The Vampire 251

Chapter 251 251: Failure

Ashlynn's world went black after she witnessed the damage to the Ancient Oak. As the world around her faded, she wondered if this counted as passing or failing the trial and if she would be taken to another vision after this. Instead of being greeted with a new vision, however, it seemed like this one wasn't done with her yet.

"Ashlynn," a pained and grief-stricken voice said, piercing the darkness that enveloped her. "Lady Ashlynn, please wake up!"

"Thane?" Ashlynn asked, her voice weak and weary. "Thane, what's…"

Before she could speak further, her eyes opened and she flinched back in horror from the man standing before her. Thane's elegant and refined features had become hideous, twisted by ghastly burns that blackened his flesh and raised fluid-filled blisters across much of his flesh. His once soft, elegant flowing locks had been reduced to strands of charred and crumbling hair, clinging to his tortured scalp and one of his brilliant, amber eyes seemed to have ruptured as the fluid within the eyeball boiled.

"Thane!" Ashlynn gasped, her eyes instantly filling with tears. "Come here, let me help you," she said, forcing down the revulsion that twisted her stomach. Slowly, with trembling fingers, she reached out toward the scarred and ravaged former knight, her fingertips coming to a stop just inches from his tortured flesh.

"The living can't heal the dead, Ashlynn," he said. Very little touched the vampire's heart these days, but seeing the young woman he thought of as a little sister with such a pained expression on her face and knowing that it was the sight of his injuries that pained her gave him a moment of warmth unlike any he had felt in years. Enough that he could relax and say what must be said.

"Mistress needs you," Thane said, his voice harsh and strained. "Zedya has her, she… she will not survive without you."

"Nyrielle!" Thane's tortured appearance had distracted her from something that should have been much more apparent. The echo of Nyrielle's heartbeat within her chest had grown irregular and weak. Lurching to her feet, Ashlynn searched about the tent full of wounded and dying soldiers until she found Zedya's equally burned and scarred form cradling a wounded Nyrielle.

"Nyrielle," Ashlynn repeated, staggering across the tent and dropping to her knees beside her wounded lover. Nyrielle's wings had been all but consumed by flames, the once pristine, inky black feathers reduced to husks of crumbling ash. Her pale, alabaster flesh was slick with dark crimson blood that flowed from countless cuts and more than a dozen arrows were embedded in her flesh.

"This time," Nyrielle said softly, opening her midnight blue eyes to gaze at Ashlynn. "It's the end. I'm afraid, my darling Ashlynn, that there is no coming back from this."

"No, no, that's not right," Ashlynn wailed. Nyrielle could heal from almost any injury if she could feed but… the sorcery of the Inquisitors and the Templars had burned deep into her body. Feeding on her soldiers would do little against such overwhelming injuries. "Drink, my love," Ashlynn said, pulling back the collar of her dress and bearing her neck to the vampire.

"Drink, and claim our vengeance for this," Ashlynn whispered, closing her eyes and allowing the tears to spill from her eyes.

"If I do this, darling, you will die," Nyrielle said. A look of pain flashed across her face but the vampire pressed on, raising her hand to gently wipe away Ashlynn's tears. "Everything has a price. Some prices shouldn't be paid."

"It doesn't matter," Ashlynn said bitterly, opening her eyes to meet Nyrielle's midnight gaze. "I swore didn't I? I am yours, for as long as you live. If you die, I'll follow after. I won't survive your death," she whispered, placing her hand on the vampire's chest. "But you will survive mine. So drink, and claim vengeance for us both," she said, turning her head to the side once again to offer up her neck.

This time, Nyrielle didn't protest. Instead, she fell on Ashlynn like a starving beast, sinking her fangs deep into her lover's neck and gulping down Ashlynn's blood as though she was dying of thirst.

Unlike when Nyrielle usually fed on her, there was no moment of pleasure, only the most agonizing pain she'd ever felt. Still, Ashlynn put up no resistance. What she'd said was true. Ever since becoming Nyrielle's Seneschal, her life has been tied to the powerful vampire. Ashlynn could die and Nyrielle would survive, but the reverse wasn't true.

It was a price she never objected to. Without their pact, Ashlynn would have died the night of her wedding. Her life was sustained by the pact and without Nyrielle, the grace she'd been extended to defy death would be withdrawn.

So now, at this moment when Nyrielle was about to tumble into the abyss of death, she did the only thing she could. She accepted her death, in the hopes that it would at least preserve the life of her lover and that one day, Nyrielle would have the strength she needed to avenge her.

Once again, darkness came for her, but this time, the last thing she saw were Nyrielle's dark wings, rising again, restored to their former glory before the vampire gently wrapped her wings around Ashlynn, blotting out the light and carrying her away into whatever lay beyond.

"I'll find a way to make this work," her own youthful voice echoed, mocking her from the darkness. "I promise."

The next moment, the world shifted around her once again, returning her to the hilltop early in the morning. The Ancient Oak stood before her, whole and unbroken by her desire to restore Ollie's lost limb. The army below had yet to suffer any casualties, no one had died for her failures to heal them…

Each time the Ancient Willow had presented her with a different vision before, it had been an entirely new scene. Whether it was returning to an earlier time in her life when she agreed to Bors Lothian's proposed marriage alliance or when Cecile brought her to the village of the Ancient Clan, each one had been unique and distinct. This time, however, the Ancient Willow seemed to be giving her another chance.

"Everything is ready, my Lady," Heila's voice said from behind her, pulling her attention away from her thoughts about how she should correct her mistakes given a second chance at the trial. "Tents for the wounded, herbs, bandages… We've prepared everything we can. Do you think," she added, her voice quivering with uncertainty. "Do you think it will be enough?"

"It won't be," Ashlynn said definitively. The first time she stood here, she'd said 'I don't know', but now she had seen the horror that was about to befall them. This time, they would have to respond differently.

"Keep your use of witchcraft to a minimum," Ashlynn said as she led Heila into the tent. "Anything that can be treated with bandages, herbs, stitches, we should leave to the physicians to handle. Our magic is only to be used for the wounds that cannot be healed any other way."

"But, without our witchcraft," Heila said uncertainly. "Injured soldiers won't be able to return to the battlefield. If we lose the battle because we can't heal enough men…"

"It won't matter," Ashlynn said. The real battle, the important part of the battle that would determine the life or death of the Vale of Mists, that part of the battle wouldn't be fought until nightfall. Everything before that was a prelude where the Templars and Inquisitors could dominate the battlefield with little opposition.

She hadn't realized it before, but right now, the army's job was to buy time for the Vale of Mists and to exhaust the enemy's miracle workers enough to give Nyrielle and her progeny a chance to turn the tide once night fell.

The same was true of the Lothian forces. They needed to exhaust the defenders, including Ashlynn and Heila. If the witches were able to heal the Vale's most potent fighters, the battle could drag on for days. Only by inflicting massive casualties could the Lothians drag the witches down and render them useless when night came.

"We aren't strong enough to heal everyone, Heila," Ashlynn said, cursing her lack of experience as a healer. If she knew more, if she was better able to use the resources around her, if she could work more efficiently, then this Trial wouldn't be so difficult.

Cecile hadn't been wrong when she said Ashlynn wasn't ready. This test was cruel and unfair and would require Ashlynn to watch people suffer when she could ease their suffering. She would have to choose to withhold her power when it wasn't needed if she wanted to have any hope of having enough power to save Nyrielle after night fell.

It felt cold and calculated, but at the moment, she couldn't see any other way. In order to protect the person who was the most important to her, she would have to sacrifice others. She hated the idea of standing idle when she could help, but at the moment, she couldn't see any other way.

Glancing outside the tent at the Ancient Oak, an idea began to form in her mind. Sacrificing the support of the Ancient Oak to restore Ollie's arm felt like a worthy trade when she made it, but looking back, it hadn't been necessary. She could have saved his life without restoring the limb. As much as she hated it, her selfish desire to do everything she could for her friend as soon as possible had cost her one of her most powerful allies in the fight to heal the wounded.

Beyond that, the invocation she and Heila used took so much out of both of them that they were useless for the rest of the battle. In the end, Heila had still been unconscious from participating in the ritual by the time Thane and Zedya brought a wounded Nyrielle into the tent.

Ollie might never forgive her for holding back when she could have helped him, but she hoped that he would understand one day. Some sacrifices would have to be made if she was going to save Nyrielle, and only Nyrielle could save the Vale of Mists.

As much as she hated herself for it, if she had to choose between Ollie and Nyrielle… she wouldn't hesitate at all.