

The Vampire 210

Chapter 210 210: Drawing Closer

"The strong and the capable are doomed to lead a lonely life," Owain said, as though he bore a great burden. "My father was a hero and his father before him, but we've never had peers who could march to glory with us, only those who served below and failed us when we needed them the most."

It seemed like a curse had befallen his family. Whether it was his father, his grandfather or any of their predecessors, at some point, their conquest fell to ruin. Every one of them could boast of some success, but whenever it felt like they would achieve real gains, a single defeat unraveled all of the momentum they'd built.

One or two key allies faltered, a brush with death came too close to taking the life of the current Marquis and it was over. Their path to additional conquest and greater glory was snuffed out like the flame of a candle.

Without the ability to summon enough soldiers from their vassals and strong champions to counter the elite forces among the demons, no one man could put an end to the demon threat along their borders. It had happened to his father on Airgead Mountain and after the events of this hunting expedition, Owain was beginning to fear that it would happen to him as well.

"This time it will be different," Jocelynn said, taking his hands in hers and meeting his eyes with a shining gaze. "You will be the first Duke Lothian, and I will be your Duchess," she said firmly, with the same faith that others used to say their prayers to the Holy Lord of Light. "You just need people around you who can help to keep your enemies from dragging you down."

"Such people are difficult to find, and harder to recruit," Owain said bitterly. "Even the ones who come from across the sea will arrive with their pride and arrogance, having never faced a demon in battle."

They will die in droves before the worthy ones rise like cream to the top and by then, they will be too covered in their own glory to bend the knee to me."

"There are other capable men who could come under your banner, my Lord," Jocelynn said, her voice growing softer and more intimate as she leaned forward in her chair. The candlelight caught the golden highlights in her hair as she gazed at him intently. To Owain, her eyes seemed to grow larger in his vision, transforming into seafoam green pools that sought to draw him into their depths.

"In Blackwell County, there are captains of ships who are very capable warriors," she explained. "Men who live their lives fighting in the most unforgiving conditions when pirates and monsters of the sea descend on their vessels."

"These are captains of sailing ships," Owain said, finding himself distracted by the way her silk skirts rustled as she shifted closer to him. When had she come close enough to him to reach out and touch so easily? The wine must have affected him more than he'd thought. Or perhaps it was the way her eyes seemed to shine with admiration whenever she looked his way that left him inching unconsciously toward her as well.

"There are no seas for them to fight on here," he said, still puzzled by her idea. "The rivers aren't large enough to sail warships on. Why would we turn to ship captains for aid?"

Jocelynn rose gracefully from her seat, flashing him a dazzling smile as she settled into the chair directly beside him. Suddenly, he found her close enough that he felt himself enveloped by the enchanting scent that always clung to her.

Somehow, despite being so far from the seas of her home in Blackwell county, she always smelled like a crisp sea breeze, as though the ocean itself had followed her here just to tempt him. Ashlynn had always

smelled of the earth and trees, as though she was trying to blend in to the Lothian environment, but Jocelynn maintained her uniquely enchanting scent, even here.

For Jocelyn, now that she was this close to him, it was tempting, very tempting, to reach out and caress the firm, sculpted muscles of his arm beneath the sleeves of his tunic, or to reach up and caress his freshly shaved face, but she held herself back and focused on making her point.

"A captain is the master of his vessel as long as he is at sea," she explained, her shoulder barely brushing against his arm as she leaned in to pour more of the strong wine into his goblet. "But no man wants to live forever on a tiny ship in the middle of the sea..."

"As soon as a captain walks down the planks from his vessel, he descends from being a master of all that he can see to a tiny mortal man, bound to follow the whims of the merchants who own his vessel and the lords that rule the land," she said, painting a picture that felt all too familiar to Owain.

He felt something similar every time he returned from leading his men against the demons of the Southern Steppe, covered in glory and victories, only to hear from his father about the places where he'd fallen somehow short. It was a bitter, humiliating experience that he felt certain he would be forced to endure again when his father learned how extensive their losses had been.

"Such men are strong, proud, capable leaders who are shackled by their station," Jocelynn said, pressing on when she saw understanding dawning in Owain's eyes. "But you, my lord, you can offer them a path to something more. Something that their merchant masters can never grant them."

"Knighthood," Owain whispered as he realized the direction of Jocelynn's thinking. "You want me to offer these men knighthood if they will fight for me."

"Soon, you'll leave for Blackwell County," Jocelynn whispered into his ear. "I know the merchants well. There was a time that my father considered having me marry into one of the great guilds you know."

"You would have been wasted on a commoner," Owain said fiercely, wrapping an arm around Jocelynn's waist and pulling her close. "A Lady like you belongs with the greatest of lords. Any commoner who thinks they could sully you should be hung from the neck until dead and displayed to the rest of the toads lusting after you as a warning."

"You understand," Jocelynn said with a smile as she pressed close against Owain's muscular body. This was what she'd worked so hard to obtain, what she wanted so desperately to feel. Owain wasn't just the strongest or most handsome man she had ever seen, he was also a man who didn't hesitate to reveal his desires to the world.

When Owain moved boldly to capture her sister's heart, Jocelynn had wondered how it must have felt, to have those powerful arms wrapped around her, claiming her for all the world to see. To be the woman that the greatest of men had to possess. Now, as he threatened to kill unworthy men for the crime of lusting after her, she felt like she was getting her first real taste of that feeling and it was even more intoxicating than the strong wine she'd served him tonight.

She'd never dreamed that she could capture Owain's heart. She'd thought that she could only settle for a lesser lord among her father's vassals. Even obtaining that kind of future for herself had taken her years of pleading along with her mother's inability to give birth to another child before her father had given up on the notion of marrying her into one of Blackwell City's powerful merchant guilds.

No matter how wealthy, no commoner could measure up to the status of a lord in her eyes, and she hadn't met a man alive who could measure up to Owain.

"When you leave, I'll give you a list of captains who may be up to your standards," she said. "I know the guilds quite well. Of course, I don't know the truth of their fighting abilities," she said, looking down before looking back up at him through fluttering eyelashes. "My lord will have to test them himself."

"Of course," Owain said with a broad smile. "You shouldn't ever need to understand how to evaluate another man's strength," he added, gently caressing her soft, golden hair. "Just trust in me to know who is worthy and who isn't."

"Of course, my Lord," she whispered. "I put my trust in you for everything..."