

The Vampire 541

Chapter 541: Not Worth Fixing

The tension in Baron Hanrahan's Great Hall was so thick and oppressive that the people seated at the lower tables barely dared to make noise as they ate their meals. Some of them were business owners, important people by local standards, while others held positions of status among the servants in Ian Hanrahan's household.

But when Guild Master Isabell responded to the portly baron's mocking comments with biting retorts of her own, everyone in the hall who wasn't sitting at the High Table ducked their heads low and did their best to stifle any untoward laughter that threatened to spill past their lips. Wealthy they might be, or important to the functioning of the baron's estate, but no one at the lower tables thought themselves powerful enough to speak as candidly as this visiting engineer had!

"Since you want to hear my impressions, then let me make several things clear to you," Isabell began as she gestured for one of the servants to refill her wine goblet. "I'll drink whatever his lordship is drinking," she said when she saw the servant reaching for a pitcher of watered-down wine. "Perhaps the women of the frontier have weak constitutions with no stomach for alcohol, but I haven't drunk watered wine since I was a girl half of Lady Jocelynn's age."

"Are women in Blackwell County truly so bold?" Baron Hanrahan said with a snort. "Women of the frontier know to defend their virtue from the excesses of strong drink," he said as he glowered at the arrogant engineer. "Or perhaps women where you come from have looser morals and looser legs that can accommodate strong drink."

"Watch your words, my Lord Baron," Owain said, clutching the hilt of the knife in his hand and pointing sharply at the fat oaf who had just insulted his Jocelynn along with Isabell. "Unless you think that your words are appropriate for Lady Jocelynn?"

"What? No!" the baron stammered, sweat breaking out on his brow. "I would never include your lady wife or your sister-in-law in such a statement. The virtue of the Blackwell sisters is so well known that it's spoken of in the highest of places," he said, quickly blotting the sweat from his brow as he looked to other guests at the table for support.

"If this is how you treat your women, it's no wonder your town is shabby with its infrastructure in shambles," Isabell said, pointing at her goblet and giving the servant a stern look until the man changed out the watered wine for something more suitable. "Tiernan, I'm not going to be able to enjoy my meal

if I have to give a lecture on their foundations. Could you explain to them what would happen if you tried to exploit the wealth of Airgead Mountain with the Town of Hanrahan in the shape that it's in?"

"Try the turkey," Master Tiernan said, using exquisite table manners that seemed at odds with his powerful frame and calloused hands as he set down his utensils and gently blotted away the gravy that clung to the corners of his lips. "It's under spiced, but this far from a port, you can't expect them to have much from across the sea. Still, it's tender and it was prepared with considerably better care than the roads of this town," he said with a despairing shake of his shaved head.

Inwardly, the powerful Master of the Iron Mongers' Guild was already to flip over the heavy oak table and storm out of the baron's great hall for the way the haughty lord was treating Isabell. Clearly, the man had some kind of ax to grind with the woman who led the coalition of guild masters negotiating with Owan and his father, Bors, to fund the upcoming war against the demons, but he had no idea what had happened to draw the fat baron's ire.

He and Isabell had only just arrived in Hanrahan Barony, and this was their first time meeting Baron Ian Hanrahan and his son Bastian. It should have been a pleasant meeting or at least a neutral one, but instead it felt like they had sat across the dinner table from their most bitter rivals. But, since the other party clearly had no intention of respecting the Guild Masters, Tiernan had no intention of holding back in his words as he described the problems he saw.

"I don't know how the demon tribe who lived here before chose to live their lives," Tiernan started. "But it's clear that they situated their settlement atop the hill instead of down in the valley. The old road built by demons is a thousand times better than the ones you've built since coming here, but it doesn't actually connect directly to the fortified town here. So, anything that needs to be shipped by the good road you inherited from the demons needs to first suffer for the nightmares you call roads in this town."

"Roads are simple things to repair," Bastian said from beside his father. "Once we claim victory over the demons of Airgead Mountain, a single summer of men laying stones and filling potholes will have them in fine shape to transport the wealth of the mountain to Lothian City or wherever it can fetch the best price."

"Ha," Tiernan snorted, shaking his head at the young lord's ignorance. "Fool. The wealth of Airgead Mountain is trapped in stone. It weighs tons and even if we smelt it on the mountain's slopes, we'll still have ton after ton of iron, copper, gold, and precious stones to ship to places where the raw materials will be refined into useful things to trade. Put that many tons of material in wagons and cart it over a shoddy, quickly-patched road and watch your repairs crumble away in a single season."

"But isn't this why we've invited you and your fellow masters to settle out here in the first place?"

Owain offered helpfully as his hand caressed Jocelynn's soft thigh under the table. Just as his beautiful darling had suggested, these masters were proud, arrogant, and could easily be led by the nose when their professional reputations were placed on the line. All he had to do was give them a little push...

"Baron Hanrahan's men might only be able to handle the basics of smelting and refining on Airgead Mountain," Owain added. "But with a Master Iron Monger here, and with your fellow masters to turn that raw iron into weapons and armor of high-quality steel, the Hanrahan Barony won't need to transport bulk materials. Instead, they'll ship the finest of finished goods across the frontier."

"Why bother," Isabell said in between bites of the succulent turkey. Tiernan was right that it was under-spiced, but as long as she slathered enough of the rich gravy on it, it was actually fairly enjoyable. "This is a town that's not worth fixing," she said, shaking her head.

"It would almost be better to tear down everything except the walls and the fortress and start over. Then you could lay in proper drains to handle the sewage in the streets, rebuild homes atop solid foundations and purge the town of molding thatch that all but begs for sickness and death each rainy season," she said, rattling off a list of problems that were immediately apparent to someone who had traveled as much of the world as she had.

"But you have too many people who have made their lives here to do such a heartless thing," the steel-haired engineer said, with a heavy sigh, as though she were a physician telling the family of a patient that they couldn't be saved.

"So all you can do is pour everything you have into fixing the problems for the next ten to twenty years," Isabell said flatly. "By the time young Bastian here is ready to pass on the Barony to his heir, it might actually be something to have some pride in... but before that, the only thing that gives the Town of Hanrahan any value is the position of the land it sits on."

Chapter 542: Men of Arms and Action

Around the table, several people bristled at Isabell's cold pronouncement that their town had no value. Even the people at the lower tables, who had been cowed into silence by the barbed exchange between the engineer and their liege lord, began to mutter darkly about this arrogant woman who felt that their homes and businesses should be torn down.

So long as it was a matter of trading insults between an outsider and their lord, the common people would hold their tongues. Even if some of them happened to share Isabell's dim opinion of Baron Hanrahan, none of them would dare to speak in support of her or laugh at their lord's expense. After all, no one wanted to risk incurring their lord's wrath over something so petty.

But when she expanded her insults to encompass their homes, all but calling it dirty and squalid in her scathing critique, that was a different matter entirely, and many at the lower tables turned eagerly to their lord, waiting to see him put the arrogant engineer in her place.

"What, just because the roads are in rough shape and the buildings are a bit old?" Baron Hanrahan said with a snort. "Typical of a woman. You give up at the first sign of trouble and look for something better to try instead. Maybe we should replace our thatch with slate? Or tiles? Should we paint our new roofs red this year and blue the next?" Baron Hanrahan snorted.

"You'll never be happy with it, no matter what hard-working men give you," the baron sneered. "You just whine and complain and demand something newer, shinier, and more expensive than your husband will have to mortgage his soul for, just so you can grow bored of it in a few years before you move on again."

"After all," he said, pointing at her with a thick, sausage-like finger. "Isn't that why you're trying so hard to buy your way into the aristocracy out here in the frontier? It was too hard for you to make something of yourself back home, so you've come running out here where you think it will be easier."

"My Lord Baron," Jocelynn said, placing a hand on Owain's thigh to give him a reassuring squeeze under the table as she leaned forward to interject in the conversation. Her seafoam eyes widened with practiced innocence as she attempted to place herself in a position to play a somewhat naive voice of reason. "Perhaps you're being unfair to Master Isabell and Master Tiernan. They've come all this way at brother-in-law's request, after all, and we all want to strengthen the march for Lord Bors."

Turning toward the guild masters with a thoughtful expression, she paused for a moment, as if choosing her words carefully to find a way to act as a bridge between her aristocratic peers and the powerful commoners from her hometown.

"I know it must be something of an adjustment for you both compared to Blackwell County," she said diplomatically. "I've only been here for a few months and I'm still adjusting myself. Out here, on the frontier, men of arms and action, knights and lords like Baron Hanrahan hold absolute sway. The merchant associations out here don't approach the power and prestige held by the guilds back home."

"Your point, Lady Jocelynn?" Isabell asked cautiously, and doing her best to blunt the sharp tongue she'd allowed to have free rein on the frontier noblemen who looked down their noses at her. It was obvious that Lady Ashlynn's young sister was attempting to cool the temperature of the discussions, but something about her approach felt... off in a way that Isabell couldn't quite put a finger on.

"The frontier offers different challenges," Jocelynn explained, her voice taking on a wistful tone as if she were musing aloud rather than following a carefully rehearsed script. "But also different opportunities. In Blackwell, everything of value has been claimed for generations. Here..." she said, allowing her words to trail off, letting the people gathered at the high table fill in the blank themselves.

"The problem is that, in order to win over men of arms and action in the frontier, men like Lord Owain and Baron Hanrahan," the golden-haired young lady said. "It requires achievements made on the field of battle. I think that's the real source of friction here," she said, turning her innocent-looking seafoam eyes to regard the portly baron.

Jocelynn knew that Baron Hanrahan's days as a fighting man were long behind him. The War of Inches had been fought before Jocelynn was even born, but by all accounts, even when the war had been fought just outside his barony, Ian Hanrahan had functioned more as an administrator of a staging ground than a soldier on the front lines. What glory had been won in that war had been earned by the knights who were his vassals and other men who followed Bors Lothian's banner as he raided Airgead Mountain for its wealth.

But to hear Jocelynn speak of him now, Ian Hanrahan had been every bit as brave and bold in his glory days as Owain Lothian was now. It was pure fiction, of course, but propping him up as a warrior and hero in the brutal lands of the frontier gave the baron an edge that she was certain he could exploit now that she had given him the opportunity.

"Exactly, exactly so!" Baron Hanrahan said, thumping the heavy banquet table with a fleshy palm. "The knights under my command are all battle-tested men. Men who have spilled blood and risked their lives to defend their homes and purge the lands around us of wicked demons. They are worthy to be called knights!"

"But you," the portly baron said, shaking a thick, sausage-like finger at the sharp-tongued engineer. "You have never once stood on the field of battle. You know nothing of war and a man's courage. So how can I respect you as a knight when all you intend to do is buy your title?"

Sitting beside Owain, Jocelynn did her best to keep her features calm and neutral, even as she wanted to stand to applaud the baron for playing his role so well. Of course, there would be opportunities to fight in the coming war and gain martial glory, but Master Isabell could only do that if she accepted lands and a position that would place her in the midst of the conflict that was sure to come to Airgead Mountain the following year.

The bait was right there, and the trap was nearly perfectly set, all she had to do was suggest...

"I know nothing of war?" Isabell said, leaning back in her chair and laughing so loudly that it startled Jocelynn out of her thoughts. "You might be able to say that about my good friend here," she said, placing a hand briefly on Tiernan's shoulder before her eyes grew cold and she directed a piercing stare at Ian Hanrahan that made him feel as though the woman in silver spectacles had transformed into a great owl eyeing her next meal.

"But if you think I know nothing of war," Isabell said coldly. "Then I'm afraid you don't know me at all."

Chapter 543: Mockery and Doubt

"But if you think I know nothing of war, then I'm afraid you don't know me at all."

Isabell's words were delivered as a cold provocation, aimed directly at the notion that she had less right to respect and status in the frontier because she wasn't a knight or even a common soldier who had fought against the demons. Anyone who heard her frigid tone should have given pause before pushing further, but neither Baron Hanrahan nor his son Bastian had any intention of paying her the slightest bit of respect.

"I'm sure that your husband has told many stories to you and your children," Bastian said, laughing heartily and shaking his head. "About his valiant battles against... what is it that they still have in Blackwell County? Stunted Rat Demons? I'm told that they grow as large as cats and create great chaos when they gnaw on ropes," he said, nodding sagely with a furrowed brow as if these 'stunted rat demons' were truly a grave threat before his mock concern crumbled in another wave of laughter.

Immediately, the hall broke into laughter as the people at the low tables finally let loose. While their future lord wasn't known for his acts of bravery fighting against the devious and stealthy cat demons, he still wore a tunic trimmed with the fur of a demon he'd slain with his own sword and that was more than any soft, sheltered merchant from the safe lands to the east could say!

Not everyone at the high table, however, felt comfortable joining in the laughter and after a few moments of intense embarrassment, Hugo Hanrahan felt compelled to speak up, before things could become worse than they already are.

"Brother," Owain's hawk-nosed Steward said. "I think you misunderstand, Master Isabell. If you had visited Blackwell County with Lord Owain and I, you would have learned that..."

"Oh, shut up, bastard," Bastian sneered. "You don't have to run and hide behind every woman's skirts like they're your mother. At some point, brother, you have to become a man worthy of being called a knight and speak the truth, even when it's something a soft-hearted woman doesn't want to hear!"

Sitting across the table, Isabell and Tiernan shared a brief look with eyes that flicked from Bastian to the worn-down figure of Hugo at the end of the table. It seemed as though Owain and Sir Rian were only the latest in a long line of people to shove down the scholarly knight and his foundations in Hanrahan Barony were even weaker than they'd initially expected.

In negotiations, Hugo Hanrahan had never impressed either guild master with his insightfulness or ability to generate useful solutions to points of contention, but he had impressed both of them with his keen mind for organizing facts and figures.

More importantly, as Lord Owain's Steward, he had access to an incredible amount of useful information, he just needed someone to support him enough to put his talents to use. And, since the lords all seemed determined to dismiss him because of his lack of fighting prowess, Isabell and Tiernan saw an opportunity to step into the gap his current superiors had created by offering him a bit of much-needed support.

"But, Brother," Hugo protested, refusing to back down. "You should know that..."

"Sir Hugo," Isabell interrupted, holding up a hand in a clear sign that she didn't want his support. "I can speak for myself. You don't need to defend me here, though I appreciate your kind intentions," she added, offering him the same kind of gentle smile she'd given her children countless times over the years when they chose to do the right thing, even if it wasn't the best thing for them.

"Relax, lad," Master Tiernan told the flustered knight, folding his powerful arms across his broad chest and leaning back in his chair with an anticipatory smile on his face. "All this time, people keep coming up with nonsense about why she speaks for the guild masters in the frontier. You think we don't know that you lot value a person based on their achievements in battle?" he said with a snort.

"Master Sebastian of the Wayfinders is an old dog of the salty seas, and his cutlass has spilled enough pirate blood to dye the sails of his ship red before he retired," Tiernan said with a light laugh. "But the guilds didn't send him here to speak for us. They sent her," he said, pointing a thick finger at the calmly composed engineer. "If you think that was an accident, then you're greater fools than we took you for in the beginning."

"You're not telling me that this slip of a woman has actually stood on the battlefield," Baron Hanrahan said incredulously as he looked at the slender woman in her plain black dress who looked like little more than a tutor he might have hired for a young child. "If her husband is some mighty warrior who brought her along to tend his needs in the tents at night, that hardly counts as 'knowing something of war.'"

"My husband is a gentle man," Isabell said, removing her silver-rimmed spectacles and tucking them into the collar of her high-necked dress. "I met him in the court of the Emerald King in the old countries," she said as a wistful look flickered across her steely eyes before they hardened again. "But he always said that a single visit to the battlefield was enough to fill a poet's heart with endless sorrow for the tragedy of war, and never-ending admiration for those with the courage to march to it."

"Lord Hanrahan," Jocelynn interrupted politely. "You may not be aware, but Master Isabell's husband, Casquas, is a well-known poet who is very popular among the noble families of Blackwell County. He even wrote a piece that he read for my coming of age celebration last year," she said, puffing her chest up in pride as a faint smile formed on her lips, as if she was recalling the poem that Casquas had written just for her.

Coming from her soft, pink lips, the words sounded like praise but Jocelynn knew full well what these rough men of the frontier would think of a man who earned his keep writing flower sonnets that could make crowds of young noblewomen swoon.

As expected, the audience burst into laughter, and none laughed louder than Baron Ian Hanrahan and his son Bastian. Owain, his personal guard Sir Rian, and Hugo Hanrahan, however, all held their tongues, with Lord Owain giving Master Isabell a carefully appraising look.

He'd heard time and time again during his visit that Master Isabell understood war better than any of the other Guild Masters, though they were tight-lipped about what they meant. The most he could get from any of the infuriating merchants was that she'd spent a number of years touring the old countries, attending academies and universities where she studied her trade, bringing back many useful innovations when she finally returned to Blackwell County alongside her husband.

But from the way the master engineer was speaking today, there was something more at play than simple book learning, and when he looked in her steely eyes, the look he saw there matched one he'd seen all too many times from some of his father's most seasoned knights. It should be impossible for a woman to possess eyes like that and yet...

Under the table, Owain's fingers curled into a tight fist, and his brows furrowed as he focused on the woman who looked less and less like a quiet, unassuming school teacher by the second. Who was this woman really? And what secrets had she been hiding?

Chapter 544: Engineer of Destruction

"My lord Hanrahan," Isabell said calmly as she seized control of the conversation, ignoring the laughter around her to direct a sharp, hardened gaze at the portly baron. "Do you know what the greatest difference between wars fought in the old countries and wars fought against the demons is?" she asked calmly.

"Men can be reasoned with and forced to surrender," the portly baron said instantly, waving a hand as if he could shoo away her question like a distracting fly. Clearly the woman intended to claim some sort of knowledge about wars that were irrelevant to the struggle against powerful demons and he had no intention of allowing her to build momentum around that notion.

"When men squabble, all you have to do is scare your opponents into surrender and victory is yours. Men will back down if you press them hard. They'll yield territory, hand over treasures, even surrender their daughters to secure a peace instead of fighting an expensive war that ravages their domain for little gain. Demons though," he said, wagging a thick, sausage-like finger at her as though he were explaining things to a small child. "Demons fight to the death."

"Humans will fight to the death whenever they believe in their lord and their cause," Isabell corrected. "Though perhaps my lord baron has never encountered men who would show their lord the kind of fanatical loyalty that would send them charging toward the pikes and spears of their enemy," she said, casting a disdainful look over her shoulder at the collection of sycophants who seemed to have come to this banquet for no other reason than to prop up and praise their pathetic excuse for a liege lord.

"No, my lord," Isabell continued. "What I was referring to is the holy edict that prevents the Church from taking sides in a conflict between lords and kingdoms of the old world. Unless some lord or king has transgressed against the Church greatly enough to be declared a heretic and an enemy of the Church, wars in the old countries never benefit from the overwhelming power or the healing grace of the Church's miracle workers."

"It sounds like those wars must be very... tame," Baron Hanrahan said dismissively as he tried to imagine what it would be like to fight an enemy who couldn't wield flesh rending sorcery or to charge that enemy without Inquisitors in their ranks, calling down holy fire to pin down the enemy while the knights charged. When he stripped away the greatest dangers on the battlefields of the frontier, the wars he imagined taking place felt... tame. "Perhaps in the old countries, wars are more like tournaments, fought for sport. Especially if they've allowed your poet husband to bring his wife along to spectate."

"Who said I was spectating?" Isabell said as she swirled wine in her goblet and leaned back in her chair. "Here, if you want to destroy a demon fortress, tear down its walls and trample its people, you turn to the Church and they pray to the Holy Lord of Light to smite your enemies for you. There, they turn to engineers to crush their enemies."

"You're saying that you can take the place of an Inquisitor?" Sir Rian asked incredulously from his position near the end of the table. He'd fought side by side with Inquisitor Diarmuid in Lord Owain's battle against the flat tailed demon's village and he'd seen first hand the might of the Inquisition.

By the time they reached the village, even though the devious demons had left barricades and traps in their wake when they fled, nothing could resist the might of the Church's Holy Flame. In the end, nothing had been left of the village but a smoldering ruin.

"I'm saying that against a town like this one," Isabell said, draining her goblet in a single swallow and gesturing for a servant to refill it. "I would only need twenty men and five days to reduce it to a pile of smoldering rubble."

"Preposterous!" Baron Hanrahan roared. "The walls of this town have stood for close to one hundred years! No demon assault has ever breached them, and no demon has ever managed to scale them. You're telling me that you and twenty men could do what an entire demon horde failed to do in my grandfather's era?"

Spittle flew from the furious baron's lips as he spoke, and his face had taken on a reddish hue of rage. He'd agreed to provoke the overly proud merchants so that Lord Owain could draw them into a position from which they'd be forced to accept a chance to 'prove' their capabilities, but he'd never imagined that these money grubbing guild masters would be so shameless as to claim to be more powerful than the demons his family had guarded against for generations!

Now, all thoughts of Lord Owain's careful instructions fled from his mind as he slammed a fleshy palm on the table while berating the woman who seemed to think of herself as the chosen one of the Holy Lord of Light, or at least the most powerful woman in the history of the Kingdom of Gaal!

"This isn't Blackwell County," Barnon Hanrahan snarled. "Out here, a person has to be responsible for their words. Idle boasting costs lives," he said, gesturing at the people sitting at the lower tables. "I wouldn't trust a braggart to protect my people, much less bestow them with the honorable title of 'knight.'"

"Speaking nonsense like this," he said, turning to face Owain. "My Lord, please take this as a protest from your loyal vassal. This woman is unworthy of the title she's attempting to buy, and this man with her is likely unworthy as well. Please reconsider before they usher in a tragedy that will claim the lives of many innocent people and soldiers."

"Why don't you let Master Isabell speak?" Tiernan said, glowering at the blustering baron. "Can it be that my lord is afraid to hear what she has to say?"

"I want to hear," Owain said, leaning forward and gesturing for Baron Hanrahan to hold his tongue. "Master Isabell, you speak of destroying a town like this as though it's a common thing in the old countries, but I find that hard to believe. Please help fill the gaps in my knowledge," he said with a charming, well-practiced smile.

"How would you destroy the Town of Hanrahan?" Owain asked pointedly. "And can you tell us of a time when you've done such a thing?"

"I already told you that this town should be torn down and rebuilt to remove the thatched roofs," Isabell began. "It should be done for the good of the people living here, to keep the damp out, and to prevent sicknesses that come from rot that sets in when the thatch isn't maintained. Lothian March is so rainy, foggy, and damp that I doubt their roofs ever dry properly except during the summer."

"But to a person like me, all those piles of thatch with buildings clustered so haphazardly together and streets that meander every which way," she said, shaking her head as she recalled the way the city had been laid out. "I wouldn't even need to breach your walls to burn the town to the ground. In fact, those walls that you're so proud of would become my best tool to see to it that you and all of your brave soldiers die the worst deaths imaginable."

All around her, the Great Hall had gone completely silent. Forks and knives stilled in people's hands as everyone stared at the steel-haired woman sitting opposite Baron Hanrahan with a sense of growing dread.

"The Town of Hanrahan isn't that different from Umwelt City in the Emerald Kingdom," she began. As she spoke, her gray eyes grew distant, and her gaze drifted away from the people sitting around the table as she thought back to a different time and what felt like a life that barely belonged to her. She'd been a different person then, one who had been willing to do whatever it took to end the civil war that gripped the kingdom where she'd met the man who stole her heart...

"You have to understand," she explained as her mind became lost in her memories. "Civil wars are terrible things that turn father against son, husband against wife, and in the Emerald Kingdom, it turned the young king against his uncle..."

Chapter 545: Isabell's War (Part One)

Twenty years ago, the Isabel who stood atop a ridgeline overlooking Umwelt City was even more severe than the one who sat across the table from Baron Hanrahan. Her long, raven black hair whipped about her in the wind and the fitted black dress she wore had been cut to resemble the tunics of the Emerald King's soldiers. Only the slender emerald green and silver sash across her modest bust and the ceremonial sword at her waist gave any color to the Engineer of Destruction as she surveyed the city below her.

Umwelt City had a great deal in common with the Town of Hanrahan. A few thousand people living simple lives, packed into a walled town that resembled a rectangle someone had shorted on one side. Neither settlement felt well planned and both of them had opted for a location in the lowlands where water was easier to obtain rather than a more defensible position on one of the many ridges or hilltops in the region.

The biggest difference was that Umwelt City had been there for far longer, existing in a quiet and forgotten corner of the Emerald Kingdom in the shadow of vast mountains. For the people of Umwelt City, the fact that they were part of the Emerald Kingdom only mattered twice a year, once when the tax

collector arrived from the royal capital, and a second time when the entire kingdom celebrated the ruling monarch's Reign Day.

All that changed when the old king passed and his younger brother Pasqual attempted to claim the throne instead of allowing it to pass to his fifteen year old son, Marius. Pasqual's coup might have succeeded if he'd managed to hold on to the Royal Capital. Seizing the Royal Palace and the city while young Marius was away at the Emerald Academy should have been a stroke of genius that carried him to an easy victory once his forces captured the crown prince.

Unfortunately for Pasqual, Marius was a charismatic young man who had built a loyal following among the future lords and even the commoner scholars who studied at the Emerald Academy... Commoner scholars who included a foreigner from across the sea who had come to the Emerald Kingdom to study the system of tunnels that kept the city's cisterns full and carried sewage away from the ever-growing Royal Capital.

If not for her help in guiding Marius's band of loyalists through tunnels under the palace that few were aware of and even fewer fully understood, the crown prince's counterattack wouldn't have been nearly as effective, but when Pasqual fled the royal capital to build a coalition among the outlying lords in the countryside, it brought years of bitter war to every forgotten corner of the kingdom, including the City of Umwelt.

"Do you think they'll surrender?" Isabell asked the knight standing next to her overlooking the city. Sir Rafael Soteras and his 'Winged Lances', a company of nearly two dozen light cavalry men, had been tasked with Isabell's security for much of the war and the two had long become comfortable with each other despite the gap in official station.

"Baron Balleste is a stubborn man," Rafael said, shaking his head. "All he cares about is that Duke Grandee Pasqual has promised positions on the ruling council to every lord who supports him, regardless of rank, and a ten year exemption on the taxes on wheat and wool." In the end, it had been promises of wealth and power that had brought dissatisfied country lords under Pasqual's banner in droves, even though the kingdom would come close to bankrupting itself to keep all of his promises.

"That, and I don't think he believes that you can do what we claim," the armored knight added, giving the slender woman an appraising look. Year after year, he'd watched the light fade from her gray eyes as she cracked fortresses like eggs.

He hadn't been present the first time she walked through the devastated ruins of one of Pasqual's strongholds, but men who had been present said that she fell to her knees and wept at the sight of twisted and mangled bodies buried beneath the rubble, many belonging to ordinary servants and common people. Years later, he knew that she wept still, the only difference was that the tears would come in the night, long after the battle ended when she was alone in her tent.

"How many soldiers does Baron Balleste have under his command?" Isabell inquired as she gazed at the small, bustling city. They might be surrounded by five thousand men raised by Count Faura and marching under his majesty's banner, but the people of Umwelt still went about their daily business, trading vegetables from their small gardens or drinking at alehouses to pass the time until the siege ended and they could return to their farms. Only, if things went badly, it was unlikely any of them would ever return to those farms.

"Two hundred of his own men," Rafael said. "Not enough to be a threat. But Sir Alba and Sir Enric managed to bring over close to five hundred survivors from the battle of Abasqe, including more than a hundred horses. There's no way we can leave such a powerful force to nibble at our flanks while we march on to Hosque."

"I know," Isabell said bitterly, closing her eyes as she imagined how many common folk would die because a few foolish nobles refused to surrender and instead used the common folk as shields.

"When this is over, his majesty should require that every lord and knight attend the Emerald Academy before they are allowed to inherit their titles and soldiers," Isabell said, trying to distract herself from the horror that was about to unfold. "It would prevent these ignorant country lords from leaving their people to languish in squalor and poverty like this. And maybe they would learn that some things aren't worth dying for."

"These are simple country folk, Isabell," Rafael reminded her. "Even the nobles and their knights out here aren't that far removed from the farmers and shepherds they rule over. They are content with their ways," he said with a hint of longing in his voice, as though he yearned for a life like the one lived by these country lords. "Some people prefer a simple life, free from the worries found in your books and libraries."

"They can only live in ignorance until the world comes knocking at their door," Isabell said with a heavy sigh as she spotted a messenger racing up the hill toward her position. Grandee Count Faura had given Baron Balleste until the sun reached the height of its journey across the sky to surrender. The time had come and gone by more than an hour and for a time, Isabell had allowed herself to hope that the Baron would see sense. Unfortunately, it seemed her hopes were doomed to disappointment... again.

"Miss Isabell," the messenger said as he reigned in his horse. "His Grace, Grandee Count Faura asks you to begin your bombardment as soon as the towers begin to roll and he asks how long you will need to find the range."

"Tell him to light the towers as soon as they've all reached the gates," Isabell said as she turned to face the long row of siege weapons her company of craftsman had spent the past five days constructing on the ridge line. "I'll use the smoke from the fires to judge the wind. Once I can see the wind in the valley and the wind on the ridge, it shouldn't take more than ten minutes to find the range and begin the bombardment."

Five minutes for the messenger to return to the camp below, Isabell thought. Another five minutes to relay orders and send three towers rolling along the country roads that led to each of three gates in the wall surrounding Umwelt City. Ten minutes for the towers to roll into position and another five minutes for the men hiding within the towers to set the fires that would make it impossible for anyone to flee the city when her siege weapons began to rain down death from above.

Half an hour. The people below had half an hour to savor the last moments of their lives before Isabell began to erase the city of Umwelt from the map.

Chapter 546: Isabell's War (Part Two)

On the valley floor, three quickly built towers began to roll slowly and inexorably toward the gates of Umwelt City. Constructing them was one of the first steps in breaking a walled town, and Isabell had refined their design again and again over the course of the civil war.

Convention held that siege towers should be heavy, ponderous weapons that were sturdy enough to allow men to climb safely within the tower before emerging from a ramp at the top, allowing them to storm the walls and clear them of defending soldiers. The towers had to be sturdy enough not to collapse under their own weight while they rolled ponderously forward, and the sides of the towers had to be thick enough to offer protection from the siege weapons of the opposing side.

Isabell's towers, however, were nothing like the towers used to break most fortresses. She never intended for men to climb her towers to engage in bloody battle on the narrow walkway atop the city walls. Neither did she intend for her towers to endure the withering fire of powerful siege weapons. The country lords under Grandee Duke Pasqual's command had no engineers capable of constructing powerful and accurate siege weapons, and even if they possessed such weapons, they would struggle to bring them to bear against her fast-moving towers.

Isabell's towers were built on wooden frames with walls made of oil-soaked canvas before they were stuffed with straw. The result was a tower that, while still slow and ponderous compared to a soldier on foot or a man on horseback, moved with twice the speed of a conventional siege tower.

The men who pushed the towers into position would light the straw ablaze as soon as they'd anchored the tower to the enemy's gates, spilling buckets of oil in the process and creating a conflagration that would prevent anyone from escaping the city once her bombardment from the ridge began.

Of course, as things within the walls grew worse, she was certain that some brave souls would attempt to break through the inferno... There were always a few who did, but the number who succeeded was always very low.

Seeing the towers beginning to roll in the valley below, Isabell turned away from Sir Rafael, taking her position next to a machine that resembled a giant crossbow. Like the siege towers, it had only been constructed when the army reached the City of Umwelt, though unlike the siege towers, some of the metal parts of each of the ten ballistae were carefully removed from their wooden frames each time Isabell brought her company of craftsmen to a new city.

The heavy ash timbers that formed the frames and limbs of the weapons were far too cumbersome to transport, but in order to perform the role Isabell had given to these mighty weapons, certain parts couldn't be crafted from wood.

Kneeling beside each of the powerful siege weapons, well-trained soldiers knelt in prayer, many of them pleading that the Holy Lord of Light forgive them for the indiscriminate destruction they were about to rain down on a city full of innocent people. Isabell left them to their prayers but she had stopped praying to the Holy Lord of Light long ago. After too many days like the one she was about to begin, she struggled to see anything holy or purifying about fire, no matter what the priests said about the mercy offered in the next life to the people who were consumed by flames in this one.

"Begin heating the shot," Isabell commanded as she retrieved her sextant and inspected the flags drifting lazily on the faint breeze. "Wind on the ridge is slow from the east," she called out, noting that the flag was only barely unfurled in the breeze. "Ranging shots will begin in fifteen minutes. Crank balastae by five full turns to start and be ready to quarter crank once we find the range," she rattled off.

In brick furnaces behind her, a team of men began to work at huge bellows while another team of men loaded canisters filled with round balls of iron into the furnaces, heating them until they glowed a dark, cherry red. By the time they were ready to be used, they would glow and even brighter yellow but Isabell wouldn't waste heated shot until she had properly found the range.

Conventional wisdom said that weapons like the ballistae along the ridge and the more powerful trebuchet behind them could only fling projectiles for a thousand paces at most, but Isabell had learned long ago that smaller, lighter projectiles could fly much further if they didn't have to impact with lethal force when they arrived at their target.

The experiment had started with the notion of raining down triangular-shaped iron spikes that would rain across cavalry's line of advance, injuring horses when they rode across the quickly deployed trap and breaking their charge.

The idea turned out to be impractical. It was impossible to deploy enough of the spikes quickly enough to break a charge. Without enough density, too few of the sharp traps wasted themselves, and even if a horse did step on one, if the ground was too soft, then the trap was shoved down into the soil instead of causing any damage to the horse or its rider.

It did, however, teach Isabell about the power of working with canisters filled with smaller pieces of iron. It had taken months of experiments to refine that idea into a weapon suitable to use against a town under siege, but in the end, Isabell had produced a terror like no other.

Finally, the lumbering towers reached their position by the city gates and began to smoke and smolder, revealing that the wind in the valley was even calmer than it was on the ridge. That revelation set Isabell's mind in motion as she made her final calculations before passing orders to the men working on the ballista next to her.

"Load cold shot for range finding and fire," she commanded coldly. Moments later, a mighty -THUMP-sounded beside her as the crew struck the release with a wooden mallet, releasing the tension held in the arms of the ballista and hurling a canister's worth of iron shot toward the unsuspecting town. The 'cold' iron shot, solid balls of cast iron roughly the size of a hen's egg, had been painted bright red to make them easier to track as they soared through the air before raining down uselessly on the bare earth outside the city walls.

"Increase the elevation by three turns of the screw," Isabell commanded without taking her eyes off the city in the valley. "Crank the arms to five plus one-half turns. Load the cold and fire again."

Her commands were just as cold as the painted iron she flung, and her mind was filled with even colder math as she calculated the range. Power, angle, wind, each of these variables and others were precisely calculated and adjusted as she 'walked' her bombardment closer and closer to her targets until, at last, a rain of iron shot fell onto the thatched roofs beyond the city walls.

"All crews," she said, closing her eyes as she passed her orders, preparing herself to unleash what may have been the most unholy fire ever created by man. "Increase elevation by six turns of the screw, crank the arms six times plus one quarter turn. Bring the hot shot and fire as soon as you're loaded."

Standing next to her, Sir Rafael clutched his hand into a tight fist over his heart, as if he was trying to shield it from what was about to happen.

"May the Holy Lord of Light have mercy on their souls," he said solemnly. "And may these flames light their way to the Heavenly Shores in the west."

What happened next was something that no one who witnessed it would ever forget. Moving with the precision of soldiers on the march, the ballistae under Isabell's command began to fire glowing yellow shot, raining it down on Umwelt City like a rain of the sun's burning tears. Beside her, the steady - THUMP- -THUMP- -THUMP- of ballistae releasing their deadly munitions filled the air like a drummer beating the time of a funeral march.

It took more than ten minutes of sustained bombardment for the first buildings to catch fire, but Isabell's men were prepared to sustain this bombardment for hours. Of course, the ballistae weren't the only weapons she'd brought to bear. Now that the buildings had begun to smoke and smolder, it was time to pour oil on the fire, and for that, she would need to aim her trebuchet...

Chapter 547: Isabell's Lesson

"There are things that you learn about war between humans that I hope you never learn Baron Hanrahan," Isabell told the slack-jawed baron as she finished telling her tale. "I hope you never learn to take joy in windy days because the wind drowns out the sounds of people screaming as they burn to death," she said coldly. "I hope you never count it a double blessing because the flames burn hotter and spread faster when the winds are high and the work will be done sooner."

"More than anything, I hope you never fight demons who learn to fight the way humans do in the old countries," she added as she stared at the trembling baron with gray eyes that felt so haunted they must have belonged to a ghost. "Because the day they learn that is the day you learn what it's like to survive the destruction of your entire city, and what it feels like to preside over funerals that last for days."

"Survive?" Owain said, blinking rapidly as he tried to process everything he'd heard from this terrifying engineer. "The baron you attacked, Baron Balleste, he survived what you did to his city?"

"Most keeps survive the destruction of the town that surrounds them," Isabell said, glancing over her shoulder to see the people sitting at the lower tables staring at her as though she'd prouted horns and claws. "So long as your fortress wall is far enough from the walls of the keep itself, then there's usually enough of a gap to keep the flames from jumping across. Your odds of surviving are even better if you have a moat between your keep and your people, like the one you have here."

Beside her, Master Tiernan reached out to rest a comforting hand on her shoulders. Of all the gathered Guild Masters of Blackwell City, perhaps only Master Sebastian of the Wayfinders Guild truly understood the ghosts that haunted Master Isabell. On more than one occasion, Tiernan had spotted the two masters sharing a bottle of strong wine and pouring extra cups for people who had departed for the Heavenly Shores many years ago.

It wasn't until today that he realized why neither master ever spoke much of their youth and the things that had shaped them into the strong masters they'd become. For Master Sebastian, it was impossible to escape the tales of his heroism that were told by his crew and companions. His legends, for better or worse, resounded across Blackwell Harbor. Isabell, on the other hand, seemed to have left her life of war entirely behind in the old countries, taking up an ordinary life among her fellow engineers with few understanding her past.

"But wait," Bastian said, frowning as he looked at the steel-haired Isabell. "If you did all that, if you commanded soldiers in battle, even engineers, and if you defeated whole armies, then how is it that you're still a commoner? You should have been knighted for that at the very least. If you had done something so amazing here, I'm sure that Marquis Lothian would grant you the title of Baron to rule over the lands you conquered. So, if everything you just said is true, how is it that you have to buy your way into the peerage now?"

"Some things are worth more than a title and land, Young Lord Bastian," Isabell said simply. "My husband was bound in service to the royal court. I traded the title and lands that his majesty offered me for a chest of gold and my husband's freedom. We left the old countries behind and never looked back."

"To turn down a title and lands of your own," Jocelynn said, her carefully composed demeanor momentarily falling away. "That's the kind of love you only find in fairy tales and storybooks."

For a heartbeat, the coldly calculating young woman Jocelynn had been fighting hard to become disappeared, replaced by the girl who had spent countless evenings in the Blackwell library with her tutors of her own, devouring tales of knights who fought against demons for their ladies and bold captains who won the hearts of maidens by braving dangerous seas and fearsome pirates to rescue them. Now, as she listened to Isabell telling her story, her seafoam eyes shone with a genuine wonder that had been absent ever since her sister's death.

"To have someone love you so much that they would fight in a horrible war just to win your freedom and the right to marry you," she said, turning her shining eyes unconsciously to Owain before looking back to Isabell. Her voice had lost its practiced polish, instead sounding wistful and almost longing. "Having that kind of love in your life would make any woman jealous."

When she spoke, Jocelynn's eyes were filled with stars as she tried to imagine what a young Casquas and Isabell might have looked like. Casquas had always struck her as suave and courtly, with silver hair worn long in a neat ponytail while Isabell looked more like one of Ashlynn's tutors, but twenty years ago... With flames of war burning around them and an almost impossible love between them, the image of the young couple was more than enough to make Jocelynn's heart flutter with the same innocent delight she'd felt when her sister first read her stories of heroic love as a child.

Belatedly aware of how transparent her emotions had become, Jocelynn straightened in her seat, struggling to reclaim her composed exterior. But she couldn't quite dampen the spark that Isabell's story had ignited. Beneath all of the struggles and the politics that drove her family's entanglement with the Lothians, a part of her still yearned for the pure, unconditional love she'd dreamed of before politics and position had tainted her dreams for the future.

Even as her mind struggled to resume its calculations, carefully considering how Isabell's revelations might affect their plans, Jocelynn found herself wondering if Owain might someday love her the way Casquas had loved Isabell.

Certainly, Owain hadn't fought a war for her yet, but when she thought of everything that stood between them and how hard she had to work now to appease Marquis Bors so he would give his blessing to Owain instead of passing his throne to Loman... it was hard not to see a little bit of herself in

the aging engineer, and to hope that perhaps her own story might end with the same fierce devotion from Owain that Casquas enjoyed from Isabell.

"I didn't fight the war for Casquas," Isabell pointed out. "I fought the war because I was young enough and foolish enough to get myself involved with the struggles of a young prince who fought for a throne because he thought it had been stolen from him."

Isabell's words were chosen very carefully. She didn't say she fought for a prince whose throne had been stolen from him, she said that the prince 'thought' it had been stolen from him. The difference was subtle, but in this audience, with so many clever lords and knights gathered around the table, her words landed like a canister of hot shot fired from one of her ballistae.

Chapter 548: Worth Fighting For

"Wasn't it?" Owain asked sharply as he frowned at the engineer. After months of trading barbed words with her, he was enjoying watching her use her viperish tongue against someone else for a change, but he couldn't help but feel that this latest barb was aimed more toward him than it was toward Baron Hanrahan. But for that to be true, she would have to know about Loman's intention to contend for the throne...

The thought that she might be aware of Owain's struggle to inherit the throne that should be his by birthright shook him to the core. His eyes narrowed and his brows lowered as he scowled at Isabell, who seemed completely immune to any form of intimidation. Was this really an idle comment in response to Jocelynn's childish infatuation with stories of true love? Or had the entire story she told about the civil war in the Emerald Kingdom been intended to allow her to make this point?

Owain had no way to know for sure, but knowing what he did about the sharpness of Isabell's mind and the keenness of her wit, he wouldn't put it past her.

"As the eldest son and heir," Owain said carefully. "The throne was his by birthright. Or do you mean to tell me that the Emerald Kingdom practices some heretical version of the faith that denies men the position they were born into after meeting their struggle in their past life?"

Owain's question instantly drew the attention of most people at the high table, though a few of them seemed to bristle at the implications of his statement. It seemed odd for Owain to couch his question in the doctrine of the Church, though those closest to him understood that it was likely a reaction to the threat he felt from his own brother.

Owain was looking for reasons to shore up the legitimacy of his claim to the throne wherever he could find them and the Church's teaching that people born into positions of privilege had earned them through struggles in their previous lives was just one of the many straws he was grasping at as he searched for an escape from the possibility that his father would pass the title of Marquis to his brother Loman.

Bastian, on the other hand, gave his half-brother Hugo an intense, dark look, as if to remind his younger brother that there was no doubt between them about who would become the next Baron Hanrahan. Small though the barony might be, and struggling as it was, in Bastian's mind, it still belonged to him, and any problems the barony faced would quickly be swept away when he rode Owain's coattails to greater heights in the coming Holy War against the demons.

"Maybe the throne belonged to him," Isabell said, disrupting the pair of heirs from their inwardly spiralling thoughts. Her voice was light and airy, as if owning a throne was no different than owning a fine horse. Perhaps to her, there really was no difference, given how easily she talked about walking away from the title and lands the Emerald King offered.

"But I struggle to say that it was best for him to have it," Isabell continued. "In three years of wars, tens of thousands of people died, my lords, and for what? Whole cities were burned to the ground. Baronies and even Counties that had stood for a dozen generations fell and had to be rebuilt from next to nothing. And for what benefit? For a different man to sit on a gilded chair and call himself king?"

"Fine of you to condemn him after you helped him pile up so many victims," Baron Hanrahan said with a snort. As he spoke, his eyes darted nervously to the people sitting at the lower tables, as if he were afraid they would come to the conclusion that it didn't matter which lord ruled over them. It was a notion that he desperately wanted to avoid, lest any of them think of toppling his beloved son Bastian in favor of the bastard Hugo, or worse, one of the knights who was more popular with his villagers than Baron Hanrahan was among his subjects in the barony.

"Aren't you just as guilty as he is for all the people you killed?" the portly baron asked, hoping to shift the conversation away from questions about the legitimacy of a person's rule and whether or not the Emerald King's uncle could have some justified reason to seize the throne from the rightful heir.

"Perhaps I am, my Lord Baron," Isabell said directly, refusing to shy away from his accusation. She'd made what peace she could with her actions long ago, and she wasn't about to be disturbed by his

childish prodding at her old wounds now. "That's part of why I've come to the frontier, after all. It's time to build up something new, don't you think?"

"Build?" Baron Hanrahan said with a snort. "I doubt you could build anything that lasts. By your own admission, you are an engineer who rains down death and destruction. But out here, squaring off against the demons of Airgead Mountain, you could put those skills of yours to use. And you know what the Church has said about those who slay demons while fighting under the banner of a Holy War."

"It would be a way to wash away any of your failings for what you did before and maybe even earn the right to enter the nobility properly in your next life," the baron said, giving Isabell a piercing look as he attempted to do as Owain had asked and goad her into a position that she couldn't back down from. "Assuming you have the courage to fight again, that is."

"It's not a lack of courage that took me away from the battlefield, my Lord Baron," Isabell said pointedly. "It's a lack of stomach for meaningless deaths in the service of a king who knew little more of providing for his people than what he'd read in a book at the Emerald Academy."

"But there are things worth fighting for in this world," she said as a dangerous, ambitious gleam appeared in her eyes. "And there are things that I would rain down destruction from the sky in order to protect. But Hanrahan Barony and the small town here... I'm afraid that neither of them rises to that level for me."

Chapter 549: The Guild Masters' Plan (Part One)

Baron Hanrahan looked ready to explode when Isabell said that the Town of Hanrahan and even his entire Barony weren't worth fighting for. He might not be someone who had marched on the front lines during the War of Inches, but by the Holy Lord of Light, he'd done his part! He'd fought to protect this town!

No demon raid on the supply lines through Hanrahan Barony had ever succeeded during the entire war, and he'd turned his very own manor into a safe haven where the priests could gather and the wounded could be treated within the security of his fortress walls. He had done his part to secure the future of his family and his people!

Unfortunately, one glance at Owain's calm, calculating expression was all it took to know that further outbursts would only be counterproductive. His job had been to rage, rebuke, provoke, and do whatever it took to draw Master Isabell and Master Tiernan into making a commitment for the upcoming war.

It was Owain's job to gently guide them into making that commitment in Hanrahan Barony and it appeared that the young lord was finally ready to make his move. Now that they'd reached this point, Baron Hanrahan would have to swallow his pride no matter how much he wanted to speak up in front of the people at the lower tables, to make a show of defending what they had built here and that they wouldn't accept insults about the fruits of their hard labor.

But the time to do that would have to come later. For now, it was Lord Owain's turn to guide the conversation.

"I'm curious, Master Isabell," Owain said, swirling his wine casually in his goblet as he stared at the proud engineer. "If this town isn't worth fighting for, then what is? Or would you prefer to be tasked with rebuilding the town of Hanrahan into something worth protecting... maybe something that could withstand even your fearsome assaults," he said, raising an inquisitive eyebrow at Isabell.

"I've discussed matters at length with Master Tiernan," Isabell said, leaning back in her chair and sipping her wine. Finally, it seemed like they were going to get to the point. She only wished she could have gotten here without being so forceful and without having to dredge up so many old memories.

Now that she had, she needed a few minutes to calm herself before she went any further. Thankfully, she and her fellow Guild Master had discussed things well in advance, and he was more than capable of supporting her in her time of need.

"Master Isabell doesn't mean any disrespect to your lordship's estate, Lord Hanrahan," Tiernan said, diplomatically stepping into the gap that Isabell had created for him. "It's just that, when we discussed matters and considered the interests of the other Masters whom we represent, we find that Hanrahan Barony is a bit too... out of the way for our needs."

"So you've said on a number of occasions," Owain said, already dreading a return to topics they'd gone over so many times that he felt the conversations had ruts worn in them. "As I've explained, many of the lands surrounding Lothian City have been settled by knights who won their titles in earlier wars. No knight has been granted lands within a day's ride of Lothian City since the end of the Brother's War."

"That's not entirely true," Master Tiernan said, cracking his knuckles and sharing a brief, knowing look with Isabell. "After all, lands were granted to Sir Brevik Shaw and then again to Sir Halaster Mourn," he

pointed out, dropping a pair of names that Marcel had provided. "It's just that they were never able to hold those lands."

"Sir Brevik Shaw?" Owain said, blinking in confusion and looking to Baron Hanrahan, who seemed equally lost. "Sir Halaster Mourn? I'm sorry, I haven't heard of either of these 'brave' men who failed to protect the lands my family bestowed on them."

Around the room, a quiet murmur arose as people poked their neighbors, each one inquiring if the other had ever heard of these esteemed knights and the deeds that had won them some of the most treasured lands in Lothian March.

The fiefs established outside of Lothian City were so large and so valuable that many expected generations of Lothian Marquis of placing their most loyal retainers there in the hopes of elevating them to barons when the March became a Duchy. The names of the knights who held those lands were known across the march, yet no one had ever heard of Sir Mourn or Sir Shaw.

"My Lord," Hugo said hesitantly from the far end of the table. "I, I may be able to help with that, assuming that I'm recognizing the names correctly. Master Tiernan," he said, looking at the physically imposing ironmonger. "Could it be that you're talking about the parcels directly adjacent to the, the demon highway, before it enters the Vale of Mists?"

"Yes, that's it, exactly so young lad!" Tiernan said with a wide grin. "It's clear that Hanrahan Barony was chosen for its proximity to Airgead Mountain, but it's also a bit too distant from Lothian City, and while there are good streams and a few large ponds out here, nothing we've seen here compares to the River Luath."

"You, you want to build your fief at the mouth of the Vale of Mists?" Owain said, momentarily too stunned to give any sort of composed response to the outlandish request. That region was beyond cursed, and in his lifetime, it had likely become even more cursed when he ordered Sir Broll and Sir Tommin to bury Ashlynn Blackwell there after he beat her to death.

The fact that one of those men was already dead and the other had betrayed him to seek shelter in the arms of the Church was only more proof in Owain's mind that anyone who had anything to do with the mouth of the Vale of Mists would not meet a good end. Without the full might of the Church behind him, he wouldn't dare to set foot there and once it was conquered, he still didn't know if it would be safe to make use of those lands until decades later.

"Are you

Chapter 550: The Guild Masters' Plan (Part Two)

"Ha! What foolish nonsense," Baron Hanrahan roared, stepping quickly back into his role as a goad when he realized the merchants were taking the conversation well and truly off the beaten path. "A little experience fighting wars for kings in the old world, and you think yourself invulnerable to attacks from demons!"

"Do you lot really think that you're so mighty that you can fight off the Demon Lady of the Vale?" the baron asked, slamming a fleshy palm into the table for emphasis. "She'll squash you like bugs!"

"Master Tiernan," Jocelynn quickly said, stepping in before things became too heated. Under the table, she gave Owain's thigh a reassuring squeeze while she took the focus off of him so he could formulate a more reasoned response and decide if the Masters' suggestion would still suit their plan.

"I'll admit that I haven't been in Lothian March for very long, but even I have heard nightmare-inducing tales about the Demon Lady of the Vale," Jocelynn said. "They say that no walls can truly bar her unless the Church has recently blessed them and the Church charges an exorbitant amount of money for their services just to maintain the protective blessings on Lothian Manor and at the city gates."

"I know that Master Isabell's skills are very impressive," Jocelynn added, looking at the older woman with genuine admiration. "But if two seasoned knights of the frontier have already failed to hold those lands, what makes you think that you can prevail where they fell?"

"It's simple, really," Isabell said, leaning forward and smiling at the perplexed-looking Lord Owain. "In the end, it comes down to faith. Not in the Holy Lord of Light," she added quickly. "But faith in young lord Owain and the army we will prepare for the Holy War to come."

"I'm sure that the Demon Lady of the Vale is a terrifying threat to all of humanity," Isabell said in a very severe tone. "And from what I've been told since we came to Lothian March, her demon spawn are just as dangerous, if not more so. But we've made this selection for two very important reasons," she said.

"First, as you've said, everyone else who has tried has failed," Isabell pointed out. "But everyone who tried so far has been a knight, and if you'll forgive me for saying it, most knights aren't known for their ability to create something out of nothing. But our collection of masters can do what others cannot. We can turn the River Luath into an engine that powers mills, a fishery that feeds thousands, and that's just the beginning of what we can do with an opportunity like the lands at the entrance to the Vale of Mists."

"The second reason," Master Tiernan said, stepping smoothly back into the conversation. "Is that unlike the people granted these lands in the past, we'll be taking them at the start of a Holy War. We're putting our faith in you, Lord Owain, to drive the Demon Lady of the Vale from these lands after you crush the demons of Airgead Mountain, freeing Lothian March, no, excuse me, Lothian Duchy, of the scourge of her presence forevermore."

The way he said it, with a voice brimming with confidence and praise for Lord Owain, made it very difficult for Owain to back down from the Masters' proposal. Of course, Master Tiernan couldn't tell him the truth, that the mysterious Marcel had assured them he and Lady Ashlynn could arrange protection against the forces of the Vale of Mists, but it didn't matter. The tale they'd spun contained enough kernels of truth that their proposal became one that Lord Owain would have to suffer losses to reject.

It was something that Owain realized painfully well. On the one hand, he could tell them that it was presumptuous to expect anyone to drive the Demon Lady of the Vale from her nest, but to do that, he'd have to admit to his own uncertainties about achieving something that his greatest ancestor, Cellach Lothian, had only managed to do temporarily.

On the other hand, if he accepted their proposal, then he would have to risk losing some of his most useful pawns very early in the war to come. When this whole thing started, he'd wanted to stir them up and provoke their pride so they would offer to take up the 'challenge' of improving Hanrahan Barony. Now, however, it seemed like he and Jocelynn had underestimated just how proud and confident these Guild Masters were.

"I think this is too large a matter to decide over dinner tonight," Owain said carefully. "We still have time to tour the other villages of the barony while we're here. Why don't you take a better look around, and perhaps we can arrange to pass by the entrance to the Vale of Mists on our way back to Lothian City in a few days..."

"That sounds wise," Isabell said, raising her goblet in a small toast to Owain's concession. "Thus far, Master Tiernan and I have only seen renditions of the Vale of Mists in paintings and tapestries. We're very much looking forward to the chance to explore it first hand, especially with some of the bravest,

most capable knights of the frontier to act as our escorts," she said with a smile that held much more warmth than her heart felt at the thought of spending even more time in Lord Owain's company.

But, she owed it to Lady Ashlynn to keep an eye on her sister Jocelynn... and so long as the mysterious Black Merchant Marcel kept his word, doing this would allow her to reunite with her missing liege lady for the first time since Ashlynn left to marry Lord Owain.

It might be uncomfortable to endure, but if it got her where she needed to be, then she was more than willing to play the game for a little while longer. After all, if Marcel was right, the time to play games with Owain Lothian would be coming to an end soon.