

The Vampire 731

Chapter 731: Two Sides of a Coin (Part One)

For a moment, the air between the two brothers grew incomparably thick and heavy as they stared at each other in silence.

Anyone chancing upon them, even if they didn't know either of the men, would instantly recognize them as brothers. Both possessed the same chestnut hair, the same graceful and refined features with smooth jaws, well-shaped lips, and subtle brows. If a sculptor had shaped them both from clay, then he'd clearly used the same mold.

But from that same mold, countless differences emerged. Owain wore his hair much shorter to accommodate his helm when he donned armor, while Loman wore his long, tied back in a neat, scholarly tail with a silk ribbon that matched his tunic. Both men were tall, but Loman's figure was slender and graceful, whereas Owain's radiated the strength and power that flowed from his sculpted, muscular physique.

Most telling of all, however, were their eyes as they regarded each other from a few paces away. Owain's brown eyes felt as hard as flint, and even here in the deepest part of Lothian Manor, they seemed to twitch every few seconds as he habitually watched his surroundings for hidden dangers. Loman's eyes, however, even though they were nearly the same shade of brown, were open wider, calmly observing the man before him and giving his brother his full, undivided attention.

"I'm still a priest, Owain," Loman finally said with a heavy sigh. "I haven't forsaken the cloth or my oaths. But Father," he said helplessly, gesturing at his exquisitely tailored tunic and cloak. "Father wants it to be clear that I'm helping him with the barons as his son, and not as a representative of the Church."

"Don't lie to me, Brother," Owain said, pushing off the stone wall with his foot and striding across the hall until his face was only inches away from Loman's. "You aren't any good at it, so don't waste your breath. I know father's been talking about marrying you off, so you can stop pretending that this is just for appearances," he said, plucking at Loman's tunic.

"Brother," Loman protested. "I don't know what you..."

"Charlotte Otter," Owain said sharply, leaning in close enough to force his brother to take half a step back as he stared in the other man's eyes. "I can't believe Father thinks so little of you that he would

force you to court that fat sow of a woman. Or is it because you've given everything you have to the Church your entire life that you need to marry a rich hog to suckle at her father's teats in order to fund your belated thirst for power?"

"How did you..." Loman started to say, his eyes going wide before realization dawned a moment later. "Lady Jocelynn," the young priest guessed. "She heard about my lunch with Baron Otker and Lady Charlotte yesterday."

"Of course she heard," Owain said, turning away from his brother in disgust and returning to the opposite wall, leaning against it and regarding his brother as though he were an utter fool. "A lesson for you, Loman, since you're ignorant in the ways of women."

"Give a woman a little bit of attention," Owain said, holding up his thumb and forefinger less than an inch apart. "Just a tiny bit of affection or praise from the son of a Marquis and every woman, from common whores to the daughters of counts and barons, will be filled with so much pride and excitement that they'll rush to tell their friends, even if they know they shouldn't."

Owain had been surprised at how much Jocelynn had been able to learn by hosting the visiting young ladies for tea anytime the visiting knights or barons brought their daughters with them. As the daughter of a count, Jocelynn held the highest status in the entire march when it came to gatherings of young ladies, and there wasn't a single one of the young girls who hadn't been giddy to receive her invitation.

Of course, Jocelynn might not always understand which pieces of gossip were useful to Owain and which ones weren't, but she happily told him everything she'd learned each night. Once he'd heard it all, he would patiently explain to her which things were important to learn more about and which things she shouldn't bother herself with.

It was time consuming to listen to young women's gossip, but it had produced some surprising nuggets of gold, like the fact that Bors Lothian was discussing marriage options with his vassals and their daughters, and that he always brought Loman along when he did.

"You gave that fat hog hope, Brother dear," Owain sneered. "You made her think that she was special enough, lucky enough, rich enough, and important enough to discuss her marriage options with a son of Lothian. I'm amazed that Father could stomach the insult," he said with a trace of bitterness coloring his voice. "But then, if Father needs to whore you out to his own vassals, maybe I should consider it a sign that he's given up on you. Mother must be..."

"That's enough, Owain," Loman said sharply, interrupting his brother before the older man could say another word. His face had grown several shades darker as Owain heaped insults on Lady Charlotte, but he only exploded when Owain started to imply that their mother wouldn't approve of Bors and Loman's actions.

"Charlotte is a gentle lady who spends most of her time caring for her grandmother and great uncle," Loman said, leaping to the young lady's defense. "She's kind, compassionate, and she spends almost as much time as I do tending to the needs of the poor and the broken within her father's domain. I won't hear her insulted!"

"Oh, so you like them big," Owain said with a mocking smile. "I had no idea that my darling brother had developed such.. Heavy tastes. But really, Brother, if you're going to forsake your vows to contend for the throne, at least let your older brother do you a favor before you make a horrible mistake. I know a discreet brothel where..."

"I said that's enough, Owain!" Loman said as his face heated in a mixture of anger and embarrassment. "You must have been waiting here for quite some time, so what is it that you want?" Loman asked, visibly trembling and clenching his fists as he fought to regain control of his anger.

In the temple, almost nothing could push him to the point of shouting, but when it came to his brother's needling words, he felt as helpless as an unarmored and unarmed farmer on the battlefield. Before, when he was safely ensconced in the walls of the Church and cared little for his brother's ambitions, it would have been easier to let Owain's offhand insults roll off him, like water off the back of a duck.

But now, for the first time that Loman could remember, Owain's insults held real heat and sharpness that cut at Loman's own insecurities. For the first time, Loman felt a faint thread of genuine fear as he faced his brother's mocking tone, and he wondered if there would be a fist to follow the cutting words if he couldn't regain some ground against his brother.

Of course, that faint thread of fear didn't escape Owain's gaze as the corner of his lips raised in a menacing smirk. He'd clearly accomplished at least one of his objectives, now, he just needed to press a little harder to get the rest...

Chapter 732: Two Sides of a Coin (Part Two)

Under Owain's mocking stare, Loman took a deep breath, stiffening his spine and drawing himself up to his full height as he cloaked himself in the stately demeanor of a priest who bowed only to the Holy Lord of Light. His brother might be fierce and forceful, Loman reminded himself, but next to the righteous power of faith, even swords and armor bent and shattered.

"Father is resting until dinner, so if you need him, you should return later," Loman said, giving a pointed look at the heavy wooden door as if to suggest that causing trouble here would only anger their father. "Since I've already helped him to lie down, I would appreciate it if you didn't spoil my efforts," he said, speaking both as a dutiful son and as a priestly healer.

There were very few people in this world who could still intimidate Owain now that he had become a knight, especially after he spent so many years fighting skirmishes with demons, but their father was still one of the people who even Owain needed to lower himself and walk small in front of.

"Father's resting?" Owain said, raising a brow in surprise that appeared genuine. "The sun has barely set. Dinner won't be for another two bells. How bad is his health that he needs to rest now?" Owain asked, sounding so genuinely concerned that he almost believed himself.

"Don't lie to me, Brother," he added as he scowled at Loman, raising a finger and pointing at his brother as if the tip of his finger were the point of a sword. "He's my father as well as yours. If his body is failing him, I have a right to know."

For a moment, Loman hesitated. He hated that Owain was pressing him so fiercely on things, but he'd already been caught out trying to tell a half-truth once. If he did again, things might get even uglier, and they were right outside their father's door. If Bors had to come to Loman's rescue because he couldn't handle his own brother, what kind of message would that send about how he could lead the march?

"Father is still as strong as a bull," Loman said with a heavy sigh. "But his old wounds are bothering him, and the cough that he's suffering is more than a wet autumn cough," he admitted. "It may be nothing, or it may be serious. It's too soon to tell, and he won't let me examine him further to understand the sickness, nor will he let me pray over him."

"That sounds like Father," Owain agreed, painting a worried look on his face. "He'll be stubborn to the very end. Is there anything you can do?" Owain asked as he focused sharply on his brother's responses.

Had things progressed far enough that his brother would be ready to summon other healers? Or did he still have confidence in his skills to manage their father's health? Loman's answer would tell Owain a great deal about how rapidly things were moving now that his investment in the Black Merchant's services was finally bearing fruit.

"There are a few things I can do for him," Loman said, though he didn't sound hopeful. "I'm headed to the kitchens to give instructions to his cooks. No more fatty sausages, nothing boiled in butter, and no more rich creams. Too much fat and grease can inflame the organs and distress the bowel, so we should spare his body the strain until he recovers."

Loman expected his father to protest. No man liked it when healers took away their favorite dishes, and they liked it even less when they were forced to choke down bitter herbal concoctions. But, perhaps if the bland diet upset his father enough, the stubborn Marquis would relent and allow Loman the opportunity to give him a more thorough exam, if only to be released from the torment of boiled turnips, steamed chicken, and grain porridge that his son was about to inflict on him.

"But he will recover, won't he?" Owain asked anxiously. "He always said that he needed to see his grandchildren born, and I'd like to give him at least a few to bounce on his knee when he retires. He's earned that much from life after all he's done."

"I'm sure he'll be fine," Loman said with the same practiced ease that he'd used to reassure countless patients and their families, even when he wasn't certain what the future held. "As you said, Father is too stubborn to let go of life before he's seen his grandchildren. He'll be with us for many years to come, I'm sure of it."

"Good," Owain said as he pushed back off the wall and turned to leave. "In that case, I'll tell Lady Jocelynn the good news. She's been fretting, you know, ever since she heard from Lady Adala that you were fussing over Father for his cough. I'll make sure she knows that everything will be well now that Father is in your capable care," he called over his shoulder as he walked away.

Of course, Owain knew that things wouldn't be well, no matter what Loman did. Spider Demon venom was insidious in the way it weakened both the body and the mind, and it could only be cured by the Church's greatest healers.

But since Loman hadn't identified the poison yet, Owain had no intention of giving up the game. It would be fun to watch his younger brother bustling about, throwing himself at every available woman of status in the hopes of securing a patron while he tried to prove that he could inherit the throne.

By the time his brother realized the malady that their father was suffering from, it would be too late. After all, who would accept the confused ramblings of a madman in the grips of his delusions when he tried to declare Loman his heir?

Soon, Owain thought as he left his brother behind outside their father's chambers. Soon, he could put an end to the farce that Ashlynn was in the Summer Villa and dispose of the pale imitation he'd hidden there to maintain appearances. Soon, he would see his father fall and his brother's treacherous ambitions fall to ruins with the old man's death.

Soon, he would ride at the head of the greatest army assembled under the Lothian banner in more than a hundred years, and he would carve his name into history as the first Lothian Duke. All of his pieces were finally in place... Now all he had to do was wait for everything he wanted to fall into his waiting hands.

Chapter 733: Special Guests (Part One)

At the edge of the Vale of Mists, a strange caravan made its way along the ancient roadway that, if followed to its end, would lead all the way through the High Pass before ending in High Fen City. Before anyone could enter the Vale of Mists and continue on further, they would be confronted by the Vale's first line of defense, one of the largest walls ever built in Eldritch lands.

The Vale of Mists lay nestled in a steep-sided valley along the River Luath and when Nyrielle had retaken the Vale from Lothian hands, she looked for the most defensible position to establish the new border separating the Vale from Lothian lands. In the end, she chose a point in the mouth of the valley between two steep cliffs more than ten leagues apart and built a series of towering walls between the cliffs on either side.

The outer wall was the tallest, from its base to the top of the wall it stood nearly forty feet high and at the top of the wall, it was more than a dozen feet thick. Moreover, every thousand paces along the wall, a small tower stood, providing rallying points that would prevent attackers from easily sweeping the wall if they could climb to the top of it.

Behind the first wall, a second, shorter wall lay just far enough uphill to place the first wall within range of a strong shot from a skilled Bowman. The space between the two walls was normally used for the grazing of cattle and sheep, but in times of war, it could quickly become a killing field for anyone unfortunate enough to become trapped between the two walls.

Beyond that, the Vale's final wall stood at the top of a steep rise. Anyone charging the third wall would need to struggle uphill while defenders were free to bombard them using the piles of heavy stones or stacks of logs that were kept atop the wall, should the Vale of Mists ever find itself pushed back to the final line of defense.

Now, Sir Hugo Hanrahan and Sir Rain Aleese stared at the towering walls of the Vale with an impending sense of dread.

When they woke in the strange camp where Lady Ashlynn had left them, the first thing that struck both knights was how quiet the camp was. There were faint sounds of a few servants moving about and the shifting of horses against their harnesses, but soldiers weren't a quiet sort, especially after a night spent in a rough camp.

By the time the knights woke, there should have been at least a few men belly-aching, whether it was about the food, the camp, or just the eerie mist that enveloped them, but they didn't hear a peep of complaint from any of their soldiers, and when they glanced at the place where the men had bedded down the night before, they didn't see any sign of them either.

"Where are our men?" Sir Rain demanded, his hand snatching his sword from where it lay next to him on the cold, damp ground as he scanned the eerily quiet camp.

"You can relax," Sir Ollie said as he gestured toward a nearby wagon where a dozen forms lay motionless beneath heavy blankets, their chests rising and falling in deep, peaceful sleep. "They're still sleeping, we've just loaded them up in the wagon for the journey. Now that you're both awake," he added as he approached both men with a smile that looked gentle and amicable but for some reason, was even more terrifying than if he'd approached them with a naked blade.

"I need you to make a decision," Ollie said, folding his arms across his chest and making a show of not touching the hilts of any of the knives at his waist.

"What did you do to them?" Hugo asked as he stared at the unconscious soldiers, his mind reeling. How had they all been rendered so helpless without anyone raising an alarm? Just the act of picking them up to load them into the wagon should have woken them but they all looked like they'd been asleep for hours. Some of them had even rolled over onto each other, staying close for warmth through the cold night.

"The same thing I can do to you, if necessary," Ollie said gently. "You can enter the Vale of Mists as Lady Ashlynn's honored guests so long as you give your word as knights that you would conduct yourselves as gentlemen visiting a foreign nation, or you can join your men in peaceful slumber until we reach our destination."

"The potion that I added to their food last night will keep them asleep until after we've arrived," Ollie explained. "I'm sorry for the necessity, but just like Constable Daithi and Eamon, they'll need to spend a number of days in confinement before we're ready to let them have more freedom."

"Potion?" Sir Rain said with a frown. "Something like the essence of poppy?" the knight asked, instantly thinking of the medicine that physicians and even a number of priests carried to dull the pain of wounded soldiers. Among knights, it was considered shameful, close to abandoning their duties even, to indulge in medicines that dulled and clouded the mind in order to escape from pain, but if Sir Ollie had dosed all of the men under their command...

"It's something like that," Ollie said with a smile. "Lady Heila, Lady Ashlynn's lady-in-waiting, is very skilled at healing arts. Much better than my fumbling attempts," he laughed. "So, what will it be? Will you enter the Vale of Mists willingly as Lady Ashlynn's guests, or will you take a nap? There's no shame in the latter," he offered quickly. "If you feel like your virtues demand that you be taken prisoner, then we'll respect that."

"Willingly," Hugo said quickly, giving a panicked look at Sir Rain, fearing that the man would insist on being taken captive rather than submitting to... To whatever awaited them in the Vale of Mists. "We'll go willingly as guests," he insisted, summoning up all of his courage and committing to his decision. Though whether it was an act of courage to enter the Vale of Mists as a guest or an act of cowardice to escape being drugged and taken captive, even he couldn't say for certain.

Now, however, as the massive stone walls loomed ahead of them, Sir Hugo began to have second thoughts about his decision. Sir Ollie had said very little during the hours they spent in the carriage, and nearly an hour ago, the young knight had clutched his chest in pain as some kind of fit came over him. Ollie insisted that he was fine, but he'd become increasingly impatient to reach the Vale ever since that strange attack.

Worse, the sun hung very low in the sky and the mists had grown so thick that they could only see a few hundred paces ahead. The towering walls of the Vale loomed before them like giant headstones poking out of the earth and Hugo could already see the figures of several horned demons standing atop the

walls, and behind them, the looming figures of claw demons, looking like they were ready to tear a man to pieces.

Directly ahead of them, however, striding out of the fog as if she'd been summoned by dark, unholy magic, was a figure conjured directly from the most terrifying of bedtime stories told by parents in the Kingdom of Gaal to their children. A single claw demon was already frightening enough, but to see one wearing the wide-brimmed conical hat of a witch turned even Sir Rain's knees to jelly and sent shivers down his spine.

Chapter 734: Special Guests (Part Two)

"Virve," Ollie called as he opened the door of the carriage. His voice was tinged with relief and the tension between his shoulders lessened by half when he saw her waiting for them at the gate.

While it was clear from the set of her ears and her lowered brows that she wasn't entirely happy to receive their guests, there was nothing about her bearing that suggested danger or disaster. Whatever had happened to Ashlynn that Ollie could feel it from leagues away, it wasn't serious enough to distress Virve.

"Welcome home Ollie," Virve said, making her way to the carriage and climbing inside. For a moment, the entire carriage tipped on its springs and both Sir Rain and Sir Hugo gripped at the sides of the carriage, fighting every instinct in their bodies that screamed at them to open the opposite door and flee before it was too late.

"So these are Owain's knights," Virve said, taking a seat next to Ollie and filling the carriage with her sizable figure. Unlike Ashlynn's carriage which had been designed with the Eldritch in mind, Ollie was using the same carriage that Marcel had used to bring Isabell and everyone else to the meeting. Virve had to hunch her shoulders and lean forward to avoid crushing the tip of her hat against the roof of the carriage and there was barely room for Ollie to sit next to her on the same bench seat. "They aren't very impressive, are they?"

"I wouldn't say that," Ollie offered politely. "This is Sir Hugo Hanrahan, and next to him, Sir Rain Aleese," he said, gesturing at the knights opposite them who still clung to the sides of the carriage, looking like they would rush for the doors if they were given the slightest opportunity.

"P-pl-pleased t-to meet you, Lady Virve," Hugo said in a voice that trembled in fear. His complexion had gone ghostly pale and his heart thundered in his chest like the hooves of a racehorse but he did his best

to make a polite greeting. Was it correct to address a witch as 'lady?' Had he just insulted her? He didn't know, but years of experience had taught him that it was better to over praise and flatter a stranger than to underestimate their status.

"It speaks," Rain said, staring wide eyed at the demon witch who had just climbed into their carriage as if it was the most normal thing in the world. And then, as if joining them in a carriage wasn't enough of a shock, it spoke in the king's common tongue! Like it was normal.

"Is that, is that witchcraft?" Rain asked, turning his wide eyed gaze to Ollie. "Is it reading my mind in order to speak properly with us?"

"Careful, little man," Virve said sharply, raising a clawed hand while her lips pulled back enough to bare her sharp teeth. "Even if you were wearing your armor, I could still peel you like a boiled egg."

"Virve!" Ollie said, frowning in disapproval. "They agreed to be our guests. Even if they've lost their manners, we shouldn't lose ours," he said before rounding on the portly knight. "And Sir Rain, you can think of Virve as my sister. Insulting her is little different from insulting me, and Lady Ashlynn won't look favorably on either."

"I don't need Mother Ashlynn to help me deal with trash," Virve snapped, frowning at her coven-sibling. "She has enough to deal with right now. It may be a few days before Mother Ashlynn can spare any time for these two or the other captives. So you two," she said, making a grabbing gesture at the two knights, as though she was sinking her claws into something to tear it open. "You two better not make any trouble for Ollie, or I'll be the one who comes to settle you."

Faced with the ferocity of the claw demon witch, Rain froze, too terrified to even breathe. He'd faced demons in the Southern Steppe at the border of Aleese barony, and he'd fought demons at Owain's side when they burned the flat tail demon village to the ground. He thought that he was a brave man who would never back down in fear before a demon threat.

But without his armor and with nothing but a dagger at his hip for a weapon, he felt completely naked before the witch's fury. Fight? Before he could even draw his dagger, this 'Virve' demon would tear his heart from his chest or his head from his shoulders. There was no fighting this. Flee? As if he could move past the giant demon who filled half the carriage all by herself! There was nowhere in the carriage he could move that would be out of reach of her claws.

And so, for the first time in his life, fear completely overwhelmed the courageous knight. His eyes rolled back in his head and his body slumped as he fainted dead away before the oppressive aura and menacing claws of the demon witch.

Next to him, however, Hugo found himself falling back on the one thing that had always served him in moments of overwhelming fear, the discipline that his teachers and tutors had drilled into his mind over years of study in one of the best schools available to commoners in Keating Duchy.

When faced with the incomprehensible, break the problem down into smaller pieces and analyze each one. When confronted with the impossible, list out the facts and separate them from the guesses and assumptions before drawing any conclusions.

The demon spoke perfect King's Common, without even a trace of accent. Sir Ollie showed no fear of her, calling her sister. She referred to Lady Ashlynn as 'Mother' despite being clearly older than the young noblewoman. These were pieces of a puzzle, and puzzles could be solved, even when the situation seemed to contradict everything he'd been taught about demons and witchcraft.

Hugo's scholarly mind latched onto these puzzle pieces like a drowning man grasping floating branches in the rapids of a river, using logic and analysis to keep the paralyzing terror at bay.

"Ex-excuse me," he said, swallowing heavily as he scraped up what little courage he had left to ask a question. "Lady, Lady Ashlynn isn't old enough to be a mother to anyone, but, but you address her as 'Mother' and Sir Ollie calls you a 'sister'," Hugo said. "Just what kind of relationship do you have with Lady Ashlynn?"

"Ha, you mean Ollie hasn't told you?" Virve said, snorting in laughter at the 'brave' knight who had begun to drool after fainting before she turned her full attention to the trembling steward. It took a great deal of effort for her to restrain her hostility toward men who had pledged their service to Owain Lothian, especially after she'd learned everything that Owain had done to Ashlynn, but seeing one of those knights pass out in fear was like a calming balm on her ragged nerves, calming her enough that she was able to restrain herself from finding out if she could make the other knight faint the same way the first one had.

"I'm the Oak Witch, the same way that Ollie is the Cypress Witch," she said, much to the horror of Sir Hugo who hadn't realized that he'd been in a carriage with a witch this entire time. "But neither of us would be witches if not for Mother Ashlynn," she explained with a grin that showed several of her sharp teeth.

"I would have told you once we reached the fortress," Ollie said as the carriage passed beneath the large gate in the massive stone wall, definitively crossing the border into the Vale of Mists as the heavy gate slammed shut behind them. "Lady Ashlynn is one of the great witches of the Eldritch world," Ollie said calmly. "She's called the Mother of Trees, and Virve and I are members of her coven."

"A, a, a c-coven," Hugo said, slumping helplessly in his seat and wishing that he could faint the way Sir Rain had. Anything, anything would be better than facing the reality he found himself in as the implications of what Sir Ollie had just said swept over him.

"Lady Ashlynn is the head of a coven of witches," he muttered. "And Lord Owain tried to murder her," he whispered before his head snapped upright and his eyes went wide. "She'll kill him," he said, not believing for an instant that Owain, even with all of his skill at swordsmanship, could defend himself against one of the great witches of the Eldritch world.

"She'll destroy the whole of Lothian March," Hugo continued as his breathing grew rapid and his heart beat faster and faster. "We're all doomed!"

Chapter 735: Impressive Engineer (Part One)

In the room atop Ashlynn's tower, Isabell lay on a pile of cushions, listening to the increasingly loud patter-patter sound of rain on the tower's tile roof and the crackle of the small hearth that warmed the large, communal space. Not far from her, standing on a stool in order to peer into a small cast iron cauldron, Heila stirred a thick creamy liquid that smelled of mint and something else bright and fresh that Isabell couldn't identify.

"What is that aroma? Mint and something else?" Isabell asked, turning her head slightly to the side to watch Heila work. Her confrontation with Ashlynn had taken far more out of her than she realized at the time, and she felt like she finally understood the soldiers she'd seen staggering back to camp with terrible wounds who claimed that they didn't feel anything until the fighting stopped.

Her face, neck, and hands had taken the worst of the heat from the fire, and her skin felt tight, dry, and warm to the touch even half an hour after leaving Ashlynn's chambers. The black silk tunic and skirts that Heila had presented her with shielded the rest of her body from the heat, but they did nothing to cushion the other blows of mystical force that hammered her body while Ashlynn's magic raged out of control.

Thankfully, Heila had presented her with a potion that dulled the pain without dulling her mind the way essence of poppy would have. In fact, if it wasn't for the fact that she knew that her body hadn't been healed yet, Isabell would have considered sitting up to converse normally. But Heila had insisted that she wasn't healed yet, only comforted, and until she finished her treatment, Isabell was supposed to move as little as possible.

"There is a spiny plant that Auntie Amahle cultivates with great difficulty in the Briar," Heila explained, raising her wooden spoon out of the creamy liquid to check its consistency before returning to stirring. "It needs dry, sandy soil to grow and the Briar is a very wet place. But the gel from the plant is good at soothing skin and easing burns, so Auntie Amahle sent us with a jar of its gel when we left the Briar, along with several other useful things from her gardens."

"The other thing you're probably smelling is mint," Heila added. "Mint is a cooling herb, and adding its energy to this salve will help to remove the heat from your body. I'll be done with this in just a few more minutes, so just relax and you'll feel better soon, I promise."

"You don't have to use something so rare and precious on me," Isabell said as her eyes opened wide in surprise. "You said the Briar was all the way across the mountains and several days' travel south of, what was the city you mentioned? High Fen? You can't have brought very much of this gel over such a great distance."

"It's fine," Heila said, smiling at the genuine feelings in Isabell's voice. In High Fen City, at the gatherings of the wealthy, Heila had learned to hear the sort of false humility that influential people used when accepting gifts or trading favors, but she heard none of that from Isabell. Instead, she found the older woman to be a very direct and honest person in everything she said and did.

"You haven't met Talauia yet because she's tending to Lord Ritchel's wounds," Heila continued, still referring to Ritchel as an Eldritch Lord even though his title had passed into Ashlynn's hands. "Cousin Tala is the Thistle Witch, and she's part of Auntie Amahle's coven. She brought seeds and starts to help us cultivate a garden like Auntie's, filled with healing herbs that don't grow natively on this side of the mountains."

Of course, Heila didn't mention that Talauia also brought seeds for several plants that were incredibly toxic and could be used to create powerful poisons. There were some things, after all, that Isabell shouldn't hear about. At least. Not yet.

"You know," Heila added as she began to spoon the smooth, creamy salve from the cauldron into a shallow bowl where it could cool quickly. "You're much more impressive in person than Lady Ashlynn let on. She told us that you were brilliant and that she hoped you would agree to help us because you could do so many things, but she never told us how strong you are," she said as she began to use a whisk to whip air into the still cooling salve.

"I don't think I'm that impressive," Isabell said with a faint chuckle. "I couldn't even stand. I, I wanted to do so much more than I did for her," she sighed, closing her eyes and replaying her conversation with Ashlynn through her mind again, searching for anything she could have done to handle it better.

But more than anything, she wished she'd been able to give the wounded young witch the tender embrace that she so clearly needed at the end. By then, however, Isabell had lost most of her strength and only stayed upright by leaning on one of the sofas in front of the hearth.

"I don't think I've ever seen Lady Ashlynn hurting so badly," Heila said as she brought the light, frothy cream over to Isabell and began to apply a faint, very thin layer of it to the older woman's singed hands. "And I've never seen her lose control of her power."

"Most people would have run screaming from a witch who wasn't in control of themselves," Heila said. "I think... I think that, if Virve and I had been there, even Virve might have tried to run. She would have picked me up and carried me away to protect me from Lady Ashlynn until the storm passed or Lady Nyrielle woke up, but even Virve wouldn't have stood her ground the way you did."

"But you would have," Isabell said, sighing in relief as Heila's salve began to visibly restore her tight, inflamed skin. "Virve would have needed to carry you away because you wouldn't have backed down. You would have been right there next to me, trying to reach her through the pain and the grief, wouldn't you?"

"Of course I would!" Heila said instantly. "Lady Ashlynn, she, she gave me the life I'm living now. Without her, I'd still just be an ordinary chambermaid, doing laundry and mopping floors. I owe her everything I am, and I'd do anything for her."

"I think it's more than just the things she's done for you," Isabell said with a smile. "I think you've done as much for her as she's done for you. You aren't in her debt, you're her friend."

"How do you do that?" Heila said, pausing in her treatment of Isabell's wounds to stare at the older woman in genuine awe. "How do you see so clearly, even when we've only just met? How do you know just the things to say?"

Ashlynn had praised Isabell's keen mind, boasted of her vast knowledge and her worldly experiences as someone who journeyed across the sea to study her trade, but she'd never said anything about how clearly those gray eyes saw through to a person's heart.

Heila wasn't as sheltered as she'd been before. She'd met people who were cunning and shrewd in High Fen City, people who were cold and calculating in the High Pass, and people who lived for centuries and spent their idle time soaking in the sun and thinking for days before making a decision in Crystal Lake City.

But when it came to understanding another person's heart and the desires that shaped them, the only people Heila had met who could compare to Master Isabell... were her fellow witches.

Chapter 736: Impressive Engineer (Part Two)

"It's nothing special," Isabell said with a slight chuckle. "I'm just old. I've helped a king claim his throne, raised two children to the age of becoming apprentices, and become the master of my guild... In all that time, it would be strange if I hadn't learned a thing or two about people, wouldn't it?"

"But, but it's more than that," Heila insisted. "I know plenty of people who are old. My parents are the same age you are, but last night, when I brought Ignatious home for dinner and introductions, they were half petrified the whole night just because he's one of Lady Nyrielle's progeny. If it wasn't for Grandfather stepping in, I don't think they would have said ten words the whole night."

"So, I think that Lady Ashlynn is right," Heila said. "I think you're truly special. And I think Virve thinks so too. She would never have carried you like that if she didn't respect your strength and what you did for Lady Ashlynn."

"And what would Virve have done if she didn't respect me?" Isabell asked, frowning at how big of a deal Heila seemed to be making over something as simple as carrying her upstairs and laying her down on the soft cushions that covered the floor around the room's low table. "Would she have thrown me over her shoulder like a sack of vegetables and dropped me on the ground?"

"Or she'd have dragged you by your tunic," Heila said with a sharp nod that stunned Isabell. "Virve... Virve carries a lot of pain. Humans killed her father during the War of Inches when Virve was still just a cub. When we came back from across the mountains and she learned how many villages the humans had attacked and burned to the ground, it just ripped her old wounds wide open. The Heartwood Clan, the Night Weaver Clan, all those families who lost their homes..." Heila's voice grew quiet as she applied more salve to Isabell's cheeks and forehead with gentle, careful strokes.

"But she still carried me gently," Isabell said as comprehension began to dawn on her. She'd seen bitterness and hatred for 'demons' from the humans who lived close to the border with Eldritch lands, but she'd never personally felt the pain of a century-long war that took the lives of friends and loved ones every generation. Now, as she entered the Eldritch world, of course, there would be people like Virve who were nursing old wounds and hatreds they'd carried their entire lives.

"Even though I'm human," Isabell said, nodding slightly in understanding. "Even though she has every reason to hate people like me. Maybe especially people like me who have come to the frontier for the 'opportunity' to take lands for ourselves that were taken from the Eldritch to begin with. I, I don't know that I could have been so gentle with an enemy like that."

"Exactly," Heila said, her voice growing warmer with something that sounded almost like pride. "But you aren't an enemy at all. She saw what you did for Lady Ashlynn tonight. How you stayed with her when her power could have hurt you badly. How you refused to abandon her even when she was... when she was more frightening than I've ever seen her," Heila said softly.

Heila paused in her ministrations, setting aside the airy salve and meeting Isabell's steely eyes directly.

"Virve judges people by their actions," Heila said, thinking back to how her own friendship with the bearish soldier had only blossomed after Heila threw herself beneath the ice covering a frozen lake to help rescue Ashlynn from the death-grip of a Tuscan hunter. Once she'd proven that she was willing to risk herself to protect her lady, Virve's attitude to the diminutive lady-in-waiting had transformed to something much closer to an elder sister watching over her smaller, weaker sibling.

"Tonight, your actions proved you were someone worth respecting. Someone worth..." Heila started to say before she caught herself, snapping her mouth shut so quickly her teeth clicked as she realized she almost said something she wasn't certain she should reveal.

"Someone worth what?" Isabell prompted gently as she searched the young woman's grass-green eyes for a hint of the thoughts lurking behind them.

"Someone worth having as family," Heila said softly, her cheeks coloring slightly. "Our coven isn't just about magic, Master Isabell. We're... we're each other's family now. Ollie was struggling alone in the Lothian kitchens until Lady Ashlynn gave him a place to belong. Virve lost her father in the last war, but she found new siblings here, and she started letting down her walls around us even before she received her seed of witchcraft."

"And I..." Heila started as she smiled shyly, "I found people who see me as more than just the servant I was not that long ago." Her hands stilled as she looked at Isabell with growing conviction. "I've been watching you ever since we met, you know."

"I know how hard it must be to come to this place and find yourself surrounded by people who are so different from your own. People you must have heard horrible things about your whole life," Heila said, gathering momentum as if working herself up to something significant. "It was hard for Lady Ashlynn at first, too, and the first day we met, I think she was a little scared of me even though she tried to hide it."

"You're facing so many of the things she faced, and you're not retreating from any of it. You're treating all of us like people, whether it's me or Georg or Virve... And I know that isn't easy because I've seen other humans whom Lady Ashlynn brought here that refused to even eat the food we cooked for them until they were on the brink of starving themselves. But you aren't like most humans," she explained.

"I think that I have an advantage compared to humans who grew up so close to the wars and the border, though," Isabell said, unwilling to take credit for strength she didn't feel like she possessed. "You might be a 'monster out of a story book' from my childhood, but I never had to face your people in battle, and I never lost anyone to your people either. That makes it easier for me."

"But it's more than just that," Heila said, shaking her head in disagreement. "The way you stood against Lady Ashlynn's grief because you knew she needed someone to anchor her took real courage. And now that you've been hurt, you're still worrying about using our precious supplies instead of demanding that we use our best medicines to treat you the way some other humans might in your place."

"That's why," Heila said, her voice gaining strength as her certainty grew, "when Lady Ashlynn offers you a place in our coven, I hope you'll accept it. Not just because your skills would help us, but because... because I think you'd help us become better than we are. The way you helped Lady Ashlynn tonight, just by being the kind of person who won't abandon someone they care about."

"She needs that right now," Heila said softly. "We all do. So please, when she makes the offer, will you at least consider it?"

Chapter 737: Too Old to Change?

For several moments, Isabell stared at Heila in shock as she tried to process the idea that Ashlynn would, at some point in the future, offer her a place in her coven of witches. It sounded preposterous, but then, just a day ago, the notion of entering the Vale of Mists and being received as an honored guest was also preposterous. Yet here she lay, with a horned witch tending to her wounds, using exotic and rare ingredients that could very well be considered priceless on this side of the mountains...

It was too much, even for her. Accepting that Ashlynn was a witch and holding back all of her preconceived notions of what witches were until she learned first hand was already a stretch for her. She could accept that Ashlynn wasn't wicked, even if she was going to war with the rulers of Lothian March. She could accept that the Eldritch people were just people who looked different and had unique customs of their own.

She could accept all of those things and more, but the notion of joining them, of becoming a witch like Ashlynn and Heila. It just felt like a step too far.

"If she makes the offer some day," Isabell said politely. "Then I promise to consider it. But I'm not a warrior. I wasn't a warrior even when I fought in wars and I'm much less of one now. I doubt you need an old woman who can't fight to join your coven now."

"You aren't that old," Heila said with a gentle shake of her head. "You might be twice my age, but you're not that many years older than Virve or Sir Lennart, and they both began new lives as something greater than they were before. Virve became the Oak Witch and Sir Lennart married Madame Zedya and became a vampire so they could share their love forever."

"People can always change to become something different," Heila added, pausing just long enough to receive Isabell's permission to remove her tunic so she could begin to treat the older woman's wounds.

"Ignatious, he, he's more than twice your age, and he's still changing," Heila said with a faint blossom of pink across her cheeks. "Especially since we found each other. Every time I hold his hand and every time he wraps his arms around me, he's a little bit softer and a little bit warmer, all on his own, because people never stop changing."

"You said he was from the Inquisition?" Isabell said, eager to pivot the conversation away from the notion of her joining Ashlynn's coven.

She knew that Heila was trying to be helpful but Isabell felt like she understood who she was fairly well after all these years. The idea of reinventing herself at her age, especially in such an extreme way, felt like more than a simple renovation, it felt like tearing out her own foundations in a way that could cause her whole world to crumble. There was something else about the example that Isabell wondered about so she leaped at the opportunity to shift the conversation in a different direction.

"Didn't you say earlier that Ignatious was also one of Lady Nyrielle's progeny?" Isabell asked, wondering how much becoming a vampire had changed the man and whether it had been the act of transforming him into a vampire that was responsible for that transformation or something else. "It must be hard for him to reconcile his faith with his... transformation."

Isabell didn't know what else to call it. She'd shared a meal with Marcel and never realized that he was a vampire but, after seeing Ashlynn reveal all of her power, she wondered if Vampires were the same way. Did Marcel have a different form that he only revealed when he was using his powers? Was this Ignatious the same?

"It took Ignatious a long time to find a way to hold onto his faith after becoming a 'demon' like the rest of us," Heila said softly as her hands pulsed with silvery-green energy. Slowly, she traced intricate patterns on Isabell's skin, promoting the body's own healing and erasing the bruises one by one.

It wasn't the fastest form of healing she could use but after hearing Ollie speak about the fanaticism of the hunter named Eamon, she wanted to be careful about how close she came to 'working miracles.' Eamon hadn't needed to see much in order to decide that Ashlynn was a Saintess, worthy of worship according to his faith.

While Heila didn't think that Isabell would experience the same kind of religious devotion that Eamon had, she still wanted to keep her use of witchcraft as close to healing that the older woman might be familiar with as possible. That was why she started with a familiar looking salve and slowly progressed to gentle healing magic that only healed one bruise at a time instead of drawing on the vast power of the forest outside the fortress to heal Isabell's wounds in minutes.

"Ignatious shouldn't have joined the inquisition to begin with," Heila said, pulling her thoughts back to Isabell's question. "He's a kind and gentle man. The Church saw that he was talented and they twisted him into something he wasn't meant to be. Now, he's finding his way back to the person he always was. He still believes in your Holy Lord of Light, the Heavenly Shores and such, but he's been discarding several other teachings that he feels are misguided. Like the things the Church has to say about the Eldritch."

Isabell sat quietly as she tried to imagine what that must have been like for Ignatious. She didn't know the man, but it wasn't an easy thing to become an Inquisitor. She'd met more than a few Inquisitors herself over the years and they were among the most fanatical and hardened men she'd ever met.

Their faith and the zeal with which they sought out the enemies of their Church were so overwhelming that, sometimes, it was hard to see them as complete people. They seemed to have sacrificed parts of themselves, like the ability to laugh or cry, in order to become vessels for the Holy Lord of Light's power.

So, to put all of that aside after transforming into a vampire, something his former self would have hunted and destroyed without question, was a feat that Isabell didn't know if she should admire or fear. After all, he'd done it because of what Lady Nyrielle made him.

Or was it something simpler that made him undergo such a radical reevaluation of his faith?

Chapter 738: Extraordinary People, Ordinary Love

"How do you fit into all of that? Is he doing that because of what he's become, or is it because he's found his way to you?" Isabell asked, sighing in relief as she felt tension melting away from her body as Heila worked. The potion she'd been given at the beginning might have blocked the pain, but that didn't mean that her body had healed. Now, however, bit by bit, she felt even aches and pains that had troubled her for several years starting to loosen and fade away.

"I love him," Heila said, without a moment of hesitation. "Not just because he fed on me either," she added quickly. "But he began to change long before I was even born. I just," Heila started to say before pausing again and wrestling with how forthcoming she should be.

Ashlynn had told her not to hold back secrets, but this wasn't just her secret to share. Still, she firmly believed that Isabell would find her way into the coven one day, and even if she didn't, she felt like Isabell could be trusted. After all, she was a woman who could stand up to a witch's fury because she

cared about Ashlynn, and that bought her more than a little bit of trust from all of the members of Ashlynn's coven.

"A witch's blood has power," Heila said after a brief hesitation. "Lady Nyrielle has been more, alive, I suppose, since she began to feed on Lady Ashlynn. It's the same with Ignatious, though not as much. Since he fed on me, we've formed a sort of connection, and I've been able to help him heal the scars in his heart."

"I've seen what lies at the center of his heart, and he's felt what's at the core of mine. I think it scares him a little bit, to feel so close to someone so quickly. I don't think he's ready to call it love yet, but that doesn't matter to me," she said, pausing as her eyes were momentarily distant and her face heated yet again.

"Father insists that he court me properly for at least a year," Heila said with a light laugh. "Mother says she doesn't care how long the courtship lasts, as long as she gets an invitation to the wedding."

"That sounds... very normal," Isabell said in a surprised tone. If she set aside the matter of 'feeding' on the person you loved and the power of a witch's blood, it sounded like a very ordinary relationship. In fact, Isabell had been the one in her relationship who was slower to say she loved Casques, but he'd been patient with her, telling her that he would wait until she was ready to say the words. "Honestly, I didn't expect something so normal from a vampire and a witch."

"Lady Ashlynn and Lady Nyrielle aren't that different, you know," Heila said, meeting Isabell's grey-eyed gaze for a moment and pausing her work. "They're so very strong and they fight so hard. They carry so much weight on their shoulders. But at the end of the day, the things Lady Ashlynn talks about the most are the times she's gone dancing with Lady Nyrielle, or the dinners they share on her terrace. Even for people like us, with all of the power that we have, the things we desire the most are still very ordinary kinds of happiness."

"Is that your way of telling me that becoming a witch wouldn't change me?" Isabell said lightly. "That I could still go back to my Casques and continue life as though nothing had changed?"

"No," Heila said, gently helping Isabell to sit upright and helping her back into her tunic now that she was finished healing her injuries. "Becoming a witch would change you. Nothing would ever be the same. Ashlynn told me that I shouldn't hide anything from you and I won't. Even if she hadn't asked, I wouldn't. But just because some things change, it doesn't mean that you can't still love who you love and do as you please."

"It's just that, if you become a witch, you become a part of something much, much greater than yourself," Heila said. "You become part of a family like no other, and you become a part of the world itself," she said before shaking her head and laughing lightly. "It sounds a little, um, pretentious I guess, when I say it that way. But you can feel all of the living and growing things around you, and you can feel yourself as part of the greater whole. You can't feel those things and not change a little."

"I think I understand," Isabell said, carefully getting to her feet and moving gently to feel her body now that Heila had finished healing her. She'd been injured before, she'd been tended to by healers before, but never in her life had she felt better after the healers were done with her than she felt before they started. Until now, at least.

"The first time I gave birth, my world changed," Isabell said, smiling at the young witch. "There was a whole other person who had come from me, who needed me to protect them and nurture them and guide them. I felt closer to my mother at that moment than I ever had before, and all the family before me. Maybe it's not the same, but I can understand, at least a little bit, what it might feel like to be connected to something greater than yourself."

"Then, in that case, just... just think on it," Heila said awkwardly. She really should have waited until Ashlynn brought things up, she thought. She could hear the distance in Isabell's voice, as if the older woman wanted to understand in order to understand someone else instead of wanting to understand something that might matter to her own future.

There was still time, however. Once Ashlynn had a chance to process the news of Jocelynn's betrayal, she would return to other matters, including inviting Isabell to join them. For now, all Heila needed to do was to help the other woman keep an open mind.

"I don't know if there will still be a dinner tonight," Heila said as she led Isabell down from the room atop the tower. "Ashlynn wanted to introduce you to Lady Nyrielle tonight, but with everything that's happened, things may have changed. I promise, I'll come check on you in an hour or so, but you should take some time to rest after healing. Even if you're not feeling it now and the wounds have all been treated, your body still went through a lot today."

"Can we, can we check on Lady Ashlynn before I return to my chambers?" Isabell asked hesitantly as they reached the floor where the shattered door leading to Ashlynn's room was still visible, hanging by one hinge and swaying slightly in the breeze from an open window.

"Let me go see if she needs anything," Heila agreed as she stepped into Ashlynn's room, moving more quietly over the carpets and stone floor than Isabell would have thought possible when looking at Heila's cloven hooves.

A few moments later, however, Heila emerged from Ashlynn's bed chamber looking as pale as a freshly washed sheet.

"She's gone," Heila said, staring at Isabell with eyes that were open wide and looked a little bit lost. "She's not there, and neither is her armor."

Chapter 739: Chasing Ashlynn

More than an hour had passed since Heila discovered Ashlynn's disappearance. Briefly, the diminutive witch had considered recruiting Talauia to search for the missing Mother of Trees, but in the end, she decided against it. If Ashlynn had only been the Mother of Trees, then a member of the famed Glimmerwing clan who was also the Thistle Witch might be able to catch up to her. But to catch up to the Mother of Trees, who was also the Seneschal of the Harbinger of Death, would be too much to hope for, even for Talauia.

Fortunately, the days were growing very short as autumn prepared to yield to winter, and it wouldn't be long before Lady Nyrielle woke. Besides, at a time like this, Heila was certain that the very best person to chase after Ashlynn was the woman she'd just become betrothed to.

Instead, Heila had forced all of her worries to the back of her mind to settle the practical affairs that she could on Lady Ashlynn's behalf before collecting a lantern and venturing deep into the unlit caverns dug into the cliff behind the ancient fortress. A year ago, she would have needed a hand-drawn map and perhaps a marking stick of chalk to find her way through the winding caverns where no daylight could reach.

Now, however, she had made the trip to Lady Nyrielle's chambers several times in order to retrieve Ashlynn or things she left behind after spending an evening with her lover. All of that familiarity did nothing, however, to suppress the feeling of anxiety and impending doom that settled over her as she stood outside Lady Nyrielle's chambers, waiting for the powerful vampire to wake.

Each minute that Heila spent in the darkness with only the sounds of her own heartbeat and breathing to keep her company felt like an eternity, one that couldn't pass quickly enough and at the same time, one that she hoped would last forever. As she stood there, she tried to figure out what she would say to

Lady Nyrielle or how she would explain things, but before she could come to any good answers, the door opened and Nyrielle's dark, shadowy presence filled the dimly lit stone hall.

"What happened to her?" Nyrielle asked without preamble. She'd felt Ashlynn's distress hours ago, and it had only grown as the sun marched inevitably toward the horizon. Now, her hair was still askew, and she was still wearing her sleeping gown, but she didn't care to waste even a moment in her need to reach her aching lover's side.

"Lady Ashlynn, she, she learned who betrayed her secret to Owain," Heila said, pressing herself back against the stone wall when the intensity of Nyrielle's glowing, midnight-blue gaze struck her. "It, it was her sister, Jocelynn. She was jealous of Lady Ashlynn's marriage to Owain and..."

"It doesn't matter why," Nyrielle said, cutting Heila off as she extended her senses outward, feeling along the bond of blood that tied her heart to Ashlynn's. "How long ago did she leave?" Nyrielle asked, her eyes widening in surprise as she realized that Ashlynn had already moved far beyond the walls of the ancient fortress and must be nearing the boundary of the Vale of Mists itself by now.

"Do you know where she's going and what she intends to do when she gets there?" Nyrielle asked as she turned her attention back to Heila.

"I don't," Heila admitted, hanging her head in shame. "But she took her armor and the sword she used for practice. She wouldn't have done that unless..."

"Unless she intended to use them," Nyrielle said with a heavy sigh. "I'll bring her home," she promised. "She's worked too hard and laid too many plans to throw them all away in a moment of pain and grief. I won't let her do that to herself, no matter how much she wants to lash out right now. But... this will change things, no matter what happens when I bring her home."

For a moment, Nyrielle stood completely motionless, exuding the stillness that only those who were already dead were capable of. Her mind raced as she filtered through dozens of possibilities before a plan came together in her mind. Not a complete plan, that would be impossible without speaking to Ashlynn, but she at least felt like there was a reasonable way to get her lover through this moment of crisis.

"Heila, you haven't been a servant under my command since you became Ashlynn's lady-in-waiting," Nyrielle said. "But I cannot wait for Zedya and Lennart to reach me. In their absence, will you accept my commands?"

"Your commands are the same as my lady's commands," Heila said as she gave a deep curtsy. "Speak the words and I'll see that your will is done," she said in a voice that was thick with relief. For the past hour, she'd carried the weight of knowing Ashlynn was missing on her shoulders, but now, Lady Nyrielle was taking up that burden. Not only that, she was relying on Heila to help her rather than taking over entirely and shutting her out now that Lady Nyrielle had decided what needed to be done.

"First, find Zedya," Nyrielle commanded as she held up a pale, slender finger to mark off her points. "Tell her what has happened and ask her to send word to Sybyll. She needs to arrive within two nights. I doubt that Thane will be able to hold out for more than a single night in Ashlynn's current state, but I'll need to trouble him tomorrow night to help her prepare."

"Second," Nyrielle continued, holding up another slender finger next to the first. "Track down Erkembalt and tell him that his time is nearly up. He has five days to complete his work on Ashlynn's new blade. Tell him that for each day beyond the five I've given him that I'll take one of his fingers."

"His, his fingers? My Lady?" Heila said, swallowing heavily at the ruthlessness of Nyrielle's order. "Will you really, really sever his fingers? He's an artificer. Without his hands..."

"You can reattach a finger if it was only severed recently, can't you?" Nyrielle said with a faint smile that revealed a hint of fang. "Don't tell him that you can, but make sure he understands that this isn't some silly research project that he can keep experimenting on. Ashlynn needs a suitable blade when she faces Owain Lothian, and if he won't provide one, then I'm afraid she'll risk using that cursed Holy Flame Blade again," she said darkly.

Nyrielle didn't need to say anything beyond that. Some day, Ashlynn might be able to master the Church's sacred weapon, but her first attempt had left her badly burned, and they had been forced to rush her back to the Vale of Mists from the High Pass in order to have a chance to heal from her injuries.

In the wake of that battle, Nyrielle had commanded Artificer Erkembalt to forge a weapon that could replace Ashlynn's shattered darksteel blade. If it had been ready by the time of their betrothal ceremony, Heila was certain that Lady Nyrielle would have presented it to Ashlynn along with command of the Vale's forces.

Unfortunately, breaking Hauke's curse had been more important than forging Ashlynn's new weapon, and Heila hadn't heard that there had been much progress in the days since Hauke was cured. Now, however, Heila couldn't help but worry that Nyrielle was right. Ashlynn would want to destroy Owain in the most crushing way possible, and if that meant using the Holy Flame Blade to do it, especially right now when she was consumed with anger and grief over her sister's betrayal, then that was exactly the weapon she would use.

"I'll make sure he understands," Heila said solemnly.

"Good," Nyrielle said as her dark wings began to unfold from her slender back. "The last thing you need to do is to explain all of this to Thane. He has tonight to see that the army is in order and that things can proceed smoothly in Ashlynn's absence for the next several days. She'll be in no shape to give orders, and he'll need to make sure that the army can act independently."

"You don't need to look so worried," Nyrielle said with surprising gentleness, appearing before Heila faster than the diminutive witch saw her move and gently wiping away the moisture that had collected in the corner of her eyes. "I'll be back with my darling soon, and I won't let any harm come to her, even if I have to protect her from herself," she promised.

Then, between one blink and the next, Nyrielle vanished from sight with only the faint sound of feathers fluttering in the wind and a light breeze to mark her departure. For a minute, Heila stood there, too startled to even move, but once the moment passed she took a deep breath and started walking down the dark corridor.

First, she needed to talk to Zedya about summoning Dame Sybyll back from Airgead Mountain. Everything else would come after that, one step at a time. She just had to focus on doing her part, and Lady Nyrielle would take care of the rest, hopefully before Lady Ashlynn did anything more rash than taking a long walk in the rain...

Chapter 740: The Earth Wept (Part One)

Cold rain poured down on Ashlynn, pattering off the wide brim of her sturdy War Hat before running down to splatter against the metal of her chain armor. The thick gambeson she wore underneath the coat of mail kept the water from reaching her skin, but even the layers of tightly woven fabric could do nothing to warm her shivering soul.

She didn't know how long she'd been moving through the forest, only that the sun had set a number of hours ago and she had moved beyond the walls of the Vale of Mists as she headed in the direction of Lothian March, drawing closer to it than she had been in more than half a year since her infiltration of the Summer Villa.

Her eyes barely noticed the forest around her while her mind sank deep into contemplation, replaying years of conversations and shared moments with her sister as though they were the tails of an instrument of penance that she used to savagely beat her own soul.

"Father thinks I should marry into the Wayfinders Guild, but I hate the idea of turning into some kind of trophy for a wealthy trader..." -WHIP-

"I just got home from Lady Nessa's birthday party, and I brought you a..." -WHIP-

"I overheard Mother and Father talking last night, and you have to promise not to tell them I told you, but..." -WHIP-

Each memory cut deeper and deeper until tears flowed down Ashlynn's cheeks like rain, as if her wide-brimmed hat could do nothing to keep the storm from reaching her.

"Why?" Ashlynn sobbed as she staggered through the darkness, stumbling over loose stones and slipping on the damp earth as she pushed herself to move ever closer to Lothian territory. "Why couldn't you just tell me that you wanted him? I would have stepped aside for you," she said, stumbling to the ground as tears blurred her vision.

She'd pleaded with her parents to stop trying to force Jocelynn into a marriage she didn't want, but she'd never imagined her sister would decide that the marriage she truly wanted was the one that Ashlynn had only reluctantly accepted. Their father saw her marriage to Owain as the answer to their prayers, but in reality, Owain was the furthest thing from a blessing from the Heavenly Shores.

"You can't even protect yourself from him," she said as she slumped to the earth, allowing the rain to pour over her as her head hung low. "I would have helped you to find someone better than Owain, someone like Ollie if you needed a brave and gentle knight, or someone like Thane if you wanted a real hero, or... Or anyone who would make you happy."

"It's my fault," she said bitterly, slamming a hand covered by a metal gauntlet into the sodden earth. "It's my fault for letting you think Owain was a good man. I shouldn't have hidden so much. If I hadn't put on such a brave face... if I'd let you know the kind of person he really was... would it have changed anything?"

"Or would you have thought I was lying to console you?" Ashlynn wondered aloud. "Would you even have believed me? Or would you have fallen all over him because he pretends so well until it's too late to escape his clutches?"

"DAMN YOU OWAIN!" Ashlynn shouted, screaming so loudly her throat felt like it was tearing from the pain in her cry. "DAMN YOU FOR DOING THIS TO US!"

Just days ago, she'd wished her sister could have been there to see how happy she was dancing with Nyrielle at their betrothal celebration. She'd imagined her sister dancing with Ollie when the music started or laughing and giggling as Ashlynn introduced her to Georg's delicate pastries and refined dishes. She'd thought about how much better it would have been to have Jocelynn at her side, where she could keep her safe from Owain...

"Damn you, Jocey, why? Why did you have to be the one to put a knife in my back?" Ashlynn sobbed as her right hand repeatedly struck the soft mud beside her. "I HATE YOU FOR THIS!"

She wanted to lash out. She wanted to take her armored fist and slam it into her sister's body again and again and again until Jocelynn knew even a fraction of the helplessness and agony she'd felt when Owain discovered her secret. She wanted to break her sister's beautiful face until the man she'd betrayed her sister for could only look at her with horror and revulsion, and she wanted to see the pain and hurt in her sister's eyes when Owain turned on her because she wasn't perfect anymore.

The storm around her grew fiercer, and thunder rippled through the clouds above as if the skies themselves could feel her pain. Bright white light flooded her vision, followed a moment later by a - CRACK- -BOOM- as a bolt of lightning split the sky less than a thousand paces away. Moments later, a soft, reddish glow could be seen through the trees as one of the silent sentinels of the forest cracked in two and burst into flames.

"I hate you," Ashlynn whispered in a tone that was dark and venomous. "I hate you and I hate that I still love you too," she said as sobs shook her body. "I hate that he did this to us but... But if it hadn't been him, would you have betrayed me anyway?"

"Have I been lying to myself all these years?" Ashlynn asked, staring up at the sky and allowing the rain to wash over her face as her hat tumbled from her head to land beside her. "Were you lying to me all this time?"

"WHY COULDN'T YOU HAVE COME WITH ISABELL?" Ashlynn shouted at the sky as anger overwhelmed the pain in her heart. "WHY COULDN'T YOU BE HERE NOW TO ANSWER ME?"

"And why.... Why do I still want to hear your answer so badly," she said, clutching at fistfuls of soft soil as tremors wracked her body. "Why do I even care why you did what you did?"