

The Vampire 104

Chapter 104 104: Cooling Down

Paulus flinched, staring at the sturgeon head that Ashlynn had impaled into the table in front of him. This was the delicate human noblewoman that Lady Nyrielle had taken as her Seneschal? The trophy wife selected to bear the next set of Lothian heirs? Suddenly he felt very misled by the messenger the Eldritch Lady of the Vale had sent to inform them of her guest and the reason she needed to cross through the High Pass.

Paulus's gaze darted from the impaled fish head to Ashlynn's fierce expression, then to the approving nods of the other Frost Walkers both at the high table and among the more common guests.

His jaw clenched as he realized his carefully laid plans were unraveling before his eyes. This human witch had outmaneuvered him, turning what should have been a moment of triumph into a humiliating defeat.

As the conversation continued around him, his mind raced. If he couldn't make them recognize that the real danger was closer at hand than the humans would ever come, perhaps it was time to consider... alternative methods. His eyes flickered briefly to the icy walls of the great hall, beyond which lay the treacherous mountain passes.

He'd delayed long enough. Once the banquet came to an end, he would do what had to be done. One way or another, he would make sure Lord Ritchel understood how important it was to put a strong protector like his grandson Torsten in line to succeed Ritchel, and the sooner, the better.

"Do you understand now," Nyrielle said, directing a frosty gaze at Paulus and startling him out of his thoughts. "This is just one of the many reasons why I treasure Ashlynn as my Seneschal. Already, she has slain two of Owain Lothian's knights and learned much of his plans for the next war the Lothians intend to start."

"She speaks as if this 'Holy War' is certain to come," Lord Ritchel said. "My people deserve to know, how certain is this war?"

"Owain has filled a chest with gold and jewels taken from Airgead Mountain," Ashlynn said, returning to her seat next to Nyrielle. "He is sending them to the merchants in the city where I grew up, to entice them into helping him bring 'Holy Warriors' from across the seas to fight in his next war."

"He is buying weapons, armor and supplies and if he does not secure access to the wealth of Airgead Mountain, the consequences of being unable to repay his debts will be ruinous," she said. "I've made a move to slow him down. Mistress Nyrielle and I intend to do more, but the people who are sending soldiers from across the ocean have never seen a person from the Eldritch clans."

"They do not know what they are truly fighting against, but they know their god compels them to fight," Ashlynn said, her voice becoming somber. "So they will come, even if they will lose. They will come, even if most of them will die because they believe that dying in a Holy War or a Crusade will guarantee them a place on the Heavenly Shores in the life after this one."

"The Frost Walkers have a special ancestral cave where their bravest heroes' horns are kept, don't they?" Nyrielle said. "Imagine being promised that your horn would be placed there if you fought the humans, no matter whether you killed one human or a thousand, and you can begin to understand the motivation the humans Church has given them."

"This is why," Lord Ritchel began, standing up to address all of the assembled Frost Walkers. "This is why it is important to stand together. This is why it is important to fight together. Lady Nyrielle, it shames me that the High Pass has never sent soldiers to fight in the Vale," he said, lowering his head slightly. "This time, when the humans come, if our men wish to fight by your side, would you accept them?"

"I cannot say," Nyrielle said, smiling at the towering Eldritch Lord. This was what she'd wanted, more than anything else. "The High Pass has always been our ally, and the aid the High Pass has rendered has not been small. There are many things we depend on which we can no longer make for ourselves, but the High Pass extracts no toll from our merchants, and has often helped them complete dangerous crossings when winter comes early and catches them unprepared."

"If the Lothians do as they have frequently done and attack the vale in summer, it would be the wrong time to send your soldiers, but the right time to send supplies," Nyrielle explained, directing her gaze at the hunters and traders in the crowd. "But the humans have focused their greed on Airgead Mountain," she added. "If they attack there, you may travel over routes they feel are impossible and come to Lord Jalal's aid instead of mine."

"If we're lucky," Ashlynn added, "we may be able to delay the start of the war by two or more years while the humans gather their forces. But when the humans come, there's one last thing you need to understand."

"To humans, there is no difference between the Vale of Mists and the High Pass or the Southern Steppe," Ashlynn explained. "To humans, all of us are 'demons', and they will not stop until they have 'cleansed' the lands where we live," she said, very deliberately including herself in the 'demons.' The line between 'witch' and 'demon' was so thin in the teachings of the Church that the distinction barely mattered and she wanted to make it clear to the Frost Walkers that she was one of them.

She still thought of herself as human, and sometimes, she thought the same of Nyrielle, Thane and the other progeny. It was easy to let outward appearances dictate things and the rest of the Eldritch people looked very different compared to the vampires she had met so far. But the more time she spent among the Eldritch clans, the more she wondered if she would still think of herself the same way after several years had passed.

"We thank you," Lord Ritchel said formally, "for bringing us this warning. This isn't a council meeting to make any decisions, but I think everyone here better understands what we're up against."

For a moment, he paused, his eyes sweeping across the room, taking in the tense faces of his people. Many looked nervous, but more of them looked determined with several directing hopeful glances at Nyrielle and Ashlynn.

"But, as much as we have danger to prepare against, we also have friends to celebrate and the night shouldn't end without a chance to toast our friends from the Vale of Mists," he added, raising a frosty goblet in Nyrielle's direction. "After all, a feast is meant to be a happy thing, and friends should always be celebrated," he said with a wide smile that warmed the icy room.

"Now, before the night ends, while fish is succulent and its flesh can be sweet, there are better things to end a feast with." With a gesture to the servants standing at the edges of the room, he signaled for the next course.

Moments later, the doors opened and a wave of Frost Walkers entered, bearing large platters that contained bowls carved from ice, each one containing small, multi-colored balls of frozen, churned cream.

"Lady Nyrielle spoke of trade and without a good supply of milk from the Vale of Mists and the High Fen, we wouldn't be able to indulge in a treat like this. Seneschal Ashlynn, I hope you don't find it too cold to enjoy," he said with a wide grin.

Children exclaimed in excitement and even a few of their parents clapped their hands excitedly as the servants delivered bowl after bowl of different flavors of smooth, sweet ice cream.

"The purple one is blended with mountain berries," Hauke explained when he saw Ashlynn trying to decide which one to choose. "The green one is made with mint and the pink one is tart from the hibiscus flower."

"I think," Ashlynn said, her spoon hovering over several options. "I'll have to try all of them. I think this is just what we need to cool down." Despite the chill in the room, tensions had run high enough that she found herself sweating beneath her fur trimmed dress and the cool treat looked like the perfect cure for the knot that had formed in her stomach.

"Then let me choose for you," Nyrielle said, putting Paulus and his glowering face out of her mind as she scooped up a bit of minty ice cream and held it out to Ashlynn. "Taste, and tell me if you like it."

Many at the table stared open-mouthed at the sudden change in Nyrielle's demeanor. The fearsome Blood Princess - Champion of the Arena, the indomitable Eldritch Lady of the Vale, victor of countless battles against human invaders, yet here she was, smiling and doting on her Seneschal like a young woman in love.

Were they really the same person? Had they mistaken her fierceness?

Ashlynn, however, knew better. She could feel the pain of long-buried memories, tearing at the echo of Nyrielle's heartbeat within her chest. Tonight hadn't been easy for either of them, but both Nyrielle and Lord Ritchel were trying to plaster over it with something simple and joyful before the banquet ended and Ashlynn played along.

Once they returned to their room for the night, however, Ashlynn was determined to help soothe Nyrielle's hurts after bringing up so many painful topics. Her mistress had done much to shower her with affection and care in the vale, now it was her turn to do the same.

