

The Vampire 761

Chapter 761: Executioner's Armor

Ashlynn watched in fascination as Sybyll stripped off her red dress without a trace of modesty, revealing a sculpted, muscular, warrior's body marked with old scars that, on any other knight, would have told stories of countless battles. On Sybyll's body, however, only one of those scars, a mass of pebbled and rough skin covering one shoulder, looked like it had been inflicted by the flames of the Inquisition.

It was almost impossible for any human weapon to leave a scar on a vampire, and Sybyll hadn't become a knight until she'd become one of Nyrielle's progeny which meant that the scars on her body...

"It were rough work at times," Sybyll said as she followed Ashlynn's gaze to the collection of scars along her ribs before she turned, pulling her long crimson hair over her shoulder to reveal the larger collection of scars that criss-crossed her back.

"An 'ore house sells what men want of a woman, be it pleasure or pain," she said, turning back around and shaking her long, crimson hair back over her shoulder to cover the scars. "Don't go lookin' at me like it were a shameful thing," she added with a fierce light burning in her crimson eyes. "I did what..."

"No, not shameful," Ashlynn interrupted as she looked deeply into Sybyll's eye, forcing back the thoughts that flickered through her mind. On the night that she crawled out of her grave, she'd contemplated trying to return to the human world to make her way back and claim her vengeance.

When Ian Hanrahan killed Sybyll's mother, Nyrielle hadn't ridden up in a dark carriage to rescue her but she'd found a way to survive for herself, one that demanded everything from her that a woman could give. Seeing the marks left on her by that life, Ashlynn couldn't help but wonder if she would have been strong enough to do the same...

"Nyri told me how you were living before she and Sir Thane found you," Ashlynn said. "She also told me what you did to the men who prayed on your sisters and took more from them than a man should. I, I can't imagine that it was easy," she said softly.

"Me life forged me long before Mistress Nyrielle had me armor forged," Sybyll admitted as she pulled the dark crimson gambeson over her head and began adjusting the buckles, pulling the layered, quilted fabric tight against her body and ensuring that it was in place to bear the weight of her armor before her

hands moved automatically to her long crimson hair, pulling it quickly into a tight braid that would be easier to tuck under her cloth hood.

"The hauberk next," Thane said, lifting one end of a chain shirt that seemed to flow like liquid shadow and made no sound even as the links rubbed against each other. "Lady Ashlynn, take the other side. On three, one, two, three, up!"

Even with both of them helping, the weight of the armor was enough for Ashlynn to feel the strain pulling at her arms and pressing down through her legs, as though she were trying to lift the trunk of one of the fallen trees before they settled the darksteel chain over Sybyll's shoulders and the crimson-haired knight took up the weight of it.

Each darksteel link was no larger than Ashlynn's fingernail, yet there must have been tens of thousands of individual links and added together, the chain garment felt several times heavier than her old falchion had been.

"How do you even move in this?" Ashlynn asked, breathing hard from the exertion. In the half-year since she became Nyrielle's Seneschal she'd become accustomed to being stronger than most people. There were very few things that still felt 'heavy' to her the way Sybyll's armor did, but when Ashlynn looked into the chest at all the pieces it suddenly felt like Sybyll would be carrying an entire fortress on her shoulders.

"Ya learn ta live in it," Sybyll said with a grin as she watched the shift in Ashlynn's expression before she bent down, reaching for her vambraces. "Or ya die in it. Teacher Thane made sure I learned."

The transformation continued as Ashlynn helped buckle each piece into place. Vambraces protected Sybyll's forearms, followed by gauntlets with articulated plates that moved like living shadows, tipped with wickedly sharp points in the style of the Clan of the Great Claw's fighting gauntlets.

Piece by piece, the pleasant woman who had embraced Thane disappeared. Couters protected her elbows, locking into both the vambraces and rerebraces and leaving only the slightest gap in the elbow when Sybyll held her arm straight. Pauldrons crowned her shoulders like dark wings.

When Thane lifted the breastplate, a work of art that curved to deflect any blow while bearing the image of a crossed headsman's ax and scythe in a dark variation of the Hanrahan coat of arms, Ashlynn

understood why they called her the Crimson Knight. Not for the red of her hair or dress, but for the red of her enemies' blood that the dark armor would drink in as she fought.

Thane had explained to Ollie long ago that even an ordinary human could learn to wield darksteel weapons so long as they understood enough sorcery to 'feed' the armor with the power of blood, whether it was from their enemies or their own sacrificial offering. Seeing a vampire clad head to toe in such bloodthirsty armor, however, was a much more terrifying concept than a kitchen-boy armed with a darksteel cleaver.

The final piece was the helm. Unlike Thane's practical visored design, this was a work of art intended to strike fear into the hearts of those who witnessed it. The faceplate had been shaped to resemble a grinning skull with elongated fangs, making her vampire identity clear even when locked into her armor, while a plume of horse hair dyed crimson sprouted from the top of the helm in imitation of Sybyll's own hair.

"Now ya see why they fear the Crimson Knight," she said from behind the lowered visor. When she spoke, all traces of the pleasant woman who had rushed to hug Thane had vanished, replaced by something that looked like Death himself had been wrapped in armor and sent to walk the battlefield of mortals. "Still think ya want ta knock me down, little witch?"

"No wonder the stories about the Crimson Knight are so fearsome," Ashlynn said as she inspected the armored knight. Ever since she'd come to the Vale of Mists, Nyrielle's progeny had treated her with kindness, respect, and even warmth and affection.

It made it easy to forget that each of them was every bit as fearsome and powerful as the High Lord Ansgar had been in life, but standing before Dame Sybyll in her armor, it was impossible to forget how much carnage she had left in her wake and what kind of violence she was capable of.

"You see?" Thane said with a proud smile. "Darksteel weapons are something that many of us can manage, but only Dame Sybyll is capable of wearing an entire suit of darksteel armor. That's part of why Mistress Nyrielle and I feel that she's the most suitable partner for you right now."

"And the other reason?" Ashlynn asked, setting the armor down and raising an eyebrow at Dame Sybyll.

"It's not time ta tell yet," Sybyll said cryptically. "If ya want ta know, knock me down an' make me tell ya," she said with a fierce grin and a look of challenge in her crimson eyes.

Chapter 762: The Lothian Court Gathers (Part One)

As the days and nights passed, while Ashlynn trained with Dame Sybyll and the forces of the Vale gathered for the next phase of Ashlynn's war, cold autumn rain drummed against the diamond-paned windows of Lothian Manor's great hall, where her enemies had gathered to discuss the sudden and unexpected raids on the westernmost baronies.

Outside the great hall, chill winds flung rain and occasional bursts of hail against the windows of the hall, rising and falling in intensity like the cold breath of fabled ice horn demons lurking in the darkness of the approaching winter.

Compared to the storm that had raged a few nights ago in the western territories, the weather could be considered mild but it still prompted the servants to heap extra logs on every fire burning in the hearths of the great hall.

Marquis Bors Lothian sat upon the ornately carved and gilded Lothian throne, hewn from the trunk of one of the demon's sacred trees, and surveyed the gathering of his court with a deep scowl.

Three tables had been arranged into a U-shape before the dais that held the throne. Normally, the central table would have been one of the shortest, occupied only by Owain and his retinue, representing the Lothian family and their interests. By ancient custom older than even the Kingdom of Gaal, Bors Lothian was expected to set aside his family's concerns in order to focus on the good of the entire march, while his heir would represent the Lothian house.

At the central table, tension radiated between the Lothian brothers despite Loman's attempts to present an image of family unity. The younger brother looked more comfortable in his refined tunic and half cape than he had the last time Owain had seen him, but from the furtive glances the younger man kept directing at the table representing the Church, he was clearly feeling out of place.

"You look nervous, brother," Owain observed quietly, his eyes fixed on the gathering lords rather than Loman's face. "Second thoughts about abandoning your vows? Perhaps you should invite your good friend Sir Tommin to join you, or has the Church turned its back on you the way he turned his back on me?" Owain asked with a cruel twist to his lips.

"I haven't abandoned anything," Loman replied carefully, adjusting the unfamiliar sword belt at his waist, trying to find a way to sit comfortably while wearing the elegant, golden-hilted blade his father had recently presented to him. The sword itself was light and meant for one-handed use, but to a man who had dedicated his life to healing and service, it felt as heavy as a millstone, dragging him further and further away from his original calling.

"I have not left the Church," Loman reminded his brother. "Father should have made it clear that he's called on me to help prepare for the coming war. Trust me, Brother," he added gently. "When the men from the old kingdoms arrive to fight for the glory of the Holy Lord of Light, you'll be glad that I'm where I am so that you can do what you do best."

Sitting next to Owain, Jocelynn shifted nervously in her seat. The steam from her untouched cup of mulled wine carried the rich scents of cinnamon and cloves that reminded her of happier autumn evenings in Blackwell County. For a moment, her heart trembled as the scent blended with the sound of hail striking the windows to conjure a ghostly whisper of Ashlynn's voice the first night she'd ever tasted mulled wine during a winter storm that rolled in off the sea.

"Don't tell mother or father that I gave you this, Jocey" Ashlynn had whispered to a much younger Jocelynn. "You're too young to drink wine that isn't watered down, but a few sips won't hurt you and it's so cold out there..."

Shaking off the ghostly echoes of her fallen sister's voice, Jocelynn frowned at the careful way Loman had phrased his statement. Taking a sip of the warm, spiced wine, she observed Loman carefully, taking in the changes in his posture and dress as she wondered whether Marquis Bors had been giving him lessons on conducting himself as a nobleman rather than a priest in the time that the younger Lothian son had been spending visiting his father to 'care for his health' recently.

"Of course, Lord Owain will ride at the head of our armies," Jocelynn said, placing a hand lightly on Owain's muscular forearm and presenting him with one of her dazzling smiles. "And I'm sure that the man who will lead the Lothian March to greatness in the future will be grateful to have his brother at his side to ensure he never falls in battle," she said sweetly.

As soon as she said the words, she wished she could take them back. Not because they hadn't been useful, but because Owain responded by caressing and squeezing her thigh in gratitude for her support.

Ever since her conversation with Master Isabell, it had been harder and harder for Jocelynn to present the perfect fawning image of the starry-eyed young noblewoman that she'd been when she first arrived in Lothian March. Isabell had torn the veil from her eyes and for better or worse, she couldn't help but see Owain for the man he truly was.

"Of course, I'll be grateful to have my dear brother at my side when we march to war," Owain said, finally turning to study Loman with calculating eyes. "Tell me, Loman, will you be riding under the Lothian banner and healing our brave knights and soldiers or do you only bestow your blessings on people like Liam Dunn when he's trying to expand his family's lands?"

"Young Lord Liam was fighting demons," Loman said, frowning at his brother's barbed tone. "I would offer healing to anyone who suffered injuries fighting on behalf of the Holy Lord of Light. It just worked out well for us that I was healing men who fought to expand the borders of Lothian March at the same time," he said, subtly asserting his position that he considered any victory their vassals achieved to be one that benefited the march as a whole.

"I see, so that's how it is," Owain said as he glanced at the table where Young Lord Liam sat with the other noblemen. "Well, perhaps that's fine. But be careful brother," he said with a knowing look.

"Men who leave the places they belong to attach themselves to a star that seems ascendant can find themselves cast down when their new patron no longer needs them, and fickle loyalties have a way of inviting calamity," he said, staring into his brother's eyes until the other man could bear it no longer and looked away.

Behind Jocelynn, Confessor Eleanor remained silent, but her dark eyes missed nothing as she observed the family dynamics playing out before the formal proceedings began. She'd seen the changes overcoming Lady Jocelynn since her conversation with Master Isabell but as Eleanor watched the two Lothian brothers trading barbs, she wondered if it was too late for Lady Jocelynn to escape having her fate tied to one of these two men.

Part of her wanted to hope that Marquis Bors would use this opportunity to make his position on the succession clear. It would be even better if he used the opportunity to betroth Lord Loman to Lady Jocelynn. It would take something that drastic and public to keep the young woman safe from Owain's response to losing the prize woman he'd set his heart on possessing.

But inwardly, Eleanor understood that unless a powerful third party like the Church or perhaps one of the royal princes made a move, very little could free her cousin from the noose the young woman had tied around her own neck when she betrayed her sister's secret.

Now, Eleanor felt like Jocelynn's only hope lay with the missing engineer, Isabell, and whatever plan she seemed to have concocted that involved venturing out to the edges of Lothian territory. But the timing of Isabell's disappearance left her wondering if she'd really found a potential savior for Lady Jocelynn... or a different sort of doom.

Chapter 763: The Lothian Court Gathers (Part Two)

To the right of the Lothian table, High Priest Aubin adjusted his ceremonial white and golden robes while studying the gathering with sharp eyes that seemed years younger and keener than the rest of his appearance.

Over the years, as his hair had faded to a sparse and brittle white and his hands grew thin and gnarled, he'd become known as a voice of wisdom in most councils and young men like Loman and even Owain couldn't remember a time when he hadn't been the High Priest of the powerful Lothian Temple.

"You seem discomforted, young Templar," he murmured to Sir Tommin, keeping his voice low enough that only the nearby Templar could hear. "Your heart and faith are among the purest in the march, or the Holy Light Blade wouldn't have accepted you as its wielder. So why the anxious look now?"

"Your Worship," Sir Tommin said, shifting uncomfortably in his chair and dropping a hand to the hilt of the sword that many among the faithful would covet. To Tommin, however, the weapon was a reminder that he'd given up everything he once treasured in life, not because of his faith but in order to keep the people who were most important to him safe from Owain Lothian. Now, rather than seeing his faith as pure, he saw it as the only thing he had left after giving everything else up.

"I'm worried about Young Lord Loman's safety, your Worship," Tommin finally said under his breath. "I wish you would let me remain at his side. He has yet to gather a retinue, and his brother is a dangerous man. Leaving him outside the protection of the Church at a time like this..."

"I understand, my son," Aubin interrupted softly as he placed his weathered fingers on Tommin's forearm. "Have faith. The Holy Lord of Light will not abandon someone like Loman. There are still those who believe he may become an Exemplar in time, no matter what happens here. If he is ever in real danger, the Church will not sit idly by."

Sitting on the opposite side of the High Priest, Inquisitor Diarmuid leaned forward with a reminder of his own. The dark-haired Inquisitor had only recently returned from the Holy City after reporting everything he'd learned in Lothian March, including the preserved skin he'd cut from the body of Ashlynn Blackwell that proved the mark on her hip hadn't been a mark of a witch. The orders he returned with, however, were far short of what anyone would have wished for after an act of obvious magnicide.

"For the moment, the Church must not present an appearance of favoritism between the Lothian brothers," Diarmuid whispered. "But that doesn't mean we don't have eyes and ears to give us a warning if something happens. Confessor Eleanor hears much as Lady Jocelynn's chaperone, and the Inquisition has other sources as well."

"We may not be able to protect Loman directly at the moment," the Inquisitor reassured the former knight. "But that doesn't mean we're standing idly by. The Church has invested heavily in the upcoming Holy War, and both brothers are certain to play a vital role in the battles to come," he said, though the admission was bittersweet.

Despite the clear evidence that Diarmuid had gathered over the span of several months, the Church would do nothing about Lady Ashlynn's murder unless Loman took the Lothian throne. Only then would Diarmuid be permitted to bring charges against Owain on the condition with the understanding that the former Lothian heir would be sentenced to fight for the Templars in order to redeem his soul for his crimes.

And of course, if Marquis Bors chose to pass his throne to Owain, the records of the next Lothian Marquis' crimes would be quietly sealed, never to be spoken of again so long as he advanced the interests of the Church at the furthest edges of the frontier.

Tommin's jaw tightened, but he said nothing. The man who had once served Owain faithfully now found himself caught between his duty to the Church and his knowledge of the truth about Lady Ashlynn's murder.

The High Priest and the Inquisitor might think they had everything in place to keep Loman safe from Owain, but no one should have been safer on the night of her wedding than Lady Ashlynn, and Tommin had seen firsthand how that turned out.

Now, he could only wish that his former liege lord would resolve the matter of the succession soon so that Tommin could return to Loman's side to protect the pious young lord from demons and his family alike.

The coming war weighed on everyone's minds differently, and the men at the final table could, perhaps, be considered the most diverse when it came to their positions on the coming war.

At the barons' table, the contrast between the assembled lords couldn't have been starker. Baron Serle Otker leaned back in his chair with the comfortable demeanor of a man whose lands lay far from any conflict, resting his hands on his well-rounded belly and watching the room with a calculating look that searched for opportunity in every fractured faultline he observed within the court.

Sitting beside him, Baron Valeri Leufroy's weathered face bore the grim expression of someone who had seen too much war. Though both men could be considered comrades in arms who had served Marquis Bors during the War of Inches, Baron Otker had been so young at the time that his 'service' amounted to following older knights as a page, running errands in camp, and tending to his father's horse and weapons.

Baron Valeri, on the other hand, waded into the thick of battle at Bors' side, forging a friendship that had lasted for decades since the war and paying the price for it in old wounds and lost companions that haunted him still.

Now, as the Baron surveyed his companions at the table, the pains of the old wounds to his sword arm and right leg seemed to pulse with a renewed fierceness that couldn't entirely be explained by the aches brought on by chill winds. His hand itched for the feeling of a blade in his hand, and his heart beat like drums summoning men to war, but his body could no longer answer the call.

Instead, he thought bitterly, this war would belong to the younger men sitting at the table with him...

Chapter 764: The Lothian Court Gathers (Part Three)

"Steady on, Bastian," Valeri murmured to the young Hanrahan lord sitting beside him. The young man was mopping his brow for the third time in as many minutes and his face looked as pale with fear as a soldier setting foot on the battlefield for the first time.

"You've survived worse than a presentation to the Lothian Court. Remember, you're only here to represent your father, not to be judged for any of his failings in his absence," the aging baron said in a tone that directed a measure of scorn at the Hanrahan Baron who refused to join him on the front lines all those years ago, even though they were fighting on the borders of Hanrahan barony in the quest to claim Airgead mountain.

While the old baron had yet to hear any specifics of what had happened to Hanrahan barony to provoke a summons to an emergency meeting of the available noblemen, he was certain that at least half of the blame for whatever had happened could be laid at the feet of Ian Hanrahan and his constant, cowardly schemes.

There had been a time when the Hanrahans had been known as bold frontiersmen, clearing the wilderness with their axes and turning it into some of the most bountiful lands in Lothian March through the hard work of both their people and their lords. All of that seemed to have ended, however, when Aiden Hanrahan inherited the throne from his brother and raised up a cowardly heir like Ian, who grew fat on the work of others.

"It, it isn't the presentation to the court that I'm worried about," Bastian whispered back, his voice tight with anxiety. "Lord Leufroy, what if the Marquis orders us to campaign through winter? We aren't like the Dunns, we don't maintain a large force of trained soldiers during times of peace, and we weren't planning to train up soldiers for the Holy War until the spring planting was in. The demons..."

"The demons will be dealt with," Liam Dunn interrupted, his voice carrying barely contained fury despite his attempt to keep it low. "The demons think they can raid our lands with impunity, but they're about to learn otherwise. The Hanrahans might not be ready to march to war, but we won't sit idly by and let this attack go unanswered."

After the success of his campaign during the summer, Liam had been certain that he would have had no trouble calling up one of the largest forces in the march when the time came to march to war. He even felt that many of the men who joined the war from across the sea would flock to his banner when they learned which of the border lords had proven the greatest success at pushing the demons back year after year. The coming war would have been a tremendous opportunity, not just for him, but for the entire barony to lift itself up.

Now, however, the joy he'd felt at the end of summer turned bitter on his tongue as he confronted the idea that this latest demon invasion was his fault. The demons had yielded ground too easily on more than one occasion.

At the time, he'd thought that it was because they were suffering from years of losses to Dunn advances and they were finally ready to crumble, but now, he wondered if they'd just been biding their time to launch a counter-attack at a time when his people were at their most vulnerable.

"Such enthusiasm, Young Lord Liam," Otker chuckled softly, swirling his wine. "Though I wonder if you're learning the right lesson from all of this. Your family has been spreading itself awfully thin with all those hamlets for a long time," he pointed out. "Perhaps this is a lesson in remembering your station instead of trying to rise above it. It might be better to cut your losses rather than compounding them, don't you think?"

"This has nothing to do with rising above our station," Liam shot back, his knuckles white as he gripped his cup. "My people are dying while you count profits. Besides," he added with a condescending sneer. "I never once heard you complaining about our hamlets when they were sending an endless stream of barges downriver through your territory."

"Even if you can't bring yourself to care for the people who lost their lives," Liam hissed. "You can at least send us some soldiers to protect the source of so much of your wealth, can't you? You don't even need to ride to war yourself," he added with a withering look at the baron's rotund figure. "I promise you, we know better than you how to make use of your barony's soldiers."

"Gentlemen," Baron Leufroy said, raising a weathered hand to stop the argument before it grew heated enough to be heard at the other tables. "Save your arguments for after everyone has made their reports. From the sound of things, we'll have plenty to debate once young His Grace has heard what everyone has to say, and it looks like it won't be long now before we begin."

All around the hall, servants quietly withdrew after leaving behind trays of refreshments for the gathered lords, along with stacks of parchment, sealing wax, and other supplies for writing out orders or sending messages.

At this point, it would become the responsibility of the most junior noblemen present, or perhaps Lady Jocelynn as the only woman present who wasn't a servant of the church, to tend to the needs of the Lothian Court while they deliberated in a secret, closed session.

Several people were missing from the gathering, but Bors dared not wait to summon all of his barons to address the news that the two young lords brought from their respective territories. Winter was nearly

upon them, and each day they wasted on the formalities of official summons, receptions, and everything else that went with calling up the court, the less time they would have to respond before the first snows fell.

"I'm sure you've all heard at least some of the news from the western baronies," Bors said, gesturing to the table where Liam and Bastian sat. "But rather than answer your questions, I think we should all hear firsthand from the young lords about what has befallen their homes. Gentlemen? Which of you will speak first?"

"I will," Liam said, barely able to restrain himself as he stood to address Bors and the gathered court. "My Lord Marquis," he began formally. "I urge you to prepare a summons to all the barons of the realm and to call up their armies at once. The Undying Demons, unseen in a hundred years, have returned to our borders, and if we do not root them out now, then none of us may survive the winter!"

Chapter 765: Faults and Doubts (Part One)

"None of us may survive the winter!"

Liam Dunn's bold declaration shocked everyone present, especially when he mentioned the Undying Demons, the scourge led by the Demon Lady of the Vale who ravaged the countryside a hundred years ago and recaptured the Vale of Mists from Lothian hands.

"You know them to be Undying Demons?" Diarmuid blurted, lurching to his feet as he was unable to restrain himself when he heard something so shocking. "Has a Templar or Inquisitor confronted them in your barony?" the Inquisitor asked as he stood, staring at the young lord of the Dunn barony with an intense stare.

"We have witness accounts," Liam said, shaking his head at the Inquisitor. "From at least two of our hamlets, where men saw the demons attacking the night before the storm. One of them even found the bodies of our fallen soldiers drained of their blood. If not the Undying Demons, who can only be killed with Holy Light and Fire, what else could it be?"

"Many things," Diarmuid said as he slowly sat back down. "More than you might imagine, young lord Liam. Many times over the years, men have attempted to invoke the fear of Undying Demons by draining the blood from the bodies of the slain in the same way you drain the blood of slaughtered cattle and goats."

"Indeed," High Priest Aubin said while gently stroking his thin white beard. "It is best to avoid wild speculation about something as shocking as the return of Undying Demons. But you said there were witnesses as well. Did they describe these demons in detail?"

"My father is still gathering the details," Liam said, clenching the small scraps of paper he'd received from his father in his fist while he struggled to bite back the hot words on the tip of his tongue.

Liam had been in the Village of Maeril, overseeing the loading of their goods onto barges when the unnaturally fierce thunderstorm struck. He'd been delayed by a full day as he and his men worked to retrieve the pair of barges that had broken free of their moorings in the storm. When he returned to Sir Garrick Maeril's castle that evening, there had been half a dozen messages carried by pigeons waiting for him, each one more concerning than the last.

In a few days, Liam was certain that he would learn a great deal more, but now, he had only a few cramped lines of text and his father's dire warning to present at the meeting of the Lothian Court. And if he failed to convince these men of the danger...

"The witness account describes the demons as twisted creatures," Liam said as he unclenched his fist and carefully smoothed out the slips of parchment on the table in front of him before selecting one to read. "It had horns like a steer and scales like a snake with claws as sharp as a hawk's," he read, shuddering at the thought of such a potent demon.

"Preposterous," Baron Otker snorted. "Demons are creatures that blend the features of man and beast, but they never possess the features of multiple beasts. Likely, you were attacked by cattle rustlers wearing crude masks and putting on a show to stop your soldiers from chasing them."

"No, that might not be true," Loman said carefully, glancing at the High Priest and waiting for the old man's gentle nod before he continued. "In the sealed archives of the Church, there are tales of demons known as Twisted Ones, demons who result from the union of two different types of demon. They are weak, cursed beings so filled with evil and wickedness that their bodies fail them not long after they're fully grown, if they even live that long."

"Twisted ones are just as rare as Undying Demons," Diarmuid countered, frowning at the way the young lord had casually mentioned the sealed archives. He may have received permission from High Priest

Aubin to speak about the Twisted Ones, but that didn't mean he should casually reveal that he was in possession of the church's secrets, especially while he wasn't wearing the robes of a priest.

"We may still be looking at men in crude masks," the Inquisitor continued. "Because Twisted Ones are the weakest of all demons. Even a housewife armed with a pitchfork could overcome one of these cursed creatures. I doubt they would cause much trouble for the soldiers of Dunn Barony who fought so bravely against the demons this summer."

"What if, what if they aren't Twisted Ones or Undying Demons," Bastian Hanrahan said as he stood, unfolding a large sheet of parchment as he spoke. Unlike Liam, Bastian had ridden here directly from Hanrahan Town once they'd learned what happened to Sir Carwyn's caravan, and he brought with him an artist's rendering of the demons one of the wagon drivers saw.

"Our caravans were attacked in broad daylight, and one of the survivors was able to describe the demons he saw to an artist in my father's court," he said, holding up a charcoal drawing that featured a serpentine demon wearing the armor of a knight. Once he'd displayed the first drawing, he passed it over to Baron Otker before holding up a second one, this time featuring a demon with a powerful, muscular chest and a head like a lion's, complete with a wild, flowing mane and wicked, hooked axes in each hand.

"Loman?" Bors asked from his throne as he peered at the drawings. "Have you heard of demons who resemble these in the records you've reviewed? Are these a new kind of demon we haven't fought before?"

"I, I don't know," Loman said with a frown as he studied the images. "They match up to sketches of some of the Undying Demons from a hundred years ago," he admitted with a heavy sigh. "But Young Lord Bastian said that their caravans were attacked in broad daylight. The Undying Demons cannot face the light of the Holy Lord of Light, even if the sun is hidden behind clouds. Sunlight sears their flesh, and they would burst into flames."

"And this armor," he said, tapping the first image of the serpentine demon. "This armor looks similar to the armor worn by the Crimson Knight, but even the Crimson Knight has never been seen in daylight."

If the demons had figured out how to create an armor that would allow their most powerful forces to move with impunity during the light of day, then Lothian March was as good as doomed. But Loman's faith refused to accept that something like a suit of armor would be enough to allow an Undying Demon to bask in the cleansing light of the sun.

No, he thought, there had to be another explanation for these strange demons... But what?

Chapter 766: Faults and Doubts (Part Two)

"You said a survivor of your caravan described this armored demon," Owain said, snatching the parchment from Loman with enough force that he nearly tore a corner off the sketch. "Was he a soldier or a knight who understands armor well? Was the man who sketched this an armorer?"

There were several details about the sketch that seemed odd to Owain's trained eyes. From the way the plates fit together to the strange gaps that looked like they were either covered by overlapping metal scales or were exposing the scales of the demon itself. It was difficult to say, leaving him to wonder if this was a real thing or a fanciful imagining by a drunken farmer who fell off his wagon.

"The survivors were farmers guiding the wagon and carts," Bastian admitted. "Our soldiers fought bravely to the last man to buy time for the common people to escape or we wouldn't even know this much," he said, his words coming out in a breathless rush as he tried to defend the value of the intelligence he brought.

"And the artist? Is he the man who paints your castle walls?" Owain asked with a dismissive sneer as he tossed the sketch to the table.

"He, he's the man who painted my father's portrait and the portraits of many of our knights," Bastian said, nervously smoothing his tunic over his thick midsection as he fought the urge to retreat from Owain's questioning.

"He, he sketched many copies, revising them each time until the witness agreed that it was correct," Bastian insisted, thumping the table with a meaty fist as he spoke. "These, these are the best documents we have of the strange demons who attacked our march!"

"But these 'witnesses' don't know what to look for and they've likely never even seen a demon much less fought one," Owain said, scowling at the young lord and wondering if all of the Hanrahans were as cowardly and useless as Hugo had proven to be. "Are these really the demons who attacked us? Or an exaggeration intended to cover your losses?"

"It might not be entirely fanciful," Diarmuid said with a heavy sigh as he stood from his seat, walking around the table to retrieve the sketch from Owain and frowning as he inspected it. Much like Loman, he turned to High Priest Aubin, waiting for a nod before he continued.

"There was a famous High Inquisitor during the War of Four Brothers," Diarmuid said with a defeated look as he realized that there was no point in holding back secrets as long as Loman was more interested in proving himself worthy of his father's throne than protecting the knowledge the Church deemed too dangerous to spread among the masses.

But since the Highest ranking priest in Lothian March had decided to take the young lord's side in this, there was little Diarmuid could do other than to continue, providing what information he had in the hopes that the people attending this meeting would understand how precious the information they were hearing truly was.

"His name was Ignatious, and he succeeded in capturing several Undying Demons," the Inquisitor said.

"Impossible!" Liam said, nearly dropping his cup of steaming, mulled wine when he heard the Inquisitor's claim. "I've tried capturing demons before to earn the bounty from the Church. I lost three good men just trying to corner one horned demon and capture it without killing it! To capture an Undying demon... How?"

"We will likely never know," Diarmuid admitted. "He died before the end of the war. According to some records, the Demon Lady of the Vale feared his growing knowledge so much that she moved personally against him. Whether that's true or not, he left behind a treasure trove of journals and discoveries about vampires and the Undying Demons."

"Did he learn ways to kill them other than Holy Light or Fire?" Owain asked impatiently. "If we have to depend on reinforcements from the Church to face this threat then I'm afraid a good many more people will die," he said with a pointed look at both the Inquisitor and Sir Tommin. "The forces of the Church are already spread thin to protect our villages and towns after all."

It was difficult for Owain to see this as anything other than an excuse to prop up his scheming younger brother's bid for the throne. Ancient demons unseen in a hundred years and only his brother knew about them? Foes that were impossible to kill without the aid of the Church?

And all of it happened right as Loman made his bid for the throne, transforming the man without allies or a retinue into the man who possessed the only allies who could save them. It was all too convenient as far as Owain was concerned.

"I brought four Templars with me from the temples of Blackwell County," Jocelynn said helpfully from her seat next to Owain as she noticed his darkening mood. The invisible scales between the brothers were tipping further and further toward Loman the longer the meeting went on and she needed to find a way to tip it back before things could turn out any worse for Owain... and by extension, worse for her.

"Under your command, my lord," Jocelynn said sweetly. "I'm sure you could use them to hunt down these demons, just the way you hunted down the demons who killed Sir Broll," she added, placing a barb within her bait.

After all, she knew very well that the flat tailed demons he killed before visiting Blackwell County had nothing to do with the attack on the summer villa or the death of Sir Broll. They'd been conveniently nearby and their reputation as trap setters and masters of ambushes made them a convenient scapegoat.

She knew that, and Owain knew that, but the stories that had been told of his crushing victory were a different matter entirely and she was certain that Owain wouldn't allow his inflated reputation to suffer from something as inconvenient as the truth.

"My lady," Confessor Eleanor said, leaning forward to speak to Jocelynn in hushed tones. "Those men were sent to safeguard you during your stay in Lothian. You shouldn't give up your protection lightly."

"I know," Jocelynn said, giving her distant cousin a knowing look before she continued to speak. "But I am safe here within the walls of Lothian Manor, protected from demons by the High Priest Aubin and his entire temple," she said, gesturing to the table where the High Priest sat. "But if giving up my personal protectors can save the lives of villagers or our brave soldiers, then I cannot be selfish when I'm not personally in danger."

Of course, there was more that she couldn't say during the public meeting. The chance to hunt one of the most dangerous types of demons was certain to appeal to Owain's vanity and by placing the Templars under his command to go hunting, she could get him out of Lothian City, at least for a few days while she waited for Master Isabell to return in order to plan their next moves.

It was a gamble to be sure. If Owain returned with high honors from killing Undying Demons then he would become an even more unstoppable force within Lothian March. But if he met his end in the attempt... It might afford her a chance to escape the jaws of the trap that were slowly springing shut on her.

Chapter 767: Faults and Doubts (Part Three)

"I think you're getting ahead of yourselves," Diarmuid said as he returned to his seat, pausing awkwardly when he realized that Sir Tommin's acquisition of a Holy Light Blade had turned him into the most junior member of the clergy present.

"I told you that High Inquisitor Ignatious studied these Undying Demons at length," Diarmuid continued as he walked to the table filled with refreshments near the hearth, filling a fresh pitcher with fragrant mulled wine before returning to his table and refilling the cups in front of High Priest Aubin and Sir Tommin before refilling his own cup and draining half of it down almost immediately.

"These 'Undying Demons' aren't born as such," the Inquisitor explained. "Rather, they are made into vampires and bestowed great strength by the Demon Lady of the Vale whom they called their 'Blood Queen,'" he explained.

More accurately, the records left behind by High Inquisitor Ignatious had used the very specific title 'Blood Princess of the Arena' for the Demon Lady of the Vale, but the church had decided long ago to use the title 'Blood Queen' for the fearsome demon.

After all, if she were a Princess, it implied an even greater threat that she could one day grow into, or a more powerful figure beyond her, and the notion of titles earned in an arena sounded more sophisticated than the Church wanted to give demons credit for being. 'Blood Queen' sounded more menacing and preserved the people's understanding of the demons as savages ruled by blood-thirsty monsters far better than the actual title the demons used would.

"So you're saying that these are ordinary demons," Owain said, giving Jocelynn a brief look and tapping on his empty cup. Already, the young lord was losing much of his interest in hunting these demons if they weren't the famed 'Undying Demons' that had brought an end to the rule of the greatest ancestor in the history of the Lothian March.

Owain had long ago made it a goal to kill the Demon Lady of the Vale, or at least drive her to the other side of the mountains permanently. If he could achieve what even Cellach Lothian never had, then

nothing could topple him from his place as the greatest Lothian to ever lead the family. More importantly, bringing home a trophy like the head of the famed Demon Lady, who had tormented human lands for more than a century, would earn such great rewards that the King and the Ruling Council would be forced to elevate him to a position on the Council.

If Undying Demons had emerged once again, and if he could find a way to force his brother and this Inquisitor to share the methods for killing them, then the demons would become the perfect stepping stones to resolve the succession dispute while he prepared for the Holy War to come. But if they were just ordinary demons...

"So is it just that they just haven't been turned into Undying Demons yet?" Owain asked, taking a refilled cup from Jocelynn's outstretched hand and taking a sip as he stared at the men from the Church. "If that's the case, then what are they doing attacking our villages? Auditioning for the Demon Lady of the Vale in the hopes that she'll turn them into her next Undying Demons?"

"What if it's simpler than that?" Baron Leufroy said, breaking his silence at last. "Just a few nights ago, a mighty storm struck the western lands. What if these demons come from the lands west of the mountains and they're simply searching for food after storms ravaged their own lands?"

"High Priest Aubin," Valeri said as he turned to look at the white-haired old man. "The Church has long been our guide for predicting the next year's weather. All my life, we've counted on the Church's warnings of drought or floods. We've been able to plant more in boon years and stockpile against lean ones, but we've never asked about the weather across the mountains in the lands the demons still hold."

"I understand what you're asking, Baron Leufroy," the High Priest answered in a patient tone, as though speaking to a young pupil even though the Baron had already entered his fifties. "But the gaze of men, even ones as devout as Sir Tommin or young lord Loman, cannot easily pierce the veil that separates the world of men from the world of demons."

"Perhaps one of the Exemplars could answer your question," he continued. "We rely on their writings for many things, and their vision isn't as limited as the sight of lesser men. All I can tell you is that this storm, whatever it was, does not represent a Great Change. The Exemplars have given us no warnings of it, which means that whatever brought on this storm is little more than happenstance and not a change in the workings of the world."

"I see," the aging baron said, bowing formally to conceal the look of disappointment that flickered across his face. "I thank High Priest Aubin for enlightening me."

"We can waste many hours in speculation," Bors Lothian said from his throne, now that the conversation about the mysterious demons seemed to have reached enough of a stumbling block that he could guide the discussion in a more useful direction.

So long as the conversation had allowed Loman a chance to prove the value of his knowledge to the other lords, Bors had been willing to let him speak. But once matters turned into speculation and grasping at straws about the weather, as if the strange storm must be connected to the demons simply because the attacks occurred at the same time, Bors saw no reason to let it continue.

"I would rather hear things that are facts than things that are mere conjecture," he said, pausing to cough into his handkerchief before he continued. "Young Lord Liam, Young Lord Bastian, tell us how much you have lost in men and harvest. The autumn tithes are due, and we must prepare for next year's war."

"Tell me," he said, leaning forward in his gilded throne and staring intently at the two young men. "Can your baronies still meet their obligations to both?"

Chapter 768: Calculating the Costs (Part One)

For a moment, Liam Dunn stared numbly at the Lothian Marquis. He understood the question that had been asked. After their losses, could they still pay their tithes and send soldiers to fight the demons next year. It was a simple, rational question. It just wasn't the one he'd hoped to hear.

'How many men have lost their lives?' would have been a better question. Or 'Will your people be able to get through the winter after what has happened to them?' Anything to show that the man responsible for Lothian March cared about the people who fought and bled and died for the Dunns and their Lothian lords. Instead, they were asked if they could still pay their tithe and send more soldiers to fight in the coming war.

Sitting behind him, Baron Otker watched the young lord squirm with a barely concealed smile on his face. For years, the Dunns had dominated almost every industry of value within the march and they'd only grown more dominant under the rule of Liam's father. Once, the Otkers had enjoyed handsome profits from helping the Dunns ship everything from bales of wool to rough hewn logs on their way to the mills in Keating Duchy.

In the years since the War of Inches, however, they had aggressively reinvested everything they plundered from Airgead Mountain into their own local industries. Bales of freshly shorn wool had given way to spun thread and they'd even begun planting vast fields of flowers in order to dye their own wool. Saw mills dotted the barony and what timber sailed down river was already bound for customers like the ship builders in Blackwell County.

Combined with their relentless expansion and their flaunting of the restrictions about how many knights they could appoint and how many villages they could establish, the Dunns had grown so mighty within Lothian March that Baron Otker wasn't the only one hoping to see them fall. So while young Liam Dunn squirmed and fought to control his temper, Baron Otker leaned back in his chair, sipping on mulled wine as if he was watching a play on a grand stage rather than dire news presented to the Lothian Court.

"Our autumn tithe was already in Maeril Village when the attacks happened," Liam said after taking several deep breaths to compose himself before he said something he might regret. Still, he couldn't let matters stand without speaking up for the people they'd lost.

"My father is still tallying the dead," Liam added, turning to look at Loman Lothian instead of addressing the lord of the march. "At the very least, we've seen the almost complete destruction of our garrisons in Sooner's Reach and Kitchner's Fell. Captain Jorg is among the fallen," he said, looking directly into Loman's eyes.

During their summer campaign against the demon villages, Loman had spent half a day meticulously removing an arrow from Captain Jorg's leg before bestowing the blessings of the Holy Lord of Light on him. The man was a good soldier who had served the Dunn's for more than a decade and his assignment to Sooner's Reach was supposed to be a reward for his service and a chance to spend some time recuperating from his injuries.

"I, I remember Captain Jorg," Loman said after a moment. His hands gripped his cup of mulled wine firmly enough that the cup shook in his hand, spilling a bit of the hot liquid over the back of his hand, but Loman hardly noticed. He was thinking of the soldier's soft grey eyes as he boasted to his companions in the healer's tent that he'd be leaving to defend a sleepy village where the most dangerous thing for leagues were jealous bulls guarding their herds.

"He was a good man," Loman said after a moment. "I'm sure he met his struggle well in his final moments and that he awaits us all on the soft sands of the Heavenly Shores," he said, raising his cup in a silent toast to the fallen soldier and pouring a small splash of wine on the floor of the great hall.

The gesture was matched first by Baron Leufroy, followed almost as quickly by Sir Tommin and Inquisitor Diarmuid before each person sitting at the tables slowly poured a final sip of wine for the fallen soldiers and innocent farmers who had lost their lives in the sudden, inexplicable demon attacks.

Not everyone who poured wine did so to honor the dead, but one look at Liam's withering glance was enough to prompt Bastian to move and Baron Otker had been playing this game for more than enough years to recognize when rivalry had to give way to ritual. He might not care about the dead men, but he wasn't about to provoke a fight over their worthless lives by refusing to offer a sip to the slain.

"Winter is the worst time to die on a demon's blade," High Priest Aubin said, shaking his head sadly. "The temple will light bonfires for the next three nights, from sunset to sunrise to help the dead find their way through the darkness of the long nights."

The High Priest was certain that there would be many bonfires lit in the nights to come once the war began in earnest. That had been the way of it before and it would be again. During the War of Inches, it felt like the skies turned black with the smoke of pyres and guiding fires for weeks at a time whenever one side or another launched a new offensive.

To be lighting guiding fires already, however, before the Winter's Night Vigils, felt like an ominous sign. Silently, as he promised to light bonfires for the fallen, the aging priest also promised to write to the Exemplars and the Saint in the Holy City.

He'd found nothing in the almanacs or the sacred texts to warn about doom on the horizon but there were plenty of things that even he hadn't been allowed to see. Perhaps only the Saint himself would understand the darkness looming before them and how the Holy Lord of Light intended for them to fight it.

But then, as if a curtain had been pulled from in front of his eyes, he finally understood that the Saint had likely foreseen this long ago. After all, the Church was setting aside something as significant as Owain Lothian's murder of his noble wife in order to use him as a weapon in the upcoming Holy War and the Church continued to press for a beginning of their campaign against the demons.

Now that they were seeing the return of ancient threats, it suddenly made sense to the old priest. It wasn't his place to doubt or question because the Holy Lord of Light had already paved their path to salvation. All he had to do was walk it... and ensure that the lords on this council walked it as well.

In the end, all would be as the Holy Lord of Light intended because there could be no other outcome.

Chapter 769: Calculating the Costs (Part Two)

"At least your men died clean deaths," Bastian Hanrahan said, breaking the silence and gloom that had settled over the gathering with the talk of the Dunn's losses. As rude as it felt to intrude on the solemn moment, his father would flay the skin from his side if he didn't ensure that everyone felt that the Hanrahans had lost more and were facing a greater threat. So, no matter how rude it felt, he pressed forward with the story his father made sure he was ready to tell, even if he stumbled over the details in his haste to get it all out.

"Those strange armored serpent demons captured Sir Carwyn Belvin of Raek Village," Bastian said, pointing at the drawing of the demon that had made its way over to the table where the clergy sat. "And not just Sir Carwyn. They captured all of his men alive. Lord of Light only knows what torture they'll be subjected to in demon hands," he said dramatically. "Or what unholy rituals they'll be forced to partake in," he added, with a pointed look at the Inquisitor and Sir Tommin.

"Since when do demons take prisoners?" Owain asked, staring in disbelief at the young Hanrahan lord. It wasn't just the notion of demons taking prisoners that took him off guard either. Owain had encountered Carwyn Belvin in more than one tournament and he had a good impression of the man's fighting skills. He wasn't brilliant by any means but he made very few mistakes and he used his weapons well.

"How many of these serpent demons were there in order to drag down Sir Carwyn?" Owain asked as he stared again at the sketches of the armored serpent demons. "It takes at least three or four claw demons attacking together to strip away a knight's armor and two or more horned demons with spears to land a killing blow. Are these serpent demons stronger than claw demons? Or weaker?"

"According to the witnesses, they're much, much stronger than any demon I've ever heard of," Bastian said, shuddering as he recalled the pale-faced dread with which the wagon driver had recounted his tale. "Sir Carwyn had already killed a number of the flat tailed demons who ambushed his caravan when one of the serpent demons knocked him from his horse," he explained.

"After that, things became strange," the young Hanrahan lord continued. "One of the serpent demons seemed to issue some kind of challenge. The witness didn't hear what was said, but one of the flat tailed demons spoke the King's common tongue well enough to convey meaning to Sir Carwyn because after they spoke, Sir Carwyn fought a duel with the serpent demon... and lost."

"You're saying that one of these serpent demons is the equal of an armored knight? No, that they're even more dangerous than an armored knight on horseback?" Baron Leufroy asked, echoing Owain's shock.

He'd fought claw demons, horned demons, and cat demons in the War of Inches and he was well familiar with the demon's swarming tactic that Owain had described. He'd lost more than a few good knights to it in the last war before his men learned the discipline of retreating behind the ranks of soldiers with long spears while archers weakened the demons for the next charge.

Glancing at Marquis Bors, he saw a similar, deeply concerned look in the aging Marquis' eyes. The man might be holding his tongue while his court discussed matters, but he was clearly keenly interested in answers to the questions Valeri was raising. With a small, silent nod between the old soldiers, Valeri pressed on, sparing Bors the indignity of needing to question the young men when he was clearly suffering from the onset of winter.

"How many of these armored serpent demons were there?" Valeri Leufroy asked intently as he positioned himself between Bors and Bastian, subtly implying that he was speaking for the Marquis in addition to his own desire for answers. "Armor like this can't be common among the demons or we'd see more of it," he reasoned. "But if they have even a dozen of these armored serpents..."

"There were three that ambushed Sir Carwyn," Bastian said uncomfortably. Three didn't sound like a threatening number, or at least, not threatening enough to get the results they wanted, but he wasn't stupid enough to lie in the presence of an Inquisitor, no matter how much his father wanted him to produce results.

"My father ordered our caravans to remain in Hanrahan Town instead of risking losing more knights to these demons," Bastian said, making it sound as though his father had made a wise and prudent decision when he chose not to send their tithe to Lothian City.

"We've lost eight parts in twenty of our autumn harvest that was bound for the market just from these raids, and another two parts in twenty to damage from the storm," he added, turning to face Bors Lothian.

Sitting beside Owain, Jocelynn's eyes narrowed sharply when she heard the number and her fingers moved rapidly as she calculated what that would mean for both the Hanrahans and the rest of the march if the Lothians didn't receive their tithe before the winter snows blocked the roads.

In the small notebook she'd brought to the meeting, she made several quick notations, scratching quietly with a dull-gray quill that she'd selected to avoid drawing attention to herself in the moments she needed to think. The Hanrahan's losses, it seemed, were greater than she'd estimated, and that would require her to make adjustments...

"Your Grace, on behalf of my father, we plead for your understanding this year," Bastian said as he dropped to one knee and repeated the words his father had given him. "My father has declared that he will only collect half of his tithe from the villages this year in order to help make up for the losses suffered by the villages that lost their caravans. He humbly asks that Your Grace excuse us from this tithe and the next one so that we may care for our people through the winter and the spring planting."

"We also plead that your Grace will send knights and soldiers to escort the remainder of our goods to market," Bastian added shamelessly as he looked in the direction of the table of representatives from the Church. "And if your Worship is willing to spare us some aid, we ask if a Templar or Inquisitor could be present to help guard our farmers and soldiers when they bring in what little we have to sell."

For Bastian, this was the most important part of the task his father had given him. Their losses were slightly less than what he had reported, but between the storm and the demon attacks, it seemed like everyone in the room accepted the figures that he'd given. Now, he needed to use the losses they'd suffered to obtain concessions that would help them recoup the losses of several caravans and even a knight.

If he could obtain that, even if he had to give up on obtaining more guards to protect their goods, he was certain that his father would be pleased enough with the results to reward his son for his efforts.

Chapter 770: Responding to the Disaster (Part One)

For a moment after Bastian made his plea the hall went quiet and even the crackling of the fires in the great hall's hearths and the tapping of rain and hail against the windows felt loud while the Marquis contemplated Bastian's request.

Next to the young Hanrahan lord, Liam Dunn fumed quietly. The Dunns had already made their tithe for the autumn but if his father was right, the losses to their herds of sheep and cattle would be

extraordinary. Men were still scouring the countryside in the wake of the storm, but early estimates were that they had lost more than three hundred head of livestock.

To the whole of the barony, it might sound small, but for the individual hamlets, the losses were devastating. Replenishing the sheep that produced so much of the march's wool would take at least a year, and the cattle would take between two and four years to replace, so while the most recent tithe had been met, when the next ones came due it would be much more difficult.

By contrast, the Hanrahans had lost crops of vegetables and grain. Their losses amounted to a single harvest and while they would doubtlessly suffer a lean winter, by the end of spring, it would be as if nothing happened to them. Yet they were already begging to be excused from their obligations and even had the gall to ask for the Marquis and the Church to guard their caravans from the demons!

"Your request isn't entirely unreasonable," Bors said, provoking another fit of coughing intense enough that he briefly clutched his chest. "The winter weather doesn't agree with me," he said mildly after taking a moment to collect himself and sip more of the steaming mulled wine. "Pay it no mind."

"Father," Loman said, standing up from his seat and looking at the aging Marquis with genuine concern. "Perhaps we should take a brief recess. The news has been... significant. I'm sure that many of us would benefit from a few moments to compose ourselves," he added with a brief glance at High Priest Aubin. Unfortunately, his subtle request for support was met with nothing more than a non-committal shrug, as though the aging priest didn't care either way.

Jocelynn, on the other hand, didn't bother with asking for permission. She knew the old man's pride well enough by now to know that he would never ask for anything that implied he was weak or required support, especially in front of High Priest Aubin who was older than him by decades and Baron Leufroy who had been his companion in arms.

So while Loman tried to convince his father to call a recess, Jocelynn strode across the room to the racks of fur cloaks hanging next to the hearth. The garments had dried long ago and now radiated a pleasant warmth that complimented their softness when she felt each of them.

"Forgive me, High Priest Aubin," Jocelynn said, wrapping the first of three cloaks she'd retrieved around the back of the aging priest's chair so he could pull it around his shoulders if he wished or ignore it as he pleased. "I've been negligent to my elders and remiss in my responsibilities," she said as she brought the next cloak to drape across Bors' lap while bringing the third one to Baron Leufroy.

"Thank you, Lady Jocelynn," the baron said as he draped the warm cloak around his shoulders, smiling affectionately at the young woman who had already taken his darling daughter under her wing.

"The cold has a way of troubling every old soldier and I've grown so used to the aches, I hadn't even noticed the chill taking hold of me," he added with a pointed glance at the young lords at his table as if to suggest that one of them should have been so courteous to their seniors.

"Lady Jocelynn is always thoughtful and courteous," Bors agreed from his throne as he pulled the cloak close for warmth against the chill that had nothing to do with the wind and hail outside the hall. "But I doubt we need to take a recess, Loman. I'm sure everyone would prefer that this session end sooner rather than later, and young Bastian is right to prompt us to action instead of speculation.

"Owain," he said, turning to his eldest son. "I've placed you in charge of seeing to the accounting of tithes and our preparations for the war," he said, as if he was preparing to drop the responsibility for the shortfall squarely on his son's shoulders. "Tell me, how much will this set us back and what should we do about it?"

"Of course father," Owain said with a calculating gleam in his eyes and a half smile tugging at the corners of his lips. "Thankfully, even though your Grace commanded my personal guard and steward leave Lothian City for a more important mission during this time, my sister-in-law, Lady Jocelynn Blackwell, is well versed with methods of accounting."

His reminder about Sir Hugo and Sir Rain leaving under his father's orders served several purposes for the young Lothian Lord. First, it made it clear to everyone that his father had removed one of the most important supports he would need to take command of receiving the tithes, though that piece of information drew different responses from each of the barons present.

Baron Leufroy nodded in understanding, as if this sort of thing was to be expected from an aging lord grooming his successor. Forcing Owain to handle matters personally would ensure that he was deeply aware of the individual pieces that made up the larger whole of the March's administrative operation and Valeri found himself nodding in silent approval at his old friend's methods for grooming his heir.

Baron Otker, on the other hand, looked horrified at the notion of being forced to do such work without the support of the highly trained men under his command who managed such affairs. He'd spent lavishly

to have his own steward trained in the finest academy in Keating Duchy after all, and if his father had made him do without that sort of support, he wouldn't have known where to begin.

When Owain moved on to mentioning Lady Jocelynn's support, however, both men arrived at the same conclusion about Owain's second point. The young lord was already capitalizing on his marriage alliance with the affluent Blackwell family who seemed to have sent their younger daughter here to support the Lothian family while the elder daughter prepared to give birth to Owain's first child.

All of which made Owain's final point loud enough that it forced both men to reassess the frequently single-minded Lothian Heir. This was a man who would carve his own path forward, both on the battlefield and off... and he was making powerful allies who would help him to do so.

"My Lady," Owain said, extending a hand to the elegant young woman sitting next to him. "Please explain to my father and the rest of the court where matters stand and the plan I've devised to make up for the shortfall," he said with a charming smile that fooled no one who knew him well.

Of course, most of 'his' plan had come from Jocelynn, but the most important parts, the things she hadn't been clever enough to think of, had all come from him. His father might have taken away his steward and tried to push him into a trap by foisting responsibility for ledgers and accounts on the son who was least concerned with books and learning, but Owain wasn't about to go down without a fight.

Especially not when he had a convenient and compliant weapon like Jocelynn available. All she needed was a little bit of his guidance and Owain was certain she would prove as deadly as any sword... and his father would learn all too late that he'd been out maneuvered from the beginning.