

## The Vampire 213

### Chapter 213 213: Holy Festival of Light

Three days after Owain's hunting party returned to the Summer Villa, Diarmuid made his way through the bustling grounds of the fortress-like temple at the heart of Lothian City with a determined stride.

All around him, everyone from common acolytes to particularly devout lay people worked energetically at a variety of tasks from the construction of stages to scrubbing the stonework of the fortress walls, everyone went about their work with a sense of joy and reverence.

Soon, the Summer Solstice would arrive and with it, the Holy Festival of Lights would begin a week-long holiday filled with a combination of festive revels and pious observances. Many initiates who wished to enter the Church formally waited for this special holiday to take their oaths and begin their new life of service to the Holy Lord of Light.

Loman Lothian was no different than his brothers and sisters of the cloth. As the man who championed doing more outreach from the Church to the common folks, he had been given responsibility for overseeing the wide array of events that would be open to the public.

"Your festival is much livelier here than it is in the Holy City," Diarmuid commented when he finally found the younger Lothian lord. Surprisingly, when he found Loman, the young priest was kneeling in the grass with a group of children, explaining how to tell the difference between weeds that must be pulled from the gardens and young spring flowers that had yet to bloom.

"Remember," Loman said patiently. "Weeds are like wicked thoughts that come from demons who would twist our hearts. They may resemble pretty flowers if allowed to bloom, but they will choke out the other flowers that have been planted to honor the Holy Lord of Light."

"You must carefully pull out the weeds, just as you pull out angry or hateful thoughts from your heart," he explained. "When you're done, all that remains will be a healthy and beautiful garden. It's a small struggle, to clear the weeds from the garden and to pull the hurtful thoughts from your heart, but I know that each of you can meet your struggle, can't you?"

"Yes, Brother Loman!" the children cried with eager smiles on their faces.

"Good, now go pull out the weeds by their roots, don't leave any behind," Loman said, standing up and patting the dirt and grass off of his white and gold robes. "When you're done, if you've done a good job, there will be cookies waiting for you. In life, a man who meets his struggles reaps many rewards and this is no different.

"Now go," he said, gesturing to a long flower garden that lined one of the walkways leading to the temple itself. "The weeds won't pull themselves."

"You have a way with children," Diarmuid said warmly as he approached the young priest. "And a way with the Word. Though, isn't it a bit too close to bribery to give them cookies for pulling weeds?"

The men made their way into the temple proper, their footsteps muffled by the fading tapestries hanging on the sturdy stone walls. This portion of the temple was never open to the public and few people moved through the private corridors to overhear the two men's conversation.

"Every man's struggle serves three masters," Loman said, falling in beside the Inquisitor as they walked through the temple. "A man who struggles to earn his wages and feed his family struggles for himself first, his master second, and the Holy Lord of Light last. His struggle is no less genuine because he thinks first of his wages and only later of the Holy Lord than if he toiled exclusively to reach the Light."

"These little ones need to learn that meeting the struggle comes with rewards they can realize in this life," Loman explained. "The struggle to reach the Heavenly Shores is too abstract for children, but the struggle to earn a cookie and fill their belly is well within their grasp. If we build these habits now, they will work diligently all their lives."

"Well said," Diarmuid said, smiling at the young man. After fighting against the demons deep in the forest and delving into the darkness surrounding the death of Ashlynn Blackwell, the Inquisitor found Loman's simply and purely expressed faith to be a balm for his soul.

The Inquisition was tasked with carrying the Light into the darkest places and the longer a man spent there, the harder it could be to remember the purity of the light that shone on other members of their faith.

Loman led them to a small sitting room tucked away in one of the temple's quieter corners. The bright afternoon filtered through a narrow stained glass window, casting the image of a golden sword wreathed in flame onto a simple wooden table that stood between two well-worn chairs. Against one wall, a narrow table held a decanter of water, a pair of wooden cups, and a neatly folded stole bearing the crimson and gold sun emblem of the Confessors.

While Loman didn't feel the need to offer a confession, the serious look on the Inquisitor's face, when he arrived, left him feeling that the real topic of conversation, once they reached it, wasn't one that should be heard by outsiders. Within the entire temple, the young priest could think of few places better suited to such a conversation.

"You know," Diarmuid said as the men entered the private room. "I had planned to leave almost immediately to accompany your brother to Blackwell County. After seeing what you're doing here though, I'm strongly tempted to stay until the end of the Holy Festival of Lights."

"I know it breaks with some of the traditions," Loman said, fetching the decanter of water and pouring a cup for himself and the Inquisitor. "But with the demons so close, I feel that the common folk need these moments to reaffirm their faith more than ever."

"That's true," Diarmuid said, leaning back in his chair and savoring the pure, clean taste of the chilled water. "I have to admit, until now, I didn't fully appreciate the challenges involved in rooting the demons out of their nests in the hills and mountains. No matter how much the records speak of the challenges faced by our predecessors in bringing the Light to these dark lands, it's difficult to believe there weren't exaggerations until you see the reality for yourself."

"And now that you've seen it," Loman said as he took a chair opposite the Inquisitor. "What will you do? I can't believe that encountering a nest of demons, no matter how fierce, has shaken the foundations of your faith. Now you have experienced their threat, but does it really change anything for you?"

Had any other priest said the words Loman just spoke, most Inquisitors would have struck him across the face for questioning their commitment to the faith. If they felt particularly offended, they might even question the faith of the priest himself.

Loman was different. He was the son of the current Marquis and his perspective on the struggle against the demons outside Lothian March had been informed by both secular reality and the teachings of the faith. As such, Diarmuid could hardly fault him for being unperturbed by the Inquisitor's moment of revelation.

"It does change things for me, and it may change things for you as well," Diarmuid said. "Your brother is a remarkable warrior you know. On the field of battle, only Sir Tommin was his equal and Sir Tommin held a Holy Light Sword. Your brother fought with an ordinary weapon and still dominated the field."

"My brother has always been an exceptional warrior and a valiant knight," Loman agreed. "He may not be an able commander the way my father was, but his acts of personal valor are difficult to overstate."

"That's what makes this so difficult," the Inquisitor said, staring at his reflection in the cup of water. Sometimes, faith made life simple. There was light and darkness and the choice between the two couldn't be more obvious. Other times, everything felt like it had been cast in shadow. The way toward the Light wasn't clear.

To Diarmuid, this was the heart of an Inquisitor's struggle. Could he accept a lesser darkness if it conquered a greater one? How pure must their fight be in order to obtain victory over the demons in the end?

"Brother Loman," Diarmuid said heavily. "We have made discoveries in our investigation, but, before I tell you what you have found, I have to ask you a question. If we were to find that your brother was guilty of simple murder and that he'd dressed matters up in accusations of witchcraft to shield himself from the consequences..."

"If that was the result of our discovery," Diarmuid said, looking directly into Loman's eyes. "Could you remain silent about it? If the truth would deprive us of a powerful champion against the demons, could you ignore it so that we could obtain a greater chance of victory against the Darkness?"