

## The Vampire 841

### Chapter 841: A Burned Ruin (Part Two)

"Have you and the rest of the staff already recovered the bodies?" Owain asked as he stepped carefully across the charred threshold. His boots crunched on debris that mixed ash with fragments of broken earthenware, burned wood, and even bits of melted pewter candlesticks and ornaments.

The acrid stench of smoke still clung to everything, mingling with the sour smell of wet ash and something else, something that had been alive once and left an unpleasant scent that made his nose wrinkle in distaste. Cold rain dripped steadily through the collapsed sections of the roof, creating dark puddles that reflected the gray sky above and turned the ash into a black, greasy mud that clung to his riding boots and stained the hem of his fur-trimmed cloak.

What had once been the great hall's oak high table now lay in charred ruins, its thick planks split and blackened beyond recognition. Scattered around it, Owain could make out the twisted remains of cheap, pewter candlesticks and the blackened remnants of what might once have been silver serving plates, now reduced to misshapen lumps of metal embedded in the debris.

A child's wooden toy horse lay half-buried in the ash near what had been the hearth, its horsehair mane and tail had burned away, but its carved body was still recognizable. Nearby, the leather binding of a book had somehow survived despite the fact that its pages had become nothing more than gray flakes that crumbled at the slightest touch.

The walls that still stood were blackened with soot, and tapestries that had once displayed scenes of the Pyre family's accomplishments in battle now hung in charred tatters. Where the floor hadn't collapsed entirely, the wooden planks felt soft and spongy under his feet, as if they might give way at any moment.

"We haven't managed to recover all of the bodies as of yet," Philder said in a tired, defeated tone. "The blaze may have started in young master Tonnis's chambers, or his Madame Rosie's. The upstairs floor collapsed in the fire, and the roof came down on top of it. We, we haven't been able to dig them out yet," he said, wringing his hands as if he was afraid that Owain would strike him.

"That's fine," Owain said, giving the old man a smile that would have looked more reassuring if his impatience wasn't showing through in the way his eyes constantly roamed over the damage. As he moved deeper into the ruins, picking his way carefully around a collapsed section of the upper floor, Owain's boot struck something that clanked metalically against the stone.

Kneeling down, he brushed aside wet ash to reveal a pair of small, blunted practice swords, not unlike the ones he and Tommin had used to train together in their youth. Nearby, the charred remains of two small shields looked like they would shatter under the slightest blow.

"Who'd you find to train with your son, Tommin?" Owain wondered idly as he looked around at the other odds and ends lying nearby, from a child-sized, heavy leather training doublet to a cracked and broken miniature lance, it was clear that his former guard's son was trying to follow in his father's footsteps.

But now that Tommin was gone, who was training the boy? Was Tommin cozying up to one of the other noble families of the march? Or perhaps Loman had arranged something for Tommin in an effort to keep the freshly minted Templar more firmly in his camp now that Loman himself was poised to leave the Church.

"I believe it was the son of one of the soldiers, your lordship," Philder said, mistaking Owain's introspection for an actual question. "If it's important, I can find out his name for you."

"No, it's not important," Owain said as he stood and dusted ash from his gloved hands. He had to suppress a snort at the notion of a proud son of the Pyre family reduced to training with a hired servant. If Tommin hadn't turned traitor, perhaps his son could have come to train with the children that Owain planned to father once he was finally able to wed Jocelynn.

The boys wouldn't be as close in age as he and Tommin had been, but that hardly mattered. If not for Tommin's selfishness, Owain might even have taken Tonnis under his wing to help him become a knight worthy of protecting Owain's own sons. Not that any of that would have been possible even before the fire, he thought as he headed deeper into the burned-out ruin. Tommin had burned those possibilities to ash months ago when he abandoned Owain.

The smell where the fire had started was worse than it had been near the entrance, thick and cloying, mixing burnt wood with the smell of feather mattresses and down comforters consumed by fire. His gloved fingers came away black and gritty when he touched a support beam, the wood so thoroughly charred that it crumbled like a soft cheese under the slightest pressure.

"Someone must have poured lamp oil on the flames for it to burn so hot and so quickly on this side of the manor," he said as he wiped his hands on a cloth. Lamp oil or something else to intensify the blaze,

he thought as he compared the devastation to the demon villages he'd burned to the ground, the most recent of which had happened just a few months ago.

The demon huts had been slow to burn until he commanded his men to begin pouring oil on their roofs. Once they'd done that, the flames spread much faster, and stout roofs that had held for decades collapsed in a matter of minutes. The parts of the demon's huts where oil hadn't reached, however, looked like the table leg he'd inspected at the entrance, scorched on the outside but still largely intact.

"Someone started this fire deliberately," Owain said with a growing sense of conviction. If the blaze had started in the kitchens where there was cooking oil that could burn like this, he might have believed it was an accident, or if it had consumed the storehouses where there were casks of oil for the lamps, or even if it had come from the stables and the coal of the ferrier's forge...

But here, in the wing of the house where the Pyre family's quarters were, there simply wasn't a reason for there to be so much fuel to burn the house down so quickly.

"I, I agree with you, your lordship," Philder said carefully. "I've spoken to a few of the staff who are still here, your lordship, but a few of them are missing. We thought they were burned in the fire, but..."

"But maybe they were responsible for this," Owain said bitterly as he swore under his breath.

He wanted to turn around and take his carriage home as soon as he'd finished paying minimal respects to the dead. Part of him wondered if Tommin's wife or son had been responsible for the blaze, setting their own home on fire in the madness of the Spider Demon venom, but he didn't think it was likely.

His father was resting in bed more often than not, and Tommin's family had been poisoned even earlier. He doubted they'd have the strength to cause such a conflagration. And even if it had been an act of poison-induced madness, he could hardly offer that up as an explanation for the inferno without exposing how he knew that they'd been afflicted by the poison of a rare, nearly extinct kind of demon.

"Send someone to fetch the constable, Philder," Owain said grimly as he stood. "It seems like I'll be spending a few days in Hurel until we find answers about who did this," he said darkly.

With Tonnis' death in what looked like a deliberate fire, this turned from a tragedy into a high crime that had ended the bloodline of a noble family, and a lord would need to be present to dispense justice. Since Hurel Village owed fealty directly to the Lothians, Owain couldn't even summon one of the local barons to preside over things, he would have to do it himself.

"And when we do, I promise you, I'll save you a space up front to watch them swing from the neck," he said firmly.

After all, someone had ruined his plans. Now, even though the bitch and her brat were dead, Sir Tommon would never know the sting of betrayal when the Church refused to summon one of their great healers just to save the ex-wife and abandoned son of one of their templars. Instead, it would become another tragedy that would doubtless spur Tommin to even greater acts of selfless heroism...

No, someone had spoiled his efforts to torment the man who betrayed his trust after spending most of their lives facing danger together... and when Owain got his hands on that person, they would consider a public hanging to be a mercy!

#### Chapter 842: Jocelynn's Plans (Part One)

In the prestigious guest wing of Lothian Manor, the sound of rain gently falling against glass blended with the crackle of the hearth and the clink of silverware to create a soft, ordinary symphony of background sounds to a gathering that was anything but ordinary.

"Is the food sitting well with you, cousin Eleanor?" Jocelynn asked gently as she watched the severe looking woman slowly working her way through a thin soup of oats and crushed nuts while the other guests at the heavy oak table in her private dining room feasted on thick cut bacon, hearty beans and crusty, freshly baked bread.

"Even though we're prisoners," she said bitterly. "No one has stooped so low as to forget our stations. If you need something else from the kitchens..."

"I'm fine, my lady," Eleanor said after carefully swallowing a small spoonful of the thin oat soup, her throat working visibly with the effort. The warm, nutty aroma of the crushed almonds in the broth should have been comforting, but her hands shook slightly as she lifted the spoon again, forcing her to take even smaller bites if she didn't want to spill the porridge across the front of her formal Confessor's vestments.

For much of her time following Jocelynn in Lothian March, she'd replaced her formal attire with the simple white robes trimmed with gold that any initiate or sister of the faith would wear. After all, she was acting as Lady Jocelynn's chaperone rather than performing her duties as a Confessor and it wasn't appropriate to flaunt her status in a way that might overshadow her charge.

Now, however, she wore the gold robes with the crimson cowl that represented her station as a sort of armor, visibly reminding the men of Lothian Manor that she held one of the highest offices in the Church that a woman could rise to, and one with close ties to the Inquisition.

It was a feeble, thin layer of fabric that would do nothing to stop a knife or a sword from claiming her life if Bors attacked her the way he'd attacked Lady Jocelynn, but in the minds of most men, it protected her every bit as much as a knight's suit of armor would. More importantly, it helped to protect Eleanor from the feeling of impending doom that had been growing stronger for months and was more intense now than ever before.

"You forget my years in the convent," she said in a voice that was softer and more strained than her usual speaking tone, pausing to dab at her lips with a linen napkin as she tried her best to project an aura of confidence for her younger cousin. "Even your mother ate simple meals like this when she visited me there. Simple meals are best when the body needs to recover."

"But you will recover, won't you?" Jocelynn asked anxiously. Half a year ago, she'd resented her father for insisting that she take a chaperone with her when she left Blackwell County, but she had to admit that Eleanor had become more than just a simple chaperone in the months since they'd arrived in Lothian March.

Now, seeing her sunken eyes along with her dried and withered looking skin, the sound of the Confessor's weakened voice cut Jocelynn more deeply than the knife she'd taken to the chest had. When she woke last night, she'd been horrified to learn how close Bors Lothian had come to killing her, but she'd been even more sickened by the terrible cost her cousin seemed to have paid in order to call down the power of the Holy Lord of Light to heal her.

"If the Holy Lord of Light is willing, then I will recover," Eleanor said with a fragile smile on her thin, chapped lips. "And if he is not willing, then I have helped a good woman in her time of need and I can make my way to the Heavenly Shores with a clean conscience at the end of this life or the next."

"I'm sure it won't come to that," Captain Albyn said with a deep frown. "You did the most righteous thing of everyone there," he insisted. "This whole thing is madness. Count Blackwell would never have..."

"Careful Captain," the room's fourth and final occupant said, casting a warning glance at the former sailor from the end of the table that directly faced Lady Jocelynn.

Sir Elgon Prowell was the oldest and most senior of the knights that had accompanied Lady Jocelynn on this journey and he deeply regretted that he hadn't been with her last night, but it had never occurred to him that he needed to stand guard over his liege lord's daughter while she dined with the Lothian Marquis. Now, he felt as if the small group of people from Blackwell County who followed Lady Jocelynn were cast adrift on a ship with a broken mast. He didn't know what they should do, but he was exceptionally wary of rocking the boat while they were in uncertain waters.

"You've told me what you saw last night, and what Lord Bors had to say about it all," the veteran knight said carefully. "And I agree that things don't add up. I also trust Lady Jocelynn over anything someone says against her," he added quickly. "But we have to mind our words here. Calling something 'madness'..."

"You're right," Captain Albyn said, yielding the point without taking offense. "But whether you use one word or another, the fact remains that his lordship Bors Lothian intends to charge Lady Jocelynn as a demon or a witch, or some kind of heretic without a lick of proof."

"Meaning no offense, Confessor," the weathered sailor said with a glance at Eleanor. "But people out here on the frontier take the threat of demons more seriously than the threat of a summer drought or a cutpurse in the night. I feel like they'd rather see an innocent woman dangle by the neck than risk a demon getting loose in their town."

"She wouldn't hang," Sir Elgon said with a dark frown beneath his well trimmed mustache. "Noblemen face the headsman's ax," he corrected. "They say that a person is still alive long enough to see their own body when they hold up the severed head and show it to the crowd. The last thing they hear is a crowd cheering for their death."

Jocelynn's spoon froze halfway to her mouth with a bite of saucy, savory beans dripping back onto her plate as Sir Elgon's words conjured a gruesome image in her mind. The rich taste of the creamy, tarragon infused bean-sauce turned bitter on her tongue, and she set her spoon down with trembling fingers as she imagined an unruly crowd howling in anticipation of the moment the ax would fall.

"These people of the frontier are a bloodthirsty bunch," the knight said, shaking his head in mild disgust. "If they decide that Lady Jocelynn has consorted with demons, the fate she'll suffer is worse than a simple hanging."

"It's worse than the headsman's ax," Eleanor corrected as she looked between the two men. "You heard Lord Bors' threat, didn't you, Captain? He accused her of being a witch and said he'd see her burn at the stake."

"He'd see both of us burn," the Confessor said with a slight tremble in her voice as the calm, courageous facade she'd worked hard to maintain for Lady Jocelynn began to crack under the strain of the threat facing them. "Perhaps he'd see us burn whether we're innocent or not."

#### Chapter 843: Jocelynn's Plans (Part Two)

As the conversation about grim fates swirled around her, blood drained from Jocelynn's face, and her body refused to move, shivering as she thought of her sister suffering at Owain's hands just because of the accusation of being a witch. At the time, Jocelynn hadn't understood how Owain, or perhaps any man of the frontier, would respond. After all, her parents had sheltered Ashlynn for more than twenty years, so the mark on her hip couldn't be that serious.

But she'd been naive then, and Owain had spent the past half year teaching her just how wrong she'd been. So when Captain Albyn said that the people of the frontier would sooner kill an innocent person than risk that the accusation was true, she absolutely believed him.

"I agree with what you've said," Jocelynn said as she shook herself free of the gloom that threatened to take hold of her whenever she thought of Ashlynn's death and the role she'd played in it. The deed was done, and while she would spend the rest of her life working to atone for it, there was nothing she could do that would bring her sister back, and focusing on her grief at a time like this was a luxury she couldn't afford.

"So long as there's even the slightest bit of suspicion that we're heretics or worse, our lives aren't safe here. So I've been thinking about what we should do next and I have a few notions, but I know that there is a large gap between what I can think of in a few hours and a real plan that will see us safe and I need to rely on all of you to advise me before we commit to any actions," Jocelynn said carefully as she organized her thoughts, meeting the gaze of each person at the table in turn.

Eleanor nodded readily, reaching out with her withered hand to give Jocelynn's arm a reassuring squeeze. She had been the young woman's close confidant and advisor for months now, and she'd increasingly left the boundaries of her role as a confessor behind in order to do as much as she could for Jocelynn. Now, however, it seemed like her cousin was taking a decisive step forward in forming an actual council of advisors, and while it was happening in a time of crisis, she had confidence in the men Jocelynn had selected to be here.

"I've served your father all my life, my lady," Sir Elgon said as he saluted with a fist to his chest. "I may not be as well educated as your ladyship is, but I've helped guard the coast from pirates and raiders for many years. You can count on me to protect your safety and to offer what advice I may."

"Likewise," Albyn said simply. "I came here to become a knight, but I'm not married to the notion, and I'm not about to sell you out to the Lothians for the chance of a title. Just tell me what you need done and I'll see that it happens."

"Thank you all," Jocelynn said with one of the first brilliant, heart-melting smiles that had appeared on her face since the disastrous dinner with Bors Lothian the night before. "I used to argue with my sister about what to do in uncertain times," she said as memories of Ashlynn clung to her despite her desire to turn away from them.

"My tutors explained that for merchants, when markets are uncertain, a wise man waits instead of rushing to action," Jocelynn said with a slight smile tugging at the corner of her lips. "A wise merchant may not strike gold by staying back while others take the risks for an uncertain opportunity, but he rarely ruins himself," she explained.

"Ash always said that rulers had to be the opposite of merchants," the young lady continued. "Waiting is too costly when your enemies are moving against you, and hesitation allows your adversaries to dictate terms or choose their battlefields. A lord doesn't have the luxury of waiting until the profits are clear because he must move quickly to prevent greater disasters."

"Those sound like wise words from Lady Ashlynn," Eleanor said gently as she looked at the young lady with a complicated gaze. The Lothians had already taken one Blackwell lady from them, and she hoped that Lady Ashlynn was watching over his sister from the Heavenly Shores now, because Lady Jocelynn would need all the strength and wisdom she could grasp hold of if she was going to avoid the same dangers that had cost Lady Ashlynn her life.

"But what is it that you intend to do with them?" Eleanor asked calmly.



"I intend to gamble on the first trap that Bors Lothian has set," Jocelynn said as she stood up from the table and walked over to the collection of books near the hearth, returning with a large tome that contained maps of the frontier.

The book made a soft -THUMP- sound as she set it on the table, and silverware rattled from the force of the heavy, oversized book landing on the table's surface. Over the past several months that she had spent as a guest in the Lothian Manor, Jocelynn had felt like she understood Ashlynn better and better as books became one of her most frequent companions.

Now, the simple 'library' that had been part of the furnishings of her chambers had transformed from a simple decoration into one of the best tools she had for making her next move.

"I didn't do anything to the Marquis," Jocelynn said, pausing slightly as she considered that her words weren't entirely true. "Or at least, I didn't do anything that would affect him. His behavior toward me changed days ago, and I think that he started to see me as his late wife then. It wasn't until last night that I realized what was happening and I... took advantage of his confusion to learn what plans he had in mind for me."

"Bah," Albyn snorted, slamming his fine silver tankard down hard enough to slosh ale across the polished oak table. The ale served at the Lothian manor was thicker, darker, and more bitter than the pale ales he was accustomed to, and were it not for the pale foam floating atop it, the puddle of it would have resembled something far more unsavory as it pooled around the base of his tankard. "That's no different than chatting up a drunkard to see what he'll let slip when he's lost in his cups."

"You didn't do anything that thousands of other men haven't already done," he said as he wiped foam from the rough stubble on his jaw with the back of his hand. His weathered fingers balled up into a fist as he struck the table again for emphasis. "And if we're to be judged guilty of some crime for that, then there won't be enough rope to hang us all."

"Thank you for the vote of confidence, Captain," Jocelynn said with a faint smile. "But, Cousin Eleanor, I'm more interested in what you think. Will an Inquisitor judge me harshly for what I've done? Or will he declare me innocent?"

Chapter 844: Jocelynn's Plans (Part Three)

The moment she mentioned the Inquisitor, everyone at the table grew quiet. The summons for an Inquisitor had almost certainly gone out at first light, as soon as carrier pigeons could see to fly. Given the importance of Bors's accusation, an Inquisitor from Maeril would almost certainly arrive within a few hours of nightfall, and the interrogation could begin as soon as they arrived.

In Blackwell County, Inquisitors had a fairly even reputation. While some were known as obsessive zealots who sought out the slightest hint of heresy, many more had a reputation similar to Inquisitor Diarmuid's.

Ordinary criminals attempted to conceal their crimes under the guise of 'demon attacks' while petty feuds included a number of trumped-up accusations. Diarmuid and men like him were known as seekers of truth who sifted the true evil from the merely criminal.

If the Inquisitor who arrived was a man of such principles, then Lady Ashlynn was likely safe. But here on the frontier, if he was a zealot who saw demons lurking around every corner and had likely found more than a few... the outcome of their Inquisition was much less certain.

"I don't know the Inquisitors who reside in Maeril," Eleanor admitted. "But I've spent quite a bit of time with men of other temples who serve the Inquisition, and I think that most of them would find Lady Jocelynn innocent. The greatest danger is that the Inquisitor will be swayed by pressure from the Marquis and that he will fall to the temptation to betray the truth for earthly rewards."

"As much as I want to say that those who serve the Holy Lord of Light are pure and never stray from the path to the Heavenly shores," Eleanor said in heavy, resigned tones. "The truth is that some men of the cloth have come to it in order to find wealth and power that would have been forever denied to them because of their common birth. Some of those men even take great delight in the chance to 'bring down' a member of the nobility."

Sir Elgon and Captain Albyn exchanged a dark, knowing look as Eleanor spoke, and the knight looked visibly pale at Eleanor's pronouncement that they couldn't rely on the neutrality of the Inquisition here in Lothian March.

Both men had heard rumors of corruption within the Church, and Albyn had encountered church officials who threw their weight around to bully simple merchant men like him on more than one occasion.

But there was a world of difference between a priest insisting that he needed the captain's quarters on a ship during a voyage in order to protect the 'sanctity of the voyage', or lining his pockets by selling 'blessings for a safe passage' to superstitious sailors and the kind of murderous greed that would see an innocent woman die in order to satisfy the ambitions of a powerful lord and an unscrupulous inquisitor.

For a Confessor like Eleanor to come right out and admit to such a possibility was almost more terrifying to the two men than the demons they'd heard lurked in the wilderness of the march.

"In other words," Jocelynn said. "There's no way to be certain until we meet the Inquisitor, but my odds of surviving this first trial are at least slightly in my favor because I really am innocent in this," she said with a nod. If the Inquisitor who had been summoned was truly corrupt, then she was doomed no matter what she did, so rather than worrying about what she couldn't control, she focused instead on what she could.

"Which brings me to the second part," she said as she opened the book of maps, flipping pages until she found one that covered much of Lothian March and the surrounding territories. "I doubt that Lord Bors will give up on his intentions to do me harm. Even if the Inquisitor declares me innocent and Lord Bors blames this on his illness and a fever dream, he still intends to force me into a marriage with Liam Dunn that I do not desire," she said, shocking everyone at the table.

The marriage was a lethal threat in more ways than she would explain to the men in the room, but Eleanor clearly understood just how perilous such a callous plan was for her lady. In the very best case, Jocelynn would find herself trapped in a marriage she wanted no part of, but it was far more likely that Owain Lothian would lash out violently when he discovered that his father intended to give away the woman he'd set his eyes on conquering.

Whether he lashed out at his father, at Liam Dunn, or at Jocelynn herself in order to deny any other man the chance to claim the woman he'd decided belonged to him, the resulting chaos and the implication that it was Jocelynn's fault for 'tempting' her sister's husband would create consequences that neither woman present wanted to think about.

"He can't do that!" Sir Elgon roared, his face flushing red as he lurched to his feet so violently that his chair crashed backward onto the stone floor. The sharp crack of wood against stone echoed through the room as he slammed both fists onto the table, making the silver plates jump and sending a half-finished loaf of crusty bread tumbling to the floor from the force of his blow.

"The only person who can arrange your marriage is your father, the Count!" Sir Elgon said fiercely, staring in shock at Lady Jocelyn. "The Marquis has no business dictating who you marry."

"Things are different in the frontier," Eleanor said softly, choosing her words with care. After all, Sir Elgon had no idea that Lady Jocelynn had already been promised to Owain as a replacement for the murdered Ashlynn, and if he came to know the full truth of things, she was worried that his support for Lady Jocelynn might waver.

"There are old laws," Eleanor explained. "Many of them long since forgotten as archaic or as things to be used only in dire circumstances, which find more common use among the frontier lords. Scholars may disagree about whether or not Bors has the authority, but his lords won't be among those who protest."

"And that's why I need everyone's help," Jocelynn said as she looked around the room. "Ash said that a lord has to act decisively, but that doesn't mean a lord should rush into things. I've made up my mind," she said firmly. "If I can weather the storm of the Inquisitor, then it's time for me to escape Lothian March."

"I can't stay here," Jocelynn said as her seafoam eyes flashed with determination. "But going home to Blackwell County won't be as easy as following the River Luath until we're out of Lothian March," she said. "That's why, Sir Elgon, Captain Albyn, I'm going to need your help to escape the march, coss country, in the middle of winter."

Both men looked at her with wide eyes as their minds grappled with Lady Jocelynn's 'plan.' They were prepared to defend her, and they'd even considered encouraging her to leave Lothian City in favor of one of the towns ruled by the local barons. After all, they'd seen her forming friendships with several of the young ladies of the Lothian Court, and if the daughter of a count wanted to visit a friend during the winter months, most barons would be honored to receive her. But to flee the march entirely...

"I know it's daunting," she said as her expression softened as she pleaded for their help. "But there are very few people I can rely on. So, can I count on you to help me return home, even if it means we have to defy an entire march to do so?"

#### Chapter 845: The Long Way Around (Part One)

"Can I count on you to help me return home, even if it means we have to defy an entire march to do so?"

There was only one answer to Lady Jocelynn's question. Sir Elgon knew it. Captain Albyn knew it, and Confessor Eleanor most certainly knew it. Stand together or abandon the noblewoman who had brought them all here, leaving her to whatever cruel fate the Church or the Lothian Marquis had in mind.

There was only one answer, but when she put it so bluntly, it was incredibly difficult to speak the words.

If the Church declared her a witch or a heretic, then the full might of the Inquisition would follow them wherever they went. They would have to seek out a High Priest or High Inquisitor in some other territory in order to clear her name from the trumped-up charges that a corrupt Inquisitor could lay against her.

And even if she escaped the charge of heresy, she would still have to escape Bors Lothian, his sons, and all the barons and knights of the march who could turn against her. If the Lothian Marquis was her enemy, there would be nowhere in the march that would be safe for her.

"You said that you couldn't follow the River Luath back home," Eleanor said gently, hoping that it would be easier for the two men to voice their support if they understood Jocelynn's plan better. "What do you have in mind instead? How will you flee through the countryside in the depths of winter?"

"I know it won't be easy," Jocelynn said, nodding her thanks at her cousin. "But I see one path that may be open to us," she said as she placed a finger on the map where Lothian City was marked. "When the time comes, we'll need to be swift, but if we leave in the dead of night, then we should be able to arrive in the Village of Maeril in time to catch the first ferry across the river Luath."

"From there, we cross into Dunn Barony and work our way north," Jocelynn said, flipping pages in the book until she found one that displayed the barony in detail. "I don't have all the Dunn hamlets marked here, but there are more than twenty of them scattered across the barony now. We can move from hamlet to hamlet, avoiding the larger villages wherever possible."

"Why avoid the villages?" Sir Elgon asked with a frown. "The Dunn Barony is closer to the demons than most territories in the march, and the hamlets are barely defended. Just look at how many of them suffered grievous losses in the recent raids," he said. "You would be safer if you could reach villages with proper walls and a well-defended keep."

"I know," Jocelynn said with a heavy sigh. "I'd love nothing more than to take the safer road through established villages and towns, but the hamlets are missing something besides stout walls that make them safer for us. Or, at least it makes them safer from pursuers."

"No temples?" Eleanor asked with a raised brow. "That's true, but they still have at least a local priest. They might only carry the status of acolytes, but the Church would never allow a permanent community to form without some kind of representative present, especially that close to demon territory."

"No, it's not the Church that the villages lack," Jocelynn said with a slight smile as she shook her head. "It's pigeons. I've spoken to Lord Liam Dunn about the hamlets, and he said that they pass messages via fast rider because some demons are skilled at intercepting carrier pigeons. That means the people in the hamlets can't spread word about our movements faster than we can ride, and even if they send someone to a village with pigeons, they still can't use pigeons to inform the other hamlets to be on the lookout for us."

"It's an advantage, my lady," Sir Elgon admitted as he tugged at his mustache. "But it's not as great of one as you think it is. The first messenger to reach a village can alert both the Town of Dunn and Lothian City. Within two days, three at most, every village in the barony could have orders to hunt you down. By the fourth day, those orders will likely be relayed to every hamlet in the barony."

"We can be fast, my lady," he said cautiously. "But even if we avoid the places where they have messenger birds, we're only buying ourselves a few days at most."

"Not if we kill the horses," Albyn said, much to the horror of Sir Elgon. "I know it's cruel," he said quickly. "But Lady Jocelynn just said that these hamlets pass messages by fast rider. Keeping fast horses is expensive. I wager they only have two or three horses who can act as messengers at most. The rest of the horses in these hamlets are likely slow draft beasts, if they use horses at all. I hear they keep oxen for pulling plows in the more rugged areas."

"If we kill their horses, we can silence their messengers," he said confidently. "After all, these are mostly common farmers. They won't risk traveling the roads on foot through darkness just to carry word of your passage."

There was something about the way Albyn said it that stilled everyone else sitting at the table. Perhaps it was because he spent much of his life at sea that he didn't see anything wrong with killing horses in order to stop messengers. He didn't live side by side with a well-trained warhorse the way Sir Elgon did,

and he hadn't grown up with the sort of privilege that Jocelynn had to learn how to ride from a young age, with a horse of her own that she'd considered her best friend after Ashlynn for several years.

But as Jocelynn looked at the captain's eyes and the confused look forming between his brows as the rest of the table stared at him, she realized it went beyond not having a history of affection for horses.

Albyn had suggested killing horses because it was a practical method of removing a threat, and because the people he had chosen to protect were more important to him than the lives of a few horses or the sorrow and loss he would leave in his wake. To Albyn, it was an obvious solution, and he seemed genuinely confused at why everyone else seemed so shocked by it.

Which made Jocelynn very, very glad that the captain was on her side, even as she wondered what else he would do if he decided it was the best way to protect her from harm. Because wherever the good captain's limits were, she was fairly certain they were far beyond killing a few horses to stop a message from getting out.

#### Chapter 846: The Long Way Around (Part Two)

"I'd prefer to avoid killing horses if we can," Jocelynn said before the principled knight could object. "Those hamlets still need to rely on their fast riders if the demons attack again. I don't want to cripple their only means of calling for help if we can avoid it."

"But I take Sir Elgon's warning to heart," the young lady added. She'd just asked these men to act as her advisors. If she didn't listen to them and act on their advice, then what was the point of bringing them into her confidence in the first place?

"I should have earned at least a small amount of favor with Liam Dunn and his father by helping to secure a path for them to become a county," she said hesitantly. "Or at least, I should have if Lord Bors still honors his words from the last session of the Lothian Court."

"I can write to them and ask for a letter bearing their seal that I can show people in the hamlets, requesting their discretion about my travels. I don't need to reveal the reason for it," she added. "It should be enough to imply that it relates to resettling the guild masters in Dunn Barony."

"You're playing with fire if you do that, my lady," Eleanor cautioned after taking a drink of her cooling, honeyed tea. "If Lord Bors intends to wed you to Liam Dunn, then the Dunns may be just as motivated to catch you as the Lothians would be."

"Then... I'll need to think of another way to ensure the hamlets can't betray our route," Jocelynn said as she gazed at the map. "Sir Elgon, you've led men on long marches before. How long would it take us to reach the northern border of Lothian March if we moved from hamlet to hamlet and avoided the villages?" Jocelynn asked as she traced her finger over the map.

"You want to cross into Marquis Carew's lands from Dunn Barony?" Elgon said, scratching his head as he studied the map. "Is that even possible? There's a distance of more than fifty leagues between the northernmost hamlet in Dunn Barony and the lands of Baron Tibraeth on the other side... more if you figure the distance to reach the villages of any of Tibraeth's knights," he said as he studied the map.

"I'm aware of that," Jocelynn said as she stood to collect another book from the shelf in the room. "I was reading an account of the Second Crusade," she said as she placed the book on the table and began leafing through its pages. "There are ancient roads built by the demons all over this region and there's one that runs between Nialin Village in Dunn Barony and Purcell Village in Tibraeth Barony," she said as she tapped the map between the two villages.

"The area was swept clear of demons during the crusade a hundred years ago," she explained. "But no one has expanded enough yet to keep the lands between the two villages completely clear of demons. If the demons had built new villages in these lands, I'm sure they would have been seen at some point, but if there are nomads among the northern demons like there are to the south, we may run into danger here."

"So long as the Inquisition clears you of charges," Eleanor said with a brow furrowed with thought. "Then the Templars who accompanied you from Blackwell County should be reliable to fight against demons. None of them are High Templars like Sir Tommin, they don't carry Holy Flame Blades or Holy Light Blades, but they'll be a powerful force against most demons even without blessed armaments."

"You'll have me and the rest of the knights as well," Sir Elgon said, unconsciously committing to follow Lady Jocelynn on this dangerous escape. "But even with Captain Albyn and the other captains from Blackwell County, we'll barely have a dozen fighting men, and fighting in the snow is dangerous. If we're caught and surrounded by demons..."



"It's worse than you might think," Albyn said, shaking his head as he poured himself another tankard of the chewy, dark ale. The bitterness of the frontier brew suited his mood too well and the words lingering on his tongue were even more bitter than the ale. "Captains Caradog and Macsen can't be relied on. They gave up their ships to come here and become knights and they've turned themselves completely into Owain Lothian's men."

"Lord Owain has been dropping hints about the lands he intends to bestow on the 'best of us'," Albyn said after washing down his words with a heavy swallow of ale. "Those two have forgotten the waves and the dignity of a captain in order to curry favor with their new master. Even a ship's cat has more loyalty and a dead fish more spine than those two."

"What about the others?" Elgon asked as he frowned, though perhaps this much should have been expected. The men had been willing to sell their shares in their ships to come fight in this war, and while Albyn seemed to have leaped at the chance to serve a higher calling than he could have found in Blackwell County, the others weren't nearly so altruistic.

"Devlin is a good man," Albynn said after spending a moment thinking. "He has two sons and three daughters that he's hoping to build a better future for. He still boasts that his ancestor was the boatswain on the Black Tide back before the First Crusade," he explained, referring to the legendary ship of the first Count Blackwell.

"He'll follow Lady Jocelynn into demon infested lands or the briney deep. Ivor will too," he added confidently. "Though I'd caution your ladyship about letting him think he might be able to win your hand. He's a bit... infatuated," he said with a guilty look.

"I can manage infatuation, as long as he restrains himself," Jocelynn said with an awkwardly conflicted expression. It was good to be charming, but lately, she'd begun to wonder if the Holy Lord of Light inflicted her appearance on her as a curse, or a form of struggle she had to find a way to meet.

The line of men who wished to possess her had grown so long that she was beginning to sour on men altogether. Perhaps, she thought, glancing to her side at her older cousin, there might be something to a life of celibacy in a convent.

She wasn't devout enough to take up the cloth the way her cousin had, but even her mother had found peace living the quiet life of a lay woman in the convent. And right now, the life of a spinster was starting to sound more and more appealing than anything involving any of the men who seemed to be vying for the right to claim her maidenhood.

## Chapter 847: The Long Way Around (Part Three)

"So, assuming we have four templars, four knights, and three captains, plus myself and Cousin Eleanor," Jocelynn said, shaking off thoughts of infatuated suitors and an escape to life in a convent as she turned back to Sir Elgon to bring the conversation back to their escape plan. "How long would it take to reach Purcell Village in Tibraeth Barony?"

Everyone that Jocelynn had spoken to in Lothian March, from the young ladies of the court she invited over for tea to the workers in the storehouses, said the same thing about traveling the march in the winter. Don't.

The past month seemed to have fewer days without rain than days with and the ground was already sodden in many places. Anywhere that the roads were poor, they might be washed out, flooded, or turned into pits of mud that could mire a wagon. Once the snows came, there would be a brief period where things improved as the mud froze, but after that, the snow would grow deeper and deeper until the spring thaw made roads passable again.

Most people said that it wasn't worth it to travel in the winter, but the window of opportunity to do so should arrive within the next month. The only question was whether or not they could move quickly enough to flee the march before the snows piled up so deeply that it was impossible to go anywhere.

"If we were traveling over good roads in fair weather," Elgon mused. "Seven to eight days. One to reach Maeril, three or four to cross Dunn Barony since we have to avoid the villages and the Town of Dunn, plus another two, or maybe three to cross the wilderness and reach Purcell. But we won't be making the crossing in fair weather over good roads, and daylight is limited in the winter."

Sir Elgon had heard many of the same stories that Jocelynn had, but unlike the young noblewoman, he'd actually led men on campaigns in the winter months. Everything would be harder, but in his experience, as long as they were cautious and willing to retreat to the nearest settlement if conditions looked like they were worsening, it wouldn't be impossible.

"Add at least four days for the slowness of short days, poor roads and any diversions we have to make because of snow," the knight said after considering the map. "And I'd want at least three days extra of supplies in case we become blocked by snow."

"You're talking about half a month's worth of supplies for thirteen people," Albyn said as he began to calculate the amount of meat, grain, and other supplies they'd need. When he'd plied the coastal waters as the captain of a small balinger, he'd kept a crew of twenty men who were at sea for as many as ten days at a time which made for familiar calculations.

"We can probably manage supplies for everyone in two wagons, but we'll also need feed for the horses, tents when we can't reach a settlement by nightfall... My lady, this won't be a small expedition," Albyn said as he cast a worried look at Jocelynn. "I'm sure the coin for it won't be an issue for you, but someone is certain to notice the preparations."

"I think you'd be surprised," Jocelynn said as she reached into the pouch at her waist and pulled out a small, folded sheet of paper. "As a favor to Lord Owain, I've been overseeing the storage and accounting of the various autumn tithes received from the barons and their knights," she said with a mischievous smile.

"It doesn't take much for a few 'errors' in the counting to free up most of what we need for the journey," she explained, pointing to neat columns of numbers for sacks of grain, including feed for horses, barrels of salted beef and pork, pickled cabbages, and all manner of other things.

"And the men of the storehouses have become accustomed to my presence," Jocelynn added "If I bat my eyelashes at them and ask them sweetly to load up a pair of wagons to supply one of the training camps that Lord Owain has established outside the city, I doubt that anyone will question it," she said confidently.

Sitting beside her, Sir Elgon looked like he'd been struck over the head as he watched the upright and honorable daughter of his liege lord casually mention stealing supplies from the Lothians to facilitate her escape. Sitting next to him, however, both of his companions at the table were nodding in approval.

That Captain Albyn agreed with Jocelynn wasn't necessarily surprising. He seemed to be flexible in his definitions of right and wrong, and he was willing to bend or outright break rules if he needed to in order to get things done. What truly surprised Sir Elgon was that Confessor Eleanor didn't seem to have a problem with it.

"Don't look so surprised, Sir Elgon," Eleanor said when she noticed him staring at her in surprise. "An innocent man commits no crime when he flees the headsman's noose," she quoted as she gave the troubled knight a reassuring smile. "The Holy Lord of Light understands that men falter and fail in their

struggle to live good and righteous lives. When lords and Inquisitors fail in their struggle, their victims have every right to struggle to free themselves of an unjust end."

"I might wish that there were better ways for Lady Jocelynn to obtain what we need," she said as she glanced at Jocelynn. "But I agree with my lady that taking our provisions from the Lothian stores will be easier and likely safer than buying them openly and creating questions or starting rumors. When you are fleeing injustice, exceptions can be made."

"I know that fleeing the march won't be easy," she said, returning to the statement she'd made earlier. "And I know that our plan needs to be refined significantly before we make our move. But any other route I've considered only leads to doom. Since that's the case, I'd prefer to take my chances crossing the wilderness, but I can't do it without your support."

"So, gentlemen," she said, doing her best imitation of her father as she drew a deep breath and met each of their eyes directly. "Are you with me?"

"My father told me when I swore to uphold 'Loyalty' as a virtue that I'd be tested in ways I never imagined," Elgon said with a determined look in his eyes. "He wasn't wrong. But if a man isn't willing to risk his life for the sake of his oaths, then that man has no right to call himself a knight. You have my sword and my shield, my lady," he promised. "Whether it's against the Lothians, the Church or the demons, I won't fail you."

"Likewise," Albyn said from his seat. "I'll leave the pretty words for Sir Elgon, but whatever it takes, a captain sees his passengers safely back to port. I'll get you home, your ladyship, one way or another."

"Thank you," Jocelynn said, breathing a sigh of relief as the tension she'd carried between her shoulder blades since she woke began to relax. There was still a great deal to be done if she was going to escape this nightmare, but now she knew... she wouldn't have to do it alone.

Now, she just had to hope that the Inquisitor didn't condemn her to burn, because if he did, she had no idea how she would escape.

## Chapter 848: Humor Me

The hearths of the Great Hall in Lothian Manor were piled high with timber and burning fiercely enough to make the vast hall feel warm despite the dreary, winter weather outside the weathered stone walls.

In addition to the dancing, golden glow cast by the hearths, every candle in the chandeliers had been freshly lit, and the stone floors were freshly swept, as though the room was prepared to host a grand ceremony.

When Sir Gilander arrived in the Great Hall, however, there were only two people present in the vast chamber. The summons he received during breakfast had said that Lord Bors wished to see him in the great hall and so the veteran knight wasn't surprised to see the aging Marquis sitting on the oak throne.

He was, however, surprised to see his liege lord dressed in a heavily padded training jacket with a battered steel cuirass over the top of it and a long handled, blunted ax resting against the back of the throne.

Equally surprising was the presence of Master Hess, the overly slender, gray haired man who served as Lord Bors personal physician.

"My lord," Sir Gilander said formally as he knelt before the throne. "As you have summoned me, I have answered your call. What commands do you have for your loyal servant?"

"No need to be so stiff, old friend," Bors said as he gestured for the knight who had fought with him during the War of Inches to rise. "There's a jacket and plate for you over there," the aging marquis said as he gestured to one of the many tables in the hall that had been pushed to the edges of the great hall. "It's been too long since I've trained. I hope you don't mind indulging me in a bout."

"My lord," Gilander said, frowning at the man who had been on bed rest for the past few days and glancing at the physician standing beside the throne. "Are you certain? Your health..."

"Humor me, old friend," Bors said as he gestured to Master Hess. "This buzzard won't leave me be until he sees for himself that I'm fit and I'm sick of everyone hovering around me like I'm made of egg shells. Help me put an end to the nonsense, Gil," he said in a tone that was firmer than it had been in days as he looked at the aging knight, not as his subject, but as friend of many years.

"Since your Grace commands," Gillander said with a faint smile and a more casual bow. "How can I refuse?"

Stripping off his formal, embroidered coat, Gilander traded the garment for a well worn padded jacket, buckling it on with quick, practiced motions. His strong fingers pulled tight the straps at his wrists and waist before adding a padded hood and securing it to the jacket.

Most of the time, when he needed to don armor, whether for war or training, he would have had the assistance of a squire, but when demons raided their camps and the rough forts they'd built on the slopes of Airgead Mountain, there was no time to summon a youth with peach fuzz on their chin so faint they hadn't begun to shave, and so Gilander had long made a habit of working with his own armor and weapons.

If he'd been heading into real battle, he would have followed the padding with a coat of mail, but for simple training, a steel cuirass and a simple helm were enough to prevent serious injuries. There was, however, a choice to make as he eyed the weapons resting on the table.

Bors had provided him with both a blunted longsword similar to the one he'd carried into most battles against Claw Demons as well as a smaller arming sword and shield that was more familiar to his years since the war when he acted as Bors personal guard.

The Marquis had already selected a long-handled ax, just like the one he'd carried in the war, and it would offer a tremendous advantage in reach. If Gilander wanted to respond to the unspoken challenge his lord had given him then he should retrieve the longsword and fight as they had when facing the demons.

But the longsword was an aggressive choice, more suitable to young swordsmen like Owain Lothian, and his chances of injuring his lordship in a more aggressive match were higher. If it had been two or three years ago, when Bors still trained with weapons at least once a week, Gilander wouldn't have questioned his choice, but now... Now he couldn't bring himself to put the Marquis at greater risk.

"I'll make you regret bringing along your turtle shell," Bors said as he stood from his throne and retrieved his ax. He'd offered his friend the choice for a reason, but he was far from pleased with the decision that Gilander had made.

"I'm sure you will, your Grace," the knight said as he sketched a quick salute in the air with his blunted training sword before settling into a defensive stance. "But I'll make you work for it," he added with a challenging look in his eyes.

"Your Grace," Master Hess said as he knelt on the ground to retrieve a small sand glass. "I'll count out three turns of the glass," he said as he held up the device he used to keep time while taking a patient's pulse or measuring their breathing.

"So long as your Grace is in good condition after three turns, I'll withdraw my recommendations for bed rest and I'll rescind the orders to the kitchens," he said, using words that were entirely proper and polite with a tone that mirrored a parent speaking to a petulant and willful child. "But, your Grace, remember..."

"I know, I know," Bors said as he waved off the hovering physician and walked out to meet his old friend in the center of the Great Hall. "You don't understand fighting any more than I understand a physician's arts, so sit back, count your time and leave this to fighting men," he said gruffly as he placed a steel helm on his own head.

"Prepare yourself, Gil," Bors said as he raised his ax. "I've been cooped up for days and I'm looking to vent," he warned.

"Then vent to your heart's content," Gilander said with a slight nod of understanding as he tapped his shield with the flat of the arming sword. "I stand ready to receive your fury!"

#### Chapter 849: An Old Warrior's Pride

Sir Gilander leaned forward, setting his shield in front and resting the tip of the arming sword on his shoulder in a stance that was both an open invitation to attack and a challenge to withstand the counter he'd prepared. Against a man with a long-handled ax, it was a conservative, almost predictable move and one that even a squire could emulate.

For Bors, however, the weaknesses in Sir Gilander's guard made it clear that the other man understood his instructions well, even though not a word of them had been spoken. Gilander's lead foot was too far forward, his shield was angled poorly to receive a blow and while the guard he'd selected for his arming sword should allow him to attack from a number of surprising angles so long as he concealed his sword hand behind the shield, he'd actually positioned his sword hand to the right of his centerline, making his intentions obvious to a warrior as experienced as his opponent.

Indeed, Master Hess knew nothing of fighting and these subtle queues would mean nothing to the scholarly physician, but to the two men about to trade blows, they were a language all their own.

"For glory!" Bors shouted as he rushed forward, swinging his ax directly at Gilander's shield.

"For valor!" Gilander replied, leaning further forward as if he was anticipating a heavy blow.

Bors, however, had no intention of striking the face of the shield. Instead, he aimed past the edge of the shield, hooking the head of his blunted ax around the edge and pulling sharply, forcing Gilander to overbalance and leaving him vulnerable to a follow up thrust with the leading point of the ax.

Armor clattered as Bors struck his old friend in the chest, and the sound of steel ringing on steel filled the air as Gilander recovered his footing and countered with a swing of his own.

The veteran knight put on a show of fighting aggressively, circling widely to attack Bors from his weak side, charging from behind his shield and using nimble footwork to overcome the reach advantage of Bors' long-handled ax.

The Marquis, by contrast, fought like a bear beset by a wolf. He held his ground, blocking and countering smoothly and each time he lashed out with the ax, he landed a heavy, powerful blow that staggered Gilander or knocked him from his feet.

"One turn!" Master Hess called as he flipped the sand glass over. A single minute had passed but he saw no signs of fatigue in Lord Bors' motions, and despite his exertions, he had yet to trigger a fit of coughing.

From the physician's perspective, it was clear that each man had adopted a method of fighting that was suited to their preferred weapons. Bors used his ax well to both land powerful blows and to hook and catch at his opponent's limbs and weapons. Sir Gilander relied heavily on his shield for cover but clearly struggled with the disadvantage of the shorter weapon against the Marquis' ax.

Each man clashed again and again and while there was power behind their blows, the physician could see that there were smiles on their faces behind the cage of iron that formed the front of their training helms.

"Two turns!"



What Master Hess failed to notice was how conservatively Bors fought. Where Gilander circled wide, Bors remained at the center of the circle, taking smaller steps in order to realign himself with the more mobile knight.

Further, Sir Gilander telegraphed each of his swings, allowing Bors an extra heartbeat or two to position himself to receive the blow and respond to it. The knight's swings lacked the sort of power required to truly stagger his opponent and he gave up multiple opportunities to knock his liege lord from his feet in favor of landing glancing blows to Bors' breast plate or helm.

"Three turns!" Master Hess called, announcing the end of the fight as he strode forward to help Lord Bors out of his training gear.

"You danced with me like I'm a fair maiden," Bors said, moving his ax to his left hand as he stepped forward to wrap an arm around his old friend's shoulders in a firm embrace. "Thank you, my friend," he said in a much quieter tone. "Now help me out of the armor and let the old buzzard do his work, then, you and I have important matters to attend to."

"If I don't dance with you, your Grace," Gilander said, speaking loudly for Master Hess's benefit. "You'll cleave through my face-guard and ruin my good looks. I might not care for the young lasses anymore, your Grace, but it would make my Shandra very sad if I came home with a new scar at this age."

"Cad," Bors said as he stifled a belly laugh, letting out only a slight chuckle as Master Hess and Sir Gilander helped him out of the steel breastplate. "Still provoking your wife's jealousy at your age. Don't think I don't know how you 'motivated' her into giving you so many children."

"The child bearing might be over," Gilander said as he stripped off his helm and mopped sweat from his brow. "But that doesn't mean the fun has ended. I know you'd be doing the same if Lady Isla was still with you," he said gently as he placed a hand on Bors' shoulder, carefully watching the other man's eyes for signs of confusion. "I know she'd be cheering from the side to see you still in fighting shape today."

"I have to admit," Master Hess said as he stepped back from his examination of the Marquis. "You were right when you said you were still fit enough to fight. Your breathing is heavy, but no heavier than Sir Gilander's after three minutes of fighting. Your complexion is good, and your heartbeat is strong, your Grace."

"Good," Bors said curtly as he glowered at the slender physician. "Then leave us. I have important matters to discuss with Sir Gilander," he said firmly.

"As you wish, your Grace," Master Hess said with a deep bow before he moved to collect his implements and close up his bag. "I will visit you again this evening to ensure that all is well, but I believe that the worst has passed, your Grace. A few more days of medicinal tonics are in order, just to be sure but..."

"Yes, yes, your bitter brews, every morning and night," Bors said with a sour look on his face. "But enough of this bland food," he added sharply. "Now go, and tell the kitchens that I expect them to make up for the days of lean with something hearty."

Almost as soon as the doors of the Great Hall closed, Bors doubled over as a fit of suppressed coughs spilled from his lips. Gilander stepped in closely, his eyes widening as bright red drops of blood flew from Bors' lips, but he said nothing, simply offering a steadying hand for his lord as the coughing fit drained blood from Bors' face and left his body trembling.

"Thank you, Gil," Bors said roughly when the fit finally passed and he was able to stand. "Now, help me walk to my office. This may have been a sham," he said as he gestured to the training equipment. "But there truly are important matters to discuss."

"Are you certain, your Grace?" Gilander asked. "I can help you back to your rooms if you need to rest," he offered.

"No," Bors insisted as he draped an arm around the knight's shoulders. "No, the place is just as important as the conversation. Come," he said as he guided his friend toward the door. "And while we walk, tell me how it is you convinced your Shandra to take on such an infamous skirt chaser in the first place..."

As the two men made their way through the corridors of Lothian Manor, their voices carried - just as Bors had intended. Servants sweeping the halls paused to listen, kitchen maids carrying trays slowed their steps, and guards at their posts straightened with obvious relief at the sound of their lord's hearty laughter echoing off the stone walls.

For several days, rumors had circulated around Lothian Manor, some claiming that the Marquis was on his deathbed while others claimed that he'd been plotted against and poisoned. Each rumor was darker and filled with more uncertainty than the last until a heavy cloud seemed to hang over the entire manor.

Today, however, new whispers flowed through the halls and the servants chambers as people swore they'd seen the Marquis and one of his knights walking cheerfully through the halls, still sweaty and wearing training jackets from their morning session in the Great Hall. Different people reported hearing different conversations as the two men passed from the Great Hall to Lord Bors' office with some claiming they were swapping stories of old battles fought while others said the conversation turned ribald with tales of their youth before either man was married.

One thing that everyone seemed to agree on however... Marquis Bors Lothian was hale and healthy, and in good enough shape to train with weapons. Perhaps, some said, he was preparing for war against the demons who were said to be attacking the edge of the march. Others believed that he was frustrated with the incompetence of the western barons in protecting their lands and intended to school them personally in the ways of fighting demons.

But all agreed, Lord Bors was back in fighting form, and any rumor of his impending demise was nothing but nonsense.

#### Chapter 850: Unwelcome News (Part One)

A fire burned steadily in the otherwise dark and gloomy office of the Lothian Marquis. Unlike the Great Hall, no chandeliers had been lit, and no lamps burned. Outside the large windows of the manor, the gray, overcast skies blotted out the sun, making it feel like evening was approaching even though it wasn't yet midday.

In front of the hearth, Bors sprawled in an overstuffed chair with his boots and stockings off, toasting his feet by the fire and feeling the softness of a demon-fur rug between his toes.

"You can relax, Gil," the Marquis said as he closed his eyes and enjoyed the feeling of warmth from the fire. "Take off your boots and fetch a bottle from the case behind my desk," he said with a vague wave of his hand. "Bring two cups, deep ones," he added. "The news isn't good."

"What news?" Sir Gilander asked as he wandered through the trophies that dominated half of Bors' office to find a good bottle of wine.

It was hard to relax in the office that belonged to the Lothian Marquis, but that wasn't an accident. Generations of lords had put their mark on the office, each one adding to the trophies displayed in the room.

Whether it was the skull of a horned demon with a large set of horns or the captured banner of the demon lord who once ruled over the very spot where Lothian City now stood, each of the trophies added an indescribable weight to the room that made visitors question whether they measured up to the standards of the men who came before them.

"Come read it for yourself," Bors said as he fished in the pouch at his waist for three small slips of parchment that had arrived earlier this morning. The cracked seals of black wax, stamped with the sigil of the Summer Villa were clear on each of them, as were the small marks next to the seal that would be known only to those who sent messages and the people likely to receive them.

Bors had read each slip of parchment several times this morning. More than enough times to commit every bleak word to memory, but he still couldn't bring himself to speak them aloud, especially when he wasn't entirely sure they were real. The words themselves never seemed to change, but sometimes, he was certain that the words were written in ink, and other times, they were written in the deep crimson of dried blood.

Last night, he'd dined with Isla. He'd complained about her mothering him and cutting up his food for him, and then he'd teased her about making a mess in bed... But it hadn't been Isla. It had been the young Blackwell girl. Or a demon. He still wasn't sure.

Now, when he received such shocking news, he wasn't sure if he should trust his eyes or not. Perhaps the slips of parchment weren't even real, or maybe they said something else entirely. Until he heard his friend read them aloud, he wouldn't truly know.

"I've never seen you so spooked," Sir Gilander said as he set a pair of fine silver goblets down on the table beside Bors and filled them nearly to the brim. His eyes, however, remained on the three strips of parchment and the black sealing wax at the end of them.

Every territory that used messenger birds kept their own codes to ensure that messages were legitimate. Those codes included small dots around the seal and in the corners of the message, as well as color codes for the sealing wax itself.

In Lothian March, a message sealed in yellow wax was of the highest importance and needed to be rushed to the recipient as quickly as possible. Blue was used for common news, while green indicated a summons or a response to one. The code was simple and easy for the scribes in the coops to remember, even when it was changed every few years. But black wax on a message always meant the same thing across the whole of the frontier. Demons.

"Demon Giants." Sir Gilander read aloud from the first slip of parchment. "Gate breached. Walls falling. Sir Cathal.. Dead," he said as fingers began to tremble and mist collected in the corners of his vision. "Demon wolves in the bailey. All are dead or dying."

"The others are much the same," Bors said as he took a deep drink of the strong wine. Real, he thought. The messages were real. He didn't know whether he should laugh or cry at that. Laugh that he'd thought himself mad, or cry for the loss? As he took another gulp of the strong wine, he felt like both were valid.

On other days, he'd sip slowly at such a fine vintage, but today, he just wanted to feel the burn of alcohol in his throat and the warmth it placed in the pit of his stomach. But neither the fire that warmed his toes nor the heady, fortified wine could banish the chill that gripped his heart when he read the message.

"I see," Gilander said as he briefly inspected the other messages. From the way they were written, it was clear that the nameless sender was increasingly afraid for his life as he wrote.

Closing his eyes, the old knight imagined what it must have been like at the Summer Villa. The gatehouse had been breached, and the strongest defender of the villa was already dead. Perhaps Sir Cathal had shouted orders to send the message before he died, or perhaps the nameless soldier had sent the messages on his own, but either way, the man must have rushed from the battle to the coops in order to get word out.

The first message was clear enough, with hurried but legible penmanship. The second one was shorter, hastier, and drops of ink had fallen carelessly on the parchment. By the time the third one was written, the demons must have been within the villa itself, likely trying to break down the door to kill the man sending messages, but the brave soldier had continued writing to his last moment, sending a final message that read simply:

'Demon giants killed all.'