

The Vampire 69

Chapter 69 69: The Future of a Kitchen Boy

Ollie walked nervously behind Ashlynn and Thane while the two chatted on their way to the formal dining room deeper in the castle.

For the former kitchen boy, the past several days had been an increasingly unbelievable dream. His friend from the kitchens revealed herself as the true Lady Ashlynn Blackwell and accused a knight of trying to help murder her, burying her in a shallow grave in the forest. Then, they joined with a group of de-Eldritch people after she killed the knight in a brutal trial by combat.

That alone would have been enough of an adventure to leave his other friends in the servants' quarters open-mouthed in disbelief but it didn't end there. He'd been given refined clothing and a luxurious room to live in, as though he'd become a person of status. Then, when he reunited with Ashlynn for dinner, she stunned everyone yet again with a display of holy power.

Now, he was following behind her and a vampire on their way to meet the ruler of the vale, the fabled Demon Lady of the Vale of Mists. Ashlynn and the vampire Thane acted like it was normal, exciting even, but the deeper into the castle they went, the slower his footsteps became until he'd fallen several paces behind the other two.

"Ollie," Ashlynn said softly, beckoning him forward. "There's nothing to be afraid of. Mistress Nyrielle won't hurt you."

"No, I, I didn't think that she would..." Ollie said in a panic, tripping over his words. "I just, it's just, why would the Lady of the Vale want to meet a nobody like me?"

"Do you think that everyone who serves her had some kind of grand identity?" Thane said with a smile that concealed his fangs. "Marcell wasn't that different from you when he became one of Mistress Nyrielle's progeny. His father was a Carter. It's the same for Zedya," he added.

"In fact, Zedya is even more similar to you," Thane said after a moment's thought. "Before gaining Mistress Nyrielle's attention, she was a castle maid. Just because you have humble origins doesn't mean that you have a limited future here."

"I've already told Mistress Nyrielle how much you helped me in the villa," Ashlynn added, placing a hand on the small of the gangly youth's back and giving him a gentle shove forward as they resumed their walk. "I'm sure that's why she wants to meet you."

Before Ollie could think of how to respond, they entered the grand formal dining room where paintings lined the walls and oil lamps burned at regular intervals. To the young man, however, the room itself almost immediately faded into the background when he beheld the pale-skinned beauty in a dark velvet dress at the head of the table.

"...he doesn't look very much like a kitchen boy," Nyrielle said. It was only when he heard 'kitchen boy' that he realized he'd been staring long after the sapphire-eyed woman started to speak and he hurried to offer a deep bow, almost bumping into a high-backed chair in the process.

"Ollie, stop it," Ashlynn said, catching him before he could hurt himself. "You're among friends here."

"Friends?" the young man said uncertainly. How could he be friends with nobles like these? It hadn't escaped his attention that Thane mentioned that Marcell and Zedya were commoners but he said no such thing about himself. Next to these people, what was he?

"Sit, young Ollie," Nyrielle said, a hint of power whispering along her rich voice to help overcome his hesitation. "You helped my darling Ashlynn several times in the villa," she continued, pulling Ashlynn closer until the noblewoman was close enough to draw into a gentle embrace.

"That kind of help merits a reward, so tell me, young Ollie," she purred, wrapping her arms around Ashlynn possessively. "How should I reward you for what you've done?"

"Haven't I already received a reward?" Ollie said, blinking uncertainly. The more he watched Nyrielle's hand wander over Ashlynn's body, the harder he found it to focus on the conversation. Ashlynn had already been the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen but the combination of her warm vibrance and Nyrielle's cold elegance left him uncomfortable aware of his lower regions during what was supposed to be an audience with a noble lady.

How could they expect him to think like this?

Worse, Nyrielle seemed to be aware of his discomfort. At first, he thought he imagined it but when she leaned close to nibble on Ashlynn's ear, the vampire's eyes never left him.

"Maybe I can make a suggestion," Thane said, stepping in to rescue the young man. As much as Nyrielle seemed to be delighting in teasing him, it was painfully obvious that Ashlynn wasn't sensitive enough to the young man's plight to rescue him.

"There aren't any 'knights' as such in the Vale of Mists," Thane began. "But if you wanted to train as a soldier, you could be assigned to someone like Captain Lennart to learn the ways of war. If you study hard, you could even become one of Lady Ashlynn's protectors."

"You don't have to do something so dangerous," Ashlynn said, capturing Nyrielle's hands before they could wander somewhere truly naughty and trying to suppress the blush that threatened to consume her face.

"There's a vast library here," the young witch offered. "We could ask someone to help you learn how to read. You could spend your time learning whatever interests you."

"Or, if you'd prefer something simpler, I'm sure there's a village that would welcome you. It shouldn't be unreasonable to grant you a plot of land to tend however you'd like," she said, glancing at Nyrielle for confirmation before turning back to the young man.

Ollie's mind reeled with the possibilities laid out before him. Each option seemed more incredible than the last, like someone had sauntered through a field of dreams picking fanciful futures like they were daisies.

The idea of becoming a soldier, maybe even Lady Ashlynn's protector, stirred something deep inside him that he'd never felt before. Pride? Excitement? Fear? He wasn't sure. He imagined himself standing tall in gleaming armor like the knights who protected Lord Owain, defending the woman who had shown him such kindness.

But then a chill ran down his spine as he remembered the way Ashlynn had fought and killed the seemingly invulnerable knight. If he wanted to protect her, how much stronger than her would he have to become, and was that even possible? Or would he wind up like Sir Broll, dead because he met an opponent who outmatched him in every way?

Heroes in stories never seemed to fear death but when Ollie thought about dying in battle, he began to wonder if Ashlynn was right to suggest a more peaceful option.

Learning to read, to study whatever he wanted... it was almost too much to comprehend. Knowledge had always been something for nobles and scholars, not for the likes of him. He didn't even know what he would do with the things he learned. It was too hard to imagine what his life would be like if he took the reward Lady Ashlynn had mentioned so casually.

But land of his own? He'd never even dared to dream of such a thing, but he understood it very well. A house of his own, a chance to grow his own vegetables and eat whatever he wanted as long as he could grow it. A place to start a family and raise children without worrying that he would be flogged for burning some lord's dinner. More than anything else, it represented a kind of freedom that no one from his family had ever enjoyed before.

Ollie felt dizzy with the weight of the decision before him. Each path led to a future so different from anything he'd ever imagined for himself. How could he possibly choose? What if he made the wrong choice?

"Can I think about it?" Ollie asked after several moments of pondering. "I don't want to choose the wrong thing."

"Take all the time you want, young man," Nyrielle said with a small nod of approval. To a common kitchen boy, the chance to become a warrior, a scholar, or a landholder were all tremendous elevations in station. She appreciated that he didn't immediately jump into one path or another.

"Enough about rewards," the vampire said, releasing Ashlynn and ringing a small bell. "I've had Georg send some of his honey sponge cakes here for us to enjoy. Since my Ashlynn has already had the chance to know you, perhaps you can indulge my curiosity a bit. Tell me about yourself, young man."

"Well, I've been in the kitchens since I was about ten summers old," he began, not sure what a woman like Nyrielle would be interested in knowing.

Still, as desserts arrived and he continued telling his simple tale, it became easier to be in the powerful woman's presence. He never forgot how very high above him she stood, but by the time Thane helped him to find his way back to his room, he didn't feel like she was an unknowable mystery anymore.

She was nothing like the stories said. In fact, nothing he'd seen since joining Captain Lennart's group had been like what the stories said. And now that he found himself in the middle of an entirely different type of story, he had the chance to decide what kind of role he wanted to have in this fantastic tale.

Sleep claimed him long before he arrived at any answers but that didn't matter. As long as nothing went wrong, he'd have plenty of time to make up his mind.