

## The Vampire 258

### Chapter 258: Taking In Strays

Nyrielle's ancient fortress had been rebuilt and renovated several times until it grew into its current state, resembling a grasping hand emerging from the side of a large cliff. Still, every renovation served to improve its ability to function as a defensive bulwark that the people of the Vale of Mists could rely on in the never ending war against the Lothians.

Lord Ritchel's fortress had been fashioned as much from ice as from stone. It offered a commanding view of the High Pass and gave the sorcerers of the Frost Walker Clan the ultimate advantage in raining down snow, ice and even avalanches on their enemies with near complete impunity once they shattered the ice bridge across the chasm that surrounded all approaches to the fortress.

Both fortifications were built to help an Eldritch Lord maintain their dominance and hold over their territory. They were weapons of war just as much as they were places that people called home. At no time did either the Vale of Mists or the High Pass forget the purpose of a fortress.

Tausau's ramshackle fortress, however, was starting to lose the ability to function as a true weapon of war. New wings had been added haphazardly without tearing down older sections of the ancient fortress. Once important firing positions for archers hidden in towers had become irrelevant when a new wing blocked the arrow slits from being able to fire over the outer wall.

Tausau could be forgiven for this to an extent. Unlike Nyrielle and Ritchel, Tausau did not hold the title or status of an Eldritch Lord. As the progeny of a powerful High Lord, he wasn't without responsibilities and a territory to manage, but the number of people under his care were smaller than even the scattering of villages that currently made up the Vale of Mists.

To Nyrielle's eyes, the ramshackle expansion of the fortress echoed what she sensed in Tausau himself. The misshapen vampire no longer radiated the sense of predatory cunning that reminded her so much

of her grandsire Torbin. Instead, he seemed to have embraced an ennui that allowed his domain to grow like a field overrun with weeds.

"Will this do, Your Eternity?" Tausau said after leading Nyrielle down a spiral staircase into an underground sitting room.

He'd expected her to arrive in need of a meal and he quickly banished the offering he'd prepared so the two of them could speak in private. The walls of the sitting room were covered with books and five overstuffed armchairs ringed a low table in a way that suggested that small gatherings were commonplace here.

"You don't have to be so formal, Uncle Tausau," Nyrielle said, folding her wings away and restoring her human appearance. "Your progeny needed to witness the arrival of the Harbinger of Death. They need to understand the order of things. The man who taught me how to paint with bare fingers only needs to welcome his grand-niece."

"Nyrielle," the older vampire said, a rare smile forming on his lips, revealing fangs that were slightly too large for his mouth. "For a moment, I thought your heart had been completely worn away," he said, taking a seat in an overstuffed armchair across from his usual one and offering the grandest of the chairs to his guest.

"I can understand a public and private face," he said as he fetched a bottle of rich red wine and poured a cup for each of them. "But did you need to intimidate my progeny by saying you wanted answers from me about them? I'm sure that they're quaking in their boots upstairs wondering what the Harbinger of Death is going to do to them."

"I do need answers from you about them," Nyrielle said, an impassive mask settling on her features as the brief joy at their reunion slipped away. "Uncle," she said, trying to keep the conversation as informal as she could. "How many progeny do you have now? How many of them are..."

"Clanless? Mongrels?" Tausau said, raising a bushy eyebrow at Nyrielle. "Sixty two," he said flatly. "There would be more but, you know that the odds are never good when raising progeny to begin with. The Clanless, even the best of them, only one in four hold out to the end and even then, half of those who take my blood die in the transformation. These little more than sixty are the only ones I've been able to save."

"More than sixty," Nyrielle said, her midnight eyes growing wide in surprise. There had been more than thirty present at the entrance to the fortress and she'd already thought the number was large. Knowing there were twice as many sent a chill down her spine.

"No wonder you look so worn down, Uncle," Nyrielle said with a heavy. "You can't sustain so many. If you keep pushing yourself like this..."

"If I keep going like this, then I give a few more decades to people who would have lived tragically short lives," the older vampire said bitterly. "No one asked to be born a mongrel. To be brought into the world as something so misshapen and malformed that it's a miracle we even have all our organs."

"You used to approve of what I did, Nyrielle," Tausau said, his tone growing sharp. "You didn't look down on them. Or on me. You might call me 'Uncle' and put your wings away, but are you still my grand-niece or are you just the Harbinger of Death putting on an unassuming mask."

"Watch yourself, Uncle," Nyrielle snapped as shadows danced in her midnight eyes and her fingers lengthened into sharpened claws. "You can thank my darling Ashlynn that I've recovered enough of a heart to try, but don't presume that I am simply one thing or another. I am your grand-niece and I am

the Harbinger of Death. Those aren't two different people, so please don't act like you can talk to a little girl when she had to grow up years ago."

"I'm sorry, Your Eternity," Tausau said reflexively, shrinking back into his chair as Nyrielle's power flared along with her temper. The wine in his glass sloshed in his trembling hand, nearly spilling onto well worn suede of the armchair. It had only been an instant, but for a moment, he felt himself tip on the edge of the knife between life and death, as if he were about to plunge into the abyss.

"Nyrielle. I'm sorry," he amended, his voice shaking as he regathered himself. It seemed like even after all this time, his body still remembered fear. "It's just, you understand what happens to people like me. Many will cross the territories of half a dozen lords or more to reach this fortress for the chance to avoid certain death. How can I deny them the chance at survival when they come so far?"

"I'm not suggesting that you should deny them, Uncle," Nyrielle said, carefully withdrawing her power. It wasn't her intention to intimidate him but his complacency had clearly struck a nerve. It was one of the things that had been difficult for her in the High Fen and it was almost worse encountering it from someone she considered family. The Vale of Mists had been at war for more than a century, yet here he sat... taking in strays.

"My darling Ashlynn sees nobility in a person's struggle for a better life," Nyrielle said, focusing on the echo of Ashlynn's heartbeat to calm herself down. The tightness and discomfort remained but the love and dedication accompanying that strain pulsed even stronger. Just that little bit was enough for her to regain her composure.

"My darling would be proud that you've rewarded so many people for succeeding in their struggle to stay alive long enough to reach your merciful fangs," Nyrielle praised. Perhaps Ashlynn would go even further than that, finding kinship with the outcasts who suffered fates every bit as cruel as what she'd suffered from Owain Lothian.

"But Uncle," Nyrielle said, her tone growing darker. "I've seen the competence of those you've allowed into your service. You are descended from Bardas, the Jaws of Death. Your progeny exist to help you keep powerful groups in check, but this pack you've assembled aren't wolves, they're barely even hunting dogs. Some of them feel like nothing more than pets."

"Tell me, Uncle," Nyrielle said, leaning back in her chair and taking a sip of the dark red wine. "Do you still keep the old ways as Bardas commands? Can your progeny hunt their own food? Or are their fangs so dull that they can only rely on their brethren to find them a meal?"