

## The Vampire 214

### Chapter 214 214: A Brother's Dilemma

Diarmuid's words pressed down on Loman with the weight of thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of lives behind them. Moments ago, he told smiling children to pull up the weeds in the garden like the weeds of darkness that tried to grow in their hearts. Now, he felt like Diarmuid had brought him something worse than weeds to wrap around and pierce his heart as they constricted.

"I resolved myself to stand aside in my brother's matters," Loman said after several quiet moments. "The scales of justice tip too easily and my finger is too heavy. As his brother, pleading for mercy could be understood. As a priest, condemning his crimes could also be expected. Doing either feels like a betrayal," he said bitterly.

"So you choose to retreat from the struggle rather than suffer the consequences of taking either side?" Diarmuid asked. His voice was unusually gentle for an Inquisitor but he could see the torment on the young priest's face.

Loman wasn't a sinner who needed to admit his wrongs, he was a painfully young man who needed help in a moment of crisis. In Diarmuid's opinion, people who couldn't tell the difference had no business donning the crimson of the Inquisition.

"Both answers feel wrong," Loman said. "I've spoken with my father many times about my brother's deficiencies. He's valiant on the battlefield and unbeatable among knights his age. He's driven to help the family succeed where it has failed before and he's willing to bear the burdens and the risks that go with his ambitions."

"That sounds like praise more than a deficiency," Diarmuid pointed out. Taking the decanter from the table he poured a fresh cup for Loman and slid it across the table to the young man. "What deficiencies are you concerned with?"

"My brother's strengths end with what I've already said," the young man said. "As a man, he's a champion of the Light. He might have made a good Templar. If he'd been born the younger brother, I'm sure that he would have done so. But as a Marquis, he's too lacking."

"I saw a bit of that myself," Diarmuid admitted, thinking back on the days he spent in the wilderness with the young lord. "As a champion, he's perfect. As a commander, he's impatient and unsympathetic to the struggles of people who are less capable than he is."

"It goes beyond that," Loman said. "That's why this matter of my sister-in-law's murder has weighed on me so heavily. My brother gives vent to his fury too easily. He becomes too lost in the pleasures of the earthly world and loses sight of his path to the Heavenly Shores. If he was just a man, that might be fine. If he couldn't reach the Heavenly Shores in this life, then his glorious deeds in battle against the demons would surely count for much in his next life."

"But a lord, any lord, much less a Marquis, can't lose sight of their people's path to the Heavenly Shores," Loman said firmly. More than anything else, he feared where his brother would lead the people of Lothian March.

That was why, ever since he donned the robes of a priest, Loman had worked hard to become a pillar of support for the spirits of the people. Owain might wage war and bring about ruin when he overestimated himself or his army, but Loman could prepare the people behind him to survive the tragedies his brother might provoke.

That had been his answer when he plunged the depths of his faith to understand why he stood in the Church while his brother prepared to take a seat upon a throne. If things had been different, perhaps he could have been a good Marquis and Owain a famed Templar, but things hadn't worked out that way.

"I can only meet the struggles before me," Loman said, looking up from his reflection in the cup of water to meet the Inquisitor's soft gaze. "I will struggle on behalf of the people. To the people, it may not matter why my brother killed his wife. Are the taxes he levies fair? Does he struggle to defend them from the darkness of the demons? These are the things that the common man will judge him by."

"So you are resigned to your brother escaping punishment, even if he is guilty of a crime," Dairmuid prompted. It wasn't an inspired answer and it clearly didn't satisfy the young priest, but could he be blamed for it?

"No, I'm not resigned to it," Loman said, shaking his head as a dim flame began to burn in his eyes. "It's just... I don't know if the third path I see is an answer to my struggle or the worst perversion of meeting it."

"Oh? You see a third path?" Diarmuid asked. "You don't seem to feel happy about it."

"Because it feels too self-serving," Loman said. "And I lack the confidence in myself to feel that my motives are pure. But, if my brother is guilty of a crime, shouldn't he have the right to fight for his own salvation? Not as a Marquis, but as the soldier he seems to have been born to be. Let him find his salvation on the battlefield."

"And the March? You would take your father's throne in your brother's place?" Diarmuid asked, seeing where Loman was headed.

"It satisfies the needs of the people to be ruled by a Marquis who considers their path to the Heavenly Shores as his greatest priority," Loman said slowly. "It satisfies the demand for justice by stripping my brother of his place as my father's heir. It gives him a path to redeem himself."

"And it places you upon your father's throne," the Inquisitor said. "Do you feel that your struggle in this life is to supplant your brother? To take his place for the betterment of your people?"

"I don't know," Loman said, shaking his head before drinking deeply of the crisp, clear water. The question that Diarmuid had asked poked at one of his longest-held doubts.

The Church taught that such doubts need to be spoken of, to be brought into the light and examined openly before they became chains of darkness that could stop a man from ever reaching the Heavenly Shores.

Knowing the teaching was one thing. Holding himself up to its expectations, however, was much, much harder.

"My father has doubted my brother's capabilities for too long," Loman said after taking another cleansing gulp of water. "And those doubts have festered in my heart like weeds. Now that an opportunity to pull my brother down has presented itself, should I take it? If I do, is it because it is righteous and just to do so or is it because it serves my own ambitions?"

"Until I can answer those things, it's impossible to know whether this is the path I should take or not," he said, giving the Inquisitor a sad smile. "Perhaps the decision won't be mine to make. The moment to decide isn't upon me yet," he said, though his voice said that he wished it were true rather than that it was.

"For now, I will pray and I will watch. When the moment comes, I hope that I will have found my answer by then."

"You're right to think that the decision might not be yours to make," Diarmuid said. Reaching across the table, he placed a reassuring hand on the young man's shoulder and met his gaze directly.

"I still have answers to find. I need to see if there is anyone in Blackwell County that can bear witness to Ashlynn Blackwell using witchcraft," he explained. "Confessor Eleanor has found precious little evidence for it. It seems that even the private garden that Lady Ashlynn kept was only used to grow fruits and vegetables rather than any of the exotic herbs or poisonous plants used by witches in brewing their concoctions."

"So all we have as evidence is a birthmark that is similar to but not exactly like the mark of the Forest Witch," Loman said. "And a string of coincidences that become innocent happenstance when examined closely."

"There are still a few threads in this tapestry to tug on," Diarmuid said, squeezing Loman's shoulder before he stood to leave. "Once I've finished my investigation in Blackwell County, I'll return to the Holy City to present my findings. At that point, the next decisions will be out of both of our hands."

"But remember something, Lord Loman," Diarmuid said, deliberately addressing the young priest by his secular title. "The next decision may be out of our hands, but that doesn't mean that the final one is. At the end of the day, a man is responsible for the actions of his own hands and the words that flow from his own lips."

"Let your faith guide you in your struggle," the Inquisitor said as he left the small room. "Do that, and at the very least, you can look into the Light and say that you have done your best."

In the small room, the light on the table stretched until the flaming sword was little more than a dull glow cast by the setting sun. Diarmuid's parting words echoed through Loman's mind again and again as he considered the older man's advice.

The bells for the evening meal pulled Loman from his thoughts. As he stood to leave, his gaze fell on the crimson and gold stole still folded on the narrow table. The stole was a symbol of a Confessor's authority to hear the darkest secrets of the faithful as well as a binding promise to help guide those who had become lost back toward the Light.

Perhaps, he thought, it was time to hear what his brother had to say about that night. Not as a priest receiving confession, but as the man who might one day have to judge him. As a brother, he owed Owain at least that much.

When he left the small room, he stood straighter than when he entered. The burdens weighing down on him felt no lighter, but if Diarmuid's words had done anything, they had given him a dose of courage to face his brother head-on. He'd avoided conflict with Owain and his father long enough. Since they hadn't deigned to reach out to him, then he would make the next move himself.