

The Vampire 491

Chapter 491: Still a Knight?

For several minutes, the trio of Ashlynn, Heila and Ollie sat in silence as Ashlynn's question hung in the cool mountain air between them. Pine needles rustled overhead as another gust swept down from the peaks, and Heila's magical lights cast shifting shadows across their faces as the floating motes of light danced on the wind like fallen autumn leaves.

Once or twice, Heila looked like she wanted to speak, to explain more to her soon-to-be little brother. She wanted to tell him that his trial wouldn't be that bad, and that if someone as common and unworthy as her could pass the trial, she was certain that he could.

A stern look from Ashlynn, however, was all it took to keep the Willow Witch silent. It was clear to Ashlynn that Ollie had grown up in more ways than one while they were away. It wasn't just the transformation of his body, brought about by a vastly improved diet, fighting lessons from Marcel and Thane, and all of the physical labor he'd done to care for his new village either.

Ollie's transformation went far deeper than that. He didn't just carry responsibility for his own life anymore and his awareness of that fact was clear when he spoke of taking Justice and Hope as two of his virtues. Thane's mentoring might be behind some of those changes, but all the elder vampire could do was provide the lessons. It was up to Ollie to learn them.

Now, Ashlynn wanted to know how far those lessons had carried him. The decision she'd laid before him was the hardest one he had ever faced. Joining her coven would transform him in ways he couldn't possibly understand and the risk of death was only one of the challenges he would need to overcome. Ultimately, Ashlynn doubted that there was anything Ollie could do or say that would change her mind about offering a place in her coven, but if his answer was to place blind faith in her...

Across from her, Ollie's brow furrowed in thought as he stared at the dancing motes of Heila's magic light, which had drifted closer to the trees as if drawn to their stunted branches. The night had quickly grown colder with the setting of the sun and his breath now formed a small cloud that almost glittered in the silvery-green illumination of Heila's witchcraft.

"Can I ask questions?" Ollie said after several moments of careful thought. "Just a few," he added quickly. "I just want to understand a few things before I give you my answer."

"Of course," Ashlynn said with a smile, relieved that he wouldn't just accept blindly. "Ask all that you want."

"If I become a witch," Ollie asked hesitantly. "If I join your coven, can I still become your knight?"

"Why is it important to become a knight?" Ashlynn asked, turning the question back to him instead of giving a direct answer. "If it's about status then your status as a witch, a member of the Mother of Trees' coven, is far greater than just being an ordinary knight."

"No, it isn't the status," Ollie said quickly before a thought flickered across his face, bringing with it a shadow of doubt. "Or, maybe it is about status, I guess. Sir Thane wanted to make me a knight when he asked me to build the village, but I refused until I could talk to you. Now though, there is a whole village worth of people, hundreds of people, who look at me to care for them. If I'm not a knight, then can I really remain as their protector?"

"If that's your concern, then we don't need to worry about keeping to human traditions," Ashlynn said. "Not every village in the Vale of Mists is protected by a 'knight.' In fact, most of them aren't. If a village in the Vale of Mists is protected by a witch instead of a knight, I think that most people in the village would be even prouder."

"That," Ollie started, wringing his hands as he tried to find the words to express what he meant. "That's part of it, I guess. But then, as a witch, I suppose I wouldn't have to swear a knight's oath or take up five virtues or," he said, his voice trailing off as his shoulders began to slump. "Or can a witch still do all of those things?"

"You still cook in the kitchens, don't you?" Ashlynn asked gently. "You're not a kitchen boy anymore, but you still do those things, even though you don't have to. You didn't have to help Georg cook tonight, he would have been happy cooking all by himself, but you did it because that's part of who you are."

"I wanted to make something special for you to say 'welcome home,'" Ollie said awkwardly. "Not fancy, I still can't make fancy things like Georg does and I know you'll get something fancy from him when you feel better. But simple things like tonight's stew, I'm still pretty good at, so I just... I just wanted to help while I could."

Once, Ollie might have boasted that he could even cook for a lord's table, despite the fact that he rarely completed an entire dish by himself when he was working in the Lothian kitchens. Now, however, after seeing the delicate and carefully composed dishes that Georg assembled as though they were works of art on a plate, he knew that his skills were more humble and ordinary.

Now that he thought about it, maybe he'd been fooling himself to cling to his time in the kitchens. In the village, in memory of the meals they'd shared as refugees, Ollie had organized a communal meal to be held on the night of the full moon each month. At first, he'd wanted to cook for the hard-working villagers himself, to give back to them for all the work that they'd done, but the celebration had quickly grown too large for any one person to manage.

Now, Ollie found himself providing guidance, but his hands rarely held a knife to chop vegetables or butcher a carcass. Instead, as his responsibilities grew, his closeness to the things that once defined him fell away, as though they were childhood games that needed to be put down to become a man.

Now, as he listened to Ashlynn pointing out that he still cooked, he couldn't help but wonder how much longer that would still be true. And if that was the case, would his dream of being a knight one day turn out much the same way? Was it the last fantasy of childhood he would need to surrender in order to become the kind of man that Lady Ashlynn needed at her side?

Chapter 492: Not Just One Thing

"Ollie, none of us are just one thing," Ashlynn said, startling him out of his inwardly spiralling thoughts. Picking up a loose twig from the ground, soft scratching sounds filled the air as the witch began to sketch a simple circle in the frost-covered dirt at her feet.

"Sometimes, I'm Lady Nyrielle's Seneschal," she explained, carving out a piece of the circle. "As her Seneschal, I'm expected to attend to matters during the day while she hides herself away from the sun and can't interact with the waking world. At those times, I speak with her voice to execute her will, or I act on my own, but always on her behalf," she explained.

A Seneschal was the first among all of a vampire's servants, standing even above their progeny, but it was always a subservient role. As Nyrielle's Seneschal, she might be second only to Nyrielle within the Vale of Mists, but that was an authority and position that flowed entirely from her bond with Nyrielle. For some people, that would be enough to define their entire being, and no purpose could be greater in their lives, but Ashlynn's life was far from that simple.

"Other times, I'm the Mother of Trees," she added, carving out another piece of the circle. "I'm responsible for my own coven, and I walk the world with authority no less than the High Lords or True Vampires of the Eldritch world. The magic that flows from that shapes me in ways that are hard to describe, but I can't deny that becoming the Mother of Trees has changed a part of me in ways that run just as deep as the blood bond I share with Mistress Nyrielle."

"And I'm still 'Lady Ashlynn' from Blackwell County," she said as she carved out yet another piece of the circle. "I still plan to seize control of Lothian March when I deal with Owain," she added, her voice growing momentarily hard as her eyes narrowed at the thought of her rapidly approaching reunion with her former husband.

She supposed that a part of her circle should be labeled 'avenging ghost', but doing so would only distract from the lesson she was trying to give. With a deep, shuddering breath, she did her best to clear away her lingering resentments and focus instead on what she wanted Ollie to learn from her example.

"All of these things are parts that make up the whole of who I am," she said, tapping her comfortable Traveling Hat and smiling at the young man. "Witches are used to wearing many hats. Heila is the Willow Witch, the famed Willow Whip and Champion of the Arena in the High Fen, and she's also my lady-in-waiting. She's all of those things and more."

"Arena Champion?" Ollie said, blinking several times in confusion as he looked at the elegantly dressed lady-in-waiting who stood less than half his own height. "Willow Whip?"

"I'll tell you later," Heila said with a mischievous smile on her lips. She hadn't realized it at the time when she watched Talauia teasing Jacques, but there was a delicious sort of pleasure that came from having a 'little brother' that was so much bigger than she was.

She knew her advantage of strength and experience wouldn't last long. Talauia was decades older than Jacques, and it was unlikely the reptilian witch would ever catch up with his petite 'big sister', but the gap between Heila and Ollie wouldn't be nearly as large. But for the moment, as long as she held a little bit of advantage over the flame-haired young man, she intended to enjoy every minute of it.

"Maybe we can make it a tradition," Heila teased excitedly, giving the heavy-bladed fighting knives at Ollie's waist a playful tap. "You can go fight in the arena for ten days to help win champions for Lady Nyrielle's army."

"Heila," Ashlynn said with a frown that she forced herself to wear to suppress the giggle that wanted to erupt at the notion of sending a string of witches to High Lady Erna's arena to constantly empty it of worthy champions. If she did, she might be the first coven in history to provoke a war with a High Lord for 'casually bullying' them.

"What I meant to say, Ollie, is that if it's important for you to become a knight because that's part of the person you want to be," Ashlynn said warmly. "Then of course, you can still become a knight. I'll bestow your seed of witchcraft at the start of your vigil, and when you rise from it, you will be both a knight and a witch of my coven. That is, assuming you're willing to join the coven to become a witch?"

"Of course I'm willing," Ollie said with a broad, toothy grin, smiling as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He didn't realize until Ashlynn presented him with a different path just how much becoming a knight had come to mean to him.

Part of it was wrapped up in his desire to serve Ashlynn well, to repay her for everything she had done for him after they ran away from the Summer Villa together. Compared to the human soldiers they'd captured after her duel with Sir Broll, Ollie was living a much better life with the kind of privileges that he'd only ever dreamed of while scouring pots in the Lothian kitchens. For that alone, he felt a debt of gratitude that he could never truly repay.

But as his lessons with Thane continued and he worked more and more on turning a scattered group of refugees into a cohesive village, the dream of being a worthy knight and leader for those people, his people, became much, much more real than simply an idle fantasy.

But if he didn't have to let go of his dream of becoming a worthy knight and he could also join Ashlynn's coven as a witch... why would he say no to that?

"Um, can I ask one other question?" Ollie said after a few moments of thought. "Can you help me understand what the difference is between being a witch and just being a sorcerer is? I thought that witches were born to it, but, since it's possible to become one, then, what does it mean to become a witch?"

Chapter 493: Ashlynn's Demonstration

"The simple answer is that sorcery uses the power of your own body and life to influence the world," Ashlynn said with a smile as she recalled the lesson she'd received from Nyrielle what felt like a lifetime

ago. "Witches give shape to the power of the world, bending it to their desires however they please," she added, using a description of witchcraft that came more from Amahle's teachings than Nyrielle's.

"I think what you need is a demonstration," Ashlynn said as she stood from the stone she'd been resting on and dusted off her skirt. "Heila, you can dismiss your lights for now. Let Ollie see everything as it is."

"Yes, Mother," Heila said, waving her wand and plunging the forest into darkness illuminated only by the twinkling lights of the stars above and the faint sliver of light from the crescent moon. That darkness didn't last long, however, as Ashlynn drew a gnarled oak wand from the sash at her waist and began to gather faint, emerald green energy as though it were dew settling on a branch.

For a moment, Ashlynn wondered if she should stop to inscribe a circle. The wounds inflicted by the Frost Walker ancestors had been stubborn with frostbite that seeped all the way into her bones, chilling her even now. The burns inflicted by the Holy Flame Sword were just as tenacious, refusing to yield in the face of her body's immense capacity for healing.

Nyrielle's gifts allowed her to heal ever so slightly faster than the lingering energies in her body could inflict more damage, and the strength and resilience she gained from her blood bond with the vampire allowed her to endure despite the pain, but it was a fragile equilibrium at best.

A circle would make it easier to control the energy she was preparing to gather from the forest, but it would also take more time to prepare, and she didn't have any items on hand that felt suitable to use as anchor points for the working.

Besides, she told herself firmly, so long as the focus of her witchcraft was herself, she shouldn't need to struggle against the trees, even ones as gnarled and stubborn as these. With her decision made, Ashlynn began to recite the incantation she'd carefully prepared during the days she spent in the carriage, racing from the High Pass to deliver her to a place where she could finally heal.

"Through twisted limbs and weathered bark,

Where mountain winds have left their mark,

I draw the power seasons stored,

In rings of life, in heartwood's core,

I now call upon your deep reserves,

The strength each gnarled branch preserves."

Ollie's eyes went wide and his jaw hung low as he watched Ashlynn's wand trace a wide circle in the air above her, leaving a trail of glittering motes of emerald light that blew away on the mountain breeze like the seeds of a dandelion. Each tiny trace of light drifted to one of the trees surrounding them until Ashlynn's energy had reached dozens of trees, maybe even hundreds beyond his sight!

Then, as Ashlynn's voice began to resonate, echoing from each tree that bore one of her seeds of light, the trees themselves began to glow, dripping tiny drops of dark green energy from their needles as though they were shaking off the last remnants of an autumn storm.

That energy crept along the ground, resembling a tapestry of roots snaking over rocks and sometimes each other, merging together into thicker, stronger, brighter roots of light as they stretched toward's Ashlynn's feet, offering up everything the trees were willing to give, and in some cases, every last bit of life they had.

"This borrowed power, freely lent,

Now mends what fire and frost have rent.

From frostbit skin to charred remains,

From shattered bone to severed veins,

As trees heal scars with patient grace,

Let my wounds close, leave not a trace."

Slowly, like a wick dipped in oil, Ashlynn drew in the energy the forest offered, drinking deeply as she guided the strength and vitality of the trees toward her abused and battered flesh. In the distance, the sounds of cracking branches and falling trees could be heard as those trees that barely clung to life on the side of the mountain gave up their struggle at last, offering their final days or years to the Mother of Trees in her time of need.

All around them, Ollie watched in amazement as the needles of some trees turned brown, dropping to the ground in a quiet shower that combined with the distant cracking to create the illusion that the forest itself was in the midst of a thunderstorm of powerful magic. And Ashlynn, wreathed in brilliant emerald light, stood at the center of it all.

Nothing could be done in an instant, and Ashlynn's witchcraft had already spread to every tree within one hundred paces or more. But slowly, the pain that had plagued her body since the battle in the High Pass began to fade. Sharp pains dulled as cracked bones became whole and feeling returned to flesh too burned or frozen to feel anything at all.

The energy flowed deeper within her, wrapping around her heart and the seed she'd nurtured there, giving both a gentle whisper of soothing energy before flowing through her veins, mending muscles torn by strain and lungs too scarred by frost to draw deep breaths.

For ten minutes or more, while the forest bent to offer up the strength she needed to rise again, Ashlynn stood all but unmoving, focused entirely on healing her body from the wounds that tormented her and everyone who looked upon her.

As the energy flowed into Ashlynn's battered body, Ollie jumped nervously every time he heard another tree limb crack and break or the crash of another mighty trunk falling to the rocky ground of the mountainside, shattering itself on the rocks like a ship broken in a storm.

"How, how much is she going to, going to take?" Ollie asked, licking his lips as he found his mouth had gone dry. "Is this what it means to be a witch? She's like a vampire who preys on trees the way vampires feed on people?"

And quietly, too softly to be heard above the sounds of shaking trees and the mountain wind, a deeper question hung on his lips.

"Is that what I'll become if I join her coven?"

Chapter 494: Part of the Cycle

"We're not the same as vampires," Heila said, taking Ollie's hand in hers and giving him a reassuring squeeze as they watched Ashlynn drink in the energy her body so desperately needed to recover from her wounds.

"The whole world is a living, breathing thing," Heila explained. "There's a little bit of magic in everything that shapes the world."

"You mean in every living thing?" Ollie asked, turning his attention away from Ashlynn to focus on Heila as he struggled to understand what he was witnessing. "Like the energy vampires feed on when they take blood? Sir Thane says that the reason vampires need to feed on people is because there isn't enough 'vitality' in beasts."

"Ignore vampires," Heila said, thinking back on all of the misunderstandings she'd had to clear up while learning because she'd been like Ollie, seeing the similarities that were only present on the surface without understanding how different things were underneath.

"I said everything that shapes the world," she said, repeating one of Amahle's early lessons. "The wind has energy, the rocks have energy, the storming seas have energy. Everything that shapes the world has power, but that power doesn't have any desires. The trees don't want to do anything with their power, they just collect it and then they offer it up to others when they fall."

"But, doesn't every living thing want to keep on living?" Ollie protested. "If she keeps going like this, and all the trees die, there won't be a forest left here at all," he said, shuddering at the thought of clearing an entire mountainside of trees.

The Heartwood clan held trees to be sacred, and while they were building the village, the refugees from the village Owain burned worked very hard to identify the trees that were sickly, beginning to rot or who had poor conditions to grow in to be the first they felled while building the dam that would serve the village or harvesting trees for timber.

When they dug their burrows, they used the limbs of trees to weave together their walls and roofs instead of hewing their trunks into planks the way others did, felling as few trees as possible. Ollie hadn't realized it at the time, but the more time he spent with Milo and his family, the more that reverence rubbed off on him until watching Ashlynn fell trees by the dozen filled his heart with a strange kind of distress that he'd never felt before.

"In a few days, Lady Nyrielle's army will arrive, and trees will be felled to fuel their campfires and cook their meals. Orava village will grow in the years to come and more of these trees will be felled to build new long houses," she added.

"What Mother Ashlynn is doing is actually a kindness to the forest," Heila explained. "Now, the trees that were weakest will be the ones to fall. When the army arrives, we can send them to gather up the fallen timber instead of felling young, hearty trees. But there's more to it than that," she added as she felt Ashlynn's spell drawing to its final stage.

"Vampires exist outside of life and death, but in nature, the old must eventually die to make way for the young to thrive," Heila said. "If Mother Ashlynn was a cruel witch, she might not care about what comes after she takes what she needs, but she isn't like that," Heila said proudly. "Watch," she whispered, pointing Ollie's attention back at Ashlynn's luminous figure.

Finally, when Ashlynn felt the last of the frozen and fiery energies that refused to allow her to recover naturally fading and flickering away, she lowered her wand and began the final verse with the faintest traces of lingering energy that clung to the ground around her.

"The withered ones who fall today,

Your final gift I shall repay.

Your essence flows to seeds unborn,

That when they sprout in coming morn,

Your strength lives on in saplings new,

The circle whole, your gift stays true."

Suddenly, the flow of energy reversed and the last of the energy that clung to Ashlynn flowed outward, seeking the pinecones that fell from trees as they died, placing within them a spark of life that would quickly propel their growth, allowing them to catch up to saplings planted two or even three years ago before they had to face the winter's frost.

"Ollie," Ashlynn called softly when the last of the magic faded away. "Heila. Come help me with the bandages," she said, tugging back the loose sleeves of her dress to reveal arms that had been wrapped to well above her elbows. "Ollie, see for yourself the difference between a sorcerer's healing and what a witch can do."

"Is it, is it really fine?" Ollie asked, uncertain about helping her with such an intimate feeling task as removing bandages from her body. It felt, somehow, like he was helping her to undress, and that felt very, very wrong. Dangerous even when he considered how Lady Nyrielle might react to it if she heard that he had put his hands on her!

"It's fine, Little Brother," Heila said, stepping forward confidently to take one of Ashlynn's hands in her own and beginning to unwind the layers of bandages that had protected the flesh burned by the Holy Flame Blade. "Get her other arm, that one wasn't broken by the Holy Flame Blade's power, so you don't have to be as gentle."

"Holy Flame Blade..." Ollie said numbly, realizing that there was far more than Heila's apparent battles in the arena that he had to catch up on. "If you're certain then," he said, stepping forward and gently lifting Ashlynn's bandaged hand to unwind the layers of soft fabric.

When he saw the flesh beneath the bandage, however, his eyes opened wide in surprise as he kept waiting to see flesh that looked painfully tender or showed scars of healing the way sorcery made wounds look like they'd been healed years in the past. But unlike the limited healing he'd witnessed in his time in the Vale of Mists, Ashlynn's slender, toned arms looked... flawless. As though she'd never been injured in the first place!

"You see, Ollie?" Ashlynn said softly as she looked into his pale, awe-filled eyes. "This is the power that witches wield. This is part of what it means to be the Mother of Trees. So I'll ask one last time tonight and hear your final answer when we return to the castle," she said.

"Will you join Heila and become my Cypress Witch?"

Chapter 495: A Seed for Ollie (Part One)

"Cypress Witch?" Ollie asked, cocking his head to the side as he tried to puzzle out what the title meant, his breath forming small clouds in the chilly mountain air. A pine needle drifted down from above, landing on his shoulder as the forest creaked and settled around them.

Knights were often given titles for deeds of great valor and those titles could only be conferred by powerful lords like a Marquis or Duke, or even the King himself. But to be granted such a title at the beginning, before he had even accomplished anything, it had to be different somehow.

But she'd called Heila the 'Willow Witch' and the 'Willow Whip, Champion of the Arena'... That was a title earned through dangerous battles wasn't it?

"Each witch in my coven will bear a seed of witchcraft," Ashlynn explained, unlacing the top of her dress to reveal the faint scar that vanished into her impressive cleavage, seemingly oblivious to the effect her action had on the flame-haired young man.

Ollie's eyes widened momentarily before he quickly averted his gaze, fixing his attention on a distant tree while heat rose from his collar to the tips of his ears. His hands, previously relaxed at his sides, suddenly seemed impossible to position naturally, and he finally clasped them in his lap as he shifted his position awkwardly to conceal the reaction from his traitorous body.

"I take a seed from a specific tree," Ashlynn continued, seemingly oblivious to the young man's distress, "and nurture that seed next to my heart until it is ready to be given to the witch who will bear it."

"I'm the willow witch because my seed came from an Ancient Willow tree," Heila said, providing a welcome distraction from Ashlynn's unintentionally provocative display, or at least it was welcome until she traced a finger between her own humble breasts, pulling the fabric of her dress tight against her bust and revealing the top of the fading scar on her chest.

"The seed is what allows you to connect to the energy of the world and direct it's power. It also bestows it's own mark of the witch on you once it's grown into a permanent part of you."

"Oh," Ollie said, trying to look thoughtful as he stared at the ground to escape the near scandalous actions of both women as he focused on what they had to say, slowly coming to understand the meaning behind some of their earlier words.

"So, when you said that you could transform a person into a witch, you really meant it. Just like when," he started to say only to cut himself short when he saw Heila narrowing her eyes at him. "Similar to how people are transformed into vampires, but different, because, um, vampires are transformed into predators while witches are transformed into part of the natural cycle of life?"

"It is a similar transformation, yes," Ashlynn agreed with a knowing look as she glanced at Heila who smiled proudly at her 'little brother's' understanding. "And similar in that both transformations are very dangerous. Life threatening even. But the two transformations have less in common than they have areas of difference," she continued.

"For example, the type of tree your seed comes from is important because it will shape your powers in profound ways," Ashlynn explained. "And there can only be one of each witch in each coven. Further, while each new vampire can create progeny of their own, only a Mother or Father of the Earth is capable of creating a witch."

"So, the seed that you're growing for me," Ollie said, pointedly not staring at Ashlynn's full bust, though his darting glances betrayed his struggle to maintain proper eye contact. He wished that she would lace her dress back up now that she'd shown him what she needed to but he feared that he said anything it would only make the moment even more awkward for both of them.

So instead of saying anything, he tried to focus on the conversation at hand, grateful for the dim light that might conceal the flush still warming his cheeks, even though he was certain that she'd noticed the way his eyes couldn't seem to meet her gaze.

"It's a seed that comes from a Cypress tree?" he said, carefully pronouncing the name of the unfamiliar tree. "What sort of tree is that?"

"One that was hard to choose for you," Ashlynn said, returning to the stone she'd rest on earlier and gesturing for Ollie and Heila to take seats as well. Now that she had healed her wounds, she would only need a few days to restore her strength but she had still used a significant amount of energy tonight and standing around to talk felt like more effort than it was worth.

"I know you wanted to be a knight, so I considered using a seed from the Ancient Oak for you," Ashlynn explained slowly, provoking a sudden intake of breath from Heila. "Oak Witches are known for developing not only tremendous physical strength but exceptional fortitude as well, with the endurance to outlast even the greatest of challenges," she explained.

"It's just that, when I confer a seed from an Oak on someone, I intend to use one of the seeds I received from the Ancient Oak," Ashlynn said slowly. "The seed Heila received from the Ancient Willow was very powerful and I have no doubt that the person who receives the seed from the Ancient Oak will be just as mighty, but using the seed of an Ancient tree comes with risks that I don't want you to face."

"It's really good you won't get the seed from the Ancient Oak," Heila said, shivering in a way that had nothing to do with the cold mountain breeze and everything to do with her memories of the spectre of Cecile who twisted her trial at the hands of the Ancient Willow into one that nearly killed her, and might have if Ashlynn hadn't found a way to lend her a portion of her strength to overcome Cecile in the end.

Ollie, on the other hand, couldn't help but wonder if he had fallen short of the diminutive Willow Witch in some way. On the surface of it, they both had so much in common. Heila had been a serving girl before she became Lady Ashlynn's first witch and he had been a kitchen boy. It wasn't like Heila had been a great warrior or sorceress to begin with.

So, if she could receive an Ancient Seed but he couldn't, then what was the difference between them? Was it because she was from one of the Eldritch Clans and he wasn't? Or was there something else that he lacked that made Ashlynn unwilling to bestow one of the powerful seeds on him?

Chapter 496: A Seed for Ollie (Part Two)

"It's better that you get a normal seed," Heila added, rushing to reassure Ollie as she could see a trace of disappointment forming on his face when he heard he wouldn't receive the seed that he wouldn't be receiving a seed that would make him as mighty as Heila seemed to have become. "The Ancient Trees have seeds that are powerful from the beginning but they come with all sorts of catches and challenges that make them dangerous," she explained.

"But your seed," Heila added. "Mother Ashlynn has been nurturing your seed for months so it will be just as powerful as mine, but it won't be twisted by an ancient tree's spirit. It's harder for her to make your seed, but Mother Ashlynn cares so much, she..."

"Enough Heila," Ashlynn said, stretching out an hand to ruffle Heila's soft brown curls. "I think he understands now. The seeds from ancient trees have advantages, but they have disadvantages as well. The seed I've prepared for you is one that is free of entanglements so you can grow into the kind of knight you want to be, and the kind of witch as well."

"I see," Ollie said, nodding as the shadow of disappointment cleared from his features. "But that doesn't tell me what kind of tree the Cypress is or why you picked it for me. Is it strong the way an oak is strong? Or is it softer like the red cedar trees of the Vale of Mists?"

"The red cedar wouldn't suit you at all," Ashlynn said with a laugh. "That tree is suited to people who meld with the world, changing their shape and blending in with the earth. People who can show one face to the world while their heart holds something different entirely. That tree doesn't describe you at all."

"No, I guess it doesn't," Ollie thought, though he wondered if it fit a little too well for someone else. "I don't exactly blend in," he added, gesturing at his flame-red hair and tall figure.

"The Cypress tree is one that grows in adversity," Ashlynn explained. "They take root in the swamps of places like the Briar and the Endless Marsh, far beyond the High Pass. Some day, I'll take you there, but I brought several seeds with me if there's somewhere you'd like to have them planted. Maybe in this village of yours?"

"They grow in swamps?" Ollie said, raising a brow in confusion. "But wouldn't the waters just wash them away?"

"That's what makes them such powerful guardians," Ashlynn said with a smile. "They surround themselves with walls of... well, they're called 'knees' and they're neither roots nor trunks but they help to shield the tree from storm surges, they anchor it in place and help it to breathe," she explained.

"More than that though," Ashlynn continued when she saw him struggling to visualize the strange trees. "They become anchors for all manner of creatures to rely on and shelters that can withstand the worst of storms."

"So it's a tree for protectors," Ollie said with a wide smile as he began to understand. "A tree that won't break or yield while it guards its people."

"It's the opposite of my tree," Heila chimed in. "The willow survives by bending and flexing, but the cypress stands tall and never breaks, no matter how fierce the winds blow."

"So, what do you think, Ollie?" Ashlynn asked. "Did I choose well for you?"

"Yes," the future witch said, nodding excitedly as visions of this strange guardian tree that surrounded itself with defensive walls began to fill his mind. "This way, I can help to protect you the next time someone tries to hurt you," he said, shuddering as he thought about how extensive her wounds had been and how much pain she must have endured to have so much of her body covered by bandages.

"Not just me," Ashlynn said as she stood to return to the guest house, yearning for the warmth of its hearth. Frost had begun to form on the stones where they sat, and the temperature was dropping rapidly as night deepened. She held up a hand and conjured a pale golden flame that resembled the fires of a torch, casting long shadows of the three figures among the trees as it guided them back toward the village path.

"Now, you'll be able to protect your villagers too. No matter what comes," she said, making a promise that she hoped would hold true during the challenges they were certain to face in the coming conflict with the Lothians and behind them, a full fledged Crusade led by the Church of the Holy Lord of Light.

Of course, everything she had told Ollie was true. But behind those reasons, another hid in the shadows deep within her mind. The memory of the vision the Ancient Willow had given her of Ollie falling in battle with an arm torn from his body and wounds so horrific that it had required the sacrifice of the Ancient Oak to restore him to what he had been before a templar nearly cut him in two...

The Ollie in her vision hadn't become a witch yet and she hadn't known at the time what kind of path she would choose for him. Now, she'd selfishly chosen to bestow a seed on him that she felt offered the best opportunities to safeguard his life. She only hoped that he didn't come to resent her for it one day when he outgrew the need for such heavy handed protection.

But without that protection now, when he was young and vulnerable, she was far too worried that he wouldn't survive to outgrow her protective instincts and if the worst happened and she'd chosen something else like the Lacebark Tree with its powerful connection to flames that could rival those of the Church's Exemplars, giving him the strength to fight in the fiercest of battles while putting his life on the line...

She'd never forgive herself for handing him something so dangerous when she'd already torn him away from the safety of the life he knew. She owed him far too much for dragging him into her world of wars and vengeance and even put his parents at risk because she'd latched onto him at the Summer Villa. She only hoped that this would help to tip the scales back toward even and give him the strength to protect the people he was coming to care for in his new life in the Vale of Mists.

And if it wasn't, there was still one more gift waiting for him that could give him powers no other Cypress Witch had ever hoped to wield.

Chapter 497: A Strange Meeting

That same night, hours after the sun had set on distant Lothian City, a carriage from Lothian Manor clattered across the well-worn cobblestone roadways, splashing through puddles from an afternoon rainstorm as it carried two unique guests of the manor into the heart of the merchant quarter of the city.

Master Isabell of Blackwell County's Illustrious Guild of Engineers, and Master Tiernan of the Iron Monger's Guild occupied an awkward position in the social order of Lothian Manor. Neither of them were nobles of any sort, and as such, they should be bound by the rules that required commoners, even commoners who had been invited by Marquis Bors Lothian, to find accommodations in one of the city's many inns.

But it was an open secret among the servants of the manor that Marquis Bors intended to grant knighthood on the visiting Guild Masters, making them proper nobles as well as his personal vassals. So while their status as noblemen hadn't been confirmed, and no one among the household staff would dare to address them as 'Sir Tiernan' or 'Dame Isabell', they were both treated with the same level of respect and privilege as a junior member of the peerage.

If things had ended there, then the servants of the manor could have adapted easily enough, but the visiting Guild Masters went even further in flaunting traditions, placing Master Isabell in charge of nearly everything while the taciturn Master Tiernan seemed content to only voice his opinions on matters directly related to his trade.

The strange arrangement had led to a number of unsavory rumors about the pair, with some even speculating that Master Tiernan had become a eunuch in some kind of unfortunate smelting accident. After all, to the hot-blooded men of the frontier, nothing else could explain the way such a physically imposing man would act so henpecked around a woman who wasn't even his wife.

Neither master seemed to care much for what people whispered in the halls and servants' quarters during their visit to Lothian City. Instead, both of them were more concerned with the strange request that one of Owain Lothian's knights had brought them to meet with a merchant in the city.

"Who exactly is this Marcel?" Isabell had asked when Sir Hugo Hanrahan brought the invitation to a private dinner. "And why has he requested to meet privately with us?"

"Who he is is a little awkward to explain," the timid steward said. "He's not a person of importance, but he represents one of the most well-connected businessmen of the frontier. Lord Owain had some business with his master now that we've returned to Lothian City, and while I was speaking with Mister Marcel, he mentioned that he would consider it a favor for his master if he could meet privately with the two of you."

"What nonsense," Master Tiernan had said at the time, folding his thickly muscled arms over his chest. "I don't meet with people for no reason."

"I doubt it's for no reason," Isabell said, placing a hand gently on the burly man's shoulder. "I assume, Steward Hugo, that Lord Owain would consider it a favor from us if we were to accede to this request? In the interests of furthering his own business with the man that Mister Marcel represents?"

"Yes, yes," Hugo said, nodding his head like a chicken pecking at grain. "If you two would meet with Mister Marcel, I'm sure the goodwill Lord Owain would receive for making the arrangements would go a long way to smoothing out his other business. Very much so," he said with a relieved look on his face.

"At least tell us who this man represents," Tiernan said with a dark scowl rippling across his brow. "That's not asking too much, is it, Master Isabell?"

"I'm sure we can find out when we meet with this Mister Marcel," Isabell said, carefully noting the way sweat formed on the timid knight's brow. Clearly, the young man wanted to say as little as possible about his lord's business, but facilitating this meeting put him in an uncomfortably awkward position.

In Isabell's opinion, there was little to be gained from squeezing Hugo Hanrahan. The man had already been badly whipped into subservience to one lord. Squeezing such a man further was little better than attempting to wring water from a stone.

Kindness, however, could go a long way toward placing the poor man in her debt, and it was much easier to ask him for the occasional 'small kindness' to repay the small kindnesses she'd shown him than to bark and threaten when he was already backed into a corner by Lord Owain.

Now, as the carriage rolled up to the brightly lit exterior of the Gilded Horns, a widely celebrated establishment that catered to the most wealthy among the commoners of Lothian City, the two guild masters were looking forward to getting some answers.

The building itself wasn't that impressive by the standards of Blackwell City, standing only three stories tall and lacking any of the grand statues or intricate stonework that would have marked a similar establishment in their home city.

What it lacked in common grandeur, however, it more than made up for with the row of gilded horns, each taken from the skull of a horned demon, that ringed the entrance to the stately building. By quick count, Isabell estimated that there were at least a hundred horns on display, making it brutally obvious how the original owner of the establishment had acquired his fortune to open such an opulent business in the frontier.

"I thought they had to hand the horns over to the Church to receive the bounty offered on these," Master Tiernan said, pausing to admire the grizzly display. "Do you think these are cast replicas of the original horns?"

"Oh, these are real, friend," a young, handsomely dressed man in tight breeches and a loose midnight blue tunic said from the doorway as he flashed the arriving guild masters a dazzling smile. "Cast replicas would come off as idle boasting, don't you think? Anyone can take a single horn and make replicas, but to acquire these... it takes something different, doesn't it?"

"That it does, Mister...?" Isabell asked, adjusting the silver rimmed spectacles on her nose and taking a closer look at the dark-haired youth. The steel haired woman was no stranger to spoiled youths with more money than sense, and looking at this fellow, he certainly dressed the part with expensive silk and hammered silver buttons and buckles but when he moved, there wasn't the slightest hint of carelessness that she was used to seeing from young men who grew up with a silver spoon in their mouth.

"Marcel, at your service," he said with a graceful, exaggerated bow. "Now, Master Isabell, Master Tiernan, I've reserved a private dining room for us on the top floor. I hope you'll indulge me in your company for a few hours tonight," turning to guide them into the lavish interior of the Gilded Horns.

"After all," he called over his shoulder. "We have much to discuss."

Chapter 498: A Private Meal

Marcel led the two guild masters through the heavy oaken doors of the Gilded Horns, which swung open on silent hinges to reveal an interior that rivaled the grandeur of any noble's hall in Lothian March, perhaps even exceeding the opulence on display in the halls of the western barons closest to demon-occupied territories.

The common dining area sprawled before them, its high-beamed ceiling supported by massive timber pillars carved with scenes of legendary hunts and battles against demons with thin layers of gold leaf applied to the horns of horned demons, the claws of clawed demons or any other defining feature of the myriad types of demons who plagued the frontier. The display didn't escape Master Tiernan's discerning eye, who carefully noted that any feature of the carving that had been covered in gold leaf was a treasure the Church would pay a hefty bounty for.

A great hearth dominated the far wall, large enough to roast an entire ox, its dancing flames casting long shadows across the rush-strewn floor interspersed with fresh-cut herbs that released their fragrance with each step guests and servants took across the wide open space.

The aroma mingled with the rich scents of roasted meats, freshly baked bread, and spices so expensive they were normally only available to the nobility in the frontier. Cinnamon, cloves, and nutmeg brought at great expense from the old countries across the sea tantalized the nose along with fresher herbs of tarragon and thyme.

All around the room, merchants and wealthy tradesmen rubbed elbows with accomplished demon hunters at heavy oak tables draped with fine linen cloths. Servants in the establishment's colors, midnight blue and gold, moved with practiced efficiency between kitchen and tables, bearing enormous platters laden with autumn's bounty.

At one table, a whole roasted turkey had been reassembled in its plumage, its flesh arranged on a bed of turnips, parsnips, and apples glazed with honey. At another, a suckling pig turned slowly on a spit, its skin crackling and glistening with fat as a server carved slices for eager guests.

In the corner of the room on a raised wooden platform, a trio of musicians plucked gently at their instruments, filling the air with the faint music of harps and a citole that looked to be as old and well cared for as the Gilded Horn itself.

A grand staircase of polished walnut rose along the western wall, its banisters adorned with more of the gilded horns that gave the establishment its name. Each step was covered in plush carpeting imported from the eastern duchies, a luxury that muffled footfalls and proclaimed the owner's reach and connections more clearly than any herald.

The staircase split at a landing halfway up, one branch leading to a gallery overlooking the common room, the other continuing upward to the third floor where private dining chambers offered discretion for more sensitive conversations.

"This way, if you please," Marcel said, gesturing toward the staircase. "The finest wines are reserved for the upper chambers, and I've taken the liberty of arranging a meal that I believe will suit your discerning palates."

"You're going a long way to impress a simple smith," Master Tiernan said as he ascended the stairs, carefully inspecting the craftsmanship of everything from the polished banister to the gilded candelabras hanging from the rafters.

He'd visited the Guild Halls and manors of plenty of men who plastered gold leaf over shoddy work in an attempt to appear prosperous, but what he saw in the precisely riveted fittings and smoothly polished woodwork spoke of an attention to detail rarely found outside the halls of counts and dukes.

"You're important people who have come a long way to visit this lonely corner of the frontier," Marcel said smoothly, bowing slightly as he ushered them into a small dining room hung with rich tapestries depicting ancient mist-filled forests and grand waterfalls along the river Luath. One wall even held an oil painting depicting a demon fortress wreathed in flames behind an army flying banners of the Lothian family and the Templars of the Church.

Marcel studied their reactions to the artwork carefully, noticing the way Tiernan seemed more interested in the subtle, natural beauty of the misty forest while Isabell's eyes seemed to have become caught on the painting, flickering over countless details that felt far too accurate to have been accidental.

"This painting," Isabell said when she could no longer hold back her curiosity. "How, how old is it and which master painted it?" she asked, moving to stand directly before it and adjusting her silver rimmed spectacles as she examined everything from the orderly arrangement of the invading army to the crumbling walls broken by the miracle workers of the Church. Even the roads leading away from the burning fortress town were meticulously drawn in, dotted with tiny figures of demons fleeing the carnage to the hills beyond.

"I cannot name the painter," Marcel said slowly. "But the painting dates to the reign of Cellach Lothian, and the painter is said to have borne witness to this battle. Whether it's true or not, I cannot say," he said with a helpless shrug.

"It's a bit sad to look at over a meal," Tiernan said, definitively choosing a seat that placed his back to the painting. "I prefer this one," he said, pointing at the tapestry of the misty forest on the opposite wall. "Somewhere quiet."

"You chose a strange profession for someone who prefers the quiet, my friend," Master Isabell said as she pulled herself away from her examination of the exquisitely detailed painting to take a seat next to the burly iron monger, choosing to angle herself in a way that let her observe both the misty forest and the churning waters of the river Lauth.

"I prefer the quiet because of my profession," Tiernan said, tapping the side of his shaven head just in front of his ear. "Too many years, too many hammers on anvils and too many clattering chains. A foundry is a noisy place," he told their youthful-looking host. "But maybe one day soon I'll have a place like that to call my own," he said, pointing a thick, sausage-like finger at the tapestry.

"I'm sure that one day you will," Marcel said with a knowing smile and a twinkle in his eye as he took his seat at the table, ringing a bell to signal the staff that they were ready to be served. "I hope you'll pardon me for the small talk while we wait for our meal," he said, taking a crystal decanter of fragrant red wine from the table and filling each of their goblets. "The things we have to discuss tonight, they aren't for most ears to hear, even in a place like this."

Before either master could respond to his statement, the doors on the opposite side of the private room opened, revealing a narrow hallway and several servants bearing platters piled high with spit roasted boar sitting on a bed of cabbage leaves wrapped around balls of ground meat and nuts, a steaming pot filled with rich, creamy rabbit stew, and several individual pies stuffed with either sweet fruit preserves or savory roasted vegetables.

"There are only two of us, Mister Marcel," Isabell said as the stream of servants continued bringing in even more dishes until the table was almost completely covered with enough food to feed a dozen men Master Tiernan's size. "Or do you mean to tell me that you have a young man's appetite to eat for three grown men? My youngest just grew out of that stage a few years ago..."

"Oh, I just like to nibble on a little of everything," Marcel said, wishing for the dozenth time that he could bring the cooks of the Gilded Horn back to the Vale of Mists to study Georg's method of cooking small portions for vampires who only ate for the joy of a flavor and had no need of food for sustenance. For now, it was a distant dream, but if Lady Ashlynn had her way, that might change.

"If you only have one thing, then may I suggest the Rainbow Trout?" Marcel said, pointing at a platter with two fillets of tender, flaky fish nestled between the preserved head and tail of the fish.

"Lady Ashlynn seemed to take quite a liking to it the last time we dined together," he said, carefully watching the faces of the guild masters for their reaction.

"Mister Marcel," Isabell said, her hands pausing in the air halfway to the serving tools for the fish. "It sounds like we do have important things to discuss tonight. Tell me," she asked as the last of the servants exited the dining room, closing the door behind them. "When was the last time you dined with Lady Ashlynn?"

Chapter 499: Straight Answers (Part One)

"It's been some time," Marcel said as he began to fill the plate before him with small morsels of boar, roast vegetables, and slender slices of fruit pies. "One of the last times I spoke with her, she asked me to arrange for letters to be delivered to the two of you and a few other acquaintances in Blackwell City," he said, taking a delicate bite of the rich, slightly nutty tasting boar and chewing slowly to savor its slightly springy texture while his mouth filled savory juices that carried the faintest hint of fresh herbs.

"Tell me, esteemed masters," Marcel said, smiling in genuine appreciation of the cook's work with the boar. "Did the letters I arranged arrive safely? It's rare, but there have been occasions where my carriers fail to reach their destination."

"We received a single letter each," Isabell said carefully, finally shaking herself free of her shock enough to begin serving herself a portion of the fish, though her hands trembled with more than just the shakes

of her advancing years. "Should there have been others? I've heard that Lady Ashlynn only receives a few visitors at the Summer Villa, so I can't imagine she's had much opportunity to send others, unless you visit frequently?"

"Have you made plans to visit her at the Summer Villa?" Marcel asked without answering the engineer's question. "I imagine that she would make an exception to allow a visit for friends she felt were important enough to write to so soon after she arrived in Lothian March," he said as he swirled the rich red wine in his goblet.

"I'm afraid we haven't been granted the opportunity," Isabell said, frowning at the young man who seemed to be toying with his words. "Lord Owain will be taking us to visit Baron Hanrahan in the hopes that we find the lands near Airgead Mountain to be to our taste."

"That's a shame," Marcel said, using his goblet of wine to gesture at the tapestry of the misty forest. "You would enjoy the lands around the Dunn barony more if you want to see places like the one in that tapestry."

"That's a real place then?" Tiernan asked, raising a thick, bushy brow at the delicate young man. "Is that the famous Vale of Mists?"

"It might be," Marcel said, taking a sip of the heady red wine. "Or it might be somewhere nearby. The woman who wove that tapestry is an old friend and she's exceedingly well traveled," he said with a faint smile. "She has a better eye for detail than most, and she has a way of pulling her into a world of her own making with her work. It might be real, or it might be one of the most vivid dreams she's ever manifested."

"Do you have an allergy to direct answers, Mister Marcel?" Isabell asked, tapping her long nails on the table in irritation. "I don't think I've heard a straight answer from you since we arrived here. Or is this more of the 'small talk' you need to dole out while prying ears are nearby? If this place isn't safe enough to talk, then I'm happy to skip the meal to discuss more important things."

"We are discussing important things," Marcel said, smiling while his dark eyes tracked Isabell's every irritated movement and his ears listened to the subtle shifts in the pitch of her voice. "You're worried about Lady Ashlynn, aren't you?"

"We both are," Master Tiernan said, intercepting the question before Isabell could be drawn into a spat with the strange young man. Reaching across the table, he placed himself momentarily between the two of them to fetch a selection of small meat pies, loading up his plate before turning to regard the dark-haired youth with the same intensity he'd directed at the craftsmanship of the furnishings earlier.

"Giving Lady Ashlynn privacy to be on her rest makes sense," the burly guild master said. "My Nisa spent most of two months in bed, barely taking more than a dozen steps to the privy or to wash before our oldest was born. A giant of a lad who takes too much after his father," he said, gesturing at his own heavy frame.

"But when Nisa was laid up on bed rest, she wanted visitors more than anything," he added. "She hated being cooped up at home. Her sisters came twice a week, her mother once a week, and she even asked the baker down the street from us to deliver bread at the end of the day so the two of them could gossip like she used to when she did the shopping herself."

"So to hear that Lady Ashlynn will take no visitors because she's with child," Tearnan said around a mouthful of meat pie. "It's a bit strange now, isn't it?"

"Mister Marcel," Isabel said, looking at him with tired, pleading eyes that couldn't hide their anxiety behind her silver rimmed spectacles. "I've spoken with Lord Owain, but he seems to be in no hurry to visit his wife. Instead, he invites us to tour the countryside with him and Lady Jocelynn, who also seems to have no interest in spending time with her sister."

"The Blackwell sisters were always close," Isabell said softly. "Lady Ashlynn even asked me to show her how she could sneak out of Blackwell Manor while my guild was rebuilding one of the wings. When I showed her a path the work crews used to haul stone from the work yard, she was as giddy as a girl half her age and she couldn't wait to tell her sister, but now, when I ask Lady Jocelynn how her sister is fairing she tells me that she's 'sure her sister is doing well' and that she's happily 'holed up in her room with her books.'"

Perhaps if she didn't know Ashlynn as well as she did, Isabell would have believed the polite non-answers she received from Lothian family and Ashlynn's own sister when she asked after the young lady's condition. Perhaps if she hadn't received Lady Ashlynn's warning about Sir Kaefin dying because he couldn't keep his hands to himself, she would have trusted the safety that Lord Owain claimed he'd provided to the missing Blackwell sister.

But too many pieces of the puzzle didn't fit together the way they were 'supposed to' for the engineer to be satisfied with the answers she was getting. And so, since this young man seemed to have the answers she didn't, she was determined to get the truth out of him, one way or another.

Chapter 500: Straight Answers (Part Two)

"That's fitting, isn't it?" Marcel asked as he speared a cabbage roll and began cutting it into smaller pieces. The intense stare that Isabell directed at him rolled off his pale skin like water off the back of a duck. At this point, he'd lost count of how many determined, focused people he'd sat across a table from, and the look she gave him was no different from the hostile looks he'd received from men who were old when she was still a child.

"Wasn't it always said that she kept to herself?" Marcel asked as though the answer was common knowledge. "It's been said that she rarely left the manor because of her poor health, hasn't it? Lady Jocelynn's words aren't too out of place then, are they?"

"Lady Jocelynn says what outsiders expect to hear," Isabell said bitterly, pushing the flakes of fish around on her plate, unable to find any joy in the careful preparation of the local trout while anxiety about Lady Ashlynn gnawed at her belly.

"But anyone who really met Lady Ashlynn knows that she's always busy doing something. She planted her own garden in Blackwell Manor and dug in the dirt with her bare hands," she said with a snort as she tried to imagine the frail, withdrawing image of Ashlynn that she'd been told about next to the rambunctious young girl she'd known for several years.

"She snuck out of the manor at night to go up on the cliffs and watch the ships come in when the sun rose," Isabell said, repeating the story she'd heard from Ashlynn's mother, the Countess, when she asked about revealing a way for the mischievous young Ashlynn to slip out at night. She hadn't been surprised that the Countess knew about her daughter's escapades, but the resigned look she had when she gave her permission to reveal a small secret had always troubled the engineer.

"But now, she's holed up in a room in the villa, unable to receive guests and doing nothing but reading?" Isabell said incredulously. "That doesn't sound like the Lady Ashlynn that I knew. Not one bit."

"So you two are worried about her," Marcell said, setting his cutlery down and growing very still as he regarded the pair of guild masters. "The question is, if it came down to it, would you stand on her side? Even if it meant you had to stand in opposition to Lord Owain?"

"I knew it," Tiernan said. "I told you that things weren't well between her and her husband. Is that why you wanted to meet with us?" the Iron Monger asked, looking expectantly at Isabell as he fit the pieces together in his mind. "Let me guess. Lady Ashlynn's not holed up in the Summer Villa because of her pregnancy. She's held prisoner there and you need us, need Master Isabell, to engineer a way out for her."

"If that's what's happening," Isabell said slowly. "Then of course, I'll stand with Lady Ashlynn. But when I received her letter, she didn't ask me to help her escape. She asked for my help engineering an escape for Lady Jocelynn. The way she wrote, it sounded like she'd given up on any hope of escape for herself," she said, looking at Marcel and fervently wishing that she'd read Lady Ashlynn's intention incorrectly.

"Good," Marcel said, offering the pair a smile that felt cold, calculated, and... triumphant. "As long as you remain committed to stand on Lady Ashlynn's side, I will treat you as her allies in what's to come. But I will warn you," he said as his already dark eyes seemed to become even darker, turning into bottomless pits that could devour a person's soul.

"If you betray this trust," he said in a voice that seemed to echo from somewhere far away. "Death would be a release from the fate that finds you. If you cannot promise me that you will carry the secrets I share to your graves and beyond, then we should part ways now and pretend this meeting never happened."

"You can trust in our word," Tiernan said, standing quickly and moving to place his burly frame between Isabell and the suddenly menacing dark-haired youth. "But if you're going to make threats," he added, cupping one meaty hand over a massive fist and cracking his knuckles. "Know that I don't take kindly to threatening people, especially people like Master Isabell."

"Relax, Master Tiernan," Isabell said from behind her towering companion, placing a hand on his shoulder and gesturing for him to return to his seat. "I'm sure that Mister Marcel is just making things clear before he invites his hidden master to reveal these secrets to us."

"That's the real reason you've been playing all these word games, isn't it?" Isabell asked, looking directly at Marcell's dark eyes. "We've heard of this 'well-connected' individual you serve as an intermediary for," she added, looking at the door the servants had used to enter the room. "Isn't it time for the man behind the curtain to reveal himself?"

"Hidden Master?" Marcel said, blinking several times before he burst out in laughter. "While it's true that I'm bound to the service of a powerful Mistress, I assure you that she isn't here. More importantly, unless my Mistress orders me otherwise, Lady Ashlynn's orders are the second only to hers."

"The person you've likely been told about is a real person," Marcel admitted to the suddenly confused engineer who thought she'd assembled all the pieces correctly. "He's known as the 'Black Merchant', but that name has always referred to me," he said, giving a self-deprecating bow from his seat.

"You're the incredibly powerful and well-connected individual that Owain Lothian is doing business with?" Master Isabell asked, blinking several times as she tried to fit the puzzle pieces together in a way that made sense. "But if you're bound in service to Lady Ashlynn..."

"Lady Ashlynn needs strong supporters who can fight at her side, whether that's on the field of battle or in the halls of power where alliances are forged and rivals are toppled in fair and just confrontations," Marcel said smoothly.

"She also needs supporters who have ears in many places, and hands in many pockets," he added. "I've done those things for my Mistress for a very long time, and now I do them for Lady Ashlynn as well. But in order for you to understand your role in what's to come and the way you can most be of use to Lady Ashlynn, there are secrets you should know or nothing else will make any sense," he said.

"You mentioned secrets," Teirnan said, giving both doors an evaluating look. "Is it safe to speak here? Should we go somewhere that someone won't accidentally enter here?"

"No one will disturb us here," Marcel said confidently. "Now that we have our meal, no one else is even allowed on this floor. The other dining rooms are all empty, and I promise you that I would notice anyone intruding where they shouldn't be long before they could hear what I have to say."

"Now, let me start with the most important secret," Marcel said before the pair could interrupt with any further questions. "Lady Ashlynn isn't in the Summer Villa. She isn't even in Lothian March and she hasn't been since the night of her wedding when Owain failed to murder her," he said.

For the next several seconds, Marcel said nothing as he waited for the pair to process what he'd just said. Isabell's face instantly lost all color, quickly looking almost as pale as Marcel himself did, while

Tiernan's face turned bright crimson with barely suppressed outrage as he clenched his fists and visibly shook with fury.

"I just received news the other night," he added in the hopes that he could help them channel the intense feelings storming in their hearts. "Lady Ashlynn is returning from the place where she's been in hiding. When she returns, she intends to confront Owain and lay claim to Lothian March."

"The only question is," the dark-haired youth asked. "When the time comes, are you prepared to