

The Vampire 631

Chapter 631: The Harbinger of Death Introduces Her Seneschal (Part One)

As the last attendees of the grand banquet were guided to their seats, the hall began to grow darker. Attendees could easily be forgiven for feeling that the slight fading in the light accompanied the setting of the sun, but the sun had set over an hour ago, turning the windows of the great hall into pools of inky blackness that offered only occasional glimpses of the brightly lit festival below as the celebration continued into the night.

The darkness collecting in the great hall crept in from the corners of the ceiling, slowly descending as it enveloped the gilded chandeliers. The light from above wasn't swallowed completely by the growing darkness, but the brilliant flames were reduced to tiny pinpricks of light, reflected by the dangling crystals like stars in the night sky.

By now, everyone in the hall could feel the cloak of darkness descending on them, and with it, a chill feeling that crept along their necks, whispering in their ears so faintly that it was hard to be certain if there had been a sound at all. Conversation stilled at every table, and all eyes slowly turned to the long table on a raised dais at the head of the hall.

The darkness spread further, creeping in from the walls and turning the great hearths into pools of golden firelight that felt like the last refuge of warmth in a world that had grown dark, silent and cold. In the darkness, every sound was muffled, leaving the guests with nothing to hear but the sound of their own heartbeats thundering in their ears.

"I have returned," Nyrielle said simply, though her voice echoed off the walls, rippling with power and carrying with it the feeling that she both shouted from the impossibly distant depths of the void and whispered into each person's ears at the very same time.

Sitting at tables across the hall, natives of the Vale of Mists swallowed heavily, freezing in their seats as they felt the power of the Eldritch Lady of the Vale for the first time in their lives. There were very few guests who had lived their lives in the Vale who hadn't seen Lady Nyrielle before, but none of them had ever seen such an overwhelming display of power from their ruler.

Most knew her from her visits to the villages when she needed to feed. During those visits, she was often gentle, showing respect to the people who offered themselves up to sustain her life and the lives of her progeny. She treated her people as treasures to be protected and thanked them for their contributions to the rest of the Vale.

Now, for the first time in their lives, they were feeling a hint of their lady's terrifying power and hearing a voice that could never be mistaken for one belonging to a woman who was merely mortal.

"The Vale of Mists welcomes the return of the Harbinger of Death," Commander Bassinger's deep, rumbling voice echoed across the hall once the bearish commander had collected himself enough to stand. "May her reign be eternal!"

"May her reign be eternal!"

The imperious shout echoed from the throats of more than fifty warriors and soldiers sitting at tables throughout the great hall, including the giant Tuscan, Ipiktok, startling many of the common folk as the strength of the cry shook their hearts. Some clutched at their clothing, looking about as if they were afraid that an invading army had descended on them in the darkness, while others blinked in confusion at the unfamiliar title. Harbinger of Death?

Only those who had come across the mountains with Nyrielle, or the few who had worked closely with her progeny, recognized the title she took up the moment she made her formal return to the Vale of Mists. Fewer still recognized the message behind her use of the honorific, but to those people, the meaning couldn't be more clear.

Lady Nyrielle was done keeping to herself as a mere Eldritch Lady of a small territory. For what felt like the first time in living memory, she stood among her people not as their simple local lord, but as one of the most powerful vampires in the whole of the Eldritch world.

"Be at ease," Nyrielle said, slowly withdrawing the darkness that shrouded the great hall to reveal herself standing before her throne at the high table.

For tonight's gathering, she wore a stunning dress of midnight blue silk with a plunging, v-shaped neckline that reached almost to her navel, before clinging to her narrow hips. Dark lace spilled across her hips and draped from her delicate wrists like shadows come to life, swaying gently with her every subtle move.

Most striking of all, however, were the dark feathered wings that she so rarely revealed to her own people. Only those who had seen her take to the field of battle during the last war had glimpsed the

raven wings that matched the soft waves of dark hair, and no enemy who had seen those wings had ever lived to spread tales of them unless she wished for them to live.

For a moment, as she stood at the high table in the great hall, ghosts danced across Nyrielle's vision. Memories of a time when she had occupied the seat next to the heavy throne and it had been her grandsire Torbin who occupied the position of greatest honor.

As she looked across the familiar faces gathered in the hall, her eyes lingered briefly on Torbin's siblings, Savis and Tausau, sitting at the right-hand table of honor, and she wondered if her grandsire would be proud to see them sitting here now. They had come to assist the Vale of Mists and the woman he chose as his heir in what she hoped would be their final act of vengeance against the family that had claimed Torbin's life and destroyed the Vale of Mists that he had spent centuries building into a power that could rival High Fen City or the Tangled Wood.

But Nyrielle's vengeance would do far more than restore the Vale of Mists to what it had been in the days when her grandsire ruled. With Ashlynn at her side, she intended to welcome the very humans who had once hunted them into her nation. Already, a few humans from young Ollie's village of refugees occupied positions at tables scattered across the hall, and they were just the first of many who would come to live in the Vale of Mists.

So would Torbin be proud to see his heir returning the Vale of Mists to its position of might and power? Or would he have exploded in one of his rare moments of rage, feeling that Nyrielle had betrayed their vengeance over the love of a woman and the people she wanted to protect?

Two other ghosts flickered through her memories as her eyes fell on the many couples scattered across the hall. More than two hundred years ago, Nyrielle's parents had attempted to rule their barony in peace and harmony with the Eldritch peoples they called neighbors rather than enemies until their lands were seized in the First Crusade, and they were forced to flee to the Vale of Mists to escape persecution for their heresy.

Would they have approved of the choice their daughter made? Would they have been proud to see their vision of cooperation between the humans and the Eldritch coming to life at last, or would they have dismissed the attempt as folly, doomed to be consumed by the Holy Flames of the humans' powerful Church?

In the end, it didn't matter what the ghosts of the dead thought, and Nyrielle shook off thoughts of her long departed loved ones as she focused on the echo of Ashlynn's heartbeat within her chest. Tonight

belonged to the living, not the dead, and whether her fallen loved ones would approve of her intentions or not mattered far less to her than creating a future for herself and Ashlynn that protected both of their peoples.

"Seven months ago," Nyrielle said after taking a deep breath. "The world changed..."

Chapter 632: The Harbinger of Death Introduces Her Seneschal (Part Two)

"Seven months ago, the world changed," Nyrielle said, surprising the gathered guests as she remained standing rather than taking her seat at the high table. "Seven months ago, our enemies, the Lothians, cemented an alliance with a marriage, securing the support of a powerful human family on the eastern shores."

"The Lothian's new allies hold considerable influence and wealth in the Kingdom of Gaal," Nyrielle explained, slowly revealing a scheme that could spell doom for the people of the Vale. "But their influence in the Kingdom of Gaal pales in comparison to their ability to send their fleets of ships across the seas, returning with holds filled with soldiers from the humans' old kingdoms, all eager to fight in a new Holy War."

At the front table, Kaisen reached for Helga's hand and held it tightly, as if to reassure her that they were still safe behind the walls of the Vale of Mists even as he trembled at the idea of an invading army from across the sea.

Even his father, Achim, wasn't old enough to have lived through the Crusade that shattered the Vale of Mists more than a century ago, but every child of the Vale had heard the stories of the powerful Church and their Miracle Workers from across the sea. Suddenly, the army Lady Nyrielle had raised began to make much, much more sense as a new fear began to take hold in Kaisen's heart. If the enemy from across the sea was returning, would Lady Nyrielle's new army be enough?

"Owain Lothian gained something far more dangerous than an alliance with another of the human's noble families," Nyrielle continued as if she were oblivious to the growing sense of dread in the great hall. "Because the woman he married bore the mark of the witch."

"It is fortunate for all of us that Owain Lothian is a cruel man, easily blinded by the hatred he ingested along with his mother's milk," Nyrielle said with a dark smile on her pert lips. "Any Eldritch Lord would gladly offer up half of their domain to secure a marriage to a powerful witch, but on the night of his

wedding, seven months ago, Owain Lothian beat his bride to the brink of death and sent his knights to bury her in the wilderness between the Vale and the March."

This time, it was the people who had come across the mountains who exchanged startled looks with each other. Many of them had witnessed the power of the Mother of Trees when she stood in the arena of High Fen City, nurturing a willow grove from saplings and healing the innocent spectators injured by the cultists from the Cauldron of Flame, but none of them knew how it had come to pass that she joined forces with the Harbinger of Death.

At the table of honored guests, dark, furious looks appeared on the faces of Milo, Achim, and Kaisen as they imagined the scene Nyrielle only briefly described. The notion of a man, any man, who was ruthless enough to beat his own wife to death on the very night of their wedding offended something deeply sacred within them that transcended race or clan.

Achim had given up a proud life of service because Lorena captured his heart, and he could no longer bear the thought of spending so much time away from the joy she brought into his world. Milo had rushed into battle against Owain Lothian and the Church's Inquisitors in order to buy the time for Juni and the other people of their village to escape and if he had died that day along with his brother, he would have been content with his death as long he knew that his Juni had escaped.

For any of these men, and several more throughout the hall, the day they stood in solemn or boisterous ceremonies and pledged to share their lives together with the women who captured their hearts was the day that their lives gained a new kind of richness and purpose as they took up the title of husband, and for many of them, the title of father soon after.

Hearing that Owain Lothian attempted to murder his bride on the night of their wedding transformed the young lord in the minds of everyone present from a despised enemy into a reviled monster. A monster so ambitious and ruthless that he held nothing sacred and would destroy anything to achieve his goals. And if he would beat his own bride to death... just what would he do to them when he led his armies against the people who had been his family's enemies for more than a hundred years?

"I was fortunate beyond belief to discover her that night," Nyrielle said as her smile softened. "Not buried and forgotten, but having clawed her way out of the grave they left her in, fighting to overcome her wounds and reach the Vale of Mists. That night, I promised her vengeance, and she promised to serve as my Seneschal, but even I underestimated the strength of the witch I found that night."

"People of the Vale of Mists," Nyrielle said, filling her voice once more with a hint of power that stilled every whispering tongue in the great hall. "You may have heard rumors of her, but today, the time for rumors is over, and I present to you the truth."

This time, the ripple of power in Nyrielle's voice seemed to provoke something outside the room. A whisper of wind, like a breeze dancing through the thinning branches of an autumn forest, swept through the hall. The faint wind brought with it a scent that was slightly damp and earthy, reminding everyone in the room of the Vale of Mists at night when the fog was thick and the world felt like it had shrunk to just the few feet they could see through the dense fog.

When Nyrielle spoke, the heavy, iron-bound wooden doors to the great hall swung open, revealing a lone woman with pale blond hair wearing an emerald green dress and matching witch's hat. Pale golden lace framed the deep valley of cleavage above a corset that emphasized her slender waist, and patterns like falling golden leaves were embroidered across her verdant green skirts.

Her face was fresh and youthful, but the presence that emanated from her felt as ancient as the fortress itself, with roots that sank deep into the earth. With each step she took into the great hall, the cedar boughs at her feet seemed to perk up, releasing more of their rich, sweet scent as if even fallen trees insisted on paying their respects to her passage.

"People of the Vale of Mists," Nyrielle said formally. "I present to you the woman who became my Seneschal. Lady Ashlynn Blackwell, daughter of Count Rhys Blackwell and former wife of Owain Lothian. She comes before you as the Eldritch Lady of the High Pass after defeating their greatest champion in single combat."

"Tonight, we welcome her as the Mother of Trees," Nyrielle said as Ashlynn came to stand beside her at the high table. "And together, with her coven, we will rewrite the destiny of the Vale of Mists!"

Chapter 633: A Shared Cup

A storm of applause welcomed Ashlynn as she took her place beside Nyrielle. Starting from the front of the hall, people rose from their chairs, clapping and stomping in approval to welcome one of the most powerful witches in the world to the Vale of Mists.

At the table for honored guests, Kaisen and Helga stared at each other in open-mouthed shock as they numbly rose to their feet, joining in the applause to welcome the Mother of Trees.

"Husband," Helga said softly. "Did little Heila ever tell you that the woman she had become a maidservant for was a great witch? I, I thought she was just a human lady who had become Lady Nyrielle's Seneschal the way Sir Thane and Madame Zedya became vampires..."

"If she didn't tell you, why would I know?" Kaisen said as he clapped his hands. "She tells you everything, but me? I only know if I hear it from you," he protested.

"Some things can't easily be shared, son," Achim said from his opposite side. "Look," he added, pointing around the room. "Commander Bassinger and Marshal Jakob don't seem the least surprised, but look at the village elders. None of them seem to have known until this moment. Perhaps little Heila was given orders to keep her lady's secret. It should be expected for her to say nothing if she wants to maintain Lady Ashlynn's confidence."

"And are you the one who taught her how to keep secrets, Father?" Kaisen asked, giving the grey-bearded man a pointed look with a raised eyebrow.

"Oh, hush now," the old man said when he saw Ashlynn raising her hand for quiet. "We can speak of these things later."

Ashlynn didn't use any of her power in order to regain quiet in the great hall, but she didn't need to. With all eyes on her, a simple raised hand was enough for the people gathered in the great hall to still their hands and quiet their cheers, allowing her to address the leaders of the Vale of Mists for the first time.

"Please, be seated," Ashlynn said with a warm, gentle smile. "Tonight, we have many stories to tell and many things to celebrate. I've asked Georg to help me bestow a welcoming gift on everyone here tonight," she said as the doors opened to reveal the bearish chef and a small army of servants carrying trays laden with food and wooden cups, which they began to distribute throughout the hall.

"When I arrived in the Vale of Mists, I had nothing," Ashlynn said solemnly. "Owain stripped me of the rings on my fingers and the clothing on my back. He beat me until my bones cracked and my flesh split before his knights buried me in a shallow grave with only a tattered bedsheet to serve as my burial shroud."

Sitting at a table far to the back, Daithi shifted uncomfortably in his chair as he listened to Lady Ashlynn speak. As a soldier in Lord Owain's personal guard, he was well aware of his lord's tendency to lash out at common soldiers and servants alike, and he'd counted himself fortunate to have never been the subject of his lord's ire.

But never in his wildest dreams had the former soldier imagined that the man he served was capable of being so cruel to the woman he married. Still, even if he had known, he doubted it would have changed anything for him. His expression was complicated when he gave his wife's hand a comforting squeeze, and she nodded back in silent understanding.

Even if Daithi had been the one ordered to bury Ashlynn in the forest that night, he wouldn't have dared to defy Lord Owain. Doing so would only have doomed him, his wife and their daughter. But now, because Lady Ashlynn was a kinder woman than her former husband would ever be, they had the choice to live as they pleased among neighbors that might look different from them but who had had a surprising amount in common with them, despite all of their differences.

"When I had nothing, Mistress Nyrielle was the first person to give me anything," Ashlynn said. "More than a promise of vengeance and a place to live and grow, she gave me the strength I needed to survive my wounds and the power to start taking control of my own life," she explained. "She gave me those things with a cup filled with her blood and mine, and I drank deeply of the power that cup contained."

"Tonight, I greet all of you with a cup," she said, taking a wooden cup from a silver tray that Georg knelt to present to her. "Drink deeply, and share in the strength of the forest with me."

The contents of the cup appeared as simple and ordinary as the cup itself. Fresh-squeezed apple cider blended with honey to create a drink that was both sweet and tart, crisp and refreshing after a day that many of the guests had spent reveling in the festival outside the castle. But as they drank, the people gathered in the hall quickly realized that it was no ordinary beverage.

Old Nan and Achim exchanged wide-eyed looks as the crisp, sweet flavor of the juice washed away more than just fatigue. Joints that had long ago begun to ache with age and the cold, damp weather of the Vale in Autumn no longer complained of the pressure on their bodies that came from an active day or simply sitting on a firm, wooden chair. Their breathing, even if it hadn't been labored, felt stronger and easier, and their vision seemed to sharpen, allowing them to see the world as clearly as they had in their youth.

Younger men like Milo and Daithi found themselves feeling a sudden surge of strength and energy, as if they'd enjoyed the best night's sleep of their lives, untroubled by the pain of war wounds or dreams of battlefields they wished they could forget.

The potion that Ashlynn had prepared for this evening was remarkably potent and powerful, but once it had been diluted enough to serve to more than two hundred guests in the great hall, the effects were greatly reduced. The healing and relief it brought were very much real, and the effects would last for several months before the millstone of time ground them away again. Unlike Nyrielle's Blood Vitality Crystals, the magic contained within the crisp, refreshing juice was much too weak to turn back time for anyone who consumed it.

Despite that, everyone in the hall looked at Ashlynn with eyes that shone with renewed health, vigor, and the faintest glimmer of hope that hadn't been present in the eyes of the Vale's people for far too long. If this was the power of the Mother of Trees 'greeting gift', handed out so casually to the people attending the banquet, then... then how much more was this powerful witch capable of?

"Of course, Mistress Nyrielle wasn't the only person to care for me when I arrived in the Vale of Mists," Ashlynn continued when she realized her gift was achieving what she intended for it to do. "I was battered, lost, and more than a little frightened of the people of the Vale who I'd heard so many nightmarish tales about. Thanks to two people, however, I came to see the Vale as more than a place to hide from my enemies and plan my revenge against Owain Lothian. They transformed it into a place I could truly consider home," she said with a warm smile as she turned her gaze toward the heavy, iron-bound doors.

Once again, the doors opened, this time to reveal a dashing gentleman clad in a loose, flowing white tunic with laces only half done up across his broad, muscular chest. Even now, at a time when honored guests dressed their very best, Thane refused to assume the same air of pomp and circumstance as others gathered in the hall.

The only concessions he made to the formality of the occasion were the dark, crimson half cloak he wore draped across his left side and the intricately engraved sword at his hip, resting in an ornate and clearly ceremonial sheath. Otherwise, everything about him, from the soft turned-down leather boots to the short spills of white lace at his wrists that obscured his hands, spoke of comfort, ease of movement, and the deadly grace of a man who had dedicated his life to violence.

His amber eyes, however, were warmer than they had ever been in living memory when he looked down the length of the great hall at Lady Nyrielle and Lady Ashlynn. Already, the two of them had come so far, and they'd found happiness that would be the envy of almost any man. Now, as he strode down

the length of the hall to join them, there was no envy in his heart, only a deep-seated desire to see just how much further the two women's love would take them... And a fierce resolve to destroy anything that threatened love.

Chapter 634: The Brother She Needed

Ashlynn smiled warmly as Thane took his place on the opposite side of Nyrielle before she returned her attention to the people gathered in the great hall.

"When I arrived, Mistress Nyrielle entrusted my training to Sir Thane, trusting that his years of experience could help me to draw out the greatest benefit from the gift she'd bestowed on me," Ashlynn explained. "But Sir Thane refused to be a simple tutor to me," she said, startling some in the crowd who wondered how one of Lady Nyrielle's progeny would dare to defy her will.

"I have lived my whole life in the company of knights," Ashlynn continued. "Whether they were my father's vassals, or the vassals of his vassals, there were always men of virtue and valor gathered under the Blackwell banner, ready to fight and die to protect my father and his family if the need should ever arise," she said with eyes that grew briefly distant as she remembered the members of her father's court that she'd left behind when she moved to Lothian March.

The distance between the young Ashlynn Blackwell and her father's knights was much greater than the distance between her sister Jocelynn and those very same knights, but that didn't mean that Ashlynn was unaware of the men who defended her family's lands and her very own home. She had always respected and admired the gallant nobility of her father's knights, and she found them to be gentlemen worthy of that respect in almost every instance.

It wasn't until she began interacting with Owain's knights that she realized that not every knight was cut from the same cloth. The frontier prized martial prowess over courtly conduct, and the men under Owain's command were sometimes little better than brutes in expensive armor with fancy titles. They were mighty and commanded a different form of respect than she was accustomed to, one based on the number of 'demons' they'd slain rather than their acts of kindness and generosity or their more courtly virtues of dispensing justice in their villages or protecting the peace in their domains.

"I have known knights of every sort you can imagine," Ashlynn continued as she turned her gaze back to Thane's handsome figure. "But I can think of no man who better exemplifies the virtues of Duty, Courage, and Honor than Sir Thane," she praised without the slightest bit of exaggeration in her tone. "But when I arrived in the Vale of Mists, battered and alone, frightened beyond words and without even the clothes on my back to call my own, it was his other virtues that I needed the most."

"Sir Thane is a man of unquestionable Loyalty," she explained. "And more importantly, he possesses a heart filled with Compassion. The night he took me under his wing, he refused to be my tutor and instead offered to be my elder brother. He helped me to find my strength while he helped me to find my way, and for that, he has my everlasting gratitude," she said, offering a deep curtsy to the charming vampire.

When she arrived in the Vale of Mists, she was more than just lost and confused. Her entire world had been shattered in Owain's brutal beating, and while Nyrielle offered her strength and power, she didn't yet know how to offer her a feeling of safety and security.

Thane listened to her for hours as she poured out a lifetime of grievances, and he did it without passing judgment or making her feel like any of it was trivial. Whether it was her fear of being exploited as a pawn in Nyrielle's larger war against humanity or her jealousy over the greater freedoms her younger sister, Jocelynn, enjoyed, Thane listened to all of it. And when he was done listening, he helped her find ways to work through her inner turmoil instead of telling her to forget it or suppress it as others had.

In some ways, Ashlynn felt that Nyrielle had saved her life the night they met, but Thane had saved her heart, preventing her from becoming a bitter woman who lived only for vengeance.

"Thane is not the first of my progeny," Nyrielle said, stepping forward to address the gathered crowd. "But he is, without a doubt, the greatest among them. He has been at my side longer than any other, and he has fought more of the Vale's enemies than almost anyone else alive or dead. He has trained generations of captains and commanders, ensuring that the soldiers of the Vale are led by warriors who are not only strong, but capable as well."

"Years ago, I left the Vale of Mists in search of powerful champions who could help me reclaim what Cellach Lothian had stolen from us," Nyrielle said. "But champions are not enough to rewrite the destiny of the Vale of Mists. So this time, we will rely on more than just strong champions. We have built an army that is larger and more powerful than any Eldritch Army the Kingdom of Gaal or the Church have faced since the days of the Second Crusade."

Perhaps if the Vale of Mists, the Southern Steppe, Airgead Mountain, and so many other nations had banded together to form a single army, they could have driven the Lothians from their lands and stopped the human advance on the other side of what had once been called the Verdant Hills.

By standing alone, many smaller nations had fallen, leaving behind only scattered villages buried deep enough in rugged terrain or dense forests that were too difficult for the humans to dig out and exterminate.

Further north, several Eldritch nations had banded together, forming a mighty host that defied the King of Gaal and the mighty Church of the Holy Lord of Light for years after the Vale of Mists fell. Eventually, however, even that mighty army had fallen to the constant stream of reinforcements from across the sea.

Looking back, it was easy to wonder what might have happened if the Vale had responded differently. If the Eldritch Nations had been able to reinforce each other instead of making individual, isolated stands against the unending tide of crusaders yearning for conquest. It was impossible to say for certain whether anything would have changed in the end or not, but this time, Nyrielle didn't intend to repeat the mistakes of the past.

"Such a powerful army requires more than just a Commander at its head," Nyrielle said as she placed a hand gently on Thane's shoulder. "So from today forward, we have appointed Sir Thane as the Lord General of the Vale of Mists," she announced. "And we trust that he will lead our forces to victory!"

Chapter 635: Our Real Enemy

Another round of thunderous applause filled the great hall along with scattered shouts of "Lord General Thane!" and "Victory!" Toward the back of the great hall, a few even took up a bolder chant, shouting "Death to the humans!" as the flames of vengeance stirred in their hearts.

Sitting next to his wife and surrounded by Eldritch men and women from clans he'd never even seen before, Daithi shifted awkwardly in his chair, shifting to position himself protectively close to his wife as his hand dropped to the dagger at his waist. The scaled men and women closest to him didn't seem to have become caught up in the rising tide of hostility that followed Lady Nyrielle's latest announcement, but he'd seen how quickly crowds could turn before, and he wasn't about to be caught unprepared now.

"Silence," Thane said, filling the single word with the power of the Voice of Command as he looked out over the people gathered in the great hall. The discipline of the soldiers had held for the most part, but far too many of the common folk bore scars of battles in the past. Some of those scars were still fresh and tender, covering wounds only beginning to heal after Owain Lothian and Liam Dunn's summer offensive had ended.

Others bore long nurtured grudges for fathers, grandfathers, uncles, siblings and husbands lost in conflicts dating back to the War of Inches and even longer ago. Their hurts and their hatred were well justified, but Nyrielle had chosen her words carefully when she spoke about their enemies in the Kingdom of Gaal and within the Church without claiming that all of humanity were their enemies. Now, Thane stepped forward to ensure that the people gathered here understood the difference.

"I understand the people who shouted 'Death to humans,'" Thane began. "But please, listen to a few words from a man who was once human himself," he said, subtly reminding the people in the room that not only were Nyrielle's progeny human, even Lady Nyrielle's parents had once been human, and so had the Mother of Trees. They might all be counted among the Eldritch now, but that didn't mean that they had forgotten their roots.

"Most humans are weak," Thane began. "They must gather together in vast armies or don heavy armor before they can threaten the Eldritch people. But the right to don such armor or to command those armies is restricted to a very few humans, mostly those born as descendants of their powerful lords. Humans are not like the Eldritch. It is all but impossible for a person born of humble origins to gain strength and power sufficient to issue a challenge for the right to rule."

"Our enemies are, and always have been, the powerful lords and priests who command the humans' armies," Thane explained. "There are some things that we can learn from our enemies, and the methods for raising and commanding vast armies who can retake lands long lost to our people is one of them, but make no mistake," he said as he infused his voice with power and his half cloak seemed to grow into a great cloak formed of both fabric and inky black shadows.

"There is one thing we will not learn from our enemies," Thane commanded. "When we defeat them, we will defeat them as Eldritch lords. We will claim their lands and their people, and we will welcome the defeated into our nation as our brothers and our sisters. It is the way of the Church and the Kingdom of Gall to slaughter the innocent and the helpless, purging the land of all who once lived there, but we will not resort to their savagery."

"Make no mistake," Thane said. "There are already humans among us who are our most valued friends and neighbors, and they are but the first of many thousands who will follow. So prepare your hearts well and think not only of the day we claim our victory, but the days of peace we will build afterward and who you will build that peace with."

Whispers broke out across the hall, and a few people who lived in Ollie's village began to speak favorably of the humans who lived in their community. A few of them pointed to the figure of Daithi and his wife at the table where they sat alongside merchants from the Scaled Clan and officers from the

Black Wolf Brigade, but increasingly, as the whispers spread, one name came up again and again until finally, Daithi couldn't bear it any more, standing up to ask the question that was on so many lips.

"Lord General Thane," the former Lothian soldier asked, swallowing heavily as he stood. "Where is Sir Ollie? If there is anyone who represents the very best of us, who has taught many of us to live alongside our Eldritch neighbors in peace, it's him, but... why isn't he present at the tables for Honored Guests? Surely Sir Ollie is worthy of such an honor after everything he's done!"

"Ha ha ha ha ha," Thane chuckled warmly, smiling broadly as he looked at the nervous soldier. "Ollie was right about you, Daithi," Thane said. "Your sense of justice and fairness, combined with the courage to speak up in this gathering, make you worthy of the trust he's placed in you. Your village is lucky to have such a man as their constable."

"I don't know that I deserve that praise," Daithi said, bowing deeply in the Lord General's direction. "But if I do, then Sir Ollie deserves it more. Is he joining us, my lord? I think it would be good for the people here to hear his tale."

"You aren't wrong, Constable Daithi," Ashlynn said lightly as a slight smile tugged at the corners of her lips. "You're just impatient. It wasn't yet Sir Ollie's turn. But I agree with you, it's important that everyone present hears his story. So, as long as Mistress Nyrielle is willing, I would not mind calling Ollie before us now."

"When have I ever failed to indulge your willfulness?" Nyrielle asked lightly with a twinkle in her midnight eyes. "I'm sure the lovebirds won't mind waiting their turn, and I agree that everyone here must understand that we have much more to gain by uniting our disparate peoples than exterminating our foes. So call him forth," she said with a dazzling smile.

"And let the people see what happens when a human is untainted by the ambition and greed that drives the rulers of the Kingdom and the Church."

Chapter 636: Sir Ollie's Surname (Part One)

When the servant stepped into the sitting room outside the great hall to collect Ollie, there were several surprised looks from the small room's occupants, including Ollie himself.

"There was a slight disturbance," the bearish man acting as an usher for the evening said, bowing deeply to the gathering of some of the most powerful people in the Vale of Mists. "Lord General Thane admonished the crowd because someone called for the death of humans. When he spoke of unity between humans and the Eldritch, there was a cry to see Sir Ollie," he explained with ears that lowered themselves flat against his head in shame at the way some people had disrupted Lady Nyrielle and Lady Ashlynn's careful plans for this evening.

"Go, Ollie, I don't mind," Heila said as she wrapped both of her arms around one of Ignatious's arms, pressing her diminutive figure up against him as she snuggled close to his unique warmth. "I'll enjoy a few extra minutes this way before we have to sit on opposite sides of the table."

"In that case," Ollie said, giving a polite bow to the other members of his new family. "I won't take long," he said before awkwardly scooping up the wide brimmed hat that matched the jade-green tunic and dark brown breeches he wore for the evening.

The hat was one of two that Ashlynn had gifted him after the completion of his trial and was what she referred to as a 'Fancy Hat,' suitable for formal occasions like the one he was attending now. The hat itself was formed from fine silk, trimmed with a band of black and green brocade.

Ashlynn had kept the hat's ornaments to a bare minimum, placing only a single, long, dark feather in the hat band. But even if it looked simple, it was a feather that carried the same chilling, almost haunting aura as the one used in the ritual where he received his seed of witchcraft, which meant that it was a feather taken from Nyrielle's own wings and that it carried a trace of her dark power.

The hat wasn't the only unfamiliar piece of his wardrobe tonight, but the half cloak that he wore across his left shoulder felt strangely lighter on his body than the hat atop his head. Whether that was because Thane had actually selected a lighter fabric for his apprentice's rich, earthen brown cloak or because Ollie had become accustomed to the garment over the months that he studied under Thane's tutelage, he couldn't say.

One thing was certain, however. When Ollie entered the great hall, he was grateful for both the hat's wide brim and the cloak's partial concealment as he felt the eyes of hundreds of people falling on him, watching his every movement as he strode down the central aisle to where Lady Ashlynn and Sir Thane waited for him in front of the high table.

"Ollie of Lothian City," Thane said formally, his voice clear and strong enough to echo off the walls of the great hall without the slightest hint of his otherworldly powers. "You are summoned to this hall tonight

by Lady Ashlynn Blackwell, Daughter of Count Rhys Blackwell, Eldritch Lady of the High Pass, and Seneschal of the Harbinger of Death. She has called you here tonight to account for your actions. Are you prepared to accept her judgment tonight?"

Throughout the great hall, many eyes widened in surprise when they heard the Lord General's stiff, formal pronouncement. Hadn't they just heard that he represented the best of the humans? Didn't he wear the hat of a witch, as though he were a member of the Lady of Trees' coven? Then why did it seem like he was being summoned like a criminal about to face a trial?

Only a few people in the crowd recognized the stiff, formal phrases for what they were, and each of them wore wide grins as they watched Ollie drop to one knee before Thane and Ashlynn.

"As I have been summoned, I have answered the call," Ollie said formally, reciting the words he'd practiced countless times in front of the mirror in his chambers. "My deeds are my own and I will not deny them. If my lady wishes to judge me for my deeds then I stand ready to accept her judgment."

"Ollie of Lothian City," Ashlynn said in a tone that sounded grave and solemn. "When I met you, you toiled in the kitchens of the Lothians' Summer Villa. Your highest station was as an assistant to Head Cook Otis, and even he was only a Head Cook during his time in the Summer Villa," she said, pitching her voice to ensure that it could be heard throughout the great hall.

"Your parents held no office of honor nor position of valor," Ashlynn continued. "Rather, they served the Lothian family as a stablehand and chambermaid. Your origins could not be more humble or common, and you were born into bondage to the Lothian family. Have I said anything that is not true?"

"This is the best of the humans?" a serpentine woman at Daithi's table said softly under her breath. "A boy from the kitchens? Would he survive even a single fight in the arena?"

"Quiet," a Golden Eyed soldier whispered fiercely before Daithi could say anything else. The strange human at their table had drawn the attention of everyone in the hall when he spoke up for this 'common' human but neither the Lord General nor the Mother of Trees seemed to think it was wrong to summon the young man here. Clearly there was more to him than his common origins would suggest.

"Be patient," the golden eyed soldier hissed when he noticed that even Commander Savis, sitting at one of the tables reserved for honored guests, seemed to have an interest in the young man. "I'm sure we'll learn of his great deeds soon enough."

"No, my lady," Ollie said in a voice that didn't hold the slightest trace of shame or embarrassment at his humble origins. He enjoyed the love of his parents growing up and he did everything he could to support his family from the day he was old enough to start working in the kitchens. There was nothing about his lowly birth that he had any reason to be ashamed of.

"My lady's words contain no falsehoods, I am a common man of common birth," Ollie said simply. "There are as many men like me as there are leaves on trees."

"I could search the servants' halls of a hundred castles, and the leaves of a thousand trees," Ashlynn said, smiling as she looked down on Ollie's kneeling figure. "But I would never find another man like you, Ollie from Lothian City. In this world, you are unique, and you are precious. Not because of an accident of birth, but because of the nobility of your deeds."

"Six months ago, I ventured into the Summer Villa, intending to spy on my former husband and uncover his plans," Ashlynn said. "During that time, it was a simple kitchen boy who became my guide to the villa's hidden places, who helped me succeed despite my amateur attempts to pry secrets from the lips of Owain Lothian's underlings, and it was you who fled into the wilderness with me when my actions threatened to reveal my presence."

"I saw then, the kind of man you are," Ashlynn said with a warm smile. "But then I left the Vale, and left you behind to make your own way here at home. So I would hear others speak of your deeds during the time I was gone. Tell me," she said, turning to address the crowd sitting in their seats. "Who will offer testimony of Ollie's deeds in the time that I was absent from the Vale?"

"I will," an aged voice said as Old Nan stood up from her place at the table for guests of honor. "I will offer testimony of his deeds," the old woman said. "And I will offer my thanks, because without Ollie, this old woman and many others would have lost their lives..."

Chapter 637: Sir Ollie's Surname (Part Two)

"I never trusted outsiders much," Old Nan said as everyone in the great hall turned to listen to her story. "I thought that Lady Nyrielle abandoned those of us who lived in the outlying villages. I never once

thought of 'returning' to the Vale of Mists, even when the Black Merchant visited with his offers of safety and security behind the Vale's curtain walls."

In hindsight, she'd been wrong to hold out for as long as she had. If she'd accepted Marcel's offer more than a decade ago, she might not have lost her son, Lako, to Owain Lothian's savagery, and that was a regret that she would carry to her grave.

"I never hated the humans either," Old Nan continued. "I didn't have any great sense of fear of them or animosity toward them. So long as we kept to the wilderness in the hills, they left us alone, and we left them alone. I thought that it would continue that way until long after my old bones were dust. I was wrong," she admitted with a tail that drooped so low in shame that it brushed against the boughs of cedar on the floor.

"Ollie wasn't wrong," she continued in a voice that sounded small and frail among the many strong warriors filling the great hall. "If humans were my enemy, then he should have been my enemy, but he came to my village with a warning. My old ears were stuffed full of wood shavings, and I couldn't hear the warning from Marcel... but I heard it from him."

The entire hall sat quietly, leaning forward in their seats as they listened to Old Nan telling her story. They heard the bitterness and pain in her voice as she spoke of losing her son, Lako, and of the deep desire that built within her chest to die and join her fallen family members.

She held nothing back and made no attempt to excuse her weakness when a deep sorrow overtook her and even chewing food felt like more effort than she was capable of, but once again, Ollie refused to give up on her, bringing her rich broth and thin porridge to sustain her while her family tried to pick up the broken pieces of their hearts to make a new life.

Finally, when she reached the end of her tale, it was Milo's turn to step up and offer his own testimony about Ollie's deeds. Even though his mother had told much of the story already, he refused to let her to be the only one to bear the weight of speaking up in favor of the man who had given them all a second chance at life.

"Ollie didn't give up on any of us," Milo said, standing next to his mother and gently wrapping both an arm and his tail around her in quiet support. "For our clan, the things we carve with our own claws contain the splinters of our hearts and the last traces of our departed loved ones. We lost most of those treasures when Owain Lothian burned our village to the ground, but once Ollie understood, he ventured

out to our village, digging in the still-smoldering ashes to find any trace of the history and loved ones we'd lost."

Ollie came to the Heartwood clan because, in his words, they held the key to turning a house into a home, creating beautiful burrows carved with more than simple ornaments. Milo spoke at length about how Ollie consulted with them to find an ideal place to build a village with a dam that could hold enough water for fish and crops, and children to play as well.

More importantly, at least to Milo, he spoke of the conflict that seemed to torment Ollie when Liam Dunn's forces attacked and many of them marched to war, leaving Ollie behind to watch over their still-forming village, their families, and their children.

"He would have been there, fighting at our side," Milo swore solemnly. "He would have been there, but we needed him in the village more. Some people may criticize him for staying where he was safe, but... Because he watched over my mother and my Juni, I could leave my fears behind when I went to war. Without him at home, I never could have left them to fight the Dunns."

Around the great hall, several people nodded, having felt much the same when they joined Commander Bassinger's forces for a chance to claim a portion of the vengeance they were owed for being driven from their homes. Without Ollie watching over their loved ones, they too would have struggled to wade into battle so soon after arriving in the Vale of Mists.

"Ollie made space for all of us," a third person said as they stood and began to tell their story of arriving late in the refugee village because they'd held out hope for too long that Liam Dunn's campaign would spare their village. When it hadn't, Ollie had adjusted the plans for the new village, enlarging it yet again and weaving the newcomers in among the first to arrive so they didn't become isolated in their new community.

"Ollie never lorded over us..."

"Ollie has always been humble. He didn't know our ways at first, but he always listened and respected..."

"Ollie trusted me," Daithi said as he stood at last. "He didn't just accept me and my family into his village, he asked me to become its Constable. I didn't realize how much losing my position as a soldier

haunted me or how lost I felt until my family arrived, and I felt like I no longer had anything for them to take pride in. But when I went to Ollie to offer to work, even if it was just as a guard at the gate, he offered me so much more."

As Daithi spoke, his eyes grew distant, and a faint smile tugged at the corner of his lips. Lady Ashlynn had promised that if they did their best to live their lives well in the Vale of Mists, she would attempt to bring their families to join them in the Vale. Perhaps she'd understood that having men cut off from their wives and children was a recipe for disaster and that it would only encourage them to attempt to escape in order to rejoin their families.

Or perhaps she was simply kind, in the same way that Sir Ollie was kind, and saw it as the right thing to do. Either way, Sir Marcel had kept the promise Ashlynn made, spiriting away wives and children, even siblings or elderly parents of the captured men in order to reunite them, but it had been Ollie who helped them to build real lives in the Vale of Mists...

Chapter 638: Sir Ollie's Surname (Part Three)

"Can you break up fights without hurting people?" Ollie had asked one summer afternoon when Daithi approached him, asking if there was more that he could do than working as a laborer helping to build the village. Hauling stones and timber was honest work that required a strong body, but compared to 'monsters' like the men from the Clan of the Great Claw or the dextrous builders from the Clan of Painted Masks, it was hard to feel like accomplished much, or that he was making the best use of the skills he'd developed while serving under Lord Owain's banner.

"It's getting crowded in the village," Ollie explained. "And some people don't know how to get along yet. The Clan of Painted Masks steal from each other like it's a game but they don't always understand when the thing they've stolen is an irreplaceable treasure to the Heartwood Clan and some people are still terrified of the Night Weaver Clan because of their poisons," he said, shaking his head and letting out an exhausted sigh.

"Everyone's doing their best, but when there are misunderstandings, it can get a little out of hand," Ollie said helplessly.

"So you want me to keep folks separated when they get heated?" Daithi asked, envisioning himself as someone like a strongman at a soldier's bar. He'd seen such men carrying leather saps filled with sand and had fallen victim to their 'direct' methods more than once as a young man, but he could appreciate the need for that in a place as chaotic as the new village felt at times. "I can do that."

"Good," Ollie said with a tired smile. "I'll talk to Marshal Jakob about the laws in the Vale and what you need to know to be a Constable," he said, sounding relieved, as if the decision about how to handle this problem had been weighing on him for several days. "I don't really think we should build a jail, but if you need a place for people to cool their heads or stay separate while you sort things out, tell me and we can think of something..."

"C-constable?" Daithi asked as he struggled to keep up with what Ollie was saying. Constables were rare in human villages, though a few had been appointed in the oldest of villages close to Lothian City as they grew large enough to be considered small towns. It might not be a position in the aristocracy like becoming a knight, nor did it offer a path to becoming a knight the way becoming a squire would but it was still a position of significant power within the walls of the village where the constable served and he would have the power to use the force of arms to enforce the village's rules and keep the peace.

"How can you make me a constable?" the former Lothian soldier asked, feeling that there were surely villagers here who would be better suited to such an important position. "I'm just a common soldier. Maybe I could work for your constable, if, if you think there's enough to be done to need two people keeping the peace but, aren't there people here who already know the rules and laws of the Eldritch people who would be better at this?"

"Sure, there are other people, but you're like me, Daithi," Ollie said, looking at the older man as though he'd seen a kindred soul. "Whether it's the Painted Masks or the Glass Eyed Clan, the Night Weavers or the Great Claw, you're outside all of that. You don't belong to any of the villages that disbanded to come here, and you don't belong to the clans that are already here. I'd been thinking of asking Milo to help, but he's busy as a scout for Commander Bassinger, so I thought maybe you would be willing to take up the duty..."

"We should have been enemies," Daithi told the people in the great hall. "I served Lord Owain as one of his soldiers, and Ollie is more loyal to Lady Ashlynn than anyone I know. It should have been impossible for him to trust me so much, but he did. He did, and he helped me find a place to be more than just a lost soldier in search of a home."

At the table where Daithi sat, the scaled woman exchanged puzzled glances with the soldier from the Golden Eyed clan as they listened to one piece of 'testimony' after another. Everyone spoke of this 'Ollie' in voices that were filled with gratitude, respect and admiration but none of them spoke of his strength, his victories or the enemies they'd defeated.

"That's it?" the scaled woman said softly. "He has gone from servant in the kitchens to the leader of the village, and not once has he defeated an enemy in battle? I thought the people of the Vale were proud of the wars they fought against these Lothians and their Church..."

"You don't understand, Dalmatia," Neridia said, leaning over to place a scaled hand on her friend's shoulder. She and both of her friends had donned their best fur-lined cloaks for this evening in the Vale of Mist,s but she could tell that the cold had left her friends feeling irritable and eager to return to their rooms where they had roaring fires in the hearth and heated stones to wrap their tails around. But unlike her two friends, Neridia heard something entirely different in the stories these people told. Something far more important than rushing back to their rooms to warm themselves against the chill!

"Did you hear it, husband?" she said, tugging on Beilan's fur-lined cloak. "Her Dominion didn't deceive us in High Fen City when she said that you would be rewarded even without achieving merits in battle. This man, he rules over a village, not because he fought in an arena to prove that there were no stronger defenders, but because he helped build it up with his own hands and fed its people."

"He's still a powerful witch, my love," Beilan said with a shake of his head. "He's a powerful protector for his people, even if he never fought to prove it."

"But he wasn't a witch when he built his village," Neridia insisted. "He was simple and ordinary, but the things he did are being hailed here as great deeds. So what about us? What could we do that would be considered great deeds here? I'm sure that if we put our minds to it, we can come up with much more than just feeding the people in order to earn Her Dominion's recognition..."

"Well Ollie," Ashlynn said warmly, silencing the hall once the last person had finished speaking in support of the young witch. "It's clear that you have lived up to your virtues while I was gone. You have given comfort and aid to people in need, and it is clear that you have shown great strength and courage of conviction to build such loyalty among so many people, so quickly."

"Therefore, it is my judgment that you be raised to the station of a knight," Ashlynn said with a warm smile. "As the second witch of my coven, you are the Cypress Witch, so as I knight, you will also bear the title of the Cypress Knight. Can you accept this honor, Sir Ollie, and the burdens and duties that come with it?" Ashlynn asked formally.

"I can, my lady," Ollie said around the lump that formed in his throat. "Ever since we escaped from the Summer Villa together, I've wanted nothing more than to be a knight who serves at your side. No honor could be greater."

"Then, as a knight, you are allowed to choose a surname," Ashlynn said warmly. "This name will be yours and may be passed down to all of your descendants. It will be the name for your family and your noble house, remembered for all time as the first noble house to swear to serve me. Have you chosen a name you would like to use?"

Chapter 639: Sir Ollie's Surname (Part Four)

"Is this how humans do things?" Kaisen whispered, leaning over to Milo since the archer from the Heartwood Clan seemed to be well acquainted with human traditions. "I thought that their lords named themselves after the places they are from. Is that not the case?"

"It's the opposite," Milo said softly. "They name the places they rule after their ruling families. Their family names have to be earned with great deeds in moments like this, and they pass their glory down to all their descendants."

Milo hardly considered himself an expert on the subject, but he'd asked several questions of Lady Heila during the days they spent watching over Sir Ollie's vigil and he'd been surprised to learn how intricate the customs of human nobility were and just how much being a part of the Blackwell family had shaped the Mother of Trees.

Some of those customs still seemed odd to him, but when he realized that Ollie's title and name were something that he would be able to pass down to his children and his children's children, it let him see this moment in an entirely different light.

Lady Ashlynn wasn't just honoring Ollie with the title of 'knight', she was helping him to establish a legacy that would endure long after his death, and ensuring that a piece of him would endure for generations to come. To bestow such a heavy honor said a great deal about how much the Mother of Trees valued taking care of the common people.

"I have chosen a name, my lady," Ollie said, looking up at Ashlynn and smiling widely. "I've made many friends in the Vale since coming here, but none have become as close to me or meant as much to me as those from the Heartwood Clan. I may not have sharp claws or teeth, or a powerful tail, but I still feel close kinship with them," he said, looking over his shoulder to meet the gazes of Old Nan, Milo, and Juni each in turn.

"They say that I helped them," Ollie said slowly as his vision grew hazy until he blinked away the moisture gathering there. "But they helped me find a place and a purpose when I felt more lost than even I realized. You will always be my liege lady," he added quickly. "And Sir Thane will always be my mentor as a knight."

"But when I think of 'home'," he continued. "I can't help but think of a door carved with my own hands, and a room filled with treasures that remind me of my closest friends. So, if you will accept it, then I would like to be known as Ollie Heartwood from now on."

At the table for honored guests, Old Nan stood trembling, her claws biting into the wood of the table as she fought to stay standing while her heart raced within her chest and her tail thumped the ground in ever growing agitation. Next to her, Milo and Juni both reached out to wrap their arms around her as their tails joined hers in thumping the ground rapidly.

Seeing how overcome with emotion the trio from the Heartwood clan were, Achim raised his wooden cup high in the air before slamming it down on the table, tapping it down again and again and again in time with the beat of the Heartwood Clan's tails. Soon, Kaisen joined him, followed by Helga, Commander Aspakos, and everyone else at the table for the guests of honor. A moment later, the sound of rhythmic thumping of wood on wood filled the air as every table in the hall took up the gesture, proclaiming their approval at the young knight's name.

"Sir Ollie Heartwood," Ashlynn said loudly, adding a trace of power to her voice to be heard above the din in the hall. Slowly, people set down their cups, returning quiet to the hall, but this time the mood of the hall had subtly changed. Because of Achim's simple gesture, the hundreds of people in the great hall were no longer simply observing Ollie's elevation to knighthood... they were participating in it.

"I think the name suits you," she said, nodding in acceptance not only at the name but at the deep feelings behind his decision as well. Perhaps she should have questioned it, and a very small voice in the back of her mind wondered if this might become a source of division in his village if people felt he favored one clan over another, but seeing the tears of joy on the faces of Old Nan, Milo and Juni, she couldn't bear to pay that voice any attention.

Instead, she turned to Thane, who held out a slender, glittering dagger. The weapon had been carved from a deep, ice-blue Frost Walker horn before it was fitted with a hilt carved from the tusk of a Tuscan hunter. When Ashlynn took it from Thane, it felt cool and heavy in her hands, as though it was a piece of ice carved from the mountains of the High Pass themselves.

"This weapon is called 'Frost Fang,'" Ashlynn explained, her voice carrying clearly through the hushed hall. "It is the twin to your elder sister's 'Snow Fang', carved from the horns and tusks of enemies defeated in the High Pass."

The dagger felt surprisingly heavy in her hands, its surface so cold that it seemed to draw the warmth from her palms. Artificer Erkembalt's work on the blade was truly exceptional and the ice-blue horn had been polished to a mirror finish that caught and reflected the candlelight from above, while the carved tusk hilt bore intricate patterns and runes that were far older than any of the ones she'd studied in her time with the Mother of Thorns.

"While tradition dictates that a knight be given a sword, I think you will find this weapon even more useful than an ordinary sword," she said, allowing a thread of emerald energy to flow from her heart, down through her arms, and into the glittering horn weapon. The technique she used was very similar to the way Ignatious said the Holy Flame Blade should be used, but unlike the temperamental artifact crafted by the Church to test true believers, Frost Fang responded instantly and without resistance to her will.

The transformation that overtook the weapon was both immediate and breathtaking. Frost formed along the blade's edges with a sound like breaking glass, and tiny crystals spread outward as moisture from the warm air of the great hall rushed toward the weapon. The ice that formed along the weapon didn't simply coat the blade, rather, it grew from it, extending the weapon's reach until what had been a dagger became a slender sword of translucent blue-white ice.

Gasps echoed through the hall as the temperature around Ashlynn dropped noticeably. Those sitting at the tables for guests of honor could see their breath misting in the sudden chill, and several people unconsciously pulled their cloaks tighter. The ice blade caught the candlelight and fractured it into dancing rainbows that played across the stone walls, casting prismatic shadows that shifted with each tiny movement of Ashlynn's hand.

"With your teacher, Lord General Thane, and all of those gathered here today as my witness," Ashlynn said formally, her breath forming a faint cloud around as she spoke. Slowly, and moving with a bit of caution lest she accidentally injure the newly risen knight, Ashlynn extended the blade toward Ollie.

The ice blade made only the faintest sound as it touched Ollie's shoulders, left, then right, then left again, but where it touched his shoulders, frost flowers bloomed briefly on the fabric of his tunic before melting away in the warmth that radiated from the crackling hearth behind the high table.

"Let it be known that you are Sir Ollie Heartwood, both the Cypress Witch and the Cypress Knight, Vassal of Lady Ashlynn Blackwell and Guardian of the Village of Refuge," Ashlynn announced, bringing this part of the ceremony to a close. With a gentle pulse of her will, Ashlynn dispelled the blade of ice, leaving nothing behind but the original weapon and a few tiny ice crystals, dancing on the air before they faded away entirely.

"Rise, Sir Ollie Heartwood," she said, presenting him with the ornately carved dagger, its horn surface already warming under her touch. "And take your place among us!"

Chapter 640: Love That Breaks All Rules (Part One)

In the great hall, the sounds of people banging their cups on the table, stomping and cheering in enthusiastic acceptance filled the air as Ollie made his way to the seat that was waiting for him behind the high table, though he left a seat conspicuously empty between himself and Ashlynn, prompting a few people in the audience to wonder who that space was reserved for.

"The world is changing," Nyrielle said when the hall had quieted enough for her to be heard. "Things I long considered impossible have begun to happen, and both the power and the people of the Vale are transforming as a result of those impossible, wondrous miracles."

"Lord General Thane speaks of five pillars of strength in the Vale of Mists," Nyrielle said. "The common soldiers who answer to Commander Bassinger, men who guard our walls and gates and shield us from harm. We also have powerful soldiers who form the sharp point of our spear, thrusting at the heart of the enemy under Commander Savis, as well as irregular soldiers who will tear our enemy down by raiding where they are weak, striking where they do not expect us. These men follow Commander Tausau," Nyrielle said proudly as she gestured to the pair of vampires who were brothers to her own grandsire.

"Though it will take longer to ready them for war, Commander Aspakos is preparing our fourth pillar of strength," Nyrielle continued, gesturing to the second table for honored guests. "He will pull together the many diverse traditions of sorcery among our different clans and peoples, gathering them into a force to counter the Church's Inquisitors and Miracle Workers."

Some in the Vale had already heard of the four armies that Lord General Thane was organizing their people into, but for many, this was their first time realizing the scale of the forces that the Vale was assembling in its quest to retake the lands they had lost and strike back against their enemies. As Nyrielle announced each new army, a cheer rose among the warriors in the hall, with more and more voices joining the welcoming cry with each new name she called.

"We have said nothing so far about the fifth and final pillar of our strength," Nyrielle said with a wide smile on her lips. "Because this power answers to myself and Ashlynn alone. They are my progeny and her coven and the Lothians and the Church have never once faced any of them at their full strength," she said as a dark, hungry smile that revealed a hint of fangs spread across her bow-shaped lips.

"But to think of them only in terms of their strength is to miss how truly unique and precious each and every one of them is," Nyrielle added as she looked briefly at Thane and Ollie in turn. "Tonight, you will meet many of them, but four of them have shattered barriers that have existed for hundreds of years and achieved things that I would have called impossible before Ashlynn proved that the rules that bound us were little different than chains around our own throats."

Throughout the crowd, people began to mutter and whisper among each other. Nyrielle's progeny were well known to everyone in the Vale of Mists, but Ashlynn's coven was a complete mystery. Already, they'd seen a human kitchen boy elevated to the position of a knight and only one seat separated him from the Mother of Trees herself. But to hear Lady Nyrielle speak, these next four people would be even more shocking than the newly ascended Sir Ollie Heartwood?

"For two hundred years," Nyrielle said, speaking over the whispers of the crowd. "I have taken progeny because they were strong when I needed strength to fight our enemies. I have taken in progeny who shared the same hatred that burned in my heart and the same enemies that threatened the Vale of Mists. But once, and only once, I encountered someone that I hated enough to take as my progeny because I refused to give him a quick or merciful death," she said, instantly stilling the whispering tongues as countless people held their breath, waiting to hear what kind of crimes this person had committed to earn such a punishment.

"Lord General Thane has reminded you all that our enemies are the lords who rule in the Kingdom of Gaal and the leaders within the Church of the Holy Lord of Light," Nyrielle continued. "But he has said little about why some enemies must not be allowed to survive the coming war. Among all of the Inquisitors I have encountered, only one had both the skill and the unflinching zealotry to capture and torture my progeny until they begged to be left in the open when the sun rose," Nyrielle said.

As she spoke, memories swirled within her midnight blue eyes, accompanied by ghostly cries of men and women who had become her progeny on the blood-stained sands of High Fen City's arena. The humans called her retaliation 'The War of Undying Demons' and they sent the very best of their Templars and Inquisitors to Lothian March, plotting for years before they launched their counter-attack, proving in the process that even Nyrielle's powerful progeny could not only die, they could be broken so badly that they begged for death.

"For close to eighty years, he has lived in exile, suffering torture far worse than what he inflicted on my first progeny," Nyrielle explained, closing her eyes briefly to clear away the ghosts of the past and focus on the wonder that had been born from that tragedy.

"I would expect an Inquisitor to lose their faith after eighty years of unending torture," Nyrielle said. "But Ignatious emerged from that torture with a clearer understanding of his faith and the people within the Church who had perverted it in the name of worldly power than any man I've ever seen."

Sitting at the table for the Guests of Honor, Achim's brow furrowed in thought while he tugged absently at his beard. In all his years of service, he'd never been called on to torture someone for information. He wasn't a fool, he was well aware that the man he answered to didn't always restrict himself to 'gentle' methods, but Achim himself was grateful he'd never been the one to hold a knife or wield an iron brand.

He'd seen firsthand, however, the way that surviving such an experience could change a man, so when Lady Nyrielle said that this 'Ignatious' emerged from decades of torture with his faith intact, Achim could

only marvel that the man had emerged with his sanity intact. Just how deep must such a man's convictions run to endure for an entire lifetime and still hold true to his calling?

He didn't know, but he did know that any man with that much strength of will was a dangerous man, capable of enduring anything and perhaps sacrificing anything in the service of his cause. Such men could either be the sharpest swords in their master's hands... or the most venomous of snakes who would twist in their master's grip to sink their deadly fangs into the hand that attempted to control them.

Achim had no way to know, yet, what kind of man this 'Ignatious was', but he was certain that they would all find out soon.