

The Vampire 38

Chapter 38 38: Owain's Arrival

Preparations for the feast continued long into the night and by the time Ashlynn crawled into the straw bed she felt more exhausted than at any point in her life. The sun had set long ago and the dinner they ate amounted to a stew of meat broth with vegetables thickened by old bread.

Eating such atrocious food while preparing the refined dishes for the upcoming feast was, in Ashlynn's mind, a special form of torture. To add insult on top of the horrible dinner, Sir Kaefin posted one of his guards outside the kitchens to prevent any of the staff from sneaking food before it could be served to the nobles during the feast.

The next day started just as early as the last one had and once again Ashlynn found herself hauled from bed early to feed the rest of the household staff. After that, the day turned into a sweltering nightmare as every hearth and oven was lit to cook everything from loaves of fresh bread to meat pies and spit-roasted venison.

At midday, there was considerable fanfare from the entrance to the villa. Seeing his two young assistants fidgeting, Otis gave them each a few minutes to gawk so long as they remained out of sight of the arriving lords.

"Follow me," Ollie said eagerly, dashing into the cellars and pulling Ashlynn along with him.

"But, they're arriving in the courtyard," Ashlynn said.

"Mister Otis said to stay out of sight. Come look, you'll see," he added, entering a cellar and pulling Ashlynn over to the far wall. There, a small window allowed both light and fresh air into the cellar, set just at ground level. The window was only a handbreadth tall, but it offered not only a view of the courtyard but a welcome cool breeze after working in the sweltering kitchens.

"I told you I know all the best places," the gangly youth grinned, eagerly stepping up to the window and peering outside.

"Ollie," Ashlynn fumed, searching about the cellar until she found a small cask of pickled vegetables. "I'm not that tall," she said, dragging the cask over to balance on, clutching the iron bars of the window to keep herself stable.

"Oh, sorry," the gangly youth said without taking his eyes off the scene in the courtyard. "But look!"

In the courtyard, two dozen armored men had formed into ranks leading up to an elegant carriage emblazoned with the blue and yellow coat of arms of the Lothian family. Two knights stood at either side of the doors to the elegant carriage, one of whom ignited a fire within Ashlynn's chest.

"Sir Broll," she whispered, recalling the way he'd kicked her to prove that she was 'dead' before dumping her into a shallow grave. Some might say that she owed her life to his negligence that night but she would never take such a forgiving view of him. "But where's Sir Tommin? He should be here too."

"You know the knights on sight?" Ollie said, his eyes wide. "They still have their helms on!"

"Sir Broll's the one with the green cloak and the stag painted on his shield," she said. "The other one I don't know, but his armor looks pretty old," Ashlynn added, trying to remember any knights who used a bird for their sigil but failing to recall anyone.

"Look, it's Lord Owain and Lady Ashlynn," Ollie said excitedly, unaware that the real Lady Ashlynn was right beside him, carefully perching on a barrel of pickled radishes and turnips.

Owain exited the carriage first, his well-tailored tunic conforming to his broad, muscular chest while his tight breeches highlighted the notable bulge in his pants. Most infuriating to Ashlynn, however, was the gentle smile he bestowed on the woman exiting the carriage delicately behind him as he helped her down.

The fake Ashlynn had her long blond hair arranged in elegant braids and she wore a dark maroon dress with a plunging neckline that had been part of the luggage Ashlynn brought from Blackwell County. Around her neck, she even wore the scroll-shaped pendant Ashlyn had received from a tutor as a farewell gift when she left Blackwell County.

The woman stood perhaps an inch or two taller than Ashlynn herself and her features were sharper than the real Ashlynn but her figure was every bit as buxom. When she took Owain's arm in her own and pressed up against him, they gave off a very convincing appearance of a newlywed couple in love.

As much as she hated to admit it, the woman that Owain had found resembled her enough that if someone was only given a description of her, they might actually believe that she was the genuine lady Ashlynn Blackwell.

Standing side by side, the differences between the two women would be obvious and Ashlynn didn't think for a moment that the fake could fool her tutors back in Blackwell County or anyone else who had met her more than a few times, but out here, so far from home, almost no one knew her so well.

"She's so pretty," Ollie said, oblivious to Ashlynn's seething beside him. "Lord Owain is really lucky."

"That's odd," Ashlynn said when a footman closed the doors to the carriage. "There's only one carriage, and there's no one else with O- Lord Owain," she said, her brows lowering in confusion. "Where are Lady Ashlynn's attendants? There should be at least another young lady or two from the march with her, shouldn't there?"

"Didn't they say that Lady Ashlynn's sister is coming soon?" Ollie said, not understanding what the problem was. "Maybe they're all coming with her."

"You don't understand," Ashlynn said, not bothering to explain. Inwardly, however, she wondered what Owain was playing at. Bringing his wife out here alone, without any other women to accompany her, would have created a scandal back in Blackwell County, particularly since he wasn't intending to stay for very long.

Was he just trying to minimize the risks of someone figuring out about the deception? It was true that she'd met several of the young ladies of the march when she arrived in Lothian City but surely he could have reached out to some of the country barons to send one of their daughters along, just to maintain appearances sake.

Unless there was something else going on, it didn't make sense why he'd allow her to go unescorted. That sort of thing made it far too easy for rumors to form about a lady's virtue and fidelity.

"We should go back," Ollie said, when Owain, the fake Ashlynn, and their servants began to enter the manor. "I have an even better spot to watch from tonight. We can see them again then," he added excitedly."

"Good," Ashlynn said, hopping off the barrel of pickles. "I can't wait to see what goes on at the feast tonight. Who knows," she added, walking beside Ollie. "Since there aren't any ladies accompanying their lordships, and no other young lords besides Lord Owain, there might even be leftovers we could sample when we clear away the dishes."

"No way we'll be that lucky," Ollie laughed. "The soldiers will snap up all the good bits before we get a chance."

"You never know," Ashlynn said cryptically as they returned to the sweltering kitchens. "Strange things happen all the time."