

The Vampire 83

Chapter 83 83: Escaping the Trap

"I hesitate to say that I've studied warfare," Isabell said, adjusting the spectacles on her nose. She had her own opinions of the situation and the information that Lady Ashlynn had sent her included a detailed assessment of the reasons that the Lothians had yet to win any of their wars against the demons arrayed against them.

In her opinion, it would take a tremendous effort to come away with victory but she wasn't trusting enough of these men to go so far as to say that the demons couldn't be defeated. A whisper of that into the wrong ears and she would quickly find an Inquisitor on her doorstep.

"I've studied the construction of fortifications and the methods to demolish them," she said, carefully grounding her statement in her acknowledged area of expertise. "Still, that knowledge gives me some concerns given the information contained in Lady Ashlynn's letter."

"According to Lady Ashlynn," the gray-haired woman continued. "Any attempt to purge the demons from Airgead Mountain without first eliminating the Demon Lady of the Vale will fail."

"I thought that the Lothians always waged war around the height of summer to keep the vampires from disrupting things," Olver said with a frown. There were special weapons used to fight creatures of the night, but they were expensive to produce and Lord Owain hadn't made any mention of producing them for this war.

"Isn't Airgead Mountain too far away from the Vale for the Vampires to reach it during the summer? I don't see why we would need to worry about them," the weaponsmith said.

"You should worry about them because, according to Lady Ashlynn, the Vale of Mists is protected by several layers of curtain walls and terrain that is impassable to cavalry," Isabell said.

"The advantage that gives their defenders is extraordinary, which means that they can almost send their entire army to trap an invading force between the defenders of Airgead and their own forces," she said. "I don't think I need to explain to you or Tiernan what happens when you put soft metal between a hammer and an anvil."

"But everything that Lord Owain said in his letters talked of assaulting Airgead Mountain," Ruadhan said with a scowl. "He even asked if I had carts that could move swiftly to transport materials back to Lothian city."

"He did, did he?" Tiernan said, scowling at the carter. "He asked me if I could supply men with expertise in smelting and how quickly we could break down ore for transportation."

"I think I understand now," Sebastian said, looking at the dark faces around the room. "Lord Owain is clever, but I imagine he's following Marquis Bors's instructions in this. The Marquis wants us all to think about the riches to be had in conquering Airgead Mountain. He looks down on merchants like us," he said, resisting the urge to stand and pace while thinking things through.

"He thinks we'll be so blinded by greed for the wealth of Airgead Mountain that we'll bankroll his war," the former captain said. "By the time the soldiers arrive in Lothian, it will be too late for us to object, we'll already be at sea."

"That's when he'll turn his forces on the Vale of Mists," Isabell agreed. "And you'll need to bankroll all of the siege engines and other things he'll need in order to fight the vampires of the vale if you're going to have any hope of recouping your investment. Perhaps that's when he planned to approach me with an 'opportunity' to gain access to a portion of the spoils from Airgead."

"It's a shame Lady Blackwell is in delicate condition and unable to travel," Olver said with a heavy sigh. "I'd rather deal with her than her husband. The Blackwells would never deal with us in such an underhanded way."

"Count Rhys Blackwell is an honorary member of the Linemen isn't he?" Tiernan asked. "Do you think he'd be willing to relinquish his post with them and accept a membership in one of our guilds to represent us in handling the Lothians?"

"Impossible," Sebastian said. "Blackwell city would starve in three months without the support of the Linemen and their fisheries. If Jocelynn had married into one of our guilds there might be a chance, but since the count has no male heir and Lady Ashlynn is already married off to the Lothians, I'm told that the Count is looking for a suitable nobleman who can succeed the Blackwell name."

The old captain worked hard to keep the bitterness out of his voice but from the looks he received around the table, everyone already knew how frustrated he was that his attempts to arrange a marriage between his son Myles and Lady Jocelynn had met in failure.

Only he knew, however, that it was Jocelynn who refused any matchmaking inquiries that came from men of common birth, no matter how great their wealth or accomplishments were. It was a bitter insult to swallow from a teenage girl but one he had no choice but to accept.

"Gentlemen," Isabell said, a smile forming on her thin lips. "A fortress is more than just a curtain wall. It's the trench before the wall, the portcullis at the gates, the watch towers, and the archers atop the wall."

"If you wish to scale a wall, a ladder will do," she said. "If you want to breach a gate, a ram will knock it down. But taken together, the ram must weather the fire of archers and cross the trenches before it can even touch the gate. We've already taken the first step to countering the Lothain's efforts."

"Lord Owain tried to keep us separate for a reason," Ruadhan said, standing up from his chair in excitement. "But Lady Ashlynn brought us together to form a fortress," he said, looking at Isabell with a wide grin. He'd never given much thought to what it must have taken for a woman to become the first among all the master engineers in her Illustrious Company but now he was beginning to see that it was no accident or act of nepotism.

"Gentlemen," Isabell said, her smile turning predatory. "Going forward, I propose that we only meet with Lord Owain as a group. Alone, he can use our ignorance against us. Together, however, it will be much harder to take advantage of us. What say you?"

Sebastian was the first to stand in favor of her proposal but everyone else quickly followed. They still had much to discuss and many details to resolve but none of them wished to be trampled beneath the Lothian's ambition. Alone, it would have been difficult to resist the powerful family, but together, there was much that they could do.

As the discussions continued deep into the night, they began to gain more and more confidence that they would be able to turn the tide in their dealings with the Lothians. There was no way to avoid involvement in the war, but they finally began to see opportunities to profit from it if they could bring the young Lothian lord to heel and work at a more reasonable pace instead of rushing into a campaign that began next spring.

Victory was never assured in business or in war, but now they at least had a fighting chance. And everyone among them realized that they had Ashlynn Blackwell to thank for it.

Several hours later, Isabell slumped into the soft cushions of her carriage as her coachman navigated the dark and narrow streets of Blackwell City. At this hour, many of the lamps hung by the common folk had already burned out for the night and only the business owners who could afford to do so still kept the lamps lit outside their storefronts.

The darkness, however, suited Isabell's mood as she realized how unique her letter from Ashlynn had been.

~My husband is not to be trusted around women and neither are his knights. Do not meet with him alone. News of Sir Kaefin's death may reach you soon. Had he kept his hands to himself, he would still be alive. If, as I expect, you become my husband's ally in this war, please watch over my sister. She may need a safe place to hide or a tunnel to escape at a time I will be unable to protect her.~

Isabell frowned as she contemplated Lady Ashlynn's words. At her age, she'd long ago passed the time in her life when young men leered at her openly or otherwise, but she had worked hard to elevate other women with sharp minds to the position of Master Engineer. When the time came, she would have to be careful in the instructions she gave to her engineers.

The second part, however, was even more concerning.

"Lady Ashlynn," she whispered, staring out the window at the crescent moon. "What is happening in Lothian March that you would say such things? And if your sister will need help to escape, why not ask for yourself as well? Or is it already too late...?"

The night sky held no answers, but that night when she returned home, Isabell knelt in prayer for the first time in many years. She only hoped that the Holy Lord of Light could find someone to keep Ashlynn safe from whatever danger she was in.