

The Vampire 142

Chapter 142 142: Owain's New Knights

It was late in the day at the Lothian castle when Owain gathered several of his new companions to welcome Lady Jocelynn Blackwell to Lothian March.

For several days, Owain had struggled to contain his growing impatience with the delays in his future bride's arrival. Every carrier pigeon that brought word of a washed-out bridge, a bad storm or some other setback on her journey just made the time he spent waiting more unbearable.

Under his father's orders, he had gone to each of the western barons seeking support to hunt the demons responsible for slaughtering Sir Broll and any trace of the mysterious 'Lynnda' or the missing kitchen boy 'Ollie.' In order to secure the support of those barons quickly enough, he'd made a number of promises and concessions.

Now, as one day of delay had turned into two, and two turned into four, he cursed the promises he'd made and the price he'd paid when it turned out to be completely unnecessary.

Standing next to him in the courtyard, Sir Rian Aleese looked positively smug. The portly man was built much like the boar that adorned his green and white shield, with a pronounced underbite and a jaw that resembled a hunting hound's.

Despite his poor looks and his frequently crude demeanor, he had secured an appointment as one of Owain's new personal guards, replacing the fallen Sir Broll as a permanent member of Owain's staff.

Rian's older brother would likely be the next Baron Aleese within a few years and the old Baron had been almost eager to see his younger son taken away where he couldn't cause trouble with the succession in upcoming years.

To his other side, the hawk-nosed and blade-thin Sir Hugo Hanrahan at least managed to look refined and dignified. As Owain's new Steward, Sir Hugo was poised to rise far above the station he should normally have been entitled to.

Securing his services had cost more than almost anyone else, but Baron Hanrahan insisted that his bastard son be given a proper title and the ability to found his own family line so long as he served well.

Promising a title to a second son wouldn't have been too big of a problem for Owain. As the future Marquis of Lothian, he still had vast unsettled areas where he could issue a decree to construct a village and install a loyal retainer as the new lord of the land. This would be especially easy after they secured the rich lands of Airgead Mountain or the fertile fields of the Southern Steppe.

The problem was that Hugo bore the stigma of a bastard, born to a scullery maid that his father bedded in a night of drunken revels as a much younger man. Now, Hugo's questionable status would cling to Owain wherever he went.

Worse, bastards like Hugo were hated by noblemen and commoners alike. Nobles disdained their impure origins while commoners resented the way men like Hugo could rise above the station of their mother just because of an accident of birth.

As Owain's steward, no matter how capable Hugo was, he would always have to work against the stigma that haunted him, and that stigma would make him a less effective tool for Owain's use.

As Jocelynn's carriage pulled into the courtyard, he tried to banish the traces of disgruntlement from his face, putting on a joyous expression as he strode eagerly toward the carriage door.

"Lady Jocelynn," he said warmly as the tired-looking young woman exited the carriage. "Sister-in-law, this journey must have been hard on you," he said, taking both of her hands and helping her down from the carriage.

Compared to Ashlynn, Owain found the younger Blackwell sister to be even more to his liking. While her chest was a touch more humble, she made up for it with a taller figure and paler seafoam green eyes that were bright even in the fading evening light.

More than her figure, however, it was the natural poise she possessed, the light way that she laughed on the occasions that they'd spoken, and her more outgoing and cheerful demeanor that had called out to him in a way that Ashlynn's subdued, intellectual beauty never had.

Now, however, that bubbly smile seemed to have wilted under the strain of her journey and she moved with a stiffness that robbed her of any of the grace she'd displayed before. Before he could say anything further, however, the Confessor emerged from the carriage behind Jocelynn, her presence quickly reminding Owain that he needed to maintain appearances, especially in the presence of so many onlookers.

There would be time for flirtatious words and 'accidental' touches later, when there weren't any witnesses who could see it as improper from a married man to the woman who was supposed to be his sister-in-law.

"It's been a longer than expected journey, Lord Owain," Jocelynn said politely, offering Owain a weak smile. Here he stood, dashing and elegant as always with soft hair that fluttered lightly in the wind and strong hands that held her own, yet she felt like a soggy worn-out shoe in his handsome presence.

The world was too unfair! This was her first time meeting him again since their families had agreed that she would take her sister's place in a little over a year's time. It should have been a magical, romantic moment when she could flutter her eyelashes at him and they could gaze into each other's eyes like lovers finally reuniting.

Instead, she only wanted a hot bath and a fresh change of clothing to wash away the aches and smells of the journey. After so many days of travel, she actually stepped back from Owain, afraid that he would catch a whiff of the scents of the journey that had seeped into her clothing and even her hair after so many days of travel. The thought of him wrinkling his nose at her as soon as they reunited was something she just couldn't bear!

"You seem very tired," Owain said gently. "Please, call me 'brother-in-law' or just Owain, we're family now. Come, I've had a feast prepared for your arrival. Sir Hugo has prepared a place for you to refresh yourself and then we can talk at tonight's feast."

"Lady Jocelynn," the hawk-nosed man said, stepping forward and bowing deeply enough to disguise the lingering look he gave her rounded bosom and curvy figure. "I'll have your belongings tended to while you freshen up, just follow me and I'll see that you're well taken care of."

"I'll be accompanying her," Confessor Eleanor said, stepping up next to her young charge. Jocelynn might be busy looking at Owain with star-filled eyes but she hadn't missed the way that the collection of 'knights' had eyed her young charge.

It seemed like matters in the frontier were wilder and less refined than she'd given them credit for. These young noblemen looked less like honorable guard dogs than ravenous wolves. Looking at the Templars who had accompanied them on the journey, Eleanor waived one of them to follow along as well. Seeing these men, she finally understood why Count Rhys had wanted a confessor to protect Jocelynn's virtue until she could wed Owain Lothian.

Now, more than ever, she was glad she'd left the family behind and given her life over to the Church. She would never have to worry about a father trading her away to men like these in the name of politics. As she walked behind the starry-eyed Lady Jocelynn, she couldn't help but shake her head at the young woman's actions.

Owain might be the future Marquis, but in the eyes of Confessor Eleanor, he was no different from the scoundrels he surrounded himself with.