

The Vampire 71

Chapter 71 71: For Her Own Good

As the night grew late, while Ashlynn and Nyrielle were discussing their plans for their future campaign against the Lothians, the hunter Eamon crouched in one corner of the common room he shared with the other soldiers, talking to one of his companions in hushed tones.

Their accommodations weren't bad by any definition of the word. The room was large enough for a dozen men and the soft beds were covered with fine wool blankets that warded off the chilly night air even when the fire in the hearth had burned low. Even more luxurious, heavy wool curtains hung between each of the beds, offering the men more privacy than they usually enjoyed in a common barracks.

"I know Daithi is trying to speak for us," a young hunter whispered to Eamon. "But we all followed Sir Kaefin, and you are the most senior hunter here. I just wanna say, I'll follow your orders, whatever they are."

"You're a good man, Darragh," Eamon whispered, keeping his voice low. "I'll be counting on you and the others in the days to come. Her Holiness needs our help."

"Then, you believe she really is one of the chosen ones?" Darragh said. He'd knelt and bowed and said all the words with the others but that was when Ashlynn was right in front of them. Now, after having his family threatened by the vampire called Marcell, he wasn't so certain that what they'd seen was real. What kind of holy woman would threaten their families?

"I think something strange is going on here," Eamon whispered. Standing up, he peeked around the curtain to ensure no one else was close enough to listen and that the horned demon guard outside hadn't decided to poke his head in before he continued.

"My gran used to tell stories about vampires," the aging hunter said quietly, his eyes never ceasing their search around them for anyone who might overhear. "She told stories about a purple-eyed temptress who could cloud a man's mind and make him murder his own wife and children, just so she could steal the man for herself."

"It got me thinking, what if that purple-eyed vampire is real? The clawed demons are real and we saw one with the strength to tear a man limb from limb," Eamon said, shuddering as he recalled the way Captain Lennart had dismembered Sir Broll.

"You think the purple-eyed temptress bewitched her Holiness?" Darragh asked, his eyes wide and his voice growing louder. The power Ashlynn had shown them was a gift from the Holy Lord of Light. No demon should possess the strength to bewitch one of their holiest saints, but if someone did....

"I think it's all really strange," Eamon said, pressing a leathery hand over the other man's mouth. "Her Holiness talked about the Demon Lady of the Vale feeding on her subjects and claimed the subjects were willing, that they treated being fed on like paying a tax."

"I don't think it's that simple," the aging hunter said. "Darragh, you offer up a boar every year to keep your permit to hunt and roam the wildlands. Would you let a demon drain your life's blood away to avoid hunting a boar for your lord?"

"No, never," the younger hunter said, horrified at the thought. Unconsciously, he placed a hand on his neck as though he was protecting himself from being bitten. "Even if I fell on hard times, I'd hunt something else to pay my dues. I'd never let a monster feed on me."

"But a monster is feeding on her Holiness," Eamon said, recalling the way Ashlynn had touched her neck when she mentioned that the 'feeding' wasn't painful. If he didn't know better, he'd believe that she even enjoyed it!

"That's why, I want your help and any of the others we can bring to our side, to kidnap her Holiness when the time comes," Eamon said, his eyes narrow as he directed a piercing gaze at the younger man. "We need to rescue her from these demons before they do something irreversible to her."

"Eamon," the young man said, sweet forming on his brow. "It's just you and me, maybe one or two of the others. Daithi isn't with us, he's too scared to try doing anything."

"That's why it has to be us," Eamon replied, placing a hand on the young man's shoulder and giving it a firm squeeze. "I have no family to lose, my parents have long crossed over to the Heavenly Shores and I have no wife or children."

In some ways, Eamon felt bitter about that. He'd served Sir Kaefin's father before transferring to the young knight's service and in all that time, he'd spent more days sleeping rough in the wilderness than he had in a warm bed in a castle. Other than women at the occasional brothel, he'd never had the time to find love or build a family.

Now, however, he wondered if it was because the Holy Lord of Light had greater things in mind for him. Now, at this moment, when the demons wanted to threaten their families in order to keep their captives compliant, he had no family for them to threaten. It left him freer to act, and to do the things that must be done.

"For now, don't do anything untoward," Eamon instructed his young accomplice. "In fact, we should be extra diligent in 'making friends' among the demons. We have to be the ideal captives for them to lower their guard."

"Just like covering ourselves in deer droppings," the young man said. "Sometimes, you have to dip yourself in filth to hunt bigger prey."

"Exactly," Eamon said, a predatory gleam shining in his eyes. "For now, we play along, but when the time comes, we'll have to take her Holiness away from this place. Lord Owain's brother, Lord Loman, is a priest in the temple in Lothian City," Eamon reminded the younger man.

"As long as we can take her back to Lord Loman, I'm sure he'll be able to cleanse whatever sorcery is afflicting his sister-in-law."

"Do you, do you think that Lord Loman will reward us for saving her?" Darragh asked hesitantly.

"Lord Loman?" Eamon said, a broad grin forming on his lips, displaying an array of yellowed teeth. "I think her Holiness herself will be grateful for the rescue and so will Lord Owain. Just you watch, Darragh," Eamon said, his eyes growing distant as he looked off toward a future that few in his position would dare to imagine.

He leaned in closer to Darragh, his voice low but filled with a mixture of purpose and anticipation. When his eyes returned to the young man, they burned with a new light that had been all but snuffed out in the days they spent as captives of Captain Lennart and his men.

"You know, lad, I used to think the Holy Lord of Light had forgotten about me," he whispered. "But now I'm starting to see things differently. All those years in the wilderness, all that time serving others... it put me in a place to do something when almost no one else could."

"What do you mean, Eamon?" Darragh asked, his brow furrowing in confusion. He trusted Eamon as both a senior and a mentor but he'd never seen a look of such... fervor on the man's face.

"Think about it," the older man said, his eyes burning with intensity in the dim light of the barracks.
"We're hunters, the most ordinary of free men. But who else would have the patience to lurk among the enemy like we would? Who else could evade pursuing demons all the way back to Lothian City?"

The more Eamon spoke, the more animated he became as if he'd had a divine revelation of his purpose in life.

"There's only one high priest in the entire march who can work miracles," Eamon pointed out. "What do you think they'll do for us when we bring home another miracle worker? Her Holiness could be what the Marquis needs in order to finally win a war against these demons."

"They'll probably reward us with anything we ask for," Darragh said, his eyes growing wide. "We, we could retire with a home of our own, maybe even a parcel of land to work so we don't have to spend so much time in the wilderness," he said eagerly.

"Think bigger lad. Sir Broll and Sir Kaefin are both dead," Eamon said, gripping the young man's arm firmly with his weathered, leathery hands. "Sir Owain will need new knights to serve at his side. Who better than the men who rescued his wife from the demons who tried to beguile her?"

"But you can't be rash," he said before the young man could speak to express the joy blossoming across his face at the notion of becoming a knight. "Her Holiness is still very strong and she has many defenders here. So first, we have to conceal ourselves perfectly."

"Then, it's just a matter of patience," the young man said, calming himself. He'd been on enough hunts to know that patience, more than anything else, was the essential skill of a hunter. "And when we see our opportunity..."

"When we see our opportunity," Eamon whispered. "Then we free her from these demons, and we take her home to the temple where she belongs."