

The Vampire 84

Chapter 84 84: Journey Begins

The final days until the new moon passed in what felt like the blink of an eye and before Ashlynn knew it, she was packing away her few possessions for the trip and preparing to leave the Vale of Mists behind for what could be several months.

"Is there anything else you wanted to bring, my Lady?" Heila asked, standing patiently nearby while Ashlynn surveyed the room that had only begun to feel like home. On the terrace, the flowers she'd brought up from the gardens had only just begun to bloom and she wouldn't be present to see them in all their glory. The simple table where she'd taken so many of her meals with Nyrielle would have to keep them company until she returned.

"I think I'm already bringing quite a bit," Ashlynn admitted. While it was true that she had far more luggage when she moved from Blackwell County to Lothian March ahead of her marriage to Owain, this time, her packing was considerably more diverse.

She only brought three of her fine dresses, along with one common skirt and blouse. For a young lady traveling, it should have been plenty, but it wasn't enough for her. Not anymore.

Now, next to the satin and velvet dresses she also packed breeches and a loose tunic along with what she'd come to think of as her fighting boots, sword belt and the heavy darksteel falchion that had begun to feel as familiar in her hand as a pen.

"Sir Thane said he would have your armor loaded into the carriage as well," Heila said when she noticed Ashlynn's eyes pausing on her sword belt. "Just in case."

"Just in case," Ashlynn repeated with a light chuckle. "I'm stalling," she said, picking up the sword belt and slipping the heavy weapon on over her dark chocolate-colored traveling dress. In the mirror, she thought her reflection looked like a strange blend between a noblewoman and a knight, with her tightly braided hair and a lack of elaborate jewelry.

"I wonder if Thane's sister would have approved," she said quietly. The more she learned from the former knight, the more she admired the sister he spoke of so often. To master a sword without any of the gifts Nyrielle bestowed on her must have taken incredible dedication.

"I'm sure she would have been delighted to have your company," Heila said, picking up the last of Ashlynn's luggage, a case containing her journal, writing supplies, and the book Nyrielle had written for her to study the basics of sorcery.

At this point, there was little in the book that Ashlynn didn't understand but she still returned to it as a reference whenever she found herself uncertain about how to proceed.

"I'll be back before the pass freezes," Ashlynn promised her room before resolutely turning away and following Heila down to the courtyard where the carriages were being prepared for the first leg of their journey.

While Nyrielle and her progeny could reach almost any place in the Vale of Mists in a single evening, a journey of this length required significantly more preparation and support from Nyrielle's household.

Captain Lennart led ten men as Nyrielle's personal honor guard for the trip. All of them were familiar faces who had accompanied him during Ashlynn's mission to the Summer Villa. Only Harrod stayed behind to continue training with Ollie as the former kitchen boy worked to become a capable warrior.

"I'm going to miss you," the young man said awkwardly when Ashlynn reached the small group of people who had come to say farewell. "I wish I could go with you."

"No you don't," Ashlynn said, stepping forward to give the awkward young man a hug. "Traveling for days by carriage is exhausting and dull, and you're not ready to defend yourself if you get in trouble. Next year," she promised, pulling back from the hug. "If Thane says that you're ready, then we can consider visiting Eldritch cities together next year."

"I'll whip him into shape," Thane promised, stepping in to collect a hug from Ashlynn. "You don't have to worry about him."

"Keep an eye on him," Ashlynn said, sinking into Thane's strong embrace and holding him for longer than her mother would have considered appropriate with a man she wasn't romantically involved with. Ashlynn, however, couldn't think of Thane as anything other than the older brother she never had.

He'd become an unshakable pillar of support for her in the Vale of Mists and she hated that he had to stay behind. In Nyrielle's absence, however, Thane became the highest authority in the vale. In the future, that responsibility would fall to Ashlynn so long as she wasn't also away, but for now, it was a familiar duty that Thane assumed without hesitation.

"Keep an eye on the captives too," Ashlynn said, pulling back from the embrace. "Daithi seems sincere in his desire to start a new life in the vale. If he seems trustable, I wouldn't mind Marcel bringing his family here as an example to inspire the others."

"You don't feel the same way about Eamon?" Thane said with an eyebrow raised. The twinkle in his amber eyes said he had his own opinion but he was testing Ashlynn to see if she shared it or disagreed.

"He's too eager," Ashlynn said with a shake of her head. "He reminds me of the merchants who came before my father with grand promises and never said they couldn't do something even when everyone knew it was impossible. I don't know why he's doing it but maybe you can figure it out before I get back."

"I'll hand him over to our own hunters," Thane promised, a proud smile forming on his lips. "He can work for his keep for a while and if he can't work beside the Horned Clan's hunters then he'll have no future here anyway."

"You would have done that whether I said anything or not, wouldn't you?" Ashlynn pouted. "Then I won't waste any more words on you," she said, turning to the last person in line. "Georg, you didn't have to bring a parting gift," she said, eyeing the oversized basket held gently in the bearish man's paws.

"Nonsense," the castle chef said, kneeling in front of Ashlynn to pull the cloth off the basket and reveal the layers of baked treats beneath it. "The left side is savory, spinach and cheese puffs, sausage rolls, and onion fritters," he said, pointing at each of the treats in turn.

"The right side are sweet treats, berry tarts, honey cakes, and on top are the cream puffs. You and Lady Nyrielle should enjoy those soon, the rest will keep for a day or two longer," he said as though the greatest tragedy he could imagine was for some of his confections to spoil before the two ladies of the castle could enjoy them.

"Georg," Ashlynn said, taking the basket and setting it aside to give him a fierce hug. Many people had worked hard to care for Ashlynn since she came to the Vale of Mists but Georg had made it his mission to help her transform it from a place she lived into a place she could call home.

Whether it was attempting to recreate recipes from her hometown or finding new delights that could only be found in the misty atmosphere of the vale, he'd done more than she would ever have asked for to make her feel not only cared for but like an active participant in making this place her new home.

"Come back soon," the bearish man said, gently patting her back with a giant paw while he blinked back the mist forming in his eyes. He'd served Lady Nyrielle for as long as he'd been old enough to work in the kitchens but only Ashlynn had come into his domain to work alongside him and learn firsthand just how much effort he spent to delight the people he cooked for.

Now, just when he had come to find joy in her presence in his kitchens, she was leaving again, only this time it would be for much longer than her trip to the summer villa. Silently, he promised to spend the next several months preparing new dishes for her. Perhaps he could find a way for Marcell to bring some pickled fish from Blackwell County all the way to the vale...

As Georg's mind turned to the future and the new dishes he would experiment on, Ashlynn gave a last wave to her newfound family before climbing the steps into the carriage where Nyrielle was waiting for her.

Just under two months ago, this carriage had brought Nyrielle into her life, swooping in like a dark raven and snatching her back from the edge of death. Now, it would carry her deeper into Eldritch territory than any human had ever gone where she hoped to find the guidance she needed to unlock the real power of her witchcraft.

"Done saying goodbye?" Nyrielle asked lightly as Ashlynn entered the carriage carrying Georg's basket of goodies.

"Thank you for giving me the time," Ashlynn said, taking her seat next to the vampire and falling into the other woman's cool embrace. "I didn't think it would become home so quickly or that it would be so hard to leave after just a few months."

"No matter how the Mother of Thorns treats you, you're not allowed to think that way about her abode when I come to bring you back home," Nyrielle teased, pinching Ashlynn's ribs and provoking a squeal in response.

"Home is where you are," Ashlynn insisted, snuggling closer to Nyrielle. "No matter how much I learn from the Mother of Thorns, she can only be my teacher. Only you can be my lover."

"Good that you know," Nyrielle said, smiling with a hint of fangs showing at the corners of her lips. "Now, we have several hours before we reach Orava," Nyrielle said, gently stroking Ashlynn's hair. "How would you like to pass the time?"