

The Vampire 209

Chapter 209 209: An Intimate Dinner

That evening, after scrubbing away weeks of wilderness grime in a steaming bath scented with fragrant oils, Owain settled into his private dining chamber. The comforting feel of fresh linen against his skin and the gentle warmth of the hearth fire helped wash away the lingering memories of sleeping in mud-splattered tents and enduring the foul odor carried from hastily dug latrines whenever the fickle wind shifted its direction.

His muscles still ached from days spent hiking through the dense underbrush, constantly tense and on alert for another ambush by the devious demons, but cleaned and properly dressed once more, he felt himself transforming back into the noble lord he was meant to be.

He'd arranged to take his evening meal privately with Jocelynn. Part of him yearned to rush through the formalities and seek out 'Ashlynn' in her chambers. Samira might be a simple, uneducated woman, but her body was ripe and luscious, and after so many nights spent listening to nothing but the whistle of wind through mountain passes and pitiful complaints of wounded men, he ached to drown himself in the pleasures of her flesh.

Jocelynn, however, offered something even more satisfying when she arrived alongside platters of roasted fowl and spring vegetables, their rich aromas filling the chamber. The soft rustle of her silk skirts and the gentle click of her heels on stone spoke of refinement that Samira could never match.

As a man who appreciated beautiful women, it was impossible to deny that Samira lived up to at least eight parts in ten of Ashlynn's alluring figure. What Samira lacked, however, Jocelynn had in abundance.

"My hero has returned victorious," she said, raising a goblet of rich, fragrant wine and toasting his victory. "I knew that no demon alive could defeat my perfect champion. You didn't suffer, did you?" Jocelynn asked, her face full of concern. "Are there injuries you're suffering from?"

Whether it was her graceful movement or her refined mannerisms, Jocelynn radiated the poise and elegance that only a true noblewoman could possess. More than that, conversation with Samira felt dull, lifeless, and quickly became little more than a pretext for enticing her out of her borrowed dresses. Conversation with Jocelynn, however, left him feeling refreshed, restored and somehow more sure of himself than he'd been before she joined him.

"I'm not suffering anything worse than a few aches and pains," Owain said lightly, his heart swelling with pride. "Nothing that a hot bath and your charming presence can't ease. There were a few moments that were dangerous," he added. "It pains me to admit it, but without Sir Tommin and Inquisitor Diarmuid, I might have suffered grievous injuries."

"Even alone," Jocelynn said sweetly, placing her hand lightly on Owain's muscular forearm. "Had you returned covered in wounds, you would have returned covered in glory. I saw how many soldiers failed to return this time," she said, her eyes falling low. "Was it, was it because the demons are really that strong? Or were the soldiers not strong enough for you to rely on?"

"Ah, how is it that you know me so well?" Owain said, setting down his fork and knife to hold Jocelynn's hand. "Would you like me to tell you about it? About the devious traps and hidden archers? They tried to pull the mountain down atop our heads, you know. It took more than a day to find the bodies of all the men who were buried beneath the mudslide."

"That, that's horrifying," Jocelynn said, her eyes shining in a way that didn't match her words. "Please, tell me everything, I only want to hear about your heroism from you, before the tales are mixed with the words of others at tomorrow's victory feast."

"Oh?" Owain said, raising a brow. "You can't wait even a day?"

"I could wait a day, a week or a month if I must," Jocelynn said, pulling her hand back and giving him a coy look. "It's just, tomorrow at the feast, you must share your glory with the others, even if their accomplishments are less than yours. You must appear humble before the other knights and most especially the church," she said. "I'm sure that tomorrow you will raise up the deeds of others, even if they are less worthy, and you will diminish your own valor so that you don't outshine the Church."

"But I know," she said, her eyes shining brightly. "I know that you are more brilliant than any of them. So tonight, tell me how you fought. Tell me how you conquered and claimed so many trophies. I want to hear it all."

"Well, it started when my scouts discovered a trail," Owain began. As he spoke and ate, he drank deeply of both the fine wine served with dinner and the attentive worship of the younger Blackwell sister.

Ashlynn was never like this with him. Both Blackwell sisters were intelligent and perceptive, but when Owain told his stories of fighting demons on the Southern Steppe to Ashlynn, she always asked questions. She probed at the sequence of events of the details of his retelling in ways that forced him to speak more of the accomplishments of others and the limits of his own abilities.

Ashlynn used her intelligence and perception to transform Owain from a glorious hero into a capable soldier. She respected him, praised him where it was worthy and her assessments of him had been genuine and well worded. But she never showered him with devotion the way Jocelynn did.

When Jocelynn asked questions, she already knew that Owain was the greatest warrior on the field of battle. She knew that he was a hero covered in glory. She only wanted to understand more about others in the battle so she could understand how far above ordinary men the man she adored stood.

"It must have been frustrating," Jocelynn said at the end of Owain's boast-filled tale. "You fought so hard but you were held back because the people around you weren't as capable. Men died because only Sir Tommin was capable of fighting at your side and now that he's embraced his faith as his true calling, you can no longer rely on his sword."

"It is the way of the world," Owain sighed, slumping in his chair. His belly was full of roasted duck and spring vegetables and his head swam slightly with the strong wine that Jocelynn poured for him whenever his cup ran low.

At this moment, despite the aches and pains, despite the unwelcome appearance of Liam Dunn and the equally unwelcome presence of Inquisitor Diarmuid and all of his adherents, Owain felt more content than he had at any point he could recall in recent memory. Even his marriage to Ashlynn, in the hours before he learned of her true nature, couldn't compare to this moment.

And yet, despite all of that contentment, underneath it all was an aching void. He'd returned from his hunt with half the men he'd left with. He'd gained glory for himself as the most valiant warrior on the battlefield and he'd come home to the adoration of a beautiful woman, but was it enough?

Could it ever be enough?