

The Vampire 581

Chapter 581: A Recurring Dream

Low clouds hung across the Vale of Mists, wrapping the ancient fortress in a soft, cottony layer of dense fog that made it impossible to see more than a few dozen paces beyond the reach of a person's own hands. For Ashlynn, as she sat behind the writing desk in her room, it meant that the world beyond her terrace vanished into the fog, leaving her feeling like the tower she had claimed for her coven was an island, floating in a vast sea of gray.

The fire in her hearth crackled merrily, filling the room with the faint fragrance of cedar smoke as it pushed back against the autumn chill in the air. Near her hand, a cup of hot jasmine tea added a faintly floral scent to the air that helped calm her heart.

She'd intended to sleep for most of the day after returning from the celebration of Ollie's awakening but after a handful of hours, she woke gasping for air, trembling with remembered terror from a dream that seemed to come more and more frequently the closer she came to Lothian March.

Ever since forging a bond of blood with Nyrielle, Ashlynn's dreams had become more vivid and more memorable, but one dream had haunted her more than any other.

It began with a familiar conversation with her mother. The pair of women stood alone in a luxurious sitting room hung with white lace curtains and filled with the earliest flowers of spring while the Blackwell Countess helped Ashlynn make the final adjustments to her wedding dress.

"Mother, what do I do if he sees the mark?" Ashlynn asked, just as she had on the night of her wedding to Owain Lothian. "How can I hide it when we..."

Looking back, it was almost embarrassing how flustered she'd been at something as simple as an act of intimacy between a man and a woman. In the months she'd spent with Nyrielle, she'd learned all too well the ways that leaving clothing on while hands roamed beneath and tongues danced along the slight gaps where a bit of skin showed could build pleasure in a way that simple nudity never accomplished, but the Ashlynn trapped in her dream had none of that experience.

"Just do as I've taught you," her mother suggested. "Dim the lights and..."

The advice was useless. By the time Owain reached the bedroom where she had prepared to give every last bit of herself to him, he was already aware of the mark on her hip. She never had the chance to dim the lights or slip into bed without him seeing her mark... everything ended before she could even try.

Sometimes, when the dream came upon her, she tried to run the moment she realized she'd returned to the same dream. If she could just make it to the Vale of Mists, if she could steal a horse, or a carriage, if she could find the place where Nyrielle had hidden herself, waiting until nightfall, if, if, if...

But fleeing never worked. Sometimes, her mother stopped her from fleeing. Other times, she escaped her chambers only to be brought back by a smiling guard, a wandering priest of the temple, or someone else. Once, it had even been Bors Lothian who brought her back to her wedding with Owain.

"It's fine to be nervous," the gray-haired Marquis said when he caught Ashlynn trying to slip out of the temple through a side entrance that led to the stables. "My Isla was as nervous as a young colt on its first ride to war the night of our wedding. Her mother found her pacing in the gardens until just before the ceremony."

"Do you like horses?" Bors asked with a gentle smile. "If it would help, I could take you to the stables. They might even have an apple or two stashed away that you could feed to the horses that will pull your carriage when you leave the temple and come home to the manor," he offered, speaking as though his soon-to-be daughter-in-law was as skittish as the horses he thought she wanted to visit.

"I'd love to visit the horses, Father-in-law," Ashlynn said sweetly, hoping she could use it as an opportunity to escape. Once they reached the stables, she was confident that she could subdue the aging Marquis, and then she would take the fastest horse she could find and ride away from the wedding without ever looking back.

When she tried to summon her familiar magic, however, she found that her body couldn't even feel the power of the world beneath her feet. The grass in the fields, the trees in the gardens of the temple grounds... she couldn't feel any of it. In the dream, she was just as weak and helpless as she was on the day of her wedding.

Suddenly, the idea of overpowering Bors Lothian became laughable. Without her witchcraft or her bond with Nyrielle, she was just a young woman trying to confront the veteran commander of the War of Inches. Even if it had been years since Bors Lothian last rode to battle, he was still a powerful man who towered over her and could easily overpower a simple, ordinary Ashlynn.

And so she learned, no matter what she did in this dream, it would always result in her standing beneath the glittering golden dome at the center of the temple, bathed in the multicolored light filtering the stained glass windows and swearing herself to love, honor, cherish and obey her husband for as long as the light of the Holy Lord of Light shone upon them.

After that, she attended the banquet where she danced with Owain, Loman, Bors, and her own father before finally retiring to the chamber where Owain brutally beat her to the edge of death.

The dream never ended there. Each time the dream repeated itself, it didn't end until she found herself wrapped in nothing but a bed sheet, soaked to the skin in the rain, and shivering as Sir Broll and Sir Tommin shoveled pile after pile of sodden earth into her grave. Only, in this dream, the trees never helped her, the roots never found her fingers to pull her from the earth, and she had nothing to cling to as she struggled to get free.

In the dream, the darkness of her grave was inescapable and the dirt piled on and on and on until there was no air left to breathe.

That's when she woke, shivering, gasping for breath, and desperate to escape the dark curtains that blocked out the light in her room while she slept through the middle of the day. Her heartbeat thundered like a warhorse at a gallop, so loud in her ears that it drowned out the echo of Nyrielle's heartbeat in her chest, leaving her feeling more alone than she'd felt any time in the past six months.

It wasn't until several minutes passed that she was able to light a lamp beside her bed, open the curtains and reassure herself that, no matter how vivid and real it felt, it was only a dream.

But some dreams held more truth in them than others and so Ashlynn began to ask the question... Could she use the dream to find answers? Could she search for the person who had betrayed her to Owain Lothian?

Whether it had been one of the serving women who helped to fit her dress, or one of the ladies of the Lothian court who had seen something they shouldn't have when they escorted her to the cleansing ritual, could she use the dreams that haunted her to discover them?

She didn't know, but since she couldn't keep the dreams away, she resolved to use them however she could. And maybe, if she could find an answer somewhere in the depths of her mind that she could only search from within these vivid dreams... maybe she could find her way to a measure of peace and put an end to days where she woke breathless and alone, feeling the weight of the sodden earth crushing the air from her lungs...

Chapter 582: A Letter Unsent

Ashlynn's attempts to use her recurring nightmares as a means of finding the person who betrayed her turned out to be worse than a waste of effort. Unlike Nyrielle, who relived her memories each night, Ashlynn's dreams, no matter how vivid and real they felt, were still dreams. They still prayed on her hopes and fears and the things she 'discovered' within them were no more reliable than wild guesses.

In one dream, she managed to catch a young female acolyte, peeking in her chambers within the temple. Later on, she saw that same acolyte whispering in Owain's ear during the preparations for the banquet. In another dream, it was one of the maids from Blackwell County who had accompanied them on the long journey that stopped Owain just outside the door of the bridal chamber to tell him what she had seen on Ashlynn's hip several years ago.

The worst nightmares were the ones where her own family moved against her. In some of those dreams, a member of her family arrived in the bridal chamber after Owain had beaten her nearly to death in order to confirm that she was 'dead.'

"The deed is done?" Count Rhys Blackwell asked, striding into the bridal chambers where Ashlynn lay limp on the floor, unmoving and barely breathing after suffering yet another beating at Owain Lothian's hands.

"I've done your dirty work," Owain said, fetching a handkerchief to wipe Ashlynn's blood from his knuckles and the places on his face where dark crimson droplets had splattered when he pummeled her once beautiful face. "You'll keep your promise to deliver the ships and supplies that we need, no matter the cost, won't you?"

"As long as you keep the other half of your bargain, young lord Owain," Rhys Blackwell said darkly. "The Lothian artifact that allows your family to birth multiple sons into each generation. I expect that it will work for my Maela, or we won't have a deal..."

"Relax, Count Blackwell," Owain said as he gestured for Sir Tommin and Sir Broll to carry Ashlynn away. "Even if it doesn't, you still have one more daughter. If you cannot father a son with Countess Blackwell, then I will wed Jocelynn, and I can promise you that I will father enough grandsons to provide you with a method of continuing your bloodline's rule over Blackwell County..."

Listening to her father speak over her 'body' in such a cold, detached way, as though the wedding had been a trap all along, left Ashlynn heartbroken, waking in tears and struggling to catch her breath through the sobs that shook her body long after the feeling of being buried beneath the wet soil of the Vale of Mists left her.

But Rhys Blackwell wasn't the only person who appeared in her dreams after betraying her. Another time, it was her mother who appeared, this time claiming that she had to put an end to her daughter's evil and that she couldn't allow the spawn of a witch to inherit both Blackwell County and Lothian March. Before the nightmare ended, she watched as her mother pleaded with Owain, offering up Jocelynn to buy his silence about the Blackwell family's 'great sin' of sheltering a witch.

In the end, Ashlynn refused to believe that any of the caricatures of her family that her nightmares conjured represented the truth. Dreams were only dreams, and the fears she confronted there were just that, fears that preyed upon the mind and heart in moments of weakness.

Now, as she sat at her writing desk, staring out the window at the endless sea of gray fog that blanketed the Vale of Mists and left her feeling cut off from the world she had once known, she clutched the cup of steaming jasmine tea in her hands and tried to draw some of its comforting warmth into her body as she inhaled the light, floral fragrance of the tea.

"When this is over," Ashlynn swore bitterly. "I'll leave you with just enough breath in your body to understand the feeling of being buried alive. You'll still get off easy, though," she whispered as she imagined piling heavy, sodden earth on Owain's broken and battered body. "You'll only have to live through it once because there will be no crawling out of the grave for you."

Several minutes slipped by as Ashlynn sipped the warm, soothing tea, breathing in the cool, misty air of the Vale and extending her senses out among the the red cedar, hemlock and oak trees of the Vale, as if she was reassuring herself that she hadn't lost the strength to fight back against the Lothians before she felt calm enough to open the box of writing tools on her desk and fetch a fresh sheet of paper.

~Jocey~

~I've finally returned to the Vale of Mists after so many months in the Eldritch lands. I'm closer to you now than I've been since this nightmare began, but I still feel so far away.~

The sound of Ashlynn's steel tipped pen scratching across the paper filled the air as line after line of neat, flowing script filled the page.

~I hoped that you would still be in the Summer Villa when I returned. If you were, there is no force in this world that would have stopped me from rushing to rescue you from Owain's clutches.~

When Ashlynn had spoken to the woman impersonating her in the Summer Villa, Samira, it had sounded like Owain planned for Jocelynn to remain in the villa until the fake Ashlynn could conveniently 'die in childbirth', something that shouldn't happen for a few months yet. When she left to learn from the Mother of Thorns, Ashlynn firmly believed that she would be able to rescue Jocelynn before anything tragic could happen.

When she finally arrived back in the Vale, however, it had been to the news that Jocelynn had left the Villa, returning to Lothian City under the watchful eyes of Bors Lothian until Owain returned from Blackwell County with a pair of Guild Masters in tow. Since then, Jocelynn and Owain had often been seen together, as if the Lothian heir refused to let his captive bride out of his sight for even a moment.

~Soon, we will have the strength to confront Owain and his family within their own city walls,~ Ashlynn wrote.

~It isn't fair to you that I make you wait, and I hope that one day you can forgive me for so many days of delay. Our soldiers may be strong, but they aren't yet an army. Until we are ready, we would risk too much by moving too soon, and I will not snatch you back now only to lose you to a Lothian counterattack.~

~Among the men I will bring to rescue you, there's one you may find to be a worthy companion. Sir Ollie earned his place as my Cypress Witch, and there are few people that I would trust more to keep you safe, even if you don't take a fancy to him, though his appearance is handsome enough that I'm sure you won't mind his company.~

~I argued with Father long ago to give you the right to choose your own husband, and I won't meddle in your love affairs more than introducing you to a good man who I respect and admire. Your choices are your own, and I will never try to force you, no matter the circumstances. But if you find him as charming as I think you will, I hope you'll give him the chance to win your heart.~

~Tomorrow night, Nyri is holding a grand festival and banquet to announce our betrothal. I wish that you, Mother and Father, could be there. It feels so lonely without you, even though I'm surrounded by the family I've built among the Eldritch. You will always be the sister that I treasure, and no one can take your place in my heart away from you.~

~I hope that you will be able to join me soon. There's so much of this world I want to show you. The world is so much bigger than the tiny spaces behind castle walls where we've lived our lives as children. I miss the days of sneaking out with you to roam the cliffs and coves of our home, but the places I've gone since then are just as beautiful and even freer. You'll understand what I mean soon, I promise.~

~With all my love,

Your sister, Ashlynn~

Once the ink had dried, Ashlynn carefully folded the letter, sealing it with a drop of dark green wax and pressing a freshly carved sigil of a mighty tree surrounded by lavender blossoms into the wax.

From a box on her desk, she pulled a stack of similar letters, bound together by a slender silk cord. Gently, her thumb ran along the edge of the stack, silently counting the letters she'd begun writing in the Briar when Amahle suggested that she find a method of giving vent to the feelings bottled up in her heart.

At times, Ashlynn wished that she could send the letters to her sister. Occasionally, she indulged herself in the fantasy of asking Marcel to find a way to carry the stack of letters where she laid her heart bare and poured out the wonders she'd seen along with the worries that plagued her, just so her sister could know that she was still alive and that she was fighting to bring them back together again. To keep Jacey safe from Owain's murderous hands.

But the letters themselves were far too dangerous, and if they were ever discovered in Jocelynn's hands or even in her chambers, it would be all too easy for her sister to find herself consigned to the grim fate the Inquisition reserved for heretics who consorted with witches and 'demons.'

Once she managed to free Jocelynn, she would give her the letters in the hopes that Jocelynn would understand that she'd never given up on her. Until then, there was little Ashlynn could do to retrieve her sister from Owain's dangerous clutches.

"After the festival," Ashlynn mused... "I should return to the Summer Villa. Even if Jocey isn't there, she still spent several months there with the impostor, Samira. Maybe Samira knows more about how Jocey is fairing than Marcel has been able to learn. Even if she doesn't know anything, it's still worth the trip to find out, and the trip can serve as an opportunity for my coven to flex their might and find their limits..."

As plans went, a visit to the Summer Villa to interrogate Samira might not offer much information of real worth to the war that was rapidly approaching. But to Ashlynn's uneasy heart, the idea felt like a soothing balm on an open wound, and that alone made it worth the risk. She just had to wait a few more days before making her move...

Chapter 583: The War Council Gathers

The night before the festival was to begin, while many in the fortress city were making final preparations for a day of joy and celebration, a gathering of an entirely different nature was about to begin in a formal dining room deep in the caverns of the ancient fortress.

Unlike the last time Ashlynn had dined with Nyrielle, Thane, and the handful of others who made up what passed for a ruling council in the Vale of Mists, this time the room was filled to capacity and not a single seat at the long cedar table was empty.

Nyrielle took her place at the head of the table, dressed in a form-fitting black gown adorned with spills of dark crimson lace that accentuated the curves of her lithe figure while making her appear even taller and more imposing than she was on her own. Though she kept her wings tucked away, it was impossible for her to conceal the aura of darkness that clung to her when her emotions ran high and the fresh, blood red coat of polish she wore on her pointed fingernails only added to the feeling of bloodthirsty menace that radiated from her as she gestured for the others to take their seats.

That aura of darkness melted like frost as sunrise as soon as Ashlynn took her place to Nyrielle's left. One touch of Ashlynn's delicate hand on Nyrielle's slender wrist was enough to bring the powerful vampire out of her dark musings and place a smile back on her soft lips.

Of course, Ashlynn's choice of attire may have contributed to the change in Nyrielle's mood. While Ashlynn normally preferred natural hues of greens and browns that suited her nature as the Mother of Trees, tonight she'd adorned herself in a gown of deep crimson.

Paired with a half cape made entirely of dark raven's feathers that gave the crimson gown an aggressive, martial feeling, as though she couldn't bear to restrain her sword arm in the event that some violence should break out at the council meeting.

The dress, along with the absence of any of her signature hats, served as a reminder to everyone present that, although she was the Mother of Trees, a woman with status that could rival the Harbinger of Death herself, she was also Nyrielle's Seneschal and tonight, she was making it clear which identity took precedence.

"You know, if you keep this up, my darling," Nyrielle said, her eyes shining with affection as she gazed at Ashlynn. "I'm going to need to find a larger table to accommodate your coven and my progeny."

"I'm sure that Ollie knows someone who would be happy to carve something for us when the time comes," Ashlynn said, laughing lightly as she looked down at what had become 'her' side of the table.

To Ashlynn's left, each member of her coven had come dressed in their finest. Whether it was Heila in her understated brown dress with its accents of coppery brocade, Ollie in his ice-blue tunic with its silver embroidered accents, or Virve in the formal midnight blue tunic with a crimson captain's sash running from one shoulder to the opposite hip, each of them had come with an awareness that their actions in this meeting represented not only themselves, but the lady they served as well.

Even Hauke, who was large enough to loom over everyone else in the room, managed to make himself feel smaller as he set aside the chair at his place at the table to sit directly on the floor, reducing his stature until it felt as though he matched the height of the Clan of the Great Claw.

"Are you sure I should be here, Lady Ashlynn?" Hauke asked as he fidgeted into position. While Nyrielle's formal dining room had been built to accommodate men and women like Lennart and Virve, if Hauke

wasn't careful, his iridescent horn would brush up against the crystal chandelier hanging overhead and the last thing he wanted to do was cause trouble by bringing the dozens of small oil lamps arranged within the chandelier crashing down on their dinner table.

"I'm not even properly a member of the coven yet," he added as he looked around the room at the other people taking their seats. "And I don't know that I have much to add to something like this."

"Hauke," Ashlynn said gently. "You aren't here because you may one day join my coven. You're here because in a few years, you may find yourself the lord of the High Pass. I cannot hold the title of Eldritch Lady of the High Pass forever, it belongs with you and your clan. When that day comes, the things you learn by observing gatherings like this will be priceless."

"Besides," she added with a knowing look. "You may find that you have more to say about the things we discuss today than you thought."

For a moment, Hauke looked like he still wasn't sure he belonged there, but a reassuring look from Ashlynn, along with a gesture that he should stay put, stopped him from protesting any further. Instead, since he was supposed to be here to learn, he turned his attention to the other side of the table and the several notable figures he had only barely met, if he had met them at all.

Opposite Ashlynn, Sir Thane led what had become 'Nyrielle's' side of the table. The amber-eyed vampire seemed to be one of the only people who was immune to dressing up for the formal occasion, sitting comfortably in the same loose-sleeved white tunic and tight black breeches that he'd worn when he taught Ashlynn how to fight with a sword. Only the intricately embroidered midnight blue sash at his waist gave any hint that he'd chosen to 'dress up' for the occasion.

Beside him, Ignatious, still wearing the crimson and gold robes of the Inquisition, seemed slightly uncomfortable taking a place ahead of Zedya until he realized that it placed him directly across from Lady Heila, who smiled warmly when he took his seat. Next to him, Zedya and Lennart both exchanged knowing looks as the former captain pulled out Zedya's chair to help her into her seat.

"Marcell will be joining us later," Nyrielle said, nodding to the sole empty seat at the table as the final members of the gathering took their seats. Commander Bassinger and Marshal Jakob looked distinctly uncomfortable in a room filled with so many powerful beings. They subconsciously shifted their positions further down the table, yielding the more prominent seats to Savis, Tausau, and the broken-beaked Aspakos.

"Tomorrow will be a day of joyful celebration," Nyrielle began, taking Ashlynn's hand in hers and gazing lovingly into the young witch's emerald eyes for a long moment before she continued. "But our people are also uncertain about their futures. I've brought an army like none the Vale has ever fielded, and Ashlynn has brought engineers and workmen to transform not only the city we live in but the way we live our lives each and every day."

Looking around the table, Nyrielle saw a variety of looks from the faces arrayed before her. Some, like Thane and Ashlynn, knew what was coming. There would be no surprises for them in what Nyrielle had to say, and any objections they might once have held had been resolved in the nights leading up to this meeting.

Others were quietly confident, even though they didn't know what was coming. People like Heila, Ollie and even Hauke were too young to have participated in many grand undertakings and this was their first time joining a war council as participants. Their quiet confidence came from the belief that people like Nyrielle, Ashlynn, Thane and Zedya would lead them well no matter what storms awaited them on the horizon.

It was the third and final group that created the only cause for concern Nyrielle had as she surveyed the council she'd assembled. People like Bassinger, Savis, Tausau, and Jakob, who had been too far from the inner circle while Nyrielle underwent tremendous changes brought about by her bond with Ashlynn, had no way of predicting what the Eldritch Lady of the Vale would do now that she had returned with such a powerful force.

The doubts and concerns on their faces couldn't have been more clear if they were written in black ink, but if any of Nyrielle and Ashlynn's plans were going to succeed, they would need to dispel those doubts. Because without the support of the people in this room, and several who weren't able to attend as well... everything they wanted to build was likely to collapse under its own unsupported weight.

"I know some of you must have concerns," Nyrielle said, looking around the table. "Tonight, speak your mind. I would rather resolve your doubts now than leave them to fester in the dark where they might poison us all."

"In that case," Thane said, stepping into the conversation as though he were expecting this exact opportunity. "There's something that I think is weighing on the minds of several people in this room..."

Chapter 584: Rumors Light and Dark

"Rumors have already begun to spread, Mistress," Thane said, leaning back in his chair and crossing his ankles in front of him. "Some rumors say that you've brought men from the High Fen because you intend to submit the Vale of Mists to the rule of High Fen City. Others wonder if you're about to take friend Savis as your husband to gain the support of High Lord Hamdi's progeny in fighting against the Lothians."

The first rumor Thane mentioned drew a handful of scoffs from people who knew Nyrielle well, especially people like Heila, who had seen the way Lady Nyrielle interacted with High Lady Erna. Some of them could envision the serpentine High Lady offering up her domain to her teacher, but no one could imagine things flowing the other way.

When Thane mentioned the second rumor, however, the entire room broke into laughter, though Savis adopted a detached posture, as if the idea of a betrothal between himself and Nyrielle was too ridiculous to acknowledge enough to laugh at.

"Those are tame rumors compared to the ones I've heard, Sir Thane," Marshal Jakob said from the far end of the table, interrupting the moment of levity with a serious tone and a worried expression on his weathered face.

The aging Marshal from the Horned Clan had presided over the villages across the Vale for more than twenty years at this point and there wasn't a village elder, wise woman or prominent figure in the entire Vale that he hadn't spoken to within the past ten days since Lady Nyrielle returned to the Vale of Mists at the head of a vast army.

Perhaps more importantly, as the Marshal of the Vale, Jakob was responsible for keeping the peace within the Vale. Normally, that involved mediating in instances of minor disputes and arranging a few strong men to watch over ale houses late at night in case things got out of hand, but lately, with so many strangers mixing together with the natives, his constables had been strained to their limits trying to keep minor conflicts from turning to raucous brawls.

"We've taken in thousands of refugees from the outlying villages," the old man pointed out, tugging at his snow-white beard as he began to make his point. "We were able to endure through the summer without hardship, and thanks to Sir Ollie, the village of Refuge has begun to sustain itself."

"While some people settled in the castle town, the ones who have are the ones who are looking to be around others, to ply their trades and open shops of their own. They don't create much trouble. Still, whether it's the village of Refuge or the newcomers in the castle town, half of the food they consume needs to be gathered from other villages."

"We're working as fast as we can to solve this problem, Lady Nyrielle," Ollie said awkwardly, feeling compelled to speak up on behalf of his villagers. "Some crops take longer to be ready, and it was already summer by the time we began to plant our fields. Next year, the crops will be more abundant, and the herds of goats and sheep will be larger too. We just need to make it to the next harvest in order to stand on our own."

From his seat across the table, Thane smiled with obvious pride in his young pupil. In the beginning, Thane might have given him more specific directions and advice to guide the young man in managing the crisis.

He'd also made men like Marshal Jakob available to Ollie in order to help with much of the planning that resulted in the harvests the young knight had mentioned. Still, it was no exaggeration to say that Ollie himself had made many of the critical decisions that allowed the village to be much more successful than even experienced leaders like Jakob had believed would be possible.

"That may be true, Sir Ollie," the aging Marshal acknowledged. "And many of the newcomers were able to bring enough of the necessities for living that we've been able to fill the gaps without anyone suffering too much hardship, but..."

"But?" Nyrielle asked, raising a slender brow at the old man who knew the people of the Vale almost as well as she did, if not better. If he was worried enough about the people of the vale that he was speaking up now, then the cracks caused by the recent influx of people must be large enough to pose a significant risk.

"What rumors have formed about the refugees that concern you, Old Goat?" Nyrielle asked, using the term of endearment she'd applied to the Marshal ever since his beard turned white.

"They say that this will be the last war against the Lothians," Marshal Jakob said directly. "They say that we cannot feed everyone who has come here, and all the extra mouths that have come with the army will only make the winter leaner. The people are worried that the winter will be too hard, my lady," the old man said.

Around the table, several people nodded, unsurprised at the rumors that had circulated. Both Nyrielle and Ashlynn had worked hard to compensate for the impact of bringing along such a large influx of people and many of the wagons that followed the army were loaded with everything from grains and preserved meat to sugar and spices that would let people find more than just subsistence in the meals they ate through the cold winter months.

Still, neither Nyrielle or Ashlynn had been aware that Owain Lothian or Liam Dunn would go on a rampage through the outlying villages, sending thousands more people into the Vale of Mists to find safety from the human's latest wave of aggression. Now that the refugees were here along with the army, the concerns Jakob brought up weren't unfounded.

"If it were just rumors about running out of food, it would be bad enough, my Lady," the horned Marshal continued. "But people who can rub two ideas together often ignite the worst sparks. Some people think that you're not worried about the food shortages because they haven't seen anything being done about it. They say that once spring comes and the winter snows melt, everyone will be forced to fight to the last man, woman and child... and that you'll sacrifice the weak that you cannot feed in order to preserve the lives of the army in the hopes of claiming victory."

"It's not all that bad, is it?" Heila asked from beside Ashlynn. "Surely the people understand how hard Lady Nyrielle worked to recruit an army just to keep the people of the Vale safe from the Lothians. And Lady Ashlynn brought in so many people to help build up the Vale... they can't think we mean to give up after all this work and sacrifice them to the Lothians, can they?"

"That's just it, Lady Heila," Marshal Jacob said grimly. "When they see the strangers tearing up the ground to build new roads and buildings, some of them see new neighbors and they welcome them with open arms. But others worry that the people coming from across the mountains are more skilled than they are... and they think that Lady Ashlynn is bringing them here to replace them."

The picture that Marshal Jakob painted was grim, filled with anxiety about the war to come and uncertainty about whether or not Nyrielle truly cared for her people when it seemed like she'd brought in warriors that were stronger, engineers who were smarter, and sorcerers who were far more powerful than anyone who had grown up inside the Vale in the past century.

"The worst rumors are always the ones that contain a kernel of truth," Ashlynn said, giving Nyrielle's hand a comforting squeeze. "The people are right to think that we're preparing for our final war against the Lothians," she said.

"But if they think that we'll need to sacrifice the common people to bring the March under our control," Ashlynn continued, her voice growing dark as her emerald eyes grew cold. For a moment, her chest grew tight with the remembered sensation of sodden earth piling atop her as Owain's knights tried to bury the person who had slowly transformed herself into the greatest threat the march had ever faced.

Sensing the dark mood settling over her lover, Nyrielle reached out under the table, placing a slender hand on Ashlynn's thigh and giving her a gentle squeeze to remind her lover that whatever she felt, she wasn't alone, and that she would never have to face her enemies without the help and the support of the people who loved her the most.

"Thank you," Ashlynn mouthed softly to Nyrielle as she drew a deep breath to recollect herself before she continued speaking in a fiercely determined tone. "If our people think we'll need to sacrifice the common folk just to gain a chance of victory in the war to come, I'm afraid they've underestimated the strength we've brought back to the Vale and just how vulnerable the Lothians are to our plans," she said, nodding at each member of her coven in turn.

Just the fact that the Vale of Mists had gained four powerful witches, plus the support of Hauke, who was still a powerful sorcerer even without a seed of witchcraft, and Talauia, who wouldn't hesitate to join in battles even if it wasn't appropriate for her to join the war council that planned them already added a kind of strength that the Vale of Mists had never hoped to wield against the Lothians before.

When you added that to the powerful army Nyrielle recruited, along with everything else that they planned.... Ashlynn and Nyrielle had already begun to plan for the war they would have to fight after they defeated the Lothians, when the Church began to launch its crusade. But while the two of them had already started to look at the next threat, the people around them were still very much concerned with the threat directly in front of them.

"My darling and I have spoken extensively about how we intend to use the power we've brought back from the lands across the mountains," Nyrielle said. "For years, I've cared little for the world beyond our borders. So long as we could protect the lands we still held and the people who lived there, I was content."

"But now that Ashlynn has joined us, I am no longer able to remain as impassive as I once was," the powerful vampire added with a predatory gleam in her eyes that had only rarely been seen by those who had grown up seeing only the impassive mask her face had worn for so many years.

"So this time, instead of defending our borders, we will bring the war to the Lothians and their vassals. And we will not wait for the snows to melt in the spring... Our war will begin as soon as the festival ends!"

Chapter 585: Appointing the Lord General (Part One)

"Our war will begin as soon as the festival ends!"

Nyrielle's words landed in the room like a torch thrown onto a puddle of oil, igniting strong reactions in everyone present. A few eyes turned to Hauke, wondering if the Vale of Mists' recent alliance with the Frost Walkers was the reason that Nyrielle felt confident to press for war as winter approached.

For decades, the Vale and the Lothians had fallen into a stalemate where the heavy snows and bitter cold of winter constrained both sides, preventing Nyrielle and her progeny from exploiting their greater reach during the long nights of winter. While it was true that Nyrielle and her progeny had more ability to move, any attempt to bring her army along with her was likely to result in more deaths from exposure to the cold and difficulty transporting supplies than they would suffer at the hands of the enemy.

It was the same for the humans. While they could try to lay siege to the Vale or other Eldritch strongholds during the winter, they would be placing themselves at the edges of their ability to manage supply lines and deep within the striking range of Nyrielle and her progeny. Enough of them massed in one place might deter the powerful vampires but doing so would certainly leave them exposed somewhere else without the ability to quickly send reinforcements through the harsh weather.

But when people looked to Hauke as if the young Frost Walker lord was the key to the strategy behind Nyrielle's announcement, he looked just as confused as everyone else. Other people at the table, however, were freer with their thoughts.

"Finally," Savis growled. A fearsome, predatory grin formed on his face as he bared his fangs, clutching his claws in anticipation of heated battles in the days to come. The battle against the Frost Walkers had been a shameful affair, and even though his Black Wolf Brigade had acquitted themselves well, it was far from the unrestrained slaughter that he and his men yearned for in these human lands.

"Already?" Ollie said softly, blinking in surprise and turning to face Ashlynn with a puzzled look. Hadn't she said that they would need the winter to study witchcraft and prepare for the war to come? If the war was going to begin in the fall, how could he prepare himself for something that would surely be much, much worse than the nightmare he'd faced in the trial that Ashlynn had given him?

"My Lady," Commander Bassinger said in a deep, rumbling voice that cut through the chatter coming from other members of the war council. "My men are capable and blooded, and they will follow any order that you give. But they have just spent the summer fighting a campaign against Liam Dunn and Loman Lothian's forces. The men are tired, and even though we fought well, there were losses to be mourned. It may be too soon to press them into battle again."

"They've fought one season, and they need to rest for two before they can fight again?" Savis sneered. "What kind of soft soldiers are you training in the Vale?"

"Soldiers whose lives are too precious to expend on uncertain actions," Bassinger shot back. "Each life in the Vale is worth twenty human soldiers, and I won't trade one for less than that. To do so is an insult to their sacrifice and a price we can't afford. You may have the luxury of expending your men's lives carelessly, but we do not."

"Gentlemen," Ashlynn said softly, tapping the table with a finger and sending a ripple of soft, soothing power down the length of the massive piece of cedar. "Mistress Nyrielle has yet to explain our plans. Wait until you've heard what we have to say, and then you can make your arguments," she said firmly. "And when you do, please remember that everyone seated here is a brother or sister in arms. You may question an idea, but save your insults for our enemies."

"My darling is right," Nyrielle said, sweeping the table with her midnight blue gaze. "We need to save our energy for fighting our real enemies, not for fighting among ourselves. To that end, before we discuss our plans, it's time to make the first of many changes to the leadership of the Vale of Mists," she said, startling several people at the table to sit up straighter.

"Commander Bassinger, you have served the Vale well for decades," Nyrielle began. "You've been my guard, my captain, and the commander of all the soldiers of the Vale, and for that you have my deepest thanks."

"The honor has always been mine, my lady," Bassinger said in a deep, rumbling voice as he placed his hand over his heart, bearing his sharpened claws as if demonstrating a willingness to rip out his own heart and offer it to her if she required it. "If you need something of me now, you need only to ask. These hands will always be yours to command."

"It's good of you to make that offer," Nyrielle said with a smile. "But from now on, you and your claws answer to another." The statement, in and of itself, didn't draw much surprise, and many heads were already turning toward Ashlynn when Nyrielle spoke again, and this time, nearly everyone at the table was taken off guard.

"Our army has grown too large and too complex for a man of Commander Bassinger's limited experience to lead," Nyrielle said. "We need to swiftly integrate members of several different clans and traditions, and at the same time, we must quickly learn to make use of their unique strengths while finding ways to compensate for their individual weaknesses. To that end, the Vale of Mists will create a new position with the title of Lord General of the Vale of Mists."

"Every soldier within the Vale will ultimately answer to the Lord General," Nyrielle said, pinning a sharp gaze on several people around the table to ensure they accepted her pronouncement before she continued. "There is one man here who has fought at my side through more wars than anyone else, and I can think of no one better suited than him to lead our growing army."

"Thane," Nyrielle said, turning to face the vampire sitting at her right hand. "Our people are worried that the forces we've raised will become a chain around their necks, dragging the whole of the Vale to ruin. I believe that you can do more than just prove their fears unfounded. Will you take up this burden and lead our forces to victory in the battles to come?"

"I swore my sword to your service long ago, Mistress," Thane said, sitting upright in his chair for the first time since the meeting began. "When I did, you bestowed the Voice of Command on me so I could give your soldiers the courage and discipline of knights with nothing more than a spoken word."

"Today, our men already have the courage of knights," he continued. "They will fight to the last man to defend the home they've reclaimed from the ruins of High Lord Torbin's Vale of Mists. But the discipline to fight, and the ability to fight together with men they barely know... Mistress Nyrielle, if this isn't the best use of the power you've given me, I don't know what is. Of course, I'll take up this burden."

"In that case, Lord General Thane," Nyrielle said with a faint smile as she led the conversation in a direction that had clearly been prepared in advance. "I think everyone gathered here would benefit from understanding your plans. You must attack and wage war when supplies are scarce, you must teach the Lothians and their vassals that they are no longer safe huddling behind their walls though the dark months of winter, and you must deliver decisive victories before the humans begin to receive reinforcements from across the sea next year."

"So please, Lord General," she said, her dark eyes twinkling with a mix of pride in her progeny and anticipation for how he would rise to the challenge of this moment. "Tell us your plans for the coming war."

Chapter 586: Appointing the Lord General (Part Two)

The challenges Nyrielle laid out so plainly were ones that weighed on the minds of everyone who had dwelled in the Vale of Mists their entire life. Virve and Lennart both nodded along as Nyrielle laid out the challenges, quickly understanding why, even with the sizeable reinforcements they'd brought from across the mountains, Lady Nyrielle would choose to create a new, more senior position imbued with the authority to command their forces in such an unconventional campaign.

Others around the table showed reactions that had less to do with the coming war and more to do with what they saw as long overdue recognition of Thane's position within the Vale of Mists. Ashlynn wore a radiant smile as she looked at the man who had declared himself her 'big brother' when she first arrived in the Vale, and Ollie, sitting nearby, looked equally proud at the recognition his mentor was receiving.

But not everyone reacted to the appointment of Nyrielle's oldest human progeny to the position with the same levels of enthusiasm.

Sitting beside the bearish commander, Marshal Jacob reached out to put a gentle, reassuring hand on his long-time friend's forearm. To give an entire life to the service of the vale, leading his men in countless minor actions of the long-simmering conflict since the end of the War of Inches, and suddenly finding himself relieved of command now that the next real war was about to begin...

The diminutive Marshal couldn't begin to understand how his friend could swallow the insult.

"It's fine," Bassinger said quietly as he gave his old friend and fellow councilor a fragile smile that held back a storm of conflicting emotions. "If it were anyone else, I might argue, but compared to Lord General Thane, I truly am inexperienced and lacking."

Thane had been old, wise, and experienced when Bassinger was still a cub. It had been Thane who noticed the bearish commander's talents during the War of Inches, pulling him away from the front lines and assigning him to Nyrielle's personal guard where he could begin to observe more of the decision-making that shaped the final days of the war. Years later, it had been Thane again who recommended Bassinger to take over the position as Captain of her guard when his predecessor retired.

There had never been a point in Commander Bassinger's long career when he hadn't been able to turn to the powerful vampire for support, whether it was honing his fighting techniques or adjusting to life behind a desk when he assumed what had once been the highest office in Nyrielle's army. Thane had always been there, acting like a big brother to Bassinger and everyone under his command.

"Thank you, Bassinger," Thane said graciously from the opposite end of the table. "But just because I'm assuming command as the Lord General, that doesn't mean I won't need capable commanders like you to help through this war. In fact, I need three more men to take up burdens every bit as heavy as your own if we're going to use our forces to the greatest effect."

As soon as he said it, people once more cast glances around the table, some more overt than others. A few gazes gathered on the newest vampire at the table, wondering if the former captain of Nyrielle's guard would be taking up some greater responsibility now that he had transcended the barrier between life and death. Others looked to Zedy, Virve, and even Savis, wondering which of them would be next to be named to a position of authority.

"There are five pillars of strength within the army of the Vale," Thane said. "The largest by far are Ordinary Soldiers, men who are well trained, disciplined, and who we will rely on to man the walls in defense and lay siege in offense. Commander Bassinger, these men will be yours to command, and you can expect that you will receive several reinforcements as we reorganize our soldiers to thicken your ranks," the Lord General explained.

"Our next pillar of strength are the elite soldiers who are capable of serving as the sharp point of the spear on the attack, and siege breakers on defense. They are men and women with the power to become arena champions in High Fen City or to serve as the most feared division under the command of High Lord Hamdi," Thane said, turning his gaze to the white-furred vampire from the Golden Eyed clan.

"Sir Savis, will you accept the title of Commander and weld together the greatest of our warriors into a force that can stand toe-to-toe with the Templars and the knights of our enemies?" Thane asked.

"You want me to submit to a man less than a quarter my age and accept that he is a greater general than I am?" Savis said, his white fur bristling in instant revulsion at the idea. Savis was the first of High Lord Hamdi's progeny, and he stood within the same generation as Nyrielle's grand sire, the late High Lord Torbin. Nyrielle's parents could be considered his nieces and nephews, to say nothing of Nyrielle and her own progeny.

To the proud and mighty Savis, the mere suggestion that he should answer to 'Lord General Thane' was little different than asking a veteran warrior to take orders from his own great-grandson who had barely graduated from playing with toy soldiers in the dirt!

"Lady Nyrielle, I can humble myself before the Harbinger of Death," the lupine vampire said, turning to look at the woman at the head of the table. "I agreed to serve you until High Lord Hamdi heals and calls me home, but this..."

"Thane," Nyrielle said, silencing the furious Golden Eyed vampire with a single word. "If you want him to serve as one of your commanders, you need to bring him to heel. I'm entrusting my army to you, to forge as you see fit, but if Savis proves himself to be the greater man," she said, casting the older vampire a pointed look. "Then I will pass the position of Lord General to the man who can best wield my army to defeat our enemies."

Savis bristled when he heard Lady Nyrielle mention 'bringing him to heel' and his claws resting on the table dug into the soft cedar wood, leaving shallow gouges behind as she prodded one of the few emotions the white-furred vampire had left. But a moment later, she offered a balm to his wounded pride along with a chance to seize control of power and authority in the Vale of Mists that was as great as what he had possessed under High Lord Hamdi in the Tangled Wood.

"Do I make myself clear?" Nyrielle asked, returning her midnight gaze to Thane. That gaze seemed to carry even greater weight and meaning than the simple words would suggest, and Ashlynn did her best to keep her face impassive as Nyrielle and Thane led the unsophisticated Savis into the trap they'd prepared for him.

Of all of the leaders who had come under Nyrielle's banner during her visit to the Eldritch nations beyond the mountains, Savis was the most difficult to control. He acknowledged his defeat at the battle of the Tangled Tower, and he gave his service and the service of his Black Wolf Brigade to Nyrielle in exchange for a promise that she wouldn't kill his sire, High Lord Hamdi, for the offenses he committed against Nyrielle when she visited.

On the surface, capturing a portion of a defeated enemy's strength to use as your own was a brilliant move and one that had given her new army a core of well-trained, elite soldiers. Beneath that, however, there were several cracks in their relationship, and Savis remained a reluctant weapon that could twist in Nyrielle's hand to betray its wielder.

They'd made it this far by relying on his sense of brotherhood with Tausau, who was far more enthusiastic in supporting Nyrielle. But everyone knew that this wasn't enough to bring Savis fully into the fold, and so Ashlynn had suggested giving him an opportunity to seize command of the army for himself at the very beginning.

By allowing him to make the attempt to usurp command at the very beginning, they would preempt any attempts that might occur later on. More importantly, he would learn firsthand, in the Eldritch way, that besides Nyrielle and Ashlynn, there were still people in the Vale with the strength to command his obedience.

"Your orders are perfectly clear, Mistress Nyrielle," Thane said with a smile as he stood up from his chair and faced Savis's bristling figure. "If I can't subdue one lone wolf, how can I ever hope to lead your army?"

"Savis," the newly named Lord General said in a voice brimming with so much confidence it could be mistaken for arrogance. "I will accept your challenge, but do you dare to accept my terms?"

Chapter 587: The Voice of Command (Part One)

"I will accept your challenge, but do you dare to accept my terms?"

Thane's taunt dug under Savis's skin like barbed needles, tearing at his already tattered pride and provoking the beast that lurked behind his normally impassive golden gaze. During the battle of the Tangled Tower, Savis fought Zedya to what could charitably be called a draw. In reality, only Nyrielle's prompt arrival had rescued her prized maidservant from the powerful vampire's claws.

Now that he was being asked to simply submit to another of Nyrielle's young progeny, it was all Savis could do to keep himself from erupting in fury in the middle of the war council.

"If you wish to settle this as a contest between men, I won't refuse," Savis growled, standing up from his chair. "Little Brother Tausau can stand as my second and as my witness. Name your second, and we can take this outside to resolve without spoiling the mood here."

From his seat beside Savis, Tausau gave Nyrielle a complicated and helpless look before the Clanless vampire stood at Savis's side. He'd shared his concerns about his 'older brother's wounded pride and questionable loyalty on more than one occasion since coming under her banner. Savis had once been

hailed as the White Fang of the Tangled Wood, renown for defeating two Eldritch Lords in single combat to expand High Lord Hamdi's territory and the sudden fall in status had shaken Tausau's older brother more than the proud vampire might admit.

In the High Pass, while they were recovering from the battle and making arrangements for their dead, Tausau had even gone so far as to plead with Nyrielle for her to bestow the same gift of reawakening the heart that she'd given him. He'd hoped, perhaps naively, that a return of the emotions he'd lost centuries ago would fill Savis with the same gratitude and loyalty that he felt after experiencing a rebirth at her hands.

Nyrielle had rejected him instantly, saying that Savis had yet to earn such a favor and that there were others who were still waiting for that gift who had contributed far more to the Vale's cause over decades of war than Savis had by contributing in a few minor battles while they traveled the Eldritch nations. Now that things had come to a head, part of Tausau's complicated glance at Nyrielle seemed to say 'I warned you, grand-niece,' even as another part seemed to say 'Now that it's come this far, I'm helpless to stop him.'

"I have no need of a second," Thane said, smiling lazily as he stood from his own chair, spinning it effortlessly as though it were a dance partner before he tucked it out of the way. "My terms are very simple and advantageous to you," Thane continued as he adjusted the laces at the cuffs of his white tunic, as well as the laces across his pale, muscular chest that he normally allowed to hang loose.

"I've worn my best white tunic for tonight's gathering," the Lord General continued, holding his arms out wide in a grand gesture and taking a slow turn as if to show off the way the garment strained across his broad shoulders while falling loose around his trim waist before vanishing beneath his wide sash. "If you can stain it with so much as a single drop of my blood, I will count it as your victory and submit to your rule as Lord General of the Vale of Mists."

"You think that your sword will give you an advantage against my claws, boy?" Savis jeered. "I thought that you knights had honor and fought for your virtues. But I'm not a petty man. If you want to match your sword against my claws, I'll allow it. And if you can stain my fur with a single drop of my blood, we'll count it as your victory."

"Sir Thane wouldn't resort to such low tricks," Ollie objected fiercely. Thane was the man who had taught him more about what it meant to be a knight than anyone else, and seeing him insulted like this struck Ollie in a particularly sensitive spot after completing his own vigil to become a knight.

"It's fine, Sir Ollie," Thane said, untying the knots that bound his darksteel arming sword to his sash and removing the weapon, sheath and all, before passing it across the table to a surprised-looking Ollie. "I said that I wouldn't need a second, but since you want to make this a matter of the honor of knights, then Sir Ollie can stand as my second and hold my blade. I won't be needing it anyway."

"Arrogant boy," Savis growled, moving to one end of the room and taking a fighting position with his knees bent, ready to pounce and his claws extended as though he was preparing to tear Thane's flesh from his body.

"Give us the side," Thane said calmly to the people on Nyrielle's side of the table. "This room is a bit narrow for a duel but if you clear this side and stand behind Lady Ashlynn's coven, there should be enough space. It won't take long anyway," he said confidently.

Thane's words weren't a request and everyone on Nyrielle's side of the table acquiesced immediately to his spoken command, deferring to the newly promoted Lord General without the slightest word of complaint.

"Don't worry, Ollie," Ashlynn said softly when she noticed the young knight's hands tightly gripping Thane's sword. "Lord Thane has nothing to fear from Sir Savis. You're about to witness something very important so watch closely."

"What do you mean?" Ollie asked, keeping his eyes fixed firmly on the two vampires as if he was afraid he would miss their duel in the blink of an eye. Given the speed with which he'd seen Thane move during their lessons, it was possible that thing truly would begin and end in the blink of an eye.

"Sir Savis is one of High Lord Hamdi's progeny," Ashlynn explained. "High Lord Hamdi inherited the Blood of the Pack from Bardas, the Jaws of Death. He's passed a trace of that power on to Savis."

"Savis is the most dangerous when he's surrounded by other members of his clan," Virve added, having seen Savis fight first hand during the battle of the Tangled Tower. She'd felt helpless then to help Zedya in her battle against the fearsome vampire and even now that she'd received the seed of the Ancient Oak, she knew she was far from becoming the Golden Eyed Vampire's match.

"He doesn't have any progeny of his own," Virve explained. "But he shares the blood of the Golden Eyed Clan, so as long as he's among other members of his clan, he can use their strength to supplement his own."

"But, he's alone here," Ollie pointed out the obvious as the people from the other side of the table shuffled in behind them. "So is that why Sir Thane thinks he has an advantage?"

"No," Ashlynn said, sharing a knowing look with Nyrielle. "Watch, see for yourself," she said as the air began to crackle with intense energy.

Even though Savis couldn't draw on the strength of a 'pack' he was still a vampire who had lived centuries longer than even Nyrielle had. He knew the limits of his powers well so when he summoned the power of his blood, he focused all of that energy into the speed of his limbs and the strength of his claws. The battle would begin and end in a single strike, and the young pup before him would learn that there was more to being a vampire than having the fortune to be the progeny of the Harbinger of Death!

Thane, on the other hand, made no movements and summoned no power. He seemed content to stand facing Savis with a calm expression on his face and his empty hands at his sides, as if he couldn't be bothered to defend himself from Savis's attack.

"Begin!" Nyrielle said, giving the table a sharp tap with a pointed nail to signal the start of the duel that would determine once and for all which of these powerful vampires had the right to command the armies of the Vale of Mists.

Chapter 588: The Voice of Command (Part Two)

"RAAAA!" Savis roared as he exploded forward in a rush that became a blur of white fur to many of the people who lacked enhanced senses in the room. His right hand opened wide, stretching his claws for a powerful swipe that would end the duel in a single move as soon as he closed the gap between him and the young 'Lord General.'

"HOLD!" Thane snapped, his voice echoing with the power of a battlefield commander who would be heard by thousands of soldiers marching under his banner.

Two things happened at the same time as soon as Thane spoke. Beyond speaking the word, Thane took a short step forward, reaching out with blinding speed to capture Savis's wrist in a grip that felt as tight as iron shackles.

All around Thane, the air seemed to darken, coalescing into a billowing cape of shadows that hung from his shoulders, flapping lightly in a wind that no one else in the room could feel. Everyone could, however, hear the faint sounds that emanated from Thane's shadowy cloak as he held a paralyzed Savis in his iron grip.

The sounds of horses preparing for a charge echoed from a great distance away, as if they were preparing to charge out of the abyss itself. The faint clank of armor and the footfalls of thousands of soldiers echoed alongside the snorts of horses and beyond that, sounding almost too faint to make out, the shouted orders of sergeants and captains as they marshalled their legions of the damned, preparing to answer Thane's orders to descend upon the man trapped in his grip and tear away his soul.

"KNEEL!" Thane commanded in a voice that carried a hint of the darkness of the void, pressing down on everyone who heard it with an intense sensation that bypassed their conscious mind and whispered into their innermost being that failure to obey would doom them to a swift and merciless death.

Ollie felt his knees touch the floor before he realized he'd left his chair, and Virve similarly knelt next to him. Lennart, Commander Bassinger, and Marshal Jakob all found themselves obeying as well, as years of habit to defer to Sir Thane left no room in their mind to defy the powerful vampire. Surprisingly, both Heila and the young Frost Walker lord, Hauke, managed to resist the pull of Thane's powerful command. Both of them had far too much experience with forces from beyond the grave attempting to twist and control their fates to yield so easily to Thane's command.

Savis, however, bore the full brunt of Thane's powerful command, and something deep within his heart that he had once forgotten existed stirred to life again, shuddering and trembling as Thane's dark power reminded him that even vampires as powerful as Savis still had a reason to remember fear.

For a moment, Savis managed to resist. His legs shook with the effort of remaining standing and his tail already drooped low as Thane seemed to grow even larger in his vision, towering over the frightened lupine vampire like he had come to drag him back to a kennel.

"I don't want to make this ugly, Sir Savis," Thane said as his sandy blonde hair danced in the same wind as the one that caught at his cloak of shadows. "Submit now, and I can leave you with a shred of pride."

"I, will, not..." Savis began, only to be interrupted by Thane's sharp, commanding voice.

"HEEL!" Thane commanded, pulling down on Savis's wrist and taking a sharp step back, pulling the startled vampire off balance and breaking his resistance to Thane's orders as the younger vampire treated him like a disobedient pup.

"Dancing leaves and whispered winds," Ashlynn said softly as soon as she felt the strength of Thane's humiliating command descending on the people on her side of the table and the ones gathered behind them.

Power rippled across the room as Ashlynn's simple spell created a curtain of drifting phantom leaves that rippled as if caught in a quiet breeze, shimmering between Thane and everyone watching. The spell blunted the strength of his voice enough that the demeaning command failed to take hold in the minds of the people who were most vulnerable to the Lord General's Voice of Command.

Savis, however, had no such protection against Thane's cutting command and he was left as vulnerable as a newborn pup before the intensity of the Lord General's order. Deep within his soul, something ancient and primal shattered when Savis heard that word. In his centuries of existence, he had been many things. Savis was a celebrated warrior, and a champion of the Tangled Wood, even the commander of the Black Wolf Brigade, but not once in half a millennium had he been treated like a common beast to be tamed.

A hot flash of humiliation burned through him, more painful than any wound he'd suffered in battle. Again, it was happening to him again! First Lady Nyrielle had humbled and humiliated him, turning him into nothing more than her herald and treating him like a defeated dog, and now one of her progeny was dragging him even lower.

This wasn't just defeat, it was degradation in front of witnesses who had once looked upon him with both fear and awe. But behind the growing panic that filled his ears with the sound of his heart's rapid beat, a voice of reason whispered in his ear, reminding him that it didn't have to be this way. Thane had told him that he didn't want to make it ugly and when Savis had rejected that kindness, the Lord General responded with ruthless venom that pierced to the very core of Savis's being.

That realization gnawed at him even as the word 'HEEL' echoed in his mind, forcing his body to submit whether he was willing to accept the order or not. All of Savis's desires, his determination to fight until

the last, his pride... none of it mattered as his body acted on its own before the dreadful command that echoed from the depths of the void.

On the floor of the formal dining hall, Savis's resistance completely crumbled as he quickly sank to all fours, lowering his head to the ground and looking fearfully up at the terrifying figure cloaked in shadows above him. For a moment, he almost thought he saw the shadows gathering to form a suit of armor around the vampire knight, but as soon as his chin touched the ground, the shadows began to fade, evaporating from around Thane as though they'd never been there to begin with.

"Never forget this lesson, Ollie," Ashlynn said as she helped the Cypress Witch back into his chair. "While Lady Nyrielle had several progeny before Thane, in many ways, he can be considered the one she spent the greatest effort to nurture from the moment she chose to bring humans into her household."

"Savis might be the greatest among High Lord Hamdi's progeny," she explained. "But even Savis can only inherit a portion of what Bardas bestowed on Hamdi. Thane has received one of the greatest blessings that Mistress Nyrielle is capable of bestowing, and she is no weaker than the Jaws of Death who created Hamdi. The gap between Thane and Savis," she said with a faint twinkle in her eyes. "Is as wide as the gap between a kitchen boy and a knight."

Chapter 589: Bitter Realization

The outcome of the duel between the newly appointed Lord General Thane and Savis couldn't be any more clear. Savis's claws hadn't come within a handbreadth of Thane's brilliant, white tunic without being completely restrained by the new Lord General. Rather, with a few sharp words and a display of frightening power, Thane had completely dominated the white furred vampire, leaving him with no ability to retaliate.

At this point, the people who had moved behind Ashlynn and her coven should return to their seats so the meeting could continue, but as they stared at the sight of the powerful, Golden Eyed vampire groveling on all fours before Thane's relaxed figure, no one seemed willing to make the first move.

"RISE," Thane commanded as a gentle smile spread across his soft lips, allowing the power of his voice to ripple over the cowering vampire like the cleansing waters of a mountain stream. "Rise as my commander and REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE."

Once again, Savis found his body moving of its own accord before he could even think of whether or not he should obey, only this time, something about Thane's softer tone made him want to rise, to climb to

his feat, not because he hated the humiliation of being forced to grovel on the floor but because Thane asked him to rise and to remember himself.

"You are Savis, the White Fang of the Tangled Wood, Slayer of the Eldritch Lords Garibor and Talshafan and Commander of the elite soldiers of Lady Nyrielle's army," Thane said, infusing his voice with enough power to completely dispel the effects of his earlier command.

"There is no shame in submitting to your Lord General," he added in a quieter tone as he extended a hand to help the defeated vampire return to his feet. "And there is no reason to lose your pride for what you have accomplished in the past. But now, I need you to set your eyes on the battles of the future. Can you do that for me, Commander Savis?" Thane asked, looking directly into the older man's golden eyes.

"I admit my mistake," Savis said, turning his golden eyes briefly to Zedya whose amethyst eyes shone brightly as whispered in her husband's ear, doubtless sharing her own insights on what had just taken place. "I judged you by my experience fighting Madame Zedya. I didn't realize that there existed a vampire among Her Eternity's progeny who could overwhelm me with their strength."

"Then I should warn you," Zedya said lightly as she took Lennart's hand in hers and led him back to their seats. "Among all of Lady Nyrielle's human progeny, I am the weakest in a clash of arms. Because I serve at Mistress Nyrielle's side, I rarely need to resort to force and I have much less practice fighting than my siblings."

"Had you been facing off against Marcel," she suggested with a brief glance at the empty seat. "You may never have seen him before his blades found your neck. And Sybyll would have torn you limb from limb, just to paint the room red with your blood."

"Zedya," Thane said gently as he helped the still shaken vampire back to his seat. "He's acknowledged his mistake. There's no need to rub salt in the wound. I'm sure that Commander Savis is looking forward to the chance to fight side by side with the rest of us in the battles to come."

"Your Eternity," Savis said as he took his seat, his voice carefully controlled despite the slight tremor he could still feel in the hand that Thane had grasped, stopping his attack as if his arm were caught in a vice even before the command of 'HALT' overwhelmed his mind. His golden eyes remained lowered, unable to meet those of the others at the table directly and there was no trace of his previous arrogance to be found in his slumped shoulders and tightly curled tail. When he finally did look up at Nyrielle, his golden eyes held a mixture of deeply wounded pride and grudging respect.

"I have defeated Eldritch Lords who were strong enough to rule over domains twice the size of the Vale of mists," he said quietly. "But none commanded the kind of... presence I felt from Lord General Thane," said as he straightened his shoulders slightly, sitting upright in his chair and attempting to recover some of his lost dignity.

"After seeing Sir Ignatious suffer under High Lord Hamdi's claws for so long, and facing Madame Zedya in combat, I believed that I understood the limits of your progenies' strength and ability. Clearly," he added with a touch of his former pride, "I was sorely mistaken."

For a moment, the defeated vampire paused, visibly struggling as he suppressed his desire to lash out at one of Nyrielle's other progeny in order to reclaim some of his lost standing and the bitter realization that the difference between him and the other vampires at the table might be even greater than he imagined.

"The others in your service," he finally asked, choosing his words with uncharacteristic care. "Do they all possess such... formidable gifts?" His gaze flickered briefly between Thane and Nyrielle, as though he was trying to reassess not just the opponent who had defeated him but the nature of the battlefield itself now that he had entered the heart of the Harbinger of Death's territory.

"As much as I would like to boast that all of my progeny can stand equal to Thane," Nyrielle said, looking at the handsome vampire with a complicated gaze. "Even I will admit that Thane received a greater gift from me than I have given anyone else. When he drank from my wrist the night he became a vampire, I allowed him to feed until I could feel the call of the abyss tearing at my soul," she said, looking into Thane's eyes as she briefly fell into a world that belonged to the two of them alone.

Both of them had changed a great deal in the years since their first meeting and looking back, perhaps she'd been wrong to do what she had done. It wasn't until decades later, when Ashlynn had appeared in her life, that she realized just how misguided she'd been, but at the time, she had risked her very existence in the hope that Thane could bring her something that she had only seen from the outside and never felt for herself...

Chapter 590: The Secret of Thane's Power (Part One)

In the wake of two bitter wars that saw the death of her parents and the fall of the Vale, followed by a ruthless reclamation of the territory she'd lost and her blood-soaked vengeance on Cellach Lothian, Nyrielle spent years searching for something that would soothe the jagged wounds in her heart.

While it was true that Nyrielle had recaptured the Vale of Mists, she lost several of her forty-seven progeny in the process and even more in the war that followed when Cellach Lothian's children came of age. Her heart was still filled with hatred, burning with the desire for revenge, but she was also haunted by a terrible, aching loneliness that had plagued her since her parents' death.

Pouring herself into the reconstruction of the Vale did nothing to fill the void that threatened to consume her. Too many of her people refused to return, and those who did were as frightened as mice gazing at the shadow of a cat on the wall. They demanded safety more than anything, and so Nyrielle built the strongest walls she could, sealing the entrance to the Vale from the Lothian threat without realizing that she was only isolating herself further from the villages that couldn't be part of the smaller, reconstructed Vale of Mists.

In the end, it had been a cook in the kitchens, a man named Yorig, one of Georg's ancestors, who suggested that she seek out humans who might be worthy of becoming her progeny.

"We all have each other, My Lady," he'd said at the time. "And your champions are all fierce warriors. But... none of them are more than that, and few of them think of the Vale as a place where their heart belongs. They belong here because you are here and they are bound to you, but... they don't care about us and they don't care about fighting our enemies."

"The soldiers all know that they may have to fight again," the chef continued as he set out a small dish of her favorite pickled vegetables and sweet beets. "But they don't have a champion among your progeny that inspires them the way you do. Maybe... maybe that's what we're lacking. And if none of our people in the Vale are worthy of being your progeny, then maybe our enemies have enemies among the humans."

"How did you become so wise, Yorig?" she asked between bites of the sweet and sour salad. "Where did you learn these things?"

"Everyone needs to eat, my lady," he replied. "Even you. And when people eat, they share their thoughts. I just happen to be good at listening."

"You've become wise from listening," Nyrielle said, giving the bearish chef a reevaluating look. "Are you sure you aren't worthy of becoming one of my progeny? Just for your council alone, you would be worthy, and I wouldn't mind being able to eat your cooking for many years to come."

"I'm honored, my lady," Yorig replied, bowing deeply. "But I have a wife and three little ones to raise. If I were your progeny, I'd have to..."

"Say no more," Nyrielle said, pausing before his words could pierce any deeper into her heart that still ached for the family she'd had with her parents and grandsire Torbin. "But I take your meaning. Take care of your own little ones," she said as gently as she could manage. "And when the time comes, if any of them wish it, I'll be happy to have them cook for me as well."

Yorig hadn't realized it at the time, but it was his mention of family more than anything that drove Nyrielle into the darkness and the rain of autumn outside the Vale. At first, she didn't quite know what she was looking for, but as she listened to rumors in rundown alehouses or in the refined restaurants of Lothian City, a picture began to emerge in her mind... one that reminded her of her dashing, handsome father and the affection he always showed to her kind, loving mother.

No longer was she simply searching for a powerful warrior to take as her progeny. While it was still important that she find someone who could share her mission to fight against the Lothians and their vassals who constantly threatened the Vale's safety, Nyrielle had begun to look for something much, much harder to find.

Her lucky break had come when she learned of a fallen knight, stripped of his lands and title after his sister murdered a baron for assaulting her. With little left to his name and few skills beyond fighting, he'd opened a small school in Lothian City to teach swordsmanship to men who fancied themselves demon-hunters and young lords who dreamed of fame as duelists.

"Would you teach a woman how to use a sword, Master Thane?" she'd said one cold winter's night when she approached him as he was locking up his school for the night. "I could pay," she added, opening her hand to reveal several gold sovereigns. "Private lessons, after nightfall," she added.

"I wouldn't advise it, your ladyship," the handsome young man said. "I've seen women dream of mastering the blade before. I've even seen them do it, but people who choose to live for the sword have a way of dying by it... She didn't meet a good end," he said, speaking around a lump in his throat. "My lady is far too beautiful to meet the same fate she did."

"I'm not as weak as you think I am, Master Thane," Nyrielle said, smiling for the first time in what felt like far too long. "Let me worry about the danger," she added, tossing him a pair of coins. "That should be enough to buy me an opportunity to be your student, shouldn't it?"

It was an underhanded move, and she was well aware of just how underhanded it was. Thane was struggling to make ends meet, even after selling his horse, his armor, and most of his possessions. An opportunity like the one she presented him could keep his school open through the winter and perhaps even longer.

In the end, practicality beat out his principles, and he agreed to let Nyrielle study the sword with him. A 'try out,' he called it, to see if she was truly suited to the sword. What he didn't realize at the time was that even as he was testing her, she was testing him to see if he was the man she'd been hunting for.

Slowly, over the course of the winter, Thane opened up about what had happened to his sister and his reasons for opening a school in Lothian City.

"So you're hoping that you'll have an opportunity to challenge the Marquis or one of his heirs to a duel in order to claim your vengeance," Nyrielle said after one of their lessons. Winter would be coming to an end soon, and she would need to return to the Vale of Mists, but she'd already determined that Thane was an ideal candidate to become the first of her human progeny.

She couldn't say that she loved him, but they shared many of the same pains and the same hatreds. Human relationships, especially those that were arranged between noble families, had been built on far less, and she was willing to take a chance on Thane.

"I know it sounds silly when you say it like that," Thane said in a voice that had lost none of its confidence. "But it's the only opportunity I've been able to make for myself so far. Maybe in a year or two I'll find another, but for now, I need to find a way into the inner circles of knights and lords around the Marquis, and this is the best I've been able to come up with."

"What if... what if I had a better way?" Nyrielle asked with a raised brow. "One that would all but guarantee that you would be able to see your enemies dead and buried. If it meant leaving behind everything you've built for yourself since your family's fall... would you dare to take it?"