

The Vampire 188

Chapter 188 188: Holy Flames

While Ashlynn enjoyed the remainder of the masquerade ball with Nyrielle and her new thorny protector, a very different ceremony was taking place on the site of what had once been a village belonging to the Heartwood Clan.

Thick woodsmoke filled the air along with the stench of burning flesh. Heaps of logs had been piled into grand funeral pyres that stood as tall as any of the men responsible for constructing them.

It had taken days to retrieve all of the bodies of the fallen after the demons shattered their own dam and unleashed a flood of mud and water on Owain's hunting party. Some men had been buried so deep in the mud that they were only found with the use of hunting dogs.

Left to his own devices, Owain wouldn't have spent the time to retrieve every lost member of their party but in the presence of Inquisitor Diarmuid and the other men from the Church, there was little he could do but spend the time to see that each and every person was found, no matter how far the flood carried them from the site of the ambush.

While the hunt for the missing dragged on, Owain vented his rage by tracking and hunting as many fleeing demons as he could. When he reached the village after the flood it was immediately obvious that most of its occupants had fled at least one if not two days in advance.

A few aged demons, likely too old and frail to make the trip to the Vale of Mists, had remained behind. Even the elderly flat tailed demons had proved themselves to be a dangerous threat. Some propped bows on stumps or branches in order to draw them like an improvised ballista. Others had rigged traps of their own, ready to drop sharpened stakes or heavy logs on anyone who came close enough to them to claim their lives.

Every single demon who remained seemed to burn with a desire to take down at least one human with them when they died. The only real satisfaction Owain had found in exterminating them came when he barged into one of their underground burrows and found a heavily pregnant woman guarded by a young warrior that Owain assumed to be her husband.

A man fighting to save his wife in child was a force to be reckoned with and Owain had taken great delight in dismembering the demon before his wife's horrified gaze. Owain ordered the pregnant demon to be hauled away in chains. If she survived to give birth, perhaps her children could be trained as infiltrators and spies or at least raised into vicious attack dogs.

No one had ever succeeded in raising captive demons before. But, after the difficulty of digging just one village of flat-tailed demons out of the hillside, Owain was willing to consider more insidious methods even if it would take more than a decade to bear fruit. If he failed, it wouldn't be too late to slaughter them a few years from now and wash his hands of any problems they caused.

"My Lord," Diarmuid said, stepping up next to the young lord as he watched the fires burn. "The last of the fires is awaiting your hand."

"Mine? Not yours?" Owain said, moderately surprised that the Inquisitor would allow him this honor.

"I have fought the occasional demon when they appear in the central lands," the hawk-faced older man said. "There are still places within a few days' ride of the Holy City where demons show up from time to time, attempting to reclaim some sacred spot or ancient burial site. I thought I knew what it meant to fight demons."

"There are High Inquisitors who do not understand why the borders haven't moved much further west in the past several decades," Diarmuid said, shaking his head and heaving a heavy sigh. "I used to count myself among the people who had such thoughts. We believed that the Marches were making excuses for failing to advance without the support of a Crusade."

"And now?" Owain asked, keeping his eyes on the fires burning around them. In order to light the way to the Heavenly Shores for everyone who had died on this hunt, Owain didn't stop at building giant pyres using the wood salvaged from the flat tailed demon's dam.

Each and every demon burrow had been doused in lamp oil and holes were dug into the roofs so that fresh air could fuel the flames as the intricately carved homes burned. The smoke from this fire was dark and heavy and it could be smelled from dozens of leagues away but Owain didn't care about the smoke as long as the fires burned bright enough and hot enough.

"Now, I understand what it means to dig the demons out of their own homes when they've had decades to prepare to resist," the Inquisitor answered. "Soon, I'll be returning to the Holy City. I intend to speak of this hunt when I arrive. I'll make it clear that when the Holy War begins, the banners of the Inquisition and the Templars must be present in great numbers."

"Good that you understand," Owain said. His response was carefully neutral. As a proud son of the Lothian line, he wanted nothing more than to crush these demons without becoming dependent on the Church to do so. If they drew too much of their support from people like Diarmuid, it wouldn't become the Lothian Duchy, it would become the Holy Lothian Duchy, and any Lothian Duke would have to fight to become more than a puppet of the Church.

At the same time, it was as obvious to Owain as it was to Diarmuid that this wasn't a war that could be won without the miracle workers of the Church. A complicated look flickered across Owain's face as he looked at Sir Tommin nearby. Fighting together with him again had almost been enough to forgive the man for his desertion. As a pair on the battlefield, they had never been defeated.

Now that his former guard had become a Templar wielding a Holy Light Sword, it was impossible for the man to return to his side as things had once been. But... that didn't mean they couldn't fight together. He just had to find a way to pull the man back toward him before Tommin sank too deeply into his newly discovered piety.

"Pass me a torch," Owain commanded, stepping away from Diarmuid and approaching the only fire that had yet to be lit.

A giant heap of logs had been thrown around an intricately carved wooden statue of a beautiful woman with feathered wings. Outsiders might think that it was a depiction of an ascended saintess or some divine servant of the Holy Lord of Light. Those with access to the hidden records of the Lothian family's many wars against the Vale of Mists, however, would instantly recognize the statue for what it really was.

"I'm surprised you aren't taking this as a trophy," Inquisitor Diarmuid said quietly as he joined the young lord before the statue. "Given the relics in your father's office, I would have expected you to want to add this to the collection."

"As long as the Demon Lady of the Vale lives, icons like this can only be destroyed," Owain said, flinging the torch onto the pile of oil soaked wood. "I have looked at the face of my enemy. I will recognize her if I see her on the field of battle. That's enough. The rest can burn."

"Indeed," Diarmuid said in approving tones. He still didn't like everything he'd seen from Owain since coming to Lothian March, but if this hunt had taught him anything about the young lord it was that his hatred of demons was deep and genuine. He may be prone to excess and womanizing, he may be a murderer who used an accusation of witchcraft to rid himself of a wife he suspected of infidelity, but there was one thing that Diarmuid firmly believed about Owain.

Owain Lothian hated the demons enough to march into battle at the front of an army instead of cowardly commanding it from behind. More than that, he had the personal strength as a warrior to carve his way to the demon lords as long as the army supporting him was strong enough to keep him from being overwhelmed.

He may be imperfect... but it would be difficult to say that the Church shouldn't support such a man in his ambition to launch a Holy War.

As flames crawled their way over the surface of a statue that bore a striking resemblance to Nyrielle, blackening its surface before cracks began to tear it apart, Inquisitor Diarmuid began to speak to the survivors of the hunting party gathered around the giant pyres.

"We are born in the light of the east," Diarmuid intoned formally. "From the very first day we draw breath, we greet the dawn and the arrival of the Holy Lord of Light."

"We are born in the Light," the gathered templars and soldiers of the church intoned. "We live under the blessings of the Light."

"All those who struggle under the Light do so in the hopes that one day, they will reach the Heavenly Shores in the west," Diarmuid said, his voice loud and echoing across the hills. "These brave men have died in the struggle to reach the west. They have died in the struggle to cleanse wickedness and darkness from the land."

"All life is a struggle," the soldiers intoned. "The unworthy struggle that one day, they may be worthy of resting on the Heavenly Shores."

"For these men, the struggle has ended," Diarmuid said loudly. "They have died as champions of the Holy Lord of Light. They have fought the darkness to their last breath. And so we burn the bodies, the homes and the icons of their enemies."

"May the flames light their way," the soldiers chanted.

"May the flames light their way to the Heavenly Shores," Diarmuid echoed loudly. "And may they burn the wickedness from these lands!"