

## The Vampire 72

### Chapter 72 72: The Ancient Oak

Ashlynn spent the next two days putting the beginnings of her plans in motion and tending to the human captives.

Despite the risks involved, Nyrielle approved of her opening moves and agreed to lend Marcell to her for a mission in Lothian City. The young-looking vampire would only be able to carry the letters she'd written as far as Lothian City but once he was there the letters would be handed over to a courier to make their way to Blackwell County.

As much as she wanted to write to her parents or tutors, doing so would jeopardize not only her plans but risked accelerating the timeline for the Lothians to begin their next war against the Eldritch nations. Her immediate goal was to slow things down, not speed them up, so she limited herself to contacting only the people who could help her spoil Owain's upcoming visit to her hometown.

The captives, thankfully, were easier to deal with. As she promised them, she took her morning and evening meals with the captives in order to help them integrate into life in the vale. After the morning meal, she sent them out with Captain Lennart to tour the castle city or to visit one of the nearby villages.

She wanted them to see life in the vale firsthand, but she refused to dedicate all of her time to minding them. The hunter Eamon seemed particularly enthusiastic about having her join them but she refused to become mired in the affairs of the captives when she still had so many important matters to attend to.

Strangely, Eamon and Daithi had nearly come to blows over it when the weathered and aging hunter had offered to stay behind so he could protect her. He seemed to believe that she wasn't safe when there weren't any humans to serve as her guards and he even suggested that Daithi was derelict in his duties as a guardsman for not volunteering to protect her.

Thankfully, Captain Lennart stepped in before either man could harm the other, pulling them apart and holding them dangling from his giant paws like kittens held up by the scruffs of their necks until they promised to leave Ashlynn alone to tend to things that they had no business being involved in.

It was forceful, but it made it clear to both men that if Ashlynn needed a guard in the Vale of Mists, neither of them was capable of protecting her better than the Eldritch people in the vale. Once they accepted that reality, Ashlynn left them in the captain's capable paws and turned to more important things.

One of those matters had led her back to the Ancient Oak where she'd formed her blood pact with Nyrielle. Seeing the oak in daylight, when she wasn't fighting just to stay alive, was even more impressive than it was in her memories.

The massive tree swayed gently in the morning breeze, its leaves rustling with an almost rhythmic sound that mingled with the chirping of birds to create a bright, welcoming song as she approached the mighty oak with Ollie beside her.

"It, it's bigger than the towers of the villa," the young man gasped, looking up at the towering tree that rose above any of the others he could see.

"Mistress Nyrielle says that the Ancient Oaks were here before the first Lord of the Vale of Mists built the castle here," Ashlynn said, tugging on Ollie's tunic to bring him along as she began to climb the steep hill to the base of the tree.

"There used to be more of them, but now there are only four left," she said a touch sadly. One of the previous Lothian Marquis had made the ancient oaks a target of his campaign against Nyrielle's forces. She'd heard Owain boast in the past that the throne the Marquis sat on had been carved from the trunk of one of these sacred trees.

At the time, she'd been impressed, but now, standing before the majesty of the ancient tree, the thought of chopping it down to make furniture felt more like blasphemy than something to boast of. These trees were just as sacred to the Eldritch people as any of the golden relics left behind by the saints and martyrs of the Church and yet they had been turned into something that people sat on to boast of their ability to kill or destroy that which other people treasured.

"Hello," Ashlynn said when they finally reached the trunk of the mighty tree. "I didn't thank you that night for saving me. I know that Nyrielle offered you blood to help me, but even then, you still could have said 'no' couldn't you?"

As she spoke, she reached out to gently caress the stately tree's bark, coming close enough to speak to it softly, her voice little more than a whisper. The closer she came, the more she felt that she was stepping into another world.

The air carried a rich, earthy scent that was deeper and richer than the overpowering scent of cedar that filled much of the Vale of Mists, and beneath that scent, a soft, gentle smell like fresh cut grass and flowers in bloom.

"Is it alive?" Ollie asked, slowly approaching the tree. "I mean, I know trees are alive, but, can it talk?"

"It isn't like that," Ashlynn said, closing her eyes and placing her forehead against the bark of the ancient tree.

When she touched it, she felt a cozy, enveloping warmth from the tree, like it was welcoming her home. The branches trembled, almost like the tail of a dog who was excited to see their favorite person.

The Ancient Oak, she realized, would have helped her even without Nyrielle's offering of blood. The connection she felt with the cedar trees of the vale was thin and tenuous, even though they offered her their strength willingly. The Ancient Oak, however, extended more than simple strength to her.

"I'm sorry," Ashlynn said. "You probably already know why I came. If you want something from me, just tell me what it is. I don't think it's right to just take your gifts, I should give back as well."

She didn't know what kind of price the Ancient Oak would demand of her, but whatever it was, she was determined to pay it. The date of her departure was getting closer every day and she needed the Ancient Oak's help if she was going to stand a chance of success when she asked the Mother of Thorns for help.