

# The Vampire 801

## Chapter 801: The Meeting of Real and Fake (Part Two)

As soon as he realized Ashlynn had seen them, Ollie began to trot down the hill, wincing slightly as he strained the barely healed wound in his side but pushing thoughts about it to the side in his haste to reach Ashlynn's side.

"I have good news," Ollie said once he'd reached her. "Owain took one of the villagers in Old Nan's village as a prisoner. Her name is Noomi, and she gave birth to a son in the dungeons beneath the villa."

"He took a pregnant woman? What did he want to do, raise her child as a pet?" Ashlynn said hotly, glancing briefly at the woman in Ipiktok's arms and realizing that she was cradling a small blanket-wrapped figure in her arms. "But her son survived, even though he was born in the dungeons? That's incredible..."

"That's the second piece of news," Ollie said in a rush as Ipiktok and Virve drew closer. "Noomi and her son, Saku, survived because Samira cared for them. She's been sneaking them food for months, keeping her company, even smuggling her bits of firewood to carve a weaning spoon for Saku so she had something to feed him with."

"She, she what?" Ashlynn said, staring in confusion. The Samira she remembered was a simple woman, obsessed with earning Owain's favor and dreaming of their perfect life together in the future. She was also someone who had been completely lost dealing with the subtle nuances of the life of a noblewoman and the expectations that would be placed on her as someone pretending to be 'Lady Ashlynn Blackwell.'

Nothing she'd seen in her brief conversation with the woman gave her the impression that she would be venturing into the dungeons to care for an Eldritch woman and her infant child. It wasn't surprising because Samira struck her as some kind of faithful zealot, but rather because she struggled to imagine her doing something that would have been certain to infuriate Owain if he ever found out.

"Evidently, she and Noomi became close friends," Ollie said awkwardly, glancing over his shoulder at the approaching group. "So close that Noomi insisted on staying with Samira when she meets you. She's worried, um, actually, we're all a little worried, because..."

"Because Samira is carrying Owain's child," Ashlynn said, shocking Ollie and everyone else who was close enough to hear. "I already knew that he was using her to vent his lust," Ashlynn said to the stunned-looking young knight. "I accepted that this might happen a long time ago. From the look of her, she must have conceived as soon as she arrived in the Summer Villa, if not earlier."

"You, you're not angry?" Ollie said hesitantly as he tried to read her expression from her strangely calm face.

"Tell me something, Ollie," Ashlynn said quietly as Ipiktok set the two women down. "Does she still love Owian?"

"No," Ollie said instantly. "She's terrified of what he'll do if he finds out she's carrying his child. Evidently, she and Noomi have been trying to find a way to escape the Summer Villa together for more than a month now. When we attacked, Samira let Noomi out of her cell, and then she bumped into me while she was looking for food for their escape to the Vale of Mists."

"Then she's like me," Ashlynn said with a sad smile. "She's living the life I would have lived if my mother's advice had worked out. If I'd managed to bear a child for Owain, I would have lived forever in fear that he would discover the mark on my body. And when that day came, or when it became inevitable that it would happen, I would have faced the same decision she did."

"Stay, and risk that he'd kill me," Ashlynn said. "Or run with a child in the hopes that we could survive somewhere far away that he couldn't reach us."

"She's not that different from me, Ollie," Ashlynn said as she began to walk towards Samira and Noomi. "So how could I be angry at her? I fell for Owain's charm too, you know. I let myself believe that he wouldn't be cruel to me, just the same as I'm sure Samira told herself that Owain wouldn't be cruel to her."

"But Owain isn't like that, is he, Samira?" Ashlynn asked as she drew close to the pair of women.

"No, my Lady, I don't think there's anyone in the world he wouldn't be cruel to if he didn't need them for something that he would lose if he showed his true face," Samira said, offering as deep of a curtsy as she could given the weight of her belly and the weakness of her knees.

Samira had thought that she was prepared to enter the Eldritch world when she made up her mind to run away with Noomi but one look at the towering giant with his curled ivory tusks and the flexible trunk that could produce such terrifying trumpet blasts had frightened her so much that she would have fled back into the villa if it weren't for Sir Ollie's hand supporting her.

Ipiktok, however, proved himself to be incredibly considerate, offering to carry both mothers to meet with Lady Ashlynn instead of forcing them to walk or wait for Constable Daithi to send a cart for them. More than that, he let the arm cradling Noomi sway gently as they walked, soothing Saku as the powerful giant rocked him to sleep in his mother's arms.

Now, however, the comforting ride in the giant's arms had come to an end, and she stood before the woman she had spent more than half a year impersonating. Sweat trickled down her back, between her shoulder blades, and her entire body quivered as she found herself close enough to the real Lady Ashlynn Blackwell to reach out and touch.

"You don't need to bow to me," Ashlynn said as she stepped close enough to the other woman to wrap her arms around her in a gentle embrace. "I promise you," she whispered in the other woman's ear.

"Owain will pay for hurting you. I'll get revenge for both of us."

## Chapter 802: Lost Lord (Part One)

Soft morning light filtered through the heavy fog in the Vale of Mists, spilling into guest rooms in the ancient fortress that hadn't seen much use in decades. Now, however, the number of people who had become 'guests' of Nyrielle's fortress had grown large enough that even Georg needed a bit of help keeping up with the demands of so many unique individuals.

In one of those guest rooms, it was the combination of the light pouring in through the windows and the smell of spiced sausages and fresh bread that roused Liam Dunn from sleep.

"Where am I?" Liam asked as he sat up in the plush bed, throwing back the warm, comforting blankets and looking around the luxurious bed chamber in confusion. "This doesn't look like the rooms in Sir Garrik Maeril's castle..."

The last thing that Liam remembered was arriving in the Village of Maeril the day after his infuriating meeting with Marquis Bors and the few members of the Lothian Court who had gathered to learn of the

demon attacks. He remembered Sir Garrik Maeril being insufferably polite about the Dunn family's losses and the lack of support they were receiving from the Marquis while Bors sent Loman and reinforcements from the Church to Hanrahan Barony.

Technically, while Liam was the son of a baron and held a higher station than Sir Garrik, the infuriating knight didn't owe any allegiance to the Dunns. The village of Maeril fell within the territory claimed directly by the Lothians and Sir Garrik was one of Bors Lothian's personal vassals, the same as Liam Dunn's father.

So, despite the differences in their station, Sir Garrik saw little reason to hold back his sense of satisfaction that the powerful and wealthy Dunns had suffered such an overwhelming setback. In the end, Liam had left the contemptible knight's fortress for a knight of honest drinking in a pub that served the wealthier landowners bringing their goods to Maeril to ship downriver.

But, while he remembered going out drinking with a few of his knights, he had no memory of how he'd gotten to the room where he found himself now. The only thing he remembered at the end of the night were a pair of strange, amber eyes and the sound of a voice richer and stronger than any he'd ever heard, though he couldn't remember anything the voice had said. Everything other than that felt hazy and the more he tried to think about it, the more details seemed to slip away.

The fortress in the Village of Maeril wasn't very large and the accommodations offered to visiting noblemen weren't much better than what could be found in any of the traveler's inns in the bustling riverside village. By contrast, the place he'd woken was fit for the son of a count or better, with elegant tapestries on the walls and intricately carved furniture throughout the room.

"And where are my clothes?" Liam wondered as he realized that he'd been stripped to nothing but his underwear before he was placed in bed.

Glancing around the room revealed his boots and sword belt sitting near a chair, though the sword itself was missing. On top of the chair lay a neatly folded set of breeches, warm looking socks and an intricately embroidered tunic of soft greens with coppery designs that resembled falling leaves.

When he touched the thick, wool socks, however, his brows rose several inches in surprise. The Dunn Barony had made a significant amount of its fortune on their large herds of sheep and those fortunes grew even greater when they invested in mills to spin or weave wool and fields of flowers to dye it with.

He doubted that someone like Owain would notice the quality of something as mundane as a pair of socks, but in Liam's hands, both the socks and tunic felt like the work of master weavers... people who maintained a far higher standard than his own family's barony had been able to achieve. Combined with the luxurious bed chamber, left him even more puzzled about the place where he found himself.

"I suppose I'll play along," he muttered, cleaning himself quickly in the room's washbasin before dressing. He wanted to shave the night's stubble from his face but while the room offered a mirror and comb, there wasn't a blade in sight. Outside the room, however, faint voices and the clink of silverware on dishes could be heard, so clearly, wherever he was, he wasn't alone.

"Good morning Lord Liam," Hugo Hanrahan said warmly when he saw the door to Liam's room open. "Sir Carwyn and I were just wondering if you would wake in time to join us for breakfast or not."

"Sir Hugo?" Liam said, blinking in surprise as he surveyed the well appointed sitting room before walking over to join the other two men at the table. "So you didn't go missing in the demon attacks," he said with a relieved sigh.

"I'm sure Lord Owain will be glad to hear that you're safe. But," he paused, looking around the room, finding to his surprise that there were four other rooms in addition to his that had doors leading to the sitting room. "Where is Sir Rain? Still asleep?" Liam asked as he took his seat at the dining table.

"Sir Rain is, um, confined at the moment," Hugo said slowly as he shared an awkward glance with Sir Carwyn.

They'd asked for permission to visit their captive companion but they had been told that Sir Rain was being kept away from others after losing his duel with Sir Ollie because they feared he might attempt to instigate some form of resistance among their men. Supposedly he was being treated well, but he lacked the courtesies that had been extended to Sir Hugo and Sir Carwyn as 'guests.'

"I'm sure they'll return him to us after Sir Rain has had a chance to cool his head," Carwyn said helpfully as he passed a heaping platter of sausages over to Liam. "Sir Ollie doesn't seem like the sort to hold a grudge and no one has said that anyone here has claim on him the way they've spoken of Dame Sybyll."

As he spoke, Sir Carwyn shot a questioning glance at Sir Hugo, raising a brow as if to ask whether his liege lord knew if any of the demons had laid claim to Lord Liam's life the same way that Dame Sybyll had claimed Sir Hugo's.

Hugo, however, could only shake his head helplessly. If one of their hosts had a deep grudge against the Dunns, they hadn't mentioned it to him. But given who had brought Liam into their shared chambers this morning, the motive for bringing the young lord here shouldn't be simple... He just had to learn as much as he could to figure out what it might be.

### Chapter 803: Lost Lord (Part Two)

"Be mindful of the reddish sausages," Carwyn said, hoping to keep the atmosphere from growing too heavy and pointing to the pile of sausages on one side of the platter that he'd just passed to Lord Liam. "They're very spicy if you enjoy that sort of thing. Otherwise, the brown ones have a good flavor but they won't leave you reaching for water the way the red ones will."

"What are those?" Liam asked, pointing with his fork at a basket full of some of the most delicate and artful pastries he'd ever seen before he started spearing the dark red sausages and piling them on his plate. "They look amazing."

"Master Georg has been sending a basket of pastries with our morning meal," Hugo said with a slightly guilty look. "I'm afraid I've already taken the onion tart today, and Sir Carwyn favors the dill scones, but the others are all just as good. There are even sweet ones stuffed with a fruity, creamy cheese and dusted with sugar," he added helpfully.

When Liam bit into the spicy, red sausage, his eyes widened in surprise at the rush of rich, fatty juices that flooded his mouth, coating his tongue in an intense explosion of flavor that not only included an intense, peppery heat, but sharp notes of garlic and mustard seed as well. Chewing the tender, almost bouncy sausage opened up even more flavors along with the pores of his face and the sinus passages in his nose as well.

Immediately, he turned to the dish of pastries, chasing down the spicy sausage with a large bite of a soft, pillowy pastry filled with a pale lavender cream that reminded him of blackberries in summer with the slightest kiss of something tart that helped to prevent the cooling cream from becoming cloying.

"You see why Sir Carwyn warned you about the spicy ones? You'll get a better idea of Master Georg's artistry tonight," Hugo added as he sat back in his chair with a slightly anxious expression on his face.

"Lady Heila said that Lady Ashlynn wants to speak with us over dinner tonight. It sounds like she's been very busy since Sir Rain and I were 'invited' to be her guests, so if she's making time for us, it must be something important."

"Important enough for Lord General Thane to fetch Lord Liam personally," Carwyn said with a somber expression as he spooned sweet, red jelly onto a piece of warm, crusty bread. "Lord Liam, we don't get much news here. Has anything happened in the past week that we should know about? Something that might explain why Lady Ashlynn wanted you here badly enough to send the Lord General after you?"

"Wait, stop," Liam said, setting down his utensils and looking between the two knights in absolute confusion. "I'm utterly lost. Is this the Summer Villa? I knew the quality of goods were better in Blackwell County than out here on the frontier but I never imagined she'd had so much shipped all the way out here," he said as he carefully reevaluated their surroundings.

The view out the window was shrouded in fog and he couldn't see much beyond the tops of trees extending above the fog, but if Lady Ashlynn was here, then where else could he be other than the Summer Villa?

"And the people you mentioned," Liam continued as he tried to sift through the conversation that he still didn't entirely understand. "Sir Ollie and Dame Sybyll? Are they knights visiting from Blackwell County as well? But what is this about a Lord General? That sounds like the sort of title only His Majesty could confer..."

"Lord Liam," Hugo said with a heavy sigh. "I've been trying to think of a good way to explain this to you since the Lord General dropped you off just before dawn and I still haven't come up with a 'good' way, so I'll just tell you. But I have to warn you, no matter how shocked you are, you can't do anything foolish here."

"Lady Ashlynn has already made it clear how unimportant we are, just by the way she's ignored us for nearly a week since we arrived," he said firmly. "And when it comes to the soldiers here... Even if we had ten men as brave and as skilled as Sir Carwyn with all of their weapons and armor, we would stand no chance of accomplishing anything. The only weapon you have here is this one," he said, tapping on his temple. "So make sure you use it well."

"Out with it then," Liam said impatiently. He'd only met Lady Ashlynn on a few occasions and when he last encountered her in the Summer Villa she'd struck him as an exceptionally mild individual that one

could almost call timid. But the way Hugo was talking about her, she sounded more like a reigning monarch than a soon to be mother.

"What is it that has you two so spooked?" Liam asked as his heart began to sink. He'd been ready to dismiss Hugo's warning as overblown, after all, the man had never been known for his courage, but seeing Sir Carwyn nodding solemnly along with the Hanrahan bastard made Liam take back his words as the seed of genuine fear began to take root in the pit of his stomach.

"Lord Liam, this castle isn't the Summer Villa," Hugo said carefully. "It's the fortress of the Eldritch Lady of the Vale of Mists. Carwyn, Rain and I... we didn't escape the Eldritch raids. We're 'guests' of the Eldritch rulers of the Vale."

"And Lady Ashlynn," Hugo said with a face that had gone slightly pale while his hand trembled enough for his fork to rattle against his plate. "Lady Ashlynn is one of the Great Witches of the Eldritch world, the Mother of Trees."

"That's why any news you have to share from outside is so important to us," Sir Carwyn added as he rested a hand on the shaken young lord's shoulder. "Lord Hugo has been trying to piece together what's going on and what Lady Ashlynn may be planning, but without enough information, we're making too many guesses."

"So, please," the knight from Raek Village said with eyes that held a great deal of worry. "Can you tell us what has been happening in the march? And do you, do you have any news of what's happened to the people in my village?"

#### Chapter 804: In Command But Not Alone

That evening, Ashlynn stood before the large mirror in her dressing room, carefully adjusting the lacing of her corset and wishing that Heila was still within the ancient fortress, for more reasons than just a bit of help with her laces.

In order to meet Ashlynn's schedule, Sybyll and the forces under her command had left for Hanrahan Barony at the same time that Ashlynn had taken her forces to the Summer Villa. Large armies moved slowly, and unlike the small raiding force Ashlynn had led to destroy the Summer Villa, Sybyll needed to bring along enough soldiers from Commander Bassinger's First Army to garrison Hanrahan town after she took it.



Everyone was moving quickly and at the time, Ashlynn felt like it made sense to send Heila and Hauke along with the rest of the army rather than asking them to catch up, but now, after her long ride back to the ancient fortress in one of the carts designed to navigate narrow trails through the wilderness, she yearned for the familiar presence of a close friend she could let down her guard around, even if just for a few hours of the evening.

"You're frowning, my darling," Nyrielle said as she swept into Ashlynn's room and appeared behind her lover in a single breath. Wrapping her arms around Ashlynn's slender waist, Nyrielle pulled her closer, trapping Ashlynn's hands in the laces of her dress as she inhaled her lover's rich, evergreen scent.

"What's wrong?" Nyrielle asked gently. "Did you find something unpleasant in the Summer Villa?"

"Nyri," Ashlynn breathed, closing her eyes and relaxing back into the comforting coolness of Nyrielle's embrace. "I've made you worry, haven't I?" Ashlynn asked, glancing out the window where the stars were slowly winking into view. The sun had barely set, and Nyrielle was already here at her side. Clearly, her lover had rushed to her as soon as she'd woken from her slumber.

"Of course I'm worried," Nyrielle said, giving Ashlynn a gentle squeeze. "Not that anyone could injure you, but that something would go wrong and injure one of your close ones, or that you would find something disturbing among your effects in the Summer Villa..."

"Even if nothing there should have been able to injure you, there are countless ways you might have suffered," Nyrielle said as she held Ashlynn tightly. "So how was I supposed to rest without worrying over you?"

"Samira surprised me," Ashlynn said, opening her eyes and twisting in Nyrielle's arms until she could meet her lover's midnight gaze. "She surprised me in so many ways. She's carrying Owain's child," she said, holding tightly to Nyrielle's lithe body. "I, I knew it might happen. I just wasn't prepared to see her so far along. She must have conceived within a week of my wedding night. Owain barely waited before moving on..."

"From what you've said of him," Nyrielle said gently. "Owain is far from a chaste man. Is it surprising that he found the next convenient woman available to vent his lust upon?"

"No," Ashlynn said, hanging her head and shaking it gently. "It isn't surprising, but it makes me hate him more. His father was a better man... For all his faults, Bors hasn't so much as touched a woman in the years since his wife passed. But Owain," Ashlynn said bitterly. "As far as he knew, I was dead and gone, but he didn't even wait long enough for my body to cool before he pinned another woman under him."

"All the more reason to put an end to him," Nyrielle said in a tone that was momentarily sharper than she intended. She traced her slender fingers through Ashlynn's soft, pale blonde hair as if she was restoring her own emotional balance before placing a finger under her chin and lifting the younger woman's gaze back up to meet hers. "You knew all this before, including that this Samira woman intended to bear a child for Owain, so why are you so troubled?"

"Because Samira has changed since I first met her," Ashlynn said, pulling back from Nyrielle and holding out the laces of her corset. "Do me up and I'll explain?"

"This isn't how I like to tie you up, my darling," Nyrielle said, leaning in and whispering into Ashlynn's ear before gently nibbling on her lover's tender earlobe. "But if it's what you wish, I'll help you," she said as she took the laces in her hands and began to make adjustments. "Tell me about how Samira has changed, and why that disturbs you so much."

"Jocelynn started it," Ashlynn said, leaning into Nyrielle's touch and savoring her closeness as she unburdened her heart. "According to Samira, Jocelynn hated being around her because Samira and I were so different, but looked so similar when she was dressing up like me."

"At some point, Jocey said that, so long as Samira was pretending to be me, she needed to at least be able to hold a conversation like me," Ashlynn said. "Which makes sense. Samira nearly cuckolded Owain publicly in a conversation with the young ladies of the Lothian Court because she didn't know that noble ladies send a dozen messages or more every time they dress to meet other nobles."

"Oh?" Nyrielle said, pausing as she inspected Ashlynn's dress for the evening. Dark green silks were accented by green and silver brocade with the patterns of leaves, while a brighter green corset with silver laces emphasized the slenderness of her lover's waist. Around her neck, she wore a simple silver chain made from dozens of tiny silver snowflakes while the cut of her dress displayed only a narrow window of her lush, perfect cleavage.

"What messages does this dress send?" Nyrielle asked lightly as her fingers tied the laces of Ashlynn's corset into an intricate bow.

"The necklace is a gift from Hauke that represents both my coven and my place as the Last Eldritch Lady of the High Pass," Ashlynn said, running a finger across the snowflakes of the necklace. "The silver is taken from the mists of the Vale," she added with a smile. "But I'm wearing green without blue, because at the moment, I'm standing on my own."

"I gave you command of our forces because your vengeance is your own to claim," Nyrielle said as she reached out to cup Ashlynn's cheek. "But you aren't on your own. I'll always be here for you, to catch you if you stumble or fight at your side if you need me to. You're never alone, my darling," she said as she moved her hand lower, resting it over Ashlynn's heart.

"Our hearts beat together," she said, stepping in close and resting her forehead against Ashlynn's. "Our lives are bound together. I know you want to do as much of this with your own strength as you can," she whispered. "But even if you come home from the battlefield covered in the blood of your enemies, you still have me to come home to, and my heart will always be open to hear your pains."

"So tell me what pains you," Nyrielle said as she pulled Ashlynn into a tight embrace. "About Samira, Jocelynn, or anything else. Tell me, and we'll face it together..."

#### Chapter 805 805: Samira's Evolution (Part One)

Ashlynn took Nyrielle's hand and slowly guided her over to the sofa in front of the hearth. In the days since she'd learned of Jocelynn's treachery and lost control of her power, Heila had seen to the restoration of her chambers. The scorched rugs had been replaced along with the broken door, and the walls scrubbed free of soot.

Some traces, however, would take much longer to fade away, like the feeling of a dagger plunging into her heart as Isabel confirmed her worst fears and the memory of the devastated sitting room that echoed the devastation in her heart when she struggled to understand how things could have turned out like this.

"Like I said," Ashlynn began slowly as she took her seat next to Nyrielle on the comfortable sofa. "Jocey hated the way Samira reminded her of me. At one point, she demanded that Samira spend time studying so that she could hold a proper conversation."

"Jocey brought most of my books with her when she came," Ashlynn continued as she snuggled up close to Nyrielle, though her eyes remained fixed on the flames in the hearth. "She had to bring them in order

to convince people that she was bringing them to 'me.' Since the books were there, she wanted Samira to read them. But... Samira could barely read, or at least, she could barely read in the beginning."

"Your sister taught her to read?" Nyrielle said, raising a brow in surprise.

"I think Jocey was trying to find a way to, I don't know, to grieve? To heal?" Ashlynn said, though she was deeply uncertain about Jocelynn's motives at the time. "Samira said that, in the beginning, Jocey berated her for being slow and stupid, constantly telling her how smart and clever I was and how little Samira was like me."

"As time went on, though," Ashlynn said. "Samira said their conversations started to have more substance. Samira asked questions about things she didn't understand. Not just words she didn't understand, but concepts, and Jocey started to tutor her for real."

"You think your sister started to treat Samira like your replacement?" Nyrielle asked gently. "Was she hoping to turn Samira into a substitute for you?"

The idea was ridiculous. Her Ashlynn was one of the most unique women to walk the face of the world, and that would be true even if she weren't the Mother of Trees. The things that Ashlynn had done and the way that she did them couldn't be matched by more than a handful of people, even if they were given the same powers that Ashlynn had.

While it was true that Ashlynn was born to be the Mother of Trees, everything that defined who she was as a person and the ways she used her powers came from Ashlynn's own heart and mind, and they were the fruits of her own labors.

Her years of turning her captivity into a reason to study, her determination to ensure other people didn't experience the things she'd suffered from, and her unwavering dedication to the people she chose to recognize as her family were all things that defined who Ashlynn was, the mark she'd been born with hadn't imbued her with any of that.

"I don't think Jocey wanted to replace me," Ashlynn said slowly. "I think she just missed me. But, she opened a door for Samira that would have been closed without her, and once it was open, Samira kept walking down the path it revealed, even after Jocey returned to Lothian City and left her alone."

"Samira even asked me about the notes I'd left in the margins of my gardening books," Ashlynn said with a faint laugh. "Things from years ago, when I thought that Father might let me expand from growing things in my own garden to designing farms. I used to think that, if I couldn't inherit the county from Father and help him to rule it, I could at least do things that would help the people, and they could thank him for my work..."

"So Samira has also taken up an interest in plants after reading your books?" Nyrielle said with a raised brow. "I must read these books of yours if they can turn a chambermaid into a gardener. Maybe it will help me understand you better as well," she teased lightly, though she was serious about reading Ashlynn's books.

By sharing their dreams, they were able to share memories of the times and places that defined them, but there was so much more of her Ashlynn that she wanted to explore and understand. Years of isolation and study had left their mark on the young witch and how she thought, and Nyrielle felt like those margin notes might teach her just as much about her lover as any shared dream ever would.

"Virve brought back the ones that were still at the Villa," Ashlynn said softly. "I'll bring them to you. Jocey took most of my collection back with her, along with most of my things... she only left a few books behind for Samira and some of my old clothing. Everything else, she took back to Lothian City with her."

"You know that I'll feast on a single morsel and savor every moment it's on my tongue," Nyrielle teased. "So long as it's important to you, it's important to me, and I'll delight in reading what a younger you thought, even if it's just your thoughts on crops and farms." Love this story? Show your support on M9VLEMPYR.

For a moment, Ashlynn just lay there, listening to the crackle of the hearth and the beat of Nyrielle's heart. Farms and gardens... They were simple things and her dreams of bringing new crops to Blackwell County or finding ways to improve harvests of the things they already grew felt like distant dreams that belonged to another life.

Now that Samira was picking up those books, it felt like the other woman was walking a path in life that Ashlynn might have taken if she hadn't been destined to become the Mother of Trees. From bearing Owain's child to dreaming of lush fields that prevented the common people from going hungry, Samira was taking up many of the things that Ashlynn had once thought would define her future.

But, when she thought about what she'd gained after losing those things, it was hard to feel any kind of jealousy for Samira as she walked those lost paths. The comfort and love she'd found in Nyrielle's

embrace were as bright as the light of the moon next to a candle's glow when she compared it to what she'd received from Owain, and that didn't even touch on all of the other joys she'd found once she began to form relationships in the Eldritch world.

Samira might be inheriting some of Ashlynn's old dreams, but she didn't mind at all. Instead, she wondered if there was anything else she could do to tug the former maid's path toward an even brighter future...

One that wasn't dominated by what Owain had done with her and instead allowed her to find the same kind of happiness on the path that Samira intended to walk with Noomi that Ashlynn had found on her path with Nyrielle.

#### Chapter 806 806: Samira's Evolution (Part Two)

"There's something else Samira did as well," Ashlynn said, shifting the topic as she listened to Nyrielle's steady heartbeat through the fabric of the other woman's dress. "Owain captured a pregnant woman from the Heartwood Clan and kept her prisoner in the dungeon of the Summer Villa so he could take her infant son and raise it as a pet," Ashlynn explained.

"Her name is Noomi," Ashlynn said, shaking her head slightly in wonder at the strength of the woman who had given birth alone in a prison cell and continued to survive just to take care of her son in the days she had before Owain could return to snatch him away. As much as Ashlynn had been impressed by Samira's growth and changes, she was equally impressed by the friend Samira had made in that dark place.

"Samira became Noomi's close friend in that dungeon," Ashlynn continued. "She brought her food, blankets, even wood to carve. I, I intended to bring Samira back here to the castle so I could talk to her more about her time with Jocey, but... Noomi couldn't bear to be separated from Samira and vice versa."

Their insistence on staying close had been clear from the very beginning of their journey when they paused by a stream so Noomi could wash herself and her son before they continued on.

Despite the strain of walking down the bank in order to stay by Noomi's side, Samira looked at Virve with pleading eyes until the strong witch agreed to make an extra trip to carry her to the stream. And when Noomi needed to hand off the freshly washed Saku in order to wash herself, she handed her child directly to Samira, as if no one else could be trusted with her infant son.

It was a bond forged by their mutual chains that trapped them in the Summer Villa, both the iron ones that bound Noomi and the softer ones that trapped Samira in a gilded cage. It wasn't a bond that Ashlynn could completely relate to, but it was one that she could clearly recognize.

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"So you sent them both to Ollie's village," Nyrielle said as she stroked Ashlynn's hair. "Because you wouldn't keep Samira for yourself if it meant keeping Noomi away from Old Nan and the other villagers who came from her old village."

"I agree with what you did, darling," Nyrielle said as she bent down to place a gentle kiss on the crown of Ashlynn's head. "You need to focus on confronting Owain right now. Poring back over things related to your sister will only cloud your mind. Face one problem at a time and then solve it. It isn't time to face this problem yet."

"No, I know that," Ashlynn said as she soaked in the fire's warmth with Nyrielle. "But talking to Samira about the things she did for Noomi and the way she spent time with Jocey, it made me consider doing something special for her when her child is born."

"Even though the child is Owain Lothian's?" Nyrielle asked gently, raising her brow at her young lover.

"The child will never know their father," Ashlynn said firmly. "Owain will be dead and gone before the child is even born, or not long after. And Samira won't teach her child that they should emulate the man their father was. So it doesn't matter if the child grew from Owain's seed, because Samira and Noomi will be the ones to nurture it. Seeds, by themselves, are nothing until they're nurtured to grow."

"But the seed of an oak tree will always be an oak tree," Nyrielle countered. "Are you certain that you want to help nurture that seed?"

"Not all oak trees are the same," Ashlynn said as she thought of the Ancient Oak that stood watch over the Vale of Mists and the way it had subtly influenced Virve ever since she had taken its seed to form the root of her power. "But I think that Samira and Noomi are both good seeds, and they could be something greater if we nurture them... and so could their children if they grow up well."

"I see," Nyrielle said softly. "In that case, leave their care to me while you focus on your war against the Lothians," she offered. "I'll make sure they know that it's you who feel they've earned the attention, but you can trust in me to make them comfortable."

"Thank you," Ashlynn said as she reluctantly pulled away from Nyrielle. The night was long, but she had summoned the captured human noblemen for dinner tonight, and there were things that must be done.

"But, there's one more thing," Ashlynn said as she stood. "I don't know if it will be possible, but when the time comes to confront Owain, I'd like Samira to be there."

"I'll ask her if she wants to witness his fall with her own eyes," Nyrielle promised, only for Ashlynn to hold up a hand and interrupt her.

"You misunderstand, my love," Ashlynn said. "I want Samira to be there to help me expose Owain's true nature to the rest of the rulers of the march. I need to conquer their hearts and minds in order to conquer their lands with the least bloodshed, and the fact that Owain used Samira to sire a child after 'murdering' me is a weapon I can't afford to ignore."

"That's the other reason I want to do something nice for Samira," Ashlynn said as her voice grew firm. "She's earned the right to raise her child in peace, but before she can, I need to make use of her, just like Owain made use of her... I just hope she won't resent me too much for it because doing so will tarnish her reputation in front of all the assembled lords and ladies of the march."

"Perhaps," Nyrielle said with a dark smile tugging at the corners of her lips. "Or perhaps she cares less about her 'reputation' than she cares about the opportunity to watch the man who used her fall to your blade. I will offer her the choice," Nyrielle said. "Because I believe she will accept it. If she doesn't, then it will fall to you to convince her. Is that reasonable, my darling?"

"More than," Ashlynn said as she pulled Nyrielle into a brief embrace. "Thank you, Nyri, for knowing me better than I know myself."

"Only in matters of vengeance, my heart," Nyrielle whispered. "In so many other ways, I'm still learning how much more of you there is for me to fall in love with. So don't ever stop revealing yourself to me," she said with a faint tug on the laces of Ashlynn's corset. "And return to me when you're done with the human lords tonight," she whispered into her lover's ear.



## Chapter 807 807: Liam Dunn's Ambition

Liam Dunn thought himself to be a well traveled, worldly man. In order to pave the way for a more prosperous Dunn Barony that could transform into Dunn County, he'd been sent to one of the finest schools in Keating Duchy. It might not have been as prestigious as the Royal Academy in the capital, but for the son of a frontier lord, it was much better than anything he could have experienced if he'd attended school in Lothian March.

Keating Duchy was hundreds of years older than the march, and the grandeur and splendor of Keating City had left a deep impression on young Liam. Each summer, when he returned home to the frontier, he brought with him a host of ideas, and he gushed to his father for days about the things he missed the most from his school.

As he grew older, the desire to see the advancements of Keating Duchy take hold in the frontier never left him, but he gradually came to understand what it would cost to bring about such a transformation.

Public carriages pulled by a team of horses along fixed routes through the city were a tremendous convenience but without enough people who would pay for a ride instead of walking, it was a marvel that couldn't sustain itself. Likewise, the grand fountains and public displays of impressive statues were all funded by men who had more wealth than they could spend on their needs.

Despite his desire to see such things in the Town of Dunn, when his father asked him if he should build a new tannery or a grand plaza, the answer was all too obvious.

In a way, Liam's exposure to the finer life enjoyed by the well settled duchies away from the frontier was both a blessing and a curse. His desire to see his own home reach those heights fueled his ambition like lamp oil poured on a bonfire, but the realization of the enormity of the task to achieve his ambition burned him like a bonfire turned into an inferno.

Now, as he walked the halls of the ancient demon fortress on his way to dinner with Lady Ashlynn, he realized that the demons didn't just live as well as he had in Keating Duchy... they lived better lives.

"You said that they're rebuilding the city on a grand scale?" Liam asked Hugo as they followed a diminutive horned demon servant who had come to fetch them from their chambers. "Is it all going to be like this?"

"Better, if Lady Heila is to be believed," Hugo said, though he struggled to understand how a city could exceed the grandeur of the ancient fortress. The tapestries and paintings that hung in the corridors had clearly been created by Master artists, woven from the finest silks or painted with the richest, most intense pigments he'd ever seen.

More impressive than the art, however, were the functional elements that had been transformed into works of art in their own right. The gilded chandeliers ran on lamp oil with dozens of wicks and there were so many of them that even in the dark of night, the grand hallways were as brightly lit as mid day.

"Lady Heila," Liam said, rolling the unfamiliar name over his tongue as he sifted through everything he'd learned from Hugo and Carwyn since he woke in this strange place. "Lady Ashlynn's lady-in-waiting? The one they call the Willow Whip?"

"The very same," Hugo said with a nod. "She said that Lady Ashlynn was greatly inspired by a place called High Fen City where they used canals alongside roads to transport the vast amount of materials flowing through the trading hub."

"She was also inspired by another Eldritch city," Hugo continued as he repeated what he'd learned in the tour of the city that he'd been taken on. "Crystal Lake City is a place where a people called the 'Ancient Clan' bent and twisted their roads around the proudest, oldest trees and created a city that held tens of thousands of people but felt like it was a collection of small villages all nestled together instead of a single cohesive city."

"That... doesn't sound very practical," Liam said with a frown.

"Lady Ashlynn seems to think that these things help people live better lives," Hugo said. "Even Lady Heila didn't seem to understand it all but Master Isabell found it to be very impressive. She said that even the old countries across the sea hadn't been as ambitious about transforming their cities with new knowledge as Lady Ashlynn is." This content is hosted at M|V|LE^MPYR.

"One thing is clear from all of this," Sir Carwyn added from his place walking half a step behind Sir Hugo. "Lady Ashlynn is spending a great deal of money on things that will only be useful if she wins her war against our people. I thought I'd see smithies hammering constantly on armor or fletchers producing arrows by the bushel, but she's building homes and roads and marketplaces..."

"Just because you haven't seen it," Liam countered. "That doesn't mean it isn't happening somewhere they haven't been willing to show you. They may have their forges somewhere deeper in the Vale, or suppliers on the other side of the High Pass you mentioned."

"Isn't that more frightening to consider, Lord Liam?" Hugo asked. "If she can spend so much wealth rebuilding Vale City in the image of the greatest cities of the lands beyond the mountains, and she still has enough wealth to set up foundries, forges, armorers and the like, or to import her arms from another nation... Isn't that a bit too much?"

The entire time Hugo had been in the Vale of Mists, he'd been counting. Counting soldiers when he saw them, but also cataloging their armor and weapons and how much it would cost to equip and maintain them. He counted horses in the stables, workers at construction sites, merchants setting up shops... he counted all of it.

Now, after touring not only Vale City but a few of the nearby villages as well, Hugo's tally had led him to an incredibly uncomfortable conclusion. The Vale of Mists had been slumbering for nearly a century but its foundation was much, much older than he'd ever believed and that foundation was stronger than the foundation of Lothian March by far.

A strong foundation was worthless, however, if there wasn't anything built on top of it, and that was the most uncomfortable thing that Hugo had realized. The Vale had a strong foundation but until recently, very little stood atop it. Now, however, vast sums of wealth were being spent at a speed that would make even a Duke's treasury bleed.

And from the comments Lady Heila had made, they were only just getting started...

## Chapter 808: Facing Reality

"You're right," Liam said, stopping in the middle of the hallway as he realized the magnitude of what they'd just said. "This whole time, I've been thinking about how we'll crush them once the forces of the Church arrive from across the sea. The Church has been gathering its resources for a hundred years to launch another Crusade, and this Holy war is just the beginning..."

"I know," Hugo said, putting a hand on Liam's shoulder and giving him a slight tug to continue following their guide. "I thought that the Eldritch were barely holding on and that they were weakening year over year as we advanced. But now, I think they've been doing the same thing the Church has."

"Lady Heila knew the Holy War was coming when I mentioned it to her," Carwyn said while unconsciously flexing his shoulder. He'd mistakenly addressed Heila as 'your Worship' and praised the Holy Lord of Light for allowing her to bestow a Miracle of Healing on him when he arrived in the Vale, losing his duel to Captain Barsali.

Heila had wasted no time in explaining to him that she had nothing to do with his Church, their Holy Lord of Light, or anything that could be called a 'miracle.' If he wanted to thank her, she told him, then he needed to accept that he owed a debt of gratitude to a witch.

He'd tried countering, suggesting that if she could channel the blessings of the Holy Lord of Light, then the Church would surely welcome her in with open arms despite being a 'demon' but she not only refused, she openly mocked the Church for its misguided attempts to subjugate all lands leading to the Heavenly Shores in the west.

"I think," Carwyn said reluctantly. "I think that the Eldritch have been preparing for the upcoming Holy War even longer than we have. They've let us grow complacent with our small victories in pocket wars that are little more than skirmishes in their eyes. Now, they're baring their fangs for the first time since the Second Crusade... and I don't know if we have a chance of winning."

"You're saying that we should just surrender now?" Liam asked cautiously. "You know what the Church would do to you if they heard such a statement?"

"I'm sure they'd turn me over to the Inquisition faster than I could blink," Carwyn said with a dark chuckle. "But am I wrong? They attacked my caravan and maybe half a dozen others in Hanrahan Barony at the same time as they were raiding more than a dozen hamlets in Dunn Barony and as near as any of us can tell, they suffered almost no losses for it."

"It's easy to claim victories in an ambush campaign," Liam countered. "We don't know how they'll fare in a real war yet." In fact, from Liam's perspective, the Eldritch raids against 'soft targets' like the Dunn hamlets and the Hanrahan convoys spoke of a position of weakness more than one of strength.

If the Eldritch were truly powerhouses capable of threatening human strongholds, why hadn't they attacked the Town of Dunn or Hanrahan? In fact, they hadn't attacked even a single village and Sir Carwyn was the only knight they'd fought so far. Clearly, the demons were powerful and coordinated...

even well armed and well equipped. But it felt too early to be talking about surrender when humanity hadn't even fielded its strongest warriors against the Eldritch threat yet.

"True, we don't know how they'll fare in a real war," Hugo said thoughtfully. "But do we really want to find out what they'll do to our people in an open war? Without Grand Templars and High Inquisitors from the Church, do we even have a chance against Lady Ashlynn's forces?"

"And if that's the case," Hugo said with a heavy sigh as he looked at the slowly crumbling resistance in Lord Liam's eyes. "If that's the case, shouldn't we look for the best terms we can find to preserve as many lives and as much of our holdings as we can?"

"Because I think," Hugo said softly. "Whatever terms we can obtain now, they'll be a hundred times better than the terms we're offered when they've torn our armies asunder and razed our homes to the ground."

"None of that," Liam said, clapping his hand on Sir Hugo's back. He'd been impressed by how much information the man had gathered in the days that he'd been a prisoner in the Vale, but it was clear that he still had much to learn when it came to fighting wars.

"It's too soon to surrender," Liam said as he glanced at Sir Carwyn for support. "We should at least wait until Marquis Bors has recognized the real threat and prepared a counterattack. Don't admit defeat before you've truly fought."

"But, that's just it," Carwyn said, shaking his head at the young lord. "I have fought them, Lord Liam," he said. "One on one, and there were two more of them just like the captain I fought. I don't think our knights have the advantage they used to have," he said.

"And... I've seen their witchcraft," he added quietly. "I've never been hurt as badly as I was in that duel, but look at me now. Not a mark on me. As a healer, Lady Heila is capable of miracles greater than the High Priest in Lothian City, I'm sure of it, and Lady Ashlynn has a whole coven of witches."

"I know you still have hope for resisting," Carwyn said. "But, I think that we should listen to what Lady Ashlynn has to say tonight with a very, very open mind," he said cautiously. "We may not get a second chance to confer with her and I," he said as a lump suddenly lodged in his throat. "I owe my first duty to my family, and my second duty to my village."

"So, if there's a way to protect my family and my village from harm," Carwyn said firmly. "I intend to grab hold of it with both hands, even if I have to break my oaths to Baron Hanrahan to do it."

#### Chapter 809: Ashlynn's Offer

Ashlynn was later than she intended to be when she finally arrived at the small dining room she'd chosen for her meal with the young lords of Lothian March. Her lips were ever so slightly swollen, and a small dab of fresh blood lingered at the corner of her mouth after the intense kiss she'd shared with Nyrielle, but next to her crimson lipstick, it was unlikely anyone would notice it as anything more than a smudge of her makeup.

When she entered the dining room, Lord Liam, Sir Hugo, and Sir Carwyn all stood immediately, though the room's final occupant remained sullenly seated. Sir Rain looked rougher than he had when he arrived, and it was clear from the rough beard that had formed on his neck and jaw that he'd refused the aid of an Eldritch servant to maintain his appearance.

It was a shame, Ashlynn thought as she gave the petulant knight an evaluating look. The beard suited him, even if such things were out of fashion on the frontier where lords strived to appear 'civilized', but the thick growth on his neck combined with the sullen set of his lips to rob him of the dignity the beard should have given him.

"Be seated, my lords," Ashlynn said as she took her own seat at the head of the table. Sir Rain's childish refusal to act like a guest aside, the others seemed to have taken the hint when she sent new clothing to each of them that tonight would be an important evening, and they were all on their best behavior.

"Lady Ashlynn," Carwyn said, gesturing to the decanters and goblets on the table. "Would you prefer barley water or cider? I'm afraid there's no wine to offer," he apologized awkwardly.

"There will be wine later if there's anything to celebrate," Ashlynn said with a slight smile at the village knight's manners. Ollie had called him a good man, and he was already making a good impression. "For now, cider will do. We have several things to discuss, and I prefer to keep a clear head," she explained with a slight flush of embarrassment.

By the time the young knight had finished pouring drinks, the doors opened to reveal a pair of horned servants, dressed in blue and green harlequin-patterned livery and bearing silver platters covered in

small dishes. The scent of warm herbs, savory and thyme, filled the air, accompanied by a delicate, slightly sweet aroma wafting from bowls filled with a bright orange soup and topped with crumbled cheese.

"Your Dominion," one of the servants said with a deep bow toward Ashlynn. "If it pleases you, Georg has prepared a butternut squash soup with goat cheese and fine ground walnuts, a salad of winter greens topped with a roasted quail leg, and butter poached carrots with parsnips to begin the evening," he said as his companion placed a trio of dishes before Ashlynn and each of the young lords.

"Send my thanks to Georg," Ashlynn said warmly. "And tell him that I've been looking forward to this meal since I left the fortress last night."

"The custom here is to eat many small dishes," Hugo quickly explained to Liam. "If this is like the last feast that Master Georg prepared for us, I suggest that you only eat as much as you enjoy. There will be several more dishes to come."

"I see," Liam said politely, waiting for Ashlynn to take a spoonful of the warm, comforting soup before spearing a carrot for himself. He'd expected it to be soft and nearly mushy when the servant mentioned that it had been poached in butter, but the center was still pleasantly firm and the sweetness of the carrot mingled with the richness of the butter along with a spice he couldn't identify to create a bite felt perfect for an evening next to a crackling fire while cold rain and hail fell outside.

"Lady Ashlynn," Liam began carefully as he tried to find a way to begin what was certain to be a delicate conversation. "You've lived among the dem-, er, among the Eldritch for quite some time now. Sir Hugo even mentioned that you've traveled beyond the mountains to places that no human has ever seen. Is the food this impressive everywhere you've traveled?"

Of course, he was asking about far more than just the food. It was clear that this mysterious Master Georg had elevated cookery to a high art form, but this was a place that had been, even though only briefly, conquered by humans. The powerful vampires here were also humans. So, while Liam was asking about the food, what he really wanted to know is if the lands beyond the mountains were the sorts of savages he expected them to be, or if they were just as sophisticated as the people here.

"Everywhere I've been is different," Ashlynn said without reservation. "The Frost Walkers of the High Pass are carnivores who cut holes in the ice to fish for giant sturgeon and other fish. They produce a caviar as good as or better than any of the caviar I've been served from Marquis Kuusik's domain in the north, and their raw preparations are nearly as sophisticated as the ones I enjoyed in Blackwell County."

"High Fen City is far more diverse," Ashlynn added. "With hundreds of thousands of people traveling from all across the Eldritch lands to trade, you can find dishes, spices, and traditions from almost every corner of the Eldritch world. I'll confess that I'm not brave enough to try the delicacies of the Scaled Clan, though," she said as she moved from the warm, comforting soup to the crisp, peppery salad.

"The, the Scaled Clan?" Sir Carwyn asked. "People like the knight who challenged me to a duel?"

"Yes," Ashlynn said with a warm smile. "But Captain Barsali isn't a knight. He's a Champion of the Arena in High Fen City. It's an honorable title, one not inferior to your own," she quickly added. "But it must be defended constantly in battles before the people of High Fen City and he holds no lands."

"I'm sorry," Liam said, interrupting before Ashlynn could explain further. "Did you just say that there is a city the size of the Royal Capital just the other side of the mountains? One of the greatest cities of the de, the Eldritch world, is that close to us?"

"High Fen City is impressive," Ashlynn agreed. "More impressive than Crystal Lake City or the High Pass, to be sure. But compared to the Lake of Stars or The Dark Wood, to say nothing of Thousand Spires, it can only be called a large city, but not a great one. It's ruled by a High Lady, not a Great Lady. If you've studied your history well, then you should know that it boasts the same sort of power as the Vale of Mists did before it fell to Callach Lothian in the Second Crusade," she said pointedly.

"But Sir Carwyn," Ashlynn said, pointedly turning away from Liam to address the most junior person in the room. "I'm glad you mentioned Captain Barsali. There's unfinished business between the two of you, and I've intervened on your behalf," she said as she delicately carved a morsel of quail meat off the bone.

"If you're willing to accept my offer," Ashlynn said after savoring the herbaceous flavor of the slightly gamey fowl. "You and your men can return home to your village. You can even leave in the morning if you like," she said with a pleasant smile. "You just need to accept two conditions and you can return to your wife in time for the birth of your child..."

Chapter 810: Tempting Sir Carwyn



"No, don't do it, Carwyn!" Sir Rain snapped as soon as Ashlynn made her offer. "Whatever she's asking for, it isn't worth selling your soul over. Once Lord Owain strikes back, you don't want to be standing on the wrong side of this," he said with a menacing glower.

"Sir Rain," Ashlynn said, narrowing her eyes sharply as she looked at the scruffy knight. "You're here as a courtesy and because I have business with you, but don't mistake your place here. You might all be our unwilling guests at the moment, but don't think for a second that your circumstances are the same."

"Clearly they're not the same," Rain said, pushing his empty plates away from himself and crossing his arms over his barrel-shaped torso. "Some men have forgotten their oaths already, and they're ready to turn their backs on everything they ever fought for just because a beautiful woman flashed her..."

-SLAP-

The sound of Liam's hand striking Sir Rain's cheek filled the small room like a clap of thunder, followed by a heavy -THUMP- as the barrel-chested man fell from his chair, crashing to the floor in an undignified heap.

"I'm sorry, my Lady," Liam said as he picked up a napkin from the table to brush off the back of his hand as if striking Sir Rain had somehow soiled it. "Sir Rain is loyal to your husband to the last breath, but he isn't known for his tact," he said with a fierce glower at the fallen knight.

Standing from his chair, Liam quickly moved to offer Sir Rain a hand, pulling the burly man to his feet sharply enough that the other man stumbled into him.

"She's a witch," Liam hissed when Rain was pressed close up against him. "Mind yourself or I won't save you again," he said before gently pushing the other man in the direction of his own chair. He had no idea how powerful of a witch Lady Ashlynn truly was, no one had seen her use her powers, but Liam was convinced that if Lady Ashlynn had lashed out in anger at Sir Rain's insulting words and tone, he would have suffered far worse than a slap across the face.

"You owe Lady Ashlynn an apology," Liam said in a louder tone as he returned to his own seat, hoping that Sir Rain would be wise enough to recognize what could have happened without Liam's intervention.

"I, I'm sorry, Lady Ashlynn," Sir Rain said, barely choking back the venom behind his words as he realized how much trouble he'd almost landed himself in. He'd become too accustomed to Ashlynn's lightweight little sister, and when he heard similar scheming words dripping from Ashlynn's lips, he'd forgotten that Lady Ashlynn was much, much more dangerous than Lady Jocelynn would ever be.

Only, as he looked at Ashlynn's carefully composed features, he couldn't help but worry that Lady Jocelynn's older sister would be even more adept at wrapping men around her fingers than the younger Blackwell sister had proven herself to be. Since returning to Lothian City, Owain had begun to have more and more 'ideas' that felt like things someone else had whispered in his ear rather than his own thoughts, no matter what he said.

But then, perhaps he'd been wrong about all of this from the start. Now that he knew that Lady Ashlynn was a demonic witch, it didn't require someone of Hugo's intellect to put the pieces together and realize that Lady Jocelynn was likely a witch as well. A witch who was working with her sister to steer Owain and the whole march onto a path of ruin from which it would never return!

"I can accept your apology this once, Sir Rain," Ashlynn said in a tone that made it clear that her patience had limits. Liam's whispered warning hadn't escaped her enhanced ears, and even through the days of coarse stubble on his face, Ashlynn could see Sir Rain's complexion turning pale and sweat forming on his brow.

He'd realized his misstep, and that should be enough to keep him in line while she finished her business with Sir Carwyn. When it came to the Dunns, however, she expected an entirely different explosion from the son of Baron Aleese.

"Sir Carwyn," Ashlynn said, turning back to the young knight whose mind was still caught in thoughts of returning to his home and pregnant wife. "I said that I have two conditions for you and I promise you that they aren't things that will compromise your oaths or your honor as a knight," she said solemnly.

"First, you all need to understand that the Eldritch have no true equivalent of a knight," Ashlynn explained as she rang the bell to signal the servants to bring the next course. "Villages tend to themselves or follow the directions of their Eldritch Lord or Lady. The idea that someone would be a lord of a village is foreign to them, and Captain Barsali wasn't sure if he could treat you like a defeated Eldritch Lord or not."

"What, what would it mean for me if he did?" Carwyn asked hesitantly. He'd already lost his weapons and armor to the serpentine Champion... was there more that the man might take from him? Or would he be bound in chains to serve as a slave to the victor? Perhaps something worse? He had no idea.

"When an Eldritch Lord, the ones humans have called 'demon lords' for centuries, are defeated in single combat," Ashlynn explained. "The victor is entitled to seize the throne of the loser, along with anything else the loser may own."

"In some nations," she added in an ominous tone. "That includes seizing the defeated lord's woman and slaying their children. In this case, if we respected Eldritch traditions, Barsali would become the new knight of Raek Village, though he would have no reason to seize your family."

"But you said you interceded," Hugo said, stepping in when he saw Carwyn's face go pale at the thought that another man might lay claim to his wife. "You said you intervened on Sir Carwyn's behalf. So, what manner of deal did you come up with for Captain Barsali to give up his claim?"

"I convinced Captain Barsali that only retiring old men would want to claim territory in the west, when our new borders with the Kingdom of Gaal will be much further east," Ashlynn said with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes.

"As a Champion, so long as there is fire in his blood, if he wants to claim territory in the east," Ashlynn said smoothly. "Then I will provide him with territory equal to or greater than what he could have taken from you. There, he has a greater chance of fighting to defend his territory from the Kingdom, leaving Sir Carwyn's village in relative peace."

"And, and what is it you require of me to return to my village?" Carwyn asked once he'd composed himself enough to ask the question. "What are your two conditions?"

"The first one is easy," Ashlynn said. "You are the vassal of Baron Ian Hanrahan. I ask only that you consider yourself to be the vassal of Dame Sybyl Hanrahan instead. Baron Ian is the son of a usurper, and Dame Sybyl is the heir of the last rightful Hanrahan baron. I don't think that violates your oaths too much, does it?"

"What is the second condition?" Sir Hugo asked, placing a hand on Sir Carwyn's forearm to stop the other man from speaking until they heard the second demand that Ashlynn had.

The first one sounded reasonable on the surface of it. If they believed Dame Sybyll, it was true that Ian Hanrahan was the son of a usurper and the legitimacy of his claim to the Hanrahan throne could easily be called into doubt. For vassals to be divided between internal factions until the Marquis pronounced judgment was nothing unusual, and Sir Carwyn wouldn't be branded a traitor just for taking sides in a disputed succession.

But this wasn't an ordinary disputed succession. As a woman, Dame Sybyll shouldn't be allowed to inherit at all, which in normal times, would have meant that Ian could have become the legitimate next Baron Hanrahan, even if his father had been a murdering usurper. That alone would have made the waters muddy.

Yet Lady Ashlynn was going further, asking Sir Carwyn to pledge himself to a demon, to one of the vampire spawn of the Demon Lady of the Vale. That kind of oath of fealty went far, far beyond backing one side over another in a succession dispute and walked firmly into the lands of heresy that the Church would send inquisitors to root out. Carwyn's whole family could be killed just for going along with the mad scheme.

"My second condition is easy," Ashlynn said. "Captain Barsali will lead a contingent from the First Army to occupy your village until I've resolved matters with my husband. No one is permitted to leave your village for the duration of this war, and in the battles to come, you will not participate on either side of the conflict."

"Is that reasonable, Sir Carwyn?" Ashlynn asked. "That doesn't put too much strain on your honor or your oaths, does it?"

"How long?" Liam asked before the young knight could answer. "How long will this war of yours against Owain Lothian go on? Sir Carwyn could be agreeing to become a prisoner in his own village for years if things drag on long enough," he said, hoping to fish out more details about Ashlynn's plans.

"Oh, you shouldn't need to worry about that," Ashlynn said as the doors opened behind her to admit a familiar pair of horned servants bearing the next course of their meal. "I expect to resolve matters with Owain by year's end..."