

THE VAMPIRE & HER WITCH

Chapter 8 8: Lothian Plots

While Ashlynn enjoyed her sumptuous and hearty breakfast, a very different scene was unfolding in the office of Marquis Bors Lothian.

The office was grand and stately, with one wall almost completely occupied by large windows that gave a view of the inner keep and the sprawling City of Lothian below it. Trophies covered another wall including the ancient banners of demon lords slain by the family's founding ancestor when he established the March of Lothian.

Compared to his greatest ancestors, Bors' own trophies were more humble. A polished skull taken from a horned demon slain in battle against the forces of the Demon Lady of the Vale sat next to a stuffed panther-like head taken in a different battle against the Cat Demon of Airgead Mountain.

Some might think that the trophies were an attempt to prop himself up next to the accomplishments of his forefathers but Bors knew differently. He kept the trophies as reminders of the work he had to finish.

The Marquis himself was solidly built though his body had become softer after celebrating his fiftieth birthday and the armor he'd once worn to fight against the demons of the vale would no longer fit without making adjustments.

Still, while his body had softened, his mind had sharpened. Now as he sat behind the desk his great-grandfather had carved from the trunk of one of the vale's sacred Ancient Oaks, he turned that sharpness to the mess his eldest son had created.

"Is it done?" Bors asked the young lord who sprawled in a comfortable chair as though the events of the past few days were inconsequential. "You've seen her family off?"

"It's done, they're gone," Owain said having just returned from the tedious chore. "The Countess Blackwell wasn't happy but her husband is a smart man, they'll play along."

"They'll play along because the alternative is to face an inquisition from the Church," Bors sneered. As much as he hated how much his family relied on the Church, there were times when currying its favor proved useful. "What about the girl, Jocelynn? Can she be trusted to keep her mouth shut for the next two months?"

At the mention of Ashlyn's sister, Owain frowned, sitting upright for the first time since he'd entered his father's office.

When Jocelynn had found him during the ball, she'd been as nervous as a startled kitten, calling him Brother-in-law and insisting that she was entitled to a dance with the groom before he retired to accompany her sister for the night.

"I cannot bear to see her sink her wicked claws into you," she'd whispered after telling him that she'd seen the mark of the witch on her sister's hip when they visited the baths. "All this time, she's avoided people, hiding herself away in a library full of books. I suspect she's long made a study of witchcraft."

"Now that she's here, what will happen to Lothian if she fells its mightiest protector? Without your strength to lead your people, the demons will ravage the march and everyone in it," she'd said. "You mustn't let her harm you."

Now, hearing his father's sharp tone, he worried that Jocelynn's warning would be misinterpreted as something other than a pure, almost noble attempt to save him and the march from the claws of a witch.

"Without her warning, I might have been deceived by the witch," he said, refusing to use Ashlynn's name. "We're lucky she found me at the ball to confide in me."

"That doesn't mean that you should trust her, quite the opposite. She was willing to betray her sister to earn your favor. Who's to say she won't betray you to win favor with someone else?"

"She's not that clever, father," Owain said dismissively. "She's been infatuated with me since we met at last year's harvest festival. She told me about the witch because she wanted to protect me, nothing more than that."

"Don't underestimate women's schemes," Bors said, glowering at his son. Sometimes, he wished that Loman had been born first. He'd promised his second son to the Church almost as soon as the lad was born but it wasn't until both men were adults that he realized that his younger son had been the one to inherit all of his talent.

Owain might be the stronger of the two and he'd proved his skills with a sword in skirmishes with the Horse Lord's forces in the south on more than one occasion. When it came to ruling a vast territory, however, Bors found Loman's careful examination of problems and broader perspective to be much more important than the ability to lead soldiers on the battlefield.

Now, the only way that Loman could return to the family was if something unfortunate happened to Owain. As ruthless as Bors was in fighting the demons, he would never harm one of his sons to favor the other.

"How many generations has our family fought the Demon Lady of the Vale without rooting out her wickedness?" Bors said. "She's weaker than the other Demon Lords but that hasn't stopped her from making a mockery of our family's soldiers in virtually every battle."

To turn the March into a Duchy and claim a seat on the ruling council had been the goal of every generation of Marquis to follow the first, yet the Demon Lady had worked relentlessly to thwart the Lothians at every turn.

If he wanted to become a Duke, he needed to control the headwaters of the River Luath, yet she'd constructed so many defensive barriers in the steep-sided vale that a direct assault became almost impossible.

If he turned his attention to the rich metal deposits of Airgead Mountain, she flew to the aid of the cursed cats and bled his forces from the rear. And, while he'd never been able to prove it, he was convinced that it was the heretical vampires she'd spawned from his own citizens who were responsible for

spying on his movements and providing information to the Horse Lord who constantly raided their farms in the south.

The other Demon Lords were bad enough with their fierce armies and powerful commanders but the meddling of one woman had stymied the Lothian family's rise for generations.

"Father, I think it's a bit extreme to compare a silly little girl like Jocelyn to an ancient hag like the Demon Lady of the Vale," Owain said, thinking of the pure and innocent look on Jocelynn's face when she confided in him at the ball.

"She's barely eighteen, all she cares about is having the prettiest dresses and finding the best husband."

"And she wants you to be that husband?" Bors said skeptically.

"She does, I told you, she's been infatuated with me since we met." If there was one thing Owain was confident of, it was his natural charm and stunning good looks.

When he wore his armor to battle, he resembled a hero from the pages of a storybook with strong features and flowing chestnut hair. When he attended balls, his carefully tailored tunics clung to firm muscles that women yearned to

cling to. Not once in his life, since he was a young man coming of age, had he ever lacked for the company of adoring women.

"Besides, doesn't it work out for us that way?" Owain said, holding up his hand and ticking off his fingers as he made his points.

"We still secure a tie to the Blackwells and their connections to the merchant families on the coast. We gain control of one of the only people to know that I was briefly married to a witch. Moreover, keeping her close gives us leverage against her parents to stop them from telling the tale if they ever wanted to drag us down with them."

Owain might not be as thoughtful as his brother Loman, but he wasn't a fool. In the hours after he ordered his knights to dispose of the witch's body, he'd racked his brain for a way to salvage his father's plans. To break the stalemate they'd been locked in with the demons for generations, the Lothians needed vast sums of money.

Raising a greater army would require not only experienced soldiers but superior arms and armor, engineers, and siege engines to tear down the fortifications in the vale and more. The Blackwell family might not be personally prosperous but they were incredibly well connected with the merchant families who traded across the sea and they directly controlled one of the busiest ports on the coast.

The Blackwells weren't fools to be taken advantage of either. They'd openly offered to support the Lothian's campaign against the demons in exchange for the ability to share in the glory and rewards that came with victory. Ashlynn's marriage to Owain had been the foundation on which their alliance would be built.

Now, however, Owain would need to rely on Jocelynn if he wanted to secure the support of the Blackwells, especially after what had happened to their eldest daughter.

"Fine," Bors said, conceding the point. "I've found a servant who resembles Ashlynn enough to pose as her so long as she's only seen from a distance. In a month's time, we'll announce the joyous news that your wife has conceived and is withdrawing to a villa in the hills until the birth of her child."

"As soon as we do that," the silver-haired man continued. "Send for Jocelynn so she can 'keep her sister company' during her pregnancy. Come winter, we can announce her tragic death in childbirth."

"Do you want me to stay at the villa the entire time?" Owain asked, a smile spreading on his face when he imagined having both the serving girl and young Jocelyn to himself in the remote villa.

"No, of course not, you have other duties to attend to," his father said, scowling at his son. "Once Jocelynn reaches the villa, you'll need to leave for Blackwell County. There are several people that I need you to meet with..."