

The Vampire 871

Chapter 871: Home Cooked Meal

When Ashlynn stepped out of the small room that Rosie shared with Tonnis, she found Lennart waiting for her with a concerned expression on his bearish face.

"Lady Nyrielle is waiting for you," the former captain of Nyrielle's personal guard said as he knelt before Ashlynn and stretched out his muscular, furry arms. Since becoming a vampire, his hearing had grown sharper each day, and he'd heard everything that took place while Ashlynn tended to her patients, including the way she turned to Zedya for support when standing and walking.

"Let me take you to her," Lennart offered in a voice that rumbled with genuine concern at seeing Ashlynn looking so tired.

"Thank you, Lennart," Ashlynn said as she took his hand, relaxing into his gentle, furry embrace as he scooped her up off the ground. "I'm going to close my eyes, just for a minute or two," she murmured as she buried her head in the hollow of his shoulder, almost instantly falling asleep while he carried her away.

Ashlynn only meant to close her eyes until she reached Nyrielle's chambers, but within a minute of closing her eyes, exhaustion overwhelmed her and her chest rose and fell with the steady rhythm of sleep. When she finally woke up in Nyrielle's bed, several hours had already passed. The cozy warmth of the bed combined with the softness of the feather mattress to soothe away much of the fatigue she felt, and though she still felt tired, she no longer felt like it took an act of will just to keep her eyes from drifting closed again.

"Nyri?" Ashlynn said softly as she propped herself up on pillows, looking around the dimly lit room and frowning slightly at the scents that filled the air.

In the past, each time Ashlynn had come to Nyrielle's chambers, soft floral scents dominated the space. Lavender was common, as was Jasmine, but there were times when her lover changed things out for scents of rose, sandalwood, or even hibiscus. But right now, as Ashlynn's nose twitched and her eyes adjusted to the dim light, the room smelled overwhelmingly of freshly baked bread, savory herbs, and beneath all that, the faint aroma of cooking fruit.

"You're awake," Nyrielle said warmly as she stepped out of the darkness, appearing at Ashlynn's side in the blink of an eye.

When Ashlynn saw her lover, her eyes opened wide in surprise at the way Nyrielle was dressed for the evening. Gone was the typical dress of dark silk with elegant embroidery and rich brocade that she wore on a daily basis. Also absent was the delicate and occasionally provocative nightdress that she changed into before the sun rose, with its laces left half-tied to entice Ashlynn's eyes to feast on a view of pale, alabaster skin underneath the dark fabric.

No, tonight, when Nyrielle appeared next to Ashlynn, she was wearing a dark purple skirt cut in the same style as the one Ashlynn had worn to work with her coven, paired with a bell-sleeved peasant's tunic that only looked exceptional because of the deep crimson color of the fabric. Most striking of all, however, was the simple linen apron tied around Nyrielle's lithe figure, covered with a dusting of flour and stained in a few places by splatters of oil.

"You're cooking?" Ashlynn asked with a frown as she turned to look from her domestically dressed lover to the room's large hearth.

There, she found that the hearth itself had changed. Where before its only purpose had been to warm the room, it now sported the heavy, wrought-iron frames used for hanging pots over the coals, a number of trivets and stands for supporting pans, along with a small collection of cast iron and earthenware cooking vessels, all sitting at various places in the large hearth and emitting a collection of tantalizing aromas.

"I asked Georg to teach me," Nyrielle said with a smile that was both proud and a little hesitant as if she wasn't quite certain of the results. "With the way you talk about cooking with your coven, I thought that you would enjoy something I made with my own hands."

"Of course I will," Ashlynn said, reaching out to capture one of Nyrielle's hands and pulling the slender woman into a tight embrace. Her stomach grumbled at her, clearly unhappy about being ignored while food was so close at hand, but Ashlynn didn't care as she buried her face in Nyrielle's bosom and wrapped her arms around the woman who mattered more to her than anyone else in this world.

"You're spoiling me," Ashlynn said softly as she relaxed against Nyrielle, inhaling the familiar scents of lavender and jasmine soap that clung to the vampire's body mixed with the slightly dusty scent of flour and freshly bruised herbs. It was a scent that was distinctly Nyrielle's and also very cozy and domestic in a way that Ashlynn found to be immensely soothing.

"Come," Nyrielle said as she pulled back from Ashlynn, tugging her hand to guide her out of bed and over to a small dining table set for two near the low-burning hearth. "I know you need to eat, and then I have a hot bath drawn for us both. You can return to your coven in the morning, but for tonight, let me care for you."

"All right," Ashlynn said, smiling as she watched Nyrielle returning to the cooking vessels on the hearth, carefully checking on each one and moving them away from the fire.

Even Nyrielle, she realized, moved with a trace of hesitation as she worked to overcome an instinctual fear of fire when she moved around the hearth. Her lover was certainly powerful enough to resist the heat of ordinary coals and mundane flames, but there was something almost primal that lurked in the heart of vampires that treated intense heat and flame the same way an ordinary person might respond to the snarling jaws of a wolf or the threatening gleam of a knife.

Or perhaps it went deeper than instinct with Nyrielle, Ashlynn realized as she felt the echo of her lover's heart grow unsteady as she bustled about the hearth, carefully checking on the contents of each vessel before removing it and setting it to the side.

Nyrielle had watched the Vale of Mists burn, and Cellach Lothian had her parents put to death as heretics, burning them at the stake while a crowd of lords and soldiers cheered for their deaths.

Now, when Ashlynn thought back to the way Nyrielle had reacted to the Holy Flame Blade when Ignatious brought it to her in High Fen City, she realized that it hadn't just been the power of the sword that Nyrielle struggled with. It was the combination of deeply rooted, instinctual fears and lingering trauma that made the weapon so oppressive to the woman she loved more than life itself.

And yet, for the simple joy of cooking for her betrothed, Nyrielle was facing that fear, reaching into the hearth again and again, just so she could present Ashlynn with a meal cooked with her own hands.

"Nyri," Ashlynn said softly as she watched the older woman preparing a pair of plates for them. "I love you..."

Chapter 872: Nyrielle's Cooking

"And I love you, my darling," Nyrielle said with a smile as she worked carefully to assemble the dish she intended to present to Ashlynn.

She'd only taken a few lessons from Georg since returning to the Vale, and he insisted that the dishes she was learning were ones that Ashlynn would enjoy, even though they were simple to prepare.

Now, at the final stage of putting everything together, Nyrielle found herself struggling to balance her artist's eye with the task of assembling a plate of food. Georg always worked to make his plates artistically appealing, but he also served up small portions that he knew suited the preferences of vampires.

Ashlynn, however, needed to replenish herself after a long day of work with her coven, followed by intense healing, and Nyrielle wanted to make sure there was plenty for Ashlynn to eat, even if the proportions and balance of color on the plate fell short of her sense of artistry.

She started by opening an earthenware crock that released a cloud of savory, herbaceous steam as soon as the lid was removed. From within the crock, she carefully spooned a hearty portion of dull green colored barley porridge onto Ashlynn's plate. It didn't look as bright and vibrant as Georg's, but the smell was right, and when Nyrielle tested one of the grains, she found it to be as delicate and tender as it should be.

From another, much larger earthenware crock, Nyrielle carefully retrieved a delicate filet of butter-poached mudfish that was so tender that it nearly flaked apart before she could rest it on the bed of barley porridge she'd prepared.

"It may not be as pretty as Georg's cooking," Nyrielle admitted as she reached into a small wooden bowl for a pinch of freshly chopped herbs to sprinkle over the top of the fish. "But it should still be very tasty," she said.

She'd spent decades learning how to paint, beginning with simple charcoal drawings and working her way up to the sweeping vistas and landscapes crafted from layers of carefully blended oil paints that she displayed throughout the ancient fortress.

Now, she was honest enough to admit that her cooking fell far short of the kind of artistry on a plate that she wanted to present her lover with, but in a way, that was fine. Georg had honed his craft for

most of his life, and all it took was one look at the affection and anticipation on Ashlynn's face to give Nyrielle the motivation to spend decades practicing dishes that would delight her beloved.

"It smells wonderful," Ashlynn praised from her seat at the table, sitting up straighter as she tried to catch a glimpse of what Nyrielle was preparing for her before she forced herself to sit calmly and wait patiently.

"Most of it does," Nyrielle said, frowning in disappointment when she pulled the iron lid off of a large iron pot to reveal a loaf of bread that had swelled up so much in the pot that the top of the loaf stuck to the lid. Part of the top of the loaf tore away when she removed the lid, and the rest of the crust was blackened and burned, giving off a sharp, acrid smell that overpowered the faint nuttiness of what should have been a soft, spongy bread.

"I should have set this aside earlier," she sighed with disappointment. She wanted to make sure that it stayed warm and fresh, but clearly there was a limit to how long it could be left in the pot to 'keep warm', though she supposed it still would have been ruined just by virtue of sticking to the lid.

"Let me see," Ashlynn said, getting up from her seat and joining Nyrielle at the table where she was preparing their plates. "I can salvage this," she said confidently as she looked around for a long slicing knife and a pair of serving tongs that she could use to retrieve the loaf from the pot.

"Here, I'll take care of the bread while you put the rest together," Ashlynn said as she leaned close to Nyrielle and bestowed a soft peck on the other woman's cheek. "You, um, you don't mind do you?" Ashlynn asked hesitantly as it occurred to her that Nyrielle had worked so hard to create this moment for her and that her lover might not want help in finishing it.

"I don't mind," Nyrielle said with a light laugh, shaking her head slightly and tapping Ashlynn softly on the forehead. "But did you have to use a word like 'salvage', my darling?" Nyrielle teased. "My poor loaf of bread isn't some ancient ruin to haul stones from..."

"No," Ashlynn said as she began to carefully slice away the burned exterior and the layer of dried, tough bread beneath the crust, revealing a core that was still soft and springy like it should be.

"Nothing ancient or ruined," she said with a soft smile. "Just something soft and tender on the inside, underneath a crust that got a little hard and scorched, protecting the important part," Ashlynn said as she reached out and briefly held Nyrielle's hand.

"All right, oh wise one," Nyrielle said as she moved on to the next dish, removing a lid to reveal a pot filled with soft, delicate apples swimming in a sauce of butter, sugar, cinnamon, cloves, and cardamom. "Show me how you're going to 'salvage' my poor loaf of bread."

"I learned this from Ollie when we were in the Summer Villa," Ashlynn said as she took two slices of soft, crustless bread and slathered a thin layer of soft butter on them before sprinkling more freshly chopped herbs over the butter and bringing them to the fire. "A little bit of butter and some fresh herbs, and you can put a 'fake crust' on the bread," she said as she carefully set the slices of bread over the fire.

"You have to be careful and watch them closely," she said as she flipped the slices of bread over as soon as the butter began to sizzle. "But this way nothing goes to waste."

For a moment, Nyrielle said nothing, just standing in perfect stillness as she watched the warm glow of the hearth highlighting Ashlynn's pale blond hair and soft, delicate features.

Her darling had just climbed out of bed, her hair was still askew, and she was wearing nothing but the comfortable nightdress that Nyrielle had helped her into after Lennart brought the sleeping witch to her chambers, but in that moment, Nyrielle found Ashlynn's beauty to be absolutely captivating.

"Ashlynn, my darling," Nyrielle said softly, surprising the younger woman when she used her name. "Do you think that I could join you and your coven from time to time when you cook together?" Nyrielle asked hesitantly. "I don't want to intrude on something that you share with them..."

"Of course you can," Ashlynn said, nearly dropping the 'salvaged' bread in the fire in her haste to return to Nyrielle's side. But as soon as the freshly toasted slices were resting safely on their plates, she flung her arms around the other woman and held her close.

"I've wanted to cook for you, too," she said softly. "There just hasn't been the time, but... I like this. I like it a lot," she added as she clutched Nyrielle tightly. "And I want more of these moments with you. Many, many more of them..."

"Always so willful," Nyrielle said with a light, musical laugh. "But then, I suppose I'll just have to indulge you..."

The meal they shared that night was a simple one. The most extravagant thing about any of it was the amount of butter used in poaching the fish and the apples, and the number of spices that found their way into the pot along with the apples, but none of it required extraordinary skill from the cook preparing the meal.

And yet, for Ashlynn and Nyrielle, it was one of the most flavorful meals they'd shared, simmered in the warmth and affection they had for each other as they set aside the concerns of the world outside. Later, they would once again be the Mother of Trees and the Harbinger of Death. They would face their enemies in battle soon enough, but right now, they put all of that aside to be Ashlynn and Nyrielle, two women in love, sharing a meal and each other's company.

It was a quiet night filled with warmth, one that would sustain them both through the many cold nights to come...

Chapter 873: Cold And Wet (Part One)

The dungeons beneath Lothian Manor hadn't seen much use in the past fifty years, ever since Lothian City grew large enough for the city's constable to build a proper jail that imprisoned most people either awaiting judgment or condemned to sentences of confinement.

Ever since then, the dungeons beneath the manor had been reserved for the rarest sorts of prisoners, either members of the aristocracy or people accused of such dangerous and heinous crimes that demanded the increased security offered by the cells built into the very bones of Lothian Manor.

The cell that Jocelynn had been thrown into had gone more than a decade without an occupant, and Inquisitor Percivus wasn't inclined to do any cleaning before locking the daughter of Count Rhys Blackwell into the narrow cell that was barely wide enough for a grown person to lie down along one wall.

"I don't have time to deal with you tonight," the flame-haired Inquisitor said when he fitted a shackle around Jocelynn's slender ankle, securing her to the wall with a chain so short that she couldn't reach the iron-bound oak door unless she was willing to kneel down on the bare stone floor and crawl to it.

"Perhaps I'll deal with you in the morning," Percivus added before retrieving a bucket of water and soaking Jocelynn with its contents. "Or perhaps by tomorrow night. I'm in no rush," he said with a smile that looked like he was setting off to enjoy a fine meal of his favorite foods or the company of a woman. Only it wasn't a common human comfort that put such an eager, anticipatory smile on the Inquisitor's face, but the people awaiting him in the cells adjoining Jocelynn's.

"You c-can't do this to me!" Jocelynn protested, stamping her foot on the ground as water dripped from her hair and her suddenly sodden dress. She'd chosen to wear one of her best seafoam colored dresses, embroidered with silver patterns of crashing waves around the hem of the skirts and a pattern of tiny, silver birds flying from her hips to the swell of her bosom.

She didn't think that she could seduce the Inquisitor by putting on such a display, but she wanted to present an image that would remind him that she was the daughter of Count Rhys Blackwell. Even the Inquisition should tread carefully around people of her station, and by wearing one of her finest dresses along with an aquamarine pendant necklace, fine silver bracelets, and rings on her fingers, she hoped to provide an unspoken reminder of her station.

"I'm innocent," Jocelynn shouted as she brushed wet hair away from her face and fumed at the Inquisitor by the door. "I've done nothing wrong. I'm not a witch or a demon. Confessor Eleanor just healed me! She proved I'm innocent with the Holy Lord of Light's own blessing! Ask her, just ask her, and she'll tell you!"

"Oh, I intend to speak to Eleanor about many things," Percivus said from the doorway. "But I have others to attend to first. Don't worry," he added as his predatory smile grew wider. "Your time will come," he said before stepping out of the cell and closing the heavy door with a resounding -THUD- followed by the clank of iron as he barred the door from the outside.

With that, Jocelynn was left alone in her dark, narrow cell. There was a small window on the wall opposite the door, set at the very top of the wall, but it was only a hand's breadth tall and no wider than the length of her arm, fit with iron bars that made it clear that even the smallest of prisoners would be unable to squeeze through it.

At first, Jocelynn saw the window as a blessing that kept the air from turning foul and offered a sliver of light in what would otherwise have been a pitch black room. It was just enough light that she was able to find her way onto the wood-framed cot that served as the room's only piece of furniture.

There was no mattress or blanket on the cot, only a web of wide leather straps nailed to the frame of the narrow cot that had been bolted to the wall directly beneath the window. The straps themselves were old, stiff, and brittle, but lying on the cot was better than lying on the floor, and so Jocelynn reluctantly prepared herself to spend the night lying on the crude bed.

The room was already cold when Inquisitor Percivus brought her in here, but as the night went on, the window that offered her a tiny sliver of light became her silent tormentor. Cold air seeped in through the window, combining with her wet hair and sodden dress to rob the warmth from her body.

What had begun as a simple indignity turned into an agonizing form of torture as the cold seeped into her bones. Her skin turned even paler, taking on a faint bluish hue, and when she pressed her fingernails into her palm, she barely felt anything. The numbness crept up her arms like a slow poison, making even simple tasks like gripping the fabric of her dress nearly impossible.

As soon as she realized the problem, Jocelynn stripped off the wet dress, struggling with her stiff fingers to undo the laces of her bodice and nearly falling over when she pulled the sodden garment over her head. It wasn't enough to escape the damp layers of fabric, however, and she forced her aching, protesting fingers to twist the dress section by section, wringing it out until there was a shallow puddle on the floor of her cell.

At first, she'd thought that if she could wring her dress dry, she could quickly put it back on to resist the cold, but even after painfully wringing every drop of water from the sodden garment that she could, it was still too damp to feel like it would offer any warmth, leaving her wet and naked in the cold cell, torn between exposing her bare skin to the cold in the hopes that she would dry off faster or putting the wet dress back on.

In the end, it was the thought that Inquisitor Percivus or one of the other guards could return at any time that drove her to put the damp dress back on, but just as she'd feared, the damp fabric did almost nothing to protect her from the frigid, damp air of her cell.

"I-I'm g-going to die here," she realized as her mind flashed back to the conversations her father seemed to have every winter about ensuring that even the most down on their luck sailor or common man had a place that was warm and dry to go to when the winter storms buffeted Blackwell Harbor.

Every year, despite the count's best efforts, dozens of men with no place to call home died of simple exposure after spending a night out in the cold and wet air of the bitter winter, and if she didn't figure out a way to keep herself warm tonight, Jocelynn was afraid that she would soon join them!

Chapter 874: Cold And Wet (Part Two)

"M-moving," Jocelynn told herself as she wrapped her arms around her body and tried to rub some warmth into her arms. If she could keep herself moving, that should help her to stay warm, shouldn't it? But shackled to the wall in such a narrow cell, she could only take one or two steps in any direction before the chain around her ankle pulled taut, stopping her from pacing or moving very far.

Within an hour, the cold had stolen all feeling from her fingers and toes, leaving them pale and stiff as winter twigs. Her muscles cramped painfully with each violent shiver, and when she tried to stand, her legs trembled so badly she nearly collapsed back onto the cot. Even speaking was difficult as her jaw muscles seized up between chattering teeth.

"In-inquisitor!" Jocelynn yelled. "You c-can't t-treat a lady l-like this! I've d-done n-nothing wrong!" Her mind clung to that statement like a lifeline in storm tossed seas. She'd done nothing wrong, nothing that the Inquisition could have any reason to imprison or torture for. She was innocent and she could prove her innocence if they would just let her!

But when she shouted for the Inquisitor and she strained her ears for sounds that he or someone else might respond to her cries, she only heard faint, muffled cries from the cells adjoining her own. The stone walls and thick door muffled the sounds too much for her to make out any words, but the voices sounded like they belonged to at least two different men who were trapped along with her.

"Oh no," she realized, pressing both hands to her lips as her eyes went wide in horror. Two men. Captain Albyn and Sir Elgon. Her cousin, Eleanor, had been taken prisoner with her, but she'd had some hope that the other members of her tiny collection of advisors in her conspiracy to escape would have avoided the reach of the Inquisitor. They were supposed to be in Lothian City, searching for the supplies they needed to flee the march. If they'd been captured too...

"Guards!" Jocelynn shouted. "I w-want to sp-speak to Marquis B-bors! A l-lady c-can't be t-treated like this!"

Her repeated shouts, however, were met with only stony silence and the muffled cries from the other cells.

"At l-least, g-give me a b-blanket!" Jocelynn pleaded. "It's t-too c-c-cold in here!"

But no matter how much she begged or pleaded, no matter how many times she threatened that there would be consequences for treating the daughter of a count this way, the heavy wooden door never budged. No help ever came, and Jocelynn was left alone, shivering and cold in the dark until her throat was hoarse from crying out and her body felt like it would tear itself to pieces with the intensity of her shivers.

Eventually, it all became too much for her and the darkness of her cell blended with the cold exhaustion that tormented her body to pull the young lady into an even darker, dreamless sleep that lasted until the weak light coming in through the cell's only window began to grow brighter with the light of day.

Still, it wasn't until hours after dawn when Jocelynn jolted awake to the sound of a -CLANK- as the iron bar on the door was thrown aside and the door to her cell opened, revealing the looming figure of the crimson-haired Inquisitor carrying a lamp that felt brighter than the sun after a night spent in such deep darkness.

"Well," Percivus said with a broad, almost eager smile. "It looks like you've survived the night. That's good," he said as his eyes roved over her young, supple body, lingering on the curves that her damp dress clung to as if he couldn't wait to tear the fabric away to expose the soft, pale skin beneath.

In truth, it wasn't the desire to ravish her body that lit the fire within his hazel eyes. The Inquisitor had long ago turned away from the temptations of the flesh that would only distract from the work of cleansing the world of darkness. No, the young woman before him represented a different, rare kind of treat, one that he intended to slowly savor in the coming weeks.

Even now, shivering and cold, wearing a dress that had grown wrinkled and stiff after being slept in while it was wet, Jocelynn still radiated the arrogance and indignation that was so common among noblemen and women when they fell into his hands. The attitude that said that she was too special, too precious, too important to suffer or struggle the way countless common people all around her did.

She had never in her life known what it was like to pass a night cold and shivering because there was no wood for the hearth. She'd never gone to bed hungry because there was no money for food. She'd never spent the night just trying to keep dry because the roof above her head leaked in the cold winter rain.

But now she'd had a taste of the common man's struggles, and already her pale, seafoam eyes burned with hatred when she gazed at him, and it was that look that Percivus truly savored. It would take time to snuff out that flame of hatred and resistance, but soon, this pampered young lady would learn what every commoner learned from their youngest years.

It's futile to resist those above you, and no amount of struggle would ever let the common man triumph over those born into the privilege of the aristocracy... just like no amount of struggle would let a weak woman like her triumph over the power of the Inquisition.

"Now, I finally have a bit of time to spend on you," he said as he walked into the room, carrying with him a bundle of coarse fabric and a wooden box with a leather handle and a heavy iron clasp.

"And I'm so looking forward to our time together..."

Chapter 875: A Taste of Things To Come (Part One)

"St-stay b-b-b-back," Jocelynn said, shrinking away from the advancing Inquisitor and pressing herself into the corner of the small cell. The old, worn-out cot underneath her creaked as though the leather straps would snap because of her sudden movement but Jocelynn ignored it as she focused all of her attention on the crimson-haired man wearing the crimson and gold robes of the Inquisition.

Behind him, golden torchlight flickered and glowed in the hallway, shining off the polished armor of two temple guards who followed the Inquisitor into the cell, making it feel incredibly cramped as they placed a small stool in the room for Percivus to sit on along with a small folding table.

"Now, now, there's no hiding from the Holy Lord of Light, and there's no hiding from me," Percivus said as he stepped forward, reaching out to place a palm on Jocelynn's pale, bluish tinged cheek while his thumb wrapped around her delicate chin to firmly hold her face in place as he inspected her.

Jocelynn wanted to jerk away from him, but his hand was so blessedly warm that she found herself unable to move as her icy flesh drank in the sliver of warmth offered by the imposing man's grip.

"You haven't died yet, girl," he said grimly as he turned her head in his hand, gazing at her as if he was inspecting livestock for defects before making a purchase. "But you aren't far from it. Those wet clothes aren't helping you stay warm, are they?" Percivus added with a twisted smile that didn't match the

piercing look in his hazel eyes. The eyes were intense, inquisitive and searching for something as they roved over Jocelynn's face and body, but the smile on his lips was... content, pleased or self-satisfied.

"T-take me b-back t-to my ch-chambers," Jocelynn stammered as she glared at Percivus. Her seafoam eyes smoldered with a hatred more intense than any she had ever felt and she wanted nothing more than to claw at his disgusting, smiling face, but she kept her hands wrapped firmly around her knees, drawing her legs up close to her body to preserve what little warmth she had left instead.

"I d-demand-d a fu-full hearing," she stammered, glancing past Percivus to the temple guards and trying to make sure they could hear her. "I am the d-daughter of C-count Blackwell, a-and I have the r-right to b-be t-tried before a h-high p-priest," she insisted.

The trials of noblemen were always highly public spectacles, held before a tribunal of Church officials. Members of the public were allowed to observe and inspect the evidence that supported the church's accusations and the family of the accused were allowed to dispute the charges so long as they could present evidence that the accused was innocent.

Right now, what Jocelynn wanted more than anything was a way out of this cell. A way back to her warm chambers where there was dry clothing and a hearth to drive the chill from her body. Since the Church wasn't in the habit of humiliating members of the aristocracy, she was certain that they would let her change into fresh clothing before they brought her to the temple to stand trial.

Anything else, everything else, could come after that, but right now, the only way she would survive is if she could convince someone to let her out of this cell!

"Ah, I see the problem," Percivus said, clucking his tongue as he let go of the young woman's face and turned back to the stool and small table where his men had placed a compact stove that provided a small trace of warmth to the chill room. "You think that you're going to face a trial. Perhaps one day you will, but for now, I haven't even begun to investigate you," the Inquisitor said as he took a seat on the stool and made a show of warming his hands over the iron stove.

"I brought you a change of clothes," he said as he retrieved the cloth bundle from atop his wooden case. "They might not be as glamorous as what you're currently wearing, but they're dry and they're warm," he said as he casually tossed the bundle onto the cot beside Jocelynn. "Why don't you strip out of that wet dress and put on something that will stop you from freezing to death?"

"F-fine," Jocelynn said as she snatched up the rough woolen bundle, clutching it close to her chest as if it were a shield that could protect her from the stares of the three men in the room. "L-leave me b-be and I'll change."

"Oh, no, Lady Jocelynn," Percivus said as he leaned over to unlatch his case, retrieving a small earthenware pot that was the size of a large man's fist. "I said I haven't begun to investigate, but that doesn't mean I'll ignore the accusations you're facing. You'll strip off every last stitch of clothing, shift and all, so I can inspect your body for a mark of the witch. If I find one on your skin, then I'm afraid things will become much more serious."

"I d-don't have a m-m-mark!" Jocelynn protested through chattering teeth. For a moment, she nearly blurted out that Ashlynn was the one with the mark but she firmly clamped her trembling lips shut before she said something that would only make matters worse. Eleanor told her that the Church concluded that her sister's mark was only an ordinary birthmark, but that didn't mean it could be mentioned in front of these men.

"C-confess-sor, Eleanor has s-seen my bod-dy," Jocelynn stammered as she prodded her slow and tired mind for anything she could do to escape the indignity of having these men 'inspecting' her body for signs of a mark. "She can g-give w-w-witness that I have no m-mark."

"I told you last night," Percivus said slowly as he carefully set the earthenware pot on the small stove and retrieved a second, small crock that carried with it the faint aroma of cooked meat. "I plan to have a lengthy conversation with Madam Eleanor soon. I'm sure her testimony will be very useful once we've ensured that it's accurate, but if you want to call her here to bear witness for you, I'm afraid it's impossible."

"Now," he said in a tone that grew sterner and more menacing with each word. "Are you going to strip out of your dress and allow us to inspect you for a mark of the witch? Or," he asked, as he drew a thin, curved blade from the golden belt at his waist and set it on the table next to the small stove. "Do I need to come and cut your clothing off of you?"

Chapter 876: A Taste of Things To Come (Part Two)

Jocelynn stared in horror at the slender, curved blade sitting on the table before her eyes flicked to the face of the crimson-haired Inquisitor. But when she looked at his face, what she saw made her stomach turn, clenching violently even though it was empty. A surge of hot bile filled her mouth, and only an extraordinary act of will, or desperation to cling to what little dignity she had left, allowed her to swallow it back down.

There was something very, very wrong with the way Percivus looked at her and at the knife on his table. There was no lust in his gaze, as if he were a eunuch who was incapable of being tempted by thoughts of seeing a beautiful woman's bare skin, but there was a desire and a hunger that lurked behind those hard, hazel eyes, combined with a callous indifference that seemed at odds with his hunger.

Whether she stripped out of her own dress or he cut it off of her truly didn't matter to him, she realized. Not because he didn't care, he wasn't cold and emotionless about it, but because he was like an alley cat who had been offered a bowl of fresh cream or a plate of fresh fish. Whichever one he was allowed to feast on, he would savor every moment of it.

"At l-least m-make your g-guards turn their b-backs," Jocelynn stammered as she forced her stiff limbs to move, scooting to the edge of the well-worn cot while the chain around her ankle clanked with every movement. "Y-you can d-do that much, c-can't you?"

For a moment, Percivus considered refusing her request. Marquis Bors had given him a full month to obtain results, and the tone he set here at the beginning would create ever-growing ripples in their coming interactions. It would be easy enough to protest that his guards couldn't keep him safe from her if they couldn't watch her.

But just like an unbroken horse, people had limits, and Jocelynn was already very close to hers. If he crushed her now, she might snap before she became pliable in his hands, and that would ruin too many things to be allowed. Besides, he reminded himself, giving her a glimmer of hope now and then would propel her even further down the road he intended to pave for her. By the time she realized what she'd done to herself, it would be too late to undo the damage.

"Very well," Percivus said as he reached into his case yet again, this time producing a pair of fitted leather gloves, dyed in the crimson hue of the inquisition. "But if you try anything, I won't be gentle with you, and neither will they," he said as he made a small circular motion in the air with a raised finger, instructing the guards to turn their backs.

For Jocelynn, the next few moments felt like an eternity as she fought to make her stiff, shivering limbs move the way she intended, peeling off her dress, shift, and undergarments before standing naked under the Inquisitor's intense stare.

"Hold out your arms," Percivus commanded when he saw her attempting to preserve the last shred of her modesty with her hands. "Then turn around slowly so I can inspect you for a mark."

The man barely touched her as he did his work, and when he did, Jocelynn only felt the smooth texture of his leather gloves, as if the man couldn't bear to be tainted by touching her exposed flesh. Then, after what seemed like an eternity, but had in truth been less than a minute, the 'inspection' ended.

"You may dress," Percivus said as he returned to his stool, slowly stripping off his gloves and returning them to the case. He paid no attention to the young lady as she dressed herself in the dull, undyed wool dress that was little more than a large sack with two sleeves and a hole for her head. Instead, he pulled the next item out of his case, setting a small, intricately carved jewelry box on the table in front of him before finally looking back up at Lady Jocelynn.

Jocelynn's face burned with shame, and she felt as though she'd been inspected and appraised like someone's prized fish, ready to be filleted, stuffed, and mounted above the mantle like a sick trophy. Once the moment passed, she stumbled awkwardly, banging her shins on the frame of the wooden cot in her haste to don the dull, shapeless dress and hide herself away from the world.

"N-now that you've s-seen that I don't have a m-mark," Jocelynn said as she huddled back into a corner of her cell, luxuriating in the warmth offered by the dress even though it was rough against her soft skin. "You know I'm n-not a w-witch. So I-let me, g-go," she demanded as she glared at the Inquisitor.

"Great witches have marks," Inquisitor Percivus said as he removed the lid from the small earthenware pot on his miniature stove and inhaled the bland, slightly nutty fragrance of the steam that drifted free of the vessel as soon as the lid was removed. "You could still be a hedge witch. Or a familiar, or thrall, or any number of things. Pure skin doesn't mean you're innocent, it only means that your wickedness hasn't bubbled to the surface of your flesh."

"But enough of that. I've told you that I still have an investigation to conduct so that's the last I want to hear from you about releasing you, facing a full court or any other womanly nonsense," he said in a tone that made it clear that pressing further could have dire consequences. "Instead, I have an offer for you. One that might prove there's still a glimmer of a good, decent woman somewhere in your black heart."

The way he said it made it sound like he didn't believe it was possible for there to be a shred of decency anywhere within Jocelynn's heart. On her darkest days, when she recalled the fate that befell her sister because she'd been selfish enough and stupid enough to betray her trust, Jocelynn might even agree with the man.

But today, she refused to go along passively with whatever cruelty Inquisitor Percivus wanted to inflict on her. She knew that she'd done nothing to deserve this, and the only thing that she deserved to be punished for, this man wasn't worthy of being the one to punish her. Some day, if she ever reached the Heavenly Shores and found Ashlynn there, she would submit to whatever punishment her sister wanted to inflict on her.

Until then, she refused to accept any of this as suffering she deserved!

Chapter 877: A Taste of Things To Come (Part Three)

Clearly, the Inquisitor was trying to draw her into a conversation, though to what end, it was impossible for Jocelynn to say. He framed things as an offer, but offers were made between parties for mutual benefit. While there were certainly things that he could do that would benefit Jocelynn, in her eyes, the scales were so far out of balance that calling anything an offer or a negotiation was a farce.

He wanted her to surrender and he wanted her to do it on his terms, just like he'd forced her to stand in the nude while he 'inspected' her for a mark that they both knew full well he wouldn't find. So, rather than play along with his game, Jocelynn said nothing, waiting for the Inquisitor to say something.

"Not speaking?" Percivus said, raising an amused eyebrow at the defiant young noblewoman. They all started this way, finding petty moments of resistance to cling to, but things would change soon enough. "Then, perhaps I should take your meal away," he said as he placed the lid back on the earthenware pot. "Since you don't seem to be interested in hearing what I have to offer.

"F-fine," Jocelynn said, hating the way her jaw still shook and her lips trembled in the bitter chill of the cramped cell. She'd hoped that the small, portable stove the Inquisitor carried would help to heat the room, but the handful of small coals burning in the base of the stove could barely heat whatever was placed directly atop the stove, to say nothing of the rest of the room.

"W-what do you w-want?" Jocelynn stammered as her eyes stared hungrily at the earthenware pot that contained not only food her body desperately needed, but warmth that would help her fight off the dangerous, icy cold that had seeped into her bones. "I'll answer y-your quest-tions, w-whatever you w-want to k-know."

"Oh, no, you misunderstand," Percivus said with a dark, calculating grin. "I don't want answers from you. I just want to barter. This is a pottage of millet and sour turnips," he said as he wrapped a small cloth handkerchief around the earthenware pot, providing just enough protection from its heat to make it easy to handle. "I'll sell it to you for the necklace you're wearing," he said as he placed the pot down on the table next to the intricately carved box.

"M-my necklace?" Jocelynn said, reaching up to clutch the aquamarine pendant that her mother had given her for her tenth birthday. It wasn't a treasured heirloom the way her grandmother's pearls were a treasure she couldn't bear to part with, but it was special to her because it had marked her entry into polite society.

The Countess insisted that her daughter have something fitting to wear to tea parties and other gatherings of young ladies, and this necklace had been her first 'real' piece of jewelry that reflected her status.

"Y-you could feed a w-whole f-family, f-for a y-year for w-what this c-cost," Jocelynn stammered as she clutched the necklace, sounding both shocked and offended that he would offer up a single pot of millet porridge in exchange for such a valuable piece.

"I'm sure that's true," Percivus said as he opened the small, intricately carved box to reveal its empty interior. "So the Church will gladly accept your donation and see that it feeds a family in need for the next year. Or, if you'd prefer, we can feed thirteen families through the leanest month of winter," he added with a predatory gleam in his eyes.

"Surely a kind woman of means like yourself feels no heartache at giving up a bauble or two in order to feed the needy through the winter," the Inquisitor said in a slow, exaggerated tone. "And you stand to benefit as well. The necklace can't warm your body or fill your belly, now can it?"

"I can even add a bit of meat if you'd like," he said, opening the second earthenware pot to reveal a few pieces of dull gray meat that looked like it had been boiled beyond recognition. "For each of your rings that you're willing to donate to the Church, I'll add a bit of meat to your breakfast. I'm sure you're very hungry after skipping dinner last night," he said suggestively.

For a moment, Jocelynn's hands wrapped around each other protectively, as if she was afraid that he would strip away the delicate silver rings that adorned her fingers. But he wouldn't. That was the whole point of this. This wasn't about 'donating' to the Church or helping the poor. It was about forcing her to

give up things that she treasured in order to stay alive, and in the process, humbling herself and bending to his will.

She knew it. She knew that he was bullying her far worse than any merchant or guildmaster in Blackwell City had ever bullied a customer, holding her life hostage to force her into accepting a terrible 'offer'... Because right now, he held all the power, and there was nothing she could do other than bow down to it.

This entire time, the temple guard had stood passively, never raising their voices in protest, never speaking out against the cruelty of the Inquisitor, who seemed to delight in what he was doing to Jocelynn. They were as stoic as statues and equally useful to her in resisting the merciless Inquisitor. So if she was going to survive this, then the only way to survive was to play along and hope that an opportunity to resist would present itself before it was too late.

"Fine," Jocelynn said as she began tugging off the rings on her fingers. "S-see that as m-many families as p-p-possible are f-fed this w-winter," she said with as much dignity as she could muster while her numb, frozen fingers fumbled at the clasp of her necklace.

Moments later, she slowly forced herself out of the corner of her cell, placing her feet on the freezing cold stone floor and walking the two short steps to where Inquisitor Percivus sat. Opening her stiff fingers, she dropped the necklace and her precious rings into the empty box, staring directly into the Inquisitor's eyes as she did.

The warm food on the table called out to her, but she refused to look at it as she instead focused all of her strength and the simmering hatred within her eyes on the man sitting calmly behind the table. He was playing a game with her life, and even now, he was smiling as if he was winning, but Jocelynn refused to give him the satisfaction of seeing her defeated.

Instead, she reached out for the two warm containers, taking one in each hand, cradling them to their chest for warmth as she made her way back to the cot. And as she did, her mind spun forward, just as it had when she thought that she would be escaping through the countryside. She would find a way out of this nightmare... but first, she had to survive the Inquisitor, and if he truly intended to kill her, then she would resist him every step of the way.

Chapter 878: Strange Homecoming (Part One)

Far from Lothian City, at the northern edge of Hanrahan Barony, Sir Carwyn sat uneasily atop a borrowed horse. His breath formed puffy white clouds in the early morning air that was so cold, his chest felt like it had been pricked by dozens of icy needles every time he drew a deep breath. Before him, a strange caravan of soldiers, both human and Eldritch, along with more than a dozen carts and wagons snaked its way along roads that had been muddy quagmires just weeks ago.

Now, however, the mud had frozen solid, making the horse's footfalls sound like they were walking atop hollow logs while the wagon wheels crunched the frozen mud into fresh, shallow ruts as they rolled along the dirt track that had seen little use since the village's founding more than a century ago.

It had been less than two weeks since he left the village escorting a similar caravan toward Hanrahan Town. Then, the heaviest thoughts weighing on his mind were concerns about his wife's pickled radishes and whether they would truly generate the returns on their investment that she believed they would. His mind had been full of thoughts about the child she carried in her belly and whether or not he would be as good of a provider for his child as his father, Sir Rhodri Belvin, had been for him.

Now, he was still fretting about the approaching birth of his first child, but the context of that worry had changed as dramatically as the composition of the caravan that he led. Before, he worried if the merchants of Lothian City would value his goods fairly. Now, he worried if his people would value their lives enough to accept Eldritch rule. When he left, the carts and wagons were filled with vegetables and oats bound for market. Now that he was returning, those carts and wagons carried supplies for an occupying army.

The strange weather did nothing to ease his mind. First there had been the unnaturally fierce thunder storm that shook the Vale of Mists, not long after his arrival. Now, the air itself felt wrong, dry and brittle in a way that made his nostrils sting with each breath. The air should still carry the damp, heavy feeling of late autumn, but instead, he could all but feel the snowflakes ready to dance in the air of deep winter approaching far too early.

"You look worried," a deep, rumbling voice said from beside him, pulling him out of his thoughts before the cold weather froze even those in place. The voice belonged to a bearish soldier named Loftur who had become the de facto translator between Carwyn and Captain Barsali while both men worked to learn each other's native tongues, and he stood almost as tall as Carwyn was on horseback.

"You're coming home," Loftur added as he reached up to pat the human knight on his armored back. "Your woman is waiting for you. You should be happy, not worried."

Loftur was a simple man who had never fought against humans. Instead, he was a native of Orava Village who spent much of each summer guarding the waystations between the Vale of Mist and the High Pass, watching for any trouble that approached from the Eldritch side of their border and breaking up fights between competing traders who sometimes found themselves occupying the same camp at the same time.

To Loftur, time away from home was always difficult, whether it was a week, a month, or a whole season. At the same time, reunions were joyous things and any year when you came home safe and on time was a good year. While he understood that some things were different for humans, this kind of worry didn't seem like it served his new companion well.

"I wish I could ride ahead to tell my people that we're coming," Carwyn complained as his fists tightened on the reins enough to prompt his horse to shift uncomfortably. When he spoke his words were accompanied by a thick cloud of steam that hung in the unnaturally still air longer than it should have. The cold seemed to leach the warmth from his breath almost before it left his lips, and he pulled his cloak tighter against the bitter cold. "I'm worried that they'll think we're attacking them."

"So what if they do?" Loftur snorted. "You said that your village lacks the strength to resist us. If they attack, they will fail." Between the soldiers of the First Army and all the other men from the Vale of Mists who had come to occupy Sir Carwyn's village, plus Carwyn's own liberated soldiers, there were nearly fifty men in the caravan.

It was more than enough to overwhelm the dozen or so fighting men that the human knight claimed were the village's only remaining protectors. It didn't make any sense that the humans would fight such a lopsided battle and so Loftur found it hard to believe that there would be another tragic battle like the one he'd heard about in the High Pass.

"You don't understand," the young knight said as he shook his head. This was something that he had argued with Lord General Thane about before they left, but in the end, the Lord General remained firm that Carwyn and his men travel together with their escort of Eldritch soldiers. Carwyn may have earned Lady Ashlynn's trust with his words and his pledge to shift his allegiance to Dame Sybyll Hanrahan, but it would take more than that for the vampire general to trust him.

"A man who has changed his allegiance once may change it again," Thane said when Carwyn asked how he could prove that he could be trusted. "You will never be trusted the way you would have been before. Now, you will have to earn the trust that a knight is due with your actions, because your loyalty can no longer be assumed."

The vampire knight hadn't meant it as an insult, and when Carwyn spoke to him, he was surprised how seriously Sir Thane took the position and duties of a knight, but that didn't change his judgment. In the Lord General's eyes, Carwyn might have made the right decision when he threw in with Dame Sybyll, but that didn't mean he could be trusted.

For Carwyn, the hardest part hadn't been the decision itself. He'd experienced Dame Sybyll's extraordinary strength first hand, and he'd also felt what it was like to receive the miraculous healing of a witch who pulled him back from the edge of death, just because a man he thought of as his enemy found him to be a 'worthy Champion.'

He knew that resistance would only lead to pointless slaughter in service of Baron Ian Hanrahan's murderous ambitions, and that the 'demons' wanted to live simple lives, free of conflict, just as much as he did.

No, the hardest part of all of this was the doubt that had seeped into his heart along with the intense winter cold. Would Olwyn still look at him with soft tenderness when she learned he'd sworn to serve the Crimson Knight, and by extension, a powerful witch and an even more terrifying vampire? Would she understand that he'd chosen their child's future over the hollow honor of dying for a cause that was already lost? Or would she see only a husband who had betrayed everything she thought he stood for?

"I'm not worried that my people will attack us," Carwyn told the soldier next to him as he struggled to find a way to articulate the web of fears that had grown tight around his heart. "I'm worried that they will see your strength and think that it's hopeless. I'm worried that people will decide that it's better to die on their own blades instead of falling victim to your claws," he said with an anxious look on his face.

Even though he couldn't make himself say the words, a silent statement followed what he'd already said, and its words were written clearly on his face. More than anything, he was worried that his wife would take her own life just minutes before they could be reunited.

Chapter 879: Strange Homecoming (Part Two)

Carwyn's worry that his people would take their own lives rather than fight against the Eldritch 'invaders' hung in the air like icicles ready to fall on anyone foolish enough to disturb them. It wasn't something that made sense to Loftur, but then, he'd been born long after the Lothians burned much of the Vale of Mists to the ground, and even then, his people would rather have died trying to cross the mountains than falling to their own claws before the Lothians could capture them. The idea of giving up when there was any hope left was just too strange.

From the other side of Loftur, Captain Barsali asked a few questions in the Eldritch tongue, conversing briefly with their translator before Loftur turned back to Carwyn with a confident smile.

"He says that you shouldn't worry," Loftur said, giving an approximation of the arena Champion's words rather than translating directly. "He says that you are a Champion and that Champions do not come from weak people who would die on their own swords instead of fighting."

"He also says that he is eager to meet your father and your woman," Loftur added after the serpentine captain said a few more words. "He wants to tell them of your courage since they weren't able to see your glory in battle. He says they should be proud of you."

"I don't know if that's possible," Carwyn said as he stared into the distance in the direction of his home. "My father fought in the War of Inches. He lost friends in that war, and many of our villagers lost family members. I gave my fealty to his enemies, to the Crimson Knight who slaughtered Light only knows how many people. Forget proud," he said with a huff of bright, white steam. "I'll be happy if he doesn't kill me on sight as a traitor."

Loftur and Barsali exchanged more words, speaking at length as the bearish translator explained the War of Inches and the Crimson Knight, Dame Sybyll Hanrahan, to the Champion from across the mountain before he finally turned back to Sir Carwyn.

"Things are different in the arena," Loftur said. "Captain Barsali has embraced many foes while blood is still hot and wet on the sands. For him, when the reason to fight ends, opponents can become fast friends. He has many friends who he has fought with, friends who gave him scars that he wears with pride and friends who have suffered wounds at his hands."

"He believes that there is no longer a reason for your people and ours to fight," the bearish translator explained. "Because there is no longer a reason to fight, it's time to embrace each other as friends. He thinks that your father must be a brave Champion to have survived many battles in the War of Inches and that he'll understand that the time for fighting is over."

"I hope he does," Carwyn said, shifting in his saddle as he spotted the last cart rounding the bend. "We'll find out soon enough," he continued as the three men began to move again, taking their position at the head of the caravan. "The village is less than an hour away at the pace we're moving. I just hope the Lord General is right and that they'll listen to reason when we explain it to them."

He didn't expect it to be easy to convince a village full of people who had grown up fearing the 'demons' in the wilderness that those very same 'demons' were now their trusted neighbors, but Lord General Thane and Lady Ashlynn had given him several tools to use to convince his people. Carwyn only wished that he shared their confidence, or that he could see things as simply as Captain Barsali seemed to.

The remainder of the ride passed in pensive silence, broken only by the steady crunch-creak rhythm of wheels on frozen ground and the occasional snort from horses whose nostrils flared wide in the bitter air. Carwyn found himself flexing his fingers repeatedly to maintain feeling in them, even through his riding gloves. The cold seemed to seep through every gap in his armor, as if it were goading him to rush faster to the warmth of his home and the tender embrace of his wife.

While there was more that both Loftur and Barsali wanted to say to reassure the young knight, both men felt a barrier had sprung up between them and Carwyn, heavier and thicker than the armor he wore. These were his people and his responsibility and the weight of his decision was something he intended to bear alone.

When they finally arrived at Raek village, the sight of it took Carwyn's breath away and it was all he could do to keep his hands steady on the reins of his borrowed horse to keep himself from galloping toward the village gates.

Raek was an oversized village for its population and much of its interior was still grassland where small herds of goats and the occasional dairy cow grazed. Some knights in the Hanrahan Court chided Carwyn for putting on airs as if he intended to contend for rule of the barony, but Carwyn had never seen it that way.

His father had taught him long ago that it was the duty of a knight to care for his people, to protect them not only from the spears and arrows of their enemies but from the ravages of lean winters and empty bellies as well. It was that advice that led him to transform the village from the small settlement it had once been into something that clearly planned to become greater.

In his father's era, the village sat next to the rushing waters of the River Belvin. It had been surrounded by a simple wooden palisade ringed with eight wooden watch towers to prepare the village to defend itself from any Eldritch raids.

Under Carwyn's leadership, however, the village had more than doubled in size, with wooden bridges that crossed the river, and stone culverts that channeled the river under the expanded village walls. It had all been part of his vision to place mills along the river, but when he thought of the possibility that raiders could burn the expensive mills to the ground in a single attack, he worked furiously to expand the village enough to encompass their new, fledgling industry.

Now, as he gazed upon the village that he'd worked so hard to transform, the heavy anxiety that had weighed him down for the entire journey blended with a familiar pride in what he had accomplished over the past few years of hard work. None of it had been easy, and there had been people in the village who insisted that it was foolish to take on so much work when the fruits of their labor were so uncertain, but Carwyn pressed ahead anyway.

"We've made difficult changes before," he reminded himself as he prepared to ride forward with two of his soldiers carrying a large, white banner. Captain Barsali fell in beside him, as did Loftur, adding a strange, menacing feeling to the group even though neither man intended to fight today.

"We've changed before," Carwyn said softly. "We can do it again..."

Chapter 880: Raek Village Prepares for War

Within the walls of Raek Village, Sir Rhodri Belvin sat astride his aging horse, wearing armor he never thought he'd don again as he shouted orders to the common people of his village.

"There is still room in the manor for women and children younger than twelve," Rhodri shouted as he waved for more villagers to enter the rambling home that served as the knight's manor in the village. The central hall was large enough to hold close to fifty people during a feast, and more than a hundred could be packed in if they removed the tables.

Removing the tables and placing them in the village square as an improvised barricade had been one of Sir Rhodri's first orders when a farm boy came running not long after first light, claiming that a caravan of demons was marching toward the village. Word had slowly trickled in from other farmers who had spotted not only the demons, but humans who might be captives.

"There's no more room in the great hall," a heavily pregnant woman with long, straight hair the color of straw said as she directed mothers and their children as they approached the manor. "There is still room in the east wing, don't mind who the rooms belong to, just find a place where you can take shelter and stay quiet. If we run out of room there, then there are the storehouses and root cellars under the west

wing, but it's cramped and dark in the cellars, so start by going to the family chambers on the east side," she said.

Olwyna moved through the crowd like a stiff-limbed puppet with one hand always resting protectively over her swollen belly as she guided families toward safety. A few weeks ago, every time she touched her belly, her eyes lit up and a smile tugged at her lips as she imagined the day she would welcome her first child into the world. She thought of how wonderful it would feel to hold her baby to her breast while Carwyn cradled both mother and child in his strong, muscular arms.

It was a simple dream, one that any expecting mother might have, but the demons had snatched it away from her. She'd barely slept since the caravan failed to return, and when she did manage to drift off, her dreams were filled with images of her beloved Carwyn lying broken on some distant battlefield while creatures with claws and fangs picked over his remains.

The strange, bitter cold that had settled over the village yesterday only made it worse, as if all the light and warmth of the world had been drained away along with her husband's disappearance.

"Your ladyship," a young mother said, stepping close enough to Olwyna to offer her a steadying hand. She was carrying a small child who had just been born at the beginning of summer, but she looked at Olwyna with eyes that said they were the same, despite the difference in their stations.

"You shouldn't be out here in the cold like this," the young woman said as she took in the deep shadows under Olwyna's eyes and the stiff, unsteady way that she moved about the village square. "Let one of the others take over for you..."

"It's fine, Sidra," Olwyna said hollowly as she gave the young mother a reassuring touch on the small of her back and guided her toward the manor. "Carwyn isn't here, so Father-in-law has to take his place. Since Sir Rhodri can't tend to this, then it's my place to step up."

"Now go. My little one is warm in my belly," she said as she stroked her stomach, feeling the faint movements of the child in her womb. "Yours can't be out for long in this cold. So go," she said, giving the young mother a small shove before turning to look at the figure of her father-in-law as he sat atop his horse, projecting an aura of confidence that few could match in the face of a demon raid.

"Anyone who can fire a bow," Sir Rhodri called, standing up in his stirrups to get a better view of the men of the village as he directed them. "Climb a watch tower and take as many arrows as you can carry with you. If you can't hit a bird in flight, keep to the towers on the south and east sides of town. Men on the north and west, you better have the strength to hit a target on the other side of the wall!"

The men he was sending into the watch towers weren't soldiers. Some of them were boys barely fourteen summers old. But each and every one of them was good enough with a bow to put food on their tables, and if they could shoot from the watch towers, then they were almost as useful as a soldier in light armor.

"Sir Rhodri," a burly villager said as he dumped an armful of axes, hatchets, sledge hammers, and mauls on the ground before the armored knight. "This is all I could scrounge up from tha workshops. How should I pass 'em out?"

"Find the biggest men you can and send at least one with a maul or large ax to each of the watch towers to guard the base," the aging knight said as he looked out over the men who had gathered to form a last line of defense around the manor. "We don't have enough to go around, so make sure our strongest men get the best. The rest can stay here with whatever they have."

The men of Raek Village made for a motley group. Most of the ones who lived in the village were skilled tradesmen, many of whom had come to the village at Carwyn's invitation in order to bring new opportunities to the village.

Carwyn had given away plots of land in the village that were large enough to build both a house and a shop as long as the tradesmen agreed to take on at least two apprentices from among the villagers who were between the ages of twelve and seventeen years old.

At the time, Rhodri thought his son was giving away too much, shorting the village of the money that new settlers were generally required to invest in order to receive a deed to their lands, but a few years on, he had to admit that he'd been wrong. They'd long had a blacksmith who could care for most of the village's needs, but now they boasted a skilled ferrier as well as a cooper who had both more than paid back the village with the impact they had on everyone else.

But now that they were facing an attack by demons, Rhodri wished his son had put more effort into recruiting trappers, furriers, fletchers, and other men who knew more about ending a life than making one more comfortable.

As it stood, no matter how much he appreciated the unique ciders and ales produced by the brewer who had built his shop beside the new bridge, he would have preferred to have even one more man who could wield a blade, and Master Kraki resembled his kegs far too much to be of use in the fight to come.

Of course, he wasn't in much better shape himself. He cut a dashing figure in his gleaming armor, sitting atop his well-trained horse. But underneath the polished plates and intricately woven mail, his body had grown soft with age, and his bones ached in the cold. He'd left his sword behind in favor of a long-handled hammer with a wicked spike on the back side because he wasn't confident that he could display the skill required to use anything else from horseback.

"One last ride," he said softly, tapping his horse's neck and leaning forward to whisper directly into his steed's ear. "We get one last ride, old friend, so help me show these young lads how it's done."

Sir Rhodri didn't expect to survive this raid, not when the demons were said to number in the dozens, but that was all right with him. As long as he was able to lead the men who had stepped forward and they were able to protect the women and children behind them, including his daughter-in-law and unborn grandchild...

Then it was worth giving it one last charge, not because he thought he could survive it, but because he hoped that the last of his family would.