

## The Vampire 16

### Chapter 16 16: Witness

While Ashlyn's night in the vale came to a close with the rising of the sun, in the City of Lothian, early morning bells rang at the temple of the Holy Lord of Light.

Grand spires, one oriented in each cardinal direction, rose high into the sky like sentinels guarding the central spire of the grand temple. Gold covered the top of each spire, shining in the early morning light as though the Holy Lord of Light himself had reached out to touch the temple.

Originally built to secure an alliance between the Lothian family and the Church, the temple was more than just a place of worship and prayer. Occupying the highest hill in Lothian City, the temple complex was large enough to serve as a fortress if needed, and the outer walls that ringed the temple had been built with that need in mind.

When it was originally built, the Church claimed that the temple would serve as a last bastion of hope should the city's defenses fail against the demons. To the Lothians, however, it represented a powerful warning. Should the Lothians ever make an enemy of the Church, that enemy would possess a fortress and army within their own city walls.

This morning, in the bailey within the walls of the temple, one hundred soldiers in gleaming coats of mail formed neat ranks on either side of the roadway leading to the temple. When the massive iron clad gates opened, all hundred men knelt, bowing their heads low.

It could have been a welcoming honor guard for the Marquis or at least one of the Barons of the march, but at this temple, at dawn each day, the soldiers assembled to welcome a different sort of guest.

Entering through the gates, dozens of the poorest and most destitute citizens of the City of Lothian shuffled onto the temple's hallowed grounds. Some of them were old pensioners, soldiers from previous wars against the demons who had fallen on hard times.

Others were travelers who had come from outlying villages just to visit the temple in the morning. Many of them hadn't washed in days if not weeks and most of them moved with difficulty, whether from old wounds or recent illness.

At the head of the soldiers, a tall handsome man wearing white and gold robes stood to receive the city's needy. The man's dark hair was cut short and neatly, eschewing the longer styles preferred by the nobility, and his brown eyes radiated a gentle warmth as he surveyed the approaching commoners.

"Please, everyone, be welcome before the light of dawn and may the blessings of the Holy Lord of Light shine upon you," the man said, holding a gleaming golden staff up high to catch the early morning light and reflect it on the commoners.

"Praise to the Holy Lord of Light and Lord Loman," several people in the crowd said.

"Please, I have forsaken my worldly titles. Here, I'm just Brother Loman. Come," he said warmly, gesturing to the shuffling group of people. "Gentlemen may follow me, women may follow Sister Elsbeth by the gates," he explained, gesturing at a young girl in plain white robes who beckoned to the women in the group.

"We have warm water for washing, hot food and medicine if anyone is sick," the young woman called. "Please, don't be shy, all are welcome who seek the aid of the Holy Lord of Light."

"Ya see?" One man said, tugging on the travel stained clothes of a companion from the outlying villages. "Ah tol ya, twas worth rising before da sun. Hot meal an a wash is what ya need."

His companion attempted to speak, perhaps to agree or thank the other man, but broke off in a series of ragged, retching coughs before managing to croak out the word "medicine."

"Yes," Loman said, taking the coughing man by the shoulders and helping him to walk. "We have medicine for the wet cough, and for the pains it brings. First a wash and then the healers will tend to you."

The ritual seemed familiar to several of the people in the crowd but some still marveled as they were brought away to be fed, washed and prayed over by the Church.

In truth, the practice was still new to the temple. Loman Lothian had made a number of suggestions over the years, and the High Priest had quickly come to value the results of listening to Loman's ideas.

The morning act of charity could be easily understood as a means to curry favor with the common folk if one was cynical, or it could be seen as a righteous duty if one was pious. To Loman, however, the morning ritual was about much, much more than tending to the poor.

Tending to the poor, after all, didn't require a hundred soldiers to present themselves as though receiving a dignitary every morning. Loman had explained that the soldiers were there for two reasons. First, to remind the holy guard that they served all people. They bowed their heads to the poor to remain humble.

Second, he wished to display the strength of the guard to the common people. When demons attacked, he wanted the people to believe that the Church was mighty enough to protect them.

His reasons didn't stop there, but just those things were enough to convince the High Priest to open the Church's coffers and spend both time and money every day to tend to the poor, and that was the most important part to Loman.

Near the end of the morning session, one man wearing a stained hooded cloak and an old, battered uniform from the Marquis' army lingered, beckoning for Loman's attention.

"Soldier, can I help you?" Loman asked when he reached the man.

"My Lord is looking well," the soldier said, briefly pulling back his hood to reveal a face much younger and in better health than Loman had expected to see. "My Lord, will you hear my confession?"

"Sir Tommin? Why are you here," Loman whispered, placing an arm around the other man and guiding him to a smaller room within the temple itself. "And why have you come in disguise? The Holy Lord of Light asks us all to come openly into the light with truth in our hearts. This isn't right," he said, his dark brows lowering as he frowned at his brother's protector.

"Lord Loman," the knight said, throwing back his hood before kneeling at Loman's feet and bowing his head. "It is because the truth has been hidden that I had to come see you. Your brother accused his wife of witchcraft and murdered her on their wedding night. He commanded me to dispose of her body."

"No," Loman whispered, dropping to his knees and grabbing the knight by the shoulders to look directly into his eyes as if hoping to see deception reflected there. "Say that again. You must tell me everything that happened."

Tommin kept his story brief. He hadn't seen Owain beat his wife to death, he'd only arrived after the deed was done. He also explained the struggle they had in burning her body during the storm and that he'd considered going back to complete the deed but lacked the freedom to do so.

"I told his lordship that we should report the matter to the High Priest but he refused. He said there would be an inquisition. My Lord, I am not a perfect man," the knight said, lowering his head to the floor. "But I try to be a good man before the Holy Lord of Light. Please, tell me, what must I do?"

Loman's mind worked furiously as he looked at the knight bowing before him. Tommin was approaching forty and had been Owain's personal guard for almost twenty years. Never once in all those years had he taken action against the man he'd sworn to defend even at the cost of his life.

Now, however, the poor knight was torn between his duty to Owain and the Lothians and his faith and duty to the Holy Lord of Light. Loman couldn't imagine the torment in the poor man's heart in the days that had passed since the wedding. From his haggard look and weary eyes, clearly Tommin hadn't rested comfortably since he returned from disposing of Ashlynn Blackwell's body.

"I understand why you came to me," Loman finally said, resting a hand on the man's lowered head before helping him to stand. "Of everyone you could tell, I'm the only one who is both a man of the church and a Lothian. You're hoping that I can find a way to help you serve both aren't you?"

"I'm ashamed to admit it but I'm afraid, My Lord," the knight said. "Your father knows what happened. He's keeping everything quiet. They've dressed a young girl up to resemble the Blackwell woman to hide that the, the..."

"Murder," Loman said. "She wasn't tried or convicted of witchcraft. Only the Church can do that. If my brother did as you claimed and killed her in their bed chambers, then he committed murder."

"A man may only take life on the fields of battle or honor, or in the defense of his life and family," Loman recited from the Church's scriptures. "My brother should have brought her here for a trial."

"Not just murder," Tommin said, his voice trembling. "Magnicide by the son of a Marquis. He killed a noblewoman. Even if he's pardoned for it, he must be tried and he cannot be tried by his own father. But, if I speak out against him..."

"I understand," Loman said, lowering his head. "I wish I could say that you have nothing to fear, my father is a just man. But he is also a practical man with all the failings that men who rule come to possess. I cannot promise that he would not kill a witness to protect my brother," he admitted, even though it pained him greatly.

"I need to make arrangements," Loman said after thinking for a few moments. "Protecting you will not be easy. Come and see me again in two weeks. And Sir Tommin," Loman said. "Write down everything you remember about where you buried Lady Blackwell while the details are fresh in your mind."

"Without a body to prove my brother's crime," he said sternly. "You won't be able to petition the king for justice."