

The Vampire 62

Chapter 62 62: The Neighbors

"So what kind of person is this Lord Ritchel," Ashlynn asked, pausing when Heila entered carrying a tray loaded with succulent roast boar tenderloin smothered in a rich mushroom gravy and sitting atop pillowy whipped potatoes.

"Heila," Ashlynn said, looking at the tremendous portion of food. "Did Georg send me Mistress Nyrielle's portion as well?"

"No, my Lady," the horned servant giggled. "He said that's to help you recover. And he's prepared something just as rich for dessert. He mentioned regretting that you didn't get to your last course last night so he's making up for it tonight," she said with a smile.

"That," Ashlynn blushed furiously. They'd only finished the lamb last night when Nyrielle swept her off her feet and brought her to the luxurious bath... she hadn't even thought of the desert that Georg must have prepared to go with the welcome home meal he'd prepared for her.

"Please tell Georg I'm sorry," Ashlynn said sincerely. "And tell him that I'll visit tomorrow to help him cook to make up for wasting his dessert last night."

"It's fine," Heila insisted, a mischievous smile tugging at the corners of her lips. "Since you didn't eat it last night, Georg shared it with me. So, if you miss another one, I won't mind," she teased.

"You!" Ashlynn said, reaching out and ruffling the diminutive woman's hair affectionately. Truthfully, she owed Heila a lot for taking care of her since she arrived and she was glad to hear that the horned woman had gotten to enjoy dessert in her place. "Still, give him my apologies," she insisted.

"As you wish," Heila said, offering a polite curtsy and excusing herself so Ashlynn could enjoy her meal.

"So, what is it you want to know about Lord Ritchel?" Thane asked, smiling as he saw Ashlynn tucking into her meal. She'd come a long way since the battered woman she'd been when they first met and the easy way she bantered with a member of the Horned Clan like Heila was just as important a transformation to him as her physical one.

"I guess, to start, what clan is he part of?" Ashlynn asked. "And what territory does he rule?"

"Lord Ritchel is from the Frost Walker Clan," Thane explained. "They're bigger than Georg's people and quite a bit furrer, with a single horn in the center of their forehead," he said, tapping the spot on his own head.

"Those horns are sacred to the Frost Walkers," he added. "The older they are, the longer they grow and the more clear they become until they resemble a giant spiraling icicle. It's not really made of ice, but when they die, the horns are placed in a memorial cave filled with the horns of their ancestors. They guard those ancestral caves fiercely," he warned.

"Why would they have to guard a place like that?" Ashlynn asked, only now realizing how hungry she still was after devouring half of the tender boar. "Are grave robbers a problem?"

It wasn't unheard of for people to attempt to rob the tombs of ancient kings in human nations or even powerful lords. Oftentimes, noblemen were buried with treasured artifacts and perhaps a few trinkets of some value.

In general, however, the Church of the Holy Lord of Light taught that a person reached the Heavenly Shores as they'd entered the world, naked before the Holy Light. A person couldn't take their wealth or treasures with them so it was better to pass them down to the living to help the next generation grow stronger.

"Because those horns can be carved into powerful blades that will freeze the blood of someone impaled on one," Thane said bluntly. "Not everyone respects the beliefs of the Frost Walkers that their horns should be worshiped in ancestral caves. Some would prefer to use them as weapons."

"That, that's terrible," Ashlynn gasped, momentarily forgetting about her meal. If someone told her that they wanted to break into her great-grandfather's crypt and carve one of his bones into a dagger, she would be beyond furious. Suddenly, it wasn't so hard to understand the perspective of the Frost Walkers.

"Mistress Nyrielle respects their traditions," Thane said, reaching out to dip a finger in the sauce of Ashlynn's bowl and savoring the rich, meaty taste. "As does High Lady Erna. For generations, that respect has largely protected the Frost Walkers from grave robbers."

"So, Lord Ritchel's territory is completely enclosed by the Vale of Mists, and High Lady Erna's territory on the other side?" Ashlynn guessed.

"Not exactly," Thane explained. "Lord Ritchel and his Frost Walkers rule the High Pass, between the Vale of Mists and the High Fen on the other side. He doesn't rule all of the Frost Walkers and there are other

ways to enter the High Pass if you're willing to traverse over the mountain peaks, but it's difficult which makes raids on their graves rare."

"What about the High Fen?" Ashlynn asked, pushing the last of the whipped potatoes around her plate to scoop up the few remaining bits of rich sauce. "Is it called the High Fen because it's ruled by High Lady Erna or is she called High Lady after the name of the fen?"

"She's called a High Lady because the territory she rules is vaster than Nyrielle's and she's believed to be more powerful as well," Thane said. In a true battle between the two women, he wasn't certain that Nyrielle would be defeated but neither seemed to have any interest in settling an outsider's curiosity about their respective strength.

"You can think of an Eldritch Lord or Lady like our Mistress as being similar to a Baron," Thane explained. "A High Lady like Erna is similar to a Count, and a Great Lord would be similar to a Duke. The parallels aren't exact, the Eldritch have never cared for the intricate layers of power that humans divide themselves into, but the size of territory and number of people they rule over is fairly similar."

"Then, is there an Eldritch King?" Ashlynn asked, wondering what kind of person could be so incredibly powerful to rule over beings even mightier than Nyrielle.

"No," Thane said. "But there is an Emperor. The greatest and most powerful of the Eldritch of any generation. Emperors aren't like human kings though. Remember, each Eldritch Lord or Lady, no matter their status, is a sovereign of their own nation. They are subordinate to no one and they are free to rule their nation as they see fit."

"Then, why call someone an Emperor?" Ashlynn asked, confused by the concept.

"Because sometimes, the strongest among the Eldritch chooses to conquer those who are weaker, to unify the nations under one banner. Not all of them do," Thane said. "But enough have that the tradition remains."

"It sounds," Ashlynn paused, trying to organize her thoughts around the strange notion. "It sounds very fluid."

"It is," Thane said with a smile. "And that's why traditions like paying tribute when one lord passes through the territory of another are so important. It's a demonstration that you aren't a threat and you don't intend to conquer your neighbor."

"So," she began slowly, "as Nyrielle's Seneschal, I might one day have to navigate these relationships too?" Ashlynn asked, thinking about the delicate balance of power, the importance of strength. Nyrielle had once mentioned needing her help against enemies other than the Lothians, was this what she was referring to?

"As a Seneschal, you should expect to represent Mistress Nyrielle wherever you go and that she may send you to places that are difficult for her to reach," Thane said. "Right now, Narcissa is the one who spends the most time in Eldritch lands, acting as an ambassador of sorts, but one day, Mistress may ask you to take over some of that responsibility. Or not," he said lightly. "It's much too early to pin you into a specific role."

"Then, will my strength be tested?" Ashlynn asked. "Will I have to fight people like Lord Ritchel?"

"Most certainly," Thane said, his voice hardening. "An Eldritch Lord will almost never stoop to fighting a servant, even someone who is first among servants like you are. But that doesn't mean they won't attempt to take your measure by sending their own champions after you."

Looking at Thane's focused amber eyes, Ashlynn took a deep breath, putting down her fork, and pushing the plate away. While she'd been eating, it was easy to forget about the upcoming trip or to think of it like a simple holiday but Thane had just reminded her that nothing among the Eldritch would be what she expected it to be as long as she thought of them as simply differently shaped people.

"What do I need to do to prepare for the trip? I'm still in my blossoming period for another two weeks," she said, rising to her feet. "More training? Sword practice?"

"Yes, that too," Thane said, moving swiftly and appearing behind her. Gently, he placed his hands on her shoulders and pressed her back down into her seat. "But not tonight. Tonight, you recover from feeding Mistress Nyrielle last night, and you eat the dessert that Georg has prepared for you."

"I'll accompany you all night," Thane added. "We can talk about what to expect, the traditions you'll need to follow, and more. Your mind is an even more important weapon than your body, so we'll train that tonight and return to the rest tomorrow."