

The Vampire 1071

Chapter 1071: The Mother of Trees Reveals Her Power

"It's good that you understand," Ashlynn said, keeping one hand on his cheek as she raised the other hand high. Emerald energy spilled from her hand, flowing over Ashlynn and Tommin like a waterfall cascading over smooth stones, and when next she spoke, her voice resonated with a power that echoed off the walls of the courtyard like a proclamation from on high.

"Willow's tears upon the wounded fall,

Mend the flesh and bone, one and all..."

As she spoke, the energy flowing around her and Tommin took shape, transforming into a mighty willow tree with a trunk that completely enveloped Ashlynn while its ephemeral branches gently swayed over Sir Tommin's battered body.

Heila had done what she could for the wounded knight, but with so many people in need of her healing, she'd done little more than resolve the most life-threatening of his injuries. Several of his bones still bore cracks, even if they hadn't broken, and his torso under the tunic Ashlynn had torn was a mass of bruises. Now, however, the gentle energy of the willow tree tenderly caressed each of those wounds, smoothing cracked bones like a potter working with soft clay, and wiping away bruises as though they'd only been painted on.

"Where light has burned beyond the Willow's strength to bend,

Let true love's tears soothe hurts I cannot mend."

Healing Tommin's eyes, restoring what the Holy Light Blade had taken from him when his faith failed, would require a price that Ashlynn was unwilling to pay for a man like Tommin. She knew all too well from the days when she faced the trial of the Ancient Willow that even for her closest friends, the price to heal some wounds might be too high. But even if she couldn't restore his sight, she could still wipe away the searing pain in his eyes that the Church's 'holy' weapon had left him with.

Around the courtyard, everyone watched with a sense of awe, wonder, and varied amounts of surprise as Ashlynn summoned the power of the forest to heal the wounds of the man who had once buried her alive.

The tree Ashlynn had conjured did more than just heal Sir Tommin's wounds. Even as Ashlynn focused all of her attention on carefully controlling the energy flowing through the ethereal willow branches, a rain of emerald green willow leaves fluttered around the courtyard, falling on the people witnessing her miracle and carrying a trace of the same healing energy she used to mend Tommin's broken body.

Loman touched the stump of his shoulder in silent wonder as he felt the aches and pains of the long carriage ride fading away, leaving him feeling as refreshed and renewed as he would have if he'd just climbed out of a soft bed instead of a carriage seat that he'd spent close to an entire day in.

All around him, people had similar reactions, testing their joints and feeling their bodies as the fringes of Ashlynn's healing witchcraft eased the hurts that Lady Heila had been too overworked and exhausted to tend as well as the Willow Witch would have wished. And this, they realized, was only the effect of being nearby while the Mother of Trees focused on healing the broken, battered man before her...

Heila smiled in deep satisfaction, watching with pride as Ashlynn reached out to the Willow tree to complete the healing she'd begun back in Hanrahan town. Across the courtyard from her, Ollie smiled in relief, relaxing for the first time since the carriages had arrived in the Ancient Fortress with their prisoners.

If this was the decision she'd arrived at, then perhaps he'd been wrong to be so worried about her reaction to Sir Tommin. Maybe it was only her closest family, like Jocelynn, who could wound her enough for the powerful witch to truly lose control.

"I thought Lady Heila was the Willow Witch," Diarmuid whispered to the flame-haired knight when he saw the young man relaxing. "So, what kind of witch is Lady Ashlynn if she uses the power of the Willow as well?"

"Lady Ashlynn is the Mother of Trees," he said, confirming Diarmuid's suspicions and delivering yet another surprise to her one-armed brother-in-law, Loman. "All trees bow before her Dominion," he explained with a proud smile of his own. "Why else do you think the Eldritch address her that way?"

"So, she really is," Loman whispered as he watched the miracle of healing taking place before him. "Not just a witch, but a Great Witch... the Mother of Trees..."

On the cold flagstones of the courtyard, Tommin's mouth worked soundlessly as he tried to understand the sensations coursing through his body. All of the aches and pains that had made the journey so torturous were fading away one by one, leaving him feeling whole and hale for the first time since he buckled on his armor to fight against the Crimson Knight.

Even the lingering burning pain in his eyes faded away, as though a soothing rain had extinguished the flames that should have spelled eternal torment as a punishment for his failure.

"Why?" Tommin asked, raising his head to look at Ashlynn with his sightless eyes. "Why would you heal me before the end? I don't deserve your mercy..."

"The man you are today doesn't deserve mercy," Ashlynn agreed as she reached out to take Tommin's hands in her own, slowly helping the confused knight to his feet. "But at some point in your life, the man you were was worthy of Rosie's love, and the love of your son Tonnis," she said. "Somewhere along the way, something happened to that man, and everything that's happened since then has made a mockery of what came before."

Privately, she didn't know if the words she'd spoken were true or not. Tommin had served at Owain's side for much of his life, and not once in that time had Tommin felt that Owain had crossed a line that made him unworthy of Tommin's service.

Tommin hadn't done anything when Owain's nearly annual attempts to earn glory by fighting against the Eldritch produced dozens of casualties among his commoner soldiers. He hadn't resigned in protest when Owain abused the women he vented his lust on in the brothels he visited. Even when Owain exacted brutal vengeance on people he felt had somehow slighted him, Tommin continued to serve like a man who had learned to become selectively blind long before he was physically blinded.

Her act of mercy didn't come from a belief that Tommin had been a good man, a good husband or a good father... But she wanted very badly to believe that even a man as flawed as Tommin could transform himself if he had the chance. More than that, she wanted to believe that she could turn away from her need to destroy someone who had hurt her so badly that she still suffered from nightmares...

Tommin didn't deserve this chance, but she was going to give it to him anyway. Not for his sake, but for her own.

"So listen carefully to my judgment," Ashlynn said sternly. "Because I haven't forgiven you for what you have done to me, and I've forgiven you even less for the way you've hurt your family. Family is precious," she said, glancing briefly at the one-armed figure of her brother-in-law before she turned back to Sir Tommin. "You should struggle to be a person who is worthy of their love."

"Now, everyone, listen closely," Ashlynn said, speaking to everyone in the courtyard who was watching this moment unfold. "You will not speak of this moment to anyone. If you cannot swear to keep this secret, then leave now before I pronounce his sentence. I will not have word of this reaching Lady Rosie's ears or anyone else's..."

Chapter 1072: The Death of 'Sir Tommin'

Ashlynn had no concerns about the members of her coven keeping the secret, but she made sure to make eye contact with everyone else in the courtyard, from the quiet carriage drivers to trusted retainers like Kurtz and Emmie, extracting a pledge from each of them before she turned back to face Sir Tommin, drawing a deep breath to steady herself before she issued her judgment.

The act of healing him had already put a considerable strain on her heart, and more than once, she'd struggled to keep the gentle energy flowing from the branches of her ethereal willow tree from turning violent.

She remembered how hard it had been to breathe beneath the damp, sodden soil that Tommin and Broll had shoveled atop her as she lay in the shallow grave and the temptation to transform a healing branch into a strangling noose hovered constantly in the back of her mind as she healed the man who had nearly sealed her fate.

Now that she'd let go of her power, it was easier to clear her mind and focus on the things that still needed to be done. She wasn't certain that she'd made the right decision... but from the moment she summoned the power of the willow tree to heal Sir Tommin rather than killing him, she'd committed to this path. She only hoped that she wouldn't come to regret her decision in the days to come.

The shining image of a giant Willow Tree had faded away when Ashlynn finished healing Sir Tommin, but no one in the courtyard would soon forget the majesty of that moment. Now, even though she was only

wearing a simple green dress that wouldn't have looked out of place on a farmer's wife, nothing felt strange about hearing her pronounce Sir Tommin's sentence.

"First, from today forward, it will be announced far and wide that Sir Tommin Pyre is dead," Ashlynn said firmly. "Lady Rosie is your widow," she told the blinded Templar. "She is free of you, to find a partner who loves her if she wishes, or to choose a life without companionship. From now on, whatever she chooses to do with her life is her business alone, and none of yours, do you understand?"

"I, I understand," Tommin said with great difficulty. Lady Ashlynn had already spared his life and healed his wounds. As much as he wanted to run after Rosie, even if he had to beg people to show him the way to her, he understood he'd lost the right to be a part of her life the day he'd forsaken his marriage to seek the safety offered by the Templars.

"Your title and your lands, along with Hurel village are forfeit," Ashlynn continued once she saw that he both understood and accepted her judgment. She'd already asked Rosie if she wanted to return to Hurel to rule it in her own name, without the need of a man to give legitimacy to her claim, but she'd resolutely refused.

Since Rosie preferred to leave her old life behind in order to make a new beginning in the Vale of Mists, Ashlynn saw no reason to force the village on young Tonnis simply because he was Tommin's son. If Tonnis grew into the kind of man who was a worthy leader of a community, she would consider granting him lands and titles based on his merits, not on his heritage, and Rosie had accepted Ashlynn's proposal not only willingly, but with a profound sense of relief.

"Since 'Sir Tommin Pyre' is dead," Ashlynn said as she gave the blinded knight an appraising look. "From today forward you will be known as 'Knot'," she said, feeling that the word suited him. The knots in a piece of lumber could be serious flaws, and to a commoner chopping wood for their hearth, knots could become stubborn, intractable nuisances that would dull the blades of their axe before the log finally yielded to the blade and split.

But, in the hands of a skilled woodworker, they could also produce patterns of surprising beauty, but only if someone invested both time and skill in the process of shaping the wood. Likewise, if 'Knot' was willing to invest time in himself, perhaps one day, he could become a man who was worthy of the mercy that Ashlynn was granting him today.

Beside the Carriage, Diarmuid found himself nodding approvingly at Ashlynn's judgment, though his brow furrowed and his lips pursed tightly in a frown as he examined her decree from different perspectives.

As a ruler, she was displaying a level of mercy and fairness that few would aspire to. From the few encounters that Diarmuid had with her father, Count Rhys Blackwell, he could see clear parallels in how the count's daughter delivered her judgment. Loss of lands, title, and even his name was an extreme punishment, but the crime of attempting to murder someone like Lady Ashlynn usually carried the penalty of death.

By allowing Tommin, or rather, Knot, to keep his life, Lady Ashlynn had acknowledged that Tommin wasn't acting on his own desires, but rather, the orders of his liege lord. He was also unaware that she was still alive when he buried her. Those two facts gave her grounds for leniency and opened a door to providing a chance for Knot's family to reconcile with him in the future.

It was a wise, merciful decision that few rulers would have been able to arrive at, but that only held true when he treated Lady Ashlynn like a ruler. In this instance, however, she was more than just a ruler pronouncing her judgment... She was also the victim of Sir Tommin's crimes.

In most instances, the victim would never sit in judgment over the accused. Only kings bore the burden of judging the people who had wronged them because there was no higher authority to appeal to for justice. In the end, if a victim was dissatisfied with the verdict of the lord who ruled on their case, they could direct a portion of their resentment at the judge or the people who may have influenced them.

But Lady Ashlynn was both the victim and judge in the trial of the man who had buried her alive and left her for dead. She had no one to blame but herself for the merciful treatment that he had received. Perhaps the ruler Ashlynn could live with her decision, but could the woman who had been so brutally wronged accept it?

And what would happen to that woman as she carried the weight of that decision? Diarmuid didn't know, but the thought that she'd sacrificed her own ability to receive justice and to heal from such a horrific incident in order to show mercy to her attacker's family concerned him deeply...

Chapter 1073: Choosing To Struggle

"Lady Heila," Ashlynn said formally, more for the benefit of some of the people watching than because the situation called for it. "May I have your leave to command your squire and your guardian?"

"Kurtz and Emmie would be honored to do whatever you need," Heila said, smiling at the father and daughter pair. Both of them had worked incredibly hard during and after the battle in Hanrahan, and Heila was certain that they wanted nothing more than a bit of rest now that they were home in the Vale, but she wasn't lying about their willingness.

In the Vale of Mists, only the opportunity to serve Lady Nyrielle directly carried more honor than serving Lady Ashlynn, and both of Heila's horned attendants stepped forward eagerly before kneeling before the Mother of Trees.

"Take 'Knot' to Orava Village," Ashlynn declared, naming the village that stood closest to the boundary that had once separated the Vale of Mists from the High Pass. In the years to come, she was certain that the village would grow significantly as trade between the Vale and the High Fen increased, but for now, it was appropriately isolated, and more importantly, it was populated almost entirely by the Clan of the Great Claw.

"Tell the village elder that I will give him silver each year to provide for Knot's care, food, clothing, and whatever else he requires," Ashlynn said, knowing that she was inflicting a burden on the village and hoping to at least compensate them for that. "They should care for him as one of their own, but he is free to make of himself whatever he wishes."

"Knot," Ashlynn said, turning to face the former templar who she had stripped of everything but the clothes on his back, including his name. "In six or seven years, when Tonnis comes of age, if you have proven yourself to be a man who is worthy of seeing his family again, I'll tell Lady Rosie that you're still alive."

"At that time, it is her decision, and hers alone, to tell her son the truth about his father," Ashlynn said firmly. "And once your son has grown into a man, it will be up to him whether he ever wishes to see you again. This is the limit of the mercy I can offer you, Knot," Ashlynn said as she looked at the trembling knight with his tear-stained face. "Can you accept this? Or would you prefer to die today?"

Part of her still wanted to swing the sword. Or, better yet, to bury Tommin alive the way he'd buried her, leaving him to struggle his way free as she had, or die beneath the soil. She wanted to end him... But more than that, she wanted to leave a door open for Tonnis to know his father, and for the man his father had been to become worthy of knowing his son.

"How can I prove myself worthy of them?" Knot said in a rough, broken voice. "Even though you've healed me, I'm still blind... I'll never swing a sword again," he said mournfully. "I won't ever be a knight again. So, what kind of man can I become for them?"

When he thought of the sort of father his son deserved, he thought of all the things he'd wanted to teach his son, the moments he'd wanted to be there for. How to ride a horse and hold a lance, how to fight while protecting someone whose life mattered more than his... There were so many things a young knight needed to learn, and he wanted to pass on the things he'd learned to his son, just as his father had instructed him.

And when he thought of being a man who was worthy of Rosie, he thought of a husband's duty to protect and provide for his wife. But how could he protect her when he was blind? And what sort of life could he provide for her as a cripple? Lady Ashlynn would be paying for his food and clothing because he couldn't do anything to earn his own way in the world, much less provide for someone else, so what was he to do?

"That is your struggle," Ashlynn said without a trace of pity for the blind man in her voice. "Even a beggar on the street may have their pride, and even a crippled man may find a way to make his way in the world. What you do is up to you. No one will give you the answers you're looking for. You have to find them for yourself. So can you accept it, or not?" Ashlynn asked as the last of her patience wore away and emerald energy once again gathered at her hand.

"I, I can accept it," the man she'd named 'Knot' said with great difficulty. "I don't know what to do, but... I will struggle to find a way," he said, submitting fully to her judgment and allowing Emmie and Kurtz to lead him away.

Standing near the carriage where Ashlynn had left him, Loman wore a conflicted expression on his face as he listened to his sister-in-law handing down her sentence.

Loman's father, Bors Lothian, would never have been so merciful to someone who acted against him. Bors acted decisively and ruthlessly whenever anything threatened his family or his rule, and Loman shuddered to think what Bors would have done if any of his knights had ever attempted to harm Loman's mother, Isla.

At the very least, such a man would have died a painful death in full view of the common people as a warning that some crimes should remain forever unthinkable. Drawing and quartering before staking

the guilty man's body out for the crows to feast on would have been the limit of Bors' 'kindness' for such a traitor's former service.

But the way Ashlynn spoke to Tommin, calling him to meet this new struggle, and giving him a chance to rise again in this life... The priest in Loman couldn't deny that she'd done exactly as the Church had always taught, and he couldn't help but wonder if she'd learned this from her cousin, Confessor Eleanor, or her mother, who frequently visited the convent. After all, helping a man lost in darkness to find a path back to the light was the essence of the Confessor's mission.

Clearly, whatever she'd been through since the night his brother tried to murder her, she hadn't abandoned her faith, and Loman found himself once again confronting something his teachers would have considered a heresy of the highest order. A witch... a Great Witch no less, walking the path of a Confessor. A High Inquisitor who had become a vampire. A horned witch who professed to love that High Inquisitor and who claimed that Loman himself had been misled by the Exemplar who taught him.

If this was heresy, then it was the most insidious kind of heresy, dressed up in the trappings of true faith. But when he looked at the way his sister-in-law was acting, showing mercy to the man who had buried her alive... he couldn't help but wonder whether he was seeing heresy of the highest order, or if his own teachers were the heretics who had been led astray.

"I'm sorry that your first moments in the Vale had to start with something so ugly," Ashlynn said as she turned to face her brother-in-law, Loman, and Inquisitor Diarmuid. "I know you've come here as prisoners, but I want you to think of yourselves as guests as much as you can," she said, trying to put thoughts of Sir Tommin and the shallow grave he'd left her in out of her mind now that she had punished the man for his deeds.

"Inquisitor," Ashlynn said, offering the man in crimson robes a smile that was surprisingly warm and gentle for a witch greeting a member of his order. "Sir Ollie will show you to a place where you can rest and refresh yourself. I know it's been a long time in a carriage. I'll see you again when we gather for dinner later tonight."

"I'm sure Georg is working on something special for a welcoming feast," Ollie told Diarmuid. "But once we get to your chambers, I can at least put together a simple hot meal for you. Let me show you the way," he offered politely.

Meanwhile, Ashlynn turned to face her one-armed brother-in-law, finally making herself confront the thorniest of challenges that had arrived in the carriage along with Heila.

"Loman, I'm sure you have a lot of questions," Ashlynn said. "Let me take you somewhere private that we can talk..."

Chapter 1074: Awkward Smalltalk (Part One)

Loman sat in a luxuriously appointed sitting room, looking from the furnishings to the decor with a growing sense of... of what, he wasn't quite sure.

Part of him felt like he was floating in a castle that only existed in dreams, and when he looked out the clearest glass windows with the largest panes he'd ever seen, the mist-shrouded tree-tops and the distant shapes of the other towers of the Ancient Fortress only added to that feeling. Like, this place couldn't quite be real.

Another part of him felt like he'd once again become an uncouth, country lord like he'd been on his first visit to the Royal Capital as he took in the grandeur of Ashlynn's sitting room. Most of the furnishings featured intricately carved woodwork with tables and chairs that lacked any of the gilding he would have expected in the sitting room of a noblewoman.

Instead of covering up the bare wood with paint or gilding, skilled artisans had transformed simple table legs and chair backs into works of art that resembled streams tumbling over stones and winding between trees on their way to the floor, and every bit of it felt like it was a frozen moment in time, as if each of those streams were simply waiting for Ashlynn's command to turn back into water and begin flowing again.

"Is all, um, Eldritch furniture like this?" Loman asked carefully as he tried to make small talk. He'd had a chance to change into fresh clothes and to wash up before joining Ashlynn in her chambers for a more private reunion, but evidently, he'd arrived before she'd finished preparing whatever it was she intended to share with him for an early afternoon meal.

"The way the furniture is carved," he said, looking at it more closely. "It reminds me of the miracle of healing you performed for Sir-, for Knot," he said, thinking about how her emerald energy had spilled from her hand like water, flowing over her and the former knight before it rose as a mighty willow tree.

"Most of these pieces were made by the Heartwood clan," Ashlynn said as she carefully measured spices into a small pot that she was preparing to hang above the fire. "The ones you call 'flat-tailed demons,'" she explained as her fingers sorted through different small jars until she found the one she was looking for.

"After Owain destroyed their village, Ollie helped many of them to settle here," she said. For a moment, her hands froze in mid-air with a jar half opened as she forced herself to keep her tone even and conversational. "By the time you and Liam started your campaign, he'd already begun work on a place for the refugees to settle."

"Ashlynn, I..." Loman started, almost reflexively apologizing, but the words died on his tongue before he could even speak them. He'd started to say that he was sorry, but was he? He still carried a belly full of anger over the way the Eldritch had wounded so many of Liam Dunn's men, and the only thing that had stopped it from turning into a slaughter had been Loman's tireless work in the healer's tent.

"You don't need to apologize, Brother-in-law," Ashlynn said, deliberately emphasizing their relationship, even though it felt strange for her to hold on to her position as Owain's wife after her husband had tried to murder her.

"This war is older than either of us," she said as her hands started moving again, adding the last of the finely ground spices to the pot and starting to stir. "For a time, we were on opposite sides of that war. But I want to believe that we aren't doomed to be on opposite sides of that war forever."

"If people like you and I can forge a peace, then the common folk will follow," she said, more because she wished things would work out that way than from any real certainty. "We just have to show them that there are more things to gain from cooperation than there are from extermination."

"I know that your family has wanted the jewels and precious metals of Airgead Mountain for generations," Ashlynn added. "But the skilled craftsmen among the Eldritch are an even greater treasure. I received these as gifts from the people, but how much do you think the barons of Lothian March would pay to have a table like the one in front of you? Or a chair like the one you're sitting in?"

"I, I don't know," Loman said honestly. Whether it was as a lord or as a priest, he never thought much about the cost of fine furniture. It was simply part of his life, always present in the places he went and arranged for by the small army of servants that could be found in both temples and noble houses. "Dozens of sovereigns at least. Maybe hundreds if the maker was famous enough," he said as he considered her words.

"Are the paintings and the tapestries the same?" Loman asked as he looked at the decorations on the walls. "Are the tapestries woven by another of the Eldritch clans? The ones we called 'spider-demons'," he asked. Liam Dunn had given him a pointed warning to scrub the word 'demon' from his vocabulary while he was here, but absent the label, Loman wasn't quite certain how to refer to the different groups of Eldritch people that had been at war with his family for nearly a century.

He'd never once thought about the sort of art those people would create, but if his guess was right about the source of the work in Ashlynn's chambers, then there really were amazing talents among the Eldritch, and the beautiful things they made couldn't be exploited the way a vein of gold or silver could.

On most of the walls in Ashlynn's sitting room, beautifully painted landscapes depicting the Vale of Mists at night, or moonlit pools deep in the woods, flanked intricate tapestries that felt like they offered glimpses into another world. A world where strange leaf-shaped boats floated long flooded city streets, or a churning river tumbled over the edge of a cliff, falling into an inky abyss as if the cliff had no bottom.

If there'd been a royal princess in the Kingdom of Gall at the moment, Loman imagined that her sitting room might barely match up to what he was seeing here, but somehow, he felt that such a room would drown in so much gilding, expensive lace curtains and glittering, jewel encrusted chandeliers that it would feel almost like a childish attempt to match up to the more mature sophistication on display here.

"No, those are different," Ashlynn said with a smile on her lips that she couldn't have hidden if she wanted to. "The paintings are Nyri's, and the tapestries were woven by one of her progeny, Zedya. I don't think either of them would ever sell their work. There are people among the Nightweaver clan who make things like Zedya's tapestry," Ashlynn added, hoping to shift the topic of conversation away from her vampire lover.

While Ashlynn wasn't ashamed of her relationship with Nyrielle in any way, shape, or form, it somehow felt incredibly... rude to discuss her lover's hobbies with the brother of the man she was still technically married to.

She needn't have worried, though, because Loman's attention had already been captured by something else in her sitting room.