

The Vampire 64

Chapter 64 64: Treating Captives as Guests (Part Two)

Entering the city at the base of the ancient castle provided one shock after another to Daithi and his fellow captives. The people here weren't what they had expected to encounter at all.

The looks they received from the demons were also very mixed. Some anxiously shooed children out of the streets when they saw a group of humans passing by while others looked at them with open hostility.

Many of the demons, however, including almost all of the children, looked at them with mild curiosity or an occasional look of pity when they realized the men were being escorted under guard like common criminals.

When Daithi glanced at his fellow captives, he noticed the same mixture of fear, anxiety, and bewilderment in their eyes. Nothing was what they expected and it left all of them uncertain about what would happen to them now.

It seemed like they were a truly uncommon sight in the castle town and no one, neither the humans nor the demons, knew what to make of their presence.

"You speak as though we're going to be alive to see autumn," Daithi said dourly, returning his attention to the looming figure of Captain Lennart. As interesting as it might be to walk the streets of the city during the time of year when the mists of the vale were the thickest, he doubted that he would still be present to see it. "I can't quite bring myself to share that optimism."

"True," the bear of a man said in a deep, rumbling voice. "But perhaps things will be different for you. You never waged war on us. Your hands are clean. That makes you different from other captives."

"Does it really?" Daithi asked, mostly rhetorically. The words Lady Ashlynn had said to Sir Broll echoed through his mind again and again - 'I think the world isn't as we were taught.' He'd been taught that demons were ruthless to their captives, working them to death before feasting on their flesh, but was it true? The further they walked, the less sure he was of anything he'd learned as a youth.

"You'll know soon," Lennart said. "When we passed through the outer gates I was told that the Seneschal wants to receive you and your fellows personally. It's a great honor," he emphasized, glowering down at the human. "Do not do anything impolite."

Before Daithi could ask what might be considered impolite, they passed through a mighty gate and under a wickedly sharp portcullis that gave him the feeling of being devoured by an enormous beast with giant fangs sharp enough to pierce through his entire body.

Beyond the tunnel leading through the thick castle wall, a space had been cleared among the bustling activity of the courtyard where a stunning woman with pale golden hair and piercing emerald eyes awaited them.

She had washed the black dye from her hair and traded her servant's garb for a pale blue dress with silvery lace but Daithi wouldn't forget that face for as long as he lived. When he compared the woman before him, standing with regal pride and unassailable confidence in her power, he couldn't help but laugh under his breath at the pale imitation of this woman who currently occupied the Summer Villa.

If he'd doubted before, then all of his doubts vanished like the vale's mists at midday when he saw the radiant beauty standing before a group of horned demons dressed as servants.

"Lady Ashlynn," Daithi said, taking a knee formally and gesturing for the men behind him to do the same. "I'm told my fate is in your hands. If it will appease your anger, my life is yours to take," he said with a heavy swallow.

"I only ask that, that the men behind me..." he tried to say only to trail off as he saw the gazes of the demons grow increasingly hostile. Was he not allowed to plead for the lives of his men? Was even this little bit of mercy to be denied to him?

Captain Lennart balled his hand into a fist, ready to strike out at the human for the string of insults he'd greeted the Seneschal with. Daithi acted like his life still belonged to him, to bargain away for his men. The truth, as far as Lennart was concerned, was that Daithi's life and the lives of all of his men already belonged to the Seneschal from the moment she defeated their leader in single combat.

The strong had the right to claim dominion over their defeated foes, yet this man acted like he still had room to bargain. Before Captain Lennart could strike the foolish human, however, Ashlynn gestured for him to wait while she addressed the kneeling human soldier.

"What is your name, Soldier?" Ashlynn asked, her voice cool and even. The dark stares of the gathered Eldritch people were clearly sufficient for the soldier to notice his misstep, even if he didn't understand it.

Now, all she needed to do was follow up on the tone they set in order to keep these men on their back foot, responding to her directions rather than trying to formulate plans of their own. It was one of the many lessons her father had taught her that she'd never had the chance to use at home and was now profoundly grateful to be able to draw on. She only wished her father could be here to see her using his teachings.

"I'm called Daithi, my Lady," the man answered, lowering his head and fixing his gaze on the smooth cobblestones of the courtyard lest he commit another offense.

"You may rise, Daithi," Ashlynn said with a faint smile, forcing the memories of home and her father's lessons to the back of her mind while she focused on the men in front of her. There would be time for reunions later, but only if she built herself a road on which she could return.

"This is Piet," she said, gesturing to one of the short, horned men dressed as a servant behind her. "He's going to take you and your men to wash up before you join me for dinner."

"Ollie," she said, waving at the gangly kitchen boy who stood with the horned soldier Harrod. As the person who had helped her escape, his status was clearly different than the other captives and Harrod had taken personal responsibility for guiding the young man for the past few days.

"Come with me, I have something else prepared for you," she said with a warm smile. "If you thought the Summer Villa was impressive, just wait until you see this place," she added with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes.