

The Vampire 68

Chapter 68 68: The Carrot and the Stick

It didn't take long for Ashlynn to weave her story. The sun had fully set and they'd enjoyed a delicious course of roasted capons by the time she was finished explaining everything from the bazaar in the castle town to the things she'd witnessed when Nyrielle fed in one of the villages.

"So, it's true then?" Daithi said when Ashlynn brought up Nyrielle's feeding. "The, um, Eldritch Lady of the Vale really does drink blood?"

Around the table, everyone looked pale at the notion, and the youngest man aside from Ollie, one of the other soldiers in the group, had set down his utensils, unable to continue eating after hearing Ashlynn's story.

"It's true," Ashlynn said, wistfully touching the spot on her neck where Nyrielle had first fed on her. "She only feeds on the willing," she said, blushing slightly and snatching her hand away from her neck. "And while I won't say that she's never killed anyone, neither she nor her progeny need to kill just to feed. They're all capable of stopping short of that and a person can recover in a few days of rest."

Her movement wasn't lost on her audience. While Ollie and Daithi looked surprised, Eamon and one or two of the other hunters scowled darkly at the notion of a vampire 'feeding' on a woman as holy as Ashlynn.

"Does it hurt?" Ollie asked bluntly, missing the dark looks from the captives around the table. From the way Ashlynn was acting, it seemed like she might actually... like it?

"For a moment, and then it doesn't," Ashlynn said, her face heating even more when she thought about Nyrielle's fangs sinking into her tender thigh. "The important thing is that it's not cruel. The Eldritch see it the same way as we'd see a tax paid in grain or livestock," she said, trying to get the conversation back on track.

"Perhaps one of them would like a demonstration," a warm, masculine voice called as Thane entered the hall along with Marcell. "I've eaten recently but I'm sure my little brother could use a bite," he said, gesturing to the darkly elegant younger vampire.

"Don't listen to him," Marcell said with a smile. "He knows I prefer the company of beautiful women to coarser men. I'm sure these fine soldiers would agree that if you're going to nibble on someone's neck, it's best that it be a neck free of stubble."

"You two, don't frighten them!" Ashlynn said in mock indignation. Two of the hunters had already clasped both hands awkwardly over their necks and even Ollie was looking pale when Thane flashed his sharp fangs.

"We won't harm your pets, er, guests," Marcell said with a mischievous twinkle in his dark eyes. "But I do need to ask them a few questions before they tuck in for the night."

"Mistress Nyrielle wants to meet the boy Ollie who helped you in the villa," Thane added. "You can leave your guests in Marcell's care for the night."

"Oh, all right then," Ashlynn said, standing and turning to the bewildered-looking former kitchen boy. "Come, the nights are getting shorter and it's never good to leave the Lady of the Vale waiting for you. You want to make a good impression, don't you?"

"I wouldn't dare," the young man said, scampering out of his chair and turning to follow Ashlynn and Thane out of the room.

"Now," Marcell said, dropping into the seat Ashlynn had vacated, sprawling with one leg draped over an armrest. "I shouldn't have to tell you this, but I expect each and every one of you to be honest with me," he said, snatching Ashlynn's half-finished goblet of wine off the table and twirling it lazily between his fingers.

"She's already obtained some information from the late Sir Kaefin, but I'm interested in details. I want to know how many men were stationed at the villa in total, soldiers and servants alike. I also want to know everything you know about Lady Ashlynn's sister Jocelynn and the force she'll be bringing to the Summer Villa."

Around the table, several of the men went pale as Marcell began to ask his questions.

Daithi shifted nervously in his chair, struggling to meet the young-looking vampire's intense gaze.

"This isn't proper, is it your lordship?" Daithi said, uncertain how he should address the vampire. "As you said, we're Lady Ashlynn's guests. Shouldn't we be treated like guests rather than interrogated like prisoners?"

"Lady Ashlynn is very kind, even when she is cornered by her enemies," Marcell said, his free hand drifting across the spill of dark lace from his other wrist. "But don't mistake your situation for one of security," he added, his dark eyes narrowing sharply.

With a flick of his fingers, a slender knife flashed across the room, embedding itself in the heavy wooden table just inches from Daithi's hands. The knife thrummed, vibrating with the force of its impact and holding the gazes of every man gathered around the table.

Daithi's eyes shook as he slowly returned his gaze to the vampire in Lady Ashlynn's chair. For a little bit, while they'd feasted like young lords and listened to Ashlynn's tale, he'd begun to forget just how dangerous the Eldritch beings of the vale could be.

Marcell's demonstration brought every childhood nightmare and campfire horror story he'd ever heard right back to the front of his mind. Just inches from the vibrating knife, his hands clenched, wishing that he had a more suitable weapon to fight back with than the small silver knife that sat alongside his fork.

"I have questions for you," Marcell repeated, twirling another knife he'd pulled from somewhere hidden in his free hand. "It would sadden Lady Ashlynn if I had to be forceful but I remind you all that I answer to Mistress Nyrielle. She has sent me to obtain answers and I will have them from you, one way or another."

Of course, if all they wanted was information, sending Zedya would have produced results with considerably less effort. The woman with the Mesmerizing Eyes could easily captivate the six men sitting at the table, pulling answers from their lips without a moment of hesitation.

Nyrielle hadn't sent Zedya for a reason. She understood what Ashlynn was trying to do with these men and while she might think that it was doomed to fail, that didn't mean she wouldn't let Ashlynn try.

While the answers Marcell was seeking were important, it was even more important that these men make the conscious decision to betray their former master. Even if the information they provided was limited because none of them were very important, the simple act of choosing to cooperate would drive a wedge into their hearts.

Ashlynn wanted to provide the men with a carrot. She believed that, given knowledge and the experience of a comfortable life in the vale, they would make the same decision she had.

Marcell was more cynical. He'd seen men do any number of irrational things when they felt they had nothing left to lose and he wanted to make sure that these men understood that they were still captives, even if they were being treated well by the Seneschal.

"Look, let's start with something simpler," Marcell said, shifting in the chair to sit normally. "There is a chance that you can be reunited with your families if you behave well while you're in the vale. Come autumn, when the days are shorter, I can slip into a number of places to carry away your loved ones and bring them back to join you here."

All around the table, the men quaked in their boots when the vampire brought up their families. For a moment, some of them sat up straight, ready to tell the vampire everything about their families so they could be reunited with their loved ones.

Most of the men had wives and a few even had children. Even Jesse, the youngest of the soldiers, had aging parents that he supported with his limited salary. For the most part, they'd given up hope that they would ever see their loved ones again but now it sounded like there was a chance!

A second realization hit them mere moments after the first. If this powerful vampire could, as he said, slip into places in Lothian City or elsewhere to whisk their loved ones away, couldn't he just as easily slip into those places to kill their loved ones?

Suddenly, they realized that the vampire's question wasn't simple and that answering it could be just as dangerous as answering his questions about soldiers in the villa, only the consequences would be much, much more personal.

They might have thought they had nothing to lose if they refused to answer his questions about the villa but now they realized that, even if they were willing to die to protect Lord Owain, it wasn't just their lord or their own lives they needed to worry about.

"So, tell me who you treasure," Marcell said, smiling with a flash of fang. "And then we can discuss things about the villa."