

The Vampire 66

Chapter 66 66: The Power of Heresy

When the captives finally entered the hall, they had changed out of their rough forest wear or cloth armor and donned simple breeches and undyed wool tunics that were as well made or better than anything they'd worn at home.

Seeing the darkening room, the men clustered closer together, pushing Daithi forward as the official 'spokesman' of the group.

"Please, be seated," Ashlynn said, gesturing at the long table. "We're still waiting for one more person," she added, pointing at the chair to the left of her own seat at the head of the table. "Daithi, if you'd like, you can sit to my right."

"Thank you, your ladyship," the soldier said awkwardly.

Everyone moved awkwardly, the heels of their boots echoing off the ancient stone floors as they walked toward the heavy oak table near the hearth. Some wondered if this was going to be their last meal while others wondered if they were about to be treated to some form of gruesome demon delicacy.

Two days spent with Captain Lennart's men had begun to erode their beliefs in the most extreme horror stories told about demons but a few of them believed that it was only the realities of traveling in the forest that prevented the beastly people from indulging in savage pleasures. Now that they were in the demon's own fortress, who knew what kind of dark feast they'd be served?

Shortly after the captives had taken their seats, the doors to the grand hall opened again to reveal a gangly youth who had undergone a remarkable transformation.

Not only had Justus shaved the scratchy stubble that had begun to form on the young man's face, but he'd also tamed his unruly red hair, trimming it neatly and shaping it into an elegant short style. The change combined with a sapphire blue tunic and dark breeches tucked into polished black boots gave the former kitchen boy an appearance much closer to the son of a knight than a common servant.

"Ollie," Ashlynn said with a smile, leaving her seat to walk the young man over to the chair on her left side. "You look incredibly dashing like that. I'll need to warn Zedya and the other ladies before they fall for your charms."

The young man would have stumbled over his own feet at the praise if Ashlynn hadn't caught him. Looking around at how differently he was dressed compared to the other captives it was clear that he was being treated much differently but he had no clue how he was supposed to act given the difference, much less how he was supposed to respond to gentle teasing from a noblewoman.

"I, um, I won't do anything I'm not supposed to," he said sheepishly, hoping that no one could tell how much he was blushing in the darkening room.

"It's fine Ollie," Ashlynn said, taking her seat. "Everyone, I know you likely have several questions but I want to make a few things clear at the beginning," she said, turning her attention to the remaining humans at the table.

Raising her right hand, Ashlynn briefly closed her eyes, feeling the power slumbering deep within her. She still hadn't fully recovered from using sorcery on Sir Kaefin but she'd regained enough energy for a small demonstration.

For a moment, she hesitated. Everything she'd been taught growing up said that this was wrong on such a deep level that no one would question Owain's decision to murder her if they'd caught word of it. It contradicted the Church so directly that she would have been branded a heretic and hunted to the ends of the earth if she did it anywhere but here in the Vale where she was safe among the Eldritch.

And yet, after everything she'd seen and learned since coming to the Vale, she found more and more about the 'holy' laws that she couldn't abide by. Taking a deep breath, she steadied herself and let her power flow, crossing a line in her own heart that might surprise even Nyrielle if she was present to witness it.

"Glow, golden, hand to crystals," she said too softly for most of the men to hear.

Suddenly, a brilliant golden energy enveloped her outstretched hand, lighting the room more brightly than a dozen torches. The energy then flowed from her hand to half a dozen crystals along the table, spreading their golden light over everyone at the gathering.

Daithi, Ollie, and the other men trembled at the sight. Three of the hunters even scrambled out of their chairs before dropping to their knees at the display. Of those who remained seated, none of them were any less reverent at the sight, they were just too stunned to make any kind of movement.

Only Daithi was both old enough and senior enough in Owain's guard to have attended one of the Grand Masses held by the Church of the Holy Lord of Light where one of the high priests called upon the blessings of their patron deity to bathe the congregation in holy golden light.

Daithi felt his heart racing, torn between awe and terror. The light was beautiful, reminiscent of the holy glow he'd witnessed in the Grand Mass. The light was perfect and pure, providing light without the heat of flame.

He'd seen street performers and charlatans attempt to imitate the holy light but it had always been an act of trickery using burning oils to create a flame that resembled holy light. This, however, was a shining display or pure holy light yet it was called forth by a woman who openly consorted with demons.

Eamon, the oldest of the hunters among them, clasped his hands together instinctively, muttering a prayer under his breath. His weathered face was a mask of conflict, reverence warring with a deep suspicion of anything associated with 'demons'.

No one could spend as much time deep in the forest as he had without having a few chance encounters with demons but he'd never once seen them do anything that looked so... holy. To witness it here shook him to his core.

Even Ollie, despite his privileged position, found himself gripping the arms of his chair tightly. He'd known Lady Ashlynn was special, but this, this was beyond anything he'd imagined. Reaching under the table with one hand, he pinched himself as hard as he could, drawing a sharp breath at the pain that told him this was really happening.

Now, as everyone watched the light flowing from the woman at the head of the table, their hearts trembled in worship and fear.

Only the chosen of the Holy Lord of Light could summon such a sacred glow, but this woman stood among the people the church called demons. What Ashlynn had just done amounted to heresy of the highest order yet none of them could speak as they stared at the holy light she summoned.

"I told Sir Broll that much of what we have been taught is wrong," Ashlynn said, breaking the silence at last. "Tonight, I want to tell you about the world as I see it. You don't have to accept my words, but for the sake of your futures, I hope you'll listen to what I have to say."