

## The Vampire 751

### Chapter 751: Something Normal

For several moments, Ashlynn and Nyrielle remained motionless, basking in the feeling of holding and being held as their hearts began to still. There was still hurt, guilt and even a trace of fear between them, but the storm had passed, leaving them both shaken but still standing strong and still clinging to each other for strength.

"I'm a mess," Ashlynn said after a few minutes had passed. Slowly, she pulled back from Nyrielle and truly looked at her lover, realizing that, beyond her puffy, tearstained eyes, Nyrielle's hair was in just as much disarray as hers was. In fact, she looked more disheveled at this moment, with her dark silk robe slipping off one shoulder and her sash only half tied than Ashlynn had ever seen her.

"You're a mess too," Ashlynn added with a faint smile as she glanced around the room. Ashlynn's armor and the practice sword she'd fetched lay strewn across the floor, dumped in a sodden, muddy pile along with the dress she'd worn under her armor. Elsewhere in the room, she spotted a pale night dress stained with dried mud and discarded near the door leading to Nyrielle's lavish bath.

"There wasn't much time last night," Nyrielle admitted, looking slightly apologetic. "You were shivering and cold when I found you and flying through the storm didn't help. I barely had time to wash the mud from your skin and hair before the sun pressed down on me. I, I can't keep you warm while we sleep," she said sheepishly. "So if not for the bath, I was afraid..."

"It's fine," Ashlynn said, reaching out to place a finger on Nyrielle's lips, unconsciously mirroring what Nyrielle had done for her in her moments of distress the night before. "Come," she said, sliding off the bed and pulling on Nyrielle's hands.

"Let me thank you for rescuing me last night," Ashlynn said, flashing the vampire a fragile smile. "I'll wash and brush your hair. And you can start making it up to me by washing and brushing mine."

"You don't need to force things," Nyrielle said, hesitating at the entrance to her marble tiled bathing chamber. The fire in the room's hearth had burned down to little more than embers, and the water wasn't hot enough to fill the room with steam, but the stones of the room still held much of the warmth of the night before and the temptation to sink into the warm waters with Ashlynn was difficult to resist.

Still, Nyrielle hesitated, unwilling to take advantage of her lover when she was this vulnerable.

"Nyri, I'm afraid," Ashlynn said, pulling Nyrielle closer and wrapping her arms around her lover's lithe body. Nyrielle hadn't fed recently and her skin was icy cold to the touch but that only made Ashlynn grip her tighter, sharing the warmth of her body with the woman who meant more to her than anything... including her vengeance.

"I'm afraid that if we let this moment become a wedge between us, the cracks will only grow," Ashlynn said. "I'm afraid that if you keep your distance from me, if we can't even do normal things, then we'll turn into strangers before we know it. So, right now, I mean it. I need you to make up for what you did wrong by staying close to me instead of pulling away."

"When did my darling become so wise?" Nyrielle said, relenting and following Ashlynn into the marble bathing chamber. Their feet made faint slapping sounds as they walked across the marble tiles, each one turning to different tasks to warm the room and the bath.

For a truly luxurious bath, fires would be lit in a room on the floor above and hot water would pour into the bath, constantly warming water of the bath until it was hot enough to turn their skin pink. But without instructions to do so, the servants of the castle rarely lit the fires on the off chance that Nyrielle would desire a bath when she woke.

Instead, Ashlynn piled fresh wood on the hearth, stoking the flames with a faint flow of wind like a blacksmith working the bellows. Beneath the flames, several smooth, iron balls soaked up the heat as Ashlynn fetched tongs to transfer them into the tepid waters of the bath.

While Ashlynn tended the fire, Nyrielle collected a tray of soaps and fragrant oils. Working with the same precision that Ashlynn used when concocting potions, Nyrielle expertly blended fragrances before blending them with the soaps and whipping a soft, airy foam that smelled of primroses and jasmine.

"Nyri," Ashlynn called from beside the hearth while she waited for the iron balls to soak up more heat. "You need to feed."

"Not from you," Nyrielle said, shaking her head as she set the tray of soaps down next to the bath and fetched a set of towels to hang next to the hearth. "I can feed later tonight. My hunger isn't out of control. And if I fed from you..."

"I know," Ashlynn said softly. "I, I'm not ready to let you feed from me directly right now. I'm sorry, I know I said that I wanted to keep doing normal things but..."

"But my bite will cloud your mind," Nyrielle finished with a sad but understanding look. "I know. You don't need to force yourself."

"Yes, I do," Ashlynn said, padding across the marble floor to leave the bathchamber and returning a moment later with a small goblet and a simple knife. "I know it won't completely slake your thirst," Ashlynn said. "But, I want to care for you. I want to nourish you, even if I can't yield to your bite tonight. Is it, is it alright this way?"

"It's fine," Nyrielle said, wrapping her fingers around Ashlynn's on the goblet. "But you exhausted yourself last night and you'll need your strength to train with Thane tonight. Are you certain? You don't need to do this for me."

"I don't need to," Ashlynn agreed. "But I want to," she added, pressing the goblet into Nyrielle's hands before using the blade of the knife to open a long, red wound in her palm. Making a fist above the goblet, she squeezed her hand tightly, rhythmically squeezing and releasing to stimulate the flow of blood, spilling enough crimson liquid into the goblet to cover the bottom of the vessel and filling until it would cover the first knuckle of her smallest finger.

"I love you, Nyri," Ashlynn said as she ran a finger around the rim of the goblet, leaving behind the faintest crimson stain where her lover would drink. "No matter what, that won't change. So drink, and then join me in the bath..."

## Chapter 752: Immediate Plans

The hot iron balls sizzled as Ashlynn lowered them into the deep marble pool, producing low clouds of steam before they sank to the bottom of the pool, where the water around them hissed and bubbled.

The pool was large, and even adding ten large iron balls from the hearth could only raise the temperature of the pool from tepid to mildly warm, but Ashlynn wasn't looking for a luxurious soak in a muscle-melting hot bath. She wanted a chance to do something simple and normal with Nyrielle, to bathe and wash each other's hair, but both women knew that they could only delay the inevitable for so long.

Soon, Ashlynn would need to emerge from her sanctuary in Nyrielle's room and face the things that she had learned. But right now, as she slid into the warm water of the pool and allowed herself to drift just beneath the surface, everything still felt fuzzy and distant enough that she could think her way through what would come next.

"Why do I need to train with Thane tonight?" Ashlynn asked when Nyrielle began working foamy soap into Ashlynn's hair, gently massaging her scalp as she worked to loosen the tangles and knots. "Is it because you thought I would hate you too much to see you tonight?"

"In part," Nyrielle admitted. "But only in part. You want to face Owain with your own strength, but in order to seize the Lothian Throne from him, you planned to do it without revealing your powers as a witch."

"Coming back from the dead will be enough of a shock to the people of Lothian," Ashlynn said, sighing as the tension in her head melted under Nyrielle's skillful fingers. "Learning that he tried to kill me will shock the barons and the knights who rule the march. But if I prove the truth of his accusation, it won't do me any good."

"We agreed on these things," Nyrielle said, pausing to pull Ashlynn into a gentle embrace. Her soapy hands slid over Ashlynn's smooth skin with only the slightest of ripples in the water as she brought her lips close enough to whisper in Ashlynn's ear.

"But the Ashlynn I saw last night could never have bested Owain Lothian with a sword in her hand," Nyrielle whispered, shuddering at the thought of an angry, wounded Ashlynn trying to press for her vengeance in the state she'd been in. "Owain, for all of his many faults, is a gifted swordsman, and you didn't spend enough time with Thane learning how to counter a skilled swordsman to overcome the gap now."

"But I'm stronger now," Ashlynn countered. "Strong enough to cleave through his armor if I have to."

"There are better ways to channel your rage and your pain, my darling," Nyrielle reminded her. "Tonight, Thane will teach you how to fight against a person who is skilled. You will need to rely on your speed and power to defeat Owain, but you need to control them or you'll only reveal yourself before you're ready to."

"I can't wait that long," Ashlynn said as anger surged within her chest. "I don't have time to become a skilled swordsman, that would take months or years and I, I don't know that I can wait more than a few days," she said as the pain that accompanied the anger pierced her heart again, draining away the strength that rage had given her and leaving her limp, floating in Nyrielle's embrace.

"I know," Nyrielle whispered, splashing in the water as she pulled Ashlynn closer to her. "I know, my darling. That's why I asked Sybyll to return. She received the Potence of Blood from me. Her body is sturdier and stronger than any of my progeny. Even those Tuscan giants cannot match her strength."

"In the coming days, you will practice with her and Thane will visit you long enough to direct your training," Nyrielle explained. "You can hit her, hard if you wish to. She can stand up to even your abuse. She also knows a thing or two about being betrayed by her own family. If you wish, you can speak to her about it as well."

"For how long?" Ashlynn asked. Under the water, her fists clenched tightly and her fingernails dug into her palms, reopening the freshly healed wound on her hand and spilling a thin trail of crimson into the pool. "How long do I need to stay here and train before I can go and get the answers I need? How long before I can put an end to his life?"

"Long enough that your rage has a chance to recede," Nyrielle said. Pushing off of the side of the marble tub, Nyrielle swam around Ashlynn until she could look directly into the other woman's eyes. "Five days," she said, reaching out to cup Ashlynn's cheek. "Tonight with Thane and four nights with Sybyll. Then we'll talk about what to do next."

"Five days," Ashlynn agreed, letting out a deep, shuddering breath. "I can wait for five days. But, when the sun rises and Sybyll and Thane sleep, I'll still come to you," she said carefully. "Because I don't trust myself right now I, I need you to do what you did to me last night. Only this time, I'm asking you to."

"There are other ways to hold you back, my darling," Nyrielle offered. "I could have Erkembalt forge darksteel chains for you if you'd prefer," she added in a lightly teasing tone. "I could just bar my door. Or, if you trust your coven to keep watch over you, I can release you to their care. I choose to do what I did because I could be certain that I could restrain you. If you don't want me to cloud your mind, then we can find another way."

"No, I, I'm afraid right now," Ashlynn admitted, wrapping her arms around Nyrielle's lithe figure and clinging to her for support. "I'm afraid of myself, and I'm afraid of my nightmares. But, because of what

you did, even though I'm angry and hurting and even though I want to... to... I don't even know what I want to do about Jocey, but I want to tear Owain limb from limb!"

As she spoke, her grip on Nyrielle tightened enough that her fingernails left short, red marks on her lover's pale back.

"But because of what you did, I could at least think with a little bit of clarity. You dulled the hurt enough that I haven't reached out for the power of the forest even once tonight, despite how much it hurt to have your powers turned against me," Ashlynn said slowly. "So this time, this time, I want to give you permission. This time, it won't be a betrayal because I'm asking you to hold me back and help me get through the next few days..."

"Since you wish it, my darling, how can I refuse?" Nyrielle whispered. "Tell me what you would dream of and I'll fill the daylight hours with all of it, just for you."

For a brief moment, Ashlynn hesitated, debating whether or not her request would bring Nyrielle any undue pain. After all, for her lover to draw her into a memory meant wading back through time, either recalling the things she'd lost to Cellach Lothian's destruction of the Vale of Mists or revisiting the hollowed-out life she'd lived afterwards. Neither of them seemed like easy things, even if there were several gems scattered across Nyrielle's more than two hundred years of life.

"Please, don't share anything that's painful for you to share," Ashlynn said as she gave Nyrielle an affectionate squeeze. "But I'd like to see places I've never seen before. Dance to music I've never heard, watch operas I haven't seen, or eat food I've never tasted. I, I don't want to share memories that will remind me of anything. I want moments that can belong just to you and I."

"Is that, is that too much to ask?" Ashlynn asked, biting her lower lip and looking at Nyrielle with misty eyes.

"Of course it isn't, my darling," Nyrielle said as she reached out to gently stroke Ashlynn's hair before depositing a small collection of frothy soap bubbles on the other woman's nose. "If it will make you happy and help you to heal, I'll share any memory you'd like to see and I'll only cloud your mind enough to keep the pain at bay while we sleep."

"Thank you," Ashlynn whispered as she wrapped her arms and legs around Nyrielle's lithe figure. "Thank you..."

#### Chapter 753: Sword Master Thane

When Ashlynn emerged from Nyrielle's chambers, she was greeted by a sight that she'd never expected to see. Thane's handsome features were unmistakable, and his casual demeanor as he leaned against the wall couldn't have been more normal.

It was the suit of armor that he'd donned that truly surprised Ashlynn. During most of their training, there had been little need for Thane to don more than a simple padded gambeson to cushion the occasional glancing blows that made it past his guard, but now, he'd donned a full suit of three layered armor.

Unlike most of the forces of the Vale who wore a padded gambeson as their primary armor, Thane wore one as a foundation garment, covered by one of the most intricate suits of blackened steel chainmail she'd ever seen. For a moment, she almost mistook the chainmail as being darksteel, but the armor lacked the weight and presence of the Eldritch's people's enchanted steel.

Chain over gambeson was what Ashlynn had learned to fight in when she wore her armor. The protection it afforded the body against swords and arrows was substantial and even axes and maces were substantially blunted against a person wearing two-layered armor. But Thane had gone even further, covering the suit of chain with a complete set of blackened steel plate armor.

Some would call Thane's armor an antique, lacking the sophisticated articulation at the joints of more modern armor and relying on the skill of the knight to protect his most vulnerable joints that were only protected by two layers. His chest and back, however, were protected by a sturdy steel cuirass, while bracers, rerebraces and pauldrons protected his arms. Steel greaves covered his shin while tassets hanging from his cuirass covered his thighs.

Modern armor increasingly favored the mounted knight, with many of the innovations in the past hundred years coming from a desire to produce tournament victories rather than to fight in true wars. On the frontier, where wars against the Eldritch were more common, armorers worked relentlessly to adapt innovations from tournaments into new methods of closing up gaps, trading flexibility for the ability to survive the swarming attacks favored by many Eldritch forces against armored knights.

To Ashlynn's eyes, however, Thane's armor didn't just look like an antique, it looked like a carefully considered compromise between maximizing the defensive capabilities of three-layered armor and allowing him the freedom of movement to employ his vampire speed and strength. Without his armor, Thane had always had a presence that felt both noble and playful, but with it, he felt... Commanding.

"Do you, do you really need all that?" Ashlynn asked as she looked at the knightly vampire. "I'm still a long way from posing a threat to you." Far from being a threat, Ashlynn wasn't even wearing armor. At some point, while she was bathing, her mud-stained gambeson and chain had been taken away to be cleaned, likely by Heila, and in its place, a fresh tunic and breeches had been laid out along with a simple gambeson from the ancient fortress's armory. Against someone like Thane, it felt like barely wearing armor at all.

"Tonight's lessons will be frustrating," Thane said, pushing himself off the wall to retrieve his longsword and a small cloth sack from the floor next to him. "Heila showed me what you did to your room yesterday and we all saw the storm you conjured last night. So I thought I should keep myself safe," he said in a light, jovial tone.

"I even brought treats from Georg," he added, passing her the cloth sack that had been stuffed full of everything from savory hand-pies to sticky, sweet honey rolls. "If you lose your temper again, I think throwing one of those at you will help more than the armor, but the armor doesn't hurt," he teased.

"Why does everyone think that food will pacify me?" Ashlynn asked, pausing with her hand in the sack, caught in the middle of inspecting the delights that Georg had packed for her. As soon as she spoke, however, her stomach grumbled at her, reminding her that she hadn't eaten in more than a day.

"Ashlynn," Thane said, placing a hand covered in chainmail lightly on her shoulder as they began to walk toward the outer areas of the ancient fortress. "I haven't met anyone who can't be swayed, at least a little bit, by Georg's cooking. And if the day ever comes that you're hurting so badly that one of his pastries can't put even a ghost of a smile on your lips, then I promise to destroy whoever hurt you so badly."

"Not Jocey," Ashlynn said, almost instinctively, before she caught herself. "I, I don't know what to do about Jocey yet."

"You don't have to decide yet," Thane said, keeping his tone light. "If you need to keep her locked up for years while you sort it out, we can do that. I don't think you'll need to, though," he added. "I think, once

you see her and talk to her, you'll figure out what you need to do. Until then, you're only borrowing worry from the future to try to work it out now."

"Focus on Owain," Thane said, unknowingly echoing Nyrielle's advice. "That's what I'm here to help you with and it's the other reason I'm wearing all this," he added, tapping the steel plate over his chest lightly. "When you face Owain, there's a good chance he'll be wearing his armor. You need to learn how to defeat an opponent in armor."

"I miss my falchion," Ashlynn said, finally selecting a pastry and beginning to munch on the still warm hand-pie. Soft, flaky, buttery crust surrounded a filling of minced mutton, peas, carrots and onions with just the right amount of a dark brown sauce to keep the pastry from feeling too dry. Even though it was something simple that could be eaten with one hand while she followed Thane to wherever they were going to train, Georg's care and attention to detail came through in every bite.

"I suppose it's out of the question to use a darksteel blade when I face Owain," Ashlynn mused. "Do you have another sword in mind for me, oh wise Sword Master Thane?" Ashlynn asked, giving the vampire knight the best playful look she could.

Her smile wasn't as bright as normal, and her teasing sounded slightly forced, but Thane smiled brightly at the signs that the Ashlynn he'd come to think of as a little sister wasn't completely broken by what her own little sister had done to her. She might be hurting right now, but one day, he was certain she'd recover that dazzling, cheerful smile that so many of the people who served Nyrielle had come to treasure.

"For now, a blunted training sword is best," Thane said. "But when the time comes, I'm sure Master Erkembalt will have something for you that won't lose to your last blade. At the very least, you won't need to worry about shattering another sword when you face Owain," he teased.

"Now, come, we still have a long night ahead of us, and once we leave the castle behind, I'm going to stop being nice to you," Thane warned. "So eat up and then we'll get to work."

#### Chapter 754: Targeting Weaknesses (Part One)

Outside the ancient fortress, Thane quickly guided Ashlynn to an area of the forest that was directly north of the tower she'd claimed for her coven. It was, in fact, the very same stretch of forest she'd planned to clear in order to plant a more diverse selection of trees that would be nurtured by her coven

in the same way that Amahle nurtured the sandbox trees, blackberry vines and other thorny plants of the Briar.

When she arrived with Thane, Ashlynn was momentarily shocked by the scene of devastation that greeted her within this stretch of the forest. Branches lay strewn about the ground and on their way to a small clearing they passed several whole trees that had snapped and fallen in the tempest of the previous night's storm. The ground underfoot held a thick layer of freshly fallen leaves and cedar needles, muffling their footsteps and adding an eerie quiet to the forest.

"I, I did this last night, didn't I?" Ashlynn said, swallowing heavily as she realized how destructive the tempest had been.

"This forest has seen worse than last night's storm," Thane said, pointing to vine-covered stumps scattered about the forest. "A century ago, it was a firestorm that swept through the Vale. Fifty years ago, it was the worst blizzard I've ever seen and far more than just trees collapsed under the weight of that much snow. The old and the weak fall when a tempest rages, but they make way for the young who will replace them."

"There you go again," Ashlynn said, shaking her head at the vampire knight. "Sounding ancient and wise. But I understand," she said, looking around at the devastation. "This is a reminder to keep control of my power, but I shouldn't mourn the losses so much that they paralyze me. This too is part of nature's rhythm."

"Good that you understand," Thane said, tossing a practice blade to Ashlynn and drawing his own sword. "Now, listen carefully. I've never seen Owain fight personally, but he has a habit of abusing his training partners and Marcel has been able to gather a bit of insight from people who have suffered his notion of 'practice,' so I have a rough idea of what you should expect when you face him."

The instant Thane began his lecture, his demeanor shifted and his amber eyes sharpened, becoming much more focused as he began to prepare Ashlynn to face the man who had tried to murder her.

"Owain favors power with both hands on his sword," he said, taking an aggressive, high guard position with one foot slightly extended and the pommel of his sword held even with his chest. "He has an advantage of height against you and he'll try to use that to batter you down, raining blows at your head, neck and shoulders," he said as he launched himself forward, swinging down at Ashlynn's head as though he was splitting a log with an ax.

-CLANG-

Steel rang against steel as Ashlynn blocked the heavy blow directly. The force of the impact sent shivers through her palms, all the way to her elbows and her knees bent to absorb the force of impact. Less than a heartbeat after she blocked, Thane pressed forward, twisting slightly as he slammed the pommel of his sword into the side of Ashlynn's head, knocking her violently to the ground.

"Owain doesn't believe in a restrained fight," Thane added as he pointed the tip of his sword at Ashlynn's startled emerald gaze. "He uses the whole weapon. Pommel, cross guard, and the entire length of the blade. When he comes at you, each attack is only a prelude to the next one," he said, pulling his sword back and holding out a hand to help Ashlynn to her feet.

A trickle of blood flowed from a cut on her scalp, staining her pale blonde hair red and pain surged behind her eyes, making it difficult to see for several heartbeats as she fought her way through the pain to reach out to the forest. The freshly fallen trees still held traces of life that would take days to dissipate, but Ashlynn borrowed that energy freely, sealing the wound and restoring clarity to her vision as she pulled her sword back into a middle guard position.

"Before, I taught you how to counter force with force because you would be as strong as most of your opponents, if not stronger," Thane said patiently when it was clear that Ashlynn could focus on his words again. "But now, you need to learn how to deflect without stopping his force. You need to be aware of the follow up that will come after you deflect the first blow and think of how to counter it as well."

"Like chess," Ashlynn said, nodding in understanding. "The more moves ahead I can see, the better my chances of winning are."

"Like chess," Thane agreed. "But played very quickly. And, just like in chess, if you only anticipate your opponent in order to counter his movements, you will never control the battle. When you defend yourself, your mind should be thinking of how you'll move to attack, to make him feel threatened by your blade instead of seeing it only as a barrier he has to break down in order to hurt you."

"Now, come at me as I came at you and watch how I respond," Thane said as he adopted the guard that Ashlynn had used.

This time, when Ashlynn attacked, Thane made a similar blocking motion to the one she had used, but as he blocked, he twisted his body and lowered the tip of his sword, deflecting Ashlynn's blade harmlessly past his body before his blade swung in a tight arc, landing softly against the edge of her neck.

"Visor, neck, armpits, elbows, wrists, knuckles, belly, groin, knees and ankles," Thane said, using the tip of his sword to tap each area in turn. "These are the vulnerabilities in armor that every knight trains to attack and defend. Threaten one of these spots, and you force Owain to pause his attack to deal with yours. Swing at his chest," he said, tapping his steel breast plate for emphasis. "And he'll ignore it and allow his armor to do the defending while striking where you're weak."

"Aim for the joints of the body," Ashlynn said. "Got it."

"Good," Thane said with a nod as he took up a defensive position once again. "In that case, show me that you understand," he said, holding his arms out wide and turning slowly in front of her. "Attack me where the armor is weakest. Come for my head and fight like you mean it!"

#### Chapter 755: Targeting Weaknesses (Part Two)

For the next several hours, steel rang against steel as Ashlynn attacked again and again. Thane held nothing back, countering viciously with precise deflections and counterstrokes. Each time he slipped past her guard, fresh welts bloomed across her arms and shoulders. Underneath the quilted fabric of her gambeson, purple bruises swelled and throbbed until she drew emerald energy from the fallen trees to seal split skin and mend torn muscle.

By the second hour, blood had dried in her hair from three separate scalp wounds. By the third, her right wrist had been sprained twice when Thane mercilessly knocked her blade from her hands. The breaks Ashlynn needed for healing grew longer and longer as her reserves depleted, until she knelt gasping among the fallen leaves, one hand pressed to ribs that Thane had cracked using the pommel of her own blade after wresting it from her hands.

After four hours, she was utterly spent and struggling just to draw breath. Her hands shook as she leaned heavily on her practice sword, using it as a crutch just to remain upright at the center of the clearing. Sweat and blood had turned her tunic into a sodden, stained mess that clung to her trembling frame, and the chill night air did almost nothing to relieve the feeling of being steamed within her own armor.

Standing at the edge of the clearing, Thane watched her with calculating amber eyes, his own breathing barely smooth and even despite the brutal pace he'd maintained. When Ashlynn looked up at him, hoping to at least see his usual nod of approval at her progress or a gentle word of encouragement, she instead found something different in his expression. A cold, nearly emotionless mask that reminded her so much of Nyrielle in the early days of their relationship that it made her stomach clench with unease.

"You're making progress, but not nearly fast enough," he finally said. Only this time, when he spoke, his tone held none of the warmth of the guiding older brother or kind tutor he'd always been with her before. Instead, there was a sense of superiority and disapproval that she'd never heard from him before... But she'd heard it plenty of times from Owain and other nobles like him.

"But at the rate you're going, Owain will die of old age before you're ready to face him," he said, shaking his head as he began to circle her slowly like a predator evaluating wounded prey. "Tell me, Ashlynn, if this is all you're capable of, why should Mistress Nyrielle let you chase after your vengeance? If you're just going to get yourself killed trying, you should give up now instead of persisting in this foolishness."

"After all," Thane said as he loomed over her. "Mistress Nyrielle loves you, and so does the rest of the family you have here. Aren't you just betraying them by rushing off to fight a battle you can't win? How can you be so selfish?"

"It's not! It's not like that," Ashlynn said, hanging her head in shame under the torrent of barbs that dripped from Thane's suddenly viperish tongue. "I won't fail in this. If I have to," she added, glancing up at him with a look that contained pure determination, but none of the fire that Thane was looking for. "If I have to," she repeated. "I'll use witchcraft against him. Better to reveal myself and throw away the chance to rule the march than die because I held myself back."

"So that's it, is it then?" Thane said, clicking his tongue in disappointment. "If you can't defeat him the way you need to, you'll throw away all your plans and provoke a Crusade that we aren't ready to defeat. I'm sure that will work out just fine in the end," he sneered. "If that's all you have in you, it's no wonder Owain nearly killed you. It wouldn't have been any harder than slaughtering a lamb."

"What?" Ashlynn asked, staring at him in open-mouthed shock as his words went far beyond critiquing her or reminding her of the consequences everyone would face if she couldn't do her part. "Thane. Please," she said between breaths. "I know what you're trying to do. Don't. Don't bother," she said. "I won't fall for cheap taunts."

"You're not as perceptive as you think you are, Ashlynn," Thane said, shaking his head at the young witch. "If you were, you would have noticed Jocelynn's infatuation with Owain long ago. You'd never have found yourself at his mercy if you'd actually understood what was going on," he said as he lifted his blade again.

"You're only calm right now because you're too tired to fight back," he added. "So go ahead. Draw on the strength of the forest. Be the Mother of Trees. Come fight me with all the strength the earth can give you and prove to me that cheap taunts won't work," he said as he continued to prod at the weaknesses in her heart.

"Prove to me that you care enough to fight with everything you have," he added in a voice that rippled with a hint of the power of the Voice of Command. He hated that he had to use his power against her in order to draw out her emotions but if he couldn't provoke her then he would never be able to help her fight through them.

If she had been at her strongest, in full command of herself and her powers, he wasn't sure whether his Voice of Command would be powerful enough to overwhelm the Mother of Trees' natural defenses. It was only by holding her back and wearing her down until her arms trembled and her chest gasped for air that he felt he had a chance of compelling her.

"Come at me with all of your strength and fury and prove to me that you can claim vengeance for yourself," he said in a voice that echoed from a place deep within the void as a shadowy mantle began to swirl about his shoulders, flapping in a breeze that carried echoes of soldier's final orders from countless battle fields. "Because if you can't do that, I'll go kill Owain and Jocelynn myself and present you with their heads."

"No! You can't!" Ashlynn shouted as the slumbering fury in her heart flared to life at last. Her body lurched into motion, almost before she realized it, raising her sword more like it was a prop than a weapon, pointing it at Thane as she yelled at him. "Nyri promised that Owain would die by my hand! And Jocey... You can't lay a finger on my sister!"

"Mistress Nyrielle did promise you that," Thane said as he began to advance on Ashlynn with his sword raised. "But I never promised. So, unless you want me to deal with them myself, prove to me that you're capable of it!"

"Don't go too far, Thane," Ashlynn said as an emerald energy began to flow from the fallen trees toward her, swirling around her body like a tornado of shimmering emerald green leaves before covering her body and sinking into her weary, exhausted flesh.

The energy washed pain and fatigue from her body like a bucket of cool water washing away mud and sweat, but it went further than that as well. The strength and resilience of cedars who had survived infernos and blizzards infused her muscles and her bones, and her emerald eyes blazed with flames of rage as Thane needled her again and again.

"Defend yourself!" Ashlynn cried, lunging at the vampire with all the fury and frustration that had built in her heart since she learned the truth of Jocelynn's betrayal. Thane wasn't Owain, and he wasn't Jocelynn, but since he insisted on prodding her wounds and provoking her rage... she would finally give vent to the violence in her heart and let Thane see for himself what the consequences of provoking her were.

#### Chapter 756: Eldritch Honor

More than a full day after Sir Ollie's duel with Sir Rain, Hugo Hanrahan and Carwyn Belvin sat in their luxurious sitting room, staring at the remains of the most sophisticated meal either man had ever consumed while they tried to process the events of the past two days.

Following the duel, Sir Rain had lost his privileges to be treated as a guest. Sir Ollie had apologized more than once but the way he'd explained things gnawed at Hugo, leaving his heart restless and his mind turning over again and again.

"The Eldritch see duels between champions as somewhat sacred affairs," Ollie said when they asked why Sir Rain would be imprisoned after the duel. "The Eldritch don't require loyalty to a lord who can't prove their strength. It isn't like it is in the kingdom where you owe a man loyalty because he sits on a chair his father gave him. A lord can be challenged at any time."

"But Sir Rain didn't challenge you," Hugo countered. "You were the one who issued the challenge. A knight's challenge. What do Eldritch rules have to do with a challenge between knights over a matter of honor?"

"His disrespect was his challenge," Ollie said with a sigh. "If I accept that rudeness from him, the Eldritch would have believed that he was stronger than me. So, whether it was a matter of honor between

knights or a challenge to the ruler of my village, we had to fight. But in the Eldritch world, just like it isn't a crime to challenge a ruler, there are consequences for challenging a ruler and failing."

"So you're saying that if he'd won the duel, you might have let him go free?" Sir Carwyn asked, trying to understand the logic of Eldritch honor.

"I can't do that because he isn't my prisoner," Ollie said. "But if he asked me to bring him to Lady Ashlynn to plead his case, I would have done it. And he may have been granted additional freedom in the castle. It's complicated. The thing you need to know is that your status and titles don't work like suits of armor or swords here. They won't protect you from the consequences of your actions, and you can't use them against people who have no reason to respect your strength."

"To the Eldritch, power comes with obligations," Ollie said. "The strong must protect the weak. Lady Nyrielle rules here but she must protect the people of the Vale of Mists. If she fails to do so, she can no longer be the Eldritch Lady of the Vale. It's the same in my village. I need to protect my people," he said solemnly. "All of my people. If I don't do that, I don't deserve to be their knight."

Ollie's words dug their way under Hugo's skin like splinters, haunting his heart and mind like a pebble in his boot that he couldn't ignore.

Hugo had seen good men who cared for their people. Sir Carwyn was one of those men. Hugo still remembered his last visit to the young knight's village when Carwyn had eagerly shown him the new mills they'd built and the excitement in his eyes when he talked about putting an end to lean lean years since they'd be able to ship more of their harvest to market.

Carwyn, Hugo realized, was the kind of knight who would take to the Eldritch ways like a duck to water. He'd placed his life on the line, fighting a duel against another champion to protect the lives of his men. He worked hard to ensure the prosperity of his people. And even now, when they were deep within the territory of their mortal enemy, the first thing he did was to stand up for the son of his liege lord because his honor wouldn't let him do otherwise.

Compared to Sir Rain, or Owain, or even his own half-brother Bastian, Sir Carwyn and Sir Ollie acted like knights out of story books. Or out of Church scriptures. They were too good and too pure to be real men... and being close to those men made Hugo's own failings painfully obvious.

Hugo tried to imagine either Carwyn or Ollie breaking down under the constant bullying from Sir Rain and Lord Owain and he just couldn't. But then, Sir Rain could never bully Sir Ollie because the former could never have overpowered the latter.

But then, when Hugo thought of more subtle things, like being sent into the seedier parts of Blackwell City to find women for Lord Owain or meeting with Marcel to buy poisons to use against a woman and her child... He couldn't imagine either man meekly submitting to those orders either.

"You seem troubled, my lord," Carwyn said from the opposite side of their dinner table, pulling Hugo out of his thoughts and bringing him back to the present. "Is the food troubling you? I didn't notice anything off but..."

"No, the food is fine," Hugo said, shaking off his thoughts about Eldritch honor as he looked at the remains of the feast they'd been served.

After the duel, they'd been joined by the guild masters, Tiernan and Isabell while Ollie showed them around the town outside the fortress walls. During that tour, Hugo and Carwyn had their first real taste of Eldritch food prepared by Eldritch cooks. It was a simple dish of stewed fowl in a hearty, slightly spicy gravy, eaten with the softest flatbread that Hugo had ever tasted but unconsciously, the two knights felt the defenses they'd raised against the 'demons' lowering even further.

Now, at the end of their second day spent touring the Vale of Mists with Sir Ollie and the guild masters, they'd returned to a meal prepared by the Eldritch Master of Kitchens. At first, they'd thought that the meal was meager, consisting of a crisp salad of winter greens dressed in a herby, vinegar sauce and accompanied by artfully presented pheasant legs covered in a sticky, peppery, sweet sauce.

Both men ate every bite but they couldn't help but feel a little disappointed by the portion size. That was until the door to their chambers opened again with the next 'course' of a warm broccoli soup served with crumbled walnuts and a small wheel of creamy, pungent goat cheese. When the door opened again to reveal a servant carrying small filets of delicately poached trout covered in a rich, buttery and lemony sauce they realized why the portions had been so small.

This wasn't just 'food' that the Master of Kitchens had prepared for them. The word seemed far too limiting. This Georg person was clearly an artist who painted with flavors and textures the way a painter might use pigments. It was an elevation of a meal into a decadent and indulgent experience that Hugo felt wouldn't have shamed the Marquis even if Lord Bors had been hosting the dukes of the Ruling Council or the King himself. It was just that... sublime.

"The food is fine," Hugo repeated, resting a hand on his bloated feeling belly. "It's just... This place. It's wrong. It's all wrong."

"Wrong, my lord?" Carwyn asked, sitting up straight in his chair. He'd been feeling a growing discomfort with the things he'd learned about 'demons' as a child and the reality he had been confronted with in the Vale of Mists but he kept his opinions locked tightly within his chest.

After all, if he spoke his mind, he was certain he'd come dangerously close to saying something heretical and he didn't know young lord Hugo well enough to know if the other man would turn him over to the Inquisition for spreading blasphemy.

"I know we're only seeing what they want us to see," Hugo said, gesturing to their luxurious quarters and the remains of their lavish meal. "And they're treating us exceptionally well. But I can't escape the feeling that we've misunderstood the dem- er, the Eldritch for a very long time."

"I, I feel the same way," Carwyn said carefully. "I've heard of the villages hidden away in the deep forests and steep valleys of the march. The ones no one has been able to dig out despite decades of trying."

"Whenever one of those villages falls, we hear stories of how primitive they were, living in burrows in the ground like animals or building nests in trees like birds but," Carwyn said, letting his voice trail off as he sighed heavily. "If you told me that this fortress had been built by Master Isabell's guild of engineers, and not by the Eldritch," he said slowly. "I'd believe you."

"It goes beyond that though," Hugo said as he tried to figure out how to put his feeling of wrongness into words. "I think it's the way..."

Whatever words Hugo had been about to speak died on his tongue as the door to their chambers opened with a forceful -BANG-, bouncing off the stone wall and nearly closing itself again from the force if not for the elegant hand that stopped it.

Both men jumped in surprise, turning to look at who had been so bold that they would barge in on the pair of supposedly 'honored guests' without so much as a knock. That surprise only grew larger when they saw the beautiful vision of a woman with flame red hair and pale, alabaster hair standing in the doorway.

"Ello, lads," the woman said in a voice that was rich and a touch sultry. "I didn'a expect ta come home ta such a lovely welcoming gift," she said as her crimson eyes flicked from one man to the other. "So tell me, boys, which one of ya is Cousin Hugo?"

Chapter 757: Dame Sybyll Hanrahan

"Which one of ya is Cousin Hugo?"

The question couldn't have been clearer but hearing it seemed to rob both men of their senses as they struggled to process what they'd heard.

Carwyn glanced back and forth between the woman in the doorway and young lord Hugo several times, trying to find anything to call a resemblance between the two people. Both were tall, but Hugo rarely drew himself up to his full six feet of height. The scholarly lord had spent too many years hunched over desks or ducking the abuse of 'proper' noblemen to carry himself with the kind of posture that was expected of a knight and his bearing only added to the impression that he lacked the strength to speak up for himself.

By contrast, the woman in the doorway radiated physical power and dominance. The red dress she wore hugged a figure that was solidly built with wide hips and a full bust, but it was her toned, muscular arms that caught Sir Carwyn's eyes along with the broad-bladed sword hanging from her waist that caught his attention more than anything. The hilt of her sword showed the signs of years of wear and use and when she moved, the weapon felt like a part of her body.

Unconsciously, Sir Carwyn rose, dropping a hand to the place where a sword should have hung at his own waist before he remembered, once again, that he'd been stripped of his weapons. Still, that didn't mean he would retreat from his duty to protect his lord and while the enchanting woman's words had been light and casual, the power and sense of menace she radiated, combined with the place where they were, was too much for the young knight to feel comfortable about.

While Carwyn focused on trying to determine if the other woman was a threat or not, all of Hugo's attention was on her face. At a glance, she was a few years younger than he was, with the smooth, unlined features of a woman just entering her twenties.

When he first compared her features to her own, he struggled to find points of commonality, but the longer he looked, the more he realized that she possessed the same sharp, almost bird-like eyes and fierce brow that he'd seen not only in his own mirror but every time he looked at his half-brother Bastian as well. And while she'd avoided the prominent, hawk-like nose he'd inherited from a maternal grandfather, there was something about the set of her slender, curved lips that felt very similar to his own.

"I, I'm Hugo," the hawk-nosed knight said, placing a hand on Sir Carwyn's shoulder to hold the man back as they faced the crimson-haired woman. "Whether I'm a cousin or not," he said with a heavy swallow. "That I don't know."

"Yer Ian Hanrahan's git, aren't ya?" the red-haired woman asked as she strode into the room, closing the door behind her and trapping the men in the room with her by sheer force of presence. "So long as yer the spawn of that man's seed, yer a cousin o' mine," she said as she took a seat at the table along with them.

"Sit," she commanded, pointing downward while her crimson eyes surveyed the remnants of their meal before reaching out and taking an untouched walnut-crust mutton chop from Hugo's plate and taking a bite of the succulent, tender meat.

"Mmm, this is good," she said around a mouthful of mutton as she licked her lips. "Is this Georg's cookin'? He's even better 'an the last time I came home."

"It should be," Sir Carwyn said awkwardly, still standing as he watched the strange woman picking at the remnants of their meal. "I think Georg is the name we were given for the Master of Kitchens, lady...?" Carwyn asked, allowing his voice to trail off in the hopes that this woman would at least give them a name.

"Sybyll," she said with a slight frown as she looked at the young knight. "I said sit," she added, pointing at the chairs the men had occupied before she entered the room. "An' name yerself, since ya insist on knowing me," she added, giving Sir Carwyn a piercing look that was sharp enough to draw blood.

"Sir Carwyn Belvin," the young knight said, giving a slight bow. "Knight of Raek Village, vassal of Baron Ian Hanrahan."

-THUMP- -CRASH-

Neither man saw Sybyll move. One second, she was sitting in her chair, gnawing on the bone of a mutton chop. The next moment, she was standing over Sir Carwyn's chair with a hand outstretched while the young knight lay in a heap where he'd crashed into a side table by the sofas nearly four paces away from the dinner table.

Carwyn gasped, struggling to draw breath as pain exploded across the center of his chest where her open hand had struck him. The blow had lifted him completely off his feet, hurling him through the air like a rag doll in a display of physical power no human could possibly match. Sharp agony lanced through his shoulders and the back of his skull where he'd struck the table's edge, and for several heartbeats, his vision swam with dark spots. When he tried to push himself upright, his arms trembled like a newborn foal's legs.

Vampire, he realized far too late. He should have known there would be others here, but the tales he'd grown up on always described vampires as hideous, fanged monsters. Demon horrors with sunken skin and hollow eyes who sustained themselves on the blood of the innocent. So how could he have realized that this beautiful woman with her powerful, alluring figure was anything other than human?

"Call that thieving bastard 'Baron' one more time an' I'll take yer tongue," Sybyll said, glaring at the fallen knight. "But I'll give ya a chance ta make amends," she added, reaching into a pouch at her waist and slipping on a heavy, well-worn men's signet ring.

Standing at the table, blood drained from his face as Hugo watched the exchange with a growing sense of horror. But it was the sight of the ring, even more than the physical violence, that made his blood turn to ice water in his veins.

His scholarly mind cataloged every detail automatically, from the aged gold band, clearly sized for thicker fingers than Sybyll's, to the way she had to make a fist to keep it from sliding off as she displayed the crest to Carwyn.

"No," Hugo whispered, not even aware that he'd spoken in his shock. "It can't be."

But there it was. The stone signet at the center of the ring was carved with a farmer's scythe facing an upside-down woodsman's ax in front of three rolling hills, exactly the same as the one his father wore on his own hand every day.

The ring of tiny red and amber stones surrounding the central crest, however, held a luster and fire that his father's ring had never possessed with each stone carefully selected to compliment its peers and precisely cut to enhance their beauty. And beneath it all, the detail that turned Hugo's knees to jelly. The tiny indent in the shape of crossed swords underneath a diamond. The mark of the Royal Jeweler of the Kingdom of Gaal.

The original ring. The one he'd seen described in the family's archives that had been bestowed by the king himself upon the creation of Hanrahan Barony during the Second Crusade. The ring that had been lost since before Hugo was even born.

The ring his father wore was nothing but a pale imitation, crafted by local jewelers in Lothian City using stones looted from Airgead Mountain who could copy the design but never managed to match the Royal Jeweler's artistry.

Hugo had only heard stories of the lost family heirloom during the period when his half-brother Bastian had yet to recover from his fall, and Ian Hanrahan had thought that Hugo might inherit the barony. At the time, Ian Hanrahan had spoken of it as the irreplaceable symbol of their barony that had vanished before his own father claimed his title.

"How?" Hugo asked, staring at the signet ring in open-mouthed shock. "How do you have that ring? That ring..."

"The ring belonged to me father," Sybyll said coldly, turning her gaze to Hugo. "The man yer grandfather killed to pass his throne ta yer father, my cousin Ian. So you, Sir Carwyn," she said, turning back to the knight on the floor. "If yer goin' ta claim fealty ta the house o' Hanrahan, then kiss the ring 'o Dame Sybyll Hanrahan, and help me put an end to the usurper's line!"

Chapter 758: A Stolen Throne (Part One)

"Kiss the ring 'o Dame Sybyll Hanrahan, and help me put an end to the usurper's line!"

Sitting on the floor and struggling to take deep breaths, Sir Carwyn stared at the signet ring bearing the seal of the Hanrahan Barony, blinking several times in confusion. Dame Sybyll Hanrahan? When had the Hanrahans ever produced a woman who could be awarded the title of a knight? And she claimed to be Baron Ian Hanrahan's cousin?

But she was a vampire! How could a vampire be related in any way to one of the noble houses of the Kingdom of Gaal, much less the one he was pledged to serve?

Sybyll's demand left Carwyn stunned and confused but it drew exactly the opposite reaction from Hugo.

"No, you can't," Hugo said, scrambling around the dinner table to put himself between the vampire and the fallen knight. "Don't do this to him," Hugo said. "He, he's a good man who won't compromise his oaths. If you have a problem with my father, or a problem with me, then, then take it up with me."

"But don't ask a good man like Sir Carwyn to break his oaths," Hugo pleaded. "He, he deserves better than that," he said, though his voice grew weaker and less confident toward the end as Sybyll's crimson eyes bored into him.

Hugo's heart thundered in his chest and he needed to keep a hand on the back of a chair in order to keep himself upright with knees that felt like jelly, but he refused to move out of Sybyll's way. He'd just been thinking about how pure and upright Sir Carwyn was compared to his own bent and twisted self and he wasn't about to let this woman who claimed to be his cousin do to Sir Carwyn what Owain and Sir Rain had already done to him.

"So there is a spine to ya, cousin," Sybyll said with a light, musical chuckle that sent a shiver down Hugo's spine. "So be it," she said, withdrawing her hand and tucking the ring back into the pouch at her waist.

"Since yer willin' ta stand fer him, I won't make it rough on you," she said as she returned to her seat. Her posture when she sat was hardly dignified or lady-like, and the high slit in her red dress parted enough to reveal an exceptionally toned and well muscled thigh, but Syble gave no sign that she even noticed. Instead, she reached for the bottle of wine on the table, pulling out the cork with her bare hand and taking a long swallow directly from the bottle.

"I told ya ta sit, didn'a I?" Sybyll said as she looked from Hugo to Carwyn and back again before she gestured at their seats with the bottle in her hand. "Sit, drink with me, I won't be here long. I jus' came ta take a look at me little cousin."

"I still don't understand how you can be my cousin," Hugo said as he helped Carwyn back to his seat at the table before sitting himself. Neither man was comfortable sitting too close to the red-haired vampire and they both unconsciously slid their chairs to the farthest corners of the table from Dame Sybyll.

"My father has no siblings," Hugo said carefully, anxious that questioning her story would provoke another outburst that he would be helpless to defend against. "And if you were related to my mother you wouldn't be a Hanrahan... Just because you have the ring, it doesn't mean..."

"Boy, you weren't listening," Sybyll said, thumping the bottle of wine down on the table as she gave Hugo a dirty look. "I'm yer father's cousin. I'm the daughter of Baron Brighton Hanrahan, your bastard grandfather Aiden's older brother."

"That's not possible," Hugo blurted. "Brighton died childless and Baroness Caitlin was known to be barren," he said, thinking back over everything he'd read in the family's archives.

It had been nearly fifty years since Brighton Hanrahan died of a sudden illness and while many suspected that he had succumbed to poison from a demon's bite, the official record said that it was the Red Cough that claimed the life of both husband and wife.

After Brighton's death, the barony had passed into the hands of his younger brother Aiden who already had a young son, Ian Hanrahan. The very same Ian Hanrahan who had grown up to become Hugo's father.

"Aye, everyone thought me mother was barren," Sybyll agreed as she took another swig of wine. "An they thought the throne would pass ta Ian when me old man gave it up. But then, me mother weren't as barren as they thought she were," Sybyll said. "And yer grandfather Aiden decided not ta risk that she might birth a proper heir."

"But you couldn't have inherited," Hugo said. The most a daughter could have done for the succession was to hold Baron Brighton's place by giving birth to a worthy grandson who could inherit, but Brighton

would have had to hold his throne long enough to see his grandson born and he was already approaching his forties by the time Sybyll would have been born. It shouldn't have changed anything.

"But no one knew. If it would be a boy or a girl," Carwyn said through painful breaths that strained against the ribs he was certain were at least badly bruised from Dame Sybyll's strike to his chest. "And even if she was a girl, she was proof that the Baroness wasn't barren," Carwyn pointed out as he thought of his own pregnant wife at home and how worried she must be if word had reached her about the attack on their caravan.

"What happened then?" Carwyn asked almost unconsciously as his mind lingered on his Olwyna. "How did, how did your mother manage to survive with you when your father died?"

It was a question both men at the table wanted an answer to. Neither man doubted the truth of Dame Sybyll's words. They were both rapidly learning that the Eldritch people considered lying to people who were significantly weaker than they were to be beneath their dignity. Clearly, Dame Sybyll barely needed to raise a hand in order to end their lives and as long as that was the case, what reason did she have to lie to them?

But still, there were gaps in her story that didn't make sense to either man and until they understood what had happened, how could they decide what to do about it?

#### Chapter 759: A Stolen Throne (Part Two)

"Almost no one knew me mother were with child," Sybyll said slowly after taking a deep pull on the bottle of wine. "But me father, he told his brother Aiden when the second month passed an' mother didn'a get her moonflow."

"So yer grandfather, he brought the strongest wine he could," Sybyll said, shaking her head at how simply her father had been defeated. But then, he'd never grown up needing to defend himself from the people who were closest to him. He'd never had to watch the person sleeping next to him for a hand in his purse or a knife in his back. And he'd never thought his brother would turn against him instead of celebrating with him.

"I weren't even born yet, but me mother saw first hand when Aiden strangled his own brother in bed after gettin' 'im drunk that night," Sybyll explained. "She only barely got away from it all by throwin' herself out the window. She broke her arm in the fall an' walked with a limp the rest 'o her life after that, but she got away an' fled the barony."

"Aiden never stopped huntin' her, neither," she added bitterly. "We was always runnin' those years. Runnin' an' hiding ourselves away from his knights an' their hounds," she said with a pointed look at Sir Carwyn.

The young knight shuddered at the thought of what Baroness Caitlin must have endured. His own wife was only a little bit further on in her own pregnancy than the Baroness had been she'd been forced to flee and he couldn't imagine Owlyna walking from one side of their village to the other without taking a rest, much less fleeing through the wilderness.

"The, the records say it was the Red Cough," Hugo said numbly as his mind grappled with the version of events that Sybyll related. But as soon as he thought about the Red Cough, he realized why Aiden Hanrahan might have chosen that particular sickness to blame for the deaths of his brother and sister-in-law.

"He wanted an excuse to burn the bodies quickly, before anyone could see how Brighton really died," he said as he forced himself to meet Sybyll's crimson gaze. "Or that the woman's body they burned wasn't really Baroness Caitlin. Everyone would have insisted on a grand funeral for a baron's death, but to stop the spread of the Red Cough..."

A year ago, Hugo might not even have thought of such a thing. But, a year ago, he hadn't entered Owain's service or conspired to poison an innocent mother and her child using spider-demon venom, just because Sir Tommin had offended Owain.

A year ago, things like plotting to murder family members over the right to inherit had seemed like fantastical tales told by minstrels about the schemes of corrupt noblemen in the old countries. They were things that couldn't happen in places like Lothian March where good and godly men still held the line against the real enemy, the demon hordes who would wipe out their kingdom and their way of life if they had the chance to.

Against the backdrop of the war against demons, internal strife within the kingdom was seen as a mortal sin and even the Church would decry a man as a heretic for fighting his fellow man when he should have pointed his sword at demons. Now, however, after spending a mere half-year in Owain's service, Hugo no longer suffered from the delusions that noblemen were immune from schemes that required betraying their own kin.

"Marcel said you were a clever one," Sybyll said as she leaned forward to pour more wine in Hugo's cup. "An me new little brother begged me ta spare yer life, at least until 'is liege lady kills yer current master."

"Little brother?" Sir Carwyn said, finally managing to speak after spending several minutes regaining control of his breathing. "Do, you you mean Sir Ollie? Then, is he, is he also a child of Baroness Caitlin? Is she a, a vampire like you?"

Other than the similarity of their hair and stature, Sir Carwyn had a difficult time saying for sure that they looked enough alike for siblings. But Dame Sybyll was a vampire and Sir Ollie was a witch and who knew how much that had transformed either of them? Sybyll's crimson eyes certainly weren't anything that belonged to a human after all.

But, if Sybyll really was the daughter of Brighton Hanrahan and Baroness Caitlin, then she was almost as old as Hugo's father, yet she looked as young as a woman who was barely twenty. If the same was true of the Baroness... could she still be young enough to have given birth to Sir Ollie?

"Sir Ollie looks ta be a good lad who's done more honest work than I ever did," Sybyll said with a shake of her head. "But he's no blood kin o' mine. Sir Thane's the one who trained me up into a knight, and he's done the same for Ollie too, an' that makes 'im my little brother in arms."

"I, I suppose it does," Sir Carwyn said. "But, Dame Sybyll," the young knight continued, unable to let some matters lie. "Even if Bar, er, even if Aiden Hanrahan was a murderous usurper, Ian Hanrahan was only a young child at the time. He and his sons shouldn't be guilty of anything other than being born the children of a murderer."

"Don't speak of what you don't know," Sybyll snapped, snatching a butter knife from the table and flinging it at the table in front of Carwyn with enough force to embed itself half way to its hilt in the solid wood of the table top. "You think me mother never tried to return ta Hanrahan Barony ta reconcile with the bastard that took the throne from Uncle Aiden? Ta have me recognized as kin so I could live a lady's nice life an' not beg on the street with me crippled mother?"

"Like father, like son," Sybyll spat. "That bastard, Ian, finished what 'is father didn'a do an' me mother lost her life from try'in ta find me a better one. So don't tell me who's innocent an' who's not till ya' really know," she said, pushing off of the table to stand.

"Ya don't hafta fear nothin' from me," she said as she turned to leave. "Not fer the next four nights at least. I'll be busy with Lady Ashlynn. It's good to have kin in this world I might not need ta kill, Hugo," she said, sighing heavily when she reached the door. "Don't make me change me mind."

#### Chapter 760: The Crimson Knight and the Witch

When Sybyll reached the stretch of woods where Lady Nyrielle had told her Ashlynn would be waiting, she was momentarily shocked by the scene of devastation that greeted her.

Great gouges had been torn in the earth, leaving trenches deeper than she was tall and more than three paces long in the sodden earth. From the way many of them had filled with water, it was clear that they had been made the night before, or perhaps a few nights ago during the intense storm.

Whole trees had been torn in two from their trunks to their tips and several trees bore circular impressions as if they'd been hit with a boulder thrown by a Tuscan or some other giant. What little underbrush remained looked like it had been trampled beneath the hooves of dozens of horses, crushed into the soft earth or torn from its roots and hurled across the clearing.

And standing there at the center of the clearing she found Thane's familiar armored figure along with a shorter, blonde woman in armor who could only be the Mother of Trees. The two of them were standing at close distance with their blades pressed together as Thane demonstrated a half-swording technique, grabbing the sword by the blade with his off-hand in order to thrust toward a gap in a visor or between plates.

"Teacher Thane!" Sybyll called excitedly as she set down the heavy chest she'd been carrying with a solid -CLANK- before she rushed toward the man who had helped turn her into the woman she was today.

"Looks like I'm 'ere on time," she said, throwing her arms around his armored figure as soon as he stepped away from Ashlynn and giving him an embrace that was fierce enough to make his armor creak in complaint. "Mistress Nyrielle was worried you wouldn'a last a second night."

"I might not have," Thane chuckled as he unlatched his helm and pulled it off, revealing a face that was as handsome and charming as it had ever been with a smile on his lips and a twinkle in his eyes that held a significant measure of pride for his first pupil.

"Dame Sybyll Hanrahan," Thane said, giving a light hearted bow with a dramatic flourish. "May I present Lady Ashlynn Blackwell, the Mother of Trees, and betrothed of our Mistress Nyrielle," he said as he straightened up.

"Don't let her gentle look at the moment fool you," he added. "If she hadn't offered me a spoon's worth of her blood tonight, I wouldn't be looking nearly so spry."

"Dame Sybyll," Ashlynn said, holding out her arms and offering an awkward, armored hug to the towering woman who nearly matched Thane for height. "Nyri has told me a bit about you. Thank you for coming to help me train."

"Nyri?" Sybyll said, blinking in surprise at hearing such a cute, diminutive name applied to her fearsome Mistress. But then again, the look on Lady Nyrielle's face when she'd spoken of her 'darling Ashlynn' had been just as shocking to the woman who had only known Nyrielle's cold, emotionless face, "I'm sorry, me lady, ya took me by surprise there."

"She does that," Thane said, though his tone held a hint of warning as he gestured to the devastation around them. "Especially when she's angry. And she was already half exhausted when we started last night."

"It's your own fault for provoking me," Ashlynn countered. "But it's true that I need to be provoked. I'm calm enough right now because Nyri spent the whole day giving me pleasant dreams, but if not for that, I wouldn't be nearly so calm. When I face Owain, I can't lose control like this," she said, looking down in embarrassment.

"I told you," Thane said gently, resting a hand on Ashlynn's shoulder. "Last night was already an improvement. You devastated a few acres instead of conjuring a storm that stretched from here to Hanrahan and Dunn, almost all the way to Lothian if the messenger's reports are to be believed. A little more time and focus, and the sharpness of the pain will fade," he added gently.

"Once your mind is clearer about what you need to do next, you'll be able to restrain yourself more," Thane said, speaking from experience. In the days after he'd lost his sister, he'd felt like a man lost at sea, battered against the rocks and the cliffs one moment and swept under the waves the next.

It wasn't until he worked out a plan to obtain his vengeance that he began to see the world clearly again and the pain hadn't left him until he'd watched the life drain from the eyes of the man who condemned his sister to die. Even then, nothing could ever fill the hole in his heart that had been left by the loss of his closest family.

"Well, since Mistress Nyrielle an' Teacher Thane want me help, 'ere I be," Sybyll said a touch awkwardly as she watched Thane directing a familiar, gentle reassurance toward someone else. "How can I help?"

"Let's get ya properly dressed for battle," Thane said, gesturing at the chest that Sybyll had brought with her. "Lady Ashlynn, we'll need your help as well. Dame Sybyll's armor is a bit... heavy."

"How heavy can it..." Ashlynn began, then stopped as Sybyll opened the chest. The contents seemed to drink in the moonlight, revealing armor so dark it appeared to be cut from midnight itself.

"Every piece is darksteel," Sybyll said simply, already reaching for a deep crimson gambeson that lay folded at the top. "From the smallest rivet ta the grandest plate. It cost a small fortune ta have made, an' years ta forge it all but Mistress Nyrielle wouldn'a accept anythin' less fer me," she said with a hint of pride in her voice.

There was one piece missing from the set, the two-handed ax that Nyrielle presented her with when she asked Sybyll to serve as her personal executioner, capable of wading onto any battlefield to kill anyone that Nyrielle said must die.

But tonight, she wasn't here as an executioner, she was here to help Lady Ashlynn learn how to fight and kill an armored knight.