

## The Vampire 831

### Chapter 831: A Tree For Isabell (Part Two)

"Imagine building a healer's hall," Ashlynn suggested while her friend's pen danced across the parchment. "Because you desire people within the hall you built to get well, the hall itself will draw on the energy of the world to help the injured to heal and the sick to recover. Infections will be rare, and even pain may be reduced within the walls of the healer's hall you build."

"You're telling me," Isabell said as her pen froze on the page. "That I could help to heal people just by building a place that was filled with my desire for people to get better? Or that, if I build a library," she suggested as she tried to fit the principle to another topic. "Then, I could dampen sounds that might be distracting and help people to study?"

"All of those things and more," Ashlynn said with a nod. "It's different from the totems and charms that belong to the Cypress Witch," she explained. "Though there is some overlap. Your witchcraft would lend itself well to things that are constructed rather than simply carved. If you craft the head and handle of a mallet and fit them together, for example, it will become a much stronger tool."

Isabell's hand trembled slightly as she set down her pen, her mind racing with possibilities, some of which sparkled with the promise of greatness and others that felt dark and frightening. Her mind thought back to the dam that had failed three years ago, flooding dozens of farms at the height of the rainy season and leaving the reservoir too low to irrigate those very same fields in the dry months.

But if she brought the power of witchcraft to bear to do what no amount of mortar and well fitted stones could accomplish... could she construct a dam that wouldn't fail?

Or did it go even further than that? If she designed and built a new plow to be pulled by horses, could she ensure a better yield of crops? Not because the blades of the plow were sharper or cut the soil to the right depth for the seeds the farmer was planting, but simply because she desired the fields worked by that plow to grow and thrive and feed as many people as they could?

"You're offering me the chance to solve problems I've wrestled with my entire career," she said in a voice that was barely above a whisper. "To build things that could save lives, prevent famines, end droughts..." She looked up at Ashlynn with eyes that gleamed with dangerous hunger. "Do you understand what you're tempting me with?"

"It's been the same for everyone in the coven," Ashlynn said gently. "Heila cares for people just as much as you do, but she was searching for ways to do something meaningful. The willow tree suited both her desire to help and her desire to fight by my side," Ashlynn said. "It's the same with Ollie and Virve. We're all driven by our desires to do things and witchcraft gives us greater strength to do what we've always wanted to do."

"The power isn't infinite," Ashlynn cautioned. "And there are always prices to be paid. Energy has to come from somewhere. If you build a grand hospital that heals the sick simply for walking through its doors, then it will likely leave the ground around it barren and desolate for dozens of leagues. You can break the limits if you choose to," she warned. "But you must be willing to accept the consequences afterward."

"I see," Isabell said in a slightly deflated tone as Ashlynn's words brought her spiraling thoughts back down to a smaller scale. Still, even on a smaller scale, she couldn't stop the flood of ideas as her mind started to explore the possibilities. On the parchment, she quickly sketched several tools from simple items like a mason's square to complex cranes and even a large waterwheel before her mind started to turn in other directions, imagining how the power of witchcraft might be able to enhance each of them.

"So as long as I used the power of witchcraft to build things, I could empower them to be better at their purpose," she said as she tapped the tip of the pen on the water wheel. "But nothing is ever that pure. I spoke with Lady Heila about how her tree gives her both the power to heal and the strength to lash out at anyone who threatens the people she shelters."

"So, if the call ever came, and I built engines of war again," she said as she began to idly sketch the familiar lines of a simple catapult. "They could become the most devastating engines of destruction ever seen in this world," she said as her voice trailed off.

Dark visions filled her mind's eye, obscured by black smoke and the cloying stench of death. One of the hardest things she'd learned to do was to hurl fire. A fast moving projectile of any sort would extinguish flames just the same as blowing out a candle. That was why she worked so hard to design clay pots that could be filled with oil, hurled over walls and shattered on impact.

It was the follow-on projectiles that ignited the oil, and once the flames were lit, even more oil could be poured on the fire to spread it. But as a witch, if she wanted to see a city burn, what was stopping her from putting it all together at once?

Or, she could go further. Her pen danced again across the page as she imagined a trebuchet infused with anger and rage as it hurled boulder after boulder at a fortress until nothing was left but rubble.

"Ashlynn," Isabell said softly as her pen stopped. Her face had gone pale and she spoke softly, as if she was afraid that speaking of a thing would summon it into existence. "Are you certain that someone like me should have power like this?"

"I know you don't want me to march to war," Isabell said quickly before Ashlynn could respond. "But Owain Lothian has already threatened to take my son hostage as his squire and to press my daughter into marriage to one of his lackeys who are a decade older than her. I, I might not hate him the way you do, but if anyone threatens my family," she said as her gray eyes grew haunted and dark behind her silver rimmed spectacles.

"I don't think I could stop myself from using this kind of power against them," she said, suddenly realizing that the distance between herself and Ashlynn's drive for war was much, much smaller than she'd thought it was... and that realization terrified her more than anything she'd seen since she came to the Vale of Mists.

#### Chapter 832: Isabell's Decision

"Isabell," Ashlynn said, rushing to the older woman's side and wrapping her arms around her. "Isabell, I'm sorry," she said softly. "I'm sorry for getting you involved in my mess. Owain would never have targeted your children if I hadn't asked you to get involved with things back in Blackwell City," she said as she gave Isabell a reassuring squeeze.

"No," Isabell said as she forced herself to step back and look at things logically. "You were right when you sent me the first letter. Owain would have dragged me into this eventually, and if he didn't, the Holy War would have, one way or another. You gave me the opportunity to get involved on my own terms instead of being forced into it by someone else, so please, don't apologize."

"Still," Ashlynn said as she pulled back from the embrace. "I didn't mean to lay something so heavy on you. When I wrote that letter, I don't think I understood yet what things would turn into, and I never imagined that I would be asking you to become a witch and join my coven."

"I knew it would be a harder decision for you than it was for the others," Ashlynn said as she looked deeply into her friend's gray eyes. "But I didn't think it would feel this agonizing. So, you don't have to. I won't pressure you. I think I understand now why it's so hard, so you can forget about it."

"Just be my friend," Ashlynn said gently. "Help us build this place and I'll make sure that we find a way to bring your family safely to you," she said as she stood. "You don't have to take on the burdens of witchcraft or become involved in this war."

"No, wait," Isabell said as she reached out and caught Ashlynn's hand. "I didn't say no." She held on tightly, as if Ashlynn might disappear if she let go. "I'm just... I need a moment to think this through properly."

Isabell pulled Ashlynn back down to sit beside her, still holding her hands as she stared into the fire for a long, quiet moment, watching the flames dance and flicker. They were the flames of a gentle, warming hearth, one that made for a comfortable home with friends or family. At the same time, they reminded her of the flames she'd rained down on towns filled with innocent villagers who were on the 'wrong' side of a war between two feuding royals. When she finally spoke again, her voice was quieter, more thoughtful.

"When I fought for the Emerald Prince, I fought for someone else's war, not for myself. I think... I think that let me stay distant from some of it. I could be detached in a way that people fighting for their homes never could be." She turned to meet Ashlynn's eyes. "But that detachment came with a price. I could build engines of war because I told myself it was for a just cause. Because I believed that the war was necessary to give people a better future."

"The truth is," Isabell said as she removed her spectacles and cleaned them slowly, giving her hands a task to stay busy with while she organized her thoughts. "I've been afraid of getting attached to another great cause. Afraid of caring too much, because caring too much is what leads to the kind of destructive desires you warned me about."

"I've done the best I could in Blackwell City, but I've never taken any great risks or poured my heart and soul into any of the projects I took on for your father," she said as she put her spectacles back on and looked around the comfortable room, then out the window toward the lights of Vale City below. "It was enough just to do right by my family, and beyond that, to do well for the Illustrious Company of Engineers."

"I don't think my father ever felt that you slighted him," Ashlynn said gently as she rested a hand on her friend's slender shoulder. "He always praised your work, whether it was on Blackwell Manor or on projects for the city and the county. Even if your work wasn't filled with passion, you were so blindingly competent and capable that everyone knew you were doing your best for them."

"I don't know if I ever did 'my best' work for your father, but I do care about helping people," Isabell said with growing conviction. "I like it here in the Vale of Mists. I see the potential of this place, and I want to bring my family here. I want to help build something that will last, something that will bring people together instead of forcefully keeping them apart. I want to be a part of the dream you have for a world where the wars between humans and the Eldritch have come to an end because we've built a peace that can endure," she said as her hands trembled slightly until she clasped them firmly together in her lap.

"And that's exactly why I'm terrified," Isabell continued. "Because if I bring my family here, I can't stand apart from the fighting and the violence anymore. If I bring them here and someone threatens them, I'll have to do everything in my power to keep them safe. Even if that means becoming the very thing I swore I'd left behind in the Emerald Kingdom."

"Even if it means completely destroying the people who would harm what you, what we," she corrected herself, "are trying to build here. So I'm frightened by the power and the potential to do great harm because I've already wielded the power to destroy whole villages and towns, and it's a terrifying thing to do. I guess what I'm really asking is, if I join your coven and I join your fight, do you really think I can still be a woman who is building the future? Or is the need to defend my loved ones going to turn into the 'desire' that overwhelms me?"

"Isabell," Ashlynn said gently as she reached out to stroke her friend's soft, gray hair. "I wouldn't have asked you to do this if I didn't believe that you could do it. I, I know what it's like to have a strong dark desire and a bloodlust that is all but impossible to ignore," she said softly. "But I also know what it's like to have a whole coven rallying around you when you're at your lowest and your worst."

"You've already stepped up for me along with the rest of the coven," Ashlynn pointed out. "You've already stood in harm's way when I was losing control. So why would you think that we would do any less for you?"

"You're right," Isabell said slowly. "I'd been thinking that I would have to face it all by myself, but Lady Heila said it again and again... I just didn't hear it. The coven really is a second family, isn't it?"

"It is," Ashlynn said with a warm smile. "Does that mean that you're ready to join it?"

"It does," Isabell said with a slight smile of her own as she felt the heavy weight of the decision falling from her shoulders. She was still frightened, and there was still a great deal she had to learn about witches, but there would be time to soothe her fears and learn what she must learn. "When do I need to be ready to face the test you mentioned? In the spring, I imagine? Once you're done with the war against Owain and the forces of the march?"

"Tomorrow morning," Ashlynn said as she placed a hand on her chest where a seed of witchcraft had been growing ever since she gave Virve her seed. "There's time enough while Dame Sybyll prepares to assault Hanrahan Town, and we await Owain's response to the destruction of the Summer Villa. And I need to prepare another seed so that it's ready when the time comes," she said with a faraway look.

"So you were certain that I would accept from the very beginning," Isabell said with a wry smile. "You just needed the stubborn old woman to realize that the youngsters had already arrived at the right answer long ago," she teased.

"I wasn't certain," Ashlynn said, shaking her head at the other woman. "If you'd refused, I would have planted the seed and allowed it to grow into a witchwood tree. I always meant for you to be free to make this decision."

She just hadn't intended to ask Isabell to make this decision so quickly. But, she could only cultivate one seed of witchcraft at once, and the next one she needed to prepare would be the most important one yet, perhaps the most important one ever... and she just couldn't wait.

"You should rest tonight," Ashlynn said as she took Isabell's hands in hers and gave her a tight, reassuring squeeze. "I'll ask Georg to prepare a special breakfast for you. The process can take up to nine days, so you'll want to eat a hearty meal."

"And, Isabell," Ashlynn added after a moment of hesitation. "If there's a message you want to leave behind, for Casquas or your children, it's best to write it down. I have faith that you'll succeed in your trial, or I wouldn't offer you this seed, but only you know about the dangers and desires that lurk in your own heart. If they consume you, you won't ever wake from this trial."

"I know," Isabell said softly. "While you were... training, I asked both Lady Heila and Sir Ollie what their trials were like. They've explained the dangers to me."

"And you're still willing?" Ashlynn asked, not because she doubted, but because she needed to hear Isabell accept the risks.

"I am," Isabell said firmly. "There are dangers, but there's also the opportunity to build a brighter future, for my family and for all the families here. If I let myself walk away from that kind of chance," she said with a broad grin and a twinkle in her gray eyes that seemed eager for a challenge. "Then what kind of engineer am I?"

### Chapter 833: Two Blades (Part One)

The ancient fortress in the Vale of Mists was home to many workshops needed for the maintenance of the sprawling building and the care of its unique inhabitants. Some of those workshops, like the castle laundry, were busy year-round. There was always washing to be done, whether it was clothing or bedding, or an annual cleaning of rugs and tapestries.

There had been a time when Lady Heila spent most of her days in the castle laundry, and ever since her meteoric rise, the servants of the laundry had held fast to the hope that one of the new witches in Lady Ashlynn's coven might take one of them on as a personal maidservant. Of course, the chances were very low, but it didn't stop the younger ones from feeling like they might be the lucky ones.

But while some workshops never went quiet, others could be dormant for months or even years between uses. The horses of the ancient fortress were mostly used to pull wagons and carriages, and the farrier only needed his smithy a few times a year to replace worn shoes. The same was true for the stone cutter's shop, where a local craftsman worked only when damage to the fortress required repairs.

One such workshop, often dormant for years at a time between wars, had recently been refurbished and given over to one of the most eccentric guests currently residing in the ancient fortress. After all, a swordsmith was a specialist who required a number of things that an ordinary blacksmith wouldn't, or at the very least, a different arrangement of their workstations to produce the carefully tempered and exquisitely sharpened blades used by the swordsmen of the ancient fortress.

When Artificer Erkembalt took over the workshop, however, it underwent a substantial transformation.

Where there had once been racks of carefully sorted steel stock, there were now shelves that held assortments of crystals, lumps of rare metals, and an assortment of even more exotic materials, many of which were considered taboo to harvest even if possessing them wasn't a crime.

The shelves that contained wood suitable for handlemaking had tripled in number with newer, more exotic woods like box elder, kingwood, white liba, and more. And, as if the exotic woods weren't enough, several unique bones, some of dubious origin, sat in neatly labeled rows as if they were soldiers lined up and ready to be selected to fight once again.

The artificer himself looked much less composed than the rest of his shop. Days of work with few breaks had left the fur of his tail bushy and frazzled, and his whiskers drooped with the fatigue that haunted his body. The acrid scent of quenching oil lingered in the air, mixed with the metallic tang of worked steel and the faint sweetness of exotic wood shavings that covered his workbench like snow.

His eyes, however, shone behind his gold-rimmed spectacles while his hands carefully manipulated a hammer and jeweler's engraver. The rhythmic tap-tap-tap of metal on metal echoed through the workshop as he carved a slender channel into a twisted piece of metal that would soon become the handle of a sword.

Occasionally, he would pause to blow metal filings away from his work, the tiny particles catching the lamplight like falling stars before settling onto the leather apron that protected his chest. The forge itself had cooled to a dull orange glow now that day had turned into night and Erkembalt had moved on to more detailed work, but it was more than warm enough to keep the winter chill from invading the workshop, even though he kept many of the shutters open for fresh air.

"How goes the work, Master Erkembalt?" Nyrielle's smooth, dark voice said when the artificer paused his engraving to adjust the vice and rotate the workpiece.

"Y-your Eternity," Erkembalt said with a tail that shot instantly upright as he nearly jumped out of his skin. "H-how long have you been standing there watching?"

"Only a few minutes," Nyrielle said as she glided across the floor of the shop to inspect the piece that Erkembalt was working on. "Long enough to know that you're taking your work seriously."

"Please, your Eternity," the artificer said as he bowed nervously while wringing his hands. "It's more than my fingers are worth to disappoint you, and I already finished the first sword on time, didn't I?" Erkembalt asked rhetorically as he gestured to a recently completed blade sitting on a rack in a freshly stitched leather sheath that had been dyed a deep, ocean blue and tooled with patterns of cresting waves.



"You did," Nyrielle said with a genuine smile as she crossed the workshop to run a finger along the immaculate stitching of the leather sheath. "You also ran me ragged scouring the lands for the materials you needed for this blade. Even in the long nights of winter, reaching Airgead Mountain and returning before dawn is difficult and draining."

"You didn't have to do it in a single night," Erkembalt said with a frown before he realized that the powerful vampire was teasing him. "But I'm sure Lady Ashlynn will be grateful for all the work you did to help bring her blade into being," he said as he came to stand next to Nyrielle. "It's almost a shame that it won't see much use."

The sword in the leather sheath had been the first one that he made for Ashlynn, and Nyrielle had been very clear in her instructions. The blade needed to suit Ashlynn's human origins, but it also had to stand up to her enhanced strength and speed with an edge that wouldn't chip on impact and a blade that would return to true, no matter how hard on it she was.

It was a sword fit for a Marchioness, crafted with care and meant to perfectly suit a noblewoman from Blackwell County. When Ashlynn stood before the people of Lothian March to face Owain in battle, they might see her as a heroine, a lady knight, or even a saintess... but they wouldn't see her as a creature of darkness or the servant of a vampire.

"Even if it won't see much use, it's an important part of her journey, and you've done everything I've asked for and more," Nyrielle said as she felt the power hidden deep within the weapon that made it anything but ordinary. "You still have plenty of time to complete the next one, so you can stop worrying about your fingers," she added with a smile that showed the barest hint of her fangs.

Even as she spoke, however, Nyrielle never took her eyes off the lethal work of art that had taken shape under Erkembalt's talented hands during the days that Ashlynn spent training with Sybyll.

Soon, this blade would claim Owain Lothian's life, and if it did nothing else but free Ashlynn from the torment of remembering what her murderous husband had done to her, then it would be worth everything she had done to help Erkembalt forge it and more. But inwardly, she couldn't help but hope that the blade would find a new wielder once Ashlynn was done with it, even though she hadn't been willing to tell Erkembalt that he should prepare it for a second person to inherit the blade.

There were two women who had come from the sea and suffered under the hands of Owain Lothian after all, and if her darling was able to forgive her sister, Nyrielle wanted to ensure that Ashlynn had something suitable to give her younger sibling as a symbol of their reconciliation.

And if they weren't able to reconcile in the end, then the blade was equally suitable to reap Jocelynn Blackwell's life. If it came to that, Nyrielle would never speak of her other intentions, and Erkembalt was completely unaware of them... but deep within her heart, Nyrielle hoped that her lover wouldn't have to live with the pain of killing her closest kin.

#### Chapter 834: Two Blades (Part Two)

"Did you come for it tonight, your Eternity?" Erkembalt asked as he looked from the sheathed blade to Lady Nyrielle. "Or was it something else that brought you here? I still haven't finished the sketches for Lord General Thane's new blade, or Sir Marcell's knives..."

Nyrielle didn't need new weapons for her progeny to fight in Ashlynn's war, but as she looked to the Holy War ahead and the very real threat of a Crusade that would follow, she expected that her progeny would once again face off against Templars, Inquisitors, and even the Exemplars of the Church.

When those men marched against them, they would come with their holy swords, perhaps even blessed armor and who knew what else the Church had devised to fight their wars in the past hundred years since she drove Cellach Lothian from the Vale of Mists. The Lothians might not have grown much in power in the past hundred years, but their armor grew tougher with each generation and the rest of their warfighting materials had advanced as well.

If a frontier lord could boast such advancements, then Nyrielle was certain that they would face even greater threats when the warriors from across the sea arrived, bringing with them the same knowledge that had made Isabell such a formidable engineer. To combat that, she'd asked Erkembalt to push his craft to the limits to improve the tools used by her own progeny. Complacency had been the death of many ancient vampires over the years, and now that she had Ashlynn by her side, Nyrielle refused to be one of them.

"I did come for the first blade," Nyrielle acknowledged. "And you don't need to worry about the weapons for the others just yet. Wait until my darling Ashlynn has settled things and the pass opens again in the spring before you begin planning your work. I know you couldn't bring everything you desired across the mountains, so you need not rush to make do with what you have."

"The other sword, however," Nyrielle said as she reached into the pouch at her waist and pulled out a small, velvet pouch. "I've finished the third Blood Potency Crystal," she said as she handed over the pouch to the artificer. "And, just as I said, there will be a fourth in the days to come," she said with a warm smile.

"I see, I see," Erkembalt said as he eagerly opened the velvet bag and poured a single blood red crystal the size of a small quail's egg and pulsing with an energy that felt strong and fierce, like a wild animal straining at a leash. "So this was made using the blood of the Oak Witch," he said, marveling at the intensity of the power radiating from the small crystal.

"It's larger than the other two," he said as he walked over to a work bench where two similar crystals had already been cut and mounted into the ends of what would become the quillions of his next sword. "I'll have to mount this one as the pommel stone," Erkembalt mused as he compared the latest crystal to the parts he had laid out on the table.

"She may not be able to harness the full power of the fury contained in this crystal if I do that," he said with a disappointed sigh. "Rage is a form of strength all its own and it carries with it the ability to ignore pain. But if I want her to harvest everything this stone could give her, I'd have to cut it down and diminish its power to mount it in the center of the guard," he said with a frown as he fished out an additional set of magnifying lenses to clip onto his spectacles.

"Physical might, bodily resilience, explosive fury and..." he said as his voice trailed off in surprise. "And an endurance that knows no limits. I can tap into the fullness of two of them, half of the power of three of them, or a quarter of the power of all four. How would you like it mounted, your Eternity?" Erkembalt asked formally as he turned away from the gem to raise a bushy eyebrow at the woman who had created it.

"Strength to strike down her enemies," Nyrielle said decisively. "And enough resilience to protect her body from a thousand arrows or a hundred blades. She has enough fury all on her own," she said with a wry smile. "And enough willfulness to persist long past the moment she shouldn't. She doesn't need more of either of those things."

"I understand," Erkembalt said as he carefully tucked the stone away.

When Nyrielle had described the blade she wanted him to forge as Ashlynn's war sword for the battles looming against the greatest forces of the human church, Erkembalt's first reaction had been to declare her idea impossible.

Blending the blood sorcery of vampires with the power of witches should be impossible. At best, if Nyrielle could truly form a Blood Potency Crystal using the blood of a witch, then a single such crystal could be mounted as the centerpiece of a weapon's power. Doing so would already produce a weapon that Erkembalt felt certain the Sorcerers of Sundered Earth would seize to seal away in their vaults, but Nyrielle hadn't been content to place the power of a single witch within a weapon.

"Ashlynn is my Seneschal," Nyrielle had said when Erkembalt protested that it was too much power for a single weapon to contain. "Her coven is bound to her and she is bound to me. My teacher might not be able to form a Blood Potency Crystal with the blood of a witch, but as long as it's drawn from a member of my darling's coven, I will not fail."

"Further," she added as she began sketching a series of ancient, hook-ended runes on a piece of parchment. "Because the crystals come from members of her coven, they will not reject each other. Instead, in her hands, they'll become as docile as kittens with cream and they'll offer up their power to her freely."

"No matter where she stands, Ashlynn's coven will fight beside her," Nyrielle insisted. "And whether I am there or not, she will have my protection."

"But, but even if you say that, your Eternity," Erkembalt had protested. "I don't possess the skills to blend blood sorcery from so many different sources, much less sources as powerful as witches. This... Even if Aspakos could help me, I doubt he would be able to devise a way to do all of this."

"In that case," Nyrielle responded. "Do your very best on the first blade that my darling needs, and as payment for your work, I will tutor you in the blood sorcery to complete this blade. I may not be an artificer, but in matters of blood sorcery, only the Fangs of Death is more knowledgeable than I."

"Do we have a bargain, Master Erkembalt?" Nyrielle had asked with a look in her midnight blue eyes that made it clear that refusal wasn't an option. But the intimidating stare was completely wasted on the artificer from the Clan of Painted Masks. His objections had evaporated as Nyrielle had offered to tutor him because she was right. In the entire world, other than the Fangs of Death himself, no one could teach Erkembalt the things she could.

Now, a week after he'd begun the work, she had delivered the third gem that would allow Ashlynn to draw on the power of her coven whenever she used the sword. The blade itself would do even more,

once the time came to forge it. Nyrielle had promised that she would supply him with her own blood to quench the darksteel blade, imbuing it with her own power and the ability of a vampire to draw upon the blood spilled by the blade to fuel the sorcery of its wielder.

So far, Erkembalt had only begun with the hilt, but already the power of the weapon taking shape on his workbench intimidated him. When it was complete...

"Have you decided on a name for the second blade, your Eternity?" Erkembalt asked. "If I know, I can prepare an inlay for the blade that's appropriate for its name."

"Dark Desire," Nyrielle said softly, speaking the name that had settled in her heart for the first time. "A witch's power is rooted in desire and mine is rooted in darkness. This blade will carry both. It's also a manifestation of my desire to keep her safe through the battles to come..."

"I'm sure she'll understand," Erkembalt said as he nodded his acceptance of the name. "Dark Desire," he whispered as he ran a claw along the unfinished piece of the guard. "I promise to make you worthy of the name..."

## Chapter 835: Nyrielle's Gifts

It was already close to the middle of the night by the time Ashlynn finished with both the young lords and Master Isabell, but her footsteps were light and her shoulders felt substantially unburdened after her conversation with the latter.

Ashlynn had no doubt that Isabell would pass the trial of the Hemlock seed. The worst that her friend would face would be the specters of her past but Isabell had made peace with those long ago. It was only her unfamiliarity with the powers of witchcraft that left her uncertain about the path ahead. Once she learned what life as a witch would truly be like, Ashlyn was certain that someone as intelligent and capable as Isabell would adjust rapidly to her new reality.

For now, however, Ashlynn put all thoughts of the young lords, Isabell's trial, and the greater shroud of war firmly out of her mind. Today, she had seen the Summer Villa crushed and burned and struck another blow against Owain and the Lothian March. The day had started well and it ended well with Carwyn's surrender and Isabell's acceptance of her offer to join the coven.

Now, it was time for the 'dessert' that Nyrielle had promised her, and Ashlynn had to force herself to slow her pace as she navigated the dark halls leading to the underground chambers where Nyrielle and her progeny made their homes in the ancient fortress.

"Nyri," Ashlynn said warmly as she opened the door to her lover's bedchamber. "I hope I haven't kept you waiting," she said in a voice that grew fainter and fainter as she saw what Nyrielle had prepared for her.

In place of the usual lamps, Nyrielle had lit dozens of blood red candles, each one spilling their dark crimson wax into a pool at the bottom of their respective candleholders. The candles all cast deep, inky shadows across the room, leaving some parts of the room in complete darkness while others were bathed in a soft, flickering golden glow.

There were no fresh flowers in the room, but Nyrielle had lashed together a bundle of cedar branches, tying them with a wide crimson ribbon in an intricate bow before hanging it above the crackling fireplace in order to fill the room with a rich, evergreen scent.

Red silk ropes spiralled around the solid wooden posts of the bed they shared each day, secured playfully with a loop at the end and a knot that could clearly be slid along the rope to secure a hand or foot in place. And on the bed itself lay her lover, wearing a dark silk robe that stopped half way down her pale, creamy thighs while a wide crimson sash pulled the robe tightly closed around her slender waist.

"My love," Ashlynn said as she walked to the bed and reached out for Nyrielle's hands. "You've outdone yourself."

"No, you have," Nyrielle chided lightly with a smile on her lips that was completely unguarded and a twinkle in her dark, midnight eyes. "I know you didn't fight today, and I'm glad that you let others lead the charge, but you still commanded soldiers in battle and returned to the work of a ruler."

"You deserve this much as a reward for what you've done, and more besides," she said as she shifted in the bed to reveal a long, slender bundle wrapped in dark silk and tied with another red ribbon. "I brought you two gifts to unwrap tonight. This is the first one."

"How is it that you're like this?" Ashlynn asked, taking the gift from Nyrielle's hands and immediately setting it aside as she sat down on the bed next to her lover. While part of her wanted to tug at the red ribbon and discover what Nyrielle had brought for her, the greater part of her was fixed solely on the mixture of joy, relief, and comfort she felt in her lover's presence. Next to just a minute of time in Nyrielle's arms, even if the gift had been a rod of solid gold, it would have been an inferior gift.

"We're at war," Ashlynn said, as if she had to remind herself about the events of this morning that felt so distant and far away after she entered Nyrielle's bedchamber. It was as though she'd stepped into a different world, or another one of the dreams Nyri crafted for her, only this was no dream. "Just this morning I was on the battlefield, but when I came home... you've done so much for me," she said softly as she wrapped her arms around Nyrielle's slender waist.

Pulling her lover closer, Ashlynn buried her face in Nyrielle's silky, luxurious hair and rested her chin on the other woman's shoulder, inhaling the familiar fragrance of lavender and jasmine that clung to Nyrielle's soft, alabaster skin. Sitting there, listening to the echo of Nyrielle's heartbeat in her own chest and feeling the slow, steady beat through the fabric of their clothes, the world around her completely melted away.

Gently, Nyrielle wrapped her arms around Ashlynn, stroking her back and running her fingers through Ashlynn's luxurious blonde locks. As much as she wanted to see her darling's reaction to the gift she'd prepared, it was obvious that this moment was much more precious to Ashlynn, and so she indulged her freely in soft, gentle touches.

"I worry about you, my darling," Nyrielle said. "You focus on things so much and you drive yourself so hard that I feel like I have to remind you sometimes, about what it is that you're fighting for. If I don't, I fear that you'll become lost in the heat of blood and battles the way I did so many years ago and... I don't want you to suffer the way I did."

By the time Nyrielle had extracted her revenge on Cellach Lothian, there had been almost nothing left of her old world. Torbin and her parents were both dead. Her grandsire's other progeny, who had been her friends and mentors growing up, were dead. The few 'friends' she had in the High Pass, High Fen City, and beyond were too far away to be part of her life...

Her heart had died that year, and there had been no one who knew the Nyrielle of old well enough to help her find her way back to the young princess-like woman she'd been. The warmth and affection she knew under Torbin's rule of the Vale of Mists had been replaced by cold, bitterness of loss, and the calculating ruthlessness necessary to preserve her people.

What little warmth she had left, she gave to the people of the Vale, and later, to her human progeny, but even when people had given her warmth in return, she'd been too cold inside to feel it. It wasn't until Ashlynn entered her life that she realized how warm and loving her world could be, and how much warmth had been there all along.

The process of moving from loss to love had taken over a century, and Nyrielle promised herself daily that she wouldn't allow Ashlynn to fall into the same desolate, lonely world that she had.

"You've brought life into my world, my darling," Nyrielle said sweetly, pulling back from Ashlynn enough to gently capture the other woman's chin and look deeply into her emerald eyes. "I need to make sure that your world stays rich and full of life and love, even while you carve a bloody path through your enemies. You always have me to come home to, so never forget what that means," she whispered as she closed her eyes and pressed her forehead against Ashlynn's.

"I won't forget," Ashlynn promised in a heartfelt whisper. "I'll never forget you. But... I feel," she paused for a moment as she searched for the right word to describe the sensation in her heart. "I feel unworthy when you do something so grand for me at a time when I can do nothing for you."

"You've already given me more than I can ever repay," Nyrielle said with a soft smile, followed by a gentle kiss that only brushed the surface of Ashlynn's plump, luscious lips. "If we tried to count up all the things you've done for me and all the things I've done for you, the scales would break under the weight of it all long before they could tip to one side or the other," she said gently. "So take these moments as mine to pile up gifts large and small on one side of the scales, and you can do the same when the time is right for you."

"After all," she whispered in Ashlynn's ear as she leaned close enough for her breath to tickle the fine hairs on the other woman's skin. "We have an eternity to spend spoiling each other. So take this gift from me, and know how much I love you..."

#### Chapter 836: The Blackwell Coat of Arms

"Take this gift from me, and know how much I love you..."

Nyrielle's whisper sent a shiver down Ashlynn's spine and for a moment, she couldn't move other than to cling tightly to her lover, relishing in the feeling of being loved and cared for. Her vision was misty



with unshed tears and her heart fluttered in her chest, while a single word bubbled up from deep within her and forced its way past her lips.

"Nyri..." Ashlynn said softly as her hands tightened on the silky fabric of the other woman's robe. She wanted to say more, to add 'I love you' behind her lover's name, but the name alone carried all that and her throat was too tight with emotion to say any more.

"I love you, my darling," Nyrielle said softly as she gave Ashlynn a reassuring squeeze. "With all my heart."

It took a few minutes for the intensity of the moment to pass, but when it finally did, it was Ashlynn who pulled back, placing the lightest of kisses on Nyrielle's graceful, curved lips before she turned to the bundle wrapped in dark silk and tied with a decorative red bow.

The bundle wasn't very heavy, especially with her enhanced strength, but it was close to half her height in length, even if it was fairly slender. When Ashlynn's slender fingers found their way to the bow, Nyrielle's breathing quieted and she became unnaturally still, as if she couldn't bear to even breathe lest she disturb the moment that Ashlynn unwrapped her gift.

The first thing Ashlynn saw as she unwrapped the gift was the deep blue leather sheath of a falchion slightly smaller than the one that had shattered in her battle against the High Lord Ansgar in the High Pass. The leather itself had been tooled to resemble an endless series of waves with dark, shadowy pigment adding depth in the grooves of the carved leather while carefully applied white paint made it look like the waves were breaking and crashing into each other along the length of the sheath.

Wrapped around the sheath, a matching sword belt looped several times before passing through a buckle made of silver and cast with a relief that couldn't be more familiar to her if it had been her own likeness.

"Nyri, you..." Ashlynn said numbly as her fingers traced over the curves of three sails crossed by a harpoon and an anchor bound together by a single rope. The Blackwell family coat of arms was unique among all counties in that it included something that most wouldn't consider a weapon, crossed with something that was.

In the Kingdom of Gaal, only the house of a Duke could bear crossed swords, and by long tradition, the house of a Marquis bore crossed axes to represent the clearing of demons from the land. Counts were allowed to cross any other weapons with many choosing lances or warhammers, while Barons were allowed a pair of weapons that did not cross in their emblems.

But the founding ancestor of the Blackwell line in the Kingdom of Gaal had been a privateer that some said was a barely reformed pirate. When Phylip Blackwell drew up the original coat of arms for the family he established in one of the deepest bays on the eastern shore, he said that a ship was the mightiest weapon ever built by man, and the anchor represented a ship that had fought its way to safe harbor. Combined with the harpoon, the crest represented a kind of fighting that most lords in the Kingdom of Gaal would never understand and one that Phylip Blackwell demanded they respect.

For Nyrielle to have made it a part of her gift caught Ashlynn completely off guard, and for a moment, her emotions were tangled up with the ghosts of the past as if the rope that bound the harpoon to the anchor had wrapped itself around her heart and pulled it beneath the waves.

"I meant for this sword to stand for the place you came from," Nyrielle said gently as she reached out to wipe a tear from the corner of Ashlynn's eye. "Your family is important to you, and they are just as much a part of your origin as my family is part of mine."

"Your parents gave you a safe harbor for many years, and I know you treasure them for it still, no matter what happened when they were foolish enough to trust Owain Lothian with their precious daughter," Nyrielle said as she ran her fingers through Ashlynn's soft, blonde hair. "You should carry a reminder of them with you as part of your strength."

"Thank you," Ashlynn said, setting the weapon briefly in her lap to give Nyrielle a fierce hug. "I still don't know how to face them after, after everything," she said awkwardly. "But this helps. I, I needed the reminder that they've always been a safe harbor for me, and I hope that they can be again."

"They will be," Nyrielle said. "They will hear of your confrontation with Owain, and when they do, they will hear that you fought him while wearing your family's coat of arms. The message should be clear to them, even hundreds of leagues away. You are still their daughter and still part of their family. So long as they wish it, there is no reason that they cannot be a part of your life."

"But won't this also pull them into trouble?" Ashlynn asked. "Once we begin to reshape these lands, the Kingdom and the Church will come out against us. If I present myself as a lone exile divorced from my family..."

"Then it still wouldn't keep your family safe from the people who are looking for an excuse of association in order to drag them down," Nyrielle said firmly. "They will tar and feather your parents with your deeds, whether you wear the Blackwell coat of arms or your own. But by wearing this, you tell your family that you haven't abandoned them. Whether they respond to that message or not is up to them, but you'll have done your part."

"You're right," Ashlynn said, giving Nyrielle another squeeze before she turned back to the weapon. "The sheath and the sword belt are already perfect," she said as her eyes swept along the length of the sword to reach the hilt that was a functional work of art.

"But this," she said as her fingers reached out to touch the gleaming, polished metal. "This is one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen..."

#### Chapter 837: Water's Edge (Part One)

Ashlynn's hands trembled as she traced her fingers across the elegant, polished metal of the sword's hilt.

Artificer Erkembalt hadn't forgotten that this was a sword for fighting and killing and there wasn't a single feature of his artistry that made the sword less functional as a weapon of war, but despite the need to protect the weapon's function, he'd brought a true artist's skill to the form of the weapon.

The S-shaped quillions were similar to the guard on her old sword, with a sweeping knuckle guard that stopped short of connecting to the blade's pommel and an upward curling quillion that rose toward the weapon's spine. But while the shapes were familiar, the design was very different.

The blade's lower knuckle guard resembled a twisted pair of steel ropes, polished until the high spots of the design gleamed like a mirror while the recesses of texture shone with a dark, bluish-black hue. Where the ropes divided around the blade of the sword, they transformed into a rolling, blue-black wave that curled toward the spine of the blade with a brightly polished crest. The work on the wave was so detailed, in fact, that Erkembalt had left several brightly polished dots along the blue-black of the 'water' to resemble the spray of the sea.

The theme of twin ropes continued along the blade's handle, which looked like a piece of polished bone. Deep, spiralling flutes had been carved into the bone to provide a sure and steady grip while two

braided ropes of silver wire were inlaid in grooves in the bone, forming a double helix of silver that spun all the way down to the sword's heavy pommel.

At the top and bottom of the bone handle, Erkembalt had set a ring of brightly polished aquamarine gemstones that caught the warm glow of the room's candle light and sparkled like the shallow waters along the coast under a warm, yellow sun. The pommel itself yielded from artistry to practicality, taking the shape of an oyster's shell where it met the handle before 'opening' to reveal a smoothly polished ball, as if the oyster held a pearl of immense size.

"This is too beautiful for words," Ashlynn said as she rotated the sword in her hands, inspecting the elegant hilt from all sides. A heartbeat later, however, she froze, staring in disbelief as she caught the faintest shimmer of sorcery at play within the stones of the hilt. The work was subtle, far more subtle than the radiant sorcery employed in Ignatious's Holy Flame Blade, but it was very clearly there.

"I fetched the gemstones from Airgead Mountain," Nyrielle explained as she followed Ashlynn's gaze. "And the handle is carved from a piece of whale bone. Don't give me that look," Nyrielle teased as she saw the shock on Ashlynn's face. "I couldn't risk traveling to the sea for it, but when Erkembalt asked me to find a bone from a great sea creature, I spoke with the Tuscans under Captain Ipiktok's command. One of his men had a trophy from a hunt long ago that he was willing to part with as long as Erkembalt was willing to help him turn the rest of it into a protective charm."

"What does it do?" Ashlynn asked as she carefully observed the energy flowing through the blade. It seemed to ebb and flow like the tide, never staying still and giving the impression that the surface barely rippled while greater energies moved beneath the surface.

"The blade itself contains no darksteel," Nyrielle explained. "But you are too strong for an ordinary weapon, my darling. So the blade absorbs force that could bend or shatter it the way a waterskin absorbs the force of a blow. It may deform in the moment of impact," she said proudly, as if it had been her own accomplishment. "But it will always return to true."

"Does it have a name?" Ashlynn asked as she continued to run her fingers over the hilt before slipping her delicate digits around the wire-wrapped bone handle and feeling the energy of the blade singing in her hand.

"It's called 'Water's Edge'," Nyrielle said as she held out her hands to take the sheath from Ashlynn. "Draw it and you'll understand why."

The soft sound of steel whispering over leather filled the air as Ashlynn finally drew the blade that Nyrielle had clearly invested deeply into creating, even if Erkembalt's hands had been the one to do the work. When she finally saw the blade, however, her breath caught in her throat as she marveled at its beauty.

The blade itself was slightly more curved than her previous sword, with a clipped point tip that was sharpened on the back edge of the tip to make the weapon just as lethal in the thrust as it was in the cut. It wasn't the blade's clean, elegant lines or the smooth transition from the thick spine to the tapered point that took her breath away though.

The blade had been forged from multiple pieces of steel, stacked in layers and welded into a single piece before it was stretched and pulled into shape, then ground to reveal a smooth, rippling pattern along the entire length of the blade.

To most eyes, the pattern was simple and chaotic, but to Ashlynn, it felt like she was looking at a series of waves on the shore, each giving way to the next until the sharpest, shining steel was revealed at the edge. There were even spaces where the pattern produced little spots like islands in the wave, making it feel like a real, living example of the water's edge where land met the sea.

"I expect that you will kill Owain Lothian with this blade," Nyrielle said as Ashlynn's gaze wandered along the length of the sword's edge. "So I asked Erkembalt to reclaim steel from a few old weapons that I've long ago tired of looking upon."

"Edge of Light was the blade Caun Lothian carried into battle during the second crusade," Nyrielle explained with a wistful smile. "My grandsire, Torbin, crumpled it in his fist when he tore it from the man's hand and the mangled ruin of the blade lay in our vaults ever since. Cellach Lothian's 'War Spike' joined it when I finally claimed my vengeance," she said with a slight catch in her voice.

'War Spike' hadn't been the weapon that claimed her parent's lives, or the one that brought down her grandsire, Torbin. But it had been the war hammer that Cellach Lothian carried in every battle of the bloody war that doomed the Vale of Mists and Nyrielle's loved ones with it. Once, she'd thought that seizing the weapon and bringing it back to the crypts where the ashes of her parents and grandsire lay would help them find peace, but Nyrielle knew better now.

"You mean," Ashlynn said slowly as she ran a finger along the spine of a blade. "This sword was forged from the weapons of fallen Lothian Lords? Is each layer here from a different weapon?"

Ashlynn blinked several times in disbelief at the notion and she had to ask the question to be certain. Because if she understood what Nyrielle had just said correctly, then the blade that Erkembalt had made for her to kill Owain Lothian with had been forged from the weapons of Owain's own ancestors!

#### Chapter 838: Water's Edge (Part Two)

"They are," Nyrielle said with a predatory smile. "The most recent of them, the darkest line running through the blade, is from 'Bone Reaver', the axe carried by Bors Lothian's father in war more than fifty years ago. By the time I fought him, I'd given up on killing Lothian lords in favor of robbing them of their ambitions, hopes, and dreams of conquest, but taking his treasured weapon helped to break his spirit."

"Now, those old and forgotten blades have a new purpose in your hands," Nyrielle said. "Because you will be the one to truly end these wars along with the family that has been responsible for so much pain and suffering," she said as she gently stroked Ashlynn's hair. "This sword is meant to be both an ending of things and the hope for new beginnings."

Listening to Nyrielle speak about the blade's origins, Ashlynn couldn't help herself as she stood up from the bed, taking the sword in hand to feel how so many different weapons had come together to create something entirely new. The moment her fingers closed around the hilt, she gasped softly at the sensation as the weapon felt almost... alive in her hand.

The bone handle felt cool against her palm despite the warmth of the candlelit room, and the carved flutes fit her grip as if Erkembalt had somehow measured her hand beforehand. Where her previous sword had been forged for a man's larger hand, leaving her fingers stretching uncomfortably to maintain control, this hilt nestled perfectly into her smaller hand. The silver wire inlay provided just enough texture against her skin to ensure her grip wouldn't slip, even in the heat of battle.

When she lifted the blade, she marveled at how the shifting feel of the sword's weight in her hand. It was heavy and substantial enough to deliver powerful cuts with a forward balance suited to the aggressive, cleaving style of fighting she'd learned from Thane, yet when it moved, it felt like it was perfectly balanced so that the sword seemed to respond like a much lighter weapon with a balance point that was closer to the hilt than it should have been.

Taking a cautious step further away from Nyrielle, Ashlynn made a few experimental cuts through the air, listening to the soft whisper of steel slicing through the air. The blade moved like an extension of her arm, responsive to the slightest shift in her grip. Each motion felt effortless, as if the sword wanted to dance rather than fight.

"It's perfect," she breathed, finally understanding why the blade sang in her hand. The sorcery of water in the blade was subtle, likely imperceptible to anyone but the most sensitive sorcerers who were familiar with water and the way that it flowed.

'Water's Edge' moved like the waves lapping at the shore. Crushing and powerful when she attacked, surprisingly swift when she withdrew, like a sneaker wave that could suddenly pull a person far out to sea.

When Erkembalt infused the blade with the power of the sea, he hadn't just made it resilient and able to absorb the force of impacts without deforming; he'd turned it into a blade that flowed from attack to defense and back again as swiftly as the seas could change in a storm.

And all of this wonder had been born from the remnants of the blades that once served the greatest enemies of the Vale of Mists and the people responsible for the greatest tragedies that her lover had ever suffered.

"I, I understand," Ashlynn said softly as she walked back over to the bed and returned the blade to its sheath. "I know that the past hundred years have been an endless nightmare for you and for the people of the Vale," she said as she set the sword aside and wrapped her arms around her lover. "But out of all that pain, we've found each other and we're making something beautiful to take the place of all that suffering."

"Thank you," she whispered as tears dripped from her eyes, falling silently on the dark fabric of Nyrielle's robe. "Thank you for giving me something so perfect and so full of meaning right when I needed it the most," she said. "Thank you for always knowing what to do, and what to say, and..."

"Hush," Nyrielle said, pulling back slightly to place a finger across Ashlynn's lips even as her face heated with the faintest of pink blushes. "One thank you is enough between us, anything more would feel too distant. It's enough that it suits you and that it will be useful to you in the days to come."

"No, it isn't enough," Ashlynn said with a slight shake of her head. "It isn't nearly enough to express how much your gift means to me." She carefully set the sheathed sword aside with reverent hands, treating it like the precious artifact it was before turning back to face Nyrielle fully.

"Ever since the night we met, I've carried the weight of everything," she said softly. "It's only now, when I can finally strike back, that I realize how much it's all been dragging me down," she said slowly. The twin hurts of Owain and Jocelynn's betrayal dragged at her like heavy anchors mired in the silt of the seabed, while her fears and anxieties piled up on her shoulders like heavy stones that she had no way of setting down.

"But this... this sword reminds me that I'm not carrying it all alone," Ashlynn said as she reached out to gently cup Nyrielle's pale, alabaster face. "It's a reminder that someone understands not just the woman I've become, but the woman I've always been beneath the impressive titles and the power of witchcraft."

"You are my darling Ashlynn," Nyrielle said as she leaned into her lover's touch. "As simple and as complex as the rarest of wines and the most beautiful of flowers. You've never been defined by the things people use as labels," she said as she gazed lovingly into Ashlynn's emerald eyes.

"The real you has always been here," she said as she placed a hand on Ashlynn's chest, directly over her heart. "And I feel the echo of your innermost self here," she said as she moved her hand to her own chest. "So how could I not know the real you and all the burdens that have weighed you down? How could I not understand the pain you've felt all these months, even when you've put on your bravest and kindest faces to show the rest of the world?"

"I know," Ashlynn said as she closed her eyes to listen to the sound of her heartbeat and the echo of Nyrielle's heartbeat within her chest that seemed to keep time with her own. When she spoke again, her voice grew quieter, more intimate.

"You saw the woman from Blackwell Harbor who missed the sea, and you gave her waves in steel. You saw the woman who needs to avenge herself and put a stop to these endless wars, and you gave her the blade to do it with," she said as she leaned closer, opening her emerald eyes to gaze longingly at her lover's perfectly sculpted features.

"I don't have words for how much I love you and how much your gift means to me," she said, slightly breathlessly as she pressed her forehead against Nyrielle's. "So, let my body say what words cannot," she whispered as her hands moved to the laces of her corset, fingers trembling not with nervousness



but with overwhelming emotion and desire to remove anything that stood between her skin and Nyrielle's touch...

#### Chapter 839: To Desire And Be Desired

Nyrielle had fed recently enough that the only hunger in her midnight eyes was the deep desire to feel Ashlynn's warmth wrapping around every inch of her body. So when her darling began fumbling with the laces of her corset in her own haste to be free of the clothing that kept them apart, Nyrielle's deft fingers quickly came to the rescue.

"I see you're ready for your second gift already," Nyrielle said softly in a voice that was thick and heavy with desire. "Let me help you first so that you can take your time unwrapping me," she purred as she leaned in close enough to whisper directly into Ashlynn's ear.

For a moment, the only sound in the room was the soft whisper of laces pulling free or the brush of silks against each other as Nyrielle removed each layer of Ashlynn's outfit until nothing covered Ashlynn's body but the faint pink blush of desire on her soft, pale skin.

Gently, with a touch so feather-light that Ashlynn's body twitched in anticipation, Nyrielle ran her fingers along her darling's voluptuous figure. She started with her delicate, arched feet before tracing her way along the toned calves and firm, lush thighs of a noblewoman turned swordswoman, feeling the strength that lay beneath the softness as proof of her darling's hard work since she arrived in the Vale of Mists.

"Mmmmm," Ashlynn moaned softly as she bit her lip and shivered in anticipation when Nyrielle's touch passed over the tree-shaped mark on her hip. Her lover's fingers glided along the crest of her wide-set hips before descending to swirl around the delicate hollow of her belly button, teasing her when Nyrielle's fingers dipped briefly lower, hovering just above the entrance of her secret garden before gliding along the crease where Ashlynn's thigh and hip met and resuming their journey upward.

Once again, Nyrielle marveled at the faintly visible contours of the muscles of Ashlynn's abdomen, not prominent enough to be individually countable but still standing out proudly as the young witch squirmed beneath her gentle touch. Then firm muscles gave way to the greatest softness as Nyrielle cupped her hands around the swell of Ashlynn's breasts, lifting ever so slightly to feel the weight of her lover's full bust and kneading them ever so gently.

"Ahhh," Ashlynn cried out as Nyrielle's cool fingers passed over the tips of her proud, pink nipples as her lover leaned in closer, spilling her dark, silky hair across Ashlynn's chest as she brought her tongue ever so briefly in contact with the pink buds atop Ashlynn's snowy breasts, savoring her taste before pricking the left one ever so gently with her fangs.

Yet despite the use of her fangs, Nyrielle didn't spill so much as a drop of blood as she worked her way higher, tracing her tongue along the strong pulse in Ashlynn's neck that grew faster and faster as her darling's heart raced before their lips met at last.

The world around them fell away as Ashlynn moved at last, wrapping her arms and legs around Nyrielle as she pulled her lover closer for a deep, passionate kiss that sent shivers down her spine and stoked the fires in her loins.

The kiss stretched out from one heartbeat to the next as each woman savored the taste and touch of the other. The heat of desire rose in each of them as their tongues danced across each other until a sharp prick caught Ashlynn's lower lip and added the faint, metallic taste of a few drops of spilled blood, and a sudden rush of thought-erasing pleasure washed over them like a warm wave cresting under the summer sun.

"Not too much," Ashlynn whispered as she pulled back from the kiss, licking her lush lips and gazing at Nyrielle with emerald eyes that burned with passion and barely restrained desire.

"I haven't even unwrapped my second gift yet," she teased as her hands roamed over the silk of Nyrielle's dark robe, feeling her lover's body through the fabric as her hands sought the knot of the dark red sash at her lover's waist that kept her lover's perfect body concealed from sight.

Ashlynn's heartbeat quickened in her chest as she gave the red sash a sharp tug, releasing the knot and parting her lover's dark robe at last. What she saw beneath the robe, however, wasn't the pure, alabaster flesh of her lover's body, or at least, it wasn't just that. Rather, Nyrielle had tied herself up like a gift, winding a wide, wine-dark strip of crimson fabric around her pert bust and across her slender hips before tying each with an artful bow.

"I told you that you would have to unwrap your gift," Nyrielle said as she shifted on the bed, displaying her sensual curves to Ashlynn and drinking in the feeling of the echo of her lover's racing heart beating within her chest.

This moment of want, the intense feeling of desiring and being desired, was more intoxicating than anything the most potent blood or strongest wine either woman had ever consumed. It stretched between them as Ashlynn's breath caught in her chest and her eyes drank in the sight of her lover's pale, alabaster flesh against the dark black blankets covering the bed and the crimson bows that sang a siren song her fingers could barely resist.

"You are the best gift a woman could ever ask for," Ashlynn said as she imitated Nyrielle's previous actions, tracing her fingers lightly over her lover's slender, exposed midriff, swirling around the hollow of her navel before wandering higher, dancing along the edge of the crimson silk that kept her lover's pert bust from view.

"You are everything I desire," Ashlynn whispered as she moved closer, sliding her hands up under the silk ribbon to cup her lover's breasts, relishing in the feeling of her hands becoming trapped against her lover's skin as she felt Nyrielle's firm nipples beneath her palms.

"You are all that I could have ever asked for," she breathed as she slid her hands around her lover's body, leaving them trapped by the ribbon as she caressed Nyrielle's shoulder blades before pulling her into another deep, passionate kiss.

"You are the greatest gift I could ever dream of," Ashlynn whispered in a ragged, breathless tone when their lips finally parted. "And I will never let you go."

"I am yours forever, my darling," Nyrielle said, just as breathless as Ashlynn was after the intense kiss that she felt all the way from her soft lips to the tips of her toes. "From the moment we met until the end of days, I will always be yours," she breathed.

"You are mine," Ashlynn agreed as she tugged on the bow that secured the ribbon around Nyrielle's chest, untying it in a single, smooth motion and pulling it aside to reveal the beauty of her lover's unadorned body.

"And I am eternally yours," she added as she lowered herself down, savoring the feeling of their chests pressed up against each other as two hearts beat as one in the soft glow of the candlelight. "Now, and until the end of time," she breathed before their lips met again and their passions consumed the night...

In Hurel Village, rain danced on cobblestone streets in the early morning light, filling the air with a continuous -tat-tat-tat-tat- sound that some found soothing and Owain Lothian found to be incredibly irritating, especially when he was out in the cold, wet rain at such an unreasonable hour of the morning.

Located a day's ride south and east of Lothian City, Hurel Village was one of the oldest in Lothian March and it should have been renamed Hurel Town long ago when it became home to more than ten thousand people living either within the village walls or on the surrounding farms, but doing so would have required promoting the knight who presided over the village to a baron and the Lothian March had reached its limits on barons long ago.

As a form of compensation for the Marquis' inability to bestow lands befitting a baron on the family who guarded the sprawling village, the Pyres had been given near-permanent positions as guards of the Lothian family. Sir Tommin Pyre's father had once served as Bors Lothian's personal guard until the day he fell in battle during the final year of the War of Inches, leaving behind a young son who was very close in age to Owain Lothian.

There had been a time when Owain thought of Tommin as one of his best friends, even if he was a bit boring. More accurately, Tommin felt that it was part of his duty to help keep Owain out of trouble, and he'd always been at least a little bit at odds with Sir Kaefin when the older knight took Owain out to indulge in his vices.

But Owain and Tommin had trained together, in the sword, in riding, and all other manners of fighting, from the time they were old enough to swing a wooden sword at a straw dummy. Kaefin might have been the brother that Owain wandered into bars and brothels with, but Tommin was the one he would charge into battle beside. Together, they'd been unstoppable against the demons, and though he hated to admit it, Owain had fought better knowing that he had a reliable knight like Sir Tommin protecting his flank.

Only now, Tommin had abandoned him, claiming that he'd experienced a holy revelation and an awakening of his true calling to serve the Holy Lord of Light as a Templar. And because he'd managed to illuminate a Holy Light Blade, no one could claim he'd been motivated by anything else, even though he'd abandoned Owain within just a few days of the witch, Ashlynn Blackwell's death.

"You shouldn't have left me, traitor," Owain muttered under his breath as he walked along the cobblestone road leading up to the place where a grand manor had once stood. "Now look what's happened because you ran away over a dead witch," he said bitterly as he approached the manor's gates.

"Lord Owain," an aged, tired voice called from the gatehouse next to the large, wrought-iron gates that protected the manor. The voice belonged to Philder, a stoop-shouldered, balding man who had been the head butler of the Pyre family even in the days of Tommin's father. Now, however, who was to say what would become of the old man?

"Philder," Owain said in an appropriately solemn tone. "I'm sorry I didn't arrive sooner. I came as quickly as I could," he said smoothly, acting more like he was meeting an old friend than the lackey of his treasonous guard.

In truth, he wouldn't have come at all if his father hadn't ordered him to. He was already furious that the manor had burned down, presumably with Sir Tommin's wife and child inside. Of all the misfortunes to suffer, after he had gone through to have the bitch and her brat poisoned, they died in a fire before Tommin could even learn that they were sick!

But as soon as word of the tragic fire reached Lothian City, Bors commanded Owain to go and take a look for himself, presumably to be certain that it wasn't another strangely bold demon raid or some other form of foul play.

Privately, Owain wondered if his father had taken an improper interest in Jocelynn and was sending him away to make some kind of move of his own... The old man certainly seemed to be spending an inordinate amount of time with her lately. Jocelynn assured him that nothing inappropriate was happening and that she was caring for his father in an attempt to convince him to listen to Owain's plans for responding to the demon attacks.

Owain, however, felt that his father had a much simpler motivation for having a woman as beautiful as Jocelynn tending to him as he struggled against the apparent 'illness' that ravaged his body, and he wished that he'd been able to keep her at his side on this trip instead of leaving her behind with his manipulative father.

But at the moment, it was important that Owain did as little as possible to draw attention to himself while the poison affecting his father's body and mind did its work, and there were advantages to being away while his father's sanity crumbled. After all, if he was constantly seen as the dutiful son, following his father's orders and riding across the realm, no one would think he'd had an opportunity to harm the aging Marquis, and so he obediently took a carriage and rode an entire day to reach the village where Sir Tommin's family had died in fire.

"We're all honored that you came at all," the old butler said with a deep bow as he opened the iron gates. "I gathered up the staff by the stables," he added helpfully. "Most everyone made it out alive and unhurt."

"How many is 'most everyone', Philder?" Owain asked sharply as he eyed the burned-out husk of the manor.

Fires were rare in the dreary, damp winter months, but even on a cold and rainy day, once the flames spread far enough, even if the Holy Lord of Light himself sent a flood, the house would still burn. It was just a question of how much the flames would spread before the wind and rain eventually snuffed them out.

In this case, it didn't look like the flames had spread too far, but the entire east wing of the century old manor had been reduced to blackened beams and the charred husks of furniture while the central hall had collapsed when the massive beams supporting it gave way.

"Twelve of fifteen of the house staff serving that night are gathered here, your lordship," the old man said as he followed behind Owain while the Lothian heir approached the wreckage. "And six of the nine soldiers who were on duty that night. Captain Lemond charged into the flames with Dorn and Pall alongside him, hoping to rescue young master Tonnis and Madame Rosie, but they all died in the blaze."

"Mmm," Owain said noncommittally even as he mentally castigated the fools for running into an inferno for the sake of a spoiled woman and an immature brat. The pair were likely dead already by the time the soldiers tried to rush the blaze, but they clearly hadn't realized the futility of their 'honorable sacrifice.'

At least they'd been loyal, though, he thought. Unlike the knight they'd served...