

## The Vampire 19

### Chapter 19 19: Caoirigh Village

"I told you," the vampire whispered, her lips inches from Ashlynn's ear. "Tonight, just watch."

A heartbeat later Nyrielle had scooped Ashlyn up in her arms again, racing along the trail to reach Caoirigh village before she completely lost control of her hunger.

A few minutes later, once Ashlynn had managed to calm her racing heart, they arrived at a small village surrounded by terraced hills covered by grape vines.

Despite how flustered she felt after nearly becoming Nyrielle's meal, it took only a moment for Ashlynn to recognize the village from the painting on the dining room walls.

Rough wooden huts with thatched roofs dotted the hilly landscape with winding dirt paths snaking their way from hut to hut. Torches burned at every doorway, casting a warm flickering light over the village and blending the smell of woodsmoke with the faint mist that hung in the air throughout the vale.

Small garden plots stood next to most of the huts and several chickens wandered through yards, clucking softly and pecking away the ground. At a glance, she also thought the village looked larger than it had been when it was painted with several additional huts and a new covered well that wasn't in the painting she had seen.

For a moment, the village struck Ashlynn as strange or incomplete. Behind small fences, she noticed several children, held back by mothers or fathers so they didn't run out of their yards, but that was normal for any village receiving a visit from their liege lord.

It wasn't until they'd reached the wooden wall surrounding the village that she realized why it felt incomplete. Though the huts were of a similar size to what she might see in a human village, the families of the Horned Clan were much larger than human families. Only their small stature allowed them to have a third again as many people in this village as you would have found in a human village of this size.

But no human village of more than a few hundred people and certainly not one of this size, would lack a shrine or small temple dedicated to the Holy Lord of Light. Yet here, not only was there no temple to the familiar human deity, it seemed like they had no temple or shrine at all.

Any additional observations she might have made were interrupted when Thane strode out from the gate in the village's wooden wall, taking from Nyrielle's arms and helping her to regain her footing after Nyrielle's hasty sprint through the forest.

"I've told Village Elder Rauiri," Thane said, taking Ashlynn's hand in his own and leading the way into the village. "He was honored to offer an additional villager to slake your thirst. I asked for one of the village guards to go first," he added. "Just in case."

"Thank you, Thane," Nyrielle said, composing herself as best she could as she moved toward the center of the small hillside village. "Elder Rauiri," she said a moment later, greeting the stoop-shouldered man with large curled ram's horns and a scraggly gray beard who stood at the front of a small group of villagers.

"Thank you for accommodating me. Who is making the offering today?"

"Hanno," the horned elder called, waving forward a sturdy young man with dark hair, a close-cropped dark beard, and heavy-looking curled horns. "Hanno defended the village six nights out of seven through the entire winter. He slew a mountain lion that tried to claim the life of a lost child and rescued the lost lamb before harm could come to her. He deserves this honor."

"Hanno," Nyrielle said, kneeling down to better match the short warrior's height and calling him over. "This is your first time as an offering, you were too young before. Have you prepared yourself?"

"My life is yours, my Lady," he said hoarsely. He'd seen the Eldritch Lady of the Vale when she visited before. He'd even witnessed others in the village serving as the offering but this was the first time he'd come so close to her.

"You will feel pleasure," Nyrielle whispered in his ear, placing a hand on his chest directly over his heart to feel his pulse race beneath her fingertips. "If the pleasure becomes pain, you must cry out," she said forcefully. "If you do not, I may harm you."

"Our lives are free and happy because of you, my Lady," Hanno said. "Even if there is pain, I will not cry out," he added, puffing his chest up beneath Nyrielle's hand.

"Hanno!" Elder Rauiri snapped, racing forward and pulling the young warrior back from Nyrielle. "Forgive him, my Lady, he must not understand," he said bowing deeply before he rounded on the young warrior, slamming his horns against the other man's skull, splitting his forehead, and sending him sprawling to the ground.

"Moritz is already prepared to step up when you reach your limit," the horned elder said, reaching down and dragging the young warrior back up to his feet. "Our Lady called for two! That means she has weakened herself, using her powers to fight our enemies. If you do not cry out, she may claim your life."

"If you cannot promise then you cannot be an offering," the elder said fiercely. "You are not being brave. Your death would pain her because she doesn't wish to claim your life. If she needed a life to be offered, she would have taken mine or another who is close to death. Now, promise me or I will find another to take your place."

"I, I apologize," Hanno said, trembling before the elder's fury. He had been told, of course. His father often repeated the tale of the time that Lady Nyrielle reached their village wounded from battle and his grandfather offered up his life to aid her recovery.

The whole family had been proud of that sacrifice, but it was precisely because it happened so rarely that it was so notable. What he had just done cheapened his great grandfather's sacrifice and worse, insulted their Eldritch Lady.

"I will cry out," he promised, lowering his horns in submission.

"Good," Nyrielle said, moving swiftly and grabbing a fistful of his tunic to lift him off the ground. The delay was straining her limits and the scent of blood from the wound on Hanno's forehead had only made matters worse.

"See that you do," she whispered before plunging her fangs into his neck and drinking deeply....