

## The Vampire 141

### Chapter 141 141: A Sister's Memories

"Ashlynn isn't like me," Jocelynn said, looking out the window and fidgeting uncomfortably. She done the right thing, she was certain of it, but whenever Eleanor brought up Ashlynn it made her wonder if she should have done things differently. If she'd had the courage to speak up before the wedding, things could have been rearranged to allow her to marry Owain instead.

Now, everything had become so much more complicated. Eleanor had become one of the only people she could talk to who knew the truth of what had happened but somehow, the conversations about her sister never brought her any comfort.

"Ashlynn always looked forward to these trips because she didn't get out of the manor very often," Jocelynn said after spending a few minutes gathering her thoughts. "It didn't matter whether it was hot or cold, raining or sunny, any excuse to leave the house was something she looked forward to."

"Did she do anything interesting while she was away from home?" Eleanor asked gently. "Was there something she looked forward to more than anything else?"

"It's silly," Jocelynn said. "We're supposed to be refined ladies but my big sister always played in the dirt with plants. On her first trip to Lothian March, she brought back a whole wagon load of plants in pots, just to try to grow them in her garden at home."

"Her garden?" Eleanor asked, sitting up a little straighter. "She had her own?"

"Mother spoiled her at home," Jocelynn said, though her voice lacked any trace of bitterness or jealousy. "Mother always tried to make sure that we were both given things together. If I got a new dress for a ball that Ashlynn couldn't attend, then mother bought Ashlynn a new book for her library, or new stationery or whatever she liked."

"A garden all to yourself is different from getting a book instead of a dress," Eleanor pointed out. Each witch was unique but many of them drew power from natural things. More importantly, some of the most dangerous witches were adept with poisons and other foul concoctions which required rare ingredients. If she'd asked for a place to grow her own collection of deadly herbs, it would be another piece of evidence that she really had been a practicing witch.

"I asked my father for a horse of my own that year," Jocelynn said. "Mother said that since I would be able to tour the countryside as I wished to see its beauty, Ashlynn should have a place to bring the beauty of the countryside to her."

"When she came back from Lothian March, she brought a different kind of apple tree than the ones we have at home, but she never got it to bear any fruit. Some of the bushes wouldn't bloom, but Mother said it was already a miracle none of her plants died after the hard trip."

"Did she make things using the plants in her garden?" Eleanor asked directly.

"Just arrangements of flowers," Jocelynn said. "She gave them to Mother and I all spring and summer long. In the autumn, sometimes she had vegetables that she'd give to the cooks to turn into special dishes," she added, shaking her head. "Can you believe it? The daughter of a count, growing vegetables like a common farmer."

"Different people see the world in different ways," Eleanor said, leaning back on her seat in the swaying carriage and looking out the window herself. Once she got the full story out of Jocelynn it sounded less like witchcraft and more like... a desire for something simple and normal. Maybe the illusion of freedom.

It was clear from the stories Jocelynn told that her family all believed Ashlynn's mark of the witch to be genuine. They kept her isolated from the world much of the time, turning her into the ghost of Blackwell Manor.

When Eleanor talked to the servants accompanying them, many of them said they'd only rarely spoken with the eldest Blackwell girl. They had seen her sitting and observing Count Rhys Blackwell when he held court and she seemed to spend much of her time studiously in the library of the manor.

Many of the household staff thought that she had a frail constitution and a weak body, incapable of bearing the strain of large gatherings or long trips. Others said that she spent all of her time trying to find ways to assist her father since he had no sons to bear the burdens of the Blackwell name in the future. They felt that Owain was lucky to have married a woman who would be so helpful in leading Lothian March in the future.

The more she learned and the clearer her image of Ashlynn Blackwell became, the less certain Eleanor was that she'd done anything the church would have executed her for. There were no tales of strange events late at night, no stories of mysterious disappearances or misfortune seeming to haunt people who had offended the eldest Blackwell daughter.

It was the petty things that most frequently exposed young women who had begun to consort with demons or practice black magic. A girl who won the favor of a boy they both liked would find herself unable to speak or her hair would turn gray and fall out. A parent who was firm with discipline would suffer unexplainable falls or find themselves attacked by feral dogs when venturing out of the house.

Petty conflicts were a normal part of growing up, but when a child had access to dark powers that others couldn't defend against, they tended to make the mistake of using it without restraint. But Eleanor found no such stories when she listened to people speak about Ashlynn Blackwell.

Rather, the young lady seemed like the type of studious, filial daughter that would spark envy from a number of rivals, likely without understanding why anyone would envy her in the first place.

It was still much too soon to draw any conclusions, but the more she spoke with Jocelynn, the more she agreed with Diarmuid's assessments. There was something more going on here than a simple accusation of witchcraft, and it reminded her far more of secular scheming than demonic intervention.

As she continued to talk to Lady Jocelynn about her deceased sister, Eleanor paid just as much attention to the young woman's body language as she did to her words. Sometimes, she saw misty eyes that could be said to be swimming with grief. Most of the time, however, she saw anxious fidgeting, guilty eyes that wouldn't meet her own, and a voice that trembled with occasional fear.

Whether it was fear of being caught in a lie or fear that she might suffer the same fate as her sister, Eleanor couldn't say. All she could say was that the truth was buried in darkness, and she wouldn't rest until she'd brought it into the light.