

## The Vampire 691

### Chapter 691: A Long Story (Part Two)

"Nyrielle and I are betrothed."

Five simple words shocked both guild masters with a statement that defied all conventions of propriety in the Kingdom of Gaal. But when they looked at her, Ashlynn's face held the shy smile and faint blush of a young woman who was helplessly in love. But even as she admitted to a relationship that would have been kept quiet among the nobility of the kingdom, her voice was clear and pure without the slightest hint of evasion or shame.

Tiernan's cup slipped from his numb fingers, clattering against the carriage floor before rolling underneath the seat where the swaying of the carriage tossed it back and forth in an ironic approximation of the whiplash the guild master had felt ever since entering the carriage. His mouth worked soundlessly for several moments before he managed to croak out a question.

"Betrothed? To the... to Lady Nyrielle?" He asked as he reminded himself for what felt like the dozenth time that he shouldn't, absolutely couldn't, refer to Ashlynn's vampire partner as the 'Demon Lady of the Vale.'

Isabell's reaction was entirely different as she examined Ashlynn's face, reading the young woman's reactions the same way she'd learned to read her younger sister Jocelynn.

"Is this another political marriage?" Isabell asked carefully, discarding the notion immediately as she saw the way Ashlynn's expression darkened at the faintest suggestion that her union had been politically motivated.

"Or... is this love, Ashlynn?" Isabell asked as she took off her silver-rimmed spectacles to look directly into Ashlynn's emerald eyes. "All the way out here, living among the dem, the Eldritch. Have you really found true love?"

Isabell's question broke off suddenly, leaving the second part unsaid but it still hung in the air between the occupants of the carriage along with the heady aroma of wine and the more subtle scents of leather upholstery and freshly polished wood.

"It's real," Ashlynn said with a gentle smile on her lips and a softness in her eyes that suggested she understood the other woman's skepticism. "We made our announcement at the banquet last night after Sir Ollie was formally knighted. We won't marry until we can hold a proper ceremony and I hope you'll both attend," she said quickly.

After all, she'd arranged to meet them tonight, after the betrothal banquet, because she needed the cover of the raids to account for their disappearance. But even though it was a necessity, she didn't want them to feel like she had kept them away from the celebration because she didn't value them as friends. If she could have, she'd have prepared a place for them at the table for guests of honor along with Heila's parents and Ollie's friends from the Heartwood Clan.

"But we still have so much to do before we can invite my parents and everyone else who should attend so it may be some time," Ashlynn added a touch wistfully. "Whether we have a ceremony or not, it won't change anything between us. I belong to her and she belongs to me," she said as she placed a hand on her chest, directly above her heart where she could feel the echo of Nyrielle's heartbeat within her own chest. "Now and for as long as we can resist the pull of the abyss."

"But isn't that too fast?" Tiernan blurted, no longer able to hold his words in. "You courted Lord Owain for two whole years before you married him and he was, wasn't so, so... different from you," he said as he pushed through the warm, pleasant fog of alcohol that wrapped itself around his mind like a soft, cottony blanket keeping the sharp pains of sudden revelations at a more comfortable distance. "Do you really know her well enough to say that you'll, um, that you'll really marry her?"

Was it even possible for two women to marry? Tiernan didn't know but he was certain that the Church would have something to say about it... But then, did that even matter? Lady Ashlynn was a witch and this Lady Nyrielle was a Vampire so the Church wouldn't approve of anything they did to begin with.

But then, if they announced to the world that they were married to each other, wouldn't that just give the Church yet another reason to call them heretics? The more he thought of it, the more his heart filled with a deep sense of forboding and his head ached with the thought of how many different people Ashlynn would provoke with her simple statement about who she intended to marry. And that was without considering the fact that she was still technically married to Lord Owain!

"I do," Ashlynn said, with a warm, gentle smile on her lips. "I know her better than anyone, and she knows me just as well. Loving a vampire, any vampire, is different than loving someone else, but it's especially different when it's love between a witch and a vampire," she explained.

"Heila is already learning what it's like with Sir Ignatious, but once you share blood, you form a bond that is much, much deeper than even the bond a normal person would feel when they offer their blood to a vampire."

"It's stronger for Nyri and I," she admitted. "Because I'm her Seneschal and we already have a bond of blood, everything has been twice as intense, if not more. But between a witch and a vampire, we share so much more than just blood," she explained.

"When we sleep, we can share each other's dreams," she said. "Not just dreams, but bits of memory as well. Nyri and I have had a picnic on the cliffs overlooking Blackwell Harbor because I remember the place so well. And we danced in the great hall of her ancient fortress to music that was played more than a century ago before the Lothians burned Vale City to the ground and murdered her parents and her grandsire."

"Maybe it feels sudden from the outside," Ashlynn admitted. "But in just half a year, I've shared more with Nyri than I've shared with Owain in two whole years. For all the festivals and feasts Owain and I attended while we were courting, we were never really close and we never opened our hearts to each other the way that Nyri and I have."

## Chapter 692: Love Is Love

Outside the carriage, the fog grew thicker, muffling the sounds of hoofbeats on ancient pavers and the creak of the carriage as it rolled along at a speed that would have been impossible for any human driver to match on such a dark and foggy night. Inside the carriage, however, the dark of night and even the fact that they were approachign the legendary Vale of Mists seemed distant compared to the revelation of Ashlynn's relationship with the vampire, Nyrielle.

For the past two years, both guild masters had seen what had looked like a proper and even happy courtship between Ashlynn and Lord Owain. There had been numerous formal banquets and balls where the Blackwells hosted the young Lothian Lord and his enterouge of knights and Ashlynn always looked happy to be hanging on the young lord's arm at those events.

She'd seemed even more delighted when they toured Blackwell City and the county together, particularly the year that Owain had visited during the Holy Light festival when he'd taken Ashlynn around the festival, proving his skill and winning piles of prizes for her at the festival games. She'd looked so happy that everyone on the outside had assumed that they weren't just entering into a political marriage but one of genuine love as well.

The truth, however, was very different than it appeared to be from the outside. Compared to Owain, Nyrielle had been more open and more vulnerable with her the first night they'd shared a meal than Owain had been in the entire span of time they'd been courting. Owain worked hard to present a perfect appearance of what a lord and gentleman was supposed to be, but he never once shared his pain or his fears with her the way Nyrielle had. He engaged in all of the ritual and spectacle of courtship without ever once attempting to understand or relate to the woman he was supposed to be courting.

It made Nyrielle's openness and honesty both confusing and a little frightening in the beginning when she'd mistaken Nyrielle's honest admission that she hoped to benefit from Ashlynn's powers as a witch for a statement that she only wanted Ashlynn for her powers.

That misunderstanding hadn't been the only one while they each learned to understand each other, but her memory of that first dinner together and the way she'd overreacted to some of Nyrielle's statements was something she still felt embarrassed about, even all these months later.

"Nyri and I both still learning about each other," Ashlynn said, breaking the silence that had begun to feel awkward after she revealed how much she and Nyrielle had opened their hearts to each other.

"She's so much older than I am, and my life has been very different from hers," Ashlynn admitted, because it was true that there was still a great deal that she didn't know about her lover and the reverse was also true. "But we're walking forward, hand in hand, discovering more and more about the person who holds the other half of our heart in their chest each and every night we spend together."

"Pfft," Isabell said with a snort as she shook her head at Ashlynn. "You sound like my husband with all those pretty words," she said, laughing for the first time in what felt like several hours since the carriage ride began.

"But I know what you mean," she said, taking another long drink of the smooth, honeyed wine. "I always said Casquas was like a rose bud, each petal pulled tight over the others, waiting for the right person to open up to before revealing all of the soft, beautiful layers within."

"So how did you know he was the one?" Ashlynn asked. She'd met Isabell's famous poet husband a few times in the past, but at the time, she'd thought love would never have anything to do with her. So she'd never asked much about how the two fell in love in the old countries or what convinced Casquas to give up life in the royal court of the Emerald King to follow Isabell all the way across the sea.

Now, however, she was genuinely curious about how Isabell had found herself in a relationship nearly as unlikely as her own.

"He sat with me in silence," Isabell said laughing lightly as she realized that, for all their differences, there were still some things that Ashlynn and Jocelynn had in common. Both of them, it appeared, had a soft spot for a good love story.

"Casquas has dozens of words that can make a woman's heart flutter and her knees go weak, but with me, he sat in silence," Isabell said. "The civil war in the Emerald Kingdom was tearing new wounds in my soul day by day and I felt so far away from home. I was surrounded by people but I felt all alone. So, at night, any time there was some formal dinner or gathering of the court, whenever I slipped away to find some quiet, he went looking for me."

"I wasn't hiding," Isabell added, pointing at Ashlynn and Tiernan with a finger on the hand that was holding her cup of wine, as if it was somehow important that they understood that she was only withdrawing from the crowd rather than hiding from it. "But he came and sat with me so I wouldn't be alone. He didn't tell me he understood, because he knew he didn't. He didn't try to tell me it would all be better soon because he didn't know if it would."

"He just sat there," Isabell said, smiling as she savored the memory of those long ago evenings when she and Casquas had sat in dark gardens for hours, staring up at the stars and listening to the faint music echoing from the great hall as the banquet dragged on into the night. "He sat with me so I wouldn't be alone because he understood that was what I needed."

"That sounds nice," Ashlynn said as she thought back on all of the things that Nyrielle had done for her since they'd met, from the quiet nights where she helped massage away the aches and pains that Ashlynn accumulated while she was learning the sword from Thane to the grand gesture of a mural she'd painted in her underground bedroom to give Ashlynn a view of the sea in the space that they shared.

Nyrielle might be a person who favored grander gestures than the one Casquas had made, but as she listened to Isabell tell her tale, Ashlynn couldn't help but hope that her friend would recognize the love that Ashlynn and Nyrielle shared once she saw them both together.

It had worked for Heila, after all, Ashlynn thought. Just seeing how affectionate she and Ignatious were towards each other had been enough to overcome the near bone-deep fear of Inquisitors that plagued

most residents of the Vale. In the end, Heila's mother had accepted Ignatious readily, simply because he made Heila happy. Now, Ashlynn just hoped that Isabell could do the same for Nyrielle.

After all, if Isabell could understand and accept the bond of love that had formed alongside her bond of blood with Nyrielle, then it was much more likely that she could come to understand the other bonds of family that Ashlynn had formed in the past half year. And if Isabell could accept those bonds between Ashlynn and the rest of her new family, then it would be much easier to convince her friend to accept a place within Ashlynn's closest found family...

### Chapter 693: Kitcher's Fell (Part One)

On the outskirts of Dunn Barony, a small hamlet perched atop a steep-sided hill that men had labeled Kitcher's Fell. Local folklore varied about the name, with some claiming that Kitcher had been a hero of the people, leading a small army of farmers armed with nothing more than pitchforks and hand axes to repel demons from the lands humans had only begun to settle.

Other stories claimed that Kitcher had been little more than a bandit, on the run from Lothian City, who had chanced upon a demon camp and slaughtered them with his band of brigands in the hopes that it would clear their names. Given the sizeable bounties paid out by both the Lothian family and the Church for killing demons, it certainly felt plausible to people who rejected the myth of Kitcher as some kind of peasant folk hero.

Whatever Kitcher had been, he'd won the favor of the Dunn family, and the hamlet built on the site of his victory still bore his name. The man himself had died long ago, but his family still held some of the most coveted grazing land outside the hamlet's wooden palisade walls, and his great-grandson, Keller, would likely inherit the family's sprawling ranch when he came of age.

For now, however, the young man was barely fifteen years old, and the only thing he currently felt about his family's ancestral home was that it was much, much warmer than the cold, wet autumn night outside with the cattle.

"Ah-choo," Keller sneezed, pulling his heavy wool cloak tighter around his shoulders and inching closer to the small fire that felt far too feeble to keep the evening chill at bay.

"You'd feel better if you drank some of the tea, young master," an aged voice said from the opposite side of the fire. "The real secret to keeping warm on nights like this is to use your fire to warm your drink and use a hot drink to warm yourself."

"How can you drink anything that comes off that fire, old man?" Keller asked, doing his best to take shallow breaths as he held his hands out toward the putrid fire. "Why do we have to burn dung to keep warm when a wood fire would be brighter and warmer?" he groused. "And it wouldn't stink so much!"

"Haha, you'll learn quickly how much better it is to burn dung than to burn wood when you have to haul your own fuel out here in the winter, young master," the old servant said with a hearty chuckle. "Dung is lighter once it's dried, and a few bricks of dung will last you all night if you manage your fire well," he said over his shoulder, not bothering to look at the shivering young master who huddled near the fire.

Cabrin had served young master Keller's family since he was even younger than the young master was and he knew his duties well. With a herd of nearly thirty head of cattle, it took a fair amount of minding to make sure as many of them as possible made it through the winter.

Even though Keller was unlikely to spend much of his life personally tending to the herd of cattle, the flock of hens, or the fields of marigold and goldenrod that had provided much of the family's wealth over the years. It was far more likely that Keller would follow in his father's footsteps, managing the whole of the family business and spending almost as much time in Dunn Township dealing with the merchants there as he spent at home.

But Keller's father insisted that he spend a year doing the work of each of the family's businesses before he would be allowed to accompany his father to learn how to manage the whole of the family business. It was an approach that Cabrin approved of, even if he had the misfortune to be young Keller's first teacher.

"Dung still stinks," the young man complained as he eyed the kettle sitting next to the glowing coals of the campfire as he tried to decide whether or not he was really willing to drink something warmed by burning cow manure.

"Oi, did you see that?" Cabrin said, staring out into the darkness as he tried to find a trace of the flicker of light among the slumbering herd that had caught his attention. "Something moving out there..."

"There's nothing out there but cows, old man," Keller said, glancing in the direction that the old man was looking and seeing nothing but the dark lumps of dozens of dull brown cows that were barely visible in the dark of the moonless night.

"Damn it, boy, I told you to keep your back to the fire," the old man hissed, momentarily forgetting to be polite as he cursed the young man's foolishness. It might feel comforting to stare into the warm glow of the fire, but it spoiled a man's ability to see in the dark, especially on a night like this! "Over there to the left, my left," he said, pointing where he'd seen the flash.

"I swear, there's nothing," Keller started to say as he stood up from the putrid campfire to stand next to the old man. But when he looked, he saw the same thing the old man had seen, a brief flicker of movement, like the light of the campfire reflecting off of polished metal.

-MROOOO-

One of the cows made a startled noise, shuffling to the side and colliding with a neighbor who norted and tossed its head in response but other than a few spooked cows, nothing seemed to be moving among the herd.

"Just cows, old man," Keller said, turning away from the old man to look back at the kettle beside the campfire. What he saw, however, was something that would haunt his nightmares for the rest of his days.

The demon standing before him, and he was certain that it was a demon, stood half a head taller than a man with long, pointed horns growing out of its head like the horns of a bull. Its body was twisted and misshapen, covered with reddish coppery scales that glittered in the light of the campfire.

The demon's chest was large and broad but its legs were slender and spindly, as though it had been a figure made of clay that was pinched at the bottom to create piles upon piles of muscles for its broad chest and heavy arms.

It was a creature straight out of his nightmares, a being so twisted and evil that he silently cursed himself for ever doubting the words of the priests when they warned about the greater horrors lurking behind the common demons that the Dunn's soldiers had proven so successful at defeating over the years.

The priests had given their warnings countless times that a life lived aimlessly by a man who refused to meet his struggle would invite disaster when demons arrived to exploit his weakness. At the time, he'd



treated their words as no different than his mother's dire warnings to eat his turnips or demons would gnaw away his belly in the night.

Now, however, he realized that he'd been very, very wrong to dismiss the warnings of the priests... only it was far too late to do anything with his regrets.

#### Chapter 694: Kitcher's Fell (Part Two)

"De-de-de-demon!" Keller sputtered, stumbling backwards until he tripped over his feet and fell to the ground, landing in an undignified sprawl on his backside, staring up at the scaled, horned, twisted demon in horror.

"Khal'ix, nûn!" The demon said, sounding insistent as it raised a menacing fist.

"Young master!" Cabrin shouted, drawing a heavy-bladed utility knife from its sheath at his waist and dashing forward as fast as he could to put himself between the demon and his master's only son. "Run!"

kārlum, zātpāra!" the demon snarled, stepping forward and lashing out with speed that felt impossibly fast for a mishapen demon as large as this one. One moment, it was still several paces away, the next, its oversized hand clutched a fistful of Cabrin's cloak and tunic, effortlessly lifting him off the ground as the demon scrutinized him with greenish eyes with a serpent's elongated pupils.

"Ik'khakra, u'drih ke The demon snarled as it opened its mouth to reveal wickedly long fangs.

On the ground, Keller scrambled backwards on all fours, sliding his backside along the ground until he'd put several paces between himself and the demon beast before he flipped himself over and tried to scramble to his feet, dashing toward the sprawling farmhouse as quickly as his feet would carry him.

"Demons!" Keller shouted. "Demons in the night! Demons!"

Beside the campfire, Cabrin summoned all of the strength that was left in his old bones and sinewy body as he stabbed his knife straight at the demon's broad chest. But even with all of his strength, the old man was far too slow, and the demon was much, much too quick for the knife to cross even half the distance between them before it seized his hand.

The demon's hands were massive, twice the size of a normal man's, and it crushed Carbin's hand in a sickening -CRUNCH- of shattering bones. The old man barely had time to cry out in pain, however, before the demon struck with the speed of a serpent, pulling him close enough to bite into his neck with wickedly sharp fangs.

Pain exploded in Carbin's neck, followed a moment later by the feeling of something warm and wet sliding down his neck. A heartbeat later, the pain faded away, replaced by the strange sensations of the aches and pains of age fading away, leaving his mind drifting somewhere warm and hazy.

The campfire that the young master had been so disdainful of was the last thing Carbin saw as the fuel seemed to exhaust itself, growing dimmer and dimmer until there was no light left in the world. No light, no pain, only an endless darkness that seemed to call out to him, offering peace, quiet, and rest at the end of a long life of toil and struggle.

At least the young master got away, Carbin thought as the light faded from his eyes. At least I did that much...

For a moment, the only sounds were the dying crackle of the dung fire and the nervous lowing of cattle who could smell blood on the night wind. Then, as if summoned by the scent of fresh death, two more misshapen figures materialized from the fog-shrouded darkness, their footsteps silent on the damp grass as they approached their companion.

"Are humans so weak that they don't even struggle at the moment of death?" One of the newcomers asked, staring at the old man's limp corpse with a mixture of curiosity and disdain. "Is this really the prey that Master Tausau wants us to hunt?"

"He tasted old," the horned figure, a Clanless vampire named Sique, said, withdrawing his fangs from the old man's neck and dropping him unceremoniously to the ground. "He'd all but given up on life already. He isn't our prey tonight."

"Then why did you bother with him?" the third figure asked as he watched the young man running up the hill toward his home. The sounds of a crude bell being struck began to fill the air, adding to the young man's panicked cries of 'demons' as he raced for the safety of his home. "You let the tasty one get away."

"He's still a calf," Sique said, shaking its head. "Master Tausau said to leave the young ones alone unless they use a weapon. Besides, I didn't 'let him get away,'" the horned vampire said as he licked the blood from his lips.

"I sent him to fetch the human's soldiers," he said proudly. "Seeing as we missed the banquet last night, don't you think we should give Her Eternity and Her Dominion a fitting betrothal gift? What better than the broken blades of their enemy's soldiers?"

"We weren't supposed to fight their soldiers if we could avoid it," the second man said as he glanced at the cattle, who seemed spooked by the scent of blood. "If we lose our prize because we got greedy, then I doubt Her Eternity would value any gift we give her."

After all, while giving the Dunns and the Hanrahans a bloody nose in the opening phases of Her Dominion, Ashlynn's war of vengeance was important, their other objective was even more important.

Even though the Mongrel Horde could sustain themselves by taking blood from volunteers or the humans they hunted, but the rest of the army needed to supplement their stores of food for the winter. It was the entire reason that they'd been sent to raid farms rather than burning hamlets to the ground in the first place and failing in their primary mission would have consequences for the other soldiers who were depending on them.

"You worry too much, brother," the horned man said, grinning eagerly as he heard the sound of armor rustling in the night as soldiers within the hamlet began to scramble into their armor and retrieve their weapons. "Come, we should make quick work of our prey so we can collect our prize," he said as he faded back into the darkness and the fog, already moving in the direction of the hamlet.

Soon, the first soldiers serving the Dunn family would face the men of Tausau's Mongrel horde on a dark and moonless night. In a battle where they outnumbered their enemy by four to one, it should have been a crushing victory for the young captain watching over Kitcher's Fell.

But of all the horrors the young captain had trained to face, no one had ever expected that he would face off against even one vampire, much less three of them. If he'd known, perhaps he wouldn't have led his men out from behind the hamlet's palisade wall.

Maybe he would have considered whether or not it was worth risking his life in the hopes of currying favor with the wealthiest family in Kitchel's Fell by charging to the rescue. Maybe he would have sent a man on a fast horse to ride through the night to summon reinforcements from the neighboring hamlet.

But the men of the Mongrel Horde had been let off their leashes after suffering decades and even centuries of scorn and disdain from the descendants of High Lord Hamdi's other progeny. They'd been treated as weak, inferior, and defective for so long that many of them had come to believe it was true.

Now that they had a chance to prove otherwise, none of them would be content until they returned, not only with their prize of captured livestock, but with proof that they'd hunted dangerous prey of their own and emerged from the hunt covered in blood and glory.

Of course, Kitchel's Fell was only one of dozens of hamlets across the Dunn Barony, but the scene playing out there was already being repeated eight times over across the Barony... And this was only the first night of their assault!

#### Chapter 695: Milled Oats and Pickled Radishes

Sir Carwyn Belvin yawned as he sat in his saddle, watching the long train of carts and wagons making its way along the dirt road from the Village of Raek to Hanrahan Town. There was a faint morning breeze that ruffled his tawny hair as he watched over his villagers and he relished in the feeling of the cool air on his clean shaven face, enjoying the respite from the heat of his heavy chain armor and the layers of padding beneath it.

The trip would have been even worse at the height of summer, he thought, but then again, in summer they wouldn't have needed to contend with dismal weather and the poor condition of the road that led from Raek to Hanrahan.

The road was little more than a dirt track in most places. Countless caravans had tamped the earth down over the years, creating a firm surface that resisted the autumn rains. Still, careless drivers could easily wander into the roadside ditches. The mud there was surprisingly treacherous, deep enough to swallow a man's foot, and thick enough to claim his boot if he wasn't careful trying to free himself.

Normally, Sir Carwyn hated the tedious duty of escorting a long train of goods from his village to the markets at Hanrahan Town and Lothian City beyond, but this time was different. This time, as he sat atop his horse, his mind was filled with hope for this year's harvest and the coins it would place in his purse.

When they reached Hanrahan Town, the Baron's tax collector would have the option of either taking two parts in twenty of the goods to be sold, or two parts in twenty of the coins they earned when goods were sold at market. In Lothian City, the tax collector would take three parts in twenty and almost never took their payment in anything other than gold and silver.

But for Sir Carwyn, as the knight protector of the village, he was entitled to one part in twenty of everything that was sold from his villagers' farms in addition to the profits from his own farms. On top of that, he also collected one part in twenty from the farmers in exchange for providing an escort to the market.

Of course, some of that money would be paid out to the dozen armed men who trudged alongside the carts, spending most of their effort on keeping them out of the mud rather than watching for highwaymen at this stage of the journey, but it would still leave Sir Carwyn's purse fat as a hog by the time they were finished in Lothian City.

It was only then, when they were returning home with fresh goods purchased at market and purses filled with coin, that he and his men would truly be wary of robbers and cutthroats on the road. Few brigands wanted a sack full of flour or a barrel full of pickled radishes when, just by waiting, they could have several bags of silver and perhaps even gold if they attacked a caravan returning from market.

"Worried about your wagon, Sir Carwyn?" the weathered voice of the village purser, Dyfad, said as the man standing beside him followed his lord's gaze. "You're looking at it like it's carrying your child. I promise, it's built sturdy enough to make the journey, even with as much as you've loaded in it this time," he said with a hearty chuckle.

"Does it show that badly?" Carwyn said, chuckling lightly as his face heated in embarrassment when the village purser caught him fretting. "Olwynna thinks that pickling the radishes and the turnips in the village will earn us more from this crop, but those barrels weigh so much more than sacks of raw vegetables would. I'm worried we'll get stuck in the mud."

"Trust the missus, either way, your lordship," the older man laughed. "If it causes trouble, she doesn't need to know, so long as it all sells. And I'm sure it will sell," he added as he watched the wagons winding their way through the gently rolling countryside.

"After all, womenfolk might get fussy when they're expecting, but they're always sensitive about building a nest egg for when the baby's born," the older man said sagely.

Few men in the Village of Raek would be so blunt with the knight whom they owed their fealty to, but Dyfad had been the village purser since Carwyn was a youth young enough to ride on his father's shoulders. A certain informality had formed between the two men in the years that he acted as Carwyn's tutor, helping to prepare him to take over his father's duties.

Now, while Carwyn did his best to maintain the distance expected between a knight and a loyal retainer, there were times that he couldn't help but look to the older man for advice, just as he had in the years that Dyfad had been his tutor.

"Was your wife like this when your sons were born?" Carwyn asked lightly as he watched yet another cart round the bend. The past several carts were all piled high with freshly milled oats, and they represented the real treasure of the village.

Putting in three more mills in such a tiny village had been an immense undertaking and one that Carwyn had fought his father over for years before his father finally gave up the fight when he retired. In the end, Carwyn had only won a grudging admission that he'd been right when he presented his father with the earnings for last year's harvest and paid back the costs of building the mills in the first place.

"Like you wouldn't believe," Dyfad chuckled as he thought back over all the things his Sulwyn had asked of him when she was carrying each of their brats. "I was out in the garden half the summer, digging extra rows of turnips, carrots, beets, and anything else that would keep in the root cellar because she was afraid we'd have a hard winter and wouldn't be able to trade for anything in Hanrahan's market until spring."

"Pft," Carwyn snorted. "Maybe there's something in a woman's body that drains them of heat to give it all to our growing child," he said with a laugh. "Olwyn's feet have been like blocks of ice at night, and she wants me to spend the earnings from this year on a better roof and patching up any spot in the manor where there's the slightest draft. She's been walking around the manor with a stick of incense and a bit of charcoal, marking everywhere there's a slight bit of breeze when the shutters are closed."

"Well, you know what they say, your lordship. A woman..." Dyfad began, only to be interrupted by a panicked cry from further up the road.

"Demons! Demon attack!" The terrified cry echoed across the caravan, followed by the high-pitched whinnying of panicked horses as they reared in their harness, desperate to escape the sudden threat from ahead.

In an instant, the quiet drudgery of the caravan's journey to market was shattered, replaced by the screams of men and horses and the sudden stench of blood and fear.

#### Chapter 696: Demons On The Road

"Demons! Demon attack!" The frightened cry reverberated through the cold morning air as the driver of one of the lead wagons sprinted toward Sir Carwyn in the rear, hoping against hope that the knight would be able to save him before a demon arrow claimed his life.

"They're coming out of the ground!" Another voice shouted, the words nearly lost beneath the whistle of arrows cutting through air and the wet thud of iron points finding flesh.

"Holy Lord of Light, save us there are—urghg!" The shouted prayer cut off suddenly, dissolving into a wet, choking gurgle that seemed to hang in the sudden stillness before more screams erupted further up the column.

"Hya!" Carwyn cried, tugging on the reigns of his horse and turning him in place before charging in the direction of the shouting. Frightened farmers abandoned their wagons and carts, running back the way they'd come while leaving their horses and mules to panic where they stood, trapped by the harnesses that bound them to their wagons.

In a matter of mere heartbeats, Sir Carwyn arrived at the head of the caravan to find several thick, heavy arrows sticking out of the lead wagon and two of his men clutching at bloody wounds while hiding behind the wagon for cover.

Looking forward, the young knight stared in momentary shock as first four, then six, then ten flat tailed demons emerged from the tall grasses by the roadside, unleashing arrows from their twisted, demonic war-bows as they appeared.

There weren't supposed to be any flat tailed demons this close to Airgead Mountain, but Carwyn recognized them from the stories that had circulated since Lord Owain Lothian's raid in the summer. Long, sharp teeth protruded from their mouths and on their backs they wore dull green and brown

cloaks covered with clumps of grass and leaves, making them look like a piece of the land come to life as they fired their arrows.

The first volley hissed through the morning air with the sound of angry wasps. A black-fletched shaft seemed to hover just inches above the ground as it whistled underneath the lead wagon, followed immediately by a man's scream from behind the wagon when the arrow bit deeply into his calf. Another arrow arrived half a breath later, falling from the sky like a bolt of thunder as it reached the end of a long arc over the wagon to bury itself in the mud just inches from a cowering soldier.

As if the deadly archers weren't enough of a threat, something even more terrifying emerged from the tall grasses behind them.

Strange serpentine demons with glittering scales in different patterns slithered forward across the sodden earth, wearing suits of chain mail armor covered with steel plates that had been embellished with strange glyphs or depictions of serpent demons slaying even greater demons. The armor looked like it was both a work of art and a tool of war and the scratches and dings on the armor made it clear that these men were hardened veterans who had survived many battles.

Each serpent demon's armor was unique and distinctive and they wore strange helms that covered their faces with cages while brilliant plumes of brightly colored feathers stood out like the blade of an ax rising from the tops of the beaten metal domes. In their claw-like hands, they carried hooked swords or sharp spears, and every weapon had been embellished with gold inlay and even more brilliant feathers.

In all his years, Carwyn had only heard of one knight among the demons, the Crimson Knight who was said to be a human heretic who sold their soul for the dark powers of demon-kind. So far as he knew, however, the Crimson Knight never left the slopes of Airgead Mountain so there should have been no need to ever worry about a knight among the demons.

But now, standing before him, he couldn't think of anything to call these serpent demons if not knights because no one but a knight could bear such impressive weapons or armor!

But how? Sir Carwyn thought as he struggled to free his shield from the bindings that secured it to his saddle while he rode. How had demon knights, the likes of which no one had ever seen before, arrived on this backcountry road without anyone seeing them coming?



Even if they hadn't encountered any soldiers or watch keepers, surely someone would have seen them and come running to the village to report it. A herder or farmboy, a hunter with his hounds... someone, somewhere should have spotted this many demons before they could come so far from... from wherever these demons had come from!

"To me!" Carwyn shouted as he glanced over his shoulder, wishing his men would hurry before it was too late to save their wounded companions. "Brave men of Raek, to me!"

-THUNK-

Sir Carwyn barely raised his shield in time to stop an arrow from claiming his life and the impact of it was enough to send shivers down his arm. In the upper corner of the shield, the wood splintered and cracked around a sawtoothed arrowhead that protruded nearly an inch beyond the wood.

Moving more by instinct than conscious thought, he forced his horse to turn yet again, riding back toward cover around the bend as he shouted to gather his men.

"Beware of their archers! Bring shields! Gather together!" Sir Carwyn shouted as he waved to the handful of soldiers who traveled with the caravan to retrieve their weapons and prepare for battle. "The Holy Lord of Light is with us! We will not fall to these creatures of darkness!"

"For the Hounds of Belvin!" Sir Carwyn shouted, holding his shield up high before his men so they could all see that the man who bore the crest of two snarling hounds had no fear of demons, even with one of their dark arrows protruding from his shield.

"For the Hounds!" The men cried as they raised their shields, following Sir Carwyn Belvin as he led the charge into battle against the demons. He might not know what manner of demons the strange serpentine men were, but it didn't matter.

The only thought in Sir Carwyn's head as he led the charge was that he refused to let these demons destroy the hard work of his village... but since they insisted on coming, then their tails would be his prize!

Chapter 697: A Knight's Charge (Part One)

"Shields together! Shields Together," Sir Carwyn Belvin yelled as he prodded his horse into a full gallop. "Beware the archers! For the Hounds!"

Carwyn wasted no time waiting for his men as he charged toward the flat tailed demon archers. He clutched his shield with one hand and in the other, he tightened his grip on the short, wooden handle of a horseman's flail. At the end of the wooden rod, an iron chain the length of his forearm connected to a smooth, iron ball that the young knight had already begun to spin as he rounded the bend in the road.

Lying low against his horse's neck, Carwyn relied on the speed of his charge to evade the arrows streaking at him. His vision narrowed as he glimpsed an archer who had advanced too far forward in the hopes of landing a better shot, straying close enough to the road to strike as Carwynn charged by. In one smooth motion, he lifted his shield into place to protect his left side and head while his feet and knees prodded his trusted companion to run down the startled demon who had clearly never faced a charging horse in battle.

The flail spun even faster as he charged, leaning to the side in his saddle as he swung at the demon's unarmored head. The startled creature cried out in surprise, dropping its twisted bow and trying to dodge out of the way. Unfortunately for the demon, it underestimated Carwyn's reach by nearly a foot, and that mistake cost the archer his life.

-CRUNCH-

A sickening sound filled the air and bright red blood, shattered teeth along with bits of wet, thicker things sprayed into the air in a gruesome crimson rain as Sir Carwyn's horse thundered past, breaking past the demons and rounding another curve in the road to vanish from sight as a storm of black-fletched arrows came whistling at him from behind.

"The Hounds! The Hounds!" Carwyn's men cried behind him as they charged into battle, using the distraction of his charge to close the gap with the archers. With ten of them marching side by side in two rows of five soldiers, they intended to form an anvil, pinning the savage monsters in place for Carwyn to hammer against on his returning charge, trapping the monsters between them.

Few of them had ever seen a demon, and the ones they had seen were all pathetic scavengers, cast out of their homes and preying on human villages to survive through the winter. They were nothing like the organized and well-equipped demons they faced now, but that didn't change the discipline that Sir Carwyn and his father before him had drilled into the men who pledged to protect their village. Now,

with shields in hand, they advanced as one, ready for Sir Carwyn's next charge to crush the demons against their wall of shields and the points of their spears.

It didn't take long for the archers to adjust their tactics, turning their bows from futile shots at the mounted knight charging away from them to focus their fire on the approaching formation of lightly armored men. Arrows slammed into shields with a heavy -THUNK- and one man cried out in pain as a skilled archer managed to fire through a gap between shields.

Blood flowed from his shoulder, and the arm that held his spear went numb, dropping his weapon as the injured limb dangled uselessly at his side. Still, he held his position, keeping his shield in place to cover himself and his neighbor as they advanced rapidly on the demons.

Some of the flat tailed demons darted backward, keeping the distance open as they continued to loose arrows from their strangely twisted bows, while others dropped their bows in favor of long, curved knives, suitable for carving flesh and bone the way their claws carved wood. Even they retreated, however, as the three serpentine demons wearing knightly armor and strangely plumed helms pressed forward onto the roadway.

"Krujauni anqan iktu iliyu! Rujon, plet kuloj niš tu!" the demon with the green plumage in his helm shouted as it slithered onto the road to face in the direction that Sir Carwyn had ridden. Already, the sounds of thundering hooves echoed off the dirt road as the knight began his second charge while his men faced off against the armored demons.

Seeing the demon-knight on the road before him, Sir Carwyn's expression became grim, and he cursed himself for riding into battle without a lance or at least a long sword. Against common bandits and highwaymen, the flail should have been more than enough, and even against the cat demons of Airgead Mountain, he shouldn't have been at a great disadvantage. But who would have thought that he'd have to fight against another knight, a demon knight no less?

"A man can't always choose his battles, son," his father had told him when he asked if he should join in Lord Owain or Lord Liam's wars over the summer. "Given enough time, a man's battles will find him. Fight the ones you have to and never run from them, but never seek out a battle you do not need to fight."

"You have a woman now, and a child soon," the aging knight said. "Your shield bears the family coat of arms for a reason. Your shield is for them, and after them, it's for this village. If the war against the

demons ever comes to us, then raise your arms against them. Until it does, treasure the days of peace you have, they'll be over soon enough."

You were right, Father, Carwyn thought as he charged the demon knight. The shield he carried was there to protect his wife and unborn child, and after them, the men under his command today. If he wanted to keep anyone safe, he had to defeat these demons before they could turn back on the village, where there were no protectors strong enough to stop them.

It was a hopeless charge, he realized as he gazed at his unflinching foe. At best, he would be able to defeat one of the demon knights before the others dragged him down. But hopeless or not, Carwyn thought, his battle had found him, and it was time to fight it to the end.

#### Chapter 698: A Knight's Charge (Part Two)

Sir Carwyn's enemy's armor bore no coat of arms, and he held no shield. Instead, the serpentine demon carried a hooked sword in one hand and a short spear in the other, as if every fiber of his being was intended to attack and not defend.

It was a posture that Carwyn welcomed as he closed the final distance between them, swinging his flail in a wide arc, aiming for the oversized, cage-like helm with its brilliant green plumage. For a moment, everything seemed to come together as the demon didn't even seem like it intended to get out of his way, but in the next moment, everything changed.

The serpentine demon moved with inhuman speed, using its short spear in place of a shield to knock Carwyn's flail aside. But the spear and the sword were both distractions compared to the demon-knight's most lethal weapon.

Originally, Carwyn had thought that the polished metal tip that wrapped around the demon's tail was just another piece of armor, or perhaps a decoration like the green plumage in its helm. It wasn't until the serpentine demon flickered to the side, moving just out of the way of the horse's charge, that the young knight realized his fatal mistake.

The demon's tail went suddenly stiff, striking like a spear and tearing through the horse's neck in a spray of crimson blood. Instantly, Carwyn's world exploded into chaos as his horse's dying scream filled his ears and hot blood splattered across his face. The familiar rhythm of hoofbeats vanished, replaced by the heavy thud and sickening crunch of his long-time companion collapsing beneath him. Before the

young knight could even react, a brief sensation of weightlessness overwhelmed him as he was sent tumbling through the air.

Sky and earth spun in a nauseating blur before the muddy ditch rushed up to meet him. His body moved without thought as he tucked his chin to his chest and tightened his stomach, curling into a ball as best he could.

"If you ride, then one day you'll fall," his father had told him when he met his first horse. "And if you fight while you ride, then one day, you'll be thrown. Learn to land, tuck, and roll," his father said, slapping him on the shoulder. "Aim for this. It'll hurt, but banging your head is worse. Then across to the other hip. Even in armor, you can tuck and you can roll. Remember..."

Those lessons and countless others were the only things that kept Carwyn from getting tangled up in his horse's fall, and now, as he slammed into the earth, those lessons once again saved his life.

The impact drove every breath from his lungs with a sound like a bellows collapsing, and cold, fetid water immediately soaked through his gambeson, carrying the stench of rotting leaves and animal waste. His flail flew from numb fingers as he rolled instinctively across his back, feeling every stone he rolled across like a punch landing on his body until he kicked out with his feet and brought himself to a stop, lying in the putrid mud of the ditch.

For a moment, the world went silent except for a high ringing in his ears and the wet gurgling of his dying horse somewhere that sounded far away. The taste of his own blood filled his mouth, and when he tried to breathe, pain flared across his ribs. His left shoulder screamed in pain after absorbing most of the force of his fall, and a tingling sensation like pins and needles running over his flesh spread all the way from his left elbow to his fingertips.

The edges of Carwyn's vision went black, and the sounds of his men fighting against the demon-knights grew faint as he struggled to draw breath. His right hand fumbled about in the mud, searching for his flail while his left arm drew his shield across his chest in an almost reflexive desire to protect himself.

A moment later, however, it all felt futile as the green-plumed demon arrived above him, pointing a spear down toward him while it rested the spine of its hooked sword casually on one shoulder.

"Olwynna," he said softly as he closed his eyes, waiting for the final thrust of the spear. "I'm sorry. I'll wait for you in the heavenly shores..."

The final thrust of the spear never came. Instead, he heard the demon shouting in their strange, infernal language as it towered above him.

"Kvarna halt! Vri'na, zha ékrium ikta zhal tuor. Izh zha'ra!"

A handful of breaths later, the sounds of fighting seemed to stop. The demons shouted a few more strange phrases at each other before Carwyn opened his eyes, surprised to see one of the knife-wielding, flat tailed demons approaching with a scowl on its face.

"litkâ ušbîl, nûl ôntok kâti qíka. litkâ nûl, ôk yâr - îmal púrok, nûl tûr mîr hína," the serpentine demon said, looking at the shorter flat tailed demon while pointing his spear insistently at Carwyn's chest. A moment later, the flat tailed demon gave the young knight yet another shock as it opened its mouth and spoke the king's common tongue.

"He says that your battle isn't over," the flat tailed demon said. "He wants a true battle between champions, and so he challenges you to single combat."

Single combat? Carwyn struggled to believe that a demon would have any concept of honor or a fair fight in a duel, yet here he was, lying flat on his back and vulnerable before the demon's spear, yet he hadn't been killed.

So why did this demon want to fight him? What did the demon possibly have to gain from it? Was it just to humiliate him before the other demons in some strange mockery of a 'fair' fight? Carwyn was about to reject the offer when the flat tailed demon opened his mouth again and made an offer that Carwyn couldn't refuse, even if it was a lie.

"He says," the flat tailed demon said, "that if you defeat him in single combat, then you and your soldiers and all of your common folk can go free and we will not hunt you down. Even if you kill him, his brothers will honor his word."

Sir Carwyn Belvin stared at the flat tailed demon in disbelief as his mind struggled to catch up to everything that was happening. Glancing in the direction of his men, he found that many of them held broken shields and bled from wounds to their legs and arms, but none of them seemed to be on the edge of death.

The other flat tailed demons had moved to encircle his men and many of them held bows drawn, ready to fire the instant they received a command but two of the strange serpentine demons with their brightly colored, plumed helms had placed themselves between the flat tailed demons and his men. Was this some kind of internal discord among the demons?

"I don't understand," Carwyn said, blinking and shaking his head as he tried to clear the fog in his mind. "I am unhorsed and disarmed. I am defeated. Why does he want to give me another chance?"

"Because he doesn't know how disgusting and cruel you humans are," the flat tailed demon spat without bothering to translate. "Because he's never seen one of you 'knights' burning villages and murdering helpless pregnant women. Because he thinks you're a 'champion' like him, and the battle shouldn't end just because he killed your beast. Because... because... because he hasn't lost anything to you monsters and he thinks he's still in the Arena in High Fen City."

The way the demon spoke, with venom and hatred in his voice and hot tears in his eyes, took Carwyn completely by surprise. More than that, he was stunned to hear a demon calling knights monsters and accusing them of...

"Your village," Carwyn said as his eyes widened in sudden understanding. "Your village was destroyed by Lord Owain and his men this summer, wasn't it?" It was a story he'd heard just weeks ago while Lord Owain was touring Baron Hanrahan's territory with a pair of guild masters who intended to become knights.

At the time, it had sounded like a fierce battle against devious monsters who set traps and ambushes to slaughter his men. Owain described it as purging the land of an infestation and complained that many of the demons had escaped, leaving behind only a few of the elderly and women with 'bellies full of demon spawn.'

"I, I wasn't there!" Carwyn protested as he suddenly wondered if this attack on his village's caravan was some kind of retribution for Owain's summer campaign against the demons. "We, we never did anything to your village or your people," he pleaded. "We didn't even send soldiers to help Lord Owain!"

For a moment, hope began to burn in his heart. It was feeble and flickering, sustained only by the hope that, if he could speak to this demon and convince him that this had all been a terrible misunderstanding, they might be able to walk away from all of this. Next to that feeble hope, immense gratitude swelled in his chest that he'd listened to his father and stayed home instead of joining either young lord Owain or Liam in their campaigns against the demons.

That hope, faint and feeble as it was, snuffed out like a candle flame when the demon next spoke.

"You think we don't know that?" The flat tailed demon snarled. "If you'd been there, even if Sir Ollie was here himself, nothing would stop us from killing you! We should still kill you! But Barsali wants to give you a chance to fight like a champion. He thinks you deserve it because he thinks that human knights are like Sir Ollie. So get up! Get up and take his offer because if you don't, then I'll kill you myself!"

"Kăkûtiş sāvraén? Năemna iörā yăei? ĩmâk, tăērā ky lim fidōn uzunā pî horâ, kăvūn prī kězārñā," the serpentine demon referred to as Barsali said, gesturing to the wounded soldiers and tilting his head as if he was confused when he looked from the flat tailed demon to the knight lying in the mud.

"Get up, human," the flat tailed demon said as its tail thumped the ground in obvious agitation. "Get up and fight him, and he'll spare your men's lives, even if you fall here. If you win, you and your men can go free. If you lose, you and your men become captives. Those are his terms."

"Isn't that too good for me?" Carwyn said, more to stall for time than because he had any real questions. The numbness had begun to fade from his left arm, and he could feel his fingers again. His breathing was still shallow, and he was certain he'd cracked at least a few ribs, but the pain had gone from sharp and hot to dull and throbbing, and his vision was clearer by the minute.

"Why should I believe his offer?" Carwyn asked. "Ask him," he added quickly, pointing at the serpentine demon with a shaky hand. "I want to hear his words," he said.

Carwyn was hoping that he could force the flat tailed demon, who clearly hated humans, to translate instead of arguing with him directly. The smaller demon was clearly not only a junior soldier under the command of this 'Barsali' but biased against humans as well.



Whether or not the demon translated truthfully, he couldn't be sure, but if the positions were reversed, Carwyn knew how he would treat one of his men who twisted his words when relaying his messages. He could only hope that the demons possessed a similar level of discipline.

After a brief exchange in the demon's infernal tongue, the one who had been translating turned back to Carwyn with a defeated look in his eyes.

"He says that the terms of a wager are sacred when champions take to the sands," the demon said. "He says that he would never insult the Blood Princess or the Willow Whip by breaking his word. So long as you swear to order your men to obey his commands and surrender if you fall, he swears they will not die here."

"Tell him that's not good enough," Carwyn said as he struggled to his feet. "Tell him that, if I fight this duel here, he has to promise to leave my village alone. We had nothing to do with the attack on your village," he said, locking eyes with the serpentine demon through the cage of the other man's helm. "Tell him that I will fight him and I will die for my village, but after that, our debts are settled."

"He can't promise you that," the flat tailed demon said after another exchange in their own language. "This raid has nothing to do with what Owain Lothian did to my clan. The most he can promise is to let your farmers and workers go and take only the soldiers. Whether your village is attacked or not is not his decision to make."

"Very well," Sir Carwyn said, drawing the deepest breath he could while he rotated his right shoulder, feeling out the extent of his injuries. It had been too much to expect that he could save his village by dying in a duel, but he felt like he had to try.

The terms were already skewed far too much in his favor and Carwyn didn't know if that was because the demon was treating him like sport or if they had their own twisted sense of honor about these fights but in the end, it didn't matter why it was doing this. If the demon was lying, things wouldn't be any worse than they already were, but if it was telling the truth then it was the only chance Carwyn had to save his men's lives.

"Tell him I accept his offer," Carwyn said as he stepped up out of the ditch to meet Barsali's reptilian gaze. "Tell him that I give him my word," he added as he held out his hand. "So long as my men's lives will be spared, I will face him in single combat!"

## Chapter 700: Win for us!

Following a series of sharp orders from Barsali, the demons surrounding Carwynn's men lowered their weapons, pulling back to form opposing ranks lining the roadway, spaced just over a dozen paces apart. Some of them looked less than pleased with their orders, but the other two serpentine demon-knights banged their weapons together as if celebrating before slithering along the dirt road to speak with their companion.

"You will be given time to tend to your armor and weapons," the flat tailed demon said on behalf of Barsali. "Drink water, replace your shield, do what you can in order to fight your best. You will be given five minutes to prepare."

"Five minutes?" Carwyn asked, blinking in surprise. He'd expected to begin almost immediately.

"And not a minute longer!" the flat tailed demon said. "I've started counting, so go and make peace with your vile god while you're at it!"

Carwyn moved slowly, still testing his body for the aches and pains from his fall. It was a minor miracle that he hadn't broken any of his limbs and that, at the worst, a few ribs had cracked from the impact. The soft mud had helped, as had the padding of his gambeson under the coat of chain mail that he wore, but there had been a tremendous amount of luck to it as well.

Before approaching his men, the young knight stopped beside the fallen body of his horse. The stench of blood and death mingled with the thick, cloying odor of decay from the mud to assault his nose, and mud had mixed with blood to obscure the once shining grey and white coat of his treasured companion.

Cloud Stepper had been his mount for nearly three years now. The horse was a gift from his father, presented to him the day after he stood his vigil and swore his oaths as a knight.

In three years, he'd never ridden Cloud Stepper into a real battle, nothing like what had happened today, but the horse had been with him everywhere he went for years. They rode together in tournaments from Hanrahan Barony to Aleese Barony and even in Lothian City last year.

More importantly, Cloud Stepper had carried him and Olwynna out into the countryside for countless picnics and excursions when he courted her. Olwynna was such a delicate woman that he felt like the proud war horse hardly noticed her weight because he never once complained of the extra burden of

carrying two riders. Or perhaps it was because Olwynna always brought an apple or carrot or some other treat any time Carwyn came calling.

Now, because he'd been foolish enough to charge a demon-knight, never once thinking that it would use its tail as a weapon, his trusted companion had fallen, landing in the ditch on the opposite side of the road. If there was any saving grace to it at all, it was that the wound was clean and deep... Cloud Stepper hadn't suffered long.

"Forgive me, my friend," Carwyn said as he began rummaging through his saddle bags for a water skin, taking a long, deep drink before tossing the water skin aside and returning to his bags.

For a simple ride escorting wagons full of produce and oats, he hadn't bothered with a helm or his gauntlets, but now that he had the time, he wanted every last bit of protection before facing the demon called Barsali.

Finally, after retrieving his flail from where it had fallen when he was flung from his horse, he returned to his men. When he looked in their eyes, he saw uncertainty, fear, confusion, even pain as men pressed on their wounds to stop the flow of blood. But underneath all of that, a grim determination and the faintest glimmer of hope that their liege lord could still find a path to victory for them today.

"Sir Carwyn," one of the soldiers, a man with a dark, heavy brow and a sharp chin named Esal said as soon as the knight drew close. "What's going on? Why did they all stop fighting?"

"See that one with the green feathers sticking out of his helm?" Carwyn said, pointing at the serpentine demon who was making preparations and checking his armor and weapons. "He wants to fight a duel. If I win, we can all go home and they won't stand in our way."

"But, your lordship," a thin man named Touf said nervously as he clutched at the shaft of his spear hard enough that his knuckles turned white. "You've just been thrown from your horse. You, you aren't in any shape to fight a duel! It won't be a fair fight."

"It doesn't matter," Carwyn said. "Fair or not, the demons promised that if I accept this duel, even if I lose, they won't kill you. They may take you captive, but they'll spare your lives."

"But, but they're demons," Esal protested. "Sir Carwyn, you can't trust them. Most of us can still fight. Say the word and we'll charge with you! You don't have to fight alone!"

"Yeah!" several men echoed.

"Hounds hunt as a pack, my lord," the second soldier said. "Didn't you always tell us that? A pack of hounds together can pull down a demon or a bear. We're your hounds, my lord, don't leave us behind!"

"They'll just kill us after you fall," a third man muttered through teeth clenched in pain. A dark arrow still protruded from his right arm and even if he survived the wound it was unlikely he'd ever carry a spear again. Still, he raised his shield with pride, as if he intended to use it as a battering ram against the demon soldiers. "Better to die fighting together, right your lordship? One last charge for the bards to sing a song about."

"No, no, none of that," Carwyn insisted. "Look, I don't understand everything the demon told me... I don't know if I believe it all either. But that one," he said, pointing at Barsali. "He said that wagers on duels are somehow sacred to them. That it would disgrace someone called the 'Blood Princess' and dishonor something he called the 'Willow Whip' if he didn't honor the terms of our agreement."

"But, Sir Carwyn," another man started, only to be interrupted when the young knight stood.

"Enough," Carwyn said. "I already gave my word that I would fight this duel. Don't turn me into an oath breaker. Even if the demons betray our bargain, I want to go to the heavenly shores with a clear conscience."

"It's time, human!" the flat tailed demon yelled from the center of the road. "Come and meet your end!"

"One moment!" Carwyn yelled back before looking over his men one last time. "Whatever happens," he told his men. "So long as they honor their words, promise me you won't fight back. Not today. Later, if you can, you can escape, but right now, please, do this for me. Survive this, even if I don't," he said fiercely.

"My lord," Esal said as his eyes brimmed with tears that he refused to shed. "Win for us! Win so we can all go home together. Madame Olwyn, she's waiting for you, so you have to come home too!"

"Yeah!"

"Win for us!"

"Win for the Hounds!"

"Win for the Hounds of Belvin! Win for Raek Village!"

"Win for us! Win for us! Win for us!"

The sounds of his men cheering for him stacked up one upon the next, like waves of the rising tide piling on top of each other until they became a flood of strength that surged through Carwyn's body.

Pain faded away and even the stiffness of his cracked ribs seemed dull and distant as he lowered the visor on his helm, striding down the length of the road to where his opponent stood waiting for him.

Just minutes ago, he had prepared himself to die. Injured and outclassed by the inhuman strength of the serpentine demon, he had no reason to believe that he would emerge victorious from this duel. But somehow, with the sounds of his men cheering behind him, he found the strength to stand up tall.

And with that strength, he found the courage to believe, even for just these few moments, that it was possible for him to win the day. For his men. For Raek Village, and most importantly, for the wife who waited for her brave knight to come home and the child that was soon to be born.

For all of them, today, he would win!