

The Vampire 87

Chapter 87 87: Ruthless Nyrielle

"What am I missing?" Ashlynn asked, looking into the vampire's midnight blue eyes. She was afraid she'd see disappointment there but instead she found a hint of... amusement?

"You don't need to fight Hauke at all," Nyrielle said, her voice losing its warmth and gaining a faint edge. "Destroy someone else, perhaps one of his rivals. Find an excuse to do it preemptively. The difficulty is more or less the same but your harvest will be much greater."

"But you asked me what to do if Hauke is the one testing me," Ashlynn asked, confused about why Nyrielle would mention a proactive attack.

"Yes, but no one ever said he would come at you directly," Nyrielle said, shaking her head. "You've seen human noblemen and merchants scheme against each other in all manner of subtle ways. Don't think that the Eldritch won't scheme against you simply because we value contests of strength."

"But if the test is coming from Hauke and I strike out at someone who is blameless..." Ashlynn started, only to be silenced by a finger placed gently on her lips.

"No one who desires the power to rule is blameless," the vampire said, all emotion draining away from her face, leaving her cold and expressionless. "When you rule, you must see a wider world. Anyone who opposes Eldritch Lord Ritchel is a valid target when your goal is, as you said, to protect the favorable relationship between the Vale of Mists and the High Pass."

"If you crush one of Hauke's rivals, eliminating him from the board," Nyrielle continued. "You are selling a favor to both Hauke and Lord Ritchel."

Ashlynn's brows lowered, furrowed in thought as she considered the implications of Nyrielle's approach. She could prove her strength, eliminate a rival for Hauke, and send a loud signal that the Vale of Mists supported Ritchel's chosen successor. All of these things were positive outcomes.

Achieving it, however, would mean attacking someone who had done nothing to draw her ire. While Nyrielle said that no one who desired the power to rule was blameless, Ashlynn struggled to see it the same way.

Thane taught her that the Eldritch placed the strongest member of their nations on a throne and with that throne came the obligation to protect and support their people. If a person felt they would be a better protector for the High Pass than Hauke would, shouldn't that be respected as long as they had the ability to do so?

"How many rivals does Hauke have?" Ashlynn asked, trying to read anything from Nyrielle's cold, expressionless mask.

"Are you hoping one of them will have flaws that make them feel more palatable for you to target?" Nyrielle asked, a hint of disapproval coloring her unusually cold voice. "Perhaps you're hoping one of them will resemble Sir Kaefin?"

"There are frequently people who have done wrong but escape punishment because of their power," Ashlynn said, pulling back from Nyrielle. "Aren't those the best people to eliminate before they can make more trouble? I, I don't think I would mind acting as a borrowed knife if I could also help eliminate someone who was troublesome for Eldritch Lord Ritchel."

"I'm sure that would be ideal," Nyrielle said, sinking into the shadows and turning her gaze to the trees of the forest whipping by outside the window. "But we don't always get to choose the people we use to send a message. Think about it, my darling."

"If the world had to burn for you and I to live, could you strike the match?" Nyrielle asked. "You have spent your time since coming to the vale learning how to use the powers you've gained from our pact. Now that you have that power, it's time you give more thought to how you will wield it."

"Burn the world..." Ashlynn whispered softly, the words catching in her throat. A chill ran down her spine, and she shivered despite the warmth of the carriage. Her fingers clutched the fabric of her dress tightly as her mind conjured visions of places like Blackwell City or the Vale of Mists vanishing in a sea of flames.

Taking a steadying breath, she stared at Nyrielle's pale silhouette against the darkness outside the window. At the moment, the vampire's otherworldly stillness felt more apparent and unsettling than ever before. Ashlynn's heart quickened, its rapid beating falling out of sync with the echo of Nyrielle's heartbeat in her chest.

Ashlyn swallowed hard, her mouth suddenly dry, as she wondered what had happened for Nyrielle to propose such a grim notion without even the slightest flutter in her heartbeat. Despite the grave images her words conjured, Nyrielle still looked as calm and coolly collected as ever.

Had there been a time when her mistress held herself back and suffered a loss for it? After Cellach Lothian burned her parents at the stake, had there been a measure of guilt that drove Nyrielle's brutal vengeance beyond her hatred for the man who murdered her only family?

Ever since coming to the Vale of Mists, Ashlynn felt more and more comfortable with her relationship with Nyrielle. They took meals together, bathed together, practiced sorcery, and more. But, now that she thought about it, she was reminded of how much older than her the ancient vampire really was, and how little they'd talked about either of their lives before Ashlynn came to the vale.

Two months was far too short of a time to truly know a person who lived as long as Nyrielle had yet somewhere in the soft caresses and intoxicating bites, she'd forgotten just how different Nyrielle was and that some of those differences could be... frightening.

"You have time to think about things," Nyrielle said, misinterpreting the pensive silence that radiated from Ashlynn. "A few days before we arrive in the High Pass at least. Use it to think about what you'll fight for when it isn't personal."

"Yes, Mistress," Ashlynn said, taking it as instruction from the Lady of the Vale instead of advice from her lover. It still wasn't comfortable advice, but it made it easier to stomach if she didn't think about her lover suggesting they might need to burn down the world to protect each other.

When she thought about it as a question from her lover, it provoked too many questions she hadn't resolved for herself yet. Just how much would she sacrifice for the love she'd never expected to find? And, more than that, if she really did have to sacrifice other people she loved to protect her life with Nyrielle, would she be able to live with herself afterward?

She didn't have answers and she hoped that she would never have to put the question to the test, but a cold pit of dread settled into her stomach as she turned her gaze to the other window and thought about Nyrielle's words.

The High Pass would come with tests, that much she was sure of, she just hoped it was nothing as serious as Nyrielle implied.

