

The Vampire 86

Chapter 86 86: Clever Ashlynn

Nyrielle smiled in the dancing shadows cast by the swaying lantern in the carriage as Ashlynn began to share her perspective on handling Lord Ritchel's nation in general and Hauke in particular.

When Nyrielle initially made the decision to bind the young witch as her Seneschal, she knew little about what sort of woman Ashlynn was. She'd gone to Lothian City in the hopes of taking a look at Owain Lothian's new bride, though the presence of the High Priest made it impossible to get close during the late-night feast.

She'd never expected to learn that the woman Owain was marrying bore the mark of the witch, nor that he would attempt to kill her as soon as he discovered it. When she finally found Ashlynn, hours later, beaten, cold, and shivering in the dark of a rainstorm, she hadn't hesitated to seize the opportunity to bind a child of the earth to herself as tightly as she could.

At the time, she assumed that it would take years for Ashlynn's powers to blossom and maybe just as long to give her the instruction she needed to act as a Seneschal within the Vale of Mists and beyond. Perhaps it was because she'd seen few extraordinary women among the noble houses in Lothian March, but she didn't have high expectations for Ashlynn in the beginning.

It quickly became obvious that her darling Ashlynn was cut from a different cloth. Now, as Nyrielle listened to the young witch's confident voice, she found herself nodding along with many of Ashlynn's assumptions.

The training Ashlyn received from her father was clear as she counted off her assumptions. First, she assumed that Nyrielle was content with her relationship with Lord Ritchel and further, that she supported Hauke as the next Eldritch Lord of the High Pass.

Second, she assumed that Nyrielle didn't want to suffer a loss, however she was tested. Finally, she assumed that There was a reason that Rtichel wanted Hauke to succeed him but that Hauke himself wasn't the strongest person among the Frost Walkers who were currently contending to be the next Eldritch Lord of the High Pass.

"Correct on all counts," Nyrielle said with a pleased smile. "The Frost Walker clan are almost natural born ice sorcerers, but they aren't all equally gifted. Much like there are different marks of the witch that can tell you about a witch's power, there are differences in the horns of Frost Walkers that can help you gauge their potential."

"So Hauke has potential, but he's like me, still learning to use his powers," Ashlynn said, nodding in understanding. "That gives him an excuse to lose because people will be understanding that he's still growing."

"He's still growing," Nyrielle acknowledged. "And he's younger than you are by four years, but unlike you, he's been taught how to use his powers from a young age. How will you overpower him?"

"By limiting the field," Ashlynn said confidently. "I need to draw him into a contest that I can win, but it should be one that leaves the question of comprehensive strength open. The worst thing would be to fight a duel to submission."

"If I force him to submit to me then it will be a mark of shame that he'll need to blot away," the young witch continued. Years ago, when she'd asked her father why the previous master of the Fellowship of Wayfinders threw good money after bad, backing increasingly risky ventures, her father had explained that it was difficult to erase the shame of a humiliating failure through years of steady work.

Pressured by rivals within the Fellowship of Wayfinders and driven by the desire to blot away the shame of failure, the guild master had engaged in a series of increasingly risky ventures in the northern sea. Each subsequent failure had added to his burden and shame until he felt so pressured that he hung himself.

Her father had warned her that at times, it was more important to help someone salvage their pride than to do the 'right thing,' and that a victory that damaged a person's pride too deeply, even if it didn't harm them very much, could open the door to disasters that neither side could afford.

"I need to find a way to win while also suggesting that he would defeat me in other contests," Ashlynn said. "If I can achieve a narrow victory or a small one, it protects your reputation and the strength of the Vale of Mists but it doesn't create a mark of shame that Hauke has to resort to desperate acts to erase."

"Do you have a contest in mind that you believe you can win?" Nyrielle asked, raising a brow at the young witch. As a matter of political strategy, she was willing to give Ashlynn high marks for her observations and general strategy. Accomplishing what she said, however, was much more difficult than simply saying it.

"Not yet," Ashlynn admitted, deflating slightly. She'd talked to Thane about fighting the Frost Walkers and the things he shared were more than a little intimidating. She wasn't without opportunities but seizing them would prove incredibly difficult. "As long as I'm headed in the right direction though, I'm sure I can figure something out."

"My darling Ashlynn is so gentle," Nyrielle said, softly stroking Ashlynn's pale blonde hair and admiring her features in the warm glow of the lantern. "But kindness to your enemies and rivals can become cruelty to yourself. You have other options you're not exploring."

As Nyrielle gazed at Ashlynn, she searched her lover's eyes for a hint of understanding or a trace of the darkness that came from doing what needed to be done in order to survive and reap the lives of the ones who had wronged her.

Unfortunately, it seemed like she underestimated the impact of recent events on Ashlynn's mindset. Despite her growing awareness that her vengeance against the Lothians would consume the lives of many who served them and that it would also risk the lives of the people of the Vale of Mists, she was still fighting hard to find ways to limit the collateral damage.

Perhaps that was a good thing and perhaps it wasn't, Nyrielle couldn't say for sure. The only thing she could say was that until Ashlynn understood the darker paths, she would be trapped by convictions that her enemies didn't hold.

It was fine if Ashlynn chose to avoid the darker roads that led to her objectives, but if she wasn't willing to walk them in times of need, if she couldn't acknowledge that some darkness might be necessary to protect the light, then she might not survive her time in Eldritch lands, to say nothing of reaching her objective and claiming her vengeance.