

The Vampire 208

Chapter 208 208: A Hero's Homecoming

Less than a month ago, an impressive column of knights, Templars, soldiers, and the many servants who supported them, marched out of the Summer Villa in the name of justice. Their armor had been polished until it gleamed in the sun, their banners snapped crisply on the wind and they resembled a sacred host, blessed by the Holy Lord of Light himself, ready to slay the demons responsible for Sir Broll's violent murder and dismemberment.

Now, the column that returned to the summer villa looked very little like the one that had left. The shining armor and bright tabards had been covered by a layer of grime that no amount of attentive cleaning in the field could remove. The banners hung limply, covered in even more dirt and grime.

Most notably, however, the column that returned was little more than half the size of the one that had left. Almost every man remaining moved with some awkward stiffness as each one attempted to find ways to put less strain on the injuries that had yet to fully heal.

At the head of the column, Owain held his head high, seemingly the only one returning with the bearing of a conquering hero. His armor was dull and dirty, his body smelled of blood, smoke, and ash, and other than his hands and face, he hadn't properly bathed but he refused to allow any of these things to diminish the aura of pride and victory he radiated.

From his saddle hung several tails taken from flat tailed demons, proof of his prowess in combat against the demon enemies. Whatever tragic fate had befallen many of the soldiers under his command, it was clear that his personal abilities as a slayer of demons couldn't be doubted.

In the courtyard of the Summer Villa, Jocelynn, Confessor Eleanor and a dark-haired knight stood awaiting Owain's return. Samira, in her guise as a fake Ashlynn, was conspicuously absent for the return of her husband.

Eleanor had already circulated word that her condition was 'delicate' and that she may face a 'difficult birth' if she didn't have sufficient bed rest. The lie served two purposes. At the moment, it offered a convenient excuse for why the socially awkward servant would be absent from so many functions. Later on, once news of her difficult pregnancy spread, it would make her 'death in childbirth' more believable to anyone hearing the news.

Falsehoods like this never sat well with the confessor and she wore a bitter expression on her severe face as the gates opened to admit Owain Lothian and his column of soldiers. Falsehoods could be tolerated in the service of revealing greater truths, but as Eleanor looked at the triumphant young lord riding through the gate, she promised herself that she would find a way to cleanse the filth she'd been forced to taint herself with.

"Welcome home, Brother-in-law," Jocelynn said, striding forward to offer a deep curtsy in greeting. "I knew that the hero of Lothian March would return victorious," she added, standing up straight and flashing him a dazzling smile.

"Jocelynn," Owain said, sliding smoothly out of his saddle and stepping forward to take her hands in his. "Seeing you looking so radiant makes me feel like I've finally returned to the light after spending so long in the darkness. Have you been well here? How is my beloved?"

"My sister is in a delicate state and she must spend much of her day resting in bed," Jocelynn said, her face heating in delight. She knew that Owain cared nothing for the servant masquerading as her sister. When he asked 'how is my beloved', she believed that it wasn't 'Ashlynn' that he referred to, but rather it was a subtle reminder that he accepted her feelings and returned them as well.

"I've also been quite well here," Jocelynn added. "The air is crisp and cool and everything feels fresh and green. I see why you would go to the effort to maintain this place, even when it's so close to the dreadful demons."

"You have nothing to fear from demons so long as I'm here," Owain promised as he became briefly lost in Jocelynn's seafoam green eyes. For a moment, he nearly reached up to caress her tender cheek, but the sounds of approaching boots on the courtyard's cobblestones pulled him back to reality before he could do anything that might be misinterpreted as being more familiar than a brother-in-law should be.

"Well met, Lord Owain," the dark-haired knight said, offering a deep bow. "I see that I missed a glorious hunt. I've never seen so many demon tails hanging from a single saddle."

"Sir Liam Dunn," Owain said, turning to the handsome knight with a dark scowl. "I expected your arrival before we departed. If you had no intention to join our hunt, why bother to come at all?"

"Now, now, my Lord," Liam said with a good-natured smile. "Please don't misunderstand. You should have received word from my father that I would be delayed by matters in the barony. Still, you asked for support from the Dunn family and we would never dream of withholding it," he said, stepping back to gesture at several soldiers standing in neat ranks wearing the brown and yellow colors of the Dunn family.

"Since you've gone to kick over the ant's nest, I felt it best to bring along some reinforcements for your Summer Villa," the young knight said affably. "After all, if the demons were to retaliate against the Villa before your forces returned, your lovely wife and unborn child might fall victim to an attack."

"From the looks of it," he added, glancing at the worn and weary state of the column of soldiers behind Owain. "Reinforcements may be useful even now that your soldiers have returned."

"I see that Baron Dunn is 'thoughtful' as always," Owain said darkly, scowling at the young knight. An additional knight and fifteen additional soldiers might or might not have been enough to shift the outcomes of their battles.

Owain had never seen Sir Liam fight personally, but as the son of one of the westernmost baronies, he must have spent several years fighting against the demons outside the Vale of Mists. The strength in his grip when the men shook hands and the confident way that he stood made it clear that even Owain's recent accomplishments didn't intimidate him and he had no intention of humbling himself before the future Lothian Marquis.

"My father, of course, sends his regards to you and yours," Liam said with a wide smile. "But I'm keeping you standing when you should be returning to rest. We'll have plenty of time to speak tomorrow when you can enjoy a proper victory feast. I'm sure you're eager to see your lovely wife as well," he added with an oddly familiar wink.

"You've met my Ashlynn?" Owain asked, pausing to give the knight a hard stare. "She should be taking her rest."

"Lord Owain doesn't need to worry," Liam chuckled. "I only met her briefly to pay my respects. You know, I didn't realize that we had such similar taste in fair maidens. My own Illa bears such a strong resemblance to your lovely wife that when I first saw her, I thought I'd found my missing love."

"Missing love?" Owain said, raising an eyebrow at the other man. "Don't tell me that your darling Illa has fled the barony to escape your affections. Or is it that Lady Illa's parents don't approve of your intentions?"

"Nothing like that," Liam said, shaking his head. "My Illa is a commoner but she pricked my heart nonetheless. She vanished around the same time that you and your Lady Ashlynn were married," he

explained as the men walked into the villa itself with Jocelynn and Eleanor following at a respectful distance behind.

"This is the nasty business that kept me from reaching you in time to join your hunt," the knight continued. "Her parents accused my father of having her killed. My father is the one who didn't approve, but, well, I'm sure you understand well that the heart wants what the heart wants."

"I understand how a woman who resembles my Ashlynn can stir a man's desires," Owain said, reluctantly agreeing with the young knight. As much as he disdained the man for missing the hunt and resented Baron Dunn for holding back his aid until it was too late, it was undeniable that he and Sir Liam had certain things in common.

"Sir Liam," Owain said before the conversation could continue any further. "I'm afraid I'm too tired to entertain you tonight. Tomorrow, we can speak more of many things. Perhaps I can help you with your troubles with your father's requirements for your future wife."

"For now," he said, turning to look back to Jocelynn and Eleanor. "I want to have a proper bath, and then to spend a quiet evening with my wife and my sister-in-law. We'll speak again tomorrow."

"Of course, of course," the young knight said with an expression that said he knew exactly why Owain was in a hurry to reunite with his beautiful wife. "Tomorrow, we can speak of many things. For now, I leave you to the company of the Blackwell beauties."

Owain watched the younger knight depart, his brows furrowing when he noticed how the soldiers in Dunn colors seemed to straighten as their lord's heir passed by. Despite Liam's casual manner, the respect the soldiers gave him spoke of just how much time the young knight had spent pushing into the demon-infested wilderness to expand his family's vast holdings even further... and how much success he'd enjoyed in doing so.

The Dunn family might technically be his subordinates, but their influence in the western reaches of Lothian March couldn't be ignored. For as long as Owain had been alive, there had been whispers about the Dunn barony rivaling the stature of a county, held back only by the failure of the Lothian March to become a true duchy.

That power and influence had turned the Dunns into an increasingly difficult-to-handle thorn in the Lothian's side. If Liam truly saw a kindred spirit in him, even if it was built on something as flimsy as their preference for fair-haired buxom women... well, perhaps that was worth exploring. As long as he was able to ensure that the man's intentions toward his "wife" remained purely nostalgic, of course.