

The Vampire 70

Chapter 70 70: Vengeance and Conquest

Once Thane departed with a bewildered Ollie in tow, Nyrielle's mood became much more solemn, her face sliding back to the calm, emotionless mask that she'd worn so often when Ashlynn first arrived in the vale.

"My darling Ashlynn," Nyrielle said, her voice as calm as still water, betraying none of her thoughts. "You've made some decisions and you're beginning to make your moves. Don't you think we should discuss them before you get too much further down this path?"

Ashlynn's heart froze for a moment, her hands stopping mid-motion as she prepared to take one of the last bites of the delicate honey cake Georg had sent up. When she entered the dining room she hadn't encountered the Eldritch Lady of the Vale, rather, it had been pure Nyrielle, the woman who had become her lover.

Now, however, even though no magical power emanated from the ancient vampire, Ashlynn couldn't help but tremble slightly at the shift between identities. As much affection as Nyrielle lavished on her, she'd almost forgotten that this woman was hundreds of years old and she'd ruled the vale almost since the founding of Lothian March.

"You're right," she said, setting her fork down and taking a breath to steady herself. "I've thought a great deal about what happens next, but I haven't done anything that commits to a course of action yet. I knew I'd have to talk to you first."

"Then talk to me," Nyrielle said, taking a sip from her goblet of rich, red wine. Nyrielle leaned forward, her elbows resting on the table, fingers steepled beneath her chin. Her midnight blue eyes seemed to bore into Ashlynn, searching for answers before the young witch even spoke.

"Tell me what you're planning with these humans you've captured," the vampire asked.

"I, I don't want to kill people who don't need to die," Ashlynn began, her emerald eyes hardening with determination as she met Nyrielle's gaze. Perhaps Nyrielle harbored a grudge against the entire population of Lothian March but she didn't believe it to be the case. The common people, at least, shouldn't be contentious to spare.

"So who needs to die and who doesn't? Who decides who goes on the list?" Nyrielle asked pointedly, her tone growing colder. "You?"

"No, you, of course," Ashlynn said, looking down at the crumbs on her plate, no longer able to meet Nyrielle's stare. In matters of the heart, perhaps they were equals, but Nyrielle's question was a sharp reminder of the difference that still existed between them.

"My list is short," Ashlynn said, looking back up. "Owain, his father Bors, whoever sold me out to Owain, Sir Tommin," she said, ticking off names on her fingers as she went.

"I haven't made up my mind about Samira yet. I dislike that she's masquerading as me but she's been so thoroughly duped by Owan and Bors Lothian that I almost pity her more than I can hate her."

"You know that I'll help you reap those lives," Nyrielle said, a predatory grin forming on her lush lips that revealed a hint of sharp fangs. "But do you mean to say that everyone else should be allowed to live?"

"No," Ashlynn said, shaking her head. "I'm sure you have your own list. I'm also sure that we'll need to kill several of the Lothian's pawns and minions. As long as someone is following the orders of the Lothians and standing in opposition to us, to you," she corrected herself.

"Then that person is an enemy and can suffer the fate of any soldier who falls in battle, whether they're soldiers or not," Ashlynn concluded.

"It seems like your conversation with Thane was fruitful," Nyrielle said, offering Ashlynn a smile that contained a hint of warmth before her face grew cold again. "Now, tell me what you intended to do with these human captives of yours. I can't imagine that you're only going to take meals with them."

"I'm testing them," Ashlynn admitted. "I want to see if they can come to accept the Eldritch people when they live beside them."

"Of course humans can live side by side with the Eldritch as long as no one forces them to wage war or teaches them to hate," Nyrielle said. "Why do you think my parents were driven from human lands when the Church declared the Eldritch people to be demons who must be exterminated?"

"Your parents were already living with the Eldritch then?" Ashlynn asked. Other than the first meal she'd shared with Nyrielle, the vampire had almost never mentioned her parents.

"My father felt that there was plenty of land in between the places claimed by the Eldritch nations for humans to settle," Nyrielle explained.

"When he founded his Barony, he did it on the basis of building trade relationships with the nearby nations. The prosperity he achieved through diplomacy and trade earned him a great deal of jealousy from his peers who spent most of their wealth to raise armies for conquest."

"So when the Church declared a crusade against the Eldritch," Ashlynn said softly. "Those jealous peers took it as an excuse to attack him as an heretic. But really, they just wanted to plunder his wealth, didn't they?"

"Exactly so," Nyrielle said, her eyes growing dark and her grip tightening on her goblet enough to leave faint impressions under her fingers. "Cooperation is possible, but only so long as the Church doesn't launch one of their crusades. Or at least, that used to be true."

"Now, who can say?" Nyrielle said helplessly. "The hate hadn't been mixed with mother's milk to be drank by infants when my father was a baron. Now, perhaps it really is impossible. Is that what this test of yours is intended to reveal?"

"In part," Ashlynn said. "Six men don't represent all of the common folk. It will take more than just them to understand how the people will react."

"And what, exactly, will the people be reacting to?" Nyrielle asked, raising an elegantly shaped eyebrow at her young witch. She could see that Ashlynn had formed at least the skeleton of a plan. Now, she was curious to see how much meat was on the bones of that plan.

"I intend to conquer Lothian March," Ashlynn said, her words as firm and as heavy as iron. "I will conquer it and rule it as the Marchioness. As Owain's legal wife, I have that right."

"You can't become the Marchioness unless Bors is dead to pass the title of Marquis to Owain," Nyrielle pointed out. "And some would argue that if you kill Owain, then the title of Marquis should pass to Loman rather than allowing a woman to assume power."

"I, I haven't gotten far enough to work out the timing," Ashlynn admitted. "But, when I challenged Sir Broll to a trial by combat, the common people with him allowed me to fight that duel and they accepted the results afterward."

"So you intend to fight more duels to claim your throne?" Nyrielle asked, her brows raised in surprise. While she wasn't certain that it would work, it was certainly a bloodier plan than she'd expected from her young Seneschal.

"I don't know that duels need to be fought. I don't even know if Owain needs to die before I take the title of Marchioness," the young witch said. "What I do know is that Owain is guilty of attempted murder and the people will not accept the rule of a man who murders his wife, replaces her with a fake, and then marries the sister of his dead wife."

"Some things form bright lines that separate men from beasts," Ashlynn said. "Owain crosses too many of those lines. I intend to expose him and to assert my claims to the march."

"And then what?" Nyrielle asked. "You'll declare peace with the Vale of Mists and offer me Lothian March as an expansion of my territory? You don't really think you can keep the conquest of an entire march that bloodless, do you?"

"No, no I don't," Ashlynn said softly, looking at the dark red wine in her goblet and imagining the amount of blood that would flow once she executed her plan. If some of the barons rejected her rule, if they rose up against her, then the march would tear itself apart in civil war before she could offer anything to Nyrielle.

"It won't be bloodless, but I'm sure I can find a way to make it as swift as possible," she added. One point Thane had made clear, the longer a conflict wore on, the more bodies piled up on both sides and the harder it became for either side to accept surrender.

If she wanted to spare the lives of most common folk who would be pressed into service as footsoldiers in the armies of the lords, she had to achieve an overwhelming victory or a display of force so great that attacking her became unthinkable.

"In order to make the conquest swift, I have to work to weaken the Lothians as much as possible before I strike," Ashlynn said. "And for that, I already have the beginnings of a plan..."