

The Vampire 561

Chapter 561: The Will To Fight

"You did help more people," Ashlynn said as the vision of Milo standing before him faded away and the two were left alone in the desolate village. "If you keep going, if you don't give up when Old Nan dies, then maybe you'll see how much more you did. After all, things might be a bit worse here, but they're much, much better in the other villages," she pointed out.

"But I still failed," Ollie said, shaking his head as he knelt in the dust. "I still failed my people."

"That happens sometimes," Ashlynn pointed out gently. "We do our best, we do everything we know how to do, and it still isn't enough. We make mistakes, we jump to conclusions... we fight battles we shouldn't have, and people die because of it," she said, speaking from painful experience as she placed a gentle hand on his shoulders.

"It's okay to fail," Ashlynn said. "But now that you've tried helping the other villages and you've learned how hard it is to work on a bigger scale, to help even more people, are you content with what you've achieved? Is this a result you can accept?"

"No," Ollie said, shaking his head and blinking away the moisture that clouded his vision. Why was it that no matter how parched he was, no matter how chapped his lips or dry his throat became, his body always held enough moisture for tears? He'd sooner be done with them and save the water for more useful things.

"No, I can't accept this," he said. "If you were standing here instead of me, the real you, then you'd have thought of dozens of things I haven't thought of yet. You wouldn't accept this defeat, I know you wouldn't," he insisted. "So I need to try again. How many times can I try again?"

"You can try as often as you want," Ashlynn said. "But if you persist too long, your body will fail you, and the cypress seed within your chest will consume you. Sooner or later, you must accept that you have done your best and move on from what you have achieved with it. Already, you're suffering from repeating this trial just three times. Are you sure that you're up to a fourth?"

"I'm not giving up," Ollie said, pushing himself up from the dirt and standing firmly in front of the vision of Ashlynn. The sun overhead pounded down on them, and he briefly wondered if the heat had baked

his brains to mush to be this stubborn, but he refused to accept that this was the best he could do. "Let me try again."

"And what will you do differently if you try again?" Ashlynn asked. "How will this attempt be different than the last?"

"Help isn't coming for any of the villages," Ollie said. "And nothing seems to be stopping the Inquisition from punishing innocent people with their 'second sun.' So, if I can't save the villagers by outlasting the Inquisition, the only thing I can do is take the fight to the Inquisition and purge the sun from the night sky."

"Does that mean you no longer wish to face this trial as a witch?" Ashlynn asked, summoning a familiar-looking suit of armor in the dark midnight blue and black of the Vale of Mists. "Do you want to prove that you can beat this trial as a knight?"

For a moment, Ollie considered the question seriously. Growing vegetables wasn't going to save everyone as long as the Inquisition lorded over them with irresistible magic. He'd tried everything he'd learned as a witch, but none of it would help him to turn the tide against the Inquisition. Why not face them as a knight instead?

The thought didn't last long before he discarded it as folly. Ollie had learned enough about sorcery and witchcraft to understand that conjuring the oppressive second sun every night must have taken the combined efforts of several of the Church's 'miracle workers.'

He had no idea how many of them there were but even if they were helpless in direct combat, he was certain that they were protected by a large number of Templars or other soldiers from the Church. As a pure knight, he'd never be able to accomplish what he needed to do before he was overwhelmed by superior numbers... and likely superior warriors as well.

"I'll take my armor," Ollie finally said after several minutes of thought. "But not yet. You gave me a lesson on using witchcraft to nurture plants and to heal people, but that isn't what I need if I'm going to fight the Church."

"You also said that the Cypress Tree was a tree for powerful guardians, but all I've been using it for is to find a source of strength to sustain people and crops," he admitted. "I, I should have asked this sooner,

after I failed the first time,e but... will you teach me how to fight like a witch? Without the power of witchcraft, I know that I don't have a chance of stopping the Inquisition, but with it... Maybe there's a way I can still save my people."

"Look at me, Ollie," Ashlynn said, stepping up close enough to the young man that the fabric of her loose dress brushed up against his tunic. Slowly, reaching out with both hands as if she were picking up something that was incredibly delicate, she took Ollie's head in her hands and stared deeply into his pale eyes.

"Remember this look," Ashlynn said after a moment of inspecting the young man's gaze. "The things you've seen that make you so determined that you're willing to go to war instead of seeing them happen again, never forget those things. Keep them with you long after this trial ends."

"But the things that happened here, they aren't real," Ollie said, blinking in confusion. Already, he was afraid that he would have nightmares of this trial for months to come, but Ashlynn wanted him to hang on to those memories? Wouldn't it be better if this trial just faded away like a bad dream when it was all over?

"They are and they aren't," Ashlynn countered without letting go of his face. "They are yours to remember, and if the memory of these tragedies gives you the strength to fight to prevent them from ever happening, then they're real enough. You understand?"

"I, I think that I do," Ollie said. As much as he hated the things he saw every time he failed, he had to admit that the vision had motivated him to see a larger picture, and it provided a well of strength to resist, to try again so he could prevent things from happening. If he could carry that same strength out of the trial...

"Good that you understand," the vision of Ashlynn said, waving a hand to banish the vision of the village and returning him to the flooded cypress forest that he'd begun the trial in before facing the haunting ordeal of two suns.

"Now, let me teach you about the weapons and the defenses of the Cypress Tree," Ashlynn said, spreading her hands wide and pulling thousands of cypress needles from the trees around them, holding them aloft like deadly arrows suspended mid-flight. "Starting with a storm of needles..."

Chapter 562: Witch Vs. Army

Ollie crouched behind the roots of a mighty cypress tree, looking out across the open plains below where a powerful army had built their camp. Banners flapped idly in a faint summer breeze that seemed to bring no relief from the endless heat of the two suns. The symbols of the Lothians, the Dunns, the Hanrahans, the Rians, and dozens more major and minor families could be clearly seen, mixed with a nearly equal number of banners displaying the gleaming sword of the Order of Holy Light, the burning blade of the Order of Holy Flame, and the burning sun of the Inquisition.

"How many of them do you think there are, Milo?" Ollie asked in a hushed voice. Between Milo and Harrod, he'd managed to rally over four dozen soldiers and twice as many villagers who were skilled with weapons, though most of them were hunters skilled in bows and snares rather than the use of axes or maces, the way Harrod's men were.

"At least a thousand, Sir Ollie," the Heartwood archer said, crouching behind a screen of tall grasses as he observed the army arrayed against them. "Enough to burn our village to the ground even if they didn't soften us up with the second sun at night. What they're doing," he said bitterly. "It's just cruelty."

"No," Harrod disagreed. "It's pragmatic. Commander Bassinger always said that to attack a fortified town or village, you need to outnumber defenders by at least five to one. But that only results in a bitter fight with many casualties."

"So they're trying to weaken us to reduce their own casualties?" Ollie said, frowning at the army on the field below. "And they're willing to camp here for weeks, torturing us to do that?"

"Maybe they think they can bait us into attacking them," the horned soldier said. "We don't have the advantage of our walls here, and they've had time to dig trenches and fortify their position. If we attack them head-on, we're only offering our heads up to their blades."

"Then we don't attack them head-on," Ollie said with a predatory gleam in his eyes. For months, he'd suffered under the eternal sun this army had created, and he'd watched his people suffer at the hands of the Church's cruel and cowardly plan. Finally, they were within the reach of his blades and the witchcraft he'd learned from Ashlynn.

Ollie thought that he understood Lady Ashlynn's desire for revenge when he learned what Lord Owain had done to her on their wedding night. Anyone would want revenge after enduring suffering like that, and so he thought it was only logical for Lady Ashlynn to seek vengeance.

Now, however, he understood the fires that must burn in her heart and the rage she must feel at the thought of her tormentor living well for even one more day. He'd never before desired someone's death, but now there was almost nothing he wanted as badly as he wanted to kill the Inquisitors responsible for the curse of the second sun. All he had to do was prod them into abandoning their fortified camp in order to 'slay some demons and a witch' and he could finally put an end to this trial.

"The trees are both our spears and our shields," Ollie said as he began to sketch a rough plan in the dirt. "Milo, take your hunters into the cypress forest. Tell me where you need walls raised, and I'll extend the knees of the cypress trees to give you places to take cover while you hunt their soldiers."

"We won't need much," Milo said, his tail quivering with anticipation of the battle to come. "But every bit of help the Cypress Witch can give us will be worth a dozen hunters."

"Harrod," Ollie said, turning to the horned soldier who had accompanied him ever since they fled from the Summer Villa. "We need to bait them into a trap. They won't believe that a force as small as yours would attack their army, but they have to expect that their second sun will eat away at our food supply. I want you to circle around to the side of their camp where the supply wagons and the cook tents are..."

It was a simple plan, but Ollie was counting on several things to see it succeed. He knew how badly the Church and the Lothians hated 'demons', and he believed they wouldn't easily tolerate their enemies raiding their supplies. Owain particularly, was certain to rage at his men for any 'failure' and send them chasing after the fleeing Eldritch soldiers.

Of course, he didn't expect to draw the entire army into their trap. But just drawing off one or two hundred of the enemy's soldiers would weaken their lines enough to create a gap that Ollie could exploit to attack their Inquisitors, assuming that they didn't send one or two of the 'holy men' to chase after Harrod's raiding party.

The loss of a single Inquisitor would significantly weaken their ability to use sorcery as demanding as the curse of the second sun. The loss of two might mean they wouldn't be able to summon it at all. Defeating Lord Owain's army was likely impossible, but stripping them of their ability to devastate his village and make his people suffer without ever exposing themselves to danger... that he could put an end to.

It only took an hour for Milo's hunters to find their positions and another hour for Harrod's men to circle around to the far side of Owain's army. Still, they held their attack until the true sun began to sink toward the western hills, timing their attack for the moment the Inquisition was focused on preparing to launch their second sun into the skies once more.

"Demons! Demon attack!"

"They've come for the food! Stop them!"

"Stand and fight, you demon cowards! How dare you flee!"

The shouts that rose from the army's camp were furious, indignant, and filled with a sense of righteousness as they demanded that Harrod's men stand to fight instead of fleeing with the meager supplies they'd managed to steal.

Of course, Harrod and his men weren't really interested in the food they'd stolen and they quickly dropped sacks of flour and barrels of pork as they sprinted for the safety of the cypress grove.

Following close behind them, running in disorganized ranks clustered together based on which lord or knight they served, the human army roared with fury, showing no sign of hesitation or caution as they charged into Ollie's first trap.

"Through air they fly at my command,

Like arrows loosed by nature's hand.

Strike deep and true, my wooden rain,

Leave none who face me free from pain!"

A dark grin formed on Ollie's lips as he recited the very first spell Ashlynn had taught him to fight against the Lothians. All around him, dozens of cypress trees shook and trembled, shedding thousands of needles in an instant and filling the air with a rain of deadly, glistening darts.

The storm of needles weren't precise weapons, and many of them wasted themselves against shields, helms, and the trunks of trees that the human soldiers quickly hid behind. But when there were thousands upon thousands of needles, even if nine out of ten of them missed their targets, hundreds still slipped through gaps in armor or the visors of helms to pierce the flesh of their targets.

"Aaaarghhh!"

"Demons!"

"Witch! It's a witch among the demons!"

"Now, Milo!" Ollie shouted, grinning as he watched the charge break as the leading wave of soldiers crumpled to the ground in pain. Not only were the cypress needles propelled by his witchcraft wickedly sharp, but each one of them carried a tiny drop of poison that caused pain so excruciating that it would be difficult to continue fighting if even one needle pricked a man's skin, to say nothing of the pain they would feel when pierced by dozens of the wicked needles.

Milo's men wasted no time in exploiting the opportunity Ollie had given them. The storm of cypress needles was followed by a deadly accurate storm of arrows, exploiting the helplessness of the men writhing in pain to deliver killing blows that forever silenced their anguished cries.

"Trap! It's a demon trap!"

"Retreat! Retreat!"

The combination of deadly witchcraft and an ambush of archers turned the tide rapidly, turning the men who had been boldly chasing 'demons' just moments ago into a panicked stampede of men rushing to be the first to escape the deadly cypress grove, even if it meant trampling their own people in the process.

For a moment, Ollie's heart thudded in his chest, filled with the intoxicating rush of victory in the first battle he'd led against the Lothian threat. That exultation, however, lasted for only a moment before the sounds of several voices raised in chorus cut through the chaotic din of the fleeing men.

"Feel the Holy Lord's wrath and sacred light,

Let cleansing flames purge the land of demon's blight!"

Suddenly, a blinding light flooded the cypress grove, followed half a heartbeat later by flames so intense they seared the flesh from his bones, consuming Ollie, Milo, Harrod, and everyone who had come with them in a raging inferno of Holy Flame...

Chapter 563: Courage Or Stubbornness? (Part One)

"I should ask if you are satisfied with what you've accomplished," Ashlynn said as Ollie lay twitching on the grassy hillside overlooking the village he had been charged with caring for. "But I think we both know that you aren't. What happened to you, Ollie?" the vision of Ashlynn asked gently as she knelt by his side.

The memories of being burned alive by Holy Fire continued to torment him, trapping him in the feeling of his flesh blistering and tearing itself apart before his bones cracked under the intense heat... Watching as the flames consumed his friends and companions before pain engulfed his vision as the fluid within his eyes boiled, robbing him of his sight as his eyes ruptured...

Ashlynn's voice failed to penetrate the hazy fog of agony that clouded his mind for several minutes as he lay shaking on the ground, curled into a tight ball with his eyes screwed shut as if to deny the reality of the horror he'd witnessed. The horror he'd led his men into. The horror that was entirely his fault.

"Ollie," Ashlynn said, reaching out with a hand wrapped in soothing emerald mist. "It's all right. You can stop now if you wish. Just tell me what went wrong, and this can all be over."

Ashlynn's magic did nothing to heal Ollie's wounds. Those wounds had vanished the moment the vision brought him back to the beginning of the trial. The pain Ollie was suffering was entirely within his mind as it refused to let go of the agony of his final moments. Part of that was to be expected as it was difficult for the mind to accept sudden changes in what it felt, but part of that came from Ollie's

determination to hang onto the pain, as if he felt that he deserved to suffer some kind of punishment for what had happened to his companions.

When the vision of Ashlynn wrapped him in soft, soothing mist, it did little more than provide a calming, soothing sensation to slowly wear away at the pain and agony his body had felt, but it still took several minutes before his mind was willing to let go of the bone deep feeling that he deserved that suffering.

"What went wrong?" Ollie spat as he slowly opened his pale eyes to find the vision of Ashlynn kneeling over him. His eyes were red and swollen, and his voice was tinged with deep bitterness and self-loathing as he spoke.

"I got everyone killed is what went wrong," he said. "I, I had no idea the Inquisition had such terrifying sorcery! I thought sorcery was weaker than witchcraft, but that... that was more powerful than anything I could do, even with the support of dozens of trees. I never should have brought everyone so close to something that, that... powerful."

"How can they be like that?" Ollie asked, his eyes misting with tears of frustration and a deep, heart-twisting pain he couldn't begin to describe. "How could they be so strong?"

"The Church is very familiar with the limits of sorcery," Ashlynn said as she gently cupped Ollie's face and wiped away the tears forming in his eyes. "They weave their sorcery into their battle hymns and prayers, reciting them so many times that whole groups of them can combine their might."

It sounded simple and logical when she said it, but in truth, the practice of several sorcerers working together was rare among the Eldritch Clans. The Eldritch people celebrated individual strength and the power of champions far more than collective effort in battle. Eldritch wars could be decided in duels between feuding Eldritch Lords or small-scale battles between elite forces, leaving the common people safe from harm so long as they submitted to the rule of the victor.

It was humans who brought the concept of grand armies to the continent, along with the notion of pursuing a defeated enemy to utter destruction. That fundamental difference and failing to understand it had led to the fall of countless Eldritch nations during the First Crusade and now, it had led to the complete destruction of the small, elite force Ollie had brought to attack Owain's army as well.

"How do you defeat that?" Ollie asked as he searched Ashlynn's face for answers. There must have been some magic he simply hadn't learned yet, some stronger form of witchcraft that would allow him to stand against a force like that, he thought. Or perhaps it wasn't more powerful witchcraft that he needed to learn, but a different strategy for using it instead. Whatever it was, at the moment, he desperately wanted Ashlynn to teach him!

"How can any one person defeat something like that?" he asked.

"Let me ask you a different question," the vision of Ashlynn said as she studied the storm of emotions swirling within his heart. At the moment, he'd already shifted his focus to what he could do better, much like he had in the first several rounds of the trial. On one hand, it was an admirable trait and part of what made Ollie such a remarkable young man.

He refused to give up when he felt that if he worked harder or learned more, he could achieve a better outcome. It was that selfless drive to do better for the refugees that had earned the loyalty of so many different Eldritch people despite the fact that Ollie himself was human.

On the other hand, it was the young man's unwavering belief that he was the one who was too weak, too inexperienced, and that others could have done much better than he could have that prevented him from learning other, potentially more important lessons from the trial he faced.

"When you unleashed your storm of cypress needles," the vision of Ashlynn asked gently as she redirected the young man's thoughts. "And you inflicted agony and suffering on hundreds of Owain's men, how did you feel?"

"How did I.. feel?" Ollie said, pausing in surprise as he tried to remember the moment his spell had completed and he'd watched the front ranks of Owain's army crumble under his withering assault. He'd been so focused on his crushing defeat and the agonizing death that he'd consigned his companions to that he hadn't even stopped to consider anything else.

At that moment, when he unleashed a storm of wicked cypress needles that carried an agonizing toxin... how had he felt?

Chapter 564: Courage or Stubbornness (Part Two)

"Powerful," he said after thinking for a few moments. The sensation of dozens of trees offering up their strength, whispering their support and echoing his desire for the invaders to suffer and die was more intoxicating than the strongest wine he'd ever tasted. "I felt strong and mighty... like I'd finally become strong enough to protect the people relying on me."

"And?" Ashlynn asked pointedly. "Is that all you felt?"

"No," the young man said, shaking his head as he recalled his feelings at the time. "I was... happy, I think. I was glad that it hurt so much, that they didn't die without knowing the kind of suffering my friends had endured because of them. I, I wanted it to last longer," he said awkwardly, looking away from Ashlynn as shame burned in his heart. "I didn't want them to die so quickly when Milo's archers opened fire but..."

"But you remembered your mission," Ashlynn said. "Even as you were consumed by vengeance, you remembered your duty."

"They deserved to suffer for what they did," Ollie said. "But if we didn't kill them, we'd never be able to reach the Inquisitors behind them, and the pain wouldn't have lasted forever. Once we started, we couldn't stop."

"Did they really deserve it Ollie?" Ashlynn asked. "The Inquisition were the ones forming the second sun in the sky. Those soldiers were only there to act as guards. They followed the orders of their lords and knights, but they'd never drawn a blade against your men until you attacked them."

"That doesn't mean they were innocent," Ollie said, staring at the vision of Ashlynn and wondering if the real Ashlynn would ask such a question. "You heard how they shouted at us. They wanted to kill 'demons' just as much as the Inquisition does."

"You're the one who took justice as one of your virtues, Ollie," Ashlynn pointed out. "When you punish the guilty, justice and vengeance can go hand in hand. But when you punish the innocent simply because they fight alongside the guilty, are you serving justice? Or are you prioritizing your vengeance?"

For a moment, Ollie wanted to argue that vengeance had nothing to do with it. His trap had been the best plan he could think of and if not for the unexpected strength of the Inquisition, it might have worked. Whether or not he satisfied his vengeance in the process didn't matter as long as the ends were

just and righteous. He was protecting his village and the people who died were soldiers in a war... Just because they hadn't swung a sword at his people yet didn't make them innocent, did it?

But the words died on his lips before he could speak them when he thought back to the day that he and Ashlynn had escaped the Summer Villa after she killed Sir Kaefin. They were hunted by Sir Broll, a man she'd sworn to take revenge on for his part in burying her after Owain nearly killed her.

When Sir Broll and his soldiers finally caught them, Ashlynn hadn't harmed a single one of the soldiers. Even when she'd lured them into Captain Lennart's camp where the forces of the Vale of Mists outnumbered Sir Broll's men by more than two to one, she still hadn't commanded the slaughter of the soldiers who were following Sir Broll's orders to capture her.

Instead, she'd taken them captive and given them a chance to build new lives in the Vale of Mists. A few of those men had even gone on to settle in Ollie's village, allowing Marcel to bring their families into the Vale to start their new lives together.

But what had he done as soon as he saw the soldiers under Owain's command charging at them? He'd given them the cruelest death he could imagine... and he'd taken pleasure in doing it. Moments later, the Inquisition had paid him back in kind, delivering an agonizing death wreathed in Holy Fire.

"But what am I supposed to do about Owain's army?" Ollie asked. "I can't challenge Owain to a duel the way you challenged Sir Broll to one. He would never accept it. And I can't take on the Inquisition alone either. Innocent or not, they're soldiers in a war, aren't they? Do I really have to find a way to solve this without killing them to pass the trial?"

"Did I say that you couldn't kill when you deemed it necessary?" Ashlynn asked, raising an eyebrow at the flame-haired youth. "If your cause is just and the war is necessary, some deaths are inevitable. On both sides," she added softly. "But if you examine your actions, ask yourself if you truly prioritized winning your war and protecting your people, or if you let the pursuit of vengeance get in the way of achieving your just objectives."

"I, I understand," Ollie said as he reconsidered everything he'd done. He'd become drunk on the power of the witchcraft Ashlynn had taught him and he charged into battle at the first opportunity, eager to pay back all of the pain and suffering he'd endured in the previous iterations of the trial. Ashlynn was right... He'd lost track of what was truly important and both he and his companions had died for his mistakes.

"Good that you do," Ashlynn said with a gentle smile. "Now that you understand, are you ready to accept that you have done your best in this trial? Can you live with what you have accomplished and what you have learned?"

"No," Ollie said, shaking his head stubbornly. "No. The only way I can succeed is if I take the fight to the enemy but this time, I need to keep a clear head. I can't rush into things and I need to prepare a better trap. I understand what I'm up against now and I swear, I can do better next time."

"Are you sure, Ollie?" Ashlynn asked. "If you charge into battle and fail again, the pain you'll suffer will be just as great, if not greater. And, no matter what you do, some of your companions are bound to die. In battles, victories where one side doesn't suffer a single casualty are exceedingly rare. Are you willing to go through all of that again?"

"I already failed to live up to my virtue of justice," Ollie said, standing up and dusting the grass off his armored gambeson. "If I run now, aren't I failing to live up to the virtue of courage? Let me try again," he asked. "I promise, I'll do better this time."

"As you wish," Ashlynn said, waving a hand and returning him once again to the beginning of the trial when the second sun appeared in the night sky. "But I wonder, Ollie," she said softly. "Is this courage? Or has it become stubbornness?"

Chapter 565: Making Preparations (Part One)

When the trial began again, Ollie wasted no time in putting a new plan into motion. The cypress tree was a powerful guardian and Ashlynn had showed Ollie several ways to harness its power but when he compared the offensive might of the witchcraft he'd learned to the power demonstrated by the massed group of Inquisitors, he found it sadly lacking.

"It isn't that I'm weak," Ollie realized. "It's that my strengths are more suited for defense and counterattacks than offensive actions. More than that, I need time to prepare. Trees don't grow overnight, and I can't prepare my army overnight either. I need time..."

He also needed to set aside his desire for revenge. In his haste to strike back against the Inquisitors who had tormented him in his previous attempts to pass the trial, he'd skipped over many of the things he should have done in a bid to cut the head off the serpent, ending things once and for all.

It had been foolish, and he had abandoned his just cause in favor of a violent, aggressive attack that lured men into a deadly trap but failed to do anything to the people responsible for harming the village. Worse, it had done nothing to stop the Inquisition from continuing their assault and eventually reaping the lives of everyone he was supposed to be protecting.

This time, it would be different. This time, Ollie took out everything he had learned from every previous iteration of the trial. He sent men to each of the neighboring villages, asking that they send as many fighting men as they could, while sending craftsmen to create shades for their crops and instructions to begin harvests of crops that couldn't endure the heat, even if the yield would be lower.

"Old Nan," Ollie said, presenting himself at the home of one of the people he most admired in the village. Old Nan had lost everything, including one of her two sons, when Owain burned her village to the ground. Despite that terrible loss and bone-crushing grief, she'd taken the few possessions they were able to salvage and pulled herself back up out of the depths of despair to become one of the pillars of the rapidly growing village of refugees.

"Sir Ollie," the old woman said, her whiskers twitching in surprise. "You have so much that you are doing in this crisis. What brings you to this old woman's door now?"

"I, I need you to teach me how to carve wood," Ollie admitted awkwardly. "I don't have strong claws or teeth, but I know how to use a knife delicately," he said, thinking of the precise knifework that had been required for some of the dishes served at the high table during feasts at Lothian Manor or the Summer Villa. "It's just, I've never learned to carve wood before."

"Of course I can teach you, Sir Ollie," Old Nan said, frowning at the youth as she struggled to understand his request. "But why now? Do you need to carve something to resolve this crisis?"

"I do," Ollie said. "Our enemy is very strong, and they have powerful sorcerers from the Inquisition. If our soldiers are going to survive a clash with them, then they need greater protection than armor can provide," he explained.

"Generations of Cypress Witches have carved the wood of cypress knees into powerful totems and charms that can protect the bearer from harm," Ollie added as he saw comprehension dawning on Old Nan's face. "I need to make as many of these totems as possible in the next ten days before we attack Lord Owain's army to break this curse," he said, pointing at the sun burning in the night sky.

"I see," Old Nan said, tugging on her whiskers as he tail swished in thought. "Do you need to do the carving yourself, or can you empower the carving that someone else makes? There isn't much that an old woman like me can do in the fields in this heat but if you can use these old claws to help keep Milo and his hunters safe..." she said, her voice trailing off as she confronted the very real possibility that she would lose both her sons to the humans in a single year. But if she could help him fight...

"I don't know," Ollie admitted as he sank into thought. "I don't know, but we can try," he said moments later. "If it works, then we can ask Juni and some of the others to help. If I have to do it alone, I'll never finish enough in time. But, together... together we might just have a chance."

For the next several days, Ollie labored in Old Nan's cottage with a series of knives, gouges, and rasps as he labored to create protective amulets that could guard against the flames of the Inquisition. Through trial and error, they discovered that Ollie needed to complete at least half of the work on the amulet himself, and it was best that he did the finishing work.

"When you hold the work piece in your left hand," Old Nan instructed patiently as Ollie worked on yet another amulet. "It can be tempting to keep your left hand as still as possible, to make a stable platform while your right hand carves, but you should never do this."

"Why not?" Ollie asked. When chopping vegetables, the job of the left hand was often to stabilize food and guide the knife but moving your off hand carelessly was a good way to lose fingers when wielding a sharp knife. "Isn't it important to keep the work piece stable?"

"Not stable," Old Nan corrected. "Within your control. Remember, your right hand, the one that holds the tool," she said, reminding herself that Ollie was limited by his lack of sharp claws. "Your right hand is connected to your mind," she continued, tapping her temple with the point of a claw."

"Your right hand carries your thoughts, your plans and intentions, all of the things you have chosen to do, your right hand will do them," she explained. "But your left hand," she said, stepping behind Ollie to cup his left hand with hers. "Your left hand is connected to your heart. It carries your joys and your fears, your dreams and your hopes for the thing that you are bringing into being with your hands," she said as she adjusted the angle of his left hand slightly.

"But, won't I ruin the piece if my left hand moves too much?" Ollie said, still puzzled at the instruction.

"When you pull a stubborn cork from a bottle, you twist it with both hands, don't you?" Old Nan asked. "The movements of both hands should be small and close to your body. The left hand pulls the work piece into the sharp edge of your claw, or your blade," she explained. "It is the combination of push and pull that lets you make a longer, smoother stroke as you remove material.

"More importantly," Old Nan said, moving her hand to tap Ollie first on the head and then above his heart. "If both hands move together, the work will carry both your intentions and your hopes. The heart and mind come together in the work. Only then can your presence be felt by those who touch your work."

"I understand," Ollie said, tracing a finger along the rough gouge he had made in the work. Perhaps it was because he was doing it wrong when he carved the piece or perhaps it was because he lacked the sensitive claws of the Heartwood clan but the only thing he could feel in the wood was the rough surface and the heat of his hand that had gripped the piece of cypress wood tightly for several minutes, but he didn't dismiss what Old Nan had to say.

"Maybe this was another of the lessons I was always supposed to find in this trial," Ollie realized as he continued to process what Old Nan had told him. "Just how many different lessons did she prepare for me... and how many of them have I been blindly rushing past?"

Chapter 566: Making Preparations (Part Two)

When Ollie stopped to think about it, Ashlynn had taught him that witchcraft was about blending his desires with the energy of the world to make things happen. Old Nan's explanation might be slightly different than the witchcraft he'd learned from Ashlynn but that didn't mean it wasn't a valid path for him to follow in order to put his desires to keep his people safe into the wood as he carved.

If anything, it was a tradition that meshed so well with witchcraft that he wondered if it had been something the Heartwood clan learned from a previous Mother of Trees. Given the way the entire clan revered the Mother of Trees and the witches in her coven, it wouldn't be surprising if traditions like this one had originated in witchcraft.

Feeling an even greater sense of confidence in the direction his plan had taken, Ollie redoubled his efforts to learn everything he could from Old Nan about the Heartwood Clan's way of carving and dedicated himself almost completely to producing the protective amulets that would help to shield his men from the Holy Flames of the Inquisition in the battle to come.

Working together, day by day, with Old Nan to break logs down into appropriate sized blanks, roughing out the shape of the design to be inscribed and giving Ollie guidance as he turned each small piece of wood into a protective amulet, they made rapid progress even though Ollie had to be the one to finish carving every single piece.

At the very end, he held the finished amulet close to his heart and spoke the words that would transform a simple wooden charm into a powerful protective amulet.

"Through wood that stands where waters flow,

Where fire fails and cannot grow,

I carve this shield 'gainst zealot's flame,

Let water's touch end fire's reign."

Each amulet was shaped like the shield of a knight and bore a symbol in the center reminiscent of ripples spreading across a pond. The first ones were simple and crude, but by the end, they were not only much more refined, but simply putting one on would bring a sense of calm safety and even relief against the oppressive heat of the double suns.

"I wish I'd realized this could protect people from the heat sooner," Ollie said, cursing himself for failing to think of something like this when he'd poured all of his energy into protecting his people. There was still time, however, to protect one important person who wouldn't be taking to the field of battle with him against the Lothians and their partners in the Church.

"Please wear this, Old Nan," Ollie said, slipping a simple leather cord through a hole in the best protective amulet he'd made. "It isn't much, but I know that the strain of the heat is taking its toll on you. Please, promise me you won't give this away and that you'll use it to protect yourself from the heat," he said, staring into her dark eyes with an intensity that surprised the old woman.

"You really should give something like this to the men working in the fields if you have extras," Old Nan said, as she took the amulet from the young man's hand. He'd worked with tools instead of claws, of his

own but as the tips of her claws traced the ripples on the surface of the amulet she felt a trace of a deep yearning and... an deep well of pain that momentarily took her breath away.

"It's fine if you wear it," Ollie said, taking the amulet and tying it in place around the old woman's neck. "If for no other reason than that Milo and I will be able to focus on the battle ahead knowing that you are protected."

"Well, if you say so," Old Nan said, searching Ollie's face as if she was trying to find the source of the pain she'd felt carved into the protective amulets. But whatever it was, she saw no sign of it before he turned to leave, marching out under the scorching heat of the true sun to speak with his soldiers.

"Harrod," Ollie asked when he reached the horned soldier who had taken command of Ollie's hastily assembled army while he worked on his witchcraft with Old Nan. "How are our men?"

"Tired, and overheated," Harrod said honestly, refusing to mince his words with the young witch who they all looked to for leadership during this nightmare. "But we've gathered two hundred men from the surrounding villages and added them to our own men. Some of the volunteers from the other villages are woodsmen who brought their own axes. They've never fought in battle before, but they're strong and willing to stand up for their villages," he said proudly.

"Will they be useful?" Ollie asked. "If they'll only get in the way then we should leave them here to defend the village."

"They'll do their best," Harrod said in a carefully neutral tone, as though he couldn't bear to hold the men back from the chance to fight against the human invaders... but didn't want to offer his opinion on how helpful they would actually be. "We've all been practicing calls and signals so we can coordinate small groups," he said, changing the topic.

"With so many men who have never trained as soldiers, it's going to be hard to coordinate this many small groups," Harrod said honestly. "Sometimes, when skill is lacking, it's better to form ranks and fight as one organized mob instead of several small bands that can be defeated in detail. Are you sure you want to fight this way, Sir Ollie?"

"I'm sure," Ollie said as he tossed a bag filled with protective amulets to the horned soldier. "Pass these out to the men. Make sure everyone gets one, but this one," he said, pulling out two of his best, most

recent attempts. "Is yours, and the other one is for Milo. They should help with the heat as well, but everyone needs to get a full night's rest before we move on the enemy."

"I'll see to it, Sir Ollie," Harrod said, pressing a fist to his chest in salute. Looking in the bag, he was stunned to find hundreds of intricately carved wooden amulets, each of which bore a trace of the same energy he felt from the amulets Ollie had given him.

There was a clear difference, however, in that the amulets in the bag felt more like the cool shelter of a cypress tree at the edge of a gentle pond while the ones Ollie had handed him carried an additional feeling of deep strength and the ability to weather endless storms. Clearly, the two that the young witch had set aside for his closest companions bore an even greater investment of his strength... and a stronger feeling of the care and concern he felt for the people he'd prepared them for.

"Sir Ollie," Harrod asked before departing to pass out the protective amulets. "Do you think we can win?"

"Honestly?" Ollie said, looking in the direction of Owain's army in the distance. "I don't know. But we're running out of time, and we have better odds now than ever before. Whether we can win or not, we'll find out soon enough..."

Chapter 567: Fighting in the Fog

Once again, Ollie crouched behind the trunk of a cypress tree overlooking the army that Owain Lothan and the Church had assembled against the Eldritch people. This time, however, several things were different.

The first time Ollie poked the hornets' nest, drawing the combined forces of several knights and lords into the cypress grove, the men had been fresh and alert. They had only recently built their camp, and the assault of the never-ending day had just begun. Now, however, the combined human forces were looking distinctly wilted, and the enthusiasm many of them held for earning glory by going to war against 'demons' had faded under the tedium of what amounted to guard duty protecting the sorcerers of the Inquisition.

"This time, you won't have such an easy time of it," Ollie said under his breath before giving Harrod the signal to begin his raid.

Much like the first time, Harrod's men struck at the vulnerable supply wagons, but this time, rather than drawing the pursuing soldiers in a single direction, they scattered six different directions with each small cluster of men leading the human pursuers into a different ambush.

Milo and his hunters had more than a week to prepare traps in the cypress grove and they made good use of that time, digging pits filled with sharpened stakes, hanging nets and preparing blinds from which they could rain down arrows on the human soldiers.

Ollie himself, however, held back from the fray, even though part of him wanted to unleash a storm of cypress needles that would cripple the human soldiers before their spears and axes could inflict as much as a scratch on any of Ollie's men.

It was a temptation born of equal parts hatred of what these men had come to do and a fierce desire to protect his own men, but he firmly pushed down the desire and focused on his own mission. His only purpose in this battle was to counter the sorcery of the Inquisitors and to reap their lives, bringing an end to the oppression of the second sun. Everything else, he would have to entrust to Harrod and Milo and their men.

Thankfully, it didn't take long for the army under Owain's command to martial its knights, sending armored men leading small groups of soldiers into the cypress grove. Most importantly, each knight escorted a pair of Inquisitors who clearly intended to unleash their holy flames on the small bands of 'demons' lurking in the forest.

Ollie, however, had no intention of making it easy for them to hunt down his men and as soon as the knights and Inquisitors entered the cypress grove, he let loose with a different incantation than he'd used the first time.

"Cypress sentries, breathe your veil,

Let mist rise thick and senses fail."

Water was scarce after weeks of the curse of two suns but the Cypress trees had deep roots and stored vast amounts of moisture within their trunks. Now, branches shook as the trees seemed to exhale a cloud of thick fog that quickly blanketed the grove, muffling sounds and making it difficult to see more than a few dozen feet ahead.

The fog was the last boon he could bestow on his men before he eliminated the Inquisitors who had come with the intention to burn 'demons' to death. While it wouldn't do much, the thick fog would suppress the Inquisitor's Holy Flames, combining with the protective amulets his men wore to give them a chance of surviving if they ran afoul of the Inquisitor's sorcery. It wasn't much of an advantage, but at the moment, it was the best he could do for them.

"Now, the real hunt begins," Ollie said as he slipped into the fog, drawing his fighting knife in one hand and a wicked darksteel cleaver in the other. Of course, Ollie wasn't the only person entering the battle late. Across the open field, a powerful figure in polished, gleaming armor made his own preparations, drawing a sword that had been polished to a mirror finish and grinning in anticipation as he strode toward the cypress grove.

Instantly, the battle entered a new phase as Milo's archers became largely ineffective. In their place, Harrod led his combined force of professional soldiers and volunteer woodsmen into a direct clash at close range.

In any other environment, the woodsmen would have been at a clear disadvantage, but Ollie's mist gave them a vital advantage as the towering members of the Clan of the Great Claw emerged from the mist like giants, wielding axes that could easily fell mighty trees in just a few blows, to say nothing of something as small as a human soldier.

"For Sir Ollie and the Vale!" Harrod cried, raising his mace up high as he led the charge against a group of human soldiers. He kept the shield on his left arm angled upward, deflecting the clumsy spear thrusts of soldiers who clearly had no practice fighting men who were several feet shorter than they were.

That inexperience proved fatal as Harrod swung mercilessly at vulnerable knees, producing a sickening - CRUNCH- of breaking bones as he knocked the human soldiers to the ground. The horned soldier wasted no time finishing off his victims, however. Once someone fell to Harrod's mace, they were easy targets for the woodsmen following behind him and their axes fell mercilessly on soldiers whose agonized howls made them easy to find even in the densest of fog.

Meanwhile, Ollie opened himself up to the grove of cypress trees, allowing them to guide him toward the clusters of men attempting to use their holy flames to burn away the fog.

"Through air they fly at my command,

Like arrows loosed by nature's hand.

Strike deep and true, my wooden rain,

Leave none who face me free from pain!"

Once again, Ollie summoned a storm of poisoned cypress needles, raining them down on a startled knight, his soldiers, and most importantly, the pair of Inquisitors they were protecting.

"Witchcraft!" one of the Inquisitors shouted, his eyes going wide in panic even as his body collapsed under the painful assault of hundreds of cypress needles. Moments later, his eyes grew cloudy and dull as a powerful blow from a sharp blade cleaved through the back of his neck, severing his spine and spraying hot blood across the former kitchen boy who had emerged from the fog behind him.

Ollie tore the cleaver free of the first man's neck, spinning to face the second Inquisitor while his hand still stung with the force of his knife's impact on the incapacitated priest. For a moment, his stomach twisted and lurched, trying to expel what little food he'd eaten as a wave of revulsion swept over him along with the hot blood splattered across his face but he firmly pushed the revulsion down and swung his cleaver again.

Images of Eldritch children, their bellies grown thin with hunger, and Old Nan collapsing under the unceasing heat danced before his eyes as the heavy cleaver bit into the forearm of the second Inquisitor, cleaving as cleanly through the man's bones as it would through the bones of a chicken on the carving block. Clutched in the man's severed hand, a golden emblem of a burning sun glowed feebly as the faith that powered the artifact flickered and failed in the face of sudden death.

Again and again the cleaver fell, hacking into the dying priest's raised arms twice more before Ollie buried the weapon all the way to its spine in the Inquisitor's terrified face.

"What, what kind of demon is that!" a pain stricken soldier on the ground cried, scrambling backwards on all fours to put as much distance as he could between himself and the flame haired monster who had emerged from the fog, butchering inquisitors with a terrifying knife that seemed to drink in the fresh blood spilled on its broad blade.

"Not a demon," the knight said through gritted teeth as he forced himself to stand despite the pain surging in his body from every gap in his armor where a cypress needle had reached his flesh.

Compared to the pain the soldiers and the Inquisitors faced, the knight had suffered far less with barely any cypress needles reaching his skin, but those few that had pricked him produced such an intense feeling of ripping and tearing agony in his muscles that he'd been helpless while the Inquisitors were slaughtered like helpless sheep.

"He's a heretic! A witch who serves the demons," the heavily armored knight spat. "Name yourself, heretic, and prepare to die on the blade of Bastian Hanrahan!"

"Sir Bastian, is it?" Ollie said, looking at the struggling knight with eyes filled with pity. "You're lucky, Sir Bastian," he said, returning his knives to the sheaths at his waist. "I'm not here for you today, and I don't have time to waste prying you out of that armor. If you know what's good for you, take your men and leave this place," he said, reminding himself firmly of the way Lady Ashlynn had given a chance to the men who followed Sir Broll.

"If I see you again, you won't get another chance," he said as he vanished into the thick fog. Two Inquisitors had already fallen, but according to the trees of the cypress grove, there were still eight more who were calling down Holy Fire within the forest, along with a knight who seemed even more threatening than the Inquisitors themselves, piling up the bodies of Eldritch warriors like they were kindling.

If Ollie didn't speed up his hunt, even if he was able to slay all of the Inquisitors, there would be no one else left alive to celebrate the victory. And if he encountered that dreadful knight, there might not be any victory at all.

Chapter 568: Deadly Adversary (Part One)

The sounds of battle echoed through the cypress grove, muffled by the thick fog and seeming to come from every direction at once as Ollie crept through the forest in search of his next target. His midnight blue armored gambeson bore several dark crimson stains and drying blood clung to the blades he carried as he moved from tree to tree in search of the remaining Inquisitors.

Seven of the ten had already fallen to his darksteel cleaver, though one had escaped after losing his arm beneath the elbow. Whether the man would survive the injury depended entirely on the strength of the Church's healing magic but either way, Ollie was certain the man wouldn't be returning to the battlefield any time soon.

"For the Vale and Sir..."

A fierce battle cry split the air, chilling Ollie's heart when it cut off abruptly with a wet, choking sound that had become all too familiar over the course of the past hour. Even more chilling was how familiar the voice sounded, even through the distortion of the heavy fog.

"Harrod!" Ollie shouted, momentarily forgetting to conceal his presence as he charged through the fog in the direction of the strangled cry.

Bodies littered the cypress grove as he ran, many of them wearing the distinctive and colorful tabbards belonging to human noble families. Some had fallen to deviously placed traps while others resembled pincushions, filled with arrows fired by Eldritch hunters. Still others were missing limbs or bore the marks of being hacked to death by the powerful blows of woodsmen from the Clan of the Great Claw.

But too many of the bodies Ollie leaped over as he ran wore the familiar midnight blue gambesons of the Vale of Mists, their horned figures looking almost child-like as they lay on the blood soaked ground next to the larger, more imposing figures of the human soldiers. Still others wore the dark green or brown cloaks favored by the Heartwood Clan's archers and a few towering figures with powerful claws lay next to their great axes, resembling mighty trees that had fallen to the ground.

Ollie refused to look at the faces of the fallen, too afraid he would recognize someone he'd once helped to build a home or plant a garden to spare even the briefest of glances as he rushed toward the sound of Harrod's strangled cry. If he saw more friends among the fallen, he was afraid that something deep inside him would crack and he couldn't allow himself even a moment of vulnerability if he wanted to rescue the first friend he'd ever made among the Eldritch.

Moments later, Ollie emerged from the fog into a clearing that had been pulled from his worst nightmares. Around the clearing lay more than a dozen bodies, each one bearing more gruesome wounds than the last until they were barely recognizable. A few features, however, were impossible to miss, like the protective amulet hanging from the broken neck of a Heartwood archer that Ollie had spent hours toiling over in the hopes that it would provide Milo with a bit of extra protection.

The empty quiver at his friend's side and his blood stained claws made it clear that he had given everything he had and more to the fight... but Milo's everything hadn't been enough to preserve his life.

Another familiar figure lay at the center of the clearing, his dark eyes growing cloudy as they struggled to focus on the human boy who had once followed Lady Ashlynn like a lost puppy fleeing Lothian hunting dogs.

Harrod's shield hung in broken fragments, held together only by the straps of leather that bound it to his arm. His mace likewise dangled useless, secured to his wrist by a thin loop of cord intended to prevent him from dropping the weapon. Blood flowed from a vicious wound to his head and one of his horns had cracked and broken, losing more than half its length to a blow that would otherwise have split the horned soldier's head in two.

"Ollie," Harrod whispered as pink, frothy blood spilled from his lips. "Run..."

Standing over the fallen soldier, an armored knight stood tall and proud, his chest heaving in exertion as he rested a polished longsword across his shoulders. Though his face was obscured by his helm, it was impossible for Ollie to fail to recognize the man in blood stained armor crafted with such exquisite care and so precisely fitted that he moved without any of the stiffness that was common in such heavily armored men.

As a young boy, when Ollie thought of the power and grandeur of a knight, he had envisioned the man before him, wearing this very suit of armor and riding astride a towering warhorse. He had seen him riding at the head of countless parades, watched him cut a dashing figure at numerous banquets and festivals, he'd even toiled in the kitchens to prepare dishes to be served at the man's feasts.

But not once in all those years had he imagined that the day would come when he stood before the man with eyes clouded by the red haze of bloodlust and a bone deep desire to destroy the person he once thought represented everything it meant to be a knight.

"Lord Owain Lothian," Ollie spat as he surveyed the carnage of the battlefield. Behind Owain, a nameless knight lay fallen, his visor pierced with arrows that bore Milo's distinctive fletching. Along with the knight, one member of the Inquisition knelt over another, his crimson and gold robes wet with the other man's blood as he desperately tried to heal the deep wounds caused by simple woodsman's axes.

"You know me?" Owain said, raising the visor of his helm to inspect the strange human wearing the same armor as the horned demon soldier he'd just killed. In this battle he'd encountered more varieties of demon than he'd ever seen in one place before, but this was the first time he'd ever encountered a human, dressed like a demon and staring at him with eyes that burned with malice.

"Name yourself, heretic," he demanded, pointing his sword at the flame-haired youth wearing demon armor and wielding what appeared to be demonic kitchen knives. "Tell me whose family I should destroy for your treachery," he sneered.

Chapter 569: Deadly Adversary (Part Two)

"Of course I know you, Lord Owain," Ollie said as the sound of his own thundering heartbeat filled his ears. Milo had fallen, Harrod had fallen, and even though they'd clearly tried to bring down the powerful Inquisitors, slaying a knight in the process, they had been chopped down like saplings by Owain's ruthless blade.

"I grew up in your manor," Ollie said, silently calling on the strength of the cypress grove to aid him as he stalled for time. "I spent years in your kitchens. I even cooked your meals in the Summer Villa. But do you know who I am, Lord Owain?"

"You're the kitchen boy! The boy who fled with the murderous witch who killed Kaefin!" Owain shouted, recognizing Ollie from the descriptions of the young man who likely set the kitchens on fire to help the witch escape the Summer Villa after Sir Kaefin's murder. "So you really were conspiring with demons this whole time! Who are you really?" Owain shouted. "Tell me, boy!"

"Sir Ollie, the Cypress Witch, at your service," Ollie said, raising his blades and giving a mocking salute before assuming a fighting posture. As he did, a faint jade-green aura formed around him, adding a layer of protection like the knees of the cypress trees while the strength of their mighty trunks flowed through his every muscle and sinew, giving him the power to stand toe-to-toe with vampires like Savis and Tausau.

At the moment, he felt strong enough to cleave through Owain's gleaming armor with his darksteel knife while the aura around him felt like his skin had grown a thick layer of bark that could resist even the ax blades of Eldritch woodsman. It was a power fueled by his singular, focused desire to put an end to Owain Lothian and avenge his fallen friends.

Behind Owain, the Inquisitors shared a startled look when they heard the young man call himself the Cypress Witch. Though his title was unfamiliar, when they combined the young man's declaration that he was a witch with the faint demonic aura that began to glow a clear jade-green around him, it was obvious that he wasn't lying about his identity.

Silently, the two men exchanged a look built on years of understanding before the older of the two gave up on healing his injured companion. If they were in the presence of a witch, then there was no time to waste on healing... Unless the Holy Lord of Light himself descended, they were certain that they had entered the final moments of this life.

"Ollie the Heretic Witch," Owain said as he slid effortlessly into a fighting stance with his sword in a two handed grip before him, "I'll have it carved on the statue of your headless corpse under my boot when this is over," he taunted.

"I shouldn't fight you," Ollie said as he narrowed his eyes, searching for an opening in the armored lord's guard. "Lady Ashlynn wants that right. But you killed my friends," he said. "So I'll have to apologize when I present her your head!"

Dirt and fallen cypress needles exploded from the ground with the force of Ollie's charge as he surrendered to the red tide that clouded his vision. All thoughts of his mission fell away as he rushed the man responsible for countless acts of cruelty.

It had been Owain who nearly killed Lady Ashlynn on what should have been the happiest night of her life. It had been Owain who burned Old Nan's village to the ground and murdered her youngest son, and now it was Owain again who had taken Milo and Harrod away from Ollie, Old Nan, and everyone in the Vale who loved them.

Again and again and again, it was this man who brought endless pain and suffering. Now that he was here, within reach of Ollie's blades and surrounded by a grove of cypress trees, Ollie would stop at nothing to see the man dead.

Sparks flew as Ollie's fighting knife collided with Owain's polished blade, but the veteran knight seemed to float across the forest floor despite the weight of his armor, turning effortlessly to deflect the strength of Ollie's charge and striking out with a powerful thrust of his own.

Were it not for the flickering jade-green energy that covered Ollie's body like a second suit of armor, that thrust would have pierced his shoulder before Ollie could pivot, awkwardly knocking Owain's blade away with the spine of his darksteel cleaver.

The first clash was followed half a heartbeat later by a second one, then a third as Ollie drew deeply on the strength of the cypress trees to batter at Owain's strong defense. Yet no matter how powerful Ollie's blows were or how many times he tried to rush in after battering Owain's blade aside, the veteran warrior always managed to deflect Ollie's blows at the perfect angle to minimize the impact.

Even more frustrating, whenever Ollie did manage to close the distance, Owain slipped just out of reach, making it look effortless as he prevented Ollie's blades from cutting so much as the edge of his cloak.

"You call yourself a knight, but you fight like a kitchen boy," Owain sneered even as he flexed his fingers to shake off the sting of their repeated collisions. He shuddered to think what would have happened if he'd tried receiving any of those blows directly instead of deflecting them. The young man clearly possessed physical strength that was far beyond human limits, but he was just as clearly inexperienced in using that strength in a real fight against a skilled opponent.

"Give up and the Inquisition may grant you a merciful death," Owain suggested, briefly glancing behind him at the pair of Inquisitors who were clutching tightly at each other and speaking softly as though saying their final prayers.

"You can join your companions here," he added, gesturing at the fallen bodies of Milo, Harrod, and the other soldiers, hunters, and woodsmen who had staked their lives to break the curse of the second sun.

A red haze of rage already clouded Ollie's vision, but he refused to surrender to the urge to charge the skilled knight a second time without doing something to break down the other man's advantages.

Thane said that enough strength could cleave through any amount of skill, but clearly there were limits, and Ollie had too little experience fighting with strength beyond human limits to use the gifts bestowed by the cypress grove to his greatest advantage. Since that was the case...

"Cypress roots beneath the ground,

Rise, capture and hold him bound!"

Ollie's spell was brief, focused, and instantly called forth thick, writhing roots of the cypress trees, commanding them to envelop Owain's legs and bind him to the ground. One of Owain's clear strengths was in his ability to maneuver, dancing out of the way of Ollie's powerful blows, and so the young witch didn't hesitate to strip that advantage away from him.

As soon as the incantation was complete, Ollie rushed forward again, circling just wide enough to come at Owain from his offside. Nothing could have prepared him, however, for the young lord's counterattack.

Rather than struggling against the roots that bound him, Owain used them, dropping his sword and crouching low at the last moment before springing upward, taking the charging witch by surprise as his armored shoulder collided with the young witch's stomach.

"Raaaa!" Owain shouted as he used Ollie's momentum against him, heaving him up and over his shoulder and throwing the young man like he was a sack of grain. In any other circumstance, the move would likely have resulted in toppling both men, but with his feet bound by the cypress roots, Owain was able to toss Ollie several paces away without tumbling with him.

"Burn the witch!" Owain shouted as he crouched down to tear at the roots binding his feet.

"In your great name," the two inquisitors shouted, having held their prayer for a moment when it wouldn't consume Lord Owain in flames along with the witch, the Inquisitors finally unleashed the magic they'd prepared in order to defeat the terrifying young witch. "Burn both our lives to fuel our Holy Flames!"

Brilliant white light enveloped their figures as both men, previously looking as though they were in the prime of their lives, began to rapidly age. Their hair turned from lustrous brown to brittle shining white as their skin grew taut and wrinkled, sagging over bones that had become brittle as their muscles melted away.

The transformation took only a pair of heartbeats before the Inquisitors released the fury of the Holy Lord of Light, calling down a pillar of Holy Fire brighter than the sun on the place where Ollie crashed into the ground.

Pain exploded in Ollie's mind, first as his body slammed into the ground and then, a burning, searing heat that was thousands of times more agonizing. The amulet on his neck glowed brilliantly for two full heartbeats, resisting the power of the flames before it cracked and burned to ash, overwhelmed by the combined power of two Inquisitors who were willing to burn up their lives if it meant they could slay a witch.

Still, the protection it afforded was just enough that Ollie didn't die. Though his armor and flesh had been burned until little was left but a mass burned and blackened ash and pale flecks of bone could be seen as he drew a ragged breath, some part of him still clung tenaciously to life, unwilling to succumb without killing the man who had caused so much suffering.

"Sir Ollie," Owain sneered, retrieving his sword and walking slowly across the scorched earth, grinding out flickering flames as he approached the fallen witch. "Nothing more than a kitchen boy," he said as he thrust his sword out, piercing Ollie's heart and with it, the last flickering embers of the young man's life...

Chapter 570: An Ending You Can Accept

For several minutes, Ollie hung suspended in darkness, tormented by the lingering pain of his horrific wounds and the sight of Lord Owain standing over him with a mocking smile on his lips as his blade pierced Ollie's chest.

Slowly, at a pace that felt much, much slower than any of his previous recoveries, the blackness faded away, leaving Ollie's body restored, though his clothing had been replaced by the simple tunic and breeches that he'd worn in the real world when he first began his vigil.

"Well, Ollie," Ashlynn's voice called out while the aspiring knight and witch shook and trembled on the ground of the blood-soaked battlefield. "Do you accept your results as the best outcome you could achieve?"

"This? This is the best I could do?" Ollie said bitterly through clenched teeth. "Dying on Owain's blade, along with Milo and Harrod, is the best that I can hope for?" Ollie said, turning bloodshot and tear-filled eyes on the vision of Ashlynn kneeling next to him. "And Owain walks away from this without a scratch on his body?"

"How can I accept this?" Ollie asked, gesturing at the bodies strewn across the battlefield. The sight of Harrod alone was enough to pierce his heart, but when he glanced at the slumped figure of Milo, who had all but adopted Ollie as a member of his own family, he felt like a claw made of ice was squeezing his chest. "How could anyone accept this?"

"Many brave knights would accept this," the vision of Ashlynn said, holding out a hand and waiting for Ollie to take it. "Ollie, come with me and take a look at what you've achieved with your death."

Slowly, Ollie clambered to his feet without the help of Ashlynn's hand. Part of him wanted to snap at her, to let him try again, to get on with things so he could figure out where he had gone wrong in his latest attempt to pass the trial, but he forced himself to hold his tongue.

Closing his eyes, he took several deep breaths as he reminded himself again and again that this was both a lesson and a trial. If Lady Ashlynn wanted to talk to him about this moment, and if the trial had failed to bring him back to the beginning again, then there had to be a lesson in all of this mess somewhere that he was meant to learn. Thus far, many of the lessons he'd learned had been the most heart-wrenching, painful moments he'd ever experienced, but he couldn't deny that he had grown from each and every one of them.

"All right," he said, opening his eyes and looking at the vision of Ashlynn before him. "Let's take a look."

"This will hurt," Ashlynn said, taking one of his hands in both of hers and holding it firmly. "But the first step is counting." With a wave of her hand, the thick mist vanished, revealing the entirety of the gruesome battlefield all at once. "You can either count your friends or your enemies, and I will count the others. Which do you choose?"

"Friends," Ollie said around a lump in his throat. Now that he could see the entire battlefield at once, he realized that there were many, many more bodies than he'd thought. So many that for a moment, his head swam, his face turned pale, and he felt as though the world had tipped sideways.

"Take your time," Ashlynn said as she steadied the flame-haired young man before he could fall over. "This won't be easy, but I believe you can do it."

"I'm fine," Ollie insisted, shaking off the support that the vision of Ashlynn offered and walking over to Harrod's body. Kneeling next to his fallen friend, he reached out to gently close his eyes, rolling the horned soldier onto his back in a position that almost looked like he was sleeping.

Despite the fact that he knew it was a vision and that the real Harrod was still alive, likely watching over him along with Milo in the village, he couldn't bear to see his friend lying in a heap where he had fallen after Owain pierced his chest with a sword.

"One," Ollie said numbly as he stood, moving to Milo's crumpled, lifeless figure to do the same for him that he had done for Harrod, closing his eyes and easing him into a comfortable position for his final rest. "Two," he whispered.

Again and again, Ollie repeated the ritual, walking to each member of his hastily assembled army in turn. Sometimes, he searched around the area until he could find a severed limb or treasured weapon, returning them to rest along with the warrior who had fallen in the battle that he'd so confidently planned.

How long it took, Ollie couldn't say, but after what felt like an eternity, the vision of Ashlynn caught his hand before he could leave in search of more of their fallen.

"That's it, Ollie," Ashlynn said softly. "That's all of them."

"That's it?" Ollie said, blinking in confusion. "But we, we had nearly three hundred and fifty men. I, I only counted one hundred and nineteen of them."

"Exactly," Ashlynn said. "Some people would condemn you for losing a third of your men, but you know full well that a hasty assault would have resulted in everyone's death in the inferno of the Inquisition's Holy Flames. This new plan of yours saved two-thirds of your men's lives."

"But a hundred and twenty people still died," Ollie said stubbornly. "One hundred and nineteen good friends and villagers... and me. And for what?"

"For what?" Ashlynn asked, blinking in surprise. "Ollie, even though you personally fell, you also caused the death of nine out of ten of the Inquisitors, and the remaining one may still perish from his wounds."

The curse of the eternal sun is broken, and the price the Inquisition paid is so high that they are unlikely to make an attempt like this ever again."

Suddenly, the view shifted around them, and Ollie found himself standing once again in the center of the village, only now, there was no burning sun hanging in the soft, velvety night sky. Only a tiny sliver of the moon was casting its pale, silvery light as a cool evening breeze caressed the grasses and gardens of the village.

"You died, but all of these people will survive, and many more besides," Ashlynn said. "Isn't that worthy enough?"

"But Milo died," Ollie said, walking to stand beside the entrance to Old Nan's burrow where he'd recently spent several days learning how to carve protective amulets. "I, I didn't keep Old Nan's son safe, and now she's lost them both to Owain," he protested. "And Juni has lost her husband. My witchcraft wasn't strong enough to keep him safe."

"But it was strong enough for him to kill several Lothian soldiers, and a knight," Ashlynn pointed out. "In fact, because of your protection, the Lothians and their vassals paid a steep blood price in this battle. Nearly four hundred of them died, more than three times the number that you lost."

"It may not be the ending you wanted," Ashlynn said, stepping up beside the grieving young man and turning him around to face her. In the pale moonlight, her pale blonde hair drifted lazily on the wind, and her simple skirt and tunic looked perfect and pristine, far too clean for the blood-soaked world that Ollie had just come from, as though she somehow stood apart from the world of lesser, mortal beings.

"It's an ending that saved the people you swore you'd protect," she said. "An ending that killed the people who inflicted pain and suffering on your villagers. An ending that preserved the lives of enough of your soldiers to pick up your burden after you've fallen and cost the lives of enough of Owain's soldiers to stop him from pressing his assault."

"So, even though you died," she asked softly. "Isn't this an ending you can accept?"