

The Vampire 811

Chapter 811: Death Wish (Part One)

"I expect to resolve matters with Owain by year's end..."

Ashlynn's words hung in the air like a headsman's ax, ready to fall on the neck of the condemned. The statement was so shocking that for a moment, none of the noblemen at the dinner table knew how to respond to it.

The horned servants, however, went about their business as if everything was ordinary, placing artistically plated dishes before Ashlynn and each of the young lords.

"For your next course, Master Georg has prepared a taste of the hunt," one of the horned servants said as he gestured to the dishes on the table. "Roasted quail stuffed with berries, herbs, walnuts and goat cheese," he said, gesturing to a deboned quail that had been pressed flat before being slathered with the sweet, savory, crunchy and creamy filling and then rolled tight like a cigar to be roasted.

"Continuing the hunt," the servant said as he lifted the cover on the next dish. "Rabbit backstrap crusted in hazelnuts and served alongside pickled radishes," the servant explained, provoking a startled fit of coughing from Sir Carwyn.

"Did you say pickled radishes?" Carwyn asked as the coughing fit passed.

"Yes, Sir Carwyn," the servant said politely. "Master Georg obtained a barrel of pickled radishes that originated in Raek Village. He said that he wanted to prepare a dish for you that would carry the comforts of home."

Carwyn nodded numbly at the servant's words, not knowing what else to say while his heart felt like it was running away faster than a rabbit could dash. The pickled radishes had been Olwyn's idea after all. Something they'd done for the first time this year to try to earn more from their harvest when they brought them to market.

She'd been certain that it would be worth the investment, but Carwyn hadn't been willing to risk the villagers' profits on the idea, and so the only radishes that had been pickled were the ones that came

from his family's own fields. To be served his own radishes here... words couldn't describe the storm of conflicting emotions raging in his heart.

"I know it's difficult to be away from home," Ashlynn said gently, reaching across the table to place a hand on the young knight's forearm. "I spent half a year on the far side of the mountains, and it's been even longer since I've been able to taste the muscles, crab, and yellowfinned fish of home."

"Georg is a gentle man," she said gently. "He isn't trying to tease or taunt you. He just wants you to enjoy a taste of home, and if anything, a taste of life could be like if we share the fruits of our labor with each other instead of fighting each other. But mostly, Georg wants his cooking to make you smile. If it's too much, we can have it taken away."

"I don't understand," Carwyn said, looking at Ashlynn with moist eyes. "Why? And how? How can everyone here be so kind after everything that's happened? Your Captain Barsali defeated me in a duel, and when my body was broken and I would never ride or fight again, he brought me to one of your witches to heal my wounds."

"You've stolen my village's harvest, but you serve it back to me because you're worried that I'm homesick," he said as a lump began to form in his throat that made it difficult to speak. "You could slaughter us all, you could install your men as overlords, but instead, you offer to return me to my village, and all you ask of me is that I stand aside during your war. You don't even demand that I fight for you..."

"How is it that the people we call demons are this kind?" Carwyn asked with tears streaming from his eyes. "

"You call this kind?" Sir Rain said with a snort. "Lady Ashlynn, I thought that Lady Jocelynn was skilled at playing a man's heart like a lute, but compared to you, she still comes up a bit short. Lady Jocelynn's words are subtle and clever, and Lord Owain bends around her finger more every day, but you barely even need words when even the food served at your table is a tool to twist a man's heart," he said, lifting his mug of cider to offer a toast to her cunning.

"Sir Rain," Liam said in a harsh, warning tone while the horned servants in the room stared at Sir Rain as though he'd sprouted a second head to be scolding the Mother of Trees so openly.

"Sir Rain," Ashlynn said as she shook her head at the scruffy, bearded knight. "If my sister is as skilled as you say she is, then I should send you back to her for lessons. I told you that my patience wasn't limitless, but this kind of goading is childish. I expect this from young boys still in finishing school or Frost Walkers who live in isolation from the rest of the world... you need to do better."

"Lady Ashlynn," Liam said, hoping to pull some attention away from the belligerent knight. "I'm sure that Sir Rain is just tired from his time in isolation," he said, very carefully not using the word 'captivity.' "If you'll excuse him for this..."

"No, damn it, Liam, shut up and stop trying to put a muzzle on me," Sir Rain said angrily as he tossed his knife and fork on the table. His dark eyes flashed with barely constrained fury as he lashed out at Liam Dunn before he rounded on the rest of the men.

"She's a witch!" Sir Rain reminded the other men at the table. "She's a witch and she's bewitching Sir Carwyn right in front of our eyes, and we're sitting here with food fit for the royal table acting like it's all normal. But it's not normal! It's not normal to let these sorts of things stand. She's the enemy," he said, pointing a thick finger at Ashlynn. "We're her prisoners here. Why am I the only one who seems to remember that?"

Chapter 812: Death Wish (Part Two)

"You aren't the only one who remembers that," Ashlynn said, gesturing for the servants to withdraw. "You're just the only one who's chosen such a foolish method of fighting back. You want me to strike you. Maybe you're even willing to die at my hands if that's what it takes because you know that the instant I treat you with violence it 'proves' that I'm the evil one, the 'enemy' who has to be resisted. The 'demon' you all fear," Ashlynn said disdainfully.

She'd wondered why Sir Rain had pushed things so hard with Ollie in the beginning, forcing Ollie to fight a duel with him in front of Hugo and Carwyn, but now she was starting to understand. Sir Rain was Owain's right-hand man, and he was good at playing the provocateur in order to create opportunities for Owain to be the 'voice of reason.'

Sir Rain was willing to drag his own name through the mud and to play the fool so that other people could 'do the right thing.' Or, when the situation called for it, he was willing to take the fall for roughing someone up, perhaps even killing them in a duel, so that Owain didn't have to. He hadn't served Owain for very long, but he'd moved very quickly to do whatever it took to earn his lord's favor.

Now, he was trying to provoke the sort of violence that would put an end to talks of peace between the Vale of Mists and Sir Carwyn's village, or any of the other territories she might propose a truce with. He wanted to force her to be the monster they'd all been taught to fear so that everything she was trying to build tonight would fall apart.

"Sir Rain," Hugo said, staring at the bearded knight in surprise. He'd always known Sir Rain to be rough and belligerent, but he'd never thought that he harbored enough hatred of the Eldritch to lash out as much as he had since their arrival in the Vale of Mists. Until now, he'd been utterly confused by the other man's obstinacy, but was Lady Ashlynn right about Sir Rain's motives?

"Is that why you've been insulting everyone since we got here?" Hugo asked. "You could get yourself killed doing this!" He didn't like Sir Rain. Over the past several months, the larger man had bullied him more than enough times to earn Hugo's animosity, but he didn't want to see the other man dead. He might not ever call the other man a friend, but they were at least companions who served the same lord after all. The bond between them wasn't light.

"So what if it is, and so what if it isn't?" Sir Rain said petulantly. "It seems like Lady Ashlynn has no intention of doing anything about it. She's just going to sit there and take it, just like she lay back and took it when Lord Owain beat her half to death," he said, staring at Ashlynn with an arrogant smirk that he seemed to have learned from Owain.

It was a smirk that said he'd won. If she retaliated against him for his rudeness, then he won. And if she didn't, then he proved that he had successfully restrained her by making it clear that any violence she committed was an admission of defeat.

It was also a look that said he had no fear of death. Sir Rain, it seemed, had accepted that he would die no matter what happened. If he cooperated with Ashlynn, he was convinced that Owain or the Church would kill him as a traitor or a heretic. And if he didn't, then the 'demons' would kill him for defying them. Since he was dead either way, he had nothing to fear.

But that was where Sir Rain was very, very wrong.

Reaching out to the bell on the table, Ashlynn gave it a quick double ring, waiting only a handful of heartbeats before the door opened to reveal a pair of burly soldiers from the Clan of the Great Claw wearing harlequin-patterned gambesons along with darksteel fighting gauntlets that were already on their hands.

"Your Dominion," the first soldier to enter said. "What orders do you have for us?"

"Sir Rain is, what did you say, Lord Liam?" Ashlynn asked with a raised eyebrow at the young lord. "He's tired from his time in isolation. He isn't good company at the moment. I'm afraid he'll need to return to his chambers and await Madame Zedya's return. She and Sir Lennart can see about adjusting his attitude when they return to the Vale."

"What? You can't even beat me with your own hands?" Sir Rain said mockingly as the two bearish soldiers lifted him bodily from his seat. "You looked so brave when you used my sword to run that traitor through. Where is that courage now, Lady Ashlynn? Did it melt like the fog when we came back to your castle? Was it all an act? You need to have your minions beat me into submission for you?"

"I know you aren't afraid to die, Sir Rain," Ashlynn said with a heavy sigh. "But you really should remember where you are. I'm still being kind to you by turning you over to Madame Zedya. The last traitors she gave an 'attitude adjustment' to gave up their horns to be carved into weapons after they died. They forgot they were anything other than weapons to begin with."

"Since you seem to insist on acting like a child," Ashlynn said in a voice that turned frosty. "Perhaps Madame Zedya can help you to forget that you were ever a big, strong knight... I'm sure if I ask her to, she'll be able to convince you that you're just a silly little girl, acting out because you've lost your dolls," she said with an emerald gaze that was so cold, the winter rains outside the window seemed like balmy summer showers by comparison.

"The Eldritch have long ago learned that there are worse fates than death, Sir Rain," Ashlynn said. "Since you wish to provoke me, then you can enjoy one of them for yourself. Perhaps after a few weeks of wetting yourself and eating nothing but an infant's mush, you'll be willing to act like an adult who has the power to rescue or doom the Aleese Barony."

"You, you wouldn't... You wouldn't dare!" Sir Rain managed to say before the soldiers dragged him out of the room, leaving a deeply uncomfortable silence behind.

"I'm sorry that you all had to see that," Ashlynn said before she picked up her knife and fork and carefully cut herself a portion of hazelnut-crusted rabbit backstrap with pickled radishes. "These really are lovely, Sir Carwyn," she said after savoring the complex interplay of savory and sour flavors with the crisp and crunchy textures.

"Please understand," she added when it was clear that no one at the table knew how they should respond to what had just happened. "I prefer Georg's way of thinking. I want to enjoy the things that we can make by working together," she said, gesturing to the dish as she cut another bite. "But if we can't be kind to each other, I won't sit back and allow myself or my people to be trampled on."

"So what do you say, Sir Carwyn?" Ashlynn asked. "Can you accept the terms I offered?"

Chapter 813: The Only Choice

"So what do you say, Sir Carwyn?" Ashlynn asked. "Can you accept the terms I offered?"

Sir Carwyn was still staring at the door that the soldiers had just carried Sir Rain through when Ashlynn asked her question. Of all of the things he expected when the powerful witch took action, the notion of mesmerizing a man until he believed that he was a little girl who wet herself had never once entered his mind.

To a man like Sir Rain, that was a fate worse than imprisonment or torture. If they paraded him in public, the shame would haunt him for the rest of his days, and even if they didn't, it would still break the man's spirit. From her words, the punishment would only be temporary but in a way, that only made it worse. It was something she could do and undo as she wished and the thought of the other things she could do with that power was...

"Sir Carwyn?" Ashlynn prompted gently, shaking the young knight out of his thoughts. "Please, don't mistake me. You can refuse my offer without facing the kind of consequences that Sir Rain will. You have been nothing but honorable and courteous since you arrived. You won't share his fate if you feel that honor demands that you reject my offer."

"Then, if I refuse, what will happen to my family?" Carwyn asked hesitantly. "What will happen to my village?"

"If you refuse, I'll send a message to Commander Savis and he'll add it to the list of villages the Second Army must capture," Ashlynn said, as though it were only common sense. "I understand your father is still healthy enough to don his armor and swing his sword. I imagine he'll rally the remaining soldiers and villages to resist the assault. Many will die, but it isn't the Eldritch way to slaughter the innocent," she said.

"If your father is as honorable as you are, then he'll likely die in battle," Ashlynn continued. "I cannot order his life to be spared if he takes up his sword. But your wife may be captured and brought here once the village is occupied. That much, at least, I can offer you."

"When you say it like that, the choice seems obvious," Liam interjected calmly as he sliced a portion of the rabbit and radish dish for himself. "Sir Carwyn, you should take Lady Ashlynn's offer. Save your village. Save your father's life. Resisting the Eldritch armies with the forces of your village will only welcome tragedy."

"Afterward, whatever happens, you can say that I gave my blessings for your surrender," Liam suggested. "Or, if it would be better this way, I'm sure that Sir Hugo can give his blessings for your surrender in place of his father."

"Of course," Hugo said quickly. "Sir Carwyn, you're the most honorable man I know. You shouldn't have to lose your father and your village when Lady Ashlynn is offering you a better path."

"Thank you, my lords," Carwyn said formally after taking a deep breath to calm himself. "But what I do, I will bear responsibility for doing. I already told you that I was prepared to surrender my village to protect my family and my people," he said as he stood, walking around the small table to kneel before Ashlynn.

"Your Dominion," he said, deliberately choosing to address her in the Eldritch way. "I cannot give you my sword, because my sword will belong to Dame Sybyll after today, but I give you my surrender. I will guide Captain Barsali and his men to my village in the morning, and I will ensure that they accept the terms you've offered. You have my word."

"Thank you, Sir Carwyn," Ashlynn said as she stood and helped the other man to his feet. "I hoped you would accept this offer," she said with a warm smile. "So did Sir Ollie. He offered to accompany you in Captain Barsali's place, but I need him elsewhere in the days to come. He and I are both worried that some among your people may not accept your decision," Ashlynn said as she reached into a pouch at her waist and withdrew two small wooden medallions, each the size of a thumb's last bone and carved in the shape of a shield.

"The power in these is weak because Ollie only had a few hours to carve them today," Ashlynn explained as she pressed the shield-shaped amulets into Carwyn's hands. "They will break under strain. But they

should grant enough protection to you and your wife to stop the blade of a farmer turned assassin, even if the attack shatters the amulet in the process. I know the sting of a traitor's blade too well," Ashlynn said softly. "And good people may do foolish things when their emotions run hot. This way, you'll have a chance if the worst happens."

The pain in her voice and the ghosts lurking in her eyes couldn't be clearer to Carwyn and as he looked at that pain, he felt like he finally understood Sir Ollie and how a man raised as a kitchen boy could strive hard enough to become a knight. Because if there was something he could do to ease the pain he saw in her, he knew he would do it.

"Do I need to do anything to use these 'amulets', my lady?" Carwyn asked as he felt the warmth radiating from the wood. "Do they require a blood offering of any sort, or spoken words? I, I know nothing of witchcraft, but I remember Lady Heila speaking several words over me when she healed my limbs."

"Just wear them so they touch your skin and that's enough," Ashlynn said as she returned to her seat and gestured for Carwyn to do the same. "They are quickly made and their power will fade over time, so do not rely on them forever, but they should be more than sufficient to protect you and your wife until next winter."

"Lady Ashlynn," Liam asked as he cut into the stuffed quail. Part of him wished that there had been more of the rabbit, but when he bit into the savory, sweet, creamy, stuffed quail, he found himself grateful that he hadn't filled up on the previous dishes.

There was always plenty of variety at feasts, but all too often he found himself returning to the same things over and over again without ever tasting half the dishes piled on the long tables where the lords sat.

"Are protective amulets like those common among the Eldritch people?" Liam asked directly. "Do your soldiers all wear such a charm?" He'd never seen one on any of the demons he'd killed in all his years of fighting, but he'd also never confronted the forces of the Vale of Mists directly before. If they all had items like this, it made it even less likely that the forces of Lothian March could prevail against the demons in the short term.

"It would take Ollie months to carve enough of these amulets to protect all of our soldiers," Ashlynn said with a pleasant smile. "In the short term, there's no reason to rush him to do such a thing."

Beside him, Hugo's mind was already busy calculating. In just a few hours time, Sir Ollie had already produced enough of these 'amulets' to ward two people from the blade of an attacker. From the way Ashlynn described them, they were consumable goods, much like arrows, but even if that were true, they were just as easily replaced.

And from the sounds of it, with more care, they could be made even stronger. Perhaps strong enough to survive multiple blows. On the battlefield, that kind of advantage could allow a single Eldritch soldier to kill perhaps twice or even three times as many men before they were brought down, and by the end of winter, she could likely equip as many as a hundred men with them.

Her losses in every battle would be fewer and her enemy's losses would be greater. And this was just the work of one of her witches if she chose to have him strengthen her army... Moreover, Hugo realized, this was something simple enough and common enough that she didn't even seem to be worried about exposing this capability to them.

And if that was the case... What else did she have hidden in her witch's hat?

Chapter 814: A Taste of Things to Come

Ashlynn allowed the conversation to fall into a quiet, contemplative lull as each man finished Georg's carefully prepared dishes. Sir Rain's outburst made the atmosphere much tenser than she wished, but Sir Carwyn's surrender had accomplished the first truly significant goal she had for this evening's meal.

Now, as she rang the bell to signal the beginning of the main course, she turned her thoughts to the remaining young lords gathered at the table.

Lord Liam was working aggressively to position himself as a leader of this small group, so much so that he'd shoved Sir Hugo almost completely aside.

Every time something had happened this evening, whether it involved him or not, Liam had chosen to involve himself. From the moment he slapped Sir Rain in order to take control of 'punishing his outburst' on Ashlynn's behalf, he'd sought to present himself as a man in control of his environment.

The point where he'd offered to cover for Sir Carwyn's surrender was the most outlandish overstep he'd committed, brushing aside Sir Hugo to whom Sir Carwyn actually owed a measure of fealty in order to claim responsibility for the young knight's actions.

He was trying too hard, Ashlynn thought. But the question was, why? At times, he felt similar to Owain in his need to be in command, but unlike Owain, there seemed to be an intention behind his actions that benefited others more than himself.

She wished she had more time to study the man and to understand what drove him. Was he genuinely concerned for the others in this room and acting out of a sense of obligation as the highest-ranking nobleman present? Or was he scheming to put himself into a more advantageous position with her when it came time to negotiate for the Dunn Barony? She couldn't tell.

The doors opened to admit several more servants than had come previously, each carrying a much larger platter covered with a silver cloche. In addition, a servant set a large leather scroll case on a side table near Ashlynn, ready for the moment when it was needed.

"Master Georg understands that larger portions are more common in the lands that Lady Ashlynn and her guests are from," the horned servant said as he raised the cloche on the dish in front of her. "And so he has prepared something to represent a triumphant hunt."

"The venison loin before you has been wrapped in boar bacon and the sauce accompanying it is a reduction of venison stock and rich red wine," the servant explained as he gestured to the first dish, featuring a slice of venison the size of Ashlynn's fist, wrapped in thick cut bacon and resting in a pool of sauce so dark and red that it reminded Ashlynn of freshly spilled blood.

"Beside that," the servant continued, "we have a split Elk bone, roasted until the marrow is soft and flows like butter, topped with pickled mustard seeds with bread for dipping."

"And finally," the servant said, gesturing to the last dish. "A seared double breast of duck on a bed of foraged mushrooms and wild sorrel. Please, enjoy," he said before withdrawing from the room with the remainder of the servants. In the process, they removed every last trace of Sir Rain from the room, including his chair and the rest of his place setting, leaving a conspicuous gap in the seating arrangement but no other sign that he'd ever been there.

"I'm sure you'll all appreciate such a hearty meal," Ashlynn said as she tore herself a small piece of bread to dip into the rich elk marrow. "But if you enjoy sweet things, do save room for dessert. Master Georg's cooking is among the most refined I've sampled in the Eldritch world, but his pastries are his highest art."

"I'll be honest, Lady Ashlynn," Liam said lightly as he emulated his host in sampling the elk marrow. "When I saw the bone, I almost wondered if this was harvested from the cattle recently taken from Dunn hamlets. I don't know if I should be relieved that it isn't, or disappointed that you didn't see fit to give me a 'taste of home' as well."

"I told you in the beginning that your circumstances aren't the same, Lord Liam," Ashlynn said, shaking her head at the young lord. "Sir Carwyn has been here for several days already, and I know very well how much he must miss the flavors of home. So does Georg. The dish he offered for Sir Carwynn was meant to provide comfort. If we served you your own beef, however..."

"There's a good chance I'd take it as an insult," Liam acknowledged. "You understand people very well, my Lady. I really regret that I wasn't able to know you better before you... left the march," he said delicately.

"There will be plenty of time for that in the future," Ashlynn said with a cautious, reserved smile. "I have a proposal for you, Lord Liam, just as I had one for Sir Carwyn."

"Just for me?" Liam asked, raising his brow slightly as he glanced at Sir Hugo. "By seniority, shouldn't you speak to me last? It should be Sir Hugo's turn, shouldn't it?"

"No, I'm different from you," Hugo said, shaking his head and reluctantly setting down his utensils before he'd finished even a quarter of the venison and boar. "Lady Ashlynn wasn't just being polite when she said our circumstances were different. My life has been claimed by my cousin, Dame Sybyll. Sir Ollie and Lady Heila have both acknowledged this, and I imagine that Lady Ashlynn does as well."

"Whatever is in store for me and for Hanrahan Barony, it will be up to Dame Sybyll to decide," Hugo said. "So, while there is room for Lady Ashlynn to negotiate with each of you, when it comes to me, I'm mostly a spectator," he said with a resigned shrug.

"Don't dismiss the importance of the things you'll see, Sir Hugo," Ashlynn said with a knowing look. "After this meal, there are men waiting to take you to Dame Sybyll's camp. The winter nights are long and you should be able to catch up to them shortly before dawn. You and Lord Liam, in fact. I had intended to send Sir Rain with you as well, but... I'm afraid that Baron Aleese will need to hear about what you see from Sir Hugo or Sir Liam instead of from his own son."

"And what are we going to see?" Liam asked as he looked at Ashlynn. "More of your raids against the Hanrahan villages, like the one you threatened Sir Carwyn's village with?"

"No, not a raid," Ashlynn said as she took a bite of the tender, delicately prepared venison. "Commander Savis and Commander Tausau will mop up any of the villages in Hanrahan Barony that still have knights to defend them, and they'll occupy everything else directly. Sending the two of them after villages feels like using sledgehammers to open walnuts, but the experience will help with their perspective."

"No, Dame Sybyll intended to confront her cousin Ian at Hanrahan Town directly," Ashlynn said with a smile that was more genuine than the last one but also distinctly predatory. "Of course, she'll have to wait until Loman Lothian arrives with Sir Tommin and Inquisitor Diarmuid," she said, shocking everyone at the table with her casual mention of what should have been secret plans to reinforce the Hanrahan Barony.

"The two of you will be going as observers," she said sweetly as she took another bite of the venison that dripped dark red sauce, leaving a faint line running down from the corner of her lips that was reminiscent of Nyrielle and the other vampires after they'd fed until she carefully blotted it away. "It's time for you to have a taste of what may descend on the rest of the march. To see firsthand how this will be different from any war that's ever been fought in Lothian March."

"I take it you feel like we'll be impressed enough by your demonstration that we'll accept the terms you're offering each of our baronies for surrender?" Liam asked. "You know that there's a large difference between your initial attacks against people who aren't expecting you vs what will happen when the real war begins."

He could accept that the right thing for Sir Carwyn to do was to surrender as quickly as possible. It was impossible that anyone could reinforce his village before Ashlynn's forces arrived to capture it, and without a knight and his best soldiers behind stout walls, defeat was almost certain.

But for the larger towns like Dunn or Hanrahan, or the older, more established villages closer to Lothian City, like Maeril, which boasted a stout stone wall and larger fortress, the chances of being able to

successfully fight back were much greater. It was in those bastions of human strength and the power of the Church's priests and templars that Liam placed his faith for humans to fight back against Ashlynn's forces.

"That's true," Ashlynn agreed. "But it's my hope that we can prevent much of that suffering," she said with a sigh as she set her food aside and lifted the scroll case off the table nearby. "There's a vision of a better future I'd like to share with you. One that, given the choice, is much, much better than the results of any extended wars."

Around the table, everyone slowly set their utensils down as their eyes tracked the scroll case. From inside, Ashlynn pulled a simple map of the westernmost territories of the Lothian March, extending all the way to Airgead Mountain, the High Pass, and slightly beyond.

The maps were of a higher quality than any of the men sitting at the table had ever seen, with precise distances measured and a great deal of detail about regions where humans had yet to make any significant progress exploring.

But even though there were hidden lakes and rivers, peaks and passes, and many other things the men had never seen, it was the borders and the labels on the map that sent a ripple through their hearts and froze their breath in their chests...

Chapter 815: Redrawing the Map (Part One)

"I don't understand," Sir Hugo said as he stared at the map Ashlynn had unrolled in confusion. "Hanrahan Barony would almost completely envelop Airgead Mountain... That, that more than doubles our territory!"

On the map, the border for Hanrahan territory had expanded slightly to the north, east, and south, but the true expansion of the territory was westward, encompassing all of Airgead Mountain except for its northwestern slopes, where the border seemed to run into another territory they'd never heard of.

"What are the 'Four Peaks,'" Sir Carwyn asked as he stared at the map in confusion.

Despite living in the shadow of the mountains, the maps available to humans were very limited. Explorers often ventured into the mountain ranges, but few returned. A few had made it back, telling

tales of distant peaks, monstrous demon giants, and weather so cold and air so thin that men froze to death in their sleep.

Whether those tales were true or not was a subject of great debate in the frontier. One thing was certain, however. The Vale of Mists lay at the mouth of a way across those great mountains and demons had built a road that lasted for a thousand years running all the way from the distant shores, through the Vale and to the lands beyond, so there must be something further west for humans to discover, they simply hadn't made it far enough yet.

"Long ago, this whole land was buried beneath sheets of ice," Ashlynn began, smiling slightly as she watched the map sparking genuine curiosity in their minds. "It was known as the Age of Ice, and during that era, there was a Frost Walker High Lord named Ansgar who was called 'the Lord of the Seven Peaks.'"

"The High Pass threads its way between two of those peaks," Ashlynn said, tapping on the map just beyond the Vale of Mists. "Fortress Peak is the current domain of the Frost Walkers. Their people have dwindled to a point that it makes little sense to them to claim any other mountains. Across from that, and behind Airgead Mountain, is Knife Peak. If you look south from Fortress Peak, you can see the top of Knife Peak above the clouds, looking like a sharp blade stabbing up from below."

"You mean that you've," Liam started to say, only to shake his head and hold up his hand in apology. "I'm sorry. Of course, you've seen it. You've traveled beyond the mountains and seen many things we haven't. Mountains taller than clouds..."

"Fortress Peak and Knife Peak aren't the only giants in this range," Ashlynn explained as she traced her finger north from Fortress Peak. "They call this one the Sage's Summit," she said, tapping a mountain. "It was once home to Frost Walker sorcerers, and it was the birthplace of both Ines, the Unending Blizzard, and Erarik, the Frost Architect," she said, pausing briefly as she remembered the tragic end of the ancestors who had tormented Hauke.

She didn't regret their deaths. Nyrielle had been right to destroy them utterly before they could cause any greater harm, and both Ashlynn and Nyrielle still wondered if they had been acting on some ancient plan of Shubnalu's when they possessed Hauke.

But to live through so much and die the way they had still felt like a great loss. Hauke greatly valued each of those ancestors as mentors, and the knowledge he'd gained from them in just a brief half year was already substantial.

Losing them had cut off access to some of the Frost Walker's greatest legacies of sorcery. More than that, the loss of the ancestors themselves cost them a number of people who could have been powerful allies against the fire sorcery of the Church of the Holy Lord of Light.

"My Lady?" Carwyn said gently. "Was there something more about the people you mentioned from this 'Sage's Summit?' Those sound like impressive titles, and from what little I've learned of the Eldritch, they don't give such titles lightly. But, if it's a sacred matter or a deep secret, just tell me and I won't pry."

Now that he'd made the decision to surrender to Lady Ashlynn and to come under the banner of Dame Sybyll Hanrahan, he found that he was much more curious about the Eldritch people. Or perhaps his curiosity had been growing ever since his duel with Captain Barsali, and it was only after his surrender that the dam holding his curiosity back finally shattered.

Whatever the reason, when he saw the complex look flicker across Lady Ashlynn's eyes as she gazed at 'Sage's Summit,' he felt like there was something important there. At the same time, he wanted her to know that he would respect whatever boundaries she chose to put in place. He was a very new ally and he'd done nothing so far to earn her trust.

"In their eras, they were great heroes and guardians of their people," Ashlynn said with a heavy sigh. "Ansgar is the man who shattered my sword when we fought in the High Pass," Ashlynn explained. "Hugo and Liam will be traveling with young lord Hauke, the future ruler of the Four Peaks, though he hasn't seen this map yet, so I'd ask you to keep this detail to yourself," she said with a slight wink.

"If you want to hear about Ansgar, Ines, Erarik, and the other ancient heroes who guarded their mountains," Ashlynn said as she looked between the two men. "You can ask him if he's willing to share what he knows when you all return. I think it would be good for him to speak of it," she said softly. "When he's ready. Don't press him," she cautioned. "He's only just recovered from his own conflict with their lingering spirits."

"I, I see," Carwyn said carefully, exchanging a surprised look with Liam and Hugo. Lady Ashlynn had spoken of a time long ago, not only before the founding of the Kingdom of Gaal but before humans even arrived on this continent, and yet these powerful 'Frost Walkers' had lingered on to this day?

If ancient ghosts were frozen in the ice of the mountains, then it was no wonder that so few explorers returned from the snow-covered peaks, and the ones that did seemed half mad when they described what they'd experienced.

The lands that Lady Ashlynn was describing sounded like they were covered in ancient magic and lost ruins, haunted by centuries of ghosts... Things that no amount of armor could ever protect a knight from. And these Frost Walkers who ruled there were just one of the many dangers waiting for humanity's relentless push west.

Hearing that, it was no wonder she'd drawn the borders the way she had, but... just what other dangers were out there waiting for them that they'd never even dreamed of?

Chapter 816: Redrawing the Map (Part Two)

"Table Mountain is broad and flat and the Frost Walkers claim that the top of the mountain was cleaved off in an era before the Age of Ice," Ashlynn continued after shaking off the memories of iridescent horns cleaved in two by Nyrielle's ax and the helpless, blank expression on Hauke's face as he struggled against the curse the ancestors had left behind. "Whether that's true or myth, no one knows, and it's hard to see from Fortress Peak but I'm told there was once a vast city built atop the mountain."

"The Four Peaks is the name of the territory that the present High Pass will grow to encompass," Ashlynn explained. "Airgead Mountain was one of the original seven, but Dame Sybyll has defended that mountain for decades. She deserves the right to claim it and it is the 'littlest brother' in the range. Knife Peak will become their new southernmost holding, and Table Mountain will become their new northern border."

"What's beyond Table Mountain?" Liam asked as he stared at the map. "Why not give them back six of their seven peaks?"

"Because Aurora Mountain doesn't exist anymore," Ashlynn said, tapping a spot on the map further to the north. "It was destroyed hundreds of years ago by the Volcano Witch. All that remains is a smoldering crater that oozes with the molten blood of the earth. Lady Heila has fought with cultists from the Cauldron of Fire who lord over that mountain, and while she defeated them, even Nyrielle and I would hesitate to provoke them on their own mountain."

"Excuse me," Liam said, staring at Ashlynn in open-mouthed disbelief. "Did you say that a witch destroyed an entire mountain until nothing is left but a crater? Is this 'Volcano Witch' another one of the Great Witches? Like you?"

"No, not like me," Ashlynn said with a gentle smile. "The Volcano Witch is a subordinate witch of the Father of Calamities, in the same way that Lady Heila, as the Willow Witch, is a subordinate witch of the Mother of Trees," she said, resting a hand on her ample chest.

"I don't know much about the traditions of the Father of Calamities," Ashlynn said. "But my teacher, Amahle, the Mother of Thorns, claims that the Witches of Calamity possess the greatest power of destruction among all witches because they possess so little power of creation."

"I see," Liam said. A deep sigh of relief escaped his lips, and he realized that for a moment, he'd all but given up hope. If Lady Ashlynn's forces could destroy whole mountains, then what point was there in organizing any kind of resistance? They might as well surrender now.

But clearly, whoever these Witches of Calamity were, they weren't involved in the present conflict... and perhaps they weren't even around anymore. After all, if the Church had ever confronted a witch that powerful, the whole world would know of it!

"As to the other mountain," Ashlynn said, dragging her finger south and east until it passed into the westernmost edge of the expanded territory marked 'Dunn.' "This one is called the Little Sister. There was a time, before humans arrived on this continent, when it belonged to the Vale of Mists, or at least half of it did. For the past hundred years, it has been an ownerless place, home to dozens of small villages that trade with the Vale but hold themselves apart from it."

"Sir Ollie said that some of the refugees in his village came from a nearby mountain," Hugo said as he fit the pieces of information together in his head. "He called them the Night Weaver Clan, but he said that only the Night Weavers were willing to leave."

"There are supposed to be other clans there that still believe they'll be safe from," he started to say, only to trail off with an awkward look at Liam. "Safe from the expansion of the Dunn Barony," he finished lamely.

"But this is much farther away than my family thought to reach in my lifetime," Liam said, staring at the map in wonder. "The hills here are about as far as we felt we could press things if we could become a county in the Holy War or the next Crusade," he admitted with a sheepish look of his own at Ashlynn. "Anything beyond this, we expect to be claimed by others. To extend our territory so far... that would make us one of the largest counties in the Kingdom of Gaal."

"Though I suppose," he said as his smile turned wry. "If we accepted this offer, we wouldn't be part of the Kingdom of Gaal anymore, would we?"

"No, you wouldn't be," Ashlynn admitted. "You'd be part of something else. Something entirely new. A place where humans and the Eldritch can live together in peace," she said, tapping the marks on the map that represented Eldritch villages in the territory marked off for the Dunns.

"There are Eldritch people living within the territory we're preparing to offer you," Ashlynn said. "Just like there are Eldritch villages in the territory that will be claimed by Sybyll Hanrahan," she said, tapping on the area that included Airgead Mountain. "These borders won't be finalized until my war against the Lothians ends, and they may shift as we all negotiate to build something new here," she explained.

"But one thing that will be true in this new nation we're building," Ashlynn promised. "Humans may choose to build their own communities apart from the Eldritch, and the reverse will also be true. No one will force you to live together side by side. But the days of warring on each other will come to an end. If you wish to rule this land, all the way to the Little Sister, then you have to rule over the Eldritch people within your borders with the same even and just hand that you use to rule over your current villages and hamlets," she said.

"And if we can't?" Liam asked before holding both his hands up helplessly. "I don't mean to suggest that we'd rebel," he said quickly. "If we accept your offer and join with you, then we'll be as loyal to you as we've been to the Lothians."

"If you know our history, then you know that we chafe at the limits of our station," Liam confessed with a slightly guilty look at Hugo, who served as Owain Lothian's steward. "But we've never plotted to topple the Lothians to replace them as rulers of the March. We only want the chance to grow as we see fit, without the constraints that the kingdom and the march put upon us."

"It's just that, no matter how loyal we are, there are limits," Liam said. "We still have the Church and the people's faith. It won't be easy to convince them to accept de-, er, the Eldritch as our friends and neighbors. And there have been deaths among my people, recently even, because of your raids. Some

people have legitimate grievances that won't be easy to put down. So what happens if the people act out?"

"I understand that there will be challenges," Ashlynn said in a tone that started gently but grew firmer the more she spoke. "But there have been tragic deaths on the Eldritch side as well. Villages burned and people driven from their homes by your soldiers and Owain's, and hurts that go back decades further too."

"Someone has to decide that the wars will end," Ashlynn said firmly with eyes that blazed with an emerald flame. "And Nyri and I have resolved to be those people. This era where the Church and the Kingdom of Gaal can slaughter the Eldritch with impunity is coming to an end, my lords," she said as she looked around the room.

"We don't want to replace it with an era where the Eldritch do to humans as humans have done to them," she said. "So we're willing to compromise and to extend offers like this," she said, tapping the Dunn territory on the map. "We can give you the chance to rise, but in return, you have to help us build the peace. If you can't do that, even though it will be hard, then there's no reason for us to preserve your family or offer you a position among the rulers of the nation we will build."

"We know it won't be easy," Ashlynn said as a smile began to tug at the corner of her lips. "But if you or your people are so devout that making peace seems impossible, maybe it's time that you consider this the greatest struggle that you'll ever be called on to meet. War and slaughter are easy, but peace is hard."

"That's why I'm sending you all to watch what happens in Hanrahan," Ashlynn said solemnly. "And after that, I'll ask for your answer," she said as she rolled up the map and returned it to the scroll case. "But I hope, for all of our sakes, that you're able to convince your father to choose peace."

Chapter 817: A Lost Steward (Part One)

Once again, a lull fell over the conversation as everyone returned to their meals while they struggled to digest what Ashlynn had just revealed to them.

For the moment, Ashlynn was content to sit back and observe. She had planted all of the seeds she needed to. Other than Sir Carwyn's surrender, no decisions would be made tonight. Liam Dunn couldn't accept Ashlynn's offer on his father's behalf, even if he wanted to. Similarly, nothing Hugo had to say would change the fate of Hanrahan Barony, as those promises had been made to Dame Sybyll long ago.

In the end, however, it was Hugo who broke the silence.

"Lady Ashlynn," Hugo said as he set down his utensils. Everything the famed Master Georg had served was more extraordinary than the last, but Hugo found that his appetite had left him as he grappled with the question before him. "I, I have a question. It may be impertinent but, I hope you won't object."

"I'm not a tyrant, Sir Hugo," Ashlynn said gently. "You saw how far over the line Sir Rain was willing to charge. I doubt you would be so foolish. So please, if you have a question, just ask."

"Thank you," he said, drawing up what courage he'd managed to scrape together and sitting up as straight as he could. "My Lady, I know that my life belongs to my cousin Sybyll," he began slowly. "But if she spares my life, what happens to me then?"

"Your life belongs to Dame Sybyll because Nyri promised her that she could exterminate the usurper's bloodline to the last drop," Ashlynn said, startling Sir Carwyn and drawing a frown from Liam in the process. "But you aren't Ian Hanrahan's heir, or even his legitimate child. So Dame Sybyll has very little reason to claim your life."

"But if she's going to rule over Hanrahan Barony in this new kingdom of yours," Liam said cautiously. "Hugo is a threat to her rule. He's the son of Ian Hanrahan and even if Dame Sybyll kills her cousin, people who support the old Baron may rally around his sons if either of them are still alive."

"But I don't want to rule!" Hugo protested. "I didn't want it when Father summoned me back home in case Bastian didn't recover and I don't want it now. I especially don't want to fight my cousin Sybyll," he said with a pale faced look of absolute terror at the idea. "I don't want to be trouble to anyone just because my father, he..."

It was hard for Hugo to put it into words. Just because his father had taken a fancy to a chambermaid and bedded her in a drunken bout of lust, Hugo had spent his entire life living in the shadow of his birth. He had been sent away from his home as a young child to preserve his father's dignity, then hauled back when his father needed a spare heir.

Later, he'd been shoved into Owain's service in order to remove any doubts that the Hanrahan Barony would pass to Bastian when the time came. And now, after all that, he'd been told that his life might be

forfeit because of someone else's vengeance against a grandfather he'd never known and a father who used him as a convenient tool. Bitter didn't begin to describe how he felt about the fate he'd been consigned to because of his father's actions.

"So what do you desire?" Ashlynn asked gently as she reached across the table to put a reassuring hand on Hugo's. She knew the pressure on him had been immense even before she married Owain and the current chain of events began to unfold, but Hugo had done something that gave her hope in the abused steward.

He referred to Dame Sybyll as his cousin. Even knowing that she was a vampire, one who had slaughtered countless soldiers in the War of Inches and in the years since then, to say nothing of the men she'd killed before Nyrielle found her. And yet, Hugo was still willing to acknowledge her as his kin. That alone meant something to Ashlynn.

"Everyone I have spoken with about you says that you're a man who thinks before he acts and that you pay attention to even the smallest details," she said, praising the scholarly steward. "I doubt that you haven't considered all of the reasons that Dame Sybyll should desire your death, so let's assume for a moment that she ignores those reasons anyway and spares your life."

"What would you desire then, Sir Hugo?" Ashlynn asked. "What is it you want if she lets you live?"

"If you succeed," Hugo said, swallowing down the knot that tried to form around his tongue as he spoke. "And if my cousin succeeds, then I have no place left to go. I can't return to Hanrahan or it would be just like Lord Liam said. I'd become a rallying point for anger and opposition, even if I didn't want to. People would die for supporting me..."

"They wouldn't be supporting you," Ashlynn corrected. "Not really. They'd just be using your name and your identity as a shield to hide behind and a banner to rally people with. They wouldn't be serving your goals, but their own."

"I know that, but it doesn't matter," Hugo said with a heavy sigh. "If I'm there, then I create a shield and a banner for them to use. If I'm not, they have to make their decisions on their own, and if they rebel, it has nothing to do with me."

"But if I have no place at home," Hugo continued as he gave vent to his frustrations. "I can't return to Lothian City either. I'm sworn to your husband, my Lady, and in a way, I suppose I'm sworn to you as well," he said with a complicated look on his face.

"I, I thought I had been serving you all this time already," he said awkwardly. "I sent many things to the Summer Villa for you in the hopes that it would make your life there better. I just didn't realize that the person I was helping in the Villa wasn't the real Ashlynn Blackwell."

"I've spoken with Samira about the things you sent her," Ashlynn said, startling the hawk-nosed steward. "Don't look so surprised. The Summer Villa fell shortly after dawn this morning. She and I had several hours to speak on our way back to the Vale. Some of the gifts you sent her in Owain's name were quite extravagant," she said with a wry smile. "How is it that you got him to spend so much on a common serving woman who was pretending to be me?"

"Ah, that," Hugo said as a blush spread across his cheeks and he looked momentarily sheepish. "I managed Lord Owain's accounts very carefully. There are dozens of things he needed to spend his money on, and that includes gifts for other noblemen, laborers' wages on his farms, maintenance on his own wardrobe..."

"So you hid the expenses from him in your bookkeeping?" Liam said incredulously. "I'm amazed he didn't think you were keeping a mistress! What would you do if he found out how much you were spending?"

"But, but I wasn't hiding anything!" Hugo protested. "It was all right there in the ledgers. If he ever inspected them, it would have been obvious. I clearly noted down 'Lady Ashlynn's Wardrobe' or 'Gift for Lady Ashlynn' every time I made a purchase. I'd even begun collecting items for the child I thought was about to be born," he added defensively. "It's all right there in the ledgers..."

"But Owain can't be bothered to inspect them," Ashlynn said with a heavy sigh. "Because that's the work of a steward or a merchant, and it's beneath the notice of a true knight and lord. Is that right?"

"It, it is, my lady," Hugo said. "But, I'm good at my work and I know it must be done and done well," he continued. "So, even though it's impertinent to do so, I wanted to ask if I can enter your service. Or, rather, if I can remain in your service after you deal with Lord Owain," he said as he stood from his chair in order to kneel at Ashlynn's feet.

"My lady, I know that it's twisting my oath to claim to serve you already," he said as he lowered his head, too frightened of what he might see in her eyes if he met her gaze. "And I know how you feel about traitors. My request is selfish and self-serving, but I promise you, I will serve you just as well as I served the imposter in the Summer Villa, if not better. All I ask for is the chance."

Chapter 818: A Lost Steward (Part Two)

Hugo's question hung in the air for several moments as everyone's eyes fell on the powerful witch who presided over this gathering. Neither Carwyn nor Liam had seen Ashlynn execute the traitor, Darragh, but Hugo had told them about it. Lady Ashlynn's reaction to treachery was extreme, but given what they had heard about the events that led her here, neither man found it unreasonable.

Now, Hugo was attempting to follow in Sir Carwyn's footsteps. Carwyn had been given a chance to move his allegiance from one Hanrahan lord to another after clarifying that the man he currently owed his allegiance to was the son of a murdering usurper. While scholars of law and ethics might debate for years about whether or not Sir Carwyn's choice was the right one, it was certainly understandable and even justifiable under the laws of men.

But Sir Carwyn had been offered an opportunity to do this. Sir Hugo was making the request on his own initiative, and his claim was different. He'd pledged himself to Owain Lothian and, by extension, he was bound to serve Owain's entire household, including Lady Ashlynn as Owain's legal wife. It was just that, while Lady Ashlynn and Lord Owain were still technically married, no one would think that their marriage should still stand, given everything that had happened.

So for Hugo to use it as grounds to transfer his loyalty from the husband to the wife... History surely wouldn't look kindly on him. But whether Lady Ashlynn cared about that or not was a different matter entirely.

"My father once told me," Ashlynn said after considering Hugo's offer for a minute or so. "A man who offers you his loyalty when he has nothing left isn't choosing you. He's no different than a drowning man clutching at a floating board in a storm. Such a man hasn't chosen you, he's simply chosen the only hope he can see."

"I, I understand," Hugo said as Ashlynn's words crushed the last hope that he had managed to construct in the time he'd been held captive in the Vale of Mists.

"I don't think that you do," Ashlynn said, reaching out and placing a finger under his chin to lift his gaze until her emerald eyes met his dark, murky gaze directly. "On account of the service you rendered to Samira when you believed that she was me, I'm willing to grant you a choice, Sir Hugo, assuming that Dame Sybyll doesn't slay you out of hand."

"First, you may retire here in the Vale of Mists," she said simply. "You will be provided with five acres of land and fifty gold sovereigns to build your home and develop your lands as you see fit. You will be free to live out the rest of your life in the Vale of Mists, safe from the judgment of human lords or churches for what you have done. Should you find love one day, you would be free to marry as you wish and raise a family of your own."

"Or, if you would prefer, I can offer you the life of a scholar," Ashlynn added as she leaned back in her chair. "There will come a time, not long from now, when we will establish an academy of our own in the Vale. Children need a chance to learn if the Vale is to grow into a prosperous place, and you are skilled at writing, arithmetic, administration, and more. When the time comes, I can promise you a position as a teacher or administrator, with a salary befitting your contributions and a home within the city to call your own."

"My, my lady?" Hugo said, blinking in confusion. "You, you would offer all that, just for what I did for Samira?"

"She always knew that those gifts came from you, Sir Hugo," Ashlynn said gently. "She knew that Owain wouldn't show her that much care. But because you cared for her, she was able to care for Noomi and her child, Saku. You may not have known it, but the care you extended saved many lives. I think that's worth offering you a plot of land or a job in the days to come, don't you?"

"If, if you say so, my Lady," he said uncertainly.

"Now that you understand, I want you to spend some time thinking," Ashlynn said as she stood from her chair. "Now, you have a real choice to make. If you still wish to serve me after you've considered the alternatives, then I promise to at least discuss it with you."

"Now, I'm afraid that we're running out of time," she said as she reached for the door. "Master Georg will be here soon to present dessert. After you've finished, the men of Tausau's Mongrel Horde will carry Liam and Hugo through the night to join Dame Sybyll's forces. Before you go, I thought you might want some privacy to discuss tonight's matters among yourselves."

"Thank you, Lady Ashlynn," Hugo said as he stood before bowing deeply with a fist over his heart. "In your place, I don't think that I could be so kind to someone who served Owain Lothian. Truly, the kindness you've shown all of us, it's more than we deserve."

"Whether you deserve it or not," Ashlynn said from the doorway. "It represents my hope for the future. There are some people who must die for what they've done," she said firmly. "But for everyone else, I still have some hope," she said before the door closed behind her.

In the hallway, Ashlynn slumped briefly against the cool stone walls of the ancient fortress and drew a deep, shuddering breath.

It was just dinner with a handful of young lords, but it had touched on so many painful things that she felt as though she'd just sailed through a storm with one white knuckled hand on the rudder and another torn raw from clutching the ropes of a sail.

After all of that, she wanted nothing more than to return to Nryielle's welcoming embrace and fall into the comfort of her lover's arms. But there was still one more conversation she needed to have before she could relax for the evening, and it was even more important than the last one.

"Master Isabell," Ashlynn said softly as she rested her fingers gently on her chest, just above the place where a new seed of witchcraft pulsed with power. If Ashlynn had still had any doubts about offering the older woman a place in her coven, those doubts had blown away in the winds of the storm she raised on the night that Isabell had confronted her with the truth of Jocelynn's betrayal and her sister's current circumstances.

Now, she only hoped that she hadn't ruined her chances of convincing Isabell to join her with the way she'd lashed out that night. Because if Isabell rejected her offer tonight, she had only herself to blame...

Chapter 819: Sharing Meals (Part One)

In Lothian Manor, a steady rain tapped at the windows of Bors Lothian's bed chamber with gusts of chill, wintery wind that rattled the glass in the window frames. Cold seeped in from the stone walls despite the tapestries hanging over them and the small hearth burning quietly in the corner of the room.

In a stately bed, carved from the trunk of one of the demon's sacred oak trees, Bors Lothian lay uncomfortably, propped up by a pile of pillows and wearing nothing but a dressing gown beneath the heavy fur blankets piled atop the feather mattress.

"Blech," Bors said as he finished drinking the steaming contents of a thick, wooden cup. "What is wrong with physicians? Have they seared the sense of taste from their tongues? What an utterly foul concoction," he groused as he set the cup on a table beside the bed.

"I know it's bitter, my Lord," Jocelynn said as she worked at a nearby table to assemble a plate of food for the man she once hoped would become her father-in-law. Because Loman had directed the kitchens to minimize the fats they served the aging Marquis in order to protect his health, many of Bors's favorite dishes were missing from the serving platter, but there were still things that could stir even an ailing man's appetite.

"I spoke with the Master of Kitchens about your meals," Jocelynn said lightly. "They've made a sweet porridge of broken rice and cream with dried cherries and raisins. I even convinced them to soak the fruit in wine for you before adding it to the porridge. I'm sure they meant it for your dessert, but if you'd prefer it now to chase away the bitterness of the medicine, I can bring it to you," she offered.

"Dessert before dinner," Bors snorted. "I'm not Loman and I'm not five. A few thick sausages or a hearty beef roast, and I'll forget all about the damn foul concoction," he insisted.

"No sausages," Jocelynn said as she lifted the plate from the table and carried it over to Bors. "Roasted hen's breast with garden herbs, beef cheeks stewed with sweet onions and carrots, and a warm salad of pickled beets and cabbage," she said as she handed him one plate while setting a similar plate on the bedside table for herself.

"At least it's not an invalid's diet of gruel and broth," Bors groused as he looked at the contents of his plate. "But did you have to cut everything up for me? You're acting like I can't be trusted with a blade."

"Your blade is right here," Jocelynn said with a light laugh as she tapped the oak-handled carving knife on the bedside table. "But so long as you're taking a meal in bed, don't you think it's better to save the hacking and sawing at things? You wouldn't want to make a mess and have to sleep in it," she teased lightly.

Ever since the meeting of the Lothian Court, Jocelynn had made a point of taking all of her meals with the ailing Marquis. He'd sent Loman to investigate the demons in Hanrahan Barony, and he'd turned very cold toward Owain, but somehow, Jocelynn had managed to slip under his guard like a thin blade sliding under the plates of a knight's armor.

He'd been grumpy when she first joined him for breakfast, but when she pointed out that Loman had instructed the kitchens on how to prepare his meals out of an abundant concern for his father's health, Bors had strangely relented. By the time she'd taken lunch and dinner with him, he seemed to act as though this had been a regular habit of theirs and not something that had only begun recently.

Of course, Jocelynn wasn't attending the ailing Marquis out of pure filial piety or a noblewoman's sense of duty to their lord. She had come with a purpose, and she used these meals as a way to speak her mind to a captive audience, though she'd needed to steel herself to keep trying to break through his initial resistance when her first attempt produced such meager results.

At their very first breakfast together, when she'd tentatively suggested ways the march might recover from the demon raids, Bors had been taciturn and reluctant to discuss anything of importance with her. That morning was full of incredulous snorts and dismissive prevarications about finding real solutions once the full Lothian Court assembled.

"You think there are enough fish in Valeri's lakes to make up for the loss of the Dunn's herds and flocks?" Bors had said, laughing so hard at the notion that it provoked a fit of coughing. "If that were true, the Leufroy's would have risen to rival the Dunns long ago. The best use of those lakes is irrigating their fields of wheat and sustaining the orchards they're so fond of."

"But I've spoken to Lady Adala Leufroy several times about the fish in those lakes," Jocelynn protested. "They dine on them regularly in Leufroy Town and the surrounding villages. They just don't have boats with trawling nets the way we do on the coast. My father is an honorary member of the Lineman's guild, and I'm sure that he'll send us a few experts to teach the Leufroys how to better harvest the abundance of their lakes..."

"As if fighting men can subsist on those tiny little fishes," Bors snorted. "They're no bigger than a man's hand!"

No amount of explaining on Jocelynn's part could make it sound appealing and so she'd given up and moved on to another topic involving the lands for the Guild Masters at the edges of Dunn Barony, which Bors seemed more receptive to discussing.

It had come as a complete surprise that evening, when Jocelynn joined the ailing Marquis for dinner, when he brought up the notion of harvesting fish from the numerous lakes in Leufroy.

"I've been thinking of those fish in Valeri's lakes," he said gruffly when Jocelynn served him a plate that included spit-roasted trout from the River Luath. "What was it you called them? Panfish? You said a fighting man can have a full meal of just two of these fish?"

"It depends on how it's prepared," Jocelynn said with a sweet smile. "To supply a ship at sea or an army in the field, you should pickle them in large barrels, but they'll be sour and salty. It's easiest to mix them with potatoes to make a cake from..."

Chapter 820 820: Sharing Meals (Part Two)

In the end, they'd talked long into the night, and the longer they spoke, the more amenable to Jocelynn's ideas he'd seemed. His defenses against her suggestions evaporated entirely, and she felt more genuine affection from him in that one evening dinner than she had in months of verbally sparring with the keen-witted Marquis.

And now, as she sat next to his bed, dining on the same roasted hen's breast and beef cheeks that the cooks had prepared for him, she felt a genuine warmth in her chest as she teased him about making a mess of himself if he tried to use a knife and fork to eat in bed rather than letting her cut up his food for him.

"I'll make a mess of you," Bors said, pointing at Jocelynn with a forkful of beet salad. "But not tonight," he said as he broke off in a fit of light coughs. "Tonight, I'm not fit company for anyone," he said once he recovered from the coughing fit.

The coughs had faded in intensity once the Marquis's personal physician began preparing medicinal concoctions for him. It was the opinion of the physician that Bors suffered from an extreme winter cough, one that was inflamed by the secretions of his nose draining down his throat when he slept.

Bors had taken more than a few hits to the face and nose in his youth, as had most knights, and breathing problems from a cracked or injured nose that didn't manifest until the later years were a common ailment among men who had trained for and fought in wars. Since there was no rash on his neck or back, the physician was certain that it wasn't the dreaded Red Cough, but only a seasonal ailment exacerbated by old injuries and age.

Not that hearing any of those pronouncements made Bors any happier. To prevent the drainage from his nose from causing more problems, he'd been ordered to sleep sitting up in bed, propped up by a mountain of pillows and covered by heaps of blankets to sweat out the bad humors plaguing his body.

Combined with the bland food and the foul-tasting medicine, his temper had grown even worse whenever his aids called on him for important business of the march. A man's pride could sustain many blows, but there were limits to what someone who had once strode proudly across the battlefield with a mighty ax, felling demons like timber, could endure, especially when his body seemed to betray him in such confusing ways.

His hands remained steady, his color was good, and his mind was as sharp as ever, yet the slightest activity would send a ripple of icy cold, stabbing pains through the old wound in his side and provoke the wracking coughs that left him gasping and confined to bed like an invalid. He'd never in his life retreated so much from pain, but given the choice between resting all day or clouding his mind with Essence of Poppy, he chose to grit his teeth and suffer the humiliation of being bedbound.

It wasn't all suffering, though. Meals, at least, came with their own pleasure, one that he'd been deprived of for far too long.

"You deserve so much better than this," Bors said as he looked affectionately at the beautiful woman sitting beside him, eating the same bland food that he'd been inflicted with and acting like it was one of the best dishes she'd ever been served.

But then, she'd always put on a kind face for him, even when life was cruel and they mourned the passing of yet another old friend or wise mentor. She always had that same bright smile for him and the same gentle, reassuring touch.

"Cooped up in here for your meals, feeding me when you should be dining with the ladies of the court on dishes far better than this. I've made you suffer," he said as he placed a hand gently on top of one of her slender, delicate hands.

"If it wasn't me, then who else would it be?" Jocelynn said warmly. "Loman will be away until the full Court convenes. Owain is," Jocelynn started, trailing off slightly as she carefully selected her words. "Owain is busy attending his duties and training his men, just as you commanded," she said. "So, if your own sons can't be here to tend to you, who else could?"

Things were still very tense between Owain and his father. But for some reason, whenever Jocelynn approached Owain about using the opportunity presented by Loman's absence to reconcile with Bors, Owain only laughed at the idea. He said that he had things well in hand with his father and that she should focus her energy on preparing for their wedding when the day came because he intended to claim her and the throne together.

He sounded confident, but, sitting next to Bors for the past several days, while he seemed weak and needed the attention of a physician, he was still very much in control of what was happening in Lothian Manor and the March beyond its walls.

"Sons shouldn't have to watch their father when he's frail and weak," Bors protested fiercely enough to provoke another coughing fit. "They should be away earning glory on the battlefield. But Owain is covered in too much glory and Loman, not enough," he said with a heavy sigh.

"You don't mind, do you, my darling Isla?" Bors said as he reached out to cup Jocelynn's cheek. "I know you had high hopes for Owain, but his blood runs too hot for battle and not hot enough for his people. Our youngest still has a tender heart, just like you, my love," he said as he stared deep into Jocelynn's eyes, seeing the face of a woman long dead.

The moment he said the name, Jocelynn froze, and her heart trembled in her chest. Isla had been Bors' wife, Owain and Loman's mother, but she had passed on to the Heavenly Shores more than seven years ago...

"But even though his heart is tender," Bors said as he used a thumb to caress Jocelynn's soft cheek, oblivious to the turmoil his gentle touch had unleashed within her heart. "It's filled with care and concern for the family and the march. He'll make a better Marquis than Owain will, and that's because of the things he learned from you that a father can never teach," he rambled.

"But, before I announce it to the Court, I'd like to hear your blessing on it, Isla," he said as he withdrew his hand. "Before I snatch the throne away from Owain, I'd like to know that your soul would be at peace with my decision..."