

The Vampire 194

Chapter 194 194: The Harbinger of Death

"The death of the soul?" Ashlynn whispered. "What... does that..." her mind shook, struggling to process the concept. It wasn't that she didn't understand. It was that it was too horrifying to accept.

"If you can cause the death of the soul," Ashlynn said, her eyes trembling as she met Nyrielle's midnight gaze. "Then you can stop a person from ever reaching the Heavenly Shores. If they die, then they will never..."

"That's a human belief," Nyrielle said, interrupting Ashlynn before her mind could go too far down that path.

Nyrielle had seen too much of the human's 'faith' in their 'Holy Lord of Light.' To her, the scriptures that spoke of struggle and rebirth into a higher station were nothing more than methods to convince the masses to accept their painful lives while the lords above them carried a 'divine mandate' because of supposed virtues in a previous life.

She hoped that with time, Ashlynn's faith would fade. Years of experience and perspective would wear away at ideals her lover's beliefs like a millstone. It was pointless to argue matters of faith and asking Ashlynn to forsake her faith would only have created unnecessary conflict between them.

The fact that the Church Ashlynn grew up in considered her to be a heretic who must be put to death was like a hand upon the wheel. The Church's lies about the Eldritch people were another one. Eventually, they would add up to something that eroded what faith Ashlynn still had in the Holy Lord of Light, freeing her from the human superstitions.

Now, however, Nyrielle's nature presented an existential threat to Ashlynn's faith, one that could drive a wedge between them if she didn't address it.

"I cannot say what happens to the soul after a person dies," Nyrielle said. "Not with any certainty. A vampire exists between life and death. I may be able to glimpse the other side but if I reach out too far toward death then I would succumb to it."

"Can you feel it though?" Ashlynn asked. "Can you feel a soul's departure at the moment of death? Or see it?"

"I can feel the moment that death overwhelms life," Nyrielle said. She closed her eyes and let out a heavy sigh before giving Ashlynn the most earnest look she could. "You shouldn't think of my power as something that concerns itself with the afterlife."

"If the death of the soul isn't about stopping someone from reaching the afterlife," Ashlynn said. "Then what is it about?"

"You have studied history," Nyrielle said, brushing aside a lock of Ashlynn's hair and taking hold of both of her lover's hands. "Have you ever read of great men who lost their greatness? Men who were once fearless who became cowards, or people of great ambition who retired to a humble life?"

"Of course," Ashlynn said, latching on to Nyrielle's words like a lifeline thrown to a woman drowning in the storm tossed sea. "The Church often speaks of such people as having given up the struggle but I think that's unkind. I think that those people have realized they were on the wrong path or that continuing as they had been would result in disaster."

"That sort of thing is the lightest application of what my personal power is capable of," Nyrielle said. As she spoke, she held up a hand and filled it with a blossoming flower made of pure darkness.

When Ashlynn looked at the dark flower, her heart froze in her chest. The flames in the hearth seemed to dim, as though the darkness emanating from Nyrielle's palm consumed even their light. The longer she stared at it, the less anything else seemed to matter. Her conflict with Owain felt small, petty and pointless. Reunion with her parents was unimportant. Learning witchcraft....

With a flick of Nyrielle's hand, the darkness vanished. The room brightened and warmth rushed back into the room as though someone had thrown an additional log on the fire. Gently, Nyrielle placed her hand on Ashlynn's back, withdrawing any traces of her power that found their way to her lover.

There wasn't much, the merest brush of darkness that clung to Ashlynn like a film of soap in a bath, but it was enough to cast the young woman's world in a bleak, desolate darkness until Nyrielle withdrew it.

"You see?" Nyrielle said softly. "What I bring is the death of desire, the death of ambition, and even the death of the will to live. The death of hope and all things that make life worth living. When I say that I bring the death of the soul, that's what I mean."

"But, I thought your greatest power was sorcery," Ashlynn said numbly. Nyrielle had withdrawn every trace of her power, but the memory of that sensation still left Ashlynn shaken. "You used blood curses against the abomination in the ancestral cave," she recalled. "And Thane always said that your unique gift among vampires was the strength of your sorcery."

"The blood sorcery that I used is an imitation of my teacher's gift," Nyrielle said. "Compared to him, my skill is much lower. I could imitate the gifts of the others as well, just as they could imitate my gifts, but I would never dream of matching my blood sorcery against my teacher's. Likewise, if he fought me with darkness, he would have no chance of escaping the abyss that my power would drag him into."

"I see," Ashlynn said, still struggling to come to terms with how Nyrielle had made her feel. She was grateful for the demonstration. It made it clear in a way that words couldn't that Nyrielle's power had nothing to do with preventing a person from finding their way to the Heavenly Shores in this life or the next.

Though, if the Church was right, then Nyrielle could effectively end a person's struggle. If that happened, they might not only fail to reach the Heavenly Shores in this life, they might start again at the same point or an even lower one in the next life. It wasn't the same as destroying the soul outright but it was still deeply troubling.

"This is why the Lothians have never conquered the Vale of Mists," Ashlynn realized. "This is why the wars always end as the price begins to mount. As long as you can reach the Marquis or his generals, they'll lose the will to keep fighting the war."

"Reaching them is not as easy as you might think," Nyrielle pointed out. "The Lothian Marquis of every generation brings a High Priest to the battlefield with them. The risks of coming close enough to use my powers against a reigning Lothian are very high. The damage I can inflict from a safer distance is much less."

"That's why Bors Lothian may have given up on attaining more personal glories," the vampire said. "But he's pushed all of his ambition onto his sons and he still works hard to pave the way for their conquest. I managed to force Bors to retire from the battlefield but I could never force a Lothian Marquis to give up on their fight against the Eldritch."

"And even if you did, it would only result in someone else taking the throne earlier," Ashlynn realized. "If you'd turned Bors Lothian into a hollowed out shell of a man with no ambition, the King would have appointed a regent or the march would have passed to the hands of Bors Lothian's surviving brother."

"If you understand my limits," Nyrielle said softly. "Then you can understand the limits of the others. And your own limits as well. After all, witches and vampires are different parts of the same puzzle."

"In what way?" Ashlynn asked. There was still a great deal for her to process about Nyrielle's revelations but she felt like, given a little time, the pieces would fit together for her. She couldn't say that it didn't change how she thought about Nyrielle, but it wasn't something that would destroy her faith in her partner or the trust that they'd built.

As much as Ashlynn hated to admit it, she was still very young and very new to this world of sorcery, witchcraft, vampires and everything Eldritch. If Nyrielle had told her that she could cause the death of souls two months ago, right after they'd met, Ashlynn didn't know how she would have reacted but she felt that it would have been much harder to build the trust that currently existed between them.

"Vampires are forces of death that serve life," Nyrielle said. "We destroy that which cannot be allowed to live so that others may not only live, but thrive."

"That is a very elegant way of framing it," Ashlynn said. Given everything Nyrielle had said so far, as strange as it might sound for vampires to be 'servants of life' who performed their service by sewing all forms of death, there was a cold, cruel sort of logic to it.

"Your teacher may disagree with me," Nyrielle said. "But the common belief among vampires is that while we are forces of death who serve life, witches are forces of nature that serve the world."