

The Vampire 89

Chapter 89 89: The Eldritch Tongue

The trip to the High Pass was much swifter than Ashlynn had imagined. At the end of the first day of travel, they reached a small roadside waystation. There wasn't much to it, a small stable, a large cottage that could be shared by travelers and a well comprising a majority of the amenities.

What surprised Ashlynn, however, was the presence of another set of fresh horses held by members of the Horned Clan, ready and waiting to take over as soon as the sun set and Zedy emerged from her daybed to take the reins of the lead carriage again.

"You must have mobilized half the horses in the vale for this," Ashlynn said when Nyrielle entered the carriage that night. She'd taken a small rest in the cottage with enough time to have a cold wash and change into a fresh set of clothes, but otherwise, she'd barely left the carriage since leaving the ancient castle in the vale.

"More than," Nyrielle said as she settled into the carriage. "We'll spend a few days as Lord Ritchel's guests while the horses are taken forward to the way stations between his keep and the High Fen, and then we'll set out again."

"Is it that important to move swiftly?" Ashlynn asked. She knew they'd planned to trade horses in Orava Village but she hadn't realized they'd be doing it all the way to the High Fen.

"It's not just about speed," Nyrielle replied, looking out the window of the carriage as Heila and the other servants worked to prepare to depart again. "You've seen the way stations. They aren't fortified and they're tended to by ordinary people, not soldiers. If someone decides to attack us while we're traveling, I'd rather be somewhere that we won't involve innocents."

"I see," Ashlynn said, a small smile blossoming on her lips. Nyrielle really was just as she thought, cruel to herself to be kind to her people.

"About last night," Nyrielle began only to stop when Ashlynn shook her head.

"You were right that I've been limiting my thinking," Ashlynn said with a heavy sigh. "But I think I'm falling into a trap where my mind is consumed with 'what if.' I know that you've taken time to consider dozens of possibilities over the years and it's easy for you to come up with plans in advance but I'm just not there yet."

"Instead, I want to focus on what I can do with the time we still have before we arrive," Ashlynn continued. "I can't practice with my sword in here but I can practice my Eldritch with you at night and I can practice my sorcery during the day. I'd rather do that than contemplate any more 'what if' scenarios."

"Nuhū," Nyrielle said, a slow smile spreading on her lips. "Inu t̄lalu."

While Ashlynn said that she wanted to practice her Eldritch, she had more than one motive in doing so. She wanted to learn more about Nyrielle and the life she led in the vale before the Lothians arrived. She wanted to understand the kind of woman Nyrielle had been before the loss of her parents and grandsire plunged her into a generations-long war with their mutual enemies.

She kept the topics light, conversational, and suitable for expanding her mastery of the language, but over the course of the ride, she learned that Nyrielle spent much less of her youth in the vale than she'd originally thought. As a True Vampire, she'd traveled across the breadth of the Eldritch lands, meeting with the few others of her kind and learning the different ways they ruled their territories.

"So, you the youngest True Vampire?" Ashlynn asked in halting Eldritch. "By how much years?"

"Two hundred," Nyrielle said, holding up a pair of fingers. "The first and only human True Vampire," she added.

"The others," Ashlynn asked. "Are they all women also? Or men, some are?" Ashlynn hated struggling as much as she did, even with simple questions after so many days of studying with Thane. She'd finally progressed beyond basic words and phrases but as she tried to construct her own sentences she found the grammar infuriatingly counterintuitive even when she compared it to the older forms or regional dialects of her own language.

The Eldritch saw the world differently and several times she found herself sifting through different forms of the same word that were needed for questions versus statements, formal or informal or a half dozen other modifiers that human language made do without. It made even simple sentences feel... slippery when she tried to form them.

"All men," Nyrielle laughed, wrapping an arm around Ashlynn. "No one can take you from me."

"You know, I liked men," Ashlynn protested, her face heating in the flickering light of the single lantern. "Men pretty too," she added. Before she met Nyrielle, she'd never considered having any kind of relationship with another woman. She expected to live a spinster's life because of her mark of the witch until Bors Lothian approached her father to propose marriage and an alliance.

Since then, she put all of her heart's energy into nurturing a love for Owain, planning to dedicate her life to helping him rule Lothian March and raising children of their own. Love with another woman had

never entered her mind until Nyrielle appeared in her life, sweeping her off her feet and showering her with affection.

"Doesn't matter," Nyrielle said, gently caressing the young witch's face. "You're mine."

"Yes," Ashlynn agreed, sinking into the touch. "Yours." Now that she had bound herself to Nyrielle, there was no going back and she had no regrets. She had never sought out a relationship with another woman but the one that found her delighted her in ways she'd never imagined were possible.

Like that, the night passed comfortably, with Nyrielle helping to smooth out Ashlynn's more conversational Eldritch and several moments that devolved into comfortable flirting. Before she knew it, they were pulling into a way station, changing horses and setting out again once the sun was up.

"You're getting better, my sweet," Nyrielle told the frustrated witch before she returned to her locked daybed for the next leg of the journey. "Your mind is a gift all your own and you're learning much faster than Thane or any of the others did."

"Did you," Ashlynn started, uncertain if she wanted to broach this particular question. "Did you learn Eldritch first or the common tongue first?"

"Both together," Nyrielle said with a smile. "My parents struggled with it, but my grandsire insisted that I learn. Until the Lothians arrived, almost no one in the vale knew the common tongue."

"What, what happened to change things in the vale?" Ashlynn asked. She'd been curious for a while but it never felt appropriate to ask. While she'd heard some of the elderly people among the Eldritch in the

vale speaking mostly in the Eldritch tongue, younger people like Heila and Georg spoke the modern dialect as fluently as anyone Ashlynn had ever met.

"Shifts over time with power," Nyrielle explained, pausing outside the wagon that carried her daybed. "All of my progeny are humans who had some grievance against the Lothians, the Church or the other lords of the Lothian March. When I made them, I was looking for people to help me claim my vengeance," she said softly.

"Then, over time, the staff in the castle learned the modern common tongue to speak more comfortably with my progeny," she continued. "They brought it home to their villages where elders learned it for much the same reasons. Over time, families like Georgs who served in the castle for generations almost stopped speaking Eldritch entirely."

"If you spend more time in the hills and the distant villages, you'll find there's a dialect emerging that blends both languages," Nyrielle said with a smile. "But I have no idea if it will last."

"Maybe it's something we can encourage one day," Ashlynn said, an idea beginning to form in her mind. "Maybe I should encourage the captives to learn that, to see how well other humans acquire it."

"You're dreaming of a day that we're no longer at war with humanity, aren't you?" Nyrielle said, her expression difficult to read.

"I'm dreaming of the rest of my life with you," Ashlynn said, raising up on her toes to give Nyrielle a gentle kiss on the cheek. "And I don't want to dream of spending all that time at war."