

# The Vampire 821

## Chapter 821 821: A Dangerous Delusion

For a moment, Jocelynn sat absolutely still, unable to move or draw breath as Bors Lothian looked at her with beseeching eyes.

Now she understood. She'd thought that he'd made some kind of decision about her, perhaps even deciding to have her betrothed to Loman when he announced Loman as his heir. Or perhaps, now that he intended to install Loman as his successor, he was willing to let go of whatever worries he'd held about her and Owain since she wouldn't become the next Marchioness.

But she'd been very, very wrong. Bors' resistance to her presence and her ideas hadn't come about because he accepted her, it had happened because, when he looked at her, he wasn't seeing Jocelynn Blackwell. He was seeing his fallen wife, Isla.

The thought of it sent shivers down her spine. She'd misread him from the first moment things changed. The gentle, reassuring touches weren't the touches of a potential father-in-law for a person he saw as a daughter, they were the casual gestures of affection directed at a woman who had burned on a pyre seven years ago. He wasn't comforting her, he was finding solace in the company of a ghost!

The fire burning in the hearth in the corner was far too feeble to ward off the chill that seized her at the notion, and the rain mixed with hail drumming against the window suddenly felt more ominous, as if skeletal fingers were tapping on the glass and begging to be let in. Still, she couldn't let fear paralyze her or she might shatter the delicate state she found herself in.

"You're certain about Loman?" Jocelynn asked hesitantly, swallowing the lump in her throat and thinking of something relatively neutral she could say while she tried to decide what to do now that she understood at least a little bit of what was happening.

When he touched her, he didn't feel feverish, and he didn't look feverish either. In almost everything he said, he was very rational, even if he was gentler and kinder than he'd been in her past encounters. And yet, when it came to her, he didn't seem to see her at all... So if it wasn't a madness brought on by fever, what was it? And, more importantly, could she rely on it now that she understood it?

For a moment, she considered calling out to Confessor Eleanor in the sitting room outside Bors' bedchamber. While she wasn't a member of an order dedicated to healing, she still knew far more about sickness and treating it than Jocelynn did, and she could beseech the Holy Lord of Light to cleanse illness.

But Jocelynn dismissed the notion almost as soon as it occurred to her. If she called out for the Confessor, who knew what kind of reaction it would provoke from Bors? The old Marquis' relationship with the Church was strained, after all, and involving Eleanor might provoke something she couldn't predict. No, she thought, it would be better to keep going as she had, play along with his delusion and see where it led.

"Owain won't take it well if you strip him of his position as your heir. He might lash out at his brother and the wedge it would drive between them..." she said softly, allowing her voice to trail off suggestively at the end.

"Owain is certain to lash out," Bors said as he shook his head. "He inherited too much of my temper and not enough of your grace. But Loman has Sir Tommin at his side now, and Sir Tommin is at least as good a swordsman as Owain is. He also has one of those Holy Light Blades, so I doubt that Owain can overcome him until the Church arrives to take Owain into custody."

"The Church will take Owain into custody?" Jocelynn repeated in surprise. "Why?"

"It's that whole mess with the eldest Blackwell girl," Bors said as he picked at the food on his plate, eating nothing but moving the bits of beet and chicken around his plate aimlessly. "The Church found no evidence that she was a witch. I've spoken with the High Priest about it, and they're willing to arrange protection from the King's justice for him if he'll take the oaths of a Templar to fight against the demons in their Holy War."

"I never imagined he'd be so violent and foolish over a birthmark," Bors said with a heavy sigh, followed by a bout of coughing that left him short of breath. "It's his own fault for starting this mess. I've given him chances to clean it up, and he's failed to produce any results of value. The only thing he's managed to do for us is to keep the Blackwells from breaking off our agreement and turning their attention to one of the other Marches."

"I see," Jocelynn said carefully, taking a deep breath before committing to playing along with Bors' apparent delusion. "Then, if Owain is to become a Templar, he won't be allowed to marry. Have you, have you found a match for Loman?" Jocelynn asked hesitantly.

Consigning Owain to the Templars wasn't a bad thing for her. If it actually came to pass, it would remove the greatest threat to her safety, and she wouldn't have to search for a way to put distance between herself and Owain. It would happen naturally, and even if Owain wanted to lash out, the Templars and the Inquisitors of the Church were more than capable of handling him, despite the impressive sword skills he possessed.

"Loman is still casting his eye about," Bors said with a deep scowl. "He understands too little of women to make good decisions, but he understands enough of politics to see a few worthy possibilities. He knows that he should set his sights higher than the women of the march, but he just has no clue where to look without risking offending the princes or the people hoping to wed their daughters to the royal family."

"I've begun writing letters of introduction," Bors said, gesturing to a stack of sealed letters on his writing desk, each bearing the name of a prominent count from one of the long-established duchies. "The Blackwells were ideal for securing a path to bring soldiers and supplies across the sea for the Holy War, but there are other considerations we should make when planning our future."

"Won't it create problems with the Blackwells if you turn away from the arrangement over Jocelynn?" Jocelynn asked delicately, placing herself fully in the role of the departed Isla as she stood to fetch a bit of unfinished embroidery that was sitting on a table in the corner of the room.

Remnants of Isla's embroidery were everywhere in Lothian Manor, and the chair that had been reserved for her beside Bors' desk in his office made it clear that it had been common for her to sit and embroider even while he worked on the affairs of the march. Now, she hoped that by doing something that would have been familiar to his departed wife, she could use that association more actively to understand his plans.

Her skills with a needle weren't very refined. There were so many net makers and sail masters in Blackwell County that she'd refused to learn more than the basics required to join in ladies' gatherings in the county. It had been a childish rebellion against her father's desire to pair her up with one of the many guilds in Blackwell city, and she regretted it slightly now.

Still, she didn't intend to actually do any embroidery, just holding the piece, sorting the colored threads, and preparing a needle would be enough to help sustain the image of herself as Isla in Bors' mind.

"Our boys aren't capable enough to wed a woman like Jocelynn," Bors said bitterly. "Owain is too arrogant, and Loman is too naive. She'd have either one of them wrapped around her finger as soon as bedded them, if not before. She's already got Owain acting as a mouthpiece for her schemes. If I matched her with Loman, it would be even worse."

"Would it really, my Lord?" Jocelynn said carefully as she tested the waters. She wasn't truly interested in Loman. At this point, she wanted nothing more than to escape and return home, away from the dangers of the frontier where she was haunted by the ghost of her murdered sister. Still, just because Bors didn't want to pair her with Loman, it didn't make her safe from the Lothian Marquis's schemes.

"From what I've seen," Jocelynn prompted. "Lady Jocelynn cares for the future of the march. She wants to see it rise just as much as you do."

"She's a viper who schemed against her own sister," Bors said decisively, slamming his fist into the soft mattress beneath him and provoking a fit of coughing that sent a wave of shooting, icy pains through his side. "She's ambitious, cunning, ruthless, and willing to sacrifice anything to achieve her aims," Bors said through gritted teeth as he struggled to regain control of his breathing.

"I won't deny that she's intelligent and capable," Bors said after a moment when he seemed to have recovered enough to speak calmly again. So long as he kept himself calm and focused, it didn't put any strain on the old wound or trigger the malady that had settled into his chest, but there were some things that it was impossible to remain calm about, and Jocelynn's treachery was one of them.

"No, a woman like that is a dangerous weapon that takes more skill to wield than either of our sons possesses. No," he said after collecting himself. "I have other plans for that woman..."

Chapter 822: Shattered Dream

"I have other plans for that woman..."

Bors' statement filled Jocelynn with so much dread that she nearly dropped the embroidery hoop and thread in her hands and blood drained from her face as drops of sweat formed between her shoulder blades. Plans for 'that woman' couldn't be good, no matter what they were.

"What, what do you have in mind for her?" Jocelynn asked carefully. "And have you... have you consulted with Count Rhys about it?" As odd as it felt to refer to her father by his first name, at the moment, Bors thought she was his wife, the Marchioness and though she almost said 'my father', she caught herself and held fast to the script that would conform to Bors Lothian's delusion.

"After the mess he's gotten us into, he should thank me for settling his affairs," Bors said gruffly as he started nibbling on small bites of tender beef cheek. Bland food or not, his appetite hadn't left him, which only added one more thing that didn't fit with his apparent ailment.

"The Blackwell girl has schemed to elevate the Dunns in the coming war, all but promising them elevation to a County. If she backs them that strongly, so be it," Bors said around a mouthful of beef and sweet onions. "Liam Dunn is still unmarried and his father tells me that he's given up on finding the tailor's daughter he was chasing last year. Since the young lord has a thing for blonde beauties, then I'll reward his service with one."

"Rhys can hardly complain that I've done his second daughter wrong if I wed her to the next Count Dunn. It's a match of equal station and it maintains the alliance between the march and his county," he said, as though it should be readily apparent. "And it keeps her close at hand where we can make use of her cleverness and connections, without exposing our own family to the knife she could plant in our backs."

"But Jocelynn never had any intention of marrying into the Dunn family," Jocelynn blurted out, shocked at the way Bors would just pass her over to another man who fancied blonde women.

If she remembered correctly, Liam had once confided in Owain that the tailor's daughter he was pursuing greatly resembled her sister in looks and figure. Which meant it was happening again.

Owain had greatly admired her sister's voluptuous figure with her full bust, slender waist and curvy hips, even if she was a touch on the short side. But Jocelynn had slowly helped him to see her as more than just a younger version of her sister, but a striking woman with her own unique charms and beauty.

Now, Bors was offering her up to another man who fancied women like her sister... because she was 'close enough' to his tastes. Never mind what she thought about the man, or what Liam might think of her. The stallion needed a mare and she was fit for the task... and that was all that mattered. After days of enjoying warmth and kindness from a man she had started to see as another father figure, hearing the reality of his thoughts about her felt like a knife to the heart.

"I'm not so sure of that," Bors said as he frowned at the pale faced look of fear and revulsion on the face of his 'wife.' "I told you, she's a cunning serpent. She's seeing Owain falling from grace and she knows I may proclaim Loman as the next Marquis. I wouldn't be surprised if she's been pushing so hard for the Dunns to rise in order to secure exactly this opportunity."

"I know you think that there's merit in her ideas," Bors said, pausing as his scowl deepened. Since when did Isla have opinions on Jocelynn's ideas? No, how was Isla even here to begin with? Something... something was very, very wrong...

Suddenly, the pain in his side pulsed with a sharp, icy sensation that shot all the way down to his knee and up to his jaw, driving the air from his lungs and forcing tears from his eyes.

"Arrrggg," Bors groaned through clenched teeth as he screwed his eyes shut in pain. The fork fell from his hand, clattering against the fine porcelain plate but he barely noticed as icy, stabbing pains pierced his eyes, his ears, his temples.... It was if a claw demon made of ice had grabbed his head and squeezed and he was powerless against it.

"My lord," Jocelynn said, leaping to her feet and dropping the embroidery hoop to the ground in the process as she rushed to his side. "My lord, what, what's happening?"

Bors' entire body had gone cold to the touch and his muscles trembled and shook as if he'd been plunged into an ice bath. His breathing was rough, ragged and shallow and he'd bit down so hard on his lip when he clenched his teeth that a thin rivulet of blood spilled down his chin.

"Confessor Eleanor!" Jocelynn shouted, hoping her constant companion who was awaiting her in Bors's sitting room would hear through the closed door. "Confessor, something is wrong!"

The instant Jocelynn shouted, Bors' dark brown eyes snapped open to a horrifying sight. Isla, his beloved Isla, had vanished, and in her place stood Jocelynn Blackwell. But the Jocelynn Blackwell he saw wasn't the shaking, deeply concerned young woman who was calling for help.

Instead, to Bors' eyes, she was a towering figure, looming over his bed with a cloak of darkness spreading out behind her that devoured the light of the world and made it impossible for him to see the door out of his room. Her seafoam green eyes glowed hauntingly and horns curled from her brow, just like the demons he'd fought in countless battles.

"Demon! You demon witch!" Bors screamed as the door opened to admit another dark, shadowy figure who swept into the room like a descending vulture with talons reaching for his chest. "You wore my Isla's face like a mask," he shouted as his right hand fumbled at the bedside table for the oak-hilted steak knife that Jocelynn had told him he didn't need. "You deceived me!"

"Lord Bors, no!" Eleanor cried as she joined Jocelynn at the bedside, reaching out to restrain the frantic lord. "Lord Bors, you aren't..." she started to say only to jump away quickly when the enraged lord grabbed the knife and swung it at the women beside his bed.



Jocelynn, however, failed to see the blade coming in time to move. Bors' attack was wild and his gaze was slightly unfocused but he was still a man who had been a knight with all of the strength and training that went with it. The tip of the knife met Jocelynn's pale, delicate flesh just a finger's breadth below her exposed collar bones, drawing a deep, ragged crimson line across her chest, as the blade sought her heart.

Before Bors could turn his slash into a debilitating stab, the blade tangled itself in the cheap necklace of shells and sea glass that Owain had bought her in Blackwell city. The chain of the necklace pulled taut against her neck instantly, pulling her off balance and cutting into the flesh of the back of her neck as Bors attempted to wrench the blade free.

-SNAP-

The necklace broke almost instantly when Bors yanked the knife back, sending beads and shells clattering across the floor or pinging off the walls while Jocelynn staggered backwards as soon as she was free of the cursed piece of jewelry.

Pain flared in her chest like a hot brand pressed across the entire length of the ragged wound and her body trembled in terror as she realized how close the aging Marquis had come to stabbing into her heart with a single wild swing.

-CRUNCH-

The frame of the embroidery hoop shattered under Jocelynn's feet as she stumbled backward, just heartbeats before Eleanor's arms wrapped around her in a steadying embrace.

"HOW DARE YOU!" Bors shouted as he struggled to free himself from the oppressively heavy fur blankets that covered his bed. "Guards! Guards! Demons in the keep! To arms," he cried as he tumbled from his bed before the piercing, icy pain in his side overwhelmed him, leaving him curled up around his old wound as the knife fell from a hand that no longer had the strength to hold it.

"Isla," he cried as darkness consumed his vision and the sound of armored boots approaching filled his ears. "Where have you gone... My love..."

#### Chapter 823: Accusation (Part One)

The doors to the Marquis' chambers opened with a crash as guards stationed nearby rushed into the room.

Leading the way was a man with tanned, leathery skin and sun-bleached hair who moved with a quick, rolling gait as he shouldered his way past the other soldiers to be the first one into Bors' bedchamber.

"My Lady!" Captain Albyn shouted when he saw blood running down Jocelynn's chest from a ragged wound above the neckline of her dress. "What demon did this?" he shouted as he drew the heavy, curved sword from his hip and searched around the room for any sign of a threat.

One look around the room told him very quickly that something was very, very wrong. He'd heard Lord Bors call of 'demons in the keep', but there was no sign of demons anywhere in the room unless you counted the mounted horns or the other trophies scattered around the room.

Instead, he found Lord Bors curled on himself in what looked like incredible pain, a bloody dinner knife on the floor, and Lady Jocelynn shivering in the embrace of Confessor Eleanor.

It was a scene that couldn't be more familiar to a man who had spent a lifetime in ports where he'd been called to brothels to sort out the problems caused by drunken sailors who pushed a working woman too hard or tried to take advantage well beyond what the lady of the night was offering.

Only, when he'd arrived at scenes like that, it had been the man who was wounded and the woman who was clutching a blade. For Lady Jocelynn to be injured while there wasn't a single drop of blood flowing from Lord Bors, despite the look of pain on his face... Something didn't add up.

"Secure the room," a booming voice said from the doorway as a weathered knight with salt-and-pepper hair swept into the room. Sir Gilander was a member of Bors' old guard who had fought with him in the War of Inches and commanded the Lothian Marquis' personal guard for decades.

Though he was older than Captain Albyn by more than twenty years, his eyes missed nothing as they swept the room, searching for ways that demons might have entered or escaped. His ears strained for the slightest out-of-place sound, and even his nose twitched as he scowled at the room, finding none of the signature scents that so often accompanied demon kind.

Finding nothing else to explain what happened, Sir Gilander quickly rounded on Jocelynn and Eleanor, only to find the swarthy sea captain blocking his path as he stood protectively over the two women.

"My Lady," Eleanor said to the pale-faced and trembling woman in her arms as soon as Captain Albyn positioned himself between the pair of women and the Lothian Marquis. "Let me tend to your wound," she said, looking at the ghastly injury where the tip of the knife had clearly skipped off her breastbone as it cut across her chest, leaving a flap of skin hanging that exposed the meaty tissues and a touch of bone beneath.

"H-him, f-f-first," Jocelynn stammered, pointing at Bors as Sir Gilander knelt carefully at his lord's side, rolling him onto his back and searching for any signs of wounds. "He, he... something, something is

wrong with, something..." she said weakly as her knees buckled and she slumped into Eleanor's arms. Her eyes fluttered closed, and her head hung limply to the side like a rag doll, supported only by Eleanor's embrace.

Blood continued to flow from her wound, and the neckline of her dress had gone from pale, icy blue to dark crimson red by the time Eleanor laid her down on the floor. Moving as quickly as she dared, Eleanor knelt beside Lady Jocelynn and pulled out a well-worn gilded amulet in the shape of a sun with rays beaming down.

Confessors weren't healers, but offering comfort was part of their creed. For those who had wandered from the path of Light, a Confessor was supposed to be a beacon who could help guide the lost back onto the path.

People who were in pain and suffering from a life of struggle they couldn't meet often needed at least a bit of healing and comfort, and so Eleanor had learned the basics of caring for the injured and the sick. She only hoped it would be enough to save Lady Jocelynn's life now.

"Holy Lord of Light, I humbly pray,

Heal this wound and stop the bleeding.

If a price is due, then let me pay,

Take my strength to aid her healing."

For a moment, pain flared in Eleanor's chest, sharp and burning as she felt the soft golden glow of the Holy Lord of Light envelop Jocelynn's chest. The pain was part of the price that the Holy Lord of Light always demanded for healing.

Anyone who would beg for the grace of the Holy Lord of Light had to be willing to join their patient in their struggle, to suffer the agony of their wounds along with them. It was a test of the healer to prove themselves worthy of being a vessel for the grace of the Holy Lord of Light.

The pain in Eleanor's chest grew more and more intense until she felt as if someone was attempting to carve her heart from her chest. Just when it felt like it couldn't get any worse, the pain spread throughout her entire body, searing her flesh as if she stood naked before the holy light of a summer sun.

Eleanor's complexion faded, becoming wan and pale, and her eyes took on a sunken, dark look as though she hadn't slept in days. Still, the price of the healing had to be paid, and she clutched her medallion tightly as the burning sensation grew even more intense. In a handful of heartbeats, her body took on a frail appearance, as though she hadn't eaten in days. Her lips grew chapped and her throat parched by the time the light faded away, leaving her worn and exhausted.

It was one of the most intense healings she'd ever performed, and it would take her months to recover from this moment, assuming she was able to recover completely at all. But one look at Jocelynn's peacefully slumbering figure was enough to make the pain and the price she'd paid more than worth it.

Where there had once been a ragged, bloody wound deep enough to expose bone, now, only a bright red and pink line of a freshly healed wound remained, and the look of pain and fear on Jocelynn's face had faded completely.

Over time, the mark would fade, and it was certain to leave a scar, but the scar would be thinner and paler than if the wound had been stitched by the hand of a physician. At the same time, unnoticed by Eleanor, the cut that ran around the back of Jocelynn's neck from the necklace biting into her flesh also healed, leaving behind only a faint, pink line.

But even though Lady Jocelynn had healed, the danger they were in was far from over as more than half a dozen soldiers crammed into the Marquis' chambers, most of them with weapons drawn, and ready to fight against whoever had injured Lord Bors... while Eleanor and Lady Jocelynn had only Captain Albyn to protect them.

#### Chapter 824: Accusation (Part Two)

"My lord, my lord, wake up," Sir Gilander called as he gently shook the aging Marquis. "What happened to him?" he asked as he turned to face Confessor Eleanor and Jocelynn. "Why did he shout about demons in the keep?"

"I don't know," Eleanor said slowly through dried, chapped lips as she pulled Jocelynn close to her. The young lady had fainted dead away from the pain of her wounds, and though Eleanor carried smelling salts to help with a young lady's fainting spells, she had no intention of rousing Jocelynn just to answer this knight's questions.

Right now, both Lady Jocelynn and Lord Bors clearly needed rest, healing, and strong protection. As far as she was concerned, investigations into what happened could wait until her lady was safely back in her chambers with more guards to protect her. She needed rest herself, but she refused to relax until she'd seen to Jocelynn's safety.

"Lady Jocelynn called out that something was wrong with Lord Bors," Eleanor said curtly. "I was in the sitting room when she called for me. Before I could reach his side, he began shouting about demons and witches. Then he lashed out with the knife. He collapsed right after, when he fell out of bed," she said, giving a simple account of events without including any of the other details of what Bors had said.

She might not be a healer, but she'd met plenty of broken men in the years since she dedicated her life to hearing the confessions of the lost and the damned. Bors sounded like one of the most haunted, broken, and anguished men she'd ever seen, and if she didn't know better, she'd have thought that he was lost in drugs or drink when he claimed that Jocelynn had stolen the face of his dead wife.

"She is a witch," Bors said weakly as his eyes fluttered open. Raising his left hand with great difficulty while his right hand clutched at the wound in his side, he pointed at Jocelynn's slumped figure with fury in his eyes. "A demon witch, just like her sister, and a plague on our lands," he said bitterly.

"She cast a hex on me," he said with a growing strength and venom in his voice. "She made herself resemble Isla to seduce me or manipulate me or... or worse."

"Is it really that way, your Lordship?" Albyn said as he rested his sword across his shoulders, unwilling to point the weapon in the direction of the ailing lord even though he was clearly the most dangerous person in the room at the moment.

"I've seen many a man try taking what they shouldn't from a young lass," the captain added with a pointed look at the guardsmen. "Then the man claims the woman was a witch or heretic for striking out to defend her honor."

"How dare you!" Sir Gilander shouted as he shot to his feet, dropping his hand to the hilt of his sword as he glared at the arrogant captain whom he knew only as one of the men that Lord Owain had recruited in Blackwell County to fight demons in the coming war.

"Lord Bors has never once looked at a woman other than Lady Isla," Gilander growled. "He wouldn't remarry after she passed, and he still holds vigils over her grave. How dare you suggest he would lay a hand on a young lady with impure thoughts and wicked intentions!"

"I'm not saying that your lordship did what he shouldn't," Albyn said quickly, even though he'd heavily implied exactly that. "But Confessor Eleanor here just prayed over Lady Jocelynn's wounds and the Holy Lord of Light himself saw fit to heal her," he pointed out.

"I'm no priest, Confessor," Albyn said with a glance over his shoulder. "But I kept a chaplain onboard for more'an ten years, and he always said that the Holy Lord of Light's power was like fire on the flesh of a demon or a witch. So, Lady Jocelynn shouldn't be either of those now, should she?"

"Damn you, fool!" Bors shouted only to cut off as another bout of coughing racked his body, this time accompanied by blood that stained his lips. "That's no Confessor, but a demon as well! I saw it. I saw it with my own eyes," he insisted. "She's a creature of the night, just like, just like the Demon Lady of the Vale! With sharp talons and a cloak of night, she... she..." he said, only to trail off as he realized that both Jocelynn and the Confessor looked completely normal to his bewildered gaze.

"But I saw it," he said in a tone that lacked much of his previous confidence. "I swear, I saw it."

"My lord has been unwell," Eleanor said as she gently stroked Jocelynn's hair. "Perhaps it was just a fever. I'll send for the High Priest himself to tend to you," she suggested. "He's a far better healer than I."

"I don't need a priest, damn it," Bors snapped. "I'm not confused and I'm not feverish," he insisted. "I saw it. She was pretending to be Isla! Just look," he insisted as his eyes grew moist when he pointed at the broken embroidery hoop on the floor that contained his Isla's last, unfinished work. "Why was she carrying Isla's embroidery if she wasn't pretending to be my love?"



For Gilander and the other soldiers who knew their lord well, the broken embroidery hoop was damning evidence of foul play. Lord Bors treasured each and every one of the treasures that Isla had left behind, and in the seven years since her death, he hadn't let one of them come to harm.

"It's a beautiful piece," Eleanor acknowledged in a non-committal tone as she looked at the outline of a lily in bloom illuminated by the sun's rays. Seven years ago, Loman wouldn't yet have come of age, and she couldn't help but wonder if Lady Isla had meant it as a gift for Loman that combined her love for him with the greater love of the Holy Lord of Light.

"Perhaps your lordship asked for Lady Jocelynn's help to complete it and you've forgotten?" Eleanor suggested. "Lady Jocelynn has been coming to visit you several times a day to care for you. If completing this piece would have brought you joy, I'm sure she'd have done it gladly."

"No, that's not right, that's not right at all," Bors said as he shook his head. But when he thought back, he found several moments in the past few days that felt... fuzzy, in his mind. As though he was remembering watching events through a gossamer curtain. He'd often thought of finishing the piece himself, but he knew he had no skill for it, and his hands were meant for swords and axes, not needles and embroidery. Had he really asked Jocelynn to finish it?

"Let me fetch someone to help you, even if it isn't the High Priest," Eleanor suggested, hoping that Bors would be reasonable. "Your physician, perhaps? He can be the one to decide if you need to summon a healer from the Temple."

"Fine," Bors relented. "You won't be the one to fetch anyone. Sir Gillander," he commanded forcefully. "Lock her up," he added, pointing at Jocelynn. "Lock both of them up," he added as he waved his arm at both women. "I'm not sick, and I saw... things. Take them below the keep and summon an Inquisitor," he insisted. "I'll have the truth of this, one way or another!"

Bors refused to allow the Inquisition to establish a Chapter in Lothian City, and he'd already sent away the visiting Inquisitor, Diarmuid. Because of that, the nearest Inquisitor was a day's ride away in the Village of Maeril. Now, for the first time in his reign as Marquis, he regretted not keeping one by his side, and he would have given a great deal to rush a man here faster than a carrier pigeon could summon him.

"The lady can rest in her chambers," Captain Albyn countered. "Under house arrest if you insist," he added. "There's no need to insult the lady by hurling her into the dungeons. She's already suffered from your blade, your lordship... I think that's enough for her tonight, don't you?"

If Captain Albynn had been a man of the frontier, he never would have dared to talk back to a lord like that, much less a lord as powerful as the Marquis. But on the high seas, a ship's captain was the highest and final authority after the Holy Lord of Light himself, and Count Blackwell had long accorded the captains of vessels the same level of respect as landed knights in his county.

Because of that, the captain stood his ground firmly, unwilling to back down even though he was outnumbered by guardsmen. Lady Jocelynn had come to him for help and asked him to serve as her personal guard, and he wasn't about to let her down when she needed him most.

"House arrest," Bors relented as he slumped against the heavy oak timbers of his bed frame. "Take her away. All of you go away," he added as he reached out for the half-finished piece of embroidery, wrapping his fingers around it with the gentleness of a man picking up a delicate treasure he dared not break.

"I'll see my physician in the morning," he added as he slowly climbed to his feet. "Until then, until the Inquisitor arrives to reveal the truth of this, no one is to speak a word of what happened tonight," he said. "Not to anyone!"

"And I swear to you," he said, pointing a thick finger at Eleanor and Jocelynn. "Whatever you've gotten away with in Blackwell County, things are different here in the Frontier. Here, we burn witches and heretics at the stake when we find them. So say your prayers to whatever demon god you believe in, because once the Inquisitor confirms your guilt, the both of you will burn!"

## Chapter 825: The Vale Through An Engineer's Eyes

Isabell sat quietly in the sitting room of her chambers, staring out the window and listening to the sound of gentle rain whispering across the roof tiles of the ancient fortress. There was nothing to see outside other than the occasional flicker of lightning in the clouds and the tiny lights of the fortress town beyond the walls, but somehow, she found the view of the dark night to be more calming and soothing than anything else in the room.

She'd been in the Vale of Mists for a week now or close enough to it, and she was beginning to feel comfortable with the unique rhythms of the place.

The night outside was darker than Blackwell City without the harbor to reflect the light of the sky or the city around it. More than that, the tall trees of the old forest around the fortress and its town, combined with the massive, looming cliff above, conspired to make the place feel like it had been draped in shadow even hours before the sun set.

But the lights that she could see from the fortress were very different from the lights she was accustomed to in Blackwell. They burned bright and clean in neat, orderly rows that lined the streets of Vale City. If she hadn't seen them up close when Lady Heila or Sir Ollie led her through the city, she might have mistaken the distant lights for the campfires of a military camp because they were so orderly. Every fifty paces, along every major street, a pole had been placed, crowned with a glass-sided lantern that was lit as the sun set and burned all through the night.

It was an idea that should have been ordinary and logical, and yet she hadn't seen such a practice anywhere in the Kingdom of Gaal or in the old countries across the sea. Doing things the Eldritch way would have required noblemen to empty their own coffers in order to light the streets or to collect a tax just to maintain the lights. It was far easier to simply require the people to place a lamp in a window at night to light the streets, even if most people only used enough oil to give a few hours of light.

The lamps weren't the only thing that struck Isabell about Vale City, but here, at night, looking down on the faintly glowing lamps from high above, they were one of the most obvious signs of what this place had that most human cities lacked.

Intention.

Nothing that Isabell had seen in the Vale of Mists felt haphazard. From the orderly streets with their lights, to the villages spaced far enough from each other across the vale to let each one stand uniquely in a place that was suited to what the village did best, it was clear that there was a grand plan at work in the Vale and to an engineer like her, it was impossible to miss it once she started seeing the signs.

"It isn't just a plan, though," she muttered as she sipped a mug of steaming, mulled wine. "It's the discipline to adhere to the plan for longer than a single man's life."

Lady Nyrielle had ruled the Vale of Mists for a century, longer than any human monarch could dream of, but she was even older than that, and her patience and discipline had helped the Vale of Mists recover from near destruction when most human nobles would have abandoned the land entirely. And even among those who were stubborn enough to rebuild, at least half would have failed outright.

But the Vale, even in its vastly diminished state, still built and maintained roads between villages, still kept up its bridges across the streams that fed the River Luath, and still did many more of the things that no one needed to do for the small population of the Vale today, but which would help the Vale immensely in the years to come.

"It's enviable," she said with a heavy sigh. "To see someone so farsighted with so much care for their people."

Heila had explained it to her as an Eldritch Lord's 'Duty of Care', a responsibility of the strongest to use that strength on behalf of the people they ruled over. Failure to discharge that duty well, Heila had said, resulted in the rise of strong men who could slay irresponsible tyrants or rebellions that pulled poor rulers from their thrones. But Isabell thought that it went beyond that.

"What exactly does an undying vampire see her people as?" Isabell wondered. "Are they her treasured children? Beloved pets? Something else entirely?"

Isabell had seen communities that existed to serve the ambitions of their lord, but the Vale wasn't like that at all. In fact, to her and Master Tiernan, it seemed like the Vale re-invested in itself aggressively, even before Ashlynn's arrival and the transformation of the Vale under her influence.

Of the many things that Isabell had seen in the Vale that left a deep impression on her, there were things that she hadn't seen which left an even larger impression on her. She hadn't seen anyone sleeping in the streets or on benches in the city's parks. She hadn't seen any pensioners nursing old wounds who had been abandoned without families.

It wasn't that she hadn't seen any old and fallen soldiers. She'd met people of both the Horned Clan and the Clan of the Great Claw who suffered grave wounds during the War of Inches. Only, those people continued to live on in the long-houses of the Clan of Great Claw, or they kept a small hut in the Horned Clan's villages where half a dozen grown children ensured that their parents or uncles never went unattended.

The entire Eldritch world wasn't like this. It couldn't be, and her conversations with the merchants from across the mountains confirmed as much. In general, the people of High Fen City or Crystal Lake City

might be better off than most people in the Kingdom of Gaal, but the Vale of Mists was special. The care that Lady Nyrielle gave them was special, and Ashlynn only made that greater.

It was that something special that made Isabell's hands itch for her drafting table and a chance to be part of what the Vale of Mists would become.

When she left the wars of the old countries behind, she returned to the Kingdom of Gaal to build a life for herself and her family. To make a place that was better than it had been, rather than tearing places apart with her engines of war.

In Blackwell County, she'd done as much of that as she could. She brought new engineering techniques from across the sea, and she could point to many places in Blackwell City that thrived because of what she had done.

The massive cranes that loaded and unloaded ships with sophisticated systems of pulleys and counterweights were just one of the things she'd brought to the city. The reservoirs and aqueducts that helped keep the city and its surrounding farms supplied with fresh water even in years of drought were another, one for which Count Blackwell had greatly rewarded her.

But there were limits to what she could do in a place where she had to compete with so many other interests. Whether it was the constant pressure from the Wayfarers or the Linemen to invest more heavily in the industry of the harbor, or the rising drumbeat of the Holy War that Count Rhys had made himself such an integral part of, there were always things that were 'more important' than.

Over the years, Isabell had proposed revising the storm drains to prevent flooding, or laying down better roads in the city's expanding 'New Quarter', or any of a dozen other projects that felt vital to a growing city. And each year, Lord Rhys Blackwell agreed they were important endeavors, but they were never vital enough for anyone to pay for.

Which was why helping Ashlynn to shape the Vale of Mists was so appealing. Ashlynn, and by extension, Lady Nyrielle, were investing in infrastructure at a furious rate, and Isabell could likely spend the rest of her life here, working on worthy projects, and never find a lack of interest in seeing how she could make the place better for its people.

Yet, much like the Emerald Prince she had once served, Ashlynn's hands were slick with blood and they would only be growing more so in the years to come. The Kingdom of Gaal and the Church would never stand for what Lady Ashlynn intended to build.

And if Lady Heila was to be believed, then what Ashlynn intended to offer her was far more than just a chance to use her engineering skills to build up the Vale. To become a witch and join Ashlynn's coven would mean far more than just plying her trade in a different city for a different people. It would require her to completely change herself, and in more ways than one.

Even though Ashlynn claimed that she didn't want Isabell to involve herself in the wars, the gray-haired engineer didn't know if she could hold herself back from marching to the battlefield if the place she was helping to build came under attack. Especially not if her family joined her here. She could never sit idly by while...

-knock- -knock-

"Master Isabell?" Ashlynn's voice called from outside the sitting room. "I hope you're still free to talk tonight..."

"Of course, my lady," Isabell said as she stood from her seat by the windows and set down the empty mug of mulled wine. It was time, she supposed, to make a decision.

#### Chapter 826: Power That Is Earned (Part One)

When Isabell opened her door, she was surprised to find Ashlynn alone, carrying a covered silver tray and a bottle of wine that looked quite old. There were no servants or attendants following the mighty Mother of Trees, only a young woman who looked like she'd come for a night of treats and drinks with a dear friend.

"The pears here are nothing like the pears back home," Ashlynn apologized as she entered Isabell's sitting room, where she set the tray on a low table near the hearth. "So I asked Georg to make us tarts with apples instead. These come from the orchards on the north side of the river and they're very similar to the apples grown in Kade Barony," she explained, referencing the famed Kade apples that she was certain Isabell had encountered since coming to Lothian March.

The tarts under the cloche were deceptively simple with a spiral of sliced apples lying gently in a simple, dark brown sauce, nestled in a golden, flaky crust that was just the right size for picking up and holding.

The apples had been sliced thick enough that they still held a bit of crisp bite in their centers even as the outside had become soft and delicate, soaking up the spices of cinnamon and clove. The pastry that held the apples and their succulent juices was golden and flaky, with a rich buttery flavor that blended with the apples to create a bite that was warm and comforting without feeling as overly complex as the dishes served at the tables of human noblemen.

"Do you ever think about going home to Blackwell County?" Isabell asked gently as she looked at the tarts that were so reminiscent of the tarts made with Blackwell pears that could be purchased from every baker in Blackwell City during pear season. Had Ashlynn explained the tarts to Georg and asked for something that reminded her of home, she wondered as she took the bottle of sweet, crisp white wine from Ashlynn and poured each of them a small glass before taking a seat in one of the chairs facing the hearth. "Or has the Vale of Mists become your only home now?" Isabell asked.



"I want to visit," Ashlynn said, much more easily than she would have just a month ago. Now that she knew that neither of her parents had betrayed her secret to Owain Lothian, her desire to visit them had grown stronger, and her fears about seeing them again had lost much of their sharpness.

"I want to see my parents again and to let them know I'm well," Ashlynn continued as she gently sipped the wine, grateful that Georg had been able to suggest a vintage that was more refreshing than intoxicating for her conversation with Isabell. "I want to walk barefoot on the beach and feel the sand beneath my toes and smell the salt air," she said wistfully. "I want to go to the festivals by the docs and eat shellfish and do all of the things I used to do. But then, I want to return to the Vale where my new family is."

"This is where I belong now," Ashlynn said firmly. "There's no place for me in the Kingdom anymore. Even without the Church, they have no place for a woman like me."

"Because you're a witch?" Isabell asked delicately as she took a bite of the sweet and tart apple dessert. "Or because of your relationship with another woman? Or something more than that?"

As much as Isabell would have liked to let the conversation remain light, she felt like it wasn't doing either of them any favors if they avoided the topic that she knew Ashlynn had come here to discuss. Thankfully, her younger friend seemed to have recovered from her ordeal after learning of Jocelynn's betrayal, and Isabell felt comfortable guiding the conversation toward more serious matters.

"It's because I don't want to submit to the rules of others when I have the strength to make my own rules," Ashlynn said with a fierce glint in her emerald eyes. "In the Kingdom of Gaal, everyone lives in fear of 'demons', in awe of the Church, and in service to the King or his vassals."

"But when I look at the Eldritch world, I don't see anything to be afraid of," Ashlynn said as she sipped the light, fruity wine. "When I look at the Church, I don't find any great mysteries or profound truths to be in awe of. And when it comes to the King and his vassals, I see too many people who have inherited their power without working to earn it or learning to master it."

"I understand what you mean about learning to master it," Isabell agreed with a nod, even as her brows wrinkled in thought. "Statecraft is an art, and not all men are as gifted at it as your father. Even the Emerald King I served needed to learn many difficult and painful lessons when he fought for his throne, and he had spent his entire youth in preparation to sit upon it."

"But what do you mean by working to earn their power?" Isabell asked. "From what I understand, you were born to your power in the same way that a king is born to theirs. It seems like the one truth the Church has uncovered about the world is that the life we are born into determines the extent to which we may rise, or for those who are born high, the extent to which they can fall."

Isabell had seen common men work all their lives to raise their station. She'd seen men and even some women who had been orphans who never had anything, as they struggled to become merchants or masters of their craft. Step by step, they ascended higher, becoming pillars of their community, finding wealth, companionship, family, and even a measure of status.

Yet in the end, the most they could accomplish was to rise in the trades. They would never be the equal of even the lowest knight, and they bowed politely to ten-year-old boys who were the sons of barons, even after decades of accomplishment.

The opposite was also true. While some noblemen who were the victims of tragic circumstances experienced a fall to a life as a commoner, a penniless nobleman was all but unheard of. It was as if there was an invisible hand waiting to catch them if they stumbled too much, and countless more hands who helped to lift them back up whenever disaster loomed.

From what Isabell had heard of Ashlynn's experience, her young friend experienced the same thing, only to a much greater extent. By rights, she should have died after the beating she suffered from Owain, but because she was born as the Mother of Trees, the world itself supported her, catching her when she fell and preserving her life until the powerful vampire, Nyrielle, rescued her.

"That's true and it also isn't," Ashlynn said carefully as she tried to decide how to respond to Isabell. On one hand, she wanted to protest that being one of the great witches was nothing like being a king. No one had greeted her birth with promises of a throne and an entire nation ready to bow down in service of her every capricious whim.

At the same time, it was true that no one else could obtain the opportunity she had. Only one person at a time could hold the power of the Mother of Trees, and she had been chosen for the role since birth. And if she'd been born in the Eldritch nations, many of them would have prepared a throne for her from the day she was born, though an equal number of them would have attempted to have her killed before she could grow into her power.

But if she wanted Isabell to accept her offer, she had to help the other woman understand how this was different from the abusive use of power that dominated human aristocracy. After all, Isabell had seen some of the very worst of what could happen in a world filled with power inherited by people who were unworthy to wield it.

If she couldn't get Isabell to understand the differences between the corrupt world she'd come from and the one that Ashlynn and Nyrielle wanted Isabell's help building then she might lose not only someone who could become a talented witch, but one of the few friends she had who knew her before she became the Mother of Trees, and that was a loss she just couldn't bear.

#### Chapter 827: Power That Is Earned (Part Two)

The fire in the hearth hissed and crackled, filling the room with warmth, a soft, golden glow and the faintest scent of woodsmoke as Ashlynn considered how to respond to Isabell. Thankfully, the older woman gave her the space to consider her words carefully, sitting back and nibbling on her apple tart while Ashlynn thought about how to explain something that was completely outside the other woman's experience.

"Vampires believe that they are born with a purpose, to wield death in order to protect life," Ashlynn began slowly. "They serve as a check on power, preventing whole peoples from vanishing or the dominance of any one group at the expense of all others."

"That doesn't sound very different from the teaching of the Church that those who are born to power are born to its burdens," Isabell said softly. "The power that your Lady Nyrielle wields transcends death and so the burden she bears must be even greater than the power of a king. But that still doesn't make her power something that she earned."

"I don't know if a vampire's power is 'earned' or not," Ashlynn said carefully. "They certainly pay a price for it. But I'm not talking about vampires to suggest that they earn their power, only to say that they believe that their existence has a purpose. But witches, we don't believe that there's a grand purpose behind our power. We don't believe that we were born with it in order to fulfil some grand role or destiny the way vampires do," Ashlynn explained.

Here, she was repeating words she'd heard from Amahle at the beginning of her training, but she wasn't just parroting the words. In the past half year, she'd come to understand a great deal more about her own connection to the world and her ability to harness the power of the world and bend it to her will. Now, she felt like her relationship with the world was very, very different from Nyrielle's relationship with the Void and the Abyss that lay beyond death.

"Let me use a different analogy," Ashlynn said as she looked at the simple black tunic and skirt that Isabell wore for this evening. Or, more accurately, at the intricate set of knots that hung from the belt at Isabell's waist, serving as a badge of rank that anyone in the large cities of Gaal would recognize. "In Blackwell City, you wear the knots of a Master Engineer. How did you earn those knots?"

"Studying," Isabell said instantly as she recalled long hours spent poring over tomes filled with mathematical formulas and engineering rules. "There were exams. And I needed the confirmation of other masters that I was worthy of the title," she said with an oddly rueful expression.

The Illustrious Company of Engineers in Blackwell City refused to acknowledge her master's knots when she returned from the Emerald Kingdom because they had been bestowed on her by royal decree. It had been meant as a favor from the newly crowned king who recognized her skills so that she didn't need to seek out patrons among the older masters to receive recognition he felt was already earned. In the Emerald Kingdom, where her reputation as the Engineer of Destruction had spread far and wide, no one questioned her right to wear those knots.

When she returned home, however, the guild had taken it as a sign that she couldn't earn the qualifications of a master without somehow earning the favor of the royal court and there had been some unsavory rumors about what she had done to earn that decree for a number of years.

In the end, she'd gone back through the process of taking exams, then completing tasks for three different master engineers to prove her skills met the grade of a master. Two of the three had been reasonable, but one of them kept sending her back to the drawing table for revision after revision of a mutli-gear waterwheel until she could account for the adjustments that would be needed over more than ten years of wear and tear on components.

It had been a ridiculous task when any sensible engineer would have replaced parts as they introduced instability from wear and tear, but she had refused to buckle under the intense pressure of the white haired and stoop shouldered master and in the end, she'd received a surprising bit of advice from him.

"Your customers may not always be wealthy enough or skilled enough to maintain what you build," he said when she finally completed her revisions to his satisfaction. "A farmer may not be able to replace a gear in a lean year, and even if he is able to replace a worn part in a year where he harvests a bumper crop, he may not have the luxury of time to replace it because he must process much more grain."

"You need to think beyond the math to the circumstances of the man who uses what you have designed and built," the old master said. "Then and only then can you consider yourself a master who can be relied upon by not just your customer, but the whole of the community you serve."

It had been a powerful lesson that changed her view of the old man, and she had to admit that when she received her master's knots for the second time, they felt much more 'earned' than they did when she received them by royal decree.

"There was a lot of hard work to earn those knots," Isabell said as her mind returned to the current conversation. "It wasn't all easy, but looking back, I'm glad for the challenges that tempered me before I could wield the power and authority of a master, and I've tried to take the same approach with aspiring masters who come to me for an endorsement of their craft."

"And that's what witchcraft is like," Ashlynn said with a wide smile. "Every witch in the coven is tested, both by the witch who grew their seed of witchcraft and by the world itself. We all face our tests and trials in order to receive the power we wield."

"Even you?" Isabell asked with a raised brow. "I thought that you were different from the witches of your coven. Didn't this whole mess with Owain Lothian begin because you'd been marked from birth for the power you carry?"

#### Chapter 828: A Witch's Dangerous Desires (Part One)

"I am different," Ashlynn acknowledged as she set down her half empty goblet of wine while her tone grew very solemn. "But just because I was born with power doesn't mean that I haven't faced trials in order to earn it. It's just that the trials I face feel like they're a never ending exam," she said a touch wryly.

"You've seen what happens when the power I have isn't kept under control," Ashlynn said softly. "There was a Mother of Trees in the past who lost control of her power and it not only consumed her, it consumed an entire forest, leaving behind a towering spruce tree that is the only growing thing for more than fifty leagues in any direction."

At the time, the story Amahle told her all those months ago felt like an abstract sort of cautionary tale. The sort of folk lore that warned children to go to bed on time before the monsters gobbled up their toes or the warnings of the Church about the ancient times when the spirits of the dead preyed freely on the living in the old countries. It might be a thing that happened once, but it had very little to do with her.

Now, she knew better. Amahle hadn't given her a vague warning that was part of witchcraft's body of ancient, dusty traditions, but a dire warning about the very real threat of being consumed by her own power.

"For the coven, earning the right to be a witch means facing the trials of your seed. Essentially, witchcraft's version of the exams you took," Ashlynn said as she tried to compare the process of becoming a witch to something that Isabell was familiar with. "But to be a great witch, earning your power means facing the constant threat of your power consuming you. If you cannot prove yourself capable as a witch, just as you had to prove yourself to be capable as an engineer, then there will be nothing left but a tree or a bush to mark the place where you fell."

The previous Mother of Trees who had been consumed by the desire to produce an overwhelmingly powerful seed of witchcraft for her husband was just one example of a witch who had succumbed to their power. Sister Holly in the Briar was another, and there were countless more.

Nyrielle said that vampires danced on the edge of a blade between life and death. For Ashlynn, there were times when being a witch felt like resisting the powerful pull of a dozen anchor chains, each pulling in a different direction. And if any one of them overwhelmed her, they would drag her to the inescapable depths at the bottom of a sea of desires.

"I don't know if what I'm about to say is true or not," Ashlynn added carefully. "But lately, I'm coming to believe it, at least a little. Nyri says time grinds away at the hearts of vampires, wearing their ability to feel until nothing remains but cold and dust. For witches, I think it's the opposite. We, we feel, very, very intensely. Love, hate, grief, joy..."

"Our powers are driven by our desires," Ashlynn said solemnly. "And sometimes, we are tormented by those desires. Mastering that nature goes beyond learning to use your power and if I'm honest, I'm still a long way from calling myself a master. It's just that I don't have the luxury of time to wait until I can master all of this... or maybe, it's that the only way I can master it is if I work through the things that torment me so that I'm not consumed by them in the end."

"I see," Isabell said as she carefully considered Ashlynn's words. "Lady Heila said that you'd come to offer me a position in your coven," she said after several quiet moments. "I've thought for days about what sort of answer I'd give you when you came and to be honest," she said as she removed her silver, wire framed spectacles. "I haven't come up with an answer because I still don't understand what all of this means for me."

Isabell set down her wine goblet with hands that had begun to tremble slightly. The thought of being consumed by magical power, of losing herself so completely that nothing remained but a tree to mark where she had stood, sent a chill through her that had nothing to do with the winter night outside.

Worse than the thought of turning into a tree, however, was her memory of Ashlynn, surrounded by a strange wind and lost in the rush of power, pain and grief when she'd learned that her sister had been the one who betrayed her.

At the time, Isabell was helpless to protect herself and without Lady Heila's healing, she'd likely still be bed bound recovering from her wounds. If Isabell ever did that to her own family... and if there wasn't



someone who could protect them from her or if she did something to them that couldn't be healed... she could never forgive herself.

"When I was younger," Isabell said slowly, "when I followed the Emerald Prince into battle, I had nothing to lose. I was alone in the world, with no family depending on me, no children who needed their mother to come home safely each night. I could throw myself into the work of war because the worst thing that could happen was that I would die. At the time, that felt like an acceptable risk for the chance to help build something better."

She really had believed that she was fighting for something worthwhile. That the prince's usurper of an uncle represented a danger to the kingdom and its people because a man who would betray his own family would surely betray his subjects.

Later on, when the newly crowned Emerald King began to assemble his court and she saw the way people eagerly began carving up the map, claiming new territories to lord over as their spoils for backing the 'right side' in the war, she began to question if the war had truly had a 'right side' and if it had been worth the risks she'd taken.

And here she was again, sitting in a sitting room that reminded her so much of the private study where she'd met with the Emerald Prince and his close confidants to discuss fighting back against his uncle, speaking with a young noblewoman with a just cause for starting another war. Only this time, the thought of joining that war carried much, much more severe consequences.

Chapter 829: A Witch's Dangerous Desires (Part Two)

"When I was younger, it was easier to make these sorts of decisions," Isabell repeated. "But now... now I have Casquas, and my daughter Issandra, who's just begun her apprenticeship with the Shipwright's Guild. She's just taking her first steps out into the world, and she needs a safe home to return to."

"And my son Lassian still needs a bit of guidance to keep his hot head from getting him into trouble he can't handle," she added with a wry smile and a faint chuckle as she thought about her son's growing interest in the young women around him and his father's 'advice' about wooing them using his poetry. Already it had led to a few moments of public embarrassment and one spectacular fist fight when he unknowingly selected someone else's fiancée as the object of his desire.

"There's so much of his father's passion in him that, if I were consumed by desires and lost my ability to be the parent with a logical voice of reason to counter the strong pull of his heart, I worry that I wouldn't be able to be the mother he needs."

The more she spoke of her children, the tighter her throat became, and moisture began to blur the corners of her vision. It had already been months since she left Blackwell County, and while she'd received a handful of letters from them, it was the longest she'd been away from her family in years.

Now, as she spoke to Ashlynn about how desires drove witches, part of her couldn't help but wonder if Casquas or her son Lassian would make a better witch than she would... or if it would be even more dangerous for them because they were already driven by strong passions and desires.

Either way, just thinking of them right now made her heart tremble with the feeling that they were even farther away than they had been when she was in Lothian City, and any decision she made here tonight carried the risk of increasing that distance even more.

"I won't say that I understand," Ashlynn said carefully as she placed her hands on Isabell's. "I don't have children and I never will. But... I have people that I care about. I have so many more people that I care about today than I did a year ago, but even a year ago, I would still take tremendous risks if it would help my family."

After all, that had been the entire reason for her betrothal to Owain Lothian. She did it to help her family secure an alliance, and if all had gone well, to bear enough children that one of her sons could inherit the Blackwell name and her father's throne in Blackwell County. To obtain that, she'd risked being discovered as a witch, and when she was discovered, it could easily have spelled doom for her family.

"So, I think I can empathize, at least a little bit, with what you're feeling right now," Ashlynn said. "You have to choose if the risks you're taking will make your loved ones safer or not. But Isabell, now that you're here, you have enemies, and people like Owain will target your family because they cannot hurt you."

"For all that you're the 'logical' parent," the young witch continued. "You have a deep desire to protect your family, and becoming a witch will give you the power to help keep them safe. It can also give you the tools to build an even brighter future for them than the ones they can currently reach. I know this isn't just about you, but it's an opportunity not only for yourself but for your family as well."

"I know there's an opportunity here," Isabell acknowledged. "But it's one that comes with more danger than anything I've ever done before. And if the very worst happened, and I lost myself," she said as her voice caught slightly. "Then my family would lose their mother or their wife. Bad enough if it happened because of an enemy's arrow or because I was caught up in a battle I couldn't escape," she said with a shake of her head.

"That, at least, they could understand," Isabell said with a heavy sigh. "But if it was because of something I did to myself, because I made a choice and I couldn't control what happened to me after that... that's a very different kind of risk to take, isn't it?" Isabell asked rhetorically.

"So, assuming I'm willing to become... someone," she said carefully after nearly saying 'something.'  
"Someone who is driven by their desires to a greater extent than most people. What is it that you want me to do with those desires that would require me to become a witch instead of remaining at your side as an engineer?" Isabell asked.

As she thought, she picked up her spectacles and turned them over in her hands, studying the wire frames that had been bent and straightened countless times over the years. She probably needed a new pair, but she kept telling herself that as long as this one could be mended, there was no reason to bother with something new.

But maybe she'd been holding on to something for too long, simply because it was easy to mend when she should have selected a pair that would serve her better. Now, as she stood at the crossroads between the familiar world she understood with all of its problems that she had learned how to navigate and the idea of something completely new... she felt deeply conflicted.

Reaching out to the young woman in the seat next to her, Isabell carefully took Ashlynn's hand in hers and looked directly into the other woman's emerald eyes before she spoke again in a very quiet, very sincere tone.

"Because, no matter what," Isabell said. "Now that I'm here, and now that I know you need my help, I'm willing to stay by your side to do what I can." Whether there had been a right or a wrong side in the civil war of the Emerald Kingdom, she couldn't say. But after seeing Owain Lothian and his family's ambition and what it had done to the Eldritch people who had never once been the aggressors, she no longer doubted that there was a 'right' side to Ashlynn's war, or that the 'right side' of the war lay with Ashlynn and her people in the Vale of Mists.

"The only thing I don't know right now is if becoming a witch and joining your coven is something I can, or should do. So, help me understand," she said with a gentle squeeze of Ashlynn's hand. "What kind of witch is it that you want me to become?"

Chapter 830: A Tree For Isabell (Part One)

"I promised you when you came here," Ashlynn said as she reached into the pouch at her waist for a folded piece of paper along with a few sprigs of tender, young branches and small pinecones taken from a much larger and older tree. "I didn't bring you here to fight in my wars. You've always been honest with me and open about your reasons for leaving the Emerald Kingdom behind."

"I didn't ask you here because I wanted to borrow the power of the Engineer of Destruction," Ashlynn said firmly. "And I'm not asking you to join my coven because I need someone who can bring death to our enemies. Virve and I can do that just fine, as can Heila and Ollie. What we need from you is something else," she said as she unfolded the paper to reveal a sketch of a slender tree shaped like the long blade of a spear or the point of a lance, rising high into the sky.

"You may have seen this tree in the hills around us, growing side by side with the red cedar that dominates the Vale of Mists," Ashlynn said. "In the Kingdom of Gaal, they call it 'Western Hemlock', even though we're still in the eastern lands as far as the Eldritch are concerned."

"I have seen this tree," Isabell said as she reached out to pick up the soft, tender tips of branches that Ashlynn had brought. The needles were still a brighter green than the rest of the tree would be, but they had already started to lose the brilliance of new spring and summer growth. The tree these had been picked from was clearly healthy and growing, renewing itself and striving to be greater every year.

"These grow very tall and their trunks are very straight," Isabell said as she set down the twigs to pick up one of the pinecones, turning the rough, round sphere over in her fingers as she inspected it. "The Clan of the Great Claw said that the oldest long houses are made of these trees and that they can take more than a hundred years to grow tall enough to be used in the most important long-houses."

"You've been learning a great deal about the Vale since you arrived," Ashlynn said with a warm smile. "Yes, these are towering giants that the Clan of the Great Claw respect for more than just their timber. In the spring, women who want to bear a strong child will weave the tender shoots of the hemlock into their hair while they, um, take their mates beneath the furs," Ashlynn said with a face that had turned a faint shade of pink.

When she spoke with Virve about the tree, the older woman had been quite a bit more explicit about the ways the tree was used in some of the old rituals of the Clan of the Great Claw, including

constructing a wooden frame of the tree's branches and lashing a woman to it in order to be ravished by her chosen mate. Supposedly, after the deed was done, the husband would tip the frame upward to aid in the flow of his seed...

"Besides that," Ashlynn said, quickly moving on from thoughts of how the tree had been used in fertility rights. "The tree represents the ability to create shelter and safety for others. To house and nurture many in its branches or to comfort those who sleep on the bed of needles beneath its boughs."

"So you chose this tree because you wanted to center my role as a mother," Isabell said with a frown as she cleaned the lenses of her spectacles and put them back on. "But you're the mother of this coven. Are you certain you need another mother?"

"This tree is about more than motherhood," Ashlynn said as she stood from her chair and walked over to the window that overlooked the fortress town below. "It's about the enduring wisdom that you offer to the people around you. It's about building things that will last for generations to come."

"It's about striving upward for a brighter tomorrow than the one we can see from where we stand," Ashlynn said as her eyes began to shine with hope for something beyond the constant cycle of wars the Eldritch had been trapped in for so long. "And looking far ahead from on high instead of getting lost in the thick of the forest of problems in the present."

"That sounds very aspirational Ashlynn," Isabell said, dispensing with the formalities and speaking to Ashlynn as a pure friend. "But I'm a practical person. I need more concrete details to work with. How does this power manifest? Are you telling me that I should expect to have dozens more children, or that I can cause an explosion in population by conducting fertility rights?" Isabell asked, laughing openly at the notion of having more children at her advanced age. "How would these traits manifest for me?"

Ashlynn smiled slightly as she turned away from the window to look at her friend, only to realize that while she'd been laughing, the older woman had retrieved a pen, parchment and a small inkwell in order to take notes.

Isabell's mind was incredibly sharp and her attention to detail was better than most but this conversation was far too important to leave to vague recollections, especially as Ashlynn had a habit of dripping shocking revelations as easily as a tree dropped pinecones in the fall.

"There are other trees for people who nurture and care for others, and for people who can bring peace and wisdom to a coven," Ashlynn admitted. "The Black Locust is well known for helping to stabilize volatile covens. But I chose this tree for you because its wood grows long and straight and true. Because it doesn't easily warp or twist, it isn't just good for ordinary construction, but power flows through it easily as well, so it has long been favored by witches who build things."

Amahle had taught Ashlynn how to draw magic circles of increasing complexity in order to guide the flow of vast amounts of power, but what Ashlynn was talking about now went even further. Rather than simply drawing a circle on the ground, the Hemlock Witch would be able to build things that functioned as permanent circles, guiding the flow of energy through the things that they built long after the witch herself had moved on.

"Remember what I said about our desires being the core of our powers, Isabell," Ashlynn said as she returned to her chair by the fire to pour another cup of wine for herself and to refill Isabell's. "The things you build will inherit your desires for them, whether you use the wood of a hemlock tree or not, though it will always be better if you do."

"You told me that you wanted to build the future, Isabell," Ashlynn said softly. "This tree gives you the power to do just that..."