

The Vampire 33

Chapter 33 33: Within the Grave (Part Two)

"I see," Diarmuid siad, pulling back the cowl of his cloak and running a hand through his thick black hair as he walked back toward the grave. The thick smell of rotting flesh mingled with the damp loamy smell of the earth to produce a scent that he was all too familiar with. Only the crisp scent of cedar in the air and the cool spring mist did anything to alter the familiar stench.

Pulling back the sheet, he gently rolled the young woman's body over, his eyes going wide at the number of vicious wounds on her body. The cold season had slowed the decay enough that the bruises and cuts inflicted by Owain's merciless beating could still be clearly seen.

"Is she..." one of the diggers asked, making a gesture with one hand to ward off evil while the other covered his nose to block the thick, cloying stench of decay.

"She has a mark," Diarmuid confirmed, examining the birth mark on the woman's hip. "But I'm not sure that it's a mark of the witch. People are born with all sorts of blemishes and it doesn't make them wicked."

As a young acolyte in the Inquisition, Diarmuid had been present countless time when sobbing, broken-hearted mothers brought their infants to the Church to hear a pronouncement about one blemish or another. In virtually every case, the Church pronounced the child innocent and provided a blessing to the relieved parent.

Sometimes, he wished that he'd remained an acolyte, with no greater responsibilities than reassuring parents that their children weren't overtaken by demonic magics. If he had, he wouldn't be in places like this, standing in the dead of night over the body of a woman who had died for the mark she'd been born with, whether she was a witch or not.

"This looks like the mark of the Witch of the Forest," Loman said, fighting down the urge to empty the contents of his stomach and looking at the naked body of his late sister-in-law. Inwardly, he wished he could see her as just a victim of a crime or a demon in human form like any other witch.

Yet, no matter how much he tried, when he looked upon the broken and battered body that had been dumped into a shallow grave without the dignity of a burial garment or a memento to take on the journey to the Heavenly Shores, he couldn't remain cold and detached.

Her face was bruised and battered almost beyond recognition but the last time he'd seen that pale blond hair it had been topped with a bridal veil. The last time he saw those delicate features, they'd been radiantly smiling as if the day she married his brother was the happiest day of her life.

Now, Loman clung desperately to the shape of the mark on the woman's hip. So long as it was a genuine mark of the witch, even if his brother had committed an error by killing her instead of bringing her to the church, he could forgive him for what he'd done. If it turned out that it wasn't, that it was just a normal birth mark... Loman didn't know how he could face his brother again.

"Doesn't that mark form in the shape of a tree?" Loman asked, pointing at the mark on the woman's body and hoping that Inquisitor Diarmuid would give him the confirmation he sought.

"You've been reading the Sealed Histories," the Inquisitor said, giving Loman an appraising look. "I didn't realize you had risen high enough to be given access to those records. Yes, whenever a Witch of the Forest is born, she bears the mark in the shape of a tree. But, this mark is different. See here," he indicated, pointing at two slender lines at the bottom of the birthmark.

"The mark is irregular and bulbous on one end, narrow in the center and has slender protrusions at the bottom," he said, speaking as though he was lecturing junior temple acolytes despite the grim setting. "It resembles a tree, but a Witch of the Forest is marked with a tree that has five roots, corresponding to the powers of Earth, Air, Fire, Water and Wood. The length of each root can tell you about which of her powers are stronger," he said.

Within the records kept sealed by the church there had been a number of powerful witches who challenged both the rule of the king and the power of the Church. Those records were kept sealed so that the common people and even the nobility didn't realize how close their kingdom and faith had come to crumbling before the strange powers of powerful witches.

Now, however, when he compared the mark on this woman's body to the ones that had been recorded in those histories, what he saw didn't match what he'd read.

"This mark is similar, but it has only two strands and they do not truly resemble roots. They may just be stretch marks from growth," he said, frowning as he examined the area closely. "Whether she was a virtuous woman with an unfortunate birthmark or a lesser or unknown form of witch, I cannot say," he finally said after several minutes.

As much as he wanted to pronounce her innocence, the mark was close enough to leave him uncertain. The Church had cataloged many forms of witch over the centuries, particularly before witches were eradicated in the old countries. It was possible that this was a mark of a witch, just not one that had ever been seen here in the new world.

"My Lady Blackwell, if you truly are innocent, then I apologize for the desecration that will come," he said, offering a brief prayer over her body. "Wrap her back up and bring her back to the temple. I'm afraid I'll need to remove the flesh with the mark and take it back to the Holy City with me. We have more records there on other witches and their marks."

"Then, what will we do with her body?" Loman asked, his knees weak at the thought of the inquisitor cutting into a dead body.

The Holy Lord of Light taught that a body should either be interred in the earth, offered up in flames or entrusted to the deep if buried at sea but in all cases, the body was sacred as the last remnant of the living upon the earth. To carve up a corpse and send part of it away...

"We'll keep her in a crypt beneath the temple. She must be sealed away until we know if she was a witch," the Inquisitor pronounced. He didn't mention the other things he would do to the body. Clearly he had already disturbed the two men who weren't familiar with the inquisition's methods.

Diarmuid, however, wouldn't rest until he had solved what had happened here. If Owain had killed a witch, he should be lauded for it. If he'd murdered a woman to hide his own affair or because she carried another man's child, then circumstances were very different and the consequences would be dire.

Until he knew for sure, it was impossible to take action against the son of a Marquis. But perhaps this would turn out to be one of those rare occasions when there really was witchcraft at play, and if so, he wouldn't rest until he found it.

Diarmuid couldn't say whether it would be better for the dead woman to be proved a witch or not. While the Inquisition claimed to be above such things, he was well aware of forces within the Church who would love an excuse to pull Owain down from his seat as the heir of Lothian so they could install Loman as the next Marquis.

Placing one of the Church's priests into one of the highest offices in the land would be as good as taking control of the March of Lothian for the Church itself. For some people, the outcome would be so desirable that the truth wouldn't matter.

Others had invested greatly in the growing alliance between the Blackwells and the Lothians. That alliance would fuel the next crusade against the demons, expanding human territory and fulfilling their destiny. Anything that jeopardized that crusade had to be squashed, whether it was the truth or not.

Diarmuid didn't care, one way or another. All he wanted to discover was the truth. Once he obtained that, the consequences weren't his concern.