

The Vampire 145

Chapter 145 145: Demons in Lothian March (Part Two)

"We've sent more hunters and trackers into the area," Owain said, tearing into roasted lamb chop as though he wasn't concerned about matters and gesturing with the bone to punctuate his statements. Despite the heavy gazes, he tried to downplay how serious things were. The last thing he wanted was to set off a wave of panic among the young nobles and wealthy merchants who had come to his feast.

"They found tracks of horned demons mixed in with several other demon tracks in the area," Owain said, as though it was an ordinary occurrence. "We think that woman, Lynnda, led Broll and his men into a nest of spider demons, and then a fight broke out between the demons to devour everyone," Owain explained. "Spider demons are well known for taking their kills back to their nests to devour. That's why we haven't found any other remains. For this hunt, we're going to seek out the nest of spiders and burn it to the ground."

"Wait," Sir Rian said, his attention finally pulled away from the painted women posing in the hall when he heard a mention of spider demons. "You only mentioned tracks of horned demons. No one said anything about fighting spider demons!"

"As my charming sister-in-law said, it's not much different when you get right down to it," Owain said, giving the golden-haired young woman a dazzling smile. "All of them burn. I intend to bring enough blessed oil to make the forest resemble the setting sun at night."

Across the table from him, Loman wore a slightly pained expression. He and Owain weren't children anymore, but he couldn't help but wish their father was present. When Owain had been sent to the Southern Steppe to gain experience fighting demons, it clearly helped to build his confidence but he was still underestimating the demons far too much.

Bors had never been shy about giving his sons a good verbal tongue-lashing when they stepped truly out of line, nor was he above physically impressing on them the importance of his words. Now that he seemed to be stepping back to allow Owain to build his own strength as a leader, Loman was increasingly afraid that no one could make his brother see reason.

"Why don't you bring an Inquisitor instead?" Diarmuid said, leaning forward, his dark eyes flashing with a predatory gleam. He still had many questions that needed answers, but if he could both embed himself with Owain's hunting party to gather information and burn down a nest of demons in the process then it was as good as reaping two harvests at once.

"I know your family has quite the stockpile of blessed oil, but a conflagration of that size can be difficult for your own men to escape," Diarmuid explained. "I'll bring a pair of Templars with me to secure our flanks. This way, Brother Loman won't have to worry about his brother's safety facing demons."

Owain's hand tightened on his goblet as he forced himself to adopt a pleasant demeanor. While it was true that bringing an Inquisitor and a pair of Templars into the forest would make the expedition safer, it would also complicate his plans tremendously.

The existence of a nest of spider demons was pure speculation on his father's part. They'd seen no real proof of it, but it was the only possibility they could come up with unless a group of flat-tailed demons had used the bodies of the slain as logs in one of their dams somewhere.

The problem was that he never intended to confront demons in the first place. The rainy season this year had come early and with unexpected fury. His trip to Blackwell County had already been delayed by the need to resolve matters near the Summer Villa and he didn't want to waste more time than he had to.

He had originally planned to spend a few days searching the woods around the summer villa for any traces of demon camps or hidden nests. A simple search could be done in four or five days and provide a level of assurance that nothing threatened the villa itself. After that, he would declare that the demons had 'escaped', call off the search and be about his business.

Now, however, he had two problems. First, an Inquisitor wouldn't easily give up the search. They could be in the forest for a month without finding anything and as long as there was a tiny thread to follow, the Inquisitor would keep pushing. Second, and almost worse from Owain's perspective, he would have to share any glory that he earned with the Church.

This entire hunting trip was his father's punishment for events at the villa. Giving up because there was nothing to find was one thing. As long as he put in the work, Bors Lothian would likely forgive his son and heir. If he came home with stories that the Lothians couldn't hunt demons without the aid of the Church, however, he was likely to suffer an even worse punishment.

"Inquisitor Diarmuid," Owain said, politely schooling his features to display a welcoming grin. "I know that you're a busy man. I couldn't possibly impose on you and your Templars when we aren't a hundred percent assured of finding a nest of demons to eradicate."

"Nonsense," the Inquisitor insisted. "It is the duty of the Inquisition to find evil wherever it dwells," he said, giving Owain a pointed look. "The searing flames of the Holy Lord of Light cannot be resisted. Having us close at hand is a boon for every righteous man, wouldn't you agree?"

Sweat broke out on Owain's brow under the intensity of the Inquisitor's stare. While his brother might take the hint that his meddling wasn't welcome, and by extension, the meddling of the Church, Inquisitor Diarmuid was built of much sterner stuff.

"Please, Brother-in-law," Jocelynn said, placing a hand on his arm. She could feel the tension in his muscles even through his fine tunic and knew she needed to give him a graceful way to yield. Looking up at him with wide, seafoam green eyes, she continued.

"I know you are brave and mighty, but the demons may be cunning and devious. Since Inquisitor Diarmuid offered, you should accept his help. I'm sure my sister would be devastated if anything were to happen to you, and so would I," she said, placing extra emphasis on her last four words.

"Well then," Owain said, swallowing his resentment along with a mouthful of strong wine before putting on the best smile he could manage. "Since my sister-in-law wishes it, I suppose I can't refuse. Inquisitor Diarmuid," he added, raising his goblet high. "A toast! To drowning demons in holy fire!"