

## The Vampire 59

Chapter 59 59: Confessor Eleanor

In the courtyard of Blackwell Manor, the squawks of gulls filled the air, their cries carrying over the rhythmic crash of waves against the distant seawall. A cool, salty breeze blew through the courtyard, rustling the banners that hung from the stone walls and carrying with it the pungent scent of fish from the nearby harbor.

Jocelynn Blackwell pulled her fur-trimmed cloak tighter, the soft fur tickling her cheeks as she fought against the chill. Beneath her feet, the cobblestones of the courtyard were slick with morning dew from the damp air, forcing her to tread carefully as she made her way to the waiting carriage.

The horses shifted restlessly, their hooves clapping against the stones and their tails twitching to chase away flies. Servants bustled about, their voices a low murmur beneath the screech of gulls as they secured trunks and crates to the waiting wagons.

In the distance, beyond the manor's high walls, she could hear the shouts of fishmongers and the clang of ship bells as the bustling port prepared for the busy day to come. Part of her wished she'd taken the opportunity to watch the sun rise over the water one last time before the journey ahead but there had been far too many last-minute preparations to make to allow her the luxury of those idle minutes.

Publicly, she was bringing supplies to her sister Ashlynn who had retired to the Summer Villa for the duration of her pregnancy. In order to maintain that illusion, the wagons contained not only much of Jocelynn's wardrobe but several things that Ashlynn had not brought with her when she moved to the Lothian March, including many of her favorite books from the Blackwell library.

Jocelynn had never understood why her sister was so enamored of the books in the library when Blackwell City brought them so many new and exciting wonders from across the sea. Now, looking at the

boxes being carefully loaded under the supervision of an aging family retainer, she blinked back tears at the realization that she likely never would.

She felt like she had made peace with the decision to tell Owain about her sister's mark but even she had never expected his response to be as swift and violent as it was. She'd thought that perhaps her sister would be imprisoned, the marriage annulled so she could step into the place her sister vacated but she'd never really contemplated that she would never see Ashlynn again.

Now, as box after box of treasured books were loaded onto a wagon, she wondered if she should fetch one to read on the long journey. Sending the books had been all her father, Rhys Blackwell, could do to prevent Ashlynn's former tutors from insisting on keeping her company during her supposed convalescence but that didn't mean that she couldn't 'borrow' one or two along the way.

Much like Owain and Bors Lothian, the staff being sent to accompany Jocelynn had been carefully chosen to include people who had little contact with Ashlynn herself. Fortunately, to conceal Ashlynn's mark of the witch, she'd been attended to by far fewer servants than had accompanied Jocelynn in her youth.

Rhys Blackwell, his once dark brown hair having turned mostly gray as he approached his fifties, stood beside his only remaining daughter, one hand resting on her shoulder while he let his cloak flutter in the breeze.

"This is your last chance to change your mind," he said, giving Jocelynn a firm squeeze. "There are other ways to secure our alliance with the Lothians. You don't have to marry Owain."

"But I want to father," she insisted, turning her jade green eyes to meet his gaze. She'd risked so much to make this moment possible, she wasn't about to back down now. "Mother was right. It should have been me in the first place. Now, I can salvage things for us."

"Your mother's notion was foolish and naive," Rhys countered. "Owain would never have consented to marry you as long as you weren't the eldest daughter. Concocting an excuse that Ashlynn was barren would never have been believed without the testimony of doctors that we could never allow to examine her."

"The only reason that you have this opportunity is because your sister died to secure it for you," he hissed. "Don't forget the kind of man you're marrying. He was ruthless enough to kill your sister at the first hint that she was a danger to his ambitions, don't think that he won't do the same to you if you cross him."

"Owain would never do that to me," Jocelynn insisted. "He didn't harm Ashlynn because she was a danger to his ambitions, he killed her because she was a vile witch who never should have been allowed to marry him in the first place," she said darkly.

Rhys opened his mouth to argue further, but the sudden sound of approaching hoofbeats cut him short. Both father and daughter turned towards the manor gates, their conversation momentarily forgotten.

"That must be the Church delegation," Rhys muttered, his brow furrowing. Despite the arrangements he'd made, it was never a comfortable thing to rely on the Church for aid, especially at a time like this. "Remember what we discussed, Jocelynn. Be cautious with your words."

Jocelynn nodded, smoothing her skirts and straightening her posture. As much as she wanted to continue defending Owain, she knew better than to do so in front of others. The approaching riders demanded their full attention now.

The clatter of horses and the jingle of mail armor grew louder. Servants and stablehands rushed to clear a path in the crowded courtyard. Moments later, four heavily armored knights wearing the white and gold tabards of the Templars of the Holy Lord of Light rode through the gates, escorting a woman dressed in the gold and red robes of the Inquisition.

Behind them, several additional men drove a pair of wagons loaded with supplies for the long journey to the Summer Villa.

"Confessor Eleanor," Rhys called, offering a polite bow while Jocelynn curtsied deeply beside him. "Thank you for agreeing to our request and accompanying my daughter on her journey."

"Light be upon you, Count Blackwell," the other woman said after dismounting from her horse. "The Church is always happy to extend its support to those who are truly pious. The Blackwells have long been friends of the Church, both on this side of the sea and in the old countries. How could we refuse your request?"

Rhys could only nod politely at the way the Confessor had phrased things. As a Count, he was limited in how many knights he could call up from the family's cadet branches and his subordinate Barons.

The six knights he'd gathered already represented a considerable force to dispatch to the Lothian's summer Villa but Rhys didn't trust his only remaining daughter in a place so close to demon territory without at least some divine aid from the Church to keep her safe.

Since that was the case, he'd made the difficult decision to share the truth with a distant cousin who had left the family to join the church in the hopes that she could bring additional support to accompany Jocelynn on this dangerous journey.

"Thank you, Confessor Eleanor," Jocelynn said, stepping forward to greet the older woman. "I'll feel much better knowing that I have you to watch over me."

The Confessor, seen up close, was an imposing woman with sharp features and coal-black hair. Her thin lips formed a polite smile but the smile never reached her dark eyes that seemed sharp enough to take in every detail of the courtyard and the people in it, as though nothing could escape her gaze.

"A Confessor isn't like an Inquisitor, my Lady," Eleanor said politely. "You can call me Sister Eleanor if it pleases you. I promise you have nothing to fear from me," she said, taking the young woman's hands in her own. "In fact, it would please me greatly if you could treat me like I'm just a big sister and not someone so distant from you."

"I, I wouldn't dare," Jocelynn said, taking her hands back nervously. "Sister Eleanor is very different from my big sister Ashlynn and your identity is too special. Father says I should never forget myself with a person of your stature."

"Is that so?" the confessor said, raising an eyebrow at Count Rhys Blackwell. "I suppose that's only right and proper. Come, we should spend our time getting to know each other," she said, turning toward the waiting carriage and entering it without waiting for Jocelynn to precede her.

"Remember," Rhys said, looking deeply into his daughter's eyes and holding her shoulders with both hands. "Though the Church sent many men, only Confessor Eleanor knows the truth. She is part of the shield you must carry to ensure that no suspicion ever falls on you that you practice witchcraft or consort with demons."

"I know, father," Jocelynn said, giving her father a reassuring smile. "In public, I must be twice as pious as anyone around me to deflect suspicion. You don't need to worry about me. I'll be careful."

Once the two women were alone in the carriage, Eleanor gave the young lady across from her a reassuring smile.

"I know that you've done a very brave thing," she said. "It must not have been easy exposing your sister's heresy to her husband. Men might speak of courage as though it can only be proven on the battlefield with a sword in your hand, but I know that it takes just as much courage for a woman to speak the truth into the ears of someone powerful enough to claim your life if your words displease them."

"Now," the confessor said, settling back in the carriage. "I know your elder sister was a very different kind of woman. Why don't you tell me about her? It's a very long trip and I would like to understand the kind of person she was better by the time we arrive in Lothian."

In truth, this was the real reason she'd agreed to accompany Jocelynn on this journey in the first place. Diarmuid's first report had already arrived in the Holy City and he'd shared his suspicions about whether or not Ashlynn Blackwell was truly a witch with his superiors at the Inquisition.

Now, it would be Eleanor's job to learn as much as she could from the woman who first told Owain Lothian that his wife was a witch. What proof did Jocelynn Blackwell have for her accusation and did she have some other motive for turning on her sister?

Eleanor didn't know, but over the next few months, she was just as determined as Diarmuid was to find out the truth.