

## The Vampire 721

### Chapter 721: The Sister She Loved

"But Jocey isn't a little girl anymore," Ashlynn insisted, rounding on Isabell as she gave vent to everything buried in her heart. She'd suspected for some time now, even feared it was true, but she would have felt so much better about the betrayal if it had come from her mother. Her mother had at least suffered because of Ashlynn's existence, but what had Ashlynn ever done to Jocelynn to deserve this?

She'd tried so hard to be a good big sister. When Jocey was young, Ashlynn stayed up late with her, reading her favorite stories long into the night whenever social obligations kept their parents away, even if they were gone for days at a time. She'd shared all of her secrets with her little sister, holding nothing back because she thought that Jocelynn deserved a big sister who led by example.

As children, Ashlynn brought Jocelynn to play in her very first garden, digging in the dirt together without a care in the world for what 'proper young ladies' should be doing. Jocelynn had looked up at her sister as if she were a miracle worker when Ashlynn showed her the sweet peas and marigolds she'd planted and carefully tended until they turned into colorful, beautiful flowers.

When they were young, Jocey had even insisted in wearing clothes that were the same color and fabric as her older sister's, even when her parents explained that she was growing too fast to wear things that were as delicate as the refined dresses that Ashlynn was starting to wear as she began to transition from being a girl to a young woman.

Jocelynn used to idolize her older sister, and they seemed inseparable for years after she was born.

Things began to change when Jocey was old enough to attend more functions with other noble ladies close to her own age. After years had passed without any hope of an heir, Rhys Blackwell had begun making considerations for his daughters, and that included sending Jocelynn to the sorts of gatherings that were expected of young noblewomen that Ashlynn herself had never been able to be a part of.

Slowly, Jocelynn started drifting away from her bookish, cloistered sister. She started to dress and act more like her peers instead of imitating her big sister, but she still understood the cage that Ashlynn lived in and tried to make it easier for her. There were both growing up and a distance was forming between them but Ashlynn had never felt like Jocey was abandoning her.

"They gave out party favors at Young Lady Tise's coming of age feast," a fourteen-year-old Jocelynn had said excitedly as she held out a slender, polished wooden case with both hands. "They didn't have any extras, but you can have mine," she said, excitedly opening the box to reveal a metal-tipped quill pen with a lustrous blue-green feather.

"In the old countries, they say that ladies who keep a diary written with the tail feather of a blue jay will never have sorrows to write about," Jocelynn said, excitedly pressing the expensive 'party favor' toward her older sister as she recounted the story that had been told at the party as though it was a solemn truth. "You write more than I do, so you should have it!"

Briefly, Ashlynn wondered if the quill pen was still among her belongings in Lothian Manor or the Summer Villa. She'd used it for years, and it had been one of her most treasured possessions.

Had Owain pressed it on Samira as part of her 'disguise', the way he'd given the imposter her grandmother's pearls? Had Jocelynn or Ashlynn's family reclaimed the treasured quill as a reminder of their lost loved one? Or had it been thrown on a rubbish heap, discarded with the same rough treatment that Ashlynn herself had faced when Owain's knights dumped her into a shallow grave?

Another time, Ashlynn remembered, a slightly older Jocelynn had come home in a fury from a tea party with other young ladies. It had been shortly after word began to spread that Owain Lothian would be arriving to formally court the eldest Blackwell daughter, and in Blackwell County, no gossip could be juicier for the young ladies of the court than the love life of the count's eldest daughter, especially when Ashlynn's younger sister would be at the tea party to provide even juicier details.

"Cassidy dePries is a hateful woman and I won't go to her tea parties ever again," Jocelynn fumed when she returned home late in the afternoon. "How dare she say that Lothian March is a place for savages and barbarians who only know how to fight demons? She said that Lord Owain would probably arrive riding a bear or something else ridiculous, and that you'd be lucky if he didn't dress you up in furs for your wedding."

"Jocey," Ashlynn remembered saying gently, laughing at the image of Owain riding a bear even as her heart warmed at her sister's fiercely protective tone. "We don't hear much from the frontier besides their battles with demons. I'm sure she doesn't understand how sophisticated things are in Lothian March."

Remember, it's been over a century since the first Lothian became a Marquis. I'm sure it's not as wild as it once was, but Lady Cassidy may not have as good of tutors to teach her that," she said, gently

reminding her sister about the gap that separated the daughters of the count from the daughters of his vassals.

"It doesn't matter," Jocelynn said stubbornly. "It was still a hateful thing to say, and I still won't go to her tea parties, at least not until she apologizes to you for what she said!"

Not quite three years later, Ashlynn's world had turned completely upside down. The younger sister who once stood up for her in places she couldn't go had become the woman who hurt her more than anyone, betraying her secret to a murderous villain who had nearly beaten her to death before ordering his men to dispose of her body.

Just those few years, and her sister had become a completely different person... Perhaps she'd even become the kind of person who should marry Owain. After all, if Jocelynn could sell out her own sister to get what she wanted, wasn't she the same kind of selfish, ruthless monster that he was?

Was there anything Jocelynn wouldn't do to get the life she wanted? After all, she'd already sacrificed her own sister... So, since she was willing to go that far, since she could already be that wicked, was there any reason that Ashlynn should show her any mercy?

"Jocey isn't a little girl anymore," Ashlynn repeated as she took a deep, shuddering breath and let it out in a long, slow exhale. "She had her coming-of-age celebration last year. She had the chance to choose between me and Owain, and she chose him," Ashlynn said as she gathered in the hot, simmering rage that threatened to boil over and turned it instead into an icy cold fury.

All this time, she'd fretted and worried for Jocelynn. All the sleepless nights she spent hoping that it had been anyone but her sister who had shattered the life she knew and ripped her away from the family she loved. All of the pressure she felt to race back to Lothian City to pry her sister free of Owain's grip and bring her back to the safety of the Vale of Mists...

All of that, and it had been her sister who shoved her into the shallow grave that refused to completely let go of the woman who had crawled out of it. All this time, she'd thought that her sister had become Owain's latest captive when in fact, she'd happily betrayed her sister just to take Ashlynn's place at the Lothian Lord's side.

"Since she wants to take my place as his wife," Ashlynn said coldly as she fought to suppress the warmth of her memories of the little sister she loved, leaving herself with nothing but the bitter cold of betrayal buffeting her heart like the winds of the High Pass. "Then she can stay by his side... until death comes for them both!"

## Chapter 722: Conflicting Desires

"She can stay by his side, until death comes for them both!"

Ashlynn's frigid proclamation came with a surge of power, as if the entire forest surrounding the ancient fortress responded to the pain and grief of the Mother of Trees, lending her strength and support in her moment of fury. The air became so thick and oppressive with the weight of Ashlynn's power that Isabell struggled to draw breath.

The fire in the hearth flared brighter as the flames gorged themselves on the dense, woody energy that flooded the room. Hanging above the flames, the forgotten tea kettle that Ashlynn had hung at the start of her conversation with Isabell hissed and whistled, sputtering madly as it boiled over and spitting out a cloud of steam.

"Ashlynn!" Isabell cried, pushing herself up off the sofa and struggling against the surge of energy that filled the room. Until now, she'd only seen the gentle, nurturing side of Ashlynn's witchcraft, but now that she stood in the presence of a witch's fury, she finally understood why the Church was so terrified of witches.

But no matter how terrifying Ashlynn's power was, Isabell refused to retreat from it. Somewhere deep in her heart, the older woman felt that this might be the only moment she had to help Ashlynn understand her sister.

If she ran from this tempest, if she showed Ashlynn that she was afraid of her, then Isabell feared that the young noblewoman would never let her come close as a confidant again. And if she turned into an outsider, she would never have a chance to share the rest of what she knew.

"Ashlynn, please, listen to me," Isabell said, dropping to one knee as the pressure emanating from Ashlynn increased to a point that made it impossible to remain standing, much less approach any closer. "Please, you don't know what Owain has done to your sister, what he's still doing to her! Please, just, just listen. Just for a few minutes," she pleaded, looking up at Ashlynn with tears brimming in the corners of her eyes.

The Ashlynn she saw standing over her barely felt human. Even though the energy flooding into the room was invisible to Isabell's eyes, Ashlynn's hair danced wildly in a breeze that only affected the young witch.

Her eyes glowed a brilliant, emerald green that was so bright, Isabell couldn't see the whites of her eyes or the dark spots of her pupils through the glow. Even her skin seemed to have transformed, with faint patterns emerging on her arms and chest that resembled the loops and whorls of woodgrain.

Isabell hadn't understood what it meant when Heila called Ashlynn the 'Mother of Trees', but as she gazed on the transcendent being before her, she felt like she was starting to understand now. She understood why the Eldritch people could accept a witch as one of their own instead of seeing her as a human invader and she also understood why the Church considered witches to be no different than demons.

But... but this was still Ashlynn! This was still the woman who had become her friend despite the wide gap in their age and the equally wide gap in their social standings. And if the two of them could become friends despite those differences, then whether Ashlynn was a witch or a demon didn't matter to Isabell in the slightest.

"What Owain is doing to Jocey?" Ashlynn repeated in a voice that wrapped around Isabell, seeming to come from all directions at once. "He hasn't," she started to say, only to falter and stagger a step forward as her grasp of the forest's energy faltered. "He hasn't forced himself on her, has he?"

This time, when Ashlynn spoke, the fire in the hearth roared even hotter, flames leaping toward the ceiling and sending a shower of sparks onto the stone hearth as the logs cracked and popped under the intense heat. Isabell flinched, instinctively scooting sideways as the heat pouring out of the hearth resembled a furnace. Still, she refused to back away from Ashlynn even as sweat beaded on her forehead and her skin felt flush from the intense heat of the flames.

"I'll tear him in two if he's laid a hand on her!" Ashlynn shouted as her body crackled with nature's energy and reason left her mind entirely.

Jocelynn had betrayed her. Her sister had wounded her more deeply than even Owain's beating had, and she would die for that. She had to die for that! But that didn't mean she wanted to see her suffer...

and certainly not at Owain's hands. It would be enough to make a swift end of things, just as she had with Darragh... Wouldn't it?

The power in the room rippled again, wavering like heat shimmer as Ashlynn's conflicting emotions tore at her concentration. The brilliant glow faded from her eyes as she staggered, and this time, Ashlynn dropped to her knees, no longer able to maintain her connection to the power of the forest as her love for her sister warred with her hatred of betrayal. The power of the world would answer a witch's call and take the form of their desires, but right now, Ashlynn wasn't sure what she desired.

She wanted revenge! She wanted the person who betrayed her to know how she'd suffered. She wanted them to regret until their last breath what they'd done to her. But she loved her sister more than almost anyone. In Ashlynn's heart, perhaps only Nyrielle meant more to her than the little sister she'd watched over since she was a babe. She wanted revenge, but part of her wanted to protect her sister even more.

At the same time, if there was anyone in Ashlynn's heart that she truly hated, then no one could compare to Owain. The fury and hatred that Ashlynn felt for Darragh's betrayal, or even Elder Paulus's betrayal that resulted in Andrus's death, were like candle flames next to a forest-consuming inferno of hatred that she felt for Owain.

So the feeling that Owain, the man she hated more than anyone, was harming the sister she loved more than almost anyone, should have produced the clearest surge of murderous intent a human soul was capable of. But, like a chain wrapped around her heart, the knowledge that Jocelynn had been the one to betray her choked her fury, yanking her back like a chain wrapped around a hunting dog's neck.

As the oppressive energy dissipated, Isabell sagged with relief, her shoulders dropping as the crushing weight lifted. She immediately started to rise, reaching toward Ashlynn, only to freeze a moment later when she heard heavy footsteps thundering toward Ashlynn's chambers.

"Mother Ashlynn!" Virve shouted as the bearish woman charged into the room, slamming the door open with such force that the wood splintered and it tore free from one of its hinges.

Isabell's head snapped toward the doorway as the heavy oak door crashed against the stone wall. Her heart, already racing from the magical tempest, lurched at the sight of the towering bearish woman with claws extended.

Here in the coven's own tower, there shouldn't have been a need for Virve to stand guard over her lady, and even less need to protect her from an aging human engineer. Still, the habits Virve acquired in her years as a member of Nyrielle's personal guard were hard to let go of, so despite every rational argument saying she wouldn't be needed, Virve had remained close, staying in the large room at the top of the tower in case she was needed.

Ashlynn should have been safe here, and yet, the pain Ashlynn felt at this moment was so great that it rippled outward to every member of her coven, like a warning cry that their common root was in great danger. Now, the closest member of the coven arrived with her claws bared, ready to tear into anything that threatened the woman she was sworn to protect.

Only, when she looked across the sitting room, she found Ashlynn kneeling on the soft carpet as tears streamed from her eyes and blood trickled from the fists she'd clenched so tightly that her fingernails had pierced her flesh. And the only other person in the room was the gray-haired human engineer who was kneeling on the ground herself and looking physically shaken, as though she'd just come in from a terrible storm.

"What, what happened here?" Virve asked as she strode hesitantly into the room, positioning herself at Ashlynn's side and glaring at Isabell with eyes that held deep-seated distrust. "Did you do this to her?"

"No, I," Isabell started as her gray eyes slid from the anguished Ashlynn to the protective soldier and back again. "Please, let me explain..."

#### Chapter 723: Jocelynn's Predicament (Part One)

Before Isabell could begin to speak, the door onto Ashlynn's terrace opened with a loud -BANG- and a flurry of snow as a cold wind swept through the room. The oppressive heat from the hearth retreated before the onslaught of the cold, but not before turning the leading edge of the flurry of snow into a brief shower of fat, cold raindrops that fell across Ashlynn's sitting room. At the center of that snow flurry, Heila's diminutive figure emerged, clutching a glowing-white Snow Fang in one hand as she dashed into the room.

"Ashlynn, what's wrong?" Heila asked, rushing to Ashlynn's side and reaching out to offer her a gentle, comforting touch. In Heila's chest, the seed of witchcraft that Ashlynn had planted there pulsed with a ripping, tearing pain that left Heila breathless even before she used the power of her dagger to dash through the sky. The feeling of distress had been so intense that she didn't dare delay, even for the amount of time it would have taken to rush through the halls.

"Tell me," Ashlynn said, in a voice that sounded rough and hollow. Her emerald eyes looked dull as she focused all of her attention on Isabell, ignoring both Virve and Heila as she demanded an explanation from Isabell. "What has Owain done to Jocey? What is he doing to her now?"

As soon as Ashlynn spoke, both Virve and Heila relaxed visibly, and Virve withdrew the hostile look she'd directed at Isabell. She offered no apology to the human engineer for her hostility, but she could at least understand why Ashlynn felt so anguished. If the older woman carried news of a threat to Ashlynn's sister, it made sense to both of the other witches why Ashlynn would have reacted so strongly.

What Isabell said next, however, shocked them both to the core.

"When Jocelynn betrayed you," Isabell said slowly, collapsing to sit on the singed rug and leaning her back against the sofa she had sat on previously. "She had no idea that Owain was as violent of a man as he is. She thought that, if she told him, they could find a way for you to go back to living quietly like you had in Blackwell Manor while she took your place as Owain's wife."

"How would that have even worked?" Ashlynn said numbly, stunned at her sister's naivete. "Don't tell me that this business about me 'dying in childbirth' so she could take my place was just a version of a plan she'd already hatched. Did she really think that Owain and his father Bors would go along with such a risky farce if they weren't forced to?"

"I don't know," Isabell said slowly, wincing slightly as she struggled to calm her breathing.

Jocelynn hadn't seemed quite that clear on how they were supposed to work things out, only that she'd 'confided' in Owain in the hopes that they could come together 'as a family' to solve the problem of Ashlynn's mark. And of course, she was all too happy to volunteer to take her sister's place at Owain's side.

"The important part," Isabell said as she finally felt her racing heart beginning to slow. "The important part is what happened after. Jocelynn might have been naive, but she isn't stupid. The more time she spent around Owain, the more she was able to put pieces together and the more she came to understand the kind of man he really is."



"More than that, the more things have gone wrong for Owain in Lothian March, the more his veneer of propriety and charm has started to slip," Isabell said. "He hasn't been afraid of letting Jocelynn see his cruelty, his willingness to deliver beatings to his own men, or the ugliness of his temper."

"He hasn't harmed Lady Jocelynn, has he?" Heila asked nervously, looking from Ashlynn to Isabell with a pained look on her face as she tried to decide where she should be right now. Ashlynn felt brittle, raw, and almost as drained as she'd felt following her battle against the ghost of High Lord Ansgar. She clearly wasn't well after hearing the news that Isabell had shared with her, and her own powers had raged out of control.

At the same time, Isabell looked almost physically battered by her encounter with Ashlynn's fury. Her skin had reddened as if she'd spent all day out in the summer sun, just from being too close to the hearth when the power Ashlynn summoned fanned the flames until they resembled a blacksmith's furnace. Isabell's once neat and tidy gray hair looked as if it had been tousled by fierce winds, and even though she was recovering, her breathing was still shallow and labored.

Heila wanted to rush to the older woman's side, but after hearing that Jocelynn had betrayed her sister, Heila didn't dare move from Ashlynn's side. With how raw her closest friend felt, even that little move to prioritize someone else might sting like grinding salt into a fresh wound. Torn between her desire to help someone who was physically hurting and Ashlynn's raw emotional wounds, Heila ultimately made no move, remaining at Ashlynn's side to offer what comfort she could.

"Owain hasn't harmed her, yet," Isabell said, emphasizing the word 'yet.' "But Owain is on thin ice with his father, Bors. The Marquis has already given Owain a deadline of the end of the year to prove himself worthy of becoming the next Marquis, or Bors intends to pass his throne to Loman. And if he gives Loman the throne, he wants Jocelynn to marry Loman instead of Owain."

Put simply, Jocelynn's position was incredibly precarious, trapped between the factions contending for the Lothian throne. Worse, as autumn gave way to winter, she was running out of time. The year would end with the winter solstice, and by the time Midwinter's Day arrived, Bors Lothian intended to present his decision to the march. At that point, Jocelynn's fate would be sealed.

#### Chapter 724: Jocelynn's Predicament (Part Two)

"They're treating her like a prize mare," Virve said, narrowing her eyes as her fur raised at the notion of someone offering her to whichever man was chosen to sit on the Lothian Throne. "Do those men see her as anything more than a field to plow and plant their seeds in?"

"No, they don't," Ashlynn said bitterly. "But Owain is very good at pretending otherwise. 'Prize mare' is exactly the way he thinks of women. He'll treat them gently so he doesn't spook them, but..."

"Owain is already 'breaking' your sister the way you'd break a horse," Isabell said, wincing slightly when her expression of disgust tugged at flesh that was still tender from the brief kiss of the hearth's heat. "He hasn't struck her, but Jocelynn says he's come close. Ever since he returned from Blackwell County, and even a bit before he left, she's been doing everything she can to keep him pacified and content with her."

When Isabell thought back on the list of things the young lady had admitted to doing in order to keep Owain's attention, her stomach churned and her hands shook with the desire to find a weapon. Confessor Eleanor's presence had been enough to keep Owain from deflowering the young lady before they could be married, but he'd been far too free with his hands and Jocelynn had been too afraid of his anger to deny his advances.

"Ashlynn, I won't pretend that Jocelynn's circumstances come close to what you have suffered," Isabell said. "But... She's all but alone in Lothian Manor and she's being schemed against on all sides."

"Bors is treating her like a set piece who's destined to marry whoever he chooses to give his throne to," Isabell said, holding up one finger, then adding another finger as she continued to speak, ticking off her points as she went. "Owain is treating her like she's already his property, and you know very well how little he cares for things he owns completely."

"Loman is actively contending for the throne," Isabell continued, holding up a third and final finger. "But he's keeping his distance from Jocelynn. When I spoke to Confessor Eleanor, she implied that the Church won't do much if anything to support your sister in Lothian City. In fact, the Church seems to be taking a step back while they wait to see the dust settle between the two brothers."

Isabell had hoped that the Church could at least become a place of refuge for Jocelynn, much like it had been for Jocelynn's mother. But aside from Confessor Jocelynn who was acting as a chaperone for a member of her own family and the four Templars who had come with them, the Church intended to offer no support.

Publicly they didn't want to be seen as taking sides, but privately, Isabell wondered if the Church wasn't as unified in the matter of the Lothian Succession as they claimed to be. The whole situation reeked of compromise between factions that each wanted something different, whether they supported the pious and compassionate Loman or the aggressive demon-slaying Owain and it left Jocelynn stuck in the

middle without support of the only other power in Lothian City who could protect her from the Lothians themselves.

"You're saying that she's already suffering for betraying me," Ashlynn said, frowning at her friend as hot anger flared within her chest again. "So I should forgive her for what she's done? Accept that she's suffered enough?"

Once again, Ashlynn found her heart at war with itself. Part of her wanted to rush to Lothian Manor and pull her sister away from the men who were treating her so callously while another part all but cackled in a twisted form of glee. Her sister's suffering was entirely the result of her choice to betray Ashlynn and now that it wasn't working out... wasn't that a form of the world giving vent to her feelings?

"I'm saying that, whether you want revenge on her for what she did or not," Isabell said, looking directly into Ashlynn's emerald eyes. "Now that she understands the man she 'sacrificed' her sister to be with and the way the Lothian family would treat her, she may not survive long enough for you to reach her."

"I've stopped her from taking her own life for now," Isabell said flatly. "She was convinced that the only way she could make up for what she had done to you was to use up her own life to help you reach the Heavenly Shores, and if she was lucky, she might have taken Owain down with her. But even if she doesn't try something as foolish as using her closeness with Owain to try to kill him, if he realizes that she's no longer besotted with him..."

"He won't let her go," Ashlynn said, slumping in exhaustion as she came to fully understand her sister's circumstances. Any joy she might have tasted at her sister's suffering turned to bitter ashes when Isabell explained that Jocelynn's guilt had consumed her enough that she would throw away her life for a chance to kill Owain.

"He'd never let his prize go," Ashlynn said flatly. "Just because she doesn't love him anymore, that doesn't mean he won't force himself on her... If both his father and mine support their marriage after the sham of my 'death in childbirth', what's to stop him from doing whatever he pleases with her?"

The other possibilities that occurred to Ashlynn were even worse. If Bors Lothian selected Loman as his heir and tried to take Jocelynn away from Owain, who knew what the eldest son would do? Ashlynn was certain that Owain would feel compelled to deny his brother the chance to claim the woman who 'should be his', but killing Jocelynn or running away with her were both far too tame for the kind of man Owain was.

No, Ashlynn thought, if Bors tried to give the throne and Jocelynn to Loman, then Owain was certain to 'ruin' Jocelynn in every way he could. Especially if he realized she no longer adored him the way he once had. He would break Jocelynn so badly that Loman would be left with a living, constant reminder of what happened when he took something that 'belonged' to his brother.

"I know she's hurt you, very badly," Isabell said. "And I don't know if you can ever forgive her for that. I don't know if you should," she added, raising a hand weakly to forestall any argument on the topic. "But... Whatever fate she suffers, I don't think it should be men like Owain and Bors Lothian who get to decide."

## Chapter 725: Time to Breathe

For several minutes after Isabell spoke, Ashlynn sat in near perfect stillness on the soft carpet before the hearth. Only the sounds of the crackling fire and the falling rain on the terrace outside filled the sitting room while everyone waited nervously to hear how Ashlynn would respond to Isabell's words.

"I need some time to think," Ashlynn finally said, lifting her head and looking around at the chaos her loss of control had brought to her room. From the scorched rug to the door that Virve broke in her haste to reach Ashlynn's side, even the puddles that formed after Heila charged in from the terrace, leaving the door open and swaying in the wind, in order to reach Ashlynn a few seconds sooner.

All of it combined to make it look like a fight had broken out in Ashlynn's sitting room, and perhaps one had.

It was the people, however, who truly tore at Ashlynn's heart. Heila stood anxiously at her side, trembling ever so slightly as if she were afraid to make a move. Her soft ringlets, usually styled neatly around her horns, hung limp and wet around her face, dripping more cold water onto the floor. Virve only looked better by comparison, but the veteran soldier's eyes never stopped moving from person to person and the open doors to the room as if she was afraid some new threat would emerge to strike at Ashlynn while she was vulnerable.

Isabell's appearance was the most heartrending. Heila and Virve had both come rushing because they felt Ashlynn's pain, but Isabell had stood at the center of the storm, refusing to leave Ashlynn as she confronted the powerful witch with painful truths. Now, her skin was burned, her hair disheveled, and it was clear that her body had been battered by mystical forces beyond anything the aging engineer should ever endure from a friend.

"Isabell," Ashlynn said softly, lowering her head in shame for a moment before forcing herself to meet the other woman's steely-eyed gaze. "I'm so sorry. I didn't... I should never hurt someone who cares for me enough to tell me what you did. I..."

"Don't," Isabell interrupted curtly. "Whatever you're going to say, don't."

"Master Isabell," Heiala began, clutching Ashlynn's arm as she felt the powerful witch flinching back from Isabell's words. "I know that..."

"Shush," Isabell said, holding up a hand, making a sharp motion as if she was cutting through the diminutive woman's words. "I said, don't say it because I don't need to hear it. You think I've never seen someone lose control of themselves when they hear the worst, most heartbreaking news they've received in their entire life?"

"So what if you hurt? So what if you lashed out?" Isabell said with a huff. "Haven't you suffered enough just now without beating yourself up because of me? So I don't want to hear it. You want to take some time to think, I think that's good. There are plenty of pieces to pick up in the meantime," she added with a wry smile as she looked around the room. "So focus on that and don't worry about me."

"Are you like this with your own children?" Ashlynn asked with a light chuckle at Isabell's gentle scolding. "I, I won't press an apology," she said. "But you can't hide the pain you're in just by sitting still like that. I don't think I can manage healing right now, but Heila's just as good at healing as I am, if not better. She's been itching to take care of you ever since she got here," Ashlynn added, reaching out to ruffle the horned woman's damp hair.

"Go," Ashlynn said softly, giving Heila a gentle push toward Isabell. "You can take her upstairs to tend to her injuries. And, Isabell, I'm sorry, I know we had other plans for this evening but..."

"It's fine," Isabell said, waving off the apology before Ashlynn could finish it. "You need to think. I'll tell Tiernan enough that he'll understand. I'm sure Sir Ollie, Lady Heila, or Captain Virve can host us later on if there's a need. You just take the time you need to think. It's fine if it takes a few days to sort things out," she added.

"Before I left, I encouraged Jocelynn to stay close to the ship captains that Owain recruited in the hopes that they could become knights," Isabell said as Heila helped her to her feet. As soon as she moved, Isabell took a deep, sharp breath as she found several sharp aches and pains across her body in places she hadn't even realized she was hurt. "At the very least," she added. "Jocelynn shouldn't be in any immediate danger. You can take some time to make your decisions."

"I know," Ashlynn said softly. "Virve, can you help Isabell upstairs? After that, you should meet Ollie at the gates. I'm sure he's worried after feeling what two felt, but he's still a bit short of reaching the outer walls."

"I'll take care of him, and I'll see that our 'special guests' don't cause him any trouble," Virve promised before stepping up to Isabell and holding out her arms with a clear offer to help.

"My hero," Isabell teased as she allowed the towering witch to scoop her up off her feet. Isabell found Virve's touch to be surprisingly gentle, and her reddish-brown fur was even softer than it looked, helping her to relax while the larger woman carried her off like a child who had stayed up past their bedtime.

"We'll take care of everything," Heila promised, hesitating to follow Virve and Isabell out of the room. "And Lady Nyrielle will be awake in just a few hours," she added nervously. "But, will it be all right for you to be alone until she wakes? If you want, I can fetch Talauia or Georg or..."

"I'll be fine," Ashlynn said softly as she forced herself to stand and turned in the direction of her bedroom. "Like I said, I need to think, and having some time to be quiet and alone will help. Take care of Isabell and tend to the wounded when they arrive. Just knowing that you can take over for me is already a tremendous help."

"If you say so," Heila said, giving Ashlynn a brief curtsy before she left the room to follow after Virve and Isabell. Along the way, however, she couldn't shake the feeling that Ashlynn wouldn't be all right, and she wondered... Did Ashlynn really need to be alone in order to think? Or was she trying to send them away for some other reason?

## Chapter 726: A Healer's Reluctant Patient (Part One)

While Virve carried Isabell away so that Heila could tend to her injuries, another healer was tending to their patient in one of the most private bed chambers of Lothian Manor.

The bedchamber felt hushed and intimate compared to the grand halls of Lothian Manor, with thick stone walls that muffled the sounds of the household's daily activities. Gray autumn light filtered weakly through diamond-paned windows, casting shifting shadows across the room as heavy clouds rolled overhead.

Rain drummed steadily against the thick glass, creating rivulets that distorted the view of the courtyard below while a fire crackled in the room's small hearth, providing just enough warmth to press back against the damp chill that seemed to seep through the manor's ancient stones.

The air in Bors' bedchamber carried the faint scent of lavender and beeswax, remnants of Isla's presence that Bors maintained even after her passing. The first summer that passed without his wife at his side, he'd berated the Mistress of Servants so fiercely for failing to hang lavender to dry beside Isla's embroidery table that even years later, the household staff brought fresh flowers without fail lest they provoke their lord's rage.

Now, as the daylight outside faded toward evening, Bors Lothian sat uncomfortably on an armless chair, feeling the cool air of the room on his bare chest and arms while Loman pressed his ear to his father's chest, listening to the sounds of his breathing as air moved through his lungs.

"Breathe deeper for me, Father," Loman said gently as he moved his head to the opposite side of his father's chest, straining to hear the slightest trace of a catch, rattle of wheeze as the older man's chest rose and fell.

More than twenty years ago, during the War of Inches, Bors Lothian's figure had been strong and powerful. His thick muscles allowed him to fight in heavy armor as though it were light, and his long-handled ax cut and cleaved through any demon wearing less than a heavy coat of mail.

Now, the ravages of time had turned solid slabs of muscles soft, and the hair on his chest had turned a gray that matched the hair on his head. There was still strength in his body, and his eyes were still as sharp and cunning as they'd ever been, but a certain roundness had settled across his shoulders, his belly, and even his backside, making it clear that his days of riding into battle astride a mighty warhorse were long behind him.

"I told you, it's nothing to be worrying over," Bors grouched when Loman stood, frowning at his father as he carefully considered the results of the exam so far. "I'm growing old, but I'm not dying yet, much to your brother's chagrin, I'm sure," he said with a slight chuckle, though his voice held no mirth.

"Father, I think that's going a bit far," Loman said as he traced his fingers down the centerline of his father's chest, sliding past the faded scars of an old wound before moving off to one side and pressing. "Tell me if there is pain here, Father," he said smoothly as he continued his examination.

"Of course there's pain!" Bors snapped, glowering at his youngest child. "You're pressing hard enough to drive a knife through me. And I'm not exaggerating. Your brother is growing desperate, and men as tenacious and ambitious as he is can lash out in dangerous and foolish ways when they feel like they're running out of options. Don't underestimate him or you'll find yourself face down in a gutter with an empty purse and a cheap knife in your chest to make it look like a robbery."

"I know he's ruthless, Father," Loman said patiently as he slid his fingers to the opposite side of his father's chest and pressed, frowning as he saw a brief wince of quickly suppressed discomfort flicker across the older man's face. "I know what he did to his own wife after all. But blood kin is different. And even if it wasn't, I doubt that he would risk the wrath of the Church by making a move against me."

A sudden gust of wind rattled the window panes, and both men glanced toward the sound as a cold draft swept across the room, making the fire flicker and sending shadows dancing across the walls. Loman pulled his light half-cape closer, adjusting the unfamiliar green and silver trimmed garment to better ward off the cold while wistfully wishing he had brought a set of his robes to change into after finishing yet another luncheon with a visiting Baron.

"Is that what you think of your brother?" Bors said, returning his attention to Loman and scowling at his son. Even though Loman had left behind the white and gold robes of his office in the Church, at times like this, the Lothian Marquis thought his son still looked at the world through the rosy-gold tinted windows of his temple instead of seeing to the heart of a person's true nature.

"Your mother always said that Owain inherited too much of my strength and not enough of her deftness," Bors said in a slightly softer tone as his eyes drifted to the lonely embroidery table beside the window and the half-finished project that still sat atop it.

More than once, Bors had considered learning needlepoint himself, just so he could personally finish her final piece, but every time he considered it, he dismissed it as utter foolishness. His hands were thick, strong, and calloused from years of fighting, and he was certain that if he used them on her delicate needles and silk threads, he would only destroy what remained of her last, incomplete piece.



"She was right to worry that he would grow too accustomed to overpowering his problems and solving things with his sword that would be better solved with words," Bors added as he turned back to Loman, seeing much more of Isla in his younger son's refined profile than he saw of himself.

"I think you still underestimate, OW!" Bors snarled as searing, white hot pain surged through his body, twisting his stomach in knots and sending pulses of burning hot pain racing all the way up his neck to the base of his jaw and shooting downward until he felt as though someone had grabbed hold of his dangling jewels and given them a painful twist.

"Careful there," he snapped, glaring at his son even as the color drained from his face as he looked at the long, ragged scar on his ribs that his son had driven two fingers into, producing pain that was worse than being stabbed with a knife. "That's where I..."

#### Chapter 727: A Healer's Reluctant Patient (Part Two)

"I know, Father, I know," Loman said patiently, masking his concern with practiced ease even as his heart began to race within his chest at his father's extreme reaction to what had only been a firm press at the center of the old wound.

Slowly, his fingers moved on from the scar that ran several inches along his father's side where the spear of a Horned Demon had nearly impaled him. The jagged scar still bore the marks of hasty battlefield stitching all these years later and if not for having a priest almost constantly at his side during that war, the wound would likely have been fatal.

Loman hadn't even been born yet when his father received the wound, but there had been a time when Bors would proudly lift his tunic, revealing his battle scars to his sons and telling them that they had to become strong men one day to earn battle scars of their own. Of course, the idea of it had horrified Loman's mother, who insisted that, even if Owain was bound for the battlefield one day, Loman didn't have to ride to war unless he chose to.

Now, as Loman examined the old wound, he tried to compare it to what it had looked like in his memories, attempting to determine if it had changed in shape due to some underlying condition of the body and illness or if it was simply a matter of age. For years, his father had sworn that it had only been an ordinary wound and not one caused by one of the demon's infernal darksteel weapons, but seeing the fierceness of his father's reaction, Loman began to wonder if that was really true.

"I know the old wound is tender, but is it more tender than usual?" Loman asked as he gave his father the same patient look that he'd given to countless proud men who were in dire enough straits to seek a healer's aid but too proud to admit the full extent of their suffering.

Too many men treated the priests of the Holy Lord of Light as miracle workers, believing they could wipe away all sickness with a single prayer and that all of the time spent poking, prodding and questioning was simply an act. Such men weren't entirely wrong. There were, after all, Exemplars and Saints within the Church who were capable of such miracles.

But for most of the Church's priests, a clear diagnosis was a vital part of any healing effort. A healer could kill themselves trying to heal a patient's entire body, and many foolish priests had shortened their careers by years, if not decades, by underestimating the cost of healing a grievous wound or severe injury.

Only by fully understanding the disease could a healer minimize the energy required to cure sickness, and that understanding required careful examination of the patient. Whether it was viewing the patient's urine in a clear glass for signs of cloudiness or bleeding, feeling their pulse for unsteady beats, listening to their breath or 'poking and prodding' at their bodies, each piece of a healer's ritual was vital to understanding the underlying sickness.

Now, as Loman examined his father's body, particularly the old wounds, he began to see a pattern of faintly discolored flesh, extra tenderness, and mild inflammation that left him feeling that there was some kind of illness that was just beginning to rear its head. But with just the few things he'd observed so far, it could be any one of more than a dozen sicknesses, and it was difficult to know which if his father wouldn't cooperate with his examination!

"I hardly go around poking my old wounds, Loman," Bors said, shaking his head at his son. "Enough of this," he added, pushing his son's hands away before the well-intentioned young man could unleash another unholy spasm of pain with his 'gentle' examination. "I told you, it's just a winter cough. I'm getting older, and the cold and wet weather aren't doing me any favors, but that doesn't mean I need you fussing over me."

And even if it was more than a winter cough, Bors thought, would that really be a bad thing? He'd kept Isla waiting for so long. So long as he could hold on for a few more years to settle things in the march, if he could see his first grandson born and know that the family was in good hands to continue after he passed, he wouldn't mind if his time came to follow Isla to the Heavenly Shores or to search for her again in their next life.

"Father," Loman protested, frowning at one of the few men he couldn't use his position as a young lord or a priest to bully into obedience to submit to his examination. "A winter cough is one thing, but you can't lie to me. Your handkerchief is stained red. Coughing, even coughing that produces yellow or green phlegm, is one thing. Coughing that is stained with blood is another."

"Wine stains on my handkerchief aren't bloodstains," the Marquis insisted stubbornly as he began lacing up his cream colored tunic. "Are you going to make a fuss every time your old man has a bit of wine go down the wrong way? Ridiculous. Enough of this, I'll be fine with a little extra rest for a few days. In the meantime, we have other matters that are more important."

After all, today had been the third day in a row that he summoned Loman to entertain one of the barons visiting from the eastern territories that bordered Keating Duchy. Yesterday, it had been Baron Otker who held the easternmost territory on the River Luath.

The deep canyons and swift rapids that defined Otker Barony made it impossible for goods to travel further east by river without being unloaded and carried by wagon for a stretch of several leagues and the fees the Otker family collected for their services made them one of the wealthiest baronies in the march and one of the most important supporters of the upcoming war. Even if Bors thought a match between Loman and Baron Otker's daughter was highly unlikely, he had to at least go through the motions of entertaining his vassal's proposal.

Today's lunch, however, was important for entirely different reasons. After all, not only was Baron Leufroy someone who had fought at Bors's side during the endless skirmishes of the War of Inches, he brought along a far more suitable candidate for his son's hand, someone whose charm and grace could match up to Lady Jocelynn Blackwell, even if she lacked Jocelynn's calculating and ambitious nature.

"Tell me," Bors said, fixing his son with an intense, evaluating look that was every bit as observant as the young healer's gaze. "What did you think of Baron Leufroy's daughter, Adala? Do you think she has the temperament of a future Marchioness?"

## Chapter 728: Family Planning (Part One)

Loman frowned at the intense look in his father's eyes, wishing the aging Marquis would worry more about his health and less about the romantic affairs of his children. The way his father reacted when he palpated his old wounds was deeply disturbing and at the moment, Loman wanted nothing more than to perform additional tests so he could determine how he should treat his father.

Yet, no matter how much he wanted to continue the examination, he knew better than to press his luck with the aging Marquis. Loman had already learned a few things from the impromptu exam that he'd insisted on. He would just have to wait for his father to give him another opportunity to continue. And in the meantime, he'd entertain Bors's insistence on discussing possible marriage partners.

Loman had resigned himself to some form of arranged marriage when he told his father that he intended to contend for the right to inherit the throne. Even though he'd spent most of his adult life assuming that his only partner in life would be the Church, he had resigned himself to renouncing many of his vows in order to inherit the throne, and that included his vow to give all of his love in this life to the Holy Lord of Light.

While Loman had no illusions that he would find true love in the span of time he would be left with if he was going to inherit, he hoped that he could find a partner with whom he could build an enduring love in the many years they would share after the wedding. After all, his father's marriage had been arranged, and he had found great happiness with Loman's mother, even if they had been little more than strangers on the day of their wedding.

Still, it was one thing to accept that he would need to find a marriage partner within the next year or so and another thing entirely to have his father playing matchmaker at every available opportunity! And the women he'd met so far had some questionable characteristics to say the least.

"I thought young lady Adala Leufroy was pleasant company," Loman said politely as he helped his father to move to a more comfortable, overstuffed armchair next to a window that overlooked Lothian City. Loman took a seat in the opposite, matching chair, gazing out the window at the rain rather than looking into his father's intense gaze as he gave his honest opinion of the young lady he'd just met.

"Her ideas are a bit... strange," Loman admitted, shifting uncomfortably in his chair as he recalled some of the questions Lady Adala had asked about the possibility of capturing demons in the upcoming war. "You said that she spent several years in the old countries, attending one of the finishing schools there?"

"After the last war," Bors said in acknowledgement. "Baron Leufroy used a sizable portion of his spoils from raiding Airgead Mountain to finance his children's education abroad in the hopes that they could raise their stations or make valuable connections from across the sea. If I remember correctly, Lady Adala and her siblings were educated in the Kingdom of Iron," Bors acknowledged, frowning as he guessed at the topic his son had seized on.

Most of the conversation between his son and the young lady had been little more than pleasantries, or polite comments about hobbies and interests. When the topic had moved to school and her experiences abroad however, the ideas she expressed after spending several years overseas were the ones that could be considered almost heretical in the Kingdom of Gaal.

"I understand that the use of slave labor is common in the Kingdom of Iron," Bors said, trying to smooth over the potential pitfalls of the topic by reminding his son that the Church hadn't rooted the practice out of the Kingdom of Iron, even after hundreds of years, and it was practiced to this day. "In fact, the kingdom's wealth is built on the backs of men who wear the iron collars of bondage."

"The Church teaches that a life spent in chains is penance for a life filled with refusal to meet one's struggle," Loman acknowledged with a nod, even though the doctrine had seen little use on this side of the sea. "It is considered a method of cleansing the soul of great sins and preparing to return to the struggle to reach the Heavenly Shores after turning away from Holy Light."

On the surface, the practice of owning slaves the way the people of the Iron Kingdom did wasn't much different from the custom of taking in bondsmen in the Kingdom of Gaal. The reality, however, was very, very different, and it was one that Loman took very seriously, given how many of the people who reached the frontier arrived as bondsmen.

The biggest difference between a bondsman and a slave was that a bondsman owed a debt to his lord, and while he had no freedom to leave his lord's service without repaying that debt, he was still a person. A bondsman could own property, labor for himself when he wasn't laboring for his lord, spend or save his wages as he pleased, and when his debt was paid, he would become a freeman again.

A slave, however, was less than a person. They were property. The place a slave slept, the food they ate, the tools they used... all of it was the property of their owner. They were never paid wages and could never again become freemen. The only virtue that could be ascribed to enslaving a man was that it forced him to meet his struggle in this life so that he could once again strive to reach the Heavenly Shores in his next one.

"You do realize the implications of her suggestion to enslave demons as laborers, don't you, Father?" Loman said, shifting uncomfortably in his chair. "If an enslaved man is purifying his soul through a lifetime spent as property, then enslaving demons would be granting them the same opportunity. It would be as good as opening a path for demons to reach the Heavenly Shores!"

The thought of it shook the young priest to his core. Living in the frontier, the High Priest and the Inquisition frequently gave sermons on the dangers of trying to interact with demons as though they were people.

The Church taught that demons were manifestations of darkness and wickedness and that all someone had to do was look at their twisted, beastly features to know the truth of their corruption. Even though they were intelligent and could speak, could even learn to imitate humans, they were never to be treated the same as human beings, even if the humans they were given the same status as were slaves.

It was one of the very oldest teachings of the Great Prophet after all, that the day man forgot the wickedness of demons would be the day that the Church and by extension, all mankind, would lose the protection of the Holy Lord of Light.

"She's only recently returned from her schooling," Bors said, attempting to plaster over the issue. "I'm sure she wasn't serious when she suggested that we should break demons to the collar instead of cleansing the lands of their influence. The old countries are less devout because they've never seen a demon or the damage even one of them can inflict on a village or its people."

"She probably didn't even realize she'd run afoul of a sacred tenet," Bors said, waving the issue aside as though it was of no great consequence. "She wasn't trained in the Church the way you were, after all. Who could expect a young girl to master the scriptures as well as you have?"

"But, if you fancy her, you could show her the error of her ways," Bors suggested. "It isn't a bad thing to be able to show the depths of your knowledge and wisdom to the woman you'll wed. She might even respect you for that."

"Perhaps," Loman said with a heavy sigh. It wasn't just the heretical notion of enslaving demons that bothered him, however. His father was right. Lady Adala hadn't grown up in the Church the way she had. If she had, or even if someone had told her that her idea would provoke the ire of the church, she never would have expressed it. No, it wasn't the idea that was the problem. It was the warm, almost bubbly, and excited tone of her voice when she made the suggestion that truly bothered him.

It was the very same tone with which she'd suggested taking dog sleds out to visit the Diamond Lakes in her father's territory once they'd frozen over for the winter, or any of the half dozen other topics she'd brought up during their lunch. There was no denying that Lady Adala was charming and pleasant, but there was something... off about the young woman's ability to remain cheerful even when discussing things as dark and dire as enslaving demons that left Loman recoiling in revulsion.

There were many sacrifices that Loman was prepared to make in order to keep his murderous brother Owain off of the throne, but if it came to marrying a woman like Lady Adala... He had to find a way to say no!

## Chapter 729: Family Planning (Part Two)

"Isn't the daughter of a baron, and one of our own vassals at that, fishing in our own pond at a time when we should be looking for external allies?" Loman said, offering up something he hoped his father would find to be an acceptable excuse to move on from considering Lady Adala as a marriage partner.

"Sometimes, a loyal vassal should be rewarded with the chance to rise," Bors said, reaching into a cabinet nearby for a bottle of his favorite strong wine and a pair of small cups. "But perhaps you already have your eye on someone?" Bors asked after pouring a cup for himself and a shallower one for Loman.

As a father, there were times he felt like he'd failed to school his younger son in the ways of men and lords. He'd left too much to Isla, and when she passed, he'd left nearly everything to the Church as Loman transitioned from adolescence to manhood.

While he would never suggest that Loman should learn to drink and carouse the way his brother Owain did, a man should be able to enjoy a stiff drink with his father from time to time. So, even though Loman had made a habit of refusing strong wine, Bors poured a cup for him anyway, even as he directed a silent apology to Ilsa for 'corrupting' the gentle young man she'd been so proud of.

"No one in particular," Loman said more quickly than he meant to. Immediately, his face flushed with warmth that had nothing to do with the sip of strong wine he'd taken. "I thought, perhaps it would be a good time to draw closer to Keating Duchy," the young lord said, hoping his father wouldn't misinterpret his moment of awkwardness for a hidden interest in one lady or another.

"We'll be moving a considerable number of soldiers and supplies through their territory in the years to come," the young lord pointed out. "Wouldn't a marriage between one of their families and ours help to send a message that we didn't intend to use those forces against them when the war ends?"

"It's been years since anyone raised an army to attack their neighbors instead of the demons," Bors scoffed. "The Keatings know that we wouldn't waste our fighting men on them so long as there are

demons at our border and wherever we finally draw the lines, we'll still have demons on the border," he reminded his son.

"You've been reading too many of the history books and the old laws if you're thinking that way," Bors chided his son lightly. "Besides, there aren't that many eligible young women among the noble houses of Keating Duchy."

"I thought Duke Keating had two unmarried daughters," Loman said as he tried to remember the conversations he'd heard among young ladies gathered at the wedding between Ashlynn and his brother. At the time, his priestly robes allowed him to remain aloof from any conversations about matchmaking, but that didn't mean he hadn't heard plenty of gossip about people that the young ladies attending thought would have the next significant wedding.

"Or Count DuValles?" Loman offered thoughtfully. "He and Count DuCoutmont are both said to be looking for matches for their younger daughters, aren't they?"

"Forget about Duke Keating's daughters," Bors said instantly and fiercely enough that it provoked a fit of coughing. "I'm fine," he insisted as soon as the coughing fit passed and he saw Loman's concerned look. Swallowing heavily, Bors gulped back the phlegm that tasted sharp enough that it almost certainly contained a trace of blood, refusing to stain another handkerchief and provoke even more worry from his son.

"It's just a cough," Bors repeated after taking a deep swallow of wine to wash the taste of blood and phlegm from his mouth. "But I mean what I say about Duke Keating's daughters. For one, they're twelve and fourteen years old. Your betrothal to either of them would last for years, and if you intend to claim the throne, you need to do your part to produce an heir sooner rather than later."

"Besides," Bors said with a snort. "Keating intends to present his daughters as candidates for the crown prince's hand at His Highness's coming of age ball in three years time. Those waters are too deep and too dangerous for us to fish in until we've been a duchy ourselves for a generation or two. It will be different once His Majesty selects a bride for his heir, but until then, forget about the families of the dukes."

Most of the time, Loman's suggestion would have had considerable merit. In fact, a marriage between the next Lothian Marquis and the daughter, even a younger daughter, from one of the five ducal houses would have done a great deal to pave the way to the Lothian family's ascension.



But at the moment, the king had not just one, but three male children, and the ruling council would do everything they could to ensure that they maintained as much influence as they could over the men who might become the next king. If Bors approached one of the dukes about a marriage with their eligible daughter, it was as good as making a declaration that the royal family wouldn't be interested in that daughter, and Bors had learned long ago that he couldn't afford to deliver such a stinging insult.

"As to the counts and their families," Bors said, leaning back in his overstuffed chair and shifting until he found a position that didn't put pressure on the old wound his son had poked. "Why don't you tell me about the advantages you hope to secure from each of them?" Bors asked in a challenging tone. "Tell me how you'll use this opportunity to strengthen the march."

"Well, to begin with," Loman said, rising to his father's challenge in the same way that he'd responded when his mother or his tutors gave him complex problems to reason his way through. "The DuValles have mining traditions of their own, though they mine for salt more than anything. But once we seize control of Airgead Mountain..."

Once Loman got started, Bors sat back and listened to his son's reasoning, nodding in agreement when he thought that Loman's points were reasonable and interjecting only when he felt like his son had made unfounded assumptions or lacked important pieces of information.

In the end, Bors was less concerned at the moment with which of the possible candidates his son might choose to court and more concerned with the thinking that was guiding his decisions.

There was still time, after all. He could spend the entire winter writing letters of introduction if he needed to, and send Loman on a tour of the neighboring territories for the whole of next spring if that was what it took to secure the right match. So long as there was a wedding by next summer, when they would begin to launch their Holy War against the demons, it would all work out in the end.

Speed was important, especially after the chain of disasters that flowed from Owain's marriage to Ashlynn Blackwell, but there was still enough time to make the right move. And if push came to shove, there was always the younger Blackwell girl. Jocelynn might not be ideal, but once she realized that Loman was not only just as charming as Owain was, but several years closer to her in age as well, he was certain that he could help her see the sense of transferring her devotion from the elder brother to the younger.

Besides, by the time spring came, the Church would have sent one of their High Inquisitors or even an Exemplar to oversee the Holy War. Once that happened, Bors intended to offer up Owain as a Templar, allowing his eldest son to do what he did best... and if he died gloriously on the battlefield, then it would put an end to any delusions that Jocelynn might harbor about a future with Bors' eldest son.

In the end, there was still plenty of time, and there were plenty of options as well, Bors thought as he listened to Loman's assessment of other potential marriage partners. He didn't need to let the failures of the past year become the foundation of more failures to come. When the time was right, he would make his intentions known more broadly.

Until then, he was content to allow Owain to strut about before the public, gathering support for the Holy War and building himself into the sort of hero that could inspire generations after his death. By the time the Church arrived to take his eldest son into their ranks, it would be too late for Owain to escape his fate.

#### Chapter 730: The Discarded Heir

Outside of Bors Lothian's chambers, Owain leaned against the smooth stone wall, resting one hand on the hilt of his sword while the other fidgeted with the heavy signet ring on his index finger. Years of wear had dulled the finish on the once lustrous gold ring, but the stone signet was still as crisp and sharp as the day he'd received it from his father more than ten years ago.

"One day, you'll bear the Lothian Coat of arms as the next Marquis," his father said when he asked Owain to select his personal sigil. "But before you are a lord, you are a man and a knight. The sigil you select is the one you will be known by, whether you fight in tournaments or on the field of battle against demons."

"Even after you become Marquis Lothian," Bors said sagely. "It will still be the symbol you use when you speak with your own voice and not on behalf of your people. So, what have you chosen?"

"Something strong," Owain said, unrolling a sketch he'd commissioned from one of the best artists in Lothian City. "A sword before the claw marks of a bear."

"Why the claw marks?" Bors asked, frowning slightly at the unconventional design. "Why not the head of a bear?"

"Because no one fears the bite of a bear, or its roar," Owain answered. "The teeth look scary but they aren't what the bear kills with. A roar is loud but so what? Old men are loud too and no one fears them. But just the sight of a bear's claw marks on a tree or barn, anywhere really, is enough to remind people of the strength that can tear them limb from limb. When people see my sigil, I don't want them thinking about the beast, I want them to think about what it can do."

"And the sword is your declaration that you aren't a mere beast? Rather, you're more dangerous than a mere beast because you have brought a sword to war." Bors said, nodding in approval as he came to understand his son's choice. "I'll have it carved, and present it to you after you stand your vigil. I'm proud of you, Owain," Bors said warmly, resting a calloused hand on his son's shoulder. "I'm sure that the march will be in good hands when it's your turn to sit upon the throne."

Now, just a little over ten years later, Owain stood outside his father's chambers, clearly set aside as his father broke every promise he'd ever made in order to groom Loman as his heir. More and more, Owain was convinced that his father's promise to wait until the year ended to make up his mind had been a hollow delaying tactic, forcing his son to exhaust his efforts preparing for war while Loman prepared to ascend the throne.

"You're growing sloppy, old man," Owain said under his breath while he glared at the heavy, ironbound wooden door to his father's chambers. If his father really wanted him to believe that he still had a chance at inheriting the throne, he should never have interfered with Owain's men.

Sending them away, forcefully commanding his son's closest vassals to escort the pair of guild masters on their insipid inspection of the lands near the Vale of Mists was a blatant attempt to deprive Owain of the support he relied on.

"The joke is on you, Father," Owain murmured, smiling as he imagined the look on his father's face when he realized that Owain already had someone who could take over most of Hugo's work.

While it was true that Jocelynn couldn't handle some of the more... questionable assignments he'd given his Steward, she could still be useful for several of the mundane tasks that Owain was certain his father thought he'd be incapable of handling on his own. When Owain had complained to her about his father stripping him of the man who managed his accounts just when he was supposed to be ensuring the barons each brought their autumn tithes to Lothian City, Jocelynn had demonstrated an uncanny knack for managing figures and ledgers.

"Father wanted me to marry into one of the guilds after all," Jocelynn said, as she pressed her lush body against his while explaining the notations in the family's ledger. "Once you know what each of the symbols mean, the sums aren't difficult to determine. You can leave this with me and focus on training the captains," she said with an encouraging smile. "They will never match your skill with a blade, but every hour of your teaching is a treasure that can't be bought. You shouldn't waste any of your time on things like this."

"You'll have to visit the storehouses and the granaries," Owain pointed out. "Those places aren't meant for a lady as refined and as beautiful as you are. And because of my father's blatant favoritism, I can't even send Sir Rain to escort you."

"So give me one of the captains," Jocelynn offered. "There are six of them. You can rotate one to me every day while you train the others. If you wish," she added in a quieter voice, stretching up on her tip toes to whisper into his ear. "You can even make them compete for the privilege."

"Why would I do that?" Owain said, scowling at the beautiful woman in his arms. "You belong to me. Why would I let them fight over you?"

"Because I belong to you," Jocelynn said with a coy look, teasing him as she ran her delicate fingers along the outside of his firm, muscular thigh. "But they don't know that. So you can enjoy watching them fight to win the favor of Count Blackwell's second daughter, drawing it out for weeks if you wish as you toy with them, until the day comes when you can claim me publicly. Wouldn't that be delicious? And it would remove yet another burden from your shoulders until Sir Rain and Sir Hugo return."

Owain had to admit that Jocelynn understood him well. Once she explained herself, he couldn't move quickly enough to issue his orders. After all, if she was going to give him the gift of watching fools fall all over themselves to win her favor only to pluck the tastiest fruit for himself in the end, how could he delay in accepting it?

Unfortunately, he couldn't dwell forever in his fantasies of seeing men who thought themselves mighty realizing how wide the gap between them truly was, nor could he indulge in his more lecherous dreams of what he would do when he was finally able to unwrap the real treasure who'd gone unnoticed while he was forced to marry her demonic sister.

As much as he wanted to linger in those tantalizing visions, the moment the door to his father's bed chambers opened, he was brought immediately back to a cold, uncomfortable reality.

"Hello, little brother," Owain said as he looked Loman's figure up and down, taking in the rich forest green tunic with its silver embroidery and the half cape he wore atop it. "I see you've given up all pretenses of being a priest these days," Owain said disdainfully. "Since that's the case, shouldn't you be fetching someone from the temple to tend to Father if he isn't well?"