

The Vampire 212

Chapter 212 212: A Heavy Burden

"This must have been weighing heavily on you," Owain added. How could he have forgotten? Jocelynn was such a tender girl, barely an adult. Her cleverness made it too easy for him to forget that at her core, she was just a soft hearted maiden.

The warm firelight cast flickering shadows across the delicate features of her face and highlighted the graceful curves of her body as she pressed against him. Her eyes were moist with tears she must have been forcing herself to hold in even as her voice trembled when she asked about her sister's death.

She was perfect. Her features were achingly beautiful and her body tempted him even now to ravish her in the most sinful of ways. But the pain and uncertainty in her eyes evoked a much stronger, more primal urge to be a man who could protect her from the world's cruelty and hurts.

"You are not your sister," he reassured the young woman quivering in his arms. "Her crimes, whatever they were, aren't yours to bear. You don't have to feel guilty because of what she might have intended to do."

"Witches are evil existences that must be destroyed on sight," Owain insisted, his eyes growing flinty and hard. "But I've said nothing of your sister's wicked nature because of your kindness and selflessness," he praised her, gently stroking her cheek.

"Because of me?" Jocelynn asked, her voice quivering with uncertainty.

"Slaying a witch is a feat that could earn a lifetime of glory," Owain said, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. After all, only the defeat of a demon lord could eclipse the slaying of a witch. "But if I told the world that your sister was a witch, what would have happened to my darling Jocelynn? Your love for me was obvious, even then, and it was as pure as your sister's heart was black."

"All of this hiding away your sister's crimes, concealing her death, isn't it all so we can have a chance to be together?" Owain said. "All of this, I do for you. For us. For a future where we can be together. Why else would I destroy your sister so resolutely?"

This poor young woman, Owain thought. She must have agonized for months with fear that he would hate her or suspect her of being a witch like her sister. No wonder she'd worked so hard to find a way to strengthen his forces. She was clearly desperate to display her loyalty and to prove that she would be an asset to him after her sister had nearly trapped him in a marriage to a witch.

"My dearest Jocelynn," he whispered. "As soon as you told me of your sister's mark, I confirmed it for myself. I'm sorry I couldn't just accept your words, but once I saw the truth, I did not hesitate to destroy that evil woman," he said.

"You don't need to fear that she placed a hex on me or anything else," he added. "I never gave her a chance to fight back or use her witchcraft. Since she couldn't harm me, even if she desired to, there's nothing for me to hold against you. You are my shining pearl from the sea, pure and bright, selfless enough to sacrifice even your own family in order to do what's right."

"You don't have to work so hard to prove yourself to me," he said, tapping her gently on the forehead. "It must have been hard for you to put together a plan to recruit potential knights to my banner. I will meet with the men you wish me to meet, but don't feel like you need to do this again. It's better that you focus your thoughts on the family we will create together in the future, isn't it?"

"Yes, my Lord," Jocelynn said, burying her face in his shoulder and wrapping her arms around him.

Finally, she had an answer, but the answer twisted in her heart like a knife. Ashlynn hadn't done anything to hurt him. Owain didn't need to kill her to protect himself. Instead, he'd killed Ashlynn to secure a future together with her. Reflexively, her hands clenched at Owain's tunic, clinging to him like a drowning woman clutching a rope as sobs threatened to break free from her chest.

Perhaps, she thought, perhaps Owain was right. A witch couldn't be allowed a chance to work their witchcraft. From the moment he knew, there had been only one outcome, whether he had been the one to do it or the Church had carried out the execution. This way, at least they could be together.

Inwardly, her heart twisted. If anyone was to blame for her Sister's death, her father had to bear the greatest share of blame. If he had come to Jocelynn instead of Ashlynn in the first place, all of this could have been prevented. So what if Jocelynn wasn't the eldest daughter, she was infinitely more suited to be Owain's wife than her bookish sister.

Now, she had done the only thing she could to salvage the situation. Owain had been trapped by fate as well. What else could he do when confronted with a witch in his bed chambers on his wedding night?

And now, as she relished in the embrace of the man she desired most, an aching emptiness gnawed at her. Just two doors down the hall, an imposter wore her sister's clothes and pretended to be the sibling she'd shared countless days with.

It only made everything harder. If she wanted to, she could drown herself in the illusion that Ashlynn was still alive. She could rush into Samira's chambers and tell her that Owain had held her close and confessed his love. She could pretend that she still had a sister to share this moment with.

But she couldn't. Samira could never replace Ashlynn. Every time she saw the woman, she hated the sight of the hollow mockery of her sister's brilliance even more.

Trembling and fighting to hold back tears, she sank into Owain's embrace. At least, after all of this, she had him. They had both done the only things they could. It wasn't their fault that they'd been placed in such a cruel and impossible situation.

But as long as she had Owain, then it was fine. The sacrifice, cruel as it had been, was worth it. Wasn't it?

As Jocelynn shook in his embrace, Owain gently stroked her hair and quietly savored the feeling of her tearful surrender. No woman could be expected to endure what his Jocelynn had, but in the end, when she most needed strength, she'd come to him.

However they arrived here, this was where she belonged. He had stumbled with Ashlynn, but in the end, the person who came away with the greatest prize was still him. Jocelynn had been right about one thing at the very beginning of their evening together. He would become the first Duke Lothian.

And as long as Jocelynn was like this, turning to him with that vulnerable look and recognizing when she needed his strength... then she would be the perfect Lothian Duchess.