

The Vampire 159

Chapter 159 159: Real and Fake

In the courtyard of the Lothian's Summer Villa, Samira stood next to the captain of the guard, her heart hammering in her chest while she watched a mighty procession wind its way up the road toward the villa.

Weeks ago, when Owain brought her here, she had thought it was a marvelous trip with two dozen soldiers, more than a dozen servants, and three knights. She'd never in her life been part of such a grand event.

Now, seeing the arrival of Jocelynn Blackwell, she couldn't help but laugh at herself for feeling like she'd been treated like a genuine noblewoman. Counting the banners, there were more than ten knights in the procession approaching the Summer Villa. Some of them she recognized but others bore the personal emblems of knights from far away Blackwell County.

In addition to the knights, she counted at least six armored templars riding under the banner of the Holy Lord of Light, and one of the carriages flew the red and gold banner of the Inquisition.

All of this would have been impressive enough, but the armored knights and ornate carriages were only the beginning of the procession. Nearly twenty wagons stretched behind the carriages. Some were loaded high with crate after crate of supplies and personal belongings while others were filled with dozens of servants and attendants coming to take up any number of responsibilities in the Summer Villa.

Bringing up the rear of the winding column, Samira couldn't begin to count the number of armored soldiers marching in neat rows four men abreast but she estimated it at more than a hundred men.

In comparison, her own arrival suddenly felt like she had snuck out of Lothian City in the hopes that no one would pay much attention to her. The arrival of so many important people put incredible pressure on her. Sweat beaded between her shoulder blades and she clutched at her skirts with hand that had grown damp as she felt the pressure increasing.

With an event as important as this, she'd dressed in her best dress, a deep ocean blue that she paired with a necklace of pearls that seemed to be the most expensive piece of jewelry in Ashlynn Blackwell's collection. She wore her blonde hair in a loose braid and kept her makeup simple as Owain had told her repeatedly that Ashlynn rarely bothered to paint herself up.

When the carriages finally arrived, she had to hold herself back from rushing forward to greet Owain as he exited the carriage. Under the light of the midday sun, Owain seemed to almost glow in the light that reflected off of his crisp white tunic and soft flowing chestnut hair. When he turned back to the carriage, his handsome face wore a smile that seemed brighter than the sun as he extended a hand to the woman within.

Samira's first look at Jocelynn hit her like she had been doused with a bucket of icy water. The grace and poise that she moved with seemed natural but had in truth been diligently practiced since she was a young child. Each movement seemed careful, deliberate, and incredibly dignified as she exited the carriage. This, Samira realized, was a real noblewoman.

While Owain had often told Samira that she greatly resembled Ashlynn Blackwell, when she saw Jocelynn she could only laugh at herself for taking the comparison seriously. Jocelynn was taller than her and her figure had classic, elegant proportions. Her features were delicate and refined and her skin was radiant and flawless. Wrapped in a dress of pale seafoam blue, she seemed like a siren stepping from the sea into the world of mortals who lived their lives shackled to the land.

"My pearl of the sea," Owain said, stepping forward with his arms open wide. "I have missed you, my wife."

"Husband," Samira said, offering a very slight curtsy before gently embracing her lover. There might not have been a wedding between them, but Owain had made her his in every way a husband would claim his wife and she had yearned for his touch since he left the Summer Villa.

"I've missed you," she said when he pulled back away from her. Despite the public display of affection, he seemed oddly reluctant to touch her when they embraced and his hands were much more restrained on her body than they had been previously. "And I've missed you too, sister," she said, turning to face Jocelynn.

"Sister, it's only been a few months and you've already changed so much," Jocelynn said lightly as she stepped forward to place a hand on the imposter's belly. "You are radiant but you shouldn't strain yourself too much when Brother-in-law has so many things to settle with his knights and soldiers. Let's retire to your chambers and you can tell me how you've been."

To others who did not know the real Ashlynn Blackwell, Jocelynn had to admit that the imposter Owain's father had found bore a striking resemblance to her late sister. For a moment, when she stepped out of the carriage, she felt like it had all been a bad dream and that her sister really was simply being confined to the Summer Villa in order to prevent others from discovering that she was a witch.

As soon as the imposter spoke, the illusion shattered. Her sister's voice was light and even in formal gatherings, she would never address Jocelynn as 'sister.' At that moment, if the imposter had lovingly called her 'Jocey' she might have fallen into the illusion but as soon as she heard 'sister', it ripped away the dream and replaced it with a reality filled with imperfections.

When the two women reached the opulent suite that Samira had been occupying, all of the polite civility drained away from Jocelynn as soon as the door closed behind her.

"What is your name?" Jocelynn asked sharply. "And take off that necklace, give it to me."

"My name is Samira," the imposter said, startled at the sharpness in Lady Jocelynn's tone. "But, you can still call me Ashlynn. Owain does, even when we're in private," she said. Her mind worked furiously trying to find the right words to respond to the other woman's hostility. Had she done something wrong?

"The necklace," she said, reaching up to undo the clasp. "It was in the jewelry box Owain gave me. He said that I should make sure to always maintain the image of a proper noblewoman so..."

"Stop, just, just stop and give me the necklace," Jocelynn said, her voice cracking slightly as she struggled to suppress the storm of emotions swirling within her chest. "That belonged to my grandmother. It's not a common trinket to be worn on days that should be cheerful, unless you're trying to mock me? Did you do this to remind me that my sister is dead and gone?"

The more she spoke the harsher Jocelynn's words became. Months. She was supposed to live with this woman for months and pretend that she was Ashlynn? If it wasn't for the fact that it would provoke a scandal she'd have the woman flogged for disgracing her grandmother. As is, she could only swallow the insult and hold out her hand for the necklace.

"I, I'm sorry, I didn't know," Samira said, quickly placing the necklace in Jocelynn's outstretched hands. "Please, I..."

"Stop, don't say anything else," Jocelynn said, clutching the necklace and closing her eyes. It took several deep breaths before she could regain her composure. She thought she'd prepared herself for this, but clearly, she'd been wrong. Even in this isolated villa, away from most people's prying eyes, she would have to work hard to present the appearance that this woman was really her older sister.

"Anything that happened before I arrived can be forgiven," Jocelynn forced herself to say. "But from now on, you will take your instructions from me. In public, you may call me 'sister'," she said. It would be less painful that way. "In private, you will call me 'Lady Jocelynn', and I expect you to remember honorifics with everyone else as well, especially Lord Owain. He is not your husband, no matter what we're pretending at the moment, and will not stand for you treating him more intimately than common custom requires when in public."

"Now, there will be a welcoming feast tonight," Jocelynn said, taking a seat and gesturing for Samira to do the same. "It's good that you've started to pad your dress," she added, pointing to the very faint bulge at Samira's waist. "You're supposed to be in a delicate condition which makes some things easier. Still, there are a few things that I expect from you on a night like this, so listen closely..."