

The Vampire 32

Chapter 32 32: Within the Grave (Part One)

While Ashlynn made plans with Nyrielle and her council, elsewhere in the Vale of Mists, not far from the border of the March of Lothian, another group was also seeking the lost young lady Blackwell. Or at least, they were seeking her remains.

Sir Tommin wore his full armor, though he covered it with a dull cloak. In one hand he carried a lantern and in another, a heavy flagged mace, ready to strike at any demons who discovered their intrusion into the vale.

Behind him, both Loman Lothian followed, dressed as always in the gold and white vestments of his faith, though he joined Sir Tommin in covering his conspicuous outfit with a cloak of his own.

Waiting for the past several weeks for his message to reach the Holy City and for the Church to send a representative with their reply had been agonizing for both men. Sir Tommin's confession weighed on Loman's heart like a stone.

Loman had never been a devious man. Clever, yes, and he always tried to return multiple benefits from a single action. But when he schemed, he schemed openly. He hadn't hidden the benefits that the Church stood to reap from his charitable efforts, he'd advertised them to the High Priest directly. As long as both sides stood to gain, he didn't see any reason to conceal his motives.

But when his father sent an invitation to join the family for a small gathering, he couldn't bring himself to go. The thought of confronting his brother and saying nothing turned in his stomach like a viper, constantly biting at him until he sent a message to his father that he'd undertaken a holy vigil and wouldn't be able to leave temple grounds for some time.

Now, however, as he trudged through the misty forest at night, he felt like he would at least be able to put part of his heart at ease.

Behind him, four other men carried lanterns and three of them carried tools for digging. The man leading them, an Inquisitor named Diarmuid, wore robes similar to Loman's own, though the Inquisitor's robes had also been trimmed in red alongside the gold.

"Here it is," Sir Tommin said, pointing to a small mound of earth at the base of a tree. "You can see, the grave hasn't even sunken yet."

As soon as he pointed out the tree, Tommin's feet felt like they'd become glued to the soft earth, unable to take another step closer. The sound of rain and the echo of thunder from that night filled his ears and an icy hand gripped his heart.

If he'd followed his lord's commands that night, if they'd burned the body and scattered the bones, he wouldn't be standing here now. At the same time, if he'd done as he'd been commanded, there would be no proof of Owain's crime.

Now that he found himself here again, he found it impossible to approach the proof of his failures, standing rooted to the ground like he'd become one of the giant trees in the misty forest.

"Stand aside," Diarmuid commanded forcefully. At thirty years of age, he was a senior enough member of the Inquisition that it had been some time since anyone brought him traipsing into the wilderness in the dark of night to examine a report of witchcraft.

In Diarmuid's experience, nine in every ten reports of witchcraft or demons invading were lies and outright fabrications. When the Inquisition arrived, they found victims who had been "murdered by demons" were, in fact, murdered by jealous rivals or jilted lovers who sought to blame demons to escape justice.

Now, hearing that the son of a Marquis had murdered his bride on their wedding night, the hawk nosed Inquisitor felt like he was about to unearth more of the same. Perhaps they would find that the woman in question was pregnant with another man's child, or that the young lady had walked in on her husband taking liberties with a maid.

Diarmuid expected many things, but he didn't expect to unearth the body of a witch tonight.

"Oh Holy Lord of Light," the Inquisitor intoned formally. "Today, we bring your light to the darkest of places. May you watch over us in this land of demons as we seek to reveal the truth where there has been deception."

"Forgive us as we desecrate the grave and body of one of your chosen children to discover if she is wicked or virtuous, and know that we do this with your blessing to protect your chosen children from further harm," he concluded. "Light illuminate us all."

"Light illuminate us all," the others intoned formally before the three men with shovels began to dig.

As the shovels bit into the earth, a sickly sweet odor began to permeate the air, growing stronger with each layer of soil removed. The wet squelch of mud and the scrape of metal against earth filled the air like claws tearing at the night

Loman's stomach churned as the scent filled the air. Sweat beaded on his brow despite the cool night air, and he found himself unconsciously stepping back, leaves crunching beneath his feet.

"Sir Tommin," the Inquisitor said, stepping away from the grave and gesturing for the knight and Loman to follow him. While the knight seemed to be holding up well enough, it was clear that the grim scene was beginning to overwhelm the young priest.

"You're doing a bold thing right now," he praised, setting a hand on Sir Tommin's shoulder. "When confronted with the choice between fealty to one's liege lord and piety before one's god, most would choose the former."

"I have fought demons, Inquisitor," the knight said, bowing his head respectfully. "I have seen the horned ones and the ones with great claws, the ones with the bodies of horses and with the faces of jackals."

"I know that evil walks among us and that without the Holy Lord of Light and his Temple, we would never have come so far in cleansing these lands. My father would never have become a knight, and I would not be who I am today if not for the Church."

"With faith like that," Diarmuid said, "twenty years ago, you would have surely ascended to great heights within the church. Now, it is the best I can do to support your petition to take a Templar's oath."

"That alone is enough," Sir Tommin said, dropping to one knee and bowing deeply. To him, there was no other choice. Serve the Church or serve a murderer. The former meant he would have to leave his wife and child behind to fight under the banner of the Holy Lord of Light.

The latter meant that he and his family could be killed at any time to ensure his silence. Perhaps to the Inquisitor he seemed pious, but Tommin couldn't bring himself to see it that way.

"Inquisitor Diarmuid," one of the digging men called. "We've recovered remains. The body is wrapped in a fine bedsheet, soaked in oil, as Sir Tommin described. The bedsheet may very well have come from young lord Owain's marital bed chambers."

The three men who had dug the grave all stood back, not a single one of them willing to lift the body up out of the earth. The mist of the forest swirled around the grave, flowing into the shallow pit as though the body within was breathing in the mist to rise again.

One of the men made a nervous gesture to ward off evil and all of them looked to the Inquisitor, waiting for him to approach where they dared not go.