

# The Vampire 601

## Chapter 601: Room For Two (Part One)

When Nyrielle opened the heavy, iron-bound door to her bed chambers, she carried Ashlynn across the threshold as though she was carrying a newlywed bride, refusing to set her down until they'd reached the center of the opulent space.

On the far wall, a fire crackled merrily in the hearth, filling the air with the faint scent of cedar woodsmoke that accompanied a warmth that was rare this far beneath the ground. Previously, on the occasions that Ashlynn visited Nyrielle's bed chambers, the flames in the hearth had only burned long enough to take some of the chill from the air. A few hours of a burning fire could only do so much to push back the chill that seeped from the stones themselves after all.

Now, however, the entire chamber felt warm and inviting, as if the fire had been kept burning for several days until the stone walls of the chamber themselves were no longer cold to the touch.

The changes in the room went far beyond the simple hearth however. While Nyrielle's large, four poster bed still dominated the center of the room with its dark curtains and spills of delicate lace that trimmed the soft, satin bedspread, a new feature in the room immediately commanded Ashlynn's full attention.

"Nryi, you," Ashlynn whispered softly, unable to take her eyes from the sight of the wall that faced the foot of the bed.

"I painted it for you," Nyrielle said as she set Ashlynn down gently on her feet. "I did my best to capture every detail you showed me in your dream," she said. "I, I hope that you don't mind," she said quietly as she felt the echo of Ashlynn's heartbeat within her chest begin to race.

"Mind?" Ashlynn said numbly as she took two hesitant steps toward the painting before she even realized she'd moved. "How could I mind something like... something like this?"

After Nyrielle's conversation with Zedya about what she could do to make her bed chambers more welcoming for her lover, Nyrielle had gone far beyond looking for ways to add hints of life and growing things to her cold, dark chambers.

Her room already held one of her largest paintings of the ancient fortress and the city around it in the days of her youth, before the Lothians had put it to the torch. It also held one of Zedya's best tapestries depicting the Vale of Mists as her progeny saw it, a place of vast trees shrouded in layers of silvery fog that promised safety and refuge for everyone who had been burned by the greed and ambitions of human rulers.

Both pieces brought a trace of life and vibrancy to the dark chambers but neither of them would speak to Ashlynn in a way that would truly welcome her lover and make her feel at home. So, rather than adding another painting of the Vale or even one of the Briar where Ashlynn had spent so much time mastering her powers as a witch, Nyrielle had taken up her paintbrush to transform an entire wall of her bedchamber into a vision of a place that she had only visited in Ashlynn's dreams.

Gently swaying seagrass framed the bottom of the mural, faithfully recreating the look Nyrielle remembered from the edge of the cliff where she and Ashlynn had enjoyed a moonlit picnic beneath the stars. The sky she'd painted was light, with the faintest hint of peach coloring the bottoms of wispy clouds in the moments before the sun would rise above the waves in Blackwell Harbor.

As Ashlynn examined the mural in greater and greater detail, she realized that everything in the harbor had been recreated so perfectly that she could read the names of several familiar ships, captured in moments of stillness as they raised their sails to ride the morning tide.

The view of Blackwell City was just as detailed, with streets laid out exactly as they were in Ashlynn's memories, as if Nyrielle had possessed a perfect map to reference when bringing the city in Ashlynn's dream to life on the bed chamber wall. There were even tiny people moving about, opening shops after the previous night's celebration or collecting near the docks to begin the day's work.

"You even, even added this," Ashlynn whispered, falling to her knees before the mural as her fingers traced the well worn footpath that she and Jocelynn had taken when they snuck out of Blackwell Manor at night to watch the sun come up and the ships setting sail. And at the opposite end of the mural, seen in the distance as it reached the far wall, Blackwell Manor itself, perched in its stately position atop a ridge, overlooking the harbor below.

"I thought about adding our picnic blanket and the basket you filled with delicacies from the festival," Nyrielle said softly as she knelt next to her lover. "After all, this is the memory of your home that you chose to share with me," she said, wrapping her arms around Ashlynn in a tender embrace. "But I wanted to give this to you the way it always was, not just the way it was that one time..."

"It's perfect," Ashlynn said, leaning her head on Nyrielle's shoulder as her eyes continued to scan the mural, picking out one familiar feature after another. "But why? This must have taken you days... Did you start the day we returned?" Ashlynn asked, turning slightly to gaze into Nyrielle's shining, midnight blue eyes.

"Not quite," Nyrielle admitted. "It was after Zedya and Lennart's wedding when I realized that I was jealous of the two of them," she said slowly, choosing her words with care as she tried to find a way to express the emotions that felt so twisted together and tangled within her heart.

"I, I haven't allowed you to share a bed with me when the sun rises," Nyrielle explained, struggling to meet Ashlynn's limpid emerald eyes as she confessed what felt like a deep, personal failing. "You have been present when I seal myself away in a daybed while we're traveling, but you've never seen what truly happens to me, to any vampire, when the sun rises."

"But, talking to Zedya about how she falls asleep in Lennart's embrace, I realized that maybe, maybe it was wrong of me to send you away before the sun rose each day," Nyrielle said faintly. "So, I wanted to make this a place for both of us... one that you didn't have to flee before the break of dawn."

#### Chapter 602: Room For Two (Part Two)

"You did all this," Ashlynn said, gesturing at the expansive painting that was at least a dozen paces across and stretched all the way from the floor to the chamber's high ceiling. "Just so I would feel comfortable falling asleep here?"

"This much and more," Nyrielle said as she stood, pulling Ashlynn to her feet along with her. "Come, let me show you," she said, guiding Ashlynn first to the large four poster bed which seemed to have spawned twice as many plush feather pillows as it had before along with a dark set of nightstands carved from figured walnut.

"I cannot risk flames near my bed while I sleep," Nyrielle said, pointing to a strange looking lamp that held a piece of crystal, roughly the size of an apple, at the center where a candle or the wick of an oil lamp should be. "I know that most days, you won't sleep as long as I do, but with this for a focus..."

"I can use it the same way I used a crystal the night you started teaching me sorcery," Ashlynn said, reaching out and gently touching the crystal lamp as she remembered the feeling of Nyrielle's hands roaming over her flesh, helping her feel the power within her and guiding it to the surface for the very first time. It had also been the night they shared their first kiss, and the first time that Nyrielle fed on

Ashlynn, taking a small bit of her blood to show the young witch the potential of blending their power together.

"Wait, this is the same crystal from that night, isn't it?" Ashlynn said, remembering the way it had glowed a deep midnight blue when Nyrielle used her energy to illuminate the terrace and how Ashlynn's own energy had pulsed with a deep, emerald green. "You saved it for something like this?"

"I set it aside as a memento of the first... ah hem, the first time we kissed," Nyrielle said awkwardly, suddenly feeling too embarrassed to say that she'd preserved it as a keepsake that had helped her to lower the barriers that stood between them, letting them blend their powers for the first time and so much more that night.

"There's more for you to see," Nyrielle said, pulling gently on Ashlynn's hand to lead her away from the bed and into a corner of the room that held several heavy wardrobes. "The one on the left is yours," she said, pointing to an ornate piece that was clearly several decades newer than the other ones in the room. "I know you'll still spend some nights in your tower along with your coven, so I only prepared a single wardrobe for the items you choose to keep here. But, if you find it's not enough..."

"It's perfect," Ashlynn said, opening the wardrobe to find that it contained not only a few of her favorite simple dresses in browns and greens that were suited to the practical work of witchcraft, but also some of the most elaborate gowns and outfits that she'd worn for formal occasions in High Fen City.

"The jewelry boxes are mostly empty," Nyrielle mentioned as she opened a simple cedar box.

"Tomorrow night, when we announce our betrothal, I expect that you'll receive many gifts including jewelry. If I know the Heartwood Clan at all, they may also have prepared a few boxes for you and other wooden items, so I tried to keep this spare for now."

"Because you know that I'll have a long time with you to fill it up," Ashlynn said with a warm smile as the last of the ghosts that had been haunting her gaze finally fell away while she imagined the years she would spend with Nyrielle, acquiring tokens and keepsakes of their moments together until even a room as this wouldn't be able to hold all of their treasured mementos.

"I want to spoil you, my darling," Nyrielle said as she pulled Ashlynn into a close, loving embrace. "I want to fill your life with the moments of happiness and joy that were denied to you because of the mark on your hip and the power that you bear."

"But you still included a sword rack," Ashlynn noted as she looked at the fixture attached to the wall next to her wardrobe. "And a stand for my armor."

"We'll have to have another sword made for you," Nyrielle teased. "Since you broke your last one in the High Pass. But yes, I made sure that there would be a place here for your weapons," she said as she gently turned Ashlynn around, staring deep into her emerald eyes.

"You are the woman that I love more than anything in this world," Nyrielle said softly. "And at night, I will always fight to keep you safe, no matter what threatens you. But during the day, while I'm asleep, I'm at my most helpless. And here, there are no trees for you to draw on, no life to sustain your witchcraft. But, if danger ever finds us here..."

"Then I'll be able to fight to protect you," Ashlynn said, understanding the significance of Nyrielle preparing a space for her weapons and armor here even though Ashlynn would most likely keep both sword and armor in her chambers in the tower where they would be more convenient for her.

Nyrielle's room would then require a second set, but when she thought of standing as her lover's last line of defense should the very worst happen, she immediately decided to commission Artificer Erkembalt to prepare something specifically to keep in Nyrielle's chambers.

"I love you," Ashlynn said, caressing Nyrielle's pale cheek and drawing her forward into a brief, chaste kiss. "I love you in ways I don't have the words to explain, and I will never, never let anything hurt you while you sleep through the day," she promised solemnly.

"I know you won't," Nyrielle said, pressing her forehead against Ashlynn's and savoring the rich, earthy scent of ancient trees and evening mist that clung to her lover like sweet perfume. "And while you sleep with me, I'll safeguard your dreams," Nyrielle promised. "Until the nightmares leave you alone, I'll carry you away at the break of dawn into the very best memories that I can share, or you can show me your most treasured moments."

"When the dawn comes," Nyrielle whispered. "We can be together. And when you stand watch over my body, I will stand watch over your dreams."

"I'd like that," Ashlynn answered softly, running her slender fingers through Nyrielle's long, raven locks and relishing in the feel of her love's lithe body pressed against hers. "But why all this," Ashlynn said,

pulling back and gesturing at all of the subtle and not-so-subtle changes that Nyrielle had made in order to welcome Ashlynn into her bedchambers on a more regular basis. "Why all this just to have me stay until you fall asleep at dawn?"

"You've been hesitant to have me close to you when the sun rises," Ashlynn said gently. "So what is it that happens to you when the sun rises that you haven't wanted me to see?"

Holding Ashlynn close, clinging to the warmth of her body as if the room had suddenly become colder than the High Pass, Nyrielle took several breaths before she was able to answer Ashlynn's question. And when she finally did, her voice trembled, as if she was afraid of how her lover would react to what she had to say.

"I told you before, my darling," Nyrielle said slowly. "A vampire balances on the edge of the knife between life and death. We are neither truly living nor completely dead but caught in between. But in the light of day, we're pressed off the edge of that knife, into the darkness of the abyss beyond..."

"Each night, a vampire's body dies," Nyrielle said softly. "We become little different from a corpse..."

#### Chapter 603: First Dawn Together

"What do you mean?" Ashlynn asked slowly as she held Nyrielle's hands tightly. "What do you mean that your body dies?"

"You can feel my heartbeat slowing when the sun rises each day," Nyrielle said, choosing the safest place to start from, hoping to ease Ashlynn into what would happen to her when dawn came. "More than just slow, a vampire's heartbeat during the day is so weak that it can barely be heard by normal ears, even with your head pressed to our chest."

"Our breathing stills as well," Nyrielle continued. Her hands grew restless as she spoke, and her thumbs began to make slow, gentle circles over Ashlynn's fingers as she continued to speak. "You won't notice a vampire's chest rising or falling, and because our bodies have grown cold, even a mirror placed before our lips and nose wouldn't show a hint of fog."

"Marcel taught me sorcery once," Ashlynn said, looking deeply into Nyrielle's eyes and seeing clouds of doubt and worry there, unlike any she had seen in her lover's eyes before. "He called the technique

'Death's Deception.' It slows my heart and breathing until I resemble the dead. Is it, is it the same as that?"

"I know the spell you speak of," Nyrielle said. "What happens to vampires is... similar. Close enough that you understand, but what we experience goes further." Gently, Nyrielle guided Ashlynn's hands to her soft cheeks before pulling away and looking at Ashlynn's hands in hers.

Nyrielle's flesh had always been pale, having never once known the caress of the sun's rays since the day she was born. Her life had been one of eternal darkness that left her even more ghostly pale than her progeny, as if she'd been carved from the purest marble.

Ashlynn's skin, on the other hand, though she was pale by human standards after spending much of her life hidden away indoors, was a delicate shade of light peach that carried the warmth and hue of both life and youth. Her skin was smooth and supple, without the slightest sign of wrinkles or the drying of age. Only a few calluses from years spent gardening and her recent lessons in swordwork marred the soft perfection of her tender flesh.

"Life is like water," Nyrielle said without taking her eyes off of their hands. "Right now, I seem just as soft and full of life as you are, but when the sun rises, I will wrap what life my body contains around my soul to keep the abyss at bay until the sun sets. There won't be enough left to sustain the soft skin you touch so freely. When the sun rises, there will be little of me left but skin and bones," she said softly.

"Ah," Ashlynn said softly as the final piece of the puzzle fell into place and she realized once again that Nyrielle had the same concerns as many young women in love. Growing up, she'd heard that some young ladies were so worried of their husbands seeing them without their faces painted that they would rise before dawn, having their servants tend to their hair and makeup before their husbands even woke.

What Nyrielle was facing wasn't as trivial as being seen without her face paint, but the root of it was at the same point. For Nyrielle, when the sun rose, she would lose more than just the essence of life that gave her softness and beauty, she would also lose the strength that allowed her to stand tall as Ashlynn's protector. She would become weak and vulnerable, barely able to perceive the world around her, and little trace of the woman she had been for Ashlynn all these months would remain.

"I don't know what it will feel like," Ashlynn said slowly as she reached up to place a hand under Nyrielle's chin, lifting her lover's gaze back up to meet hers. "To watch you wither away and 'die' when the dawn comes. It might frighten me the first time I see it," she admitted.

She could say that she wouldn't mind, that nothing would bother her, but the truth was that it might be as deeply unsettling as Nyrielle feared it would be for her. So instead of giving her lover empty platitudes, she gave her the purest truth she could.

"But the first time I see it won't be the last time I see it," Ashlynn said, cupping Nyrielle's face and gently wiping away the faintly pink tear that had begun to form in the corner of her lover's eye. "I will stay with you tonight, and tomorrow night, and many, many nights after that. Because the person I love is in here," she said, resting her hand over Nyrielle's thundering heart.

"And if you need to wrap every bit of life you have around your soul to resist the abyss when the sun rises," Ashlynn said. "Then you can wrap me around you as well, and I'll fight alongside you. Just like I promised under the Ancient Oak the night we met. I'm here with you, for as long as we both live."

"I don't deserve you," Nyrielle said softly, biting her lower lip as she stared at Ashlynn with shining eyes. "Humans have called me a monster for more than a hundred years and... I've been a monster in more ways than one," she said softly. "Yet when I tell you about the monster I'll become when the sun rises, the withered husk who is unable to die, you tell me that you love me still and you will not leave my side."

"We both have monsters within us," Ashlynn said as she fought off intrusive thoughts of what she intended to do with Owain Lothian when she finally got her hands on him to focus on the woman in front of her. "But I know the real you. The shy, nervous you who is afraid to reveal her vulnerable self to the woman she loves. The tender, sentimental you who kept the crystal from the first lesson you gave me on sorcery, just so I could use it as a lamp when I spend the day with you..."

"I know you," Ashlynn said, wrapping her arms around Nyrielle and drawing her close enough to press their foreheads together. "And I know I have much, much more to learn about you. So don't ever worry that there is some hidden part of you that I cannot accept," she said softly. "Because even if there is a part of you that shocks or frightens me, I will learn to love that part too."

"I was supposed to be the one comforting you, my darling," Nyrielle said softly. "I brought you here to protect you from your nightmares. So how is it that you are the one comforting me?"

"Because you understand me, my love," Ashlynn said, running her slender fingers through Nyrielle's silky, raven hair. "You know that I didn't need your strength, wrapped in a suit of armor and wielding a



sword to fight my nightmares. I needed your softness, your openness, and your vulnerability so we could face the dark together."

"I don't need a champion who never falters or fails," Ashlynn said, brushing her lips against the softness of Nyrielle's. "I need a partner who struggles together with me. Who gives me a chance to be strong for you, even when you're being strong for me. And you do that for me in ways no one else in this world can," Ashlynn said as she crossed the final hairsbreadth of distance between them, kissing Nyrielle deeply and passionately until her heart raced and she felt breathless.

"There are still hours before dawn breaks," Nyrielle said with a mischievous gleam in her eyes as Ashlynn caught her breath. "How would my darling Ashlynn like to spend the time?"

"With nothing between us," Ashlynn said as her hands began to roam over the soft, satiny fabric of Nyrielle's dress in search of the laces that kept her corset in place. "From now until dawn breaks," she said in a voice that grew thick with desire. "And even when dawn comes and you sweep me into a dream that's safe from nightmares, I want nothing to come between us... now, or ever."

#### Chapter 604: The Engineer and the Confessor

In the early hours of the morning, while the Vale of Mists prepared to celebrate the betrothal of Lady Nyrielle with a day of games for children and contests for adults before the grand banquet that would begin with the setting sun, very different preparations were underway in Lothian Manor.

Walking through hallways that bustled with servants even at this early hour, Isabell fought the urge to pluck the folded slip of parchment from her breast pocket to read it yet again before she arrived at her destination. The message had been perfectly clear, leaving little room for doubt about who had sent it and the purpose of their message.

~In two night's time, join me for dinner at the Broken Blade Tavern in the village of Maeril. Reunions are joyous and conversations may run long, be sure to pack accordingly.~

Marcel, the mysterious Black Merchant who seemed to know things that no boy his age should know, had promised her and Master Tiernan both that he would arrange a meeting with Lady Ashlynn if they could secure the rights to settle lands near the mouth of the Vale of Mists.

After days of traveling with Owain Lothian, touring not only Hanrahan Barony but the territory claimed by the Dunns as well, Isabell had yet to secure a promise to allow her to settle the lands that she and Master Tiernan had selected.

In fact, when she'd suggested that they camp in the wilderness for a day or two if needed to allow her and Tiernan to inspect the lands as they passed through them on their way to Dunn Barony, Owain Lothian had reacted as though she'd suggested camping in a bear's den while wearing a suit of raw meat. He not only flatly refused her request, he berated the coachment to drive their horses faster when they drew close to the Vale of Mists.

Now that they had returned, however, Owain seemed to be strangely reluctant to bring her request to his father. Day after day, he sent excuses for denying her meeting, citing the Marquis's workload, preparations to receive visiting barons from the east, and even his father's health in order to delay the meeting.

Now, it seemed like even Mister Marcel was tired of waiting for a resolution to the issue. Isabell had no doubt that a man as well informed as he seemed to be had a number of men in the manor in his employ, doubtlessly feeding him whatever gossip or news they could gather. When she received the note, lying folded on her nightstand and seemingly placed there while she was washing after dinner, her suspicions were all but confirmed.

Packing would be easy. Even though she traveled with multiple trunks on the long trip from Blackwell County, she had learned long ago how to live out of the single chest allowed to an officer among soldiers, and she could make do with even less if she was required to. But while packing could wait until the last minute, her business of the morning could wait no longer.

"Please announce my arrival," Isabell told the bored-looking serving girl sitting outside Lady Jocelynn's chambers. "Her ladyship is expecting me for tea and pastries this morning."

"Yes, yer ladyship," the young serving girl said, hopping up from her chair and dropping into a deep curtsy before rushing into Lady Jocelynn's room to deliver the message. She hadn't even hesitated long enough for Isabell to explain that she was just a commoner herself before she'd vanished from sight. A moment later, the door opened again as the servant dashed down the hall, no doubt having received fresh instructions, while a woman dressed in white and crimson robes appeared in the doorway to greet Isabell.

"My lady Jocelynn has been looking forward to your visit, Master Isabell," the dark-haired confessor said warmly, though her dark eyes seemed to hold none of the warmth her voice did. "She's waiting for you on the balcony."

"Thank you, Confessor Eleanor," Isabell said, carefully keeping her tone even as she addressed Lady Jocelynn's chaperone. During the time that she traveled with Jocelynn and Owain, she'd the severe looking Confessor intervene between Jocelynn and Owain more than once, clearly deflecting Owain's inappropriate overtures which led Isabell to tentatively consider the other woman a potential ally.

Still, it was difficult to tell how much of Eleanor's protectiveness came from a sense of religious doctrine about propriety and how much of it came from a genuine desire to watch over her young charge, leaving Isabell uncertain where the Confessor's ultimate allegiance lay.

"Will you be joining us for breakfast, Confessor?" Isabell asked politely as she entered Jocelynn's luxuriously appointed sitting room. From the gilded furniture to the elegant paintings and rich tapestries hanging on the walls, it was clear that the Lothians spared no expense in treating Jocelynn like an honored guest. To Isabell's eyes, however, it was perhaps the most gilded cage she'd ever seen.

"Since Master Isabell has come to visit without Master Tiernan, my presence is hardly required," Eleanor said smoothly. "I've already sent Epina to inform the kitchens that I'll be taking my meal in the halls below. Before I retire," Eleanor added as her dark eyes flicked in the direction of the balcony. "Can I ask you for a small favor?"

"You can always ask," Isabell responded, lowering her voice and slowing her pace as the women crossed the room. "A good merchant entertains every proposition, no matter how preposterous, and judges it only on its merits."

"You may not have heard," Eleanor began slowly, coming to a complete stop next to the crackling hearth in the room. "But Lady Jocelynn and I can be considered cousins, even if the relationship is somewhat distant."

"I thought that noblemen renounced their household when they entered the Church," Isabell said, raising an eyebrow at the Confessor, who wore a strangely conflicted look on her face. "Even if there are blood ties between you, surely those were forgotten long ago when you donned the robes of a Confessor."

"No one can sever all earthly ties, Master Isabell," Eleanor said with a slight shake of her head. "Too many of us are called to return to our families when misfortune strikes. One misfortune has already struck the Blackwell family in Lothian March. I fear that another may devour Lady Jocelynn, no matter what advice I give."

"Lord Owain," Isabell said, not bothering to mince her words now that the Confessor had said as much as she had. "That man's eyes divide the world into tools he can use and people he must conquer. He seems to look at women with the very same gaze," she said. "Are you worried that he intends to use Lady Jocelynn as one of his tools?"

"Worse," Eleanor said with a heavy sigh. "I'm afraid that he sees her as a woman he must conquer."

Instantly, the warm air from the fireplace felt several times hotter, as if Isabell had stepped directly in front of one of Master Tiernan's smelting forges rather than a simple hearth. Behind her silver-rimmed spectacles, Master Isabell's eyes tracked rapidly around the room, looking for any sign that Lady Jocelynn was close enough to hear them or that anyone else was in the room with her.

While her eyes searched the room for hidden observers, Isabell's mind worked with lightning speed as she tried to understand just how much the other woman knew about the truth. Taken on its own, the statement that Owain Lothian wanted to conquer Ashlynn's younger sister was all but a condemnation that he intended to commit adultery or worse.

But if Eleanor knew that the 'Ashlynn Blackwell' in the Summer Villa was an impostor, and if she believed that Owain was moving onto the next Blackwell sister, then the simple chaperone must know some of the deepest secrets that swirled around the Lothian and Blackwell families in the March. In which case, the question of whether she was an ally or not became even more important to resolve.

"I'm sure the Church has strong opinions on the notion of a married man 'conquering' his sister-in-law," Isabell said carefully.

"In this case, the Church has no opinion at all," Eleanor said lightly. "And by extension, as a Confessor, I have no opinion on the matter either. But, as someone who once carried the Blackwell name, and as a woman who has heard the confessions of countless young women who have been led astray by charming men in positions of wealth and power..." she said, allowing her voice to trail off suggestively.

"Well," Eleanor said lightly as she straightened her shoulders, as if she were standing up under a heavy burden. "You can imagine that such a woman would have many worries about her charge that she isn't permitted to express. And perhaps you can also imagine why such a woman would seek out the aid of someone whom her young charge has come to admire for her tales of bravery in battle and love that defied a king's wishes."

"You want me to deliver a warning to Lady Jocelynn?" Isabell asked. "Can you tell me what I'm supposed to be warning her against?"

"I've said more than I should already," the Confessor said, raising the crimson cowl of her robes to cover her head and giving Isabell a long, searching look before she turned toward the door. "But I believe that Master Isabell must have already seen the truth of Lord Owain's character. Perhaps you've even learned things about him during his stay in Blackwell City," she suggested.

"The truth is one of the most powerful weapons the faithful can wield against evil, Master Isabell," the Confessor said as she crossed the room. "I just hope that you can open Lady Jocelynn's eyes to a few truths today."

With that, and without giving Isabell a chance to respond, Eleanor slipped out of the sitting room, closing the door quietly behind her and leaving Isabell alone to find her way to the balcony where Jocelynn waited for her company.

"Lady Jocelynn," Isabell said softly under her breath. "Just how much trouble are you in that even a Confessor is powerless to intervene?"

#### Chapter 605: Greatest Swordsman Of An Age (Part One)

Isabell stood before the hearth in Jocelynn's sitting room, breathing deeply of the combination of woodsmoke and sweet perfume that filled the room and calming herself as she prepared to face the young lady that Lady Ashlynn had asked her to protect. Confessor Eleanor's warning had shaken her, but as Isabell thought back over the other woman's careful words she realized that it changed little about what she had come here to do.

It was clear that Lady Jocelynn was in danger and the protection the Church was prepared to extend was much more limited than Isabell had imagined but she never intended to rely on the Church to keep Jocelynn safe in the first place.

For a moment, she considered asking Jocelynn to join her on her journey to meet with Lady Ashlynn. She was certain that both of the Blackwell sisters would be delighted by a chance to reunite, no matter what the circumstances were. But Lord Owain only rarely let Lady Jocelynn out of his sight and even when she was, he still assigned the guards that protected her and the servants who tended to her needs.

Isabell might be able to get Jocelynn out of Lothian Manor by requesting her company to tour the city, but she would never get her out of Lothian City without an entourage of knights and soldiers who were certain to be Lady Ashlynn's enemies. Since that was the case, the best she could do was to give Lady Jocelynn a warning before learning what Lady Ashlynn's intentions were.

With a deep breath to steady herself, Isabell strode across the sitting room, passing through a small, private dining room before walking out onto the balcony where Lady Jocelynn sat at a small table overlooking a courtyard below.

Despite the early hour, Jocelynn was dressed in a fine gown of fitted cerulean blue silk that clung to her slender frame and emphasized her modest bust. Spills of white lace made her look like a siren of the sea with waves cresting over the gentle swell of her hips and accentuating her trim waist. The ensemble combined with Jocelynn's fair complexion and golden blonde hair to create a vision of a perfect maiden, waiting atop the balcony for the arrival of a handsome knight or heroic champion.

Perhaps the only thing that marred the look was the necklace of sea glass and shells that would have been more appropriate gracing the neck of a commoner in Blackwell City than accenting the plunging neckline of a refined lady's dress. Isabell had considered asking about the oddity on more than one occasion but in the end decided it was best brought up in private.

If the necklace had been a keepsake from a friend beneath her station in Blackwell City then it likely wasn't something Lady Jocelynn would want to discuss with someone who understood the meaning of the necklace.

By contrast, Isabell's simple black tunic and skirt looked so plain as to render her nearly invisible with nothing to suggest that she was any more important than the young serving girl who had informed Confessor Eleanor of her arrival. The trappings of wealth and power had long since lost significance to Isabell, and she was far less bothered by the difference in her attire than she was by the way Lady Jocelynn seemed to be displaying herself to the people in the courtyard below.

"Lady Jocelynn," Isabell said, offering a shallow curtsy to the young lady. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"No, come, come," the young lady said, gesturing animatedly for Isabell to join her at the small table on the balcony. A steaming pot of tea sat ignored in the center of the table along with several artfully arranged pastries that looked equally untouched, though Isabell doubted it was because Jocelynn had been waiting for her arrival to begin her breakfast.

"Lord Owain has just finished warming up," Jocelynn said, returning her gaze to the courtyard below them where Owain stood surrounded by several other men holding wooden training weapons.

Owain himself held a polished oak longsword in a relaxed, two handed grip as he waited for the other men to get into position. Despite the chill of the autumn air and the faint drizzle that left everything in the courtyard damp, the young lord had stripped to the waist, revealing a sculpted, muscular physique that would doubtless cause many young ladies to swoon.

Droplets of water beaded on his skin like glistening jewels giving him a presence that seemed as if he'd been anointed by the Holy Lord of Light in a world of darkness and sin and the six guardsman surrounding him looked unworthy of facing him with their reliance on heavily padded armor and superior numbers.

Even the more refined figures of Sir Rian Aleese and Sir Hugo Hanrahan standing nearby looked mundane and ordinary as they leaned against a wall under the eaves, watching the spectacle about to begin.

Sir Hugo looked particularly pathetic as he held a handkerchief to his nose, clearly suffering from the cold and damp while Sir Rian looked almost bored as he made small stretching motions, preparing for his own turn practicing with Lord Owain.

"Do you watch Lord Owain's training often?" Isabell asked as she took her seat across from Lady Jocelynn. Though she wasn't yet a knight, she followed the etiquette of the nobility as she took the tea pot and began by pouring a cup for Jocelynn before pouring for herself.

"Every chance that I get," Jocelynn said, taking a polite sip of tea without taking her eyes off the spectacle below. "But you must have seen things like countless times in the Emerald Kingdom," she

gushed. "I've never seen real battles up close the way you have, so I'm eager to hear what you think of Lord Owain's training."

In the courtyard, two of the six men facing Owain carried long polearms with a padded edge to stand in for the blade of a halberd while two others carried longswords similar to Owain's. The final pair of men carried shields on one arm and padded clubs in their hands, doubtless emulating a footman's mace. Before they took up their fighting positions, each man dipped the padding of his weapon in a different color of paint, making their weapons look strangely vibrant on this dreary day.

"Lord Owain doesn't want his training partners to hold back because of his position," Jocelynn explained excitedly as the men began to move, pressuring Owain from all sides. "He awards an extra silvery penny to any man who can mark him with their color, and another extra penny to every man if the group can defeat him. That's why Sir Hanrahan is here," she added, pointing to the hawk-nosed Steward. "So he can pay out a bonus as soon as it's earned."

Looking at the scene below, Isabell had to admit that it left quite the impression on her, and she imagined it left an equally strong impression on Lady Jocelynn, though one of an entirely different nature. The greatest duelists that Isabell had ever seen fighting in the court of the Emerald King had practiced against two or perhaps three opponents, and they'd done so wearing thickly woven protective doublets while wielding blunted weapons meant to flex and snap before they could impale another man.

By contrast, Owain stood against six men and though the weapons they wielded were made of wood rather than steel, a solid oak practice sword was more than capable of cracking skulls and breaking hands if the wielders didn't pull their strikes in time. Yet Owain, standing naked to the waist in the rain, seemed to feel as if he held every advantage as he surveyed the men arrayed against him.

"Begin!" Owain shouted, taking up a fighting stance and smiling as though he were a wolf gazing upon a flock of fat sheep.

#### Chapter 606: Greatest Swordsman Of An Age (Part Two)

"A silver penny for striking him, and another one if the group can bring him down. That does sound like powerful motivation," Isabell agreed as she watched the skirmish begin to unfold. Owain wasted no time trying to defend himself against the greater number of men, going instantly on the offensive instead by charging one of the men with the polearms.



Compared to the soldier facing him, Owain wasn't only stronger, he was much faster and the wooden sword in his hand swung in a series of lightning fast strikes that battered the soldier's armored hands, forcing him backwards and weakening his grip on the weapon enough for Owain to use one hand to capture the weapon while the other hand drove the point of his blade against the other man's throat.

"I yield! I yield!" the soldier cried, going limp in Owain's grip, but the young lord was far from done with his defeated victim. Spinning around the helpless soldier, Owain used the captured man like a shield, fending off attacks from the other man with the polearm and one of the other swordsmen. Slender lines of paint soon covered the soldier's padded armor before Owain shoved him at the swordsman while charging the other man wielding a polearm.

"See the way he moves?" Jocelynn said with a wistful sigh as she watched Owain working methodically to defeat the men attacking him. "He never lets more than two people approach him, he always moves so they get in each other's way," she pointed out, repeating the words Owain had used when he explained his method of fighting to her after the first time she watched him practice.

In the courtyard, Owain was moving smoothly between his opponents, lashing out with vicious strikes to arms and legs, inflicting enough pain to stagger his opponent before he danced to the next, defending himself and striking again without becoming mired in a one on one duel at the expense of his ability to disengage and face a new opponent.

"Lord Owain says that demons try to surround knights so they can pull them down in massed attacks," Jocelynn continued as she gazed at Owain's heroic figure with starstruck eyes. "So he trains himself against groups that work to pull him down. The men are also instructed to keep fighting no matter how many times they are struck unless they deliver something that is clearly a killing blow, because demons won't stop no matter how many wounds they suffer."

"It sounds like Lord Owain takes fighting against demons very seriously," Isabell said in a carefully neutral tone. Seeing him in action, she had no doubt that he took his practice seriously, perhaps more seriously than anything else he did. Though, given the rumors she'd heard from the brothels in Blackwell City during his visit, she suspected that he had at least one thing he pursued just as passionately as he seemed to pursue swordsmanship.

By now, in addition to the man who had yielded at the point of Owain's blade, two other men lay limply in the puddles on the cold cobblestones of the courtyard. One of them sprawled awkwardly where he fell with eyes that were glazed over from the force of the blow he'd taken to the head. Another clutched his ribs, crawling slowly across the courtyard in a way that suggested he'd suffered broken bones from Owain's ruthless sword strike.

"I've spoken to other knights who have trained with him," Jocelynn said with eyes that seemed unable to see the suffering of Owain's 'training partners.' "And I've talked to the Templars who watched him fight against the demons before he left to visit Blackwell County. Everyone who's crossed swords with him agrees," she said with a growing smile.

"Lord Owain may be the greatest swordsman of his generation," Jocelynn said, gazing at the battle below as though she could see the future unfolding before her eyes. "Not just the greatest in Lothian March, but perhaps the greatest in the whole of the kingdom. That's why he's certain to be the one who finally topples the demon lords and transforms Lothian March into a proper Duchy," she added. "Because Lord Owain is a hero without equal."

"He's certainly a man who seems born to fight demons," Isabell said, wincing as she heard the sounds of bones crunching when Owain's training sword fell on a swordsman's forearm, knocking the blade from his opponent's hand and following up with a thrust to the chest that knocked the man to the ground where he writhed in pain, clutching his forearm.

It was impossible to say for certain without taking the man to a healer, but from where Isabell sat, it seemed like the soldier's arm was broken. If he were taken to a priest quickly, he might recover with minimal lingering effects, but unless Lord Owain was willing to pay for the use of the Church's holy magic to treat the wound, it was possible that the man would never hold a sword again.

"It must be convenient that Lord Owain's brother is a priest," Isabell said more lightly than she felt. "Not everyone has the luxury of training to the extent that they injure their partners. But with Lord Loman available to heal his soldiers, he doesn't need to restrain himself as much."

"But, Lord Loman has nothing to do with Lord Owain's training," Jocelynn said, looking awkwardly at the injured man clutching his arm. "Lord Owain believes that pain teaches the best lessons and that every knight who has risen to greatness has learned through countless painful lessons. If a man is injured in practice, then the injury is his lesson to do better next time."

"So his men are commanded to fight until they are too injured to continue," Isabell said darkly. "But if they are injured, it's somehow their fault for getting hurt? Perhaps Lord Owain's true calling is to teach demons the meaning of cruelty," Isabell said with a snort. "But whether that makes him a hero or not is another matter entirely."

## Chapter 607: Tearing Away The Veil (Part One)

"Cruelty?" Jocelynn said, blinking in surprise as she turned away from the courtyard for the first time since Isabell had arrived to truly look at the other woman. In her hand, her teacup clattered lightly against the saucer on the table as she set it down. "Do you really, really see him that way?" she asked hesitantly.

After hearing how Isabell had fought in a brutal civil war for the right to bring her husband away from the court of the Emerald King, Jocelynn had hoped that Isabell would understand Owain better than anyone else. After all, Isabell had fought in just as many battles or perhaps even more battles than Owain had, and she still chose a life of love with the man who won her heart with poetry. If Isabell could do that, then... couldn't Owain do the same?

"Cruel, ruthless and ambitious," Isabell said without sugar coating her words in the slightest. If she was going to make sure Jocelynn understood the danger she was in, Isabell couldn't afford to leave any grey areas or doubts in the young woman's mind.

"He reminds me of the men in the Emerald King's court who thought he should follow his victory with a campaign of expansion," the engineer continued. "They wanted to turn on a vulnerable neighbor and resolve a centuries old dispute over a border with the might of the army the king assembled to win the civil war."

"Surely Owain is different," Jocelynn said. After all, those men were fighting their neighbors while Owain was fighting demons. Even though he was still fighting to expand his lands, he was also fighting a just and holy cause instead of one motivated solely by ambition and greed. That had to make him different.

"Did those men fight in the war themselves?" Jocelynn asked. "Or were they like the knights in Father's court who dream of a chance to win glory in the next crusade without ever having fought in a battle before? Owain is like this because he throws himself into battle against the demons every year," she said in a voice that grew steadier with each word. "That's very different from most men."

"No one came through that war unscathed," Isabell said sadly after sipping her tea. "I don't call Owain cruel because he's an extraordinary fighter who can slaughter many demons," Isabell said. "I call him cruel because, even in training, he fights his own men the way he fights demons," she said, pointing at the men who were helping each other to limp away from the courtyard after Owain's beating.

"I call him cruel because when I've looked into his eyes," Isabell said, recalling all the times she'd faced Owain across the negotiating table in Blackwell City and ever since then. "I see a man who sleeps too well for someone who brutalizes his men this much. I've known other men who slept peacefully after battles where hundreds or thousands of men lost their lives... I call them cruel as well."

"And you?" Jocelynn asked hesitantly. "Did you sleep well after battles?"

"Not once," Isabell said, picking up a rich, buttery pastry topped with chopped nuts and nibbling on it slowly. "It wasn't until we'd been fighting for months that I could get through a battle without emptying my stomach. The nightmares that followed," she said softly as her gray eyes grew clouded. "Those lasted for years, even after I returned home. If Casquas hadn't been there for me... I might never have known a peaceful night's sleep again."

"Were you ever afraid," Jocelynn said slowly, her voice dropping to barely above a whisper. Her eyes darted toward the door as though checking if anyone might be listening. Her fingers methodically shredded the pastry into smaller and smaller pieces, growing slightly sticky with bits of sweet cream and flakes of pastry.

Her movements were increasingly awkward, seeming like she'd forgotten about the pastry in her hands and she didn't appear to have any intention of eating the bite-sized morsels she'd torn off. Instead, she slowly leaned forward, hunching her shoulders protectively inward, and when she continued, her words came in short, halting bursts.

"Were you ever afraid that the men who fought beside you, the ones you called cruel," she said quietly. "Did you ever worry that they would turn on you? Maybe not intentionally," she added quickly. "But, accidentally. Because, because they spend so much time fighting," she rambled. "Did you ever worry that they might lash out at you... even, even if they didn't mean to?"

A faint tremor ran through her body as she glanced toward the courtyard where Owain was still training. The common soldiers had all retreated from the courtyard, perhaps to tend to their wounds, and now Owain was belting on a suit of light armor, looking handsome and larger than life as he prepared to face off against Sir Rian who had donned a similar suit of armor for fighting with blunted steel swords.

Nervously, Jocelynn fidgeted with the necklace of shells and frosted sea glass around her neck that Owain had given her after his return from Blackwell City. She hated the necklace, hated how cheap and common it looked but she'd reminded herself again and again that Owain had needed to conserve his

traveling funds when he bought it, or he surely would have given her one made of pearls and fine jewels the way tradition said he should.

Here in Lothian City, none of the other ladies knew the tradition that the necklace represented and shells of any sort were exotic so she avoided too much embarrassment wearing it publicly, but the real reason she wore the necklace...

"If, if you did the wrong thing or said the wrong thing, did those men ever..." She swallowed hard, her throat visibly constricting as if the loose necklace running through her fingers had suddenly become as tight as a noose. "Did they ever frighten you?"

"My lady," Isabell said as her stoic expression crumpled, replaced by a brow furrowed deeply in a very motherly look of concern. Standing from her seat, she took Jocelynn's hands in her own and pulled her away from the balcony, drawing her back into the small private dining room and only letting go of Jocelynn's hands long enough to close the door before guiding her to the small table in the dining room.

"My lady," Isabell said, reaching out to lift Jocelynn's chin when the young woman seemed reluctant to meet her gaze. "Has Lord Owain done anything to you? Has he hurt you in any way?"

"What? No, no he hasn't," Jocelynn said, snatching her hands back and shaking her head fiercely. "He, he hasn't ever," she started to say only for her voice to trail off part way through her sentence. "He's never struck me," she said slowly. "It's just that there are times when, when something provokes his anger and, and he can be a bit... frightening when that happens. But he would never..." she tried to say, only to stop again without finishing the sentence.

After all, after what he'd done to her sister, could she really say that he would never hurt her?

#### Chapter 608: Tearing Away the Veil (Part Two)

Jocelynn wanted to tell Isabell that Owain would never harm her. She wanted to protest that she trusted Owain as much as she trusted her own father, but... She'd thought that he wouldn't harm Ashlynn either. She'd thought that telling him about her mark would be enough for Owain to call things off. She'd never thought that he would confront her sister directly, much less that he would murder her sister for being a witch.

Ever since then, she'd carried a small doubt in her mind that, one day, he might do the same to her. That was part of why she'd worked so hard to please him, to help him gather the allies he needed and the accomplishments his father demanded so that he could keep his position as heir to the Lothian throne.

She'd worked hard to please him in other ways, capturing his eye and holding his attention, even teasing his body far more than a proper young noblewoman should. Her face heated in a combination of embarrassment and deep shame as she thought of all the times she'd sat in his lap, feeling his manhood rising under her skirts while she gave Owain the very best plans she'd been able to form in her constant efforts to secure their future.

Most of the time, she was able to believe that he cared for her. That he was coming to treasure her, maybe even more than he could have ever treasured Ashlynn. But Confessor Eleanor had often reminded her that the time she'd spent with Lord Owain was only now catching up to the amount of time that Ashlynn had spent with him over the course of two years of infrequent visits while the Lothian lord had formally courted the Blackwell heiress.

"You know," Isabell said softly, pulling Jocelynn out of her spiraling thoughts. "Before Owain arrived in Blackwell City, I received a letter from your sister."

"What?!?" Jocelynn said, startled enough that she jumped up from her chair, knocking it over and nearly tripping over her skirts in the process. "When? How?" she asked, gripping the edge of the table for balance like it was the only source of stability in a world that pitched beneath her feet like a ship at sea.

"She must have sent it shortly after she arrived in Lothian March," Isabell lied, bending the truth ever so slightly. She knew that the letter had been sent after she escaped from Owain Lothian but if she revealed that, she would have to reveal too much more, and she wasn't certain how much Jocelynn knew about Owain's attempt to murder her sister. "She told me, and these are her words exactly, 'my husband-to-be isn't to be trusted around women, and neither are his knights.'"

"After that," Isabell added, choosing her words with great care. Confessor Eleanor asked her to share the truth, but some truths felt too dangerous to share carelessly, no matter how much she wanted to wrap the distraught young lady in her arms and give her the love that a caring mother should. "She said that she expected that I would encounter Lord Owain sooner or later, and when I did, she asked that I watch over you. Your sister loves you very much, you know."

"A letter?" Jocelynn said, her voice suddenly tight. She straightened her shoulders, a flash of defensiveness crossing her face. "Ash would have told me if she really had concerns. She, she shared everything with me."

Her fingers trembled as she smoothed her skirts, clinging to this image of her older sister like a lifeline. The older sister who taught her how to sneak out of Blackwell Manor, who showed her where the cooks stashed extra pastries and other treats that they could take for snacks on their adventures. The older sister who had shared everything with her, no matter how silly her younger sister's questions were. That sister wouldn't have held back fears about Owain... not when her wedding to the Lothian Lord was so important to their entire family. Would she?

"Perhaps you misunderstood her meaning, or..." Jocelynn started to say but the words died on her lips as the inescapable truth pressed down on her. Of course, Isabell hadn't misunderstood. If her sister was the smartest person she'd ever known, then Master Isabell was surely the second. The two had shared so many moments discussing Ashlynn's ever-growing collection of books or the things that Master Isabell had learned at the universities across the sea that it was impossible that the engineer would misunderstand her sister's meaning.

And if what Master Isabell said was true then... then...

Jocelynn's face drained of color, leaving her lips bloodless and pale. A cold sweat broke out across her forehead as her breathing became shallow and quick. The room seemed to tilt around her, and a rushing sound filled her ears, drowning out everything but Isabell's words echoing in her mind.

-THUMP-

Jocelynn's knees buckled, slamming into the ground as she collapsed under the weight of Isabell's words. Her sister had tried to send a warning? No, not a warning, or at least not one that was meant to reach Jocelynn's ears. Ashlynn had meant to arrange protection for her in Blackwell City during Owian's visit and... and perhaps after that as well. And she'd done it because...

A soft sob escaped Jocelynn's lips as she realized why Ashlynn would send such a warning. Her sister was always perceptive. She'd spent hours watching their father hold court and even though she was rarely allowed to speak during the proceedings, she'd seen every sort of person who came before the Count with grievances. She'd seen men who had been wronged, men who told lies with smiles on their faces... and men who had committed horrific crimes and unspeakable acts of violence over things as petty as the loss of a prized bull or the favor of a maiden.

Ashlynn knew people better than someone as homebound as her should, so when it came to Owain, Ashlynn had surely noticed his pride... and his temper. Even though their time together was limited to a few extended visits, they'd also exchanged countless letters for two whole years. Ashlynn must have had plenty of time to come to an understanding of Owain's strengths... and his flaws.

"She knew," Jocelynn said softly as Isabell knelt beside her, taking the young lady in her arms without regard for the difference in their stations. "She knew how dangerous it was to marry him and she, she did it anyway. Sweet Lord of Light, she knew," Jocelynn sobbed. "But she never said anything to me.... Or to Mother and Father. She knew..."

"Your sister has always wanted to find ways to help your family," Isabell said gently as she stroked the young woman's back. "She told me once that she never expected to marry anyone, but that she would happily marry Lord Owain and move so far away from the sea because it was a way that she could finally give back to the family that had given her so much."

"I think your sister felt deeply burdened by something," Isabell said, thinking of the way Ashlynn would occasionally grow quiet during their conversations. At the time, Isabell had believed the rumors that Ashlynn had a frail constitution and that the things she couldn't do stemmed from an inability to exert herself, but over the years, that explanation had made less and less sense to her engineer's mind.

"I think Lady Ashlynn felt guilty for needing your family to do so much to care for her," Isabell said carefully. "So she was willing to do anything to repay that feeling. Especially if it meant that you didn't have to take up a burden in her place."

"She did, she did. All that," Jocelynn said through powerful sobs that shook her body. "She, she asked you. Asked you to protect. Me. And I. I... It's my fault," she said, raising her head to look at Isabell with seafoam eyes that overflowed with tears. "It's. It's all my fault."

"Hush now," Isabell said, gathering Jocelynn into her arms. "Anything that happened, it is the fault of the people who did it," she said softly. "You don't need to carry the blame for things you didn't do."

"No, no, you don't understand," Jocelynn insisted, staring at Isabell with red, puffy eyes and tear-stained cheeks. "It's my fault. I'm the one who told Owain about Ash's mark. I'm the one who told him that she was a witch!"



## Chapter 609: Jocelynn's Confession (Part One)

"You, you told Lord Owain that your sister is a witch?" Isabell said, staring at Jocelynn in open mouthed shock.

Marcel had told her when they first met that someone had told Owain about a mark on Ashlynn's body that resembled the mark of a witch. He'd said that the mark was the reason why Lord Owain beat Ashlynn to death and ordered his knights to bury her body at the edge of the Vale of Mists. But Marcel never told her who had given the information to Lord Owain... perhaps the famed Black Merchant hadn't even ferreted out this secret.

"I, I didn't, I didn't think," Jocelynn sobbed. "I didn't think that they should be, should be together," she said as she drew a shuddering breath between great, body shaking sobs. Tears spilled from her eyes and her hands clenched at her skirts with enough force to tear loose a spill of delicate white lace from the cerulean blue silk.

"I swear, I didn't know, didn't know what he would do," she choked out. "I didn't realize how much, how much he hated demons or, or how v-violent he could be," she added, unconsciously spilling out every reason why the tragedy that followed might not be, or at least wasn't entirely her fault.

"What did he do?" Isabell said in a voice that was much softer and gentler than she wanted to be at the moment. She'd taught herself for years to be an open ear for her children, to listen to their entire story before she handed down any judgments or punishments and to give them a safe embrace that would welcome the truth so they never had a reason to lie to her.

Now, as she looked at the sobbing noblewoman, Isabell struggled to reconcile her habits and instincts as a mother with children very near to Jocelynn in age with her loyalty to the woman who Jocelynn had betrayed. While there was a good amount of mercantile self interest in her decision to pursue knighthood in Lothian March and to travel all this way, her loyalty to the Blackwells who had done so much for her and to her friend Lady Ashlynn had accounted for at least half of her motivation in coming so far.

The part of her who had spent months worrying anxiously about Lady Jocelynn's safety and fretting about Lady Ashlynn's fate wanted nothing more than to slap the sobbing young girl in her arms, or to shake her violently and berate her for what she'd done, but instead, she clamped down on those feelings and did her best to treat Jocelynn like the young woman she was... one who had made a horrible, perhaps unforgivable mistake and who was clearly still coming to terms with it.

"He, he killed her," Jocelynn said, staring at the floor with blurry vision as she couldn't bear to look at Master Isabell. The weight of what she'd done crushed down on her more than it ever had before and the knowledge that Ashlynn had tried to arrange a protector for her, someone to protect her from Owain, dragged her down like an anchor chain around her neck.

"He said he did it with a single stroke of his sword," she said as the sobs subsided to be replaced by a growing feeling of having been hollowed out. "But I, I don't think that's true," she said quietly. She wanted to believe. Months ago, when he told her in the Summer Villa that he'd ended things quickly, she'd believed every word, but she'd seen more of the Owain beneath the dazzling smile since then and he was never merciful to people who he felt had wronged him.

"He wouldn't return Ash's body to my family, even for a secret burial," Jocelynn said. "He said that he commanded his knights to dismember her and burn the pieces, scattering the ashes to the wind to ensure that she couldn't rise again, but I wonder if he said that because he'd already, already..." Jocelynn's voice cut off as another bout of sobs burst from her chest, shaking her body as she imagined what Owain must really have done to her sister.

She'd watched him just moments ago as he used a wooden sword to hack at the men he told to play the role of demons attacking him. His sword was merciless, falling again and again and again until bones cracked and the men couldn't stand, and this was only 'practice.' How would he have treated her sister then, if he truly hated her for hiding her mark from him? If he really believed that she was a witch, would he have been any less thorough?

"You said you didn't think that they should be together," Isabell said gently, redirecting Jocelynn's thoughts away from what had happened to Ashlynn in the hopes that she could better understand what led to all of this. "Is it because you thought your sister's mark would be discovered eventually? Were you trying to say something to protect her by revealing the mark before the wedding ended?"

"No," Jocelynn said bitterly. "I, I know that Ashlynn didn't love him. She, she said that, that he wasn't a bad man," Jocelynn said between ragged breaths. "She said that he was a man who many would desire and she, she felt that they could come to care for each other in time. She hoped that, even if he didn't, didn't love her, he could love, love their children," she said as she recalled the way Ashlynn had spoken of Owain in the last winter before her wedding.

"And that bothered you?" Isabell prompted gently.

"I hated it!" Jocelynn spat. "I, I adored Owain. He was so much more handsome and capable and charming than the," she started to say only to stop sharply. This time, it wasn't a sob that held her tongue but the realization that she'd been about to confess to hating her father's notion of marrying the son of one of the Guild Masters.

"Than the... What?" Isabell prodded gently. Of course, she wasn't oblivious to Rhys Blackwell's intentions for his youngest daughter. As an honorary member of the Linemen, the current count had aligned himself with the fishermen who were a vital component of the county's economy but he'd also distanced himself from the Wayfinders and the Carters in the process.

Marrying his younger daughter into one of those guilds would have gone a long way to solidifying his relationship with the other influential powers of the County and he'd dropped a number of hints about it over the years, though that seemed to have stopped when Owain Lothian began courting Lady Ashlynn.

"It's not important," Jocelynn said, shaking her head. "There were other men that Father thought might suit me, but... I only had eyes for Owain."

In truth, she had felt that the Guild Masters, as wealthy and powerful as they were, were still far beneath her station and she didn't want to consider 'marrying down' just to improve her family's standings with the powerful merchants or to give a merchant family a path into the aristocracy. Now, however, it was one of those very Guild Masters who felt like her only safe harbor in the storm she found herself in.

But... could Isabell really do anything to help her now that things had gone so far? Or was it all too

#### Chapter 610: Jocelynn's Confession (Part Two)

"I love Owain," Jocelynn said after taking a deep breath. It was a statement that she could only make to a few people, but now that she said it out loud, she realized that it was still true. Owain frightened her, maybe more than she realized, but when she thought about him, she couldn't imagine anyone she had ever known who was as handsome, courageous, or strong and capable as Lord Owain Lothian.

Next to him, every other young lord or knight she'd met felt somehow lacking. From the first time she'd seen him, she knew that he was the greatest man she would likely ever meet, and even before her coming of age celebration last year, she'd felt like no other man would make her heart flutter the way he did.

"I match up with him much better than Ash did," Jocelynn said slowly. "I, I wanted to be married to him, and she was only marrying him because mother and father needed her to. Because they don't have a son to inherit, and Owain said that their second son could return to Blackwell to become the next Count."

In her mind, it would have been the perfect thing for her to take Ashlynn's place. She'd even begged her father to change the engagement early on, but Rhys Blackwell insisted that it would be impossible for the heir to the Lothian Throne to accept the youngest daughter of a Count rather than the eldest. It might have been different if her father had been one of the five Dukes of the Kingdom of Gaal but for a Count, it was already the opportunity of a lifetime to see their daughter marrying up to a future Marquis.

"So you wanted to take your sister's place," Isabell said, struggling to keep her voice free of reproach or recrimination as she listened to the young lady. "That's why you told Owain that she was a witch? What did you think would happen?"

"I didn't think it would be like, like this," Jocelynn said. "I thought that it would be like it was at home. Ash's mark is why she was never allowed out of the house other than on special occasions. She didn't even have maidservants, so no one would see her while she was dressing or bathing. She just kept to herself..."

"Because she was afraid of what would happen if someone ever saw her mark," Isabell pointed out, no longer able to hold her tongue. For years, she'd wondered why Ashlynn had seemed like a prisoner in her own home and why she'd go through so much effort to sneak out, or why she was so eager to talk with visitors like the Master Engineer in charge of remodeling part of the manor. Now, Isabell finally understood the constant danger that Lady Ashlynn had lived in and the terrible risk she'd taken to marry Owain Lothian for her family's sake.

"Your family went to such lengths to help conceal her mark and I'm certain that your mother would have helped your sister prepare to conceal it even while consummating her marriage with Lord Owain," Isabell said in a tone that was as firm as steel even while it was wrapped in a mother's gentle care.

"But you decided that none of that mattered," she pointed out, leaving Jocelynn no room to retreat from the truth. "You decided that it would be better if Lord Owain knew the truth, not because it would be better for Lady Ashlynn if you were the one to marry Lord Owain, but because it would be better for

you. Anything else you say is just a convenient fantasy you've painted for yourself to justify giving in to your jealousy and infatuation with Lord Owain."

"You're a smart young woman, Lady Jocelynn. If you had looked at things with a critical eye instead of eyes clouded by self-interest, you would have known how things would end when you gave up your sister's secret," the engineer said.

Isabell's words fell on Jocelynn's mind like spears hurled by a ballista, precisely targeted and crushingly powerful. She tore away at the polite lies, the half truths and the hopeful wishes masquerading as carefully considered predictions, leaving Jocelynn with nothing but the cold reality of her actions and the motives that had driven them.

Her father hadn't been this blunt with her, perhaps because he hoped his younger daughter could salvage their alliance from the disaster of Ashlynn's death or perhaps because he had always doted on his younger daughter, as if he was making up for all the things he couldn't do with Ashlynn because of her secret.

Her mother hadn't been this direct either. Instead, the Blackwell Countess had retreated from life with her husband and returned to her visit with her parents and siblings, as if she could no longer bear to live in the place that was haunted by reminders of the daughter that had been snatched away from her by her husband's alliance-making and, if Jocelynn was honest with herself, by her youngest daughter's jealousy.

"No wonder mother couldn't bear to stay home," Jocelynn said softly. "I condemned my own sister to die," she said bitterly. "And now that I have her place and I'm about to marry the man I sacrificed her for... I'm scared he'll do the same to me."

Just the other night, when she'd mentioned that Owain's father, Bors, seemed to be calling in the eastern barons and arranging for Loman to receive them, Owain had flown into a rage. He shouted that his father wasn't honoring their agreement and that he'd soon learn what would happen to men who tried to take away things that belonged to him by right. He'd included her in the things that 'belonged to him' saying that he would sooner see her dead than 'languishing in Loman's arms.'

Increasingly, it felt like Bors Lothian's patience with Owain was growing thin, and more and more of his attention was turning to his pious younger son. It should have been a test that drew Jocelynn and Owain closer together as they met their struggle against a fate that wanted to tear them apart. But when she

tried to bring new plans or ideas to Owain, he only told her 'not to worry her pretty little head' because 'he had made arrangements' that would put an end to discussions of Loman inheriting 'once and for all.'

"Maybe, maybe that's what I deserve," she said as her shoulders slumped in defeat. "After what I did to take her place... I deserve to follow after her. Maybe," she said as her seafoam eyes grew dull. Perhaps there really was no hope for happiness in all of this, and her best chance of a happily ever after had died along with her sister. Maybe none of them were meant to find the kind of happiness and lasting love that Isabell had found when she met her husband in the court of the Emerald King.

"Maybe it would be best to just end it now. Thank you, Master Isabell," Jocelynn said, drawing herself upright and gently clasping the engineer's left hand firmly for a moment before letting go as she regathered a portion of her noble bearing. She'd thrown away so much of her dignity recently to retain Owain's favor, but in the end, perhaps she could recover a measure of it with one final act. "I know what I need to do now."

-SMACK-

The sound of the back of Isabell's hand striking Jocelynn's face echoed through the small dining room like a clap of thunder, momentarily startling both women before Isabell narrowed her eyes at the young lady and spoke her mind.

"That's enough of that," Isabell said sharply. "I think you've more than proven that you're not ready yet to 'know what you need to do.' If I had the power to do it, I would pack you up right now and take you back to Blackwell City so your father could set you straight, but since I can't do that," Isabell said, taking a deep breath.

"You're going to tell me everything that's been going on between you and Lord Owain these past few months," Isabell commanded sternly. "All of the plots and the secrets you've kept buried in your heart, you're going to lay it all out for me. And then," she said, holding up a finger before a stunned Jocelynn's eyes. "Then we will discuss what you will do next."

"Have I made myself clear?" Isabell asked, giving the young noblewoman a piercing stare that would accept only one answer.