

The Vampire 156

Chapter 156 156: The Splendor of High Fen City

Nyrielle was unwilling to enter High Fen City during the day. While she had a greater measure of trust for the people who served High Lady Erna, the harassment that Ashlynn was subjected to wasn't something she would tolerate again.

A year from now, Nyrielle was confident that she could leave such matters in Ashlynn's hands with ease, but for now, her young Seneschal was still too new to dealing with the Eldritch and had yet to master her powers to an extent that would make people fearful of drawing her ire.

Because they waited for nightfall, Ashlynn's first look at High Fen City was when they topped a small rise that revealed a vast, glittering jewel in the dark of the night. For several minutes as the carriage rolled along the ancient road leading into the city, Ashlynn could only stare at the sight as her mind struggled to come to terms with the size of the sprawling city.

She had seen Blackwell City from ships in the harbor and she'd seen Lothian City from the highest tower of the imposing Lothian fortress. Both cities were old with tens of thousands of residents packed densely into the city walls. At night, the lamps that burned by people's front doors turned the city into a miniature starscape like a piece of the night sky fallen to the earth.

High Fen City, however, was much, much too large for Ashlynn to think of it the same way she thought of the cities she was familiar with. There were just too many lights! The sky above the city itself seemed to possess a faint glow, like the sun refused to completely set on the sprawling city.

"This can't all be the light of the city," Ashlynn said, looking to Nyrielle for confirmation. "Is there an Eldritch Clan that glows in the dark, like fireflies? Some of those lights are moving, I think, but... it's so bright!"

"High Fen City never sleeps, not really," Nyrielle said with a smile that revealed a hint of her fangs. "You've seen the Muckins and the Glass Eyed Clan, but the Clan of Painted Masks are almost completely nocturnal and there are many of them here."

"The scaled clan is also more active at night as well," the vampire added. "It's one of the reasons that I've been able to build a comfortable relationship with the High Lords and High Ladies that rule here. At a certain surface level, we actually have much in common."

"What's High Lady Erna like?" Ashlynn asked. Compared to her visit to the High Pass, Nyrielle had barely spoken of the lord that would be hosting them when they arrived in the city.

"Dangerous, venomous, ruthless," Nyrielle said lightly. "All things you would expect from someone who succeeded in seizing power here. I'm told that she spared three of her siblings when she ascended but I've been too busy with matters at home to pay much attention to the struggle of this generation."

"Spared? She spared three of her siblings?" Ashlynn said, her eyes wide as she tried to imagine the kind of tyrant who would slay their own siblings just to inherit a title. Thankfully, she and Jocelynn had never been very competitive for anything.

Jocelynn had her interests and Ashlynn followed other pursuits. There had never been a reason for the two to turn on each other the way she'd heard that some men did when multiple brothers contended for a throne.

"The Scaled Clan is different from what you are accustomed to," Nyrielle said as the carriage began to approach the entrance to the city. "They hatch in clutches of five to ten. It is a tradition of the ruling

family that only the strongest of each generation may become the next ruler of the High Fen. The competition between them is fierce and encompasses far more than their ability to fight in the arena. Some years, only one victor survives the competition."

"So, you're saying that Erna is kinder than previous rulers because she spared three of her siblings?" Ashlynn asked.

"No, I'm not saying she's kinder at all," Nyrielle said with a shake of her head. "She's just that much stronger than her weakest siblings. Even combined, they pose no threat to her so she has no reason to sink her fangs into them."

Further conversation was interrupted by their arrival in High Fen City. Now that they were closer, Ashlynn realized the first thing about the city that seemed strange to her. The city gate they arrived at had stood for centuries but it wasn't connected to a wider city wall at all. If not for the soggy ground, it looked like a person could simply walk around the gate and enter the city without encountering any barrier at all.

Once they rolled through the gate, however, Ashlynn began to realize why a wall would have been a strange structure in a city like this.

The ancient road took a winding course through town, winding its way among a network of roads and waterways that gave the city its unique layout. On the waterways, Ashlynn spotted several flat-bottomed boats being pushed along by men using long poles that reached all the way to the bottom of the canals. Each boat carried a lantern at each end, creating a constantly dancing tapestry of lights that wove through the city at night like fireflies above the water.

The streets themselves were wide, well maintained and completely free of the kinds of garbage she was accustomed to encountering along busy roads in Blackwell or Lothian City. Beyond that, much like the

castle town in the Vale of Mists, the streets were lined by large oil lamps set atop stone pillars or metal posts, spaced evenly along the road.

Several of the shops they rolled past had closed their shutters for the night, but Ashlynn was amazed to see brightly illuminated shops still open even at this late hour of the day. In fact, the number of people moving around the wide streets at night would have looked very normal for Blackwell city at mid-day almost any day of the year.

The air in the city carried a rich scent of woodsmoke mingled with the slightly peaty, boggy scent from the canals along with the aroma of baked goods and grilled meats wafting from a number of shops happily selling their wares to late-night shoppers.

Their carriage passed through a number of bustling plazas adorned with splashing fountains and happy people idling in the cool evening air. Some were drinking and boisterous, others were thoughtful, brooding over gameboards set outside cafes and smoking pipes that gave off an almost cloying, sweet scent.

"Just how many people live here?" Ashlynn breathed as she looked around the busy city. The buildings weren't as densely packed as they were in Lothian or Blackwell cities, and none of them were quite as tall but that didn't stop the place from looking every bit as busy as any city she'd ever seen.

"Erna is a High Lady," Ashlynn said a touch wistfully as she looked out the window. "When my grandsire Torbin was a High Lord, there were more than a hundred thousand people in Mist City and almost half a million across his domain. High Lady Erna's domain shouldn't be any smaller."

For a moment, Ashlynn couldn't say anything. This was easily twice the size of Lothian March, on par with any of the great Duchies of the Kingdom of Gaal. Even the Royal Capital was barely larger than this!

Fast on the recognition of how large of a place they'd come, however, came another realization as she processed what Nyrielle had said. The Vale of Mists had once been just as large.

She'd heard the story from Thane that the original city outside the ancient fortress had been burned to the ground, but only now did she have a sense of scale for what kind of loss that had truly been. Looking out the window at the seemingly carefree people out for a stroll in the cool evening air, Ashlynn tried to imagine what it would be like if humans arrived here with one of their crusades.

Buildings burning, people fleeing and Templars eagerly cutting down anyone who tried to flee whether that person posed any kind of a threat or not. Looking at Nyrielle's complicated expression as the vampire gazed out of the window, Ashlynn reached out gently to wrap her arms around her lover.

No wonder she'd taken such desperate actions to avenge her people. To set fire to a place like this... Ever since Owain attacked her, Ashlynn had come to see the Lothians as brutal and relentless in the pursuit of their goals. She would even call them cruel.

But to burn a city this size to the ground... after doing such a thing, could they even still call themselves human?

"The Vale will be like this again," Ashlynn promised softly, tightening her embrace around Nyrielle. She had no idea how long it would take but seeing what her lover had lost only further strengthened the resolve in Ashlynn's heart. There was no place for the Lothians and their cruelty in this world.

As long as they pointed their swords at the Vale of Mists, there could be no true reconstruction and without that, how was her lover supposed to heal? Restoring the glory of the Vale of Mists would take years, maybe even decades, but as she was constantly being reminded with her travels through Eldritch lands. She had the time, it was only a question of whether or not she had the strength.

