

The Vampire 27

Chapter 27 27: Life in The Vale

Following the night that Nyrielle fed on her, Ashlynn began to truly adjust to life in the Vale of Mists.

The notebook that Nyrielle had given her to learn sorcery proved to be full of both intriguing and useful ideas and profoundly frustrating to try to read.

"Drawe a cycrle on... I don't even know what those letters are," Ashlynn muttered one evening as she prepared for dinner with Nyrielle. "Mæsture þa... forget it," she said, firmly closing the book. "I'll ask her to read it to me again and write out my own copy."

When the vampire had mentioned writing out a book for her instead of translating a text written by the Eldritch clans, she'd been overjoyed, thinking that it would be easy to devour the contents of the notebook and begin her exploration of sorcery.

Once she started reading, however, she realized that while Nyrielle's speech remained fairly modern, she still wrote and spelled words in much the same way she had more than two hundred years ago.

As an educated noblewoman, Ashlynn prided herself on having read all of the literary classics, some of them even in direct copies of the original text. That didn't prepare her, however, for Nyrielle's more casual use of outdated writing, especially when she didn't have a 'modernized' copy to compare to!

Still, once she received some help decoding the archaic writing, she began to make real progress in learning sorcery. The book began with simple spells for creating lights, forming shapes from the mist,

and making objects float through the air. All of these things were incredibly useful for living in the almost permanently misty vale.

The one that got her attention, however, was something she felt like she'd seen both Nyrielle and Thane use on multiple occasions.

"Thane," she asked one evening, panting in exhaustion after completing another of his sets of his strengthening exercises. "Answer a question for me?"

"Orange," the vampire said, smirking as he put away the heavy iron balls that he'd been throwing back and forth with Ashlynn to improve not only her strength but her agility and reaction time as well.

"What?? That makes no sense," Ashlynn protested.

"Well, you've never asked for my favorite color," Thane teased. "I assumed that you'd finally come around to asking, so, orange. It reminds me of the pumpkins in the fields and autumn leaves."

"I'm sorry," Ashlynn said, her face heating. "I've been treating you like an encyclopedia again, haven't I?"

"I don't mind it," the vampire said, dropping down to sit on the ground next to her. "But I've started to feel like you save up things you don't want to ask Mistress Nyrielle and bring them all to me. You could try asking Zedya you know, or Heila, or Georg..."

"But you're the one who offered to be my big brother here," Ashlynn reminded him. "And I'm not half as annoying about asking questions as my little sister was."

"Fine then, what's your question," Thane relented.

"I ran across a spell in the book Mistress Nyrielle wrote for me," she began. "It uses the mist of the valley as an anchor for darkness, then wraps the mist around the body like a cloak. I wondered if that was how you pulled off your vanishing trick whenever you slink away into the night."

"I'm not 'slinking into the night.'" Thane protested, giving her a playful shove. "But it is similar to what we do. The difference is that, once you've practiced enough, you can use the air itself as your anchor and it becomes like a reflex to use."

"Why do it at all though? It's not like you need to hide in the dark here in the vale."

"Because it's more than just hiding," Thane explained. "Once you master what's in that book, you can see about going further. Not everyone is good at the next steps. Anchoring darkness to air is one part of it, making yourself as light as mist is another part of it. The spell is called 'Darkwind Shroud' and it's what lets us move so quickly through the night."

"That sounds even more useful," Ashlynn agreed. "How hard is it to learn?"

"Hard," he said, reaching out to ruffle her hair. "You're making good progress, you know. You don't have to rush ahead to all of the things you're discovering. If you want to move like the wind, you need to have reflexes better than a cat and eyes that can spot where you can place your feet as you dash through the night. You have to bring together all of the things you're learning and more before you can do that."

"Besides, why would you want to?" Thane asked. "I thought you were learning sorcery as a method of figuring out your own witchcraft."

"I've been holding off on that," Ashlynn admitted.

It wasn't that she didn't want to learn how to use the power that was uniquely hers. In fact, several times, she'd felt the energy within her bubbling to the surface when she tried to use plants as an anchor for any of the sorcery she was practicing.

It was just that Nyrielle's warning about the consequences of over-drafting her magic lay heavily on her mind. Right now, she was in no rush. Everyone had made it clear that, until her second new moon in the Vale, she needed to focus on strengthening herself and developing the powers that came from her pact with Nyrielle.

As much as Ashlynn yearned for control of her life and her destiny, that didn't mean she would defy good sense once things were clear to her. Witchcraft would just have to wait, at least until the summer.

"Besides, Mistress Nyrielle said she was going to speak to an Earth Mother on the far side of the mountains for me," Ashlynn added. "I know it will take time for her to make any arrangements, but until then, I already have so many other things to learn."

"Would you like to get started on one of those things?" Thane asked, standing up and dusting himself off. "I had a pair of wooden swords carved to use in practice," he said, walking over to a corner of their training yard and returning with a pair of wooden weapons.

The blades themselves were narrow at the crossguard and flared wider along the curved length of the blade, making them tip heavy and a touch awkward in Ashlynn's delicate hands.

"You really think this is the right fit for me?" she asked, giving the wooden weapon a few clumsy swings. Her strength had grown enough that the weight wasn't any particular strain but the strange balance felt more like swinging an ax than a sword.

"It's less elegant than a rapier like my sister's," Thane admitted. "But you're not her. You'll actually get to fight our enemies. You can't cleave through a breastplate with one of those, even if you become as strong as I am and wield one made of Darksteel," he explained.

"But armor has weaknesses at the joints and other places where heavier armor becomes cumbersome. Take a man's wrists, his elbow, his knees and you'll find a darksteel falchion more than capable of severing a limb."

"You say that so calmly, like it's an ordinary thing to do," Ashlynn said, more discomforted by Thane's tone than the topic.

"The humans won't ever stop coming for us, Ashlynn," he reminded her gently. "Maybe Bors Lothian has had his last ride, he's getting on in years. But your former husband will raise an army one day if you don't kill him first. When he does, that army will assail our walls and we won't have a choice to stay our hands."

"For now, don't think about chopping limbs if it bothers you," he said, throwing an arm around her shoulder and leading her to a straw covered post. "We'll start with the basics and you can beat up a scarecrow."

As much as she appreciated Thane's attempt to lighten the mood, his words lingered with her long after she'd exhausted herself swinging her wooden sword at the straw target.

For her, matters with Owain and the Lothians were personal. If she thought of the people who had to die by her hand, at the moment, she considered only four. Owain Lothian, Sir Tommin, and Sir Broll who had dumped her in the shallow grave, and whichever person had betrayed her secret to Owain on the night of their wedding.

But beyond that, she wondered about life afterward. Killing Owain would achieve a portion of her vengeance but in the end, the march would just pass to his younger brother Loman. Worse, as a priest of the Holy Lord of Light, Loman was even more likely to raise an army against them than Owain was. Killing Owain alone wouldn't protect the vale or stop a war.

When she returned to her bed in the morning, she began to wonder what it would truly take to put a stop to things. Nyrielle had spent more than a hundred years fighting the Lothians... Ashlynn might hate Owain, but she had no desire to do the same.

The sun rose and she pulled the thick curtains around her bed closed to block out the light without ever finding an answer. Any further thoughts, however, were interrupted when Heila entered the room.

"My Lady," the horned woman said, dropping into a deep curtsy when she realized that Ashlynn was about to go to bed.

The diminutive woman's next words, however, banished Ashlynn's fatigue like a bucket of cold water.

"Sir Marcell has returned from Lothian," Heila said, holding out a folded parchment. "Lady Nyrielle said you should read his report yourself."