

The Vampire 174

Chapter 174 174: A Hunter's Plan

In the refugee camp, the two biggest problems were finding people a place to rest, and making sure they had plenty of food to eat.

Thankfully for Ollie, Sir Thane had lived through more than a few wars and he understood well the needs of people who had lost their homes. When Ollie first set out to warn the villages with Marcell, Sir Thane had already given orders for every able bodied hunter to deliver additional fish, fowl and wild game to the castle to feed the influx of people.

Some of these people had hopes of returning to their villages, while others only had the strength to move once. No one knew yet where everyone would end up but in the near term, Thane was determined to at the very least ensure that no one starved or went without a place to sleep. Everything else could be sorted out in the days to come.

Among the many people who had responded to Thane's call for additional hunters, two surprising figures crept through the late morning mist, moving carefully so as to avoid startling any of the small game birds that were plentiful in the forest closest to the castle.

The human hunters Eamon and Darragh had leaped at the opportunity to do more independent work in the Vale of Mists with Eamon passionately promising that they could hunt much more efficiently if he and Darragh were allowed to work as a pair.

Thus far, they had only been allowed to use their skills in very limited ways, assisting other hunters from the castle in occasional outings to hunt for grouse, pheasant and other birds native to the area. Longer hunts that kept them out of the castle for multiple days had been expressly forbidden, as had hunting any large game whether that was deer or bear.

All of the captives Ashlynn had taken after defeating Sir Broll were still kept under close watch, but Commander Bassinger looked for ways to reward them for good behavior in line with Ashlynn's desire to see if more humans could integrate into the community of the Vale of Mists.

Since Eamon and Darragh had been particularly zealous about demonstrating their good intentions toward 'Her Holiness', Bassinger saw no reason to restrict the men now when their skills could be used the most.

"Eamon," Darragh hissed, crouching low and holding out a hand with several clusters of brilliant red berries. "Red Baneberry," he said with a wide grin. "If we slather this on the meat we deliver to their 'welcome camp', it should thin out the weak among the refugees. It looks like that traitor has taken command over there, the blame is sure to fall on him."

Rather than looking happy, however, Eamon's hand struck out with the speed of a snake, knocking the berries from the younger man's hand and scattering them in the bushes.

"Idiot," the grizzled hunter hissed. "This is not the time and targeting Her Holiness's friend is not a wise move." Red Baneberry, in small doses, would cause anything from a bad case of the runs to days of dizziness and weakness. Mixed into food, however, with a chance to concentrate, could produce a dish so toxic that it caused the body to spasm and weak hearts to fail.

Perhaps people would turn on the human cook who oversaw the refugees, but Eamon had seen the gentleness in young Ollie's eyes. No one would believe that he would be so cruel. Instead, a manhunt would begin almost immediately, searching for anyone who might have poisoned the food.

From there, it wouldn't be long before suspicion fell on the other humans who brought fresh meat to be added to the cook pots and everything they had worked for would fall apart.

"But Eamon," the younger man said. "We need to rescue Her Holiness and take her back home to Lord Owain. You said that yourself didn't you? Weakening the people around her is a good opportunity for us. Besides, all of these refugees have escaped Lord Owain's hunt. If we can tell him that we helped clean up the strays that escaped him, won't he increase our rewards when we bring Lady Ashlynn back to him?"

"If Lord Owain wants them to die then they will die," Eamon said simply, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. "Whether they die now or die when he brings an army to trample the Vale of Mists beneath his feet, it doesn't matter. Dead is dead."

"Right now, our concern is getting close enough to Her Holiness to rescue her from the hands of these demons," the older man said. A zealous flame burned in his eyes as he remembered Lady Ashlynn's demonstration of her holy power the night they arrived in the Vale of Mists.

He knew then that he had to rescue her from this place, he just hadn't anticipated that she would leave the Vale entirely not long after his own arrival. He'd spent several nights on his knees in prayer, trying to find an answer to how he was supposed to rescue her if she was no longer in the Vale.

That was when he realized, as if by divine revelation, that Her Holiness would judge him for his deeds while she was away. If he wanted to be someone who could come close to her when she returned, he had to be someone who demonstrated that he could live according to her instructions even when she wasn't there to witness his deeds.

Now, if filling the bellies of demon refugees was what it would take for him to earn his way back into her presence, then he was willing to feed demons until their stomachs burst. The methods didn't matter,

only the results mattered. In the end, as long as he could stand with pride having returned Ashlynn Blackwell to her husband, he was certain to reap the best rewards from Lord Owain.

"Just like hunting, young Darragh," Eamon said, preparing to move to a vantage point with a better view. "Don't lose the buck you're stalking because you decided to pocket a hare along the way. It's too easy to wind up with nothing but the hare, or worse, nothing at all, because you were too greedy. I know you want to kill the demons. I know it pains you to make nice with them, but you have to endure this," he said, placing a hand firmly on the young man's shoulder.

"I know," Darragh said, looking away from Eamon's burning gaze. The passion and zealotry that burned in the older hunter since seeing Lady Ashlynn's demonstration was uncomfortably bright when Darragh himself didn't have such a strong faith. Still, he believed in Eamon's plan. Lord Owain would favor them heavily when they revealed that his wife was a miracle worker and that they'd rescued her.

For now, he would just have to hide his hatred deeper and let go of the opportunities he had to erode the strength of the Vale of Mists from within. As long as Eamon could lead him to their ultimate goal, knighthoods of their own, he would endure. And if it turned out Eamon was wrong... there was still glory to be had in slaughtering demons and there were still rewards to be claimed if he could escape with proof of his kills.

One way or another, Darragh didn't intend to take a loss in this place. Eamon had already found one way to turn the current crisis to his advantage, Darragh would just have to look for others on his own.