

The Vampire 20

Chapter 20 20: Offerings

"What's going on," Ashlynn whispered to Thane, clutching his arm when she saw the bearded elder headbutt the young man called Hanno. "Why is the elder so mad?"

"Because Hanno offered his life when our Mistress didn't ask for it. It's complicated."

"Then teach me 'big brother,'" Ashlynn said, pinching his arm. "I offered myself on the way here. She, she nearly took me, but she didn't. She said that tonight I should just watch. So what is it that I'm watching? I need to understand."

While she spoke, Nyrielle grabbed the young warrior, lifting him to her lips and sinking her fangs into his neck, spilling only a trace of blood down the man's neck. The moment her fangs pierced his skin, his eyes screwed shut and his body tensed before relaxing the next moment as though he'd been enveloped in a soft and comforting embrace.

"Mistress visits each village in the vale four times a year to receive an offering," Thane explained. "Think of it like a tax paid by the villagers to their liege lord. To be selected is an honor and many villages hold competitions to choose the person to make an offering."

"So this Hanno was chosen for his accomplishments during the winter. But what was the bit about pain? Isn't it noble to endure pain to sustain your liege lord?"

"No," Thane said, shaking his head. "When we partake of a person's lifeblood, the experience is deeply pleasurable, at least at first. As long as our will is stronger than the will of the other person they will lose

their ability to struggle, like you can see now," he added, pointing at the limp figure of Hanno as the horned man dangled in Nyrielle's grip.

"If we drink too deeply, it will threaten a person's life. No matter how weak their will is, everyone possesses a strong instinctual drive to survive. When we take too much, the pleasure ends, replaced by an agonizing pain, like fire spreading through the veins while being stung by thousands of bees. The pain shocks the person awake, breaking them free of our grasp and giving them the strength to fight for their lives."

"You, you sound like you know that pain," Ashlynn said, looking at Thane's face only to find that his gaze had never left Nyrielle and Hanno, watching calmly despite the earlier drama.

"Mistress told you how we're made, didn't she? Each of her progeny has experienced the pain of being drained to the very last drop of our life's blood before she bestows her blood upon us. If we cannot overcome that pain and submit, the process will fail and instead of being reborn as a vampire we would have died."

"Look," Thane said, pointing at Hanno. The horned man's face which had been slack with pleasure was now tensed, contorting itself into a mask of pain. His hands clenched, turning into tight fists, his nails piercing his own flesh but drawing no blood. "He should cry out now so that Mistress knows to stop."

"Can't she sense that he's starting to struggle? Why does he need to cry out?"

"Normally, perhaps, but not when she's this hungry," Thane said. "That's why she warned them and why the elder disciplined him."

"Then, why isn't Hanno doing anything?" Ashlyn asked, raising up on her toes and clutching at Thane's arm.

"He should be," Thane said, frowning at the young man who had bitten his lip to prevent himself from crying out.

"Do you think he's trying to become like you?" Ashlynn asked. "Trying to last until the last drop of life is drained away so that she can turn him into a vampire?"

"He hasn't earned that," Thane said, his scowl deepening. "Why would he think that she would save him from such a foolish thing?"

"Because young people do stupid things when they're smitten," Ashlynn said, thinking of how she'd felt the first time she saw Owain looking handsome and regal atop his horse when he arrived at Blackwell Manner.

She'd filled her head with hopes and dreams of a life that would never have come to pass even if she didn't have the mark of the witch because she was too dazzled by the image of Owain in her mind to notice the reality of the man before her.

"Why isn't anyone stopping her? If he dies, she won't turn him into a vampire, will she?"

"No, if he dies then it's his own fault," Thane said coldly. "And no one is stopping her because no one has the right to interfere with her. Everyone in the vale is her subject to do with as she pleases."

"But she doesn't want to kill him," Ashlynn insisted. "They prepared someone else for her so she wouldn't kill him, didn't they?"

"It doesn't matter. It's up to Hanno to either give up his foolishness or die for it."

As much as she wanted to, Ashlynn couldn't understand. Maybe she understood the villagers, at least a little bit. Defying your liege lord was a terrifying thing and most common folk wouldn't dare to speak out against a lord as powerful as Nyrielle.

What she didn't understand was why Thane wasn't doing anything. If the villagers could be excused because they feared her, surely one of her own progeny was close enough to her to speak out yet he did nothing.

"No, it isn't," she said, letting go of Thane's arm and racing across the soft earth toward Nyrielle and the horned man trembling in her grasp.

"Nyrielle," Ashlynn said loudly, reaching out and grabbing hold of Nyrielle's arm. "You're hurting him! Let him go!"

The moment Ashlynn spoke, Nyrielle withdrew her fangs, licking her lips delicately and removing the trace of blood from the corner of her mouth. Her eyes which had become inky pools of midnight blue slowly returned to normal and her expression returned to the placid, mask-like countenance that so often infuriated Ashlynn.

"You didn't cry out," Nyrielle said coldly, extending her arm and holding. "Why?"

"My. Life," Hanno struggled to say. "Yours. Forever."

"You stopped me from killing him," Nyrielle said, turning her gaze away from Hanno and searching Ashlynn's eyes for a trace of fear. When she looked, however, she only saw determination reflected back at her. "Why?"

"Mistress Nyrielle wished for this man to live," Ashlynn said, stepping back and dropping into a low curtsy the way her mother had once taught her to when speaking to senior nobles. "If Mistress Nyrielle wishes for him to live, how can he be allowed to die?"

"I see," Nyrielle said, a smile blossoming on her face. "Then, since I wish for him to live and you have saved his life, I should offer his life to you. What would you do with it?"

Ashlynn turned her gaze away from Nyrielle, looking closely at Hanno's drained and defeated expression. Whatever strength he'd possessed to resist the pain of Nyrielle's bite had left him, leaving him looking pale, sickly, and withered in her grasp.

"Can he recover?"

"If tended to, he can recover by winter," Nyrielle promised.

"He tried to force your hand, defying your will," Ashlynn said slowly, recalling the occasions she'd seen her father hold court and pronounce judgment. "You can offer me his life but if I take him into my service then I've rewarded him rather than punishing him."

"Then what will you do with his life?" Nyrielle asked.

All around them, from the village elder to the youngest children, everyone seemed to hold their breath, leaning forward and waiting for Ashlynn to pronounce judgment. Aside from the village elder and a few others, no one had been told about this young woman who accompanied their Lady but she seemed close enough to call Lady Nyrielle's name directly without being punished. That alone made her an extraordinary figure in their eyes.

Now, everyone turned their attention to Ashlynn, waiting for her decision.

"Since he wishes to die for Mistress Nyrielle, he can be permitted to do so," Ashlynn said formally after thinking for several moments. "Thane," she said, turning to face the vampire who had helped her to find her way in the vale.

"Some soldiers are lucky to defend their own homes where they can be close to their families," she said. "But other soldiers are assigned to the most dangerous places, unable to see their loved ones while they risk their lives in their lord's service."

"Is there such a place where he could be sent after he recovers?"

"There is," Thane said, a warm smile forming on his face as he nodded at Ashlynn's choice. "Since Mistress feels that he will need until the winter to recover, we can take him to the castle to heal, keeping him from the comfort of his family until he is ready to serve elsewhere."

"Mistress," he said, raising an eyebrow and looking at Nyrielle. "Is that acceptable?"

"I've already given his life to my darling Ashlynn," Nyrielle said, dropping Hanno's limp figure to help Ashlynn get up from her curtsy. "Since it's the will of the woman I chose as my Seneschal, see that it's done."

"Now, await me, darling," Nyrielle whispered into Ashlynn's ear. Now that she'd fed on Hanno, her voice was no longer strained and she seemed to have regained much of her strength. "I still have one other to savor before I can dine with you tonight."

"You won't refuse my company tonight, will you?"