

The Vampire 158

Chapter 158 158: The Purpose of her Visit

"Allow me to devour this one and I will find you someone better."

Tension hung thick in the garden the moment High Lady Erna made her offer. None of the servants in the garden were armed, it would be useless to think they could fight off someone like Lady Nyrielle and they'd been told that having armed guards present would be insulting as well as useless.

But, seeing the dark stares from both Heila and more importantly, the amethyst-eyed Zedya, some of the servants wondered why they weren't at least offered some protection against Lady Nyrielle's companions. If a fight broke out between Eldritch Ladies over Erna's words, it would be nice to have someone to stop the conflict from spreading to others, wouldn't it?

Nyrielle, however, said nothing at all. Her face remained calm and impassive though people who had seen her wear an expressionless mask often enough would detect a slight smile tugging at the corners of her lips and a twinkle in her eyes as she looked at her Seneschal staring down the Eldritch High Lady.

"Heila," Ashlynn said without looking away from Erna's unblinking stare. "I'll need to trouble you to fetch my sword and armor. It sounds like we'll be adding snakeskins to our collections of Frost Walker horns and Tuscan tusks at this stop of our trip."

The Ashlynn from a few weeks ago might have said something different. She might have deflected the challenge by pointing out that Nyrielle's choice of Seneschal was no one's business but hers, or that she might be weak now but she'd only just begun to master her powers.

The Ashlynn who stood before High Lady Erna had come to realize that those excuses, true as they might be, would only be taken as signs of weakness by the Eldritch. A challenge had been issued. If she retreated from it, then it was as good as declaring that she wasn't worthy of Nyrielle.

While she could accept people calling her weak, because she still was when compared to the likes of Nyrielle and Lord Ritchel, she would never accept the implication that she wasn't worthy of her partner's love.

"How many bodies would you need to see piled up at my feet to feel that I belong at Mistress Nyrielle's side?" Ashlynn asked directly.

"None," Nyrielle interrupted, pulling Ashlynn into a close embrace. "My darling Ashlynn has slaughtered enough on this trip. She's been so beaten and bruised that I've barely been able to enjoy the sweetness of her blood for fear of interrupting her healing. Don't deprive me of my favorite delicacy just because you want to test my darling's strength."

"Oh, if you're hungry, I have a treat for you," Erna said, the fierceness in her gaze dropping away instantly as she turned to her nervous looking servants. "Please, bring the special meal I prepared for Auntie," she said with a wide smile.

"You have some steel in you," Erna said, turning back to Ashlynn. "You have no idea how much it would delight my people to see a Child of the Earth in the arena. I don't think it's happened... maybe ever. To be the first witch to stand on the sands of blood and honor, people would surely come from two or three nations away."

"But, willing as you are, you're not ready yet," she said, her tongue flicking out again as she more closely sampled Ashlynn's aura. "And since Auntie doesn't want you to fight, I would never force the issue. Perhaps after you've completed your visit to the Mother of Thorns you'll be ready to entertain us."

"Even then," Nyrielle said, her eyes darkening. "My Ashlynn doesn't belong on the sands. There's nothing so important that she needs to take that risk as long as I'm here."

"Is that how it is?" Erna said, smiling widely. "Then come, Little Witch, there are several things to try, I hope you'll enjoy them."

"Thank you," Ashlynn said politely, taking a seat on one of the plush sofas where she could snuggle close to Nyrielle. "Is this a custom of the Scaled Clan? Meals of many small bites?"

"No, not at all," Erna said, selecting a delicate morsel of grilled vegetable topped with a spicy red sauce. "We prefer to gorge ourselves on something substantial and then spend a day or two digesting. This is for Auntie. It's been so long since she visited, I wanted to give her as many different dishes as I could," she said, sounding more like a spoiled child seeking praise than a powerful ruler.

"You didn't have to do this, Little Snake," Nyrielle said warmly, selecting an olive stuffed with herbs and creamy cheese which she bit in half, savoring one bite before feeding the rest of the olive to Ashlynn. "But it matches well with the purpose of my visit, so I'm very glad that you did."

"My Ladies," a servant said, interrupting the conversation. "We've brought the meal that High Lady Erna prepared for Lady Nyrielle," he said, turning to gesture to a trio of bound and gagged individuals.

One of the men was a member of the Scaled Clan, another from the Glass Eyed Clan and the third came from a clan that Ashlynn had never seen before with bull-like horns and a broad, stocky body covered in dark black fur.

"I hunted them myself when you sent your letter," Erna said proudly. "Each of them is very strong with a glorious record in the arena. If they had accepted their sentences, they might even have won enough victories to be forgiven for their crimes. Since they dared to defy the law and escape, they've lost the honor they gained."

"You don't need to worry about leaving them alive," the High Lady added. "Their lives are forfeit one way or another. Since you haven't been able to feed on your enchanting delicacy, feel free to indulge in the blood of the strong. You shouldn't be disappointed," she said sweetly.

"Go," Ashlynn said, tapping Nyrielle gently and pulling back. She felt the moment of hesitation from Nyrielle as soon as the criminals were presented, but she had no intention of turning away from this. While Nyrielle benefitted tremendously from feeding on Ashlynn, she never took enough from her to sate herself.

After asking Ashlynn to watch her feed once, Nyrielle had never brought Ashlynn along to see her feed again, but once had been enough for Ashlynn to accept the way Nyrielle fed. The people of the Vale of Mists offered themselves up willingly and considered it an honor for Nyrielle to feed on them.

Here, it seemed that High Lady Erna had different thoughts on the matter. Ashlynn didn't know what crimes these men had committed, but clearly, they had been judged, sentenced, and attempted to escape that sentence. Whether Nyrielle took their lives by feeding on them or Erna had them beheaded, the result would be the same and there was no reason to be upset by it.

"Doing all this," Ashlynn said, gesturing at the food on the table and the men Nyrielle had begun to feed on. "Mistress Nyrielle must mean a great deal to you."

"I pestered Father for a year to invite her here to teach me how to fight before I entered the arena for the first time," Erna admitted readily. "You know there's a statue of her at the arena that records the names of everyone she defeated to become the Blood Princess of the arena. When I was little, I wanted to become even stronger than her so people would call me the Blood Queen and accept me as their ruler."

"And?" Ashlynn asked, selecting a plump red fruit and savoring the sweet juices that threatened to run down her chin when she took her first bite. "Do they call you the Blood Queen?"

"No," the other woman said with an ironic smile. "I had my share of fights in the arena but by the time I was strong enough to contemplate what she had done, I no longer had a reason to do so. I had gained too much and defeat would cost me more than I was willing to pay. That's when I finally understood, at least a little bit, just how much desperation was driving Auntie in those days."

"Those days are over," Nyrielle said, returning to her place on the sofa next to Ashlynn. "Now I have people I can't afford to lose," she added, giving Ashlynn a light kiss before retrieving a pickled beet from the collection of small morsels. "And there are things about High Fen City I'd like to share with her that have nothing to do with the arena."

"Oh? Then what is it you have in mind for your visit?" Erna asked lightly.

"My darling has suffered greatly and worked hard since a foolish human attempted to murder her," Nyrielle said, a hint of darkness creeping into her gaze before she blinked it away. "Now that we're here, I intend to spoil her with a few days of decadence before we resume our journey to the Mother of Thorns."

"My darling Ashlynn," Nyrielle said, cupping her lover's cheek and gazing into her emerald eyes with warmth and affection. "You won't object to my arrangements, will you?"

Ashlynn's face heated under the vampire's intensely affectionate gaze. At times like this, even though there were several other people present, her eyes only saw Nyrielle.

"When you put it like that," Ashlynn said, leaning forward to whisper in her lover's ear. "You can do with me as you please and I will always be yours."