

The Vampire 143

Chapter 143 143: A Decadent Gathering

With the arrival of so many esteemed guests, the feast Owain prepared needed to be far grander than the sad affair that had welcomed him to the summer villa. This time, even though his father Bors declared that it should be a feast for the young ones, more than fifty distinguished guests had arrived to fill the tables of the great hall.

The cooks had begun work as soon as they received a message the night before that Jocelynn would be arriving today. Three whole venison, two large boars and countless fowl had been roasted on giant spits before being placed on the feasting tables for carving.

Casks of wine had been tapped just for this occasion and hopped ale flowed freely from kegs brought by the Church of the Holy Lord of Light. If Owain had one complaint for the evening it was that the casks of foamy ale weren't the only things that had come from the temple at the heart of the city.

"Loman," Owain said, throwing his arms open wide to greet his younger brother. "I thought that you had taken a vow of isolation these past few months. What made you carry your shoes all the way here to attend our little gathering?"

Loman did his best not to frown at the festivities taking place in the great hall. The musicians played bright, joyous songs and the tumblers and jugglers provided a lively mood. If these were the only entertainers his brother had arranged, it would have been within the bounds of propriety.

His brother, or perhaps his new Steward Hugo, had gone further to 'enhance the ambiance.' All around the great hall, attractive men and women had been painted in silver and gold body paint to resemble nude statues perched on pedestals atop tables covered with sweets and confections. These 'living statues' moved from one suggestive pose to another while some guests called out suggestions for more 'interesting' poses.

"I don't remember your feasts having quite this tone, Brother," Loman said, struggling to keep the disapproval from his voice. "Are you sure this is the way for a married man to welcome his sister-in-law?"

"Pay it no mind," Owain said, guiding his brother up to the high table where the other distinguished guests waited. "I'm told that this has become popular in the Royal Capital recently, it's only now making its way out here. I wouldn't want my beloved Ashlynn's sister thinking of us as country bumpkins in the hills, would I?"

"It is indeed a trend in the Royal Capital," a crisp, authoritative voice said from behind Loman as they walked toward the high table. It had been Inquisitor Diarmuid who pressured Loman into coming to the banquet in the first place.

Clearly, the younger Lothian brother was still uncomfortable around Owain, especially with the casual way that the elder brother lied about his murdered wife. Since it had been his need to attend that forced the younger brother back into his ancestral home, Diarmuid felt that taking the attention off of him was the least he could do.

"This trend actually started in the Holy City," Diarmuid explained. "People would assume poses from sacred art while 'Clad only in Light,' during important gatherings in the church. The imitations, however, are much less... spiritual," he said, turning away from the painted, posing men and women.

"Inquisitor," Owain said as he struggled to maintain his composure. His last encounter with the Inquisitor had been far from pleasant, but they could hardly bar one of the Church's investigators from Lothian Manor, even if he wanted to. "I hadn't expected you to be joining us."

"I came to see Confessor Eleanor," the sharp-featured Inquisitor said, looking around pointedly. "She and I are old acquaintances from the Holy City."

"She'll be arriving with Lady Jocelynn," Owain said, taking his seat at the high table and gesturing for Owain to take the seat across from him. To many, it would have been an insult, forcing his own brother to turn in his seat if he wanted to view the entertainment, but Loman took it as a kindness instead. Despite how little they'd seen each other in the past few years, his brother still understood him well.

"Lord Loman," a dark-skinned knight with a shaved head greeted him warmly when he joined them. "Since you've come, does that mean that you and the Inquisitor will be joining us for the hunt?"

"Sir Tiernan," Loman greeted politely. Of all the men that his brother seemed to have brought to this gathering, he was pleasantly surprised to see the Blackhammer Knight among them.

While Tiernan had a questionable reputation when it came to his conduct in brothels, he was known as an avid hunter of demons who routinely brought offerings of horns, claws, tails and other proof of kills to the church. Loman had encouraged him to join the Templars on more than one occasion but the powerfully built knight refused to give up his pleasures for a life of service.

Before Loman could answer, the doors to the great hall opened wide to admit a dazzling blonde woman wearing a seafoam blue gown followed by a more subdued looking woman in the robes of a confessor. When she appeared, the music stopped, the jugglers paused and all eyes turned to see the guest of honor making her entrance.

As the footman loudly announced her name, a smile spread across Jocelynn's bow-shaped lips. Tired as she was from her travels, this was the moment she had craved. For what felt like the first time in her life, she wasn't announced as 'accompanying Count and Countess Blackwell', nor was she announced in tandem with her sister Ashlynn.

All eyes gathered on her as the guest of honor and she drank in the attention as she glided across the stone floor to greet the handsome and dashing Owain Lothian.

"Brother-in-law," she said, offering a polite curtsy when she reached the high table. "I must have been a dreadful sight when I arrived. I hope you'll forget about it now that I've had the chance to make a proper appearance."

Several of the knights at the high table stood when she arrived and a few of them cast covetous glances at the stunning younger sister of their liege lord's wife. None of them had been important enough to receive wedding invitations when Owan and Ashlynn were married but now that they got a look at the younger Blackwell Sister, they understood instantly how the elder sister would have captivated someone as notorious for chasing skirts as Owain Lothian.

"Sister-in-law is as radiant as the sun," Owain praised, taking her hand and escorting her to her seat at the table. "We were just about to discuss an upcoming hunt for the demons who made trouble near the Summer Villa," he said as she sat.

"The conversation won't be too," Owain hesitated for a moment, choosing his words carefully. "Too unsettling for you, will it?"

"Nothing is more important than my sister's safety," Jocelynn said smoothly. "Demons are unholy creatures that must be purged from the land so the people can know peace and prosperity. I would be delighted to hear about your upcoming hunt."

"After all," she added, looking up at Owain's handsome face through fluttering lashes. "I'll sleep better knowing how the hero of Lothian March is going to keep his people safe from the demon scourge."