

The Vampire 271

Chapter 271: Aunt Amahle's Advice

That evening, in accordance with Amahle's traditions, Talauia and Heila joined the Mother of Thorns at her home for a family dinner.

Heila had been delighted to learn that the colorful peppers that Talauia guided her to were sweet rather than spicy. Each of them was the size of Heila's diminutive fists which she felt made them perfect for stuffing. After packing each pepper with soft, fluffy rice and succulent, slightly fatty sausage, Heila carefully set them in an iron pot directly on the coals of the fire for roasting, letting their warm, sharp fragrance fill the air.

"So, Heila, honey, Tala was telling me that you weren't too sure about what you desire as a witch," Amahle said while stirring a rich, creamy chicken and vegetable soup. "Ain't that right, sugar?"

"It is, it is," Talauia said as she carefully scrubbed at the tender okra pods she'd picked. "Can you tell her the tree that Auntie Ashlynn picked for her?"

"I can," Amahle said, using a spider-like limb to place a lid on the creamy soup. "But I think that it's best if little Heila answers a few questions for me first. You just want to do whatever you can to help Ashlynn don't you, hun?"

"I do," Heila said with a sharp nod of her head. "I hated feeling so useless when the Tuscans attacked us, all I could do was cower behind Hauke while Ashlynn went out with the soldiers to fight. It, it didn't feel good at all."

"That's a good place to start," Amahle said, pouring a fresh cup of chilled sweet tea and placing it in front of Heila. "Now sharpen that desire," she said, her crimson eyes growing intense as she looked at Heila. "Helping a person fight comes in many forms. What do you want to do to help?"

"A powerful witch could tend her wounds after the battle, helping her return to the field again and again," Amahle suggested. "Ain't no need to get yourself in danger that way. Just stay in the back and patch people up so they can keep fighting. No one will look down on you for that. In fact, many people would praise you for patching them up when they might otherwise have died."

"I want to learn to heal people," Heila said, though her voice held a trace of uncertainty. "Ashlynn gets hurt too often and it would be good if I could help to ease her pains. But I don't want to hide in the rear while other people are risking their lives. It's not right when I could be doing more."

"In that case, are you willing to take lives?" Amahle asked. "A witch who's bound to trees can often find ways to channel the power of branches or roots to bludgeon or choke the life out of their enemies. Would you be willing to watch the light fade from their eyes because you crushed them beneath the power of your witchcraft?"

When Amahle asked the question, the humid air in the open sitting room seemed to become ten times heavier and the heat became twice as oppressive. Sweat rolled down between Heila's shoulder blades as she thought about whether or not she was willing to take a life. It felt easy to say when she thought about thrusting a sword or a dagger into another person. Right now, an artificer in High Fen City was preparing to turn a Frost Walker horn into a weapon for her that could do just that.

But the way Amahle described killing with the power of trees felt much more... visceral than what she'd imagined before. Could she really make herself do it?

"If you don't want to get your own hands dirty, you could take a more... passive approach," Amahle suggested. "After all, roots and branches can bind and tangle. You could help Ashlynn by ensnaring her opponents, trapping them for her to deal with one at a time or removing threats from the field for questioning or ransom later. You don't need to become a killer in order to defeat opponents and help on the battlefield, hun."

"That," Heila said slowly as she turned the idea over in her mind. "That doesn't sound right. I know those things can help, and sometimes, I might want to do them to help," she said. After all, Ashlynn had gone to the Summer Villa to find information and she'd interrogated Sir Kaefin to learn important things. Capturing people to do the same was surely a valid way to help Ashlynn.

"I want to fight by Lady Ashlynn's side," Heila said firmly. "That way, I can be right there to heal her and protect her if she's injured, but sometimes, the only way to protect someone is to kill the person trying to hurt them," she said, thinking about the attack they endured from the Tuscans. Without killing them, nothing would have stopped the massive men from trying to claim Hauke's horn.

"So, if it's the only way," Heila said, her voice growing firmer. "Then I don't want to be powerless to do it. I, I need to learn how to fight and that means I need to learn how to kill. If the Inquisitors ever come

for her, they won't stop until she's dead and they'd do the same to me, even if I wasn't a witch. If I'm not willing to kill them to stop them then I'm only putting Lady Ashlynn and everyone else in danger."

"You see, you see?" Talauia said, setting down the batter she'd finished whipping and fluttering over to join Heila and Amahle. "I told you that she had some spikes to her."

"Indeed she does," Amahle said with a smile. "The tree that Ashlynn chose for you, little Heila, is a Willow Tree. It's a healer's tree at heart, with its greatest strengths in wood and water."

"Oh," Heila said, sitting down with a heavy thump. "So, I won't be able to fight at her side after all." After working up the resolve to learn how to fight, to stay by Ashlynn's side no matter how dangerous things became, the notion that Ashlynn had selected a healer's tree for her felt somehow... bitter.

Chapter 272: A Willow's Strength

Seeing the crestfallen look on Heila's face when she learned that Ashlynn had chosen a willow as the tree to serve as the source of Heila's power, Amahle quickly realized that she'd forgotten how little she knew about the forces at play and the many different things a single tree could mean in different circumstances.

"Oh, honey, don't go getting a look like that on your face," Amahle said. "I told you that it's a healer's tree at heart didn't I? You think a healer don't have her own ways to protect her patients? Let me show you something, darlin', just watch."

"Step back, step back," Talauia said quickly. Her wings beat rapidly as she floated across the room to tug on Heila's sleeve, pulling her to the side to give Amahle room for her demonstration. "Watch close, Mother is going to show you something special."

Before Heila could respond, Amahle held a hand and began to chant, gathering the energy of the vines wrapping around the cypress trees to power her witchcraft.

"From twisted vine and ancient thorn,

Let weapons of my will be born.

Through blood and pain thy hooks shall feed,

Till every foe is made to bleed."

As she spoke in a steady, formal cadence, dark green and lurid energy gathered at her hand, flowing to her as though it were eager to be used by the powerful witch. When the short invocation finished, Amahle held a wicked whip in her hands.

The whip looked like it had been formed by a vine that was a dark enough shade of green to nearly be black and its entire length was covered with wicked hooked thorns that were tipped in a lurid, almost blood-colored crimson. Seeing its coiled lethality and feeling the sense of sharp menace that emanated from the whip, Heila's heart felt like it had forgotten to beat while her mind struggled to understand if this was a weapon for killing... or a tool for torture.

"You'll need a different invocation to conjure a Willow's Whip, but I promise you that you can learn it," Amahle said confidently. If she noticed Heila's stunned state, she chose to ignore it, offering up a further demonstration instead. With a flick of her wrist, the thorned whip whistled through the air before it snapped with a loud -CRACK- that stunned Heila with the explosive power possessed by such a flimsy-looking weapon.

"Anyone who tries to harm someone sheltering beneath the branches of a willow tree will be whipped by its limbs," Amahle said. "Or, they may be pulled beneath the water's surface, entangled in its roots to drown. The power of wood and water offer great synergy in healing, but they also offer you the power to lash, to bind, to flood and drown."

Seeing the stunned look on Heila's face, Amahle held back the last part of the power that came from mastery of wood and water. Everyone knew the Willow for its medicinal properties but the difference between medicine and poison could often come down to simple dosage. In large enough measures, even beneficial medicine could become a deadly toxin.

Besides, just because Heila drew her greatest strength from the willow tree didn't mean she couldn't harness the powers of poison from other, more dangerous trees. It would just take more effort on her part if she wanted to embrace the power of deadly poison.

"Remember, little Heila," the crimson-eyed witch said, allowing the whip in her hands to evaporate into a cloud of dark mist before it vanished like it had never been there at all. "Nature's power ain't just one thing. It's all things. Sweet and sour, healing and harming, living and dying, all goes together. You ain't a simple woman, you want to be useful to Ashlynn in all ways, not just limiting yourself to healing or killing."

"Lady Ashlynn will face danger again and again, for a long time to come," Heila said, her eyes still fixed on the space the whip had occupied. "Being at her side, I have to be able to face all of it with her. At the very least, I can't be a burden that she has to defend."

"And yet, just six months ago, I'd say you'd never have thought of saying those words," Amahle said, lowering herself down to sit on the ground next to Heila so she could more easily look at the diminutive young woman's eyes without towering over her. "You've changed and your thinking is flexible, capable of bending in new directions without breaking."

"That's a good thing, darlin'," the witch said. "It means you're meant for all of nature's power, not just a little slice. These next few days while Ashlynn forms your seed, we just need to draw those desires out of you and help you understand what you can do with them."

The words Amahle said washed over Heila and she heard them but her heart wasn't really caught on them. Instead, her eyes were still filled with Amahle's demonstration. If she could harness power like that... then she wouldn't have to watch helplessly while Ashlynn was hurt and people like Andrus died.

"And there's one more thing I can tell you, hun," Amahle said sweetly, pulling Heila's attention back to her. "My little sister's talents are strongest in Wood, Earth, and Fire. She's almost as weak in Water as she is at manipulating the Air," the witch said pointedly. "When Ashlynn chose the Willow for you, she gave you a path to be strong where she is weak. You understand, don't you?"

Amahle's final words wiped away the last of Heila's lingering doubts. Ashlynn wasn't keeping her away from the battlefield by forcing her to be a healer hiding behind the lines. She was counting on Heila to be strong in ways she couldn't be.

That small detail made a huge difference in how Heila perceived Ashlynn's choice. Now that she had understood her lady's intentions, she knew what she desired. She just had to make sure she was strong enough to grasp it.

Chapter 273: Ashlynn's Return

Heila spent the next two days in deep study with Talauia and received a few lessons directly from Amahle as well. Both witches worked to build Heila's understanding of natural forces. The little bit of knowledge that Heila had gained from Zedya about sorcery helped her to shape her will and at least complete the simple exercises that she'd been given, even if she wasn't able to touch the energy of the earth to use true witchcraft.

"Now I understand why Madame Zedya spoke so highly of the lessons she received here," Heila said on the third evening since Ashlynn's departure. "You both see the slightest mistake with incredible detail. I feel like I've made more progress in two days than I did in two weeks before coming here."

Zedya's lessons had focused on practical activities where a little bit of sorcery could make up for things they lacked on the journey. Using a bit of energy to draw water out of clothing they washed but didn't have time to hang to dry, or creating a breeze to keep insects away while they rode through the night were practical lessons that gave her ways to practice using her energy without straining herself or risking the sorcery raging out of control.

The lessons she received in the Briar, however, were much more in tune with harnessing natural energies to do specific things. The formal incantations made it easier to focus her will and achieve greater effects.

Today, she'd stimulated the growth of several vegetables that now sat on a chopping board in front of her, ready to form the base of a salad weeks before they would have ripened naturally. The process had been a little draining, but Talauia assured her that once she was able to harness the power of nature, she would be able to use the energy of any weeds growing in the garden to fuel the growth of the plants she wanted to cultivate while removing the ones who intruded where they didn't belong.

"It ain't so exaggerated as that, sugar," Amahle said as she puttered around the hearth with two of her four spider-like limbs helping her tend to different pots. The rich and savory aromas of seared catfish rubbed in a complex blend of spices mingled with the soft, almost grassy scent of an herbaceous rice dish to create a tantalizing scent that left both Heila and Talauia eager for their evening meal.

For someone as sensitive as Amahle, with her webs extending to every corner of the Briar, it was impossible to miss the moment that Ashlynn's trial had ended. As soon as she realized that her little sister would be returning, she planned one of her best fish dishes to welcome Ashlynn home. If she had timed things right...

Suddenly, the two witches in the room paused in their work, turning to look at the front door. This close, even though Jacques kept his presence restrained, it was impossible for a witch to miss the ripple of energy that flowed through the air carrying an evergreen scent that belonged uniquely to Ashlynn.

"Right on time, on time," the Thistle Witch said, rubbing her hands together while her wings fluttered behind her, humming with excitement.

"Lady Ashlynn is back?" Heila said, standing up eagerly from the salad she was assembling.

Before anyone could answer, the door opened to reveal the sturdy figure of Jacques as he supported an exhausted-looking Ashlynn into Amahle's home.

After spending three days lashed to a tree, eating only a single meal with Jacques the entire time she was there, Ashlynn wore fatigue like a cloak. Her every movement was slow and deliberate and she leaned on Jacques for support as she made her way across the room to a waiting chair.

Despite her obvious fatigue and difficulty moving, however, even Heila could feel an almost stately aura radiating from her with a vibrance and strength that hadn't been there when she left. More than that, when Heila met Ashlynn's emerald gaze, for a moment, she thought she saw a flash of a silvery-green glow flicker across her eyes, like a leaf drifting on the breeze.

"Welcome home, little sister," Amahle said, moving several pots off the heat before she strode across the room to bring Ashlynn a glass of chilled mint tea as soon as she took a seat. "I was worried when it took so long," she confessed. Her crimson eyes roamed over Ashlynn's figure, taking in every detail as she looked for signs of deeper injuries or distortions to her mark that would erode her power. She didn't speak again until she was certain that nothing was amiss.

"I was frightened that your pact with the Harbinger of Death might interfere with your ability to pass the Ancient Willow's trial," Amahle admitted with a relieved sigh. "I'm ever so relieved to see that it didn't."

"It did," Ashlynn said flatly, giving Amahle an uncharacteristically unfriendly look. "It tried to pull us apart. It even offered to transfer my bond to the seed so that I could be 'released' from the pact."

"That," Amahle said, taking two steps back before using her spider-like legs to steady herself, a look of horror clear on her face. "It went that far? I never thought it would go so far as to harm you. I know the Ancient Willow still bears some resentment toward me, even after your offering," she said with a brief glance at Talauia.

"At most, I thought it might reject you over your bond and refuse to help you," Amahle said sincerely. "I never thought it would act against you."

"I'm learning that some people have different ideas about what it means to help me," Ashlynn said with a gentle shake of her head. Placing a hand on her chest, she felt the tightness of the seed gripping her heart.

Even now, the pressure was difficult to bear but the energy of the seed had its own rhythm and it had come to pulse in counterpoint with the echo of Nyrielle's heartbeat within her chest, as if it was offering strength to fill the gaps between Nyrielle's heart beats.

"The Ancient Willow seemed to believe that it was acting in my best interests by attempting to 'free me' from my blood pact," Ashlynn said. "From its perspective, it wasn't harming me, it was helping me by attacking Nyrielle."

Ashlynn's last words landed on the room like the crack of a whip, exploding in everyone's ears but most of all, landing on Heila like she'd been struck by Amahle's lash of thorns. The tree she was going to gain a seed from had attacked Lady Nyrielle!?

Chapter 274: An Understanding

"How could it?!" Heila said, staring at Ashlynn in horror. Of all the things that could have happened to her lady while creating a seed for her, if death was the worst then losing her bond with Lady Nyrielle would be almost as bad. To tear apart such a strong bond of love...

"So dat's what it was," Jacques said as a moment of realization struck him. "Maman, de energy of de ritual went strange and dark on de last day. Leaves fell from de Ancient Willow like it got tangled up wit' death itself and a chill filled de air. What Lady Ashlyn's sayin' it's no exaggeration."

"How could it, how could it?" Talauia said. "Lady Nyrielle is far away from the Briar. How could the Ancient Willow do anything to her."

"Through me," Ashlynn said, looking to Amahle for confirmation of what she felt to be true. When she saw the older witch nod, she continued. "I have a, a tether that connects me to Mistress Nyrielle," Ashlynn explained, placing a hand gently on her chest. "Our hearts are connected. As long as hers beats, mine will too. Our lives are tangled together and no distance can break that bond."

"I told you, didn't I little Heila?" Amahle said. "The willow has the power to entangle and restrain or to drag someone down to the depths with its roots. If there was a bond between Ashlynn and Lady Nyrielle, the Ancient Willow could pull at that bond as soon as I created the bond between Ashlynn and the Ancient Willow."

"But the trial was just for Lady Ashlynn, wasn't it?" Heila said, looking from Ashlynn to Amahle in confusion. "How could it attack her bond with Lady Nyrielle, or even attack Lady Nyrielle? Is the tree just wicked and cruel?"

"Dere's more to it den dat, ma petite," Jacques said. "Vampires and witches, dey don't usually mix as well as Lady Ashlynn and Lady Nyrielle do. De Ancient Willow, she jus' trying to help de way she knows how, non?"

"The Ancient Willow apologized, in its own way, when it saw the truth of our relationship," Ashlynn said, her emerald eyes remaining flinty as she looked from Jacques to Amahle before softening when she looked at Heila. "The willow is a fierce protector with a soft heart. I think it will suit you well," she said with a tired smile forming on her lips.

"Thank you," Heila said. Setting aside the salad she'd been preparing, she rushed across the floor, her cloven hooves clomping as she ran until she was close enough to fling herself into Ashlynn's waiting arms.

Ever since Ashlynn left to form the seed, Heila threw herself into her studies to distract herself from the increasing sense of worry that formed in the pit of her stomach. One day turned into two, and two into three and even Talauia seemed to feel nervous as day turned into night on the third day.

Now, hearing that Ashlynn nearly lost her bond with Nyrielle in order to form the seed for her, Heila's shoulders shook with quiet sobs as she buried her head in Ashlynn's bosom, weeping openly in relief.

"You see?" Ashlynn said softly, brushing her fingers across Heila's soft ringlets. "You're the same. You have a soft heart and it pains you to see people suffer. I know you'll do everything you can to keep people from harm and to help them mend if they're ever wounded. You don't mind what I chose for you... do you?" Ashlynn asked with a trace of uncertainty creeping into her voice.

"No, I don't mind at all," Heila said, pulling back so Ashlynn could see the determination in her reddened eyes. "I promise, I'll be a good Willow Witch for you."

"Just do your best," Ashlynn said with a warm smile. "We'll find a way to make it all work, one way or another," she added. The Ancient Willow might have mocked her with the words she spoke as a naive young woman, but the more often the tree said it, the stronger her conviction became to live up to those words. No matter what challenges she faced, she would find a way to make things work.

"I promise," she said, giving Heila a reassuring squeeze.

"Tala, sugar," Amahle said, returning to the meal cooking on the hearth. "Ashlynn could use a chance to wash up before dinner. Little sister," she said, turning to fix her crimson gaze on Ashlynn again. "You need a hot meal and a good night's rest before we remove the seed from your chest. Can you endure for now? If you need something for the pain..."

"I'm fine," Ashlynn insisted, rising with Talauia's help. "Everything smells wonderful, but Jacques," she said, glancing at the Sandbox Witch's hulking form. "If there's time and you're able to make a batch of that fried fish again, I think I might just have to kiss you. On the cheek," she clarified quickly.

"You don't have to go dat far, cher," Jacques said, shuffling awkwardly on his feet. "But if I can hook a fish quick enough, den I'll fry one right up."

"Thank you," Ashlynn said as she slowly made her way back toward the door and her own hut in the Briar. "And Jacques," she added before she left. "You can call me 'Auntie' from now on if you like."

"Yes Auntie," the witch said, ducking his head slightly as a large, toothy grin formed on his lips. He still didn't entirely understand how they'd gotten off to such a rough start, but ever since their first meeting, he felt like he'd been walking on the edge of a knife between Ashlynn and her vampire companions. Even Heila treated him like a dangerous beast that might turn on them at any moment.

Now, it finally seemed like they'd found a common ground they could build on, even if it was something as simple as a love of deep fried catfish.

In truth, the three tireless days he'd spent guarding Ashlynn and his acceptance of her bond with Nyrielle once he understood that even the Ancient Willow approved had done more to melt the last of Ashlynn's resistance to his presence than the catfish had.

But the way he worked so hard to prepare a meal she would enjoy even while she was lashed to a mystic tree, well, that had played a part as well. Beneath that hard, scaly surface and thorny exterior, Ashlynn was beginning to find the soft heart that beat with Jacques chest and once she saw him without his guard up, it was much easier to understand the genuine care that flowed from his heart, even if his actions didn't always convey it well.

Now, all that remained was for Heila to pass her own trial and officially join their small but growing family.

Chapter 275: Planting The Seed (Part One)

That night, Heila joined Ashlynn in the latter's hut for the evening. After days of anxiously waiting for Ashlynn to pass her portion of the trial and sleeping alone in the hut that Talauia had prepared for her, Heila barely managed to hold herself back from asking to sleep with Ashlynn in the same bedroom.

Perhaps it would have been easier if she'd adjusted to sleeping by herself in her own hut before Ashlynn underwent her trial, but right now, she just wanted to return to something that felt 'normal' and recently, normal meant sleeping near her lady and being available for anything she needed.

After spending months so close to Ashlynn, Heila couldn't fail to notice the strain in her lady's voice when she spoke or the way she frequently touched her chest above the seed of witchcraft she'd nurtured.

Of all the burdens she'd seen Ashlynn bear, seeing her lady bear such an obviously painful one for her sake sat heavily on Heila's heart. In her mind, the very least she could do to show her appreciation and understanding of the discomfort that Ashlynn was enduring would be to stay close at hand through the night in case her lady needed anything.

The small reading hammock on the balcony was the perfect size for Heila and before she knew it, she'd fallen fast asleep while listening to the sounds of the Briar outside and Ashlynn's steady, rhythmic breathing inside.

Morning came with the first rays of dawn filtering through the thick canopy of the Briar, casting diffuse light through the small hut that gradually brightened as it pressed back against the fog. The day was already hot and the air carried a muggy dampness that left everything outdoors slightly damp, including the unfortunate Heila who had slept in the balcony hammock.

When Ashlynn woke her, Heila found that despite sleeping in the hammock, she felt more refreshed than she had any right to expect. Her night had been plagued by unsettling dreams and the sounds of creatures moving in the night startled her awake several times, but each time she jolted awake, she found herself enveloped by a soothing evergreen scent that reminded her of Ashlynn, as if her lady were standing nearby to keep any harm from reaching her. Within a few moments of waking, she quickly drifted back to sleep.

Together, in a reversal of their usual roles, Ashlynn helped Heila to wash and then dress in a simple outfit consisting of a plain white skirt and white blouse, topped with a silvery-green silk bodice that matched the color of the Ancient Willow's leaves.

Amahle had made the bodice herself and the back, front, and side panels of the garment were each covered with carefully embroidered glyphs invoking the strengths of the willow tree.

"Amahle says you should drink this now," Ashlynn said after she finished tying the laces at the small of Heila's back. In her hands, she held a small earthenware bottle sealed with a cork stopper and covered with wax to prevent anything, even air, from polluting the contents within. "She said that it will help to give you strength while the seed grows within you."

For a moment, Heila hesitated, her fingers hovering less than an inch away from taking the bottle. While it wasn't exactly true, she felt that the moment she drank the contents of the bottle, there would be no turning back. She would either become Ashlynn's Willow Witch or she would join Sister Holly as a permanent resident of the Briar.

Her hesitation lasted only a moment. She'd been offered many opportunities to change her mind. Now that the moment was upon her, the time for second thoughts was over. Breaking the seal and pulling the stopper from the bottle, Heila quickly drank its contents.

The liquid was cool and refreshing with a taste that reminded her of mint tea and fresh lemonade with faint undertones of rosemary, thyme, and other herbs she couldn't identify. The concoction sent a wave of energy through her body, banishing the lingering fatigue she felt after waking and leaving her refreshed and ready to face the trail to come.

"I'm ready," Heila said firmly.

"Good," Ashlynn said with a warm smile. The pressure on her chest had grown even worse as the night went on but she refused to show signs of her distress to Heila as her diminutive friend prepared to face her own trial. Instead, she guided Heila outside to join Amahle and her coven as they boarded a wide, flat-bottomed boat.

"Jacques has raised a new island, just for you, sugar," Amahle said warmly while Jacques took a pole and began navigating their way through the waterways of the Briar. "He'll keep you company and keep you safe while your seed grows, just like he did for Ashlynn."

"I'll be with you too," Ashlynn promised. "You don't have to do this alone."

"Are you sure, little sister?" Amahle asked. "You won't be able to influence the outcome and you have much to learn in the limited time we have. I had hoped to begin your training while Heila undergoes her trial."

"I won't leave her," Ashlynn said, placing a hand on Heila's shoulder and giving her a reassuring squeeze. "I know Jacques will be there, and he's very good at protecting people, but I know that being alone is the hardest thing for Heila. I'll stay with you," she said, kneeling down next to Heila. "So don't you worry."

"Maman," Jacques added, his tail swaying with a touch of eagerness. "I can practice a bit wit' Auntie Ashlynn dese few days, non? We won't be wasting no time."

"Little sister," Amahle said, looking at Ashlynn with a slight smile on her crimson lips. "I wonder. Does Lady Nyrielle ever tell you that you can be a might bit willful?"

"More often than you'd imagine," Ashlynn said, blushing at the question. "But she always indulges my willfulness."

"So I see," Amahle laughed. "You should learn from little Heila. She's the perfect student. Mindful and diligent in every way."

The warm, casual banter helped put Heila's mind at ease as they navigated through the thick morning fog. With so many witches on the boat, the creatures of the Briar stayed far away from them, as if they could sense that only trouble would come from approaching the boat as it glided through the murky waters.

Faintly glowing moss seemed to dim as the diffuse light in the Briar gradually grew brighter but nothing else gave a sense of time to their trip through the thick, hazy fog of the early morning. Eventually, however, the journey reached its end when they arrived at a small barren island a few dozen paces across.

"Doesn't anything grow here?" Heila asked, looking at the strange island in puzzlement. Everywhere else, trees, vines, and even flowers grew, but here, the island was completely barren, as if the earth had been salted and nothing would grow.

"Maman said, didn't she? Dis island wasn't here till last night," Jacques explained. "I rose it jus' for you, ma petite. Dis way, dere ain't nothing growing here dat could infringe on you. Just you and de willow seed."

"It's safest this way, sugar," Amahle said, using her spider-like legs to navigate through the shallow water until she reached dry land. "Come," she added, extending a hand. "It's time to begin."

Chapter 276: Planting the Seed (Part Two)

Once they stepped onto the island, Heila and Ashlynn quickly noticed a circle of stones nearly five paces across at one edge of the island. Within the circle, five smaller circles had been positioned around the edges, forming the points of a star or pentagon within the circle.

"These are for offerings, darlin'," Amahle said as Jacques and Talauia began to retrieve items from the boat. "The feather of a hawk stands for Air, an oil lamp will burn for Fire, an agate for Earth, a bottle of

water taken from near the Ancient Willow for water, and a willow branch for Wood," she explained as the two witches set out items in the appropriate places.

"Little Heila, never forget, while a Willow Witch is strongest in Wood and Water, you are a conduit for the energy of the world. Your desires give it shape. Don't deny yourself a useful tool just because it isn't the one that you're most suited to," Amahle advised.

"I'll remember," Heila said, nervously standing at the edge of the circle.

"Big sister Amahle told me how hard you've been studying for this Heila," Ashlynn said, kneeling down next to her diminutive friend. "Just remember one thing about the willow tree and I'm sure you'll do fine."

"You can bend," Ashlynn advised. "It's okay to yield, but when something presses against your bottom line, you don't have to keep yielding. If you always yield, you'll bend too far and you'll break. Hold to what's important and don't let anything make you believe that you've chosen wrongly."

"I won't let it take me away from you," Heila promised. "I won't let it take me away from Lady Nyrielle, Madame Zedya, or any of the others either."

"Hopefully it doesn't test you the way it tested me," Ashlynn said. "But if it does, I know you'll pass."

"Are we ready?" Amahle said, taking her place at the center of the circle. Several complex-looking glyphs had been drawn in the soft soil of the island and the offerings had been placed around the edges of the circle. Among them, Ashlynn recognized the Eldritch glyphs for 'Witch', 'Nature', and one that resembled 'Family' that she assumed represented the coven, but many of them were still a mystery to her.

Now, the only things that were missing were Heila and her seed of witchcraft.

"I'm ready," Heila said. She held her head up high as she walked into the circle with Ashlynn following behind her. Today, her life would change. When she stepped out of the circle, she would be the Willow Witch.

All of the doubts that had swirled around her before seemed to fall away as she stepped within the circle. Amahle, Ashlynn, Talauia, and even Jacques had all contributed to preparing her for this moment. With everyone standing in support of her, Heila refused to believe that she couldn't succeed. No matter how difficult it was, she wouldn't allow herself to fail.

"In this circle, I name myself Amahle, the Mother of Thorns," Amahle intoned formally. "My blade is sharp, my hands are sure. I've come to witness a coven's birth, to lend my strength and power too. But the bond we forge," she added, looking between Ashlynn and Heila. "It belongs to you."

When Amahle spoke, dark crimson energy spilled from her hands, dripping to the ground and flowing into the glyphs drawn in the soil, lighting each of them with a lurid red glow.

"In this circle, I name myself Ashlynn, the Mother of Trees," Ashlynn followed, matching Amahle's tone and cadence. "My heart is strong and the seed is ripe. I've come to birth my heart's desire, to raise a witch and bring her home. She is my friend, my family, and the first of my coven. This seed I've grown, it's hers alone."

Above Ashlynn, as she finished speaking, ghostly branches of a willow tree formed above her, swaying in a wind unfelt by anyone present and bathing the island in their silvery-green light.

Standing opposite Ashlynn, Heila blinked away the moisture that formed in her eyes when she heard Ashlynn's words. No matter what happened today, they'd become family to each other.

"In this circle, I name myself Heila. I enter with open hands and open heart," she said with only the slightest quiver in her voice. "I've come to receive a seed, to join the coven of the Mother of Trees and become her Willow Witch. My life is hers to command. Today I've come to make this stand."

Above them, silvery-green leaves spilled from the phantom swaying branches, swirling around Heila before settling to the ground in a faintly glowing ring around her. Once the leaves had settled, Amahle drew the same silver knife she'd used on Ashlynn to place the seed, resting the tip of the blade against Ashlynn's skin as the younger witch began to chant.

"By water's flow and wood's deep song,

Where healing arts and strength belong,

This seed of power, nursed with care,

Has drunk the strength that witches share.

Beside my heart it learned to feel

The flow of power, pure and real."

This time, when Amahle's blade sliced into Ashlynn's skin, while dark crimson blood spilled down her bodice, a brilliant silvery-green light shined from within the wound. Gently, working with the tips of her spider-like limbs, the Mother of Thorns pulled the wound open wide enough that she could reach in with slender fingers, grasping the tiny willow seed and pulling it from Ashlynn's chest.

Pain exploded all through Ashlynn's body as if every hair of her body was being wrenched away, the feeling of tendrils that wrapped around her heart being torn from her chest produced a pain that was only exceeded by the beating she'd received at Owain's hands.

When the seed emerged from her chest, it trailed what looked like hundreds, if not thousands of tiny wispy roots, delicate tendrils of magical energy that pulsed in time with the heart that gave it birth.

"Do you need me to take over?" Amahle whispered, seeing the blood drain from Ashlynn's face and her features distort as she fought to clear her mind after the surge of pain. "I can complete this, you've already done the hardest parts."

"No," Ashlynn said quietly after taking a deep, shuddering breath. "I can finish this." Placing a hand on one of Amahle's spider-like limbs to steady herself, Ashlynn began the next part of the ritual, her voice clear and loud as she fought through the lingering pains that wracked her body.

"From Mother's heart to daughter's core,

Let nature open desire's door.

Now from my flesh to yours must pass

This gift of power, meant to last.

As willow bends but does not break,

So shall your power grow and wake."

As Ashlynn spoke, Amahle made a similar slit on Heila's chest, carefully pulling back her skin to place the glowing seed within. The thin, root-like tendrils twitched and writhed as the seed entered Heila's body as though they were the living roots of a tree and Heila's flesh was the soil they needed to survive. When Amahle released the seed, it burrowed deeply into Heila's flesh, embedding itself directly next to her heart as the tendrils wrapped around it.

Though blood trailed down her chest from the wound, Heila made not a sound. Not when Amahle cut into her flesh and not when the seed entered her chest. Her hands curled into tiny fists and her nails bit into her palms as she fought against the pain, but she refused to cry out when Ashlynn had already borne so much for her.

Seeing Heila standing strong after receiving the seed, Ashlynn quickly moved on to the final verse of the ritual.

"Sleep now, and seek within,

For strength that flows from coven's kin,

Now come to master willow's way,

To heal and guard by night and day.

Or let your form to wood return,

And forsake the power for which you yearn."

Amahle's spider-like limbs moved quickly to catch Heila as the magic of the ritual took her firmly under its spell, plunging her into a deep, mystical sleep.

The glowing glyphs and phantom willow branches faded away as the ritual reached its conclusion. Now, as Amahle laid Heila down on the sandy soil of the barren island, only a faint flicker of silvery-green light could be seen on the diminutive woman's chest.

The seed had been planted, now it was up to Heila, whether she would grow into a powerful witch, or the seed would consume her, growing into a willow tree and becoming part of the Briar for the rest of her days.

Chapter 277: An Overdue Conversation

In Lothian City, the week-long Holy Festival of Light had overtaken the city. At the center of the city, the fortified Holy Temple gleamed like a golden beacon with strings of lanterns and large bonfires lit along every tower and rampart, the temple turned itself into the 'Eternal Sun' at the center of Lothian City.

The streets were filled with revelers, whether they were truly pious or indulging in more worldly pleasures, the entire city came alive to celebrate the Holy Lord of Light who watched over the people and protected them from the scourge of demons who infested the land.

Far removed from the revels, Marquis Bors Lothian looked down on the festivities from the window of his office, high in Lothian Manor. This year, in order to help bolster Owain's presence among the common people, he'd chosen to step back from many of the festivities.

His eldest son's relatively successful raid deep into the wilderness created an opportunity to celebrate the power of humanity and the Holy Lord of Light that Bors would be foolish not to capitalize on, no matter what he thought in private.

Behind closed doors, however, he wondered if the price of Owain's victory had been worth it. A single village destroyed for the price of half his men. Worse, it had only been possible because of the assistance of an Inquisitor and several Templars along with members of the Temple Guard.

The Church, it seemed, was no longer content to allow the Lothians to fight for their own destiny on the frontier. The coming Holy War might bring them enough knights and noblemen from across the sea to secure their future as a duchy on the backs of the aristocracy, but if it took the full might of the church to break into the western lands then Lothian March's days of independence would quickly come to an end.

A soft knock at his door interrupted Bors' brooding thoughts. At this hour, with the city caught up in revelry, few would dare disturb him, especially with Owain handling so many of his formal obligations this year. Fewer still would be admitted by his guards without alerting him to the identity of his guest and seeking his approval to admit them.

When he saw who stood in his doorway, however, Bors understood why the guards had let him pass without challenge. The white and gold vestments of a high-ranking priest carried their own authority, even if the man wearing them was his son.

"Loman," Bors said, turning away from the window to look at his younger son. "I'm surprised you could spare a moment during the festivities to see an old man like me. Has something come up? You know I dislike it when the Church chooses to abuse you as a go-between to negotiate with me," he said with a dark scowl forming between his greying brows.

"This is personal, Father," Loman said, his steps faltering slightly under his father's gaze as he came to stand before the imposing desk carved from the trunk of one of the demon's Ancient Oak trees. "I came to talk to you about Owain. May I sit?" he asked, gesturing to one of the large, high-backed chairs in his father's stately office.

The stuffed heads of demons, captured weapons, and fading banners that covered the walls were all carefully placed to overawe visitors and impress upon them the might of the Lothian line in battling against the demon menace. As a child, Loman had played in this office and the snarling heads or hollow-eyed skulls held no fear for him.

Now, however, as he stood before his father, he found himself strangely distant from all of it. The eyes of the stuffed heads seemed to follow him and the open mouths of the mounted skulls silently cried out 'outsider.'

"If it was personal, you shouldn't have worn that," Bors snapped, gesturing at Loman's white and gold robes. "If you wanted to come as a son to see his father, you should have put aside the vestments and come to me as a man," he said, dropping heavily into his own chair behind the desk.

"If you'd like, I can change," Loman said, continuing to stand. Owain, he imagined, would have flopped into the chair as soon as his father sat, but Loman held himself to a different standard. Since he'd asked his father's permission, he wouldn't sit until he gave it.

He just wished that his father could still see his son within the robes. Loman Lothian could relax in his father's presence. Loman the Priest couldn't enjoy that luxury.

"Don't waste your time or mine," Bors said tersely. "Sit boy," he said after staring at his son for several breaths. "You don't have to be so polite with me. Your mother isn't here to scold you about propriety anymore."

"I know," Loman said. His eyes glanced to the side of his father's desk where he found his mother's embroidery chair, still sitting to the side as if waiting for her to return and take up her needlework while Bors handled the business of the march. "But I think she was right that the little things matter more than people give them credit for. A little extra courtesy never hurt anything."

"But it does, Loman, it does, more than you know," the old marquis said. Opening a desk drawer, he pulled out a small bottle of fortified wine along with two small cups. "Since you've come to see your father, then drink with your old man," he said, filling each cup near to the brim with the dark, strong wine. "Or do you need to abstain while you're wearing... that?"

"It's fine," Loman said, leaning forward to take a cup. "To Mother, may she find her eternal rest in the Heavenly Shores," he said, raising the cup to offer a toast.

"To Isla," Bors said, raising his own cup before taking a large gulp of wine. "So, out with it boy. You came to discuss your brother. What has he done that has you so unsettled that you'd come to see me in the dark of night during the middle of your Church's holiest celebration?"

In the months since Inquisitor Diarmuid arrived, Bors and his son Loman had grown even further apart, particularly after Sir Tommin abandoned his service to Owain, taking a Templar's oath and taking up some kind of position near Loman.

While there were limits to the information he could obtain about the activities occurring within the Temple at the heart of his city, common acolytes and servants were still worldly enough to understand the value of a silver penny or two. From the reports the Marquis had received, Loman had been keeping close company with the Inquisitor ever since his arrival.

That could be explained as a simple duty. For the High Priest to assign someone as important as Loman as the temple's liaison with the Inquisition likely made sense. The Inquisitor's actions, however, left Bors feeling something else was going on with his son and the Inquisition.

This conversation between them was something that both men felt was long overdue. Now, perhaps they could finally get the answers that each of them so desperately wanted. Whether it was about Owain or the Inquisition, the time for avoiding each other to avoid the subject had come to an end.

"Father," Loman said after taking a deep drink of his own. "I don't believe that Owain is fit to be your heir. I want to contend for his place as the successor to your throne."

Chapter 278: Contending For The Throne

"Ha," Bors snorted, nearly spilling his wine when he heard Loman say he wanted to contend for the Lothian throne. "A little late for that, don't you think, Priest Loman?" Bors said pointedly. "You've sworn your life to your Church. What do you have to do with the succession at this point?"

"Just because I wear the Church's robes at the moment, Father," Loman said in an attempt to separate himself from his father's distrust of the Church. "That doesn't mean I've ceased to be your son. That doesn't mean I stopped caring about the people of Lothian March. In fact, it's the opposite." Seeing that his father was listening with no intention to interrupt, Loman continued pressing his point.

"Father, all these years, I thought that the best thing I could do for Lothian March was to use my position to protect the souls of our people while Owain led the charge against the demons," Loman said. "As brothers, I thought we could learn from the era of Four Lothian Brothers, supporting each other from the throne and temple equally."

"Those four nearly signed our family legacy over to the Church," Bors countered. "If my great-grandfather hadn't taken the throne, all four of them would have been Templars and even he had to be persuaded to give up the power of a holy sword to rule the march and carry on the family. I'm not sure that they're such a good example for you."

"I think they are," Loman countered. "All of them were deeply devout and unified in their desire to cleanse the land of demons. The harmony between the family and the Church was never greater and the people prospered for it. Our gains may have been small," he said.

"But our barons grew stronger under their rule, and more lines of noble knights were founded during their reign than under any other Lothian Marquis," he added. "Their descendants now manage many more villages than we've established in the years since then. The people prospered because of the unity between the family and the faith."

"And that's what you want to do by contending for the succession?" Bors asked, taking another large gulp of potent wine. "Do you want to become the Holy Marquis of Lothian March?"

"No," Loman said, shaking his head. "I have to put down the stole to take the throne. I cannot keep a priest's position and rule over secular affairs. The Church has learned its lessons well. A king must compromise his faith at times to rule his people. A priest who compromises his faith in such a way is no longer fit to be a priest."

"And a king who will not compromise his faith isn't fit to rule," Bors said, finding himself in agreement with his son. "So why is it that you think that Owain isn't fit?"

"Because a king or a lord may compromise his faith in order to rule, but he may not compromise the integrity of his authority," Loman said. His fingers tightened around his wine cup as he gathered his courage. Everything he'd discussed so far, from the era of Four Brothers to the balance between faith and rule, had all been leading to this moment.

The words that would follow could never be taken back, could never be forgotten, and might shatter their relationship as father and son. The consequences of that happening were dire and contemplating them had kept Loman awake for many sleepless nights. But the consequences of doing nothing, in his mind, were even worse.

Taking a deep breath, Loman steadied himself and met his father's steely gaze with an unflinching look of his own. When he spoke again, his voice carried the same measured tone he used when speaking to men who had come to confess their crimes. The guilty had to stare directly into the truth of their own actions, and his father could no longer be allowed to hid from the truth of what had happened.

"Father, a lord cannot flaunt the law," Loman said, keeping his voice as even and controlled as he could, even as the cup of wine trembled in his hand. "Owain proved that he cannot be trusted with your throne when he murdered his wife on their wedding night and paraded an imposter before the people to conceal his crime."

For a moment, it felt like the room had frozen. Bors stared intensely at Loman, and the young man stared back, each of them trying to read the other's face and wondering how much the other person knew. Finally, Bors was the first to break the silence.

"So the Church knows," he said with a heavy sigh. "Did they send you to challenge me about it?"

"No, they didn't," Loman said, a slight sigh of relief escaping his lips. It wouldn't have been out of character for his father to explode in fury, even drawing a weapon if he felt that Loman was threatening him. That he didn't said much about how seriously he considered Loman's desire to challenge for the position as heir.

"I've spoken with Inquisitor Diarmuid about this matter," Loman said, choosing to be more forthcoming. "He came to investigate Lady Ashlynn Blackwell's actions, to determine if she had established a 'coven' of witches or had spread demonic influence."

"And? Did he find any proof that she consorted with demons?" Bors asked.

"None," Loman said flatly. "We exhumed the body and examined her mark. The Inquisition isn't convinced that the mark is genuine. It may just be an oddly shaped birthmark. These things aren't unknown."

"That Diarmuid has been here, sniffing about, for months," Bors said, opening his drawer again and retrieving the bottle to pour another cup. "How thorough was this investigation?"

"Very," Loman said, looking away from his father and staring into the dark red wine in his cup. "The investigation isn't over. Inquisitor Diarmuid will be heading to Blackwell County after the festival ends. He intends to investigate Lady Ashlynn's known associates there, her tutors and the guild masters she was known to be close with, just in case one of them may have been a source of demonic influence on her."

"But the Church believes that Owain may have committed simple murder," Bors said darkly. "Rhys Blackwell swore that his daughter never showed signs of consorting with demons but he admitted she bore the mark. Now you're telling me that this whole thing was some kind of misunderstanding? Do they intend to charge Owain with magnicide over this?"

As he spoke, a fire began to burn in Bors thick belly. He'd worked hard to prevent this whole situation from coming to pass. He pressed the Blackwells to accept their part in all of this to protect his son from being accused of murder and he offered a chance to salvage their alliance if they would play along with the deception long enough to let 'Ashlynn' die quietly away from the public eye. As long as Lady Jocelynn would take Ashlynn's place, things hadn't become unsalvageable yet.

But now, knowing that the Inquisition knew the truth, Bors felt like he had been cornered between the king's justice, the Inquisition's power and his own son's recklessness.

"That's why I wanted to talk to you, Father," Loman said. "If we continue on the path we're on, I don't see things ending well for anyone. But maybe, we can find a way to do what's right for our people and the family as well."

"Will you hear what I have to

Chapter 279: Between Father And Son

"Will you hear what I have to say?"

Loman's question hung in the air for a tense moment while Bors Lothian stared at his son as if he was truly seeing him for the first time.

"No," Bors said bluntly. "You've grown, son, I'll give you that. It takes a set of stones to try to blackmail your own father into following your scheme. Maybe the apple didn't fall as far from the tree as I thought."

"Father, I," Loman started only to be cut short by his father's fierce reproach.

"No, you sit there and you listen to what I have to say," Bors snarled, pointing an accusing finger at Loman. "Your father asked you a question. Your liege lord, if you still remember what that is, asked you a question. Yes or no, does the Inquisition intend to charge your brother with the crime of magnicide? Will they drag him before the king's justice and the ruling council of dukes?"

Bors voice grew louder and louder the more he said and his face grew redder and redder from the combination of wine and fury. For a son of his to come to blackmail him, just how weak had he become in his children's eyes?

"I don't know," Loman admitted, lowering his head as he felt the full weight of his father's fury. How long had it been since he'd seen his father this fierce? Since mother died? Or even longer?

"Right now, only a few people within the Church know the truth," Loman explained. "Inquisitor Diarmuid has shared a report with the Inquisition in the Holy City. I know, as does Sir Tommin, and Confessor Eleanor has been assigned to investigate Lady Jocelynn and to ensure that nothing which might have affected her sister comes to taint the remaining Blackwell daughter."

"So what you're saying is that no one who can make a decision is aware of the truth," Bors said, slumping back in his chair. "No one has made a decision yet. But if they know everything you've said, then why haven't they?"

"Because Owain is good at killing demons," Loman said with a heavy sigh. "For all that went wrong with Brother's raid, and Inquisitor Diarmuid acknowledges things that went wrong, two things were very clear to him."

"First, Owain is very, very good at killing demons. You may not have heard, but Sir Tommin has mastered a Holy Sword of Light. Diarmuid said that Owain kept pace with him even without a holy relic of his own," Loman said.

"Your brother is a madman with a sword in his hand," Bors acknowledged with a hint of pride in his voice. Even in his youth, Bors wouldn't have considered himself to be Owain's equal. Hearing that the Church shared his assessment of his son's skills both filled his chest with pride and blunted the anger he

felt. "If only he were aware of the battlefield around him. What was the second thing that the Inquisitor saw?"

"He saw the strength of the flat-tailed demons first hand," Loman said with a heavy sigh. "Inquisitor Diarmuid believes that the Church has been underestimating the strength of the demons in the mountains based on what they knew of the demons encountered in the lowlands. Because of that, and because Brother has demonstrated incredible skill at killing them..."

"The Church may decide it's better to keep his matters quiet," Bors said. Taking a sip of his wine, he stared at his younger son for several minutes before he spoke again. "You're still too young, Loman. You tell me all this and you think I'd still support you in contending to be my heir?"

"I do," Loman said. His hands gripped the well worn arms of the chair tightly enough that his knuckles turned white but he forced himself to relax and continue to make his points. His father was a wise man and a veteran lord of many decades. If he could see the logic of things, Loman was certain that he could still guide his father to the right decision.

"Whether the Church charges Owain with a crime or not, the opinion of the people will matter greatly when he begins to conscript an army," Loman pointed out. "A popular ruler with a reputation for slaying demons can raise a banner that many would rally to. But a ruler who loses half his men in battle who is rumored to have slain his wife..."

"You're playing with fire, boy," Bors said, his brows lowering as he saw where Owain was heading. "You haven't seen what happens when the common folk rebel. It isn't a pretty sight. Men pick sides for the strangest of reasons, unable to discern the truth from the lies and the things in between that fly about like arrows on a battlefield. Neighbors with grudges kill each other in the name of the lord they chose because their neighbor believed differently than they did..."

"The will of the mob is a dark thing son," the Marquis said as he looked at Loman with flinty eyes that seemed to see right through him. "Are you certain that you can wield that blade without it twisting in your hands?"

"The Church has always stood for truth in the light, Father," Loman said calmly. While it was true that he'd never seen the common folk revolt, he'd read the sealed histories of the Church. More than once in the centuries since Lothian March was founded, common folk had risen up against the Church.

Some even began to trade with demons and advocated for peace with the enemies of the Light. Those rebellions had been suppressed brutally and all but a few records of the events expunged from the history that was taught outside the temples.

"If I speak from the pulpit to share the truth of my brother's deeds, then the people will know what is true and what is false," he said. "This is the difference between someone who has been a priest and someone who has only ever been a lord."

"You're naive," Bors snorted. "You've thought long and hard and you've come a long way to reach this point, but you don't know the church the way a lord does. You can declare your 'truth' all you want. Someone else will point out that the Inquisition hasn't charged Owain with a crime."

"The longer the Church does nothing, the more rumors will circulate that you're attempting to replace your brother as the heir," Bors said, his strong fingers tapping firmly on the ancient wood of his desk as he made his points. "And before you protest, that rumor would be just as true as the one you'd spread. Because that's what you are trying to do and you can't deny that."

"Further," Bors said before his clever son could respond. "Your support as a priest is strong but the people know nothing of your ability to rule, or to keep them safe from demons. You've never gone to war, never set foot on the battlefield. You're untried, unproven and ultimately, that will make you unconvincing."

"I don't doubt that you can stir up the rabble, son," Bors said. "But if you want to rule this march, you have much, much more that you must demonstrate before you're ready."

"Now, it's my turn to ask," Bors said, leaning over his desk to peer into his son's eyes. "I might be willing to give you a chance, but I won't follow your scheme. If you want to inherit my throne, you do it MY way."

"So, now it's my turn to ask. Will you listen to what your father has to say?"

Chapter 280: To Become The Heir

Sweat rolled down between Loman's shoulder blades and his body trembled as his father's powerful presence rolled over him like a landslide. For as long as he'd held fast to his decision to dedicate his life to his church, there had never been a reason for the two to come into conflict with each other.

Certainly, there had been some spirited conversations at the family dinner table when a younger Loman had uncritically repeated things he'd learned at the temple but there had never been any heat in his father's words when they traded ideas between the salad and main courses.

Now, however, for the first time, he felt himself on the receiving end of his father's full force of will and his decades of accumulated wisdom and he realized that he'd badly misunderstood his father's gentle and accepting nature. His father accepted because nothing Loman said or did ever threatened him. Now that Loman had chosen to launch an offensive, his father's counterattack left him with little room to maneuver.

"Of course," Loman said, trying to regain his composure in the face of his father's intensity. "I will always listen to Father's wisdom."

"Smart lad," his father said, stretching out his hand to top off his son's cup of wine. "Let me get the nastiness out of the way first. Five years ago, if you'd approached me with a desire to become my successor, I would have been delighted. You showed a great deal of promise, more than your brother and I thought you would have made a better ruler than he would."

"Unfortunately, that time has passed," Bors said, ruthlessly stomping on the light of pride that had begun to shine in his son's eyes. "You wasted five years, and you can't get them back. I let you enter the Temple because you said you wanted to and because your mother..." The Marquis abruptly stopped, forcing back the memories that threatened to spill forth when he thought of his departed wife.

"Your mother always supported you in following your faith," he said. "If she had still been with us, I might have argued but, I suppose I failed you just as you failed me when I let you do what you wanted."

"Father, I," Loman started, only for his father to cut him off once again. Clearly, the wine was starting to affect his father's mood but his mind was still as sharp as ever.

"I said you listen and you will listen," Bors said, tapping firmly on the desk. "During the past five years, what have you done to show the people you can rule and what has your brother done with those years?"

"Your brother might be riding a lame horse, Loman," Bors said. "But yours is still in the stable. He's way out in front with battle honors, a public wedding to a beautiful noblewoman who captivated the people with stories of years spent in romantic courtship, and he's forming alliances with everyone from the merchant guilds of Blackwell County to the Dunn family of all people," Bors said, shaking his head in amazement at how his least talented son had managed to court the thorniest of baronies in Lothian March.

"I've done much to help the people, Father," Loman insisted. "We feed more of the poor, heal more of the sick, clothe more of the needy. The temple's doors are open wider than they've ever been and the pews are filled at every service. I have been there before the people, and beside them, every day for all these years."

"It's not enough," Bors said, waving a hand dismissively. "You have some reputation among the people in Lothian City, but if you called the barons to war, who would send their finest soldiers and who would send their discipline problems? Which could you press for an extra levy of grain and which would send you rotten wheat?"

"This is why I say that you've wasted these past five years, confined in your temple and rarely leaving Lothian City," Bors said. "If you're going to contend for the position of heir, you cannot be so disconnected from the burdens of the throne. Your brother, for all that he has fallen short, has worked hard to take up these burdens. Even now, he's standing before the people in my stead, showing them the man who will be their next Marquis."

"You said you might be willing to give me a chance," Loman said, looking for a silver lining to the dark clouds his father's words summoned around him. It wasn't until his father pointed out his own shortcomings that he realized the trap he'd fallen into.

It was easy to criticize Owain for his failures when he had known only success in all his endeavors. But the inescapable truth was that Loman hadn't failed because he'd never tried. The burdens he had shouldered within the thick and mighty walls of the temple weren't the same as the ones that Owain shouldered at all. If he wanted to take the throne from his brother, he would have to prove that he could bear those burdens better than his brother could.

"Owain has managed something extraordinary in befriending Liam Dunn," Bors said. "The problem is that Owain's obligations require him to leave for Blackwell County after the Holy Festival of Light. Meanwhile, Liam is raising a force to attack the demons in the wilderness."

"I've heard," Loman said, nodding along as he saw where his father was going. "Liam Dunn has been searching for support for his campaign. I could speak out from the pulpit and encourage people to flock to his banner. Perhaps I could direct some capable pensioners his way and..."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," Bors interrupted, pointing a finger at Loman so fiercely that his son almost flinched even though a massive desk stood between them. "You'll march to war with Liam Dunn or I'll hear no more of you contending to be my heir."

"March to war?" Loman said, blinking in surprise. "I'm not like Owain, Father. I carry a healer's staff but my fighting skills are meager at best."

"But your healing skills are much more than meager, aren't they?" Bors said with a calculating gleam in his eye. "Owain counts his victories by the trophies he takes from his kills. You can count your victories by the lives you save while exposing yourself to danger."

"No Lothian Marquis has ever failed to take to the field and fight against the demons," Bors said. "I can accept an heir who heals the wounded and commands his army from the rear but I can never accept an heir who will not join the battle."

"So, the choice is yours, my son," Bors said pointedly. "There is an opportunity for you to prove yourself. I will not retire this year or for the next several years. If you can show me through your deeds that you are worthy then I can consider you as a better heir than Owain. But if you retreat at the first opportunity then this conversation will end and I will face the Church myself in your brother's matter."

"Now, I don't want to hear the words you've prepared to say," Bors said, his voice piercing Loman, like nails pinning him to the chair. "Tell me what you're going to do."