

The Vampire 244

Chapter 244 244: For the Family

"If I can help by marrying Owain Lothian, then I'll do it," Ashlynn promised, desperate to stop her parents from digging back through all the old hurts to find a solution to the problem that had long haunted them.

"I, I'm told that he's very handsome and strong. I'm sure he'll make me very happy, and I'll be raising our children in no time. Father," she pleaded, looking into her father's stormy eyes and hoping that she could ease at least a fraction of the worries that plagued him. "Let me do this."

"Ashlynn, my sweet child," Maela said, placing a hand gently on Ashlynn's face and turning her head so she could look into her child's eyes as she spoke. "You don't understand matters between a man and a woman. You won't be able to hide your mark from him, at least, not for very long. If he sees it, he may turn you over to the Church."

"He wouldn't do that to his own wife though, would he?" Ashlynn said. "The bond between a husband and wife is sacred, blessed by the Holy Lord of Light, and unbreakable until death. He wouldn't hand me over to the church after we've sworn to live together for the rest of our lives, would he?"

"A man would do many things for a woman who captured his heart," Rhys said, reaching up to gently caress Maela's face. "I would fight a hundred duels to protect your mother, and raise an army if I had to just to keep her safe."

"But we're not talking about a union of love," Maela pointed out. "This is a union of politics. Do you really think that Owain will treat her as well as you treat me when this marriage is something arranged by his father?"

"Then, give me time," Ashlynn suggested, her mind working furiously to find a solution. "At least a year, maybe two. We can write back welcoming an engagement but ask for time so that Owain can court me. If there's no love between us, then we can withdraw. But, if he comes to love me, if he's serious, and if he can treat me the way that Father treats you, Mother," she said, meeting her mother's concerned gaze directly.

"Then, I'll agree to it," Ashlynn promised. "I'll find a way to make it work. But Father," she added, turning to face the Count of Blackwell County. "If I do this for the family, then you have to be better to Jocey. I know you've had in mind to betroth her to the son of one of the Guild Masters," she said pointedly.

"That's not the kind of partner that Jocey wants," Ashlynn said. "So, if I marry Owain Lothian, and I promise that I'll bear enough children to send back an heir for Blackwell County, then you have to give Jocey more freedom to choose her husband. Let her be courted by the young lords of the county to see if anyone can capture her heart and allow her to wed that man, even if he isn't outstanding."

"My little Ashlynn, look at you," Rhys said. A wide smile formed on his lips and pride twinkled in his eyes as he looked at his eldest daughter. In that moment, with her cheeks flushed from emotion and her pale blonde hair falling in loose waves around her face, she looked so much like her mother that it made his heart ache.

In the days since Ashlynn's coming-of-age celebration, she had grown into an almost perfect reflection of how Maela had looked when she first captured his heart. Sometimes, when he caught a glimpse of her strolling through one of the flower gardens or gazing out at the harbor from one of the manor's towers, he felt like he was looking back in time at the radiant beauty who had captivated not only the hearts of every young lord in Blackwell County, but the whole of Rowlands Duchy.

Standing side by side, Rhys felt like the Holy Lord of Light had blessed his family with incredible beauty. Though Maela's delicate features had softened slightly with age and faint crow's feet had begun to

appear at the corners of her eyes, if he were to present her as Ashlynn's older sister, few would argue against it.

The sight was enough to give his heart some comfort, despite the dangers that lay ahead. Maela had captured his heart through a combination of a keen mind and extraordinary beauty. Now that Owain would be facing that same intoxicating pairing, he had no doubt that Ashlynn would succeed in conquering the young lord's heart.

Jocelynn, on the other hand, had inherited his height and leaner build. At sixteen, she was already almost a handbreadth taller than Ashlynn, and the way young lords' eyes followed her when she moved through his court with unconscious grace reminded him uncomfortably of his own youth.

Most importantly, Ashlynn and Maela possessed the same gentle, yielding demeanor that drove men to fight for them and to protect them fiercely. Jocelynn, he thought, took after him a bit too much.

Not only was she intelligent, she was also driven in ways that Ashlynn wasn't, and he'd hoped to set her the challenge of taming the increasingly powerful merchants where her ambitions could reign unchecked. It seemed, however, that his eldest daughter had different things in mind to secure her sister's happiness.

"When did you become so outstanding?" Rhys asked his eldest daughter. "Look at you, seeking compromise and advancing demands of your own. Where did you learn such habits?"

"Watching you, Father," Ashlynn said with a light-hearted giggle that helped to dispel the somber atmosphere. "Don't tell Jocey I asked for this for her though," Ashlynn added. "I know she's been dropping hints for a while now. She wouldn't be happy if she thought it came from me, so the next time she brings it up, you can just give in to her, all right?"

"She really is learning from you," Maela said, reaching out to ruffle her daughter's pale blonde hair.

"Since she's willing, I'll accept an engagement and a period of courtship. But Ashlynn, if Owain isn't good to you, you have to speak up and tell me. I won't have you suffering in silence for the family. This is only one solution to the lack of an heir to your father's title. If it doesn't work out, we can find another."

"I know, Mother," Ashlynn said dutifully. "But I'll find a way to make this work. I promise."