

The Vampire 60

Chapter 60 60: The Form of Vengeance

After her intense night with Nyrielle, Ashlynn was only slightly surprised to wake up in her own bed. Sleeping, she realized, was a very different thing for vampires as opposed to humans. Even in a pitch-black room, walled off from the sun, Nyrielle and her progeny were still weakened and vulnerable during daylight hours.

One day, she hoped they would be close enough that Nyrielle didn't mind if they shared a bed during daylight hours, but she was in no hurry to press for access when she slept just as comfortably in her own bed.

Sitting up, Ashlynn's head swam for a moment and her body felt tired and drained of energy. If it was like the last time, it would be a day or two before she returned to her usual vigor but if the vampire drank more deeply than before it could take even longer.

Ring the bell beside her bed, Ashlynn made no effort to rush things. She stretched languidly, her muscles protesting slightly from the previous night's activities. The soft sheets whispered against her skin as she moved, luxuriating in the feeling, even more, when she compared it to the rough wool and prickly straw bed she'd endured at the villa.

She waited patiently for Heila to arrive to help her leave bed and dress for the day, taking in the afternoon sun on her terrace and nibbling on a savory meat pie that Georg sent to help her recover from losing so much blood the night before.

Georg's pastry was rich and buttery, with flaky layers that left a trail of crumbs across the table as she ate. Rich juices threatened to dribble down her chin if she wasn't careful and the smell of herbs and meat blended with the fresh air of the vale to create a unique scent that increasingly became part of what her mind thought of as 'home.'

As she ate, Ashlynn replayed her conversation with Nyrielle, thinking carefully about the older woman's words about how she felt after obtaining vengeance and the things she'd done in the Vale of Mists following the death of Cellach Lothian.

Retrieving parchment and a pen for writing, Ashlynn began to organize her thoughts, writing out the things she knew, the things she suspected, and the things she wanted to accomplish. One question occupied her thoughts more than any other. What happened after Owain died?

If she killed Owain and stopped, she could rest with the completion of her vengeance but killing Owain would hardly stop the conflict in the Vale. If anything, it would make it worse, she realized.

Loman Lothian was a devout and pious follower of the Holy Lord of Light. He'd dedicated his life to the church since his coming-of-age celebration nearly ten years ago. If he took up the mantle as the next Marquis Lothian, he would wield unprecedented power within both the spiritual and secular world.

It wouldn't be difficult for Loman to gain the support of the Templars and the miracle workers within the church. If he raised the banner of Crusade, the army he raised would be a greater threat to the Vale of Mists than any it had seen since the days of Cellach Lothian.

But how could she stop it? If she decapitated the Lothian family, killing Bors, Owain and Loman together, the result would be a power vacuum that any number of people would vie to fill. Moreover, such a fierce assault on Lothian power could spook the dukes of the ruling council and maybe the king himself.

Currently, the Kingdom of Gaal had a long border with the lands ruled by the Eldritch. Four Marches, each with the forces of a dozen subordinate Barons, guarded the interior lands of the kingdom from the threat of attack by the Eldritch peoples.

The defense of the Marches was part of the reason that she herself had known a relatively peaceful life growing up in Blackwell County, far from the reach of the Eldritch nations that still raided and fought to reclaim their ancestral lands from human invaders.

Sketching a small map, Ashlynn considered who might step in to fill the power vacuum created by the elimination of the Lothian family but she couldn't come to any strong conclusions.

The adjacent Marches might each take a bite of Lothian territory or the Keating Duchy might send one of its cadet branches forward to take over the march but she didn't know any of the lords involved well enough to make an educated guess as to which would happen.

Putting her pen down, she stared at the setting sun and tried to consider things from the opposite end. What did she want to happen?

Whether the king appointed a new Marquis or Lothian March was divided among its neighbors, none of the people involved would establish a lasting peace with the Vale of Mists or the Eldritch Nations in general.

Her vengeance wouldn't change anything for the better, yet Nyrielle still supported her. Why? It couldn't just be because she understood how important it was to Ashlynn to see Owain dead. Nyrielle had been honest about the fact that she hoped to use Ashlynn to upset the status quo. But how?

"Heila," Ashlynn called. "Captain Lennart should be returning tomorrow, along with a human who helped me escape the villa. Have arrangements been made for them yet?"

"Sir Thane mentioned they'd be coming," Heila said. "I believe that the boy who helped you is to be housed down the hall, one of my siblings is preparing his room, though it won't be as nice as yours. Sir Thane felt like you may want your companion to be reasonably nearby."

"The others will be taken to the prison in the lower levels of the castle until you or Lady Nyrielle decide what should be done with them," the horned woman said. "As your captives, it's your right to determine their fate unless Lady Nyrielle commands otherwise."

"What is typically done with human captives in the Vale of Mists?" Ashlynn asked, having seen no sign of other humans her entire time in the vale.

"Most don't live long," Heila said without mincing her words. "Some are executed for their known crimes, particularly when a knight or lord is taken captive. Others are given over to the villages where they toil in place of the villagers they killed during the war. Most of them are worked to death within a season or two."

"What about outside of war?" Ashlynn asked, frowning at what she heard. It seemed like no one was ever captured without a need to suffer for crimes committed against the vale.

"I, I don't know much," Heila said hesitantly. "I've heard that sometimes, Marcell brings back people who know secrets. The maids who clean the lower levels tell stories about screams that can be heard several hallways away. Those don't last long either," she finished quietly.

"All right," Ashlynn said, taking a deep breath. "Pass the word. When Captain Lennart returns tomorrow, I want to be notified immediately. No one is to do anything to the captives without my or Mistress Nyrielle's orders, do you understand?"

"Of course, my Lady," Heila said. "Does my Lady have plans for them?"

"I don't know," Ashlynn said, her finger tapping pensively on the parchment that contained her notes. "But I have to find something to do that's different from what we've done before or the cycle will never end..."