

The Vampire 261

Chapter 261: No Help for the Vale

"You have more than sixty progeny," Nyrielle said, cutting directly to the point. As much affection as she had for her Uncle, he and his progeny had been living far too comfortably for far too long. Now that she'd shaken him free of his ennui, it was time to put his Mongrel Horde to better use than guarding an uncontested border.

"That's far too many for you to care for," Nyrielle continued. "In a few months, I will return to the Vale of Mists to prepare for war. When I do, send twenty of your progeny with me. I think that even Bardas would agree at this point that the humans must be culled before they get out of hand. The Vale stands as one of the shields against human attempts to cross the mountains and flood the western lands beyond. Help me stop them."

"It's up to you who you send," Nyrielle added, sipping her rich red wine and letting the almost nutty flavor roll across her tongue while she watched a sense of increasing discomfort appear on her Uncle's face. He'd lost the habit of hiding what he felt and the return of so many subtle emotions left him unable to keep her from reading him like a book as he faced her.

"I understand that you don't wish for any of your progeny to die," Nyrielle said, her midnight eyes meeting his over the rim of her wine glass. "Send your strongest who have the greatest chance of surviving or send your weakest who place the greatest burden on your house, the choice is up to you. But you said it yourself, given the chance, your Mongrels would teach them fear. I'm giving you that chance."

"Your Eternity," he said, looking deeply uncomfortable. "Nyrielle, I... It's not that I do not wish to support you. If you wanted to pull down the Frost Walkers in the High Pass or any other Eldritch Lord, I would send my progeny, even if some might, might not return," he said, stumbling at the end as he forced himself to admit the truth of what sending many of his less capable progeny would mean for their fates.

"But commands have been spread far and wide from years ago," Tausau said, his head drooping with shame as he could no longer meet Nyrielle's gaze. "No vampire is to aid you in defending the Vale of Mists against the humans. We may protect you personally and give you aid," he added quickly. "Only, only we are forbidden from fighting in your war."

"Do you know why?" Nyrielle asked sharply. Darkness swirled around her hands and it took considerable effort to restrain herself from destroying the chair she sat in. The feeling of tearing had faded from her chest and a new warmth began to build there which helped her to calm herself but the idea that she would be denied the support of other vampires in her war against the Lothians... "Who issued the order?"

"I don't know," the older vampire said, barely managing to keep from cowering in front of the cold, dark fury that enveloped Nyrielle. "But the number of people who could give such an order..."

Shadows around the room danced, flowing across the floor to meld with Nyrielle as her fury grew. Her fingers flexed and along her back two faint red lines appeared as though she was moments away from unfurling her dark wings.

For more than a century she had stood guard at the far end of the High Pass, preventing human expansion into Eldritch lands. The only time she'd turned to other nations for help, she'd taken her defeated foes as progeny in order to retake the Vale of Mists. Ever since then, she'd worked only with the Eldritch Lords on her side of the mountains, leaving the western lands to enjoy generations of relative peace.

And now, now that she finally turned to her own kind for help, to a member of her own extended family no less, she found an order barring her way. Worse, she thought as her aura leached the warmth from the room, the order only prevented her kin from supporting her territory.

It was as though someone was attempting to strip her of the Vale of Mists, denying her position as an Eldritch Lady... and for what? What reason could someone have to act in such a deliberately cutting way?

"It seems like I'll have to take it up with your sire," Nyrielle said. The realization that someone was trying to separate her from her nation hit her like a bucket of ice water, helping her regain her composure to focus on the issue at hand.

Slowly, she pulled her dark aura back enough that Tausau stopped cowering as if Nyrielle was about to strike him. At times, it was useful for her uncle to be a bit fearful and compliant but she had no intention to bully the man, especially when he was one of the weakest among his peers. Someone else had already bullied him into refusing her demand for assistance. Bullying him further would do no good.

What he didn't know, he couldn't tell and what he had been commanded to keep silent she would need to destroy him to learn. As cruel as she had become over the years, even she had lines she was reluctant to cross and this was one of them. Besides, even if Tausau gave her a name, it would change nothing about the orders he'd been given.

"Prepare you men anyway," Nyrielle said as she stood to leave the sitting room. The intrusive feeling in her bond with Ashlynn had faded, replaced with something that felt more like Ashlynn herself was struggling and in pain.

That pain radiated from Ashlynn's heart and into her bond with Nyrielle, as if she were reaching out to her. As important as these matters were, anything that concerned Ashlynn was almost automatically more important.

"I'll speak with your sire about these orders when I visit him," Nyrielle said. "I expect to bring him with me when I return. It's been too long since he visited Torbin's tomb and paid his respects. At that point, he may order you to join us as well. See that you and your men are both ready to travel."

"Of course, your Eternity," the older vampire said, bowing helplessly at her command. He didn't believe she would succeed in either of her goals, but what else could he do? There was nothing wrong with preparing even if they were preparing for something that would never come to pass. Better to prepare even though it was useless than to face her wrath for defying such an easy command.

"We have other matters to discuss tomorrow night," Nyrielle reminded him in a tone that felt distracted to the point of being absent minded. "For now, something important has come up. We will speak again tomorrow," she said, sweeping from the room in a swirl of darkness that left the older vampire no chance to respond. He hadn't even had the chance to offer to escort her to the rooms he'd had prepared for her stay!

"I knew you had changed from our darling little Nyrielle," he said, several minutes after she left. Pouring himself a fresh glass of wine, Tausau stared at the door she left through, replaying their conversation several times in his mind as he tried to process details he'd missed while he sat in her overwhelming presence.

"But this change," he muttered as he thought about her abrupt departure. "What has come over you my darling niece? What is so important that you would skip feeding and rush away after giving your orders? And how did you notice it while I noticed nothing?"

There were no answers to the questions he asked but as he sat in his study contemplating their conversation, he hoped that she would at least inform him if it was something that threatened his small domain and the progeny he'd worked so hard to rescue.

For several minutes, he considered whether he should pass orders to his progeny to prepare themselves for trouble. The Mongrel Horde might not be strong individually, but they accomplished much with superior numbers. If he put them on alert...

But then, he thought, if it was something that threatened even the Harbinger of Death... then perhaps there was no reason for him to know because at that point, there was nothing he could do.

Chapter 262: Bonds

It had been decades since Nyrielle's last visit to Tausau's ramshackle fortress but the underground levels had changed very little since the last time she visited. The tapestries hanging on the walls had changed and the number of oil lamps had increased but Nyrielle noticed none of these things in her haste to reach the underground chamber that had been prepared to receive her and Zedya.

"Mistress," the unremarkable-looking vampire said as she dropped into a curtsey when Nyrielle swept into the room. "You didn't spend much time with our host... did it fail?"

"The sorcery didn't fail," Nyrielle said bluntly. Her midnight eyes swept the room, ignoring the opulent suede-covered chairs and elaborately carved furnishings until she spotted the lacquered screens that gave an additional element of privacy to the place where her coffin-like daybed had been placed.

"Something is happening to Ashlynn," Nyrielle said, placing a hand on her chest. The echo of Ashlynn's heartbeat within her chest was calmer than it had been, with a strong, steady beat that contained fierce determination. The tendrils of foreign energy probing and pulling at their bond had ceased their efforts to separate the two women but they still clung stubbornly to the mystical tie that bound Ashlynn's life to hers.

"Do we need to return to the Briar, Mistress?" Zedya asked, pausing in her preparations. To Zedya, who had served in the manor of a baron before taking her place at Nyrielle's side, Tausau's manor felt like a poor imitation of opulence. She understood that the aging vampire wanted to give his ragtag progeny a life that felt luxurious after a lifetime of persecution, but the effect was more gaudy than extravagant.

The only thing she felt was worthy of her Mistress' stature in the rooms they'd been provided was the collection of fine wines. She was preparing to pour a glass of a local vintage with a strong, oaky flavor that she felt would remind Nyrielle of the scent of growing things that often accompanied Lady Ashlynn until Nyrielle's words left her wondering if they should depart immediately to rescue their Seneschal.

"I wouldn't think that the Mother of Thorns would do anything to harm Ashlynn, but perhaps her teaching methods are a bit... extreme," Zedya said, recalling her own days under the powerful witch's tutelage.

While Amahle could present a gentle and motherly guise to the world, only a fool would forget her title as the Mother of Thorns. When the time came, anyone unfortunate enough to be on the receiving end of her protective thorns would discover just how sharp the woman wielding them could be.

"This doesn't feel like something the Mother of Thorns is doing directly," Nyrielle said. Working quickly, she released the locks on her darksteel lined daybed before turning back to Zedya.

"There are still a few hours before dawn," Nyrielle said, her words crisp and quick as she delivered instructions. "Mingle with Uncle's progeny. There are more than sixty of them. Tomorrow night, I'll want your impressions of them."

"Someone has given Tausau orders to withhold assistance from the Vale of Mists," she added bluntly. "You don't need to learn who, but expect that things may be more delicate than we thought they'd be when we left the Vale. I'm not to be disturbed unless I fail to emerge for more than three days."

"Yes, Mistress," Zedya said, dropping into another curtsy and holding it until her Mistress had retreated to the safety of her daybed. In the past two decades, there had been very few things that could bring out her Mistress's impatience and worry, but now that Lady Ashlynn had entered the picture, things were changing rapidly.

After several weeks of experiments with Nyrielle, Zedya found herself changing as well. She'd claimed her vengeance against the nobles who wronged her long ago and for years, the only emotions she'd protected against the millstone of time were her dedication and reverence for Nyrielle. So long as she could serve well, she was content.

Now that Nyrielle had begun to help her rekindle her heart, those emotions had become more nuanced and complex. There wasn't just a deep satisfaction in performing her own duties well or pride in the knowledge that her Mistress had come to rely on her. Seeing her Mistress's happiness had begun to manifest as a happiness of her own.

At the same time, seeing her Mistress pained with anxiety for Lady Ashlynn, at a time like this, left Zedya feeling something else that was distinctly unpleasant. Helplessness. There was nothing she could do to aid Nyrielle in this, so before she left the underground room to carry out the orders she'd been given she gave Nyrielle's coffin-like daybed a very long look.

"Good luck, Mistress. Lady Ashlynn," she said, offering a final, unwitnessed curtsy before she left the underground room.

Within her daybed, Nyrielle closed her midnight eyes and allowed herself to sink fully into the darkness. Without distractions, she could focus entirely on the flow of energy between herself and Ashlynn.

Distance made it more difficult to notice subtle differentiations flowing across the bond of blood. Part of why Nyrielle felt such great distress over the sensations emanating from the echo of Ashlynn's heartbeat within her chest is because they were distinct, uncomfortable, and even painful. If she could feel these changes when she was more than a hundred leagues away, how fierce would it have felt to stand next to Ashlynn during this assault?

But in the darkness, when she focused on Ashlynn's presence she felt not only the echo of her lover's heartbeat, she could hear the rustling of wind in the leaves of trees, smell the rich and sharp scent of pitch and sap... All of the subtle things that defined Ashlynn's energy in her mind were still there, pure and strong despite the distance.

Her brows furrowed as she focused more closely on the energy she felt from Ashlynn. Her lover's presence was so strong in her heart that it was difficult to notice the tendrils of something similar, something that almost blended with Ashlynn's energy of the forest.

"An Ancient Oak?" Nyrielle muttered, finding the presence to be similar to the Ancient Oaks in the Vale of Mists. And yet, there were differences as well. The energy of an Ancient Oak was strong, unyielding, and withstood the test of time through might alone. This felt much softer, and every time she thought she'd gotten her hands around the entangling roots of this energy, it gave ground, yielding to her approach only to return when she turned her attention to another tendril.

"Frustrating," she said, her hands flexing like talons at her side. She wished to rip and tear at this thing that tried to come between her and Ashlynn, that dared to attempt to pull them apart, but several of its roots had already sunk deep into Ashlynn's heart. If she tore at it violently, she might destroy it, but she would harm her lover in the process.

Hours slipped by and Nyrielle found herself no closer to a solution. The more energy she expended on forceful attempts, the more entangled she became. Worse, the approach of dawn seemed to grant this interloper even more strength while Nyrielle felt herself flagging and faltering as light spilled across the sky.

"Endure my darling," Nyrielle breathed as she felt the first rays of light fall upon the earth above her. Without the shrouding mists of the vale, persisting after the sun rose above the horizon, even when she was beneath the earth, was incredibly difficult and she'd exhausted much of her strength in the struggle.

"I will return to you..." she started to say, only to be pulled forcefully from the waking world into the distant memories that took the place of dreams.

This time, however, the place where Nyrielle found herself was nowhere she remembered. The city around her was crowded with throngs of people, and thousands of candles had been lit in lanterns all over the city. The sounds of waves crashing could be heard in the distance and the smell of salt filled the air.

"Nyrielle," Ashlynn's voice called from behind her. "I thought the visions and tests were over," she said, looking around at the familiar city in confusion before looking at the woman who shouldn't, couldn't possibly be here.

For Ashlynn, her trial at the hands of Cecile and the Ancient Willow had only just ended. They were supposed to be releasing her so that she could return to Amahle and bring the completed seed of witchcraft to Heila. Why then had she entered another vision?

The vision of Nyrielle before her was unlike any she had seen before. Rather than her usual dark and lacy garb, the vampire had dressed in a pale seafoam blue dress adorned with strands of pearls and a seashell bracelet that looked like something Ashlynn had once given Jocelynn.

All around them, the lights of a festival glowed, reminding Ashlynn of one of the rare occasions that she and Jocelynn had been free to enjoy an evening of revels among the common folk while the city celebrated the Holy Festival of Light. It was as if they had returned to one of Ashlynn's most precious memories of her home in the years before she left for Lothian March, but Nyrielle had taken Jocelynn's place at her side.

After days of enduring the visions and trials of the Ancient Willow, Ashlynn only wanted to return to her small hut to rest, but now she was presented with yet another vision of Nyrielle. Only this one looked far more real than any facsimile conjured by the Ancient Willow... and she looked deeply concerned as her midnight eyes gazed at Ashlynn.

Chapter 263: Shared Dreams

"My darling," Nyrielle said, momentarily stunned by the sight of Ashlynn before her. When Ashlynn arrived in the Vale of Mists, she had nothing, and everything she now owned had been given to her by Nyrielle since her arrival, including her jewelry.

But the Ashlynn before her now wore refined strings of pearls around her neck and delicate pearl studs adorned her ears. The dress she wore, rather than the earthy greens and browns, was a deep ocean blue that hugged her narrow waist before offering up a stunning view of her bosom with a neckline cut low enough to be considered scandalous in places like Lothian March.

"You look beautiful," Nyrielle said, reaching out to trace a finger along her lover's cheek, marveling at the intricate curls Ashlynn's hair had been styled in, adorned with strings of pearls dangling from elaborate hair pins. The entire ensemble gave her the appearance of a goddess of the sea, stepping onto land among the press and crowds of lesser beings.

"How does it feel like you're really you," Ashlynn whispered, closing her eyes and feeling the echoing pulse of Nyrielle's heartbeat in the other woman's touch. Memories flashed through her minds of a burned and scarred Nyrielle on the edge of death but as real as it had felt when the Nyrielle in her vision took every last drop of blood from her body, it hadn't felt as... present as the woman in front of her.

"Every other vision has been a hollow imitation," Ashlynn said softly, still struggling to believe that Nyrielle was truly before her. "But this... This all feels real."

"Because it really is me, my darling Ashlynn," Nyrielle said, wrapping her arms around the younger woman's slender waist and pulling her close. "Once before, you touched a dream, a memory of mine. You entered a place you could never have appeared in a time long ago and..."

"And we danced the night away," Ashlynn whispered, her brows furrowing as she tried to recall more details about the strange dream. She had only the vaguest memories of a dream of dancing with Nyrielle at an extravagant Eldritch ball.

At the time, she had been desperate to find a way to survive after a fallen Tuscan dragged her beneath the ice of a frozen lake. She'd used sorcery to place herself in a state of false death where her heart barely beat and her lungs could sustain her for several minutes off a single breath of air. In that state, she'd fallen into a dream unlike any she'd ever experienced before.

She remembered that the dream felt far too vivid and real to be an ordinary dream, but the chaotic and terrifying events she woke to afterward left her mind scattered and her memories of the dream hazy at best. By the time Nyrielle had arrived to rescue her, Heila and the Frost Walker Hauke from the abomination of melded ancestral blood golems, Ashlynn had almost completely forgotten the strange dream she experienced while trapped under the ice.

Nyrielle, however, seemed to remember the event in far more detail. The banquet Ashlynn appeared at had occurred over two centuries ago, long before the death of Nyrielle's parents. For Nyrielle, it should have been a joyous moment of reliving a memory of days before her parents fell to Lothian savagery, but it had instead transformed into something even more precious - a dream where she danced with Ashlynn while her parents and grandsire watched with approving eyes.

"It seems that our dreams have touched each other yet again," Nyrielle said, blinking back tears as she recalled their last shared dream and looking away from Ashlynn for a moment to look around the seaside city.

"Only this time, the memory we're sharing isn't one of mine, but one of yours."

For what felt like several minutes, Ashlynn stood trembling in Nyrielle's arms, leaning against the vampire and clinging to her as if to reassure herself that this Nyrielle, the one who stood calmly looking around the vision of Blackwell City, wasn't just a manifestation of the Ancient Willow in yet another strange and twisted test.

"How are you here?" Ashlynn whispered, pressing her ear against Nyrielle's chest and listening to the heartbeat that matched so precisely with the echo of a heartbeat within her own chest. "Why is this happening?"

"I don't know for certain," Nyrielle said, returning her attention to Ashlynn and gently stroking her lover's pale golden curls. From the way Ashlynn shook in her embrace, it was clear that whatever had attacked their bond had been an arduous trail, but what she had faced to feel like this, she had no idea.

"Something was attacking our bond," Nyrielle whispered gently. "I felt it probing at us, then pulling you away from me like it wished to tear us apart. I fought back against it but the energy never retreated," she said with a hint of bitter frustration. Fighting the invasive energy felt like pushing sand uphill. It yielded and moved under her touch only to flow back as soon as her attention turned elsewhere.

"The Ancient Willow," Ashlynn said, her tone growing sharp as she pulled back to meet Nyrielle's gaze. "The witches seem to want to rescue me from you. The Ancient Willow even offered to strip away our pact, 'freeing me' from our bond."

"You know I disapprove of burning down such powerful wonders of nature," Nyrielle said, her tone growing even darker than Ashlynn's. "Do I need to make an exception for this Ancient Willow? If it is bent on its own destruction, it has only itself to blame."

"I don't think so," Ashlynn said, closing her eyes and reaching out with her own senses to feel the energy of the Ancient Willow. Cecile, the spirit of the previous Willow Witch, had said they would no longer stand in her way when it came to her relationship with Nyrielle. Now, however, when she reached out to the ancient tree, she felt something completely unexpected.

"I think, I think I understand now," she said as she gingerly explored the energy that felt like roots wrapping around her bond with Nyrielle. "I think that this is the Ancient Willow's apology. It's helping me to reach you, giving me the energy to connect so deeply. It really is a healer's tree," she said with an ironic smile tugging at the corners of her lips.

"Is that the case?" Nyrielle said, raising an eyebrow in doubt. "If it is, then I suppose I can withhold any punishment for this Ancient Willow. But Darling," she said, placing a finger under Ashlynn's chin and lifting the other woman's gaze to meet hers. "The distress I felt from you, what happened?"

"I can explain but, I'd rather not do it in the middle of the street," Ashlynn said, gesturing to the crowds of people milling about. It was hard to make out the features of passersby and no one seemed to pay any attention to the two noblewomen standing in the middle of the road but it still felt strange to be out in the open with Nyrielle like this, especially in her home city.

"This feels like some of the visions the Ancient Willow immersed me in," Ashlynn said. "Some of them were memories where I could only watch things as they replayed but others were more open. I think I should be able to take you somewhere quiet where we can speak. I'll explain everything," she promised.

"For a chance to see my darling Ashlynn's home," Nyrielle said, holding out an arm as though she were a gentleman escorting a lady. "I'll go wherever you like."

Chapter 264: An Impossible Evening Begins

It didn't take long for the two women to leave the brightly lit core of Blackwell City. Ashlynn may have only left the Blackwell Manor infrequently but she still lived in this city for more than twenty years before she left to marry Owain Lothian. In order to escape the crowds that packed the brightly lit festival, she led Nyrielle to a quiet stretch of docks used mostly by local fishermen.

The air smelled of the briny water of the harbor, the mingled tar and wooden scents of the small ships, and an underlying fishy odor that clung to everything long after the day's catch had been delivered to the fishmongers of the city.

In the relative quiet of the empty docks, they could hear the gentle lap of waves against weathered hulls and the creak of mooring ropes as the fishing boats shifted with the incoming tide. The distant sounds of the festival, music, and laughter carried on the sea breeze across the open water, seemed to belong to another world entirely.

On the far side of the harbor, the tall ships that sailed across the sea were far grander and were certain to have a small crew of unfortunate souls who stayed aboard even during the festival, but here, with nothing but local fishing ships, the docks were deserted, giving the two women a quiet space in the darkness completely to themselves.

"So this is what it looks like when the stars touch the sea," Nyrielle said, gazing off into the darkness of the ocean. The glittering sight of so many stars was unlike anything she had seen from the Vale of Mists, though the view of the night sky from the High Pass came close. "It's beautiful," she whispered as she sat next to Ashlynn at the end of the dock, pressing up against her lover and holding her close.

"I didn't realize how much I would miss it," Ashlynn said softly. "But the more I attune myself with the trees, the less this feels like 'home.' I think I miss the Vale of Mists almost as much as I miss Blackwell County."

"Almost?" Nyrielle teased.

"Almost," Ashlynn said, giving Nyrielle a playful poke. "You're not there right now. Even if I rushed home right this instant, I would still be missing you. But if I rushed back to Blackwell County..."

"You still have family and loved ones here," Nyrielle said, nodding in understanding. Inwardly, her heart warmed at the way Ashlynn mentioned 'returning home' to refer to the Vale of Mists. It was something small but also profound. As much as she could feel Ashlynn's desire to visit Blackwell County and her loved ones here, that was all she yearned for. A visit.

"I'll keep my promise to you," she said, giving Ashlynn a reassuring squeeze. "I'll bring you here to visit in the winter when the nights are long."

"Thank you," Ashlynn said, looking over the twinkling lights of Blackwell City. "You wanted to know what happened to me," Ashlynn said, changing the topic before things could grow too heavy between them. The time to return to Blackwell City and to confront Owain Lothian and his family would come, but that time wasn't now.

"It started with the process to bring Heila into my coven and creating a seed of witchcraft for her..." Ashlynn began. She kept her explanation brief, sticking mostly to facts but Nyrielle paid just as much attention to the subtle expression on her face and the faint tremble in her voice as she did to the words themselves.

By the time Ashlynn had finished recounting her arrival in the Briar and the trials she faced from the Ancient Willow, Nyrielle had a very good idea of just how hard the trials had been on Ashlynn.

"So you've decided that Heila will become the Willow Witch," Nyrielle said with an approving smile after listening to Ashlynn's explanation. "I think it suits her. And I'm glad you've been able to learn so much, so quickly after arriving in the Briar."

"I am too," Ashlynn said, standing on the end of the doc and extending a hand for Nyrielle to join her. "But I'm also glad that the Ancient Willow has given us a chance for me to share a piece of my past with you. For as long as this connection lasts, will you let me show you around?"

"Of course, my darling," Nyrielle said, rising elegantly to take Ashlynn's hand. "This is one of your memories. When was this?"

"Two years ago," Ashlynn said. "It was during the Holy Festival of Light. I went out with Jocey to mingle with the common folk of the city and escape the more formal rituals held by the church. Father didn't want me to spend the whole night out but it was just after we received Owain's proposal and I pleaded that I would only have a few more chances to see it before I moved to Lothian March..."

"I see," Nyrielle said, picking at the seafoam-colored dress she wore in this vision. "So I've taken the place of your younger sister in this memory."

"Yes, but," Ashlynn said awkwardly. "The color really doesn't suit you and the dress makes you look almost as young as she was at the time," she added with a giggle. "I can't imagine being older than you by even a day."

"Then change it," Nyrielle said with a smile. "It's your memory."

"Can I do that?" Ashlynn asked, her brows creasing slightly as she thought about it. If she had to think of Nyrielle and her memories of all the things she'd seen Nyrielle wear... A moment later, Nyrielle's dress shimmered, the seafoam blue growing darker as though a drop of pitch-black ink had spilled onto the dress only to spread across the entire surface of the garment. Within a few heartbeats, Nyrielle was dressed once again in the elegant silks and dark lace that she had worn on the night that she and Ashlynn first met.

"I'm surprised you remember this dress so well," Nyrielle teased. "You weren't at your best that night."

"No, but," Ashlynn paused for a moment, biting her lower lip before she said something that felt deeply personal and a little embarrassing. "It was the most important night of my life," she said. "Sometimes, I feel like that night, I became your bride as well as your Seneschal."

"Would you like a real wedding?" Nyrielle asked, gently stroking Ashlynn's pale blonde curls. "One that your family can come to witness?" Among the Eldritch, every clan had their own traditions for formal unions, whether they were unions of love or politics.

Some were as private and simple as the ceremony she'd held with Ashlynn beneath the Ancient Oak, but others were much more intricate, sometimes turning into festivals in their own right as entire kingdoms celebrated the union of two noteworthy individuals. If Ashlynn desired a ceremony, whether it was attended by a dozen or a thousand people, Nyrielle was prepared to give it to her. So long as it made her lover happy, there was little she wouldn't do.

"I would," Ashlynn whispered, stepping close to Nyrielle and wrapping her arms around the other woman's lithe figure. "But right now, it feels impossibly far away. And, I don't know if they will still accept me as their daughter once they find out that I really am a witch."

"They loved you enough that they never turned you over to the church, despite the mark you bear," Nyrielle said, pulling Ashlynn in close and stroking her lower back to soothe her. "I'm sure that you and your happiness matters a great deal to them. They may not understand at first, but given time, the day will come. And you and I, we have all the time we need."

"I know," Ashlynn said, pulling back from Nyrielle and trying to put her other thoughts out of her mind. "But that's for the future. For now, let me show you the festival," she said, pulling Nyrielle in the direction of the well-lit heart of the city.

Her mind, however, couldn't help but wonder how much her family truly loved her. Despite the risks, her father had pressed ahead with her marriage to Owain Lothian and that had proved disastrous. More than that, someone betrayed her to Owain and she still didn't know who or why. Until she could find the truth... It was impossible to put her faith in them without answers to her questions.

Once she knew, then and only then would she decide if it was important to have a ceremony to celebrate her union with Nyrielle in front of witnesses. After all, with a bond so close that they could share a dream like this together, did they really need a wedding to prove things to each other?

Chapter 265: A Phantom Festival

The festival in Ashlynn's memory was filled with the bustle of people, the sounds of laughter and music and the smells of dozens of dishes overlapping with the salty air of the fresh sea breeze.

The Holy Festival of Light was the largest festival of the year in Blackwell County. In places like Lothian March, the Lord's Harvest in the fall was even bigger and Ashlynn had heard that in the northern territories, Mid Winter's Night held the crown for the largest public celebration, but in Blackwell, the Holy Festival of Light had always been the busiest and most enthusiastically welcomed festival of the year.

People spent an entire week before the start of the festival setting up stalls and booths that lined the streets of the city center. Some families spent an entire year preparing their wares. Children combed the beaches each morning for perfect shells or rare sea glass while their parents transformed these treasures into delicate wind chimes that sang in the breeze or intricate jewelry that captured the ocean's beauty.

The simplest crafts were often just strings of shells that children had cleaned and polished themselves. While they weren't highly prized by locals, sailors from across the sea would still pay as much as a whole copper penny for a single string of shells that were free of chips or blemishes.

Meanwhile, families with older children or adults who were particularly skilled worked with delicate tools to turn the treasures of the sea into beautiful hair combs with intricate patterns of shell pieces or set sea glass into walking sticks carved from driftwood that were admired by everyone from young merchants to aging pensioners. These handcrafted pieces would either be sold at family stalls during the festival or given away as prizes by those with the business acumen and wealth to host games for the common folk.

Most importantly, the spring squalls had ended and the autumn gales had yet to blow in, making this the best time of year for visitors from across the sea. The busy port was filled with foreign traders, eager to snap up a piece of the 'new world' to bring home to the old countries and flaunt their status before their less traveled peers. Even a common deckhand with a few copper pennies in his pocket could find hours of entertainment and chances to bring home souvenirs worth their weight in silver across the sea.

"What kind of games are played at Eldritch festivals?" Ashlynn asked, as she guided Nyrielle to a street filled with small stalls and barkers trying to lure people to one particular game or another.

"You've heard about the arena in High Fen City," Nyrielle said, gazing more at the joyful expression on Ashlynn's face than the sights of the festival around her. "The Eldritch prefer physical competitions. If it isn't gladiatorial combat, it might be wrestling matches, archery contests, or any number of other things."

"In the Southern Steppes," Nyrielle continued. "They play a game where brightly colored rings are hung on strings from poles and people from the Swift Hoof Clan race around a track with spears to catch as many rings as they can. People from other clans may ride horses to compete alongside them. The Eldritch value strength and most games they play have some martial application."

"Well, these games aren't nearly so aggressive," Ashlynn laughed, trying to imagine humans getting excited about the kinds of games that Nyrielle described. It wasn't hard to imagine many people lining up to spectate at these sorts of contests but far too few people would be able to enjoy them.

"Here, let's try this one," Ashlynn said, approaching a narrow and long stall where a man was juggling loops made of soft, pliable leather cord.

"Beautiful ladyships," the man greeted, smoothly stopping his juggling to offer a bow to the approaching women. "Come to capture a few special adornments? Such a delicate and dainty wrist deserves a spindle seashell charm," he said, holding up a simple leather bracelet with a polished spindle shaped seashell dangling from it. "The more you snare, the more charms you win. Three tosses for a penny," he said, holding out a trio of leather loops toward Ashlynn.

"Here," Ashlynn said, pressing four pennies into the man's calloused hands. "Six for me, and six for my love," she said, turning to Nyrielle. "The goal is to throw your loop and have it catch on one of the pegs on the board at the far end," she said, pointing at a wooden board covered with different colored pegs about ten paces away from where they stood.

"You want me to win charms for you?" Nyrielle said, raising a questioning brow at Ashlynn.

"No," Ashlynn said, stretching up on her tiptoes to whisper into Nyrielle's ear. "I want to see if you can beat me at the game. You might be a vampire, but I've played these since I was a child. Do you think you can win?"

Mischief glittered in Ashlynn's eyes as she stepped up to the throwing line, spinning her loop of leather through the air with a practiced toss and catching it on a bright red painted peg that was nearly as large around as the loop itself.

"That's three points for me, my love," Ashlynn said. "Can you match me?"

"I see," Nyrielle said, her eyes flashing as she accepted her lover's challenge. If she just tossed the loop through the air, the floppy leather might not be 'open' enough to fit around the wider pegs. "Who came up with this sort of game?"

"Sailors," Ashlynn said, giggling as Nyrielle's throw failed to catch the large peg she'd thrown at. The loop had sailed through the air toward a red peg with unerring precision that Ashlynn had expected of her vampire lover, but when the loop struck the board, it failed to hook around the peg and instead flopped uselessly to the sandy cobblestones below.

"Show me how you did that again," Nyrielle said, sharpening her focus on Ashlynn's next throw after giving the limp loop of leather on the ground a look dark enough that if it had been a small animal, Ashlynn was certain it would scurry away in fear.

"If you watch when they're working with ropes," Ashlynn said, effortlessly tossing another loop spinning through the air with a practiced twist of her wrist, this time catching a thinner blue post. "They can make a rope dance around mooring posts or all manner of other things when they need to secure things quickly on a ship."

"So there are still practical skills here," Nyrielle said, imitating Ashlynn's movement and managing to loop one of the thinner blue posts. "Just not for battle."

"I guess so," Ashlynn said. "To me, it was just a bit of fun. I used to dream that if I could learn skills with ropes or things like this, I could sail somewhere far enough away that no one would care about my mark and I could just be normal..."

"Darling," Nyrielle paused in her throwing, using the leather loop instead as a snare to capture Ashlynn's wrist and pulling the other woman close to her. "You deserve to be somewhere better than a place that just doesn't care about what you are. You should be celebrated for the woman you are instead of hiding your brilliance away."

"I, I don't know about that," Ashlynn said, her face heating as she struggled to meet Nyrielle's intense gaze. "But, since my mark brought me to you, then it was worth the hardship to get here."

"Your hardship has been too much," Nyrielle said. Her arms wrapped around Ashlynn, pulling the other woman into a tight embrace, but her gaze looked over Ashlynn's head at the distant Blackwell Manor. How much of a prison must it have been for her love to dream of sailing away from this place, just to be an ordinary person? The thought of it was just too cruel.

"And I haven't begun to shower you with enough affection to make up for all the years you suffered before you reached me," the vampire added. "But I promise, I will."

"You'd better," Ashlynn whispered into the dark fabric of Nyrielle's dress. Her arms held the other woman tightly, feeling her cool flesh beneath the silky dress and breathing in her faint lavender fragrance.

"But don't think you can distract me with pretty words," Ashlynn said, stepping back and wiping moisture away from her eyes as she returned to the throwing line. This time, her loop spun with even greater precision than the first one, easily catching another of the thickest, most difficult red pegs. "I'm still going to beat you at this game!"

"Don't think I'll make it easy for you," Nyrielle said, tossing a loop of her own and landing on the very same red peg as Ashlynn's last throw. "You'll find I'm a very quick study," she added with a playful smile and a challenging gleam in her midnight eyes.

Chapter 266: A Taste of Home

In the end, Ashlynn won the loop tossing game by a single toss. Nyrielle's ability to match Ashlynn's toss for toss broke the younger woman's rhythm enough that she missed her fourth throw by a laughable margin. Even with her enhanced physical abilities as Nyrielle's Seneschal, there were limits to the level of perfection she could achieve.

After that, it would have ended in a tie if Nyrielle hadn't failed on her last throw, trying for a winning toss on a red peg and narrowly missing it. Ashlynn, however, wasn't entirely convinced of Nyrielle's failure.

As the barker gathered their prizes, Ashlynn studied Nyrielle's face. That last throw had been suspiciously wide for someone who had matched her shot-for-shot until then, but perhaps even Nyrielle was capable of feeling a little bit of pressure and making minor mistakes.

"You didn't let me win, did you?" she asked, even as the man presented them with more spindle-shaped shells than she'd ever won before. Her eyes widened at the collection before she caught herself and waved him off.

No matter how real this felt, they were still sharing a dream. These weren't prizes she could take with her, even if it would have been nice to have a keepsake of the evening. Still, the suspicion remained as she turned back to Nyrielle.

"That last throw," Ashlynn said, letting her voice trail off as she raised an eyebrow at Nyrielle.

"My darling," Nyrielle said with a light laugh. "You don't have to save face for me. If I lost, I lost. I'll just have to win the next one," she added with a twinkle in her eye. "What other games are there to play?"

"We could go fishing," Ashlynn suggested, pointing to a booth further down the street with a small crowd of people holding crude fishing poles and clustering around a row of barrels. "There are colored wooden rings floating in the barrels. You have to collect rings to earn better prizes. I guess it's not that different than the game you mentioned in the Southern Steppes, just played with fishing poles."

"There's a large difference between a game that tests a lancer's aim at a gallop and a game that is simpler than hooking fish in a barrel," Nyrielle said, giving Ashlynn a teasing poke that turned into a light tickle. "But that doesn't mean I won't play with you," she added with a sly wink as her hand slid lower on Ashlynn's hip, pulling her close enough to bestow a chaste kiss on the other woman's startled lips.

For a moment, Ashlynn's heart raced and her eyes darted around, afraid of how the common people would react to such a public display of affection between two noblewomen. But in her memories, it had been a very normal night with nothing but polite and respectful treatment for the daughters of Count Blackwell.

Now, despite Nyrielle's behavior that would have shocked a good number of citizens in Blackwell City, the common people went on as if everything was normal, giving Ashlynn the momentary illusion that the people of her home town accepted not only her relationship with another noblewoman but with a vampire as well.

The thought was too silly to hold on to, but, at least for a few hours, she let herself indulge in the fantasy. One day, she hoped, it wouldn't be fantasy anymore. Until then, she would treasure the memories she made with Nyrielle this night.

One game turned into another and while they remained competitive, neither woman cared whether they won or lost in the end. The real prizes weren't the baubles handed out by the barkers but the precious moments they shared.

Suddenly, however, Ashlynn stopped halfway across a street as a familiar aroma assailed her nose. Unconsciously, her mouth began to water and she'd already taken several steps in the direction of a man on the corner with several steaming baskets sitting atop pots of water and filling the air with a scent that, to Ashlynn's nose, might as well be wafting from the Heavenly Shores themselves.

"What is it that's caught my darling's attention?" Nyrielle asked as she followed along beside her lover. The brilliant yellow lemons were easily recognizable but the strange black gleaming shells scattered all over a tray in front of the vendor looked like nothing Nyrielle had ever eaten before.

"Stuffed mussels," Ashlynn said, stepping into the line and fishing out a pair of copper pennies. "You get five of them for a copper penny. It's filled with rice and raisins, allspice and herbs and with a little bit of lemon it tastes like the summer sun on your face on the cliffs overlooking the sea," she said, eagerly pressing her coins into the vendor's hands.

Seeing the two beautiful noblewomen, the man wasted no time, quickly splitting open a mussel to reveal the spiced rice stuffing underneath the glistening steamed mussel. With a flourish, he squeezed a bit of lemon juice over the morsel and presented it to Ashlynn like he was offering up fine jewels.

"You eat it like this," Ashlynn said, taking one half of the shell and using it as a scoop to spoon the rice, raisin and mussel mixture into her mouth. For a moment, she did nothing, closing her eyes and savoring the familiar flavor. The fresh chopped herbs blended with the lemon juice to give it a freshness that contrasted with the salty muscle and the soft, delicate texture of rice. Combined with the subtle sweetness of the raisins, the dish teased and tantalized every flavor, leaving her eager for another.

"Fish, you can find in rivers and lakes," Ashlynn said after opening her eyes, finding Nyrielle holding a mussel of her own and looking at Ashlynn with an amused expression. "But mussels like these you can only get from the sea. In the old countries, they make this dish with dates instead of raisins, but here, only people like the heads of guilds or the nobility can afford dates shipped over from the old countries. Most people use raisins instead."

"And it really tastes like the sun on your face?" Nyrielle said, eyeing the mussel with a dubious expression. "Are you certain that I'd enjoy it?"

"Oh! That, that's not what I meant at all," Ashlynn said, her face turning bright red. "The lemon and herbs give it brightness and freshness, that's all. You liked the steamed trout that Georg and I made for you before we left the Vale so you should like this."

"You're too easy to tease my darling," Nyrielle said, imitating Ashlynn's action and scooping up the morsel of rice and mussel for herself. The taste was exactly as Ashlynn had described, fresh and bright, but briny in a way that was different from any fish dish she'd ever been served.

"I can see why you miss these," she said after savoring the dish. "Should we get more? I see they have small buckets we could take away. You don't have to limit yourself to just a few."

"Um," Ashlynn paused for a moment, biting her lower lip and thinking. "I forgot that this is a dream but since it is, we should be able to go anywhere I can remember. I'm going to buy a basket," she said, pointing to another vendor further down the street selling various goods woven from the wide bladed dune grass that grew along the beaches.

"Once I finish filling it, I want you to fly us to the clifftops over there," Ashlynn said, pointing off into the darkness to the north of the city. "We can have a picnic under the stars, just for us."

"I'd like that," Nyrielle said with a smile as she unfurled her wings. "Get as much as you want. My wings can carry you even if your basket is filled to the brim with heavy stones."

"In that case," Ashlynn said, a mischievous gleam appearing in her eyes. "Wait here, I'll be back in just a few minutes."

When she returned, Ashlynn had a slightly guilty expression on her face and a basket that was so full of food that she needed two hands to hold it. Nyrielle, however, met Ashlynn's guilty look with an indulgent expression and held out her arms to her lover.

"Come, my darling," Nyrielle said. "The night has as many hours as we need. We can savor as many dishes as you wish," she said, scooping Ashlynn up in a princess carry before her powerful wings began to beat, lifting them into the cool night air above Blackwell City.

In Nyrielle's arms, Ashlynn clutched the basket tightly and revelled in the feeling of Nyrielle's strong arms holding her close as they flew through the night. The basket held many things she wanted to share with Nyrielle but the most important thing to savor, as far as she was concerned, was the time they spent together.

Chapter 267: Picnic Beneath the Stars

"Over there," Ashlynn said, pointing to a point high above the crashing waves on a cliff overlooking the sea. "It'll be perfect."

The place that Ashlynn had directed Nyrielle to was far enough outside of Blackwell City that the crash of waves and the occasional cry of night birds drowned out the faint sounds of the Holy Festival of Light. Here, the tall grasses bent and swayed in the summer breeze and only the moon, high in the sky, could observe the two lovers' arrival atop the towering cliff.

"When I was younger, if Father was away at court, I used to sneak up here with Jocey in the small hours of the morning," Ashlynn said as she pulled a small table cloth out of the basket and spread it out before unpacking the basket.

"We'd get here just before sunrise and watch the sun come up over the water," Ashlynn continued, her hands pausing for a moment. Her fingers tightened on the thin loaf of crusty bread in her hands while her mind replayed those simpler days. In order to escape the manor without drawing attention, they often snuck a leftover loaf of bread and a bit of cheese from the kitchens to nibble on while they watched the sun rise.

"On the right days," Ashlynn continued, setting down the bread and pulling more items out of the woven-grass basket. "The harbor would be full of ships raising their sails to catch the morning tide just as the sun came up. We'd stay up here for hours, watching the ships and their sails until they vanished over the horizon."

"And you got away with this?" Nyrielle asked.

"Sort of," Ashlynn said, turning her attention back to Nyrielle. "Mother knew. Mother usually knew more than she admitted to. She left orders that Jocey and I were allowed to roam a bit as long as we didn't do anything dangerous, but she had a few guardsmen follow us in secret. It was years before we found out that the goodies we were 'sneaking' from the kitchen had been set out for us to find," she said with a laugh.

"Your mother sounds like a kind woman," Nyrielle said, placing a hand on Ashlynn's and looking deeply into her lover's moist emerald eyes. "My mother would never have given me so much freedom when I was young," she said in a voice that was soft and wrapped in sorrow.

"I think she was so new to being a vampire that she lived with a sort of dread that I would get stuck outside when the sun rose before I was old enough to understand what would happen to me if I did," Nyrielle said. "She was very protective of me when I was little."

"I'm sorry," Ashlynn said, pulling Nyrielle close and pressing the other woman's head up against her generous bosom. "It must have been hard for you," she whispered, lightly stroking Nyrielle's midnight hair.

"No more than it was for you," Nyrielle said. At first, she stiffened when Ashlynn pulled her close but after a moment, her body relaxed as she allowed herself to be comforted. How long had it been since the mighty Eldritch Lady of the Vale had anyone she could rest her head on instead of being the one who people turned to for comfort? More than a century at least.

For several minutes, neither woman said anything. Nyrielle sank deeply into Ashlynn's touch, soaking up the warmth that radiated from her and listening to her heartbeat while Ashlynn's fingers wove their way through her midnight hair. Both of them felt adrift on a sea of memories, recalling simpler days that were filled with a childish joy that they could never return to.

"Your basket looks like it's holding much more than just bread and cheese," Nyrielle finally said as she pulled back from Ashlynn's comforting embrace. "Just how many different things did you bring?"

"Not as many as you'd think," Ashlynn said, giving Nyrielle's hand a gentle squeeze before she returned to pulling things out of the basket. "There's a creamy, salty cheese to go with the bread, more mussels, and some crab cakes," she said, pulling out several golden brown patties formed from pale crab meat, bread and eggs that smelled strongly of fresh herbs.

She'd considered fetching a few steamed crabs just to see the elegant and composed Nyrielle making a mess of herself while cracking open the succulent claws but in the end she decided against it.

It wasn't that she didn't want to have something to tease her lover over, rather, she wasn't confident that she could manage cracking open freshly steamed crabs without making a mess of herself, and tonight, since she was dressed in her festival finest, she wanted to enjoy the way Nyrielle's eyes roamed over her figure in the moonlight more than she wanted to indulge in a bit of mischief.

"I also brought a bottle of wine," Ashlynn added, pulling out a chilled bottle and a pair of simple cups. "It's nothing special, just a common white, but it should be nice with the mussels and the crab cakes."

"Are you sure you should be drinking?" Nyrielle teased. "Not that you weren't cute last time when..."

"Stop, stop," Ashlynn interrupted, frantically waving for Nyrielle to stop before saying anything about the time she'd gotten thoroughly drunk while dining with High Lady Erna. Her memories of the night were still slightly fuzzy but she remembered saying some very embarrassing things before Nyrielle sent her off to bed. "It's just one bottle and you're going to drink half of it so I'll be fine," she insisted.

"If you say so, my darling," Nyrielle said with a look that said she didn't believe Ashlynn at all.

For the next several hours, Ashlynn and Nyrielle enjoyed their picnic under the stars, listening to the crash of waves against the cliffs below and talking idly about whatever came to mind while they nibbled at the nostalgic treats Ashlynn had gathered for their picnic.

Mostly, Ashlynn shared stories of growing up in Blackwell County while Nyrielle compared Ashlynn's experiences to her own childhood in the Vale of Mists.

Though their specific circumstances were worlds apart, both women found more and more things similar between their upbringings. For Ashlynn, the mark of the witch acted like shackles that kept her largely confined to Blackwell Manor. The threat of being exposed loomed over her constantly and forced her parents to make careful arrangements to keep her safe.

"I never learned to swim," Ashlynn mentioned at one point. "Even though we're so close to the sea, we couldn't take the risk that my mark would be seen through wet clothes or while I changed. I was so jealous when my father started taking Jocey to the beach to learn."

"Wasn't he worried that something would happen to your sister," Nyrielle asked, looking down at the waves crashing forcefully against the rocks below the cliff. "Swimming in the sea seems dangerous."

"There are sheltered coves and places where the waves are more gentle," Ashlynn said, pointing further down the coast. "There are even places where people dive from cliffs like this into the water below. Father drew a line at learning how to dive, even Jocey wasn't allowed that much freedom. But still," she said, her voice turning wistful. "I would have liked to learn."

"The Briar has several pools and there's an entire lake nearby," Nyrielle pointed out. "Perhaps you can learn while you're there. Or would it mean less since your father wouldn't be the one to teach you?"

"I, I don't know," Ashlynn said. In truth, she'd never thought of it, but given how much travel in the Briar depended on boats, it might not be a bad idea. "There are dangerous creatures in the waters of the Briar, but it might be possible to learn in the lake. I'll think about it."

"I think you should," Nyrielle said as she gave Ashlynn a reassuring squeeze. "If you don't learn in the Briar then I can teach you to swim in the river when we get home."

"So even you got to learn to swim," Ashlynn said, pouting playfully at the unfairness of the world.

"Of course," Nyrielle said, keeping her voice light. "My father was a very practical man. He put me through his own version of 'survival training' in case I ever needed to flee the Vale of Mists. I, I wish he had been wrong about needing to learn those things, but I'm glad for the lessons. Without them, I might have..." Her voice trailed off as neither woman wanted to contemplate what could have happened if she hadn't been able to escape the Lothian's attack when the Vale of Mists fell.

Ashlynn's childhood had been defined in many ways by her mark of the witch but for Nyrielle, it was her status as a True Vampire that defined her childhood. While Ashlynn would be reviled if her true nature was ever discovered, Nyrielle faced an entirely different form of isolation. A True Vampire was certain to be an important figure in the future, one with great power who was feared and worshipped by the masses.

Nyrielle's parents and grandsire all agreed that she needed to be defended until she grew into her powers enough to protect herself. There were countless people who would feel threatened by the rise of yet another powerful vampire, especially the ones with ambitions to rise higher than any of their peers ever had.

"Before the second crusade toppled the Eldritch Lords who ruled to the west of the Vale of Mists, there were a few lords who sent assassins," Nyrielle mentioned. "They were afraid that, once I grew strong enough to do so, I would descend from the Vale to conquer more territory for my grandsire."

"Would he have?" Ashlynn asked with genuine curiosity.

"Maybe in another hundred years or more if the Lothians hadn't come," Nyrielle admitted. "But he would have done it for me. From the day I was born, he wanted to hand the Vale of Mists over to me. He felt that I would be the greatest protector the Vale could ever know. If he conquered Airgead Mountain, the Verdant Wood and the Stone Fields then it would have been easy to name himself a Great Lord before passing that status to me."

"But the Verdant Wood and the Stone Fields were conquered by the Lothains before he had the chance," Ashlynn realized.

"When I was younger, I didn't care about being a Great Lord," Nyrielle said as she sipped the crisp, refreshing white wine. "Now, I still don't care about the status of being a High Lady or a Great Lady... I only care about having the strength to protect my people. Whatever it takes to get that, whatever it takes to keep you safe... I'll do it."

"We'll do it," Ashlynn corrected, taking Nyrielle's free hand and lacing their fingers together. "We'll protect each other and the people we hold dear."

While both of them had arrived at this point for reasons that couldn't be more opposite, the results were much the same. Both women grew up sheltered and isolated from many people who might otherwise have been their peers and they'd both lost the ability to live in peace with the people who raised them. That past instilled a fierce desire in both women to protect the things that mattered to them lest they lose anything else precious.

Overhead, the stars glittered and the moon crept across the sky watching silently as the two women drew closer together. In the soft darkness of the night, Nyrielle wrapped a feathered wing around Ashlynn, pulling the young witch close as the two stared out at the waves and watched the sky begin to lighten.

"This is your favorite color, isn't it?" Ashlynn said as a subtle peach hue began to creep into the eastern sky. "The color of dawn."

"It is," Nyrielle said, leaning against Ashlynn as if she was clinging to the younger woman's warmth. "But right now, I hate it just a bit. I don't want this moment to end."

"I'll find a way to reach out to you again," Ashlynn promised. "We'll share more dreams in the days to come."

"Don't hurt yourself trying, my darling," Nyrielle said, cupping Ashlynn's chin and turning her head so she could see her lover's yearning expression. "Without the strength of the Ancient Willow, you would never have reached me and I'll only be traveling farther away this summer. I'm worried that reaching me like this will take too much from you."

"I, I know," Ashlynn said, struggling to meet Nyrielle's soft, affectionate gaze. "I won't push myself, but I'll still keep it as a goal. Now that I understand that it can be done, it's just a matter of time before I find a way to do it whenever I want. There's so much I want to share with you..."

"And I have many things to share with you," Nyrielle said, leaning in closer until their foreheads pressed together. "But now, I feel our time together is ending. Even in dreams, it seems I cannot resist the rising sun."

"I love you," Ashlynn said, crossing the last bit of distance between them to press her soft lips against Nyrielles, their tongues dancing with each other as the sun inched ever closer to the horizon.

"And I love you," Nyrielle whispered, pulling back for a last look of her lover, fixing in her mind the image of pre-dawn light shining on Ashlynn's hair as though it was made of spun gold.

"Until next time," she said, her voice growing distant as she faded from Ashlynn's dream, leaving the young witch alone on the cliff as the sun finally broke above the horizon.

"Until next time," Ashlynn whispered.

"Thank you," she told the Ancient Willow. While it had never appeared in this dream, she knew that she'd never have reached Nyrielle without its help. Perhaps this too had been part of the trial the tree set for her, to see for itself what her relationship with Nyrielle was really like. Or maybe it was just what she had taken it to be in the beginning, an apology for trying to pull them apart.

Either way, it was time for this trial to end. Ashlynn could feel the tightness in her chest that Amahle had spoken of. The seed of witchcraft had spread its roots around her heart. Now, it was time to remove it from her chest and present it to Heila.

One witch's trial had ended and another's was about to begin.

Chapter 269: Learning From Sister Holly's Failure

While Ashlynn prepared the seed of witchcraft with Jacques standing guard, Talauia focused on preparing Heila for the trial ahead. At the moment, that meant both women were working in one of Amahle's many gardens, collecting both ingredients for dinner and for something else that the older witch intended to concoct for Heila.

To Heila, the garden itself was something of a marvel. She wasn't unfamiliar with vegetable gardens, she'd helped tend to her family's garden as a young girl and she helped with the flower gardens in the castle once she joined the serving staff.

One thing she had never seen, however, was a garden that was so free of weeds. Not only that, but every plant in the garden seemed to grow larger than any similar plant she'd ever encountered, towering over her and requiring sturdy wooden posts in the ground to hold themselves up with the weight of vegetables they produced.

"You know, you know, it's not easy to become a witch," the winged Thistle Witch said as she hovered over an overgrown okra plant, carefully selecting the best-looking seed pods. "You have to really know, really know who you are and who you want to be. If you lose yourself or if you lose sight of your goals, the seed will consume you."

"Like Sister Holly?" Heila asked, shuddering slightly as she recalled the holly bush that had once been a living person. "Is that what happened to her?" Heila asked as she held a basket above her head for Talauia to drop freshly harvested okra into.

Ever since her visit to the unnerving 'Sister Holly', Heila had found it difficult to put her heart at rest. The sight of the failed witch was a powerful lesson that nothing in this process was guaranteed to succeed and that failure could carry a price so heavy that she would never recover. But she still didn't understand what 'Sister Holly' had done wrong or why things had turned out the way they had.

"Don't know, don't know," Talauia said with a sad shake of her head. "Sister Holly, she, she wasn't very strong," Talauia said softly. "Well, she was strong, but she wasn't very sharp," she said, correcting herself as she thought back on the young woman from the Clan of Painted Masks that she'd once tried to rescue.

It had been decades since she brought the gentle woman to the Briar in order to escape abuse at the hands of her family. Sister Holly had an incredible talent for cultivating all manner of rare plants and her family in High Fen City had turned her into a virtual prisoner on their estate while she tended to the medicinal gardens that supplied the arena with more than half of their medicines.

Talauia had only been visiting to procure a few seeds to bring back to the Briar but when she saw the pitiful woman who struggled to raise her eyes from the ground, beaten down by years of mockery and abuse for her 'worthless' talent that could 'only' be used in the gardens, she'd been absolutely furious.

The young woman had no idea how much money her family was making from her labor and instead believed herself fortunate that she hadn't been exiled for her inability to follow her family's traditions, using sorcery to restore broken valuables to pristine condition.

When the young woman's father casually struck her while entertaining Talauia, the Thistle Witch snapped. The scene that followed was so bloody and horrifying that the surviving members of the family fled the High Fen altogether, hoping that the winged witch would never find them. Meanwhile, Talauia brought the abused genius back to the Briar in the hopes that her talents would allow her to become a witch.

"Sister Holly, she was too gentle," Talauia said, descending from the okra plant and moving to a large bush covered with brilliant red and yellow sweet peppers. As much as the peppers made for a bright and cheery sight, it was hard to shake off the remorse that clung to her when she spoke about Sister Holly.

"Mother chose the holly for her because its leaves started rounded and smooth. They only grow sharp when something tries to devour the holly bush," she explained as she let her own prickly aura wash over the pepper plant, scaring away any insects that might cling to the peppers that would become part of their meal.

"After everything she'd been through, she needed to grow some spines to protect herself," Talauia said sadly. "It's okay to be soft and gentle on the inside but if you're soft and gentle on the outside too, you can never really be free. You can only count on others to protect you then and you'll always live in one cage or another. That's why we wanted to help her learn to grow sharp enough to protect the softness in her heart."

"But she couldn't do it," Heila guessed, stepping up next to Talauia to join her in harvesting peppers. "Because she was too broken to learn to protect herself?"

"Might be, might be," Talauia said, nodding her head. She and Amahle had discussed it several times but the only person who really knew was Sister Holly and she had yet to give either woman an answer, though at least the plant that she'd become didn't seem to bear any ill will toward the witches who had been responsible for her current state. Just as before, if Sister Holly blamed anyone for her failure, she seemed to blame herself.

"That's why you need to decide what kind of witch you want to be," the Thistle Witch said firmly. "The person you want to be. If you don't know who you are and who you want to be..."

The look the Thistle Witch gave Heila sent a chill from the top of her horns to the bottom of her hooves. Images of slowly turning into a tree, like Sister Holly, filled her mind, followed by images of Ashlynn and the rest of her family coming one by one to prick themselves and make an offering just to tell her that they hadn't forgotten her...

In her mind's eye, those tear-filled faces of her loved ones looked at her with haunted eyes as if asking her 'If you didn't know then why did you take the risk?'

Chapter 270: Who Heila Wants To Be

"But can I decide what kind of witch I want to become without knowing what kind of tree Lady Ashlynn has chosen for me?" Heila asked. Her winged companion had explained that Ashlynn would need to choose a seed for her and that it would pair Heila with a tree that suited her nature but the young lady-in-waiting had no idea what kind of tree Ashlynn would choose.

Would Ashlynn choose an Oak like the Ancient Oaks in the Vale of Mists? Or cedar like the forest of their home? Heila had never thought about what kind of tree suited her before. It seemed like such a strange question if not for her current circumstances. Now that it had become relevant, she didn't know what she would choose for herself, much less what Ashlynn might choose.

"Does Auntie Ashlynn know you well?" Talauia asked, cocking her head to the side and pausing her pepper picking. "If she knows you well, she'll know to pick the right thing, as easy as picking ripe vegetables. You just have to think about what you'll do once she picks it because it will naturally fit."

"I, I think she knows me well," Heila said. Her fingers hesitated, hovering above a pepper as she thought carefully about the conversations she'd had in the carriage with Ashlynn while they traveled.

Talauia made it sound simple and saying things was often simple, but was it really that easy to know a person well enough to choose something for them that would completely change their life? Heila didn't think so and she didn't think that Ashlynn would find it easy to make the decision either.

Heila had spoken a great deal about her family and her life growing up as one of the youngest with a large group of older siblings. She'd talked about how happy she was to be able to serve in the ancient fortress and the many important friendships she'd made among the other servants in the keep.

But had she ever spoken about what she wanted? Her ears heated behind her horns as she realized how often she'd spoken wistfully about the handsome men who caught her eye or the idea of having children of her own one day.

She'd even suggested that, when the time came, perhaps one of her daughters could take over as Ashlynn's next lady-in-waiting the same way that Georg had taken over as Nyrielle's personal cook after his father retired.

"I just want ordinary things," Heila said, resuming her picking. "Maybe I'll find a man one day and raise a family. But now that I'm joining Lady Ashlynn's coven, maybe I won't. If I spent the rest of my life at her side, making sure that she was happy, that wouldn't be a bad life."

"Not bad, not bad?" Talauia said, her wings vibrating with a low-pitched hum. "Not bad isn't good," she pronounced, folding her arms over her pert bust. "You can't be passive like this," she added fiercely, turning to fix her multifaceted eyes on the diminutive horned woman. "You have to want something, really want something, or the seed will consume you."

"A witch uses her desires to shape the energy of the world," the Thistle Witch said pointedly. "You have to have strong desires. It doesn't matter what they are, but if you're passive, too passive, like Sister Holly, you'll end up like Sister Holly and that," she said, her throat seizing up as tears formed in her eyes. "That would be too sad!"

It wasn't often that someone was presented with the opportunity to become a witch. There were, perhaps, fewer than a hundred witches on the entire continent. From the moment they had met, when she saw Heilla stubbornly slogging through the soft, muddy, and silty ground of the Briar, she knew that this diminutive young woman had the heart to become a great witch.

But if things turned out like Sister Holly again... if it was her fault for not preparing her well enough again. That would be too much to bear, even for her.

"But, I don't know what I want!" Heila said, dropping the basket of vegetables in a moment of panic. "I have more than I ever wanted. I have so much because Lady Ashlynn has been so generous that I've never thought of what I could want that I don't already have," she said, her lower lip trembling.

"I used to do the laundry, make the beds, and tend the curtains," she said softly. "When Madame Zedya asked me to tend to Lady Ashlynn, I didn't know it would turn into this. Now, now I have fine dresses and I go wherever Lady Ashlynn goes and even Captain Lennart acts like I'm above him now and... and I didn't get this because I 'desired' it, it just happened because I was the one who Madame Zedya picked," she said, looking down at the soft soil beneath her cloven feet.

"I'm nothing special," Heila said in a small voice. "I just got lucky to come this far. Now, I just want to prove that I can be useful. That I can help Lady Ashlynn when she needs me and that she didn't make a mistake when she chose me," she said, her voice growing determined.

"That's not enough, not enough," Talauia said, her words slicing deep into Heila's heart even though she said them gently. "You should talk to Mother. Maybe, maybe Mother can tell you which tree Lady Ashlynn picked. Then, then we can find the best way to build up your desires to fit that tree."

"That would be good," Heila said, picking up her basket of vegetables with an embarrassed look as she collected the few peppers and okra pods that had fallen from the basket. "I know I'm no one special but..."

"No, that's not right, not right at all," Talauia said, placing her hands on Heila's shoulders and staring directly into Heila's eyes with her own amethyst multi-faceted gaze. "I heard what you did for Auntie Ashlynn, how brave you've been. Even little brother Jacques said that you're not an ordinary woman."

"You have all the courage you need," the witch said. "You're just scared of the unknown. So, we'll turn the unknown into the known and then you won't need to be afraid. I promise!"