

The Vampire 301

Chapter 301: Powerful Progeny (Part One)

Blood dripped from Zedya's darksteel fighting gauntlets as she threw herself at the white-furred nightmare that had arrived to reinforce the column of soldiers attacking Nyrielle's people. Her movements were stiff and clumsy and without heavy use of Mist Walker Dance, she wouldn't have been able to stay upright to keep fighting against the savage vampire before her.

At first, Zedya's strategy of keeping Captain Lennart and his men out of the battle worked brilliantly. Because the only people around her were enemies, Zedya was able to move freely without concern for how her movements might impact her allies. In her mind, even the Golden Eyed soldiers who had fallen under her spell were expendable as long as they kept the battle from reaching the people she had promised to protect.

When the hastily assembled barricade on the east doors failed, Zedya led the remains of her spellbound soldiers in a fresh charge against more than twice their number in fresh soldiers. These new arrivals had been hastily pulled from their beds and unlike the first wave she faced, it was much easier to sow disarray among the disorganized reinforcements.

Even though her spellbound soldiers were outnumbered two to one, she was able to make up for the gap with her strength, speed, and most importantly precision that transcended human limits.

All of that changed when a white-furred vampire charged into the hall.

The newly arrived vampire had a lithe, powerful build and stood head and shoulders taller than any of the other members of the Golden Eyed clan in the room. His simple sleeveless tunic and breeches in a room full of armored soldiers spoke of either supreme confidence in his fighting ability or the extreme haste with which he rushed to join the battle. Given the number of victory rings set in his pointed ears, Zedya was inclined to believe it was the former more than the latter.

Though his fur had been white since birth, Savis was still the oldest of Hamdi's progeny and the powerful, bloody aura he radiated when he stormed into the room momentarily stilled the fighting.

"Who dares to attack our Master in his own fortress?" Savis snarled, his golden eyes searching the crowd. He'd rushed here as soon as he felt Hamdi invoke a Blood Pledge to draw on his strength but

from the carnage he found on the floor above the place he felt his master, things were much worse than he feared.

"It's you!" The white-furred vampire roared in rage, lifting a common footman's flail in his hand and charging at Zedya faster than she could get out of his way. The heavy darksteel ball at the end of the flail spun in a blur before Savis brought it crashing down toward Zedya's head.

With no time to dodge, Zedya blocked the heavy blow hastily with an armored gauntlet. Were it not for the protection provided by the darksteel plates, her forearm would have shattered under the force of the blow. Even with the protection of the gauntlets, her hand still went numb and pain shot all the way to her shoulder as the spinning flail careened off her armor.

Before Zedya could recover enough to retreat and look for an opportunity to counterattack, the flail came streaking back toward her, this time slamming into her unarmored knee with a sickening crunch that sent her tumbling to the floor.

"Mist Walker. Dance," Zedya snapped, kicking off of air several times to gain some much-needed distance before he could strike her a third time. But even though she escaped a third strike, the white-furred vampire had already done tremendous damage. Not only to Zedya, but to the battle between her spellbound soldiers and the other members of the Dark Wolf Brigade.

Some soldiers managed to break free of Zedya's binding while others were too maddened by bloodlust and pain to take advantage of the opportunity Savis had given them. But now, with little more than a dozen spellbound soldiers, they could no longer hold back the forces who were bent on killing everyone in the room who wasn't an ally.

In the beginning, their orders had only been to capture. A fight might break out, but many of them had been certain that, in the face of overwhelming numbers, Nyrielle's soldiers would peacefully surrender and allow themselves to be captured.

Now, however, far too much blood had been spilled. No one cared whether they were supposed to take prisoners or not, all they knew is that the bodies of their friends and comrades lie broken and torn apart on the cold stones of the ancient hall and the people responsible had been cowering behind the one vampire who could even the odds.

Yet with the arrival of Master Savis, everything changed. Zedya could no longer constrain them. Like hounds released on a hunt, they lunged past their spellbound companions, clashing directly with Captain Lennart and his men as the battle entered a new phase.

"For Lady Nyrielle and the Vale!" Captain Lennart cried as he waved his men forward. Beside him, Virve protected his flank while the two dove into the onrushing men of the Black Wolf Brigade.

Though they were outnumbered by three to two, half of Captain Lennart's soldiers were men from the Clan of the Great Claw and they used their greater size and reach to tear weapons from the hands of their enemies whenever they could.

It wasn't necessary to defeat their opponents, if they could be disarmed and wounded then it was sufficient to knock them aside and move to the next while setting up the soldiers from the Horned Clan to deliver killing blows with their long spears.

The soldiers of the Vale of Mists had been outnumbered in every battle they'd fought against the humans for generations and even though many of Lennart's soldiers had never fought in a war against the Lothians, their training and traditions had grown strong through constant testing in brutal war.

By contrast, the men of the Black Wolf Brigade, while every one of them was an elite soldier, had long grown accustomed to possessing superior numbers and strength compared to the rabble they were sent to suppress. Now, when they thought they should have an advantage, they found themselves pressed into an intense battle against soldiers who fought like demons.

Behind the line of fighting men, the wagon drivers and servants huddled together near the far wall, as far from the combat as the confines of the hall would allow. Some lifted tables to create makeshift barricades while others had gathered anything that could serve as an improvised weapon, ripping legs from chairs to use as makeshift clubs or clutching the wooden chair seats as crude shields.

"Stay close to the wall," one of the older wagon drivers from the Horned Clan ordered. "If they break through, we'll make for the stairs. "You four," he added, pointing to the four strongest men from the Clan of the Great Claw who served as porters in their group. There weren't enough improvised weapons to go around but rather than arm these four strong men, he had very different instructions for them.

"We'll do our best to clear the way to the door," he said as his hands tightened on a broken table leg. "You make sure to protect Lady Nyrielle and Madame Zedya's daybeds. They won't be able to travel far without them, so... so make sure you do what you can to keep them safe if it comes to that."

Hearing his words, everyone nodded with grim expressions on their faces. If it came to that, if they were defeated so badly here that Lady Nyrielle and Madame Zedya had to be carried away in their daybeds, then it was unlikely that they would escape the pursuit of the High Lord of the Tangled Wood's forces.

Still, as long as there was something they could do to give Lady Nyrielle even the slightest chance of escaping if the worst came to pass, they were willing to die to the last man to give her that chance.

But Zedya couldn't spare much attention for Captain Lennart and his soldiers as they squared off against the men of the Dark Wolf Brigade or the actions of the servants behind them. It took all of her attention to resist the constant onslaught of Savis' darksteel flail as he relentlessly pursued her across the hall.

Chapter 302: Powerful Progeny (Part Two)

Against the common soldiers, Zedya's basic fighting skills and superior physical abilities allowed her to slaughter with impunity. Against a vampire more than four times her age with centuries of experience in battle, however, she fared little better than a talented recruit, new to the army.

She managed to avoid blows to the head or chest, only barely, but the sickening crunch she'd heard when the flail smashed into her knee was repeated again when it slammed into the bottom of her ribcage, and a third time when it crashed into her right shoulder, sending shards of bone deep into her flesh and rendering her arm useless as it hung limply by her side.

Despite her terrible injuries, a smile blossomed on Zedya's face as she pushed her Mist Walker Dance to its limits, drifting out of reach of Savis's blood soaked flail.

"What are you smiling about, woman?" the white furred vampire sneered. His answer came a moment later, not from Zedya, but from a powerful voice that echoed from the depths of the abyss as a dark winged woman in tattered, bloody clothes strode through the northern entrance to the hall.

"Drop your weapons, or Hamdi dies," Nyrielle commanded. Shadows flowed from her wings like a dark tide, blanketing the hall with a darkness that dimmed everything from the crystal chandeliers to the

standing oil lamps and cast the room into a cold otherworldly darkness like a graveyard on midwinter's night.

"You are in the presence of Her Eternity Nyrielle, the Harbinger of Death," Ignatious said, stepping in front of Nyrielle like an obedient herald and dropping the charred and desiccated body of Hamdi at her feet. "Kneel in her presence, or face her wrath," he commanded, immediately following his own orders and dropping to one knee.

"Your Eternity, Mistress Nyrielle," Zedya said formally and loudly enough for the entire hall to hear while she dropped to her uninjured knee.

"Master Hamdi!" Savis cried, his flail falling from his fingers as shock tore through him. The charred figure at the dark-winged woman's feet was all but unrecognizable, and yet the connection he felt to the man who had made him a vampire all those centuries ago couldn't be denied. Most importantly, that connection told him that, despite the ghastly wounds, his master was still alive!

Savis's anguished cry paralyzed the soldiers of the Dark Wolf Brigade, giving Captain Lennart and his men the opportunity they needed to act. Rather than strike down their foes, however, each and every one of them stepped back from their opponents, laying down their weapons as they knelt and bowed deeply to their lady.

"Your Eternity, Lady Nyrielle," they cried, the genuine passion in their voices warring with relief at her timely rescue and a measure of shock as they witnessed the many wounds on her body and the ragged state of her clothing.

"Lady Nyrielle," Captain Lennart said, rushing across the room to kneel directly before his lady. "It has been my life's honor to fight in your service. Your wounds are too severe," he said solemnly, turning his head to one side and baring his neck. Already, a nasty wound traced along his jaw bone, nearly reaching his ear and deep enough to reveal layers of muscle and even the bright white of bone in places.

"If my blood can aid your healing then it is yours," he offered formally. "If my life is required, then it is yours as well."

Behind him, several other soldiers stood, rushing forward to kneel behind their captain. Each one of them bore injuries from the brief but intense clash with the Dark Wolf Brigade but every one of them looked at Nyrielle with the kind of reverence that humans reserved for their icons of faith.

"My blood is yours for the taking," they said in ragged unison. "My life is yours if you require it."

"Little Lenny," Zedya whispered from where she knelt halfway across the hall. "Don't, don't do this..."

"Captain Lennart, stand before me," Nyrielle commanded. When he did as she ordered, she reached out gently, turning his face away from her and leaning in to brush her lips against the gruesome wound along his jaw.

Her tongue darted out, quicker than most eyes could follow, giving her the briefest taste of rich, metallic blood that danced over her tongue like the sharp sounds of battle. The energy she received from his blood was less than a fraction of what she gained from a single bloody kiss with Ashlynn and yet her tongue darted out again and again along the length of his wound.

By the time she finished, pricking the flesh next to his ear with the barest touch of her fangs, the wound had already stopped bleeding and pale flesh had begun to grow over the deepest portions of the wound.

More than that, while Lennart experienced none of the world shattering pleasure that so often accompanied Nyrielle's bite, the pain he felt from his lesser wounds had melted away completely, leaving him feeling refreshed and restored.

"Healing isn't my gift, brave Lennart," Nyrielle whispered. "But for those that I feed on, even if it's just a small amount, I can grant a small measure of healing that helps to recover from my bite. I'm afraid the rest will have to wait."

"My Lady," the bearish captain said, returning to his knee and bowing his head low. "The gift you've given me is already priceless beyond measure. I will bear this scar with honor for the rest of my days," he said solemnly.

"As you should," Nyrielle said, lightly touching the top of his head before turning her attention to Hamdi's progeny and the soldiers under his command. "Now," she said, her voice growing dark and cold.

"My men are obediently kneeling but why is it that yours still stand? Could it be that you wish to see your master die?"

"Your Eternity," Savis said, breaking free of the shock that had frozen him in place and dropping to one knee. "Please, whatever crime my master has committed to draw your wrath, let us make amends. Please, spare his life."

"Your Eternity," the soldiers of the Dark Wolf Brigade echoed, dropping to their knees and bowing their heads in imitation of Savis. "Please, spare our master's life!"

"If your master is going to live," Nyrielle said as her eyes swept over the soldiers of the Dark Wolf Brigade. "Then I require an offering. Who will give their blood to save his life?"

"I, I will offer my blood and my life if my master requires it," a young soldier said, awkwardly standing up. He placed his hands atop his head to show that he hid no weapons and walked slowly to stand over the blackened body of the man who was supposed to be the strongest person in the entire Tangled Wood and for several territories beyond their borders.

Seeing him reduced to this state, the young soldier's heart shook and it took every ounce of his willpower to keep himself from cowering in fear before the dark-winged woman who had reduced his master to this sorry state.

"It, it isn't our way to make an offering of blood," he said with uncertainty as he knelt next to his master. "Should I cut open my wrist for him? Will spilling blood on his lips be enough?"

"Who said I needed you to spill your blood for him?" Nyielle asked coldly. "Stand before me. You are my defeated prey and I will feed on you long before I feed on my own injured men," she said with a brief smile directed toward the injured Captain Lennart. "And because you offered, I will spare your life. Now come," she called. "Stretch out your neck for me."

The young soldier seemed startled by her command but he couldn't refute her words. They truly were defeated dogs. It felt shameful to offer up his own neck, but if doing so meant that she would spare his master's life... then he could only endure the shame of it.

Much to his surprise, there was no pain when Nyrielle sank her fangs into his neck, only a cool sense of comfort and relief from pain as his world grew dim and Nyrielle drank her fill. In her injured state, it would have been all too easy to drain him to the last drop but she kept true to her word, stopping well short of what she needed to completely heal and taking only enough of his blood to recover a bit of her strength.

"Now, you there," Nyrielle said, pointing a finger at Savis after laying the Golden Eyed soldier on the ground. "It seems like another of your siblings has just arrived on the floors above. Bring them here so that I can explain to you the terms of your surrender."

"And before you get any strange ideas," she added as she used the tip of one wing to prod Hamdi's slumbering figure. "Whether or not your Master is able to recover enough, quickly enough, to retain his position as the High Lord of the Tangled Wood depends entirely on how well you follow my instructions in the weeks to come. So whatever you do," she said fiercely. "Don't disappoint me."

"Yes, your Eternity," the white furred vampire said, swallowing heavily as he looked at her cold, midnight blue eyes. In them, he saw an infinite abyss that promised to swallow up anything that resisted her orders... and that wouldn't care if she had to kill him in order to make sure others understood that she wasn't to be defied.

After all, if she could defeat his master so thoroughly and do so before anyone could arrive to help him, then what chance did Savis or any of Hamdi's progeny have of resisting her?

Now that he saw her open a path not only for him to survive but for his master to regain his throne, Savis grasped it with every fiber of his being, rushing toward his sister Birsu to warn her that they only had one chance to save their master and more importantly, that the "minor guest" their master had warned them of was someone that they dared not offend.

Chapter 303: Practical Potions

In the Briar, a month had passed since Heila completed her transformation and became Ashlynn's Willow Witch. During that time, true to her word, Amahle had drilled both women on the fundamentals of witchcraft.

The increasing heat of the Briar pressed down on them and made the hot days seem endless and the slightly cooler nights feel far too brief. Within a week of Heila's reawakening, both women from the Vale of Mists abandoned their long skirts for the shorter, divided skirts favored by the villages across the lake.

Similarly, Ashlynn found herself going barefoot whenever possible and when it wasn't, she was much more comfortable in simple woven sandals than in the short ankle boots she'd arrived in.

At first, Ashlynn had felt that Talauia was bold for flashing her porcelain legs as often as she did, but now that they'd reached the height of summer, Ashlynn realized that there was nothing bold about it at all. She felt anything but attractive as sweat rolled down between her full breasts and soaked the underbust of her sleeveless tunic and the feeling of unbearable heat was made even worse by her proximity to a bubbling cauldron and the fire beneath it. If she'd tried to maintain her old wardrobe, she'd only have felt worse.

"I still think I should cut my hair short," Ashlynn grumbled as she stirred the simmering concoction. The scent of fragrant herbs filled the air along with a musty, pungent scent from ground valerian root that still clung to the mortar and pestle on Ashlynn's workbench.

"Should I make another batch of cooling drops for you, my lady?" Heila asked, looking up from her own work. More than a dozen different herbs lay on the table in front of her, along with a set of scales and precise weights for measuring each of them but the young Willow Witch had yet to begin assembling her concoction.

"No," Ashlynn said as she paused to inspect her concoction. As the liquid thickened, she'd found that she had to pay extra attention to scraping the bottom and sides of her cauldron or it would burn, just like a stew left too long unattended. Only, if a stew burned to the bottom of the pot, the worst that happened was that you threw out a batch of stew. If a potion burned to the bottom of the pot, the results could range from creating toxic clouds of gas to setting off small explosions.

"I can't interrupt your lessons every time I feel uncomfortable," Ashlynn said. If she really wanted cooling drops to get through the oppressive heat, she was entirely capable of making her own it was just that Heila's affinity for water magic was so much greater than hers that Ashlynn's concoction frequently yielded only half as much as Heila's would for the same amount of starting ingredients.

"I don't mind," Heila said as she started gathering another set of herbs. "Practice is practice and the cooling drops are useful. It isn't a bad thing to get better at making them. It'll be harder to practice once we go home until we've had a chance to grow our own gardens."

"Wait till I'm done with this one before you start reducing yours," Ashlynn said as she returned to stirring. "One fire is already almost too much, I don't think I could bear two at once."

According to Amahle, it was rare for her coven to concoct much during the oppressive summer months. They had settled into a natural rhythm where her coven spent most of the spring and summer harvesting their gardens and foraging in the surrounding wilderness before using the relatively cooler winters to do their concocting for the year.

More than once, Amahle had hinted that Ashlynn should stay through the winter and return to the Vale of Mists when the passes opened again in the spring but the former noblewoman refused to spend so long away from the Vale of Mists. She already felt an increasing anxiety about what Owain and his family were doing while she was away, being gone even longer would only make it worse.

More importantly, Nyrielle had promised her a trip back to Blackwell County during the winter months when the nights were long. They would have to move carefully and Ashlynn would need to conceal her identity for most of the journey but once she returned, she would find a way to speak to her parents to discover who had betrayed her and revealed her mark's existence to Owain.

"What are you concocting this time?" Heila asked as she looked over at the open book on Ashlynn's workbench. Amahle had instructed them both in the things she considered essential foundations but after that, she'd set them both loose with instructions to make anything they thought would be useful and that they felt confident in attempting.

The Mother of Thorns still visited regularly to check up on them, as did Talauia and Jacques, but for the past week, Ashlynn and Heila had enjoyed considerable freedom in what they made.

"This one is called 'Scholar's Clarity'," Ashlynn said without turning away from her concoction. Once it reached the thickness she required, she would need to begin the incantation that infused a combination of wood and fire energy into the thick paste, transforming it from a medicinal paste that any apothecary could produce into something that only witches and a select few sorcerers or artificers could make.

"You rub it into your temples and it banishes the fatigue and headaches that come with studying and helps to strengthen your ability to remember what you've read," Ashlynn explained. "We've both been reading so much, I thought it would help, especially when the heat makes it so hard to think."

"Ashlynn, you..." Heila said, her voice trailing off as her hands paused in gathering herbs.

Ashlynn had taken to the heavy studying load like a fish to water. She'd spent so many of her formative years in the Blackwell library and under the guidance of tutors that studying under Amahle felt almost like a return to her younger days as a student before she began preparing for her marriage to Owain.

Heila, on the other hand, had grown up in a common family in the Vale of Mists. She'd followed her mother into service in the castle as a common maid until Zedya picked her to be Ashlynn's attendant. While she'd learned to read and write along with other servants in the castle, she had never spent much time on books and learning beyond the basics that everyone was required to learn.

In order to keep up with Amahle's rapid pace of instruction, Heila had taken to staying up late at night, using a potion called 'Essence of Sleep' to spend as little as two hours a night actually sleeping while she dedicated the rest of her time to reading by lamplight. But even though the potions could provide the energy of a night's sleep to the body, they did little for the fatigue of the mind.

"You think I didn't notice how late your lamps have been lit at night when you go back to your hut?" Ashlynn teased lightly. "I know it's been hard," Ashlynn said in a gentle tone. "Honestly, I think we're both working too hard right now, but we only have so much time here before we have to go home and I'm afraid that with a war coming..."

"That's why I won't tell you that you shouldn't do what you're doing," Ashlynn said solemnly. "But, I don't like to see my friend suffer. Since this potion requires a bit of fire magic 'to spark insight', I thought it would be best if I made it. And really, it's for both of us, so you don't have to give me that look," she added with a gentle smile.

"No, you're right, but," Heila said haltingly as she tried to sift through the many emotions Ashlynn's potion had stirred within her petite chest for the words she wanted to say. "Thank you," she said, choosing the simplest expression of gratitude for what she felt.

There were many thoughts and feelings she left unsaid behind those simple words. Heila's world had changed almost as much as Ashlynn's had in the time since they met and at moments like this, the diminutive horned woman wondered what her parents would think of the way that she and Ashlynn were currently trading expensive potions as if they were sweets from the kitchens.

For Heila, brewing a batch of cooling drops to help Ashlynn resist the summer heat felt natural, like something she should do. The fact that Ashlynn reciprocated with a concoction of her own to help Heila study still felt like an overwhelming honor, but slowly, that feeling was beginning to wear away,

replaced by a more intimate friendship where the two women were much, much closer to equals than Heila had ever imagined they would be.

For the Mother of Trees, or the Seneschal of the Vale of Mists to bestow a gift on a lowly servant would carry a weight heavier than gold. But slowly, Heila felt less and less like Ashlynn's servant and more like a part of her family. And for family to gift each other with a few useful items... That was only natural, right?

Since it was only natural, Heila smiled to herself as she returned to her own preparatory work. She had her own end of the potion trade to keep up, and she refused to let Ashlynn down. Not because she was Ashlynn's lady-in-waiting, but because they were family and she wanted to be family that Ashlynn could depend on.

Chapter 304: Handling Distractions

While Ashlynn and Heila worked diligently on their studies, Amahle summoned Talauia and Jacques to her own abode for a serious discussion.

"So, it's true den?" Jacques asked between sips of cold, refreshing lemonade. "Lady Nyrielle, she really trapped de High Lord of de Tangled Wood in a pine box atop his own tower?"

"It is," Amahle said as she examined the letter in her hands for what felt like the dozenth time since it arrived early in the morning. "Though Lady Nyrielle's letter is short on details, she made it clear High Lord Hamdi is suffering greatly for the offense of failing to recognize her authority over vampires as the Harbinger of Death."

"Even then, even then," Talauia said. "A green pine box will twist and warp in the summer sun. Even if it kept all the daylight out when they made the box for him, after a few days, every seem will let a little bit of light in all day long. Won't it eventually kill High Lord Hamdi like dying from a thousand small cuts?"

"According to Lady Nyrielle's letter, she allowed his progeny to wrap him in a beggar's cloak before sealing him in the box and placing it atop his tower. Further, she's allowing his progeny to hunt for him so long as they spill the blood of their prey over the box. What little seeps through is enough to allow Hamdi to slowly heal his wounds, though the sunlight during the day may undo most of that."

"Dis woman of Auntie Ashlynn's is fiercer and crueller den I thought," Jacques said, shuddering slightly at the thought of how much he'd offended her when they first met. Looking back at the way Ashlynn had resolved their dispute, he offered a silent thanks to the Mother of Trees for saving him from a fate so dark that he wasn't able to imagine it.

"The important thing isn't what she did to High Lord Hamdi," Amahle said, bringing the conversation back on track. "The question is whether or not one of you should go to represent me at the gathering she's called. Every Eldritch Lord for three hundred leagues has been invited and she's extended us the same courtesy."

"Shouldn't Auntie Ashlynn go wit us den?" Jacques asked. "I'm sure she must be missing Lady Nyrielle, non? Dis is a chance for her to pay her lover a visit."

"That's what makes this difficult," Amahle said. "We're invited, but I have to admire Lady Nyrielle for her determination to do what's best for Ashlynn. She doesn't want to disrupt Ashlynn's training. Besides, if we went, our attendance would amount to little more than a show of support. We've already aligned ourselves with Ashlynn and through her, with the Vale of Mists. This assembly of Nyrielle's doesn't offer us much."

"But if we go, if we go, then it tells the other Eldritch Lords that Lady Nyrielle has our support," Talauia said, fidgeting with the ends of the laces on her tunic as she spoke. "But if we go, it means we can't help Auntie Ashlynn with her studies anymore..." she added, her voice trailing off.

Of everyone who could go, Amahle would send the strongest message of support. Having the Mother of Thorns appear in person would do much to convince other Eldritch Lords that they should throw their support behind the Vale of Mists in the upcoming conflict with the humans. It would also deprive Ashlynn of the best learning opportunities.

"I won't send you, sugar," Amahle told Talauia directly. While the Thistle Witch had once been something of a princess within her own clan, those days were long over, and the winged woman had never once shown signs that she wanted to return to the kind of life she'd lived as the daughter of a High Lord.

Talauia's wings quivered slightly as a wave of relief washed through her. If Amahle told her to go, then she would have gone, but among so many powerful lords, the odds that she might encounter someone who still bore a grudge for what happened all those years ago were far, far too high.

Recently, she'd begun coaching Jacques on how to attend more formal gatherings in a way that reflected his station as a powerful witch, but from what they'd heard of his visit to the High Fen, he still needed many, many more years of practice.

"And I won't go myself either," Amahle added. She couldn't deny that part of her wished she could go. After getting to know Ashlynn better, she wanted a chance to see how the Harbinger of Death had changed in the years since the powerful vampire had offered up a captured human Inquisitor as a 'research subject' for her.

The way Ashlynn spoke of her lover was so different from the raw and hurting vampire she'd met in the past that she was tempted to attend Lady Nyrielle's gathering just to see for herself what her little sister's lover was really like. Unfortunately, the cost of neglecting Ashlynn's training was just too high and it was unlikely that Nyrielle would appreciate the visit when doing so came at her Seneschal's expense.

"So really," Amahle concluded. "It's up to Jacques if he thinks he should go."

"I ain't one for de delicate dance of words wit' lords," Jacques said helplessly. "What about Saini or Mamao," he said, mentioning the missing Rose and Blackberry Witches. "Are either of dem close enough to make de gathering?"

"I don't want to disturb Saini's work, even if she could make it," Amahle said with a shake of her head. The Rose Witch had been born of a tenacious wild rose and the task she'd taken on required an amount of stubborn refusal to yield that even Jacques couldn't match. Interrupting her would spoil months of painstaking work and Amahle wasn't about to throw that away for a simple political gesture.

"Mamao is too far, too, too far," Talauia added. "It took her last letter four months just to get here. There's no way she's coming home without telling us she's coming, so, so there's no way she could help."

"I've already sent a letter to her asking that she return as soon as she can," Amahle said as she stretched across the table to pour another glass of lemonade for Jacques. "But by the time my letter finds her and she returns, it will almost be summer next year."

"I hope she brings lots and lots of new seeds when she comes home," Talauia said with a wide smile. "Sister Mamao always brings the best gifts home when she's been out for a long time."

"Either way," Amahle said, putting the folded letter away in one of the many pouches on her belt. "Since none of us will be attending Lady Nyrielle's gathering, then put it out of your minds," she said as she moved on to the next topic she'd brought them here to discuss.

"Jacques, darling, since you aren't going to Lady Nyrielle's gathering, I'd like you to take Ashlynn and Heila on a small trip to Crystal Lake City. They're working too hard and while I understand their reasons, I think it's time for a small vacation for both of them."

"Before they go, Tala, sugar, spend a day or two with them to concoct potions for trade," Amahle added. "I know they're both carrying whatever pocket money Lady Nyrielle gave them, but my little sister hasn't had much that was truly hers since she escaped that wretched excuse for a man she was forced to marry."

"Yes, yes, I can help them!" Talauia said excitedly. "The moonflowers in the garden are blooming now and there's enough that we could make several bottles of..."

"No, not like that," Amahle interrupted. "Take the two of them foraging deep in the Briar. I want the two of them to reap the benefits of their own labor from start to finish. If we give them things from the garden to use to make their potions, it's little different from when Lady Nyrielle hands them pocket money."

"This is a test for them as much as it's a vacation," Amahle explained. "They can only use what they forage for themselves. You can give them advice and show them where things can be found, but they have to do the work themselves."

"After all," she said, sitting back on a comfortable cushion and taking a long drink of chilled lemonade. "The fruits of your own harvest are always the sweetest."

Chapter 305: Vacation Planning

"So this is both a vacation and a training activity," Ashlynn said with a smile when Talauia came to explain the task that Amahle had set for them. She leaned back in her chair as the late afternoon sun filtered through the workshop windows of her hut while massaging the forearm that had grown sore

after nearly an hour spent stirring her concoction to prevent it from burning. The air still held the lingering scents of valerian root and other herbs from their day of concocting, though the heat had finally begun to ease as evening approached.

Talauia perched on a wooden stool nearby, offering a bowl of crispy fried okra she'd brought to share while they talked. The simple snack was a welcome distraction after the intense focus their work had required, and when Talauia mentioned that she'd left out the dusting of cayenne pepper for this batch so they could share, Heila reached eagerly for a piece as they considered Amahle's challenge.

"First planning, then foraging, concocting, and selling our wares before we get to enjoy the rewards of what we've made. Or we find a way to have the least expensive vacation possible because we've utterly failed at the task," she said with a wide grin.

It was the sort of challenge that she would have loved to tackle with Jocelynn. Economics was a foundation of administering any domain, whether it was a small barony or a sprawling duchy and Ashlynn's tutors had schooled her well in principles of supply and demand. Understanding the flow of goods back and forth between the old countries was something she spent many hours studying with her tutors.

On rare occasions, she'd been able to meet with the captain of a trading vessel or one of the masters from the Way Finder's guild and those people had often posed practical hypothetical problems for her to solve, grounded in their very real experience. Ashlynn always delighted in those challenges, not only because they tested her understanding of many subjects at once but because it was a chance to broaden her very small social circle, even if only briefly.

But Jocelynn had a much better head for supply and demand of individual goods. She paid attention to what was in style among noble women, what was in demand by the merchant class, and the sorts of things that even the common folk would find an excuse to splurge on if the opportunity presented itself. She was always looking for opportunities to obtain what others couldn't by finding benefits for everyone involved.

If Jocelynn were here, Ashlynn was certain that she would immediately know which questions to ask to figure out which potions would give them the best return on their efforts. Since she wasn't, Ashlynn could only try her best and hope that the lessons she'd learned at home would translate to Eldritch Lands.

"I don't think we'll have a poor vacation," Heila said eagerly. "Even if we just made some cooling drops and other simple things, I'm sure we would earn enough silver to treat ourselves nicely in Crystal Lake City."

For her, this would be an entirely new experience where she visited an Eldritch city not only as Ashlynn's lady-in-waiting but as a powerful figure in her own right. She'd had a taste of what that kind of life could be like when Jacques took her to the House of Iron but she couldn't really enjoy it as much as she wanted with Jacques's looming presence and his strange insistence on showing off his dueling prowess.

After spending so much time with the reptilian witch, Heila had come to understand Jacques, but at the time, his presence had spoiled what could have otherwise been a delightful meal with new friends she'd met in High Fen City. This time, however, there wouldn't be any disharmony in their group while they were on vacation and she could truly enjoy herself.

"What kind of place is Crystal Lake City?" Ashlynn asked while she prepared a slate to take notes.

"Jacques knows, Jacques knows better than I do," Talauia said, her wings fluttering slightly as she moved to sit between Ashlynn and Heila rather than across from them. "But I've visited with Mother and the others a few times. The best word I can think of is 'sleepy.' It's really, really a sleepy city."

"Is that because it's so hot?" Heila asked. "I have a hard enough time not sleeping away the heat of the day as is, and we have the canopy of the Briar to block out the sun. I imagine it's even hotter there."

"No, mercy," Ashlynn said, plucking at her sleeveless tunic to fan herself. "Not hotter than this. Why would someone build a city somewhere so unbearable?"

"They don't mind, don't mind at all," Talauia said, shaking her head in envy. "It's mostly the Ancient Clan who live there. They'll lay out in the sun all day long if they don't have anything important to do and they'll be happy about it. But that's not why I said it's sleepy."

The winged witch paused for a moment, her brows furrowing in thought as she tried to consider the best way to explain the Ancient Clan and the strange city they built on the opposite side of the lake from the Briar.

There were a number of phrases that came to mind, but none of them were complimentary and despite everything that had happened, Talauia didn't want to speak badly of Jacques's clan or his hometown when he wasn't here to speak for himself.

"Does this touch on some kind of secret that we shouldn't know?" Ashlynn asked when she saw Talauia's long hesitation. Compared to the Kingdom of Gaal, the Eldritch people were so much more diverse that Ashlynn had yet to catch up on all of the taboos she felt that she should be aware of when traveling to a new city.

She'd asked Jacques about the Ancient Clan on a number of occasions when they were training but he always seemed to keep his descriptions superficial and after the third time when he'd avoided her question by going on at length about some of the strange creatures that the Ancient Clan considered to be delicacies, including snails the size of a walnut, Ashlynn had stopped prying.

"It's no secret, not secret from anyone," Talauia said as she made up her mind. She would present things as neutrally as possible and hope that they didn't misunderstand. As long as she kept to the important bits, it shouldn't be too hard to avoid saying something unkind... and if she got anything wrong in her attempt to save face for the Ancient Clan, she would just have to rely on Jacques to correct her later.

Chapter 306: People Who Want for Nothing

"Going to Crystal Lake City, it's like, it's like going to a great city a thousand years ago," the Thistle Witch finally said. "The Ancient Clan is... content. They don't need to become better at anything to feed their people or clothe their people. Their buildings are simple and they don't have engineers to make things better. They do things the way they always have because they've already found an answer to everything that's good enough for them."

The words Talauia's father had once used to describe the Ancient Clan were 'arrogantly primitive and deliberately so.' When she'd last visited Crystal Lake City, she'd seen a good many bronze-smiths and a few whitesmiths but the Ancient Clan still hadn't seen the point of learning to smelt iron, much less to produce steel of any quality.

The few professions that made use of iron and steel tools obtained them almost exclusively through trade but convincing one of them they needed such tools was only slightly easier than pulling the fangs of a protesting alligator. They were like that for almost everything they did, and they were as stubborn as stones about changing.

"How could that be?" Ashlynn asked, utterly baffled by the description Talauia had given. "Isn't a natural law that without strong predators or constant warfare, each generation will be larger than the one before it? If their population keeps growing, surely they'd find a need to invent better things. Better agriculture, fishing, better housing for larger families," she said only to trail off at the end when she saw Talauia shaking her head.

"It's not like that, not like that at all" the Thistle Witch said. "The Ancient Clan live very, very long lives. They don't consider themselves 'old' until they've passed at least two centuries and their elders have usually lived for more than three. For them, a thousand years ago is just a few generations."

"Hey Tala," Heila said hesitantly as a curious thought struck her. "Do you know how old Jacques is? Is he considered very young for the Ancient Clan?"

"Don't tell him that I told you, don't tell him, all right?" Talauia said as she gestured for Ashlynn and Heila to lean in close. "He just turned thirty last summer," the winged witch said in a hushed, conspiratorial tone. "He's been here for half his life after... no, nevermind," she said, suddenly realizing that she'd said too much.

"Don't tell," she reminded them with a finger to her lips. "If he wants to tell, he can tell why he came her, but I shouldn't tell for him."

"No, of course you shouldn't," Ashlynn said, hastily waving off the notion that Taluia betray any sort of confidence. "But if the Ancient Clan feels content with what they have, what sorts of things should we concoct for them?" she asked, returning back to the original topic.

"I don't think they're all content," Heila said as she thought for a moment. "Maybe the wealthy ones are content, but if you don't have many luxuries, there's always something that the richer people have that you don't. Anyone who sees people living better than they do will spend a little time thinking about what it would be like if they had those things too."

"I suppose that's true," Ashlynn said as she thought. "The same is true of the wealthy. Maybe most of them are content, but there's always something that one person has and their neighbor wishes they had it as well."

"Tala," Ashlynn asked as an idea struck her. "Has the Eldritch Lord of the Crystal Lake ever asked Amahle to concoct something for him? Something that Heila and I might be able to make?"

"Of course," Talauia said with an almost smug nod. "Thornback Egg Paste. It isn't a potion that a person drinks, it's something they slather on their eggs so their children grow up with the strength of the Giant Thornback Alligator. It's an ancient recipe that originally comes from the Ancient Clan, but..."

"Mistress Nyrielle told me about the Giant Thornback Alligators," Ashlynn said as she sank into thought. "She said they could crush bones with their jaws and swallow goats whole. This potion... we'd have to hunt down a Giant Thornback Alligator wouldn't we?"

"You would, you would and it's very dangerous," Talauia said. "You haven't been practicing how to fight like a witch yet, you've just been working on potions and incantations with your wands. I don't know if it's a good idea to hunt one of those and Heila doesn't even have a weapon yet so..."

"I can make one for myself," Heila said with surprising firmness. "I had to learn how to conjure weapons to fight when Cecile interfered with my trial. I'm not helpless anymore," she added, holding her head up high and giving Talauia a challenging look.

"How about this," Ashlynn said, thinking rapidly as she watched Talauia's wings start to twitch anxiously. "There are other predators we could hunt to use in concoctions aren't there? Talauia, you're coming with us when we go foraging just to watch, right?"

"I am, but Auntie, I shouldn't help you hunt, shouldn't help at all," she said, crossing her arms in front of her petite chest. "But if you want help just finding thing, and only with the finding, then maybe... maybe I could do that much?"

"That's even more than I was going to ask for," Ashlynn said with a gentle smile. "I was just going to ask if you can watch us hunt some lesser predators, then you can decide if we have the strength to fight a Giant Thornback Alligator or not. If we don't, then it's fine, we'll still forage for other things. But if we do, I'd like to take the chance."

"After all, if this Thornback Egg Paste is so valuable that the Lord of the Crystal Lake wanted it for his children, I can't imagine there are many parents who wouldn't like the chance to do the same for their own children."

"You're right, you're right," Talauia said, her multifaceted eyes growing clouded as ghosts danced through the sudden mist that clouded her vision. The sounds of her father shouting for her to fly, fly as fast as she could echoed in her ears and for a moment she could even smell the acrid stench of burning bodies mingling with the thick smoke of smoldering trees.

"Parents really would do anything for their children..."

Chapter 307: It's Personal

"Parents really would do anything for their children..."

The soft, almost broken way that Talauia said it swept over Ashlynn like a sneaker wave, drawing her into a world so filled with sorrow and hurt that she was momentarily disoriented. Without thinking, she reached out and wrapped an arm around the slender witch, pulling her into a soft embrace and gently stroking her hair the same way she'd once comforted her younger sister.

"It's fine if you want to talk about it," Ashlynn said when she saw the stream of tears silently spilling from Talauia's multi-faceted amethyst eyes. "It's also fine if you don't. We're here if you need us," she said, glancing briefly at Heila who hovered uncertainly nearby. "Or we can leave you alone for a while. Whatever you need," she whispered.

For a few minutes, Talauia said nothing as soundless sobs wracked her body. She buried her face in Ashlynn's full bosom and her tears soaked the younger witch's tunic. It had been years since she last thought about her parents and she'd thought that the wounds had long healed over, but as she sat and wept into Ashlynn's embrace, she realized that the hurt had shrunk but it never truly went away.

"I'm sorry," Talauia said with a sniff as she pulled back from Ashlynn's tender embrace. "It was a long time, a very long time ago. I, I didn't mean to..."

"It's fine," Ashlynn said, blinking back the mist that threatened to overwhelm her vision. "I miss my parents too. Most days, I don't think about it and I can keep going. And then, something reminds me and... see?" Ashlynn said, wiping away the moisture collecting in the corners of her eyes. "You don't have to apologize for missing people you loved."

"Auntie, can I, can I ask you something?" Talauia asked, giving Ashlynn a deeply troubled look. "About the vampires, and... and about the Harbinger of death."

"You can always ask," Ashlynn said while she gestured at Heila and pointed at the pitcher of chilled, sweet tea sitting in the corner. Understanding immediately, the horned woman began pouring not only fresh cups of tea, but she also brought out chilled fruit and began slicing it into small pieces that were easy to nibble on.

"I may not be able to answer," Ashlynn added. "Nyrielle and I, we love each other very deeply and we're bound together," she explained. "But it's still only been a few months since we met and there's still so much about each other that we don't know."

"But, if she ever told you that, told you that you had to destroy a whole clan," the winged witch said, looking at Ashlynn with pleading eyes. "You wouldn't do it, would you? You wouldn't kill a whole clan because they were too, too good at what they do, would you?"

Suddenly, Ashlynn froze and Heila stumbled, nearly spilling the collection of cups and bowl of fruit she was carrying. Ever since coming to the Briar, and in fact, even before that, when they'd met Jacques, there had been a tension about Ashlynn's relationship with Nyrielle and about vampires in general.

At first, it had been easy to dismiss as something abstract and philosophical. After all, Nyrielle had told Ashlynn that the blood of a witch could restore a vampire to life. Such a miraculous thing was bound to create conflicts between vampires and witches in general, but there was never anything personal about it. Ashlynn had felt that time and getting to know each other as real people would smooth out any misunderstandings.

But now, thinking back, when she'd first talked to Amahle about the 'purpose' that vampires felt defined their existence, there had been a certain derision in the older witch's voice when she proudly proclaimed that nature had no desires, only people could care one way or another. To the elements, it didn't matter who was in power and who wasn't.

Looking at Talauia and the slight tremble in her lips when she asked the question, Ashlynn started to feel like this wasn't just a question of abstract philosophy for the Thistle Witch.

"I don't think it works that way for Nyrielle," Ashlynn said, choosing her words carefully. "For the longest time, she's dedicated herself to protecting her people in the Vale of Mists from humans. She knows that if humans break past her at the Vale of Mists or find other ways through the mountains, it will be a horrible tragedy for thousands of Eldritch people. She wants to stop that from happening," she explained.

"What if, what if one day, the humans became peaceful? What if they didn't want to exterminate all Eldritch people anymore and only fought normal wars with their neighbors." Talauia asked, refusing to let go of the question. "What if, what if humans weren't any better or worse than anyone else? Would you still destroy them all if Lady Nyrielle told you to?"

"No," Ashlynn said firmly. She couldn't imagine a world where Nyrielle wanted her to destroy an entire people without a good reason to do so but even she wanted to bring the Lothians to their knees for what Owain had done to her.

Ashlynn had come to accept that taking vengeance against a ruling family like the Lothians would cause untold amounts of misery for people who had nothing to do with their feud but failing to act would only create more misery for other people. No response was perfect and she could only do the best she could at any given moment and reduce the harm to innocents wherever she could.

Trying to answer hypotheticals about what she would do if this thing or that thing happened... It was too difficult to say what she would do when so many other things could change and so she shifted the conversation away from the hypothetical and toward things that were more factual.

"Is that what happened to your family?" Ashlynn asked in a softer tone. "Were vampires responsible for..." Her voice trailed off since she wasn't certain of the extent of what had happened to Talauia's family.

It didn't sound like the sort of thing Nyrielle would have done, but if she thought about it, there was another True Vampire that was known for wiping out whole populations and it was the very same vampire that Nyrielle's parents were descended from.

"Not just my family," Talauia said. "It was all of us, every single one of us, the whole Glimmerwing Clan that they said had to die. Father he," she started only to lose her voice as another set of sobs shook her petite frame.

"Here," Heila offered gently when the storm of barely suppressed sobs seemed to subside. "It's just sweet tea and chilled melon but..."

"Thank you," the winged witch said, taking a wedge of melon and sinking her pointed teeth into its juicy red flesh. A bit of juice dribbled down her chin, but Talauia didn't care as she let the sweet flavor and soft texture ground her in the present, pushing back on some of the pain she'd long kept bottled up in her chest.

"Did you know, did you know," Talauia finally said after devouring a second wedge of melon. "They used to say that there were no better hunters than the hunters of the Glimmerwing clan," she said with a proud smile that revealed her wickedly sharp teeth. "And they also called us the best assassins too."

"But nobody, nobody was ever a better assassin than my father," Talauia said in a tone that still contained a strong core of pride but this time was wrapped in a dark shroud of sorrow. "Nobody, nobody... until there was me."

Chapter 308: The Destruction of the Glimmerwing Clan

"My father," Talauia started haltingly. Her eyes were fixed on the ground, unable to meet the gazes of the people around her but in truth, as she sat there holding a cup of chilled sweet tea, her gaze was lost in the distant past.

"My father was the High Lord of the Endless Marsh. It's not really endless," she added as though it were an old reflex when describing her home. "It's just really, really big. It wasn't just the Glimmerwing Clan there either. The Scaled Clan, the Ancient Clan, even the Night Weaver and Mist Wraith clans lived there."

"But the Glimmerwing Clan was always at the top," she said in a tone that blended pride and deep sorrow. "All the way back in my great-great-grandfather's time, the family rules were to keep the peace by eliminating threats as soon as they became obvious."

"By eliminating threats," Ashlynn said as the pieces started to fall into place for her. "You mean killing people who might challenge your family for the position of High Lord?"

"Only outsiders, only outsiders who weren't part of the clan were killed before they could grow truly strong," the winged witch said. "There was no guarantee that my siblings or I would inherit my father's

crown. Anyone in the Glimmerwing Clan could compete for crown. Rich or poor, man or woman, none of that mattered. Once the contest of succession starts, anyone can compete. Only the best, the most lethal, could wear the crown of the Endless Marsh."

"What about people outside of the clan?" Ashlynn asked gently. "Was the 'contest of succession' open to them as well?"

"Of course, of course it was," Talauia said, swirling her sweet tea in her cup without drinking any of it. "But anyone who might win was dealt with before the competition."

Ashlynn nodded slowly as things became clearer. The Eldritch, in general, valued strength more than anything and challenges for lordship needed to be open to preserve the idea that the person currently ruling was genuinely the strongest. But, if their competition was never allowed to reach the stage, a lord could easily dominate 'less worthy' competitors and retain their crown on the basis that no one could defeat them.

"It's my fault," Talauia said. Tears began to flow again, dripping onto her hands and occasionally splashing into her tea before Ashlynn passed over a small handkerchief. "I was supposed to be next after Father," she explained.

"You don't know, you don't know how scary it was for people to be told a Glimmerwing assassin had been hired to kill them," the winged witch said. "The worst, worst, worst, worst of us, only failed to kill their targets one in ten times. Anyone who was that bad at assassination would be laughed at and told they should give up and reconsider life as a hunter of dangerous beasts instead of pretending they could hunt intelligent people."

"One in ten survived," Heila said, freezing in place with a wedge of bright red melon half way to her lips. "And you consider this to be bad? How successful was a good assassin?"

"The minimum standard was ninety-five in one hundred," Talauia said with a grim smile on her face. "My father only failed six times and he killed more than two hundred men. But I was better. I, I never failed. Not once."

"And that's why you think it was your fault?" Ashlynn asked gently when the winged witch fell into silence. "Because you were too good at what you did?"

"That's not it, that's not entirely it," the Thistle Witch said, squeezing her eyes shut against the painful memories until her whole body trembled and her wings began to vibrate. "Because I was so good, one of the vampires sent his progeny to collect me. They call him the Fangs of Death. He said that I was being wasted in the Endless Marsh and that I should put my talents to use for a greater purpose."

"The Fangs of Death?" Ashlynn said, blinking in confusion. She had been certain that the Glimmerwing clan had been attacked by Bardas, the Jaws of Death. Nyrielle's teacher choosing to be involved with a talented assassin made sense, but clearly she had rejected the offer or she would be a vampire now and not a witch. So how had this led to the destruction of her clan?

"He wanted me, wanted me in the wrong way" Talauia said softly. "Not just because I was a talented assassin but because I was an 'enchanted woman.' But I didn't want that. I wanted to inherit the Endless Marsh from my father. I wanted to be the next High Lady. That's why I worked so hard to be so good," she said, her shoulders shaking as she broke down in another wave of sobs.

"Now I understand," Ashlynn said, pulling Talauia into a tight embrace. "I understand why you're so weary about vampires who want to sink their fangs into someone who might be a little powerful and talented and why you all were so nervous about Mistress Nyrielle."

"But I don't understand," Heila said, blinking in confusion. "What happened after you said no, Tala? How did it turn into the death of your whole clan?"

"Because Shubnal, the Fangs of Death, still wants Talauia as his progeny," Ashlynn said as she gently stroked the winged witch's hair. "If he attacked her, she might die and then he would lose what he wants. Instead, I'm willing to bet that he suggested that Bardas do the dirty work."

"If Bardas destroyed her clan because they had grown 'too powerful', but he allowed Talauia to escape, then Shubnal could offer her a place of safety. By taking her in, he could keep her safe from 'the Jaws of Death', when really, all he had to do was ask Bardas to stop pursuing her and he likely would."

"You're saying he had her whole clan slaughtered, just to force her to become his progeny?" Heila said, her eyes going wide in horror. "But that, that's far too cruel. How could anyone be that cruel?"

"Because he doesn't feel anymore," Talauia said bitterly. "Because he doesn't know what cruelty or sorrow even is. He only knows what he wants. Since he wanted me, he would do whatever was 'logical' in order to obtain me."

It had taken her months of running, hiding, and striking back only when she was certain of her opportunity before Talauia had met the Mother of Thorns. It was only after she became the Thistle Witch that Amahle helped her to understand everything that the Fangs of Death had done to drive her into a corner.

Now, seeing Ashlynn become the Seneschal of the Harbinger of Death, the witches of the Briar had been deeply concerned not just that Nyrielle was using cruel methods to manipulate Ashlynn... but that the Fangs of Death would come for Talauia again. He might not be able to turn a witch into one of his progeny, but if Nyrielle taught him how to take a witch as his Seneschal...

If that ever happened, then perhaps even Amahle and the defenses of the Briar wouldn't be enough to keep Talauia safe from the powerful Great Lord.

Chapter 309: Feeling the Pressure

After Talauia's heavy revelations, Ashlynn put the rest of their planning session on hold. Everyone needed a bit of time to process and there wasn't a need to rush and arrive in Crystal Lake City by a specific time. Instead, Ashlynn took Talauia and Heila to one of Amahle's vegetable gardens so to prepare for the evening meal.

With the oppressive heat, no one other than Jacques wanted to spend much time standing over a hot stove to cook. Still, when they returned to Amahle's home to prepare for another family-style evening meal, Ashlynn felt like she had to put something special together for Talauia.

"You know, I think my friend Georg would love to cook for you," Ashlynn said as she carefully sliced prickly cucumbers into long ribbons before rolling them around a mixture of nuts and creamy cheese blended with tart berries. "Most people only care about how a thing tastes, but you care more about the texture of a dish. I think he'd find that very special."

"Extra crisp, crisp, or crunchy," Talauia said with a wide grin as she munched on a sweet pepper. "Doesn't matter what it is. Peppers, nuts, bones, it's all delightful once you crack into it," she said.

Getting back to basic chores helped to ground the Thistle Witch, and the close camaraderie of the family that had formed with Ashlynn and Amahle's covens helped soothe the sharp pangs of hurt that came with memories of the tragedy that brought her here.

Over dinner, Ashlynn explained their plans to Amahle. When she suggested that they hunt a Giant Thornback Alligator, however, the older witch surprised Ashlynn with a fierce rejection.

"I'm not sure why y'all are so eager to hunt the most dangerous of beasts in the Briar, darling," Amahle said, tapping the floor with one of her spider-like limbs for emphasis as she spoke. "Perhaps it's my fault for keeping everything as safe as we have here by the house, but you've never fought any creatures of the Briar. You're biting off too much more than you can chew with that one."

"It's my fault," Ashlynn said instantly. "I thought that..."

"I ain't blaming you, darling," Amahle said quickly before Ashlynn could go any further. "I just realized, y'all haven't hunted anything in the Briar since you got here, but this whole time, you've had one of us around you, keeping all the critters away."

"Dat's de safest way, ain't it, maman?" Jacques chimed while he ladled another portion of shrimp soup into his bowl. He still wasn't sure that he believed Ashlynn that there were giant shrimp the size of a person's palm that could be found in the sea, but even if the ones swimming in the waterways of the Briar weren't that large, he more than made up for the lack of size with the quantity of shrimp he was able to lure into his nets.

"Safest isn't always the best, sugar," Amahle said. Her crimson eyes flashed as she gave both Ashlynn and Heila a measuring look, evaluating their progress over the past several weeks.

Ashlynn was always troublesome for her to assess. Her bond with Nyrielle gave her strengths and capabilities that most witches lacked and many of those strengths covered for the vulnerabilities most witches had. Few witches of the forest moved with any kind of speed, yet Ashlynn possessed a vampire's quickness, making her just as fast or even faster than Talauia.

Heila was much easier for the Mother of Thorns to gauge. Despite the abnormalities of her trial, she held a seed of witchcraft harvested from an Ancient Willow, and that allowed her to make rapid progress compared to a witch with a more conventionally grown seed. She might not reach heights that

were any greater than she would have with a safer approach, but whatever her limits were, she would reach them much more quickly than other witches would.

"This isn't really about creating one potion or another, is it sister?" Amahle finally asked after an extended silence. "You were training to fight with Jacques while Heila took her trial. She insisted on becoming a witch who could fight by your side instead of being a passive healer. Tell me, darling," she said.

"What has you so thirsty for blood?" Amahle asked. "I know you've got a powerful desire to see your husband dead, but that can't have twisted you into a maniac who delights in violence and murder. So what is it?"

"Nothing gets past my big sister, does it?" Ashlynn said as she set down her utensils to focus on Amahle. "I've spoken with Heila about the visions we experienced during the trials we each faced. We were both confronted with visions of the upcoming war with the Lothians. Visions that... didn't end well for us."

"I told you, didn't I, Auntie?" Jacques said, raising a brow at Ashlynn. "De trees, she pulls on your memories and your fears to show you de worst tings you can tink of. Dey ain't real, dey ain't predictions or prophecies. Dey's jus' nightmares."

"I know it was a nightmare," Heila said. Her right hand clutched her spoon like she was ready to stab someone with it and her cloven hoof tapped the floor as she fought to banish memories of those terrible visions from her mind. "We both know that they weren't real. People didn't act like they really would in those visions. They were all twisted up."

"But that doesn't mean there isn't a core of truth in them," Ashlynn said as she gave her diminutive friend a brief, reassuring squeeze. "The truth is that we need to be prepared to face a greater threat than the Vale of Mists has faced in generations. This won't be one of their tame, generational wars. This time, it's a Holy War with the support of the Church and soldiers from across the sea coming to make their fortunes in conquest. We have to be ready."

"And y'all want to test yourselves to see how ready you truly are," Amahle said with a heavy sigh. "Part of me wants to confine you to harvesting herbs in the deep water region of the Briar. You aren't supposed to be practicing your fighting, you're supposed to be practicing your concocting and then taking a vacation."

"I've half a mind to deny you healing magic if you get hurt out there with this foolishness," she said, giving both young women a sharp look. "How are you supposed to enjoy a vacation if you're getting all banged up before it even starts? Little Sister, I know you're strong and sturdy as Lady Nyrielle's Seneschal but don't you go acting like little Heila will heal as quickly as you will."

Amahle's words landed on both women like a bucket of cold water. Ashlynn hung her head in embarrassment while Heila hung hers in shame that she was holding her friend back. Neither of them had the strength to meet Amahle's crimson gaze at the moment.

"Maman," Jacques said as he looked between Ashlynn and the Mother of Thorns. "Auntie Ashlynn, she really is something else. I ain't sayin' she can face a Giant Thronback Alligator," he added quickly, holding up his hands before Amahle could say anything.

"But she's a fierce one, non?" Jacques added with a nod in Ashlynn's direction. "And she's capable of some surprising strength. She cracked my ribs wit' her bare hands de other day and we was jus' practicing a bit. If she had her sword wit' her, it might not have been so even between us."

"Jacques, sugar, it's not that I'm unaware of that," Amahle said gently. "But y'all just became family," she said, turning to look at the sheepish pair from the Vale of Mists. "Is this what the constant fighting has done to the folks out there in the Vale? Y'all are so eager to rush off to your deaths I'd have thought you were young men."

"I'm sorry," Ashlynn said, looking up to meet Amahle's crimson gaze. "You're right. We haven't been here for very long and we're taking on too much, too soon."

"Good that you know," Amahle said with a sharp nod. "Since you can admit to it, I'll give you permission to do a little bit of hunting on your foraging trip, but only a little bit," she said, tapping the table with the sharp point of a spider-like limb for emphasis. "Since he's practiced with you, you take Jacques along as well. All four of you will go on this trip."

"Jacques, honey, you have to keep them safe," Amahle said. "You don't need to hunt anything for them, just be there to ward off anything that's bigger than a copper-bellied moccasin. Anything smaller than that, you let them learn what it's like to confront the lesser dangers of the Briar," she said firmly.

"And Little Sister," the older witch added. "I know Jacques thinks that you're more than his match with a sword, but darling, you need to leave it behind on this trip. Show me what you can do as the Mother of Trees, not what you can do as Lady Nyrielle's Seneschal. Some things, I know you can't do nothing about, but as much as you can, you go out there to fight like a witch."

Ashlynn's eyes widened at Amahle's decision and a grin appeared on both her and Heila's faces as they looked at each other before turning their grinning faces back to the Mother of Thorns.

"I understand. Thank you, big sister," Ashlynn said with genuine feelings. She hadn't realized how much pressure she'd been putting on herself until Amahle called her out for it, but the way the older woman had handled her, both showing her the error of her ways and giving ground on what she hoped to do... It reminded her of how she'd handled her own younger sister growing up.

It wasn't until this moment, however, that she realized just how good it felt to have a 'big sister' looking out for her. Now all she had to do was prove to both herself and to Amahle that the older woman's trust in her wasn't misplaced.

Chapter 310: The Deep Water Region

With changes to their plans, Ashlynn and her companions spent an entire day on preparations before setting out for the Deep Water region of the Briar. Though the actual planning didn't take more than a few hours, there was another component of preparation that Talauia declared vital for Ashlynn and Heila.

"You know, you know, without wings, it's very dangerous to be in the Deep Water region. Falling in the water is as good as falling to your death. It doesn't need to be a Giant Thornback Alligator to be dangerous and the water snakes will swarm anything that sinks beneath the surface so you shouldn't, absolutely shouldn't let yourself fall in."

"So, either we stay on the boat, or we stay on the island we're on," Ashlynn said with a nod. "But no wading into the water. Are there places that suddenly drop off underwater that make it so dangerous?"

Sailors approaching Blackwell City had the opposite problem when navigating into the harbor. Without good charts, a ship could find itself running aground on a sandbar hidden beneath the waves or other places where the water suddenly became much, much shallower than they thought.

In the swamp of the Briar, however, the boats were all flat-bottomed and wide so they could have a very shallow draft. In many places, the water was so shallow that if Ashlynn had ever chosen to wade from one island to another in the complex waterways, she wouldn't have sank deeper than her hips. From that perspective, a sudden dropoff was surely just as dangerous in the Briar as sudden shallows were off the coast of Blackwell County.

"If there are, if there are then it doesn't matter," Talauia said. "In the Deep Water region, the water is so deep that our poles don't touch the bottom anymore. I can just fly if I don't need to carry much but with all of us, we'll have to use oars. But if you fall in the water and one of the snakes or something else gets a hold of you, they'll pull you down deep quicker than you can struggle."

"You know, I wasn't jealous when Mistress Nyrielle showed me her wings because she always scooped me up in her arms like a princess and carried me away," Ashlynn teased. "But, Tala, you're starting to make me wish I had wings of my own."

"Don't you know sorcery to walk on air, my lady?" Heila asked, blinking at Ashlynn in surprise.

"I do," Ashlynn admitted awkwardly. "But, since I'm leaving my sword behind, isn't it cheating if I rely on Mistwalker Dance when we're hunting? Big sister wants me to fight like a witch."

"It's fine, it's fine," Talauia said with a wide toothy grin. "If you can learn to draw on the energy of the world for your Mistwalker Dance then it's better, but it's fine if it's just sorcery. But cousin Heila, I have a different one for you."

"For me?" Heila said, blinking in surprise. "What kind of witchcraft do you have for me?"

"It's called 'Floating Leaf Steps'," Talauia said. "It's special, extra special for you since the Willow is a water tree. You can step on the water like you were just the leaf of a tree. But if you lose your concentration while you're doing it..."

"Then I'll sink like a stone," Heila said, shuddering at the thought. "Should I really rely on something like this that I've just learned? If I don't know it, then I won't be tempted to try it."

"You have to learn it," Ashlynn said firmly. "But I'll learn it with you, even though I'm not very good at water magic. Maybe you won't be able to rely on it, but if there's an emergency, isn't it better to know it and try, even if you have a chance of failing? Not knowing is as good as failing without trying and I don't want to see you get hurt because you didn't have another option."

"Oh," Heila said, frowning in thought as she considered it from Ashlynn's perspective. "Then, I guess you're right. I'll learn it," she said with a determined nod.

Saying it was one thing, but actually learning it was something else. The incantation itself was simple, only two lines, just a handful of words. Within an hour of learning, both Heila and Ashlynn could dash across the shallow waters of the Briar near Amahle's gardens without so much as getting their feet wet.

It was when Talauia added fighting to the running across the water that things quickly fell apart. Needing to pay attention to the Thistle Witch as she lobbed over-ripe vegetables at them from the air or flew beside them to deliver a precisely timed shove proved more than either woman could handle.

By the time their preparations were complete, both Ashlynn and Heila had fallen into the water more times than either cared to count and the silty soil from the bottom of the waterways clung to their clothing, skin, and even hair as if to remind them how many times they'd failed to keep their concentration. They'd certainly made improvements, but neither woman harbored any illusions that they would be walking on water while fighting off hordes of enemies any time soon.

"I'm glad Aunt Amahle told us we weren't ready for the Giant Thornback Alligator," Heila said that evening as she scrubbed away at the silt in her hair. "Like this, I'd probably just fall in its jaws."

"We'll get there soon enough," Ashlynn said confidently from the washbasin next to Heila. She'd spent a good portion of the afternoon thinking about how she would use her Mistwalker Dance to move and fight in the Deep Water region and a plan was beginning to come together in her mind.

"I think that our goal should be to lure things to us on dry land. Or maybe even to fight the creatures that climb into the trees," Ashlynn suggested. "But after today, I'm willing to accept it if we're unsuccessful in hunting any beasts. There are still rare herbs to collect in the Deep Water region. Let's treat our hunt as something extra instead of our main goal. We can always try hunting again in a month or two."

The plan worked for both women, and both Talauia and Jacques were relieved that Ashlynn and Heila were willing to take several steps back in light of their still-developing abilities. Both of them were certain to be powerful witches one day, but no matter how soon that day would arrive, it clearly hadn't come yet.

In the morning, the quartet of witches ventured out in one of the largest boats in Amahle's collection. This one, while it was just as wide as most of the others, was more than three times as long, and it had been filled with several grass baskets to carry back the herbs they harvested along with any beasts they managed to slay.

As they exited the familiar waterways near Amahle's home, an anticipatory silence fell over the group while everyone strained their senses for the slightest sign that something might disturb them. In order to allow ample opportunities for Ashlynn and Heila to hunt their prey, both witches from Amahle's coven had drawn their thorny auras in tight, allowing fish and other creatures to swim directly under their boat, even brushing up against it without the slightest response.

Finally, after close to a quarter of an hour of navigating through unfamiliar waterways, Jacques put away the familiar pole and retrieved a long, wide paddle to begin rowing their boat into the Deep Water region.

All around them, massive cypress trees rose from the murky depths like the spires of a drowned city, their mighty trunks vanishing into darkness beneath the water's surface while their branches wove together far overhead to create a canopy that left the waterways in perpetual twilight. Clusters of gnarled cypress knees stood above the water like miniature islands that insects and small birds clung to while searching for food in the dim waterway.

The thick canopy and looming trunks blocked even the slightest breeze, leaving the air not only oppressively hot and humid but as still as the inside of a tomb. The surface of the water was like black glass, disturbed only by the ripples radiating out from their boat and the occasional movement of something beneath the surface of the water. Whatever it was that disturbed the stillness, Ashlynn only ever glimpsed it out of the corner of her eye before it vanished beneath the surface again.

"Dere," Jacques said quietly, holding the paddle in his hands and pointing ahead with a scaly claw. In the distance, the faint greenish-blue glow of witch-moss could be seen in the dark canopy above along with the faint rustle of something moving through the branches of the canopy.

"De herbs we want, dey all grow in places de witch-moss glows," he whispered. "But where de witch-moss glows, something hungry always follows..."