

The Vampire 206

Chapter 206 206: Departing High Fen City (Part Two)

Both women understood the challenges in forming a closer alliance, and Nyrielle hadn't pressed too hard for support during her visit. She had, however, made it very clear that the next assault from the Humans would likely be larger than any seen in the past hundred years.

Nyrielle had only the vaguest understanding of a human Crusade when she faced off against Cellach Lothian. By then, the Second Crusade had already officially ended. Cellach made use of remnant forces who had chosen to remain in the newly established Lothian March rather than returning to the old countries and that had made his attacks on the Vale of Mists particularly effective.

It wasn't until Nyrielle met Ashlynn that she learned the true size and scope of the human forces across the sea who would come to conquer in the name of the Holy Lord of Light. By now, Nyrielle had come to share Ashlynn's belief that the fall of the Vale of Mists and the elevation of the Lothian March to a proper Duchy would herald the coming of a Third Crusade.

If that happened, the most that the High Fen could expect from the High Pass was that they could stall for time while the High Fen built their fortifications and readied their armies. The humans wouldn't stop at claiming barren territories in the mountains.

Once they secured a pass, they would pour through it like water from a broken dam. If they wanted to prevent a Crusade, the only thing Nyrielle could do, at least for now, was to break the Lothian assault aimed at the Vale of Mists and Airgead mountain.

Breaking that assault would be costly, both in terms of war materials and lives, and if the Vale of Mists or Airgead Mountain fell, the High Pass would become a fragile barrier between the High Fen and Human aggression. Whether Erna helped Nyrielle or not, the humans were coming and something had to be done.

Erna happened to agree with Nyrielle's conclusions. She'd never known her teacher to exaggerate. The problem was that their relationship as teacher and student was too well known. Others in the High Fen would question whether Erna was being objective enough in her handling of matters related to the Vale of Mists. It would take more than just Nyrielle's warning to convince the people who opposed her to fall in line with her desires.

"I won't linger over farewells," Nyrielle said, gently taking her former student's hands in her own and giving her an affectionate squeeze. "The nights have become very short and I'd like to reach the first ferry by dawn. Be well, Little Snake. We'll see each other again soon."

"Give my regards to the Mother of Thorns, Seneschal Ashlynn," Erna said with a wide smile. "And Teacher, please give my regards to your great-grandsire when you greet him as well."

"Give your regards to my great-grandsire in person," Nyrielle said lightly. "He hasn't visited Torbin's crypt in a century. A visit every century to his most distinguished progeny is the least he can do. We'll see each other again soon," she promised.

"As little as three months or as much as five, but no more than that," the vampire said. "Come, my darling Ashlynn," she said, pulling her lover toward the carriage. "It's time to take our leave."

During the long night in the carriage, Ashlynn explained her concerns with Jacques from his actions with Heila to the strange way his behaviors resembled Owain's, she left nothing out. She both wanted Nyrielle to have complete trust in her and she also wanted to make sure that she didn't skip over something that seemed unimportant when it could actually hold great significance. In the end, Nyrielle's verdict was rather mild.

"He can't take you from me," Nyrielle said with a smile that flashed a hint of her fangs. "Especially not if his behavior reminds you of Owain. He can say or do as he wishes, as long as he doesn't touch you, then I won't make a fuss."

"That's.... Generous of you," Ashlynn said, puzzled at her lover's response. For the possessive vampire to be so magnanimous about someone else trying to woo her Seneschal, it felt like something was wrong.

"He doesn't have the strength to take you from me," Nyrielle said, her midnight blue eyes hardening as she spoke. Oddly, the firmness in Nyrielle's gaze and the promise of violence that lurked behind her midnight blue eyes was more reassuring to Ashlynn than anything else would have been.

She'd misread Nyrielle's relaxed and casual manner. It wasn't that she'd withdrawn her protective and possessive edge, it was that the vampire had absolute confidence that if Jacques laid so much as a hand on Ashlynn, he would lose that hand.

"He should know that if he challenges me and loses, not only will he face defeat, he'll face the very real risk that Zedya and I will feed on him," Nyrielle added. "He can't allow that to happen so he will not take the risk."

"And after we arrive in the Briar? Will he cause problems then?" Ashlynn asked.

"He may try, but again, you are mine," Nyrielle said, placing a long, slender finger directly under Ashlynn's chin and pulling her forward into a chaste kiss. "Nothing he can say or do will change that."

"Speak with Zedya if you're concerned, she knows him rather well," Nyrielle added. "But it wouldn't be a bad thing for you to spend some time during daylight hours with Jacques. He may not be able to tutor

you in witchcraft until you arrive in the Briar but he knows a great deal about other things that he can likely share with you."

"I'll consider it," Ashlynn said. She was struggling to articulate the anxiety in her heart but it seemed like the things that Ashlynn feared weren't things that Nyrielle saw as likely.

For Ashlynn, it hadn't been long since she was violently beaten near to death at the hands of her newlywed husband. The Ashlynn Blackwell of today had nothing to fear from Owain if she were to encounter him alone and unarmed, but that didn't mean she had nothing to fear from an equally unarmed Jacques.

"You're still worried," Nyrielle said softly, wrapping her arms around Ashlynn and pulling her close. "Time will reveal all things, but if you can't put faith in one of the people who serves your soon to be teacher then place your faith in me."

"I wouldn't have brought you out here if I didn't have a measure of trust and respect for the Mother of Thorns. Zedya benefited greatly from her time of study and you will benefit even more. Besides," she added with a confident smile. "If Jacques brings any harm to you, it's likely he'll suffer so much from the Mother of Thorns that I won't have to lift a finger to demand retribution."

"I see," Ashlynn said, relaxing into Nyrielle's embrace. "Maybe, maybe I'm just afraid because there's so much I still don't know," she admitted. "I know you want to leave things to the Mother of Thorns, but isn't there anything you can tell me? About the Briar and what kind of place it is, or anything else?"

"Hmm, let me think, my darling," Nyrielle said, lightly toying with Ashlynn's blonde locks as she thought. "There are a few things I can share," she said after several minutes of thought. "The Briar isn't the same as the domain of an Eldritch Lord and in many ways, it's one of the most dangerous places you can go in Eldritch lands that falls under the control of a powerful ruler."

"The Witch of Thorns keeps a number of dangerous things within the Briar that most Eldritch Lords would eradicate from their lands, but witches see the world differently," she continued, her voice growing more somber the more she said. "Danger and opportunity often go hand in hand, and the Mother of Thorns cultivates a good number of... opportunities."