

The Vampire 149

Chapter 149 149: Words Between Rulers

Atop one of the highest towers in the Frost Walker fortress, Lord Ritchel stood with Nyrielle, Ashlynn, and Heila as they looked out across the High Pass. Clouds had rolled in obscuring much of the land beneath a white, fluffy blanket that glowed under the light of countless stars. Every now and then, the peaks of six nearby mountains could be seen above the clouds, covered in snow and shining in the night.

"You didn't leave me with much pride in front of my people during this visit, Lady Nyrielle," Ritchel said, sipping from a cup of strong chilled wine as he stared out into the night. "My people feel like they have been trampled by the Vale of Mists."

"Good," Nyrielle said bluntly. Despite the awkwardness of doing so, she'd pulled Ashlynn's cloak around her own shoulders and wrapped her arms around her lover while she spoke with Ritchel. The sky at night in the High Pass was one of the most beautiful sights in the region and she wasn't going to give up her time to enjoy it with Ashlynn even if there were still important matters to discuss.

"Your people needed a reminder," the vampire continued. "In your grandfather's days, none of his councilors would have dared to plot against one of my people, even if he was just aiming at one of yours. Your people would do well to remember who has been keeping the humans from turning them into pelts and enchanted blades all these years."

Ritchel sighed heavily as he stared out across the clouds. While he complained, he Nyrielle was also correct. He'd tried emphasizing the hard work and sacrifice of the Vale of Mists to keep humans out of their lands, but lately, all he'd heard from his council were questions about charging traders from the vale to use the pass as they had in the era before humans invaded.

Worse, some even suggested that they should conquer the lowlands themselves. While they cared nothing for the farmlands of the Vale, if they could treat it like a subordinate power it would significantly

strengthen their position in dealings with Airgead Mountain and the High Fen. His people truly had forgotten how powerful the Vale of Mists was.

"If you claimed the title of 'High Lady' this would be easier," Ritchel pointed out. "They're more frightened of being swallowed up by High Lady Erna than they are of you. They think you're weak because they don't understand how strong the humans are."

"You know that won't happen," Nyrielle said with a shake of her head. "I might have the strength, but I lack the territory. The only way to become a High Lady would be to conquer the High Pass and Airgead Mountain or to reclaim much of Lothian March from the humans."

"I will find a way to deliver the March to you," Ashlynn said softly. "Everything that is mine is also yours. As soon as I've taken the March from the Lothians, you may consider it your own front garden."

Beside them, Ritchel blinked several times. He knew that Ashlynn had a grievance with the Lothians but did she truly think she could take their territory away from them? He'd heard Hauke's more detailed explanation of how Ashlynn had fought against the Tuscans and the strength Nyrielle had displayed to overcome the corrupted ancestors. Both were doubtlessly strong, but neither of them seemed that strong.

"It's fine," Nyrielle said lightly. "Young Ritchel's people will remember this lesson for years to come, they won't dare to cause trouble like this again. Hauke likely won't need a reminder either. One sharp lesson can last for a generation or two without a need to constantly bully the High Pass. It's better this way,"

"Hauke is a good man," Ashlynn said, thinking of the young Frost Walker. "Or, he will be, once he grows up. I," she started to say, then paused, twisting to look at Nyrielle as though for permission before speaking further.

Ashlynn had her own desires in this, and her own thoughts about relationships between the High Pass and the Vale of Mists, but ultimately, these decisions rested on Nyrielle.

"My darling can be a little willful, if she wishes," Nyrielle said with a smile. "You were already willful when you decided to title Heila as a Lady while I was sleeping. If your words cross a line, I will pull you back."

"Heila earned that," Ashlynn said, praising her diminutive friend. "And Hauke has earned my friendship," she continued, turning to look at Lord Ritchel. "He thinks differently than many and I think that this is no accident, my Lord," she said politely.

"In the future, I welcome him to visit the Vale of Mists, to spend time with me learning about human methods of ruling a nation," Ashlynn offered. "Human ways aren't better than Eldritch ways, but in my time here, I've seen places where having knowledge of human ways could be valuable. If nothing else, they can be treated as additional arrows in his quiver."

"You've already saved my son's life," Ritchel said, tipping his horn low in respect to the young witch. "Now you offer to tutor him. Lady Nyrielle, I feel like I have been trampled beneath your carriage only to be offered a meal when I stand up," he said, laughing helplessly.

"It is good if Hauke has a friend he can rely on, one that will help him to grow," Ritchel said, speaking more as a father than as the Lord of the High Pass. He had known from consulting with the ancestors that the High Pass could never withstand a confrontation with the Vale of Mists, no matter how weak they appeared.

As a lord, the entire situation left him frustrated. He couldn't even vent his fury on Paulus and his rotten grandson because Nyrielle had taken them from him. All the Lord of the High Pass could do is swallow the series of humiliations and insults that had come from Paulus's treachery.

But as a father, he could be proud of Hauke's actions, and grateful that he had found not only a potential friend, but a way to crystalize his convictions. The Hauke who had gone out on a fishing trip had been studious, diligent, and obedient as a son should be. The one who had returned was still all of those things, but he had also become determined in a way that he wasn't before.

In the end, this would only be good for his son, and eventually, it would be good for the High Pass as well. He just had to swallow his immediate hurts to focus on the broader view.

"Will the humans really come for us within my lifetime?" Ritchel asked, giving Nyrielle and Ashlynn an evaluating look.

"Bors Lothian has much in common with you, young Ritchel," Nyrielle said, looking toward the east in the direction of the Vale of Mists and Lothian March beyond it.. "He is a good and stable ruler, willing to fight the battles he must with ambition to see his territory grow mightier under his rule than it was under the rule of his father."

"But he raised his son very differently than you raised Hauke," the vampire said, her tone growing cold and sharp. "Owain is arrogant and proud and these are his weaknesses. He is inexperienced but this will not last. When humans see him, they see how he is weak because they do not understand how a man like him will change as he outgrows his inexperience."

"Underneath the face he shows the world, he is decisive enough to beat his own newlywed wife nearly to death at the first hint that she could be a threat to him," Nyrielle said. She hadn't just seen the

wounds Owain inflicted on Ashlynn, she'd studied them and that beating told her much about the man who inflicted those wounds.

"He is cruel enough and merciless enough to do the deed himself, with his own hands," she added. "He is ambitious enough and cunning enough to create a fiction to show the world that Ashlynn is still alive and married to him, just so he can complete his plans to start the next war by borrowing the power of her family's allies. There is an element of Bors' shrewdness in this, but the hand moving pieces on the board belongs to Owain."

"It is Owain's personal mission to become the first Lothian Duke," Ashlynn added. "Whether he has the ability to do so or not, in the end, is irrelevant. He has the desire to try, and many people will die before he succeeds or fails."

"So what do you want of me, Lady Nyrielle?" Lord Ritchel asked. "You never come for one reason only. You have fought the humans for longer than I have drawn breath. What would you have me do?"

"Prepare your hunters and your soldiers," Nyrielle said with a smile forming on her lips that revealed her fangs. "We are both weak in the summer, but this winter, I would like you to lend me a few of your men. A hundred or two will do. It would be good if Hauke was ready to join with them when the time comes."

"I will prepare them," Ritchel said, swallowing the last of his wine in a gulp. "But whether or not you can use them will depend on another conversation between us in winter. Even if we have a common enemy, I will not share in the risks of fighting them if I cannot also share in the rewards."

"I make no promises today," Nyrielle said, pulling Ashlynn closer to her. "Much will depend on my darling Ashlynn's abilities after she studies with the Mother of Thorns. But... I do not think she will be content to wait too long before she begins to extract a price from the humans for what they have done. When the time comes, you will not lack for opportunities to join in our hunt."

