

The Vampire 88

Chapter 88 88: Bearing Burdens

The ancient roadway snaked past the headwaters of the River Luath before becoming a steep climb toward the western most edge of the vale. Zedya pushed the horses hard in the dark of night to ensure that they arrived at Orava just as the stars began to fade into the lightening sky.

"My darling," Nyrielle said, gently cupping Ashlynn's face with both hands before she exited the carriage. "I know I've given you much to think about, but always remember one thing. You and I will always have each other. I can feel your heartbeat," she said, placing her fingers gently on the lace that stretched across her pale bosom.

"And I can feel yours," Ashlynn said, closing her eyes and relaxing into Nyrielle's touch as she placed a hand on the swell of her full bust. "You should go, the sun is rising."

When Nyrielle left the carriage, she moved so swiftly and gracefully that Ashlynn didn't even feel the carriage shift on its springs. One moment, Nyrielle was there, her cool fingers cupping Ashlynn's face and the next, she was gone, vanishing like smoke on the morning breeze, leaving behind only the ghost of a touch on Ashlynn's skin and the faint scent of lavender soap.

By the time the carriage started rolling again, Ashlynn turned her attention to the view outside as early morning light spilled over the neighboring hills.

Georg had told her that the Clan of the Great Claw preferred communal living to the individual family dwellings that the Horned Clan preferred, but it wasn't until she saw Orava Village that she realized what 'communal' meant to the bearish clan.

Longhouses built from an arch of tree trunks radiated out from the center of the village like the spokes of a wheel, bridging the space between the village square at the center and the wooden perimeter wall. In between the longhouses, neatly tended gardens boasted a variety of early spring vegetables along with a wide variety of vegetables that would be ready for harvest later in the year.

Each longhouse was large enough to house twenty to thirty people, despite the fact that most families in the Clan of the Great Claw were small with only two or three children born to each couple.

As much as she wanted to get out of the carriage to meet with the villagers, however, Captain Lennart and the servants who had come for the journey moved swiftly to change out their horses for ones that had been prepared in advance to take over from here. In less than a quarter of an hour, the carriage departed through the gate opposite the one they'd entered from.

Officially, the village marked the edge of the Vale of Mist's territory though the High Pass didn't claim all land on the opposite side of the border. Instead, they entered a form of no-man's land that neither Eldritch Lord saw any reason to claim.

To Ashlynn, it became immediately apparent why the Vale of Mists extended no further. Once they left Orava village, the trees rapidly thinned until they reached a point where nothing other than hardy grasses and the occasional wild flower grew. The air around them was thin and chill and large drifts of snow still clung to the shady areas despite summer's rapid approach.

The clatter of horses hooves and the creak of the wagons echoed off the bare rock of the surrounding hillsides and the higher they climbed into the mountain pass, the brighter the morning light felt, as though they were nearing the sun itself without feeling any of its warmth.

Drawing the heavy curtains closed, Ashlynn retrieved a fur trimmed blanket and wrapped it around herself for warmth. It wasn't just the cold air outside, but her conversation with Nyrielle had left a chill in her heart that a few moments of gentle touch couldn't entirely drive away.

Reaching into the basket Georg had given her, Ashlynn took a flakey, buttery pastry and began nibbling while she tried to sort out her feelings about the challenges ahead.

Despite all the time she'd spent training with Thane, her experience with real combat was next to non-existent. Kaefin, for all of his attempts to overpower her, had been a soft man who relied on his title to bully those who were weaker than him.

She'd defeated Sir Broll in what looked like fair combat but Thane made sure she understood afterward just how much stripping a knight of his armor placed the other man at a disadvantage. Broll's aggressive fighting style and his heavy ax both relied on having armor that could deflect glancing blows or less threatening attacks while he focused on cleaving apart his opponents. Stripping him of his armor in the name of 'fairness' was the same as forcing him to fight with an arm behind his back.

If she were to face Broll again today, she felt that he wouldn't be her match even if they both wore armor, but the Eldritch were an entirely different matter. In a fight, common wisdom said that humans needed to outnumber the Eldritch at least three to one, if not five to one, in order to have a chance of victory.

Population played a significant factor in how the two sides fought their wars but it went beyond that. The Lothians, and in fact, many human noblemen, were willing to expend the lives of scores of commoners if it would allow them to secure a victory.

So long as casualties among the knights and other landed nobility were kept to a minimum and there were sufficient commoners to support their liege lord in peacetime, they were willing to spend the lives of foot soldiers like coins if it could buy them territory or the recognition of the king.

The Eldritch, on the other hand, couldn't engage in a war of attrition. As much as Nyrielle sounded cold and calculating, she fought ruthlessly to preserve the lives of her people. As a military matter, one fallen soldier was a loss of three to five human soldiers worth of strength, but it went beyond that for Nyrielle.

Fetching a sweeter pastry after finishing the savory one, Ashlynn couldn't help but remember how Nyrielle had first described Georg to her. She'd known him since he was a cub. She'd known his father, his grandfather and several generations of his ancestors before that. She was like that for many of the people of the vale. Losing any of them must cut more deeply than Ashlynn could imagine.

If it didn't hurt to risk her people, Nyrielle would have stormed the outlying barons long ago. In the winter months, both the Clan of the Great Claw and the Horned Clan had a tremendous advantage in moving through heavy snow and fighting in the darkness after sunset.

But Nyrielle hadn't waged those offensive wars. She'd built layer after layer of curtain wall in the Vale, fortifying their defenses and making their home unassailable to all but the fiercest sieges. Meanwhile, she and her progeny bore the responsibility for helping the neighboring Eldritch Lords in their fight against the Lothians.

"She's cold and ruthless with herself, but kind and warm with her people," Ashlynn said softly. "No wonder she didn't like my answer. She expects me to bear the same weight she does to protect our people in the vale and the only way she knows how to handle that weight is by using every available tactic and weapon."

The more she thought about it, the sadder Ashlynn felt. The Clan of the Great Claw gathered in their communal longhouses for warmth and to support each other. The Horned Clan, with their large families, gathered in cozy huts that were filled with the sounds of half a dozen or more children laughing and growing in the peace of the vale.

But Nyrielle, as cruel as she was to herself and as far as she seemed to be willing to go, was alone in her deep underground chambers. Even Ashlynn had been placed at a distance in a room with large windows that filled the room with deadly sunlight.

"Burn the world," Ashlynn repeated softly. "Are you that afraid of losing me? Or are you still trying to keep me at some distance because you think I'm not strong enough?"

She didn't understand, not completely at least, but she felt like she was unraveling something important between herself and the ancient vampire.

"You want to see if I'll go to the same lengths you have in order to survive," Ashlynn mused. "But I'm not you. I can find my own way," she said, the beginnings of a plan forming in her mind. While she still wasn't sure how she would handle matters in the High Pass, she knew how she wanted to respond to Nyrielle's intentions.

It wasn't a complete answer, but it was one she would build on until she found a way to close the final distance that still lingered between the two of them.