

The Vampire 481

Chapter 481: Ripples Through Hearts

A deep silence fell over the Great Hall as the halves of the ancestral horns clattered to the ground, each piece rolling briefly on the ground as the iridescent light that once illuminated it seemed to bleed into the air before fading away like fog on the wind leaving the severed horns cold and lifeless. The sound of Nyrielle's ax passing through the horns, a high pitched -CRACK- like elegant crystal shattering on stone, continued to ring in everyone's ears long after the severed horns rolled to a stop.

In her chair, Old Svenja trembled visibly and her stoop-shouldered frame seemed to shrink further as she watched darkness ripple across the horns, devouring what little light they had left and rendering them as lifeless as the stones of the mountain.

Once the greatest of her people, their stories had only recently been rediscovered, yet now, instead of taking places of honor in Ancestral Caves where generations could learn from their wisdom, they would only be remembered as the scheming manipulators who caused the fall of the High Pass. It hardly seemed fair for so many centuries of service to count for so little in the end, but if her long life had taught her anything it was that life was rarely fair.

Beside her, Commander Jannik stood rigid, his dark fur bristling along his shoulders as conflicting emotions warred within him. Part of him wanted to cry out at the injustice of it all. Twice this year, Lady Nyrielle had visited, and twice this year, she had destroyed the horns of his clansmen. For this alone, he should hate her from the soles of his feet to the tip of his horn.

And yet, when he recalled the overwhelming presence and the near irresistible urge to worship the horns of these ancestors... he struggled to say that Lady Nyrielle was wrong to destroy them. They had seen first hand the lifeless husk that the ancestors had turned Hauke into when he fought back against their control and he didn't believe for a moment that he would have fared better than the young lord had.

Caught between both feelings, he could neither celebrate the destruction of their ancestral relics nor show gratitude for the woman who had freed them from a potential life of servitude, controlled by the ghosts of heroes long dead. Caught up in the maelstrom of conflicting feelings within his heart, he could only turn his eyes to the powerful vampire, waiting to hear what fate she had in mind for his people now that the trial had come to an end.

Further back in the room, Darfrir and his young followers responded differently. While the elders wore faces of deep loss and inner turmoil, the young men saw the world through much simpler eyes.

They finally understood just how strong Young Hauke had been to stand up against the ancient ancestors for as long as he had and seeing the way he had struggled to speak up on behalf of his father instead of pleading for his own life had cemented his position in their minds as the greatest Frost Walker of their generation.

"Next they will announce the new ruler of the High Pass," he whispered to his companions. "I hate it but... I cannot fight the vampires or the witches," he admitted, even though it pained him. Nyrielle's single blow with her shadowy ax had removed every last doubt in his mind and heart that he could stand against her.

"But I haven't lost my tongue to speak or my will to use it," the young warrior said. "When the time comes, I will speak up for Young Lord Hauke. No one else has his strength and I'm done with being lorded over by these old, fading relics who bow and scrape and surrender instead of fighting to the end. When I speak out, will you speak with me?" Darfrir asked. The others nodded grimly, quickly agreeing that it was time for someone who understood them to take the throne. Someone like Hauke who would fight with all his strength for his family and his clan.

On Nyrielle's side of the hall, reactions varied just as widely as they had among the frost walkers, though there were far fewer expressions of grief or loss and many more who gazed upon the Harbinger of Death with a newfound sense of awe.

Standing tall and proud with Nyrielle's delegation, Savis's golden eyes spent little time watching Nyrielle dispensing justice and focused instead on the widely expressive faces of the crowd. Wherever he looked, he found traces of reverence, fear, sorrow, triumph and so many other emotions that he was momentarily overtaken by the feeling that he'd been encased in ice, trapped on the other side of an impenetrable barrier that prevented him from sharing in the feelings that drove so many of the people around him.

Beside him, Tausau's mismatched features betrayed a surprising compassion as he watched the Frost Walkers process their loss while his own Mongrel Horde seemed cloaked in a strange form of pride. They had lost more than one in ten of their people, but tonight, the loss of their Clanless kin had been mourned and honored and the woman they fought for made it clear that she would not cast them aside or diminish their achievements.

They were all feelings that Savis could recognize and even dimly remember, but his own heart didn't tremble in the slightest. For him, this had been a short battle, worth celebrating for the great victory he had helped to achieve, but filled with little glory or opportunity to fully rouse his bloodlust. Instead, even as the people around him began to turn their minds to celebration, he turned his attention to Nyrielle, once again wondering what she might demand from him to receive the gift she'd bestowed on Tausau to let him feel again.

In front of the fearsome vampires from the Tangled Wood, Heila lowered her wand slowly, her grass-green eyes filled with a mixture of awe and relief. The overwhelming pressure that had emanated from the horns had reminded her too much of Cecile's attempts to control her during her own trial and she was immensely grateful that Talauia stood with her when she pulled her wand to protect the common people behind her who had come to bear witness to the trial.

Her heart swelled with fear and determination when she moved, but her body lacked the strength to do more than raise a feeble shield against the overwhelming presence of the ancient ancestors.

"You've done enough," Ignatious said softly, appearing silently beside Heila and kneeling in a smooth, graceful movement as he wrapped an arm around her shoulders, supporting her before her strength failed her entirely.

"Come sit with me," he added, scooping her up and carrying her back to their seats at the head of the delegation from Nyrielle's side. Warm, soothing energy flowed from him, banishing the chill of the Frost Walker's Great Hall and enveloping her in a gentle warmth that carried the slightest trace of freshly split firewood and a crackling hearth on a cold winter's day.

"Don't let me sleep," Heila said quietly as she drew closer to the fallen Inquisitor's rekindled warmth. "I need to be here for Lady Ashlynn," she insisted. "For what comes next."

"I know," Ignatious said, gently running his fingers through her soft, tousled curls and tucking a stray strand of hair behind a curled horn. "It won't be long now..."

As the last echoes of the horns' shattering faded, Nyrielle turned away from the broken relics, making a small gesture for the soldiers who had carried them into the great hall to take them away but paying them no further attention. Her executioner's ax dissolved into wisps of shadow that curled around her like ravens returning home to roost at the edges of her wings before blending seamlessly with the inky black aura that clung to her dark feathers.

With a slow, measured stride that carried all the weight of the onlooker's expectations, she ascended the dais once more to rejoin Ashlynn, her midnight eyes reflecting nothing of the emotions that had briefly flickered across her face during Old Svenja's plea for dignity. The time to consider the needs of the dead had passed, and the people who had harmed her darling had finally met their end.

Now, it was time for her to withdraw and pass the honor of the hour to the woman who had come to mean more to her than even her beloved Vale of Mists. Tonight, she and Ashlynn would take a step forward on a path that no one had dared to walk for centuries. It wasn't the way they had intended to begin, but even her kind and gentle lover recognized the opportunity before them that would never come again.

"The dead have had their justice," Nyrielle declared formally, bringing the trial to a close. "Now, it is time to focus on the needs of the living. The throne of the Eldritch Lord of the High Pass sits vacant. It is time to fill that void..."

Chapter 482: The Next Lord of the High Pass

Sitting next to Nyrielle, Ashlynn took a deep breath and tried to still her beating heart, or at least quiet it enough for her to take comfort in the calm, steady echo of Nyrielle's heartbeat within her chest.

They had discussed what was to come and worked hard to build toward this moment, but until they arrived at the conclusion, every step felt like it was taken on thin ice over a vast chasm. Hauke's momentary escape from his curse had given her great hope, both for her friend and for the future of the High Pass, but now, as the final moment was upon them, she couldn't help but tremble with anxiety that something would go wrong at the end.

"Last night, Lord Ritchel fell in single combat against the Thistle Witch," Nyrielle said, shocking everyone in the hall with what seemed to be a decision to grant the throne of the High Pass to Talauia by right of conquest.

"If this was enough to lose his place as Eldritch Lord of the High Pass, then no lord would ever risk their thrones to stand in battle with their own army," Nyrielle continued before someone like the young Darfir could raise a fuss.

"There are times when a lord must suffer a personal defeat for his nation to claim victory. Because we understand this, even though she defeated Lord Ritchel, the Thistle Witch Talauia will not claim the throne of the High Pass," Nyrielle said. "Unless you wish to contest my judgment?" she asked, raising a dark eyebrow at the winged witch.

"Not at all, not at all," Talauia said, hovering above her seat with wings that beat rapidly. "I cannot, cannot rule this place at all," she declared before any of the people who still looked her with eyes filled with hostility over the death of the Honor Guard could make trouble for her. "I never wanted to take the High Pass. I just wanted, just wanted to break his sorcery and free Auntie Ashlynn."

"You did the right thing, Talauia," Ashlynn said with a gentle, reassuring look. "If you and Sir Ignatious hadn't done what you did to break the ice prison, I might have fallen to the ancestors. If that had happened, I doubt that anyone would have survived the aftermath of my death," she said, reaching out for Nyrielle and lacing her fingers through the other woman's hand.

"So if not the Thistle Witch by right of conquest," Commander Jannik said, standing up and squaring his shoulders as he faced the two women on the dais. "Then who will take the throne of the High Pass? Do you intend to open the floor for challengers now?" the dark-furred Frost Walker asked, flexing his claws with eagerness at the notion.

"There has already been a challenge issued for the Throne of the High Pass," Nyrielle said smoothly as though she had anticipated the question. "The spirits of your ancestors issued a challenge, hoping to claim the throne directly. My Seneschal Ashlynn answered that challenge, defeating them in single combat."

"As the Eldritch Lady of the Vale of Mists, I witnessed the end of her duel," Nyrielle said, sweeping her dark, midnight gaze across the assembled crowd. "A challenge was made and the challenge was met. To the victor goes the throne!"

On one half of the hall, the people who followed Nyrielle leaped to their feet, many shouting and cheering at the proclamation. Those who had witnessed the battle personally had already told the story dozens of times to those who hadn't, and there wasn't a person on either side of the battle who hadn't seen her transform night into day with a pillar of fire unleashed from the Holy Flame Blade.

Now, hearing that she would become the Eldritch Lady of the High Pass, the exultation and triumph felt by Nyrielle's forces was impossible to contain.

"Wait, wait, wait!" Commander Jannik shouted, trying to be heard above the clamor that broke out among Nyrielle's people.

"This isn't right!" Darfir shouted. "The High Pass belongs to the Frost Walkers! We won't be ruled by an outsider!"

Next to Ignatious, Heila sat up as straight as she could, one hand dropping to the handle of her whip as she held her breath, hoping she wouldn't need to use it. It hadn't been easy, not a single moment of the evening's events had been easy for anyone, but they were so, so close to the end that she didn't want to ruin things with violence.

But if any of those Frost Walkers tried to take advantage of Lady Ashlynn's injuries to attack her now... Heila's hand tightened on the handle of her willow whip until her knuckles turned white from the pressure. Anyone who wanted to harm Ashlynn would have to get past her first.

"My friends," Ashlynn said, standing from her throne and holding her bandaged hands up high in the air. The motion hurt more than she expected, and a look of intense discomfort flickered briefly across her face before schooled her features into a calmer mask that imitated Nyrielle's unflappable appearance.

"My friends, please, let me speak," Ashlynn said, directing her plea to Nyrielle's forces and quickly quieting them before she turned to face the Frost Walkers. "My friends, please, listen to my words and then judge me for them."

"Her Dominion has suffered greatly at the hands of our ancestors," Odette said, standing up to face her own people. "Yet she has promised to heal my husband, to help my son escape the curse of the ancestors... and even though we've hurt her and her people, she still calls us friends. Please," she said, placing a hand gently on Commander Jannik's arm. "At least hear her words."

For a moment, no one spoke as all eyes settled on the dark-furred commander. Even the headstrong young men following Darfir seemed willing to let Jannik be the point of the spear resisting this outrageous proclamation.

"Very well," Jannik said after taking and releasing a deep, shuddering breath. "But do not think that we will submit quietly to injustice," he added in a dark tone as he returned to his seat, looking at Ashlynn

with a hostile gaze that said he expected the worst from the servant of yet another ancient vampire who had come to conquer them.

"The throne of the High Pass cannot remain empty," Ashlynn said firmly. "And as the Eldritch Lady of the High Pass, I must occupy it... at least for now. I am not an ideal ruler of the High Pass for many reasons, and I will not hold the throne for longer than I must," she promised.

Among the Frost Walkers, many began to whisper among each other, wondering who she thought should sit on the throne and how long she intended to occupy it. They were questions that everyone wanted an answer to, and Ashlynn didn't leave them waiting for long.

"But now, as your Eldritch Lady, there is something that has not been concluded which must be done," Ashlynn said firmly. "Mistress Nyrielle said earlier tonight that Young Lord Hauke bore some blame for the tragedy that unfolded last night, and I agree with her judgment. At the same time, he labored under incredible pressure to preserve and resurrect long lost techniques that are sacred to the Frost Walker Clan, hoping only to benefit his people."

"Hauke is a good man," Ashlynn said. "And I cannot bear to see him suffer the way he currently does. But he must be punished for the danger he brought among the people of the High Pass," she said, trying to be as even-handed in her presentation of the issue as possible.

"Hauke isn't much younger than my little sister, Jocelynn," Ashlynn added, surprising many in the audience with the sudden personal revelation. "He's too young to take up the burdens he tried to carry, and he has yet to grow into his power or potential. As he currently is, if he were to be returned to the High Pass as soon as his curse is broken, he would struggle to take up the weight of his nation's expectations."

"Therefore, as punishment for his mistakes, Hauke will spend the next five years in exile," Ashlynn said, her words unleashing an avalanche of emotions and shouts of protest from the Frost Walker side of the hall.

"My love," Ashlynn said, turning to Nyrielle with a pained expression on her face. It was taking all of her strength just to get through the night's proceedings, and she had nothing left to awe the crowd into submission. If her words couldn't carry the way...

"You will listen," Nyrielle said, filling the air of the great hall with a trace of her dark, menacing aura. "Wait until my Seneschal has finished speaking before you protest her words. She is far kinder than I, and her terms are far more generous than the ones I would have offered," she said with a final menacing glare before gesturing for Ashlynn to continue.

"Thank you," Ashlynn said softly before turning back to the agitated crowd. "I said that Hauke will spend the next five years in exile, but where he spends those five years is vital to what comes next," she explained. "For the next five years, Hauke will live among the people of the Vale of Mists. He will learn at my side as an apprentice to the Mother of Trees!"

As soon as she mentioned that Hauke would become her apprentice, more whispers broke out among the crowd, this time on both sides of the Great Hall. To be exiled was certainly a punishment, but to become the apprentice of one of the great witches of the world was an honor that most could never dream of! Was this... was this really a punishment?

"While he is in exile, Hauke will learn not only sorcery, but the things that a ruler must know in order to safeguard his nation," Ashlynn explained. "And when the time comes and he has grown into his power, when he is ready to bear the responsibility of the throne, then I will step down as Eldritch Lady of the High Pass and surrender its throne to Young Lord Hauke!"

Chapter 483: Relief At Last

"I will step down as Eldritch Lady of the High Pass and surrender its throne to Young Lord Hauke!"

Ashlynn's words unleashed a storm of emotional cheers on both sides of the Great Hall. Some, like Odette, dropped to their knees and wept openly in relief. They had been conquered, but the Vale of Mists would only rule over them while Hauke had a chance to grow and learn under the guidance of both the Mother of Trees and the Eldritch Lady of the Vale.

To learn sorcery from one of the great witches was already an honor beyond words, but the fact that Hauke would also benefit from being able to learn how Lady Nyrielle ruled over the Vale of Mists was almost more valuable than whatever Hauke could learn from Ashlynn. The High Pass had long kept to their ways and their traditions, but Nyrielle was right that the world was changing.

Now, Hauke would be able to learn from one of the people confronting those changes directly. When Hauke returned from his exile, Odette was certain that he would face some opposition by the more

traditional among the elders. But by then, he would likely command the strength to overrule any serious objections.

On the opposite side, Heila finally took her hand off the handle of her whip and slumped against the warm, comforting figure of Ignatious. They'd done it. Her lady had passed the most fragile, delicate moment of this transition of power, and no blood had been shed to secure their victory.

Now, feeling drained as if she were a wet towel that had been thoroughly wrung out, Heila let go of the last of her reservations and clutched at Ignatious's crimson and gold tunic, burying her face in the soft fabric and inhaling his warm, comforting scent. Her mind drifted at the edge of sleep, and keeping her eyes open felt like far too much work, but her ears remained attentive, listening to everything happening around the hall.

"Lady Ashlynn," Commander Jannik's rich, powerful voice called out over the din of the crowd's celebration. "Lady Ashlynn, will you give me a word?"

"No," Ashlynn said, her voice barely carrying across the hall as she gripped the edge of her throne to steady herself. The room seemed to tilt slightly beneath her feet, and the bandages on her hands had begun to show faint crimson stains where her wounds had reopened from the evening's exertions. Each breath felt like drawing air through wet cloth as the pain in her ribs intensified, but she forced herself to stand straight, knowing the importance of appearing strong in this moment.

"Commander Jannik, if you wish a word with me, you may have it another time," Ashlynn continued, the subtle tremor in her voice noticeable only to those closest to her. Sweat beaded along her hairline despite the chill of the hall, and her complexion had taken on an alarming pallor that contrasted sharply with the vivid green of her dress.

"There are many things that need to be done," Ashlynn explained. "But things that should be sacred, like the crowning of a new Eldritch Lady of the High Pass, will have to wait for things that cannot be delayed, like the healing of Ritchel and Hauke as well as my own recovery."

"My darling Ashlynn has endured enough," Nyrielle said, stepping forward to wrap her arms and one wing around her exhausted lover. While Nyrielle's protective appearance beside her seemed to be a simple act of affectionate support it was also increasingly necessary as Ashlynn's strength visibly ebbed with each passing moment. "Castle Mistress Odette, I'm certain that you wish to join your husband and your son, but for now, we require your presence here in the High Pass."

"Me?" Odette asked, blinking in confusion as she stood, particularly when she was addressed as 'Castle Mistress.' The title she held was one that belonged to the wife of the current Lord of the High Pass, or, should the high pass be ruled by a woman, her husband would be titled 'Castle Master.' The instant that Ritchel was stripped of his title, she should have been stripped of hers as well.

"I will be away from the High Pass for some time," Ashlynn said. "And though I am its Eldritch Lady, I can never dwell here the way your ruler should. The High Pass is truly beautiful," she said, gazing out the crystal clear windows of ice along the Great Hall and at the frosty, snow-covered world beyond.

Sitting above the clouds and under the vast night sky, it truly felt like a place that belonged more to the fairy tales she'd read as a young girl than the real world. But as beautiful as it was, it was barren and all but lifeless. This was no place for the Mother of Trees to dwell. Even looking at filled her heart with a complex ache, yearning for the lush forest of the Vale of Mists, the dense overgrowth of the Briar, or even the windswept fields of seagrass that surrounded Blackwell County. Anything that felt more alive than this desolate place.

"In my place, the people need someone who can care for them," Ashlynn explained. "You can rely on Commander Jannik to protect your people and keep the peace," she added, with a nod at the dark-furred commander. "But right now, after everything your people have just been through, they need a heart that breaks and weeps for those who suffer more than they need a stout arm or strident voice to keep them in line."

"Be their source of comfort and guidance, Castle Mistress," Ashlynn said with a weak smile. "Do this for me now, and I will send word when you can visit Ritchel and Hauke. I'm sure they'll understand that you can't be at their sides while they heal, as much as you wish to."

"As you command, my lady," Odette said, kneeling formally and lowering her horn to the woman who held all of her hopes in her hand. Ashlynn was right that she wanted nothing more than to rush to Ritchel's side and accompany him to the Vale, to be with him every day during his healing and recovery, but...

When she thought of her proud husband, brought low by the petite Thistle Witch, the agony of his wounds surely paled in comparison to the shame he felt at everything that had happened. When the thought struck her, her pale eyes widened in surprise and she looked at the Mother of Trees to see the young woman giving her a very knowing look.

Lady Ashlynn had only met Ritchel on a few occasions, and the time she spent with Hauke wasn't much greater, but she knew. She knew that neither man would feel comfortable with the wife and mother they loved so dearly hovering over them when they were at their weakest.

Asking Odette to care for the High Pass wasn't just about caring for her clansmen, it was also about caring for her family. Neither woman said anything aloud, but for a moment, a knowing look passed between them as they acknowledged that Ashlynn's intention had been recognized. Ashlynn would tend to not only their physical wounds, but also the emotional scars as well. All Odette needed to do was play along.

Toward the back of the hall, Commander Jannik stewed in bitterness that he was denied even the chance to speak at this critical moment. Everyone was cheering for Hauke's appointment as an apprentice of the Mother of Trees, and they were celebrating his confirmation as the next Lord of the High Pass, but no one was looking at the reality of the situation.

The witches and vampires would have five whole years to mold and indoctrinate the future ruler of the High Pass. By then, would he even be someone they recognized as one of their own? He cared deeply for the High Pass, but one group of powerful people had already led him to disaster. Now that his leash was being passed to a new master, everyone seemed to be celebrating, as if they were blind to the chains Hauke would surely bring with him when he returned to become Nyrielle and Ashlynn's puppet ruler.

"Darfrir," Jannik said, approaching the young man and the gathering of celebrating young hunters around him. "I respect you for speaking up tonight. What you did, it took courage."

"Thank you, sir," the young warrior said, tapping the tips of his claws to his chest in a brief salute. "I'm just glad that we won in the end. Young Lord Hauke will be a good Lord of the High Pass."

"Perhaps," Jannik said, tapping his chin for a moment as he organized his thoughts. "But Hauke will need capable men at his side when he returns. Men who can stand up to him and challenge him when he's wrong, or he may find himself caught in a trap designed for him that only others could see."

"Come with me and bring your men," Jannik said. "By the time Hauke ascends the throne, he'll need a new Commander at his side. I may be growing old, but you and your men can't ask for a better mentor to shape you into the best weapon at Hauke's side," he said with a smile.

And perhaps, he thought to himself. If Hauke truly became a puppet of the vampires and the witches, these boys would be the only weapon that could come close enough to the future lord to bring an end to the tyranny that Jannik feared he would bring with him when he returned from his exile.

Chapter 484: The Vale Welcomes You Home

Three days after the battle that fundamentally reshaped the balance of power in the High Pass, Ollie stood nervously at the western entrance to Orava Village, fidgeting with the spill of lace that fell from the cuffs of his fur trimmed coat and trying not to draw any more attention to himself than his appearance in this village already had.

Messenger birds arrived at the ancient fortress at the heart of the Vale of Mists two nights ago, carrying word that Lady Nyrielle and Lady Ashlynn had arrived in the High Pass and would be returning to the Vale soon. That piece of news alone took the entire Vale by storm as preparations were made for a grand welcoming ceremony to take place when they arrived.

The more detailed letter, meant only for Sir Thane and the others who managed the Vale of Mists in Nyrielle's absence, carried much more concerning news. A battle had been fought in the High Pass and Lady Ashlynn had suffered extensive injuries. According to the letter, the injuries were extensive enough that Lady Nyrielle was sending Ashlynn ahead of the rest of the returning army so that she could spend time in the forest recovering from her wounds before returning to the ancient fortress.

"The people of the Vale don't need to know how serious Lady Ashlynn's wounds are," Thane told Ollie when the two met in Sir Thane's office in the ancient fortress. "When she returns, I'll need you to prepare a place for her to recover away from prying eyes, at least until Mistress Nyrielle returns."

Over the past six months, Thane and Marcel had taken Ollie under their dark wings, coming to view the former kitchen boy as something between a lost puppy in need of care and a little brother in need of a good mentor.

Ollie had shown himself early on to be a man who could inspire others with his kindness, compassion, and a deep desire to do the right thing. Some of that idealism, in Thane's opinion, flowed from an almost unhealthy fixation on Lady Ashlynn and Ollie's determination to show her that the faith she placed in him wasn't a mistake.

In truth, Thane didn't think Ashlynn wanted to see the young man pushing himself as hard as he did, but Ollie had formed his opinions about what was 'proper' when he watched Ashlynn driving herself to the

brink of exhaustion during the final weeks of her blossoming period. Ever since then, the former kitchen boy had thrown himself into trying to master his new responsibilities with a vigor that was achievable only by the very young and people like Thane and Marcel who were no longer human.

All of that hard work had paid off, and Ollie had grown into his new role in the Vale of Mists in more ways than one. When he arrived at the ancient fortress, he had been a tall, gangly youth with a wild mane of flame red hair and an awkwardness that came from constantly bowing and scraping before his supposed betters at the Lothian Manor.

Now, he stood tall and proud with a confidence that came a growing series of successes. His cheeks had lost the slightly sunken look of a man who never got enough to eat and his once gangly frame had filled out with lean muscles honed by hard work building a village and long nights spent training with weapons. If Thane could find any fault with the man that Ollie was growing into it was that he was still too naive in matters of politics.

"Why keep her hidden?" Ollie asked, scratching the close cropped hair at the back of his head as he tried to understand why Thane wanted to be so quiet about things. "You don't think anyone here would try to harm her, do you?" Ollie asked, giving the only reason he could think of that Lady Ashlynn's injuries would need to be kept quiet. "There's no way that anyone could harm her in the fortress. Not with you here, and Commander Bassinger has plenty of men to stand guard during the day."

"That's not what I'm worried about," Thane said, turning away from the young man to gaze out the window to the west, where he could feel Nyrielle's presence closer than it had been for several months.

Evening fog had already enveloped the Vale, and only the mightiest of trees poked up through the gray blanket that covered the vale on this dark, moonless night, but no amount of fog could ever shroud his ability to sense the woman who had transformed him from an ordinary night into a powerful vampire. He might not be able to sense Ashlynn through the bond she shared with Nyrielle, but he knew she was out there as well, drawing closer even now.

"Rumors have a way of growing wings, and people who haven't seen her or heard the entire story may believe the wrong things," Thane said as he watched clouds drift across the moon, dimming the silvery light that filtered into his dimly lit office. "The fighting with the Dunns has only just died down, and many of our people, especially the newcomers from the outlying villages, are looking to Mistress Nyrielle and Lady Ashlynn as sources of strength."

"What do you think they would feel if one of the people they had been pinning their hopes on finally arrived, but rather than a powerful witch, they see a woman so badly injured that she can only spend a few hours a day out of her bed?" Thane asked, turning back to the young man and giving him a questioning look.

"It would shake their faith," Ollie said, understanding Thane's point instantly. "But it's just a few days before Lady Nyrielle will arrive. Will Lady Ashlynn really be able to recover enough by the time Lady Nyrielle arrives? If she's that badly injured," he said, his voice quavering with a sudden, terrifying thought. "Will she ever truly recover?"

"Don't get the wrong idea," Thane said, stepping around his desk to clap an arm around Ollie's broad shoulders. "Lady Ashlynn is the Mother of Trees. The High Pass is a bad place for her to fight and a worse place for her to heal. Once she's back in the forest, she'll be right as rain in no time."

"I hope so," Ollie said, putting his faith in the vampire's long decades of experience. "Can I bring a few people with me to prepare her welcome?" Ollie asked, turning the conversation to practical matters. "If she needs to recover in Orava Village, then it would help if I could bring a few people from the castle to help make her comfortable."

"Pft, don't think I don't know who you have in mind," Thane said with a barely suppressed snort of laughter. "Go ahead, I'm sure that Georg is eager to cook for her, but you have to take him quietly," the vampire knight emphasized.

"Don't let him yammer on about cooking for Lady Ashlynn while he tries to pack up half the castle kitchen to go with him. Lie to him about where you're taking him and why if you have to," Thane added with a firm look. "Georg is a good man with a good heart, like you, but he can't keep a secret to save his life."

"I understand," Ollie said with a wide, toothy grin. "I'll only take him from the kitchens, and a few others to help make things easier for her in the village. No one will even notice they're missing."

"Good lad," Thane said, clasping Ollie's wrist firmly. "And once Lady Ashlynn has recovered, I promise that I'll talk to her about your position here in the Vale. She may have her own ideas, but as far as I'm concerned, it's long past time for you to become 'Sir Ollie' in truth, and not just in the eyes of everyone you've helped since coming here."

Thane had made the offer to formally knight Ollie on more than one occasion in the months since Ashlynn's departure, especially when the young man completed the construction of a new village for the refugees in just a few months' time. But Ollie stubbornly refused, insisting that he would wait until Lady Ashlynn decided he was worthy of the honor.

Now, Ollie stood at the western gate of Orava Village, his eyes fixed on the bend in the road where the lead carriage of Ashlynn's entourage had just rolled into view. Six months ago, she had completely changed his life in ways that the former kitchen boy had never dreamed would be possible.

Finally, after months apart, he would get to see her again. In his dreams, he'd eagerly introduced her to Milo, Old Nan, and all of the other villagers he'd come to know so well in the past several months before guiding her on a tour of the freshly constructed village.

He imagined telling her stories about recovering carvings from the burned village of the Heartwood Clan, or the kitchen he'd built next to a stream in order to feed refugees or... or a thousand other things, all in the hopes of seeing that kind smile on her lips and perhaps a bit of pride reflected in her emerald eyes.

But now that she was almost here, his heart was filled with anxiety over her injuries and doubts clawed at his heart, filling it with worry that his preparations for her arrival hadn't been sufficient in some way that he should have thought of but failed to.

The time for worry, however, was long over as her carriage pulled to a stop directly in front of Ollie and the people who had come with him to welcome Lady Ashlynn home. As the door of her carriage opened, Ollie took a deep breath before striding forward and offering an old-fashioned bow, exactly the way that Thane had taught him.

"Lady Ashlynn," he said with the slightest tremble in his voice. "The Vale of Mists welcomes you home."

Chapter 485: No Longer A Boy

For a moment, as soon as the carriage came to a stop, Ashlynn sat absolutely still, closing her eyes and soaking in the energy of the living earth that surrounded Orava Village. Compared to the Briar or even High Fen City, the feeling of lush, growing things was muted, but compared to the barren High Pass, it felt like stepping from a harsh desert into a vibrant oasis.

The trees that surrounded the village were all stunted with roots that dug their way inch by inch through the hard, semi-frozen earth. Like the mighty cypress trees of the Briar, these tenacious pines clung to life in a world tried every year to tear them from the soil they'd claimed as their own and the strength they radiated called out to Ashlynn like a loyal butler, offering to help her up and out of the carriage if only she would lean on their gentle arms.

"Come, my lady," Heila said, standing up in the carriage and offering a hand to help Ashlynn stand. "It will feel even better once we're able to walk among the trees."

"Give me a moment," Ashlynn said without opening her eyes. The messenger birds that Nyrielle sent from the High Pass ensured that there were fresh horses waiting for them at waystations by the time Ashlynn's carriage reached them and they'd made the journey from the Frost Walker fortress to Orava Village swiftly, but the days spent in a bouncing carriage had done little to aid her recovery.

"By steadfast pines where few can thrive,

Where harshest winters leave few alive,

Let patient strength of mountain trees,

Flow through my flesh and bring me ease."

Ashlynn's invocation was simple and she refused to draw too deeply on the younger trees that were close to the village, but despite her reluctance, the trees of the vale seemed almost eager to offer up a portion of their vast reserves of strength to the badly injured Mother of Trees. Much like the night that Owain's men had dumped her body in a shallow grave, each tree within a hundred paces of the carriage offered up a bit of their energy to ease her aches and strengthen her body.

A dark, rich, emerald energy gathered around Ashlynn, flowing across her bandaged hands and feet before sinking deeper into her flesh, washing away pain and aches like a cleansing summer rain. A minute later, when she opened her eyes again, they lacked the pinched strain of pain that had haunted her gaze during much of the journey and her chest rose and fell smoothly, without the trembling ache that had accompanied every breath since bitter cold air invaded her lungs during her battle with the ancestors.

"Now we can go," Ashlynn said, offering a warm, relaxed smile to her lady-in-waiting. "It sounds like they've gathered a few people to meet us," she added as she heard the sounds of boots crunching over the frost covered dirt road that connected the village to the ancient roadway that led over the mountains.

"Lady Ashlynn," a familiar voice called when Heila opened the door. "The Vale of Mists welcomes you home."

"Ollie," Heila said as she hopped out of the carriage, landing lightly and briefly savoring the moment her cloven hooves touched the soil of the Vale of Mists again. Moisture gathered in the corners of her eyes, as if her body recognized the strain of being away from home more than her mind had, but she stubbornly blinked the joyful tears away and focused on practical matters.

"Lady Ashlynn could use a gentleman's arm to guide her to a place where she can rest from the journey," Heila said, offering the young man a smile that was far warmer than he would have expected from the maid who had left the Vale of Mists with Ashlynn so many months ago. "Come take care of Mother," she added with a teasing look. "She's been looking forward to seeing you again for some time now."

"Me? Why would she be..." he started to say, surprised by the glittering, almost mischievous look in Heila's eyes, as if she had some secret that she delighted in keeping from him. "That is, of course," he quickly corrected himself, striding forward and holding out an arm to help Lady Ashlynn descend from the carriage.

The moment Ashlynn saw him, her breath caught in her chest and it took Heila clearing her throat for Ashlynn to realize she'd frozen like a startled deer as soon as she got a look at the former kitchen boy.

Only, 'boy' was a descriptor that she could hardly apply to the young man who stood before her now. Gone was the gangly youth wearing an ill-fitted tunic stained with soot and grease from long hours spent working in the bowels of the Lothian Kitchens.

In his place stood an elegant young lord who carried himself with a clear sense of purpose and strength that went far beyond the physical might of his clearly defined muscles. Tight breaches clung to his sculpted legs before vanishing into the turned down tops of polished cavalry boots that gave him the appearance of a knight on his day off.

The greas stained tunic had likewise given way to an elegant cream colored blouse with lace sleeves that peeked out from the cuffs of his fur-trimmed coat, worn loosely buttoned against the chill of the air in the mountain village.

Most striking, however, was the face that seemed to have transformed from boy to young man in a single summer. Only the faintest traces of reddish stubble could be seen along his jaw and chin, but the last bit of boyish softness in his features had melted away, leaving behind a cool elegance that would have made any young lady's heart flutter.

"I was worried," Ashlynn said as she took the hand he offered and leaned into the strength of his lean, muscular arms to descend from the carriage. "I was afraid that life in the Vale of Mists, living among the Eldritch, would turn into a prison that tormented you. Instead, it seems like you've found the soil where you can grow and flourish."

"I owe it to your kindness and generosity, my lady," Ollie said, helping her down from the carriage and trying not to stare at the bandages wrapped around the fingers of her hand as he felt how much she depended on his strength just to take a few steps down from the carriage.

"Let me take you to the longhouse we've prepared for your stay," he said, breaking with the etiquette he'd carefully studied and skipping introductions for the people who had followed him to welcome her home. There would be time for those later. For now, all he wanted to do was help her to the place where she could rest.

"Georg," Ashlynn called, singling out one of the waiting figures beside the gate as they drew closer. "It's rude of me, but I hope you won't mind treating Heila and I to an oversized meal as soon as you can. The journey has been hard and I've missed your cooking."

"The stew is already simmering, my lady," the bearish cook said with a heart felt smile and a deep bow. "Welcome home."

Chapter 486: Friends Old and New

"Thank you, Georg," Ashlynn said warmly, nodding in acknowledgement as Ollie led her toward the village gate. As much as she wanted to linger for proper greetings, the witchcraft she'd used in the carriage would provide temporary relief at best, and more than anything, she wanted to settle into a comfortable chair by a warm fire with a hot meal. Once she had soaked in the rich, tenacious energy of

the forest around the village, she would be better company for everyone who had come to meet her here.

As she walked alongside Ollie, Orava Village spread before them like a memory from another time, a relic of the years when Nyrielle had been forced to reconquer the Vale of Mists after Cellach Lothian's soldiers and the Church's Inquisitors burned most of the Vale's settlements to the ground.

Surrounding the village, a high wooden palisade wall rose against the backdrop of stunted pines, its timbers weathered to a silvery-gray that looked like the weathered bones of the mountain in the pale autumn sunlight. These days, the wall stood not as much for protection as tradition, a reminder of harsher times when refugees fleeing Lothian territories would arrive at these gates seeking safety before they continued their flight across the mountains.

When Ollie escorted Ashlynn through the main gate, she noticed the well-worn grooves in the ground where the gates swung wide to admit both people on foot and wagons packed with people and goods, evidence of generations who had passed through these same gates.

Generations ago, in the years after Nyrielle's victory over the Lothians, much of the traffic came from people returning to the Vale after being driven from their homes. Though the village hadn't welcomed such refugees in many decades, Ashlynn hoped that Orava village would soon play host to the descendants of those refugees who might finally make the pilgrimage back to the homeland of their ancestors.

Whether they came to visit or to resettle, Ashlynn didn't care, though she hoped that more people would choose to make their homes in the Vale after seeing what it would become in the years to come. For now, however, as long as more people found a reason to cross the mountains and visit their corner of the Eldritch world, Ashlynn would be happy.

"There's a longhouse that's reserved for guests and visitors," Ollie explained, gesturing toward one of the structures that dominated the village interior. Each longhouse rose tall against the crisp autumn sky, built to accommodate the larger frames of bear-like clan members who preferred communal living. The structures formed a loose circle around a central gathering space, and beside each stood garden plots now largely dormant in the late-autumn chill. Only a few hardy greens and root vegetables remained, most covered with cloths to protect them from early frosts.

"I hope you don't mind, my lady," he added a touch awkwardly as they approached the worn, aging structure that stood slightly apart from the others in the village. "I brought some comforts from the

castle, but the guesthouse mostly serves as a stopover for traders crossing the High Pass during the summer. It, it may not be up to your standards," he apologized, worried that she would feel somehow slighted by the humble interior of the long house once they arrived.

"Ollie," Ashlynn said with an amused smile. "Heila and I spent the entire summer living in huts in a swamp. Whatever arrangements you've made, I'm sure they'll be fine," she said, giving his muscular forearm a reassuring squeeze.

As they walked the packed-earth path, Ashlynn felt the weight of watchful eyes. From doorways and windows, villagers observed their passage with undisguised curiosity, but all of them maintained a careful distance.

These were people who had chosen Orava for its remoteness, preferring to live as far from the Lothian borders as they could manage while also avoiding the bustle of the fortress town at the Vale's heart. Though none of them looked resentful at her arrival, they lacked the near reverence that she had encountered in villages closer to the ancient fortress.

Even the pointed hats that she and Heila wore only drew curious glances without any deep emotions of fear or worship that she'd encountered in Eldritch lands, though she supposed that the people of the Vale had little contact with witches in the years since High Lord Torbin's death and the Vale's decline to obscurity.

"They don't mean any disrespect," Ollie said quietly, noticing Ashlynn's awareness of the silent observers. "They're just..."

"People who prefer to be left alone," Ashlynn finished for him with an understanding look. "It's fine, really. Right now, I need to be left alone a bit myself," she said before quickly following up to clarify what she meant. "That doesn't include you, Ollie. You can stay with me as much as you'd like while we wait for Mistress Nyrielle to return."

The inside of the long house was warmed by several crackling hearths along the walls, and the floors were covered by thick carpets that stopped the earthen floor beneath them from leaching heat out of the wide open space. Several curtained-off areas functioned as individual sleeping quarters while piles of cushions formed a semicircle around the largest, central hearth, looking particularly cozy and inviting after spending so many days in the frigid lands of the High Pass.

"This is perfect," Ashlynn said, holding Ollie's hand as she gingerly lowered herself onto a pile of soft cushions before wrapping a blanket around her shoulders and over her lap. "Now, sit, everyone, please," Ashlynn said, gesturing to the remaining piles of cushions. "Knowing Georg, I'm sure he has plenty of stew for everyone, so join us for a meal."

"Are you sure, Lady Ashlynn?" a short, horned soldier asked as he stood uncomfortably beside a pile of cushions. "I can help to bring your things in if you need..."

"Your name is Harrod, is that right?" Ashlynn said, recognizing the soldier who had guided her and Ollie toward Captain Lennart's troop in the hills when they fled from the summer villa. "Harrod, you don't need to be so formal. I'm not even 'officially here' yet, so for now, just sit and eat. We'll be joined soon enough by the men in charge of the carriage and wagons, so don't worry about doing their work and take your ease while you can."

"I'm honored you remember me, Lady Ashlynn," Harrod said, bowing slightly before taking a seat on a pile of cushions.

"You already know Harrod and Georg," Ollie said, taking a seat comfortably on Ashlynn's right side while Heila took her place to Ashlynn's left. "Let me introduce you to two of my good friends," he said, gesturing to a pair of cloaked figures who had stood patiently off to the side while old friends reunited.

"This is Milo, from the Heartwood Clan," Ollie said warmly. "And standing next to him is his wife, Juni. I heard that Heila had been injured as well, so I thought that if you needed an attendant..."

"Sir Ollie speaks very highly of you, Your Dominion," Juni said, her whiskers twitching in barely concealed anticipation as she gave her best curtsy to the powerful witch. Her tail bobbed up and down, nearly thumping the ground with excitement as she felt the rich, wooden energy radiating from the Mother of Trees and the shorter, horned witch beside her.

Of all the witches to walk the world, the Mother of Trees was an almost sacred existence to the Heartwood Clan, and when Sir Ollie had mentioned that she might need an attendant for the next few days because the woman who usually served at her side had also been injured, it had been all Juni could do to keep from throwing herself at his feet to plead for the opportunity.

As is, she'd spent every moment of her free time since arriving working on a small carving made from a fallen branch of the hearty pines outside the village. She'd kept the design simple, working to create a practical hairpin that ended in the shape of a pinecone in the hopes that her feelings of deep reverence could be felt by the current Mother of Trees, even if she lacked claws of her own to read the heart of the person who carved it.

After all, of all the Eldritch people, few had a deeper relationship with trees and wood than the Heartwood clan, and there wasn't a little girl alive who hadn't dreamed that one day a new Mother of Trees would sweep them into a magical journey to join her coven. Such opportunities were incredibly rare, and Juni herself had done nothing noteworthy to earn such an honor, but at the very least, she wanted to present something to the newest Mother of Trees that expressed the feelings held by her entire clan.

"Be easy, my love," Milo teased, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and his tail around her waist. "We're embarrassing Sir Ollie like this," he said, giving her a playful poke in the ribs. It wasn't that Lady Ashlynn's presence didn't have a similar effect on him that it had on his beloved wife, but the veteran archer had already given his loyalty to Sir Ollie.

Right now, as he felt the strong, vibrant energy of the Mother of Trees, his greatest concern wasn't how he could win her favor for himself, but how he could best help his friend realize his own dream of becoming a knight in her service.

"Sir Ollie, is it?" Ashlynn said, raising an eyebrow at the flame-haired young man sitting next to her. "Has Sir Thane made it formal then? I know it was something you wanted."

"No! No, he hasn't!" Ollie said with a panicked expression on his elegant features, returning him in an instant to the kitchen boy he had been when they first met. "That is, he offered, but I wouldn't let him. Not without talking to you first," he said in a rush.

"Lady Ashlynn," Ollie said, taking a deep breath to compose himself. "I want to be a knight, and I've worked hard since you left to learn how, but I won't ever call myself a knight until you tell me that I can. I don't want to be just another knight leading a village in the Vale of Mists," he explained. "I want to be your knight. That is, if you'll have me," he finished quietly.

"Just another knight leading a village?" Ashlynn asked with a brow raised. "Sir Ollie, why do I feel like there's a story that I should hear?"

"Oh, there's quite the story," Georg said, entering the open area with a tray holding several bowls of steaming hot stew that smelled richly of fresh herbs and red meat, along with sections of warm, crusty bread kept warm by the hearth while awaiting Ashlynn's arrival.

"And if Sir Ollie leaves anything out and tries to be humble about all that he's done," Milo said, giving the young man a pointed look. "Then Juni and I will be sure to tell you how he saved our people from Owain Lothian's savagery and gave us a place to call home again."

"From Owain?" Ashlynn said, warmth fading from her face as she sat up straight. "This, I have to hear..."

Chapter 487: Ollie's Virtues (Part One)

Telling Ollie's story took over an hour, and just as they'd promised, Milo and Juni were merciless in pointing out any attempt on Ollie's part to take less credit for something than he deserved or to downplay the difficulties of what he'd done.

During that time, the remainder of Ashlynn's traveling companions slowly filtered into the long house once they'd completed their duties, including an eager and attentive young Emmie who seemed almost upset that Georg had taken charge of attending to Heila's needs along with everyone else instead of summoning her to take care of her lady.

"You'll have plenty of opportunities to wait on me when we reach the castle," Heila said with a laugh as she pulled her young squire onto the pile of cushions next to her. "For now, enjoy Georg's cooking while you can. It's a rare treat for him to cook for you personally."

"Now, now, little Heila," Georg said with a hearty laugh that shook his soft belly. "You know that I always save a few treats for people who are special. I saved treats for you, didn't I? Besides, Sir Ollie helped this time. This is just as much his work as it is mine."

"You know," Ashlynn teased from her pile of cushions as she sipped a rich, full-bodied red wine that tasted earthy and slightly smoky as it slid smoothly across her tongue. In a place like this, she had no doubt that Georg had brought the bottle specifically from Nyrielle's personal cellar, but the smile on Ashlynn's lips when she relaxed to savor the flavor told him that it was more than worth the effort.

"I didn't expect that you would take humility as one of your virtues, Ollie," Ashlynn said, giving the young man a look that swirled with hints of curiosity, consideration and a soft, gentle pride in the young man who had come so far from his days scrubbing pots in the Lothian kitchens. "Have you selected your others?"

"I didn't really plan to take humility as a virtue either," the flame-haired young man said, ducking his head in embarrassment as he became the center of attention. "But Sir Thane said that if I didn't, I wasn't being honest with myself about who I really am."

"Big brother Thane is right," Ashlynn said with a nod. "You have to know yourself, know the kind of person you truly are and the kind of person you want to become, or you'll fail at the very first step," she said, sharing a knowing look with Heila. "So what else have you taken as a virtue?"

Something about Ashlynn's tone suggested that she wasn't just making idle conversation, and Ollie realized that a moment he hadn't expected to come for several days was already upon him. After listening to the praise heaped on him by Milo, Juni, and even Georg, and the way everyone from the Vale of Mists addressed him as 'Sir' Ollie, Ashlynn was testing him to see if he was prepared to live up to the title.

In the Kingdom of Gaal, by tradition, every knight swore to uphold five virtues above all others. Not every knight chose the same virtues, but there were a few that were so common they were seen as almost required.

"Lady Ashlynn won't care about tradition," Sir Thane had advised him one night when they spoke at length about what it would mean for Ollie to become one of Ashlynn's knights. "She's broken with the Church, and I doubt that you'll find any reason to proclaim 'Faith' as one of your five virtues. Humility suits you, but you should think very carefully about the other four."

The question had plagued the former kitchen boy for weeks, and he'd spent more evenings than he could count talking to everyone from Commander Bassinger to Georg to gain some perspective on how the Vale of Mists thought about virtues, but in the end, his decisions needed to come from his heart and no one could make those choices for him.

"Even though I'm not very brave," Ollie began. "I've decided to take Courage as one of my virtues. I hope, one day, to live up to it, but for now I can only do my best so I can live up to it someday in the future."

The instant he said it, Milo shook his head at the man who called himself a 'coward' even while he constantly threw himself into difficult and sometimes dangerous tasks in the name of caring for others.

Ollie's brand of 'cowardice' had given Milo the courage he needed to step back from his vengeance against the Lothians and to focus on building a village and caring for his own family. It wasn't the kind of courage he'd grown up having childish fantasies about.

But when he faced the decision to join Commander Bassinger's army in the fight against the Lothians or return to the village Ollie was building for Milo's family and the other refugees... he'd realized that sometimes, staying away from the fight took even more courage than rushing into it, and he couldn't have reached that point without the young human's example.

"I've also taken Strength as a virtue," Ollie said, surprising both Ashlynn and Heila with his third choice. "Among the Eldritch people, strength is a requirement to protect anything else. My words won't carry much weight if I'm weak, and my people, I mean, the people in the village," he said, his face turning red when he realized he'd casually referred to the villagers as 'my people.' "Well, they're counting on me to watch out for them, and without strength, I can't do that."

"Everyone needs strength in this world," Heila said softly, giving Ollie a gentle look that contained a core of deep strength, like the roots of a tree that had sunk deep into the earth. That strength hadn't been there when she left the Vale of Mists, but looking at her now, it was undeniable that she spoke from experience.

"Even healers need the strength to strike down enemies who would harm the people in their care," Heila added. "So I don't think there's anything wrong with taking Strength as one of your virtues, no matter what kind of knight you're going to grow into."

"Um, thank you," Ollie said at the unexpected advice from an even more unexpected source. "Um, little Emmie said she was your squire now. Does that mean that you've become 'Dame Heila?' Are you a knight now?"

Chapter 488: Ollie's Virtues (Part Two)

"I'm not a knight, little brother Ollie," Heila said with a light, musical laugh as she sipped on a watered down mug of warmed cider. After spending months with Ashlynn discussing the future of their little

coven, she understood what Ashlynn was hoping to see in Ollie better than anyone except, perhaps, Aunt Amahle.

In Heila's estimation, Ollie had done even better at growing into the kind of person who could endure the trial of a seed of witchcraft than she had. Of course, he had no idea that the mentoring he'd received to become a knight would help him so much with what was to come, but that hardly mattered.

In a way, she almost envied him. She was certain that he would have an easier time of his trial than she did with hers, but then, she hadn't had the luxury of time to prepare for months before facing the trial of the Ancient Willow. But, since it was not becoming increasingly certain that Ollie would become the second witch of Ashlynn's coven, it was her job as the 'big sister' to make sure he was ready to become part of their intimate little family.

"I'm the Willow Witch now," she said, puffing her chest up with pride. "And Mother Ashlynn's lady-in-waiting," she added, placing extra emphasis on the word 'mother.' "But just because I'm not a knight doesn't mean that little Emmie can't be my squire," she said, giving her young squire an affectionate tap on the shoulder.

"Oh," Ollie said with a puzzled look on his face. Since when was he 'little brother Ollie?' But, hearing her refer to Ashlynn as 'mother' he assumed it must have something to do with the traditions of witches, so he quickly put it out of his mind. After all, even though Lady Ashlynn was a witch herself, the traditions of witches didn't have very much to do with him. "I see. So, you didn't have to choose virtues for yourself. Or did you? Do ladies-in-waiting have virtues the way knights do?"

"They don't," Ashlynn said, setting down her cup of wine before she drank too much of it. As much as she enjoyed the flavor, it was a heady vintage and she couldn't afford to loose herself to wine when there were still important things to discuss. Besides, if she was going to loose herself to strong drink, she'd prefer to do it when Nyrielle was here to carry her away to somewhere private afterward...

"But we're wandering off the topic," Ashlynn said, bringing the focus back to Ollie. "Humility, Courage, Strength," she said, counting on three fingers and giving him an evaluating look. "What else have you chosen to form the core of your oath as a knight?"

"Justice," Ollie said, without even a hint of hesitation. "I, I don't know how I feel about vengeance," he continued with slightly less confidence, giving Milo an apologetic look before he returned his gaze to Ashlynn's emerald eyes.

"I know people who have lost a great deal," he explained. "And I understand their motivations for revenge. I can't give them what they want from vengeance. But, I can hold the people who wronged them accountable," he explained.

"Whether it's the Lothians or the Dunns or the Church, it doesn't matter. People with power have hurt people who just wanted to live their lives and care for their families. That's not right," the young man said firmly. "So, I intend to stand up for what is right. For the people who don't have the strength to stand up for themselves."

"That's very noble, Ollie," Ashlynn said, accepting his views without challenging them. There would come a time, someday in the future, when she would need to see if he could hold on to these virtues when he was tested in battles of life and death or faced even harder choices, but that day wasn't today. For now, she just wanted to understand how he'd aligned his moral compass and what kind of person he'd chosen to become.

Everything she'd heard so far already put her mind at ease. She hadn't been wrong in the seed she'd chosen for him and she hadn't been wrong to think that he would grow into the kind of man who would be worthy of it. Now, she just needed to see if he was ready to take the hardest step of his life in order to become something even greater than the knight he dreamed of being.

"And your last one?" Ashlynn asked, raising a brow at the young would-be knight. "What is your final virtue?" she asked.

"Hope," Ollie said, looking around the room at everyone gathered together, enjoying each other's company after a meal that had been cooked by both Human and Eldritch hands. "I know it might sound silly, maybe even childish. I know that the real world isn't a fairytale, even when some things seem like one," he said, thinking of how he felt like he'd been pulled into a minstrel's tale when Ashlynn scooped him out of the kitchens and took him on a grand adventure to escape to the Vale of Mists.

"But I hope that one day, the fighting can stop," Ollie said, his pale eyes flashing with determination. "For people like Milo and Juni to raise their kit in peace," he added. "And for everyone else who's just trying to live a good life... I want them to have that. So, I'm taking Hope as one of my virtues. I'm no one special," he added quietly. "But if I can help give people a bit of hope for a better life tomorrow... I think that's worth fighting for."

"I think you're right," Ashlynn said with a firm nod of agreement. "Humility, Courage, Strength, Justice and Hope. They're fine choices and they suit you, Sir Ollie," she said, joining the others from the Vale in addressing him as the knight he clearly conducted himself like. To be honest, compared to some of the knights who surrounded Owain, Ollie was even more of a knight than they were!

"But there's more to life than becoming a knight," she said, giving Heila a knowing look. "Heila, help me up," she said, holding out a hand. "Ollie, come with us for a stroll in the forest outside the walls," she added once she was standing.

"I have something to talk to you about, but it demands more privacy than the longhouse can really offer us," she explained gesturing at the curtains that provided the only room dividers within the guest house.

"Ofcourse," Ollie said, quickly scrambling to his feet. If Ashlynn wanted to talk to him in private, he would hardly refuse her. It was just... what could she want to talk to him about that was so important that she'd go out into the forest at night, just so no one else could overhear their conversation?

Just what was this about?

Chapter 489: Human Contact

The pale autumn light had faded away by the time Ashlynn, Heila and Ollie exited the longhouse. Smoke poured from the chimneys of every loghouse, filling the air with the faint scent of burning pine and the distant sound of large families gathering around the central hearth to begin their own evening meals.

High above, the brightest stars were just barely beginning to pierce their way through the soft, midnight blue sky, sending a momentary pang of loneliness through Ashlynn's heart. After spending the entire summer apart, and most of fall as well, it felt like she'd only just returned to her lover's side before they were forced to separate yet again.

This time it would be brief, only a few more days before she could gaze once again into Nyrielle's glittering, midnight eyes, but every day they were apart felt longer than it should, and the nights they shared together felt far too brief.

"Heila," Ashlynn said, shaking off the feelings of loneliness that flowed from her separation from Nyrielle and focusing instead on the small and growing family around her. "Please light the way for us. Ollie," she said, holding out an arm to the would-be knight. "I'll be relying on your support."

"Of course, my lady," Ollie said, taking Ashlynn's arm while Heila drew her wand and filled the area around them with dozens of softly glowing motes of silvery-green light, like lightning bugs at night, dancing slowly around them and illuminating their path toward the woods.

"How do you do that without even speaking?" Ollie asked while they walked. "I've learned a little bit of sorcery from Sir Thane and Sir Marcel, but if I don't use words to focus, I can't make anything come together."

"We use words, too, Ollie," Ashlynn said, giving his arm a gentle pat. "But what Heila just did isn't very difficult. Not for a witch anyway," she added with a smile.

For the next several minutes, no one spoke as everyone sank into their own thoughts. The autumn air of the quiet mountain village was crisp and cool, but for Ashlynn, it resembled the warm, balmy summer nights of the Briar after spending so many days making the passage through the High Pass.

The cool, moist air soothed her battered and abused flesh and she could feel her body drinking in the energy of life as they slipped beneath the cover of gently swaying pine branches. More than the strength of life flowing through the air, however, she drank in the simple comfort of human touch as she walked alongside Ollie into the woods.

It wasn't until she saw him standing outside her carriage that she realized how much she'd missed the familiar faces of other humans. Nyrielle, Zedya, and Ignatious were almost human, but they'd all lost some of the things that made them feel human, making them feel subtly wrong until she learned to accept the vampires for what they were instead of expecting them to be humans who just happened to be a little older.

Ollie, however, didn't suffer that problem, even after living among the Eldritch ever since they fled from the Summer Villa in the spring. He'd grown, certainly, and in more ways than just the muscles he'd put on. But despite the many changes she felt in him, he was still very human.

"After the summer you've had and everything you've been through," Ashlynn said softly as they walked, leaning into Ollie's strong, reassuring presence while picking their way over the rocky soil. "Do you miss living among other humans? Does it ever feel... lonely?" Ashlynn asked, turning her emerald eyes away from the pass to watch his graceful features when he answered.

"Sometimes," the flame-haired young man said, scratching his head in thought. "Mostly, I'm too busy to think about that sort of thing very much. I miss my parents," he said in a voice that felt heavier than even he had expected it to. "Sir Marcel, he, he looked into things for me," he began.

"After we ran away from the Summer Villa, Owain captured my parents to find out what they knew about 'Lynnda' and me," he explained. "I think he was looking for someone else he could blame for what happened when we escaped."

"Oh, Ollie," Ashlynn said, freezing in her tracks and looking at him with eyes brimming with moisture as a chill gripped her heart. "Owain didn't... he didn't do anything to your parents, did he?"

"He might have tried," Ollie said, nudging Ashlynn slightly to keep up with Heila's steady pace. The rocky terrain meant nothing to the diminutive witch from the Horned Clan, who seemed to know exactly where to step and never once faltered over the uneven ground. "I don't know how to feel about it, but they were rescued by the Inquisition."

"The Inquisition rescued your parents?" Ashlynn said, blinking in surprise.

"According to Sir Marcel, an Inquisitor named Diarmuid rounded up everyone who might have been connected to events at the Summer Villa," Ollie said with a light laugh. "They were very determined to find 'Lynnda' and anyone who knew anything about the woman who killed knights and made soldiers vanish in the forest without a trace."

"I'm sorry," Ashlynn said as she racked her mind for the right way to respond to what Ollie had just shared. "Did Marcel ever try to rescue your parents? To bring them to the Vale?"

"He can't," Ollie said, pausing to help Ashlynn navigate over a sudden drop in the ground as they worked their way deeper into the forest. "He said that the Church has placed barriers around the Lothian Manor that prevent the entrance of Vampires. Supposedly, just setting foot on the grounds is no different than walking into the open at full sun in summer. The protection is that strong."

"We were able to retrieve the family members of some of the other men who, um, came with us, from the Summer Villa," Ollie said awkwardly. "A few of them even settled into the village with the other refugees. I think it was easier for them to be around other folks who had just moved house."

His words were light, but the way he said 'moved house' made it clear that nothing had been as simple as packing up and moving to a different place to live. From the story he'd told, there were at least six different clans living shoulder to shoulder in that village, and now there were humans too?

"I want to see it," Ashlynn said. "I want to see this village you built where humans can live with the Eldritch in peace."

"Not many humans," Ollie said, holding up a hand before Ashlynn could get too excited. "Really, it's just two families, both with small children."

"Children..." Ashlynn said with a heavy sigh. After years of expecting that she would do her duty to bear an heir both for Blackwell County and Lothian March, she'd expected for a very long time that she would have children one day. She'd dreamed of what it would be like to become a mother, and how she would raise her children to grow into wise, kind rulers.

Once, she and Owain had even discussed names. She was partial to Gaerith in honor of the pioneer who first discovered Blackwell Harbor while Owain wanted to name a son Caeleb after his great uncle who was famed for his skill with a sword. When she'd asked about girls' names, though, Owain only laughed.

"Silly girl," Owain had told her when she brought it up a few days before their wedding. "Lothian men don't sire daughters. Don't worry your pretty little head about it, just raise our boys up to be brave and strong and I'll turn them into fine warriors," he promised her.

Now, it all seemed distant and unreal. For her and Nyrielle, children were doubly impossible. Even if they weren't both women, vampires were all but infertile. Her parents' giving birth to a child at all was a rare miracle, never repeated for the rest of their lives.

Ashlynn thought she'd made peace with the notion, but thinking of it now, while she prepared to offer Ollie the chance to join her coven, she couldn't help but wonder if he'd be willing to accept the changes that came with becoming a witch.

He was already growing into a fine young man, and he'd no doubt be a capable knight someday soon, even without becoming a witch. But as soon as he did, he'd never again live the life of a normal human. It was a bridge that, once crossed, had no way to return from.

"Ollie?" Ashlynn asked, pausing and tugging on his arm until he turned to face her very serious gaze. "Have you given any thought to starting a family of your own? Is there... is there a woman in your life that you want to return to? Or to rescue from the Lothian Manor? Have we... have we taken that chance away from you?"

Ashlynn's question struck the flame-haired young man like a bolt of thunder out of clear skies, shaking his world from the crown of his head to the soles of his boots. Of all the things that she could ask, she wanted to know if there was a woman he was interested in? Why would she need to know?

But, she'd brought him out here to talk privately, away from prying ears who might overhear. Was it for this? Was this the question that she needed to ask him? But that didn't make any sense! She was already with Lady Nyrielle, wasn't she?

Wasn't

Chapter 490: The Second?

A cool autumn wind blew down the mountain, dancing through the sparse, stunted pine trees and whistling through cracks in rocks worn down by year after year of heavy frost. Faint wisps of clouds drifted by overhead, parting to reveal a sliver of the moon, gazing down on the trio making their way through the woods by the silvery-green light of Heila's witchcraft.

"A, a woman, my lady?" Ollie said, tugging at the lace collar at his neck that suddenly felt far too tight. "There's no one, but, I mean... You and Lady Nyrielle are... and I.... Um," he stammered awkwardly, pulling a soft, musical chuckle from Heila.

"You've confused him, my lady," Heila said, hopping up on a nearby rock to give Ollie a teasing poke. "Mother Ashlynn is asking about your love life because, the life we lead, it's a hard one," she said, her grass green eyes growing briefly cloudy before they warmed and the smile on her lips grew wider.

"I thought I was done looking for love," Heila added, her cheeks heating as she spoke. "At least, until the war ended. But... maybe something found me. She's just asking if love already found you because she's worried about you. She doesn't want to see you living a lonely life."

"Oh, um, I see," Ollie said, wishing he could hide his burning face in the hood of a cloak or anything that would mask his embarrassment. "There's no one, really," he said quickly. "Even when I was working in the kitchens, there wasn't really anyone who had much interest in me. So, so you don't need to worry about anything."

"No, I absolutely have to worry," Ashlynn said, reaching up to give Ollie's cheek a playful pinch. "Have you seen yourself in a mirror lately? If you were a few years older and I didn't have Nyrielle in my life, even I might swoon over you. But you're prettier like this I think," she added, tapping his face gently with her hand.

"But when you're this good of a man, you leave me with a very difficult decision to make, Ollie," Ashlynn said as she tugged him along with her. "Do I introduce you to Jocey? Or do I hide you from her. Because I think that pretty face of yours is going to be very, very dangerous once you make your debut as Sir Ollie among other humans."

"Jocey?" Ollie asked, struggling to keep up with the whiplash in the conversation. She hadn't been interested in him but was she offering to play matchmaker? Where had this come from? "Wait, do you mean your sister? Lady Jocelynn?"

"The very same," Ashlynn said with a wistful smile. "You and she would be an amazing pair," she said as they walked. "You're kind and brave, and I know that you'd protect her. She's clever and she's very good at helping people find ways to come together, even when they seem like unlikely partners. It's just..."

"Just what?" Ollie asked when Ashlynn's voice trailed off and she showed no sign of continuing.

"She should be close, you know?" Ashlynn said softly as a quiet yearning built within her heart. "The Summer Villa isn't far from here. Just a day or two if we move swiftly. Close enough to go for a visit..."

"Not yet, my Lady," Heila said, reaching out to give Ashlynn's free hand a gentle squeeze. "You know it isn't time yet."

"I know," Ashlynn said, trying to shake off the wave of melancholy that threatened to overtake her. "She hadn't arrived in Lothian March yet when I left or I might have tried to rescue her. Now, I just hope that Owain hasn't done anything to her in the time she's been here. If he's hurt her..."

"I don't think he's done anything to her," Ollie said quickly, hoping to offer up at least a small balm for the hurt and anxiety he could hear in her voice. "Marcel sends regular updates when he hears word of your sister, Lady Jocelynn. But she isn't at the Summer Villa anymore. She's been at Lothian Mannor ever since the Harvest Festival."

"Well, there will be time for introductions later," she said with a wistful smile. "I didn't mean to talk so much about her. I really meant to talk about you," she said. Casting her eyes around the forest they were walking through, she quickly located a few larger stones that could double as seats in the wilderness and gestured for Ollie to help her over the rocky ground to reach them.

"Ollie, I have a very serious question for you," Ashlynn said, loosing her playful manner once she took a seat. "A good friend recently taught me that serious questions like this shouldn't be answered instantly, so no matter what your answer is, I won't take a 'yes' or a 'no' until we've returned to the keep."

"I want you to give this a good amount of thought before you make a decision, you understand?" she asked.

"I understand," Ollie said. "But I've already put a great deal of thought into what I want. I know you offered a chance to become a knight as a reward for helping you escape the Summer Villa... but, this whole time, I've been working as hard as I can to be worthy of that offer."

"I want to be the kind of person who deserves to be a knight," he said, dropping to one knee in front of Ashlynn and placing a fist over his heart. "I want to be worthy of being your knight. So, whatever you have to ask, the answer is 'yes,' before you even say the words."

"Even if that 'yes' might get you killed?" Ashlynn asked, staring directly into his pale eyes as she weighed his words.

"Listen to her, little brother," Heila said, taking a seat on the ground at Ashlynn's feet. "I nearly died. Mother Ashlynn, she had to watch me dying, for days, because I said 'yes.' And if I died, I don't think she'd ever forgive herself, even though it would have been my fault for failing."

"Heila," Ashlynn said sharply. "It wouldn't have been your fault. It would have been Cecile's fault for sabotaging you, and my fault and Big Sister Amahle's fault for taking a shortcut with you that was more dangerous than we realized. It wouldn't have been your fault at all."

"See?" the diminutive witch said, turning her grass-green gaze to Ollie. "She would have blamed herself for my death, and it would become a wound in her heart that would take years to heal. So don't go saying that you'll say 'yes' when you don't understand yet. You might be willing to die for her, but she's not willing to lose you."

"I, I don't know what to say," Ollie said, taken aback by the intensity of the exchange between Heila and Ashlynn. Just what had happened that nearly cost the diminutive lady-in-waiting her life? Just how much danger had they faced on their journey?

"Ollie," Ashlynn said softly. "I know you've been working hard to become a good man and a good knight for me. This whole time we've been away, I've been thinking about what I can offer you that would match up to the dedication and the... the heart that you're so generously offering me. Being someone's liege-lady, it's a heavy thing and in the same way that you want to be worthy of me, I want to be worthy of you."

"In the Briar," Ashlynn said, her voice growing stronger as she gathered momentum. "I learned how to transform a person into a witch. How to welcome them into my coven. A coven is a special kind of family," she explained, seeing the confusion on his face. "Heila is the first. That's why she calls me 'mother' sometimes. I'm not just the Mother of Trees, I'm the 'mother' of every witch in my coven, and she is the first."

"You, you want me to become the second?" Ollie asked, blinking several times in surprise. Until he found out Heila had become a witch, he hadn't even known that it was possible for someone who wasn't born with a mark of the witch to become one. The idea of becoming a witch was so far removed from possible in his mind that he'd never once considered it.

"Is that why you've been calling me 'little brother'?" Ollie asked, turning to look at Heila. "Because you knew she was going to ask me to join her, um, her coven?"

"Our family," Heila said, reaching out to rest a hand on the tall human's knee. "Our small but growing family. It's not an easy thing to make a seed of witchcraft for someone, you know," she added, glancing at Ashlynn before looking back at Ollie and continuing.

"Mother Ashlynn, she's known what she wanted to offer you since months ago, and she's been growing a seed of witchcraft that's meant for you," Heila said. "There are other things to that she has..."

"Heila, enough," Ashlynn said, raising a hand before her friend could say anymore. Already she could feel the pressure gathering on Ollie's shoulders, but the only pressure she wanted him to face was the decision itself. She wanted him to choose based on his own views, not because he could feel the weight of her expectations and hopes weighing him down.

"Ollie," Ashlynn said. "The transformation from a normal person into a witch isn't easy. There are trials to face and if you fail them, then you'll die, leaving nothing behind but a tree that contains an echo of the person you once were. I'm not asking you to risk your life in battle," she added. "You want to be a knight and I respect that. A knight will inevitably risk their life in battle and I won't try to shield you unreasonably from those dangers."

"But this is different," she said, placing a hand over the spot on her chest where the seed of witchcraft pulsed with the energy she'd spent several months showering it with. "There's no enemy to protect me from, no opponent but yourself and the question of whether or not you can come out the otherside of the seed's trial."

"Knowing that," Ashlynn said, giving the flame-haired young man a very serious look. "Knowing that, would you still say 'yes', now that you've heard the words?"