

# The Vampire 651

## Chapter 651: A Bitter Pill (Part One)

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The toast that Thane started echoed off the walls of the great hall until it felt like the ancient fortress itself would shake apart with all of the cheering, stomping, tail slapping, and applause that greeted the couple emerging from darkness.

"Everyone," Nyrielle said, holding up a hand and infusing her voice with the thinnest thread of power to command silence. "Thank you," she said, as her face heated slightly at the feeling of such a genuine outpouring of support. Unlike the applause that came only after she'd chastised the crowd when they'd introduced Ignatious, Heila, Zedya, and Lennart, this time, none of the smiles she saw on people's faces felt forced, and when they cheered, they cheered from the heart.

"My darling Ashlynn has given me a dowry like no other," Nyrielle said as she wrapped an arm around Ashlynn's slender waist, pulling her close and holding her tightly by her side as she addressed the crowd. "Soon, we will begin weaving greater ties between the Vale of Mists and the High Pass. We will stand together against the flames of the Church and its Inquisition," she said loudly.

"But we will also support them against the raiders, looters, and grave robbers who have preyed upon them for far too long," Nyrielle promised as she looked at Ritchel's emaciated figure sitting among the other guests of honor. "From today forward, let it be known that the High Pass is under our full protection and we will visit swift death on any who would threaten its people or their honored dead!"

Sitting on the ground next to Ritchel, Ipiktok placed a heavy, woolly hand on the former lord's shoulder, leaning over to speak quietly while the great hall erupted into another round of applause.

"I know that my people have hunted yours many times in recent years," the mercenary captain said. "I will not apologize for what they have done. Those men saw you as worthy prey and treated you as

honored foes. But even if we sharpened our tusks by hunting your people, we would never dare to hunt within the Harbinger of Death's territory."

"I will see to it that word is sent back to the northern isles," Ipoktok promised. "Some hunters may not hear the message, but most will learn of this within a year's time. Your son may have sold his throne for Her Eternity's protection, but her name alone will save many lives," he said. "So, whatever you think of his actions today, know that he hasn't sold his throne for nothing."

"Do I look so pathetic now that even Tuscans take pity on me?" Ritchel said, glaring at the looming Tuscan warrior. "There was a day, not long ago, when I would have fought you for the insult."

"Haha," Ipiktok laughed. "Then, when the witches have finished healing you, I will give you that fight. But I didn't say what I said out of pity for you. I said it out of respect for your son," he said.

"I know," the former Frost Walker lord replied, grabbing his goblet of wine and draining half of it in a single swallow. "He did what I never could. As the Eldritch Lord of the High Pass, how could I choose to end our clan's dominion over the frozen peaks? My own people would never accept it from me, and I would have had so many contenders for my throne that even if I could defeat the first one, the subsequent challenges would have exhausted me to death."

"But Hauke never held the throne," Ritchel explained. "He simply refused to accept it from someone who took it from him rightfully. He's still young, and as strong as he's grown, everyone knows that he isn't yet ready to rule. Some may resent him for what he's done. Some may even flee to other peaks or trek to the mountains in the west, and our distant cousins. But most will understand that this is for the best," he said. "Even if it is a bitter pill to swallow."

There was a part of Ritchel that wished he could take on even that burden for Hauke. If his people treated him as the sinner responsible for the fall of the High Pass and placed all their blame and resentment on him, then Hauke could live an easier life among their clan when he returned to the High Pass in five years. But the blame he shouldered for the disaster that occurred when Nyrielle's army arrived in the High Pass was already the most he could shoulder. Everything else would fall to Hauke to face.

"I would be proud to have a son like him," Kaisen said, finding the courage to join the conversation after finishing two large goblets of wine. "My sons would never, could never, should never even think of thinking of something like this at your age. Their age. His age," he said, frowning and shaking his head as the words didn't quite seem to come out right. "How old is your son now?"

"This will be his sixteenth winter," Ritchel said, chuckling at the father of the Willow Witch, who had clearly taken several shocks from the revelations of his heroic daughter's deeds and her chosen companion. "And I am proud of him. He's overcome things I could never have faced, and he still fights his hardest for his people. I just wish I didn't have so much to be proud of, but I'm afraid he won't receive the peaceful years of rest he's earned after overcoming so much."

"The years ahead may be bitter and hard," Aspakos acknowledged as he sipped his wine, peering into the reflection on the surface of the dark red liquid as though he could see something there that was invisible to everyone else.

"But they will be brighter in the end because of your son. He will not disappoint you and he will never fail his people," he added sagely, as though he had already seen the young lord's great achievements come to pass.

When Aspakos spoke, several people at the table turned to stare at the Dark Feathered sorcerer with the broken beak, setting down their goblets and turning away from the cheering crowd with expectant looks on their faces. After all, many people could say what Aspakos just had, but when one of the Sorcerers of Sundered Earth spoke, it meant something different entirely....

#### Chapter 652: A Bitter Pill (Part Two)

"Stop that," Erkembalt said, reaching over to thump the Dark Feathered sorcerer on the back of his feathered head. He knew that his friend had invoked the founder's art to peer into the future for a glimpse of the young Frost Walker's fate when they debated about whether he should be freed from his curse or not, but the artificer had long ago turned away from the mysteries of the heavens and the words of fallen oracles.

More importantly, he was afraid of the price his old friend would have to pay if he gained a reputation as a man who could divine destiny or peer into the events of untold tomorrows. Each use of such forbidden sorcery carried with it a cost that must be borne by the sorcerer and one look at his friend's dark, murderous aura even in the midst of the celebrations taking place should be enough for anyone with eyes to see it to understand that Aspakos had already paid far too great a price for the secrets he'd divined.

"Save the mysterious predictions for the festival booth where you read palms and cards for any fool with a few silver coins to rub together," Erkembalt said with a dismissive snort. "Even I can tell that the lad's future is bright," the artificer said, trying to lighten the mood that had grown heavy after his friend

spoke. "Don't go sounding like you have some special gift to foretell the future when you're predicting things that anyone with fingers and toes could calculate to know."

"Haha, then don't mind me," Aspakos said, swallowing the last of the dark red wine in his goblet before turning back to Lady Nyrielle as she called for quiet once again. "After all, what do I know? It's just as you say, the young lad is talented and determined and men with such qualities are often destined for great things."

Around the table, several people blinked in surprise, wondering if it was really as simple as Erkembalt and Aspakos made it sound. After all, Hauke possessed a rare iridescent horn, so it shouldn't be a stretch to say he would have a grand destiny, and joining Ashlynn's coven would only propel him to greater heights. Maybe it really was that simple.

Before anyone at the table could ask any questions, however, Ritchel stood up and bowed deeply toward Lady Nyrielle, lowering his horn until its tip pointed at the ground before he straightened up to speak.

"Your Eternity," he began formally. "Your Dominion. I may no longer be the Lord of the High Pass, but from the bottom of my heart, I thank you for your pledge of protection for my people. Already, your words have saved many lives," he said, echoing Ipiktok's earlier statement. Perhaps it was the wine in his own cup, or the joyous mood of an evening filled with impossible seeming unions, but tonight, he could even put aside years of bitterness and hatred to borrow the Tuscan's words when the man spoke the truth.

"So I thank you both, and I thank my son as well," Ritchel added, turning to face Hauke and lowering his horn once again. "Thank you, Hauke, for doing what I couldn't and carving out a path for our people to thrive once more."

"Father," Hauke said softly before giving his father an answering bow, lowering his horn even further and holding the position for half a minute before he straightened up again. He'd fretted for an entire day about telling his father what he planned to do tonight after discussing matters with Lady Ashlynn but in the end, he never managed to summon the courage to face his father before the day of the festival arrived.

At first, he told himself that it was because his father was still recovering from his injuries and that he shouldn't be disturbed. Then, he told himself that he should be the only one to bear the blame if his people revolted because of his decision. Eventually, however, he was left to face the truth that it had

been simple fear that stopped him from reaching out to his father to share his burdens or hear his thoughts before he made his decision.

He'd been afraid this entire time of his father's reaction but now, it seemed like he'd been afraid for nothing.

"You see?" Virve said, giving the young Frost Walker a gentle poke in the ribs. "I told you that he'd understand. Your father is a good man. Now it's your turn. Show him with your deeds that you can be just as great as the image you have of him in your heart right now," she said as moisture collected in the corner of her eyes.

Watching Hauke's proud moment with his father, Virve felt her own heart swell with bittersweet joy. If her father could see her now, standing as the Oak Witch in the Mother of Trees' coven, helping guide the young cubs around her, she knew he'd be raising his own goblet in celebration. The thought brought tears to her eyes, but they were warm tears, touched by the happiness surrounding them all tonight.

In her heart, her father was still the towering warrior who fought fearlessly in the War of Inches and whenever she thought of him, he was still a much stronger and greater warrior than she had ever been during her years of service to Lady Nyrielle. Only now did she feel like she could finally make him proud of the woman she'd become, but it was already more than twenty years too late for him to see his daughter become a witch.

But for Hauke at least, for the youngest cub in the coven that had become her new family, there was still plenty of time for him to shine in his father's eyes, and she intended to help him every step of the way.

"I told you before, young Ritchel," Nyrielle said, drawing all eyes in the room back to her lithe figure where she stood holding Ashlynn atop the dais. "You are my friend, and I will always do what I can for you and your family. But to blend our nations together," she said, turning her gaze to meet Ashlynn's emerald eyes.

"My darling, you truly have offered me a dowry like no other. I can only match it with an appropriate betrothal gift of my own..."

Chapter 653: Nyrielle's Betrothal Gift

"If I could," Nyrielle said, raising a hand to gently caress Ashlynn's soft, tender cheek and feeling the warmth of her lover's skin under her cool fingertips. "I would give you a grand wedding this very night because I cannot bear to deny you any happiness."

"But as much as I wish to give my darling Ashlynn the grand wedding she deserves," Nyrielle said as she turned to address the crowd. "There are two things standing in our way, and we must resolve them both."

Across the great hall, a few people stared in open-mouthed disbelief at Nyrielle's words. She was the Harbinger of Death, and she was betrothed to the Mother of Trees! What could possibly come between them?

"By the customs of her people, as much as it sickens me, my dearest Ashlynn is still considered the wife of Owain Lothian," Nyrielle said. Her brows furrowed and her entire expression darkened as her shadow grew larger behind her until she forcibly reigned in the fury in her heart at the notion that a man who had treated Ashlynn the way Owain had could still have any claim to her beloved.

"Until Owain Lothian dies, we can never be considered properly married in the eyes of her people," Nyrielle explained. "And there's a greater gift I wish to give my darling on her wedding day, but this is the second thing that stands between us and our union."

Cradled in Nyrielle's embrace, Ashlynn felt her heart begin to race as Nyrielle vented their frustrations. It wasn't only because of customs or the opinions of the Church that they couldn't be wed, it was also because Ashlynn herself couldn't take that step until she had buried the ghosts within her heart that haunted her dreams and clawed at her spirit whenever something pressed up against the scars Owain left on her soul the night of their wedding.

But Nyrielle was too kind to expose the things that tormented her lover, and so she revealed only a portion of the truth to their people, leaving the rest as a secret between the two of them.

"My darling deserves to have her family in attendance at her wedding, but her parents are weeks away by even a fast carriage, and bringing them here, at present, would be far too dangerous," Nyrielle continued, as though she were truly helpless to solve the problem. "Worse, her sister is held captive by Owain Lothian, and she may yet be forced to take my darling's place as his bride in the name of the marriage alliance between their two families."

Instantly, the temperature in the hall felt like it rose by several degrees as countless eyes blazed with fury at the notion that the man who had tried to murder the Mother of Trees would then force himself on her younger sister. At the back of the hall, even Darragh struggled to resist the surge of bile that rose in his throat when he heard that his lord would even contemplate something so vile.

"If it would please my darling, I would fly to Lothian City tonight and return with Owain Lothian's head on a platter and her sister in my arms," Nyrielle proclaimed as she pulled Ashlynn into an even tighter embrace. "But my darling has never asked me to solve her problems for her, and even if I did, we both know that such hasty actions would only cause greater problems."

"So if I cannot give her vengeance, and I cannot rescue her family, then I will do the next best thing to honor the dowry she has presented me with," Nyrielle said, giving Ashlynn a final squeeze before stepping back from her and gesturing to the people gathered at the high table. "My darling, I place the armies of the Vale under your command, and my progeny as well," she said, shocking all but a few people in the great hall who already knew what was coming.

To anyone else, this moment might seem strange, and Nyrielle's offer felt like anything but a sweet gesture. But to Ashlynn, it was everything she wanted and exactly what she needed if she was going to put the past behind her and create a world where they could live their lives together in peace.

Moreover, Ashlynn herself needed both this war and this victory. The distance between her power and Nyrielle's strength grew smaller every day, but there was still a vast gulf between them in terms of the experiences that had shaped them. If Ashlynn truly wanted to stand beside Nyrielle as her equal in the conflicts to come, she needed to take the lead here and learn what it meant to bear the burden of command in a war against the Vale's longstanding enemies.

To anyone else, it would seem like the strangest of gifts, but to Ashlynn, no other gift would mean as much as the support she needed to free herself from the ghosts of her past and put an end to more than a hundred years of generational wars.

"Use our soldiers as you see fit to claim your vengeance," Nyrielle said fiercely. "Free your loved ones, and take back what is yours by right! Soldiers of the Vale," she said, turning to face the tables of honored guests. "Are you ready to help my Ashlynn topple our enemies and take back what is hers?"

"The first army is ready!" Commander Bassinger called, standing from his seat among the guests of honor and saluting by placing the tips of his claws over his heart, as if he were prepared to rip it from his chest if Ashlynn gave him the order to do so.

"Whether you need us to defend the Vale while you advance, garrison the lands that you conquer, or charge the enemy's gates, we stand ready!" he shouted.

Across the great hall, dozens of men who stood guard over the festive celebration matched their commander, saluting with their claws over their hearts and stomping their feet as they snapped to attention, proudly presenting themselves as if they would march to war at this very moment to slay Ashlynn's enemies and rescue her family.

"The second army is hungry for battle!" Commander Savis said, his brilliant white fur and sharp fangs gleaming in the light of the great hall's chandeliers as he stood next to Bassinger while matching the bearish man's salute. "Let us off our leash and we will tear out your enemy's throats, cripple their captains and slaughter their lords! We are ready for war!"

This time, the response was even greater as Captain Ipiktok stood for the first time since entering the hall, towering over everyone present as he raised his trunk and let out a mighty trumpet blast as if he was sounding the charge to battle.

"The third army has already begun!" Commander Tausau said, rising next to Savis and Bassinger. The smile on his lips was eager and filled with pride as he imagined the men of his Mongrel Horde, so often looked down on by the Eldritch World for their Clanless origins, being the first to shed blood in Lady Ashlynn's war of vengeance. "My scouts have already marked the way, and our men are prepared to strike. We will teach the Lothians to fear the night and pave the way for you to claim your vengeance!"

This time there was no answering call from gathered soldiers, but the lack of response seemed even louder and more stunning than Ipiktok's trumpet blast.

"Did he say that his men were already in position?" someone whispered to their neighbor. "Then, is that why there aren't any people present from the Mongrel Horde? They've really already begun?"

"The fourth army is at your disposal," Commander Aspakos said as he rose from his place at the second table for honored guests. "Though I doubt you will need us, should the enemy send their Inquisitors, their Templars or their miracle workers, call upon us and we will treat them as kindling to light the path to your victory," he proclaimed.



While Aspakos respected the need to create this moment to unify the people of the Vale, especially the ones who had journeyed across the mountains to fight in this war, he still did what he could to hold himself and his sorcerers back. Too much force, applied too soon, would only provoke a reaction from their greater enemies that they weren't yet prepared to face. Until the time came, he would restrain his support as much as possible and preserve their strength for the greater battles to come.

"You have my sword, should you require it," Thane said, walking forward to kneel at Ashlynn's feet and smiling up at her. "My sword and anything else you require from me or my siblings. As we serve Mistress Nyrielle, we serve you as well," he said formally, drawing the sword at his hip and presenting her with its hilt in a timeless display of knightly loyalty and service.

At the table of honored guests, Kaisen and Helga blinked several times as they looked at the increasingly aggressive displays from the commanders and soldiers present in the great hall. Lady Ashlynn had offered a throne and the whole of a nation as her dowry, and the scale of it was already beyond belief, but were they understanding Lady Nyrielle's betrothal gift correctly?

Did the Harbinger of Death just offer her betrothed an army, primed and ready to take up Lady Ashlynn's cause and wage war? When did this event transform from a celebration into a prelude to invasion?

#### Chapter 654: Treasure This Night

"Thane," Ashlynn said gently, smiling at the vampire knight kneeling before her. "I need something special from you. Will you indulge your little sister in a selfish request?"

"Speak the words," Thane said with a smile on his soft lips that was bright enough to dazzle anyone looking at him. "However I can help, you have but to ask."

"I broke my sword facing Ansgar, High Lord of the Seven Peaks," she said, placing her hand on the hilt of Thane's outstretched sword. She left out that Ansgar had been a ghost possessing Hauke. There were some things, after all, that shouldn't be said in front of the broader audience, but it was true that she had faced off against a former Frost Walker High Lord and lost her darksteel Falchion in the process. "He was weakened but he used a powerful blade of eternal ice and his techniques were better than mine in every way."

"When the time comes for me to face Owain," Ashlynn said in a voice that was tight with barely restrained hatred. "When I face Owain, I would prefer to face him with a sword in my hand. He thinks of

himself as the greatest swordsman of the modern age and even if I am stronger and faster than he is, it may not be enough to overwhelm him. Will you help me to counter him?"

"You left in a hurry before," Thane said with a light chuckle. "Now that you've adjusted to the changes in your body, you'll learn even faster than before. If you weren't already stronger and faster than him, it would be impossible in such a short time, even for you. But given a few months, I can ensure that he will stand no chance against your might."

"That's all I ask," Ashlynn said, lightly tapping the pommel of Thane's sword and allowing him to return it to its sheath before helping him to his feet. "Thank you, Thane, for always being the big brother I need," she said before pulling him into a brief embrace.

Around them, the crowd's energy shifted subtly with many people blinking in surprise. Moments ago, they were all stirred by the commander's strident declarations. Some were even ready to march to war at this very moment! But instead of capitalizing on the energy that filled the room, the Mother of Trees seemed somehow vulnerable, turning to the vampire general... for a moment of comfort?

"Still stealing moments with my Ashlynn I see," Nyrielle teased from beside them, though the soft smile on her lips made it clear that she didn't mind. "Teach her well, Thane, the way you once taught me," she added as she stepped close to her greatest progeny and rested her hand gently on the sculpted muscles of his upper arm.

Amber eyes met midnight blue in a moment that conveyed more between the two of them than simple words ever could. Thane and Nyrielle had known each other long enough that a simple look was more than enough for the vampire knight to understand the words Nyrielle couldn't say.

They both knew that the flames of hatred and the thirst for revenge burning within Ashlynn's heart were growing more intense with every passing day since their return to the Vale of Mists. They'd seen first hand how close she came at times to being overwhelmed by the ghosts that haunted her along with the memories of being buried alive.

At the moment, Ashlynn was in complete control of herself, but in the days to come, as she sharpened herself in preparation to take her revenge, that control could slip at any moment. Ashlynn had asked Thane to teach her, and he would. But Nyrielle had asked him to protect Ashlynn from herself and that would be much, much harder to do as the days slipped by. Still, Thane had never once failed Nyrielle in anything she'd asked of him and he wasn't about to fail Nyrielle or Ashlynn now.

"Everyone," Ashlynn said, stepping briefly away from Nyrielle and Thane to address the crowd. Around the hall, she could see many people whose faces were still flushed with battle-fever, some holding their fists in the air while others thumped their chests, and all of them had eyes bright with the promise of war. But as her gentle voice carried through the great hall, she watched a wave of calm spreading through the crowd, matching the gentle pulse of energy she released when she addressed them.

It took her several deep breaths as the crowd calmed themselves to do the same for herself. She'd known what Nyrielle intended to do, but in the moment, especially with the furious response of people like Commanders Savis and Tausau and the simmering rage of many in the crowd when they heard what Owain intended to do to Jocelynn... it touched something deep within her heart that was dark, savage and fighting to break free.

Keeping that feeling bottled up, sealing up the dark beast within her heart again was harder than it had ever been. In less than a day, Tausau's Mongrel Horde would strike the opening blows of this war and at long last, she could strike back at the man who had wronged her on what should have been the happiest night of her life.

But now, she wanted to treasure this night. She wanted to be here, in this moment, with Nyrielle and all the new family members she'd found since entering the Vale rather than focusing on the battles that lurked beyond the next sunset. Closing her eyes, she took another deep breath, inhaling the lingering scent of lavender soap that clung to her after embracing Nyrielle and let that scent become an anchor, grounding her in this moment where she stood among her precious family members.

"Everyone," Ashlynn repeated as the hall grew quiet again. "Tomorrow, we will strike the first blow to topple the Lothians from power once and for all. In the days to come, we will have moments to rage, moments of fear, moments of sorrow and moments of victory. But tonight, I want to create a moment to treasure."

"You may not know this, but each tree is special to witches, especially to me and to the witches in my coven," she said as a smile tugged at the corners of her lips. "The Willow tree is a gentle, nurturing and yielding tree that is a boon to healers," she said as she looked affectionately at Heila who snuggled close to Ignatious. "It's also a fierce protector of those who shelter under its boughs."

"The Cypress tree is a powerful protector," Ashlynn said, turning her gaze to land on Ollie where he stood in Ignatious's place next to Zedya. "Even the fiercest storms cannot topple the stalwart guardian tree and it extends its protection far beyond its own boughs."

"But tonight," she said, turning her gaze back to the attentive crowd. "I asked that the floor be covered with freshly felled cedar boughs instead of simple reeds or rushes," Ashlynn said. "That wasn't just so I could honor the mighty cedars of the Vale of Mists or because I favor their rich scent, as lovely as it is."

"The Cedar tree," Ashlynn explained as she began to draw brilliant, emerald energy to her hands. "Is a shapeshifter's tree. It shows one face to the world and hides its true self deep within its heart, but more than that, it's soft, pliable and with a little bit of skill, is capable of transforming in miraculous ways."

"Tonight, I want you to witness a moment of wonder, and I want you to join me in creating memories that we will all treasure for the rest of our days," Ashlynn said. "And I want you to bear witness to the power of a witch...."

#### Chapter 655: A Moment of Wonder

"Sir Ignatious," Ashlynn called over her shoulder as she faced the crowd. "Could you do me a favor and extinguish all the flames in the hall save for the fires in the hearths?"

"With ease, my lady," the fallen inquisitor said, stretching out his hand before suddenly making a fist, as if he was snatching a mosquito out of the air. In an instant, countless flames on the chandeliers throughout the hall were snuffed out, plunging the great hall into a soft darkness broken only by the flickering, golden light of the fires burning in the hearths that kept the autumn chill outside from creeping into the festive great hall.

Nodding her thanks to the powerful vampire, Ashlynn called even more power to her hands, holding them up high before hurling the energy down at floor in front of the raised dais. There, her energy flowed smoothly into a large circle, painted on the floor with a mixture of cedar sap and wood ash before the freshly cut cedar boughs were laid down for the celebration.

Her emerald energy flowed like green flames all the way around the circle before flowing across the circle in a series of interconnected lines. As the flames spread, several eldritch runes appeared within the design, representing 'change', 'strength' and 'light.' As impressive as the circle was, however, it was only a guide to help her shape and strengthen the magic she was preparing to unleash.

Spreading her arms out wide, as if to encompass the entire hall, Ashlynn began to speak, filling her voice with the power to bend wood to her will and calling on the final traces of life that still lingered in the freshly felled cedar boughs.

"Cedar branches, mountain-born,

Though from your mother tree you're torn,

The power flows in every grain,

Through drought and flood, through sun and rain,

Still holding the essence of your grace,

Now lend your power to this place."

Throughout the hall, every branch and fallen cedar bough began to glow with dull green aura. The traces of energy that each branch held offered themselves up to Ashlynn's desire, flowing toward the magic circle at the front of the great hall and mingling with her energy there. The two energies never mixed, but instead swirled around each other, as if Ashlynn's energy was welcoming the earthy, wooden cedar power as a partner in a complex, intricate dance.

At tables across the hall, nearly everyone with even a little bit of knowledge of sorcery stood up from their seats, leaning forward to watch Ashlynn's great working with an interest that went far beyond mere professional courtesy. For a sorcerer, a few words were often enough to bind their power to their will and give it shape, but Ashlynn used an entire verse as well as a circle on the ground and yet her witchcraft was only just beginning to give shape to the power of the world!

At the head of the hall, Ashlynn's soft smile widened as she felt the cedar's energy dancing across her hands. It was eager, playful, almost like a kitten delighting in the simple joy of having a partner to play with and eager for the real game to begin. Now, however, was the moment when things became the most delicate as she moved from calling forth the energy of the cedar boughs to giving them new form.

"Let grain flow smooth as water's course,

While heartwood bends to shaping force.

What once stood separate, now unite,

In forms that dance before my sight.

Through cedar's will and witch's art,

Let wood reshape, each willing part."

This time, when Ashlynn spoke, it wasn't merely energy that flowed across the hall, but the cedar branches themselves. Several startled cries echoed across the hall as branches moved underfoot, flowing across the hall as though they were caught on a fisherman's string being pulled toward the glowing circle at the front of the hall.

Lifting her arms up in front of her, Ashlynn clutched her hands into fists pressed up against each other before slowly pulling them apart. As her hands moved, the fresh, green cedar needles were stripped from the branches, swirling in the air and dancing on an unseen wind that prevented them from falling to the ground while Ashlynn focused on the branches themselves.

Soon, the branches began to bend and twist, braiding themselves into something that resembled the trunk of a tree at the center of the large magic circle. Ashlynn's hands danced through the air, weaving the rich, warm cedar energy through her fingers like ribbons, guiding the energy into a new shape that matched the vision in her mind.

Before the wide eyes of the audience, the bark on the cedar branches seemed to melt like wax before flowing like glue over the separate branches. Where the flowing bark passed, it left behind branches that were not only smooth and polished, but wood that looked like it had been fused into a single piece with looping whorls of woodgrain in patterns that seemed to carry a trace of the magic circle's inner structure

Once the 'tree trunk' had grown to a diameter of five paces and stood just over ten feet tall, Ashlynn changed the motion of her hands, spreading the energy wider and forming it into an ever-growing disk.

The cedar branches bent and twisted to her will, flattening themselves out as they flowed together, forming a platform that was nearly twenty paces across. The surface was perfectly smooth and glowed with the luster of freshly polished wood, smelling faintly of the cedar forest of the Vale in the depths of night when the mists were thickest and dew gathered on every branch and leaf.

Still, Ashlynn wasn't done as she turned her attention to the cedar needles she'd carefully set aside earlier in her working.

"Each needle green with life's own fire,

Now burn with light that won't expire.

As countless candles filled with grace,

Drift gently through this joyous space.

From cedar's crown to floating flame,

Let light eternal stake its claim."

Ashlynn's words echoed across the hall as she made a sweeping gesture with her arms, as if she was gathering the cedar needles to her chest before tossing them high into the air. With that simple motion, thousands of cedar needles were flung high into the air, spreading throughout the hall as they began to glow with a soft golden light.

Now, rather than being lit from above by the pure, shining light of the gilded chandeliers, the hall was filled with softer motes of dancing light that drifted through the air at every height from just above the great hall's stone floor to the space between the ancient beams supporting the ceiling. It was a soft, shifting light that seemed to call to everyone in the hall, inviting them to reach out, touch and feel the wonder of the witchcraft of the Mother of Trees.

In scattered pockets throughout the great hall, several people, including most of the young children in the hall, did exactly that, reaching out to touch the soft golden motes of light. Whenever they did, the glowing cedar needle exploded in a brief shower of harmless light with faint crackles as though it had been thrown into the flames of the hearth, burning brilliantly before fading away.

For a moment, silence filled the transformed great hall as hundreds of people stood transfixed by the floating constellations of lights drifting through the air around them. Even the most powerful sorcerers present had never witnessed magic that felt so alive, so joyous, and so completely removed from the disciplined practicality that so often limited their arts.

For a sorcerer, a display like this would place incredible strain on their bodies, and not a single one of them would have wasted so much energy on transforming the cedar needles into dancing lights when they could have lit the wicks of the chandeliers with much less effort, but for the Mother of Trees... it felt like she had barely exerted herself at all to produce such a dazzling display!

At the table of honored guests, Helga reached up hesitantly to touch one of the glowing needles, gasping in delight as it burst into harmless sparkles across her palm.

"It's like touching starlight," she whispered to Kaisen, her eyes bright with wonder. "It doesn't burn at all, it isn't even hot like sparks from the fire. It's just warm and gentle and... and amazing. Do you think, do you think that our little Heila could do something like this?" Helga asked as she looked from the dancing lights to her diminutive daughter standing before the high table and back to her husband again.

"This much and more," Ipiktok said with a hearty chuckle as he recalled Heila's skill in the arena, both when she faced off against him and against far greater threats. "Your daughter is a wonder in her own right," he praised.

All across the hall, people reached out one by one to tap the lights, releasing showers of sparks as they marveled at Ashlynn's display of witchcraft used not as a weapon of war, but for something as pure and romantic as creating this moment to share with her betrothed and all of them as well.

"My love," Ashlynn said, turning back to face Nyrielle and feeling her heart fluttering in her chest as she caught her lover looking at her with an expression of pure, joyous wonder at the enchanted environment her witchcraft had transformed the great hall into. "The musicians are ready," she said, nodding to a dozen men and women standing to the side of the hall.



Stepping from the cold stone dais onto the slightly higher wooden platform, Ashlynn held out her hand toward Nyrielle, inviting the vampire to join her atop the platform.

"Will you lead me in a dance?"

#### Chapter 656: First Dance

As soon as Ashlynn mentioned them, the musicians exchanged wide-eyed glances across their small ensemble area, each still processing the impossible magic they had just witnessed. The leader of the group, a veteran musician who had led ensembles at countless gatherings of the elite gladiators and wealthy merchants of High Fen City, had never seen anything that compared to the Mother of Trees' display.

But as Ashlynn extended her hand toward Nyrielle, his professional instincts overcame the wonder. A quick nod passed between the members of the ensemble, and they retrieved their instruments with hands that trembled slightly from more than just the evening's excitement as each of their hearts swelled with the desire to make this precious moment as perfect as it could be.

A moment later, as Ashlynn extended her hand to Nyrielle, the gentle sounds of reed flutes blended with the beating of drums, the bright, cheerful notes of harps and the energetic, rapid music of the citole as the musicians launched into a bright and cheerful melody.

Nyrielle's wings fluttered briefly before she appeared next to Ashlynn, taking her lover in her arms with reverent tenderness. When their lips met, it was different from every kiss they had shared before, not stolen in secret moments or shared in the privacy of chambers, or even hidden behind Nyrielle's wings and shadows but offered freely before hundreds of witnesses who celebrated their love.

The floating lights seemed to pulse brighter around them, responding to the magic that flowed between their connected hearts, and Ashlynn tasted not just passion but promise on Nyrielle's lips, the pledge of forever that they had just made before all their people.

For two heartbeats, then three, and then countless more, Nyrielle said with her lips and tongue what words could never hope to convey as their bodies pressed together and they held each other tightly.

Once again, the crowd broke out in applause and cheers, now completely caught up in the romance and joy of the moment. Milo wore a happy, silly grin before wrapping his tail around Juni, leaning in to surprise her with a deep, passionate kiss of his own while dancing motes of light exploded around them like dozens of fallen stars shooting across the sky.

The couple from the Heartwood Clan weren't the only ones finding themselves caught up in the moment and a few of the bachelors at the celebration briefly wondered if the Mother of Trees' magic contained more than just a bit of light and flame as they watched couple after couple sharing tender embraces and stolen kisses that ranged from chaste and tender to every bit as passionate as the one Nyrielle shared with Ashlynn.

Eventually, after giving Ashlynn a kiss that left her lover trembling and breathless in her arms, Nyrielle pulled back and smiled at the enchanting blonde vision nestled closely against her body.

"My darling, Ashlynn," Nyrielle whispered as she ran her slender fingers gently through Ashlynn's soft, pale blonde hair. "You have outdone yourself tonight."

"So have you, my love," Ashlynn said, taking a half-step closer to rest her head on Nyrielle's chest. "Now dance with me the way we danced in our dreams. Make this a memory we can return to again and again, for as long as we both live," she said, looking up at the vampire with shining emerald eyes.

"Always willful," Nyrielle said lightly as she wrapped one arm around Ashlynn's slender waist and took Ashlynn's hand in hers. "Asking me for a dance we can enjoy for eternity," she teased. "But when have I ever failed to indulge your willful desires?"

With a few quick steps, Nyrielle led Ashlynn to the center of the wooden platform before launching into a dance that her feet had never forgotten, even after more than a hundred years since Torbin last hosted a grand ball when he ruled as the High Lord of the Vale of Mists.

Nyrielle's steps didn't quite match the more modern music but Ashlynn didn't care. She surrendered herself completely to Nyrielle's lead and the only music she truly needed was the sound of their two hearts, beating as one as they stared into each other's eyes and let the rest of the world fall away until there was nothing in their sight but each other.

"Come with me," Heila said, tugging at Ignatious's hand. "If we don't join them, then the rest of the people won't feel like they can," she said, pulling him in the direction of the table full of honored guests.

"Mother, Father," Heila called, surprising her parents as she approached them with the handsome vampire in tow. "You should come dance with us. Lady Ashlynn doesn't want to have this moment to herself," she explained. "She wants to share it with everyone here."

"Really?" Helga said, blinking in surprise as she looked around, quickly realizing that in addition to Heila and Ignatious, Zedya and Lennart were also walking out onto the wide open space between the rows of tables, gazing into each other eyes lovingly and preparing to join the dance. "Is it really fine?"

"If she says it's fine then I'm sure it's fine," Achim said as he stood from his own seat and offered a hand to his wife of many years. At the start of the evening, he never imagined himself joining in the dancing and festivities, but after drinking the healing elixir or whatever it was that the Mother of Trees had shared with them at the beginning of the night, his old aches and pains no longer troubled him and his joints felt as limber and spry as they had many years ago.

"Our daughter is asking for our help to set an example," Kaisen said with a warm smile as he pulled Helga up and out of her chair. "We shouldn't let her down."

With couples from the high table and the tables filled with honored guests leading the way, many more couples found their way to the wide aisle at the center of the hall, joining in the festive romantic atmosphere and dancing among the thousands of glittering motes of light that hung suspended in the air.

Later, there would be vast trays of food, lovingly prepared by Georg and his best cooks. There would be countless casks of fine wine to be opened and the great hall would be filled with laughter and joy as the people celebrated the betrothal of the Harbinger of Death and the Mother of Trees.

But now, before the revels began, it was a time for love and dancing in an enchanted hall that made the troubles of the world seem as distant as the mountain peaks. Everyone knew that the moment would end eventually, but as long as the music played and the lights twinkled and exploded around them, those concerns had no place dancing among them.

Chapter 657: News Reaches the West (Part One)

On the night of the new moon, while Ashlynn and Nyrielle danced the night away in the company of close friends and the families they had chosen, ripples of their actions were felt in the farthest flung corners of the Eldritch world.

Far to the west of the Vale of Mists, nestled deep in the Western Shield Mountains, a lone figure stood atop the Summit of the World, the tallest mountain in the Eldritch world. The air was thin and cold and only a faint breeze blew to ruffle the lone woman's pure white fur. Her iridescent horn glittered in the night, reflecting the light of more stars than could be seen from anywhere else in the world, but her deep crimson eyes held no joy at the glittering tapestry in the sky.

There had been a time when Answaen felt that she would never grow tired of seeing the wonders of the heavens stretching out above her as far as the eye could see. She had carefully dug a cave into the bones of the mountain just half a league from the summit so she could stay up here until the sky began to brighten and the sun threatened to peek above the horizon.

Time, however, had worn away at her sense of wonder. Now, when she looked out toward the horizon, glimpsing the Endless Sea through the gaps between clouds, the only emotion that stirred in her heart was a dull sort of apprehension, a feeling that wasn't even strong enough to be called worry.

Somewhere out there, the Mother of Tides presided over the Lost Isles, lands that had once been connected to the shield mountains by vast sheets of ice. Answaen had never seen the Lost Isles, but her Master assured her they existed, even if they had become unreachable long before her older brother united the Seven Peaks in the eastern mountains.

It would have been comforting, she supposed, if the Frost Walkers could still stride across the seas to reach the Lost Isles far to the west. If they could, then Answaen wouldn't have to wonder if the Mother of Tides still adhered to her promises to keep the seas impassable to the human ships that attempted to navigate around Eldritch lands in search of new lands to conquer. Perhaps, if she no longer needed to concern herself with watching over the seas, she could find a sense of wonder in the stars again.

For hours, the ancient Frost Walker stood unmoving, feeling the faint wind through her fur and gazing out at the stars, though her mind barely registered anything she might have seen that night. In her hand, she held a shattered piece of Eternal Ice, marked with runes older than her older brother's nation and bearing the name 'Ansgar.'

It had been centuries since she last visited the lands of her birth and when she had, an old woman named Kimsel presided over only a single mountain as the glaciers continued to melt and the nation her brother had once ruled grew ever smaller.

At the time, she'd asked her Master if her brother and the other Blood Guardians could be moved to the Western Shield Mountains to join with their clansmen here, but the Fangs of Death had refused, saying that the Blood Guardians served more than one purpose in the east. At the time, he hadn't elaborated, but in the past few centuries, Answaen had come to suspect that the arrival of humans in the eastern lands hadn't been a surprise to her Master.

Now, as she held the shattered crystal of Eternal Ice, she wondered if it was those very humans who were responsible for destroying all that remained of her older brother. If Shubnalu's blood magic had failed, the crystal would have turned red, resembling the frozen blood of her brother's statue, but that hadn't happened. Instead, the crystal had broken which could only mean that his horn had been destroyed.

A disturbance in the mountain's tranquil loneliness pulled Answaen from her brooding contemplation. The steady whisper of wind across ice was broken by the scrape of metal against stone, and the labored breathing of someone climbing toward her summit sanctuary. Her crimson eyes shifted from the distant horizon to focus on the world immediately around her, and her nose twitched as she detected the familiar scent of a member of her own clan approaching through the thin mountain air.

It felt like just yesterday that she had given orders for the clan to learn what they could about her older brother's death, and at the same time, it felt like it had already been years since she descended from the mountain summit to make her demands. However long it had been, it seemed like there would finally be answers to her questions.

"Immortal, Immortal Ancestor," a ragged breath called from several paces down the summit. There, a young Frost Walker, barely four decades old, struggled to make their way up the frozen steps carved into the ice by Answaen's sorcery. Every step seemed to take tremendous effort and they clutched a spear in one hand, driving its sharp point into the snow and ice with each step in order to support themselves as they fought to reach the woman standing atop the Summit of the World.

"Immortal Ancestor," the struggling Frost Walker said. "I have, have news. From the east."

"I see," Answaen said, revealing sharp fangs when she spoke. Raising a finger to her lips, she bit down gently, staining the white fur on her hand dark red as she squeezed out a drop of crimson blood. "Blood

Offering, Gift of Strength," she intoned, forcing a thread of her body's great strength into the drop of blood before flinging it at the struggling messenger.

Normal blood would have frozen as soon as it was exposed to the frigid temperatures and thin air on the mountain's summit, but Answaen's blood sailed through the air completely unaffected by the bitter cold, splattering across the messenger's glittering purple horn before being completely absorbed by the Frost Walker's body.

"Ice Palace, form at my will," Answaen said, her iridescent horn shining brilliantly in the night as she compressed the snow atop the mountain into faceted, almost crystalline walls of ice that surrounded herself and the messenger, protecting the weaker Frost Walker from the elements and blocking out the faint sounds of the wind as it danced around the broken, snow covered landscape of the summit.

Atop the summit, the ancient Frost Walker also formed a throne formed of solid ice. Unconsciously, she patterned it after the one her brother had carved from the ice of the High Pass hundreds of years ago. As a young girl, she'd once thought that she would sit on that very throne when her older brother chose to step down, but fate had different things in mind for both brother and sister than allowing her to inherit his domain.

The messenger stared in open-mouthed shock at the casual display of power by the Immortal Ancestor. There were legends about her vast powers of sorcery and the world shaping abilities possessed by Frost Walkers with an iridescent horn, but he had never once seen it for himself.

Now that he had, however, he swallowed heavily as a lump formed in his throat while he wondered.... If the legends about the Immortal Ancestor's transcendent sorcery were true, then, which of the other legends about her... and her ruthlessness, might also be true?

"Speak," Answaen said as she sat atop the throne. By now, her blood sorcery had done its work, infusing strength and vitality into the messenger, allowing them to resist the draining effects of thin air and the cold so bitter that even ordinary Frost Walkers felt the chill.

"Immortal Ancestor," the messenger said, lowering his horn and kneeling in the snow as he faced the woman who had watched over their clan for untold generations while he prayed that she wouldn't be angered by the news he carried.

"We received a reply from the Great Lord's men in the High Fen. The Vale of Mists still stands and humans have not attacked the High Pass. The men there think that it is impossible for humans to be responsible for destroying," the messenger began to say, only to cut off abruptly when he saw the Immortal Ancestor clutching at the shattered piece of Eternal Ice.

"There, there is other news," the messenger said with a trembling voice. "If the Immortal Ancestor is willing to hear it," he added, lowering his horn even further and refusing to lift his eyes high enough to gaze upon her figure lest he somehow offend the ancient guardian of their clan.

The messenger was well aware of just how precarious his position atop the mountain was. Being selected to serve the Immortal Ancestor in any capacity was a great honor that many would have traded the lives of their parents for, but it was also a position with many dangers. After all, the last messenger who had 'wasted her time' with reports that the Immortal Ancestor considered to be beneath her attention had been hurled off the mountain's summit, crashing into the frozen rocks below.

Now, as the messenger faced the Immortal Ancestor, armed with news that amounted to little more than rumors, he could only hope that what he had to say wouldn't displease the Frost Walker vampire. Or, if it did displease her, that it wasn't so bad that she chose to kill the messenger for the crime of delivering bad news!

#### Chapter 658: News Reaches The West (Part Two)

"If I desire your silence," Answaen said in a voice that was colder than the mountain air. "Then I will command it. You have come, tell me everything you have learned."

"It, it's difficult to know much this soon," the messenger said, hoping that his explanation wouldn't be taken as an excuse. "Messenger birds can only carry so much, and the distance is great. Still, there are a few things that we have learned. Rumors, but I will confirm them soon." Seeing that the Immortal Ancestor had no intention of speaking, the messenger continued to report what little he'd been able to learn.

"There is a rumor that the Eldritch Lady of the Vale of Mists defeated Hamdi, High Lord of the Tangled Wood, and that she took one of his progeny to use as her herald," the messenger said. "There is also a rumor that the Eldritch Lady of the Vale assembled an army vast enough to encircle High Fen City and that she led that army into the High Pass."

"So the Harbinger of Death is still playing games with the humans and fighting them with armies," Answaen said dismissively. "I do not see why Master wishes to possess her so badly when she refuses to unleash her power on her enemies. But she should know better than to break her teacher's Blood Guardians, so I doubt it was her who killed my brother."

"What other rumors have you heard?" Answaen asked. "I do not believe that you only heard from a few spies in the High Fen."

"This," the messenger said helplessly, trying to lower themselves even further into packed snow atop the mountain. "I do not know that these things mean anything, Immortal Ancestor. The Mother of Thorns is said to have taken in new witches," the messenger said. "And the Thistle Witch was seen with the Eldritch Lady of the Vale of Mists. There is... there is also a rumor that the Lady of the Vale has taken a witch as her seneschal, but I have no proof of this."

For several minutes, Answaen said nothing as she drummed her sharp claws on the icy armrest of her throne, losing herself in thought as her mind wandered back to conversations that had taken place decades ago.

The Thistle Witch... the last survivor of the Glimmerwing Clan and an assassin so deadly that the Fangs of Death felt compelled to add her to his collection of lethal tools. Her escape had been one of the few things capable of rousing Shubnalu's fury in all the centuries Answaen had served her Master.

"Wait," the Frost Walker vampire said as she fit other pieces of what the messenger had said together. "Did you say that the Harbinger of Death took a seneschal? She took a witch for a seneschal?"

"I, I can't confirm that she took a witch for her seneschal," the messenger stammered. "But the report was very clear that the Lady of the Vale's seneschal arrived in High Fen City ahead of her Mistress and that she had the power to strike several bargains on her Mistress's behalf. I, I will have more complete letters in a few weeks time when the couriers arrive," he offered, hoping that his answer would satisfy the Immortal Ancestor.

"If the Harbinger of Death has challenged a High Lord, then she has grown stronger than she was a hundred years ago when the Vale nearly fell," Answaen mused. "But if she has taken in one of the Mother of Thorn's witches as her Seneschal, especially if she has taken the Thistle Witch as her Seneschal... I will have to report these matters to Master soon."



"Learn what you can in a month's time," Answaen commanded. "By the next new moon, I don't want to hear about rumors, I want to know the truth of things. And find out if the Eldritch Emperor is still acting like a turtle in the Thousand Spires."

"The, the Eldritch Emperor?" the messenger said, blinking in confusion. "Why would the Eldritch Emperor have anything to do with..."

"You don't need to understand," Answaen interrupted the messenger as her icy aura flared around her, dropping the temperature in her ice palace enough that the messenger felt the sweat under their fur freezing against their skin. A moment later, however, her tone softened as she took a closer look at the messenger and the deep purple color of his horn.

It was clear that he'd been chosen for his natural affinity for icy winds, few who lacked such powers could survive the trek to the Summit of the World where the air was thin and constant winds carried away what little warmth the body possessed. His family must have worked hard for generations to maintain such a pure, natural affinity, but to bearers of an iridescent horn like Answaen, men like the messenger lacked the ability to blend other icy powers with their core strength, leaving his sorcery as something flat and one dimensional, even if his powers of wind were strong.

But for a messenger, she mused, those powers of wind could be very useful, and with a little shaping and a small investment of power, the young Frost Walker might be very useful indeed.

"Tell me your name," Answaen commanded in a voice that she felt was warmer than the one she had used before, though it had been so long since she had had many conversations that it was difficult to say for sure.

"Naaric, Immortal Ancestor," the messenger said, trembling in fear as her crimson eyes seemed to bore into him rather than regarding him with the frozen, uncaring gaze she'd held until now. Had he offended her? Was she asking because she wanted to know the name of the man she was about to kill?

"Master will want to know many things if I disturb him about anything," Answaen explained as she stood up from her frozen throne. "And he is always interested in the activities of the current Eldritch Emperor. Learn all that you can. Visit the lowlands in person if you must. Winter is almost upon us, you should be able to reach the bottom of the foothills if you need to."

With a wave of her hand, the ice palace and the frozen throne shattered, turning into tiny shards of ice that drifted away on the wind and leaving the messenger to face the cold, thin air of the mountain top without Answaen's protection once again.

"In one month's time, I will visit Master in the Dark Wood," Answaen announced. "See to it that I am not under informed for my visit and make arrangements for my journey," she said, returning her gaze to the distant horizon far to the west and the vague feeling of anxiety that she felt whenever she stared in the direction that the sun set

"Do this well, and I may reward you with a Bloodline Gift," Answaen said. "I'm sure you would be delighted to add a trace of ice blue or brilliant white to your purple horn, wouldn't you? Or are you the caring sort of man who wishes to help others with the power of warm green winds? What sort of man are you, Naaric?"

"Immortal Ancestor," he said, trembling under the weight of her stare. "I have never had many ambitions but, but I... I have always wished to be seen as something more. My wife and child, they deserve more than I can give them. So any gift, any gift that gives me strength," he said with a shaky voice. "Any such gift would be priceless beyond measure."

"Strength is the easiest thing in the world to grant you, Naaric," Answaen said. "Serve me well in the days to come, and you will find that yours grows greatly. But if you fail me, then it won't just be you who pays the price," she said coldly. "There is no place in our clan for failures to pass on a weak bloodline," she said with a crimson gaze that penetrated to his very core. "Disappoint me, and your wife and child will be the first to pay the price. Now go, you should not waste even a moment."

"Yes, yes, Immortal Ancestor," the messenger said, scrambling to bow properly before he fled the mountain summit. With only a month to gather whatever news he could, he dared not waste even a single moment, especially since it was likely that anything he told the Ancient Ancestor would reach all the way to the ears of the Great Lord Shubnalu.

More importantly, if he couldn't satisfy her demands, then the small family who depended on him would forever curse his decision to assist the Immortal Ancestor.

## Chapter 659: An Escort

Early morning sunlight filtered through breaks in the clouds, casting bright, golden rays of light through the rain clouds that hung over Lothian City like a sodden blanket. In the outer courtyard of Lothian

Manor, footsteps splashed through puddles on the cobblestone floor while servants bustled about, preparing horses and a carriage for a journey that looked like it might last several days.

Isabell watched over everything with a practiced eye as supplies and tools were loaded into the back of the carriage. She had no idea whether she would use any of these tools or not, after all, she had only informed Owain Lothian that she intended to survey the lands near the mouth of the Vale of Mists as a pretense for her departure. Whether or not she actually spent any time there would depend on what happened once she met up with Marcel in the village outside the city.

But since she had said that she was planning on surveying the lands that she and Guild Master Tiernan wanted to settle, she packed everything she would need including expensive parchment scrolls that were large enough to draw the landscape along with plane-tables, plumb chains, and even a heavy pace chain that measured exactly five hundred paces in length.

In fact, there was so much equipment that she briefly wondered if she should have added a small cart to their trip, but she firmly reminded herself, for what felt like the eleventh time, that all of this was just a show to distract Owain Lothian from the fact that she and Master Tiernan were about to vanish from Lothian Manor for several days.

"Master Isabell," A youthful, feminine voice called from across the courtyard. "Master Isabell, I'm so glad I was able to see you before you left," Jocelynn said with a practiced, polished politeness.

The smile that started to form on the silver-haired engineer's face died the instant she turned to face the young Lady Blackwell. At her side, Owain accompanied her wearing an expression that said he would rather be anywhere else this morning though he banished the expression as soon as Isabell's eyes fell on him. But Owain's unpleasantness was something she could deal with. The sight that snatched the smile from her lips was the pair of men walking behind him.

Sir Hugo Hanrahan looked distinctly uncomfortable as he moved in his lightweight armor and he kept a hand on the pommel of his sword as if to ensure that he didn't stumble over the weapon as he walked. Next to him, Sir Rain Aleese radiated a quiet menace in his well worn armor and the heavy sword at his side felt like it was a part of him rather than a mere accessory.

"Lady Jocelynn," Isabell said politely, offering a brief curtsy as they made their way across the courtyard to Isabell's carriage. "Lord Owain. To what do I owe the pleasure of your attention this morning? I can't imagine that my departure was something so important that you had to haul yourself away from your morning training."

"Or did you run out of soldiers to beat about the training yard after sending half your partners to the healers yesterday with cracked or broken bones?" Isabell asked, raising an eyebrow behind her silver rimmed spectacles as she calmly observed the fake smile plastered on the young lord's face quiver and nearly crumble at her greeting.

"Master Isabell," he said, reigning in the explosive retort that fought to escape his lips and trying to maintain his air of superiority over the engineer that even his father was beginning to value highly. "My father heard of your plans to visit the lands near the Vale of Mists. I've warned you that it's dangerous there, but since you insist, my father has ordered me to provide you with a powerful escort."

"I told you last night that it's unnecessary," Isabell said, frowning as she saw several guardsmen wearing light armor marching into the courtyard, led by a man who started shouting for horses and a wagon to carry equipment. "Since you seemed reluctant, I've made other arrangements for our security. I'll be meeting with our escort in the Village of Maeril. I'm sure that the roads between here and there are more than safe enough to travel without so many armed guards."

"Personally, I agree with you," Owain said as he clenched his fist around the hilt of the dagger at his waist. "I'm sure that you are more than capable of hiring competent mercenaries, especially since you seem to have found friends at the Gilded Horns," he said as he watched her face carefully for any reaction. When her expression didn't change in the slightest, however, Owain's nostrils flared and his brows lowered before he moved on.

"Regardless of the help you have found, my father insists," he said. "He wants to see knights at your side who have fought demons before and he recommended Sir Rain and Sir Hugo since you were well acquainted with both of them," he said even as he fought back the urge to curse his father's meddling.

His father's 'suggestion' had been a hairsbreadth short of an order from the Marquis to a vassal rather than guidance from a father to his son, and Owain suspected that the old man was trying to weaken his support in Lothian City while he entertained the various visiting eastern barons.

But when he protested, his father had countered with accusations that Owain was neglecting his other duties and that he should use this 'opportunity' to focus on preparing for the opening moves of their offensive campaign when the snows melted and the path to Airgead Mountain would become passable enough for them to begin their siege ahead of the arrival of reinforcements from across the sea. After all, if they already occupied the best positions, the newcomers couldn't complain when they received a lesser share of the spoils.

"Well, since your father insists," Isabell said in a carefully neutral tone. "Then I graciously accept your offer of an escort. I'm sure that we'll be much safer with Sir Rain and Sir Hugo to watch over us," she said politely.

"Master Isabell," Jocelynn said awkwardly from where she stood next to Owain. She wanted to rush forward to hug the older woman who had helped her to see the truth of her situation so much more clearly. She wanted to thank her for her advice and even beg her not to go, but Owain positioned himself ever so slightly between them, radiating a fierce possessiveness that she dared not step away from.

"Master Isabell," Jocelynn repeated. "It's very dangerous near the demons. So please, come back safely. If anything were to happen to you, I don't know what I would do."

"Yes, you do," Isabell said, offering a soft smile to the beleaguered young lady. "You aren't alone here, you know. I'm sure if you'd like some company from home, Confessor Eleanor can arrange some time with the captains who have left their vessels behind for a chance to become knights here."

"And even if she can't," Isabell said, reminding Jocelynn of things they'd discussed after she learned just how much danger the young Blackwell lady was truly in. "There are more young ladies arriving every day, with the barons bringing their daughters and their vassals' daughters in an effort to attract young lord Loman's eye. I'm sure if you start hosting more tea parties, your days will be far too busy to miss me very much."

"You're right," Jocelynn said, straightening up under Isabell's reassuring gaze. "I'm sure I'll have plenty to keep me busy. But still, please be safe. Lord Owain has fought countless demons before, and he's told me many times over how dangerous they are."

"So please," Jocelynn pleaded in a voice that was very sincere and filled with concern. "Please don't let the demons get their claws on you."

## Chapter 660: An Opportunity for Escape

Darragh slumped in the back of a wagon as it trundled down the ancient roadway that led out of the Vale of Mists and followed the River Luath toward Lothian City. He never imagined that he'd have an opportunity to escape the Vale of Mists so soon after last night's celebratory banquet, but at the same

time, he wished that he'd been able to get a proper night's sleep before taking the risk to make an escape.

"You look half dead, Darragh," Eamon teased him from the wooden bench on the opposite side of the wagon. "You're still young, aren't you? Don't tell me that you never stayed out drinking the night before Lord Owain summoned us to hunt for him. I won't believe you even if you say that you didn't."

"This is different," Darragh grouched as he pulled the heavy autumn cloak tighter against his body against the damp chill. "A night drinking with mates is one thing. But dancing? With a snake woman?" Darragh said, shaking his head bitterly at his inability to escape the claws of the demon who held him hostage until the musicians finally stopped and the banquet ended as the sky began showing the first hints of growing brighter.

It was all 'Sir' Ollie's fault, the young hunter thought. No one had shown any interest in him or Eamon during Lady Ashlynn's display of heretical magic when couples flocked to the open areas of the great hall to join the Demon Lady of the Vale in a celebratory dance.

After the dance, a Claw Demon named Georg made a grand show of presenting dishes for the feast, and Darragh hoped that he could quickly devour his meal and then make a polite, or even not so polite, escape when the parents with young children began to leave. Who would have thought that the newly dubbed knight would appear at their table and ask for their help with a sensitive mission for Lady Ashlynn the very next day?

Once it became clear that Eamon and Darragh might be important people of status, men that the famous Cypress Knight would personally seek out for help, the snake women had been all too eager to wrap their tails around the hunters and pull them onto the dance floor for hours of 'entertainment', broken only by trips back to their table to drink more of the heady, mulled wine or the strangely potent cider that seemed to flow without limit.

Now, he'd barely had any sleep after staggering back to the soldier's barracks in the ancient fortress, and his head still pounded with the aftereffects of drinking too much. Lady Ashlynn had offered to use a bit of her witchcraft to ease any discomfort the men felt after the night of revels, but Darragh wasn't about to let her bewitch him the way she seemed to have bewitched others.

Thankfully, she'd accepted his claims that he hadn't drunk enough the previous night to need her help, and she told him that there would be plenty of time to rest in the wagon before he was needed for any real work.

"They call themselves the Scaled Clan," Eamon pointed out. "You know the women we danced with are friends of Lady Heila. It's not a bad thing that Eusebia took a liking to you. Dalmatia said that they're merchants and they want to find good investments to make in Vale City or beyond."

"How do you even know that?" Darragh asked, staring at his friend in shock. "I couldn't make heads or tails of what that woman said all night long. I thought the de- the Eldritch had learned the king's tongue, but she barely spoke a few words of it."

Not that a lack of common language deterred this 'Eusebia' from trying to be 'friendly' with Darragh. Quite the opposite, in fact. It felt like she was trying to make up for the lack of conversation with extra touches, keeping their arms intertwined, caressing his leg with the length of her serpentine tail.... By the end of the night, Darragh thought he finally understood what a mouse felt like when a powerful snake wrapped around it to constrict its prey to death!

"They're our neighbors," Eamon said with a shrug as if it was nothing special. "It doesn't hurt to learn their language. Even a few phrases can help."

"But where would you even learn something like that?" Darragh asked as he struggled to imagine having enough conversations with demons to actually learn their language.

"Some of the refugees from the outlying villages speak the original Eldritch tongue," Daithi said, leaning over crates of supplies in the wagon to join their conversation. "I've been learning because my little one plays with a pair of girls from the Night Weaver Clan, but I'm surprised that you learned it, Eamon."

"The Night Weavers are even better trappers than the Heartwood Clan," the grizzled hunter said. "I picked up a bit once a few of them started getting antsy about receiving our help and doing nothing in return. Good lads with very sharp eyes."

Darragh gave up on making small talk with his former companions as Daithi and Eamon fell into a conversation about the freshly elevated constable's efforts to learn the language in order to act as a better peace keeper while Eamon talked about how many different words the Night Weavers seemed to have to describe the tightness or strength of different kinds of rope or string used in setting traps.

Both men had clearly fallen so deeply into heresy that there would be no salvation for them in this life or the next, and Darragh would need to do everything he could to avoid their eyes when he made his escape later today.

According to Ollie, they were meeting with important merchants from Blackwell County, likely traveling under the escort of knights loyal to Lord Owain. From what he could understand of the plans, the merchants must not know they were meeting with heretics who sympathized with demons or he wouldn't have been present at all.

Lady Ashlynn had left almost all of her witches and demon guards behind, taking only 'Sir' Ollie from her coven on this mission and Darragh knew all too well how recently the kitchen boy had become both a witch and a knight so he barely considered him a threat.

In place of her normal retinue, Ashlynn had dressed Darragh, Eamon, Daithi, and a few of the other humans who had come to the Vale as guards, offering them freshly made gambesons featuring the same emerald green and midnight blue harlequin pattern as had been painted on the walls in the great hall.

Now, looking like proper soldiers, they were supposed to set up a tent for Lady Ashlynn to receive guests in, ostensibly so she could convince these powerful merchants to join in her heresy before bringing them back to the Vale.

It was a nightmare scenario, but it was also the best opportunity that Darragh was likely to get. Supposedly, the merchants would only be arriving after nightfall, but none of the vampires of the Vale were traveling with them, so it should be possible to slip away under the cover of night.

With only one road leading to the Vale and the place where the meeting would happen, all Darragh needed to do was to race along the road until he could intercept the knights and merchants, preventing them from falling into a demon trap.

If he was lucky, he might even know the knights who were traveling with the merchants, but even if he didn't, he felt confident that he could convince them to turn back toward Lothian City before they became entangled in the demon's schemes.

It wasn't a perfect plan, not yet at least, but Darragh was certain he could find a way to improve his odds, even if it was just a little bit. There were plenty of toxic plants near the entrance of the Vale, and if



he could find the right one, he might be able to dose the other men's water with something that would give them the runs or otherwise impair their ability to pursue him.

Darragh spent almost as much time in the wilderness as he did in civilized places, and if there was one thing he knew how to do, it was how to survive. He'd endured six long months of captivity, acting like a convert to Lady Ashlynn's insidious heresy and biding his time.

Now, the moment was finally upon him and he would do whatever he had to in order to escape... even if it meant his former friends and mentor would pay the price for it.