

## The Vampire 661

### Chapter 661: On The Road (Part One)

The Village of Maeril was one of the most comfortable and familiar-feeling places that Isabell had visited since coming to Lothian March. Nestled against the River Luath, the village spanned both the north and south sides of the river with ferries ready to carry people and goods across the river for as little as a snip of tin per person.

Two stone platforms marked the place where a demon bridge had once spanned the river, but local legend claimed that the demons destroyed the bridge themselves in order to prevent crusaders from pursuing them when they fled north of the river. Now, those ancient stone platforms served as loading stations for barges filled with beef, lamb, and wool from Dunn Barony or wheat, barley, and produce from Hanrahan Barony, all flowing down river to the markets in Lothian City or beyond.

In another decade or two, if the village continued to grow the way it was, it might transform into a proper town with more tradesmen popping up to refine the raw materials coming in from the edges of the frontier. Already, it played host to a number of mills turning grain into flour and timber into usable lumber, but both operations felt relatively small in scale compared to the potential Isabell saw here.

Still, the village was large enough to possess a number of inns for travelers, including one that catered to visiting knights and merchants, where Marcel had asked Isabell and Tiernan to wait for him until he could arrange for their transportation to meet with Lady Ashlynn.

"It would have been nice to see the ancient bridge," Isabell mused as she sat in a small, private dining room with Master Tiernan, Sir Rain, and Sir Hugo. "I never appreciated how sophisticated their engineering was until I saw the roads they left behind out here. Any surviving demon structures in Blackwell County were destroyed so long ago that there's nothing left to study."

"You praise demons?" Sir Rain said darkly as he paused eating, holding the bone of a mutton chop halfway to his mouth. Unconsciously, his grip on the bone tightened enough to crack the slender bone as he recalled the last time he had confronted demon 'engineering.'

The traps set by the Flat Tailed demons were both fiendishly clever and expertly hidden and more than a dozen men had been crushed to death by falling logs or impaled as they fell into concealed pits filled with spikes before Owain's raiding force drew within sight of the demon's nest, not to mention the men who drowned or were buried alive in the flood of water and mud that surged into the gully they were

marching through when the demons shattered their own dam just to drag a few more of Owain's soldiers to their death.

When they had finally reached the village, there hadn't been nearly enough demons to slaughter to make up for all the men they'd lost and no matter what the priests from the Church said, a promise of paradise on the Heavenly Shores was cold comfort when you were staring into the vacant eyes of men you had been drinking with just the night before.

"That kind of talk can land you in the Inquisition's hands before you see your next sunrise, you know," Sir Rain warned as he stared at the gray-haired engineer.

"You don't understand," the gray-haired engineer said with a heavy sigh, wishing that the stubborn frontier knight could put aside thoughts of war for just a few minutes to consider how useful something like a bridge that could span the entire width of the River Luath would be in times of peace. Or, if he had to think of war, how useful it would be for moving soldiers and knights on their horses between the Dunn and Hannrahan baronies.

"Engineering is all about math," she said, sounding much like the school teacher she so often resembled as she tried to find a way to reach the younger man. "It doesn't matter who does the math, one plus one will always be two. The load-bearing capacity of an arch and the strength of stones will always be the same. Math is truth, no matter who tells it, and even the Church can't claim it's heresy."

"Be that as it may," Sir Hugo said quickly as he looked at the door to their dining room, as if he were afraid someone might be listening just outside the room. The Village of Maeril was too close to the Vale of Mists after all and it was one of the few villages to play host to an Inquisitor in addition to the priests at the local temple. While the risk that they would be overheard was low, the things he'd seen Inquisitor Diarmuid do while hunting demons in the wilderness left him unwilling to risk direct confrontation with anyone who commanded such powerful holy magic.

"Perhaps there are other things we could talk about?" Hugo suggested as his mind cast about for any other topic that might be of interest to the Master Engineer that wouldn't also touch on topics the Inquisition might find to be taboo. "Do you find the docks here well constructed, Master Isabell?" he asked lamely. "What did you think of the cranes used to load the barges?"

"I think they're adequate for what they're used for," Isabell said with a heavy sigh as she looked across the table at Master Tiernan with eyes pleading for support in carrying the conversation until their rescuer arrived.

Their 'escort' had insisted on showing them around the bustling village, heaping praise on it while pointing out how dangerous it was to move beyond the village's western walls, and trying to make polite, noncommittal noises as they held to their intentions to continue their journey had become more and more exhausting as the afternoon turned to evening. By now, Isabell's patience had all but reached its end.

"It's easier to transport iron and ore by river than by land," Tiernan added gruffly after taking a heavy swallow of bitter ale that he felt suited the mood ever since they'd been saddled with their 'helpful protectors.' "But loading barges with iron using those cranes," he started to say, only to sigh in relief when he was interrupted by a rapid -knock- -knock- -knock- at the door.

"Master Isabell, Master Tiernan, I'm so sorry to have kept you waiting," Marcel said with a charming smile and half a bow as he entered the room without waiting for permission. "I've settled the bill for you already, and the carriage awaits only your presence," he added smoothly.

"Excellent," Isabell said, standing from her seat and taking a last swallow of wine before gathering her things to leave. "Sir Rain, Sir Hugo, I'm afraid we have business to attend to. As I tried to tell you before we left, we've made other arrangements for our escort. You can return to Lord Owain having done your duty," she said curtly.

"What? No, no, if you're going somewhere, then we should stay by your side," Hugo protested. "This isn't even Lord Owain's desire but comes directly from Marquis Bors. I'm sure that even Mister Marcel will understand that we can't defy his lordship's orders."

"Well, since the orders come from Marquis Bors," Marcel said, stepping up next to Isabell to offer his arm to escort her before she could raise an objection. "There's plenty of room in the carriage for two more men. I assume you'll want to bring your guardsmen along as well, won't you?" the vampire said, raising an eyebrow at Sir Rain.

"Why?" the portly knight asked, blinking in surprise. "It's safe enough behind the village walls. Even if Hugo is useless with a sword, I should be more than capable of protecting us against anyone here who would wish us ill."

"But we're not staying behind the village walls," Marcel said with a teasing smile. "So I assume you want your men with you in case any dangerous 'demons' attack us in the night," he said.

"You want to venture out into the night, on a moonless night, this close to the Vale of Mists?" Sir Rain said, looking at the merchant as if he'd gone mad. "Even if the idea of it wasn't madness, how will you manage a carriage in the dark? What could possibly be so important that you would go rushing out under the cover of darkness..." he said before his voice trailed off and his hand dropped to the hilt of the dagger at his waist.

"Mister Marcel, Master Isabell," he said as he lowered his brows. "What is it that's going on here? Why all of the secrecy?"

#### Chapter 662: On The Road (Part Two)

"Sir Rain, as someone who has purchased my services before, you should know there are limits to what I will share," Marcel said, his voice growing several times colder than anyone present had ever heard it before. "Our time tonight is already limited. You have a decision to make. You are most welcome to accompany us, and if you wish to bring your men along, I can provide a driver for their wagon."

"After all, in my line of work, driving wagons at night is a rather essential skill," he said with a pointed look between Sir Rain and Sir Hugo as he emphasized the phrase 'in my line of work.' "Of course, I have a few other skills that are useful in the dark of night as well," he said with a slight smile as his noble fingers pulled back his cloak to reveal a number of knives tucked into his belt.

Ever since Owain had sent his closest underlings to purchase Nightweaver Venom and hire an assassin to poison the people Owain wanted to see suffer a fate worse than death, both men had lost any right to claim that they were knightly or virtuous men. Marcel had made it very clear to both men that, so long as they purchased his services, he expected them and their liege lord to look the other way when he conducted his business.

They could be knightly upholders of justice and the king's law, or they could make deals with the underworld, purchasing demonic poisons and hiring assassins, but Marcel wouldn't allow them to do both, at least as far as he was concerned.

"I'm sure that Mister Marcel is quite capable of guiding us tonight," Hugo said, quickly stepping in between Sir Rain and the man who represented the legendary 'Black Merchant.' "And his offer of a driver for our wagon and the soldiers is quite welcome, isn't it Sir Rain," he said as he stepped lightly on the other man's foot.

For a moment, it looked like the portly knight intended to keep arguing but when he looked down at the slender bastard who seemed to have suddenly grown a spine he saw a subtle shake of the man's head and a look on his face that said he'd thought of something that Sir Rain might not have.

If Lord Owain was here, Sir Rain was certain that he would have understood the subtle hint but he had always favored being more direct. Yet, as much as he wanted to argue, doing it in front of Marcel and the Guild Masters seemed like a poor choice.

"I'll tell my men to prepare themselves," he said, turning to leave the room before pausing at the doorway. "I assume that I have enough time to ready the men? I'm not going to come back to find that you've slipped away in the darkness am I?"

"Perish the thought," Marcel said with a sweet smile. "We'll even have Sir Hugo with us, so he can cause a commotion if we try anything underhanded or sneaky. You shouldn't worry though," Marcell added.

"After all, didn't I come to tell you directly that we were leaving and invite you to come along? If I wanted to spirit these two away without you knowing or following, there are much better ways to come collect them than to do it while you're all eating together," the merchant said.

"You have a point," Sir Rain acknowledged reluctantly, letting go of a portion of his paranoia when he realized that, for all of the shady business that he conducted, Marcel really was keeping everything in the open with them. "In that case, it will only be a few minutes while I gather the men."

Isabell and Tiernan shared a brief, worried look but with Hugo Hanrahan remaining with them, neither Guild Master felt free to speak. Instead, they waited impatiently while Sir Rain gathered their escort and assembled the men outside the inn where they had ostensibly been planning to stay the night.

The tense silence that grew between them persisted, not just until they reached Marcel's comfortable carriage that glowed with the light of several lanterns hanging from hooks at the front and rear of the carriage, but for the duration of the ride as well.

Hugo had made one, brief attempt at small talk in the carriage, but Isabell and Tiernan both became so incredibly tight lipped about their destination or the purpose of their late night excursion that he quickly gave up any hope of getting answers out of the pair of Guild Masters.

Marcel himself occupied the driver's seat outside the carriage, leaving Isabell and Tiernan staring awkwardly at Hugo and Rain for several hours as the carriage trundled along the ancient road, followed closely by a wagon filled with soldiers and driven by one of Marcel's men.

The ride was so monotonous that Isabell had begun to doze off as the countryside rolled by in the dark outside the windows until the sounds of horses whinnying and the carriage pulling to a sudden stop jolted her awake.

Moments later, someone pounded on the door of the carriage before throwing the latch and yanking the door open to reveal a man in a strangely patterned gambeson looking harried and breathless.

"My lords and lady, brave knights," the man panted with a look of immense relief on his face when he seemed to recognize one of the carriage's occupants.

"You have to stop!" the strange man said, focusing all of his attention on Sir Rain. "You're heading into a trap and," he started to say before going suddenly stiff as his eyes rolled back in his head and his body slumped forward, revealing the disappointed looking figure of Marcel standing over the man while holding a heavy leather sap in one hand.

"Oh, Darragh," the merchant said, shaking his head while the occupants of the carriage stared at him in shock. "Of all the nights to show your true colors, you had to choose this one. And you held it in so well," he said, as though he was witnessing something deeply tragic.

"You could have become quite the asset if you'd demonstrated an ability to hold it in even longer," the merchant mused to himself, seemingly ignoring the occupants of the carriage as he addressed the fallen man that he clearly knew well enough to recognize on sight, even in the dark of night.

"But then, I suppose you would have needed to learn how to let it go before you could have been put to use. I don't suppose you'll get another chance," he said as he pulled a length of leather cord from a pouch at his waist and began to lash the fallen man's wrists together. "But then, whatever happens to you next really isn't up to me, now is it?"

#### Chapter 663: Bottomless Grave (Part One)

In the forest, not far from where Ashlynn's companions were erecting a large tent to host her first meeting with someone from Blackwell County since this entire nightmare began, Ashlynn sat on the

roots of an old cedar tree, staring into the deepest pit she'd ever seen. So deep, in fact, that the pit seemed to have no bottom no matter how intensely she stared at it.

The scent of wet cedar mixed with damp earth filled her nose, just like it had on that night seven months ago, and the damp chill air that filled her lungs was the very same as the air she'd struggled to breathe after Sir Broll kicked her ribs hard enough to crack them in order to prove that she was really dead.

Were it not for the lack of pouring rain and distant thunder, the night might very well have been a perfect recreation of the night she'd been unceremoniously dumped in a shallow grave after suffering the worst beating of her life. Of course, there were other differences as well, one of which gnawed at a corner of Ashlynn's mind like a persistent rat.

Piles of earth nearby made it clear that someone had dug up whatever might have once lain beneath the soil and scattered sword ferns and tall soft grasses had already taken root on the piles of earth. Recent rains left the pit with a puddle of water that covered much of the bottom and left the rest of the soft earth muddy and slick.

The pit shouldn't have looked like this. It shouldn't have been so deep with sharp sides that had clearly been dug out with shovels. Neither should there be smaller pits nearby, appearing as if someone had wanted to plant new trees only to give up after a few minutes of labor before searching for a different spot to bury something. Or, more accurately, as if someone couldn't remember exactly where they had buried something and they had been digging like a dog in search of his buried bone.

"Who came here looking for me?" Ashlynn whispered as tears rolled down her cheeks in a silent stream. "And why? Why would anyone have come here for me?"

There were only two people who knew where she'd been buried. One of those people, Sir Broll, was already dead at her hands. The other, Sir Tommin, had left Owain's side to take up the mantle of a Templar. According to Marcel's reports, he'd even come to possess a Holy Light Blade and achieved great fame for his 'contributions' during Owain's assault against the Heartwood Clan.

It was impossible to know which man had come here to dig her up, or why. She had spent a month in the Vale of Mists before visiting the Summer Villa and killing Sir Broll during their escape. It was possible that it had been him. There was no way to know who had done it but the fact that someone had left her deeply unsettled.

"Did you come here for me, Jocey?" Ashlynn wondered as tears continued to fall. "Did you come to take me away so I could have a proper rest?" She doubted that Owain would have let her, but he'd been away in Blackwell City for months and Jocelynn could be every bit as 'willful' as Ashlynn herself, if not more so. She might have found a way to coerce Tommin into revealing the secret of where she'd been buried.

But what would Jocey have done if she discovered that the grave was empty? What would any of them do? She didn't know, and when she tried to summon even a shred of Nyrielle's cold detachment to think through the puzzle of the yawning, open pit where Owain's men had buried her alive, she failed utterly.

Instead, the pit grew larger and larger in her mind, as though it had become a portal to Nyrielle's abyss and everything that waited after a person failed their final struggle and death claimed their soul. Visions of what might have been if she'd failed to free herself from the grave swirled behind her emerald eyes as she considered the dark possibilities.

Without her trip across the mountains, perhaps Nyrielle would have tried to resist the coming Holy War alone as she had always done. Nyrielle herself wouldn't fall to such a war, but the Vale's defenses would surely crumble.

Common people like Georg and Heila would tumble into the abyss of their own shallow graves or be thrown on great pyres as an offering to the Holy War's honored dead, lighting their way to the heavenly shores.

The pit grew larger in her vision as it swallowed up more and more people. Captain Lennart who never would have found love with Zedya without the miracle of reawakening the heart that Nyrielle had conferred using the power of Ashlynn's blood. Virve, with a bitter heart yearning for vengeance that she could never claim. Commander Bassinger and Marshal Jakob, or Heila's family whom Ashlynn had only just met...

All of them fell into the gaping abyss before her eyes, and in her mind's eye, they stared at her from the darkness of the void. Their mouths moved silently, and their sunken eyes were filled with the questions 'Are you strong enough?' and "Can you truly prevent this?"

Ashlynn had survived, and she'd escaped from her own grave. As she stared into the gaping pit, she reminded herself again and again that she hadn't fallen here and that had been when she was much,



much weaker. But now, while she had gained countless new allies, friends, and even family members, she also felt the weight of all of those people pressing down on her, begging her to ensure that they didn't meet the same fate that she herself had only narrowly escaped.

She thought that there couldn't be any place in the world where she felt weaker than she did in the High Pass, where the barren landscape and the freezing cold stripped away her access to almost all of the powers of the world that supported her. But she'd been so very, very wrong, because the place in the world where she felt the weakest and most helpless was right here in the place where her life had very nearly been snuffed out by the crushing weight of damp earth as she lay in her own grave.

#### Chapter 664: Bottomless Grave (Part Two)

How long she sat in the forest, staring into the bottomless pit, Ashlynn couldn't say. The sun had been slipping toward the horizon when she wandered into the woods in search of this spot, and the darkness of a moonless night had enveloped the forest for quite some time before the soft crunch of foot falls on fallen branches and the soft golden light of a lantern disturbed her spiralling thoughts.

"My Lady?" Ollie called as he navigated his way through the forest to find Ashlynn sitting at the base of a cedar tree. Ever since becoming the Cypress Witch, he could feel her presence and her proximity even if they were leagues apart so it hadn't been difficult to find her, but when he did, he momentarily wondered if he should have... or if he should have just waited for her to return to the hastily established camp.

"What is it Ollie?" Ashlynn asked in a tone that was much lighter and clearer than her heart felt. "Has Marcel already arrived?"

"Not yet, my Lady," Ollie said, dropping down to one knee in the soft earth of the forest and bowing his head deeply. "My, lady," he said stiffly. "One of the men I brought from the village has gone missing. Darragh, one of the hunters you captured when you defeated Sir Broll," he explained. "I, I think he's trying to escape from the Vale."

"Oh? And why would he be doing that?" Ashlynn said, looking up at Ollie with puffy red eyes and tearstained cheeks. "I thought that he was living well with everyone in the village."

"I thought he was too," Ollie confessed, as he tried and failed to suppress the look of shock and concern that flickered across his face when he saw Ashlynn's distraught visage. "My lady, are you well? This place," he said, glancing at the shallow pit that seemed just large enough to hold a person's body.

"I'll be fine," Ashlynn insisted as she brought a silk handkerchief to her eyes and rubbed the tears away. "You don't need to be so formal with me when it's just the two of us Ollie," she added as she tapped the ground next to her, gesturing for Ollie to take a seat. "All of the courtly manners, the ceremonies, those things are performances for the audience witnessing formal events and sometimes the people in the middle of them."

"Between a knight and his liege lady, there's no need for all of this," she said, giving him a gentle smile as he joined her sitting at the base of the cedar tree. "Besides, you're not just my knight. You're part of my coven and that makes us family. So please," she said, leaning her head on his shoulder and slumping against his strong torso as she continued to stare at the shallow grave. "Please, don't be too formal with me when it's just the two of us," she said softly.

"All right, Ashlynn," Ollie replied, stumbling only slightly at using her name without a formal title, though he still wasn't sure what else he should say. After yesterday's festival, followed by his formal knighting and the bestowal of his surname, his mind was still grappling with all of the different nuances to their relationship. He felt closer to her now than he had before she returned to the Vale, but that closeness kept getting tangled up in his desire to be a 'proper' knight and he didn't want to fall short of her expectations of him after last night's ceremony.

"So, you picked this place for our meeting because this is where..." he started after several minutes of awkward silence, only for his voice to trail off as he realized he couldn't speak the words to describe what had happened to Ashlynn here. He'd heard the story, more than once, but sitting her in front of the grave that she'd been forced to crawl out of on her wedding night somehow made the whole thing more horrifically real to him than it had been before.

The first time he'd heard the story, it had been shocking and he'd been furious to hear about how she'd been treated but it was all a bit abstract. Now, looking at the pit in the earth, it wasn't hard to imagine her battered body lying motionless at the bottom of the grave at all, and the thought filled him with a mixture of fury and dread that felt so heavy that it was suffocating.

It wasn't until his heart began to race in his chest that Ollie realized why the feelings that poured over him were so intense. They seeped into him from the seed of witchcraft in his chest, carrying an echo of what Ashlynn was feeling right now through the ties that bound them together.

But whatever he felt from her through their tenuous bond was so much less intense than the emotions that engulfed her own heart. Sitting there next to her, he suddenly felt like he was standing knee deep in the water of a raging river, but Ashlynn herself was completely caught by the current.

"I'm here with you," he said softly as he slipped a protective arm around her. Slowly, he opened his heart to the cypress seed within his chest, imagining himself as one of the mighty trees in the Briar that could withstand any flood or storm while providing a place for Ashlynn to take shelter. "I'm here for you to lean on," he added gently. "Whenever you need me. You don't have to be here alone."

"Mmm," she said softly as she soaked up the aura of safety and security that Ollie had begun to radiate even before becoming the Cypress Witch. Now that he had, the feeling was only stronger, allowing her to relax, secure in the feeling that someone could help to carry the burdens weighing her down in this place.

"I dream of this place often," Ashlynn said in a soft voice that was little more than a whisper. "The feeling of having piles of earth shoveled over me, of lying in wait and struggling to breathe until I was certain that Sir Broll and Sir Tommin had left me behind... It haunts me still. I thought, if I confronted this place," she said slowly. "If I confronted this place, I thought it would help to put it behind me."

"And?" Ollie asked gently. "Is it helping?"

"No," Ashlynn said, shaking her head. "If anything, it only weighs on me more. Like I've poked a wound that wasn't healed yet and now it's bleeding again. It's such a shallow grave, only a few feet deep, but I feel like it's swallowed me whole," Ashlynn said as the darkness and gloom of the forest at night seemed to cling to her body.

"It won't let go of me until I bury the last of the people responsible for putting me in that hole in the first place," Ashlynn said fiercely as her eyes began to glow with a faint emerald light, pushing back against the darkness with the strength of her determination and her bone deep need to claim her vengeance against the people who had shattered her world along with her body before dumping her into a grave that still trapped a portion of her soul, long after her body had struggled free.

#### Chapter 665: Tracking the Traitor (Part One)

"I, I don't know what to say," Ollie said honestly after another minute of uncomfortable silence, as he listened to her rough, irregular breathing and felt her body quake with occasional tremors. "I want to help, but I don't know how."

"You are helping, Ollie," Ashlynn said as she gave him an affectionate hug before she pulled back from the young knight and turned her gaze away from the pit for the first time since he'd arrived to look directly into his pale eyes.

"You just being here helps," she said softly. "It reminds me that I'm not facing this alone anymore. If you'd been with me back then, you'd have fought off both of Owain's knights and pulled me from the earth before I even had a chance to free myself, wouldn't you?"

Ollie might have been intensely stubborn in his trial, but if there was one thing she had come to understand about the young man, it was that he embodied the cypress tree long before she'd chosen it for him. He'd watched out for her when she'd been nothing more to him than another servant in the kitchens of the summer villa, and he watched out for her now.

Even if he couldn't face the ghosts that haunted her with a sword and shield to defend her, he still did the best he could, and the genuine care and concern in his voice meant much more to her than any polished words would have.

"Of course I would have rescued you!" Ollie said automatically when she posed the question. "I wouldn't have let them bury you in the first place," he added quickly.

"See?" Ashlynn said with a gentle smile. "Just hearing you say that is helping," she said as she drew in the feeling of safety and security he radiated to shake off the feeling of weight and oppression that had clung to her ever since she approached the open grave. She couldn't escape its grip entirely, but with Ollie's help, she was able to calm herself enough to consider the problem that Ollie had brought to her when he came here in the first place.

"You said that Darragh fled," Ashlynn said as she worked to recenter herself and focus on immediate problems. Unconsciously, she turned her back to the empty grave, as if to deny it the opportunity to haunt her further while she set aside the feelings it provoked within her. Once she did, it was a little bit easier to approach the puzzle of why one of the men she'd been counting on to support them had suddenly run away.

"Did he have a family that he wasn't willing to bring into the Vale?" Ashlynn asked as her mind grasped at straws in search of the slightest reason that might excuse his behavior. "Anything he might be trying to escape to? Or did something happen in the village that he may be running away from?"

"Not so far as I know," Ollie said. "Sir Marcel made the offer to everyone after we started planting crops in the village. He said that you had promised them an opportunity to be reunited with their families, but Darragh said he had no one and nothing and that he was just happy to have a place where he could hunt and live off the land."

Truthfully, when Ollie thought about it, Darragh had been well-liked by most in the village. Even if he tended to keep to himself, there were plenty of people among the Eldritch who valued peace and solitude or time in the wilderness the way the young hunter seemed to.

But whenever he returned to the village, he was greeted warmly by people who remembered the lean days when they had just arrived in the Vale after fleeing their own homes. Often, it had been Darragh and Eamon's hunting who supported Ollie's efforts to keep everyone fed and the Eldritch weren't the sort who would forget that favor easily.

"But, he did more than just run away," Ollie said as he drew a deep breath, trying to reconcile the man who awkwardly accepted bushels of vegetables in exchange for his extra meat with the actions of that very same man as soon as they had left the safety of the Vale's curtain walls. "Eamon is the one who caught it. Darragh crushed flatleaf nettles and put them in the drinking water. A few of the men are already feeling unsteady on their feet."

Eamon had done more than just catch the poison. He'd noticed the scent almost instantly when he went to refill his water skin from the large barrel on the wagon and he'd gone looking for Darragh as soon as he'd warned everyone that the water in the barrel was tainted and they should refill their skins from the river instead.

Not long after that, he'd approached Ollie with his head bowed low and confessed that there had been a time when he and Darragh had been conspiring to kidnap Lady Ashlynn to return her to Lord Owain.

Eamon's faith in Ashlynn's miracles and his constant questioning of her decision to live among the Eldritch had led him to largely abandon that plan by the time refugees began to arrive in the Vale of Mists, but he recounted a story of Darragh collecting poisonous berries to add to Ollie's cooking in order to strike at the 'demons' even while they were hunting to supply food to the refugees.

"He what?" Ollie had asked, blinking at Eamon in stunned shock at the idea that someone would do something as cruel as poisoning the food that he prepared for people, including children and the elderly, who were counting on them for support in their moment of weakness.

"We've all known that war is coming," Eamon said awkwardly. "At the time, since there was nothing we could do to bring her Holiness away from the Vale, I think he was looking for any opportunity he could find to weaken the Vale of Mists before the war began. Maybe he was hoping to be rewarded for our efforts, or maybe it was something else, but..."

"But you stopped him," Ollie said. "You stopped him and you made sure that he never acted on those feelings, no matter how much he might have wanted to. You're a good man, Eamon," Ollie praised the grizzled hunter.

Now, unfortunately, it seemed like Darragh had revisited the same kind of notion he'd had before, applying his skills once again in order to weaken the forces of the Vale. Only this time, he was doing it in order to ensure his ability to escape from pursuit by Lady Ashlynn's men while he fled under the cover of night.

And if he escaped, with all the things he'd heard at the banquet the night before and everything he'd seen during his months in the Vale... the damage that Darragh could do to their upcoming campaign was impossible to calculate and dreadful to imagine.

#### Chapter 666: Tracking the Traitor (Part Two)

"I see," Ashlynn said with a slow nod. "Help me up," she asked, reaching out for Ollie's support as she stood up from the base of the cedar tree before walking over to the tree that stood directly adjacent to the open grave. Her eyes slid over the grave, barely seeing it as she focused instead on the tree with exposed roots that was directly adjacent to the grave.

"You helped me that night," she said, leaning down and gently caressing the tree's root that had helped to pull her from the sodden earth. "I never thanked you," she said as she drew the knife from her belt and pricked a finger, spilling a single drop of potent witch's blood before dripping it on the root of the mighty cedar tree.

The drop of blood splashed on the tree root in a brief flash of dark crimson before sinking into the soft wood and vanishing completely from sight. Moments later, the tree seemed to shiver and shake, its

branches swaying in a wind unfelt by the other trees in the forest as new strength infused its aging limbs.

"I need a favor from you again," Ashlynn said softly as she returned her hand to the roots. "I'm looking for someone who is fleeing through the forest," she explained as she closed her eyes and focused on her connection with the forest that had not only helped to pull her from the earth, but sustained her life until she could reach the safety of Nyrielle's carriage.

"Through cedar's web of trunks and roots,

Let forest senses show me the truth.

Each footfall felt, every movement revealed,

Through leaf and bark, let nothing be concealed."

Ashlynn's awareness of her own body fell away, and she nearly toppled over before Ollie caught her and held her close while her senses blended with not only the cedar tree she'd thanked, but all the cedar trees within several leagues of where she stood.

Her senses stretched and expanded, seeming to seamlessly blend the sensitivity of the cedar's roots like long, slender toes feeling everything through the thick socks of the earth. At the same time, the sound of wind whispering through branches and the slenderest of cedar needles filled her ears as though she could hear everything moving through the vast forest.

For a moment, there was too much all at once, and her magic nearly overwhelmed her senses, but she slowly focused on each individual sensation in much the same way she'd learned to master her enhanced senses after becoming Nyrielle's Seneschal. With exceptional focus, she was slowly able to pick out individual creatures, people, and groups moving through the forest.

Her own camp was the first thing she noticed, with several people moving about and talking, it was impossible to miss, especially when they were so close. But as she extended her senses further, she had to carefully sift through every slight disturbance in the forest, encountering everything from wandering

foxes to a slumbering bear before she caught a trace of a human figure, racing along the ancient roadway toward Lothian March.

"I found him," Ashlynn said as she opened her eyes, blinking rapidly as she fought to readjust to the sensations of her own body before dusting the dirt off of her forest green skirts and looking back in the direction of their camp. "He's staying alongside the road and running fast."

"I'll get horses," Ollie said quickly as he helped Ashlynn to stand. "He can't have gone far. I'm sure we can catch him if we ride fast."

"Don't," Ashlynn said, placing a hand gently on his shoulder. "It's dark, and even if you can ride in the dark like this, Daithi and the others don't have even simple sorcery to rely on. Besides," Ashlynn added with a dark gleam in her emerald eyes. "Darragh is headed straight toward Marcel. Whether it's deliberate or he's just using the old road to move quickly, there's no way Marcel will let him slip past."

"Instead," she said as she began to walk back toward the camp. "There are men who have been poisoned, and we should care for them. Did you learn to purge toxins during your trial?" she asked lightly.

"No," Ollie admitted, looking vaguely sheepish. "I learned how to nurture growth and how to fight back, but healing wasn't really on my mind."

"In that case, this is a lesson for you as well," Ashlynn said as she led him back toward the waiting camp. "I learned a great deal from big sister Amahle and even more from Talauia," Ashlynn explained. "By the time Marcel arrives with our deserter and our guests, we should have everyone feeling even better than they were this morning," she said.

Thankfully, as poisons went, the flatleaf nettles were far from the worst thing in the forest that Darragh could have used to facilitate his escape, and Eamon had warned people off before they drank too much of the tainted water. Some weak legs and uneasy stomachs were the worst of what people suffered before Ashlynn arrived to purge the poison from their bodies.

"Eamon," Ashlynn said with a warm smile as she faced the grizzled and scarred hunter who was responsible for discovering the plot in the first place. The fact that he had once plotted against her was



something she could accept from a person who had once been a lifelong enemy of the Eldritch, and she saw no reason to bring up his past plots when he had never once acted on any of them.

Instead, she was far more interested in the man he'd become since he had clearly put down his schemes and moved to stand solidly on her side.

"Everyone here owes you a debt for discovering Darragh's treachery tonight," Ashlynn said. "Is there anything your heart desires that I can reward you with?"

"Your Holiness," the aging hunter said, kneeling awkwardly at her feet. "It's my fault for encouraging Darragh to plot against you in the beginning. Finding this... its just me cleaning up my own mess. I can't take a reward for that."

"No, it's more than that," Ashlynn countered directly as she glanced at the other humans who had joined her on this trip. "Whatever you might once have said when we were enemies, you ceased to be our enemy long ago. When we accepted you as an ally, a friend, and a neighbor, we gave you our trust, and today, you haven't let down that trust, for myself or for Sir Ollie."

"If you were conflicted at all, you would probably have let him go, wouldn't you?" Ashlynn asked with an eyebrow raised. One look at the older man's face was all she needed to know that she'd judged him correctly. "You spoke up, Eamon. You did the right thing, even though he was once your friend. Doing the right thing by the knight who guards your home and the lady he serves, even when you have to speak up against your own friend... It's not an easy thing to do, is it, Eamon?"

"No, your Holiness," Eamon said with eyes that glittered with unshed tears. "It wasn't easy."

"It will get harder still when you next see him," Ashlynn said. "The direction he's fleeing, he's almost certain to be captured by Sir Marcel, and when that happens, I may need to call on you and Constable Daithi to restrain him," Ashlynn said pointedly. "When that happens, can I count on you?"

"Yes, your Holiness," Eamon said, swallowing the lump that formed in his throat while his heart raced at the notion that the saintess he had come to revere would be relying on him for anything, even if it was something as small as helping to restrain a captive. "You can count on me," he swore solemnly.

"Good," Ashlynn said as her ears caught the faint sound of horseshoes striking the stone roadway and the creaking of carriage wheels drifting on the wind. "Because I think it won't be long now before our guests arrive," she said, scowling at the way Darragh's treachery had tainted the reunion with Master Isabell that she had been so dearly looking forward to.

"And when they arrive," Ashlynn said. "I intend to settle Darragh's matter before we do anything else. I can forgive much," she said in a voice that was both darker and colder than any tone that the gathered humans had ever heard from her before. "But traitors cannot be allowed to live!"

#### Chapter 667: Arriving in Camp (Part One)

Ever since the appearance of the strange soldier who insisted they were heading into a trap, the atmosphere in the carriage had grown even more tense. Neither Isabell nor Tiernan were able to relax as the carriage carried them farther and farther down the dark, ancient road and the scowls they received from across the carriage didn't help.

"Master Isabell," Sir Hugo finally said when he could no longer bear the pressure. "Don't you think it's time that you tell us where we're going?" Owain's steward asked as he glanced at Sir Rain. The burly knight might not have said anything, but the displeasure radiating off his stiff posture and the occasional cracking of his knuckles made it clear that the man was on the edge of turning violent.

"If we keep going like this, we might wander into the Vale of Mists by accident," he said nervously as he glanced out the window for what felt like the dozenth time in the past ten minutes. The night was so dark that it was impossible to see landmarks and he was beginning to lose track of time as the countryside rolled by in the dark but he was certain they were closer to the Vale of Mists than he'd ever come before, and if not, they would be soon.

"Even if the demons have been hiding like turtles in their shells, a turtle can snap at you if you come too close to it," he said, hoping that these ignorant merchants who had never once encountered demons would listen to common sense that people living on the frontier learned from the day they were children. No one wanted to be anywhere near the Demon Lady of the Vale, especially on a dark, moonless night in late autumn or winter!

"I don't know where we're going," Isabell said curtly as she fought to restrain herself from snapping at the timid knight. She knew he'd suffered at the hands of too many people in order to turn out this way but sometimes she felt like her young son had a greater measure of courage than Sir Hugo.

"Mister Marcel has made arrangements for this evening and I'm choosing to put my trust in him," she said, though whether she said it to defend the Black Merchant or to reassure herself was difficult to say. Her discomfort didn't stem entirely from the strange man who had rushed at their carriage, but also at the way Marcel seemed to appear out of nowhere behind him, striking without warning and rendering the frantic soldier utterly senseless in a single blow.

Isabell was no stranger to men who kept order with a heavy strap or a copper banded club, but the precision and speed of Marcel's silent attack put all of those rough men to shame.

"We should stop," Sir Rain said, frowning at the merchants who seemed to place so much faith in the young man who was driving the carriage. Perhaps it was because they saw him as one of their own, but even after all this time in the carriage, he couldn't think of a single reason why they should put so much faith in such a suspicious individual. "I don't like the idea of riding into a trap."

"And you think Mister Marcel is leading us into a trap because of what that man said?" Isabell asked with a raised brow. "Who was he? He looked like he recognized you as soon as he saw you. Is there something you aren't telling us, Sir Rain?"

"What? No!" Rain said, instantly offended at the notion that he knew who the other man had been. Only a madman would be wandering about in the dark like this, especially this close to the Vale of Mists and Rain had no desire to be associated with lunatics or fools. "He was dressed like a soldier. Plenty of soldiers have seen me at tournaments and feasts. I have no idea who he was."

"Then why put any faith in the notion that this is a trap?" Tiernan asked gruffly. "Sir Hugo, you're the one who introduced us to Mister Marcel, don't you trust the man you went through such great pains to arrange for us to meet?"

"That..." Hugo started awkwardly. "Mister Marcel is a man with many talents," he said, choosing his words with care. "But his methods," he started to say before his voice trailed off awkwardly. In truth, Hugo barely knew the young man and they had only met on a handful of occasions in order to arrange matters for Owain's retribution against Sir Tommin's family. Meeting with the strange youth had never felt entirely comfortable and now, as the carriage trundled along further and further into the night, he only felt more uncertain about the strange merchant's methods.

"Sometimes, when you make a deal, you can only see it to the end," Master Tiernan said definitively. "Whether or not it was a good deal will be clear soon enough. For now, take what rest you can," he said, leaning back in the carriage and closing his eyes. "It may be a very late night tonight."

Silence once again enveloped the interior of the carriage as its occupants shifted nervously, finding positions to rest or gazing out the windows into the dark of night and catching occasional glimpses of the lights of their carriage reflecting off the surface of the River Luath whenever the road approached its banks.

Eventually, they began to hear the sounds of people moving about and Isabell spotted the lights of a small camp clustered around a set of large fires not far from the ancient road. Within the camp, a large striped tent dominated most of the space while a second tent with two of its walls rolled up provided an area for servants and soldiers to rest, though the entire camp seemed strangely active for the middle of the night.

Moments later, as the carriage rolled to a stop and a group of men began to approach the carriage, Isabell realized something else about the camp. While the handsome young man leading the group was dressed in an exceptionally well made tunic with an elegant silver cloak pin shaped like a leaf making it clear that he was a person of some status, the other men in the group wore the same green and blue patterned gambesons as the man named Darragh who had tried to warn them of a trap before Marcel silenced him.

Seeing the strange camp, everyone in the carriage exchanged glances that contained varied amounts of confusion. They had arrived, but where exactly were they... and who were these people?

#### Chapter 668: Arriving in Camp (Part Two)

"Sir Marcel, we've been waiting for you," the flame-haired youth said as the merchant hopped down from the driver's seat. "Is that Darragh you have with you?" he asked, pointing to the bound and gagged figure sitting slumped on the driver's seat next to where Marcel had been. "We had a bit of trouble earlier," he said as his face heated in embarrassment.

"Ollie! No, Sir Ollie," Marcell said warmly, placing extra emphasis on Ollie's new title. Walking quickly, the youthful-looking merchant strode to the young man's side before enveloping him in an enthusiastic embrace and patting him several times on the back. "Don't worry about the trouble with Darragh," he said quietly.

"I expected that someone might cause trouble," he added. "I just wasn't certain who it would be. No harm was done, and we've uncovered a problem before it could grow into a catastrophe."

"Thank you for catching him and bringing him back," Ollie said, gesturing briefly to Eamon and Daithi to retrieve the unconscious deserter from the carriage. "I owe you one for this," he promised solemnly.

"Nonsense, we each have our roles to play," Marcel said, stepping back and holding Ollie's shoulders as he gave the young man an appraising look. "I'm sorry I missed last night's banquet. It looks good on you, and it's about time that everything is official. Is this part of your new coat of arms?" he asked as he tapped the silver cloak pin. "Have you picked a surname yet?"

"The pin is just decorative," Ollie said with a chuckle, finally relaxing now that Darragh was back and under control. "It isn't even the right leaf. But I did pick a surname. Heartwood," he said proudly, puffing up his chest.

"Heartwood," Marcel said, nodding in approval as he wrapped an arm around the young man's shoulder, leading him toward the carriage while he spoke. "It suits you, it really does. But I'm being rude to our guests," he added. "Come, let me introduce you," he said, pulling open the door to the carriage and extending a hand to help Isabell down."

"Master Isabell of Blackwell County's Illustrious Company of Engineers," Marcel said smoothly. "Along with Master Tiernan of Blackwell County's Iron Mongers," he said, introducing the pair of masters first. "They've come a long way to be here tonight, you know," Marcel said with a suggestive wink. "They even threatened me if I couldn't bring them safely here and deliver the meeting I promised. They're really very loyal, very admirable people."

Of course, Marcel wasn't just speaking for Ollie's benefit. With her enhanced senses that were as sharp as any vampire's, Marcel was certain that Ashlynn could hear every word that was said, even from within the confines of the heavy canvas tent.

When she exited the carriage, Isabell couldn't help but look around the camp, trying to find any clues she could to Lady Ashlynn's current circumstances. There was only a single carriage baring a strange coat of arms that she'd never seen before, one that featured a large tree over a field of blue and green with flowers along the base of the tree. Could this be the lord who had been serving at Lady Ashlynn's patron or guardian while she'd been in hiding?

But if Lady Ashlynn had gained some kind of protector, they were doing a poor job of defending her. From the looks of it, there were only half a dozen soldiers and a few servants moving about, and the only knight present was this young man who wasn't even wearing armor. There were no patrols moving about, nor archers unless they had scouts of some sort hidden in the wilderness.

In fact, there was absolutely nothing that suggested they felt like there was any danger here at all. If anything, it looked like a noble lady's picnic rather than a place to hold a clandestine meeting.

It seemed woefully inadequate for a place as dangerous as the mouth of the Vale of Mists was supposed to be, and Isabell instantly frowned at the young man who seemed to be acting so casually with Mister Marcel. From the sounds of it, he'd only recently become a knight, and he clearly had much to learn about his responsibilities as a knight if he was going to be assigned as a protector to Lady Ashlynn!

"Accompanying them," Marcel continued smoothly and speaking once again for Ashlynn's benefit, "we have Sir Hugo Hanrahan and Sir Rain Aleese," he said, drawing an instant reaction from Ollie as he recognized both the names and the men themselves. "Marquis Bors himself ordered them to keep watch over Masters Isabell and Tiernan, and I felt that it would be a shame to leave them behind in Maeril."

"Sirs and Masters," Marcel said with an exaggerated bow. "May I present Sir Ollie Heartwood, the Cypress Knight. He'll tend to your needs while I have a few words with her ladyship," Marcel said with a glance toward the waiting tent.

"Sir Ollie," Sir Rain said, seizing the initiative to greet the newly minted knight before Isabell could get as much as a word out. Striding forward and extending his hand, he was prepared to give the young pup a crushing grip that would leave his sword hand sore for days, only to give the young knight a puzzled look when Ollie grasped his forearm rather than his hand.

"Who trained you, Sir Ollie?" the burly knight asked, surprised to see such a young knight using etiquette that had gone out of fashion in his grandfather's era. "Someone fairly old-fashioned?"

"I suppose you could say that," Ollie said lightly. Sir Rain's grip on his forearm wasn't light, and the man was clearly accustomed to giving people more crushing handshakes, but the older etiquette that Thane had taught him offered different opportunities for gestures of dominance, and Sir Rain clearly hadn't learned them.

Briefly, Ollie considered rooting himself to the ground and giving the other knight a solid shove or twisting to tug him off balance and send the other man stumbling, assuming he managed to keep his feet. He had wondered at the time why Thane insisted he learn to bully others in what was supposed to be a knightly greeting but now that he faced Sir Rain he realized that whether he chose to be simple

gestures as an opportunity to flaunt his strength or not, other people wouldn't show the same restraint he did.

"It's been a long ride, Master Isabell, Master Tiernan," Ollie said with a warm smile as he released Sir Rain's arm without showing the slightest hint of discomfort at the other man's crushing grip.

"It isn't fancy, but we can offer you a light soup and some warm cider to keep the cold at bay while Sir Marcel speaks with her ladyship," he said, gesturing to the half open tent where servants were already filling wooden bowls with hot, steaming soup ladled from a large pot. "Sir Hugo, Sir Rain, there's more than enough for all of your men as well. After all, you've come all this way, the least we can do is offer a bit of hospitality."

"I wouldn't object to a cup of cider," Isabell said hesitantly as she glanced at the tent where Lady Ashlynn was supposedly waiting to receive them. "But I really shouldn't keep her ladyship waiting."

"Don't worry," Marcel said, waving over his shoulder as he strode toward the tent. "I won't keep her long. I'm sure she's just as eager to meet with you as you are to meet with her."

#### Chapter 669: Severing Owain's Hands

The inside of the tent had been decorated simply with small, individual planks of polished wood that could rest on a person's lap or in front of them in place of a table. Where most nobles would have insisted on bringing proper furniture, Ashlynn only required a thick rug to lay over the damp ground and piles of cushions that people could lean against when sitting on the ground. A single lantern hanging from the pole at the center of the tent was enough to fill the space with soft golden light, revealing just how sparse the interior of the tent was.

If it had been a normal meeting, Ashlynn would have put more effort into welcoming people like Master Isabell and Master Tiernan, but out here in the wilderness, practical considerations trumped normal displays of hospitality. In the days to come, if they accepted her offer to join her in the Vale of Mists, she would make amends for any slights they felt in their first meeting.

"Congratulations on your betrothal, Lady Ashlynn," Marcel said softly when he entered the tent. "I'm sorry I couldn't be present but things are beginning to move quickly in Lothian March," he said as he flopped onto the cushions in a graceful sprawl, briefly posing like a boy toy before their patron. "You can praise me for my efforts any time," he said with a light laugh.

"Only if you do that in front of Mistress Nyrielle," Ashlynn said, flinging a small cushion at him while she fought to suppress the surge of giggles that threatened to spill past her lips. "Thank you," she said after a moment of catching her breath. "I needed that. You brought some unexpected guests with you. Men loyal to Marquis Bors?"

"Hardly," Marcel snorted as he gave Ashlynn a pouting look that said he hadn't intended to move so quickly to business, but he gave in to her desires anyway. After all, their time this night was limited and the rising of the sun didn't care if their meeting ran long.

"They're men loyal to Owain Lothian," Marcel said, looking around the tent and wishing that there were some sweets or nuts to snack on while they spoke. "And they're close enough to him that he sent them to me to hire assassins to torture the family of someone who slighted him. Sir Rain has replaced Sir Tommin as Owain's personal guard and Sir Hugo took over from Sir Kaefin as his Steward. You can think of them as Owain's left and right hands."

Ashlynn's eyes widened in surprise before narrowing into an intense stare as she realized just how valuable the men were who had wandered into her camp tonight. She'd expected Owain to send some soldiers to guard Isabell and Tiernan, and perhaps even one of the aging knights in his father's court as a token show of support, but she'd never once expected that he would send his personal guard and steward. Even if it had been at Marquis Bors order, it truly was the sort of 'gift' that she couldn't ignore.

"I know Sir Rain by reputation but I only met him briefly at my wedding feast," Ashlynn said. "I've never heard of Hugo Hanrahan. I thought that Baron Hanrahan's son was a man named Bastion?"

"Bastion is his rightful son and heir," Marcel acknowledged. "Hugo is the bastard child he fathered with a chambermaid. Recently, Baron Hanrahan was forced to recognize Hugo as his child when it seemed like Bastion might become an invalid after falling off his own horse. Bastion's recovery made things awkward for Hugo and he's suffered greatly for receiving his surname ever since."

"I see," Ashlynn said, resting her chin on a petite fist as she thought about how she wanted to handle the interlopers. "You wouldn't have brought them here if you didn't have something in mind for them. What are your thoughts, Sir Marcel?"

"I think that they can be useful to us in a number of ways," the vampire said slowly. "At the very least, they have been close to Owain Lothian for months, from his raid on the Heartwood Village all the way



through his visit to Blackwell County and even now, they have been his closest aids. If we did nothing more than handing them over to Madame Zedya to extract information from, we would gain treasures worth their weight in gold."

"That would be the obvious choice," Ashlynn agreed. "But I doubt you'd bring them to me if the best use of them was the obvious one. What else are you thinking?"

"In this case, my lady, I don't dare think too much," Marcel admitted, greatly surprising Ashlynn. "Dame Sybyll has first claim on Sir Hugo's life so I dare not suggest killing him until she decides his fate. As to Sir Rain, he's less valuable for what he knows, but he may be useful as a hostage to force his father to capitulate later, or you can wash your hands of him."

"Whatever you do," Marcell added after a moment. "I suggest that they accompany us back to the Vale and that they be allowed to vanish amidst the chaos of tonight," he said. "Once news of tonight's events reaches Lothian City, Owain may curse his luck, but his suspicions won't be raised too greatly. If you'd like, I can even strip them of their clothes and armor and create a believable 'battlefield' to convince Owain and anyone who comes looking that they died in one of tonight's raids."

"I'll consider it," Ashlynn said as she thought carefully about how to handle the men that had fallen into their laps. The more she thought about it, the more the notion of handing them over to Zedya appealed to her. Not simply to extract information from them, but as a means of allowing them to return to Owain's side, unaware of what had transpired and with instructions to execute that even they wouldn't remember receiving.

It might take Thane's help to turn them into true spies and saboteurs but she had seen the results that the two were able to achieve even when they were working quickly to place her among the servants of the Summer Villa. The entire time she'd been there, people believed that she was a woman named Lynnda who might be the illegitimate daughter of Bors Lothian and no one had questioned why they believed that.

If they did something even more extensive to the two men who served as Owain's left and right hands, she was certain that the results would be devastating.

"Not everyone working under Owain's command is irredeemable," Ashlynn said after a few moments of thought. "Do you think that either of these men could become willing allies rather than unwilling tools or hostages? Eamon proved himself to be loyal tonight and Constable Daithi has adapted well to life with his family in Ollie's village."

"From what I can tell, Sir Rain represents the most basic forms of corruption and vice that are common to men of privilege and high station," Marcel said as a knife appeared in his hands, spinning lazily as he toyed with it. "He's known for excessive drinking and whoring but he isn't like Owain. He doesn't leave a trail of broken and battered women in his wake and I've never heard of him ordering someone killed for offending him."

"The bar in Lothian March is so low that men and knights must trip over it," Ashlynn said bitterly. "And it all flows from the top," she said with more heat in her voice than she'd intended. "The people deserve better than to be led by these pigs dressed as men," she said before shaking her head and fighting to rein in her temper. "So Sir Rain isn't known for beating women or killing commoners. What of Sir Hugo? You said that he suffered for his illegitimacy?"

"He's a poor bastard in every sense of the word," Marcel agreed. "His father abuses him, his half-brother abuses him, and now that he's been pawned off on Owain, Owain and Rain both abuse him. If you're looking for a man to turn to your cause, he's primed and ready, and Master Isabell seems to have been working on turning him already."

"I see," Ashlynn said as she extended a hand for Marcel to help her stand. "Then let me test their characters a bit tonight. Depending on how they respond, I may give them an opportunity to join willingly rather than coming as captives."

"Oh?" Marcel said, raising an eyebrow as he helped Ashlynn to her feet. "What does my lady have in mind?"

## Chapter 670: Probing Questions

Outside the tent, Isabell sat with Tiernan, Sir Rain and Sir Hugo as they converged on the young Sir Ollie, putting more than a dozen paces between their group and the group of tired soldiers who had endured a cold ride in an open topped wagon for hours in the dark of night. Most of the soldiers looked tired and cold and they were eagerly slurping at bowls of hot vegetable soup and drinking the warmed cider like it was water, but Isabell and her companions were more interested in the young knight and what he knew than the comforts of a warm meal.

"Sir Ollie," Isabell said, hoping to start the conversation on something minor and work her way to more serious topics. "You addressed Mister Marcel as 'Sir Marcel.' Have I been meeting with an esteemed knight all this time without knowing it?"

"A knight?" Ollie said with a strange smile on his face as he tried to imagine the flamboyant spymaster donning heavy armor and a helm that would conceal his elegant features and soft, dark hair. "No, Sir Marcel is no knight," he said with a brief burst of laughter at the image in his mind. "But his status is just as high and the men under his command are as important as any soldiers on the battlefield. Calling him 'Sir Marcel' is entirely appropriate," he finished a touch awkwardly.

It wasn't his place to reveal where Ashlynn had been or her current status among the Eldritch. That would come soon enough. For now, all he needed to do was play host to their guests, both invited and uninvited, until Marcel finished his conversation with Lady Ashlynn and they decided what to do about the uninvited guests who had joined them.

"I see," Isabell said softly as she tried to sort out what kind of man wasn't a knight but could be appropriately be addressed as though he was one. "And what is your relationship with her ladyship then?" Isabell asked pointedly. "I assume that she was the one who conferred knighthood on you? Or was it someone else?"

In truth, Isabell doubted that Lady Ashlynn would attempt to confer knighthood on anyone. It would be one thing if she was the reigning Marchioness after Owain succeeded his father, but since she wasn't, she had very little authority to bestow any kind of title, much less a knighthood.

At most, she could take someone as a lady-in-waiting but anyone she granted that title to should already be the daughter of a baron at the least. What Isabell was really after was the identity of the mysterious patron who was shielding Lady Ashlynn while she lived in exile.

"It was her ladyship," Ollie said, surprising both the Guild Masters and the knights, though for distinctly different reasons as both knights mentally readjusted their assumptions about the mysterious Lady they were here to meet.

"As to our relationship, that's a little complicated. You can consider me family," he said which instantly drew scandalized looks from both Isabell and Tiernan, prompting Ollie to nearly choke on his cider, sputtering as he realized the misunderstanding he'd inadvertently created.

"Not like that!" the young knight said frantically. "More like, more like she adopted me after... after I helped her a bit. But she's always done far more for me than I've ever done for her," he said, staring into his cup and smiling sadly. "So I have a long way to go to make it up to her."

"It can't be a small bit of help if you were knighted for it," Sir Rain said as he gave the young man an evaluating look. It was hard to tell beneath the cloak and the young man's tunic but his forearm had felt as solid in his grip as a bar of iron and his hands had calluses that spoke of hard labor despite his delicate and refined features. Clearly the young man had worked hard to arrive where he was, but hard work alone was far from enough to become a knight.

"Sir Ollie has been busy constructing a village to resettle hundreds of people displaced by war and strife," Marcel said, praising the young man as he exited the tent. "I know a good number of knights in my life, but I've seen few as beloved by their people and their soldiers as he is. One man even turned down a position as a captain because he refused to leave Sir Ollie's side. He may not have many accolades from battle to his name yet, but I'm sure those days aren't far off."

"I'm sure that Sir Ollie is worthy of every honor bestowed on him," Isabell said, standing smoothly and dusting off her skirts when Marcel emerged from the tent. "Does that mean that we can see her ladyship now?"

"It does, but before you do, she's asked me to make a request of Sir Rain and Sir Hugo, which begins with answering a simple question" Marcel said as he approached the two knights who were loyal to Owain Lothian. Marcel's easy smile vanished as though someone had blown out a candle, leaving his face eerily still. The casual slouch and slight turn of his hips that always made him appear at least slightly bent melted from his posture as he straightened to his full height.

Suddenly, between one moment and the next, the young man who had seemed barely old enough to shave now loomed over both knights despite being shorter than either of them. His voice, when he spoke, dropped to a whisper that somehow carried more menace than any shout, each word precise and clipped where moments before his speech had been flowing and warm. The playful light disappeared from his dark eyes, replaced by a look so intense that it seemed to pin the men in place, as if the slightest movement would unleash the fury of a vicious beast.

As Marcel stalked towards them, he focused every one of his enhanced senses on the two petrified knights. Every indrawn breath, twitch of eyes or subtle movement told the vampire dozens of things that men would normally try to keep hidden and at the moment they seemed both lost and confused by the mysterious lady's sudden interest in them. His next question, however, surprised both men, especially with the intensity with which it was asked.

"Gentlemen," Marcel said as he stepped uncomfortably close to the pair of knights while his hands dropped to the hilts of daggers tucked into his belt. "Tell me honestly and know that I will know if you lie. Where is Lady Ashlynn Blackwell?"

"Lady Blackwell?" Sir Hugo stammered, his voice cracking slightly as color drained from his already pale face. "She's... of course she's at the Summer Villa. We feasted with her, albeit briefly, just after burning the demon village to the ground. She's with child and taking her rest, exactly where she should be. I... I even helped arrange some treats for her myself, actually, while we were visiting her home in Blackwell City."

"The pickled whitefish that everyone there seems to love so much," he rambled as Marcel's already dark eyes seemed to loom even larger in his vision, looking at him as though they could see right through to the core of his heart. "And, and the shavings of sun-dried blue-tail for making soups and stews, I arranged a barrel of each to be sent to the summer villa for her. I even told the messenger to make it clear it was a gift from Lord Owain... why would you even..." His words tumbled over each other as he struggled to understand why this seemingly simple question felt like an accusation.

"What kind of foolish question is that?" Sir Rain snarled, as he stepped in front of Hugo, silencing the stammering steward as his hand moved instinctively toward his sword hilt. His face flushed red with indignation as he leaped to the defense of his lord and his lord's honor as a man.

"Everyone in Lothian March knows exactly where Lady Ashlynn rests," the portly knight snapped. "She carries Lord Owain's heir in her belly and hasn't left the Summer Villa in months. If you're trying to suggest something..." His voice grew louder and more belligerent with each word, as he pushed back against the dark, menacing aura that made him feel somehow smaller and weaker than the soft skinned merchant boy in front of him.

"So he hasn't told either of you the truth," Marcel said, withdrawing his menacing aura and shaking his head as he laughed under his breath. "He truly treats you like disposable pawns, sending you to do his dirty work while keeping you in the dark about half his schemes. I feel sorry for you, gentlemen," he said as he turned to face the tent.

"But since your master thinks so little of you," Marcel said with a dark grin as the flap of the tent began to open. "Perhaps you can find an opportunity tonight to serve someone better..."