

The Vampire 192

Chapter 192 192: The Power Behind Vampire Titles (Part One)

"My teacher is called the 'Fangs of Death' because he represents death that comes suddenly and in unexpected ways when a person seems otherwise invulnerable," Nyrielle said. "You can think of him as nature's perfect assassin. He preys on the most powerful individuals who feel invulnerable."

"Death comes for everyone," Ashlynn said, nodding in understanding. "A king might be defended by an army of guards, or attended to by dozens of doctors and physicians, but if your teacher decided to kill a king, could anyone really stop him?"

"Perhaps," Nyrielle said, pausing to consider thoughtfully. "The Kingdom of Gaal is protected by the miracle workers of the Church. Their power can be very difficult to overcome, particularly if they have reason to believe someone is threatening the king or his ruling council. It's one of the reasons that humans have been so successful in conquering Eldritch lands."

"You're being modest," Ashlynn teased, pinching Nyrielle's waist playfully as they sat on the soft feather bed. "I've seen what you can do with your wings unfurled. I can't believe that your teacher is any weaker than you. Are you saying that the miracle workers of the Church are that much stronger than the abomination you fought in the ancestral cave?"

"Some of them are," Nyrielle said without a moment of hesitation. She'd seen firsthand what some of the Church's mightiest Templars and Inquisitors were capable of. Compared to the weakened and conflicted blood golem in the ancestral cave, the forces of the Church were a much greater threat.

"You're right that my teacher is stronger than I am, at least in most of the ways that matter, but even he has limits," Nyrielle added. "Nature craves a balance in things and even we are part of that delicate balance. My teacher is a fearsome assassin but even he is afraid of Philosar, the Gnawing Death."

"The Gnawing Death?" Ashlynn said, raising an eyebrow. "That doesn't sound as impressive as the 'Fangs of Death.' What kind of man is Philosar to leave your adorable teacher frightened of him?"

"My teacher is attuned with the bat," Nyrielle said with a laugh. "His wings are dark and leathery. He can go further, shapeshifting entirely into a small creature of the night. Philosar is attuned with the rat. His powers are similarly insidious. Shubnalu's powers target a person's blood and vitality. Philosar's powers target the mind."

"And does Philosar resemble a rat?" Ashlynn asked playfully. "Does he have sharp teeth to gnaw away at his enemies, or is he cute like a small white mouse? Remember, you promised to gossip," she reminded her lover.

"He's not 'cute'," Nyrielle said, shuddering at the thought of what would happen if someone ever suggested to Philosar that he was 'cute.' "Better to call him 'distinguished.' He's from the Clan of the Painted Masks and he's quite proud of the elaborate patterns in his fur. He's also much neater and better organized than Erkembalt."

"Come to think of it, the two of you might get along if you can convince him to let you into his library," Nyrielle mused. "He's a collector of books and he's older than I am by hundreds of years. Just beware that he's very, very protective of his library, and be prepared to offer up a book or two of your own for the privilege of browsing his collection."

"So, the impression he gives is more refined and scholarly?" Ashlynn said. Seeing Nyrielle's nod of agreement, she pressed on with more serious questions. "You said that each of you embodies a kind of death," Ashlynn said, her brows furrowing as she fit the pieces together. "So, if Shubnalu represents the loss of vitality then Philosar represents the slow decay of a person's mind as they age. Dementia, senility, those sorts of things?"

"Exactly so," Nyrielle said, tapping Ashlynn on the nose and flashing her a soft smile. She'd worried that the topic would be so heavy and grim that it would rekindle the fear that Ashlynn had felt after things became dangerous between them the last time Nyrielle fed on her.

Thankfully it seemed like her lover's notion of treating things like 'gossip' allowed her to keep some emotional distance from the heavy topics. After that, Ashlynn's intellectual curiosity was stronger than her fear of death, at least when the conversation remained distant and abstract.

"If Shabnalu ever tried to seize the mantle of the Eldritch Emperor, he would become a different kind of threat," Nyrielle explained, returning to their earlier topic of why her teacher didn't just seize the title of Eldritch Emperor even if he had the strength to do so.

"Philosar is insidious enough to gnaw away at him, weakening him enough for someone else to pull him off the throne," she said. "My teacher knows that even he isn't invulnerable. At his most insidious, Philosar brings madness that inspires fear in the people around his target. How would your former people respond to a mad king?"

"He'd be pulled down fairly quickly so long as there was a suitable heir to take his place," Ashlynn said as she thought back over the few hundred years of the Kingdom of Gaal's history.

Nyrielle sat back and watched with a slight smile on her face as Ashlynn worked her way through the things she'd read in books years ago along with the conversations she'd had with her tutors about the things that couldn't be written down in the books used by most teachers. In the stillness of the pre-dawn morning, only the faint crackle of the hearth broke the silence as Ashlynn assembled the pieces of the puzzle.

There were actually two occasions she could think of in the history of the Kingdom of Gaal where a king had gone mad and placed the kingdom in great peril because of it. Once when a king was poisoned with a toxic mushroom that caused him to hallucinate that demons were lurking in every corner of the castle, spying on him or preparing to invade. He'd been caught by his personal priest when he attempted to burn down the royal keep in order to 'save the kingdom from demon spies.'

The second time, it had been an aging king who had fallen into a spiral of paranoia and conspiracy theories about his dukes consorting with demons to steal the crown. Before his reign of madness ended, he only ate food he grew and slaughtered with his own hands and he only allowed his grandson and one retainer to step within a hundred paces of his throne when he gave his edicts.

Trust in the court had been so badly damaged that each of the dukes had marshaled their personal armies to defend against a possible attack from their neighbors or the king himself. The entire kingdom had teetered on the brink of civil war.

Ultimately, in both cases, the Church had stepped in to declare that the king had succumbed to his struggle and that it was time for another to take up the king's mantle in his place. Had it been one of the dukes doing so or even the entirety of the ruling council, the war might still have broken out, but when the Church took action there was little anyone else could say.

"Wait," Ashlynn said, staring at Nyrielle in shock as pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place. After all, the kings who had fallen to madness had once been hailed as great kings who would expand the kingdom and they were powerful supporters of the lords leading armies against the Eldritch. "Has Philosar been responsible for targeting human kings? Is that why we've seen kings succumb to madness in the past?"