

The Vampire 81

Chapter 81 81: Guildmaster's Gathering

The same night that Nyrielle gently tended to her exhausted and battered lover's needs, the crescent moon danced on the waters of the deep harbor in Blackwell City. Gulls squawked in the night, fighting over scraps of fish that slipped from nets or were discarded by fishmongers for being too foul to sell.

Bells rang across the harbor on different ships, signaling the changes in watch or releasing gleeful sailors from their duties aboard the ship, freeing them to enjoy the delights of the bustling city beyond the harbor district.

In one towering building that occupied half a block, a constant stream of people from ship's masters to traders, pilots, and navigators, and even a small number of wealthy merchants, jostled against each other as they tried to complete their business before the various clerks closed for the day.

Three floors above the common offices, however, the scene was much quieter and more composed in a grand dining room that currently played host to a small group of distinguished individuals.

There had been a fierce argument between the Carter's Guild and the Fellowship of Wayfinders to host this evening's gathering. In the end, it had been settled by a coin toss, much to the delight of the evening's host.

Master Sebastian of the Fellowship of Wayfinders wore a wide smile beneath his bushy white mustache, his gray eyes twinkling as the other masters found their way to their seats. His days as the captain of a ship were long behind him, but moments like this brought back memories of days spent with his officers on the vast seas where the word of a captain was second only to the laws of the Holy Lord of Light.

"Master Sebastian, you look like you've got a belly full of brandy and we haven't even eaten yet," a gruff voice said as a burly man with a shaved head took his seat. "What's got you so happy?"

"Just an old master being nostalgic for his days on the sea," Sebastian said lightly. While the Wayfinders rarely did much business with the Iron Mongers, he was at least well acquainted with Master Tiernan and the two were cordial enough with each other to make meetings like this easy.

The same couldn't be said for the scarecrow-thin man with straw-colored hair who sat opposite the Iron Monger. Master Ruadhan had only recently taken over leadership of the Carter's Guild and he seemed to have made it his personal mission to either drag the Wayfinders down to his level or haul the Carters up to an equal status by trimming the fees they paid to the Wayfinders whenever they took over responsibility for seeing cargo to its final destination inland.

"I see the Wayfinders haven't lost their taste for the finer things," Ruadhan remarked, eyeing the crystal goblets. "Tell me, Sebastian, do you use these for your actual voyages, or just to impress those of us who will never cross the seas to visit the old countries?"

"You have to be joking, Ruadhan," Sebastian said with a hearty laugh. "You could likely carry a case of these in your ricketiest cart all the way to the frontier and not break more than one goblet in a dozen."

"But at sea?" the former sailor said, raising an eyebrow. "One squall and the whole load is smashed to shards. Who would insure us against such a predictable loss? Only a fool would even consider it."

"Who else are we waiting for?" Ruadhan said, ignoring the barb in the old sailor's last statement. Snatching a crystal goblet of white wine from the table, the Carter started drinking before Sebastian could offer a toast or do anything else to gather more attention to himself at this meeting. "Didn't Paidi say he wasn't coming?"

"It's true that Master Paidi can't make it," a fourth man with a close-cropped beard and receding red hair said. "But the Staunch Armorers will follow the Brotherhood of Armaments in this matter," he added, pointing a thick thumb at his chest. "So you can consider me to have his proxy."

"Two guilds, one voice," Tiernan mused. "Convenient, that. Though I wonder if Master Paidi knows just how... enthusiastically you'll be representing his interests, Olver."

"What are you implying, Tiernan?" Olver asked, clenching a powerful fist and scowling at the Iron Monger. While both the Staunch Armorers and the Brotherhood of Armaments held notable status in the eyes of the knights and noblemen, both guilds were beholden to Tiernan's Iron Mongers for supplies and the bald man never let either guild forget it.

"Nothing at all, my friend," Master Tiernan said, leaning back in his chair with a wide grin on his face and a twinkle in his eye. "Nothing at all."

"I'm sure Master Olver will represent Master Paidi's interests well," Sebastian said, giving the other master a polite nod. The Wayfinders did very little business with either the armorers or weaponsmiths of Blackwell City but neither guild was one that could easily be snubbed. For one man to represent both during this gathering could make matters difficult if their remaining guests didn't show up.

At that moment, the door to the room opened to admit a steel-haired woman dressed in a man's trousers and waistcoat. With silver-rimmed spectacles on her nose, Master Isabell of the Illustrious Company of Engineers looked more like a school teacher than a warrior but no one who knew her reputation would dare to cross the powerful woman.

Behind her, a short balding man with deep-set eyes and a limping gait walked with footsteps punctuated by the -THUMP- of his gilded cane. Though technically not the master of a guild, Adrian served as the

Assessor of Weights and Measures for all of Blackwell County, and his office oversaw everything from small commercial transactions to contracts involving sums of gold that could feed entire cities for years.

"Now I believe we're all here," Sebastian said once the final members of the gathering had found their seats. "Now, before we begin our meeting, I would like to offer a toast," he said, raising his crystal goblet and giving a pointed look at Ruadhan who was already pouring himself a second glass of wine.

"To the Lady Ashlynn Blackwell," Sebastian said, lifting his goblet high. "Without her, tonight's gathering would never have happened. May the Holy Lord of Light watch over her and keep her safe as she faces the demons of the frontier."

"To the Lady Ashlynn Blackwell," Master Isabell said, adding her own statement to the toast. "To a woman who is brave enough to remember loyalty, even when she has left our salty shores."

"Here, here!" the rest of the guests echoed with varying levels of enthusiasm.

Following the toast, the room was briefly filled with bustling servants setting out tray after tray of freshly caught delicacies, bowls of rich shellfish soup, loaves of freshly baked bread, and assortments of fine cheeses and pickled vegetables that had made the lengthy journey across the sea from the old countries. Once they departed, however, the doors were pulled shut and would not open again until Master Sebastian indicated that confidential talks had been concluded.

For the masters of six guilds to meet was not so rare of an event to alarm the local nobles, but neither was it common enough to pass without significant curiosity from a number of interested parties. Sebastian and his guests would rather serve themselves this evening than allow the slightest word of their discussion to reach unintended ears, and all of them had long grown accustomed to a lack of servants when the most important business items were up for discussion.

"Since you're here," Ruadhan said, giving Isabell a guarded look. "I assume that you also received a letter from Lady Ashlynn? But I wasn't aware that you'd received one from Lord Owain."

"It's precisely because Lord Owain failed to reach out to me that Lady Ashlynn thought I should be brought into the gathering," the engineer said as she made meticulous cuts in a wheel of soft cheese veined with blue mold before serving herself a wedge. "Whether I was excluded from Lord Owain's invitation in simple oversight or deliberate slight, I don't intend to let the exclusion stand."

"It's good that you're here," Olver said, skipping the appetizers and directly placing a large portion of poached fish on his plate. "No one should make war without a good company of engineers. If we're going to bankroll the Lothain's next war, I'll rest easier knowing you and Assessor Adrian have done the calculations."

"That is the question though, isn't it?" Sebastian said, looking around the masters gathered at the table. "After reading Lady Ashlynn's letter, I'm beginning to question if we should really involve ourselves in this war at all..."