

The Vampire 771

Chapter 771: Responding to the Disaster (Part Two)

"My Lords," Jocelynn said, drawing herself up to her full height and walking out from behind the table she shared with the Lothian brothers to stand at the center of the U-shaped arrangement of tables.

In the flickering light of the chandeliers above and the warm glow of the hearths that ringed the great hall, her skin looked radiant and her soft blond hair shone like spun gold. She'd dressed conservatively for the evening, wearing a dress of pale, seafoam blue that looked faded and aged, as if it had been washed in the waters of the sea and left out to dry.

Combined with subtle silver jewelry, bereft of jewels or pearls, it gave her a more mature presence than her seventeen years and she combined that with every other bit of grace and poise her teachers had instilled in her when she stood before the assembled Lothian court.

"I'm new to Lothian March, and I've only just begun to help my brother-in-law with the records, storehouses, and treasuries," she began. "I have to thank Head Steward Crozier as well, for his excellent notes and for answering my many questions. Marquis Bors is fortunate to have such a skilled and reliable Steward to oversee the many affairs of the March."

"We understand your experience is limited and that you've had little time," Baron Otker said from the side, shaking his head at how many words the woman wasted heaping praise on a servant who wasn't even present for the meeting. But what should he expect from a silly girl who didn't belong at a formal court anyway?

"Just tell us your estimate for how the losses will impact the march and then we can do as his Grace asked and decide what to do about it," the portly baron said, gesturing for the young lady to hurry things along.

"Certainly, my Lord," Jocelynn said, refusing to let Baron Otker's needling bother her. After months of soaking up Owain's endless rain of faint, subtle remarks that she was oblivious to one 'important' thing or another, or that she would understand better 'in a few year's time', she'd slowly built up a tolerance for the casual disregard the men of the frontier seemed to have for a woman's intellect.

It had taken a potent lesson from Isabell for Jocelynn to realize how subtle some of it had been, and that it had begun to make her doubt herself in places where she shouldn't have. But now that the Master

Engineer had helped her to see more clearly than she had since before she first laid eyes on Owain, she wasn't about to let a small-minded man like Baron Otker disrupt her plans.

"To start from the conclusion, there's no reason for the march to suffer a setback at all," Jocelynn said confidently. "The losses are devastating to the individual hamlet, severe to the individual village, serious to each of the baronies, and negligible to the march as a whole."

"As such," she said, turning to face Bors Lothian and bowing her head respectfully before raising her eyes to meet his gaze. "If your Grace wished to suspend collection of a tithe from Hanrahan Barony until next summer on account of Sir Hugo's brave service against the flat tailed demons last summer and his continued dedication to Lothian March during Lord Owain's trip to Blackwell County and ever since his return, then the treasury and the storehouses of Lothian City can absorb the loss."

"Likewise," Jocelynn said, turning to nod at Liam Dunn. "The Dunns have already suffered losses in their campaign against the demon villages during the summer, and were it not for the kind, compassionate assistance of Lord Loman Lothian in healing the wounded, the losses would have doubtlessly been tragic."

"Yet they suffered them without complaint," Jocelynn praised. "And expanded the borders of Lothian March yet again, something no other barony has accomplished in several years," she said with a pointed look at Baron Otker.

"Is it your position then that the Dunns should be exempt from tithes until next summer as well?" Baron Otker said with deeply furrowed brows. "I can accept giving way for the Hanrahans, they have always been abiding and understanding vassals to his Grace," he said quickly. "They have respected the laws of the Kingdom and the March in letter and in spirit."

"But," the portly baron said sharply. "The Dunns have suffered such great losses by flaunting the rules of king and crown. For years, this court has protested their constant expansion and the construction of these fortified hamlets, pocket garrisons, and miniature villages. There is a reason that our people must be protected by a knight and his soldiers, and the Dunns have suffered for their hubris in believing that they do not need a knight to protect their people."

"Ridiculous!" Liam shouted, surging to his feet. "The law limits us just as it limits you. We have raised no more knights than we're allowed, but we have pushed the demons back further and further each year and we have raised up soldiers to protect our people and our herds. At no time in my entire life have we been attacked by these strange 'Twisted Ones', nor ever before in the history of Lothian March."

"To blame us now for suffering from an unprecedented danger is no different than saying that Sir Carwyn deserved his defeat at the hands of these armored serpent demons," he fumed, pointing angrily at the sketch of the demon who had defeated Sir Carwyn in single combat.

"Sir Carwyn did indeed suffer an unprecedented danger," Baron Leufroy said carefully. "But young lord Liam, your circumstances and his are vastly different. By your own admission, your family attacks the demons year after year, constantly provoking retribution for your actions. Bold action is worthy of praise when it succeeds, but when your family takes such bold risks, you must be prepared to suffer the consequences if you have gambled and lost."

"My lords," Owain said, tapping firmly on the table to gather everyone's attention. "I told you all that Lady Jocelynn would present not just the facts and figures but my plan for resolving the shortfall. Did you all think that I meant that the treasury could bear these losses simply as charity and thanks for the contributions of Sir Hugo and Young Lord Liam?"

"Lady Jocelynn," Owain said, turning to face the radiant young woman with a charming smile. "Please explain to them what I've told you should be done about the Dunn family's hamlets, along with the other measures that we should take in order to address the shortage of supplies that we'll face with less of the Dunn family's wool to clothe our soldiers and less of their beef to feed our army."

"Of course, my Lord," Jocelynn said sweetly. "My lords, it's no secret that several Guild Masters from Blackwell County are planning to buy into the peerage as knights in preparation for the coming war. They have been touring in the western lands for some time now and they're visiting those lands even now."

"Have you heard from them since the demon attacks?" Sir Tommin said, breaking his silence for the first time since the meeting began. "I've heard that they were surveying the lands near the mouth of the Vale of Mists. There are... unique dangers there," he said, shooting a brief look at Inquisitor Diarmuid as he spoke. "Are you certain that they're still safe after the attacks?"

"We've received no word," Owain lied before Jocelynn had a chance to respond. In truth, he'd sent several of his best hunters and trackers after them as soon as he received word of the attacks but the only report he'd received back so far had been more confusing than illuminating.

The men had found a recent pyre where a single body had been burned. Evidently, the coals of the pyre had still been smoldering when the storm came, and the bones of the soldier who had died hadn't been completely burned away, but the storm had washed away any tracks in the area to say where the merchants had gone after whatever battle they fought ended.

Clearly, they'd been victorious or there wouldn't have been a chance to build a pyre for their fallen, but where they might have fled to in order to find safety from whatever attacked them was still a mystery to him.

At the moment, the only solace he had was that the body belonged to a man much smaller than Sir Hugo, Sir Rain or the Iron Monger Tiernan. And it was clearly a man's body which meant it couldn't have been Master Isabell either, though Owain's feelings were more mixed about the fate of the sharp-tongued shrew he'd been forced to deal with for the past half year.

"But even if we've received no word, I'm certain the demons wouldn't have bothered with them," Owain added confidently. "After all, the demons seem to have been driven more by hunger than anything else. They've stolen sheep, cattle, vegetables, and grain. Our guests from Blackwell County weren't transporting food or riches, and they were guarded by two knights and a dozen men. They should be more than safe enough, even at the edges of the Vale."

"Didn't I already say that I'd had enough of speculation?" Bors interrupted from the throne. "Young Lady Jocelynn, if you and my son have prepared a plan, then I would hear it plainly. The night is growing long already, and I would have my orders executed at first light."

"So speak, young lady," the Marquis said with a penetrating look. "Tell us how you intend to solve this problem for the March."

Chapter 772: Jocelynn's Plan (Part One)

All eyes lay on Jocelynn as she faced the assembled court. Some in the hall, like High Priest Aubin, wore calm, impassive gazes as Jocelynn resumed her explanation. Matters of taxes and tithes were of some concern to the Church, but their greater concern was the demon attacks themselves. Everything else was a distraction from fighting the root of the evil that had lashed out at the western territories.

The lords were the most anxious, though each for their own reasons. Baron Otker looked on with obvious anticipation, hoping to hear how the Dunns would be brought to heel by this disaster, while Liam Dun narrowed his eyes as if he would be able to see a trap spun from the young lady's words.

Yet no matter how people looked at her, Jocelynn kept her eyes on the only men who mattered. Owain. Bors. Loman. In the end, those three would determine whether her plans had a chance or not.

She no longer hoped that Bors Lothian would approve of Owain as an heir and bless their union. That ship, she realized, had sailed when the Marquis began introducing Loman to eligible young ladies as if he was a prize stallion. Fortunately, the demon attacks had given her an opportunity to forge a power block of her own, hidden within a plan to handle the economic fallout of the disaster.

"My Lords," Jocelynn said as she resumed her explanation. "The problems that we are facing cannot be resolved in an evening, but with careful management, their impacts can be mitigated to such an extent that the coming Holy War will not be delayed. To do so, we'll break the problem into three parts, though I can only offer solutions to two of them," she said.

"First, the heavy losses suffered by the Dunn Barony will require significant investments to address," Jocelynn said, holding up a single finger. "Second, we must make preparations to feed and clothe a large army when soldiers begin to arrive from across the sea in the late spring and summer next year. Third, we must respond to the demon attacks now to protect our people and lands before winter's arrival makes fighting back all but impossible."

"My lords, I am not a soldier and I cannot command them," she admitted sadly. "And so the third problem, I leave to Lord Owain to address directly. But for the first two which are challenges of economics and industry, Lord Owain and I have been able to prepare solutions," she said as she turned to face Liam Dunn.

"Four Guild Masters from Blackwell County have pledged to bring their fortunes to Lothian March and swear fealty to the Lothian throne," she explained. "The terms of their agreement have stalled on the matter of where their lands will be located, but the assumption thus far, from all parties, has been that they will establish their villages and domains on the open frontier."

"You want to settle them in Dunn Barony instead?" Liam said, frowning at Jocelynn as he tried to understand how that would benefit anyone. "They can't become my father's vassals. We already have ten large, established villages, each surrounded by at least four or more hamlets. We cannot support four new knights without breaking the king's laws."

"You cannot take on more knights as a barony, that much is true," Jocelynn said with a wide grin. "But the Dunn family has always favored bold moves, so I offer you a bold move now. Give up the southern and westernmost edge of your territory and the hamlets that are located there."

"Survey the hamlets in that area to determine which four suffered the least in these raids and abandon the rest," Jocelynn said decisively, as though it was the only real option. "Resettle the people and herds from the hamlets that suffered the most in the hamlets, no, the new villages, that will be handed over to the Guild Masters when they are granted their titles by Marquis Bors."

Sitting at the table of lords, Baron Otker began to clap slowly and softly as Jocelynn spoke of stripping away the lands that the Dunns had painstakingly freed from demon claws over the past several decades. Stripping away enough lands to support four knights, and abandoning at least four if not more of their hamlets in order to fortify the populations of these new villages would be a crippling blow to the Dunns.

Even better, it would break their stranglehold on the resources that they lorded over the rest of the march! Oh, they would likely keep the spinners, dyers, sawmills, and other significant industries, but their supply of raw materials would be deeply affected by this shift.

Of course, if Serle Otker understood the implications then so would everyone else. It was a slap of condemnation so fierce that he couldn't imagine it would stand, but he had to admire the young lass for delivering such a bold rebuke in the middle of the court's deliberations.

"If this is the kind of help you're offering, then on behalf of my father, we refuse!" Liam said, slamming a fist into the table. "We would rather struggle alone than hand over the lands we've fought for just because of a single demon raid!"

"Not a single demon raid," Jocelynn countered smoothly. "Several. But I never said you would lose these lands forever, my lord," she added sweetly, seemingly unperturbed by his outburst. "I said that the Dunns are known for acting boldly, and here, you must act boldly with conviction that you will succeed."

"After all, carving off portions of your lands for the creation of a new barony is one of the first steps that the Dunn family must undertake in order to grow from a barony into a county," Jocelynn said, turning to face Marquis Bors directly.

"You're gambling, young lady," Bors said in a deep, grumbling tone. "You're gambling that I will be a duke at the end of this holy war, to raise up Baron Dunn as a count and return these lands to him as part of his expanded domain. In a hundred years, we have yet to defeat the three demon lords that block our path to those heights. What makes you so certain that we could deliver on such a promise now?"

Chapter 773: Jocelynn's Plan (Part Two)

When Bors spoke of defeating the demon lords who had plagued Lothian March ever since its founding, High Priest Aubin's mask of indifference crumpled and he found himself leaning forward in anticipation of the young lady's answer.

The Temple in Lothian City was the grandest and mightiest in all the frontier, yet despite fielding twice as many Templars as the other temples, the Church had yet to claim victory over a single demon lord who had blocked their advancement west. The most they'd been able to do for the past hundred years had been to hold the line, protecting the towns and villages from dangers like the Demon Lady of the Vale and her vampire spawn with constant vigilance.

But this young lady, newly arrived in Lothian March, and educated by masters trained in the old countries, seemed more confident in their victory than even the most faithful of Templars and Aubin deeply wanted to understand why. Was it her knowledge of the support coming from across the sea that gave her such confidence? Or was it faith?

"I believe that we will defeat the demon lords this time, your Grace," Jocelynn said smoothly. "Because this time, you have two things that you have lacked for the past hundred years. The first is the support of the Church to start a Holy War and draw on the strength of the kingdoms across the sea," she said, nodding her head at the High Priest and the other men at his table.

"You are placing a great deal of faith in the Church, young lady," High Priest Aubin said. "Many have doubts, and even the Holy Lord of Light cannot promise victory at the end of a Holy War. The Lord of Light only gives us the opportunity to struggle to reach the Heavenly Shores. We must obtain victory for ourselves."

"Your Worship is right," Jocelynn said, lowering her head respectfully. "The Church cannot promise us victory. But this is the first Holy War since the end of the Second Crusade. Men of faith from all over the world will flock to our banners. That alone gives us strength not seen since the era of Cellach Lothian when he drove the Demon Lady of the Vale from her home. But this time, you have another advantage as well," she added.

"The second advantage is an alliance with my family and all the resources, supplies and knowledge we bring to this war," she added. "My sister cannot be here to speak on behalf of Blackwell County," she said, closing her eyes for a moment and taking a deep breath as she fought to present the image that her sister was merely indisposed and not lost to her forever. "But I am here in her place to ensure my family lives up to our obligations as your allies."

"Lord Liam," she said, turning back to face the young lord from the Dunn family. "The terms of the agreement with the Guild Masters of Blackwell County are very specific regarding their support for the war effort and what they will and won't contribute to the march in order to secure their titles. In fact, because of their contributions to the war, they are exempted from the thousands of gold sovereigns that would normally be owed to Marquis Bors in order to receive their lands."

"But they are required to invest their own funds to improve their lands, construct their manors and establish their villages," Owain said as he strode forward to stand next to Jocelynn, smiling proudly as he revealed the 'trap' within his plan. "Don't you see, Liam? By giving up your lands for a time, you force these wealthy merchants to spend their own money to replenish your lost herds, build stronger villages and improve more lands."

"In the end, it will all come back to you," he promised. "We'll even dangle a carrot in front of the guild masters, offering up the position of baron of these lands to whichever of them contributes the most to the reconstruction and the conquest of the demon territories in the coming war."

"You're a soldier as much as I am," Owain said, walking over to Liam and throwing an arm around his shoulders in an almost brotherly gesture. "Soldiers know when to retreat in order to advance again. Take this step back for now, and I promise you, the Lothians and Dunns will advance together when we trample the demons beneath our feet!"

Sitting at the table of lords, Baron Otker stared in open mouthed shock at the way his moment of triumph had been snatched out of his mouth before he could even savor it. Count? They were offering to formally elevate the Dunns at the end of the war so long as they were willing to take a step back now? What kind of punishment was this? This wasn't what he wanted at all!

The other lords looked just as dissatisfied, as though they'd been served a mouthwatering mutton-chop only to find it cooked to the consistency of boot leather when they bit into it. Baron Leufroy could at least recognize that it was, as Marquis Bors had said, a gamble at best. One that could still result in a loss of territories for the Dunns if they were unsuccessful in defeating the demon lords in this war. But the upside if they gambled and won... wasn't it a bit too generous?

At the table where the men representing the Church sat, however, the reaction was very different.

"They're proposing to marry the Dunn family's rise or fall to victory in the Holy War," Diarmuid whispered. "It's a shrewd trap. If the Dunns refuse, it's as good as proclaiming their lack of faith in our ability to defeat the demons. They might as well brand themselves as heretics at that point. Losing a fifth of their lands would be cheap by comparison to what they'll lose."

"It might not be as bad as that, Inquisitor," High Priest Aubin said softly as he stroked his brittle white beard in thought. "But it does bind them tightly to the war against the demons. They'll fight twice as hard because the stakes are clear. Victory delivers a very tangible reward and defeat will see them stripped of hard won lands."

"Sir Tommin," the old man said, raising a bushy white eyebrow at the Templar who had once been Owain's personal guard. "Is this kind of shrewdness typical of your former lord? I hadn't thought him to be so calculating off the battlefield."

"This," Tommin said, frowning in discomfort as he grappled with how to answer the question without betraying his former lord's confidence. Not because he owed any great loyalty to Owain since leaving his service, but because he refused to compromise on his own ideals any more than he already had when he revealed that Owain had murdered Lady Ashlynn.

"This is the sort of scheme that would appeal to him," Tommin finally said. "Lord Owain is always confident in his ability to obtain victory and he expects others to behave the same way. He never considers defeat because he is unwilling to lose. But to think of something like this? I think we can thank Lady Jocelynn for much of this."

"Mmm, and it seems that Lord Bors knows it as well as you do," Aubin said, nodding along in understanding. "But he isn't exposing the charade that this is Lord Owain's plan. Perhaps he isn't as firmly committed to Loman taking the throne as we thought..."

"Should I say something?" Inquisitor Diarmuid asked. "A few questions should reveal how much Owain knows or doesn't know about 'his' own plan. If he is propping himself up on his sister-in-law's abilities, it shouldn't be difficult to expose."

"No," Aubin said with a deep, heavy sigh. "Whether it comes from Lord Owain or Lady Jocelynn is irrelevant. The result is still a noble family on the front lines of this war who will lose their ability to retreat or accept defeat... This is a good thing for us and not something we should impede."

Chapter 774: Bors' Decision (Part One)

While the lords complained under their breath and the priests spoke among themselves, Jocelynn only had eyes for Marquis Bors, studying his face for the slightest sign that would indicate his acceptance or disapproval of her plan.

For her, this was more than just an attempt to extract capital from the Blackwell merchant guilds, though that was the most obvious and immediate goal of her plan. The real goal in her mind was the elevation of one of those Guild Masters to the position of Baron within Dunn County.

With the gratitude of the Dunn family for her role in their elevation and a guild master who still held loyalty to the Blackwell family as a newly elevated baron, she would have a stable base of power and a place she could flee to within Lothian territory if the day ever came that she needed to do so.

She might not be able to become a baroness in her own right, ruling over a territory of her own, but it was better than nothing. And if she could help the ship captains establish their domains in this new barony when they became knights, then her base of support there would be even stronger.

She only hoped that no one would realize she was building her own source of power within Lothian lands until it was too late... and that she could endure long enough for the power she was nurturing to grow strong enough to protect her.

"Lady Jocelynn, my valiant son Owain," Bors finally said after several minutes of quiet deliberation. "I trust your plan to resolve the shortfall in supplies for the army is just as considered and will also take many months of work before it bears fruit?"

"It is as you say, your Grace," Jocelynn said, offering a deep curtsy and bowing her head low. "For the short term, I can offer no better solutions than what the Hanrahans have already asked for. Reduce their tithes or forgive them entirely so that the villages who lost the most do not suffer undue hardship."

"The storehouses are filled with enough food to sustain the march through the winter, even without the tithe from Hanrahan barony," she said confidently. "And even without the contributions of the Dunns at

the end of winter, we can make up the losses across the remainder of the march. Rather than focus on the immediate shortfall, Lord Owain and I believe we should focus our efforts on preparing for the war."

"Hmm," Bors said before another fit of coughing racked his body strongly enough that his cup of mulled wine fell from his hand, spilling what little liquid remained in the cup across the floor.

"Father!" Loman cried, standing from his seat and rushing to his father's side.

"Sit down!" Bors roared, hurling the fur cloak that had covered his lap at his approaching son and glaring at him. "Fool child," he said, before another fit of coughing stopped him from speaking further.

For a moment, the entire room froze, staring in shock as their Marquis lashed out at his son.

Outside of Bors' own family, Baron Leufroy knew Bors the best, and this wasn't the first time he'd seen his liege lord lash out and hurl something at someone unfortunate enough to provoke his ire. During the war, he'd seen the frustrated lord hurl anything from bits of armor to paper weights holding down maps and even a dagger still in its sheath flung at the head of a stammering young soldier who gave a confusing and contradictory report about a demon sighting.

But no one, not even Valeri Leufroy, had ever seen Bors lose his temper and lash out physically at a session of the Lothian Court, not even a small, emergency session like this one. Nor had anyone seen him berate his sons so publicly before, and no one knew how to respond to it.

"This meeting has gone on long enough," the aging marquis said, ignoring the startled looks from his lords and guests alike as he tucked a blood-stained handkerchief back into a pocket. His movement was deft enough that only a few people attending spotted the sign of how serious the "winter cough" truly was, but after his outburst, anyone who noticed it wisely held their tongues.

"We will suspend discussions of the Dunn Hamlets and the supplies for the army until the full court can gather in two week's time," Bors announced after clearing his throat several times.

"As to the matter of the demon raids... I've made my decision," Bors said as he turned to face the High Priest with an expression that said he wasn't in the mood to negotiate about whatever he'd decided. "I

require the cooperation of the Church in order to protect our people. High Priest Aubin, will the temple submit to my orders in this fight against the demons?"

"So long as your requests are reasonable, your Grace," the old priest said in a carefully neutral tone. Clearly, now wasn't a time when he should press the Marquis on the formal divisions between his subjects and people who answered only to the authority of the Church. There was a time to assert their independence and ensure that the Marquis remained humble in making requests of the Church rather than issuing demands, but now most certainly wasn't one of those times.

"I see no reason that the Church cannot supply the aid you require," Aubin said. "One of our most sacred missions has always been to eliminate the demon threat and to protect our people from the forces of darkness. So long as it serves that end, the Church will readily march at your side."

"Very well," Bors said as he turned his gaze to his youngest son. It wasn't the moment he'd have chosen to thrust the young man forward. Nothing in this meeting had produced results that justified the action he was about to take. If anything, he should be praising Jocelynn for bringing a cool head, holding herself apart from wild speculation, and focusing on what could actually be done.

But now wasn't the moment to reward the cunning young lady from Blackwell County. At most, he would reconsider a match between her and Loman after this demonstration, but first, he needed to press forward and use this opportunity to raise Loman's standing in the eyes of the Court. And if Loman couldn't bear up under the pressure... then perhaps there would still be a chance for Owain after all.

Chapter 775: Bors' Decision (Part Two)

Loman had frozen awkwardly halfway to the dais when his father hurled his cloak at him, and now he stood there like a deer meeting a hunter's gaze, unable to advance or retreat in the face of his father's ire.

The sight of it was enough to make Bors' blood boil, but he had only himself to blame for failing to take Loman in hand earlier. The smirk on Owain's face, as he stood nearby, only made matters worse. Owain was delighting in his brother's misstep, and he wasn't bothering to hide it now that he'd captured so much attention with the plan that Jocelynn had helped him to concoct.

One brother looked like he was afraid of being struck, and the other was looking forward to seeing the punch land, and they were doing it in full view of the Church and the Court. What a sad state of affairs that he would have to clean up.

"Loman, receive the orders of your Marquis," Bors said formally, pushing through the pain of the old wound in his side to stand up as straight and proud as he had in his younger years.

"Father," Loman said, surprised to be called on but kneeling before the dais nonetheless. His heart hammered in his chest, and sweat soaked the fabric of his tunic between his shoulder blades as he waited to hear his father's command.

He knew, knew that he should have waited to tend to his father's health until the meeting ended, but the moment he saw the cup fall from his father's hand, he'd completely forgotten that they were in the middle of holding court and that his actions would only embarrass his father by calling more attention to his strange sickness.

No, he admitted to himself as he knelt on the cold stone floor. He hadn't forgotten where he was. He simply hadn't cared. His father's health was more important than a moment of awkwardness as far as the young priest was concerned... he just wished his father saw it the same way.

"Loman, you are more suited to investigating these strange demons than anyone else under my command," Bors said formally. "Your knowledge of things recorded only in ancient and forbidden texts is something no one else can match."

"Therefore," Bors said as he turned his gaze to High Priest Aubin. "So long as the High Priest consents, I would have you take Sir Tommin with his Holy Light Blade and Inquisitor Diarmuid, who is known for the power of his Holy Flames, and investigate these strange, armored demons who attacked Hanrahan Barony. Find the source of them. Kill them if you can. Put an end to our doubts and bring us the answers we require before the full court convenes in two week's time!"

"Father," Owain said, stepping forward and kneeling before the dais. "I respect my brother's knowledge," he said, though his jaw was tight and the words were clipped as he spoke them. "But he is no soldier in the field. Let me take command of the hunting party, and I swear to you, I will return with the demon's armor as a trophy and its hide to adorn our weapons."

Inwardly, Owain fumed, and it took all of his strength to continue to play the game before the court, as if he were a dutiful son who simply wanted what was best for the people. Loman in command? He wanted to laugh out loud at the absurdity of it all, but berating his brother in front of an Inquisitor and the High Priest rose to a level of stupidity and arrogance that even he could recognize as foolish.

"I've made up my mind, Owain," Bors said, looking down at his kneeling son in clear disapproval. "A year ago, I might have sent you along with Sir Bors and Sir Tommin, or perhaps with Sir Rain, Sir Kaefin, and Sir Hugo, but none of those men are by your side at the moment," he said. "Two of them are dead, two of them are missing, and the greatest of them stands with the Church rather than with you."

"Father, I..." Owain began, only for his father's merciless words to cut him off mid-protest.

"Stand down, Owain," Bors said curtly. "You have your duties here in Lothian City. Train the new men under your command into a force that can equal or exceed what you have lost. In time, an opportunity may arrive before you again, but this is not that opportunity."

"Your Worship," Bors said, turning away from his sons to face the high priest and bring the discussion to a close. "Is my request reasonable enough? Do I have your full support?"

"Most reasonable, your Grace," Aubin said with a slight nod. He'd been afraid that, after Lady Jocelynn offered up the four Templars who were part of her guard, the Marquis would demand a similar or greater contribution from the Church.

As it stood, however, sending Sir Tommin with his Holy Light Blade and Inquisitor Diarmuid with his vast experience investigating evil and the power of his Holy Flames was so reasonable and sound that the High Priest might have offered them up himself if Bors hadn't made the request.

"I'll see that Sir Tommin and Inquisitor Diarmuid are prepared to ride at dawn," Aubin said, placing a hand on the shoulders of each of the men beside him.

"We will carry the light into the darkness and root out evil," Sir Tommin said, speaking for both men as they knelt to acknowledge their orders.

"Your Grace, what about the Twisted Ones who attacked my people?" Liam Dunn said, staring in disbelief at the way all of the aid seemed to be headed to Hanrahan Barony without a request for as much as a single Templar or Inquisitor to be sent to protect the people of his home. "If the demons come again, we'll be helpless to protect everyone in our hamlets and our villages. There just aren't enough men to go around after our losses..."

"In that case," Marquis Bors said, giving the young man a piercing look. "I suggest you listen to the wisdom of young Lady Jocelynn's words. Abandon what you cannot hold. Move your people now, before the winter snows arrive."

"Remember, young lord Liam," Bors said as he turned to leave. "People can rebuild, but land cannot. Make sure you know which you should be fighting to protect."

Chapter 776: Adrift in Dreams (Part One)

Stars twinkled in the night sky like jewels scattered across a soft blanket of the deepest, darkest blue that Ashlynn had only ever seen in Nyrielle's eyes. All around her, the only sounds were the soft splashing of waves against the sides of a wooden boat, and the creak of the boat itself as the gentle waves rolled beneath it.

When Ashlynn asked Nyrielle to guard her dreams and keep her from harming herself at night, she'd asked her lover to show her the places that she had never been so they could build new memories together in dreams. She had meant it as a way to ensure that she didn't touch on anything that would trigger the hurt and pain of learning what Jocelynn had done to her, and at first, Nyrielle had obliged.

The first night, Nyrielle had taken Ashlynn to a place known as the Thousand Spires, a strange land that seemed to belong to a different world where great columns of stone rose from the earth like spears pointed at the sky.

Each spire was more than five hundred feet tall with some reaching heights ten times greater than their smallest brothers and they were studded with caves that were home to anywhere between five and fifty people. Vast rope bridges stretched between the spires like the threads of a spider's web and at night, walking across the bridges felt like walking among the stars themselves.

"This is a real place?" Ashlynn asked as she stared in wonder at the strange rocks and the homes that had been carved into the cliff faces of the giant spires. "You've been here?"

"Most Eldritch Lords come here at least once in their lives," Nyrielle said with a light laugh as she guided Ashlynn along the network of rope bridges. "Don't worry, I'll catch you if you fall," she added when she noticed her lover taking tentative, hesitant steps.

"The Thousand Spires home to Makya, the Eldritch Emperor for the past three hundred years," Nyrielle explained. "He belongs to the Soaring Clan and his wings are even larger than mine," Nyrielle said with a light laugh. "But I didn't bring you here to talk about him or to share my memories of meeting him. I came to show you how the people of the Thousand Spires paint with sand."

"Paint with sand?" Ashlynn asked, blinking in confusion. "Do they mix it with glue so it clings to the canvas?"

"No," Nyrielle said, leading Ashlynn into a small cave filled with jar after jar of brightly colored sand and lit by hundreds of candles. "The Soaring Clan create vast paintings in sand that stretch hundreds of paces across and can only be truly seen from high above," she explained. "And when the winds come, the paintings blow away as though they were never there. Then they begin again, creating something beautiful and new."

Slowly, Nyrielle walked over to the wall in the cave, taking a small woven basket and filling it with several different jars of colorful sand before returning to Ashlynn in the center of the cave.

"Tonight, we'll paint by pouring sand," Nyrielle said, offering the basket to Ashlynn. "Choose your color and I'll show you how..."

That night, Ashlynn vaguely recalled that there was something important she should be thinking about, something that had been weighing on her heart and mind, but no matter how hard she tried, the thought slipped through her fingers like loose sand.

But once she gave up trying to remember what she was forgetting and lost herself in the process of 'painting' with Nyrielle, the focus that it took to create shapes and patterns blended with Nyrielle's affectionate closeness to create a night that she would always treasure.

Day after day, after Dame Sybyll brought home a worn and exhausted Ashlynn who could do little more than eat a simple meal and allow Nyrielle to help her wash before falling into bed, Nyrielle guided her into dreams of distant places and amazing sights across the Eldritch world.

After the third night, when they shared a sumptuous meal delivered by servants who wore nothing but body paint while they watched sensual dances performed by veiled beauties who juggled fire as they

swayed to the beat of the drums, Nyrielle began to pull back on the amount of power she used to cloud Ashlynn's mind.

The combination of physical exhaustion and time between the present and the moment she'd learned the truth were quickly wearing away at the sharp, dangerous edges of Ashlynn's pain and rage, leaving behind deep aches that would take years to fully heal, but lacked the ability to overwhelm her senses.

Now, after the fifth and final night of training, Nyrielle used no power at all when she brought Ashlynn to the largest lake in the Eldritch world. A lake so vast that it held dozens of islands large enough to host a village, and there were several places on the lake where a boat couldn't see the shore or any of the islands.

"Who's territory is it this time?" Ashlynn asked when Nyrielle led her along a winding forest path covered in fine gravel that crunched beneath their feet. "I'm starting to feel like you're boasting of the powerful people you've made friends with in your travels," she teased before blinking in surprise when they exited the forest and arrived at a small cove overlooking the lake.

There, a small, spindle shaped boat lay half out of the water, filled with familiar supplies and equipment for an excursion on the calm, moonlit waters of the lake.

"We're going fishing?" Ashlynn asked, looking at Nyrielle in disbelief. "With a picnic basket?"

The gesture was incredibly sweet and exactly the sort of thing that Ashlynn had come to expect from her doting lover but it also touched on many of her memories of home. She'd never gone fishing in such a small boat before, her parents would never have taken such a great risk, but she'd fished off the back of larger ships in Blackwell Harbor several times, and on a few occasions, she'd also gone with Jocelynn to fish off the family's personal pier in the harbor.

Thus far, Nyrielle had avoided anything that would have brought reminders of Ashlynn's home or family, but this time, she felt like she'd been thrust directly into echoes of the place she missed the most and reminded of the things that might be lost to her forever, with no warning at all.

"Why?" Ashlynn asked as her eyes grew moist. "Why would you bring me to a place like this?"

Chapter 777: Adrift in Dreams (Part Two)

"Why would I bring you to a place like this?" Nyrielle said as she firmly gripped Ashlynn's delicate hand and guided her toward the waiting boat. "Because you have never been here before. Because there is nothing here that can hurt you," she promised, pulling her young lover close. "And because you have learned to swim, at least well enough to make it back to the boat if something happens," she teased as they arrived beside the boat.

"That's not," Ashlynn started, frowning at Nyrielle. "That's not what I meant, and you know it. You're testing me," she said. But as she spoke, a frown formed on her lips and her brow crumpled in thought while she stared at the boat and listened to the soft sound of gentle waves lapping at the shore.

Was Nyrielle really testing her? Or was she trying to give her back something that she'd thought she lost? This place was so calm and inviting, so wonderfully pure that even though there were familiar elements, it had stripped away all of the pieces that were part of the pain and left her with something that had always been a part of her, and likely always would.

"No, you're not testing me," Ashlynn said, turning to look into Nyrielle's anxious midnight eyes. "It's more than that. I, I was surprised to see something that reminded me of the sea and of home. It, it caught me off guard. But," she said as she let out a long, deep breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding onto. "But even though I was surprised, and even though it hurts a bit..."

"It isn't more than you can handle," Nyrielle said, pulling Ashlynn close and wrapping her arms around her lover. "One day, you'll go home. You'll walk the paths you once walked with her, and you'll eat the food you once shared with your sister. But that day isn't today. Today, you get to do something that you once enjoyed with her, in a different place at a different time, and with a different person who loves you very much," she said softly as she gently stroked Ashlynn's long, silky hair.

"If it's too much, we can go somewhere else," Nyrielle offered. "There are still many places I can show you. But I'd like to show you this one on the last day I get to keep you all to myself while I sleep."

"I, I'd like that too," Ashlynn said as she sank into Nyrielle's embrace. For a moment, she didn't move, she just stood on the shore of the lake, listening to the sounds of the waves and the rocking of the boat as they blended with the slow, steady heartbeat she could hear in Nyrielle's chest.

There were memories that tried to snatch and claw at her, but she refused to let herself dwell on them when she was in such a beautiful place in the arms of the woman who meant more to her than life itself.

There was still pain, and maybe that pain would never go away, but for what felt like the first time in several days, the fog of pain and rage that had obscured her vision felt like it had finally parted. And when it did, it revealed a world filled with wonder, waiting for her and her love to discover together.

"Let me get in the boat before you push off," Ashlynn said as she pulled back from Nyrielle. "And then you can tell me where we are this time," she said with a smile.

"Whatever you wish, my darling," Nyrielle said as she helped Ashlynn into the boat before lifting the bow effortlessly and easing it into the water. There was a faint breeze blowing across the lake, and the waves were stronger once they exited the cove, but Ashlynn paid the waves little mind as she set the oars in their locks and began to row further out onto the lake.

"This is called the Lake of Stars," Nyrielle said as she opened the picnic basket and began to spread sweet blueberry jelly onto a slice of bread before topping it with soft, creamy cheese. "Great Lord Kuunik rules over more than thirty islands and all the settlements on the shores of this lake. In the winter, the shallow areas around the lake and near the islands freeze over, and there are islands that you can walk between if you're careful."

"Say 'ahh'," Nyrielle teased as she leaned forward, holding out the treat she'd prepared for Ashlynn while her lover rowed them out into the lake.

"Aahhh," Ashlynn said, leaning forward to take the delectable morsel from Nyrielle's outstretched hand, brushing the tips of her fingers with her soft lips before she leaned back, savoring the rich creaminess of the cheese, the slightly nutty, crusty bread, and the sweet jelly that bound them together.

"You didn't tell me why it's called the Lake of Stars," Ashlynn said after she finished her treat. "Is it because the view of the sky is so good?"

"Impatient, aren't you, my darling?" Nyrielle said as she nibbled on a bit of bread, cheese, and jelly. "I was getting to it," she said with a playful pout. "I mentioned Great Lord Kuunik," Nyrielle continued once she'd finished her own treat as she moved on to preparing another one for Ashlynn. "He's a member of the Silent Ripples Clan. They're cousins of the Heartwood Clan with soft fur that lets them slide through the water without making a sound."

"According to Great Lord Kuunik, if you sink into the water until your eyes are just barely above the surface, and you're perfectly still on a warm summer night when the winds have all died and the water is calm, then its surface is like a mirror, reflecting the sky," Nyrielle explained. "He says that, if you let yourself drift, you won't be able to tell the difference between the sky above and the water below."

"That," Ashlynn said softly as she stopped rowing, allowing the boat to drift along with the waves and the current. "That sounds beautiful. Have you ever seen it when it's like that?"

"No," Nyrielle said. "This isn't an easy place for me to visit," she explained. "The lake belongs to Great Lord Kuunik, but the wilderness beyond the lakeshore belongs to Bardas and a few of his progeny who haven't claimed territories of their own."

"Ah," Ashlynn said softly without pressing for further details. She had her own reasons to resent the Jaws of Death after he exterminated Talauia's clan in order to force her to accept Shubnalu's offer of a place among his progeny.

Nyrielle had her own issues with her grandsire Torbin's grandsire as well. After all, each of the other True Vampires had made an attempt at some point to court Nyrielle, and from the few things Nyrielle had let slip, some of those attempts had been more than just uncomfortable to rebuff.

"We'll have to visit together then," Ashlynn said as she turned around in the boat so she could lie back and rest her head on Nyrielle's thighs while she gazed up at her lover and the stars beyond. "And we'll stay however long it takes to see the perfect night when the stars and the water meet."

"I'd like that," Nyrielle said, echoing Ashlynn's earlier words as she stroked her lover's soft, silky hair. "I'd like that very much..."

Chapter 778: Not Content To Wait (Part One)

It had only been a handful of days since the great hall in the ancient fortress had been decorated for a feast and played host to Ashlynn and Nyrielle's joyous betrothal celebration. Since then, the vast chamber continued to change, transforming from a place of joy and celebration into the true heart of the Vale's war effort.

Beneath the dias, a large, square table sat prominently, ringed with enough seats to accommodate Ashlynn's coven, Nyrielle's progeny, and the generals of the four armies. Around the table, large cork

boards had been fixed to wooden frames before they were covered with slips of parchment noting everything from the number of injured soldiers to the amount of grain pillaged in the first set of raids.

Most striking of all, however, were the two thrones sitting atop the dais. Both were simple compared to the grand works of craftsmanship that the Eldritch clans were capable of, but even in their simplicity, they radiated a sense of power and prestige. More importantly, at least to Ashlynn and Nyrielle, while their styling was unique and suitable to the woman who would sit on each of them, neither was positioned as superior to the other. Now, everyone gathered in the great hall sat at the table, waiting for the women who would occupy those thrones to join them.

"Dame Sybyll," Heila asked hesitantly from the side of the table where the members of Ashlynn's coven sat. "How, how was Lady Ashlynn this morning when your training ended? Is she doing better than she was a few days ago?"

The gathered generals like Savis and Tausau might be more concerned with the next phase of the war than the woman leading it, but Ashlynn's coven barely cared about the war. For Heila, Ollie, Virve and Hauke, Ashlynn's well being was much more important than the war.

"Yer lady is fine," Sybyll said after a brief glance at Thane. "She don' break easy, an' she gets up quick when anythin' knocks her down. She's stronger 'an before too. Ye'll see. So long as the Black Could o' Bad News didn'a bring any fresh disasters wit 'im, that is," she added, giving a look to Marcel that was equal parts teasing and genuine curiosity.

"You call me a black cloud like I don't bring you Keating Honey Ginger Drops every summer, and fig jelly by the winter," the youthful-looking vampire said with a teasing smile. "I have two jars for you this year, you know, just waiting for you to come claim them."

"Thievin' cur," Sybyll said in mock indignation. "Shameless cad, too. Tellin' a lass's secret weaknesses like they're common gossip. Ye brought news didn'a ye? So what word?"

Around the table, many people unconsciously leaned forward, especially the younger members of Ashlynn's coven. Only the oldest vampires in the room, Savis and Tausau, seemed immune to curiosity, while Thane looked on with the quiet confidence of someone who had already heard the news.

"Owain's had his father poisoned with Nightweaver venom," Marcel said directly. "He's sending Loman and men from the Church to Hanrahan," he continued as he leaned back in his chair, looking like the shocking news he was sharing was as ordinary as Sybyll's preference in sweets. "And he's hanging the Dunns out to dry to keep them humble."

"There's more too," Marcel continued as a small knife appeared in his hands, flashing in the light of the hearth as he used it to clean his nails. "But those are the important bits. I left Lothian as soon as I heard it and only barely made it back before dawn. Lady Nyrielle received my notes. I'm sure that Lady Ashlynn has already read them by now."

The casual way he delivered the information, with each piece more extraordinary than the last, took several people in attendance off guard. His words seemed to hang in the air for a moment before the implications fully sank in. Around the table, expressions shifted from curiosity to grim understanding as each person processed what Marcel's news meant for each of them.

Perhaps out of everyone present, Hauke looked the most shocked. While his encounter with the spirits of the honored ancestors had stripped away some of his naivete, he was still a young man who wasn't quite sixteen winters old and the idea of poisoning his own father was something so horrifying that his horn pulsed in an icy blue hue as a layer of protective frost formed over it.

Across the table, Zedya pursed her lips and narrowed her amethyst eyes as she tried to imagine what Bors Lothian could have done to provoke such an extreme reaction from his own son. Poison had been her instrument of vengeance in the years before Nyrielle found her and she understood well the cold, cruel logic that drove decisions to give someone a slow, lingering death instead of a sudden one, or even a chance to die peacefully in their sleep.

But Owain had chosen one of the cruelest and most difficult to obtain poisons in the whole of Lothian March and that was a decision that spoke of a hatred so deep that it would twist a man into a monster who delighted in the suffering of others. But had Owain always been such a man? Or had he become even worse in the half year since his attempt to murder his own wife?

In the end, it likely didn't matter, but the question took root in her mind nonetheless, and she resolved to ask Marcel for more details when this was all over, if only to satisfy her own morbid curiosity.

But while Hauke was shocked at the cruelty to betray one's own family, and Zedya was professionally curious, someone else had a much more personal reaction to learning about the Marquis' condition.

"Do you mean to tell me," Virve growled, flexing her claws as she spoke. "That Bors Lothian is going to die by his own son's hand before I have a chance to get my claws on him? That he'll be dead before we even assault Lothian City?"

Chapter 779: Not Content To Wait (Part Two)

"Easy lass," Sybyll said, tapping the table with a loud -THUNK- to get the Oak Witch's attention. "I know it's rotten. Me own uncle drank 'imself ta death 'fore I could kill 'im," she said bitterly. "He didn'a suffer enough by half 'fore he died. But dead is dead, an' dead by 'is own son's hand is a bad way ta go. Nightweaver venom isn'a a kind way ta go neither," she reminded the brooding witch.

"Virve," Heila said, reaching out gently to rest a hand on the bearish woman's furry forearm. "He might linger on for months if the humans send their miracle workers to care for him," she offered, even though the odds were poor for a man of Bors Lothian's advancing age. "And Dame Sybyll is right, the poison will only grow more painful once the madness takes hold. Even if he doesn't fall under your claws he, he won't meet a peaceful end. He'll suffer for what he did."

"Aarrgg, I know," Virve grumbled. "I want to tear him limb from limb for what he did, but I'm not so cruel that I'd poison him to watch him writhe for months. I just wish I could look into his eyes once before he dies. I want him to regret tearing my family apart with his petty war for gold and jewels... But there are others still with our blood on their hands," she said as she clenched her fists. "I'll just have to make do with them."

"You'll get your chance for that, Virve," Ashlynn said as she strode into the great hall. "And soon."

Everyone sitting around the table stood as Ashlynn strode toward a seat at the front of the large square table. For Heila and Virve, it was the first time they'd seen her since Ashlynn had learned the truth of who betrayed her and for others, they hadn't laid eyes on the powerful Mother of Trees since the betrothal ceremony when she'd stood before them as a radiant maiden filled with love for Lady Nyrielle.

But the Ashlynn who entered the great hall now was neither the vision of love and devotion they'd seen a week ago, nor the shattered and distraught woman who had brought down a tempest in her grief and outrage at her sister's betrayal. Instead, she walked with a heavy, determined gait, as if she were a mighty cypress tree that had hardened her layers of defenses in order to weather the storm.

"Your Dominion," Thane said formally, saluting with his hand forming a claw over his heart in the Eldritch style as he bowed. Around the table, the four commanders and Nyrielle's progeny mirrored the gesture, along with Virve and Ollie, while Heila offered a simpler curtsy even though she wanted nothing more than to dash over to Ashlynn's side and wrap her arms around her lady in a fierce hug.

For a moment, Ashlynn looked at the pair of thrones on the dais and debated about taking her seat there. The dark throne with its back carved to resemble feathered wings was a comforting reminder of Nyrielle's presence, even though her lover had stepped back to allow Ashlynn to command the forces of the Vale, just as she'd promised she would at their betrothal ceremony.

But, while taking her own seat on the pale throne carved to resemble the trunk and crown of a mighty cedar tree would have sent a clear message about her authority, it also would have felt too distant from the people she considered to be her family as well as her allies.

This was a meeting of her coven, Nyrielle's progeny, and their commanders, and sitting high above them would have felt like she was shutting them out rather than turning to them for help when she needed their strength.

So, instead of ascending to her throne, she took her seat at the head of the table. When she did, her emerald eyes were clear and focused, looking at each of the people attending the meeting with a sharp gaze that held the promise of violence.

"I've read Marcel's report," Ashlynn said as she gestured for everyone to sit. "Before, I expected that we would spend much of the winter drawing them slowly into a trap that they couldn't escape, but now," she said, trailing off as she took a deep breath.

"Now, I am no longer content to wait," Ashlynn said as she met each of their eyes.

She had spent several days thinking about how she should handle Jocelynn as she poured out her pain and her fury in violent clashes of steel with Sybyll. She'd also talked with the crimson-haired vampire at length during the times when they both needed to catch their breath and regather their strength.

Still, it wasn't until she read that Owain had poisoned his own father that her thoughts and feelings about how to handle Jocelynn truly crystallized for her. She still didn't know if she could ever forgive her

younger sister for the betrayal, but she would never forgive herself if she let Owain do to Jocelynn what he had tried to do to her on their wedding night.

Jocelynn was all but alone in Lothian Manor and the Confessor at her side, their distant cousin Eleanor, had already admitted to Isabell that she and the Church could do little to guarantee Jocey's safety. Since that was the case, Ashlynn would take matters into her own hands, much more swiftly than she'd originally planned.

There would be time to confront her sister once Owain was dead and Jocey was safely at her side. Until then, nothing else Jocelynn had done mattered.

"Thane once said that the fifth pillar of strength in the Vale of Mists was the group gathered here," Ashlynn said as she looked at the people who had come to mean more to her in half a year than she'd ever imagined possible. A year ago, she'd never dreamed that there would be a group of people she would risk her life for... or that she would ask that very group of people to do the same for her.

"Now, I need all of your help," she said earnestly. "Because I intend to see the Lothians fall before year's end!"

Chapter 780: Mobilizing Forces

When Ashlynn declared that she intended to see the Lothians fall by year's end, the expressions of everyone present grew solemn. Toppling the forces of the march by the end of winter felt achievable to everyone, but to achieve victory in just a few short weeks was another matter entirely.

"Tell us what you need, Ashlynn," Thane said, dropping the formality as his amber eyes met her emerald gaze. She'd taken a seat at the table instead of taking her place on a throne above them, and she had come to ask for help instead of issuing commands. The end result might be the same, but looking into her eyes, Thane didn't see a hurt and wounded woman who would use her forces like a lash to whip her enemies.

Instead, he saw a woman who trusted them enough to be vulnerable and to ask for their help. He hadn't been entirely sure she would make it back this far in just five short days, but clearly her time with both Sybyll and Nyrielle had done wonders for her mental state, and he wasn't about to put up walls of formality when she made it clear that she wanted to lower them.

"We're here for you," Thane said in a pure, earnest tone. "Every one of us is. Just tell us what you need."

"Thank you, Thane," Ashlynn said with a deep sigh of relief and a frail smile. "The next week will be demanding on everyone," she said as she turned to address the group. "And there are some things that we need to move on very quickly if we hope to capture all of our objectives. Marcel," Ashlynn said, turning to the dark-haired vampire who was still leaning back in his chair and cleaning his nails with a small, sharp knife.

"Your report mentioned that Lord Liam was likely to return home to the Town of Dunn this morning," Ashlynn said. "My guess is that he's made it to the Village of Maeril by now, and he's spending the night there before crossing the River Luath and heading north. What do you think?"

"I think that's very likely," Marcel agreed as the knife in his hands vanished into his lace sleeves and he set all four of the chair's feet back on the floor. In an instant, the idle playfulness fell away from the youthful-looking vampire, and a dark gleam appeared in his eyes as he looked at Ashlynn. "Has young lord Liam offended you? If you want him dead, I can likely arrange an accident on his way home."

"Not dead, I want him alive," Ashlynn said firmly. "He's too useful to allow him to slip through our fingers at a time like this. Besides, since the Lothians have seen fit to abandon the Dunns and their barony to us, I see no reason we can't extend an offer of safety in exchange for collaboration."

"You want to use Liam as your messenger," Marcel said as the playful smile returned to his lips. "He may not come willingly," he pointed out. "And once I snatch him, his men are likely to raise a cry about his kidnapping."

"You can't let that happen," Ashlynn said, shaking her head and frowning at the Black Merchant. "I hate to send you to slaughter, but if the only way you can ensure his men's silence is to kill them, then do it. We only have a few days before his father notices he's missing, and not long after that, the Lothians will know that he's vanished. I need as much time as possible before they learn that we have him."

"I can go with Marcel to handle Liam's men," Zedya offered. "It would be a good opportunity for Lenny to learn to use his gaze against people who are afraid of him. The soldiers of the Vale have been generous to allow him to practice, but he needs to use his gaze for real against men who would call him a 'demon.'"

"No," Ashlynn said, smiling as she looked at the newlywed vampire. Zedya's demeanor had shifted subtly in the weeks since she took Lennart as both her husband and her progeny, and much of her cold detachment had faded. In its place, she had become both softer and more affectionate when she could, and much, much fiercer when she felt that something threatened her family in the Vale.

"No," Ashlynn repeated as she met Zedya's amethyst gaze. "I have a different mission for you and Lennart. Owain poisoned his own father, but he also poisoned the wife and child of Sir Tommin Pyre," she explained. "I need both of them brought to the Vale. Alive. The sooner the better if I'm going to save them from the poison."

"My lady?" Heila said, tilting her head to the side and looking at Ashlynn in surprise. The name 'Sir Tommin' was familiar to her and anyone who was close to Lady Ashlynn. He was one of the two knights who had buried her alive at the edge of the Vale half a year ago, and Ashlynn had long ago sworn to claim her vengeance against him. Saving his family from Owain's poisoning felt... odd.

"I will still claim my vengeance against Sir Tommin," Ashlynn said with a determined look in her eyes. "But... I do not require his life. If his faith has become pure enough to wield a Holy Light Blade, then I'm sure watching a witch save his wife and child will be profoundly unsettling or worse. Ignatious," Ashlynn said, turning to face the fallen Inquisitor. "I may present you with a broken Templar before this is over. With your guidance, maybe he can still be redeemed."

"I'll do what I can, my lady," Ignatious said. "It took me years to recover from the breaking of my faith. His path... it may not be an easy one. He might prefer to die. I know there was a time when I would rather have died than..."

"None of that," Heila interrupted before Ignatious could say more. "You did it the hard way," she said gently. "There was no one to guide you. If it's you... I just know that you can help others find their way out of the hatred and darkness of the Church. You can show them what pure flames are, and you can help them heal. And, if you want me to, I'll be there with you to help, too. Just say the words," the diminutive horned witch promised.

For a moment, the great hall went quiet as a tender look passed between Ignatious and Heila. Even on opposite sides of the table, their closeness made it seem like there was no space between them, and the gentle warmth that flowed from both of them wrapped around everyone like a soft blanket against the winter chill outside the walls of the great hall.

"Ah hem," Thane said, clapping a hand on Ignatious's shoulder and giving the man a brotherly squeeze before turning to Ashlynn to speak. "Since you're sending Zedya and Lennart to collect Sir Tommin's family, how about leaving Liam Dunn to me? I'm sure he's traveling with at least one other knight," he said, pausing when he saw Marcel hold up two fingers. "Two other knights then," Thane corrected.

"If I leave soon, it shouldn't be difficult to command them to turn themselves in at the gates of the Vale," Thane explained. "No one in the Village of Maeril will think much of their leaving, and the men themselves won't realize anything is wrong until they're standing in shackles. Or did you have other plans in mind for me?"