

The Vampire 144

Chapter 144 144: Demons In Lothian March (Part One)

"I'll sleep better knowing how the hero of Lothian March is going to keep his people safe from the demon scourge."

Jocelynn's words were well received by everyone at the table and many lifted their goblets in a toast to Owain's health and future hunt. One person, however, seemed less optimistic about this hunt than the others.

"I'm hoping that Lord Owain is like the heroes of old," Sir Tiernan said, offering a subdued toast. "Demon hunting is dangerous business, especially in the western forests."

"Lord Owain has fought and slain demons before," Sir Hugo quickly interjected, not wanting to see his new employer embarrassed. "And we have you with us as well, Sir Tiernan. Surely we have nothing to fear from mangy demons with so many brave knights gathered."

"I would never say anything to disrespect Lord Owain, or to question his prowess in battle," the dark-skinned knight said. While his words were polite, his tone was anything but apologetic. "It's just, from the stories I've heard, Lord Owain's accomplishments were all earned on the Southern Steppe fighting the minions of the Horse Lord. Things in the mountain forests are different than they are on the Southern Steppe."

"Aren't they just demons?" Jocelynn said brightly. "The demons survive to this day because humans can't be everywhere at once, so some may live where we have not yet gone. But anywhere Lord Owain chooses to stand, what can they do but die?"

While Ashlynn had studied the history of Lothian March in detail, including records from many of the important battles or first-person accounts from knights and lords who had carved out a life on the frontier, Jocelynn's perspective was more shallow.

Three hundred years ago, all of the land now claimed by the Kingdom of Gaal was owned by demons. Once humans established their kingdom, under the grace of the Church, demons had been driven back year over year and humans had only grown stronger and more prosperous. Victory, in her mind, was as inevitable as the sun rising in the east and setting in the west.

"It's not quite that simple, my Lady," Confessor Eleanor said politely from her side. "Demons have many forms and each one is a different kind of threat to face. No one can guarantee victory in every battle, even if we are sure to win the war."

"A demon is a demon," Hugo insisted, scowling at the woman beside the dazzling Lady Jocelynn. He was enjoying being seated at the high table near such an exquisite beauty but the Confessor next to her buzzed like a fly in fine wine. "Dead is dead, whether by lance or sword. Lord Owain will not be troubled by minor differences."

"You're making a mistake, Hugo," Sir Tiernan countered, leaning on the table and glaring at the bastard. From what he'd heard, the man had made all of his accomplishments as a clerk and scholar and had only been trained as a warrior in case something unfortunate became of his younger, legitimate brother. Making a good impression on your liege lord was one thing, but stupidity and ignorance couldn't be tolerated when facing demons.

"On the Steppe, you can wear full plate over mail and fight from horseback," the dark-skinned knight explained. "Those horse demons might be quick, but their arrows barely scratch good armor. In the forest," he said, letting his voice trail off as he glanced around the table.

"In the forest, you have to leave almost all of that behind. Forget plate armor entirely, just wearing a coat of mail is a struggle through the thick brush."

"Sir Tiernan is wise to offer his advice," Loman said, nodding at the bald knight, grateful for at least one voice of reason among his brother's new companions. The temple's archives held detailed accounts of demon-hunting expeditions, both successful and tragic. These boasting knights with their casual attitudes toward demon hunting reminded him far too much of the tragic accounts.

"He's well known at the temple for returning from the deepest forests in the western mountains with proof of demons slain. In this generation, there may be no knight greater than him in single combat against the demons," Loman praised.

There wasn't much that he could do to help his brother and despite many days of quiet contemplation, he still wasn't sure whether he should or not. It wasn't easy to look at his brother the same way he once had after learning how he'd brutally murdered his wife on the mere suspicion that she was a witch.

At the same time, no one deserved to die at the hands of the demons, and his brother was responsible for more lives than his own. He just hoped that throwing a bit of support behind Sir Tiernan would help wake these other men up to the dangers that still lurked in the forests of Lothian March.

"The demons of the mountain forests are still mongrels compared to the Southern Steppe and Airgead Mountain," Owain said, brushing off the concerns of others. "It isn't until you enter the Vale of Mists that they truly become a threat."

"If that's the case," Sir Tiernan countered. "Then what is it that happened to Sir Broll when he ventured into the western forests? Anyone who has ever fought him says that fighting Sir Broll was like fighting a force of nature, even when he dismounted."

"But without his armor, fighting demons in the forest, he was ripped apart so badly that all we've managed to find are pieces of him," the knight said, suppressing a shudder at the idea of how Broll must have suffered in his final moments. "I understand that all of the pieces of his body still haven't been found."

Both Loman and Inquisitor Diarmuid perked up their ears as they looked to Owain Lothian for a response. It had been several weeks since Sir Broll's tragic death and neither of them had heard a satisfactory answer to what had happened in the woods. Now, they were hoping that Owain would present some answers.

The men from the Church weren't the only ones who were interested in what had happened. All around the high table, people paused in their eating, leaning closer to the conversation at the center of the table.

News of Sir Broll and Sir Kaefin's deaths had rocked high society in Lothian City and many rumors circulated from an affair with a kitchen girl gone wrong to the rise of a witch that consorted with demons but no one knew the truth. Perhaps, they were finally about to find out.