

The Vampire 211

Chapter 211 211: A Burning Question

"Of course, my Lord," Jocelynn said, snuggling close to Owain and pressing her head against his firm, muscular shoulder. "I put my trust in you for everything," she whispered.

This close to him, her heart thundered in her chest and her face flushed bright red. The warmth from his body seemed to radiate through his fine linen tunic, and the rich scent of woodsmoke still clung to his freshly washed skin, mixed with the subtle hints of cedar and musk from the expensive soaps he'd used.

This moment felt like a gift from the Holy Lord of Light, offering her everything she had ever wanted from life. Owain desired her deeply, she could feel it from the strength in his arm as he held her close, tensed like he couldn't allow her to escape.

Looking up at him from inches away, she fought down the desire to reach out to him with her soft, slightly parted lips. What would he taste like? What would the kiss be like? Gentle and tender like his eyes when he looked at her or fierce and possessive, asserting his claim to her the way his arm already had?

But one question held her back. One answer she still didn't have.

Confessor Eleanor had been circumspect with her questions during their journey from Blackwell County to the Summer Villa but it was impossible for someone as intelligent as Jocelynn to fail to notice a certain trend.

There were too many times when the Confessor asked questions about Ashlynn's habits, their time together, or her more unusual hobbies for Jocelynn to mistake the other woman's interest in her sister for idle curiosity. When she confronted the woman, she didn't even deny it.

The stone walls of her chamber had felt cold and unyielding that morning as Eleanor's questions seemed to chip away all of the confidence and justifications Jocelynn had painstakingly constructed around her heart in the days since her sister's death.

Even now, remembering the confessor's stern face and the firm grip of her bony hands whenever she offered a 'comforting' touch made Jocelynn's shoulders tense. The woman's voice had been soft, almost gentle, but each question had cut like a knife.

"There is no doubt that your sister possessed the mark of the witch," the Confessor said, accepting as fact something that very few people had witnessed. "Your decision to tell Lord Owain that his newlywed wife was a witch likely saved both his life and his soul. But if your sister was a witch, how did she use her powers? What evil might she have done? Who did she learn from?"

Each question landed on Jocelynn like a stone dropped from the top of a tower because she had no answers for them. She and her sister were different in many ways, they had been raised too differently to have great similarities, but she'd never seen her sister's actions as wicked or mysterious.

When had Ashlynn transformed from a loving elder sister, trapped in her family's manor, into a scheming and deadly witch that had to die for her crimes? Jocelynn couldn't say and her inability to answer Confessor Eleanor's questions ate away at the carefully constructed certainty in her heart that there had been no other fate her sister could have had.

"These are just a few of the many questions that I hope to discover answers to," Eleanor said, softening her tone when she realized that she'd successfully rattled the younger woman out of her complacency.

"Perhaps one of the most significant questions is whether or not your sister used her witchcraft on Lord Owain before he killed her."

"You think my sister tried to bewitch Lord Owain?" Jocelynn asked. Her first thought was that if Owain had been affected by a witch's curse then she needed to plead with the Church to treat him but... that only made sense if the witch was someone other than Ashlynn. What reason would Ashlynn have had to curse her husband on the night of their wedding?

"Lord Owain was decisive in killing your sister," Eleanor said. "But I've spoken to Sir Tommin about the scene when he arrived. He saw no signs of a great battle. But if your sister didn't attempt to use her witchcraft on him, why did he need to end her life? Why not simply hand her over to the Church and let us handle witches the way we know best?"

It was a question that Jocelynn herself had struggled to resolve. She told Owain about her sister because she couldn't bear the thought of the two coming together as one. She knew that her sister wasn't right for Owain and that she barely even had feelings for him.

It was a marriage arranged between Rhys Blackwell and Bors Lothian for the future of both families and Ashlynn had gone along with it but she had never loved Owain Lothian. Not the way that Jocelynn herself did.

She had believed then that as long as she could prevent the consummation of the marriage, there was a chance that things could still be made right. That she could step in and take her sister's place to secure the alliance and that her sister could go back to her private tower in the Blackwell manor, kept away from prying eyes who might discover her mark.

Now that she found herself held lovingly in Owain's arms, that one question stopped her from crossing the final distance between them and offering herself up to him. She said that she trusted him and she

wanted to mean it, but the only way she could really trust him with her everything would be to resolve this last, lingering doubt in her mind.

"My lord," she said, unable to hold herself back from asking now that she was this close. "My sister didn't, she didn't do anything to you the night that," she began, her voice trembling as she tried to phrase the question in the most delicate way possible. "If she used witchcraft on you, if she hurt you in any way..."

"As if I would give a witch the chance," Owain said fiercely. Then, as if realizing he'd made a mistake, his tone softened and he placed a finger under Jocelynn's chin, pulling her seafoam-green gaze up to meet his.

"Did she," Jocelynn started, her breath catching in her throat as she heard Owain's unhesitating answer. "Did she suffer?"

For a moment, a startled look flashed over Owain's face at the question. His eyes turned dark as he recalled Ashlynn's final moments. His fists fell on her again and again. Blood splattered the ground and the sound of her anguished cries blended with the sound of meaty impacts and cracking bones.

For what she'd nearly done to him, forcing him to bear the stain of marrying a witch, of course, she had to suffer. She lied to him. Even if she never used witchcraft against him, no amount of suffering could wipe away the damage done by her betrayal. But he could never say that to Jocelynn.

"Of course she didn't suffer," Owain lied, schooling his features into a gentle mask as he stroked Jocelynn's hair. "She may have been a witch, but for a few hours, she was my wife. I gave her a clean death. A single stroke of my sword. Swift, merciful. She was your sister after all," he said gently. "She deserved that much."