

The Vampire 671

Chapter 671: Two Women From Blackwell County

As soon as the tent flap opened, the entire forest seemed to come to a stop as a stunning woman with pale blond hair and emerald green eyes strode into the camp. Her dress was simple, clearly meant for travel and time spent in the wilderness rather than anything impressive or courtly but that didn't stop her from possessing an aura of majesty that brought all conversation to a stop, whether it was among the soldiers eating their fill of warm vegetable soup or the servants who had come to help Lady Ashlynn with this meeting.

Sir Hugo and Sir Rain stared in wide-eyed, open-mouthed shock as they suddenly understood why Marcel had asked if they knew where Lady Ashlynn Blackwell was. Both men had 'met' Lady Ashlynn in the Summer Villa months ago and if they thought back to that moment, she had seemed both a little withdrawn and a touch common compared to the woman they'd seen during Lord Owain's wedding feast, but at the time, they had attributed it to her delicate condition and the strain that bearing a child placed on her body.

Now, it was clear that whoever they'd met with in the Summer Villa, she wasn't Ashlynn Blackwell!

"Kneel before her Dominion, Lady Ashlynn Blackwell," Daithi barked at the visiting soldiers as he dropped to one knee, lowering his head while keeping an eye on their 'guests.' Lady Ashlynn had assured him that he and his fellow soldiers were only needed for appearances' sake, but the veteran soldier couldn't help but be nervous when he saw that their guests had brought twice as many soldiers as well as two proper knights. Now, he watched their guests carefully, sensitive to the slightest movement that might suggest that someone else intended to betray Lady Ashlynn this night.

"My lady," Isabell said, raising a trembling hand to her lips as she finally saw the woman she'd been worried about for half a year since receiving her cryptic letter in the spring. Unconsciously, she slowly dropped to one knee, but her steely eyes brimmed with tears as she struggled to take in the many changes that had occurred in the sweet young woman since they had last seen each other.

The Ashlynn in her memories had always been a beauty, but she had never possessed this aura of nobility or the sense of weight that radiated from her with every slow, precise step that she took. The Ashlynn she had known was still mischievous, sneaking out of Lothian Manor at night, or bestowing small, deeply personal gifts on her tutors and the few friends she had, which must have cost almost all of the allowance she received from the Count. Lady Ashlynn never seemed to care, though, and her smile was dazzling whenever she managed to bring a smile to someone else's lips.

Now, however, the mischievous young woman seemed to have faded away, leaving behind a woman whose eyes held ghosts that Isabell had once seen in her own eyes every time she looked in the mirror. Her back was straight and proud, but her shoulders carried a weight of responsibility that the younger Ashlynn had never known, and when she walked, the hilt of a long-bladed knife seemed to always be within easy reach of her hand, as if she was ready to fight at the first breath of hostility.

Years ago, a young and still naive Isabell had followed a prince to war, and the woman who returned from that war, though she had gained much, had been forced to leave behind pieces of herself that couldn't withstand the battering of bloody civil war. Now, as Isabell looked at the young lady before her, she saw someone who had lost just as much as she had, if not more, and in far less time, yet she seemed to have gained even more in the process, filling up the empty places with new kinds of strength and skill that could survive the harsher world she found herself in.

To Ashlynn, though she saw everyone from the soldiers to Owain's knights and even the familiar, barrel-chested figure of Master Tiernan, the only person who truly entered her eyes was the gray-haired woman in a plain black dress wearing silver-rimmed spectacles that framed eyes filled with too many tears.

It had been more than half a year since the last time she'd seen anyone who had been a friend when she lived in Blackwell County and now that one was finally here, standing directly before her, all the thoughts that had occupied her mind while she was in the tent and every fear that had haunted her when she stood next to her own grave emptied from her mind and her heart like a receding tide, leaving only the surging tide of joy and gratitude for the first of what she hoped would be many reunions in the days to come.

"Isabell," Ashlynn said, sacrificing some of her aura of majesty and dignity as she dashed across the camp to reach out to her kneeling friend, capturing her hands and pulling the older woman to her feet before flinging her arms around her and hugging her tightly. "Please, don't kneel. You've come all this way, so please, please, just be my friend right now," she whispered. "Be my friend who's happy to see me again after so long," she said as her eyes filled with tears.

"My lady," Isabell said awkwardly as she stiffened at the sudden embrace before she quickly relaxed and wrapped her arms around the trembling young woman, holding her as gently as she would have held one of her own children. "Ashlynn. I've missed you," she said softly. "It must have been hard," she added in an even quieter voice. "But I'm here now, and I've brought a friend too."

"Mmm," Ashlynn acknowledged, though the storm of emotions sweeping through her heart was far too intense for words.

She finally understood what Ollie meant when he said that the Heartwood Clan felt like they had become orphans when they lost the carvings of their ancestors. Hurts that she'd never been able to completely explain suddenly tore across her heart as she felt, for the first time in months, that she had a link to the life she'd left behind.

It might not be fair to heap so much on Master Isabell. After all, their friendship had always been constrained by the barriers between noblewoman and commoner, no matter how high Isabell's status was in Blackwell City. But now that they were so far away from home, right now, at this moment, Ashlynn didn't care about power or position or titles or any of the elements of her current mission and the duties that should be weighing her down.

All she wanted, in this tiny, fragile moment, was to be just another woman from Blackwell County, seeing another friend from home in a place that was so very far away and so very, very different from the lives they'd left behind.

In a few minutes, she would pull herself together again and become the mighty Mother of Trees, Seneschal of the Eldritch Lady of the Vale, Last Lady of the High Pass, and everything else. She would deal with the man who had tried to ruin this moment and her former husband's henchmen as well.

But right now, for just a few minutes, she didn't want to be any of those things or do any of those things. She just wanted to hug a friend whom she hadn't seen in far too long...

Chapter 672: Fragile Moments (Part One)

Moments as intense as the reunion between the two women from Blackwell County could only last for a very short period of time. Like a candle flung into the hearth, the moment burned so brightly in the eyes of the onlookers, no one felt comfortable watching.

The kneeling soldiers all kept their gaze firmly on the soft, damp earth while Ollie and the other notable people turned their backs, giving the two women a moment of relative privacy while they held each other tightly.

"Sir Ollie," Hugo Hanrahan whispered, clearly shaken by what he had just seen. "She's the real, really the real Lady Ashlynn? Lord Owain's wife?"

Seven months ago, during the grand wedding between Lady Ashlynn and Lord Owain, Hugo had been an unimportant guest at the grand ceremony. It was his father, Ian Hanrahan and his brother Bastian who sat in the front rows of honored guests while the poor bastard Hugo was lucky to have received a place in the gallery, watching from a distance. He'd never come close to the stunning woman before them, but he remembered how lucky Owain was to marry such a beautiful woman who looked so radiant in her gleaming gown.

Months later, when he met the 'Lady Ashlynn' in the summer villa, he still thought that she was a beautiful woman and Lord Owain seemed to be very affectionate with her in the few moments where he saw them together. Certainly, her light had dimmed with her advancing pregnancy, but that was normal, wasn't it? But if the woman in the Summer Villa wasn't Lady Ashlynn, and if the real Lady Ashlynn wasn't carrying Lord Owain's heir, then who was the woman he'd met in the villa?

Hugo felt his mind tearing in two and the world falling away from him as his scholarly intellect started assembling pieces of a puzzle that the rest of him refused to accept. The strangeness of keeping Lady Ashlynn at the Summer Villa well into the fall when she could have just as easily taken her rest in an isolated wing of the Lothian Manor without being threatened by the demons and vampires that prowled these lands in winter. The strangely light guard on the villa that more than tripled in size when Lady Jocelynn visited and then reduced immediately after, even though Lady Ashlynn should be the one the Lothian March most needed to protect...

The closer he examined everything had seen, the less it made sense. To the outside, to the people who didn't know any better, there was a natural explanation for everything, but after months of traveling at Lord Owain's side, Hugo had seen too much... he'd just been too afraid of what Owain might do to him to ever allow his mind to put together the pieces. He'd accepted without challenging and followed orders without questioning because if he did anything else... his whole world might collapse, just as it was falling apart now.

"She's really Lady Ashlynn," Ollie said, wrinkling his nose and frowning when the other knight mentioned Ashlynn's marriage to Owain. Following the banquet, the fact that Lady Ashlynn was still considered Owain's wife was a stain that everyone wanted to see expunged, and Ollie wasn't the only one who wished he could kill Owain Lothian, for no other reason than that it would free her to follow her heart and marry Lady Nyrielle.

But if anyone was going to kill Lord Owain, it would be Ashlynn herself and as much as he yearned to do it for her, to free her even one day sooner, a larger part of him simply wanted to be there when Lord Owain realized the depths of his mistake before Lady Ashlynn collected her vengeance with her own hands.

"Did she leave Lord Owain?" Sir Rain asked, turning on Ollie with a balled up fist. His face had turned a reddish purple in rage, and he found himself doubting the young man's earlier words that he wasn't romantically involved with her ladyship. Glancing at the exceptionally handsome, if slightly effeminate Marcel, he began to wonder just how badly Lady Ashlynn had cuckolded his liege lord. "If she's betrayed her vows to him, so help me, I'll..."

"You'll do nothing," Marcel hissed in the portly knight's ear. No one had seen the handsome young merchant move, but in less than the blink of an eye, he had appeared behind Sir Rain. More than that, he held one knife pressed up against the hollow of Rain's throat, just beneath his jowls, while the tip of another knife pressed between his ribs near the small of his back.

"Your lord treated you like a disposable tool," Marcel said, glaring menacingly at Hugo, pinning the scholarly knight in place with the intensity of his gaze while he pressed the point of his knife against Rain's throat firmly enough to spill a single drop of blood. "You think he treated Lady Ashlynn any better? She's fought harder than you can imagine for this, so don't you dare take this from her with a stupid display of ignorant fealty to a man who sees you as lesser than the mud on his boots!"

Nervously, Sir Rain swallowed his anger as color drained from his face and sweat beaded on his brow. He'd known that Marcel had the connections to hire assassins but until this moment, he'd never really appreciated how dangerous the man himself was. He hadn't seen or heard the man move, he'd just suddenly appeared, as though he was a shadow dancing on the edge of the firelight.

In a fair fight, he was certain he could best the soft-skinned merchant, but at the moment, his situation was anything but fair. Desperately, Sir Rain's eyes stared downward, trying to catch a glimpse of the blade of the knife, wondering if it was coated with the same kind of poison they'd hired Marcel to use against Sir Tommin's family. Or, if the blade at his throat wasn't poisoned, was the one at his back?

He had no way to know, but he was certain that the instant he tried to resist, one knife or the other would take his life.

Chapter 673: Fragile Moments (Part Two)

For what felt like an eternity, but was really only a few heartbeats, no one moved. The soldiers had yet to notice the standoff that had suddenly broken out between their hosts, and both Ollie and Marcel were staring so intently at Hugo that the Steward felt like his knees would give out any minute. Blessedly, much like the intensity of Ashlynn's reunion with Isabell, moments this fragile couldn't last long either.

"Is there a problem?" Ashlynn's voice called, breaking the tense silence as she stepped away from Isabell. Rubbing the tears from her emerald eyes, her gaze immediately hardened as she saw Marcel holding Sir Rain hostage.

The look on her face grew dark, and for a moment, she nearly forgot herself enough to call upon the power of the forest to restrain Sir Rain, or to somehow punish him for spoiling the moment that had been so joyous just a moment ago.

Her power responded to her desires, and ever since visiting the empty grave that had once been hers, and even more so after reuniting with Master Isabell, her desires stormed within her chest like a flooding river in an autumn storm. Everything was so close to the surface, and she'd allowed her desires to overwhelm her when she embraced Isabell, but right now, the freedom she'd given her heart threatened to call power to her hands to deal decisively with the knights who had taken the place of the men who buried her here.

Instead, she forced herself to take several steadying breaths and to remind herself again and again that it wasn't time yet to reveal her power to Isabell and Tiernan. She had faith that they would understand if she could explain things to them properly, but losing her temper and wrapping Sir Rain in a cage of cedar roots would spoil any chance she had of bringing them fully over to her side... And Rain wasn't worth that price.

"Let him go, Sir Marcel," Ashlynn said in a voice that was quickly losing its warmth. It took effort, but she and Marcel had made a plan to deal with these men, even if it was a simple one, and she intended to see it through. "He's not a threat to anyone except himself, and I still intend to give him and Sir Hugo an opportunity."

"As you wish, my lady," Marcel said. With a flick of his wrists, both knives vanished, tucked up his sleeves or returned to sheathes at his waist, no one could say for certain. But everyone who saw the motion realized just how quickly Marcel could transform from harmless-looking dandy into something far more deadly, and then back again, every bit as fast.

"My, my lady Ashlynn," Hugo said, swallowing around a large knot that had formed in his throat when he watched the normally powerful and domineering Sir Rain reduced to a pale-faced and sweating captive in the blink of an eye.

Months of subtle and not-so-subtle bullying from the portly knight had left him with a stature in Hugo's eyes that was only slightly less intimidating than Lord Owain's, but seeing him like this in the hands of a man they'd all looked down on caused yet another piece of the hawk-nosed steward's world to crumble away beneath his feet, leaving him even more uncertain of where he stood. Desperate for a way to handle the increasingly strange situation, he latched onto her words like a drowning man latching onto a floating log.

"You said, you said you want to offer us an opportunity?" Hugo asked, with a distinctly unknighly tremble in his voice. "An opportunity to do what exactly?"

Instead of answering him directly, Ashlynn looked toward the wagons where Eamon and Daithi stood watch over the slumped, unconscious form of Darragh. Both men had remained standing and alert through the entire standoff while they watched over their captive but neither of them had made any motion to assist when Marcel moved against Sir Rain.

After all, between Sir Marcel and Sir Ollie, was there really anything either man could contribute? Instead, they'd remained focused on their task, keeping a watchful eye on the traitor until Lady Ashlynn was ready to deal with him.

"Constable Daithi," Ashlynn said formally, drawing herself up to her full height and emanating the aura of an unquestionable ruler once again as her presence grew to envelop the entire camp. "Can you wake him? Or do you need my help to rouse him?" Ashlynn asked, drawing a strange look from Master Tiernan and Isabell who wondered why Lady Ashlynn of all people would be helpful in dealing with the unconscious man.

"He might, just might, need your touch, my lady," Marcel said a touch sheepishly. "I just stunned him with a blow to the head, but I may have hit him just ever so slightly harder than I should have," he said, holding up a pair of fingers a hairsbreadth apart. "I didn't realize what a tiny man he was and how little ability he had to endure rough treatment," he added in a coquettish tone that pulled a ripple of stifled laughter from many of the servants and guardsmen present, breaking the tension that had gripped the camp.

"This should help then," Ashlynn said, laughing openly at Marcel's antics before fishing in the pouch at her waist for a small bundle of pungent herbs that she tossed to the waiting constable. "It will work as well as smelling salts. If you need to clear his head, feel free to dunk him in the river, just don't let him drown," she added, though from her tone, no one could tell if she was joking or serious.

"Gentlemen," she said as she turned back to the trio of knights, schooling her features into a more somber, severe expression as she met each of their gazes. "This man is accused of betraying his liege lord and his fellow soldiers. Since there are three honorable knights available, I intend to convene a tribunal to hear the evidence of his crimes and pronounce his guilt or innocence."

"You have this one opportunity," she added, looking directly at Rain and Hugo. "Show me what kind of men of honor you are. Prove to me that you can be more than lapdogs lying at Owain's feet and waiting for scraps to fall from his table. But make no mistake," she said as her presence seemed to loom as large in their eyes as the endless dark forest behind her.

"The way you conduct yourselves and the verdicts you render will determine if you become my guests... or my captives. So hold to your oaths and your virtues, gentlemen, and prove to me that you are as worthy to be called a knight as Sir Ollie."

Chapter 674: War Orphans

Standing to the side as Ashlynn organized the impromptu tribunal, Tiernan tugged on Isabell's sleeve before nodding in the direction of the edge of camp and gesturing for her to follow so they could speak in relative privacy.

"You were much closer to her than I ever was," the thickly muscled iron monger said once they stood on the edge of the dancing golden light cast by the bonfire at the center of the camp. "It's really her? She seems... She seems very different from how I remember her from the few times we've met. It hasn't been that long for someone to change that much, has it?" Tiernan asked in hushed tones, barely speaking above a whisper.

"You've known too much peace in your life, my friend," Isabell said, resting a hand on Tiernan's muscular forearm and speaking without taking her eyes off Ashlynn. "You've never met a war-orphan, have you? Someone who had their entire world shattered in blood and fire when they were too young and too powerless to do anything about it," she said as the reflection of the bonfire danced across her eyes.

"Lady Ashlynn reminds me a bit of the young women who tried to join the prince's army after his uncle's men burned their villages to the ground and set fire to their fields to prevent the prince from collecting their crops to feed his army," the woman once known as the Engineer of Destruction said as her gaze grew distant. After all, she'd left behind more than a few war-orphans of her own during that bitter, bloody war.

"They wanted to fight?" Tiernan said, shocked at the notion of women who had been through something so horrific trying to turn themselves into soldiers in a war. "Wouldn't it be better to flee somewhere safe? Somewhere far away from the war?" he asked, trying to imagine what his wife would do, or his children, if anything ever happened to Blackwell City.

Hopefully, they would all escape long before a war could ever threaten them, but if they couldn't, and if the worst came to pass, he hoped that they could at least find safety afterwards. In his mind, even though he wasn't a soldier, he was a strong man, and he wouldn't hesitate to stand in the way of anything that tried to harm his family. So long as they could escape, it would be worth laying down his own life so they could keep theirs. As a husband and a father, he couldn't accept anything less of himself, but the idea that his wife or daughters would then come back to fight... It was too horrifying for words.

"You don't understand," Isabell said, shaking her head. "They didn't want to fight, they wanted to kill. Half of them didn't even care if they survived so long as they could take a few of the men responsible for their suffering with them when they died," she said, pursing her lips as she watched the man Ashlynn had called 'Constable Daithi' and the one named Eamon as they dragged a sodden and stumbling Daithi back to the light of the camp.

Evidently, they'd taken Lady Ashlynn at her word when she suggested dunking him in the river, but either the herbs or the river had worked, and the prisoner looked alert, even if his movements were still a bit clumsy and awkward.

"Lady Ashlynn isn't that bad," Isabell said, half believing it and half wishing it to be true simply by speaking the words. "She's hurting badly, and the wounds are still fresh, even if her body has healed from her ordeals. But even if she's haunted by what happened, she doesn't have the eyes of a woman who wants to die," she said, thinking of the countless women and children she'd seen who seemed to cling to life only for the sake of hurting the people who had destroyed everything they held dear.

"I hope my little ones never go through anything like what you describe," Tiernan said, shivering from more than the chill, damp autumn air as he listened to Isabell's story. "Those war-orphans," he said a moment later as he tried to imagine his daughter standing in Lady Ashlynn's place.

He didn't yet know what she had suffered, but from the way Isabell spoke, it must have been horrific, but try as he might, he couldn't imagine any of his children standing so tall and persevering through the hurt the way Lady Ashlynn seemed to be doing.

"Did any of them ever recover?" Tiernan asked hesitantly. "Did they find love and a normal life?"

As much as Isabell accused him of living a peaceful life, ironmongers were hard, strong men who spent their lives doing some of the most back-breaking work in the kingdom in one of the hottest, most inhospitable environments imaginable. As a Guild Master, Tiernan had seen more than one man broken or injured in a smelter's forge who turned to drink to dull the pain and lashed out at their families in frustration when they could no longer do the work that put food on their tables and kept a roof over their family's head.

He'd seen broken and haunted women and children who had watched their fathers transform into demons possessed by the bottle, and even if it wasn't the same as what Isabell had described, it still left scars on their lives. The Iron Monger's guild did its best to provide for men who were hurt too badly to work, and none of them faced a life of poverty on the streets, but the blow to a man's pride could twist him into even more of a demon than the blow that broke his body, and in the end, it was the people who were closest to him that suffered for it.

"Some did," Isabell said with a slow nod. "Time helps to heal many things. Others managed to walk out of the fog of their suffering when the war ended or the lord who destroyed their lives fell in battle. Perhaps Lady Ashlynn will be the same," she said softly. "How she handles this man will tell us a great deal."

"Mmm," Tiernan said, nodding his agreement as Ashlynn finished her preparations. Whatever Ashlynn had in store for them tonight, it appeared that she was ready to begin.

Chapter 675: A Midnight Tribunal Begins

Ashlynn had arranged the tribunal with a deliberate, almost theatrical precision. The gathered soldiers formed a semicircle, sitting on rough-hewn logs as benches, quickly dragged into position from the tent where they'd taken their meal of warm soup and hot cider. A few of them whispered quietly to their neighbors, clutching wooden cups of more hot cider and looking on at the proceedings with the barely contained excitement of a crowd that had come to watch a public hanging.

Behind them, Isabell and Tiernan stood in the shadows just beyond the fire's reach, close enough to observe but clearly holding themselves at a distance, remaining outsiders to the proceedings. Ashlynn had given them the briefest of nods, acknowledging their choice to stand apart without suggesting they do otherwise. A part of Tiernan wished she had come to consult with them, after all, Guild Masters often sat as judges in matters of discipline within their own guilds, but clearly she intended to treat this as a matter of High Justice, restricting participants to members of the aristocracy.

As the only members of the aristocracy present other than Ashlynn herself, the three knights sat in an elevated position on the wagon's tailgate, just like they would have in Count Rhys Blackwell's formal court, though the occasional creaking of the waggons springs beneath them whenever they shifted their weight spoiled a bit of the effect.

Sir Hugo perched nervously on the edge, his feet dangling like a child's, while Sir Rain leaned against the frame of the wagon on the opposite side, scowling with impatience to get things over with. Ollie alone looked attentive and focused from his position in the space between them, close enough to either man to intervene if necessary, his hand resting casually near the hilt of one of his knives. He had only been officially conferred the status of a knight the night before, and even though he knew how things were supposed to end tonight, he still intended to do his best to uphold his virtue of Justice.

At the center of this improvised courtroom, Darragh stood like a player on a stage, or perhaps more accurately, as the centerpiece prop for the evening's play. The firelight cast dramatic shadows across his soaked clothing while water still dripped steadily from his hair and the rough stubble on his chin. The rope bindings around his wrists had darkened with river water, and though his hands occasionally strained against his bindings, it seemed more like an unconscious need to chafe against restraint than an active attempt to escape.

To Tiernan's eyes, it looked more like a show trial than a real tribunal. If the accused was gagged, it meant that Lady Ashlynn had no intentions of letting the man speak in his own defense. By law, when accused of a crime by a nobleman, a commoner was not automatically entitled to speak in their own defense so long as there was sufficient evidence of their crime to pass judgment.

In practice, in all the years he'd spent attending proceedings before Count Rhys Blackwell, he'd only rarely seen the count deny a man the right to speak up to explain his actions. On the rare occasions that he had, it almost always involved the virtue of a woman or accusations of heresy by the Church. But this man's case involved neither of those things, which made her decision to leave him gagged more than a little concerning.

"Sir Ollie Heartwood, Sir Hugo Hanrahan, Sir Rain Aleese," Ashlynn began formally, drawing all attention back to her as she addressed the tribunal of knights. "I have asked you to convene in order to seek your advice in the matter of Mister Darragh's treachery. However, I recognize that, as outsiders, Sir Hugo and Sir Rain are not aware of this man's circumstances. I would hear testimony from the witnesses here about the days leading up to tonight," she said, looking at the gathered soldiers and servants from the Vale of Mists.

"Mister Eamon," Ashlynn began formally. "You were Darragh's friend, weren't you? Can you tell us how you and Darragh met, and what your life was like before you came to live in Sir Ollie's village?"

"Yes, your ho-, er, my lady," Eamon said awkwardly as Ollie shot him a dangerous look. Eamon had recognized Ashlynn as a saintess long ago, and he'd placed almost as much faith in her as he placed in the Holy Lord of Light... or maybe more faith than he held for the Holy Lord of Light. After all, Lady Ashlynn was here before him and he'd seen her perform miracles on more than one occasion, but he'd never once seen the fabled Holy Lord of Light.

Still, sir Ollie had made it clear that for the duration of this trip, they were to obey the etiquette and norms of the Kingdom of Gaal, at least until they returned to the Vale. There were too many secrets that only Lady Ashlynn could explain, and the rest of them needed to mind their tongues lest they spoil her arrangements.

"Lord Owain always has his eye out for talented hunters," Eamon began, thinking back to when he'd first met the man whom he'd thought of as not only a friend, but an apprentice he could pass on some of his years of wisdom to.

"I suppose there's a kindness in what Lord Owain does whenever he catches a poacher," he said, glancing at Lady Ashlynn nervously to see if she would be displeased at any sort of praise directed at her former husband. When he saw her slight nod of acceptance, he heaved a sigh of relief before he continued his tale.

"If a man is talented enough to kill birds or beasts in the Marquis' own forests, he's talented enough to put his skills to work for Lord Owain," Eamon said, as though it was simple, common sense. "Well, they can be put to work for Lord Owain, or they can swing from the neck until dead. I've seen some folks choose the rope, refusing to become a bondsman even if it saves their life, but Darragh wasn't like that. He was eager to follow Lord Owain, and his life was better with his lordship than it had been in all his years as a free man living at the edge of the wilderness."

"Wait, stop," Hugo said, lurching to his feet as he finally remembered where he'd heard the names Eamon and Darragh before. "You men, you men were Lord Owain's huntsmen? The ones who followed him when he traveled the march?"

"Lord Owain had several huntsmen," Sir Rain said, frowning at the clearly shaken steward. "He must have a dozen or more that he picks and chooses from whenever he travels, and he's released at least

twice as many who failed to hunt the prey he chose. Why get so worked up over these men just because they're a pair of Lord Owain's castoffs?"

"No, no, you don't understand," Hugo stammered as he looked from Ashlynn to the hunters and finally back to Sir Rain. "I, I had to handle the accounts and the ledgers after Sir Kaefin died. These men, these men aren't castoffs who couldn't complete Lord Owain's hunts... they're the men who died alongside Sir Broll the very same day that Sir Kaefin was murdered! These men, these men have been missing for six months, and everyone, everyone believed they'd been devoured by demons!"

Chapter 676: Who is on Trial Here? (Part One)

Hugo's declaration sent ripples of shock through the soldiers sitting on the rough hewn logs and even Sir Rain sat up straight, pushing himself off the side of the wagon and staring intently at the grizzled hunter named Eamon.

The portly knight prodded his tired mind, trying to think if he had ever seen the man when Owain visited Aleese Barony but in truth, he rarely paid much attention to the faces of servants unless they were charming lasses or skilled swordsmen. No matter how much he looked at the veteran hunter, he couldn't recall ever having seen him but that didn't mean that the accusation was false.

"My lady, I," Eamon said, turning to look at Ashlynn with helpless eyes. "I don't know what I should say," he said as all of the attention that had been focused on Darragh seemed to have suddenly landed on him as well.

"Tell them the truth, Mister Eamon," Ashlynn said. "Tell them about the night we met and how you and your companions were treated. It's all right," she added with an encouraging smile. "There's no shame in anything you did that night," she said, sensing where his discomfort truly came from. "No one will judge you harshly for what happened when we stood as enemies."

"Thank you, my lady, for understanding," Eamon said, slumping in visible relief before recollecting himself and turning to face Sir Hugo and the other knights. "Just like your lordship said, Darragh and I went 'missing' after Sir Kaefin died. Lord Owain ordered Sir Broll to take us and hunt up the woman who killed Sir Kaefin and the, um, the kitchen boy who escaped with her," he said awkwardly.

"Pardon, Sir Ollie," Eamon added quickly while his hands twisted nervously, clutching at the fabric of his cloak. "Meaning no disrespect, but those were his words."

"It's not disrespectful to speak the truth," Ollie said with a bright smile on his face as he thought about how far everyone had come since that night in the wilderness six months ago. At the time, he really had been nothing more than a kitchen boy, swept up into something that felt vast and grand as the adventure stories he'd heard as a youth, only it was very clear that the protagonist of the adventure was Ashlynn rather than himself.

He'd never expected then that it was also the beginning of his own tale of adventure, or that he would find himself in a place like this, sitting among other knights as a peer rather than toiling away in the kitchens, afraid they might lash out at him for something as trivial as serving the lamb sauce with the beef or forgetting to add honey to their last cup of wine.

"You hunted us very well that night," Ollie acknowledged. "If things had gone even a little bit differently, you would have captured us both."

"Now wait just a minute!" Sir Rain said, hopping off the waggon's tailgate and taking several steps back to gain the space needed to draw his heavy longsword. "Sir Ollie," he said, glaring at the young knight and gripping the hilt of his sword tight enough for his knuckles to whiten. "Lord Owain put a bounty of a hundred gold sovereigns on the head of the woman who killed his former Steward."

"There's no one in the world Lord Owain wants dead as much as the woman called Lynnda," Rain said. "So speak the truth, do you know where she is? Is she hiding in Lady Ashlynn's service?" he asked, suddenly shifting his gaze to Lady Ashlynn who wore a strange half smile. Looking around, he saw similar awkward looks on the faces of several of her servants and even Sir Ollie himself.

"Lady, Lady Ashlynn," Hugo whispered as the last pieces of the puzzle fell into place. For a moment, he considered if Ollie and this 'Lynnda' had run into Lady Ashlynn while Eamon and Sir Broll were pursuing them through the wilderness but he quickly discarded that notion. Lady Ashlynn had clearly asked Eamon to recount the tale of the night when they met, and the way Sir Ollie looked at Lady Ashlynn when he said that Eamon had nearly captured them felt like everything but an admission that Lady Ashlynn had been the person he was fleeing with. But if that was the case...

"Lady Ashlynn, you were the woman calling herself Lynnda," Hugo said, sounding uncertain at first but growing more certain as he gave voice to his conclusion, the only conclusion that made any sense. "You, you hid yourself as a servant, as a common kitchen girl and snuck into the Summer Villa," he said, words tumbling over each other faster and faster as his heart began to race and his hands started to shake.

"But why? Why sneak in there to kill Sir Kaefin?" Hugo said as he realized that assembling one puzzle only opened the door to an even larger, and even less understandable one. "I don't understand," he said, cocking his head to the side and staring at Ashlynn in genuine bemusement.

Hugo had heard a great deal about the late Sir Kaefin from Owain, particularly during their months in Blackwell County as frustrations mounted with round after round of tense negotiations. Every time they came back from a failed negotiation with Master Isabell and her fellow guildmasters, after a night of drinking, Owain would often recount Sir Kaefin's many virtues just to explain how woefully inadequate he found Hugo's own service.

Hugo knew that Kaefin wasn't a 'model knight.' He knew that the man had taken Lord Owain to his first brothel as a young man and that the two of them had been fast friends in everything from drinking to gambling and carousing with women. Kaefin wasn't a 'good man', but nothing that Hugo had ever heard rose to a level so egregious that it warranted what amounted to a covert assassination!

"Gentlemen," Ashlynn said lightly. "Have you forgotten who is on trial tonight? Sir Rain, does Sir Marcel need to take your sword from you before you hurt yourself with it?" Ashlynn asked with a brief glance at the vampire who twirled a knife casually between his fingers.

"Return to your seats, gentlemen," she continued in a sterner, more commanding tone. "I will answer your questions but only briefly, because our time is limited and the decision we must make concerns Darragh's fate for his treachery, not my own. Do we have an understanding, gentlemen?"

Chapter 677: Who Is On Trial Here (Part Two)

The instant Ashlynn mentioned having Marcel take Sir Rain's sword away, the portly knight's face immediately drained of color and his hand left the hilt of his sword almost before he realized it. Seeing the way the young man smiled at him, as if he couldn't wait for an opportunity to come close to him again, only made the feeling worse as he sheepishly returned to his place on the tailgate of the wagon.

Sir Rain tried to return to his posture of bored indifference, but no matter how much he tried to look like he wasn't bothered, he couldn't help but feel incredibly tense and on edge. It wasn't just the threat of unleashing the knife wielding merchant on him that bothered him. It was the way that everyone here, from the hunter Eamon or the Constable, Daithi and most especially Lady Ashlynn herself, had reacted to his threat.

The soldiers who came with him looked suitably nervous, but everyone that followed Lady Ashlynn looked... amused. Some of the servants even looked at him with pity! But no one, not the young knight Ollie, the smug merchant Marcel and most certainly not Lady Ashlynn herself looked the least bit intimidated by his threat! And when she spoke to him, she spoke to him like a child, threatening to take his sword away before he 'hurt himself with it.'

He'd threatened strong men before, men who clashed directly with him, refusing to back down. Some times, those tense exchanges even led to blows as neither man was willing to retreat from their stance. But Lady Ashlynn, somehow, left him nothing to clash against, and instead made him feel small and ashamed for acting out... Like he was a petulant child instead of a powerful knight.

"Let me make two things clear," Ashlynn said, pulling attention back to herself and giving Sir Rain a reprieve from the weight of his men's gazes that seemed just as filled with pity for his humiliation as everyone else's had been. "Sir Kaefin died with his pants around his ankles for trying to force himself on me. If he hadn't dragged me into his bed chambers, he'd likely still be alive today."

Ashlynn's tone was as calm as the still water of a mountain lake and her words were precise and slightly clipped as if she was stating a simple fact but to the people gathered here, there was almost nothing she could have said that would have been more shocking. The servants who came from the vale looked at her in stunned horror, wondering who would dare to assault the mighty Mother of Trees.

Strangely enough, the people who had come with Sir Hugo and Sir Rain had expressions that were similarly horrified though many were mixed with disbelief. For Lord Owain's own Steward to assault his liege lord's wife sounded... far fetched would be an understatement for how incredulous it sounded.

"As to why I was there," Ashlynn continued. "My 'husband' beat me nearly to death and Sir Broll and Sir Tommin buried me alive," she said in the same calm, clipped tone though her gaze grew momentarily clouded as she glanced in the direction of the forest beyond the camp. "The grave I crawled out of is two hundred paces that way," she added pointing into the woods. "If you don't believe me, you're welcome to go see it for yourself."

"But, Sir Hugo wanted to understand why I was there," Ashlynn said, returning her gaze to the hawk-nosed knight who stared at her with eyes that were wide in shock... but not much disbelief.

After all, Hugo knew Lord Owain well enough to understand that his lord was ruthless if he felt aggrieved. Ruthless enough to order the family of Sir Tommin poisoned with Spider Demon venom so they would suffer months of agonizing decline before succumbing to the poison. To hear that his lord

had ordered his previous underlings to bury Lady Ashlynn alive somewhere deep in the wilderness... it didn't take much for him to believe it at all.

"My husband tried to murder me," Ashlynn said coldly. "Then he found a woman named Samira to impersonate me, telling the world that I was bearing his child and hiding the imposter away in the Summer Villa to conceal the truth of what he'd done. So tell me, Sir Hugo, is it understandable why I might disguise myself to find out what exactly Owain was up to?"

When she explained it that way, many in the audience found themselves nodding along with her explanation and even Sir Rain had to swallow a bit of his indignation and fury over the murder of his lord's best friend. Part of him, a part of him that was usually the largest part, still wanted to demand answers to questions like why Owain had tried to murder her in the first place.

But under the watchful eyes of the knife wielding merchant, that part had grown much, much smaller than the part of him that didn't want to die tonight. He might still have questions, but this was Lady Ashlynn's show and she was making that very, very clear.

"I, I apologize," Sir Rain choked out, hating himself for buckling under the pressure he felt from a short woman and a soft skinned man who might as well be a woman, but seeing no alternative under the circumstances. After all, Lady Ashlynn had said that their conduct tonight would determine whether they became her guests or her prisoners... and he was starting to realize that she hadn't been making an idle threat when she said 'prisoners.'

"My lady is right," he added quickly. "This man Darragh is the one who is on trial tonight. We should render our judgment on his crimes before we do anything else," he said as he mopped sweat from his brow and tried to recover a portion of his knightly dignity to sit in judgment.

"I couldn't agree more," Ashlynn said smoothly. "Mister Eamon, you were telling us of the night we met and how you were treated afterwards," she reminded him. "Please, continue your tale..."

Chapter 678: Eamon's Tale

It took a few moments for everyone to settle back down before Eamon began his tale again. Many people, whether they were members of Ashlynn's group or people who had come with the Guild Masters and Owain's knights, were still whispering to each other in hushed tones as the grizzled hunter began to speak again.

"Like I was saying," Eamon said. "Lord Owain ordered us to accompany Sir Broll to hunt down Sir Ollie and Lady Ashlynn and we caught them near the fall of night. But that's when Lady Ashlynn told us all who she was, and what Lord Owain had done to her and how, erm, how Sir Broll had helped to conceal the crime. Then she challenged him to a Trial by Combat right there in the forest with the Holy Lord of Light to bear witness," he said, glancing nervously over his shoulder at Ashlynn as he spoke.

"You're telling us that Lady Ashlynn defeated Sir Broll in single combat?" Sir Rain said, staring at Ashlynn before frowning at Eamon. "Sir Broll was a stronger fighter on foot than I've ever been and even skilled swordsmen struggled to overcome that powerful ax of his. How did a little lady like Lady Ashlynn manage to defeat someone like him?" Rain asked incredulously.

"Meaning no disrespect, Lady Ashlynn," he quickly added as if worried that offending her would provoke her into sending Marcel to take his sword away from him or something worse.

"I can speak to that if your lordship wishes," Daithi said. "I was there that night as well and I was in command of the men serving under Sir Broll," he explained. "I watched the duel from start to finish and I agree with Sir Rain, Sir Broll was a much more skilled fighter than Lady Ashlynn."

"Then how did she win?" Sir Rain asked, leaning forward on the wagon's tailgate and looking intently at the constable. "Are you telling us it was divine providence from the Holy Lord of Light, favoring the righteous in a sacred trial by combat? Those laws are ancient and even I know that they're the last resort of a guilty man!"

"Ancient or not," Daithi said, standing his ground and refusing to back down to the blustering knight. "The laws are still on the books and Lady Ashlynn won the duel. Sir Broll over committed and got his ax stuck in the ground and Lady Ashlynn severed his hands clean off. He'd have bled to death even if she didn't deal a killing blow," he said.

"Your lordship might not believe," Eamon added with a gleam of religious fervor in his eyes. "But I saw a miracle that night. Whether it was divine providence that trapped Sir Broll's ax or that lent its might to Lady Ashlynn's sword, she proved her virtue with her very next orders."

"Orders?" Sir Hugo asked, confused as to who exactly Lady Ashlynn would have had to issue orders to. Sir Ollie? Or was the hunter implying that his men submitted to her command as soon as Sir Broll fell? "What orders did she give?"

"Sir Ollie said we almost caught them, but Lady Ashlynn had soldiers of her own waiting in the woods. She could have commanded them to kill us after the duel but she didn't." Eamon explained. "She took us all as captives and brought us away instead of killing us."

"Nadf, mmmrrr, dmns!" Darragh shouted into his gag, struggling for the first time since the testimony had begun. Fire burned in his eyes as he watched Eamon acting like they'd encountered simple, ordinary soldiers rather than a dozen Horned and Clawed demons that proved that Lady Ashlynn had become a heretic who needed to be killed. At the very least, people needed to know that Lady Ashlynn was dangerous, but he couldn't say any of that. "Mrrrms hrrmmm!"

"Enough of that," Daithi said sharply, kicking the bound man in the back of his knees and driving him down onto his knees in the soft damp soil of the camp. Grabbing a fist-full of Darragh's stringy, wet hair, the constable pulled back sharply until Darragh felt like he was about to fall over, suspended only by the tearing pain on his head. "You don't interrupt!"

"Apologies, Eamon," the constable said as he restrained the prisoner. "You can continue."

"The only one to die that night was Sir Broll," Eamon said, nodding his thanks to Daithi. "She spared every single one of the rest of us. Even though... even though we'd spent the whole day hunting her and Sir Ollie. She didn't hold it against us even once."

When Eamon spoke, there was a combination of genuine respect and deep reverence in his voice that couldn't help but move the hearts of the common soldiers under Sir Rain and Sir Hugo's command. After all, it was the fate of a soldier to live and die by the decisions his lord made and no one expected mercy if the knight leading them fell in battle, but to hear Eamon tell it, the only person Ashlynn had taken any action against was one of the men who buried her alive!

"I'd have killed the lot of them," one man whispered to his neighbor. "Or staked them out as food for the demons in the hills. No way I'd have let them live after hunting me."

"But couldn't she just let them go?" the man sitting next to him asked. "Is it any kindness if you just become a prisoner afterward? I think I'd rather go down fighting than rot away in jail."

"Don't look like these men are rotting away though, does it?" a third man said, leaning forward from the row behind the first two. "Don't look like they've suffered much at all to me."

"huuu, rmsd, ummrannd," Darragh murmured in frustration against his gag while he listened to the audience. Leave them out as food for the demons? They'd been handed directly over the demons and were forced to depend on them for everything if they wanted to live! They were made to eat demon food, sleep in the demon castle, watched over by demon guards! How was that not suffering? "Mmm, mffds, ee," he muttered darkly, glaring at the crowd who he was certain would side with him if he was just allowed to tell his side of the story!

"And how about your life since then?" Ashlynn asked, completely ignoring Darragh's struggles as she focused on the attitudes of the crowd and the two knights who served Owain. They were slowly starting to bend, like wood that had been exposed to hot steam, but they were far from ready to be reshaped just yet, and to get them where she wanted them, there were still other things they needed to hear tonight.

"What kind of life have you and Darragh been living in Sir Ollie's village, Mister Eamon?" Ashlynn asked. "And Mister Daithi, you as well. When you were taken captive, were your lives so terrible that any man would have fought tooth and nail to escape? Were you tortured and abused so badly as to form grudges that could only be answered by death?"

"Is there anything, anything at all about the way you men and Mister Darragh were treated that would excuse his treachery tonight?"

Chapter 679: A Better Life (Part One)

Eamon shifted uncomfortably when Ashlynn asked the question but this time, the source of his discomfort was the man standing next to him. For several quiet moments, Eamon stared at the bound and gagged Darragh, watching the soaking wet man shake and shiver in the chill autumn air and wondering if he'd ever really understood the young man he took under his wing.

The cold autumn air and wet clothing only accounted for half of Darragh's trembling. The rest flowed from a deep, seething hatred that burned in his eyes as he glared at the two men who had betrayed their very humanity to become the puppets of a witch and demons. But as much as he hated them at this moment, he hated himself even more for thinking he could deliver a warning to the knights who now sat in judgement above him.

He'd tried. He'd done everything he could in the hopes that he could stop them from falling for Lady Ashlynn and her bewitching ways. He tried to warn them. Certainly he hoped they'd be grateful enough for his warning that they would reward them for it.

He never really expected to receive the title and knighthood that Eamon had once suggested they might earn if they could escape the demon fortress and bring back Lady Ashlynn but he would have been content with a small bag of gold sovereigns and the chance to buy some land of his own somewhere in the domains of the eastern barons who were farther away from the demon menace. But now, none of that would ever happen and he hated everyone who had snatched that hope away from him.

"When the refugees started trickling in," Eamon said without taking his eyes off the kneeling figure of Darragh as the younger man stewed in his own rage. "Sir Ollie needed our help keeping everyone fed. We'd been kept under guard but since he needed our help, we took it as an opportunity. I, I never expected to make that much of a difference in people's lives," Eamon said as memories flickered behind his eyes.

Looking back, it had been the children who affected him the most. It didn't matter if they were from the Heartwood Clan, the Horned Clan, the Nightweavers or anyone else... Children were children and nothing was worse to a growing child than the pain of an empty belly. An empty belly meant their parents couldn't provide for them and worse, couldn't protect them from the dangers of the world.

An empty belly was pain that gnawed at children, keeping them awake at night when they should be dreaming of better days. It was there when they woke, tearing away any pleasant dreams they had with an immediate reminder of everything they'd lost and how much they were suffering.

Children could make games out of rocks and sticks. They would play in trees or bare dirt and laugh and dance with nothing but hands slapping knees to give them music. They could find joy in anything, even when they had nothing, but they couldn't do any of that if an empty belly drained them of the strength to move or gnawed away at their hopes for a better day.

"The children were the first refugees to take a liking to us," Eamon said, staring at Darragh with growing hatred as he thought about the neighbors and their children that the younger hunter had turned his back on. "It took a while for folks to trust, but they trusted Sir Ollie's cooking and they started thanking us when we brought in a brace of fowl or young buck... It didn't matter if we had a good day or a lean one, they were always happy to see us and thanked us for our work," he said.

"Mrey, ere, dmarshs!" Darragh muttered darkly. "Eddfdg, dmarshs!" The more Eamon spoke, the looser Daithi's grip on his hair had become and he was no longer quite as restrained but there was still nothing, absolutely nothing he could do about the gag that trapped his words in his mouth.

For a moment, he struggled against the wet ropes that bound his hands, hoping he could get free for just a moment, just long enough to tell these people the truth, but the ropes only bit deeper into his flesh as he struggled, giving him no chance to escape.

"When we built the village, folks set aside a place for us, even though we were out in the wilderness too much to help much with the construction," Eamon said, ignoring Darragh's struggles as he remembered the excited members of the Heartwood clan when they'd gathered around the two men to show them the small cottage they'd built to say thank you for everything the two men had done to provide for them.

"In the village, I share a cottage with Darragh," Eamon said, his gaze sharpening as he met the young hunter's hate filled eyes. "The villagers he tried to betray tonight did most of the work to thank us for feeding them when they were helpless refugees. It isn't large, but we each have a room to ourselves and a place to cook and share meals with others if we wish," he said, describing a cottage that was luxuriously large compared to the communal barracks they'd lived in when they served Lord Owain directly."

"We even have a small plot for a garden but we're hunters and foragers by trade and we might be gone for days at a time before we return with anything. Normally, it would be a waste of time to try to keep a garden but some of the women folk help tend the garden whenever we're out hunting. Miss Juni and Mister Milo even invite us over for meals sometimes to dress up our share of the hunt."

"Lady Ashlynn," Eamon said, with eyes that were wet with a storm of emotions that included the deep gratitude and sense of belonging he'd found among Sir Ollie's people as well as the bitterness, resentment and hatred at the way Darragh, a man he had once mentored, had tried to throw all that away.

"We're two drifting men who lived all our lives in the wilds," he said, clutching his hands into tight fists as the feelings in his heart threatened to overwhelm him. "We've gone where we were told, packed up at a moment's notice and traveled all across the march but... now we have a home and neighbors and people who count on us."

"Sir Hugo, Sir Rain, if you think that Darragh turning on Lady Ashlynn is only natural for a man who was captured... We haven't been captives for a long time, and Sir Ollie and Lady Ashlynn trust us with so much. We were even at the banquet last night when Sir Ollie was knighted," he added. "So, if you ask me if I can understand why Darragh did what he did...I just can't. I can't understand at all," he said, hanging his head low.

Chapter 680: A Better Life (Part Two)

Sitting on the wagon's tailgate, Hugo's mind worked rapidly as he imagined the picture that Eamon painted for them. He didn't know where this village was, but Eamon was a man of the wilderness, so if they'd been given poor lands and left to eke out a meager existence, he was certain that the hunter would have mentioned it. But from the sounds of it, they'd been settled in a place that was just as promising as the lands that the Lothians had been trying to offer to Guild Masters Isabell and Tiernan.

For a new knight like Sir Ollie, one who was establishing a village on his own lands, it was normal to collect a fee of several gold sovereigns from each person who wanted to settle in their village. That fee would provide a deed to the land their cottage was built on if it was substantial, ten gold sovereigns or more, or a lease if it wasn't, but the fee paid to the new knight was rarely less than one or two sovereigns, and that was just the fee for the land. It didn't include any of the costs of materials to build the cottage or settle in the village.

Yet, the way Eamon told it, the villagers had simply... simply given it to them! Out of pure gratitude. And not once did he mention paying taxes or tithes to receive all of this wealth. Already, Hugo noticed some men among the soldiers brought with them muttering in jealousy at Eamon's good fortune. A few had even asked their neighbors if they thought there might still be room in this village where a man could go off to hunt or fish and his neighbors would weed his garden for him.

It sounded like a common man's dream, so much so that Hugo began to wonder if there was something hidden about the village that Eamon wasn't telling them. Some dark secret that would explain how people who the hunter had described as 'refugees' in the beginning could become so welcoming in such a short period of time.

"Cmdfas, ummmersan?" Darragh muttered. Just last night, he'd been forced to dance with a Snake Demon! A Snake Demon who had wrapped her tail around him and embraced him like she was going to squeeze him to death, or crush his bones so he couldn't fight back before she hauled him back to some dark room to mate with him. He'd never felt so helplessly overpowered in his entire life, even when they'd been locked in the cells of the Vale's ancient fortress!

But it didn't matter, because Eamon had become a full fledged heretic who even enjoyed the time he spent dancing with a Snake Demon. The old man had learned their language and made small talk with them for Light's sake! But still, the people would hear none of this because no one would let him tell the truth!

"You're not the only one," Daithi said, shoving Darragh down before placing a hand on the older man's shoulder and giving him a firm, almost brotherly squeeze. "Lady Ashlynn made us all an offer after she took us prisoner," Daithi added, facing the trio of knights and allowing Eamon to take over restraining the struggling Darragh so he could do as Lady Ashlynn had asked and tell his own story about how they were treated.

"So long as we showed that we were trust worthy, she'd find a way to bring our families to live with us. Sir Marcel kept that promise for her while she was away," he explained, turning to look out at the assembled soldiers and servants.

At this point, the men sitting on the rough hewn logs were all leaning forward with expressions of eager anticipation as they waited to hear if Eamon and Daithi had been the only lucky ones. But this Daithi person, since Lady Ashlynn had called him a Constable, perhaps his rewards had been even greater, the people thought.

After all, a constable served just beneath a knight and could enforce the laws within the village. It was a position of real power, so surely he'd received lavish rewards to go with that title. Already, visions of a small manor, maybe with a house servant of his own, or an acre or two of fields danced through their eyes as they tried to imagine this miraculous village where, if a man worked hard and helped his neighbors, he could have the kind of life that most men could only dream of.

"It was hard, being away from my family for months," Daithi admitted as he thought back on the first few months of his life in the Vale. "But now, I get to watch my little one playing with other children in the village and her smiles are worth more than any amount of silver or gold," he said with a faint smile tugging at the corners of his lips despite the seriousness of the moment.

"We might not have much money yet, but just like Eamon and Darragh, we have a house to call our own and the land it sits on too. I thought, serving in a knight's guard, becoming a sergeant and such, I thought that was as far as I would ever go but... I'm living a better life now. We all are."

"Sir Ollie is a kind man," he added, turning to face the trio of knights and bowing his head in gratitude. "It isn't easy to raise up a village from nothing, and he's had more than a few challenges, bringing

together so many different kinds of folk who have lost almost everything. But he's always been out there next to us, whether he's hauling timber for homes or cooking meals to feed the workmen, he never lorded over us."

"Sir Ollie understands what it's like to work hard for everything you have," Daithi praised. "And I can't fathom betraying him after everything he's done for us, everything he's given us. Even those of us who used to be his enemies, he's more than earned our loyalty. And the whole time, as hard as he worked, he always said that he was just doing what Lady Ashlynn would have wanted him to. That he was caring for us the way he knew she would."

"So, this betrayal of Darragh's... I just can't understand it."

"Thank you, Mister Eamon, Constable Daithi," Ashlynn said with a warm smile for both gentlemen before she turned to face the trio of knights sitting on the wagon's tailgate.

"As Mister Daithi said, there was a time that Darragh was one of my husband's men," she said as she looked at Darragh's cold, shivering figure and his smoldering, resentful gaze as though he had become a proxy for Owain and all that he had done to her. "If he had held fast to his loyalties, he could have remained a prisoner. Men of conviction would rather suffer as an enemy than pretend even for a moment to have become an ally."

"But Darragh didn't take a principled stand," she said coldly. "Darragh was given an opportunity to change his allegiance and he took it. He took it and he enjoyed the benefits of a good life that came with it. And then, as soon as he had an opportunity to plant a knife in our backs, he did, and in the process, he put everything we are building at risk."

"This kind of treachery," Ashlynn said darkly. "There's no forgiving it!"