

The Vampire 67

Chapter 67 67: Gaining Converts

A heavy silence hung over the assembled captives as they stared at both Ashlynn and the glowing crystals on the table.

Daithi was the first to speak, drawing a shuddering breath and clasping his hands briefly in silent prayer before opening his mouth.

"My lad, no, Your Holiness," he corrected himself. Confusion wracked his mind and his heart trembled with questions the teachings of his faith couldn't answer but he refused to deny the proof of his own eyes.

"Your Holiness, if you have words for us, then we'll listen. When you're finished, I hope you'll allow us to ask some questions," he said cautiously.

"Some questions can't wait," Eamon said, shaking himself free of the shock and narrowing his eyes at Ashlynn. "I've seen many things in the forest between the march and the vale but I've never seen the demons tolerate something holy. How is it they haven't killed you yet?" the grizzled man asked bluntly.

"As I said," Ashlynn said, keeping her voice calm. "Much of what we have been taught is wrong. Please," she continued, turning to the kneeling men. "Return to your seats. I didn't invite you all here to bow in worship but to talk and learn."

When the men started to move, Ashlynn let her power and the golden glow fade. Ringing a bell on the table summoned several servants bearing torches that quickly lit up the room while other servants brought trays of hot, steaming bread and crocks of smooth, creamy cheese to go with it.

"Tonight's dinner is just for us," Ashlynn said, tearing off a hunk of bread and spreading the creamy goat cheese on the soft, nutty bread. It had taken her a little while to adjust to how rare cow's milk was in the vale but after returning to human lands, she found herself missing the pungent sharpness of the more common goat's milk used in the vale.

"In the future, I hope you won't hesitate to break bread with the Eldritch people who live here," she continued. "Their traditions and appearance might be different from the people we grew up with but at the end of the day, they aren't 'demons', they're just people who happen to look different."

"People who look different and can tear a man limb from limb," Eamon said, eyeing the bread as though he wasn't certain it was safe to eat.

Ollie, however, quickly imitated Ashlynn, tearing into the bread and spreading a thick layer of creamy cheese on it before taking a large bite.

"So good," he said, eyes widening at the combination of flavors. The best bread he'd eaten recently had been loaves that were slightly burnt and unfit to be served to the lords and knights, despite being made with the best flour. More often, the bread he ate had to be carefully checked for seeds and small stones that were left behind when the flour was milled, or worse, weevils.

"I'll introduce you to Georg later so you can tell him you like it," Ashlynn said with a light laugh. "Please, everyone, eat."

"It's just bread," Daithi added, following Ollie's example but taking much smaller bites. "If her Holiness wanted to harm us, her men could have killed us several times over instead of bringing us here. She wouldn't go through all this effort to spare our lives only to kill us with a meal."

Daithi's words seemed to break everyone free of their suspicions, finally allowing them to dig in as the bread was followed by a creamy lentil soup. Even Eamon managed to put down his suspicions enough to eat, though he frequently frowned at the unfamiliar flavors.

"The power I showed you," Ashlynn began once she saw people begin to relax. "Would it surprise you to know that the Eldritch Lady of the Vale, my Mistress Nyrielle, can do exactly the same thing? In fact, she's the one who taught me how."

At those words, everyone stopped, staring at her in disbelief. Children grew up on nursery rhymes about the Demon Lady of the Vale with her fearsome claws and murderous fangs, tearing naughty children away from their families to strip the flesh from their bones and drink their blood. Now, Lady Ashlynn wanted them to believe that she was also a Holy woman?

"It sounds impossible, doesn't it?" Ashlynn admitted. "Perhaps in the future she would be willing to give you a demonstration herself. For now, however, I'll ask you to put your faith in me. I was afraid when I came here at first, it's fine if you're afraid too. What I won't accept, however, is rudeness," she said, pinning a sharp glare on Eamon.

"The term 'demon' isn't used here. Please erase it from your lips. I told you before you came here that you should learn the names of the Eldritch people and I expect you to do so," she insisted.

Several of the men swallowed heavily and the two sitting closest to Eamon moved their chairs a few inches further away from him, as if they were afraid to get caught in the blast if she chose to smite him where he sat.

"I, I apologize, your Holiness," the weathered hunter said. "You won't hear it from me again."

"See that I don't," she said firmly. "I told you all that we would discuss your future," she said, moving on from the topic. "Unfortunately, at the moment, I cannot give you your freedom. Other than Ollie," she said, flashing the young man a warm smile. "The rest of you are captives and you will not be allowed free movement in the castle or in the Vale of Mists."

"That doesn't mean you will be imprisoned," she added quickly when she saw their faces begin to darken. "I've ordered a common room to be prepared for you with good beds and fresh clothing. For the next few days, I will also join you for a morning and evening meal to discuss matters of the vale with you."

"That's very kind, your Holiness," Daithi said. "But we're not people of status. You don't need to spend so much time on us." He said it as a statement but in truth, he was seeking an explanation. He wanted to know why she would go so far for people who had hunted her through the forest just a few days ago.

"I don't need to, but I want to," Ashlynn said. It had only taken a few weeks for her world to change completely. People like Georg and Heila had become more than just servants, they were people she considered to be friends. In time, she imagined she would think the same of Commander Bassinger, Marshal Jakob and the other people who supported Nyrielle in the vale.

She'd changed, in part, because she came to see herself as one of them. Not only because she was Nyrielle's Seneschal, but because of the power she'd been born with. A 'Child of the Earth' or a 'Witch',

the term didn't matter as much as what it represented. Humans didn't see her as 'one of them' anymore. The Eldritch, on the other hand, took her as one of their own.

For Daithi and the men with him, matters were different. There was nothing about them that marked them as anything other than human. But, given the chance, could they come to form their own friendships among the Eldritch?

The answer to that question would help her to resolve the lingering doubts in her own mind about her plans for the future. If it was truly impossible to resolve generations of hatred and fear then the only option left to her and Nyrielle would be a war of extermination. If they couldn't resolve the hatred, there would never be safety for the people of the vale until humans had been purged from the continent.

She didn't want that to happen. She still wanted to find a way to reunite with her own family. To have peaceful relationships between the Vale of Mists and Blackwell County along with the rest of the human territories.

Achieving that, she hoped, would start here, with these seven people. If she could find a way to convert them to her way of seeing the world, then she could find a way to do it with others.

Owain and his family might never put down their hatred. Doing so would make them heretics in the eyes of the church and they would never take those risks. But, if she could conquer the hearts of the common people like the men in this room, then once she defeated the Lothians, she might be able to put something different in their place.

"Let me start by telling you all about my time in the vale," Ashlynn began after taking a sip of her wine. She might not tell them everything, but everything she would tell them would be true. If she had to

stoop to lying in order to build trust between humans and the Eldritch, then she was doomed from the very beginning.