaving nothing behind but tiny dots of torn parchment that could blow away on a faint breeze.

And then, between one agonizing moment and the next, she found herself in a different place, standing atop a hill, looking down at a small village beside a river.

"Ugh," Isabell said softly as she flexed her fingers and inspected her body, finding nothing out of the ordinary other than a strange spot in her chest near her heart that felt... tight. "It looks like I owe Sir Ollie an apology," she muttered. "It is worse than childbirth."

"I'm sure he'll appreciate hearing you say that," a familiar voice said beside her. "He still lacks confidence in himself and he too easily assumes that others are more capable than he is."

"Ashlynn," Isabell said in surprise, turning to find her friend standing next to her on the hill, though the Mother of Trees before her now seemed... calmer, and more withdrawn than she was in real life. "No, you're not Ashlynn," she said as she looked at the figure of the woman who wore Ashlynn's face. "What exactly are you?"

"I'm an echo of everything the Mother of Trees poured into your seed while she grew it next to her heart, and the personification of your connection to the power of the world," the vision of Ashlynn explained. "I'm your guide for this trial."

"Then, you can answer questions for me?" Isabell asked, furrowing her brow in thought as she looked at the woman who wore Ashlynn's face in this vision. "About the world and witchcraft and how all of this works?"

"Yes, and no," the vision said in a voice that grew deeper and more otherworldly. "I cannot reveal mysteries to you that even your Mother of Trees has yet to touch. Your mind is very well organized and I can feel you searching for ways to wring answers from me, but I'll warn you once, that path is too dangerous and people who pursue it do not return."

"What, what do you mean?" Isabell asked as she took a step backward from the strange not-Ashlynn.

"You have a mind that seeks to understand the foundation of things upon which you will build," the vision said. "That isn't forbidden, but if you use this moment to chase after the roots of your connection to the world, you will entangle yourself in those roots and there is no escaping from that."

"The Mother of Trees has already grown a set of roots for you," she explained as she reached out to tap Isabell on the chest, directly between her breasts where Ashlynn had placed the seed. "Trust in those roots and allow them to grow and develop over time. This trial is not about your roots, it's about growing your trunk and branches," the vision explained as she gestured at the village below.

"I, I see," Isabell said as she flexed the fingers of both hands to dispel the trembling that came with the realization that she'd very nearly done something incredibly dangerous. Being confronted with a 'personification of her connection to the power of the world', Isabell's first thought had been to pepper the strange vision with questions about things that even Ashlynn hadn't been able to fully explain.

It seemed, however, that some things weren't meant to be revealed that way, and when she stepped back and thought about it, it wasn't too difficult to accept. When she had been a much younger student, her teachers had often withheld answers to her questions until she managed to work out the solution herself and this felt no different. Well, no different other than the fact that asking forbidden questions carried a much greater risk than simply earning her teacher's ire.

"When I talked to Ollie about his test, he said that he was commanded to 'take care of his people.'" Isabell said as she looked down at the village. "Is that what I'm meant to do here?"

"Ollie took the trial of a Guardian," the vision said with a slight shake of her head. "A Guardian must learn to care for their people in times of adversity. You are facing the trial of an Architect," the vision of Ashlynn explained. "Your trial is to help your people to thrive, now, and into the distant future."

"You had thought once about constructing a village on the River Luath," the vision explained. "Near the mouth of the Vale of Mists. You thought about this village several times before you entered the Vale and how you would create something that was greater than any of the frontier towns and villages you'd encountered in Lothian March."

"This is that village," the vision said, drawing Isabell's attention to the neat, organized streets and the tile roofed buildings that funneled the water from the lightly falling rain into gutters that kept the streets from flooding. "The only thing that has changed is that this village now stands at the border of the Eldritch and the Human worlds, and to make it thrive, you must create a place where both can live side by side..."

"But before that, there are things you must learn," the vision said as she placed an arm around Isabell's shoulder and guided her into the forest outside the village where a seemingly endless number of towering hemlock trees grew. "Once you have learned enough to apply your power, the real trial begins..."

#### Chapter 858: Lessons for the Coven (Part One)

While Isabell began her trial, Ashlynn, Virve and Ollie moved a small distance away, taking seats on a few of the many fallen trees in the chaotic area where Ashlynn had trained with Dame Sybyl.

"It feels different to be one of the people watching over someone facing the trial of their seed," Ollie said with a nervous look over his shoulder at where Isabell lay, seemingly sleeping on the bare earth where they'd conducted the ritual. "Is she going to be all right in the cold? Should we get a blanket for her or something?"

"She has the energy of the world to sustain her during the trial," Ashlynn said as she retrieved a small sack filled with savory meat pies that Georg had thoughtfully supplied for the witches while they watched over Isabell. "We shouldn't build barriers between her and the elements that will supply her power during this time."

"Amahle said that it used to be tradition to face the trial of a seed in the nude," Ashlynn added with a teasing smile as she passed out the pies. "And that her predecessor was known for burying people up to their necks while they faced their trials."

"That sounds, um, uncomfortable," Ollie said awkwardly as he took the meat pie from Ashlynn's outstretched hand. Inwardly, he shuddered at the idea of laying out in the nude for several days while the women of the coven watched over his sleeping body.

"Agreed," Virve said around a mouthful of rich, hearty meat filling and flakey, buttery pastry. "I'd be scrubbing dirt out of my fur for weeks."

"Well, every coven forms their own traditions," Ashlynn said as she nibbled delicately at the hand pie. Somehow, even though it was cold, there was a cozyness to the flavor of the rich, tarragon and thyme infused gravy that helped Ashlynn to forget about the chill in the misty air of the Vale while she sat sharing a meal with her coven.

"Some of them we've carried forward from other covens, like eating together," she said. "But others, we'll have to form for ourselves. I'd like to start one of those today, while we watch over Isabell."

"If we're starting a tradition," Ollie said with a frown on his brow. "Shouldn't we wait until Heila can be here with us? She's the 'big sister' of the coven after all," he pointed out. "It, it doesn't feel quite right to start something without her here."

For a moment, everyone paused and unconsciously looked to the south and east. If things were progressing according to schedule then Heila, Hauke, and the rest of Dame Sybyll's forces should have crossed into Hanrahan Barony by now, winding their way through the border lands as they prepared to assault Hanrahan Town.

Tomorrow, they would begin their preparations for the actual assault, and the following night, if everything was ready, Dame Sybyll would launch the most devastating blow of Ashlynn's war so far and claim her vengeance against Ian Hanrahan in the process.

Under normal circumstances, there would be little to be concerned about, but this attack had become anything but normal when they received word that Loman Lothian would be present along with the Inquisitor Diarmuid and Sir Tommin with his Holy Light Blade. Adding those three to the mix made everything uncertain and it put Hauke and Heila in even greater danger as the ones assigned to counter human sorcery.

"She'll understand," Ashlynn said after a long pause. She had already done everything she could short of joining the assault herself and right now, there were other things she needed to be present for, including spending this time with her coven.

"I'm borrowing a bit from my big sister, Amahle," Ashlynn said as she finished her meat pie and hopped off the fallen log. "But what we're going to do is also very different. I know that everything here looks a bit..." she said, her voice trailing off as she struggled to find the right word to describe the devastation that her training had wrought in this area.

Trees were snapped in half or torn from the ground, roots and all. Fallen branches lay everywhere and the ground was covered in a layer of leaves and evergreen needles. Deep pits marked the places where the roots of trees had been pulled from the earth, along with long furrows left by fierce collisions of power greater than anything an ordinary person could hope to wield.

"You always said you intended to tear the trees here down," Virve said helpfully when Ashlynn seemed to be at a loss for words. "So, we have a small mess that needs to be cleaned up," she said helpfully, describing acres of devastation as a 'small mess.'

"More than a 'small' mess, but yes," Ashlynn said as a light pink blush spread across her cheeks. "The tradition I want to begin is one of cycles and renewal," Ashlynn explained as she pulled a large parchment scroll from her sack of supplies.

"We have the power to bring incredible destruction," Ashlynn said quietly as she thought about the smoking ruin they'd left behind once they'd taken the servants and staff of the Summer Villa as their 'captives.' "But I don't want us to get lost in destroying things, even though the next few years are likely to be filled with battles and conflict. I want to make sure we all dedicate time to recovery and new growth."

Ashlynn couldn't deny that part of her heart sang triumphantly when the Summer Villa burned and there was a sweet feeling of anticipation as she wondered what kind of face Owain would make when he received news of what had happened to his carefully orchestrated charade. But underneath that, there was a gnawing worry that she liked the feeling of destroying things a little too much.

So, after discussing her fears with Nyrielle, she'd taken her lover's advice to reconnect with growth during the days that she needed to wait for other pieces of her plan to fall into place, starting with the Enchanted Grove she intended to plant outside the ancient fortress.

#### Chapter 859: Lessons for the Coven (Part Two)

"When spring comes, we can begin nurturing seeds into saplings and planting new trees here," Ashlynn said as Ollie and Virve pressed in beside her to look at the graceful curving lines and carefully marked areas of the diagram Ashlynn had unrolled. "But right now, it's time to pay respect to the fallen trees that once stood here by giving them a new place in our Enchanted Grove."



In her mind's eye, she could already see the place that she intended for this to become. Some sections would hold fruit trees that could be nurtured to grow exceptional fruits that could provide far more than simple sustenance. Elsewhere, she would cultivate exotic trees from across the world, providing not only unique materials for witches' wands and other forms of magic, but seeds for future generations of her coven.

Elegant stone paths would wind between areas of the grove, with small bridges that crossed over meandering streams that nurtured the entire grove. Here and there, benches would provide places to withdraw from the chaos of the world outside to enjoy moments of peace and tranquility that Ashlynn was certain all of them would need in the years to come.

"You want to harvest the lumber for raised garden beds?" Ollie said, pulling Ashlynn out of her thoughts as he studied the diagram.

A deep frown furrowed his brow as he struggled to read some of the unfamiliar words written on the large sheet of parchment. He'd been practicing his reading when he could, and he was proud of the fact that he could write out many of Georg's recipes as well as the common goods needed to supply a village. But with everything else he needed to learn in order to care for his people and become a knight as well as a witch, there had been precious little time for learning his letters.

"The number and variety of herbs we need for our potions isn't small," Ashlynn said with a nod as she tapped on a few places on the diagram. "Some herbs can be grown in the shade of other trees, but we need to be careful about the canopy we create when we start planting trees, so I want to plan small clearings between the trees where we can cultivate the things that we need."

"I understand that much," Ollie said as he scratched his head. "The trial you gave me taught me a lot about managing sunlight on plants," he said with a wry smile tugging at the corners of his lips. He'd had the opposite problem at the time, the hell of a midnight sun that scorched anything without at least some shade to give plants a respite from the blistering heat. "But building something like this will take dozens of workmen," he said, gesturing to the scarred, pockmarked earth.

"There's enough land here to build farms for ten families," Ollie estimated as he looked around. "Do you need me to fetch villagers to help us with the work?"

"I doubt she does," Virve said with a hearty laugh as she placed a hand on the young knight's shoulder. "Even if she hasn't ever said it, isn't one of the traditions of our coven that we labor with our own hands whenever we can?"

"It is," Ashlynn replied, glad to see that the example she and Heila had been working to set was taking hold. "That's another part of what I wanted to do while we're out here. The two of you haven't had much time to learn, and most of the lessons I've been able to share with you have been about fighting."

"Today, we have two tasks," Ashlynn explained. "First, we need to clear aside the fallen timber," she said, pointing at several broken trees. "It isn't enough to imbue ourselves with the strength of the oak or other mighty trees in order to move some of them, so we'll break them down as we go, turning fallen trees into rough-hewn timber that we can use to build with," she said.

"You didn't bring axes or saws with us," Virve noted as she looked at the few tools that Ashlynn had brought along. "You intend to accomplish all of this with witchcraft?"

"Just watch," Ashlynn said as she walked over to a large, fallen cedar tree with a trunk that was easily half her height in diameter.

"Noble tree, though life has fled,

Your service is not finished yet.

Where my fingers trace their line,

Let wood part by my design."

As she spoke, an emerald aura enveloped both her and the fallen tree, growing brighter and brighter, reflecting off the droplets of mist that hung in the air until the entire world was dyed in pale, emerald hues. Then, the energy enveloping the tree condensed just above the roots where Ashlynn stood, while the energy surrounding Ashlynn flowed down her arm until it became a brilliant point of light at her fingertip.

With a single smooth motion, Ashlynn drew her finger across the entire width of the tree, slicing through it with an effortless flick of her finger, as if the tree was no firmer than fresh cheese curds.

-CRACK- -CRASH-

The sounds of the roots breaking free from the trunk and falling to the ground felt far louder than they should have in the stillness of the late morning fog, but perhaps that was simply because Ollie and Virve were staring so intently at what the leader of their coven had wrought that they unconsciously held their breath.

In the span of a few heartbeats, Ashlynn had done with a few words and a finger what a pair of men with a great saw would have taken several minutes to do, and the cut she left behind was as clean and smooth as one that had been sanded and polished by a skilled woodworker.

"I always intended to clear-cut this area so we could transform it into our Enchanted Grove," Ashlynn said. "But I also intended to pay respect to the trees that are already here by making them part of what we will grow here."

"I'm sure that Isabell will have her own insights to add to the design of this place," Ashlynn said with a smile as she glanced in the direction where the next member of her coven was undergoing the trial of her seed. "So we won't do much to shape the land for now. We'll want Heila's help to plan the flow of water as well," she said, acknowledging that the Willow Witch had the greatest skill with water of anyone in her coven.

"So, for now, we should focus on clearing the fallen trees and cutting them roughly into usable lumber," Ollie said, after repeating Ashlynn's spell under his breath several times until it was firmly fixed in his memory.

"Exactly," Ashlynn said warmly. "And once that's done, we can move on to collecting stones," she said, pointing to a large boulder, half buried beneath the sodden soil. "We may not have the skills of the Father of Stones to shape rock, but after the power of wood and growth, the strength of earth, and the richness of soil are among our most common powers."

"When the time comes, I'll show you how to encourage the soil to release the stones it holds beneath the surface," Ashlynn said with an ironic half-smile as she considered how useful that magic would have been when she was buried alive. "But since we can't easily turn boulders into pebbles, we'll need to rely on the strength we can summon in order to move the largest ones."

"Just tell us where to put them," Virve said as she briefly struck a pose, flexing a powerful arm and making a fist. "We'll get the work done, Mother Ashlynn."

"I know you will," Ashlynn said warmly as she beckoned for the two witches to join her in breaking down the first of many trees that they would turn into usable lumber.

In truth, this was a task that could have waited for weeks or months without harming anything. There was no need to prepare the Enchanted Grove so soon, and Ashlynn suspected that both Virve and Ollie knew it.

But she needed to do something, anything, that felt constructive and useful while she waited for the plans she'd already set in motion to come to fruition. Spending time with her coven, teaching them new ways to use their witchcraft and making preparations for the future felt good, but the most important part of it was that it kept her busy during the day without retreating to the safety of Nyrielle's dreams.

Soon, she would put an end to Owain Lothian, and she would reunite with her sister, Jocelynn. Soon, the nightmares that lurked in the shadows of her heart would begin to lose their stranglehold on her. Until then, she resolved to keep herself busy, filling each moment with activities that wouldn't allow her mind to dwell on the things that weren't yet ready for her to confront.

Things like teaching her coven and shaping a place that would become sacred to all of them for many years to come...

#### Chapter 860: A Burned Bear (Part One)

The sun had set hours ago, bringing with it a chill that turned the ever-present mists of the Vale into a layer of frost that clung to delicate leaves and formed faint flowers of ice at the edges of the numerous shallow puddles that dotted the area where Ashlynn's coven watched over Isabell.

A warm campfire burned merrily in the center of a circle of stones where Ollie carefully tended to a number of cast-iron pots and a small iron 'oven' half buried in the coals of the fire, which Ollie promised would produce a fresh-baked loaf of bread. The scents of stewing vegetables, fresh herbs, and roasting meat blended with the sharp aroma of woodsmoke and the cold night air to create a feeling that was uniquely intimate in the space that would become their Enchanted Grove.

The day's work had left all of them tired, but Ashlynn had made a point of holding everyone back from working to exhaustion, including herself. Isabell's trial could take up to nine days, and Ashlynn wanted to stay for as much of it as she could, but they all knew that the war outside the Vale of Mists was gaining momentum, and they might need to leave at any moment to respond to a crisis.

Or, in Ashlynn's case, to fulfill promises she had made, even if they were just to herself.

"It looks like I'll be called away before dinner is ready," Ashlynn said as she stood up from the rock she'd been sitting on and turned in the direction of the ancient fortress. "Unless either of you is expecting company tonight?"

"How do you do that?" Ollie asked, looking up from the spit where he was turning a pair of freshly skinned hares as he strained his senses for the slightest sound of something moving in the forest or even a scent that was out of place.

"Did the trees tell you that someone is coming?" He asked when he couldn't detect anything out of the ordinary.

"They would if I asked them to," Ashlynn said with a faint smile. "But this is just Nyri's gift," she said as she tapped lightly on her ear. "Our guest is moving quietly, but not enough to be Thane or Marcel... I'd guess that it's Lennart," she said moments before the burly form of Zedya's husband emerged from the fog.

"It seems like I still have a long way to go before I measure up to my fangs, my lady," Lennart said with a hearty, belly-shaking laugh as he approached the campfire. "But at least I've come far enough along that I can sneak up on this one," he said teasingly as he approached Virve.

The two former members of Nyrielle's personal guard had both changed dramatically since their return to the Vale of Mists. One had become the Oak Witch while the other had become the first Vampire of Zedya's line. And, while both had gained tremendous power in the process, it was obvious that both of them were still adjusting to their new abilities.

"Maybe you can sneak up on me," Virve said with a frown as she inspected her former captain, noting the patches of singed fur and the stiff way that he moved when he extended his hand in greeting. "But

someone got hold of you in a bad way," she said, taking his hand but moving directly to pull back his sleeve, revealing even more singed fur and burned flesh beneath it.

"Ssss... What did this to you?" Virve said, shocked at the extent of the injuries her friend bore, which looked far more extensive than anything she'd seen him suffer in all the years they'd fought together while protecting Lady Nyrielle. "And how is it that you don't seem bothered by these wounds?"

Behind her, Ollie stilled for a moment, carefully setting his cooking aside as he reached for the sack of supplies that included healing salves that Heila had made before their departure. He'd become all too familiar with the pain of burns during his trial of two suns, and the color drained from his face as he imagined the pain that Lennart must be in with so many burns spread across so much of his body.

A sharp headshake from Ashlynn, however, brought him to his senses. A witch's healing salves contained vibrant, living energy, but for a vampire, the healing salves would be worse than useless, crossing over into being actively harmful if they were potent enough. If a witch wanted to help a vampire to heal, it required an entirely different method...

"My wife blocked the pain for me while we fled," Lennart explained, giving Virve his best reassuring look. Even though they'd both moved on from their positions in Nyrielle's personal guard, he still thought of himself as her captain, and a captain needed to maintain a certain bearing in front of their troops, even if it was difficult to project an image of strength given the circumstances of his wounds.

"Honestly, until you said something, these little hurts had completely slipped my mind," he said with ears that were so weighed down by embarrassment that they were pressed flat against his head. But when Zedya had flashed her amethyst eyes at him and told him that his wounds weren't serious enough to slow down for and that he felt no pain from them, his mind had completely succumbed to her will, and he really had forgotten how miserable he looked at the moment.

Now, however, in the flickering light of the campfire, as the warm glow reflected off the fog that surrounded them, it was impossible to ignore how ghastly the burns looked, and the stark reality contrasted sharply enough with the vision Zedya had given him that her enchantment began to crumble, bringing with it the slow return of pain from dozens of large and small burns scattered across his body.

"As to who did this to me," Lennart said sheepishly while forcing himself to ignore the intense discomfort of the wounds he could no longer forget about. "Would you believe me if I said it was the work of a ten-year-old boy?"