

## The Vampire 63

### Chapter 63 63: Treating Captives as Guests (Part One)

True to his word, Thane kept Ashlynn company until the sky began to show the first hints of approaching dawn.

While there was a great deal more for him to explain about the Eldritch nations that Ashlynn would be passing through on her way to visit the Mother of Thorns, neither of them could remain on a single topic the entire night.

Instead, Thane served as a sounding board while Ashlynn worked out some of her unresolved thoughts about how to act on the information she'd gained from her trip to the summer villa. She would speak with Nyrielle before she took any specific actions, but she gained a much better sense of things she could do with the information in hand and the resources of the vale.

The plan that was beginning to form in her mind would require support from Marcell at the very least, within the next few days. As the days grew longer and the distance a vampire could travel in a single night shrank, missions like the one she had in mind for the young-looking vampire became even more dangerous.

There were several other parts of her nebulous plan that Thane helped her to clarify. Whether he was pointing out flaws in her thinking or offering knowledge to fill gaps in what she knew, he was always patient, even as the sky began to lighten and they ran out of time to continue their conversation.

Once dawn came, after Thane vanished to the dark interior of the ancient castle, Ashlynn left instructions for handling the arrival of Captain Lennart and his captives before taking a rest herself. The few days she'd spent in the Summer Villa where she got up before dawn and went to bed after sunset had been a struggle after adapting to life on Nyrielle's schedule.

When it came to the captives, in the grand scheme of things, how she handled Ollie and the other six men mattered very little. As they were, there would be no difference whether she imprisoned them for the rest of their lives or had them executed. The only thing she couldn't do, at least not right now, was release them to take word of her survival back to Owain and the Lothians.

As she began to consider the greater problems facing the vale, however, she felt like these captives represented an important opportunity. One that she didn't intend to miss. She just had to give a few other instructions to Heila in order to prepare for the arrival of her... guests.

It wasn't until the late afternoon that Lennart reached the castle with his captives in tow.

A soldier named Daithi walked at the head of the column of captives. His short brown hair hung limply around a face that had grown coarse with two days of stubble and his hazel eyes seemed to be constantly on the move, taking in every detail of his surroundings with a wariness that had only grown sharper the further into demon territory they went.

While his hands were bound and his weapons had been taken from him, the old soldier had to admit that they hadn't been mistreated by the demons who took them prisoner. He'd heard stories growing up about how demons feasted on the blood and flesh of humans but he'd only seen a single hint of savagery from the beasts who held him captive.

Daithi and the other captives had expected that Sir Broll's body would be left to rot after the duel, or perhaps he would be given a hasty burial before the group began their march toward the Vale of Mists. He'd even spoken up to offer to dig a grave if the demons weren't going to.

"Your knight is still useful," the clawed demon called Lennart had said when Daithi asked about it. "He will serve as a warning to those who follow after."

Of course, Daithi wasn't unfamiliar with the concept of using the body of the slain as a warning. Criminals of extreme crimes would be hung in a public square and the body would be left hanging on display for several days to be picked at by crows or mice as a warning to the common folk that crime came with consequences.

What he wasn't prepared for, however, was the brutal dismembering of the body of a person who had once been a powerful knight. Captain Lennart intended that Sir Broll's body only be found in pieces as a warning that even the most powerful of the Lothian's warriors would face a grisly death if they were to attack the Vale of Mists.

If the human tradition of hanging criminals could be considered a display of the power of high justice in the lands, Captain Lennart's message was far more effective at communicating the martial power of the demons. No one seeing the display would sleep well or march to battle without at least a measure of fear in their hearts after finding what was left of Sir Broll.

Rather than savagery, however, Daithi found only calm, calculated strategy in the captain's actions. There was no anger or rage when he tore the knight's remains apart, only a desire to defeat his enemies without fighting them. Somehow that was even more terrifying than if it had been rage or grief-fueled malice.

Now, after two days of hiking through the wilderness and entering the very heart of demon territory, Daithi's eyes were filled with the sight of a world no human had seen in several generations. No human since Caun and Cellach Lothain's generations had breached the walls guarding the city that surrounded the ancient fortress.

Now, far from the shadowed world of depravity and murder the Church warned of, or the dark and haunting terror contained in childhood nursery rhymes, Daithi found himself in a town that greatly resembled Lothian City, if on a slightly smaller scale.

"What, what are those men doing climbing the poles?" Daithi asked, unable to hold back his curiosity.

"Those are lamplighters," Captain Lennart replied with a terrifyingly toothy grin. Despite their differences, he recognized that Daithi was trying to stand up as a leader of the captives and he'd made the decision to treat the man with the same respect he would give to a captive leader of another Eldritch nation.

There would likely never be friendship between them, but for the sake of Lady Ashlynn, he could manage common courtesy.

"Not everyone can see well in the dark of night," the captain said, tapping next to his own golden eyes that reflected the fading late afternoon light. "The people of the Horned Clan have wider vision than my kind, but they don't see as well in the dark so we light lamps along the streets to help them find their way. Come autumn and winter when the fog is thicker, even good night vision won't help you if you get lost in the fog."

Daithi's mind reeled, struggling to reconcile what he saw with everything he'd been taught. The neat streets, the lamplighters, the bustling activity - it all seemed so... normal. Not only normal, if anything, it was better than life in Lothian City.

In Lothian, shopkeepers were required to hang a lamp at night to light the streets but not everyone did. In the poorer parts of the city, people might only use enough oil to burn for an hour or two before their lamps went out, if they lit any at all, leaving anyone on the streets to navigate patches of darkness that could stretch for several blocks.

Here, not only were the streets well-lit, they were clear of garbage and waste. More than that, even after walking through the entire city to reach the imposing fortress, he had yet to see a single drunkard or poverty-stricken pensioner languishing in the streets. It was as though poverty didn't exist in this place.

A knot formed in his stomach, a mixture of confusion, fear, and an unexpected twinge of guilt. Part of him wanted to believe that they were free of poverty because the things he'd been taught were true. If they lacked for human captives to feast on then surely they were savage cannibals who slaughtered their own less fortunate for meals. But if that were true then why did the common folks he saw on the street look so... happy?