

The Vampire 103

Chapter 103 103: The Power of the Church

Paulus glared at Nyrielle, his gray fur twitching with anger while his horn pulsed with a dark blue light. At the moment, more than anything, he wanted to sink claws of ice into the vampire's heart for the insult of suggesting his horn would adorn a human spear, but he knew that his strength had faded too much with age to threaten an Eldritch Lady. Instead, he could only stomach his anger as Ashlynn began to address the crowd again.

"You have heard that the Church is powerful and dangerous," Ashlynn said. "But let me make it clear just how much the Church can do to change the course of a war."

"Bors Lothian fought the 'War of Inches' because he had lost much of the support his ancestors enjoyed. During the 'Brothers' War', Odhran and Leon were bound tightly together, unified in their desire to avenge their father," Ashlynn explained. "Odhran gave Leon much greater support than the future Marquis of Lothian would in order to raise his holy army."

"But as horrible as the Brothers' War was, it failed to topple a single Eldritch Lord," she pointed out. "It did succeed in weakening the Vale of Mists and robbing Mistress Nyrielle of many of her progeny, but no more than that. A generation later, the War of Four Templars saw the sons of Odhran and Leon unite, not against the Vale of Mists, but against Airgead Mountain and the Southern Steppe."

At the high table, Lord Ritchel's bushy brows furrowed when Ashlynn brought up the territories of the neighboring Eldritch Lords on the eastern side of the mountains. Much like his own ancestors, the Lord of Airgead Mountain and the High Lord of the Southern Steppe had been content to let the Lothians batter themselves against the Vale of Mists, seeing little reason to intervene in wars that weren't their own.

It wasn't until the war in Ritchel's grandfather's time that they realized how boundless the human appetite for expansion truly was. Airgead Mountain was said to be rich in gold and jewels and the Southern Steppe was both vast and fertile. Both Eldritch Lords suffered losses to the Lothians in that war that they hadn't fully recovered from to this day.

"This is how humans see the world, Hauke," Lord Ritchel said quietly to his son. "They view maps like a fish, ready to be carved up and portioned out. If you deny them the soft belly, they will fight you for the rich back and while you are busy defending the best parts of your catch, someone else will make off with the head and tail."

"Airgead Mountain and the Southern Steppe still stand because Lady Nyrielle sends her forces to aid them, even though they never did the same for her," he said, driving the lesson home for his son. "One day, you may need to do the same for her."

Beside him, Hauke nodded solemnly, never taking his gaze off Ashlynn as he listened to her speak. The more he heard, the more questions he had and the more he looked forward to learning more from her in the next few days.

"Make no mistake," Ashlynn said. "The Lothians have realized that they cannot expand their domain without the help of the Church. Since the War of Four Templars, the past few Marquis have sought to regain some independence from the church but Bors Lothian has realized that doing so weakened their ability to fight the Eldritch Nations."

"All this time, Mistress Nyrielle has resisted the forces of Lothian March, but Bors Lothian isn't content to make do with his own forces anymore," Ashlynn said darkly. "More than two hundred years ago, when the first humans arrived on this continent, very few of the human colonies could threaten an Eldritch Lord. Individually, they were too weak to accomplish much. That changed when the Church put their support behind a king and declared the First Crusade."

"In a Crusade, the Church takes command of the armies," Ashlynn explained. "They send not only Inquisitors and Templars but Exemplars and other 'miracle workers' who have as much power as witches like the Mother of Thorns and the Mother of Storms. From across the ocean, every human king, men with territories as vast as those of Eldritch Great Lords, sends knights and champions to fight in the Crusade."

"My Blackwell family was founded in the First Crusade," Ashlynn said, her voice colored with a trace of irony. "They were one of many who defeated an entire Eldritch Nation to claim one of the greatest natural treasures of the eastern coast - a deepwater harbor ideal for trade across the sea."

As Ashlynn spoke, many of the Frost Walkers leaned forward, including the people at the high table. It was one thing to hear the tales of the wars fought by their neighbors, but the eastern sea was impossibly far away and events more than two centuries ago seemed absurdly ancient to all but the oldest Frost Walkers at the feast.

For Nyrielle, it was something else entirely. Her parents had lost their homes in the First Crusade and were declared heretics of the Church for trading with the Eldritch Nations as partners instead of treating them like enemies. While she hadn't been alive to see the First Crusade, she'd been born not long after and she witnessed firsthand what happened after.

"The First Crusade created the Kingdom of Gaal," Ashlynn said. "The Second Crusade expanded its borders to what they are today. My father, for a very long time, has believed that a Third Crusade will not be announced until the current Marquis; Lothian, Kuusik, Monkes, and Oberese, complete their expansion and establish themselves as Dukes."

"Bors and Owain Lothian intend to be the first to accomplish this, and to do it, they've gained the support of the Church to declare a 'Holy War,'" Ashlyn continued. As she spoke, she walked to the high table, picking up a long knife, and stabbing it into the head of the sturgeon she'd taken the cheeks from to make a dish for Nyrielle.

"A Holy War isn't a Crusade. Participation is voluntary," she said, returning to face the crowd. "But the kings across the sea will send their men, and so will the other Marches. Elder Paulus," Ashlynn said, turning to face the old man. "Remember when I said I recognized this fish, because it could be caught in the territory of Marquis Kuusik?"

"Yes, what of it?" Paulus said. By now, he understood what Ashlynn was about to say but he disliked being put in a position to play along with her. At the same time, with Lord Ritchel glowering at him from the center of the table, there was little he could do but go along with the young witch, at least to an extent.

"Marquis Kuusik is descended from a noble family in the old country," Ashlynn explained. "They live in lands that are covered by ice and snow, where the ground freezes solid and can be cut from the earth to use as bricks. In Kuusik March, they also cut holes in the ice to fish and they brave the frozen sea to claim the islands of the north."

As Ashlynn spoke, she returned to the high table, this time directly across from Paulus. When she reached the table, she thrust the head of the sturgeon onto the table in front of him, stabbing the knife down into the table itself.

"The High Pass might be safe from the Lothians, but when the Lothians are ready to attack the High Pass, they'll summon the Kuusiks and men from across the sea who live their whole lives in the ice and snow," Ashlynn said fiercely.

"Your mountain won't protect you from the Church when the Church calls for a Crusade, and if the Lothians win their 'Holy War' then you can bet that a Crusade isn't far away."