

The Vampire 181

Chapter 181 181: Better Off Without Them

For the next hour, Ashlynn and Heila made their way slowly around the perimeter of the masquerade. Food, drink and conversation all flowed freely though some of the topics seemed surprisingly ill-informed to Ashlynn as she wandered by.

"Do you think that the Blood Princess is back looking for fighters to join her war against the humans?" One person asked, his voice as light and airy as it might be if he'd been asking 'Do you think it will rain tomorrow.'

"I hope so," an elaborately dressed man in a mask shaped like the face of an angry bull said. "My luck at the arena has been poor lately. I've already lost close to a thousand gold tails on unfortunate wagers this month alone. I could use a sure bet like the Blood Princess to make back a bit of those losses."

"You must be joking," another man said. "No one bets on whether the Blood Princess wins or not. They only bet on whether or not the person she defeats accepts their loss and submits or refuses and dies on the sands."

Elsewhere in, people had a different opinion on Nyrielle's visit to the High Fen.

"I've heard that Lady Nyrielle has finally given up on the Vale of Mists," a serpentine woman whispered to a bearish companion from the Clan of the Great Claw. "She's come to take a position under High Lady Erna's rule instead. Perhaps we'll see a proper Eldritch Lady ruling the Lower Falls by year's end."

"It would be wise on her part," the woman's bearish companion agreed. "No one who fled across the mountains in my great-grandfather's era is interested in returning to their ancestral lands in the Vale of Mists. We all have lives here in the High Fen that we won't leave behind. Lady Nyrielle has done well for more than a century, let her hand responsibility for fighting the humans to Lord Ritchel and the Frost Walkers for a time."

"You really think the Frost Walkers could hold back the human invaders?" a third person asked, wandering into the conversation. "I hear that there aren't many of them and they barely eke out a primitive life on their frozen mountains. Hardly the kind of warriors to fight off humans and their pretend god."

"The Frost Walkers don't have to do anything to fight the humans," the bearish man laughed from behind his silver mask. "Just stand there and let their mountains kill the humans for them. That's why defending the Vale of Mists is pointless. The High Pass can easily be closed with an avalanche or two, there's no reason for more Eldritch lives to be spent in a pointless war fought for..."

Suddenly the man seemed to catch sight of Ashlynn and changed his mind about whatever he'd been about to say. Seeing the direction of his gaze, the others involved in the conversation quickly busied themselves in their goblets of wine or an hors d'oeuvre snatched from a passing servant.

Despite the nervous looks of the masked guests, Ashlynn had no desire to involve herself in discussions about the events occurring in the Vale of Mists. While this period of the ball was supposed to be casual with barriers to social station lowered, Ashlynn had no way of knowing who the people behind the masks were which made it impossible to know whether or not trying to change anyone's minds would bring any value.

Part of her yearned for an opportunity to prove to Nyrielle that she could be useful at times like this. Convincing people who thought that the Vale of Mists was doomed to fall that it wasn't, or that the humans posed a threat to them as well was only worth doing if the people she convinced had the power or resources to do something with that changed opinion.

Her father taught her that the common people could believe whatever they wanted and there was very little point in changing their minds so long as they had little ability to act on those beliefs. If the common people thought that too much of their taxes were given as tithes to the Church, what did it matter?

They could grumble, certainly, but for every one or two person grumbling, another pious voice would shout them down, praising the work of the Church or claiming no price could be placed on a person's salvation.

As long as the people weren't starving because of unbearable taxation, grumbling could always be tolerated because it rarely led to rebellion. If a lord involved themselves in the argument, it only created more attention on the negatives, no matter how well informed or soundly reasoned the lords' arguments were.

To Ashlynn, it was clear that matters of the Vale of Mists weren't a great concern to anyone present. Nyrielle's status as the Blood Princess was far more interesting to most people and the ones who did have opinions about the war against humans were so poorly informed that Ashlynn felt it was unlikely that they held any power to do anything to help the Vale in their fight.

"Does it bother you?" Ashlynn asked, turning to Heila as they moved away from the conversation.
"Hearing from people who have given up on returning to their ancestral homes in the Vale?"

Heila frowned, glancing back at the bearish man from the Clan of the Great Claw. From his elegantly tailored tunic and waist coat to his gilded mask and finely carved walking stick, he looked like a man who had never encountered hardship nor lost anything that mattered to him greatly. He seemed... soft, compared to people like Captain Lennart.

"I think I feel sorry for him," Heila said as she and Ashlynn stopped to sample the fresh fruits offered by a passing servant. "I'm sure he has never seen the Vale of Mists. He doesn't know what he lost or how hard others have fought to protect it so he and his descendants could return to it one day."

"All he knows is this comfortable life," Heila said, gesturing at the luxurious ball. No one moving around the great hall looked like they had suffered hard or lean lives. Out of everyone present, perhaps only the gladiators who fought on the sands of the arena could understand the attitudes of people who lived under the constant threat of human invasion in the Vale of Mists.

Even Heila, who had lived a relatively sheltered life in the ancient castle deep within the vale, knew more of battle, fear, and suffering than these people did. Glancing at the servants moving about the hall, passing out delicate morsels of sweet and savory delights or collecting empty wine glasses, she realized that she couldn't see herself as 'one of them' anymore.

Heila's perspective had changed after the events in the High Pass. She couldn't ignore the harsher world around her anymore. Seeing these people who lived so blissfully unaware of it, she couldn't help but pity them.

"It doesn't bother me that they don't want to return," Heila finally said. "Instead, I think we're better off without them."

"I'm not entirely sure about that," Ashlynn said, looking back at the well-dressed people who had moved on from discussions about the Vale to a conversation about someone's new boat. "Some kinds of people can only exist when there is peace. If we didn't have to worry about the Lothians anymore, we might develop people like him within the Vale all by ourselves."

"I guess," Heila said, her voice a touch sullen. "But if we do, it will be because we earned it. We still don't need people like him to return only when we've already won. If it's right now, when we're getting ready to fight again, I still think we're better off without men like that."

"On that, I don't disagree," Ashlynn said, turning away to search for other conversations. People might not think much of the Vale of Mists at the moment, but within the next few years, she was certain that would change. And when it did, she agreed with Heila - the people who fought for the Vale should be the ones to enjoy the peace they gained.