

The Vampire 861

Chapter 861: A Burned Bear (Part Two)

"Sir Tommin's son did this to you?" Ashlynn said as she drew closer to the bearish vampire, carefully inspecting his singed fur and burned flesh. Painful-looking blisters marred his skin in several places, and in others, it had turned completely black.

A vampire's regenerative powers were among the most impressive in the world, but there were limits to everything, and fire was one of the most lethal weapons against the progeny of any vampire. Even Nyrielle retreated before intense flames if they contained even the slightest trace of magical power, and her progeny were always careful about their exposure to the hottest of natural flames.

After a minute of careful examination, Ashlynn sighed in visible relief as she found no signs of anything resembling 'holy flames.' Whatever Sir Tommin's son had done, he lacked his father's deep well of faith, and there was no sign that the flames had been anything other than ordinary, which would make healing them considerably easier.

"It's my fault," Lennart said sheepishly. "Zedya gave the boy to me. She thought that a child's mind would be easier to mesmerize," he said as his amethyst eyes twinkled in the light of the campfire. "But the boy was already half-crazed from the Nightweaver Venom. I don't know if it was a fever dream borne of the venom or my own failure to mesmerize him, but instead of seeing me as his father come to visit him, he saw me as something terrifying and doused me in lamp oil."

"That, that must have been horrifying," Ollie said numbly as he tried to imagine what it must have been like for anyone to be lit ablaze, much less a vampire with their exceptional vulnerability to flames.

"Here, drink," Virve said as she drew a dagger from her belt and cut deeply into her palm, spilling blood freely into a small wooden cup. "Lady Ashlynn said that a witch's blood can help a vampire to heal, so, drink up, Captain," she insisted.

"And I won't hear a word from you about not taking from your own men this time. You don't get to command me anymore," she reminded, teasing him lightly and sticking her tongue out at him even as she extended the cup of blood that was so fresh and warm that it steamed in the chill night air.

Virve's tone was light, but her golden eyes flashed with deep concern as she looked at her friend of many years. She'd been so accustomed to thinking of Nyrielle's progeny as wise elders, skilled in the use

of their powers and nearly invulnerable to anything but the greatest threats that she'd forgotten that their strength didn't manifest in an instant when they survived the transformation into a vampire.

Just like she had much to learn about being a witch, Lennart would need several years before he became a master of his new powers. In the meantime, while it would take years to gain that mastery, he had gained the unique vulnerabilities of vampires all at once, making this one of the most dangerous times of his entire life.

Part of her wanted to speak up, to ask Ashlynn if Lennart really needed to be included in the remainder of this war while he learned to use his powers. Instead of speaking, however, she bit her lip and held back the anxious words that fluttered like butterflies caught in her throat. It wasn't her decision, and if anyone needed to speak up on behalf of her old friend, it was his new wife, Madame Zedya.

"Thank you, Virve," Lennart said in a rough, husky voice as he took the small cup almost reverently. His eyes blazed with a pale amethyst light as hunger surged within him. Just the sight of the potent blood in the cup was enough to make it difficult to hold on to his rationality, and when the smell reached his nose, he lost what restraint he had, drinking greedily from the cup and licking up every last drop of the sweet, slightly metallic liquid.

Drinking from a cup prevented a truly intimate connection from forming between the ravenous vampire and the Oak Witch, but he could still taste how much she cherished their friendship and her deep, genuine concern for him in every drop of the intoxicating blood.

When the steaming liquid slid down his throat, it triggered a surge of feeling within him, stoking the fires of his heart and reminding him of the feelings of deep camaraderie with his fellow soldiers that had begun to feel strained since his transformation into a vampire. In this case, it wasn't the millstone of time that wore away at his heart, but the natural distance that grew between him and his former companions when his station in the Vale changed so dramatically all at once.

With the surge of feeling came a dramatic acceleration of his body's natural healing. Singed fur fell away as fresh fur grew in to replace it, and blackened, blistered skin sloughed off to reveal healthy, pink skin underneath. In the span of a few dozen heartbeats, Lennart stood straight and proud, without the slightest trace of the terrifying burns that had marred his flesh just minutes ago.

"Lord General Thane wasn't kidding the other night," Lennart said as he looked at the fresh fur on his arms in wonder. "A witch's blood really is a panacea like no other."

"Good that you appreciate it," Virve said a heartbeat before she slammed a fist into his shoulder hard enough to bruise even a vampire's flesh. "Now don't go getting yourself hurt again just so you can have another taste! But, if you are hurt," she said with a look of genuine concern on her face. "You come straight to me."

"Come to any of us," Ashlynn added as she took Virve's still bleeding hand and allowed a soft, emerald healing energy to spill from her smaller, delicate hands, quickly healing the wound that Virve had inflicted in order to offer Lennart the blood he needed to heal.

"Family doesn't hesitate to ask when they need help," Ashlynn said as she turned back to Lennart. "Was Zedya injured in the fire? Does she need my help to heal?"

"No," Lennart said as his ears twitched in embarrassment. "She moved quickly to avoid the flames and mesmerized several of the guardsmen to fight the fire. The boy suffered a few small burns, though, and his mother breathed in a good amount of smoke. Both of them could use your help, Lady Ashlynn, beyond just cleansing the Nightweaver Venom from their bodies and their minds."

"In that case, I shouldn't linger," Ashlynn said as she took a last glance at Isabell's sleeping figure and the other members of her coven watching over her. "I'll be back in the morning so we can continue our work," Ashlynn said. "But I expect to be gone for much of the night. Once I've healed Sir Tommin's wife, I have questions that I need to ask her so I can decide whether or not I should spare her husband's life..."

Chapter 862: Caring For Owain's Victims (Part One)

In a small room in the ancient fortress of the Vale of Mists, a mother and child lay calmly on a single bed while an ordinary-looking woman with striking amethyst eyes sat nearby, patiently knitting the beginnings of a small blanket.

Tonnis Pyre, at just ten years of age, already bore a strong resemblance to his father with sandy hair cut short in the style of knights and soldiers and classic, handsome features in the line of his nose and the set of his jaw. The baby fat had yet to entirely leave his cheeks, but there were also traces of his mother's high cheekbones and arched brows that left observers wondering if he would grow up to be pretty rather than handsome.

Next to him, Sir Tommin's wife, Rosie, wrapped protectively around her son. Her rich, chestnut hair still bore the stains of soot and the singed ends from the fire that had consumed her home and her willowy figure had taken on the gaunt, lean look of someone who had spent weeks battling illness, but traces of the beauty that had captured her husband's heart more than a decade ago could still be seen in her delicate features.

Both people slept more calmly than they had in weeks, experiencing dreams of years past in a world free of pain thanks to the influence of Zedya's mesmerizing gaze. Transporting them both here, all the way from Hurel Village, had taken multiple days for Zedya and Lennart, during which the vampires kept their prisoners locked away in dream worlds for almost the entire journey.

Zedya's knitting needles clicked with a steady, slightly forceful rhythm as she kept an eye on the young boy resting in his mother's embrace. Even though he'd been the one to lash out with lamp oil, dousing her husband and setting him ablaze, the only hatred that lurked in Zedya's heart was directed toward the man who had ordered such a cruel fate for the young boy and his mother.

Children deserved better than to be used as pawns in conflicts between adults, and both the boy and his mother were entirely blameless in whatever petty grievance Owain harbored with Sir Tommin. To inflict such a terrifying poison on them, just for the purpose of making Sir Tommin suffer, went so far beyond 'cruel' that Zedya had no words for it.

"Zedya," Ashlynn said from the door, interrupting the vampire's knitting as she walked into the small room, followed closely by a rejuvenated-looking Lennart. "Thank you for doing this for me. I had no idea that it would turn out to be so dangerous for you and Lennart," she apologized.

"Lenny," Zedya said, barely taking half a heartbeat to set her knitting aside before she rushed into the bearish man's arms, flinging her own arms around his sturdy torso and pressing her ear up against Lennart's chest as she listened to the slow, steady beat of his heart.

For the past several days, she'd adopted the distant, emotionless mask that had been so familiar to Nyrielle's progeny whenever she looked at her newlywed husband's wounds. Fire was a terrifying thing for any vampire to face, and she'd never imagined that Lennart would suffer so much when his Mesmerizing Gaze failed to completely control the young boy that Ashlynn had sent them to retrieve.

On the way back, Zedya had slowed their return in order to ensnare villagers for Lennart to feed on in the hopes that fresh blood would overcome the severity of his wounds, but burns healed slower than anything other than sunlight. Despite drinking from the hapless farmers until they would need weeks of

rest to recover, the most it did for Lennart was to give him the strength to carry on as though the wounds didn't trouble him, but it did almost nothing to heal the wounds.

Now, seeing him fully healed, restored as if the fire had never consumed him, her heart felt like it was ready to explode with an outpouring of worry that she'd bottled up for days, along with a surge of love for the man who had brought so much color back into her world and gratitude for the woman who restored her husband.

"You were right, my sweet," Lennart said gently as he stroked the flowing waves of Zedya's hair with a large hand, gently running the tips of his claws through her dull brown tresses. "Lady Ashlynn's coven had a way to heal me, even better than I was before," he reassured her. "I'm fine now," he said softly.

"I know you are," Zedya whispered, breathing deeply of his sweet, earthy scent and finding only the faintest trace of campfire smoke clinging to his fur in place of the acrid scent of singed fur and seared flesh that had clung to him for the past several nights.

"Thank you, your Dominion," Zedya said formally as she pulled back from her husband and offered Ashlynn a deep curtsy. "I know it isn't easy to heal a vampire's wounds, and bleeding for him..."

"Virve did it," Ashlynn said, holding up a hand and interrupting Zedya before she could make a large fuss over it. A slight smile tugged at the corners of her lips as she compared Zedya's worried look with the one Nyrielle wore whenever she saw Ashlynn's injuries, and Ashlynn couldn't help but feel like Zedya truly resembled her Mistress at the moment.

"And just like I told Lennart," Ashlynn added. "My coven and Nyri's progeny, we're all one family. Caring for Lennart is no different than caring for one of our own siblings, so please, never hesitate to ask," she said warmly as she stepped close enough to give the other woman a brief, reassuring hug.

"We've called each other siblings for a long time," Zedya whispered as her arms wrapped around Ashlynn to return the brief, comforting squeeze. "But it hasn't been until you arrived that we could really feel it. Thank you."

"All right, enough," Ashlynn said with a gentle chuckle as she stepped back from Zedya and turned to face the room's sleeping occupants. "Lennart, I hate to ask this of you, but can you wait outside? When they wake, they'll be confused and..."

"I understand," Lennart said, leaning over to bestow a chaste kiss on the crown of Zedya's head before he turned to leave. "I'll be right outside. Call for me if you need me, but I'll ignore any other shouts or cries," he said with a glance at the two sleeping figures. "The boy is stronger than he looks, and there's courage in his heart. I'm sure that Sir Thane would say he has the makings of a fine knight... So, be careful when you wake him."

"I will," Ashlynn said, pursing her lips together and frowning in distaste. "I need to start with his mother, though," she said.

There were dozens of arguments for healing the child before the parent, or healing the sicker of the two first, but Ashlynn forced herself to ignore both of those options in favor of healing Rosie first. Not because it was necessary, but because it would be easier to convince Rosie to participate in Ashlynn's plans if the woman watched Ashlynn curing his illness.

It felt cold and calculating, but it also had the best chances of avoiding bloodshed, so even though it felt manipulative, Ashlynn stepped forward to separate the mother from the child, leaving Tonnis in Zedya's care while she focused on Rosie.

She only hoped that it was the right choice, and that she would still have the strength she needed to treat the young boy after healing his mother.

Chapter 863: Caring For Owain's Victims (Part Two)

Ashlynn was familiar with Nightweaver Venom in a way that few healers could claim to be. Her own teacher, the Mother of Thorns, Amahle, was a member of the Nightweaver Clan, and both Ashlynn and Heila had studied how to treat the toxin. The problem was that even among witches, the poison was difficult to treat.

"The thing you have to understand, sugar," Amahle had explained one hot summer night. "Is that no two Nightweavers are the same, so the venom is different from one person to the next, and we each have different strengths to the venom that we make, like our own secret recipe."

"The venom has four parts to it," she said, giving both Ashlynn and Heila a look at the small holes in her jaw that were barely visible under her tongue. "One attacks the ears, makin' men hear what ain't there,

one attacks the eyes, makin' 'em see what ain't real," she explained, using her spider-like appendages to gesture to her ears and eyes.

"So we have to heal the eyes and ears separately to remove the venom?" Heila asked, looking eager and attentive as Amahle laid out the way that venom worked.

"Those two, an' more," Amahle said with a nod. "The third part grips the mind, fogging it up and makin' a man forget what happened an' remember things that didn't. The last part attacks the body, breaking it down in its own ways. The strongest of us can attack the heart, making it race when it shouldn't, as if a person is facing the greatest fear of their life in a calm, empty room, or slowing it enough to mimic death, even before their breath leaves them."

"The strongest of you can affect the heart," Ashlynn said with a frown. "But you said the fourth part attacks the body, so what else can it do?"

"It depends from one of us to the next, sugar," Amahle said calmly. "And where the poison settles. Some, it settles in the lungs, leaving a man short of breath or coughing up blood, other times, it settles in the gut, twisting it up until a man can't eat nothin' but broth and boiled oats. Anyway it goes, if it don't claim the heart, then it's a slow death for sure and weak men take their own lives before the venom ever kills 'em."

The description Amahle had given Ashlynn was so horrifying that she'd been amazed that other clans hadn't turned on the Nightweavers the way they turned on Talauia's Glimmerwing clan. Amahle's Clan, however, had developed a disturbingly practical method to ensure that they were never hunted to extinction by people who feared their deadly venom.

"Don't no one wants to die by a Nightweaver's bite, sugar," Amahle explained. "But many an Eldritch Lord has enough hatred in their heart to want to see an enemy suffer from our venom. Trading a bit of spit for protection gets safe havens that can last a generation or more, so the ones powerful enough to threaten us work with us instead of against us. Ain't the best way, maybe, but it's a way that worked enough times to keep us safe from the likes of the Jaws of Death."

It had been a lesson that Ashlynn took to heart for reasons far beyond the desire to learn how to heal such a complicated poison. When she thought about how to build peace between the Eldritch and the humans, she often thought back to the example of the Nightweavers and how she could get each side to see the other as more useful than threatening, but doing so would only solve one piece of the puzzle.

For now, she hoped that a small act of compassion could turn into something larger. She didn't know Sir Tommin's family, and she had no idea whether or not they shared the Templar's blindingly bright faith or not. Perhaps they would rather die than be healed by a witch, and perhaps Tommin would rather see them dead than owe thanks to a witch for saving them... But whether they would thank her or curse her, Ashlynn had to try.

"Can you keep her from waking while I work?" Ashlynn asked as she carefully examined Rosie's sleeping figure. The poison had settled in her lungs, and the combination of the toxin and the smoke she'd inhaled during the fire made her breathing shallow and weak, but thanks to Zedya's intervention, it was at least steady and free of pain.

"I can," Zedya promised as her amethyst eyes began to glow with an even brighter light. "Once she's under my spell, it doesn't take much to maintain it. But if you heal her eyes, you may remove my enchantment along with the poison."

"Eyes last, then," Ashlynn said as she began to gather emerald energy into her hands. "I'll start with her body and her mind. Hopefully, when she wakes, she'll be willing to listen to reason, but even if she turns out to be the most stubborn and hateful zealot, we'll still heal her son. I just hope that she'll give me the chance to do more than that..."

Amahle had taught two different methods of dealing with Nightweaver venom. The simplest was suitable for Heila, and it required a great deal of energy. The best method for Heila would be to bring Rosie to a willow tree, laying her among the tree's roots with her feet in the water so that the cleansing energy of the world could flow through her, though there was a risk that the tree used in the ritual would die in the process if the tree was too young and the venom had been given too much time to spread throughout the body.

For Ashlynn, however, there was a more complex method that required her to draw on the unique aspects of different trees, using the whole of the forest to bring about healing. It was something that only great witches like the Mother of Trees or the Mother of Thorns could do...

Chapter 864: Four Trees For Healing

In the future, she would bring people like Rosie and young Tonnis to her Enchanted Grove where she could more easily draw on the strengths and powers of many diverse trees to attempt something like this, but for now, she stretched her senses out as far as she could go, ensuring that there was at least one tree available to support her witchcraft as she began to heal the tenacious poison.

"Through willow's gift and nature's grace,

Let healing waters find their place.

Cleanse the flesh where poison dwells,

And break this fever's burning spells."

The energy flowing from Ashlynn's hands turned a soft, silvery green as she placed one hand over Rosie's chest and the other over her mouth and nose, letting the frail woman breathe in the cleansing magic naturally. Ashlynn held this posture for several minutes before an inky, smoky darkness began to spill from the woman's lips each time she exhaled as Ashlynn worked to cleanse not only the venom that tortured her body but the smoke and soot that had settled into her chest during the fire.

For ten long minutes, Ashlynn sat unmoving, her own face growing pale as she felt a burning fire settle into her chest and sharp, constricting pains as if a serpent had wrapped itself around her chest, squeezing the air from her lungs with every breath she drew. It was the same pain that Rosie felt with every breath she drew, and Ashlynn battled it with her until the pains began to recede with each exhalation of the dark, smoky energy until finally, she could breathe easily again.

"My lady," Zedya said anxiously from the side as she watched sweat beading on Ashlynn's brow. "Do you need to rest before you continue? Should I bring you anything?"

As one of Amahle's students, Zedya was no stranger to the healing art of witches, even if it was all but impossible for vampires to learn any healing arts outside of Nyrielle's blood sorcery, but this was the first time she'd seen the shared pain of healing affecting someone she cared for and the feeling of helplessness that settled over her as she watched from the side was something she hadn't felt so intensely since the days before Nyrielle found her and bestowed the gifts and powers of a vampire on her.

"I'm fine," Ashlynn said, coughing a few times as if to expel phantom smoke from her own lungs. "It's best if I continue straight through," she said before she began with the next stage of healing."

"Ancient oak with wisdom deep,

Free the mind from poison's maze.

Let thoughts flow clear and memories keep,

Restore the truth and clear away the haze."

This time, Ashlynn reached out directly to the Ancient Oak within the Vale of Mists, borrowing its vast and ancient strength with memories that stretched back to the very beginning of the Vale of Mists in order to strengthen Rosie's mind.

Greenish-golden energy swirled in Ashlynn's hands as she moved them to rest lightly on Rosie's temples in an attempt to fortify her mind against the falsehoods and delusions that flowed from the Nightweaver venom. It wasn't enough to simply purge the toxin, though that alone would have been a boon that Rosie would have taken without complaint. But cleansing the toxin alone would still leave her with the damage it had done, the distorted memories, and the lies that had burrowed deep into her mind.

Instead, like a tree growing in rocky soil, Ashlynn's energy worked its way through Rosie's mind, pushing aside the dark, twisted lumps of paranoid delusions and frightened whispers, leaving her with only the clear, gleaming truth of her life.

At the same time, the poison attacked Ashlynn's own mind, conjuring up memories of the trial she faced with the Ancient Willow, where she watched Nyrielle drink every last drop of her blood to gain the strength she needed to fight back against the army of the Church. It was a haunting memory, crafted by the remnant of a Willow Witch who sought to tear Ashlynn and Nyrielle apart, and for one horrifying moment, Ashlynn didn't know if the memory was real or if it had been part of a vision.

More memories twisted and distorted as she struggled to sustain the flow of healing energy. Things she had seen in nightmares where her mother betrayed her to the Church or the vision Claire du Gaal had shared with her about the Church dragging her away before she consumed herself in flames, only this time, Ashlynn felt like she was remembering her own death...

Blood trickled down her lip as she bit into the soft flesh, using pain to drive away the lies and haunting distortions of the venom. Unexpectedly, however, it wasn't the pain that helped her to force her way through, but the taste of faintly metallic blood that so frequently accompanied Nyrielle's kisses that tore through the haunting shadows, leaving her mind clear and her heart soaring on dark wings that would never allow her to come to harm.

This time, it took several minutes after she had completed the cleansing before she was able to begin again. Sweat soaked her blouse in the space between her shoulder blades, and her breathing was ragged from exertion, but when she looked down at Rosie's sleeping face, she could see the lines of tension and fear melting away.

"Hemlock's silence, still and true,

Let phantom voices now pass through.

What poison whispers in the ear,

Let nature's quiet make sincere."

Ashlynn's connection to Hemlock trees had only grown stronger after nurturing the seed she'd carefully prepared for Isabell. The tops of the mighty trees bent and swayed in the wind, hearing everything, but no matter how fiercely the winds high above the other trees blew, the hemlock stood tall and proud, never uprooted or torn from its place, always grounded in what was real.

Now, Ashlynn relied on the sturdy base of the hemlock tree to keep herself rooted in her work, pulling the dark, thick, almost stringy energy from Rosie's ears as if it were made of balls of cotton that had been stuffed in the other woman's ears.

By now, the dark visions that accompanied touching the essence of Nightweaver venom had become almost familiar to her. Voices whispered in her ears, and for a moment, Ashlynn paused to listen, soaking in the feeling of hearing her father's deep, rumbling voice or Jocelynn's light, musical laugh.

The words they spoke were nonsense, preying on fears and hurts that she was already facing. The words didn't matter and like the stoic hemlock, she ignored the whispers that sought to wound her heart,

taking comfort simply in the sounds before she pressed forward, purging the last of the darkness from Rosie's ears and moving on to the final stage of healing that would not only purge the Nightweaver venom from her eyes, but break Zedya's Mesmerizing gaze as well.

"Ash's sight that pierces veil,

Where poison's tricks and phantoms pale.

What twisted visions cloud the eyes,

Let truth's clear sight now recognize."

Though she had never nurtured an Ash seed and few grew within the Vale of Mists, Ashlynn had always felt a strong connection with the tree that her mark of the witch so closely resembled, and that connection seemed to have grown stronger with her connection to Nyrielle.

The Ash tree felt like a tree with roots in one world and its crown in another, and one that sat closer to death than many others. At the moment, it was that proximity to death that Ashlynn drew on, eradicating the last traces of nightweaver venom from Rosie's eyes and clearing away the ghosts and visions that haunted her.

Nyrielle's dark, midnight blue energy seemed to pulse within the rich emerald green of Ashlynn's, carrying with it the feeling that all lies and deceptions would crumble in the face of death. There was no resisting this final phase of her healing ritual, and no visions would be allowed to torment her as a cold wind blew through the small room, summoned from the darkness of the void and carrying what little venom remained along with it when the wind returned to the darkness from which it came.

Ashlynn slumped in exhaustion as the power she'd summoned drained from her body, leaving her feeling cold and wrung out like a damp towel. But on her lips, a faint smile slowly formed as she watched the eyes of her patient begin to flutter open, looking clear and free of pain for the first time in many weeks.

"Relax, Rosie," Ashlynn said, reaching out gently to reassure the woman whose eyes had begun to dart around the small room in confusion. "You've been ill for some time now, but you're in a safe place. I

know you have questions," she said lightly as she gestured for Zedya to bring over a cup of water. "I promise to answer what I can, but in return, I'll need you to answer some questions for me..."

Chapter 865: A Knight's Wife

Rosie blinked several times in confusion as she tried to understand where she was and what was happening. From the stone walls and the fine furnishings in the room, she assumed that she was in a great manor somewhere but it clearly wasn't her home in Hurel Village.

There was a buxom, blonde serving woman giving her a reassuring look even though she looked like she'd just come in from a hard day of labor in the castle gardens. Her tunic still bore the stains of dirt and grasses and the pouches that hung from a belt around her trim waist bulged with whatever odds and ends she needed for her work.

Most concerning of all, however, was the thin rivulet of blood that trailed from the corner of her lip, as if she'd recently been struck and hadn't been allowed to clean herself up after the blow landed.

Tonnis lay nearby, looking every bit as pale and weary as he had for the past several weeks while the pair of mother and son had struggled against whatever sickness plagued them. His expression seemed more relaxed though, and his breathing was calm and steady which would have been reassuring if it wasn't for the presence of a strange noble lady sitting next to the bed, softly stroking her son's sandy hair.

"My lady," Rosie said hesitantly, ignoring the serving girl next to her and bowing her head to the amethyst eyed woman wearing a dark maroon dress of crushed velvet with intricate silver embroidery. To wear such luxurious clothing even when visiting the sick, the woman was certainly at least the wife of another knight, or perhaps the daughter of one of the barons of the march.

"Thank you," Rosie said, speaking with some difficulty until the serving girl passed her a cup of cool water laced with soothing mint.

"I'm sorry," she said after taking a long, slow sip to organize her thoughts. "I don't know what happened or how I came to be here... I, I was very sick," she said, frowning as she realized that her chest didn't ache and that speaking normally didn't trigger a fit of coughing.

"You shouldn't thank me," Zedya said with a slight giggle hidden behind a hand. Her amethyst eyes sparkled with genuine mirth as she looked at Ashlynn, the powerful Mother of Trees, who was being all but ignored by the woman whose life she'd just saved. "I only brought you here. If you want to thank someone, you should thank Her Dominion, Lady Ashlynn, for curing you of the poison."

"Her Dominion?" Rosie said, turning to face the serving girl and staring in confusion. She was the daughter of a knight and had been the wife of another, so she wasn't a person who was ignorant when it came to courtly manners, but she'd never heard anyone addressed as 'your Dominion.' A Marquis or Duke would be addressed as 'your Grace', while lesser lords were addressed as 'your Lordship', and some high-ranking members of the Church would be called 'your Worship,' but what kind of person rated a title as grand as 'your Dominion'?

But before her foggy mind could stumble into an answer to the first oddity she'd tripped over, her mind seized on the second thing that the strange lady had said.

"You, you cured me?" Rosie whispered, pressing her fingertips to her lips as she processed the rest of the other lady's statement. "And I was poisoned? But, wait," she said as she looked from the strange woman dressed like a common serving girl to her ailing son and back again. "Tonnis is still sick," she said as the blood drained from her face. "Does that mean, does that mean you weren't able to cure him?"

"No," Ashlynn said gently as she took a seat on the bed next to the frightened woman. "It just means that I cured you first. It wasn't easy," she admitted as she wiped the blood from her lower lip and took a sip from her own cup of cool water. "My teacher once claimed that Nightweaver venom was one of the five most difficult poisons to cure because it's so tenacious and the longer it lingers in the body, the more difficult it is to heal."

"Thankfully, we were able to bring you here in time," Ashlynn said, resting one hand just above the other woman's knee and giving her a reassuring squeeze. "Once I've had a chance to rest a little bit, I'll cure your son next."

As soon as Ashlynn promised to cure Tonnis, Rosie slumped like a puppet with her strings cut, sighing deeply as a weight heavier than the distant mountains was removed from her chest. Her mind was still struggling to keep up with everything, but one of the fears that had briefly flickered into her mind was that the woman who cured her didn't have enough medicine to cure both of them.

If anything happened to her son because the medicine had been used up to cure her, she didn't know how she could live with herself, but thankfully, it seemed like her fears were unfounded.

"While I rest, we can talk a bit. I'm sure you have questions. Madame Zedya and I will do our best to give you answers so you can put your mind at ease," Ashlynn said as she leaned against the bedpost at the foot of the bed, grateful for the little bit of support and the softness of the mattress as she felt the exhaustion from healing Rosie wash over her.

Rosie didn't immediately ask anything. Rather, she sat quietly for several minutes, sipping the soothing mint-water and gently stroking her son's soft hair. His skin was still warm to the touch, and the fever that had haunted him for weeks showed no signs that it had weekend, but he seemed to be sleeping more deeply than he had in weeks. So deeply, in fact, that he showed no signs of waking even when she ran her fingers through his hair.

"You said that you brought me here," Rosie said, looking at 'Madame Zedya' with deeply worried eyes. "And that you got to me in time. So, does that mean that you knew that we'd been poisoned? That you discovered someone plotting against us?"

The idea of it froze her heart with dread, and her mind immediately conjured memories of the heated argument she'd had with her husband, Tommin, more than half a year ago.

"I'm sorry, my little poppin, but I can't stay," Tommin said with an expression that made it look as if he was suffering the greatest injustice of his life. "I've helped to do a thing that shouldn't have ever been done, and just knowing that it was done is dangerous. I, I can't put you in that kind of danger, Rosie. It's best that I get away from you and Tonnis, before anyone comes to hurt you because of what I've done or what I know..."

"Why won't you tell me what you've done?" Rosie pleaded. "Didn't we promise each other to face all fortunes together, both good and ill? Didn't we swear to struggle together for the rest of our days? So why won't you tell me what we're struggling against now? Why are you abandoning us so you can hide behind the Church's walls by yourself?"

She was hurt and angry, and she felt like the man she'd loved ever since she was old enough to feel her heart flutter at the sight of a man had betrayed everything they'd built together for more than a decade. It felt like all of his promises were lies, and his love was the greatest sham that she'd been a fool for believing in.

But now, as she stared at her son's pale complexion and felt his feverish brow, she wondered for the first time if she'd wronged her husband. Whatever it was he'd done, his enemies, whoever they were, really had come after her and Tonnis... but even if that was true, she still didn't know who those enemies were, or why they would poison her and their son.

So now that she'd heard the thing she needed to hear most, that the strange woman resting at the foot of her bed could cure her son, the thing she wanted to understand the most was why this had happened to them, because there was something that she was very certain of.

Whoever these people were who had helped her, they were likely opponents or enemies of the people who had poisoned her... but that didn't mean they were friends at all.

Chapter 866: Witnessing A Miracle (Part One)

Seeing Ashlynn's exhaustion, Zedya took the lead in answering Rosie's questions, but she kept her answers minimal, expressing the necessary facts without revealing larger topics that would only make the delicate position the knight's wife occupied even more precarious.

"The person who ordered your poisoning, as well as your son's, was Owain Lothian," Zedya said as she retrieved her knitting and resumed her work on the small blanket. "According to his Steward, Sir Hugo, Owain resented your husband's 'betrayal' of leaving his service to join the Church as a Templar."

"Lord Owain?" Rosie said, blinking several times in surprise as her mind struggled to accept the words, and more than that, the way the woman called Zedya had said them.

The statement had been so simple, so matter of fact, as if it was common knowledge that the future Lothian Marquis would poison women and children over something as, well, not petty, but something as honorable as joining the Templars. Rosie hadn't spoken to her husband in months, as a Templar, he was supposed to leave his old life behind, but she'd paid attention to news of him and it had been news across the whole of Lothian March when he received a Holy Light Blade.

Sir Tommin's accomplishment should have reflected glory back on the lord he'd served for much of his life, and according to the stories she'd heard, it had been Owain and Tommin who led the charge against the demons during the first raids of the summer. Several stories circulated about the men fighting side by side against devious, flat-tailed demons and even the Inquisition had praised them as the twin heroes of that raid.

So why would Owain want to harm her and Tonnis over something that Tommin had done?

"Owain isn't the man that most people think he is," Ashlynn said from the foot of the bed. "He conceals it well most of the time, but there is a cruelty and a pettiness to him. I'm sorry you got caught up in things," she said as she gave the other woman a sympathetic look.

There was something about the way the strange woman dressed like a serving girl spoke, as if she knew Owain better than most, that made Rosie take another look at her, and this time, pieces that should have been obvious before finally fell into place as she realized who the blond woman really was.

"L-Lady Ashlynn," she said softly, covering her mouth in surprise as her eyes opened wide. "You, you're the Lady Ashlynn who married Lord Owain! The one who's been in the Summer Villa all this time carrying his child..."

"Her Dominion is the Lady Ashlynn who married Owain Lothian," Zedya confirmed while Ashlynn wore a complex expression at being remembered as 'Owain's wife' instead of as 'Ashlynn from Blackwell.' "But anything else you've been told about her is likely a lie," Zedya continued as her knitting needles clicked rhythmically.

"Owain tried to murder her on the night they were married," Zedya explained. "And your husband..."

"Enough, Zedya," Ashlynn interrupted, holding up a hand and sliding off the corner of the bed so she could approach the boy who still needed healing. "We'll talk about Sir Tommin later, after his son has been healed."

"My Lady," Zedya said as the clicking of her needles paused. Her eyes were filled with worry as she looked at Ashlynn pushing herself forward. "Madame Rosie hasn't agreed to help us yet, are you sure..."

"I won't use her son's life as leverage," Ashlynn said firmly, turning from Zedya to Rosie before she continued in a gentler tone. "I won't lie to you, I have something to ask of you once I've cured your son, but whether you agree to help me or not, it doesn't change anything about what I'll do to help you."

"Of course, my Lady," Zedya said with a slight smile as if Ashlynn's response was exactly what she expected. But then, if Ashlynn was the kind of woman who would take a child's life hostage to force the hand of their mother, she wouldn't be the woman who had breathed life and love into the hearts of Lady Nyrielle and her progeny.

Zedya had never expected Ashlynn to insist on Rosie's help first, but by planting the seed in the frightened mother's mind, she both gave Ashlynn the opportunity to appear magnanimous and left the idea that there would be an opportunity to repay this kindness later.

"Come, Madame Rosie," Zedya said, gesturing to another chair sitting next to hers. "Sit with me while her Dominion cares for your son. You don't want to accidentally get in her way."

"Get in her way?" Rosie asked even as she slid off of the bed to take a seat next to the knitting woman. Perhaps this Zedya was Lady Ashlynn's lady-in-waiting? "Doesn't she just need to give my son the same medicine she used on me?"

"There is no medicine in the world that would cure you or your son," Zedya said quietly as Ashlynn began to gather energy to repeat the ritual that had cured Rosie. "Perhaps if you had only been poisoned for a day or two there might be a potion that could save you, but after weeks? Absolutely nothing."

"She called it 'Nightweaver venom,'" Rosie said quietly as the air in the room grew still and charged with a strange feeling, as if they were outside in the forest among the trees instead of within the stone walls of a castle somewhere. "I don't know anything about poisons, but is it really that fearsome?"

"In the Kingdom of Gaal, your people call it 'Spider Demon Venom'," Zedya said. "Even if you aren't familiar with poisons, you should have heard of what happens to people who are poisoned by 'Spider Demons', haven't you?"

The words 'Spider Demon' struck Rosie like a knife to the heart and she stared at her son's sleeping figure with renewed horror as her mind swam with the horror stories that she'd grown up on about one of the most wicked and conniving of all the demons that Caun Lothian had faced during the Second Crusade.

People who were wounded by Spider Demons were said to go mad, and even those who survived the deadly poison were never the same after being injured. The Spider Demons had been so common in Leufroy Barony that, in the aftermath of the crusade, the baron was forced to build a bedlam just to handle all of the people who had become raving lunatics, yet, by a miracle of the Holy Lord of Light, managed to survive the bite of the wicked demons.

"I thought, I thought there was no cure for the venom of a Spider Demon," Rosie whispered, staring at Ashlynn in wide-eyed amazement. "How is she going to..."

"Just watch," Zedya said with a slight smile on her lips. Perhaps, if she hadn't lost so much of her heart by the time she became Amahle's student, she would have felt the same kind of awe for Amahle's witchcraft that she did for Ashlynn's, but somehow, she didn't think so.

Maybe it was because Ashlynn had supplied the spark of life that Nyrielle used to rekindle her heart, but whenever Ashlynn worked her magic, it was something special to see and now that Ashlynn was beginning again, Zedya found herself leaning forward just as much as Rosie was, waiting to see a miracle unfold.

Chapter 867: Witnessing A Miracle (Part Two)

"Through willow's gift and nature's grace,

Let healing waters find their place.

Cleanse the flesh where poison dwells,

And break this fever's burning spells."

Ashlynn's words echoed in the stone room like they came from all around her instead of falling from her lips, and when she spoke, a silvery-green aura gathered around her and Tonnis. To Rosie, who had only seen demonstrations of the blessings of the Holy Lord of Light on a few, rare occasions, it looked like something divine had descended to the world and wrapped her son in a sacred light.

"Her Dominion," Rosie whispered as she stared in awe. It seemed like every minute since she woke in this place, she was confronted by something that upended everything she thought she knew about the world, but nothing could have prepared her for what she was seeing now.

The title that Zedya used to refer to Lady Ashlynn sounded important, grand, but also completely outside of the education that Rosie had received as a young lady, but now, she understood why. Whether it was her birth as the daughter of a knight or her current station as the wife of one, even a woman who had once been married to a knight who became a templar had no reason to learn the complex etiquette required to interact with someone as exalted as the woman who was healing her son.

"Saintess," Rosie breathed as she slid from her chair, clasping her hands before her chest in silent prayer even as her eyes remained fixed on what was happening before her. A dark, wicked energy like thick, cloying smoke was pouring out of Tonnis's mouth, but as soon as it made contact with the holy light that surrounded Lady Ashlynn, it evaporated like a thin cloud of steam above a pot of tea.

"She doesn't like it when people call her that," Zedya said quietly from her seat, though she could understand why the other woman would come to that conclusion. Decades ago, before Nyrielle had taken her as one of her human progeny, she might have come to the very same conclusion if she witnessed what Ashlynn was doing now.

"Lady Ashlynn has nothing to do with your Church of the Holy Lord of Light," Zedya added quietly as Ashlynn finished cleansing the toxin from Tonnis's chest and prepared to move on to clearing it from his mind. "To this day, if the Church found her, they would likely burn her at the stake as a heretic."

"Why?" Rosie asked, so startled by Zedya's statement that she turned away from the miracle taking place before her to look at the young woman who must be the Saintess's attendant if she wasn't a lady-in-waiting. "Is it because her prayers are unfamiliar?"

It was true that she'd never heard prayers like Saintess Ashlynn's, ones that honored the trees and called on them to aid in healing, but surely this was still a divine miracle that shone with the radiance of the Holy Lord of Light.

To her ears, it didn't sound any more blasphemous than prayers that begged for warm days and clear skies to nourish wheat, or for the stars at night to guide travelers on their way. Trees grew strong in the light of the sun, so surely this was just another manifestation of the Holy Lord of Light's blessings. After all, she only needed eyes to see the demonic darkness being pulled from her son's body and the light purifying it to understand that Saintess Ashlynn was a beacon of light against evil.

"It's because she's one of the great witches," Zedya said calmly as her fingers continued knitting. "Outside the Kingdom of Gaal, among the people you call demons, she's known as the Mother of Trees. That's why Owain Lothian tried to kill her, and why she's at war with Lothian March right now."

Rosie had thought that nothing could surprise her more than learning that she was in the presence of a genuine Saintess, one who had intervened personally to cure her and her son of one of the most horrifying and debilitating poisons known to man, but she'd been very, very wrong.

Only now, as she watched a look of intense pain flickering across Saintess Ashlynn's face, Zedya told her that the woman who was suffering for her child was some kind of evil witch? And she was at war with the Lothian March? It made no sense, none at all.

"Saintess Ashlynn can't be a witch," Rosie said, shaking her head in denial. "This, this can't be something so evil! Someone is wrong," she said as tears began to stream from her eyes. "If someone convinced her that she's a witch, then they were wrong..."

"No," Zedya said as she put down the knitting and reached out to lay a hand on the other woman's shoulder, looking deep into her tear-filled eyes. "I promise you, Lady Ashlynn is a witch, and a very powerful one. But the people who are wrong are the ones who teach that witches are evil. Take a look," she said as she gestured to Ashlynn and the brilliant, greenish-golden light that enveloped her.

"In order to heal your son, she has to face the pain he feels and suffer alongside him," Zedya explained. "She had to do this for you, too, and she's doing this because she thinks that you and your son are innocents who shouldn't have been harmed by Owain's schemes."

"So, if she's willing to endure all that for a pair of complete strangers," Zedya said with a pointed look. "What does that tell you about who is truly wicked in this struggle?"

Zedya's words crashed down on Rosie with the weight of a falling tree, but she couldn't speak the words to answer Zedya's question. She had never been exceptionally devout, not the way her husband was, but she'd thought herself to be a good and godly woman her entire life. She thought she lived well and worked each day to meet her struggle, just as the Holy Lord of Light intended.

But now, when her son was suffering the greatest threat of his young life, it wasn't the Church who had come to their rescue, it was a witch, one of the people who was supposed to be so evil that only the most holy of men could hope to confront her.

"I don't understand," Rosie whispered. "Why would she do this for us if she's a witch?"

"Because Lady Ashlynn has suffered too much when she did nothing wrong," Zedya said simply. "And she hates to see others suffer when they have done nothing wrong. She isn't a pure and perfect Saintess, but she's a very good person, and when she's done healing your son, she's going to ask you for help to prevent even more suffering."

"Whatever you think of witches," Zedya said as she gave the other woman a very cool, evaluating look. "I hope you'll do as she asks. You can refuse her and she won't force you," she said. "When all of this is over, you and your son will be free to go. She won't hold this over you as a debt. She just hopes that, now that you've glimpsed the truth, you'll do the right thing."

After she'd said what she needed to, Zedya returned to her knitting, watching quietly as Ashlynn tended to the young boy on the bed. Meanwhile, Rosie sat numbly on the floor, watching a miracle unfold before her eyes as she struggled with the questions Zedya had presented.

Who were the wicked ones in all of this? And what was the 'right thing' that she needed to do?

Chapter 868: A Simple Request (Part One)

Curing Tonnis drained Ashlynn even more than curing his mother. Part of it was because she was already tired from treating Rosie, but a greater portion of it was because the venom sank its claws more deeply into the child. In Ashlynn's mind, if there was a miracle here, it was that young Tonnis had clung to life as fiercely as he had, but fighting back against both the venom and Lennart had clearly cost the young man what little strength he still had.

"He's safe now," Ashlynn said, mere heartbeats before she slumped onto the bed, staring up at the stone ceiling while every fiber of her body trembled in exhaustion and remembered pain from healing two people who were so deeply poisoned.

"Ashlynn!" Zedya said, dropping her knitting and appearing at Ashlynn's side faster than human eyes could follow. "Do you need me to carry you to the forest outside? Or one of the gardens?"

If it had been Lady Nyrielle who collapsed after using an excessive amount of sorcery, Zedya would have rushed to find someone among her personal guard who could present an offering of blood, or if it was truly excessive, she would have sought out Ashlynn to offer the potent blood of a witch.

But when Ashlynn collapsed, Zedya was at a loss for what she should do. The last time Ashlynn had pushed herself too far, on the slopes of the High Pass, the thing she needed most was to surround herself with trees that she could draw strength from, so Zedya started there, but whether or not that was the best thing, she didn't know.

"I'm fine," Ashlynn insisted though her voice revealed just how tired she felt. "Help me into a chair. Let Rosie have the bed with Tonnis," she said, stretching out a hand to Zedya and accepting the vampire's strength to pull her out of bed and over to the chair that Zedya herself had occupied just moments ago.

"Your Dominion," Rosie said, prostrating herself on the floor before the Saintess who had given her and Tonnis a second chance at life after Owain Lothian had them poisoned. "I have nothing worthy to thank you with," she said in a trembling voice as he mind struggled to think of how she could possibly repay the debt she owed to a woman who had done so much to save her life.

"If you wish it," Rosie offered after thinking for a handful of heartbeats. "I will serve you alongside Madame Zedya, as your handmaid or attendant," she said in a rush. "And, and when he's old enough, then Tonnis can serve you as a knight," she added quickly. "The Pyres have been loyal guards to the Lothians for generations. Tonnis can serve you as well as..."

"Enough," Ashlynn said, raising her hand and interrupting the flustered mother. "Go hold your son, he's more important than me, and you don't owe me anything for doing this."

"Are you, are you sure, your Dominion?" Rosie asked, trembling on the floor, caught between her desire to rush to her son's side and her reverence toward her savior.

"Go, hold your son," Ashlynn said with a slight smile before she turned to Zedya to ask for a cup of tea to ward off the chill that had crept into her body along with the energy she pulled from the forest.

"Tonnis," Rosie cried as she half stumbled, half leaped onto the bed next to her son. His complexion had recovered a healthy hue and his breathing was calm and steady for the first time in several weeks. His

body was still thinner than it should have been and there was a frailness to him that remained even after the venom had been removed, but his heartbeat in his chest was steady and strong and there wasn't the slightest trace of fear on his face as he slept.

"He's weaker than you are," Ashlynn explained as Rosie held her child, gently stroking his hair and cradling him to her bosom. "Right now, he needs sleep, and in the morning, a hearty breakfast. You need one too, and a snack before bed," Ashlynn added as her own stomach grumbled at her, reminding her that she'd skipped having dinner with her coven in order to come heal Rosie and Tonnis.

"I'll have Georg prepare something for our special guests," Zedya said as she brought Ashlynn a cup of tea. "With a snack for young master Tonnis if he wakes in the night," she added with a reassuring smile at the mother who had begun to sniffle as tears flowed from her eyes. Without a word spoken, Zedya passed the woman a small handkerchief before returning to Ashlynn's side.

"Thank you," Rosie said as she looked from the simply dressed Saintess to the elegant lady-in-waiting. Her mind struggled to accept the idea that Lady Ashlynn could be a witch and so she skipped over the thought entirely, placing her faith in what she could see with her own two eyes and feel with her heart.

Lady Ashlynn was a kind and selfless woman with the power to cleanse the most insidious of demon poisons. If that wasn't reason enough to think of her as a Saintess then surely no one else was worthy of the title. Whatever the Church might think didn't matter in the face of the truth before her eyes, but she still didn't know what she should do to repay the vast kindness she'd received.

"Your Dominion," Rosie finally worked up the courage to say. "Madame Zedya told me that you would ask something of me and that you needed my help to save others," she said, though her voice lacked confidence that there was anything she could do that the Saintess couldn't do for herself. "Just say the words and I'll do it, whatever you require."

She realized that it had been presumptuous of her to offer up her service and Tonnis's as well, but when she thought about it, she truly didn't know what else she could offer. But, if she was honest with herself, there was an extra reason that she'd offered up her service and it was the same reason that she'd suggested that Tonnis could serve as Lady Ashlynn's knight.

It was hard to admit, even to herself, but a part of her she hadn't realized existed wished that whatever Lady Ashlynn needed of her, it would let her strike back at the man who had poisoned her and her son. Rosie knew she was small and weak, and it would be years before Tonnis could swing a real sword and

ride to battle, but for the chance to hurt the people who had attacked her family, she would do anything Saintess Ashlynn asked.

Chapter 869: A Simple Request (Part Two)

"No," Ashlynn said, shaking her head slightly after taking a sip of the warm, soothing tea. It did nothing to dispel the hunger in her belly but it at least helped to spread warmth throughout her body and press back against the chill that had nothing to do with the cold winter winds outside.

"I have a request, but you can refuse and it changes nothing for you and your son," Ashlynn said as she set the cup down. "But if you're willing, I'd like you to write a letter to your husband, Sir Tommin and ask him to surrender to my army instead of fighting to defend Hanrahan Town."

"You can tell him what Owain has done to you and Tonnis," Ashlynn suggested gently. "And that we've cured you if you think that will help. You can use whatever words you think will reach him. The important thing is that there are very few people who can make him stand down, and I believe that you're one of them."

"I, I don't understand," Rosie said, blinking in surprise. Why would a Saintess need to attack Hanrahan Town? She remembered Zedya saying that Lady Ashlynn was at war with the Lothians for trying to murder her, but what did that have to do with the Hanrahans? And why would Tommin be involved in the battle?

"There's too much to explain," Ashlynn said. "Dame Sybyll Hanrahan marches under my banner, and Ian Hanrahan murdered her mother while his father murdered her father. There's more to it, with plenty of grievances to go around, but the important part is that within two days, a battle for Hanrahan Town will begin and your husband will be there."

"If he takes the field," Ashlynn explained as patiently as she could. "I'm worried about the number of lives that will be lost to his Holy Light Blade. So I'd prefer it if he would stand aside and allow us to take him prisoner. If he agrees to that, we'll bring him here and he can stay with you and Tonnis until the end of the war when we can release you all."

"But Tommin is a Templar now," Rosie protested. "He won't involve himself in battles between men unless there are... oh," she said, suddenly stopping as she realized the problem. Lady Ashlynn called herself a witch and whether she was or not, the Church thought of her as one. If she had sent an army to

attack Hanrahan Town, then there might be more witches with that army, perhaps even demons. And if that was the case, Tommin would certainly take the field to fight against evil.

"There are witches in your army, aren't there?" Rosie asked, her voice barely a whisper as she held Tonnis tightly. For a moment, she wondered if she was still trapped in the delusions of the Spider Demon venom. The whole situation seemed impossible. The Saintess standing before her was a witch, but nothing she'd been taught about the savage cruelty of witches lined up with the kind, gentle woman who had cured her and saved her son's life.

How could someone who performed such miracles of healing be the enemy? Yet if Saintess Ashlynn commanded an army that included witches and she was going to attack the Kingdom of Gaal, then by everything Rosie had been raised to believe, she should flee this place. But where could she go? And how could she abandon the woman who had given Tonnis back his life?

"There is a witch with the army, and 'demons' too," Ashlynn acknowledged, refusing to hide the truth from this woman who had already suffered so much. "My lady-in-waiting, my apprentice, and a number of good friends who protected me in my times of need," she said softly.

"I don't want anyone to die who doesn't need to," Ashlynn explained, choosing her words with care because there would be many deaths on both sides no matter what happened. "But if Sir Tommin fights, even if Dame Sybyll tries to preserve his life, no one can promise that he will live. The threat he poses is too great to be taken lightly. If he doesn't join the fight, the battle will be less intense. It will end sooner and fewer people will die."

When Ashlynn sent Heila and Hauke to counter Loman and the Inquisitor Diarmuid, she'd believed it was the right decision and that they were strong enough to overcome the combined forces of Sir Tommin and the others from the Church. As the days since her decision dragged on, however, a growing seed of doubt gnawed at her and she unconsciously cradled her sword hand as she remembered the pain of the burns she suffered from Ignatious's Holy Flame Blade.

As a powerful witch, the weapon had still burned her badly and those wounds only came from her attempts to control it. To have such a powerful weapon turned against her loved ones... She believed that Dame Sybyll could counter Sir Tommin, even with a Holy Light Blade in his hands, but if she couldn't stop him from reaching the others...

She dared not dwell on the things that could go wrong or she would find herself rushing off to join the battle, and she knew that was the wrong decision. But if she could do something else to protect her people from here, then she resolved to make the attempt.

"So, Rosie, can you write a letter for me?" Ashlynn asked gently, hating herself for manipulating the other woman even as she recognized its necessity. She could see the gratitude shining in Rosie's eyes, the desperate desire to repay an impossible debt, and part of her recoiled at using that devotion as leverage. But if a simple letter could spare even a dozen lives in the coming battle, particularly if it could stop Heila and Hauke from the risk of facing a Templar with a Holy Light blade in battle, then she had to try.

"Not because I healed you," the young witch added quickly. "But because it may save many lives, including your husband's."

Chapter 870: A Simple Request (Part Three)

For several minutes, Rosie sat on the bed, cradling her son and trying to navigate the knot in her heart to find a way to answer Saintess Ashlynn's question. She tried, several times, to think of the words she would write and imagined her husband reading them, but each time she imagined it, she couldn't imagine him putting aside his holy sword simply because she'd asked him to.

"I'm sorry, your Dominion," Rosie finally said after spending a long time lost in thought. "Tommin, he, he turned his back on Tonnis and me in favor of his faith. You may not know this, but he took Piety as one of his virtues when he became a knight, and Righteousness as well. The Holy Lord of Light is more important to him than we are," she said bitterly.

"You mean that if he receives a letter from you," Ashlynn said slowly. "He'll see it as a request to betray his piety, and he'll feel that if he betrayed his piety because of a request from his family, then he'll have lost his claim to righteousness. Even though it would save many lives, because it would resemble the sort of corrupt, self-serving deals made by other noblemen for the sake of their families, he would refuse to listen."

"Exactly," Rosie said, holding her son close as silent tears spilled down her cheeks. "He has nothing left in this world but his faith and his holy sword," Rosie said, fighting to speak around the sobs that piled up in her chest.

For months, she'd asked herself again and again if there would come a day when Tommin would come back to her and their son. If this whole thing would blow over, and whatever it was he was running from would leave him alone so he could safely return.

But after weeks of struggling against the deadly poison without a single visit from her husband, she was forced to confront the bitter reality. The man who had once promised to love her and cherish her, in this life and until they were reunited on the Heavenly Shores, had truly abandoned his family in order to serve his faith.

"So, even if it was to save my life," Rosie sobbed, clutching at the handkerchief Zedya had given to her and stroking her son's hair. "He, he won't stand aside. I, I'm not worth enough to him anymore to..."

"It's all right," Ashlynn said softly as she reached out to Zedya for help standing. As much as she wanted to stay and to console the other woman, the exhaustion of healing two people dragged down on her and she had very little left to give. "I didn't ask Zedya and her husband, Lennart, to rescue you so that you could influence your husband. It's just that, since you're here, I had to try."

"My Lady," Zedya said as she took Ashlynn's hand, hovering protectively over her mistress's beloved and silently fretting over what Mistress Nyrielle would say when she realized that Ashlynn had pushed herself too far yet again, weakening herself too much for other people, and people who were the family of one of the men who buried Ashlynn alive at that.

"Let me take you to Lady Nyrielle," Zedya offered as she gently supported Ashlynn. "I can take a message to Sir Ollie and the others to let them know that you'll be spending the night in the castle and returning to your vigil in the morning. I'm sure they'll understand," she said.

"That, that sounds like a good idea," Ashlynn agreed. As much as she wanted to return to Isabell's side, there was nothing she could do to help now that her friend's trial had begun. Right now, more than anything else, she wanted to enjoy a quiet meal with her lover, followed by a long soak in a hot bath to soothe the aches of the day's work and banish the lingering chill from her body. "But after that, please come back here," Ashlynn added. "I think it would help if Madame Rosie wasn't left alone for the night in a strange place," she said with a lingering glance at the poor woman's tear-stained face.

Rosie had been through too much in too short a period of time. The poison had ravaged her body and her mind for weeks, and she'd woken to a world unlike anything she knew. Worse, the cause of all of her suffering was the husband who had abandoned her in order to devote himself to a faith that was much less pure and holy than what Rosie had believed just days ago.

In time, Ashlynn expected that Rosie would find a way to rebuild herself. She clearly loved her son too much to risk harming herself in a moment of grief and fear, but it would take more than her love of her son to get through the days ahead. The road would be hard, and while none of it was Ashlynn's fault, she couldn't deny that Rosie's life had fallen apart because of events that began with her marriage to Owain Lothian, and Ashlynn felt obligated to help the mother and son as much as she could.

"We'll talk again tomorrow, if you're willing," Ashlynn said from the door. "If Sir Tommin survives this battle, I still need to decide how to handle him. Before I make any decisions, I'd like to hear more from you about what kind of man he is," she said as her gaze fell on the slumbering boy's frail figure. "And about what kind of father he's been for his son. Can you do that for me at least?"

"Of course, your Dominion," Rosie said as she wiped the tears from her eyes and bowed her head to the Saintess. "I, I meant what I said. Anything I can do, just ask. Tonnis and I, we, we owe you everything, so..."

"None of that," Ashlynn chided gently. "Tomorrow, we'll have evening tea, and you can introduce me to Tonnis. That's repayment enough for what I've done. Now, you should rest," Ashlynn said. "Zedya will bring food for you soon, and others will care for you in the morning."

"And, Rosie," Ashlynn added softly. "Whatever happens to Tommin, I'm sorry that you've suffered for it," she said before she slipped out of the room, leaving the bewildered mother alone with her sleeping son.

When the door closed, it felt incredibly heavy, as if Rosie's life before she came to this place had ended. Perhaps it ended when Owain had her poisoned, or even earlier when Tommin left her. The life she'd known had been ending for a long time, but now, it felt like it was truly over.

When she left, Saintess Ashlynn looked like she was carrying a tremendous weight, and Rosie had only glimpsed a portion of it. But as she held her son in the silence of the small room, she hoped that the burdens weighing down the woman who had saved them weren't so heavy that they crushed her. And maybe, maybe one day she would find a way to pay the Saintess back for what she had done and lighten those burdens, even if it was just a little bit.