

The Vampire 531

Chapter 531: A Time for Preparations

The following day, Ashlynn dutifully slept until the afternoon sun had turned soft and golden, shining through the vale's mists in soft edged rays of pale light.

On her terrace, overlooking the valley beyond the ancient fortress walls, Ashlynn sat with Virve while they enjoyed a sumptuous feast prepared by an enthusiastic Georg. The bearish chef had used every technique at his disposal to assemble the flavors of fall in the Vale and place them all on artfully arranged plates for his most prestigious student and the soon-to-be Oak Witch.

Sitting across the table from her, Virve dispensed with knife and fork, using her claws directly to disassemble the soft duck breast that had been slow cooked in its own fat along with fresh herbs and sharp pepper corns, resulting in a texture so delicate that it melted on the tongue like butter, with a flavor so rich that Ashlynn had struggled to eat more than a few bites of her before moving on to lighter dishes.

"Did you sleep well, Virve?" Ashlynn asked, cutting a small piece of orange autumn squash that had been studded with cloves and basted with honey as it roasted. The flavor was just as delicate as the duck, but sweeter with a touch of earthiness that paired well with the goblet of red wine at her elbow. "Seeing a ritual like that, and being so close to the energy of it all, I can understand if it made it difficult to sleep afterwards."

"I slept fine my Lady, er, I mean, Mother Ashlynn," Virve said awkwardly as she licked the juices of the duck from her claws. "I sleep when I can and wake when I'm needed. I lost track of day and night years ago."

"I wish I could say that it will be better now that you're joining the coven but..." Ashlynn said, sighing heavily. "I'm starting to lose track of day and night myself. There never seem to be enough hours and I get so few to spend with Nyri," she said wistfully.

"The winter should be a good time to slow down," Virve said, picking up bright pink lamb chop by the bone and placing the entire medallion of mutton in her mouth before biting down and tearing the meat free from the bone. The meat wasn't as tender as spring lamb, but somehow, under Georg's tender ministrations, he'd still delivered a chop that was rich with an earthy flavor that blended with a crust of crushed walnuts and dried berries to create a flavor that exploded in the veteran soldier's mouth as soon as she bit down.

"My clansmen might not hibernate through the winter," she added around a mouthful of mutton as she dropped the bone on her plate. "But we all tend to withdraw to our long houses to escape the dreary days and the snows when they come. No one wants to be trudging through the cold and wet when you could cozy up by the fire with your close ones. You should do the same," she suggested, picking up another walnut crusted chop and pointing it at Ashlynn to emphasize her point.

"This winter will be for making preparations," Ashlynn said, shaking her head. "You and Ollie have much to learn in order to become true witches. Once the winter snows stop and the world begins to thaw, I intend to strike at the Lothians, before they have a chance to organize their army or receive reinforcements that have gathered in Blackwell County."

"Our window of opportunity is too small," Ashlynn said, moving from the squash to her own mutton, though unlike Virve, she worked carefully with her knife and fork to cut delicate slices. "When we make our move, we have to secure victory swiftly or risk provoking a war that drags on for years with more deaths and tragedies every day."

"I thought the humans only fought in the summer, like sensible people," Virve said, frowning at Ashlynn in puzzlement. "Or do you mean that we'll enter a cycle of wars every summer?"

"This time it will be different," Ashlynn said firmly, poking the center of a mutton chop with the point of her knife. "This time, Lothian City will fall in our opening move. But capturing the city is the easy part," she said, carefully carving out the center of the mutton chop. "Holding it means we have to pacify the citizens within the walls."

"If they don't accept our rule then we will constantly face small riots or uprisings from within the city," Ashlynn explained. "If we can't feed them through the winter, if we can't settle their grievances when they bring them to us for justice... If they feel like they have been conquered and enslaved instead of feeling that they have been welcomed into something greater and liberated from the crushing Lothian boot..."

"The Vale of Mists has never conquered anyone like that," Virve pointed out, dropping a third bone onto her plate and picking up a bowl of creamy soup made from goats milk and smashed carrots, drinking it down as though it were a mug of ale. "Can you really make the humans accept our rule?"

"I don't know," Ashlynn said, shaking her head at the way nothing seemed to disturb her next coven-member's appetite. Virve ate with gusto whenever the opportunity presented itself, but when the time came to fight, she was just as likely as Lennart to lead the charge, standing shoulder to shoulder with her companions when the fighting was at its fiercest.

Sometimes, Ashlynn wondered if Virve even stopped to taste the food she was devouring, or if it was simply fuel, like logs thrown upon the hearth at night for warmth. The brief flicker of disappointment that passed over the bearish woman's face when she ran out of soup, and the way she licked at the edges of the bowl before setting it down, however, suggested that she'd at least found a few favorites among the dishes Georg had prepared for them.

"Do you think that your clansmen can act like an occupying army?" Ashlynn asked pointedly. "The hatred between the Vale and the Lothians goes back generations, and not without good cause," she said, clutching her wine goblet as she considered her own grudge with Owain Lothian and the knights under his command.

"Can the people of the Vale walk the streets of Lothian City without causing problems?" Ashlynn asked. "Can they act as constables enforcing the peace without becoming tyrants who rule by the force of their arms?"

Chapter 532: Virve's Vengeance

"Why use the men of the Vale for something like that?" Virve asked, picking up a crumbly, buttery pastry stuffed with spiced apples and drizzled with honey and crumbled goat cheese. "Send to High Fen City for mercenaries, or use Frost Walkers who have never fought humans for that. You're the Eldritch Lady of the High Pass. They'll listen to your orders, and they have no grudges."

"But they don't speak the language," Ashlynn pointed out. "Here in the Vale, everyone has learned the common tongue of humans. Even the people living in the outlying villages can at least speak a few hundred words of it. Enough for simple conversations. But the people in the High Pass and beyond, they won't be able to understand the people we'd need them to police."

"You're making it too complicated, my Lady," Virve said as she munched on her pastry. "Go get some young ones from the Horned Clan. They always have houses that are overfull of young men and women just coming of age. Pair them up with a few Frost Walkers, Tuscans, or what have you and tell them that they're to act as translators. Humans will be too terrified of the bigger 'demons' to cause trouble, but they'll speak to the Horned Clan because they're even smaller than humans are."

For a moment, Ashlynn wanted to protest. It couldn't be that simple, could it? And indeed, the more she thought about it, the more problems she found with the plan. Misunderstandings would likely abound, and young men and women from the Horned Clan might be plentiful and intimidating, but they also wouldn't have the experience and wisdom to solve things with calm words instead of strong arms when they had powerful soldiers to act on their behalf.

"Why use the young ones?" Ashlynn finally asked as she turned the idea over in her mind. "Why not call up older, wiser members of our community. If we're giving them soldiers to do the fighting, then they don't need to be young enough to fight themselves."

"Because the young ones only hate based on their parents' stories," Virve said solemnly. "Everyone in the Vale has reasons to hate the humans. I'm no different," she added, polishing off her pastry and licking her claws before tapping her chest with her thumb. "I can accept Lady Nyrielle and her progeny because they aren't human anymore, not really. They're vampires."

"And me?" Ashlynn asked with a raised brow. "I'm still human. So is Ollie."

"No, you're not," Virve said emphatically, shaking her head in denial. "You're the Mother of Trees. You're a witch, not a human. And Ollie will be a witch soon, too. You're one of us, not one of them."

"But I was one of them," Ashlynn said pointedly. "I was just an ordinary human before I came to the Vale. And my sister, my parents, some of the few people I consider friends... they're all human too."

"Maybe they are," Virve said. "And if you call them good people, then I'll believe that they are. I won't ever hurt the people who have done nothing to us. But... Anyone who's old enough to gain some wisdom is also old enough to have lost some people to the humans and their stupid, pointless, greedy wars," she said, her words growing hotter than she meant for them to be the more she spoke.

"Virve," Ashlynn said, setting her knife and fork down to reach across the table, holding Virve's large paw between her hands. "I, I didn't know. I'm sorry," she said softly, looking into the other woman's misty yellow eyes. "Who? Who did you lose to them?"

"My father," Virve said, staring off to the south and watching the golden rays of light drift across the Vale of Mists. "And in a way, my mother too," she said, pausing for several minutes as she gathered up

the ghosts that had escaped from deep within her heart and pulled them back into the warmest depths of her heart, where she treasured their memories.

"Father, he, he fought against Bors Lothian on Airgead Mountain," Virve continued once she'd collected herself. "Bors is such a greedy coward that he didn't dare to fight the Vale directly, so Lady Nyrielle brought our toughest, strongest warriors to fight alongside the Dark Paw Clan on Airgead Mountain. When he died, he wasn't even defending our home," she added bitterly. "He was protecting the mines from people who killed for wealth."

Across the table, Ashlynn said nothing, focusing her attention on gentle touch, softly stroking the fur of Virve's strong paw as she listened to the other woman's story. She'd heard about the battles Bors fought, of course. Both the Lothian versions of those battles and the version Nyrielle told of the conflict.

One thing that both sides were clear about was that the War of Inches had been fought over control of Airgead Mountain's mines. Bors Lothian never managed to capture a mine for very long, and his war resembled a series of raids more than a proper war, but each time he attacked, his armies slaughtered anyone they could get their hands on before carting away any riches that had already been extracted from the earth. Then, like mice who feared the return of a house cat, they scurried back to safety behind their border forts, counting their stolen riches and their bloody trophies before planning their next raid.

To the proud people of the Vale of Mists who had fought for generations to safeguard the homes they'd rebuilt in the wake of Cellach Lothian's fiery conquest, the notion of fighting to protect stones and lumps of ore felt like a tragic waste of lives. But to the people of Airgead Mountain, those mines were the source of what little wealth they had left to purchase protection and resources from their few remaining Eldritch neighbors.

It was a war that made all too much sense to rulers like Ashlynn who could see the larger picture and the things that only came to Airgead Mountain because of the wealth of the mines. At the same time, it was a war that made little or no sense to soldiers on the front line like Virve and her father.

"What about your mother?" Ashlynn asked gently when she felt Virve retreating into herself. It was an old and painful wound, and if Virve told her she didn't want to speak about it, Ashlynn had no intention of prodding it again. But, since Virve had mentioned it in the first place, she hoped that her future coven member would be willing to open up a bit more.

"She died of a broken heart," Virve said. "Seeing Mother waste away like that... seeing the light leave her eyes when we heard how Father died," Virve said, making a fist with her other hand and squeezing it

so tightly that she could feel her sharp claws pricking her palm. "That's why I wanted to serve Lady Nyrielle as a soldier. So I could get my chance to avenge my father," she said as she blinked back the mist that clouded her yellow eyes.

"I know you have your grudges too, Mother Ashlynn," Virve said, meeting Ashlynn's gaze directly. "So I know you won't mind me claiming my own revenge while we're at it. But, if you ask me to play nice with the Lothians who kill so many of us every year, for nothing but greed over land and gold... That will be hard for me, my lady," she said without flinching, even though she knew it might not be what Ashlynn wanted to hear.

In fact, the things that Virve had just said might give Ashlynn enough pause to withdraw her offer of making Virve her Oak Witch. But, hearing Ashlynn talk about ruling over the humans, keeping the peace, and not resorting to violence... If she hadn't spoken up now and hadn't explained herself to Lady Ashlynn, then how could she just accept a place in her coven when she might bring disagreements that would tear the coven apart from within?

Better to say it now, even if it might cost her the chance to become a witch, than to accept the position if she couldn't endure what Ashlynn would ask of her.

"I won't deny you your vengeance, Virve," Ashlynn promised in a voice that contained cold steel wrapped in gentle understanding of Virve's suffering. "All I'll ask you to do is differentiate between our real enemies, the people who have done us harm and the ones who would perpetuate that harm, and the common people who have little choice but to do as their lords command them to."

"If there's one thing I admire about the Eldritch people," Ashlynn said. "It's that the strong are obligated to protect the weak. We are rulers with heavy obligations to our people. Human rulers aren't all like that. That's why, I want to show the common folk that we are better for them than the Lothians, and any lord who doesn't adapt to our ways and insists on treating people as property or fighting petty wars over wealth," Ashlynn said, her eyes sparkling with a hint of dark malice.

"I won't restrict your claws at all," Ashlynn promised. "Can you accept those terms, Virve?"

Chapter 533: The Oldest Oak

Hours after their meal, Ashlynn and Virve walked quietly through the gathering gloom of the autumn afternoon, having left the ancient fortress and the town surrounding it far behind.

Their meal together had been an opportunity to put down the barriers of guardian and liege lady, along with the need to play their parts before the people around them. It let Ashlynn see a side of Virve that the older woman had kept bottled up and rarely showed.

Ashlynn had no idea how much courage it had taken Virve to be honest about her struggles to consider integration with the humans of Lothian March, but she wasn't about to cast aside her veteran guardian just because she bore deep scars from personal losses. Ashlynn herself struggled to imagine a world where she reconciled with the Lothians after what Owain had done to her.

Still, she had some hope that Owain's brother, Loman, might be redeemable enough to become an ally rather than an enemy. By all accounts, he had been a good man, focused on the charitable efforts of the Church in Lothian City. If that was true, and if he could be reasoned with, then he could help her prevent a great deal of needless bloodshed.

If he couldn't be reasoned with, however, and if he turned himself into a rallying point for resistance, then she would be left with little choice but to deal with him in the Eldritch way and destroy him as a threat to her rule of the march. It was something that the Ashlynn of six months ago would never have considered, but much had changed for her in those six months.

That was why, when Virve said that it would be hard for her to 'play nice' with the Lothians, Ashlynn understood at least a little bit of what the older woman meant. They were both wounded, but Ashlynn's wounds were still raw and fresh, and they were still something that could heal once she'd dealt with the man who nearly killed her.

Virve's wounds were old and deep, with layers upon layers of scar tissue built up over them. Healing wouldn't be easy and true acceptance might be impossible. But, with humans like herself and Ollie in the coven, Ashlynn hoped that she could eventually build a bridge to reconciliation that Virve could cross. And who knew, perhaps the entity they'd hiked out into the wilderness to meet with could help her next coven member with that healing.

"Have you ever been to the Ancient Oak, Virve?" Ashlynn asked as they walked across the tall, damp grass that covered the hillside. "This one specifically," she added. "I know there are others still within the Vale."

"Only once, my lady," Virve said as she walked slowly beside the younger woman, taking one step to every two of Ashlynn's. "I accompanied Lady Nyrielle when she visited the Ancient Oak a few years ago. Every decade or so, Lady Nyrielle makes an offering of blood to each of the Ancient Oaks in order to strengthen them and protect them from any humans who might slip over the wall to do harm to our treasured trees."

"Was this something that High Lord Torbin did as well?" Ashlynn asked. She still vividly remembered Nyrielle's ritual the night they'd formed their bond of blood beneath the Ancient Oak, when Nyrielle had offered blood to the mighty tree in exchange for energy that could heal Ashlynn's wounds, even if it was just enough for her to make it through the ceremony where she became Nyrielle's Seneschal.

Clearly, Nyrielle was no stranger to offering blood to these trees, but the Ancient Oak seemed like a very different kind of tree than the Bloody Sandbox Tree in the Briar that had produced Jacques's seed of witchcraft. If the Ancient Oaks were like this because of vampire blood offerings, Ashlynn would have expected them to have a much more violent and much bloodier aura than the Ancient Oak seemed to possess.

"Not that I've heard of, my lady," Virve said. "As far as I know, this tree was here when the Horned Clan and the Clan of the Great Claw first arrived in the Vale of Mists, before the High Pass was even passable. This tree is the oldest growing thing in the entire valley. It was old long before the High Lord Torbin brought vampires into the Vale of Mists."

"The oldest living thing?" Ashlynn asked, raising an eyebrow at Virve. "Not 'one of the oldest' but 'the oldest?'"

"The oldest," the older woman confirmed. "Perhaps there were grasses alongside it then, but such things have died and renewed themselves several hundred times over in the time this tree has been here."

"I've even heard that the other Ancient Oaks were all planted with seeds taken from this one," Virve said, as the large, majestic tree finally came into view. Its branches stretched so wide that in the thick fog of the late afternoon, it wasn't possible to see the entire tree all at once, and the top of the tree vanished into the fog high overhead.

The trunk stood mighty and proud, stretching upward as if it were holding up the sky itself, and its gnarled roots that peeked above the ground had become tall enough in some places that members of the horned clan could hide behind them without even crouching down.

More than its physically imposing stature, however, the tree seemed to gather the fog around it like a cloak, and eddies and swirls of wind could be seen dancing about the branches, as though the tree itself were taking deep, steady breaths through its red and gold leaves.

"So this tree is the father of all the other Ancient Oaks," Ashlynn said, bowing in deep respect as she approached the base of the tree. "No wonder it asked me to help it spread its seeds when I asked it for a branch."

"The only question," Ashlynn said as she reached out to touch the bark of the mighty Ancient Oak. "Is whether or not it will allow me to turn one of those seeds into your seed of witchcraft."

Chapter 534: Lost Kin

"Hello, old friend," Ashlynn said, gently brushing her fingers across the bark of the Ancient Oak. Standing this close, the shadow of the tree felt both deep and heavy, and the creak of the branches in the gentle autumn wind sounded like the movement of old bones shuffling in the night.

To stand beneath the Ancient Oak was to stand beneath the weight of time itself and for a moment, Ashlynn felt the weight of a number of years that were impossible to count settling down on her shoulders, like a faint preview of her future with Nyrielle before the weight fell away and the tree rustled in a gentle greeting.

"I've brought a friend," Ashlynn said, holding a hand out to Virve and gesturing for her to approach the mighty tree. "She's helped to keep me and my coven safe, and she's watched over my love for even longer than she's watched over me."

Virve reached out to Ashlynn slowly, taking the younger woman's hand in her large paw and allowing herself to be led toward the towering oak. She had seen the Ancient Oak once before, but she had never come beneath the canopy of the venerable tree. Seeing it from a distance was already impressive, but now that she stepped under the branches of the mighty oak, she found herself needing Ashlynn's support and guiding hand just to approach the trunk.

"Her name is Virve," Ashlynn said as the older woman approached the trunk of the tree. "And I'd like your help to bring her into my coven as the next Oak Witch."

Virve wasn't a young woman anymore and she'd long come to accept that, unless she stretched or warmed up her body, there was a growing stiffness in her motions and a weight to her movements that hadn't been there twenty or even ten years ago. Moving under the canopy of the Ancient Oak, however, brought all of the minor aches and pains of her body into sharp focus and the closer she came to the trunk of the tree, the more stooped her posture became as the strength of her muscles faded.

Only when her large paw touched Ashlynn's small and delicate hand did the feeling of advancing years retreat, replaced by the warm, comforting feeling she had once felt as a young cub playing at her grandfather's feet. No longer was the tree ancient and imposing, rather, as someone who was a friend of the Mother of Trees, the tree welcomed her into its shade, filling her with the feeling of returning home after a long day away.

"Hello, Ancient One," Virve said softly as Ashlynn guided her paw to touch the bark of the tree.

Above their heads, branches shook and trembled as a wind felt only by the great tree swept through the branches. The place where Virve's hand touched the ancient bark grew warm to the touch, enveloping her claws in a soft golden-green glow that quickly spread along her arm before spreading across her chest.

"Don't resist," Ashlynn cautioned as she stepped back from Virve and the trunk of the tree.

Unlike the Ancient Willow, there was no spirit accompanying the Ancient Oak who could form its thoughts or feelings into words, but Ashlynn no longer needed an interpreter to understand the desires of the venerable guardian tree. At the moment, it was open, welcoming, and deeply curious about the woman who could become the next Oak Witch.

For Virve, the touch of the tree quickly grew even more familiar, taking on the slightly rough, strong feeling her grandfather's hand had whenever he ruffled her fur or tossed her into the air to play in her earliest memories.

That sensation of familiar strength and playfulness that wasn't always gentle shifted as the golden-green energy enveloped her completely, overwhelming her senses and carrying her mind into a bitter, cold world, reminiscent of the High Pass and the nation of Frost Walkers.

Endless snow covered the familiar hills and valleys of the Vale of Mists, and the river Luath had transformed into a frozen stream, shining like a brilliant, silver ribbon in the harsh light of day. At her feet, however, a single oak sapling pushed up through the snow, basking in the bright light as though it were a warm, summer day.

"This," Virve muttered, her eyes going wide in shock. "This is the Age of Ice. The end of the age of ice," she realized as she noticed that the tops of hills bore not only a few fledgling sprouts of their own, but patches of hearty grass that had begun to grow where the frost no longer held sway.

As soon as she spoke, the vision shifted to a valley where snow only clung to the hillsides in patches of deep shadow. The sapling at her feet now stretched its branches more than a dozen feet into the air above her head and acorns littered the ground around her, waiting for small groups of squirrels or passing birds to carry them away to other places.

"You really are the father and grandfather of all the Ancient Oaks in the Vale of Mists," Virve said, smiling as she watched a flock of birds settling around the young tree before springing back into the air with their treasures clutched tightly in their beaks.

Her view of the valley shifted again, this time revealing dozens of settlements as the Horned Clan and the Clan of the Great Claw arrived in the Vale of Mists. By now, red cedar had begun to fill the valley and many of the Oak trees that filled the valley were like the Ancient Oak she stood beside, weathered and aging guardians who watched over the Vale and all the living creatures within it.

"You were already old when my people arrived," Virve said, watching time slip by as years passed in seconds and the Vale of Mists grew mightier and more prosperous under generation after generation of Eldritch rule.

It was one thing to hear stories of the days when the Vale of Mists had been ruled by a High Lord and existed as one of the most prosperous nations east of the mountains. The people who remembered those days grew fewer every year and most of those within the Vale who could remember the 'golden age' spoke of it with a kind of pained wistfulness that Virve had always suspected exaggerated the glory of yester-year.

Now, however, seeing the ancient roadway packed with wagons and traders making their way into the High Pass, or the bustling city that surrounded the ancient fortress, she felt that she'd done the older generation a great disservice by dismissing their boasts of the days before humans invaded the Vale. The Vale of Mists of those days had been just as brilliant and prosperous as High Fen City, if not more so, and

the Ancient Oak had witnessed every moment of its rise, from a tiny collection of villages into a mighty nation.

The vision turned dark, however, when the first human army appeared on the horizon. Their banners snapped in the wind bearing the hated burning sun emblem of the human Church along with emblems representing the Lothians, the Dunns, the Hanrahans and dozens more noble houses come to slaughter in the name of expanding their empire.

Suddenly, Virve's perspective shifted and she found herself elsewhere in the valley, standing at the base of a different Ancient Oak. This one felt younger even though it was taller and its trunk wasn't nearly as wide, nor its roots as thick and overgrown as the ones belonging to the tree she'd started with.

Humans swarmed around the tree with axes, hot irons and giant saws, hacking and carving away at the base of the mighty tree.

"Nooo!" Virve roared. Her hands moved without thinking, slipping into the worn and familiar darksteel fighting gauntlets that hung from her waist as she charged toward the human butchers, intent on stopping them from harming the majestic tree.

When she arrived beside the first ax wielding human, however, her claws passed through their body like smoke and she tumbled helplessly to the ground when her fearsome attack encountered no resistance.

"Aaaargggg!" Virve roared, shouting in helpless fury as she could only watch the memory unfold before her.

The humans worked with brutal efficiency, chopping roots, sawing through the trunk and then processing the towering Ancient Oak into a series of slabs that they could load onto heavy wagons waiting to cart the remains of the sacred tree away, as though they were carts filled with ore or precious treasures mined from a mountain's depths.

"I understand," Virve said, hot tears burning in her eyes as she watched the humans carve up the remains of the once mighty tree. "You've lost your close kin to the human butchers too."

Above her, she heard the sound of a furious wind whipping through the branches of the Ancient Oak tree as darkness overwhelmed her sight until she found herself standing in a different place entirely...

Chapter 535: Kindling For Fury (Part One)

Thus far, the Ancient Oak had only shown Virve memories from within the Vale of Mists. Now, however, Virve found herself in a vast lumber yard where scores of craftsmen stood around the rough-hewn remnants of an Ancient Oak.

The scent of sawdust and rough-hewn timber filled the air, and a cacophony of rasping saws and thudding hammers filled the air, mixing with the clank of chains as workmen hauled impossibly large logs from the wagons into the workshop.

The vast power of a tree that had endured for more than a thousand years could still be felt in the broken branches gathered to the side and the massive logs, each as thick as Virve was tall, felt like reservoirs of tremendous strength, slowly bleeding out along with the tree's fragrant sap.

"What do you think of this one, my Lord?" an aged and withered craftsman said, tapping one of the giant logs with the cane he carried. "Thick as it is, there should be no problem ripping it into tables for your banquet hall. Every guest will marvel at the splendor of your victory each time you hold a feast, and they will endure for generations."

The craftsman said it like it would be easy, but already his men were learning just how hard it was to cut through the resilient timber of the ancient oak. In one corner, the grinding wheel spun constantly, emitting a high pitched whine and a shower of sparks as a workman sharpened blades that should have lasted for weeks that had worn out in just hours of use on oak that felt almost as tough as iron.

Already, some of the men had begun to mutter about taking up the tools of metal workers, using files intended to grind away steel and polish sword blades just to make some progress with the demonic tree, but the Lothian Lord cared nothing for their struggles as he considered the best way to use a treasure that had taken an entire summer of fierce fighting and the deaths of more than a hundred soldiers in order to claim.

"Banquet tables?" The powerfully built lord walking behind the craftsman said with a derisive snort. "No, the only tables cut from the corpse of this heathen god will belong to Dukes or the King himself. My banquets are filled with rough men of the frontier, battle-hardened soldiers, and gold-seeking

profiteers. Such men don't deserve this finery," he said, running a hand over the severed end of the great tree and rubbing its sap between his fingers.

"Carve me a throne from this," the lord commanded. "Make it from a single piece of wood, without seam or joint, and turn it into a seat that will remind everyone who sees the man sitting atop it that the Lothians are the greatest conquerors of the frontier," he demanded, gazing into the distance as though he could imagine the shape of the grand throne trapped within the simple log.

"Make sure it is fit for the duke I will become when we finally crush the Vale of Mists and Airgead Mountain beneath our boots and drive the last of the demons from the lands east of the mountains," he added. "The king will have to acknowledge our family's gains after this war!"

"A throne, my lord?" the wizened craftsman said, blinking in surprise at the request. The lord wanted an elaborately carved throne made from a wood that was heavier than stone and tougher than iron? Did he think they were miracle workers? But before the ruler of the Lothian March, he could never object that the task was unreasonable, so he racked his brain for an alternative reason to refuse the request.

"My lord," the workman said hesitantly. "Much of this wood will be wasted as shavings and scraps if we carve a throne from a single log. Are you sure you wouldn't prefer to use the material more conservatively?"

"So what if there are shavings and scraps?" the lord scoffed. "Gather them all up so I can present them to the Church to be burned in the pyres of our fallen heroes. Let it not be said that I haven't given back to the holy warriors who fought at our side in these battles."

"I see," the craftsman said, making meticulous notes. "And the other logs, my lord? This tree was hundreds of feet tall, and I've never seen an oak this stout and strong. We can still craft many things with the remaining pieces."

"This wood all but cries out that it holds great power," the lord said, musing as he inspected the other logs. "It belongs in places of power. A desk for my study, and an even greater desk to send as tribute to his majesty the King. Consider something appropriate to fashion into gifts for each of the dukes on the ruling council," he added, almost as though it were an afterthought.

"That's wise, my Lord," the craftsman said, bowing obsequiously. "Since my Lord will be joining the ruling council soon, sending a gift to your new peers will open many doors, I'm sure."

"I don't care how much you waste when you carve my throne," the lord said, placing a heavy hand on the craftsman's shoulder. "But the rest, we should use wisely. Have pens made to gift to the barons, wooden buttons to adorn the tunics of my knights," he added, his voice trailing off as a thought struck him.

"No, better than that," the Lothian lord said. "I'll send over a smith to discuss hafts for maces, flails, battle axes, or the hilts of swords. We will turn this tree into weapons that will reap the lives of the demons who once worshiped it!"

"And one more thing," the Lothian lord added with a lecherous gleam in his eyes. "This wood belongs in places where a man weilds his power. Make sure to carve a bed for me from the log nearest the crown of the tree. The feeling of power this gives me," he added with a twisted grin. "I'm very much looking forward to sharing this feeling of power with my lady. Maybe then she will finally bear me the sons that fate has been denying me..."

Chapter 536: Kindling For Fury (Part Two)

Standing off to the side, forced to observe like a phantom, completely unable to affect the perverse desecration of the Ancient Oak playing out before her, Virve trembled in rage as she listened to the Lothian Lord's growing excitement at the growing list of atrocities and sacrilegious uses he had in mind for the body of the once revered Ancient Oak.

Moments later, however, Virve dropped to her knees in agony as the vision moved forward, revealing a veritable army of human butcher weilding saws and chisels, drawing knives and rasps and dozens of other tools as they began cutting into the tough wood of the Ancient Oak.

The sensation of those saws, rasps, and chisels tearing at her flesh overwhelmed Virve's senses as the Ancient Oak allowed her to feel what the tree had felt as the humans began reducing it to so much furniture and kindling.

At first, when Virve had witnessed the humans felling the sacred tree, her heart had been filled with fury, followed by deep sorrow as she witnessed the Ancient Oak fall. At that moment, as she watched the pieces of the tree being carted away, she had mourned for its passing as a mighty hero who had safeguarded the Vale of Mists for more than a thousand years.

It was only now that she realized that 'dying' was a slow process as the life within the Ancient Oak bled out of its hard, unyielding wood. The tree had been torn apart and carted away from its roots, but it was still very much alive, feeling the agony of human tools biting into its flesh as they shaped and molded it to their twisted desires.

"Noooo," Virve cried. "How could you? How could you, you monsters! He's not even dead yet you beasts!" Trembling on the floor of the workshop, the pain faded as the Ancient Oak withdrew the vision, returning Virve to the hilltop where the Ancient Oak resided.

This time, Virve was alone with the Ancient Oak, sitting under its branches as it wrapped her in a warm, golden-green aura of soothing comfort and strength. All around her, several small woodland creatures emerged from the tree, rabbits from around its roots, squirrels from hollows in the trunk and even small birds from high in the branches of the tree.

All of them gathered around the trembling Virve, each one offering a bit of warmth and soft comfort as she confronted the horror of the fate that befell any ancient tree humans were able to claim for themselves.

For thousands of years, the Ancient Oak had acted as a guardian for the Vale of Mists. Not only did it shelter the smaller creatures who gathered close to the mighty trunk, it also sheltered the whole of the Vale, protecting it from tempestuous storms or calming the surging floods of the river Luath when it threatened to spill over its banks.

Now, the tree reached out again to calm a storm, only this time, the storm it calmed was the one that raged within the heart of the woman who had come to it in order to become a witch.

It was clear to the ancient tree that Virve shared a common enemy with it. The men who had cut down the Ancient Oak's offspring had given birth to the men who cut down Virve's father. The Ancient Oak knew this, and now Virve knew it too. All that remained was to see if she had the resolve to right the wrongs that occurred all those years ago... even if the Mother of Trees herself wanted to restrain her claws.

As the woodland creatures comforted Virve, more images began to form in her mind. They weren't memories this time, but possibilities that the Ancient Oak shared with her. In one flickering vision, she

saw herself standing before a magnificent desk in Bors Lothian's trophy-filled office, her claws tracing the ancient grain of oak wood that still held the faintest whispers of life.

In another vision, she saw herself carrying fragments of carved wood through moonlit forests, back to the Vale where a weathered and sunken stump waited in silent vigil.

In a third vision, she found herself face to face with an aging Lothian lord. His armor was worn and battered and his hair had long turned to steely gray but in his hands he gripped the polished wooden haft of a battle ax that had claimed the lives of countless Eldritch soldiers during the War of Inches.

Virve might never have met Bors Lothian, but she'd heard him described often enough to immediately identify the man who was ultimately responsible for her father's death, even if it hadn't been his ax that dealt the killing blow.

As she faced him, the golden-green aura pulsed around her, neither commanding nor pleading, but silently offering. Power without constraint. Strength without Ashlynn's measured restraint. Vengeance without mercy for the human butchers who had shown none.

With a roar of pure fury, Virve leapt forward, her powerful claws shattering the haft of Bors Lothian's ax before tearing into the armor that crumpled like paper under the golden-green power of her claws. Hot blood splattered across her fur, soaking her in an intoxicating blend of violence and victory as she beheld a future where she could avenge the injustices heaped on both her family and the Ancient Oak, putting an end to the Lothian's endless wars of greed and conquest.

The vision faded away, leaving Virve's heart pounding and her chest heaving as she panted from the sudden exertion. Around her, the woodland creatures pulled back to perch on the nearby roots and branches, each of them looking at her in silent question.

Generations of Oak Witches had been powerful guardians, standing at the side of the Mother of Trees and watching over her and her coven as mighty protectors. But the Oak's strength wasn't limited to protecting, and the power it offered Virve was far less restrained than the power of most Oak Witches. All Virve needed to do was agree to take it up, and the Ancient Oak was willing to help her become one of the most dangerous Oak Witches to ever walk the earth.

Chapter 537: The Ancient Oak's Judgment (Part One)

Ashlynn stood nervously among the roots of the Ancient Oak as the tree and Virve got to know each other. At first, she'd sensed a bit of what the tree chose to share with the woman she hoped would become the third member of her coven, but beyond a feeling of struggle against cold and snow and an innumerable number of years, she'd sensed very little from the tree.

Now, as Virve descended deeper into her exchange with the mighty Oak, she sensed almost nothing from the tree itself as it seemed to direct all of its attention toward the veteran soldier who had come to meet it.

Virve's face was more informative as her expression shifted through a myriad of emotions. At first, there was tender, gentle curiosity, followed by a soft, smiling look of wonder. All of that shifted, however, when Virve's entire body tensed and began to shake and tremble. Her hand that touched the Ancient Oak clenched into a fist and her claws scraped along the tough bark of the venerable tree, leaving behind faint scratches that would have been deep gouges on any normal, less resilient tree.

"Oh Virve," Ashlynn said, stepping close to set a comforting hand on her friend's shoulder. She couldn't intervene in what the older woman was experiencing, or if she could, she felt it wouldn't be wise to do so, but she hoped that simple touch could provide at least some comfort to her friend.

Suddenly, the mask of fury on Virve's face crumpled and soft wimpers began to spill from her lips as her body curled on itself like a young cub in great pain. Ashlynn had seen Virve charge into battle against twice their number of towering Tuscan hunters, suffering bone crushing injuries as she fought on the surface of a frozen lake and not once had she seen the veteran soldier reduced to childlike wimpers of pain the way she was now.

"I understand that your long life contains moments of joy and moments of sorrow," Ashlynn said as an emerald green glow gathered in her eyes. "But whatever you are sharing with Virve, do not forget that she is my friend and my dear companion," she warned in a voice that grew as frosty as the High Pass. "You may test her, but do not torment her!"

Above her, the wind rustling through the branches intensified and the sound of rustling leaves filled the air as the Ancient Oak reacted to Ashlynn's admonishment.

"I don't care if you are older than I," Ashlynn said firmly. "Age gives birth to wisdom that should be shared, but be mindful of passing on unnecessary suffering," she said. A vision of Ollie standing up again and again as Thane gave him painful 'reminders' of his virtues flickered through her mind.

Briefly, she wondered how many knights endured that punishing tradition for no other reason than that their predecessors had before she pushed thoughts about Ollie to the back of her mind and focused on the Ancient Oak before her.

"She is my friend," Ashlyn said again, gently caressing the silver-gray fur between Virve's brows as she debated whether or not she should pull Virve free of the Ancient Oak's vision. "Be kind to her, or I'll put an end to this," she warned, turning to look at the tree's mighty trunk.

The threat seemed to work, and moments later, Virve's expression softened as the golden-green energy flowing from the Ancient Oak grew more vibrant, taking on an aura that Ashlynn associated with healing, growth and renewal.

"Thank you," she told the Ancient Oak as she continued to gently stroke Virve's soft fur. The tree wasn't done with her yet, but it had clearly moved on to something less distressing.

Several minutes later, the golden-green aura surrounding Virve slowly withdrew into the majestic tree's roots, leaving behind a Virve who looked stronger and more refreshed than she had been when they arrived at the tree.

"My lady," Virve said softly, blinking several times as she adjusted to the real world after emerging from the tree's vision. Everything she had seen had felt so real, with sights and smells and countless other sensations that nearly overwhelmed her senses that for a brief moment, the real world felt... somehow less real than the visions she'd just emerged from.

Her paws trembled as she flexed her claws, half-expecting to find them stained with Bors Lothian's blood. She could still hear the -CRUNCH- of the Lothian Lord's ax handle snapping under her claws echoing in her ears and feel the sting of impact in her palms as she tore into the human lord's heavy armor.

The phantom scent of sawdust and sap still filled her nostrils, and the echoes of that horrible grinding against wood, against the still living flesh of the fallen Ancient Oak, sent shivers down her spine. In her chest, her heart pounded with a mixture of pain, rage and dark exhilaration that left her gasping for breath in the cool autumn air.

"The Ancient Oak showed me..." she began, her voice thick with emotion emotions she had yet to sort out as one vision jumbled with the next in her thoughts. "It showed me what the Lothians did to one of its children. Not just cutting it down, but..." Her voice caught as a knot formed in her throat and she struggled to find a way to express what she had seen.

"You don't have to force yourself," Ashlynn said softly. Reaching into the pack that Virve had brought for their hike, Ashlynn retrieved a waterskin and a small wooden cup, quickly filling the cup before passing it to her disoriented companion.

"The visions bestowed by ancient trees can be intense," she said, recalling her own experience with the Ancient Willow. "You don't have to explain everything all at once. Take your time to sort your thoughts," she said gently as Virve took the cup in her paws and began to sip. "You don't have to tell me everything it showed you either," she added. "The visions you've experienced belong to you alone. Unless I have a good reason to, I won't demand you share them with me," she promised.

"Thank you, my lady," Virve said as she drew a deep, comforting breath of the cool, misty air of the Vale of Mists. After spending so long traveling with Lady Nyrielle, just the simple act of breathing in air that wasn't bone dry and bitter cold, or filled with strange and foreign scents did a great deal to calm her racing heart.

It took several minutes for her to organize her scattered thoughts, sifting through the memories that were hers and separating them from the visions the Ancient Oak had shared with her as she reminded herself again and again that those visions weren't her own memories, and that she hadn't been the one chopped up and carved up by Lothian woodworkers, even if she could still recall the feeling of dull saw blades digging into her flesh.

Those memories of human cruelty had become tangled in her memories of her own pain. The day she'd learned her father fell in battle blended with the feeling of Lothian axes chopping down the Ancient Oak until she briefly felt like she knew what her father must have felt in the moments before his death.

But that feeling, she fought to remind herself. That feeling wasn't real and it didn't belong to her. And yet, and yet all of it had felt so intense that she struggled to free herself from the lingering feelings those memories evoked.

For her part, Ashlynn said nothing as she watched the bearish woman struggle to compose herself. When Virve gulped down the last of her water, Ashlynn silently refilled the wooden cup and waited patiently until Virve finally seemed ready to continue her tale...

Chapter 538: The Ancient Oak's Judgment (Part Two)

"In the vision the Ancient Oak showed me," she said, staring into her reflection as it danced on the surface of the water in her cup. "The human savages, they... After they cut it down, it was still alive while they butchered it. It could still feel every saw and chisel when they carved it into furniture and weapons and... Trophies." Her fur bristled along her neck as she fought to control the fury rising within her again.

Virve looked up at Ashlynn with eyes that were haunted by pain that wasn't her own. For a moment, she shuddered as a terrifying thought came unbidden to her mind. Was this what Hauke had experienced when he interacted with the horns that carried the spirits of his own long departed ancestors? The notion was enough to stop her cold and leave her wondering if she should accept the tree's offer. If it was going to use the seed to control her the way the horns controlled Hauke...

"None of what I saw or heard was real," she said after several moments of thought. "And I don't think the Ancient Oak is trying to control me. But when I think about the memories the Ancient Oak shared with me, I'm certain the visions of the past it shared were true." She hesitated, uncertain how to express what she'd felt in that moment of imagined vengeance. "It also showed me a glimpse of what my future could be..."

-CRACK-

The sound of a branch snapping high above in the crown of the Ancient Oak startled both women, pulling their attention upward as a hawk nesting in the branches above made its way down, clutching a small branch in its talons as it did the bidding of the ancient tree, delivering a gift along with the Ancient Oak's judgment.

The branch the hawk carried was longer and thicker than the one that the Ancient Oak had offered to Ashlynn when she came to ask for a branch to use as a wand, and for a moment, she wondered if the tree intended for Virve to fashion the branch into a club rather than a wand. More importantly, there was a single acorn attached to the branch, along with five leaves in shades that ranged from brilliant autumn orange to deep crimson.

"Does this mean that the Ancient Oak is willing to let me face its trial to become the Oak Witch?" Virve asked as she received the branch from the hawk's talons. The bird fluttered away without lingering to see what the soldier did with the branch, but Virve barely noticed as she ran the tips of her claws along the twisted and gnarled branch in her hands.

She'd expected some kind of approval. She and the Ancient Oak had too much in common, and even though their meeting had been brief, the depths of the memories it had shared with her had left a deep impression on her heart. If she were forbidden from facing its trials after the vision it showed her of the chance to claim her vengeance against Owain Lothian, she wouldn't have known what to do with the rage such a refusal would have provoked in her. But somehow, the branch in her hands felt far more significant than simply being a carrier for the seed that Ashlynn could use to form her seed of witchcraft.

"No," Ashlynn said, looking from the branch to the tree and back again with eyes that had grown wide in shock. "Is this truly your intention?" Ashlynn asked the Ancient Oak, uncertain whether or not she had correctly understood its message. After a moment of listening to the wind moving through its leaves, however, she accepted the tree's answer, even if it was very different than what she'd expected when she brought Virve here.

"Virve," Ashlynn said as she looked at the five different leaves on the branch in Virve's claws. She would have to check the books she'd brought back from Amahle's library to be sure, but the choice of five leaves on that branch displayed a clear message of the strengths the Ancient Oak intended to bestow on her soon-to-be Oak Witch, but she wasn't certain that she understood the meaning of the colors the Ancient Oak had used to express its message.

"The Ancient Oak hasn't just accepted you to take its trial," Ashlynn explained, offering Virve a gentle smile as she met the other woman's gaze. "It has agreed that you would be a good Oak Witch. I still need to nurture this seed for a few days," Ashlynn said, reaching out to retrieve the acorn from the branch in Virve's paws and feeling the dense energy within it as she attempted to further discern the mighty tree's intentions.

"But I will face no trial in nurturing your seed," Ashlynn said, shaking her head and smiling in wonder at the Ancient Oak's generosity. Compared to the seed the Ancient Willow had prepared for Heila, this acorn contained incredibly dense energy that would do far more for Virve than simply allowing her to access the energy of the world. If Ashlynn wasn't wrong, the seed contained not only enough power to transform Virve's body into one that could channel the power of the elements, but to turn back the clock of time, restoring Virve to the prime of her life and physical prowess.

"And neither will you face a trial to accept the powers of the Oak Witch. It seems," Ashlynn said, looking closely at the acorn between her fingers. "It seems that, in the Ancient Oak's judgment, you are the perfect person to become the Oak Witch of my coven," Ashlynn said, smiling broadly at the wide-eyed soldier.

The seed was remarkable and powerful, but when she thought of everything that Virve had done in her decades of selfless service to Nyrielle, she had a hard time feeling like the Ancient Oak's decisions was excessive. Heila, Ollie, and even Ashlynn herself were all young, untested, and though life had begun to prove the strengths of their characters, there was still a great deal of uncertainty about the kind of people they would grow into.

Virve, however, had proven herself countless times over. She had walked on the knife's edge between life and death in conflicts, small and large, and she'd put her body between danger and the people she'd sworn to protect more than once. For the Ancient Oak to reward this service by accepting Virve's experience instead of subjecting her to an additional trial... perhaps it was something Ashlynn should have expected when she invited someone so many years older than herself to join the coven.

"So, congratulations, Lady Virve," Ashlynn said, setting aside her concerns to celebrate the good news with the woman who was about to join their small and growing family. "In a few days time, you'll join Ollie and Heila as a full-fledged witch of my coven!"

Virve stared at the acorn in Ashlynn's fingers, then at the branch still clutched in her paws. A witch without a trial? Even Lady Ashlynn had faced trials from the Ancient Willow, but she would be exempted from the perilous ritual? The weight of the honor settled on her shoulders like a heavy cloak, but she couldn't help but feel slightly uncomfortable at the ease with which this incredible power seemed to have all but literally fallen into her paws.

"I..." she began, her voice uncharacteristically hesitant. "I don't understand. Heila nearly died in her trial. Ollie is facing his even now. Why would the Ancient Oak judge me worthy without testing me at all?"

Ashlynn's smile gentled as she placed a hand on Virve's shoulder. "Perhaps your life has been trial enough. Or perhaps," she added, glancing up at the rustling branches above, "it sees something in you that needs no further tempering."

Virve's golden eyes gleamed with a sudden moisture as she ran her claws reverently over the branch. All those decades of service to Lady Nyrielle, the battles fought, the people torn from her life long before their time, her father, her mother, and all too many fellow soldiers like Andrus, all of it had led her to this moment. The Ancient Oak had judged her not just adequate but ideal to become the next Oak Witch.

"I won't disappoint either of you," she said finally, straightening her back before bowing toward both Ashlynn and the Ancient Oak. "Whatever power you grant me, I'll use it to protect you, your coven, and everyone in the Vale," she promised.

She left unspoken the other promise that burned in her heart, the promise of vengeance she'd glimpsed in the Ancient Oak's vision. That conversation could wait for another day when the time would come for her to join Ashlynn in the coming war against the savages who slaughtered her people and butchered their sacred trees for reasons as shallow as greed and vanity.

As they turned to leave, Virve cast one last look at the mighty tree that had chosen her. Its leaves rustled in a breeze that seemed to touch nothing else, and for a moment, she could have sworn she felt the faintest brush of understanding against her mind, a silent acknowledgment of both her spoken and unspoken vows along with a trace of eagerness to see her again as the witch she would soon become.

Chapter 539: A Future I Design

While Ashlynn made preparations to welcome Ollie and Virve into her coven, a very different welcome was taking place outside the Vale of Mists.

At Young Lord Owain's insistence, Masters Isabell and Tiernan had accompanied the young lord and Lady Jocelynn all the way to the Town of Hanrahan, the seat of Baron Hanrahan's power and the center of Hanrahan Barony.

The journey took three days by carriage and they'd spent the previous evening in a tiny village at the eastern edge of the barony where the sheep outnumbered people by at least five to one. To hear Owain tell it, the lands they'd passed on their way to the very edge of the frontier were filled with untapped potential, but all the Masters saw when they gazed at the rolling hills studded by ancient rock formations was an endless array of challenges that would make taming the land difficult even for the most ambitious frontiersman.

The Town of Hanrahan was significantly better off, situated in a hollow where several streams drained into a deep lake, the farms and orchards outside the town's impressive stone walls were clearly a jewel to be treasured by any lord and generations of Hanrahans had clearly worked hard to see to the prosperity of the town they oversaw.

In the guest rooms of Hanrahan manor, Master Isabell studied her reflection in the room's polished bronze mirror, ensuring that nothing was out of place. Silver rimmed spectacles perched on her slender nose and she'd pulled her steel gray hair into a tight braid that hung half way down her back, standing out in sharp contrast to the severe black dress she wore for the evening's banquet.

Some would say that she looked more like a tutor or school mistress than a future knight, but to her, this was no different than a suit of armor. On her chest, the crest of Blackwell City's Illustrious Comapny of Engineers, a lighthouse shining on a mason's level, had been embroidered in glittering silver thread. The emblem served as both a badge of her office and the only ornamentation she chose to wear on occasions as formal as this one.

Earning the right to wear that emblem, and to wear it in silver no less, had taken a lifetime of effort and study, including ten long years spent traveling the universities and libraries of the old countries before she returned to her native Blackwell City to take over the Illustrious Comapny of Engineers.

In those years, she'd received offers from countless lords to join their houses and even a king had offered her a place in his court along with the chance to replace her silver emblem with gold and the title of Royal Engineer. It was an offer that few people in her profession could resist, but despite the wonders of the old countries and their institutions of learning, she never felt like she belonged to that world.

Or, perhaps it wasn't that she had never belonged in the old world as much as she hadn't been comfortable with the woman she was starting to become the longer she spent there. The recognition of lords and kings hadn't come to her because of the bridges she designed or even the acquaducts that opened up new farmland. Rather, it had been her ability to tear things down that won her the most praise and recognition in countries where men still warred on one another over lines on a map and control of wealth and resources.

Now that she had reached the frontier, even though her age was growing closer to fifty than it was to forty, she felt like she had finally found the place where she belonged. Somewhere that needed to be built up and pulled into the modern age in a way that would benefit everyone living here.

The previous Barons Hanrahan had done well to construct a fortified town in one of the only places in the western hills that could easily sustain a growing population, but they'd clearly exhausted their ability to reap easy rewards within the first two generations since the barony was established.

Now, everywhere Master Isabell looked, she saw challenges that were difficult to solve and a barony that was ill equipped to solve them. A pair of ancient roads, built centuries ago by demons served as the town's primary connections to Lothian City in the east or Dunn Barony to the north, but the roads that connected to these ancient relics of the land's previous inhabitants were poorly constructed with deep ruts and pot holes that made navigating them treacherous even in broad daylight.

The glimpses she'd seen of the town itself revealed it to be in much the same shape. From the outside, it looked like a prosperous, glistening jewel, but one walk through the quarter of town where the weavers, dyers, tanners and other tradesmen gathered revealed a town struggling for self sufficiency. They were rugged and determined frontiersmen to be sure, but compared to their counterparts in Blackwell City, their facilities were sadly lacking and their skills lagged decades behind the latest innovations making their way across the sea from the old countries.

Lothian City wasn't in as poor of shape, comparatively. As the seat of power for the Marquis, he couldn't afford to lag too far behind the dukes to the east. And even if Marquis Bors and his family hadn't constantly reinvested in elevating the standards of their home city, the most powerful temple of the Church in the entire frontier would doubtless have made contributions of their own in order to ensure that their crown jewel of the frontier didn't lose its luster because of its poor surroundings.

"Blackwell City hardly needs me anymore," Isabell said with a heavy sigh as she looked out the window of her room at the setting sun far to the west. "But these people... They make me feel like I wasted my years on the guild in Blackwell when I could have been out here making a real difference."

The statement wasn't entirely true. The knowledge she'd gained as the Master of one of Blackwell City's most influential guilds had shaped her into a woman who understood that even the most brilliant of designs was worthless without the ability to gather the support from powerful lords, suppliers of goods and all of the other parties involved in bringing grand ambitions to fruition.

And, if she was truly honest with herself, while the thrill of the frontier's challenges called out to her, she would never have chosen a place like this to raise her children. The walls of Lothian City or even Hanrahan Town might never have been breached by demon attacks in her lifetime, but neither town could have given her darlings the opportunities that they'd found in Blackwell City.

Now that they were old enough to begin their own apprenticeships, however, Isabell found her hands itching for the drafting board in a way they hadn't for several years, and the town outside the window seemed filled with opportunities to satisfy that itch.

As tempting as it was, however, she firmly reminded herself that there were larger problems demanding her attention, and Marcel's warnings about Owain's attempt to murder Lady Ashlynn still echoed in her ears, even days after their meeting in Lothian City.

Tonight, she would meet with Baron Ian Hanrahan and his heir Bastian, but she couldn't allow herself to be drawn into the tempting array of problems awaiting someone with an analytical mind like hers to solve.

Tonight, the dress she wore to display her profession was her suit of armor, and her battle was one that required her to deny the opportunities in front of her in order to secure an even more important objective.

Somewhere out there, Lady Ashlynn was preparing her counterattack against the man who had nearly destroyed her, and if Isabell wanted to win a place at her lady's side in the battles to come, she had to secure an arrangement that would place her at the edge of the Vale of Mists rather than here in the comparatively safe jewel of Hanrahan barony.

"It will be better this way anyway," Isabell said as she prepared to leave her room to join the banquet that was being prepared to welcome her and Master Tiernan to the barony. "Fixing the problems here would be a worthy challenge... but given the chance, I'd rather start from nothing."

Marcel had described the area along the river Luath at the edge of the Vale of Mists. Compared to the empty hills filled with nothing but sheep that she had seen in Hanrahan barony, it sounded like a place just waiting for someone with a keen mind to tame the land's rich potential.

"A future that I design for myself," she said with a faint smile on her thin lips. "And one that can become a source of strength for Lady Ashlynn at the edge of civilization. Mister Marcel certainly knows the sort of carrot he needs to dangle in front of me to secure my cooperation."

Now, all she had to do was thread her way through the schemes of Owain Lothian and the ageing Baron Hanrahan to seize the opportunity. It should have been easy, given how amateurish the Lothian heir had been in their negotiations so far, but strangely, she seemed to have gained an additional adversary on this journey.

"Lady Jocelynn," she said quietly as she prepared to enter the banquet hall. "Just what has happened to place you on the same side as the man who tried to kill your sister?"

The Great Hall of Baron Hanrahan could most charitably be called 'rustic.' To Isabell's professional eyes, it felt like a relic of an era that Blackwell County had left behind more than a century ago. The windows of the Great Hall were narrow, and had clearly been designed to double as positions for archers to stand in defense of the manor rather than being designed to allow in as much light as possible. While they had been fitted with glass panes at some point in the past century, the glass itself was warped and cloudy and copious amounts of lead had been used to fit them in place over the widened arrow slits.

The ceiling was high and framed with timbers that supported dozens of chandeliers and the floor was strewn with fresh cut rushes, but no amount of surface treatments could make the aging fortress feel like anything other than a dark relic of an age where the thickness of your walls was the defining measurement of your ability to survive the assault of your enemies.

For Isabell and Tiernan, it felt like they were visiting the keep of one of Blackwell County's fallen knights who refused to let go of the glory won by his ancestors, and Baron Hanrahan gave off much the same impression as those overly proud men back home.

"Master Isabell," the pot bellied baron called as he stood from his seat at the center of the high table. "Or should I be saying Dame Isabell now? No matter, you have come to join us and that's all that matters," he said, gesturing to a seat across from his own position at the high table. "Please, come join Master Tiernan and the rest of us."

The welcoming banquet was smaller than Isabell had expected with only two tables of guests aside from the high table itself. For a gathering attended by Owain Lothian and Lady Jocelynn, it felt small enough to be insulting, without any of the local knights in attendance outside of Baron Hanrahan's own immediate family.

Sitting beside the chubby baron, however, Owain seemed unbothered by the insult, as though the slight wasn't directed at him, which could only mean that the lack of fanfare for her attendance here today was a slight aimed at her and Master tiernan.

"My younger brother has heaped great praise on you," a stylishly dressed man whose tunic was trimmed in dark fur said from his seat to the baron's left. "What was it you said Hugo?" Bastian Hanrahan said, turning to look at Owain's browbeaten Steward further down the table. "For a woman, she has both a clever mind and a surprising amount of common sense?"

"Bastian!" Hugo cried, startled out of his wits at the way his half-brother had misquoted him. "When did I ever say anything about Master Isabell being clever 'for a woman'? I'm sure I always told you how

skilled a negotiator she was, with a great mind for details," he said, shooting an embarrassed look at the master engineer as she took her seat.

"Well, well, that's just to be expected, isn't it?" Baron Hanrahan said with a cordial grin. "After all, women always do mind all the little things, it's what they're best at. Nitpicking this and that until they've lost track of the big picture and the things that are truly important. Though I suppose for a builder, that might be a useful trait."

"Baron Hanrahan," Owain interjected from the seat to the baron's right side. "Please mind your words. Master Isabell has come all this way at my father's request. She is a respected engineer, not just a simple builder," he said, smiling at Isabell as though he were a galant knight coming to her rescue.

Behind his carefully practiced, charming smile, he noted with satisfaction how easily the baron had played his part in their carefully orchestrated performance. Between Baron Hanrahan's rudeness and his own willingness to come to her rescue, he was certain that the proud engineer would soon be eager for an opportunity to prove herself on their terms.

"It's quite all right, Lord Owain," Isabell said with a smile that held no warmth as she reached out to serve herself a slice of the roasted venison in the center of the table. "I'm sure Lord Hanrahan speaks from experience when he praises a woman's ability to pay attention to small things. Lady Hanrahan must have spent a great deal of time minding very small things in order to bear him an heir, mustn't she?"

"Pfft!"

Several people at the table struggled not to spit out their wine and a ripple of laughter rose from a number of guests at the high table, including Lord Owain's personal guard, Sir Rian. The heartiest laugh, however, came from the stocky man sitting next to Isabell as Master Tiernan went so far as to pound the table while he laughed.

"Isabell, you can't say that sort of thing at a lord's table," Tiernan chastised her as he tried to suppress the grin on his face to adopt a stern tone. "Insulting a lord at his own table can be grounds for fighting a duel, and I hear they still fight those to the death out in the frontier."

"I apologize," Isabell said, giving a pointed look at the baron whose face had started to turn an alarming shade of red. "Just treat it as a small, tiny, inconsequential comment made by a woman about something equally small, tiny and inconsequential. Certainly something too small for a man of your size, that is, your stature, to be concerned over."

"Master Isabell," Jocelynn said from her seat beside Owain, quickly trying to find a way to get the conversation back on track. She wanted Baron Hanrahan to antagonize Master Isabell into accepting the compromise that she and Owain would propose but she never expected the Guild Master to go on the offensive so directly against a member of the aristocracy when she had yet to receive her title and lands as a knight!

Under the table, Jocelynn's fingers briefly pressed against Owain's knee in silent satisfaction. The engineer's pride was even more easily provoked than she had anticipated. She kept her seafoam eyes carefully neutral as she composed her features into a mask of diplomatic concern more suitable for the role she needed to play in order to bring her plans to fruition.

"Perhaps we should skip the small talk," Jocelynn suggested, her voice taking on a conciliatory tone that contrasted with the calculating gleam she couldn't entirely suppress. "After all, we came here to give you a look at Hanrahan Barony and the vast lands available here for you to build a manor and establish a village of your own. Perhaps you could tell us what you think of what you've seen so far?"

"Normally, I'd be happy to share my thoughts with you, Lady Jocelynn," Isabell said politely. "I'm just afraid that Baron Hanrahan would find them to be 'nitpicky' and 'unaware of the bigger picture,'" she said, giving the flustered looking baron a brief look. "Isn't that right, my Lord?"

"Even if your observations are 'nitpicky'," the portly baron growled. "I'm sure we'd all be delighted to hear what you have to say. At the very least," he added, giving Sir Rian and Master Tiernan a sharp look. "I'm sure there are a few people who find your words to be highly amusing. Perhaps your thoughts on our humbly barony would be equally amusing."

"Very well, my Lord," Isabell said, putting down her knife and fork to take a sip of watered down wine before she spoke again. "But remember, you asked to hear my thoughts..."