

The Vampire 75

Chapter 75 75: Wayward Son

When the sun rose over Lothian City, it quickly burned away the lingering rain clouds from the previous night's storm, casting brilliant rays that glittered off the lingering dew and illuminated the golden spires of the temple at the center of the city.

In the office of Marquis Bors Lothian, however, the mood was dark and cold, as though the burly lord had drawn in the previous evening's storm clouds and stuffed them into his majestic chambers.

Bors himself had begun the day in high spirits with news that the first spring tributes had arrived from the western barons. At the very edge of the border between civilization and the demon infested wilderness, attacks from the demons could devastate a barony badly enough that they would be unable to send their tribute for the season, placing an even greater burden on the eastern barons.

In a year that Bors intended to stockpile for the upcoming war, losing the tribute of a single baron would be troublesome and losing more than one could be disastrous, but all four of the western barons had sent their tithes of wool, iron, silver and timber.

It should have been a joyous day. Standing at the window, looking over the bustling city beyond the manor's outer walls, Bors tried for a third time to reign in his temper enough to face the person that had spoiled his day. His hands clenched and unclenched as he resisted the urge to hurl one of the solid iron paperweights on his desk at his wayward son.

Owain had grown too old to discipline with violence and the days had long passed when he cowered at his father's raised fist. In a few short years, he would be thirty and old enough to take over as the next Marquis Lothian, finally allowing his father to retire and live out his twilight years in comfort.

At least, that's what he'd believed. The man who entered his office this morning, however, was a far cry from what Bors wanted to see in a successor.

"Tell me again," Bors said, continuing to stare out the window at the busy city. "How it is that you lost two knights and half a dozen men to a servant girl and a runaway kitchen boy," he said, his voice growing louder and more strained with every word.

"Tell me how it is that you came to the conclusion that you had to tell me in person days after it happened, rather than sending a courier with a letter," he said, rounding on his son and glaring at him with a face reddened by rage. "You knew that I wouldn't have let you return home if I knew what had happened, but you came anyway!"

"Father, I," Owain said, flinching back from the older man's anger. "I had to bring their remains home. I, I owe it to Kaefin and Broll's families to..."

"You didn't even return with two complete corpses!" Bors shouted, giving into his anger and hurling dog-shaped paperweight the size of his palm at Owain's stomach. Part of him wanted to strike either lower or higher but he refused to risk his son's ability to sire an heir in a fit of pique and striking his son's face would only complicate matters if he appeared beaten in public.

"Father!" Owain cried out, grunting in pain when the paperweight struck him. He knew better than to block or dodge it but that didn't make the pain any less. "Would you have had me stay at the Summer Villa with only a single aging knight to protect me? Broll was torn apart by DEMONS! I had to come home before demons could attack the villa!"

"Coward," Broll spat, dropping into the leather-covered chair carved from an Ancient Oak tree behind his desk carved from the same great tree. More than once he'd taken the furniture as a reminder of the

greatness his ancestors expected of him, but now, looking at the wastrel of a son before him, he felt like the entire Lothian line was looking down on him from the Heavenly Shores for failing to live up to their achievements.

"I could have sent men to you," Bors said, visibly trembling as he clenched his fists and tried to reign in his temper. "I could have called up more knights. The western barons have survived the winter almost completely unscathed this year," he said, tapping a stack of reports on his desk. "You didn't have to come home to receive help."

"But calling up knights from the barons would have taken at least a week," Owain protested. "This way, your heir is safely home and no one will question my decision to return to see to Kaefin and Broll's funerals personally."

"You think they won't judge you?" Bors said derisively. "If you were going to return with your tail tucked between your legs you should have at least left Sir Cathal at the villa to guard your 'wife.' Now, do you know how many people will gossip about your callous disregard for her safety by bringing the only remaining knight with you?"

"Within a day, every servant from the stables to the kitchens will know that you were too frightened of the demons to bring your fallen knights home without Sir Cathal to protect you," Bors continued.

"Within two days, the daughters of the barons will whisper about how lucky they are to have escaped becoming your wife. Within a week, the sons of the barons will mutter about being forced to protect a coward who won't fight on the front lines with them against the demons!"

"Father, you're exaggerating!" Owain protested. "I will see that Sir Kaefin and Sir Broll are buried with full honors and then I will return to the villa with a larger contingent of soldiers and knights. No one will speak ill of me for this," he insisted.

"Owain, my son," Bors said, shaking his head as his fury exhausted itself to be replaced by a bone-deep fatigue. No matter what he said, it seemed like nothing would get through.

"Your ears are growing deaf to my voice," Bors said. "You don't understand people as well as you think you do. You should visit Loman and talk to him about this. Perhaps your brother can help you hear what you refuse to hear from me."

"You know I can't do that, Father," Owain said. "I can't tell him what really happened to that witch, especially not with an Inquisitor in the temple. If the Inquisition finds out what happened..."

"Fine, fine," Bors said, waving his hand in surrender. "Leave your brother out of it then," he said, wishing yet again that his younger son had been born first. Loman would never have been so blind to the implications of his actions and he wouldn't have been so cowardly as to run away from the first sign of trouble.

"But if you won't talk to Loman, you will do something else to contain the damage caused by your lack of judgment," Bors added, his voice growing firm. "You are to use Sir Broll's death as a rallying cry among the western barons. Demand they each send one son and one other knight to join you in a hunt for the demons that killed Sir Broll. You are to lead that hunt personally," he said, putting extra emphasis on the word 'personally,' and fixing Owain with a fierce stare that denied any challenge to his directive.

Bors might be growing old, and he might be Owain's father, but this time, when he spoke, it wasn't as a tired old man or a disappointed father, but as the Marquis Lothian. Owain's mistakes could undermine the barons' confidence in the Lothian family's leadership of the march and it would take a display of martial prowess and courage for Owain to regain that trust.

"But father," Owain began, an argument quickly forming on his lips. He needed to return to the villa before Jocelynn Blackwell arrived. He needed to prepare for his own trip to Blackwell County after Jocelynn's arrival. He needed...

Whatever he needed, his protest died on his lips when a rapid knock on the door was followed by the entrance of an out-of-breath page.

"My Lord," the page said between gasps for air. "Apologies, but Inquisitor Diarmuid has arrived at the manor. He's demanding an audience."

Bors's eyes widened as soon as he heard the Inquisitor's name, turning from the page to Owain. His son, however, looked equally confused. While Bors was certain that the Inquisitor's visit had something to do with Owain's actions, neither man knew what had prompted him to visit so quickly.

"Show him in," Bors said after taking a deep breath. "And you," he added, looking at his son. "You stay here. If the Inquisition has come for you, you'll face it like a man, on your feet. I won't have you scurrying away from this."

"Y-yes, Father," Owain said, bowing his head. He'd been afraid of meeting with the inquisitor ever since Sir Tommin had joined the Templars. Was this the result of Tommin's treachery? Had the knight sold him out for favor with his new masters?

Owain didn't know, but he was afraid that he was about to find out.