

The Vampire 55

Chapter 55 55: The Vale is Home

It wasn't until Ashlynn woke, comfortably in bed with late afternoon sunlight filtering through her curtains, that she realized she truly had fallen asleep in Thane's arms on their way back to the vale.

Only now, when she was surrounded by the familiar curtains she'd selected from the market in the castle bazaar, listening to the crackle of the fire in the hearth and smelling the faint lavender of the soap used to wash her bedding, did she realize how exhausted she truly felt.

It wasn't just the toll of taking lives that had weighed on her. She'd used her magic to her limits, stressing her body more than she ever had before. She'd spent two days in the Summer Villa, fearing that she'd be exposed at any moment followed by a third day fleeing for her life with a helpless Ollie in tow.

And all of this had come on top of two weeks of intense training and preparation before she even entered the villa.

Now that she returned, however, she found herself craving one of Georg's artful meals, the gentle comforting presence of Heila, and most importantly, a return to nights spent with Nyrielle.

She hadn't noticed it happening until she returned to the human world, but when she thought of 'home', while a part of her still wished to return to Blackwell County, a growing part of her felt more comfortable here in the Vale of Mists.

Ringling the bell beside her bed to summon Heila, Ashlynn took her time getting out of bed, wandering out onto the terrace to look out over the misty forest that almost glowed in the light of the sinking sun.

She still had hours to go before Nyrielle woke, and she spent them quietly, working through the process of scrubbing away the last traces of 'Lynnda' and regaining her strength after her strenuous mission.

Georg sent up a tray of decadent finger foods, smoked meats, creamy cheeses, crusty bread and chilled strawberries, just for her to nibble on while she soaked in a luxurious bath. Heila said little, sensing her lady's mood, and instead focused on helping her wash away the dark dye that had helped conceal her identity, returning her hair to its pale golden hue.

"I don't think it's going to rain tonight," Ashlynn said after her bath, gazing out the window as scattered, puffy clouds drifted by. "Heila, can you tell everyone that, unless Mistress Nyrielle wants something else, I'd like to dine with her in the garden tonight?"

Heila paused, her hands holding a silver-backed brush as she worked on Ashlynn's hair. She didn't think that Lady Nyrielle would refuse, rather, the Eldritch Lady seemed to dote on her Seneschal whenever the opportunity presented itself. But it was the first time she'd seen Ashlynn make arrangements for her mistress without gaining permission first.

It was a small thing, Heila thought, resuming her brushing. But it signaled to her that Ashlynn was truly starting to think of herself as a lady of the castle, willing to command others in Nyrielle's place.

"As you wish, my Lady," Heila said with a smile.

"Heila," Ashlynn said after choosing a dress for the evening. "Mistress Nyrielle intends to take me across the mountains to meet with the Mother of Thorns. When we go, will you come with me?"

As much as the vale had come to feel like home, it was the people who made her feel welcome and secure there. She couldn't imagine Georg leaving his kitchens to cook for them on the journey but Heila was different.

The diminutive woman had become more than just one of the household servants of the ancient castle. She'd become Ashlynn's personal maid and attendant. More importantly, she was someone that Ashlynn felt she could relax and be unguarded around. Until she'd spent several days hiding her identity in the Summer Villa, she hadn't realized how important that was.

"Unless you command me to stay, or go where I may not, I will always be at my Lady's side," Heila said, grinning broadly.

"In that case, why don't you tell me a little bit about the place where we're going," Ashlynn said, eager to learn more about the lands beyond the mountains.

"I've never left the vale, my Lady," Heila said, selecting several pieces of jewelry and offering them to Ashlynn. "But, there are a few things that most people know..."

As Heila began to share what little she knew about the lands beyond the mountains, Ashlynn found her thoughts drifting to Nyrielle. Her Mistress would be waking soon, and Ashlynn felt her heartbeat quicken as their reunion grew closer. She wondered if Nyrielle had missed her as much as she had missed the Eldritch Lady.

Meanwhile, deep within the ancient castle, in chambers untouched by sunlight, Nyrielle was also preparing for the evening ahead. Setting the last of her silver and sapphire jewelry in place, Nyrielle glided out of her bed chamber and entered an adjoining office.

Guests who came so far into the castle were rare and Nyrielle had chambers far better suited to receiving them than her personal office. Since that was the case, the decor of her office held only things that she found pleasing to surround herself with when she worked on the business of the vale.

From the smoothly polished oak desk to the luxuriously plush carpet, everything in the room was a reflection of her personal taste. Only two things stood out from the rest, both of them paintings hanging on the wall behind her desk.

The first depicted a powerful member of the Clan of the Great Claw, a mighty figure wearing dark robes with stark white fur and blood-red eyes. She'd painted him as she remembered him in life, his arms held wide open with bloody claws as if he had just torn the world in two. When she was young, she'd felt he truly could.

The other painting was much gentler. Her mother, a dark-haired beauty with bone-white skin, stood beneath an arch of lavender while her father stood behind her, smiling as he watched his wife in a peaceful moment enjoying the flowers.

None of her grandsire's progeny remained and her parents had never felt the need to sire any when they realized how extraordinary their daughter was. Perhaps things would have been different if they'd raised several strong champions of their own.

That question, at least in part, was why Nyrielle hadn't hesitated to seek out capable subordinates of her own after her parents fell. As strong as she was, she was all too aware that she was nothing without the support of people she could rely on. People like the first of her progeny who now stood before her.

"Mistress," Thane said, kneeling before Nyrielle and inclining his head to the side to expose his neck. In all the years he'd served her, no one had ever given her cause to strike their bared neck but the ancient customs remained.

After learning about Ashlynn's duel against Sir Broll and how close it had come to turning fatal, Thane wondered if now would finally be the time that he crossed a line that demanded punishment.

He might call himself Ashlynn's big brother, but Nyrielle had commanded him to be her teacher and if she'd gotten hurt because he'd made her overconfident then he deserved any punishment Nyrielle might mete out.

"Thank you, Thane," Nyrielle said, gesturing for him to rise. "You brought her home safely and I'm grateful to you for doing so. It's always dangerous going so close to the summer villa when the nights are as short as they are now. You've done well."

"I don't deserve praise," he said with a small smile. "Lady Ashlynn is more capable than I imagined. I brought her trophy for you," he said, placing a small wooden box on Nyrielle's desk.

Looking inside the box, the Eldritch Lady smiled at the grisly sight within. Two pale hands, each one large and meaty, sat upon a small piece of velvet. On one hand, a silver signet ring bearing the emblem of a stag made it clear that the hands belonged to the late Sir Broll.

"She severed these herself?" Nyrielle asked, closing the box and raising an eyebrow at Thane.

"Yes, during her duel," Thane replied. "Since these are the hands of the man who tried to bury your seneschal alive, I thought you should decide what to do with them. I've already given orders to Captain Lennart to scatter the rest of Sir Broll's remains as a warning to the people who come searching for him."

"Does Sir Broll have a family?" Nyrielle asked, running a pointed fingernail along the edge of the box. "Wife or children?"

"I don't know. Is it important?" Thane asked.

"Have Marcell find out. If he has a son or sons, then when this is all over and Ashlynn has taken Owain's life, we should present these hands to Broll's sons as a lesson that men should always hesitate to put their hands on a woman, even one they believe is theirs to do with as they please," Nyrielle said coldly.

"If he has no heirs, then these can be burned but the ring should be kept," she added. "Ashlynn may choose whether she wishes to display it as a trophy or return it to Broll's widow."

"Now, before I meet with my darling, tell me how she is after this ordeal. You arrived too close to sunrise for me to see her but I imagine you've heard much from her."

"If I compare her to forging a blade, then I can say that she has been roughly shaped and the forge scale has been cleaned away," Thane said honestly. "She was very sheltered when she arrived here and she's had much of her naivete scoured away. There's firm steel underneath but she has yet to gain a true edge."

"But she isn't brittle," Nyrielle emphasized, a hint of concern coloring her normally impassive voice. "She's not cracking?"

"No," Thane said. "Let me tell you what she told me on our return..."

As Thane spoke, the concern slowly faded from Nyrielle's gaze, replaced by a slight smile and a sense of anticipation. She'd called Ashlynn an orchid because she needed the right environment to blossom and thrive. Now, it seemed like she was taking root and getting ready to open up.

A slow smile began to grow on Nyrielle's lips as she traced her tongue over a sharp fang. Tonight, her Ashlynn had returned and she couldn't wait to savor their reunion.