

The Vampire 257

Chapter 257: Visiting Vampires

Nyrielle's carriage clattered through the night, already more than a hundred leagues away from the tangled swamp of the Briar. Within the dark interior of the carriage, her alabaster skin lit by a single swaying lamp, Nyrielle did her best to ignore the tugging sensation that gripped her chest.

Starting part way through the previous day, she'd felt something probing around the edges of her bond with Ashlynn. At first, the probes had been light and tentative, as if a blind creature from the depths of the sea was trying to feel out the magic that connected her heart to Ashlynn's by tracing its outline.

Nyrielle was prepared to forgive the Mother of Thorns for some curious probing. As Ashlynn's teacher, the witch had the right to understand any magic that might affect her student. The longer the probing lasted, however, the less certain she was that the probing came from the Mother of Thorns.

By sunset, the feeling of gentle probing had given way to a constrictive tugging. It was still gentle, as if it was afraid that it would harm Ashlynn's heart by tearing it free, but it pulled nonetheless, trying to find ways to untangle the bond of blood that gave each woman an echo of the other's heart within their chest.

The sensation was uncomfortable, but at the moment, Nyrielle was willing to endure the discomfort, confident that Ashlynn would resolve the problem for herself. Already, she could feel the intensity of Ashlynn's love and commitment echoing stronger through their bond.

If Ashlynn had been corrupted by the invasive tendrils of magic somehow, if she was trying to break free of her bond, Nyrielle would have ordered the carriage to turn around at once and it was unlikely the Briar would withstand the fury of her arrival. From what she could feel so far, things weren't nearly that dire.

Still, the growing pressure and constant tugging made it hard to focus on her preparations for the awkward dances of diplomacy that awaited her at their next destinations.

"Mistress Nyrielle," Zedya called from where she sat driving the carriage through the darkness. "We've acquired an escort."

In the forest bordering the road, several figures moved with varying levels of stealth and grace. Some were as capable as the Heartwood clan at blending with their surroundings as they moved while others crashed through the underbrush, unable to manage both stealthy movement and the speed required to keep pace with Nyrielle's carriage.

"Ignore them," Nyrielle said, shaking her head at the performance of their 'escort.' "This pack of mutts is too terrified to come close to us," she said disdainfully. "They're not protecting us from Uncle Tausau's people, they're making sure that uncle's people don't get in our way and offend us."

Outside the carriage, more than a dozen figures raced through the night, moving with speed and grace that transcended the limits of most mortal beings. None of them would hold a candle to Thane, Marcell or even Zedya, but compared to people like Captain Lennart and his men this motley escort was still a clear cut above.

The escort followed them for nearly half an hour before the carriage arrived at an imposing fortress gate. Despite the late hour, the heavy timber gate stood open with more than twenty men standing in neat rows. Torches cast flickering golden light on the gathering while more men spilled out of the nearby forest, falling into ranks alongside their brethren.

Atop the carriage, Zedya did her best not to wrinkle her nose at the sight of the vampires who had arrived to greet them. As someone who had once been human, she might be expected to see all 'demons' as much the same. Once she had come to accept the Eldritch, by rights, she should treat them all more or less equally. And yet, she'd lived longer among the Eldritch than she had among humans and the sense of revulsion these men inspired was all but inescapable.

After a certain point, some prejudices were hard to escape and the vampires before her touched on one of the greatest Eldritch taboos. More than that, their very appearance carried a certain wrongness that would be apparent to anyone who wasn't blind. The Eldritch were far more accommodating of diversity among their people than humans were, but even the Eldritch found such people... unsettling.

No two of the vampires greeting the carriage looked the same. It wasn't that these men each came from a different clan, rather, they were the products of forbidden unions between clans.

Among most Eldritch clans, no one would quibble over a love affair between people of different clans so long as they never attempted to birth children. Once a couple crossed that line, however, the couple would be lucky to escape persecution by both of their clans. Things were even worse for their unfortunate children.

Some clans were considered close cousins. The Horned Clan and the Cloven Clan were relatively successful at blending and didn't draw much ire for skirting the taboo. A union between the Horned Clan and the Clan of the Great Claw, however, had more than nine chances in ten of producing stillborn offspring.

Those that survived were like the vampires gathered here. Each of them bore the marks of their blended heritage and rarely did that blending come without dire consequences. Hunch backs were common sights, or one limb being of significantly different size than its counterpart. Some had both feathers and fur while others had vestigial stumps where a tail attempted to form but failed to fully develop.

Men like these rarely lived more than twenty years, and seeing thirty was all but unheard of. Yet one vampire dared to turn such men into his progeny whenever he found them, granting them a reprieve from their inevitably short lives for as long as they could teeter on the edge of the knife between life and death.

"Death walks among us," the men chanted in ragged unison. "We welcome the Harbinger of Death!"

Taking a deep breath, Nyrielle unfurled her wings as she exited the carriage, allowing shadowy energy to spill like drops of water from her dark feathers as she descended to land lightly on the stone pavers.

"Your Eternity," a man said, striding forward from the ranks of his progeny to kneel before her. Like his progeny, Tausau was Clanless, the result of a union between the Clan of the Great Claw and the Clan of Painted Masks. The forbidden union had given him a bulky stature that rivaled Captain Lennart's, but paired it with arms too short for his size that ended in highly dexterous paws.

"Rise, Tausau," Nyrielle said impatiently. The ache from Ashlynn's heart had grown stronger and she wanted to waste as little time as possible on unnecessary formality. "Have your men show my people where they may stay. You and I have many things to catch up on and precious few hours before daybreak."

"Of course," the vampire said awkwardly. In the past hundred years, the little girl who he remembered bouncing on Torbin's knee had transformed into something almost unrecognizable. There had been a time when he and Nyrielle's grandsire had considered themselves close brothers and the bearish vampire had worn his ears raw boasting of the future Harbinger of Death that had been born in his lineage.

To Tausau, it would have been salt in an old wound if it hadn't been for Nyrielle's charm and grace as she grew from a young child into a talented vampire and sorceress. In those days, it was easy to feel pride in the young and growing Nyrielle as they imagined the woman she would become.

Now, however, the loss of Torbin, her parents, and countless progeny had turned her into the darkest and most ruthless vampire that Tausau had ever known. When she emerged from her carriage, she wasn't his darling grand-niece wearing a human guise the way she had more than a century ago. She was the Harbinger of Death and she made sure that Tausau and his progeny recognized the fact.

"If you'll follow me, Your Eternity," he said, gesturing to the open gate. "I've prepared refreshments for you and for Madame Zedya as well."

"I don't need refreshments," Nyrielle said distantly as though her mind was elsewhere. The last person she'd fed on was Ashlynn and she intended to savor her lover's taste for a few days more before she fed on anyone else.

"What I need from you, Tausau, are answers. I trust you'll have an explanation for me for... this," she said with a pointed glance at the older vampire's assembled progeny.

"Your Eternity, I..."

"Not out here," Nyrielle said, sweeping past him to enter the fortress directly. "Your progeny are only one of the things I require answers about. The others shouldn't be spoken of where others can overhear."

"I understand," Tausau said, bowing his head and falling in behind the powerful True Vampire. It seemed that everything he'd heard was true. Little Nyrielle had died long ago. All that remained was the Harbinger of Death.