

The Vampire 61

Chapter 61 61: Blood Vitality Crystals

As night fell, Ashlynn waited pensively on her terrace. The night before, she'd set the stage for a romantic dinner with Nyrielle and the night that followed exceeded her expectations in every way imaginable.

When she thought about it, she could still feel a whisper of Nyrielle's fingers tracing along her body and the sharp touch of the vampire's fangs against her thigh. Just remembering it made her face flush red and her toes curl in memory of the pleasure that overwhelmed her mind last night.

Now, however, she wasn't certain what kind of 'normal' they would return to. Dinner on her terrace had been the norm when she was receiving lessons in sorcery from Nyrielle but they hadn't discussed resuming those lessons after she returned to the vale.

Alternatively, after gathering information from the villa, she wondered if Nyrielle would call together her small council of advisors within the vale for another formal dinner meeting. Without knowing exactly how to proceed, she waited for the sun to set and her Mistress to make the first move.

It came as a surprise, however, when Thane arrived at her room with word that Nyrielle wouldn't be available tonight at all.

"The timing is delicate," Thane explained when he arrived. "Mistress is preparing her tribute for High Lady Erna in order to take you to see the Mother of Thorns. The sorcery to construct that tribute is delicate and can't be interrupted."

"I see," Ashlynn said, trying to conceal her disappointment. "Then, what kind of tribute is she preparing? I still don't understand much about the Eldritch people beyond the vale."

"I suppose it wouldn't hurt to give you a lesson tonight while you eat," Thane said with a smile. He'd already heard that Georg had been roasting an entire boar tenderloin just to help Ashlynn recover after Ashlynn fed on her, otherwise, he'd have invited her to stroll through the bazaar with him to sample more of the street food in the vale.

Since she was about to be treated to another of Georg's sumptuous feasts, however, it provided an excellent opportunity to fill some of the gaps in her knowledge.

"Mistress is preparing Blood Vitality Crystals as gifts to Lord Ritchel and High Lady Erna," Thane explained, draping himself languidly on the railing of her terrace and watching the mist rising from the trees in the vale under the deepening twilight.

The terrace was more than a hundred feet above the courtyard below but Thane looked just as comfortable perching on the narrow railing as he would have been on the sofa in her bedroom. Clearly, fear of heights was something he'd shed along with his mortality, or perhaps he'd always been a bit of a daredevil.

"A Blood Vitality Crystal is an item that can only be made by a vampire with training in sorcery," he continued. "To make one, a vampire has to gorge themselves, feeding much more than they need to in order to live. Then, that extra energy is condensed into an appropriate crystal, a ruby, garnet, or something similar."

"Mistress is giving five crystals to Eldritch Lord Ritchel in the mountains. Each one of those crystals contains enough vital energy to restore a middle-aged person to the prime of their youth for a single month," Thane explained.

"That, that's remarkable," Ashlynn whispered, her mind whirling with the implications. The power to restore youth, even temporarily, was beyond anything she'd imagined possible. She thought of her father, his hair graying at the temples, and wondered how he might react to such a gift.

The Church would doubtless call it heretical, and her father might take the same approach, especially if he knew that it was formed by condensing the energy taken from several other people. Ashlynn, however, understood that Nyrielle likely used a dozen or more willing villagers, just like she'd done with Hanno, to spread out the offering without putting anyone in danger.

If her father could return to his days of youth, however, she imagined that he'd eagerly return to his days of visiting countries in the old world and the friends he'd made across the sea. He'd long lamented becoming too old to easily make the strenuous voyage and he would doubtless treasure the ability to return to visiting his distant friends.

"What," she said, realizing an even deeper implication of the crystals. "Then, does that mean that, with enough crystals, she could extend a person's life, effectively forever?"

"No, a Blood Vitality Crystal doesn't work that way," Thane said, shaking his head. "The crystal won't extend a person's life a single day longer. In fact, if a person who was dying of old age consumed one every month, they would appear to be fit and full of life, right up until the moment that they collapsed and died of old age."

"Then, if it doesn't extend life, why do these lords value the crystals so much?" Ashlynn asked.

"You still don't understand how important personal strength is to rulers among the Eldritch peoples," Thane said, turning away from the scenery beyond the castle to look at Ashlynn. "Mistress Nyrielle rules in the Vale of Mists, not because she inherited it from her grandsire but because there is no one in the Vale of Mists who could defeat her."

"It is the responsibility of the strong to defend the weak," he continued. "To protect them from the dangers outside the nation. It is also their responsibility to nurture the strength of those they rule, both individually and collectively, so everyone can thrive."

"Nyrielle is a True Vampire. Her strength comes in many forms, from her sorcery to her ability to create strong progeny," he said, pointing at himself. "But not every Eldritch Lord or Lady is like her. Some have strength that is more... one-dimensional. Lord Ritchel is just such a man. He is the greatest warrior in his nation."

Ashlynn nodded slowly, her fingers absently tracing patterns on the arm of her chair as she processed this information. The idea of rulership based solely on strength wasn't entirely foreign to her, but when she'd read about it in the books written by the church, it was often used as proof of how savage and uncivilized the 'demons' were.

Yet, when she listened to the way Thane explained it, she couldn't deny the logic of it. Especially in a world where threats from humans and other Eldritch nations were constant. Without a strong protector like Nyrielle, the Vale would have fallen to the Lothians long ago, or perhaps it would have been conquered by Lord Ritchel and become part of his domain instead.

"It's so different from human politics," she mused aloud. "But I can see why it works for them. For us," she corrected herself quickly. "It ensures the ruler is always capable of protecting their people."

"Though I imagine it makes for some tense succession plans," Ashlynn said, frowning as she considered what would happen in a place like the Lothian March if Owain and Loman had to fight for the right to inherit, or if they had to face against anyone else in the march who might challenge them.

"Now, imagine that you're a great warrior, but you're growing old," Thane said. "You have to shelter your people from external threats and defend against challenges to your throne from your own people."

"How much value do you suppose such a man would place on the ability to regain his youth and vigor long enough to fight off one of those threats? Particularly if, as you said, you're trying to plan for your succession but your chosen heir isn't yet ready for the burden of leadership," Thane said, a dark smile forming on his face.

"That's what Nyrielle is offering in exchange for safe passage through his territory and hunting rights should she need to feed while she's there," he said. "If you were Lord Ritchel, could you refuse such an offer?"