

The Vampire 160

Chapter 160 160: Wild Conjecture

In a different room in the Summer Villa, Inquisitor Diarmuid sat with Confessor Eleanor and the newly titled Templar Tommin. Despite the august status of each of these people, no servants were allowed to attend them and the Confessor herself poured wine for both men before pouring a cup for herself.

"I didn't have a chance to say it during the ceremony," Eleanor said lightly as she poured. "But congratulations, Sir Tommin, on awakening the power of a Holy Light Blade. Not many who join the church so late in life are able to complete this step to become a Templar of Light in the service of the Holy Lord of Light."

"Sir Tommin's piety should be an inspiration to all young Templars," Diarmuid praised. The sword had been one of many weapons he requested from the Inquisition when Eleanor joined Lady Jocelynn on her journey to the frontier but even he had expected it to take some time for Owain's former personal guard to master the art of empowering a Holy Light Blade.

Diarmuid had two blades sent specifically to test the new Templar with. If Sir Tommin hadn't been able to master either of them, he would have remained an ordinary Templar within the Church. Such men were numerous and would be accorded the same privileges and treatment as secular knights both in life and on the field of battle.

Beyond the general order of Templars, however, existed the Order of Holy Light and the Order of Holy Flame. To ignite a Holy Flame Blade required a depth of zealotry and hatred toward demons and the enemy of the Church that few possessed. If a person's faith was lacking in desire to cleanse the world of heresy and evil, they would be unable to ignite the Holy Flame.

Sir Tommin possessed no such zeal. Instead, he possessed a deep devotion to the ideals of the Holy Lord of Light. A purity of faith that believed in the justice and mercy of the Church and its duty to protect the innocent from darkness defined the Order of Holy Light.

Most Templars trained and prayed for years, if not decades, before they achieved a purity of devotion or zeal that would allow them to wield the Church's greatest weapons, but Sir Tommin had succeeded at the first opportunity, placing him above any of the other templars who accompanied them on this journey.

"I don't think young Templars should learn from my example," Sir Tommin said with a complicated look on his face. The Tommin of a year ago would barely recognize the face of the man he saw reflected in his wine goblet.

Joining the Templars protected him from Lord Owain and Marquis Bors who might have decided at any time to kill him or threaten his family to secure his silence about Ashlynn Blackwell's murder. At the same time, Templars were allowed no family other than their brethren in the Church. Even though he hadn't left Lothian March, he hadn't seen his wife or son in the months since he approached Lord Loman to join the Templars.

Once, his life was balanced between three pillars; his service to Lord Owain, his dedication to his wife Rosie and his son Tonnis, and his personal faith. Now, he had lost two of his pillars and all he had left was his faith to sustain him. Perhaps for some men, lighting up one of the sacred swords was a joyous confirmation of their personal devotion but for Tommin, it was a cutting reminder of how much he'd been hollowed out by Owain's actions.

"Whether they should or not, I'm grateful to have you by my side on this hunt," Diarmuid said, placing a reassuring hand on the new Templar's shoulder. Clearly, the man was suffering for his faith but in Diarmuid's eyes that only made him more worthy of admiration. "Before we hunt, Eleanor, you've had a few weeks to spend with Lady Jocelynn, what is your opinion of her?"

"In many ways, she's typical for girls of her age and station," Eleanor said, leaning back in her chair and sipping on the fragrant red wine. "She is deeply concerned with her image and standing. It seems like she bears some resentment to her family over the arrangements under which she was trained."

"Oh? Did Count Blackwell have something in mind for his youngest daughter?" Diarmuid asked.

"The merchants and merchant guilds in Blackwell County are almost as powerful as Barons or well-established knights," Eleanor explained. "Count Rhys seems to have taken the approach of wedding one daughter to the nobility and the other to an important guild. Jocelynn actually has a very good head for commerce though she seems to look down on it."

"You think she revealed her sister's birthmark because she was jealous of her sister's betrothal? I didn't think the Blackwells could raise someone that petty," the Inquisitor said with a scowl on his face. "Did she ever provide any evidence for her sister's witchcraft?"

"None," the stern-looking Confessor said. "At most, she was known to keep a garden of exotic plants, mostly fruit trees and vegetables. Her parents kept her highly restricted in Blackwell manor. The impression I have is that her parents feared she might become a witch and worked very hard to keep her from developing any sort of power."

"Lady Ashlynn always seemed like a caged bird to me," Sir Tommin added. "Whenever I visited Blackwell County with Lord Owain while they were courting, she seemed just as excited to leave the manor and go sightseeing as she was to spend time with Lord Owain."

"What about relationships with other men?" Diarmuid asked suddenly. "When I examined Lady Ashlynn's body, I found that she may not have been chaste. Is it possible that there were other men in her life? Or, Sir Tommin, did you see Lord Owain take advantage of her before they were properly wed?"

"No, never," the Templar insisted. "Lady Ashlynn was very proper and she always had at least one other woman in the party with us whenever she was courting with Lord Owain. Often it was her sister or her mother, but at times it was a woman from one of the merchant guilds. I remember there was an older woman, a Master Isabell that Lady Ashlynn seemed to admire greatly."

"It's not impossible," Eleanor said, setting down her wine to meet Diarmuid's dark gaze. "Ashlynn had a number of private tutors. While many of them were distinguished masters in their forties and fifties, a few were younger men in their late twenties or early thirties, and Lady Jocelynn found a few of them to be handsome. For a noblewoman to have a dalliance with one of her tutors wouldn't be unheard of."

"I don't know," Diarmuid said. "But what if she was carrying another man's child? He doesn't strike me as someone who tolerates others coveting something he feels belongs to him."

"You're looking for motives other than witchcraft for the murder," Eleanor said, nodding at the other man's line of reasoning. Her impression of Owain Lothian was shallow but what she had seen from the men around him didn't incline her to look on him favorably.

"I can pry more deeply into what Jocelynn knows about her sister's associations with her tutors, guardsmen and all the rest," the Confessor said. "But we'll need more than just rumors and testimony if you want to pull down the heir to Lothian March."

"I've exhausted what I can learn in Lothian March," Diarmuid said, tipping back his goblet of wine to finish the first cup before pouring himself a second. "After this hunt in the forests, I intend to visit Blackwell County to follow up on any leads there. I doubt this accusation but if Lady Ashlynn was a witch, then it's possible that she was part of a dark pact or 'coven' in Blackwell County."

"You think Master Isabell may be involved in this? A senior witch advising a junior?" Sir Tommin asked.

"It's too soon to say," Diarmuid said. "People who consort with demons are often part of vast tapestries of evil. We're poking about blindly at the edges, looking for a loose thread that will allow us to unravel whatever dark conspiracy may be hiding beneath our noses. Until we find that thread, we can only keep searching and cleansing any lesser evils we find along the way."

"If Ashlynn Blackwell was innocent of witchcraft and was murdered unjustly," Diarmuid said heavily. "It will be very difficult to bring him to justice. Without proof of witchcraft or infidelity on the part of Lady Ashlynn, it will be hard for him to justify his actions. At that time, Sir Tommin, we'll be counting on you for your testimony. It would help matters if you're able to accumulate some achievements on this hunt."

"I know what you mean, Brother Diarmuid," Sir Tommin said, lowering his head. If he could bathe his blade in the blood of demons, any testimony he gave, whether it was related to matters of the Church or not, would be given greater weight by the lords of a court.

It was just that, while he was prepared to take up his blade to protect his people from demons, the idea of hunting them to accumulate merit seemed... dirtier than the ideals of his faith. The Inquisitor wasn't wrong to point it out.

The world worked the way it did. It was just that, hearing it spoken of so bluntly chipped away at the only pillar he had left. If even his faith collapsed, then what would he have left?