

The Vampire 82

Chapter 82 82: The Power of a Letter

The entire room went quiet when Sebastian asked whether they should involve themselves in the Lothian's war against the demons or not. Several of the assembled guild masters shuffled awkwardly in their chairs or took large bites of their meal under the pressure of the question. No one wanted to be the first to offer an opinion.

"Perhaps we should take several steps back before arriving at a conclusion," Isabell said, relaxing in her chair and sipping the chilled white wine. Of everyone present, she was under the least pressure since Owain Lothian hadn't planned to include her Illustrious Company of Engineers in the first place. Even if she left this gathering now, no disastrous consequences would befall her or her engineers.

"Since Lord Owain didn't see fit to include me in his deliberations, perhaps you gentlemen could help bring me up to speed," Isabell said. "What exactly is it that he's trying to obtain from you? Sebastian, as the host, perhaps you can go first."

"Ah-hem," the white haired sailor said, clearing his throat and nodding his thanks to Isabell for throwing him a line. "The Lothians have long been the most favored of the frontier marches in the eyes of the Church," he began. "They have granted more territory, a greater share of their spoils and consistently placed at least one of the members of their direct line within the Church every generation."

"Now, the Lothians have not only received the support of the Pontiff in the Holy City of Staigue," he continued. "They've received a pledge of support from the Luminary in Kilcashel to declare the start of a holy war," Sebastian said.

As soon as he said the words 'holy war', eating around the table stopped and several people looked at him with wide eyes. Owain had never intended to negotiate with them as a group and all of them had received different information from the Lothian heir about his plans but this was the first time they had

heard that the highest priest in the Church of the Holy Lord of Light in the old countries was involved in these plans.

"If this is a holy war," Ruadhan said, running a hand through his straw colored hair as if to wipe away a sudden burst of sweat on his brow. "Can we really refuse?"

"It's just a holy war," Olver said with a snort. "Don't get your knickers in a twist. A holy war isn't the same as a Crusade. If it were a Crusade, we would all be pressed into service by the Church, and we wouldn't be dealing with temporal lords like Lord Owain Lothian, we'd be talking to an Inquisitor."

"You'd understand the difference if you went to a proper school," the weaponsmith added smugly. "How a lout like you made it to Master is beyond me."

"Some of us worked our way up from the bottom," the carter shot back. "Not all of us were born into our guilds to be spoon fed and coddled until we inherited our guilds."

"That's enough boys," Isabell said sharply. "I didn't come here to watch you squabble over who has the larger endowment," she said with a pointed look in the direction of their trousers. "But if you insist, as an engineer, I can fetch my tweezers to measure."

"Ah-ah-hem, hem," Sebastian coughed loudly. "We were talking about the requests Lord Owain made of the Wayfinders," he said, trying to bring the conversation back on track. "Since this is a holy war, the Luminary will announce it to all the countries of the old world. Any man who wishes to fight will need passage to the Kingdom of Gaal. Lord Owain has asked that we restrict the transportation of arms, armor and horses to knights and above. Freemen will not be allowed to bring their own equipment for the war."

"That explains his request to the Staunch Armorers and the Brotherhood of Armaments," Olver said, nodding when he heard Sebastian's explanation. "Clever, but cruel."

"What?" Tiernan asked, not seeing anything clever about this. "Isn't he just trying to save money on passage by making them leave behind their arms and armor? He might be able to pack more men in a single ship that way but that's hardly clever or cruel."

"No, it goes beyond that," Olver said, tapping on the table with a thick, strong finger. "Forcing a fighting man to sell his gear means he'll suffer a loss. Battle worn weapons and armor that have been fitted to one man will never sell for what they cost to acquire."

"Lord Owain asked Master Paidi and I to bear the balance of equipping fighters who come over from the old countries," Olver explained. "He knows they won't be able to afford to replace what they lost, but he wants us to sell to them for what they can pay and let the Lothians carry the balance."

"That is cruel," the iron monger agreed. "At war's end, they'll either have to pay their debts to the Lothians to keep their arms and armor or they'll have to forfeit it, filling the Lothian armories at a fraction of the cost."

"Or he'll take them as bondsmen," Adrian said. The assessor might not have brought out an abacus to calculate but he'd seen enough transactions like this to have a good idea of the sums involved. "At the end of the day, the Lothians will either grow their treasury, their armory, or their standing army."

"But all of that depends on us to carry the debt," Tiernan pointed out. "Lord Owain is offering my Iron Mongers mining rights on Airgead Mountain in exchange for supplying the iron for arms and armor at a loss."

"It's exactly as Lady Ashlynn said in her letters," Isabell said. "This war is a giant game of musical chairs, moving the debt from hand to hand on assurances that, when the music stops, the Lothians will be in possession of Airgead Mountain and able to pay back the monstrous debts that you would all incur to support the war."

This had been the most shocking revelation contained in the letters that Ashlynn had sent to each of the guild masters. Lord Owain would arrive with a chest of rare jewels and precious metals taken from Airgead Mountain, but rather than offering each guild a chest as a downpayment for their support, the chest was a demonstration of the wealth that remained untapped on the mountain.

That chest had been filled nearly two decades ago, the last time Bors Lothain waged war on the demons of Airgead Mountain. Almost everything he plundered from the demons in that bloody war had been spent in the years since then. The chest Owain was bringing was all that was left, and it was hardly enough to move one of the guilds, much less all of them.

As merchants, they had seen this trick before. Some of them might even have resorted to it in desperate times. But none of them had expected the family of a Marquis to need to resort to such measures to gain their cooperation. When Ashlynn told them what she'd learned from Sir Kaefin, it shocked the merchants to their core.

"If it works, we all profit handsomely," Ruadhan said, staring at his plate full of delicacies without the appetite to eat any of it. "But if it fails, it could ruin us."

"I don't think it's as bad as ruining any of you," Adrian said, performing some quick calculations. "But the loss would be devastating enough that no one in this room would still be a member of their guild at the end of it."

"I wouldn't just lose my guild," Ruadhan said. "Carters are rough men who live on the road. They fight bandits and demons alike when they haul things to the frontier. You don't short a man like that on his pay or he and his mates will drag you behind a horse until the flesh is torn from your bones."

"As you say," Sebastian agreed, his expression grim. "Wayfinders are no stranger to fending off the blades of pirates who would rob from them. If a captain is forced to sell his ship to cover debts he took on the guild's orders, he and his crew would string me up."

A heavy silence descended over the dinner as everyone imagined their fate if the war were to fail, leaving them with ruinous debts. Worst of all, they all realized that while they would be ruined by a failure, the Lothians would still hold their positions as lords of the march.

The king would never strip a family as powerful as theirs of their titles for something as petty as money. It would take a far greater crime for a nobleman to suffer simply because they incurred too great a debt in the war to purge demons from lands the kingdom wished to claim. And even if the king didn't support them, as long as it was a holy war, the Church would make it impossible to strip the Lothians of their assets to pay their debts.

"Master Isabell," Adrian said, finally breaking the silence. "You have studied warfare more than any of us. How likely is it that the Lothians will win this war?"