

The Vampire 259

Chapter 259: A Spark

"Can your progeny hunt their own food? Or are their fangs so dull that they can only rely on their brethren to find them a meal?"

The moment Nyrielle spoke, she knew that she'd crossed a line with Tausau that would be difficult to retreat from. For a moment, she regretted her impatience. There were other matters to discuss before she left Tausau's ramshackle fortress and she could have easily filled this evening with those matters rather than springing her trap as soon as she arrived.

She almost wished she'd brought Zedya along with her. Not only was Zedya the only person who had experienced firsthand what Nyrielle was about to attempt, but her command over her Mesmerizing Eyes had reached a level that few vampires ever obtained. A more susceptible Tausau who had fallen under Zedya's sway would be a better target for her untested sorcery.

Unfortunately, Tausau was far too old and experienced to lower his guard with one of Nyrielle's progeny in the room. In order for her plan to work, she needed her Uncle to be off balance and agitated. She needed to find out if there was even a chance of success and the only way Tausau would give her the opportunity is if they were alone together.

If not for the growing sense of pressure in her chest as something attempted to pull Ashlynn free of their bond, she might not have made her move tonight. Already the feeling of pressure had shifted, accompanied by a faint sensation of tearing. Nyrielle's hands clenched on the armrests as she worked to keep concern from flickering across her face.

She had faith in Ashlynn's ability to resolve this crisis but that didn't make it easier for her to focus on what was happening in front of her. Yet now that she had set the trap, no matter how much she wanted

to retire for the night to focus on whatever was tearing at her bond with Ashlynn, she could only wait to see how Tausau would respond. Would he offer his neck, or bear his fangs?

Nyrielle's words hung in the air of Tausau's sitting room like a sword hanging above the older vampire's head. His expression darkened as he struggled to remain impassive before Nyrielle's overwhelming presence. Emotions he'd believed long lost, ground away by the milestone of time, flickered to life deep within his heart. Anxiety. Apprehension. Shame.

How long had it been since he had felt shame for anything he had done? For the past several decades as he took in more and more progeny, he'd reveled in the deep feeling of satisfaction, one of the few emotions left to his withered heart. Satisfaction and pride at every success along with disappointment and sorrow at every failure.

So how was it that within minutes of speaking to him, his grand-niece had rekindled his long-lost ability to feel shame?

"You're trying to provoke me, your Eternity," Tausau said, withdrawing into formality to shield himself from the discomfort he felt. "I understand that you have your own traditions to follow as the Harbinger of Death. You don't need to keep the old ways, even though you were born to descendants of his Eternity Bardas."

"But, your Eternity," the older vampire said, putting his wine down on the table and leaning forward in his overstuffed chair. "It isn't appropriate for the Harbinger of Death to chastise me about the traditions of the Jaws of Death, is it?"

"That's your answer, Uncle?" Nyrielle said, her voice growing colder than the winds of the High Pass. "You think you can shelter under the letters of the covenants? What has happened to the proud hunter I knew? I came to see the sire of the Mongrel Horde. You've grown soft, Uncle."

"Time comes for us all, your Eternity," Tausau said, frowning at the way his grand-niece chose to chastise him. "One day, your heart will also grow cold. You will forget the passions that drove you in your early centuries. You will see that there are only a few things that remain in your life that hold any value."

"I preserve the ones I can," he said, a hint of pride beginning to color his voice as he found the strength to push back against Nyrielle's oppressive aura. "I do what I must to sustain my progeny. Not all of them are inclined toward violence and the hunt, but that doesn't make them unworthy of survival. They may contribute in other ways."

"And who is the Mongrel Horde hunting?" Nyrielle asked pointedly. Inwardly, she did her best to conceal a smile at her uncle's response. She was afraid that he'd been completely consumed by ennui, but it seemed there was still a bit of fire left in him that could be rekindled. "Who do you prey on to keep them from becoming a blight upon the land?"

"No one," the elder vampire said, his pride wilting before her question like a rose without water. "We have been given no orders for decades. We guard the eastern border but the Ancient Clan, no matter how powerful they grow, will never leave their lands. They are no threat to Master's territory."

"So you sit here, idle and useless," Nyrielle said, ruthlessly trampling on his pride. Shadows flowed from her hands, dancing across the space between them until she enveloped the older vampire completely within her midnight aura.

"The Mongrel Horde has become so weak that it can no longer be relied on and so you guard a border that is never attacked, warding against a foe that will never expand," she said, her words slicing to his core.

"It doesn't matter," Tausau said bitterly, a wave of apathy washing over him. "We still have fangs to sink into flesh when we're needed. We may be hounds on a leash, but we haven't completely forgotten how to bite. If the day comes when we are let loose from the leash, then the world will again tremble at the mention of the Mongrel Horde."

The words he said should have contained a fire of passion or the steel of determination but when he spoke to Nyrielle, his words contained neither of those things. Instead, they were calm, flat, as though he described the rising and setting of the moon, something inevitable and unquestionable even if it had long ceased to reflect the truth.

"I doubt that," Nyrielle mocked as she prepared to unleash her attack. For weeks, Zedya had remained at her side as she practiced a technique that no Harbinger of Death could ever hope to possess. Something unique and precious that was only possible because she regularly fed on the blood of a witch. Maybe something that was only possible because she fed on the blood of someone born to be a witch just as she had been born to be a vampire.

"What you do, Uncle," Nyrielle said, sharpening her shadows into claws that molded themselves over Tausau's hands and phantom wings that formed on his back. "If someone gave you a chance to unleash your horde. If you could sharpen their fangs and send them to tear into the throats of the mightiest scourge to sweep across the lands."

As she spoke, she released the smallest trace of Ashlynn's energy into her magic, transforming her shadows from something that sapped the strength of a person's soul into a piece of burning kindling, capable of reigniting the passions in a heart long grown cold and still.

This was why she had pressed him and provoked him. She had to know if there was anything left within her Uncle that could catch the spark she was about to strike. Without Ashlynn to accompany her, she had only a few opportunities to reverse the effects of time's inevitable millstone on the heart of a

vampire before she ran out of the vital energy of life that blended so smoothly with her own sorcery. If this didn't work...

"What would I do?" Tausau said, his lips twitching into a predatory smile that revealed his oversized fangs. "With an enemy to fight, my Mongrels would teach them fear. Our fangs may be dull at the moment, but we're more than capable of nibbling at the flanks, forcing the enemy to dance at our prodding."

"We may not be able to drag them down to death, your Eternity," he said, the flame in his eyes growing brighter. "But if you ask us to stretch out their necks, then we will prepare them for the headsman's ax."