

The Vampire 711

Chapter 711: Making Adjustments (Part Two)

"I'll tend to the wounded personally," Ashlynn said as she dropped the pieces of the broken spoon on the table to inspect her hand. The wood splinters had scratched her deeply enough to raise a few red welts, but after becoming Nyrielle's Seneschal, her body was more than tough enough to resist being cut by something as simple as a broken utensil.

"And I want a list of names of people who survived their own stupidity," Ashlynn added. "I'll give them a lesson in respecting their opponents and their leaders."

"Are you sure that's a good idea, Mother Ashlynn?" Virve asked, frowning at the leader of her coven. "If they learn that you will heal them even after such a disaster..."

"Don't worry, Virve," Ashlynn said as she briefly gathered the aura of a stately, ancient tree around herself. "These are proud men. Brave warriors. One of the worst punishments they can suffer is to be called home to their mother so she can kiss their boo-boos and make them better."

The instant Ashlynn described what she intended to do, Virve choked on her tea, nearly spitting it out as she coughed and sputtered, thumping her broad chest in an effort to set her breathing right.

The image that filled her mind was just too... Too much. The idea of Ashlynn stepping into a healing tent filled with proud gladiators and fiercely independent woodsmen and telling them that she was there to tend their ouchies and make the pain go bye-bye was more than even she could bear.

Just looking at Ashlynn and the way her aura had become decidedly motherly as she radiated the age of ancient trees, Virve could already imagine the looks on the poor soldier's faces when the mighty Mother of Trees entered the healer's tent.

Her ears curled up in second-hand embarrassment and she shuddered at the thought of Ashlynn asking a mighty gladiator if he needed a spoonful of honey mixed in his medicine, or asking a skilled hunter to 'be brave for her' while she mended his wounds.

"You, you're not healing them to be kind," Virve said, her mouth hanging open in shock once she could finally breathe properly again. "You're doing it to shame them into obedience!"

"It can be both, Virve," Ashlynn said gently. "I don't want to see them suffer. I want the people who have been injured to make a fast recovery because if they try to fight while they're still recovering, they're more likely to get themselves killed. I want to preserve their lives, as much as I can..."

"But if I have to shame them into wearing their armor and fighting like real soldiers instead of acting like they're putting on a show in the Arena," she said fiercely. "Then so be it. Their lives come first. Their dignity is a distant second. There's no dignity to be found in a grave, Virve," Ashlynn added softly. "No matter how you get there, there's only the cold, dark embrace of the earth."

"I'll teach them that too if I have to," she said in a voice that was little more than a whisper. "But I hope I don't have to..."

"Remember, the news isn't all bad," Virve added, reaching across the table to rest a furry hand on Ashlynn's slender wrist. "I told you that there was a unique success, didn't I? I don't know whether or not you'll approve, but one of the men, Captain Barsali, issued a challenge to a human knight."

"I know, I know," Virve said, raising her paws as if to ward off Ashlynn's protests before they could even form on her lips. "I don't like the idea of grandstanding either. I would never have done this against the humans because they have no honor and fight like a pack of rabid dogs who will do anything to tear down just one more 'demon.'"

"You know that isn't entirely true, Virve," Ashlynn said gently as she watched Virve's temper begin to shift from a faint, background simmer to a full boil. "There are good men and bad ones among the knights of the march. Some of them are swine that should be beaten within an inch of their lives and buried alive," she said, clenching her fist as she thought of Sir Broll's companion who had helped him to bury her in the forest after Owain's beating.

She had yet to lay eyes on Sir Tommin since that night, but according to Marcel's reports, he'd become a Templar of some note, staying close to Loman and hiding himself behind the walls of the Church where he would be difficult to reach. Inwardly, she hoped he would be among the knights who would be sent to face the 'crisis' she was facing, but she didn't dare hope to be that fortunate.

"Some of the knights in the march are swine," Ashlynn repeated. "But others may yet be honorable. What happened when Captain Barsali challenged this knight to a duel? Did he accept?"

"He did," Virve said, nodding her head and pursing her lips together in reluctant respect for the gladiator. "He issued his challenge almost immediately after suffering his first casualty and he used the duel to secure the surrender of Sir Carwyn Belvin and his men. As much as I dislike his grandstanding," Virve said reluctantly. "Captain Barsali proved that he has the strength to defeat an armored knight in single combat, and he captured the knight alive."

"That is remarkable," Ashlynn agreed. "We should do something to hold up his example, but only if we can find a way to do it without undermining the lesson we need to teach."

"That shouldn't be difficult," the bearish former soldier said with a wide grin. "According to the notes Commander Bassinger included, Captain Barsali and his two brothers were known in the arena as the 'Invulnerable Triplet Tails,'" Virve explained. "They wear armor as heavy as any knight's and they fought battles in the arena where they were outnumbered at least four to one. If you need men to showcase the power and importance of armor in the battles to come, I think he's a good example to show the other men."

"Perfect," Ashlynn said, smiling in relief as she realized there really was a silver lining to how poorly the raids on Hanrahan Barony had gone. It didn't make up for the lost lives, but it helped to blunt the sting. "You said they needed Heila's help," Ashlynn added. "Why? What do they want from her?"

"Well, according to the note he sent," Virve said as she checked Commander Bassinger's notes. "He wasn't able to be 'gentle' with Sir Carwyn. In their final exchange, he nearly ripped the man's legs off and almost tore his shield arm out of its socket. Sir Carwyn survived, but without witchcraft for healing, he's unlikely to ever walk again, much less fight."

"I see," Ashlynn said. "Of course, Heila can help. I think it would be a good thing for Sir Carwyn to receive his healing from an Eldritch witch instead of from me. And after that," she said as an idea began to take shape in her mind. "I think we should house him with Sir Hugo and Sir Rain. I think it would do our other esteemed guests a world of good to hear Sir Carwyn's story directly from one of their peers..."

Chapter 712: Tea for Three

Late autumn rains settled over the Vale of Mists, filling the air with the soft pattering sound of raindrops falling on broad leaves and the sound of water spilling from gutters into catchment pools below.

In the garden where Ashlynn once enjoyed her first, tentative evenings with Nyrielle, the Mother of Trees sat under a gazebo that felt almost as ancient as the rest of the fortress. In the spring, the trumpet vines climbing the gazebo's weathered posts would bloom with a dazzling array of colors and hummingbirds would dance through the air as they feasted on the flowers' sweet nectar.

Now, however, the entire garden felt like it had gone to sleep for the winter, and only the gazebo itself seemed to hold any signs of life. A metal firepit stood in the center of the gazebo, filled with cedar logs that crackled merrily while brilliant yellow and orange flames danced to keep away the damp chill in the air.

"Not many people would choose to entertain guests outdoors this time of year," Isabell said in teasing tones as she followed Heila out into the garden. Beside her, Master Tiernan pulled his fur-trimmed cloak closer against the cold and splashing of the wind but the stoic ironmonger refused to admit any kind of discomfort at the weather.

"The gardens are a sort of 'neutral ground,' Ashlynn said as she stood to receive her guests. "My tower belongs to my coven. The great hall is far too formal, and the places that are most appropriate to receive close friends are deep underground where no daylight can intrude..."

"We've already stepped this far into dem-er, Eldritch territory," Tiernan said, stumbling slightly over the unfamiliar word. As soon as he reached the shelter of the gazebo, he pulled one of surprisingly heavy iron chairs closer to the fire pit before easing his weight onto the delicate looking chair.

Once he was sitting, however, he realized that despite the delicate looking spirals of twisted iron that formed the chair, it was incredibly sturdy, even for someone of his weight and size. But then, considering the size of the bearish fellows he'd seen walking about, perhaps it was to be expected that a person like him, usually one of the largest and physically strongest men in any gathering, would still be on the small side compared to some of their hosts.

"It seems silly to fret over being in the garden or the tower or underground when we're already behind the fortress walls," Tiernan said, holding his hands out to feel the warmth of the fire on them. "Besides, you shouldn't have to act like we're strangers when we're old friends," he added, giving Ashlynn a careful, evaluating look in an attempt to determine if she really was still an old friend now that they had entered the ancient fortress, or if she had been putting on a performance for them in the carriage last night.

"We still appreciate the thoughtfulness," Isabell said, poking the burly guild master lightly in the ribs as she took her own seat only to frown a moment later when she realized that there were only three chairs waiting under the gazebo.

"Isn't Lady Heila joining us?" Isabell asked, turning to look at the diminutive witch who had escorted them here to meet with Ashlynn. She'd spent hours talking to the young woman and the distance between them had slowly melted away when she realized how much they had in common despite their respective backgrounds.

In the same way that Isabell had found herself thrust into the highest of social circles in the Emerald Kingdom when she found herself wrapped up in the Prince's mission to reclaim his throne from his uncle, Heila had found herself standing near the top of what passed for an aristocracy in the Vale of Mists.

Heila seemed to be handling the transition better than Isabell had, but that was largely due to Ashlynn's own efforts to guide her ascension. By comparison, the Prince had seen her as one of his many allies, but he'd never thought much about how she was different from the knights and noble heirs who formed the bulk of his inner circle. If not for Casquas, Isabell would have been left to flounder on her own as she attempted to adapt to life within the Royal Court.

"This time is for the three of you who are far from home," Heila said politely, giving a polite curtsy as she prepared to withdraw. "I won't intrude. Besides, Virve tells me that there will be wounded to tend to tonight, so I should rest while I can and then make preparations."

"Thank you for caring for my friends, Heila," Ashlynn said as she retrieved a pot of hot tea and began pouring large cups for her guests. "You know I'm here if you need me."

"Wounded to tend to?" Isabell asked, raising an eyebrow while she inhaled the sweet, subtle aroma of the tea, cradling the cup more from a desire for warmth than any need of a hot beverage. "Has something happened?"

"The start of a war," Ashlynn said more calmly than she felt. She'd considered keeping quiet about what was happening, at least for a day or two while giving the Guild Masters a tour of Vale City and the many projects that could benefit greatly from their wisdom and experience.

She also wanted to introduce them to some of the Eldritch Masters who she had recruited from across the mountains to help them see the brighter side of the world she wanted to build. In the end, however, she refused to treat her friends like distant strangers who needed to be wooed and courted in order to form an alliance.

"It's only the very beginning," Ashlynn explained while her emerald eyes carefully watched the Guild Masters for their reactions. "Raids on livestock and caravans transporting grain and produce to market. A few skirmishes, but no pitched battles. Some have even ended in the Eldritch way as duels between powerful champions for the fate of their soldiers."

"You're attacking the common folk?" Tiernan blurted, squeezing the mug in his hand firmly enough that it shook, splashing hot tea over his hand but he hardly noticed as he stared at Ashlynn in shock.

"Why?" he demanded. "Why would you do such a thing to your own people?"

Chapter 713: Restrained War

"Why? Why would you do such a thing to your own people?"

Tiernan's accusation hung in the air like a sword ready to fall, and the burly man struggled to remain seated as he considered the meaning behind Ashlynn's words. He'd heard several times how Lothian March was different from Blackwell County. The rolling foothills in the shadow of the great mountains in the west didn't have the benefit of Blackwell Harbor and the ability to send out fleets for supplies if a harvest was lean or storms damaged their mills and granaries.

In Lothian March, the autumn harvest was about building up supplies to sustain families through the harshness of winter. Some hamlets in Dunn Barony and even entire villages closer to Lothian City could become completely cut off from the outside world once the snows started to fall in earnest.

These last few weeks of autumn represented a vital time for villagers to sell what excess harvest they had in exchange for the things they couldn't grow on their own. Losing a caravan now could leave a family destitute over the winter, and losing herds of livestock could mean empty bellies, not just for the families that raised the livestock but for the people in the towns and cities who would have purchased them to last through the winter.

Prices for everything would go up, and fear of additional raids would make people in the farming villages less likely to sell their own surplus on the next market day. Depending on how large these raids were, the effects could be felt throughout the entire march!

"How many?" Tiernan said slowly. "How many raids?" he asked, unable to stop himself as the need to understand what Ashlynn had done overwhelmed him. If it was something small, if it had been necessary for some reason he didn't yet understand...

"A little over a dozen on the first night," Ashlynn said, cutting through Tiernan's attempts to manufacture excuses to justify Ashlynn's actions like a hot knife burning his thoughts away as she severed the notion that she wasn't harming many people.

"Why?" Isabell asked, setting her cup of tea down on the small table next to her chair. "Why these raids? Why now?"

Tiernan's face started to grow red when he turned to look at the gray-haired engineer, sitting patiently behind her silver-rimmed spectacles as though she were a tutor, giving Lady Ashlynn an exam.

For a moment, he wanted to shout at her, to ask her what reason could possibly justify attacking so many commoners, but when he saw the focused, evaluating look in her steely-gray eyes he choked down the hot words that wanted to spill from his lips and made himself listen to Lady Ashlynn's answers.

"Why did my father ask you to build a second bridge over the Ilen river outside the city walls?" Ashlynn asked, forcing herself to take a calm sip of tea even as her heart felt like it would gallop right out of her chest.

Tiernan's reaction was one that she expected, but the fact that he seemed to defer to Isabell gave her a chance to engage the engineer on logic instead of interacting with Tiernan's hot emotions. She would have to respond to his feelings eventually, but first, like tempering a piece of steel, she wanted to allow him some time to cool down while she brought Isabell around to her way of thinking.

"There were half a dozen reasons," Isabell said as she recalled the project her guild had undertaken over the past three years. "The old bridge needed repairs because the footings were starting to crumble, but more than a hundred wagons and carts cross the bridge every market day. If we had to run ferries

across the river, people would have to come to market a whole day early just to manage all the river crossings..."

"But Father didn't just ask you to build a new bridge to tear down the old one," Ashlynn reminded the engineer. "He wants the old one repaired as well. Why?"

"The old one will just be for foot traffic, men on horses or small carriages," Isabell said, frowning as she tried to follow Ashlynn's meaning. "He wants wagons and carts routed over the new bridge because the old bridge wasn't intended to manage traffic for inspections and tolls, but the new one is... But what do tolls have to do with your raids?"

"Nothing at all," Ashlynn said. "But like Father's bridge, the raids serve multiple purposes all at once. My armies need supplies for the winter, the same as the common folk of the march do," she said calmly, giving Tiernan a stern look that pinned him to his wrought iron chair.

"The only difference is that Bors Lothian has the option of sending supplies from the Eastern Barons to cover the losses in the west," Ashlynn pointed out. "But the Vale of Mists can do little now that heavy snow has begun to fall in the High Pass. It's too difficult to get supplies from Airgead Mountain with Hanrahan Barony blocking most of the routes between our two domains and the Outlying Villages..."

Ashlynn's voice trailed off as she drew a deep, calming breath, choosing her words with care. Tiernan's response was reasonable, she reminded herself. He didn't know what had happened to the people in the outlying villages, and if he knew, he didn't understand, or he never would have asked how she could unleash her armies on the 'common folk' of Lothian March.

"Owain burned the Heartwood Clan's village down to the ground this summer," Ashlynn said in a voice that was colder than she intended, but it was the best she could manage. "Liam Dunn led his armies against four other villages this summer, destroying each one in turn. It's in large part due to Ollie's efforts that we were able to convince as many of them to evacuate to the Vale as we did."

"Now, there's almost no one left outside the curtain walls of the Vale of Mists who could aid us and help us supply our army through the winter," Ashlynn said in a tone that was as unyielding as the chair that Master Tiernan sat in.

"So, when you ask me how I can do this to my own people," Ashlynn said. "Consider what would happen if I treated the people of Lothian March the way they treat the Eldritch. I'm not the only one in the Vale who is looking for revenge, and others here have lost as much as I have or even more. Given that... don't you think we're being rather restrained?"

Chapter 714: Why Us?

"I think you're being very restrained," Isabell said, reaching out to set a hand gently on Master Tiernan's forearm. She shook her head slightly at the muscular ironmonger before turning her full attention back to Ashlynn. "At least, so far. But how long will your restraint last now that your army has tasted blood? You said they're hungry for vengeance of their own. Will they really be content to raid livestock and caravans?"

"Of course they won't," Ashlynn said, accepting Isabell's point without attempting to counter it. "Though it isn't as bad as you might think, at least for now. Commander Tausau's Third Army draws heavily from irregular warriors recruited from across the mountains. While they all have their own reasons for joining the fight, the woodsmen and hunters who are native to the Vale of Mists and the Outlying Villages are in the minority among his soldiers."

The early reports might not have mentioned it, but Ashlynn was certain that another reason for the heavy losses suffered by the raids targeting Hanrahan Barony was poor discipline among men who felt like they finally had a chance to vent their hatred for the things they'd suffered at the hands of human soldiers and knights.

Even if the men they were fighting weren't representing the same lords as the ones who had caused their grievances, asking every soldier to make such nuanced distinctions between 'Owain's men' and 'Sir Carwyn's men' was more than she felt she could ask of people who had lost mothers, sons, wives and bosom friends, not to mention their homes and the lives they'd built there.

The Mongrel Horde had a chip of their own on their shoulders. Many of them were unleashing years of repressed anger at the way they'd been hunted, bullied, and spat upon by the Eldritch world now that they were finally the ones in a position of strength. Ashlynn would hardly call them 'dispassionate' recruits in this war, but the hatred wasn't as intense as what people like the survivors of the Heartwood village felt.

"Third army?" Isabell said, raising an eyebrow in surprise. Heila had told her that they'd recruited a significant force from across the mountains, but she'd been vague about how 'significant' that was. She

knew that Heila had obtained the services of several gladiators after some kind of ritual combat, and she assumed they formed a core of 'Ashlynn's army', but had she been mistaken?

"When you said 'armies,' I thought you might be referring to a division between your forces and the forces that belong to Lady Nyrielle," Isabell said. "But you have more than just two armies between the two of you?"

"Nyri gave me command of all the Vale's forces for this war," Ashlynn said, her face heating slightly as she remembered Nyrielle's grand, romantic gesture at their betrothal celebration. The memory also helped to cool her own heated emotions and slowed her racing heart as she explained the situation to the Guild Masters.

"In most respects, the third army is the weakest," Ashlynn said. "They aren't true soldiers, though some of the ones who trained to fight as gladiators in High Fen City's arenas are as well equipped and capable as any knight. But when I said that these raids served multiple purposes, I meant it."

"These raids are an opening move to give the people of Lothian March a bloody nose," Ashlynn explained. "We need to lure the barons and their armies into the field, and behind them, Marquis Bors and Owain as well."

"So your true targets aren't the common people," Isabell said, letting out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding as tension melted from between her shoulder blades.

Next to her, Master Tiernan's clenched fist slowly relaxed as a similar wave of relief swept over him, though he still wasn't entirely comfortable with what he was seeing and hearing. In his mind, Ashlynn was still the studious and attentive young woman following behind her father when he held court.

Often, she'd had her nose in a book or was carefully taking notes, fading into the background of proceedings until many attendees forgot she was there. The woman sitting in front of him now resembled the young woman he'd known before on a superficial level, looking physically almost exactly like he remembered her.

But the more she spoke, the more he felt as though he was in the presence of a great lady or a powerful queen from across the sea, the likes of which the Kingdom of Gaal had never seen in its hundreds of years of history.

"If I could solve all of this with just a battle between Owain's army and my own, I would," Ashlynn said. "But Nyri has fought generation after generation of Lothian lords and their vassals. If I want to break the cycle and build something new, something better where there has only been an endless grinding of a millstone that breaks down both our peoples, then I have to do more than just killing Owain or winning a battle."

"So what do you want from us?" Isabell asked bluntly. "An engineer and an ironmonger. I'm sure you'd have been happier if we'd brought armorers and weaponsmiths with us, but we didn't even bring apprentices to do the work. Just a pair of masters who are getting long in the tooth to do much actual labor."

It wasn't that Isabell wanted to be rude, but in her mind, there was a clear line between her friend Ashlynn and the... Mother of Trees or Seneschal of the Vale or... or whatever Ashlynn's place was in all of this. At the moment, even though Ashlynn was her friend and she wanted to be understanding, she needed to be the Guild Master first and a friend second.

"I'm sure you need arms and equipment for your armies," Master Tiernan quickly added. "But I'm going to say it right now. I won't help to smelt iron or refine steel that will be used in war against our own people. I, I know you have your reasons for this fight. Good ones even," he said as his resolve softened like hot iron in the fires of the forge.

"And I'm not sayin' that Owain and his ilk are in the right in any way," Tiernan said, holding up a hand before Ashlynn could say anything. "But... Lots of soldiers we met, they're just simple folk, making a living for their families and doin' what their lord tells them to do. The thought of helping to make weapons just to cut them down," he said with a heavy sigh.

"I'm sorry, Lady Ashlynn," he said, hanging his head low before lifting his gaze back to meet hers. "There are some things I just can't do. Not even for you."

Chapter 715: Help for the Future

"Master Tiernan," Ashlynn said as her eyes and voice softened. "I never intended to ask you to help us wage war. Not this war at least. Whether you participate in the war that will follow this one or not is a different matter, but one I won't ask you to decide for now."

"Then what is it you want from us?" Isabell asked, keeping her focus on the question at hand. "You went to so much trouble to draw us out here to the frontier. You went to even more trouble to bring us into the Vale of Mists. It can't just be because of our friendship."

"Yes and no," Ashlynn said as she stood to pour fresh tea for each of the guild masters. "Mater Isabell, no, Isabell," Ashlynn said, trying to draw the other woman back into a conversation between friends. "You told me once that you wanted to leave the wars of the old countries across the sea, so you could build something instead of tearing things down."

"Out here, the Vale of Mists needs people who can dream of grand things to build," Ashlynn said, gesturing at the ancient fortress around them and the city under construction beyond its walls. "These wars have been a milestone, grinding away at the Vale of Mists for over a century and now there is very little left to give the people prosperity. They need industry. They need infrastructure. They need people to trade with and they need to produce things worth trading."

The more she spoke, the more animated Ashlynn became and her eyes began to glitter with a vision of a brighter future, not just for the Vale, but for the humans in Lothian March as well.

"Take a look at this garden," Ashlynn said, gesturing at the dormant garden as the rain continued to soak the soil of the garden beds and patter off the leaves of the few plants that remained green all through the winter.

"The time isn't right yet for it to bloom," she said. "But come spring, we'll plant new things in some places, tear out weeds from others, and in the end, it will be a beautiful garden to be enjoyed by everyone. It just needs someone to give it a little help," she said as she walked over to the climbing trumpet vine that covered one of the columns of the gazebo.

Reaching out with one hand, Ashlynn summoned the faintest trace of power, allowing a rich, woody energy to flow into the vine. Her touch was delicate as she guided the plant into forming a bud, then gently encouraged that bud as it grew larger and stronger until a brilliant orange trumpet blossom sprang forth.

Both Guild Masters had already experienced a small 'taste' of witchcraft when Heila brought them 'potions' to mend their hangovers but this was their first time truly seeing it unfold before their eyes. Surrounded by the climbing trumpet vines that covered the ancient gazebo, they had the brief feeling that the plant was... happy to receive Ashlynn's attention.

To Isabell, it felt oddly like a neighborhood cat. One that spent much of its time tending to its own needs, whether it was out in the rain or luxuriating in the sun. But, given the chance, it would rush toward any open door where a housewife set out the leavings from gutting a fish or a bit of cream to thank the hunter who kept their street free of rats. It shouldn't have been possible for a plant to 'preen' under a person's touch the way an alley cat would, but to Isabell, that was exactly how the scene looked when Ashlynn called forth a blossom in the coldest month of autumn.

"Isabell, Tiernan," Ashlynn said as she plucked the flower from the vine to present it to Isabell. "All those months ago when I sent letters to Blackwell County, I had two goals. The first was to hamstring Owain, to slow down his efforts to bring soldiers across the sea for his Holy War. But the second, the reason I wanted to draw as many of you here as I could, was to help build the peace after the war."

"I know it's early to think about those things," Ashlynn said as returned to her chair, flashing Isabell a look that said there were other things she needed to say but only to the other woman. "It would have been impossible to bring you over once the fighting started, and at the same time, last night and today's raids have given us cover for your 'disappearance.'"

"So, bringing us here really wasn't about your war against Owain Lothian?" Tiernan asked as though he couldn't quite believe it. "You... you don't want our help in this at all?" After months of Owain's incessant negotiating that waffled between bullying and pleading, all to obtain their help to fight the 'demons' it was strange to hear that the other side of the conflict had no need of their help at all. It left Tiernan feeling oddly... hollow.

He'd felt like he was becoming a man of greater importance, especially as the day he and Isabell would be conferred titles as knights drew closer. He thought himself a levelheaded man who hadn't become arrogant about his growing profile in the social circles of Blackwell County and Lothian March. It was only now, when Ashlynn said she didn't need his help to fight off Owain's forces that he realized how much his sense of self importance truly had inflated, and she popped it like a bubble of soap.

"I told you," Ashlynn said. "You're here as my friends and as my guests. I hope you can help me transform the Vale of Mists into something greater. But while I fight this war against my former husband, I do not expect your help in the fight."

"Then, you don't need an answer from us tonight?" Tiernan asked as he fought to regain his internal sense of equilibrium. Glancing at the trumpet blossom Ashlynn had placed in Isabell's hand and then out

at the rest of the vines covering the gazebo, he started to realize some of the more subtle meanings that Lady Ashlynn was trying to convey.

He might not be a courtly nobleman, but he'd spent enough time with them to understand that some things weren't easily said directly, and that was even more true among noblewomen. It wasn't that Ashlynn didn't need him or that he wasn't important to her cause... It was just that it wasn't time to blossom yet.

"I'm getting ahead of myself, aren't I?" Tiernan said with a snort at the realization he'd started to think of himself as someone who could be a beautiful flower in Ashlynn's garden whose time to bloom simply hadn't come yet. The comparison might be accurate but it didn't suit his tastes at all.

"Not at all," Ashlynn said with a gentle, welcoming smile. "Take some time to think. In an hour or so, I can take you and Master Isabell on a tour of the city," she offered. "I'd like to show you what we're building here so you can understand what I mean when I say that this is about more than just a war."

The rain would slow the work in the city, but it wouldn't bring it to a halt. After all, the Heartwood Clan were perfectly at home in water or on dry land, and many of them were helping to shape the way the city would manage water once it needed to serve thousands or tens of thousands of residents.

At the same time, there were a number of people who had come from across the mountains who were eager to finish their new homes, or their new workshops and businesses. Rain was a near constant companion in the Vale of Mists and if they waited for a dry day in autumn, they'd quickly find themselves building their homes in the snow come winter instead of taking shelter from the cold next to a cozy hearth in a home of their own.

So, while there might not be as much activity to show them as there had been a few days ago before the weather turned, there would still be more than enough happening for the guild masters to understand the scale of her efforts to transform the Vale of Mists. But before that, there was something else weighing on her heart that she could no longer put off.

"But, if you don't mind," she said, turning to face Isabell. "I'd like to spend a little while talking to Isabell," she said, steeling herself to have the conversation she could no longer hide from. She'd tried earlier in the day, fighting to focus on Virve's reports and matters pertaining to the war but there were some worries that gnawed at her so painfully, she could never escape them.

Now, even though she knew that Tiernan had likely also spent time with Jocelynn since arriving and her parents in Blackwell County, she looked to her closest friend from home in the hopes that keeping the conversation between the two of them would make things easier to face.

"I won't press you, either of you really, to give me information about anything you may have noticed about our enemy's defenses, logistics or anything else to do with the war," she added quickly. "But, I hope you can tell me about my family... before you left home, and after you arrived as well."

"I'm worried about Jocey," Ashlynn said softly, blinking back the moisture that gathered in her eyes when she thought of her sister being in such close proximity to Owain, and worse, the idea that he would try to marry her sister to complete the alliance between their families that her own marriage to him had been intended to secure.

"I'm worried about how my parents are handling my 'death,'" she added. "But with Owain around, I'm much more concerned about my sister."

Chapter 716: Family Matters (Part One)

After bidding a polite farewell to Master Tiernan, Ashlynn and Isabell withdrew from the garden and the rain, returning to Ashlynn's chambers in the tower she'd claimed for her coven. Normally, Ashlynn would have filled the walk with idle chit chat, pointing out the features of the castle or sharing stories of her time here along the way, but not today.

Today, the clouds outside mirrored the ones that had gathered in her heart and everything she might have talked about seemed trivial next to the conversation she was about to have. Even the castle's servants seemed to sense the heavy mood, stepping out of her way and bowing silently at her passage rather than offering the warm greetings or congratulations on her betrothal to Lady Nyrielle that they would have just the day before.

The garden where she'd met with the guild masters wasn't far from her tower, only a few minutes walk, the silence of the walk made it feel twice as far as they navigated the ancient stone hallways and the winding spiral staircase at the center of the tower.

When they finally reached Ashlynn's sitting room, with the warm fire crackling in the hearth and the comfortable sofas sitting before the fire, Isabell finally broke the silence as she took in the luxury and splendor of Ashlynn's living arrangements.

"I think, if your mother saw this, she would be happy to know that you've been living well this past half year," Isabell said idly as she approached the hearth that was large enough to heat large kettles of water for bathing in addition to pushing back the late autumn chill that hung in the air.

When Isabell had seen the furnishings in her own chambers, she'd already been impressed by their quality and the luxury that she was afforded as a guest. Whether it was the soft, thick carpets that covered the cold stone floors or the intricately carved wooden furniture, none of it would have been considered inferior to the pieces she'd seen in Lady Jocelynn's quarters in Lothian Manor.

Ashlynn's quarters, however, went a step further, reminding Isabell of the apartments occupied by the Emerald Prince in the early days of the civil war. Much like the young prince, Ashlynn didn't surround herself with gold and displays of wealth, but instead created a space that was filled with a combination of comfort and refined, artistic touches including multiple paintings of vivid landscapes that had clearly been painted by the hand of a Master artist.

"Though I suppose things like this would probably worry the countess," Isabell added as she paused to examine the shattered remnants of a falchion that had been mounted on a slab of polished wood in order to display the broken weapon above the mantle.

Each piece had been meticulously positioned a fingersbreadth away from its neighbors, making the complete destruction of the weapon clear while preserving the general shape of the blade enough that even an untrained eye could tell what it once was. Much like everything else in the room, the fit and finish of the fittings on the unbroken hilt of the sword made it clear that this had once been a weapon of exceptional craftsmanship that even a person without training in swordsmanship could appreciate.

"You weren't joking when you said you shattered your blade fighting in the High Pass," Isabell said, reaching up to touch one of the blade shards before yanking her hand back in surprise when she felt the metal react to her touch with a shock and a prickling sensation that shot from her finger tip all the way to the palm of her hand.

"Darksteel?" Isabell asked, turning to look at Ashlynn with wide eyes. "I, I thought darksteel weapons could only be destroyed with Holy Flames!"

The only other time she'd seen a weapon forged from the strangely heavy dark metal had been a broken spear displayed in Blackwell Manor's great hall, dating back to the founding of the county. Even two

centuries later, the edge of the spear was still sharp enough to cut flesh with the lightest touch and it required a man of Tiernan's considerable strength to lift it off the wall for cleaning, and that had just been enough darksteel to form the spearhead and a counterweight on the spear's butt.

Realizing that Ashlynn had been wielding an entire sword made of the same dark metal forced Isabell to reevaluate her already high estimate of the strength her younger friend had come to possess... and the strength of the dangers she faced in the Eldritch lands as well.

"It was broken by a sword made of Eternal Ice," Ashlynn said as she filled a pot with water for tea and hung it over the hearth to boil. "It's an ancient Frostwalker technique, all but lost to them now," she said as she looked at the weapon with an odd pang of loss.

It had been Virve who collected the pieces of her broken sword, reassembling them to present to Ashlynn as a memento of her victory over the High Lord Ansgar. The blade wasn't famous, it didn't have a name and it had only accompanied her for half a year, but in the end, it saved her life more than once. It was worth remembering.

But Ashlynn didn't keep it to remember the victory. She kept it to remember how close she'd come to shattering, just like the blade had. She'd fought with everything she had and more, but it hadn't been enough. Not really. She'd been lucky to keep her life in that battle and it taught her just how far she still had to go before she could truly stand at Nyrielle's side as an equal.

Standing next to Isabell and staring at the shattered sword produced a strange sort of dissonance. Isabell knew the woman she'd been, the woman who had kept to her garden and her books, only stepping occasionally into the world outside Blackwell Manor as if to remind the people that she still existed.

Ashlynn felt like she was leaving that woman farther and farther behind the longer she lived among the Eldritch people. Her mother would never have dreamed of doing the things Ashlynn had done. The idea of a proper lady in the Kingdom of Gaal taking up weapons, leading armies, or sitting in judgment over traitors and defeated enemies would have been almost heretical to her pious mother.

Her father, on the other hand, had been her first model of how a lord should rule his domain.

"Do you think Father would be proud of me?" Ashlynn asked as she stared at the sword. After all, even though he held the title of Count, he'd famously only fought a single duel when he was courting her mother. For all of his involvement in helping the Lothians to launch their Holy War, he'd never been a warrior, and even when he sentenced a man to die, it had always been one of his knights who swung the sword.

"If he knew I was fighting out there," Ashlynn said softly. "If he knew that I'd taken up arms myself to protect my people and find my way forward... If he knew what I was trying to build out of the shattered remnants of the Vale of Mists and the other Eldritch lands, do you think he would be proud?"

Left unspoken was an entirely different question which Ashlynn couldn't bring herself to ask. Do you think that he'd be happy that I'm still alive?

Chapter 717: Family Matters (Part Two)

"I think he'd be very proud of the woman you're becoming," Isabell said, setting a hand on Ashlynn's shoulder and guiding her to a seat on one of the comfortable sofas facing the fire. Rather than taking a seat on the opposite sofa, Isabell sat directly next to Ashlynn, ignoring any sense of etiquette or distance between their positions in order to stay close and comfort her friend.

"Truthfully, I think that if he could see you now, he'd curse the King himself and petition the Ruling Council for permission to pass his throne to you," Isabell said as she looked at the young lady. There was a great deal of Count Rhys's strength and determination in her bearing and she was clearly comfortable making the sort of heavy decisions followed by committed actions that had characterized her father's rule.

Neither Count Rhys nor Ashlynn seemed like the type of people who would shy away from something just because it was hard. Nor were they the sort of people who would force others to suffer to escape making sacrifices themselves.

"I think you learned more from him than he realized," Isabell said gently. "And he would be happy to see you become the next Countess Blackwell instead of," she started to say, only to trail off as she became uncertain of the truth of what she'd been about to say.

"Instead of living out here with the 'demons'?" Ashlynn said, raising an eyebrow at Isabell when the older woman hesitated to put her thoughts into words.

"I was going to say 'instead of suffering a marriage to an abusive villain like Owain,'" Isabell said, pulling back slightly at the feeling of barbs hiding in Ashlynn's words. "But... I don't know if that's actually true or not. Count Rhys would cut off his own arm for the sake of Blackwell County. For a man who would sacrifice so much," she said, allowing her voice to trail off toward the end.

"I know," Ashlynn said softly. "He, he never spoke about it, but, I think that Father knew the sort of man that Owain really is. Owain isn't skilled enough at hiding it when he thinks he's around people who are 'on his side,' and Father is too good of a judge of people to have missed the signs."

"You seem to take after him in that respect," Isabell said carefully as she searched Ashlynn's eyes, wondering if the young woman already understood who had betrayed her secret. "How well did you understand Owain before you married him?"

"I knew him better than I let myself admit," Ashlynn said slowly. The signs had been there all along, after all. She'd just told herself that he wouldn't direct his cruelty at her, that he valued family and would fight to protect her and their children once they were born. She'd told herself every reassuring lie she could in order to go forward with the marriage her father had arranged to secure their family's future.

"I, I wanted to make things work out so badly," Ashlynn admitted. "After everything that Mother had suffered trying to bear an heir for Father, and everything my parents did to keep me safe despite the mark of the witch on my body, I felt like I owed it to them to make things work out, somehow."

"Especially for Mother," Ashlynn added softly, closing her eyes as she blotted away tears with a handkerchief. "She tried so hard for Father and she did so much to care for me and keep me safe. I just... I just wanted to take over some of her burdens."

All her life, Ashlynn's mother had called her a miracle child, and she'd done her very best to give her eldest daughter a good life. But she was also a pious woman of deeper faith than her husband or Ashlynn herself.

The countess had told her daughter for as long as she could remember that Ashlynn would need to work twice as hard to earn the Holy Lord of Light's favor because of the mark she bore. She told Ashlynn that the only way she could balance the weight of her mark was by becoming a person who brought about a great number of good things for her people.

"It seems silly now," Ashlynn added with a wry smile. "But I think that I had started to believe some of the things Mother said about needing to redeem myself for bearing the mark of the witch. I thought, if I could help someone like Owain who seemed to live for fighting 'demons,' maybe I could make up for the 'sin' of my birth and convince the Holy Lord of Light to stop tormenting my mother for sparing my life."

She hadn't understood when she was younger, but when she looked back on things from the outside, it was clear how much her mother's faith hollowed her out each time she failed to conceive a child. Year after year of suffering had left the countess shaken and weak, wondering at times if she had been cursed by the Holy Lord of Light to suffer for some sin committed in her previous life.

It had been so bad that, during her pregnancy with Jocelynn, she'd gone to live in a convent with one of her husband's cousins until Jocelynn was born. But even retreating to the convent wasn't enough to allow her to give birth to a son, and when her last child was stillborn, Ashlynn felt like a piece of her mother's heart had broken forever.

Her mother might never have said the words, but for the past half year, Ashlynn had wondered if somewhere, deep inside her heart, she'd blamed Ashlynn for the 'curse' that left her unable to bear the son that Rhys so desperately needed to inherit his throne.

After all, Maela had given birth to one of the great witches who could threaten the entire Kingdom of Gaal. Worse, she had been unwilling to do what a good woman of faith should, surrendering her infant child to the Church so they could deal with the demonic influence before she could ever grow into a force that could topple their Kingdom and their Church.

So when Ashlynn thought about the people in her family who might betray her, her mother was the first one who came to mind...

Chapter 718: Family Matters (Part Three)

"I think your mother would gladly take up whatever burdens she carried if she could have you back by her side," Isabell said softly, taking Ashlynn's slender hands in her own. "I can't say for certain, but I think that the reminders of you are why she left Blackwell Manor after returning from Lothian March."

Of course, Isabell only felt like that was part of the reason. After all, the countess knew just as well as Isabell did who had betrayed her eldest daughter to a murderous husband. She had lost one daughter to

the schemes of the other one. How could any mother still live in the house that carried so many reminders of the children she'd raised to suffer such a tragic fate?

Try as she might, even as a mother herself, Isabell couldn't imagine how the poor woman must feel. If Lassian ever did something so heinous to Issandra or vice versa, she couldn't imagine forgiving the child who had betrayed their sibling. At the same time, she struggled to say that she would have the strength to see one of her children punished for their crimes against the other.

And Countess Maela's situation was even graver. If she ever exposed what Jocelynn had done, she would have to expose her own crime of hiding Ashlynn away for more than twenty years. The stain of heresy over so many years would spread far beyond herself and who could say how many of her loved ones would suffer at the hands of the Inquisition before the Church was satisfied they'd rooted out the infernal influence of 'demons.'

Savaged by so many wounds to her heart and soul, with no one that she could share her agony with, was it any wonder she would want to escape any reminders of the life she'd lived in Blackwell Manor? After all, given his own role in arranging the marriage that had caused this tragedy, even her husband would struggle to become a source of comfort for his grieving wife.

"She left?" Ashlynn asked, snapping Isabell out of her thoughts and bringing her back to the present. "Where, where did she go?" Ashlynn asked, trying to understand where her mother would have run to if she couldn't bear to be home. "Did she go back to live with her family?"

"That's what your father said when I last spoke with him," Isabell said, though her tone suggested that she didn't believe it. "Perhaps she has, but if that was the case, I'm sure we would have visited her when we passed through duCoutmont County on our way to the frontier, especially since Jocelynn was with us."

Looking back, it had been one of the many signs that something was very wrong with the relationship between the Blackwells and the Lothians. Owain could be forgiven for taking the most direct route through Keating Duchy to return to Lothian March without making a lengthy detour to visit Duke Keating. After all, doing so would have added weeks to their journey.

But bypassing his mother-in-law's family home when it would have added only a few days to their journey was a different matter entirely, especially if that very mother-in-law was currently visiting her aging parents and her elder brother's family.

But neither Owain nor Jocelynn seemed to have any desire to make the detour and instead their course clung to the River Luath as soon as they crossed it and officially entered Keating Duchy, all the way until they passed the marker between Keating and Lothian lands.

"So she's returned to the convent," Ashlynn speculated. It made sense as one of the few places that a noblewoman could go to retreat from the world without provoking the sorts of scandals and rumors of infidelity that could tear Blackwell County apart. It also explained something else that Ashlynn had been wondering about since she reviewed what little information Nryielle's spy master had managed to gather about her sister.

"Marcel said that Jocelynn is keeping a Confessor at her side as a chaperone wherever she goes," she said as he worked to fit the pieces of the puzzle together.

"Is it Cousin Eleanor? She has dark hair and a severe look," asked, briefly describing one of the few members of the Church that her mother had trusted to be around her daughter for important events like her coming of age ceremony. "She was just a novice when my mother first visited the convent, but she's been a Confessor for several years now. If there's anyone mother would have been able to share the 'truth' with, it was probably Cousin Eleanor."

"It is," Isabell said, impressed that Ashlynn was still able to reason things through so well despite the storm of emotions she must have been struggling with. "She brought four Templars with her to keep Jocelynn safe, though I don't think they can do much to protect your sister from Owain," the engineer said with a heavy sigh as she thought about the severe woman's strange warning before she left Isabell to have a private meeting with Jocelynn.

"Eleanor is aware of the truth of what happened to you," she added. "Or, as much of the truth as anyone in the Kingdom is aware of. At the very least, she believes that Owain killed you for bearing the mark of the witch. She and an Inquisitor named Diarmuid have been asking questions about you and your childhood."

"So the Church knows," Ashlynn said with a heavy sigh. "I wonder if they were the ones who tried to dig me up. Not that it matters," she added a moment later when she realized she was wandering farther and farther afield of what she needed to ask and the question she needed to find an answer to.

It was easy to get caught up in the plots and machinations of her family, the Lothians and the Church. She could speculate for days about what the different factions were doing based on the scraps of information they possessed. The pressure of the war she'd just begun provided a convenient excuse for her mind to tug at the loose threads surrounding this nightmare until she had unraveled all of the plots and schemes.

But those things were only on the periphery of what she needed to know. They were questions for later. The question that burned in her heart refused to let her distract herself anymore. She didn't know whether Isabell held the answer she needed or not... but she had to ask.

And then... once she knew, there would be no hiding from what she needed to do to the person who betrayed her.

Chapter 719: Family Matters (Part Four)

"Isabell," Ashlynn said, holding onto the older woman's slender, almost bony hands and looking deeply into her steely-gray eyes. "I need to know something. I don't know if you know or not, but if you know, please tell me the truth. Someone told Owain about my mark, but they didn't tell him until after the ceremony was over, so it must have been some time during the feast or the ball."

Ashlynn's heart hammered in her chest, drowning out the familiar, steady echo of Nyrielle's faint heartbeat during the day as she faced the question that had haunted her for more than half a year. Her palms were damp with sweat, and her face felt flushed from more than just the heat of the fire in the hearth as she looked deep into Isabell's eyes, hoping her friend would have the answer she so desperately needed.

"With my mother in hiding, I don't know if you would have heard anything about who told Owain and how things happened that night," Ashlynn said, swallowing heavily and speaking around a knot in her throat that felt as large as a hen's egg. "But I, I have to know. Was it Mother who told him?"

"Does she... does she blame me for all the times that she suffered?" Ashlynn asked as tears began to spill from her limpid emerald eyes. "I, I don't know if it's because of the Church or something else, but if she, if she finally decided that she had to, had to do something about me. If she thought that I was a curse that she had to protect Owain's family from..."

There weren't many reasons that Ashlynn could come up with for her mother to have betrayed her, but the combination of her mother's suffering and her faith was something that Ashlynn couldn't deny.

Ashlynn never once thought that it could have been her father. After all, of her two parents, her father had always been the one to weigh the risks and benefits of everything he did and he charted the best path forward for the Blackwell family and the whole of Blackwell County. His willingness to marry his eldest daughter to Owain Lothian despite the risks was a testament to how much he was willing to risk and sacrifice if it could obtain a better future for their family.

There were no benefits to be had from telling Owain Lothian about her mark, unless he wanted to use the information that Owain was married to a witch to somehow blackmail or control the young lord when he became the next marquis. But even then, telling him on the night of the wedding, before Owain had consummated their marriage or fathered an heir, would do him little good.

Which meant that, if one of her parents had betrayed her to Owain, it must have been her mother...

"I, I just need to know," Ashlynn said as the pain she'd carried deep in her heart for so many months tore its way free, leaving a gaping, fresh wound in her soul that was even more raw and ragged than it had been on the night she was beaten until the edge of death.

"Oh, Ashlynn," Isabell said, dropping Ashlynn's hands to wrap the suddenly fragile-seeming younger woman into a tight embrace. "It wasn't her," she whispered in a soft, soothing voice. "Whatever your mother suffered, keeping your secret all those years and everything else that happened, I don't think she would ever want to see you hurt. She didn't do this to you," Isabell said softly.

"Your mother loves you and I don't think she could ever betray you," Isabell said, hoping that her words could ease at least a portion of the soul-rending ache she felt from her young friend.

The moment Isabell said 'it wasn't her,' a surge of relief swept over Ashlynn's wounded spirit, washing away months of fears, doubts, and uncertainties about the woman who had raised her without the help of servants, just to keep her miracle baby safe for all those years.

"She, she still loves me then," Ashlynn whispered softly as tears fell from her eyes, dripping soundlessly onto the dark fabric of Isabell's tunic as the older woman held her close. "Thank you," Ashlynn whispered as silent sobs shook her body.

No matter how much her mother had turned to the Church for comfort or relief from her own suffering, she hadn't let it twist her into a woman who would betray her own daughter. That thought alone was enough to light a candle in the darkness that filled Ashlynn's heart, giving her hope that one day soon, they could see each other again.

If her pious mother could accept her daughter enough to conceal her mark of the witch even now, then perhaps she could accept more than just her daughter's witchcraft. Perhaps, perhaps she could accept the woman who had captured her daughter's heart, and she could celebrate the happiness that Ashlynn had found in what was supposed to have been a world of cruelty and certain death.

For a moment, Ashlynn let herself bask in that feeling of relief, finally putting down half of the worries that had plagued her ever since that dreadful night. She sank into the fantasy of holding her mother the way she was holding Isabell now before introducing her to Nyrielle as the love of her life. And maybe, just maybe, now that Ashlynn had gained a level of mastery of her powers as a witch, she could help her mother's body heal from everything it had suffered over the years, repaying all of the kindness and love her mother had showered her daughter with despite the mark she bore.

For a moment, Ashlynn clung to the warmth cast by the feeble, flickering flame of knowledge that her mother hadn't been the one to betray her.

But her mind was far too sharp to let her wallow in that feeling or relief for long. After all, Isabell had said 'it wasn't her,' not 'I don't think it was her,' which meant that her friend knew who had betrayed her deepest secret to Owain Lothian.

"W-who?" Ashlynn asked with a slight tremble in her voice. "You know, don't you? You know who really told Owain that night... So, who? Who was it?"

Chapter 720: Traitor Revealed

"You know, don't you?"

The question, filled with months of pain and anguish, pierced Isabell's heart like the lance of a charging knight, tearing away her ability to hide from this question for even a moment longer.

Just the day before, she'd still entertained hopes of helping these sisters reconcile, but now, those hopes felt feeble and thin once she came to understand what Ashlynn had endured in the past half year.

When she left Lothian City, she felt like she'd come to understand how the past six months had been a slow, ever-increasing torment for Jocelynn as Owain revealed more and more of his cruel, true self to her.

Jocelynn understood that she'd made a terrible mistake, one that had cost her a person who truly loved her and bought her the 'affection' of a brutal man who wouldn't hesitate to do the same to her or worse if she ever crossed him. Now, Isabell stood before living proof that Jocelynn's mistake, as horrible as it was, hadn't torn her sister away from her forever. It should have been a joyous moment of revelation that would precede an even happier reunion.

But Isabell had seen for herself just the night before how Ashlynn responded to betrayal after what had happened to her, and the things she'd heard from Heila today only made it worse.

From the betrayal of Elder Paulus and his grandson Torsten in the High Pass to the ancestral spirits who had possessed young lord Hauke to attack Heila and Ashlynn, Heila had told Isabell everything that her lady had endured to reach the place where she was now. After hearing all that, Isabell understood that Ashlynn had learned all too well the feeling of a knife in the back, clutched by a hand she trusted to be at her side.

Now, months of pain and anguish turned Ashlynn's gaze murky even while a fierce anger, bordering on pure hatred, simmered beneath it, churning up a maelstrom of boiling emotion that the young woman could no longer contain.

"Ashlynn," Isabell said softly as she gathered up her courage to at least make an attempt at paving the way for the two sisters to reconcile. "I, I won't lie to you. I know. But, are you sure that you want to know? If it's someone who loves you..."

"They don't love me," Ashlynn spat as the anger and pain in her eyes surged to the forefront and she blinked away the tears that clouded her vision. "How could anyone who did this to me claim to love me? Telling Owain was as good as sentencing me to die, and if I hadn't been a witch, if I hadn't managed to fumble my way through using my powers that night, I would have died!"

Once again, the feeling of shovelfuls of cold, wet earth falling on her body as she was buried in the wilderness washed over her, making her world seem smaller, colder, and much, much darker as the stifling weight of the memory pressed down on her body. Her breathing grew shallow and labored, and the sound of blood rushing in her ears made the crackling of the fire and the rain against her windows feel distant, like they were sounds muffled by deep layers of soil.

"So how could anyone," Ashlynn said hoarsely as she struggled against the memory of being buried alive. "How could anyone do that to me and still say that they love me?"

"Because she made a horrible mistake," Isabell said softly, closing her eyes and lowering her head as if she couldn't bear to look Ashlynn in the eyes while offering up her explanation. Next to what Ashlynn had endured, it seemed like such a feeble thing to say, but she made herself press forward anyway because she would never be able to forgive herself if she didn't try.

"Because she's a young girl who gave in to a moment of jealousy for the 'perfect life' her big sister was about to obtain," Isabell said, shaking her head at how hollow her own voice sounded when she said it. "And because she had no idea that the man she thought was perfect and gallant was a monster capable of horrific violence."

"And because by the time she realized what she'd done," Isabell said, opening her eyes and taking off her silver-rimmed spectacles as she forced herself to meet Ashlynn's puffy, red-eyed, and tear-filled gaze. "By the time she understood that the man she dreamed of was really a monster that her big sister had been sacrificed to, it was far too late to take back what she'd done."

"So Jocey wanted Owain," Ashlynn said bitterly, followed by a cold, mirthless chuckle. "Amazing, isn't he? He charmed my father into offering me to him, charmed my sister into betraying me for him, and he's so charming and cunning that he has you laying all of the blame at his feet and making excuses for what my sister did in order to be with him."

"Ashlynn! That's not..." Isabell tried to say as Ashlynn's words tore at her heart like claws sharper than Georg's.

"But it is, isn't it?" Ashlynn interrupted as she staggered to her feet, no longer comfortable sharing a couch with the woman who wanted to make excuses for her sister's betrayal. "The biggest secret of my life, the thing that would see me burned at the stake if the Church ever finds out, and when she tells someone, it's a 'childish mistake?'" Ashlynn roared.

"Owain is a monster!" Ashlynn shouted, no longer able to contain the storm of emotions within her chest. "He's a monster who will destroy anything that gets in his way, and he'll use anyone foolish enough to let him. He used me, used that poor woman Samira, and he's using Jocey now, and we all let

him do it! He destroyed me, destroyed the Heartwood Clan's village, and who knows how many others he's destroyed because they were in his way or they slighted him somehow?"