

The Vampire 243

Chapter 243 243: Looking Back

For Ashlynn, the world around her faded away, leaving her mind adrift in a sea of darkness. Within the dark, she could feel her own heartbeat along with the distant echo of Nyrielle's heartbeat. When she focused on the heartbeats, trying to count beats and gain a sense of time in this dark space, she found it impossible to keep track. Numbers slipped away from her along with any other sense of time.

She wasn't asleep but she wasn't awake either. Instead, she drifted in a world that was empty of everything but her.

Eventually, light began to filter into the dark space, revealing a familiar room that she hadn't seen in several months.

Her father's study in Blackwell Manor was part of the oldest section of the manor. The windows were small, and narrow, and let in very little natural light. They were a reflection of an era long passed when Blackwell manor had been a frontier fortress and every window was a potential firing position for a skilled archer. Now, the only thing that ever passed through the window was a cool, salty sea breeze, carrying with it the sounds of ship's bells ringing in the harbor in the distance.

Above them, a large chandelier hung high overhead, filling the room with a soft, golden light while the fire crackling in the hearth filled the room with warmth. The scent of dozens of books blended with woodsmoke and the salty sea air to produce a scent that felt more strongly of 'home' than anything else Ashlynn could imagine.

The room was dominated by an antique wooden desk, fashioned from hard, sturdy blackwood. The desk was older than Blackwell County, constructed in the old countries and brought across the sea as an heirloom by Yoam Blackwell, the first of his line on this continent. Now, Ashlynn's father, Rhys Blackwell, sat behind the desk, looking between her and her mother with a complicated expression.

"It's a difficult offer to refuse," Rhys said, dropping several neatly folded sheets of paper onto his desk. "It seems like Bors Lothian understands our circumstances exceedingly well."

It wasn't until he spoke that Ashlynn realized that this wasn't just a dream of her parents, but a memory... or had she drifted through time itself? But as soon as the thought came to her, it left again, replaced by a strange fog that made it difficult to recall what she'd been doing before she arrived here. It had been something very dangerous and very important... hadn't it?

"Rhys," Ashlynn's mother said from a seat next to the hearth. "You know that Ashlynn isn't suited for marriage. If Bors Lothian is looking for a wife for his son, we should recommend Jocelynn instead. If need be, we can tell him some tale, claim that doctors have examined our beloved Ashlynn and pronounced her to be barren. We can't risk sending her away."

Her mother was right, and Ashlynn knew deep within her that it was true, but she couldn't express why. She just had a vague feeling that things wouldn't turn out well if she married Owain Lothian.

"Impossible," Rhys said, shaking his head. "Maela, I know how you feel about both our girls but Ashlynn would already be marrying up into the Lothian family. That he would consider the daughter of a count instead of turning to one of the other Marquis or even the daughter of a duke for his son is a sign of how much he values our connections to the merchant guilds."

"Marquis Lothian is doing us a considerable favor by extending this opportunity," Rhys said. "If we respond to his offer by suggesting that his first-born heir marries our second-born daughter, the insult..."

"Husband, I know," Ashlynn's mother, Maela, said. Her shoulders slumped and her brows drooped as she looked at her husband with pleading eyes. "But if Owain believes that her mark is the mark of a witch, things won't end well for her or for us. It's too risky. What could possibly be worth sending our darling Ashlynn to the Lothians when so much could go wrong?"

"Bors Lothian has made a promise, and he'll put it in writing as part of the wedding agreement between our families," Rhys said. As he spoke, he stood from behind the desk, walking over to the hearth and kneeling at Maela's side.

"For generations, the Lothians have had a tradition of sending every second-born male child to the Church, to take up the office of a priest within the great temple in Lothian City," Rhys said. His tone was mild and gentle and he took Maela's hands in his own as he spoke to her. "In this case, Bors Lothian has promised that after Ashlynn bears an heir that can inherit Lothian March, her second-born son can return to Blackwell County to become the next Count Blackwell."

"This is my fault," Rhys said, giving Maela a deeply sincere look. "I've failed to sire an heir and now..."

"No, it's not your fault," Maela insisted. "I was the stubborn one. I refused to let you take a concubine, I promised you that we could keep trying, I..."

"I'll do it," Ashlynn said from the side, interrupting her parents. "Father, mother, please," she said, dashing across the room to hold them both. "Please. You've both sacrificed so much for me. You've given me everything I could ever want," she said, tears beginning to stream from her eyes.

Seeing her parents like this, each one trying to shoulder the blame, was too much for the young Ashlynn to bear. Her mother hadn't just promised to keep trying, she had been pregnant twice more since giving birth to Jocelynn.

Once, Ashlynn had nearly welcomed a little brother into the family. Only, something went wrong and her mother went into labor weeks before she should have. The child, her darling baby brother, was stillborn. Her parents named him Maelon and her mother visited his grave to this day.

After that, the Blackwell family was forced to endure yet again as joy turned into a bitter tragedy, this time just months after Maela realized she was with child. If it weren't for the intervention and healing magic of a distant cousin who had entered the Church as a Confessor, Maela herself might have died in addition to losing the child. After that, however, it became clear that Maela would never again bear a child for the Blackwell family, and Rhys Blackwell would be left without an heir.