

## The Vampire 321

### Chapter 321: An Unexpected Welcome

Owain shook off thoughts about his family and returned his attention to his spineless steward. Privately, he wondered what Lord Hanrahan had done to his bastard child to leave him so skittish and eager to please. If it wasn't for the fact that he was genuinely talented at his actual duties, he'd have done as Hugo's father had and found a way to rid himself of the cowardly knight, but now, all he could do was try to hammer the poor man into shape and hope that a trial by fire would be enough to turn pig-iron into refined steel.

"My father-in-law is far too busy managing the affairs of this busy county to spend time giving me pointless introductions," Owain said, waving the thought off like it was trivial. "Besides, if he attended, the merchants would negotiate with him instead of negotiating with me and I don't want that at all. Better that he stays out of it."

"Besides," Sir Rian said, attempting to mimic his lord's disdainful attitude. "Didn't he send most of his available knights to escort Lady Jocelynn and protect Lady Ashlynn until she gives birth? This is only a county, he can't have as many knights to spare as Lothian March does."

"Enough about the Blackwells," Owain said more sharply than he'd intended. Reminders of Ashlynn were always a sensitive matter with him, but ever since the nights he spent entertaining her at the Summer Villa, reminders of Jocelynn were even more sensitive. If he wanted anyone with him while handling these merchants, it would be her.

It might not be appropriate to involve a delicate lady in matters of commerce but in the few nights he'd spent talking to her about his upcoming trip, he'd come to realize that the education she'd received from Rhys Blackwell wasn't any worse than his own.

She might not be clever enough to put all of the pieces together the way he could, she lacked a mind for strategy, but she had a talent for offering up useful pieces of information at the best times in ways that let him refine his own plans and strategies.

Now that he was preparing to put her experience with these merchant guild masters to use, he found himself wishing she were here at his side to whisper in his ear all the things he couldn't possibly have learned from her in the short time that they spent together.

"Rian, keep a tight hold on that chest and don't lose sight of its contents once this Master Sebastian starts to examine them," Owain reminded the portly knight for what felt like the tenth time.

The iron bound chest sitting on the floor of the carriage was their bargaining tool for this round of negotiations. Most of the riches that Bors Lothian had plundered from Airgead Mountain had been spent in the years since his campaign against the demons, but a few treasures remained. Enough, Owain thought, to spark the greed of simple merchants eager to find easy profits.

Tonight, they would meet with the most important of the guilds on Owain's list. It was necessary to enlist the support of the Fellowship of Wayfinders to begin ferrying soldiers and knights across the sea from the old countries under the Church's declaration of Holy War as soon as possible.

In the fall and winter, storms would make the seas difficult to navigate and prices would soar tremendously for transporting men. The delays caused by his need to 'redeem himself' for the incident that claimed the life of two of his knights at the Summer Villa followed by the Holy Festival of Light had already cost them an entire month. Any further delays might push back the start of the war by an entire year if they had to wait on weather to assemble their army.

"We're here, my lords," the carriage driver's voice called, interrupting their thoughts as they arrived at the sprawling building that served as the beating heart of the Fellowship of Wayfinders. Flags bearing the guild's crest snapped in the cool wind blowing off the harbor and all manner of men from sailors to traders packed into the plaza before the building as they rushed to or from the many ships in the harbor, many hoping to finish their business before tides shifted and ships set sail.

When they arrived, several smartly dressed servants formed neat lines to meet the carriage and a footman raced to personally open the door and help Lord Owain and his knights down from the carriage.

At the end of the line of servants, two elegantly dressed figures waited for Owain to reach them at the entrance to the guildhall. If it had been Marquis Bors Lothian arriving, they would have come to his carriage door and knelt until he acknowledged them, but for his presumed heir, they were far more reserved. After all, Owain might be a young lord, but this was business and yielding too much ground to the opposing side from the very beginning would only hurt them in the end.

"Welcome, young Lord Owain," Master Sebastian said with a brilliant, toothy grin beneath his bushy white mustache. "I'm Master Sebastian, Guild Master of the Fellowship of Wayfinders," he said while offering a polite bow. "Come, the journey must have been a long one and I'm sure you'd be more

comfortable inside. I've had our chefs prepare their finest dishes from this morning's catch, I promise, it won't disappoint you."

"Master Sebastian," Owain said, putting on a charming smile of his own as he extended a hand. When he shook the old merchant's hand, he was surprised at the strength in the other man's grip, but even more surprising was the familiar feel of sword callouses on the other man's hand. Jocelynn, it seemed, had been right about the sorts of lives that ship captains led.

The realization made him glad that he'd chosen to meet with the Fellowship of Wayfinders first. If he could hammer out a deal between warriors he was certain that the other man wouldn't press him as hard for funds he didn't have. With one guild onboard, the others would fall in line like dominoes, each one accepting his terms because the others already had.

"And who is this charming lady?" Owain said, his dashing charm on full display as he reached out to take the hand of the woman who had accompanied Master Sebastian. "Do I have the pleasure of meeting Mrs. Master Sebastian?" Owain asked.

"Lord of Light, where are my manners," Sebastian said with a harmless laugh. "My young lord Owain, may I present Master Isabell, currently the Guildmaster of the Illustrious Company of Engineers," he said, gesturing to the steel haired woman beside him. "I'm afraid that my accomplishments as a sailor weren't the sort of things that would have caught her eye, but I promise, you'll find her more entertaining company than my old lady," he said with a wide grin.

"My lord Owan," Isabell said, offering a brief curtsy. "As my old friend Sebastian said, I'm sure you'll find the feast we've prepared to be delightful and the others Guild Masters are already present and waiting. Shall we head upstairs to meet them?"

"Other Guild Masters?" Owain said, blinking in surprise. Isabell's presence was already a minor shock. He'd never contacted her Illustrious Company of Engineers and he didn't intend to until war preparations were much further along. If she was Master Sebastian's wife, he could understand, but since that wasn't the case, what business did she have attending this meeting? And now it sounded like there were other Masters gathered as well?

Just what were these merchants up to?

## Chapter 322: Assembled Masters

Master Isabell smiled as she led Owain and his knights upstairs to the luxurious dining room on the third floor of the Fellowship of Wayfinders' guildhall. Once again, there had been squabbling about who should host this meeting, but in the end, she had won the others over by suggesting they let Owain make the decision. Whichever guild he reached out to first would inform the others immediately and take on the role of host.

Owain's choice of the Fellowship of Wayfinders already gave them their first advantage. He clearly valued the ability to transport eager knights and soldiers from the old countries across the sea above anything else or he would have met with one of the others first.

From the startled expressions on the faces of his knights when they were told that the other guild masters would be present, their decision to surprise the young lord with a collective meeting had already handed them a second advantage. Clearly, Lord Owain was trying to make adjustments to his plans but none of the guild masters present intended to give him much time to do so.

"It's regrettable that Lady Ashlynn wasn't able to accompany you on this trip," Isabell said lightly as they walked upstairs. "I had the privilege of supervising renovations to Blackwell Manor some years ago and formed a small friendship with Lady Ashlynn. She's truly a remarkable young woman."

"Yes, well," Owain said awkwardly as the guild master's small talk derailed his train of thought. Couldn't she have chosen something else to comment on? The weather or the journey? But she had to mention the person he least wanted to discuss on this trip.

"It's a joyous thing," he said, plastering on a charming but slightly exaggerated smile. "By the end of the year, I may be blessed with a son of my own. But the priests who examined her fear that it will be a difficult birth given my adoring wife's stature and a journey of this length would be far too arduous for her."

"Really?" Isabell said, raising an eyebrow in surprise. "Certainly, she isn't a tall woman, but with hips and a bosom like hers, I would have thought she'd have an even easier time of childbirth and nursing than I did with my lads. But I can see that Lord Owain is a man of impressive stature," she added, openly pandering to his vanity. "If most Lothian children are as impressive as you must have been as a babe, then perhaps the caution is wise."

"You know, I've heard that Lord Owain's brother Loman is a priest of some renown in Lothian City," Master Sebastian said with a hearty laugh. "I wouldn't be surprised if he double-checked the work of your family's physicians personally, just to ensure everything goes well for his soon-to-be nephew and our beloved Lady Ashlynn," he said with a toothy grin beneath his bushy white mustache.

"Congratulations my Lord Owain," he said as he opened the door to the opulent dining room before he turned to address the people already waiting for them, all of whom stood politely as soon as Owain entered.

"Since everyone is here," Sebastian said. "Please allow me to make introductions, though I'm sure that my lord has already at least exchanged correspondence with most of the people gathered here today."

"From the left, Master Tiernan of the Iron Mongers," he said, pointing to a burly man with a shaved head and a physique that looked strong enough to challenge Sir Rian if the two men were ever to come to blows. "And beside him is Master Olver of the Brotherhood of Armaments."

"A pleasure to meet you, Lord Owain," the red-haired man with a close-cropped beard said as he offered a polite bow. "I bring Master Paidi's apologies that he cannot attend in person, but he has given me his proxy for this gathering so I can assure you that the Staunch Armorers will hear of what we discuss today and you won't lose the chance to include them in our bargain today."

"I see," Owain said as he struggled to keep a polite smile on his face. Between the Iron Mongers, the Brotherhood of Armaments, and the Staunch Armorers, everyone he needed to equip outfit his army with everything from lances to horseshoes was present which would make it impossible for him to demand concessions from one of them while claiming that it was required in order to meet the demands of another.

These men were merchants, they were supposed to be scheming, greedy competitors. Since when did people like this pool their negotiating power?

"Continuing on," Master Sebastian said affably. "The last of the masters present is my good friend in the landbound side of the transportation industry, Master Ruadhan of the Carter's Guild," he said, gesturing to the scarecrow-thin man with thinning blond hair. Usually, the two men would be at each other's throats over any number of petty disagreements, but today, such things had to be put aside while they dealt with this young lord.

"Last of the masters?" Owain blinked in confusion looking at the other men on the left side of the table. "Then these two are...?"

"Allow me to introduce myself," a short, balding man said while leaning on his gilded cane. "My name is Adrian and I serve as the Crown's Assessor of Weights and Measures in Blackwell County," he said with a slight bow. "This young lad beside me is Journeyman Cal of the Gilded Jeweler's Hall. I've asked him to sit in and lend his sharp young eyes and jeweler's loop since this discussion is likely to involve the treasures of Airgead Mountain."

"Pleased to meet you, Lord Owain," the sharply dressed man standing next to the Assessor said. Despite the fact that Adrian introduced him as young, he was a near match for Owain's age, working diligently to earn the title of Master before he turned thirty in two year's time. For a gathering like this, just being present would be a significant step forward on the path to receiving the Guild's recognition, but doing well today could shave as much as a year off of the time it took to gain the support of other masters.

"I want to assure you, my lord," Cal said smoothly. "While I am a journeyman in good standing from the Gilded Jeweler's Hall, I am not here today to represent my guild in any negotiations. I'm only here at Assessor Adrian's request to provide appraisals for any gems or precious metals that will be traded today."

"I promise you, everything I examine today will receive a fair and impartial appraisal," he said, hoping that the young lord would favor his response. After all, while he couldn't come out and say that he was on Owain's side, but he could make it clear that he wasn't on the guild master's side either.

Hopefully, that little bit of favor was enough for Lord Owain to consider working with their guild later once it came time to process the riches of Airgead Mountain. If he brought that level of business before his masters, they would practically beg him to accept a promotion to Master, if only to secure the relationship he built with Owain today. But all of that depended on how today's talks went. If he failed, he would be lucky if he retained his position as a journeyman.

"Now I see why the tables in guild halls are so long," Owain said neutrally as he moved to the opposite side of the long table to take his seat at the center. "If I had realized there would be so many people present today, I would have invited the rest of my retinue along," he said in a tone that held a mild trace of reproach.

"My steward, Sir Hugo Hanrahan has been preparing the figures for today's discussion," Owain said, gesturing briefly to the man on his right. "And Sir Rian Aleese has brought a sample of the treasures

from Airgead Mountain with him," he added, gesturing to the portly knight carrying the iron-bound chest with him. "Of course, this isn't everything my family has pried loose from demon claws on Airgead Mountain, but it should give you a good understanding of the riches to be had in this venture."

"Of course, of course," Sebastian said, gesturing for everyone to take their seats as servants entered the hall carrying bottles of crisp white wine and trays loaded with small, bite-size pieces of bread topped with everything from small shrimp to lumps of fresh crab meat.

"A toast," the guild master of the Fellowship of Wayfinders said, raising his glass. "To the Lady Ashlynn Blackwell, may she give birth to a strong Lothian heir, and to Lord Owain, that we may strike a good bargain today."

"To Lady Ashlynn and Lord Owain!" the assembled merchants cheered. Owain, however, found it difficult to share their cheer and it took every bit of strength he had to keep a smile on his face as he raised his crystal goblet before draining to the bottom in a single long drink.

Across the table, Master Isabell silently watched Owain struggle when Lady Ashlynn was mentioned yet again. The choice to do so, like many of today's other actions, had been deliberate, though she hadn't explained to her fellow masters why. Yet now that she saw Lord Owain's face when they mentioned his wife, her concerns grew even deeper.

Lady Ashlynn, she prayed silently. Whatever Lord Owain has done, please hold on until we can rescue you and Lady Jocelynn from it. She had numerous doubts in the months since she received Lady Ashlynn's private letter, but now that she saw Owain and the dark look in his eyes whenever she was mentioned.

Now, she no longer doubted that something untoward had happened to the Blackwell sisters, she only wondered why Ashlynn had asked her to help Jocelynn and not herself... and she hoped that it wasn't because it was already too late for the elder Blackwell daughter.

## Chapter 323: Collective Bargaining

Sweat rolled down Hugo Hanrahan's back as servants passed plate after plate of local delicacies to the assembled guildmasters and their guests. Sitting on a seat beside him, a leather-bound ledger contained all of his notes for the meeting with the Fellowship of Wayfinders but his notes about negotiations with the other guild masters were far from complete enough to present any detailed facts and figures. Even

worse, no one had told him that they would be meeting with Master Isabell and her guild of engineers. When it came to negotiating for her services, he had absolutely nothing prepared!

"Sir Hugo, there's no need to look so nervous," Isabell said in a kind, almost motherly tone when she noticed him looking in his direction. "It hasn't been a year yet since the tragic death of your predecessor. I imagine that Sir Kaefin left big shoes for you to fill. My condolences, Lord Owain," she said, turning in the young lord's direction. "From what I've heard, your former steward's death was quite sudden and unexpected."

"Master Isabell is surprisingly well informed for matters happening so far from Blackwell County," Owain said, once again taken off guard by these merchants. "I loved Kaefin like an older brother that I never had," he said, taking a heavy drink of the crisp white wine in his goblet. "But outside of Lothian March, I'm surprised that anyone knew much about him."

"Lord Owain might be surprised," Master Ruadhan said as he nibbled on a succulent lobster claw. "Ever since news of your engagement to Lady Ashlynn was announced two years ago, there has been increasing interest in Blackwell County about events happening in Lothian March."

"The Frontier is a long way away from our humble coast," the scarecrow thin carter continued. "But even I've made a trip out there to visit since the announcement. It's a shame that I couldn't be present for your wedding, it must have been very grand. The temple in Lothian City is unrivaled outside of the Holy City."

"Since I've been to the Frontier, I know that you may prefer to be a bit more direct than most of my companions are accustomed to," Master Ruadhan said. "If you let old sailors like my good friend Sebastian start spinning a yarn, we wouldn't get to business until the sun was setting. How about this, since we're blessed with the company of a Journeyman jeweler, why don't we let him have a look at the treasures you've brought while we eat and then we can get down to where the wheel meets the roadway without taking up too much of your lordship's time?"

"My lord," Hugo said hesitantly, his hands twitching toward his ledger. "I already have a preliminary appraisal for the treasures we brought. I can share it if it would make things faster."

"No, don't bother," Owain said, gesturing for Sir Rian to open the chest. "Since we have the services of a journeyman jeweler, we might as well make use of the man. Cal was it? Take a look. This is only a portion of what we retrieved from Airgead Mountain in a single summer campaign. I imagine you won't have seen gems of this quality anywhere else," he said with a smile.

In truth, Owain had a reason for wanting Cal's appraisal. He was hoping that he could use the journeyman to claw back some of the ground he'd lost to these conniving merchants by getting a higher appraisal from one of their local guilds than he'd been able to obtain in Lothian March.

It wasn't that he thought the young man would make a mistake or could be pressured, rather, the market for luxuries in Lothian City was much smaller than what it was in a place like Blackwell County where they frequently traded with the wealthy countries across the sea. Here, he thought that the jewels from Airgead Mountain would command a higher price.

"Let me see," Cal said, taking the chest from Sir Rian. The portly knight didn't retreat after handing it over, instead he loomed directly over Cal's shoulder as the journeyman brought out his tools. The sound of creaking leather and the faint clink of metal as the knight adjusted his sword in its sheath made Cal's hands tremble slightly as he opened his jeweler's loop.

Several of the assembled guild masters exchanged subtle looks at Sir Rian's aggressive manner, but none said anything to protest. A common guard treating a journeyman of the Gilded Jeweler's Hall with such suspicion would have been sharply rebuked, but Sir Rian wasn't only a knight, he was the son of Baron Aleese. Meanwhile, as important as they might be, none of the guild masters who were present possessed so much as a trace of noble blood. So as much as it rankled to see one of their peers treated with such blatant distrust, the insult would have to be endured.

When the chest was finally opened, everyone gathered in the opulent dining room stopped eating as they unconsciously leaned forward to catch a glimpse of the treasures in the chest. Even Sebastian, who had seen countless treasures in his days as a ship captain felt his breath catch as he beheld the glittering jewels and lumps of ore displaying veins of copper and gold.

"These sapphires are exceptional," Cal said forcing himself to project confidence despite the looming presence of the portly knight behind him. He held up a jeweler's loop and carefully examining one of the larger stones that was nearly the size of the last joint of his thumb. "There are inclusions, he muttered as he turned the stone gently in his fingers. "But they can be cut around and still leave a substantial amount of facet grade stone..."

"If you had to put a number on it, then what would you say?" Owain asked expectantly, leaning back in his chair and grinning at the journeyman jeweler.

"As it is, ten gold sovereigns and not a crown less," Cal said confidently, though he had to stop himself from flinching when Sir Rian shifted his weight behind him. The portly knight's breath caught at the low valuation, and Cal could practically feel the man's displeasure radiating off him like heat from a furnace.

"And from a quick glance at the other sapphires here, I'd wager than none of them are worth less than five sovereigns," he added, hoping the good news would be enough for Lord Owain to call off his overzealous knight.

"Ten?" Hugo said, his brows furrowing in confusion. "I spoke with a jeweler in Lothian City who assured me that stone could be cut into two high grade stones worth at least fifteen sovereigns each once they were cut. Isn't a third of the final value just a bit too low?"

"I wouldn't say a third of the final value," Cal responded with a slight frown. "More like a quarter. I think this could be cut into two pieces of at least twenty sovereigns final value as long as you create an appropriate matched set out of them."

"The problem is that the labor required to extract that value isn't inexpensive," the journeyman explained. "You'll need a master stone-cutter to truly maximize the value of these stones, and even once they're cut, you'll need a jeweler to fit them into settings of appropriate value, and someone else will have to either carry the inventory or find a buyer who can afford such a prized piece. Outside of the ducal families or perhaps the royal family there aren't many in the kingdom of Gaal who would spend so much on sapphires."

"Sad to say, but the lad's not wrong," Sebastian said as he scratched his chin in thought. "You'd do better locally with rubies from what I've seen. Sapphires trade well in the old countries because the crown jewels of two different kingdoms are sapphires, and emeralds are almost the same. Shame you didn't find any sunstones, the church buys those at exorbitant prices."

"So what you're telling me," Owain said with a dark expression. "Is that we have something that can be a treasure, but turning it from potential treasure to real treasure will require paying so many people along the way that we'll only receive a fraction of the stone's value unless we do the work ourselves."

"That's the way it usually is," Sebastian said before he reached out and picked up one of the stones showing a thick vein of copper and tossing the stone to Master Tiernan. "What do you think?"

"It's dense," the burly iron monger said as he bounced the stone in one hand. "I wouldn't want to transport ore this dense very far but if lumber is plentiful and we can do the smelting near the site of the mine then the yield could be very good. With gold veins in the area too, it could be worth while over the long haul, but you'd need somewhere to process all this before transporting it or Ruadhan will spend so much on extra teams and soldiers to defend them that you'll lose the profits to the transportation and refining process."

"It comes down to the best ways to use this box of treasures as seed capital," Master Isabell said with a smile. "Journeyman Cal, if you had to put a value on the complete contents of the chest, what would you say?"

"Um, I'm not comfortable estimating the complete chest, but, could you give me an hour?" Cal said, looking sheepishly from the glowering Owain to the smiling masters. Clearly Owain thought his chest was worth more than it really was so the only way to give him the highest possible number would be to inspect every single gem and bit of precious metal.

"That's probably for the best," Isabell said, adjusting her spectacles as she took the lead once again. "While we eat, we've taken the liberty of preparing a few proposals for how we might best cooperate. Would Lord Owain be interested in hearing them?"

"Since you've gone through the trouble," Owain said with a strained smile on his lips. "I'm all ears."

#### Chapter 324: A Business Venture

"Before I begin," Isabell said as she set aside her meal to retrieve a small leatherbound notebook that contained several pages of notes.

Hugo's fingers tightened on his own ledger. The woman hadn't even glanced in his direction, but somehow he felt like she knew exactly how incomplete his preparations were. His eyes darted from Isabell to Owain and back again, looking at the calm, collected engineer as she adjusted her spectacles like she could see through to a man's heart through them.

"I know that you only intended to meet with Master Sebastian today," Isabell said calmly as she considered how hard she should press Owain on this point. From what she had seen so far, he was both fragile and offbalance, as though he'd never considered battles fought in dining halls rather than battlefields. Since that was the case, she decided to cut directly to the heart of the matter as she

doubted he had the skills to manage a more subtle conversation. "Do you have a chest like that one for each of the guilds you had planned to meet with?"

Thanks to Ashlynn's letter, she knew that he didn't, but whether or not he admitted to it, the way he handled her question would tell her much about the Lothian heir and how he intended to proceed. Thus far, her impression of his understanding of business was... poor. It seemed like Lady Ashlynn had taken his measure quite well and she hadn't hesitated to lay bare the arrogant nobleman's shortcomings.

"I wouldn't dare to bring so many chests of treasures on such a long journey," Owain said casually. "This one was carefully crafted to demonstrate the wealth to be had in our campaign to capture Airgead Mountain and its riches. Of course, a Holy War will do far more than capture a single mountain but you needn't concern yourself with other objectives. After all, the most interesting gains should be treasures like these, shouldn't they?"

"You would be surprised at what we would find worth negotiating for, Lord Owain," Isabell said with a smile before she turned to the short, balding Assessor for Blackwell County. "Assessor Adrian, what price has the crown currently set on a low peerage? How much land must be secured and held in order to grant a title?"

"The cost is not low, Master Isabell," the assessor said with a heavy sigh. Of course, he'd discussed this matter with Master Isabell in advance but he never expected that the Lothian heir would arrive so hat-in-hand that she would have an opportunity to make this move. Since he had, however, he saw no reason to go easy on the young man.

"A knight should not be granted less than one thousand acres of land, though some may wish for more, and it must be purchased from the granting lord at a fair price," Adrian said. "Further, a sum of twenty thousand sovereigns must be paid to the granting lord and a sum of ten thousand sovereigns must be given as tithe to the crown upon creation of the title. This completely ignores the costs of constructing a fortified manor, establishing a village and raising soldiers to serve in the lord's army during time of war."

As the man spoke, Hugo's hands were busy in the margins of his ledger, making careful notes and calculating quick sums. Owain had told him of his intention to recruit ship captains as new knights but he'd never mentioned how much money was involved in conferring a title! Now, as he stared at the growing sum once he added the cost of the land and everything else involved, his heart began to race in his chest.

Was Owain expecting the Lothian treasury to bear these costs or did he think that he could extract this money from the captains themselves? Just the few names that Lady Jocelynn had given them would already amount to more than a hundred thousand sovereigns... where was this money going to come from?

"You see? There are other treasures to be had in Lothian March besides the ones to be mined on Airgead Mountain," Isabell said with a smile as she looked at the horrified expressions on Sir Hugo and Sir Rian's faces.

Both men were the sons of barons. They had soaked in the notion from birth that noblemen were somehow better than commoners. Their positions were given to them by right of inherent superiority, and yet, the woman before them was talking about buying the same level of privilege they possessed in the same tone she might have used to talk about going to the market to purchase fish.

"Becoming a knight isn't that easy, Master Isabell," Owain countered. His voice was calm and even but his hands clenched on the armrests of his chair tightly enough for the wood to creak. He was already planning to use offers of knighthood to entice ship captains to take up arms with him, and in doing so he expected to gain trained fighting men who were capable leaders. Yet this woman thought that she could just buy her way into the peerage?

At the opposite end of the table, Sir Rian's reaction was even more obvious as he momentarily forgot to pay attention to the hands of the Journeyman who was appraising the jewels. If the person speaking wasn't a woman he'd have marched down the length of the table to slap them for suggesting that a knighthood was something so petty that it could be bought and sold like sacks of grain.

"Before a title can be granted, a person who wishes to be a knight must render meritorious service to the lord granting the title," Owain pointed out as he held up a hand, gesturing for Sir Rian to back down before the portly knight could cause an incident that would completely derail their negotiations.

"Further, the Church must attest to the person's upright moral standing. These things can't just be bought."

"You think that funding your war and arming your soldiers wouldn't count as 'meritorious service'?" Master Olver said with a snort. "You're not just coming to us for arms and armor, my Lord. Battle takes a toll on both even as it takes a toll on fighting men. I imagine that if I brought a few of my journeymen and another master smith or two, I could shorten the time it took to repair a fighting man's equipment by several days, and that's just the service I can offer."

"Everyone here can do more for you in this war than supply materials," the red-haired master of the Brotherhood of Armaments said. "Master Isabell is skilled in the design of fortifications and she's spent time in the old countries learning the what scholars across the seas have spent decades refining when it comes to siegecraft. She's too humble to say it, but she knows more of war than many knights who have led men in battle," he said, giving a pointed look at Sir Hugo and the portly Sir Rian.

"The point I wanted to make, my lord," Isabell said, raising a hand before anyone else could pile on. She was well aware of what everyone desired from this, but she had to lay out a bit more rope before she could draw the net closed around Lord Owain. "Is that, while you have brought a chest of treasures, it will take actual expenditures on all of our parts to support your war efforts. I'm afraid that no matter how highly that chest is valued, it won't be sufficient to meet your demands for all of us."

"I haven't demanded anything of you, Master Isabell," Owain pointed out as he rapidly lost patience with this woman and her attempts to diminish and dismiss what he had to offer. "Airgead Mountain has rough terrain and the cat demons that infest the mountain don't favor the construction of large fortifications. I don't need a master of siegecraft to take the mountain, much less a woman playing warrior," he said as he finally lost his patience.

Sir Rian's hand dropped fully to his sword hilt now, and the portly knight shifted to stand directly behind his lord's chair, looming over the table like a storm about to break. The subtle sound of steel scraping leather as he loosened his blade in its sheath sounded much louder than it should have, like another log thrown on the fire, increasing the temperature in the room even further.

Beside him, Hugo nearly dropped his fork as blood drained from his face. This was bad, very, very bad. As a steward, he should speak up. He should do something, anything to smooth the tensions before his lord's outburst could derail their negotiations. And yet, looking at the man's tightly clenched fists and the way that Sir Rian's hand had dropped to the hilt of his sword, he couldn't bring himself to move.

On the opposite side of the table, both Master Tiernan and Master Olver looked like they were ready to treat the young nobleman the same way they treated mouthy apprentices and neither smith looked much like they cared about the consequences of doing so. Even Master Sebastian looked like he was wishing for the sword he'd worn during his days as a captain at sea and the way he held his steak knife looked far too practiced for Hugo to feel comfortable within arms reach of the white haired guild master.

The room itself seemed ready to erupt like a pot about to boil over and all eyes turned to Master Isabell to see how she would respond to Owain's insult.

## Chapter 325: Offering Terms

"You may not need me in order to seize Airgead Mountain," Isabell admitted smoothly, refusing to back down in front of this young lord's ire. When hadn't she seen men blustering that a woman couldn't be an engineer, couldn't study the art of warfare, or couldn't do any number of things she had already done? If she lost her temper every time some entitled man got his testicles in a twist, she'd never have secured her position as master of her guild.

"But you do need someone to help you keep it," she said, gesturing for the assembled masters to relax and waving a servant forward. Slowly, as if she was in no particular hurry and felt no pressure from Owain or his knights, she took a large, rolled-up piece of parchment from the servant before spreading it across the table. "This is a simple design for a mining fortress," she said, explaining the sketches on the parchment. "It can be built quickly using materials that are available so long as you bring enough laborers to clear trees and construct the earthworks."

"I've consulted with Master Tiernan's Iron Mongers about what it would take to construct a foundry for the safe smelting of ore within a fortified mining operation," she added, pointing to sketches for several structures. "From what I've been told, digging out nests of demons can take years, if not decades. With my help, you can begin extracting the wealth of Airgead Mountain much more quickly."

"And the price you want for this is a peerage?" Owain said with a snort. "You'll hide in safety behind fortress walls drawing your maps and plans and expect to receive the same rewards as the real knights who ride into battle?"

"Not every knight rides to war," Master Sebastian pointed out as he gestured at Sir Hugo with a crystal goblet. "Your steward there doesn't look like he's battle-hardened but I imagine that many of your plans rely on the battle he's been fighting with that ledger next to him. Half a captain's battles are the same, whether it's laying in the right quantity of supplies for a voyage and accounting for spoilage to ensuring the men get paid before they mutiny, there's more to it than swinging a sword. A battle at sea can be won or lost in the ship's ledge before you ever set sail."

"And I suppose you're looking for a peerage for yourself as well?" Owain said, trying to restrain himself as he looked at the aging former captain. He was glad to see the man had experience leading others in battle but instead of finding an ally in the other fighting man, it seemed like he'd found an opponent who wanted to use clever words instead of openly crossing swords. Perhaps he'd overestimated the man and he'd already gone from bold warrior to old coward.

"No, I want nothing of the sort," Sebastian said bluntly. "I'll need the contents of that treasure chest of yours if I'm going to charter vessels and pay ship's crews. I have no interest in lands or titles so far from the sea. It's the others who you might have a chance to barter with, but for me, coin is king."

"I've prepared a draft agreement," Isabell said, producing a roll of papers bound with a crimson ribbon. "Lothian March would need to agree to grant deeds to sufficient acreage to most of the masters present, free of charge. In addition, the fees for title that are to be paid to the Marquis are to be waived."

"Of course, we would bear the costs of paying the tithe to the crown and the construction of our own manors on the lands we are granted, but in exchange for all this, you gain our support as well as an initial round of funding to prepare for a small scale war against Airgead Mountain," she finished with a smile as she handed him the documents.

"A small-scale war against Airgead Mountain?" Owain said with a brow raised as he snatched the documents from her. Once he held them, however, he couldn't bring himself to bother reading them and instead shoved them into Hugo's hands while he seized on Master Isabell's last statement. "This is a Holy War. It won't end with an assault on Airgead Mountain."

Hugo's heart sank as soon as he took a peek inside the 'draft' agreement. The handwriting was smooth and crisp with none of the inkblots that came from someone who was thinking while writing out a draft. This 'draft' had likely been revised several times before being handed over to a scribe in order to produce an immaculate copy. Compared to his own preparations, it was frighteningly thorough with page after page outlining terms in exquisite detail.

"Oh, we all understand that," Master Tiernan said, drawing the attention of everyone in the room as he cracked the knuckles of his thick, meaty hands. "But understand what you gain from signing this agreement, my Lord. It sounds like you give up a great deal up front, but in the end, don't several of us become your vassals? At that point, as my friend Sebastian would say, we've boarded your ship and set sail together. There's no getting off in the middle of the ocean."

"Aren't you selling out your guilds by claiming titles for yourselves?" Owain said, trying to find a way to turn this nightmare around. "Will your guilds really sign off on this... deal?"

"I'm sure they will," Isabell said with a slow smile. "Please, have Sir Hugo review the details in the agreement. There are provisions that support each of our guilds. For example, while Master Tiernan is willing to relocate and personally work on establishing foundries, the mining and mineral rights wouldn't

be in his name at all, they would rest in the hands of the Iron Mongers. Similarly, there are other terms that each of our guilds would insist on to back a venture of this magnitude."

"Think about it carefully, my Lord Owain," she said, sitting back in her chair and retrieving a crystal goblet of crisp white wine. "Discuss it with your steward. Write back to your father, the Marquis if needed. We have time to do this right. If we cannot conclude our business this summer then we can conclude it in the fall. What you're holding is a proposal for beginning our conversation, not something that you should take as a conclusion."

"But consider one thing, my lord," she said, driving the final nail into the coffin she'd shoved him into. "If this takes too long, you won't be able to do more than launch a minor offensive against Airgead Mountain next year. I'm sure that we can arrange the funding and enough trips across the sea to gather manpower for that much as long as we conclude things within a month or two. More than that... well, I suppose it's really up to you how important it is to wage your war next year."

Across the table from her, Owain glowered fiercely before turning his glare on the young man who had been painstakingly appraising the contents of the chest. He didn't look like he was finished, but Owain had completely lost his patience with these money-grubbing merchants who thought that they could exploit him to buy their way into the nobility.

"Well," he snapped, startling the journeyman jeweler. "Do you have a value for those treasures? I imagine it's all calculated at that same quarter of its true worth, isn't it?"

"It, um, it varies, piece to piece," Cal said, sweat dripping from his brow as he spoke. "There are a few pieces of ore that I cannot value without smelting them to extract the precious metal, but I know that my lord included them so masters like Master Tiernan could inspect the raw ore, and..."

"Get on with it," Owain interrupted. "How much?"

"Fif-fifteen thousand, four hundred sovereigns," Cal said nervously. "It, it truly is a chest of treasures."

"Fifteen thousand," Owain said darkly. His own estimates had placed it between twenty-five and thirty. These merchants weren't even giving him half of what it was worth! "Rian, retrieve the treasures. We're done here for the day," he said, standing up from his chair and turning to leave the room.

"Master Isabell," Owain said, looking at the older woman with a dark glower. "I don't know how you came to be included in these talks when you weren't ever invited. This sort of thing isn't how business between men is conducted in Lothian March. It would be a shame if your efforts to insert yourself were to cause losses for the men you've placed under your spell," he said, directing his glare around the room at the other masters.

"In that case, it's good for me that we aren't currently in Lothian March," Isabell said with a cold smile. "When you're ready to discuss terms," she said, meeting the eyes of each of the other masters before returning her steely gaze to Owain. "We'll be waiting to meet with you again."

## Chapter 326: Venting Frustrations

After the meeting, Owain's luxurious carriage felt more like a prison cell. The scented oils that the Blackwell servants had applied that morning had turned sickly sweet in the afternoon heat, mixing with the sour smell of three men's frustration and anger. Every bounce and rattle of the wheels over cobblestones made Hugo's teeth clench, each jolt feeling like another small humiliation after their defeat in the guild hall.

The leather beneath Owain's hands creaked as his fingers dug into the upholstery. His scowl deepened with each bump, transforming his handsome features into something dark and brooding. Across from him, Sir Rian's considerable bulk shifted restlessly, the knight's sword scraping against the wooden panels as he adjusted his position for the tenth time in as many minutes.

"Sniveling cowards, scrambling for coins and benefits when there are demons breathing down our necks," Sir Rian spat, clenching his fist as if he wished that one of those guild masters was present in the carriage with them so he could personally tell them what he thought of their attitudes.

"This is what it's like on the coast," Owain said with a snort. "Money, money, money. They treat these 'Guild Masters' as though they're the same as knights and even Count Rhys is a member of one of their guilds. He's actually proud of it, belonging to a guild of fishermen and fish mongers."

"Count Blackwell is a guild member?" Hugo said, blinking several times in surprise. "Doesn't that create a conflict with the other guilds that he's not a member of?"

"He has other ways of currying favor with the guilds, bowing and scraping before those spineless vultures," Owain said. "Until recently, he actually planned to marry my, my sister-in-law Jocelynn to the son of one of those feckless 'masters,'" he said, barely catching himself from calling her 'my Jocelynn.'

Unlike the murdered Sir Broll and the traitorous Sir Tommin, neither Rian nor Hugo were aware that the 'Ashlynn' at the summer villa was an imposter and he saw no reason to tell them the truth. As far as he was concerned, too many people already knew, it felt like it was inevitable that it would get out some day.

That wasn't a problem in the long run, as long as he married Jocelynn and inherited his father's throne then the truth might hurt him but it couldn't topple him. Until then, however, he had no intention of sharing his secrets with his newest confidants.

"You know what," Owain said after his thoughts turned to Jocelynn and her perfect proportions and sparkling seafoam eyes. "Stop the carriage!" Owain shouted, banging on the walls of the carriage to catch the driver's attention.

"Hugo, get out," the young lord continued, shocking his steward with the intensity of his gaze. "Go find me a woman. Make arrangements and come fetch me when everything is prepared."

"My lord," Hugo said, frowning at Owain. "Your only just married and your wife has yet to give birth to your child. If she's carrying a boy, it's all well and good, but if she's carrying a girl and you accidentally leave behind a child in this place, it could threaten your succession," he warned.

Hugo was all too familiar with the fate of bastards. If his own older brother hadn't suffered a frightening injury falling from his horse, he might never have been recalled from his studies to the Hanrahan Barony. His father had treated him as a 'back up heir' in case his half brother never recovered from his fall.

A year later, however, when his brother was once again fit to ride and fight, Hugo's existence had become an inconvenient reality that threatened his brother's status. Owain's sudden need of a steward gave Baron Hanrahan the perfect method of securing a title for Hugo and in doing so, making it clear that he wouldn't contest for the title of Baron when the time came. But now, as Hugo looked at Owain's burning gaze, he worried that his lord was about to commit the same sort of mistake that his own father had and the consequences could haunt him for the rest of his life.

"Do you think I'm an idiot?" Owain said coldly. "This is Blackwell City, home of one of the three greatest ports in the kingdom. Do you think that in a town with this many sailors there aren't professionals to tend to a man's needs?"

"Go hire me a woman, a professional will know how to prevent herself from conceiving," Owain said as though he were explaining things to a child. "And Hugo," he added after a moment of thought. "I like blondes. There shouldn't be a shortage in Blackwell City."

"Damn, brat," Sir Rian said, slapping a hand on Hugo's back with enough force to knock the wind out of the slender steward. "Don't tell me you've never bought yourself a night with a woman when you were lonely. You're not the charming sort who never has to pay for it."

"I don't..." Hugo started, only for Rian to grab him by the tunic and pull him out of the carriage as the portly knight stepped out. "Lord Owain, I could use a good wench myself. I'll teach the boy what needs to be done, be sure of it, and I'll send him back to fetch you when things are arranged."

"And you, boy," Rian said, poking the young man in the chest. "Tonight, it seems like we need to make a man out of you. Don't hold your purse strings tight," he added in a low voice. "I hear these Blackwell women can rock a man with the rhythm of the waves and they'll sweep you away to the Heavenly Shores with the way they move their hips."

"Just get it done," Owain said. "And be discrete," he added before slamming the door shut and pounding on the walls of the carriage for the driver to continue.

It was times like this that he missed Kaefin the most. Kaefin hadn't just been his steward, the man had been like his older brother. He even took a much younger Owain to his first brothel more than ten years ago so that his 'little brother' wouldn't suffer from an inexperienced partner for his first time.

Now, as the carriage rolled away, he wondered if Sir Rian even understood him well enough to know what he wanted when he sent the man to find him a blond. What he wanted right now was someone like Jocelynn, with a figure that was well balanced, who smelled of the sea and had eyes he could drown in.

It was impossible for a common woman to possess even a fraction of Jocelynn's refinement and elegance, but as long as her features were pleasant and her body was supple, he could lose himself in the illusion for a while and let go of the stress that had built up in his body after meeting with those conniving merchants.

He was afraid, however, that Rian would mistake his desires and search out a buxom woman who could rival Ashlynn's endowments. The last thing he wanted right now was a reminder of the witch who had derailed his perfect life. If not for her, there would have been no need to hide away an imposter at the summer villa and Sir Kaefin would never have fallen on that demon woman, Lynnda's knife. So many things wouldn't have gone wrong if he hadn't nearly been tricked into lying with a witch.

But then, as he considered the possibility that Rian would find a woman who resembled Ashlynn, a dark smile began to form on Owain's lips. If they found a woman like Jocelynn, then he would relax and let go of his pent-up desires as he waited for the day he could truly make her his own.

And if they found a woman who resembled Ashlynn? He'd never had a chance to sample her charms, though Samira came close. But out here, in Blackwell City, with a prostitute that no one would care about, who wasn't needed for his plans to conceal Ashlynn's death...

Owain's hand curled into a tight fist as visions of an evening's pleasures danced through his mind. There were limits to what he could do with Samira, but here... he could vent out more than just his lust if they found him a woman who resembled Ashlynn....

#### Chapter 327: Crystal Lake City

While Owain sought to drown himself in the pleasures of the flesh to relieve the tensions of his failures, Ashlynn and Heila celebrated their recent victories in Crystal Lake City in very different ways.

There were very few attractions that could draw outsiders to the sleepy city built by the Ancient Clan. When the flighty and animated Talauia had described it to Ashlynn, the city sounded as interesting as a stick in the mud. It wasn't until Jacques showed them a few of the local attractions that Ashlynn realized that being a stick in the mud wasn't an entirely bad thing.

"De Ancient Clan, she's filled with traditions dat are thousands of years old," Jacques had explained when they entered the city. "De way tings' happen here, everything dat people do, it's jus' like it was a thousand years ago and more. Not much new gets built here, but de places we have, dey get fixed up instead of tearing down and building new."

"Families almost never leave where dey started," he said, his voice catching briefly as he looked at sprawling family home on one corner. "But by de time enough years have gone by, ever bit of it has been rebuilt at least once or twice," he explained.

The Ancient Clan's homes reflected the same harmony with their environment that Ashlynn had seen in their shops and other buildings. Unlike the tight-packed buildings of Blackwell City that tried to squeeze as many people as possible into the valuable harbor district, these homes spread out languidly, each one surrounded by broad verandas raised slightly off the ground.

The overhanging roofs extended far beyond the walls, creating deep pools of shade where members of the Ancient Clan lounged on cushions or woven mats, their scaled hides soaking in what rays of sunlight filtered through the cypress canopy.

Most of the buildings were low and squat, seldom raising more than two or three stories in height and constructed from baked mud bricks or rough cut timber. What surprised Ashlynn, however, was the number of cypress and tulip trees that lined the roads or filled the spaces between those buildings.

As they wandered deeper into Crystal Lake City, she was repeatedly struck by how different it felt from human cities she'd known or even the neatly organized districts of High Fen City. Here, there were no rigid streets laid out in careful grids, instead, packed-earth paths meandered between the ancient trees like streams finding their natural course. The paths widened into small squares where people gathered, then narrowed again as they wound between buildings, creating a rhythm that felt as natural as breathing.

As witches attuned to trees, all of them were sensitive to places where people had chosen to dominate the landscape with dense construction and the crowded life of urban centers, but walking through Crystal Lake City didn't feel very different from walking through the forest. Certainly, there were more people about, but those people gave way before nature's most majestic trees and built their homes and shops in the spaces between rather than clearing vast stretches of land to house their people.

Slowly, the trees thinned out as Jacques lead them toward the lakeshore. Here, fewer people built houses and most of the nearby shops seemed to be dedicated to recreation rather than any serious form of trade. Within a hundred paces, Ashlynn felt like she'd seen at least half a dozen small cafes, each one surrounded by clusters of people lazing about in the outdoor seating areas.

"Some people, dey say dat we're lazy or sleepy because we spend so much time layin' about in de sun," Jacques explained when he caught Ashlynn studying a group of elderly clan members playing some sort of game with carved tokens on a low table. "But de sun, she gives us strength, yeah? And what better way to spend your strength den enjoying life with family?"

As if to prove his point, they passed a small cafe where the scent of roasted nuts and fragrant tea drew them in. Outside the small grass-roofed wooden hut, couples and small groups occupied nearly every table, but none seemed in any hurry to leave. Instead, the proprietor and his young son brought out seemingly endless small dishes that they passed out to each table. A few pieces of fruit here, a handful of spicy roasted chicken wings there, each serving small enough that it seemed more an excuse to continue talking than a proper meal.

"In Blackwell City," Ashlynn said as she imagined this sight playing out at home, "a cafe owner would go mad watching people occupy tables for hours while ordering so little." It brought to mind the recent dream she'd shared with Nyrielle when they gathered at a vendor's stall to buy a basket of mussels.

Their picnic had been lovely, but few cafes held more than a few tables for people to dine at, rather, most people took their food and left to eat it elsewhere so the busy shop keepers could move on to the next customers before people could wander away to spend their money elsewhere.

"Ah, but here, dey know dat good food and good company feed de soul as much as de belly," Jacques said with a warm smile. "De Ancient Clan, we learned long ago dat having enough and enjoying what you have brings more happiness den always wanting more."

Looking around the scattered cafes that lined the meandering street, Ashlynn couldn't help but agree with him. Every face she saw looked genuinely content, whether they were young couples leaning close together over tiny cups of tea or groups of friends laughing as they shared small plates of colorful fruits and roasted meats. Even the servers moved unhurriedly, stopping to join conversations as they delivered each small dish, as though the act of serving was as much about nurturing relationships as providing sustenance.

Looking around, she couldn't help but feel like Talauia's Glimmerwing clan had truly misunderstood the Ancient Clan. Perhaps it was because the Glimmerwing clan focused so much on being the ultimate hunters that they were always chasing the slightest advantage, but when Ashlynn looked around, she didn't see people who had failed to advance. Rather, they were people who had advanced enough to know when to stop, as if to say "this is enough" and focus on enjoying what they had rather than constantly striving for more.

"I think I see why it isn't very exciting to outsiders," Ashlynn said with a heavy sigh. "But seeing it and how happy everyone is... It almost makes me want to put down roots," she said with a soft chuckle at her own pun.

"So Jacques," Heila asked, chiming in from the opposite side of Ashlynn. "You've been keeping your lips tight ever since we sold our potions in the market when we arrived. Are you finally going to tell us about this surprise you've prepared for us? Maybe it's not very exciting to outsiders, but you always do things for a reason," she said. "Even if I can't always understand it," she added quietly in a voice too low to be heard.

There had to be a reason why he'd skipped past every shop and cafe, taking them on a winding course through half the city until they reached the lakeshore. Now that they were here, just what did he have in mind?

### Chapter 328: A Place to Rest

"It's true, most people don't see much point in coming here. But, de medicinal traditions of de Ancient Clan draw people from hundreds of leagues away," Jacques explained as he led them deeper into the forest city. "Some say dat de people of de Ancient Clan live so long because of dese traditions and dey say dey feel ten years younger when dey leave."

"I doubt Mistress Nyrielle would want to see me when I was a little girl," Ashlynn said with a laugh. "But this doesn't sound very different than the noblewomen in the Kingdom of Gaal. In Blackwell City, people would come from inland to soak in the saltwater pools or treat themselves to salt scrubs that would be horrendously expensive anywhere else. It softens the skin and makes it glow."

"We don't ever have skin dat glows," Jacques said, pointing to his own thick, scaly hide. "But it's de same idea, Auntie. Here, it's de mud soaks dat are magical for de body. Jus' let old Jacques show you de way."

For a moment, Ashlynn wanted to tease Jacques that he wasn't that much older than her, he was nearly the same age as her ex-husband but that would mean betraying Talauia's confidence and so she bit her tongue and let her 'nephew' put on an act as though he were a wise and experienced old man, guiding them around his former home like an eager tour guide.

The place that Jacques eventually guided them to was a large wooden hut with a grass roof that rustled softly in the cool summer breeze blowing over the glittering blue lake. The scent of fresh earth mingled with the aroma of freshly crushed herbs, rosemary, sage, and something sweeter that Ashlynn couldn't quite identify. Wooden wind chimes hung by the entrance, their hollow tubes creating gentle, random melodies that somehow made the air feel cooler despite the summer heat.

Behind the hut, a fenced area stretched down to where waves lapped gently at the soft, sandy soil of the lakeshore. Steam rose from several wooden tubs partially sunken into the earth, and the rich smell of mineral-laden mud drifted up from carefully tended pools separated by screens made of woven grass.

"Would you look at dis," a bright and excited young woman said, her long tail swishing rapidly enough that Ashlynn was momentarily concerned she'd break the low table behind her. She wore a simple wrap dress of faded green cotton that left her midriff bare. The fabric looked soft and well-worn from countless washings. Despite, or perhaps because of its obvious age, the dress seemed perfectly suited to both the setting and its wearer, as natural as the grass roof above them or the packed earth beneath their feet.

For a moment, Ashlynn wondered if she should find a similar dress for herself, at least while they were in Crystal Lake City. The thought of wearing something so skimpy in public felt a little scandalous even after she had adjusted to wearing sleeveless tops and shorter skirts in the heat of the Briar, but it was a vacation after all...

"De Mother of Trees herself, and de Willow Witch," she said, her words pulling Ashlynn out of her thoughts as she bowed deeply.

The young woman's scales caught the filtered sunlight as she moved, shimmering like dewdrops on morning leaves, and even though Jacques had claimed that the skin of the Ancient Clan never 'glowed' the way a human's would after being thoroughly scrubbed with salt, to Ashlynn's eyes, this young woman's scales seemed to be fresher and more... supple than the toughened, leathery hide that Jacques showed the world.

"You two are guests of de highest honor, even if you come here wit' him," she added, gesturing awkwardly at Jacques.

"Auntie Ashlynn, ma petite, Heila," Jacques said, looking embarrassed. "Dis is ma little cousin Aledia. She'll take good care of you both, non?" he said, raising a scaly brow at his excited cousin.

"Go, go away you lump of a man," Aledia said, placing two hands on Jacques's shoulders and directly pushing him toward the door. In the presence of his cousin, the normally prickly aura that surrounded the Sandbox Witch melted completely and he seemed to let himself be easily overpowered. "Dis is a space for women, yeah? So you got' no business being here."

"Dere's a quiet little cafe down de road," Jacques said, giving Ashlynn a helpless glance as he let himself be pushed outside. "I'll be waiting dere."

"Now," Aledia said once she'd shoved her older cousin out the door. "You jus' let little Aledia take care of you for de rest of de day, yeah? Don't worry 'bout anything but feeling good under our care."

"Before we start," Heila said, stepping forward to take care of things she felt were beneath Ashlynn's station. "Could you explain to me what your services cost? You may be Jacques' family but we don't want to take advantage, so, whatever the going rate is, please just tell me directly."

In the end, the potions they'd managed to craft for bartering hadn't been anything as exaggerated or extraordinary as what they would have made from the flesh and bones of a Giant Thornbacked Alligator, but they'd still secured a small collection of gold tails and a large handful of silver ones.

It would have been a fortune to someone like Ollie before he had left the Lothian kitchens. Even though the gold tails traded in this region were half the weight of the kingdom's gold sovereigns, two gold tails would still be enough to purchase an entire acre of land to work as a free man and the small handful that Ashlynn and Heila had could support a common family in the Kingdom of Gaal for close to a decade.

Here, they felt that it was enough to treat themselves quite well in Crystal Lake City so long as they didn't splurge on luxurious souvenirs. Today would be the first day of their 'vacation' and while both women were eager to spend most of what they had earned as a reward for themselves, it wouldn't do to run out of money in their first day or two by overindulging.

"Going rate?" Aledia said, blinking rapidly in confusion. "I can't take a single white tail from you for dis," she said sounding mildly horrified at the notion. "No, when I bring you back and you soak in de waters and de mud, you'll see. We gain so much more den we use jus' from having a mother and child of the earth be here, taking money on top of it, that would jus' be greedy, yeah?"

"I understand," Ashlynn said gently before Heila could press the point. She didn't know what kind of effect the young woman was hoping for from having a pair of witches in her bath house, but even if there was no mystical effect of witches bathing here, being able to say that they had would surely be good for business. "We shouldn't press things, Heila," she said gently. "I'm sure that Aledia has considered things well."

"In that case," Heila said, putting away her purse and turning to face the eager woman. "We'll be in your care."

## Chapter 329: Bad Water

Ashlynn and Heila were led by an obviously excited Aledia to a simple changing room where they were provided with baskets to hold their clothing and simple cotton robes to change into. When it came to their hats, however, even though both women were only wearing their most practical hedge hats, Aledia seemed to grow particularly agitated.

"I promise you," she said as she reverently placed the hats high on a shelf. "No one will dare to touch dese, not so much as de point of a claw will come close to dem," she said. "We don't have problems with thieving, but if you want, I can hide them away somewhere wit' a lock, yeah?"

"They're just hats," Ashlynn said lightly, afraid that her stature was putting too much pressure on the young woman. "It's good that no one will touch them on the shelf. We don't need more than that."

"It's kind of you to say it dat way," Aledia said with a wide, toothy grin before she led the pair of witches outside. "Today, we will refresh and renew your body from de tips of your toes to de top of your head. We start wit' some good heat to loosen your body and expel all de bad water our bodies hold on to," she said, leading the way to a small wooden shed sitting next to a crackling fire.

"Bad water?" Heila asked, puzzled by the term. "What do you mean by the bad water our bodies hold on to?" Since becoming the Willow Witch, she had become particularly sensitive to the properties of water, whether it was fresh and pure, or stagnant or murky, she could tell without looking as long as the body of water was close enough. But she had yet to feel that there was 'bad water' within her own body.

"All de hard tings' in life, dey leave traces in de water of our bodies, yeah?" Aledia said as though it were common sense. "De sweat when our heart shakes wit' worry, de tears when our loved ones leave us, all dese tings' and more build up de bad water in our bodies. We get rid of some of it when we sweat, when we cry and all de other times, but always, some's left behind. It builds up wit'in us, makes the body heavy and de mind slow."

"Sit in here," she said, gesturing to the wooden benches that lined the walls of the wooden shed. "I'll bring you a basket of hot rocks here soon, and cold, clean water to drink too. You need to keep drinking de cool, good water to sweat out all de bad water in your bodies. If you don't replace de bad water wit de good, you'll fall faint, so don't hold back and drink deep."

To Ashlynn, it sounded strange to attribute the accumulation of stress to a build up of 'bad water' within the body, but she set aside her discomfort at the idea and decided that it wouldn't hurt to take the Ancient Clan at their word when they said that this would help.

It was also the exact opposite of what the Church had taught, that a person should bottle up the accumulations of hurts and fears as the pain they carried within their hearts was proof of their struggle over the years of their life.

In the eyes of the Church, only the Holy Lord of Light could cleanse a person's soul of such pain, but as she'd come to do with many of the things she'd learned from the Church, Ashlynn set this notion aside until she could see what it felt like to live a different way. Her life had enough struggle, ever since she was born with the mark of the witch, there had been plenty of pain, loneliness and fear to struggle against. Even if she let all of it go, there would still be plenty more in the months and years to come.

"Breathe deep of de steam," Aledia said as she rejoined them. "If de steam gets too thin, pour a bit more water on de rocks," she added, gesturing to a small bucket of water with a ladle sitting next to the metal bucket filled with hot rocks that she'd fetched from the fire. "And drink dis down," she added, handing each of them tall cups of cool water, each holding a slice of lemon and a sprig of a fragrant herb.

"Dis smoke," the reptilian woman said as she lit another bundle of herbs and placed them in the center of the room. "It helps to expel de bad waters. Jus' sit back and tink' on de tings' dat made you sad or hurt or mad. Breathe in de smoke and let de bad waters go."

"Thank you," Ashlynn said, taking a seat and sipping on the cool water. "How long do we stay here?"

"I come for you when it's time," Aledia said, bowing deeply as she left. "Take all de time you need."

For a few minutes, the two witches sat awkwardly on opposite sides of the shed, looking at the drifting steam in the small wooden room and adjusting to the heat as their bodies began to glisten with sweat. The sweet-smelling smoke from the burning herbs seemed to coat Ashlynn's throat with each breath, making her tongue feel thick and her thoughts begin to drift. Colors seemed brighter through the steam, and memories that usually stayed carefully locked away began to float to the surface of her mind like leaves drifting on a pond.

A few minutes later, however, she noticed a pained expression on Heila's face as the young witch tried her best to hold back tears.

"It's okay to cry here," Ashlynn said softly. "Isn't that what we're supposed to be doing? Letting the 'bad water' go?"

"But it's not, it's not okay," Heila sniffled. "I, I shouldn't feel this bad just, just because I've been away from home so long. I'll see them again soon," she said, fighting to get the words out around the lump in her throat. "But you, you... it's so unfair, so how can I cry when you don't even..."

"Oh, Heila," Ashlynn said, standing from her bench to rush to Heila's side. The instant she did, she deeply regretted her decision as the world went briefly dark and everything around her felt like it was falling off the edge of the world.

Seeing Ashlynn tumbling, Heila sprang to her feet, trying to catch her lady before she could hurt herself only to suffer the same sensations of darkness, floating and spinning before both women crashed to the floor, nearly crashing head first into each other.

"Heila," Ashlynn said, reaching out to pull the diminutive witch closer to her without bothering to get up off the floor. "Just because I've been holding it in, it doesn't mean you have to. It doesn't hurt more or less, it just hurts," she said, tears streaming down her face.

Visions of her chambers in Blackwell Manor, her personal garden and the handful of tutors who guided her studies danced through her mind. She missed her parents and her sister more than she had words to describe, but there were so many other people that she hadn't given herself space to miss. She said her goodbyes when she left Blackwell County to marry Owain but she couldn't help but wonder what had happened to her tutors since then.

Were they writing to her? Did they think she had turned her back on them while Owain paraded around the imposter, Samira, as though she was still alive? They must think she'd become a different woman after leaving home, a cold, cruel woman who didn't care for the people who had helped her grow and learn as a child.

Tears spilled down her cheeks as she thought of how the life she once knew must be falling apart the longer Owain kept an imposter prisoner and told the world that she was doing well and pregnant with his child.

Part of her wished that she'd written more letters before she left the Vale of Mists. Marcell would have seen them delivered. But she couldn't risk contacting anyone close who might have learned the truth... even sending the letters she had to the guild masters had been a tremendous risk.

Now, as she lay on the floor of room filled with steam and smoke, her body trembled and nothing she did would hold back the tears that spilled from her eyes. Once she started sobbing, Heila joined her and before they knew it, they weren't just crying quietly but pouring out the aches in their hearts... From the pain of losing Andrus so shortly after coming to know him to the frustration of the many misunderstandings Jacques created when he awkwardly tried to protect them, words spilled from their lips one after another just as the sweat and tears poured from their bodies.

After fifteen minutes, Aledia slipped in quietly, refreshing the cool water in their cups before she lit another bundle of mind cleansing herbs and left the two witches to pour out their troubles. Her cousin had told her that these two women carried great burdens and from the glimpse she had of them, she believed it. Now, her only concern was to help them find strength and renewal after they finished purging the bad waters that weighed them down.

If she could do that much for the Mother of Trees and the Willow Witch, then no matter what else she accomplished or didn't accomplish this year, she would be content. No one would ever know, and she would never speak a word of the things she'd heard from the two vulnerable witches but that didn't matter. Just helping them was enough...

### Chapter 330: Taking Root

Ashlynn and Heila spent almost half an hour in the tiny wooden shed, sweating, sobbing, drinking cool water, and doing it all over again until they felt lighter than air, as though they would drift away on a gentle breeze the moment someone opened the door.

"Thank you, my lady," Heila said as she scrubbed the tears from her eyes. "I feel better now."

"I do too," Ashlynn said, lightly stroking the diminutive woman's soft, curly hair. "I don't think I realized how much, just how many things were weighing on me until I let them go..."

"Dat's why we have to chase de bad waters out," Aledia said as she entered the room accompanied by a wave of blessedly cool air. In truth, it was still a very warm midsummer day outside, but the humid heat inside the shed made even the unbearably warm summer feel cool by comparison.

"Don't try to walk now," the reptilian woman cautioned. "Dis here is Corinne, she'll be taking care of Lady Heila," she explained as another woman entered the room carrying fresh robes for the two witches. "Now, your skin is still slick wit' de bad water, so we're gonna scrub it all away, yeah? Leave you nice and clean, fresh as de day you were born into dis world."

As much as Ashlynn wanted to protest that she was capable of walking on her own, the hazy memory of how she'd stumbled and fallen after trying to stand prevented her from making any such claims. Instead, the two women of the Ancient Clan proved that even if they weren't as strong as Jacques, they were more than capable of carrying a pair of witches to the next treatment.

They weren't carried far and before they knew it, they were laid out on a pair of cushions on simple tables overlooking the lake. The cool breeze blowing across the water felt like a welcome balm on their sweat-soaked skin and the sounds of birds overhead blended with the distant sound of wooden windchimes to lull them both to sleep.

"It's all right if you sleep, yeah?" Aledia said as she helped Ashlynn to remove her robe and began to prepare a thick paste of scented oils and coarse sugar to scrub her body with. "Jus' let us do our part while you rest. We'll wake you up when it's time to move again," she promised.

As much as Ashlynn wanted to protest, to stay awake to learn as much of the Ancient Clan's healing treatment as she could, once Aledia's strong hands began to knead her tender muscles as though she were a ball of bread dough, Ashlynn's resistance melted like the scented oils seeping into her skin.

Beside her, Heila's eyes had already drifted closed and a faint trace of drool could be seen on her pert lips before Ashlynn herself succumbed to fatigue that swept over her after the intense experience in the steam room.

When Ashlynn finally woke, she found herself not on the table by the lake but resting on a long padded lounge chair under the shade of a grass umbrella. When she tried to sit up, however, she was startled to realize that she'd been tightly wrapped in a soft blanket that smelled of grassy herbs and honeysuckle.

The blankets weren't uncomfortable, but they bound her so tightly that she could only barely move her hands next to her thighs and turn her head enough to see Heila in a similar cocoon next to her.

"Do you feel rested, Lady Ashlynn?" Aledia asked when she saw the Mother of Trees begin to stir.

"Very," Ashlynn said. "I didn't think it would feel so good to be so warm on a day like this but... I don't think I've ever felt so relaxed.

"Mmmm, me too," Heila said sleepily before letting out a startled cry a moment later when she realized she'd been wrapped in a blanket like an infant and had just about as much freedom of movement as a newborn babe.

"Jus' relax here a spell," Aledia said with a toothy grin. "Corinne is coming soon with some fresh fruit and shrimp to nibble on before we place you in de mud."

The food, when it came, was much like what Ashlynn had seen at the cafes on their way here. Small plates covered with sliced fruit drizzled in a sticky, sour sauce came paired with shrimp no larger than her small finger, lined up on skewers, and grilled over an open flame while being basted with melted butter and herbs.

"Now, dis mud, she's not just de silt from de lake bed," Aledia explained as she led Ashlynn and Heila toward what looked like two shallow pits dug into soft, dark mud. "We've mixed dis up special wit' all of de earth's bounty to refresh and renew you."

"Do we just, lie in the pit?" Heila asked as she nervously prodded the soft, clinging mud with a cloven hoof.

"Oh no," the reptilian woman said. "First, we'll paint your faces and your bodies wit' de mud, and den, cover you in it up to your neck. De earth, she'll nurture you. You're her chosen ones after all," she added with a humble bow. "Dis is just something dat lets normal folks know the slightest whisper of de earth's power helping dem to heal. For you, it will be more."

"Have you done this with witches before? With the Mother of Thorns or her coven?" Ashlynn asked.

"Not me, no, but I learned from my mother and she's served de Mother of Thorns before. Dis is something old, dat goes back to a time before de Briar belonged to de Mother of Thorns, yeah? You can trust dis, or my cousin wouldn't have brought you here."

"It wasn't that I didn't trust," Ashlynn said with a gentle smile. "Only that we wanted to understand, right Heila? It's fine, you can paint us when you're ready," she said, taking a seat on a small bench nearby and holding her chin up to make it easier for Aledia to paint her.

Since they were going to be buried up to their necks in mud, Ashlynn expected that 'painting them' would be a simple application of mud on their skin before they entered the pits to be buried. Instead, she was surprised to find that the two women produced small clay jars of a much paler mud along with delicate brushes and began to paint intricate symbols over their faces and bodies. She was even more surprised when the two women began to sing in an older dialect of Eldritch.

"Deep below where roots entwine,

Let healing earth with flesh combine.

Through clay that holds time's secret art,

Let strength flow back to flesh and heart."

The incantation that the two women used was brief but combined with the ancient glyphs that adorned their skin, Ashlynn felt a tingle ripple across the surface of her skin before it sank deeper, seeming to meld with her flesh and bones. The feeling slowly intensified as more and more glyphs appeared on their skin and Ashlynn began to feel a pulling sensation from deep within her core, as if her body yearned to find its home within the earth.

"Now, it's time," Aledia said, leading Ashlynn to one pit while her companion led Heila to the other. "De earth, she'll welcome you home. Don't resist her call and let her nurture you de way she nurtures any tree."

Of all the things that Ashlynn expected when she was told that she was the Mother of Trees, she never expected that one day, she would plant herself in the earth like a tree. When she did, however, rather

than feel crushed or suffocated by the increasing weight of earth upon her body, she felt like she'd returned to the most comfortable, safest space of her childhood.

Leaning back into the soft, cool mud, Ashlynn repeated the incantation the women of the Ancient Clan had used, allowing her power to gather within her chest before it flowed out into the earth around her.

Her energy twisted and flowed, sinking deeper and deeper into the earth as it went. Dimly, she could feel tendrils of her energy brushing up against Heila's as the other witch followed her example, but neither of them allowed their 'roots' to become entangled with each other. It was enough to know that they weren't alone on this journey and to feel each other's presence, but both of them were far more absorbed by the feelings that began to flow into them from their mystic 'roots.'

With her eyes closed, Ashlynn began to feel the stout cypress trees that dotted the shore before her senses extended further, encompassing all the trees within Crystal Lake City and beyond. If she listened, she could hear the wind rustling through the leaves of trees so far away that she couldn't possibly see them, and she could feel the warm sun on the leaves of the vast canopy that stretched for leagues in every direction.

As her mind stretched further and further from where she lay, she began to hear a different sort of sound. It was quiet at first, and rhythmic, like the precise beat of a drummer keeping time when soldiers marched or the steady clatter of a carriage rolling across a well paved road.

"Well, young one," a soft, weathered voice said in a tone little louder than a whisper. "It seems someone has finally inherited my curse," the woman's ghostly voice said. But what shocked Ashlynn almost as much as the voice itself was the language it spoke. After spending so much time among the Eldritch, she'd become fairly comfortable with the language but this voice, a voice that carried a trace of power that felt hauntingly similar to her own, had spoken in the common tongue of the Kingdom of Gaal!