

The Vampire 76

Chapter 76 76: A Visit From The Inquisition

When Diarmuid entered Bors Lothian's office, he did so not as a man but as the manifestation of an institution.

His coal black hair was pulled back into a tight braid and his thick brows perched over dark eyes that scanned the room as if he was searching for demons lurking behind the lampstands. The red and gold robes of the Inquisition billowed around him like the wings of a hawk swooping down on its prey as his powerful strides brought him quickly across the room to arrive before the Marquis Lothian and his son.

"Marquis Lothian," the inquisitor said with a slight bow. "Lord Owain," he added with a polite nod, his eyes briefly flickering from the handsome young lord to the iron paperweight on the floor next to him before returning to the Marquis.

"I thank you for making time for my unplanned visit," Diarmuid continued. "I came as soon as I received word," he said. While most people would explain what they'd received word of, however, Diarmuid didn't, leaving the statement hanging and allowing the Marquis to respond to whatever he believed the Inquisitor would have received word of.

It was a simple trick, but Diarmuid had been playing this game for many years and even if he didn't expect much from it, sometimes the combination of a sudden arrival and vague comments netted surprising fish.

"I wasn't aware that word had already reached the Temple," Bors said, frowning at the inquisitor. "I must confess that I'm surprised that it startled a member of the Inquisition. Perhaps you can tell me what it is that was important enough for you to come directly here?"

"The loss of two knights in the span of a day is a tragedy for the Lothian March," Diarmuid began.

"Hearing that one of them was dismembered by demons, returning home without a complete corpse is an even greater tragedy. Of course, the Temple wouldn't hesitate to dispatch a priest to purify Sir Broll's remains before he is interred in his family crypt," the hawk-nosed man said smoothly.

"As a member of the Inquisition, nothing is more important than rooting out the influence of demons," Diarmuid said, turning his sharp gaze from the Marquis to his son. "So I thought I would offer my services to find the root of the tragedy. After all, I'm told that Lord Owain brought his wife to the Summer Villa early this year, before the Villa entered a zero-hour zone."

In two weeks, it would be impossible for Nyrielle's progeny to reach the summer villa and return in the same night. While that didn't make it unreachable, it meant that any vampire who attacked the villa would have to find a place in the wilderness to wait out daylight, leaving them vulnerable to hunters until sunset.

Historically, the Lothians would only occupy the villa after the days became long enough for this to be true. To move out beforehand was risky as the demons were known to be more bold in their attacks if they could rely on Nyrielle's progeny either for rescue or to tip the tide in a nighttime assault.

"Lady Ashlynn had difficulty adjusting to life among the ladies of the frontier," Bors said, offering an excuse he'd prepared well in advance. "Given her delicate condition, we felt it wiser to move her to the summer villa where she could enjoy the quiet and solitude she preferred in Blackwell county rather than subjecting her to the pressures placed on the next Marchioness."

"And so you instead subject her to the dangers of the frontier in a distant fort," the inquisitor said blandly. "The Lady Ashlynn must be particularly naive about the dangers of demons on the frontier if she felt it was better to reach the fortress early rather than face the barbed comments of young noblewomen on the frontier."

"You know that Blackwell County hasn't seen a demon attack in generations," Owain said quickly. Sweat formed on his brow as his mind scrambled to offer an appropriate explanation to the imposing man in red and gold.

"My Ashlynn put her faith in the strength of her new family's protectors," Owain said, doing his best to put on an air of pride and confidence. "She's still safe behind the walls of the Summer Villa. The only danger from demons came from an encounter in the wilderness while hunting."

"Yes, so I heard," Diarmuid said, stroking the neatly trimmed beard on his chin. "But I also heard it was no ordinary hunt. A kitchen girl killed another of your knights within the walls of the villa and escaped with a kitchen boy. If one didn't know better, one might think that these servants snuck into your villa to commit murder and lured your hunters into a demon trap when they escaped."

Bors scowled, his hand tightening in their grip on the armrests of his chair as he turned his gaze from the Inquisitor to his son. Owain had been personally involved in the selection of servants sent to the villa to minimize the risks that someone would discover the imposter masquerading as Ashlynn Blackwell.

Or at least, he'd given that responsibility to his son. Now, however, he wondered if Owain had carelessly handed it off to his steward or another servant, creating this disaster.

"Tell me, Marquis Lothian," the Inquisitor said, turning his piercing eyes on the older man. "The page who brought word to the temple mentioned this servant girl named 'Lynnda.' He said there were rumors that she was your illegitimate daughter. When I arrived at the manor, I asked your clerk for a list of names of the servants in your household, and yet I found no mention of any Lynnda in those records."

"Is there something you're hiding, Marquis Lothian?" Diarmuid said fiercely. "You should know. Lies. Ring. Hollow. Before The Inquisition." As he spoke a golden glow enveloped his red and gold robes. It

was faint in the bright light streaming in through the window but Bors couldn't miss the significance of the way the Inquisitor had spoken.

There were always rumors that a person couldn't become an Inquisitor unless they were a miracle worker or had been blessed by one of the great saints of the Church, invested with the power of the Holy Lord of Light. Inquisitors ventured into the darkest places to hunt heretics and demons and wherever they walked, they brought the light of their deity with them. Now, seeing the glow surrounding the Inquisitor Bors realized that there was much more truth to the rumors than he'd initially believed.

Quick on the heels of that realization, however, came another one. Inquisitor Diarmuid hadn't cloaked himself in that power from the moment he entered the office. There were limits to its use and the Inquisitor had chosen this question to emphasize. He wanted to know if Bors Lothian was hiding a descendant that consorted with demons.

Once he realized that, Bors let go of his restraint. There were many insults he could swallow when confronted by the powerful Inquisitor but this one crossed his bottom line and he saw no reason to hold himself back.

"How dare you!" Bors shouted, shooting to his feet and slamming his calloused hands onto the desk. "Not once, not while she lived or after she died, not once have I betrayed my Isla! How dare you profane her memory with vile rumors."

"My Lord Lothian," Diarmuid began, only to be cut off by Bors' fury.

"I will have names and I will have tongues!" Bors shouted. "Who is spreading this slander? Tell me who is spreading these lies so I can carve out their tongues and burn them before my Isla's tomb. I will not have such things uttered in what is still her home!"

"Father, please," Owain said, rushing to his father's side to hold him back before he could charge the Inquisitor. In the seven years since his mother's death, he'd made the mistake of suggesting his father take a second wife exactly once, on a night he'd come home from a drunken trip to a brothel with Kaefin. The beating he received for it had shown him just how deeply his father still grieved for his late wife.

"I can see that there's no truth to these lies," the Inquisitor said. The golden glow around him faded away like fog burned away by the morning sun leaving behind a man who still looked fierce and unapologetic but no longer as sacred as he had a moment ago.

"Still, I find many things happening to be highly irregular," Diarmuid said. "I will begin by conducting my examination and cleansing of Sir Broll's remains. If I have more questions for you, or young lord Owain, I will return to you then. Good day, Marquis Lothian."

For a tense moment, Bors looked like he still intended to vault over his desk to pummel the Inquisitor for the insult but a firm squeeze from Owain brought him back to his senses before he did anything he would come to regret.

"I apologize, Inquisitor," he forced himself to say. "Some wounds are still raw, even after all these years. If you have need of me, please send word to my steward and I will receive you properly."

Outside the Marquis' office, an armored templar fell in behind Diarmuid like a metallic shadow.

"You heard?" Diarmuid asked as they walked toward the crypts where Sir Broll's remains awaited examination and cleansing by the Church.

"It would be difficult not to," Sir Tommin replied. "I told you that it was unlikely to be true."

"Unlikely doesn't mean impossible," the Inquisitor reminded the newly minted Templar. "And it leaves us with another question. Who is this Lynnda that managed to slay Sir Kaefin and lead Sir Broll to his death at the hands of the demons?"

"Until we have answers, I'm afraid none of us will sleep easily," the Inquisitor said. Someone who could slip into a guarded Lothian fort, kill a knight, and escape in broad daylight was even more terrifying than the Demon Lady of the Vale's famed progeny. Against the vampires, at least sunlight provided a shield. But this new enemy... if the sun didn't constrain her, what would?