

The Vampire 341

Chapter 341: Subduing Giants

"Snow Flurry Steps," Heila whispered as soon as the explosion of snow erupted from the small sword at her hip.

She'd barely had time to practice the technique since coming to High Fen City and receiving the weapon from Artificer Erkembalt but the spell she'd crafted to use with her new weapon wasn't very different from the Mistwalker Dance used by the vampires of the Vale of Mists. For a moment, Heila was all but weightless as she threw herself into the swirling maelstrom of snow, drifting with the wind and treating the snowflakes like solid ground she could spring off of.

By the time the Tuscans arrived at the place she had been standing, the Willow Witch had already circled around behind them and begun her next attack. She knew she wouldn't have much time, but all she needed were a few seconds as she began to speak.

"By willow's peace and evening's sigh,

Let heavy lids now close each eye.

Through branches swaying, soft and slow,

To dreamland's depths now shall you go."

The swirling winds of the snowstorm carried her voice like snowflakes on a breeze, wrapping it around the Tuscans like a heavy winter blanket. The Tuscans, however, weren't fools and they weren't as disorganized by the snow as many would have been.

"Hunters, form circle!" Ipiktok shouted, holding his spear high in the air. Instantly, the men around him gathered into a tight formation, standing shoulder to shoulder with their weapons facing outward.

"Clear the air!" The Tuscan leader roared, raising his trunk in the air and taking a deep breath to gather his energy. Moments later, a loud -BRRRUUUU HUUUUUMMMM PFFFFFFFF- split the air as all ten

Tuscan hunters let loose not only a powerful trumpet blast, but powerful sorcery that rippled visibly through the air, stilling the wind and knocking the swirling snowflakes from the air.

In the stands, the crowd covered their ears and small children broke out in distressed cries as the noise assaulted their ears. Several people shrank back from the haunting sound in fear and a few even tumbled from their seats when they felt the impact of the sound washing over their bodies like a physical blow.

At the far end of the arena, Heila's smiling figure was revealed, standing on the ground near the iron gate that the Tuscans had entered from. The Tuscans had succeeded in dispelling her snowstorm, but by using sorcery to do so, they'd weakened themselves, losing much of their ability to resist her spell of sleep.

One by one, the lumbering giants lowered their trunks as their eyelids grew heavy. Weapons clattered to the ground, falling from fingers too tired to hold them moments before several of the powerful warriors swayed on their feet and crashed face-first onto the snow-covered ground of the arena.

-THUD- -THUD- -THUD- -THUD- -THUD- -THUD-

The earth shook and seats in the arena rattled as six powerful Tuscan hunters dropped like felled trees, falling to the ground where they lay snoring loudly into the rapidly melting snow.

In High Lady Erna's box, Nereida and her friends whooped with delight, clapping their hands and pointing excitedly at the fallen warriors.

"Just look at that! Six of them, she defeated six of them in an instant!" Nereida said with a grin so wide that it completely revealed her venomous fangs. "She'll be done with them before we finish our snacks!"

"Not that easy, really, really not that easy," Talauia said, perching at the edge of her seat. Her multifaceted amethyst eyes tracked every motion on the arena sands but more than that, they revealed to her just how much energy Heila had used to subdue those six men.

"But if she got six with one spell," the serpentine woman said, confused by why not only the normally animated Talauia but the supremely confident Mother of Trees looked concerned. "She, she should be able to win easily now, shouldn't she?"

"I don't know," Ashlynn said softly. "The arena is the worst place she could possibly fight. Nothing grows on the sands there. Heila is very strong but she isn't very versatile. In the Briar or the Vale of Mists, she'd be unstoppable against so few men, but here..."

"In the arena," High Lady Erna said, leaning forward with a predatory gleam in her eyes. "A person can only rely on their own strength. There is no strength here for a witch to borrow. For her to overcome six men at once, just how much of her energy did she have to expend?"

"Most of it," Ashlynn said nervously. Heila knew better than to exhaust herself but she was pushing things to use her spell of sleep on all of them. If she'd only attempted to lull five of them to sleep, it would only have taken a third of the energy and she likely would have succeeded on at least four out of five. By pushing for everyone, she had achieved greater results but at a much higher cost.

"Now is when the real contest begins," Erna said, holding up a squirming rodent and dropping it into her mouth. She took a single bite to release the rich, fatty flavors of the specially prepared rodent before swallowing it whole and returning her attention to the battle below.

Ipiktok was a disciplined commander and he wasn't about to let the loss of more than half of his soldiers bring him to an easy defeat, especially when the stunned men were merely asleep. It was obvious, however, that this witch was slippery and a simple charge would be all but useless.

"Iron shot!" Ipiktok shouted, shouldering his spear and retrieving a long loop of reinforced leather. From a pouch at his waist, he retrieved a smooth iron ball. The iron ball was roughly the size of a plum, and when Ipiktok placed it into his sling and began to spin the weapon through the air it made a terrifyingly loud low-pitched hum. The three men still standing beside him copied his movements and soon the air was filled with the sounds of whirling slings.

Heila's confident smile vanished in an instant, replaced by a look of grim determination as she lowered the brim of her War Hat. Her mind worked rapidly as she realized that these men, unlike the bloodthirsty trophy hunters she'd seen in the High Pass, fought more like the professional soldiers of the Vale of Mists than any of the gladiators she'd faced so far.

These me, she acknowledged privately, were worthy of respect...and that only made it harder to find a way to subdue them without killing them.

"Don't let her speak," Ipiktok commanded as he let an iron ball fly toward the Willow Witch at the far end of the arena. The ball of iron split the air with a sound like a crack of thunder before slamming into the stone wall behind Heila, missing her by mere inches. Fragments of shattered stone fell to the ground in a clatter as the iron shot buried itself several inches deep in the arena wall. An instant later, another ball dropped into his sling, and the hum of four slings again filled the air.

"Advance with me," Ipiktok said, striding forward with slow, lumbering steps that shook the sands of the arena. "Just like hunting rabbits," he added with a dark smile. All they had to do now was keep her boxed in so she couldn't flee until they were close enough to lay hands on her. Once they were close enough, the witch was all but doomed!

Chapter 342: A Gift From A Friend

In the stands, the crowd shouted and cheered as the Tuscans advanced mercilessly toward the cornered witch.

Certainly, a majority of the common people wanted to see Heila overcome impossible odds yet again. Already, she had defeated forty men in a series of increasingly lopsided matches that pitted some of the most capable of High Fen City's gladiators against the witch from the Vale of Mists.

Only the most revered champions had refused to take to the sands, believing it would stain their honor to participate in a match that was so unfavorable to their opponent, though a few of them had begun to hope that Heila might entertain a proper challenge for single combat if she survived this ordeal.

A small number of residents in High Fen City had taken the chance to bet against the outsider who had, in their minds, humiliated many of the city's most famed gladiators. Seeing Ipiktok's unrelenting advance, they raised their voices and called out for blood!

"Spill her blood!"

"Crush the witch!"

"Tuscan! Tuscan! Tuscan!"

In his private box, sweat poured from Yotsun's brow as the silver-haired merchant gripped the railing with white knuckles. He had already spent more on these Tuscan warriors than he had spent on everyone else he hired to take down the diminutive witch and seeing six of them fall without so much as swinging a weapon made his blood boil and his stomach churn.

"What's the matter, old friend," a serpentine merchant wearing expensive silks said as he slapped the shorter, horned merchant on the shoulder. "It couldn't be that you think your mercenaries will lose, could it? Weren't you just boasting to us that you'd treat everyone else in this box to a revitalizing potion brewed by 'your witch' once these Tuscans defeated her?"

"Shut up, Beilan," Yotsun spat. "Don't think I haven't noticed your wife getting cozy with the witches in High Lady Erna's private box. When I win, there won't be any potions waiting for you."

"Ha ha ha ha ha," the serpentine merchant laughed at the dark look on his rival's face. "I never expected to receive anything from you, old goat. But maybe when this is all over you can..."

-CRACK-

An explosive sound split the air interrupting their exchange of barbed pleasantries as the situation in the arena changed yet again.

Blood flowed in a wide rivulet down Heila's face, seeping from a wound hidden by the War Hat. Without the hat's strong defense, protecting her as well as a helmet would have, the impact of the iron shot might have shattered one of her horns and certainly would have knocked her senseless.

Four other iron balls had already embedded themselves in the stone wall behind her as the advancing Tuscans coordinated their attacks, forcing her into a position where she was off-balance and unable to dodge out of the way.

"Damn it," she cursed, running a finger along the band of her War Hat and retrieving one of the gifts that Jacques had bestowed on her. The seedpod taken from the Bloody Sandbox Tree was a precious

item and not one that could be easily replaced. He'd harvested more than a dozen for her before they left the Briar, bemoaning the fact that he couldn't accompany them on their journey.

Heila had intended to save them all for the upcoming war with the Lothians, but now that she found herself all but surrounded by the advancing Tuscans, she reached for her most unlikely friend's gift without hesitation.

"A gift from a friend," she taunted the advancing Tuscans as she hurled the palm-sized fruit of the Bloody Sandbox Tree.

"Cover!" Ipiktok shouted, dropping to one knee and covering his head with his arms as he felt a dangerous surge of magic from the strange cluster of seeds.

An instant later, while his companions were still in the midst of responding to his orders, dropping their slings to protect themselves, the seed pod tore itself apart in a violent explosion. There was no light or burst of flame, but a lurid red aura spilled from the fruit leaving a dozen crimson streaks hanging in the air as the shrapnel of the seedpod tore through the thick fur of the Tuscans, embedding themselves deep in their flesh.

Had it been a normal seedpod from a sandbox tree, even one empowered by the notoriously prickly Sandbox Witch, that would have been an end to it. The wounds inflicted were grievous but hardly life-threatening. This seedpod, however, had been taken from a Sandbox tree deep in the Briar, one that had been nurtured by decades of blood offerings, first from the Mother of Thorns and then from the Sandbox Witch who bore one of its seeds as his seed of witchcraft.

-BRRREEEEEEE-

The wail of injured Tuscans split the air, once again driving the crowd to cover their ears as the trumpet blast was higher in pitch than any they'd heard from the towering giants before. Ipiktok staggered to his feet, retrieving his spear and glaring at Heila with murderous hatred as he clutched the bloody wound on his side where two of the seeds had embedded themselves in his flesh. A second later, however, that murderous glare trembled, his eyes widening as horror gripped him.

"What, what did you do to us, witch!" Ipiktok shouted, unable to suppress the tremble in his voice.
"What, what was that?"

"A gift from the Sandbox Witch," Heila said, clutching her head as silvery-green light swirled around her hand, sealing the wound and stopping the flow of blood as she regained her composure.

"Surrender now," she said, her voice growing loud enough for the crowd in the arena to hear.
"Surrender now," she repeated. "And I'll save your lives. Refuse my offer and you'll die within the hour."

"Leader," one of the Tuscans said with a pained look on his face. "That thing... it, it's moving," he said, clutching at his bleeding leg as his thick fingers poked at the wound, desperate to stop the advance of the burrowing seed.

"It's called a Heart Seeker Seed," Heila explained, using a trace of wind energy to carry her voice to the entire arena. "It's a creation of the Sandbox Witch. The seeds in your flesh will dig deeper and deeper into your body until they can 'plant' themselves in your heart. When you die, they will use your body as nourishment to grow a new Bloody Sandbox Tree wherever you fall."

In the stands, a hush had fallen over the crowd as they heard Heila's description of the terrifying weapon. Several looked at the wounded Tuscans with gazes filled with pity. Perhaps the men were still strong enough to fight. With the wound that the Willow Witch had already suffered, they might even be able to defeat her. But what kind of victory would it be if they died less than an hour later? Even though they could still fight, what was the point if they killed the only person who could heal them?

"Defeat her!" Yotsun shouted from his private box. His small fists pounded on the railing as strained his voice to make himself heard. "If you defeat her, she must enter my service! I will command her to heal you, so just defeat her now!"

"You're a smart man," Heila said, looking up at the leader of the Tuscans. "You could still fight me. You're not dead yet," she acknowledged. Slowly, she drew the small sword at her hip, filling it with just enough energy for the crystalline blade carved from Frost Walker horn to grow a brilliant white. "But if I have to expend my energy to fight you, will I still have enough left to heal you in time?"

"Right now, I can remove those seeds from all of you," Heila promised, meeting wide-eyed gazes of each of the wounded Tuscans. "The seeds haven't burrowed too deeply yet. I still have strength to fight, or to heal. Or you can fight me. Maybe you'll win," she added, lowering her head enough to hide her eyes from the men under the wide brim of her War Hat. "Maybe you won't. Either way, if we fight, you'll probably die."

"Leader," the man clutching his leg said. "This isn't how I want to die, but if you order it, I will fight to my last breath."

"Not every fight is worth winning," Ipiktok said with a shake of his shaggy head. "Perhaps, if we fight for this little witch for a few years, we'll be even stronger when we return home. A hunter doesn't die pointless deaths, he consumes his prey to grow stronger and he never fights battles he knows he cannot win."

"There is no shame in this," the Tuscan said as he bowed his head and touched the tip of his trunk to the ground in an oddly formal gesture of subservience. "We are defeated, Willow Witch. And we wish you victory in the coming days so we may grow stronger under your banner."

"Damn it, you feckless sell swords!" Yotsun shouted, cursing the Tuscan mercenaries and seven generations of their ancestors while he was at it.

Unfortunately, the cheers of the arena were so overwhelming that no one, not even the other merchants in the private box with him, could hear his curses. Everyone was too busy cheering the intense battle that marked the Willow Witch's fifth consecutive victory over ten times as many foes.

Meanwhile, several people began to look at the fuming merchant with curious gazes, wondering what else he could produce at this point that would pose a threat to the diminutive witch who seemed like an unstoppable force unleashed in the arena.

Chapter 343: Rumors

Four days since Heila's crushing victory over the Tuscan warriors, rumors once again swept through High Fen City, this time with even greater fervor than the arrival of the Mother of Trees and her unbeatable Willow Witch.

By now, everyone had forgotten the rumors that had painted the noble and refined Mother of Trees as a pauper from the impoverished Vale of Mists. It was as clear as the bright blue autumn sky to anyone with eyes in the arena that this human witch was a woman of grace, elegance, and strength that no one could fathom.

Never before had the people of High Fen City seen the strength of a witch on display in their sacred arena and now they finally knew why. Witches had nothing to fear from the arena's challenges, rather, there was little there that could challenge them

With Heila's final victory feeling increasingly assured, people turned their attention to the latest rumor circulating in the busy markets and the shaded parks. Farmers from the outlying villages had already brought word of a powerful force on the march. Hundreds of soldiers, no, thousands, no, tens of thousands of soldiers, all marching under the banner of an Eldritch Lord that no one recognized.

"A hundred thousand strong, and not a soldier less," an apple seller confidently told the young women gathered at his stall as he filled a sack for them. "They say it's just an honor guard for the lord that's come to challenge High Lady Erna to a duel in the arena. Mark my words, by winter, we may be tithing to a new High Lord, or even a Great Lord!"

"I heard that the Golden Eyed Clan marches at the head of a great army," an excited voice said in a small cafe elsewhere in the city. "They say that they're refugees. A motley bunch of refugees who escaped the destruction of High Lord Hamdi's Tangled Tower. They're coming here to beg High Lady Erna to take them in."

"Hush, none of that here," a worried-looking shopkeeper said as he poured fresh mulled cider for the pair of young men gossiping at a small table in the corner of the cafe. "What if it's true, eh? You think you're strong enough to fight off High Lord Hamdi's men if they hear you've been talking down on them? Even a starving wolf can kill a rabbit and what are you but a juicy rabbit to the likes of them?"

"I'm no rabbit," the young man from the clan of painted masks protested. "I'll be sixteen come spring and I'm already enrolled in the Crimson Blade Academy. I'll be a gladiator on the sands in two year's time!"

"Sure, a gladiator in two years, but a rabbit today," the shopkeeper said. "So mind your tongue. Besides," he added, leaning in close and giving the young man a conspiratorial wink. "Have you forgotten who has been keeping our High Lady Erna company in the arena lately? I hear that Her Dominion Ashlynn has called up the rest of her coven from across the land and she's just waiting for them to gather here before she returns to the Vale of Mists..."

Some rumors were more wildly exaggerated than others, and the only people who knew the truth weren't saying anything, or at least, they weren't saying anything to the common folk.

Rumors of an impending attack died almost instantly when soldiers and staff from High Lady Erna's palace assembled in force near the city's North Gate and all along the thoroughfares leading from the gate to the palace.

The streets were swept clean and vendors with carts on the street were ordered to move their business to a side street or close for the day. Velvet ropes in rich, royal purple were hung at intersections, blocking people from entering the larger street and stone-faced soldiers took up positions to keep back the growing crowd as onlookers gathered to see what the fuss was about.

People still didn't know who was coming to their city, but one thing was clear. Whoever this esteemed visitor was, they were being welcomed with open arms. The only question in the minds of the more politically savvy people in the city was whether those open arms concealed a knife for the visitor's back or not.

After all, just because a person was greeted with great pomp and circumstance didn't mean they were a welcome visitor, and when you thought about it, what kind of welcome visitor arrived with an entire army at their back?

When the sun slipped below the western horizon, and still no one had arrived, some people began to mutter, wondering if the esteemed visitor was trying to deliberately snub the people of High Fen City by dragging out their arrival until the last minute. Others, however, remembered the rumors from a day or two prior, when people spoke of the defeated forces of High Lord Hamdi.

"I heard it from my cousin's husband who's a soldier at the east gate," an animated old man said in hushed tones to the disbelieving people around him. "High Lord Hamdi isn't just part of the Golden Eyed Clan, he's a vampire who's ruled the Tangled Wood for centuries. The people who are coming here, they're his defeated progeny. That's why they won't arrive until after dark. They're vampires!"

"Enough with your vampire stories," a nearby neighbor said with a derisive snort. "You've been on and on about vampires ever since the Blood Princess visited at the end of spring. You've never been within ten thousand paces of a vampire and you never will!"

"Oh? Then why do you think they're getting here so late if they aren't vampires?" The old man said, using a well-worn cane to prod at his younger companion. "If they were coming tomorrow, High Lady Erna wouldn't have blocked the road today. So why are they so late if they're not vampires?"

"It could be anything," the younger man said, crossing his arms and refusing to back down. "A carriage with a broken axle. A washed-out bridge across one of the canals. There are perfectly ordinary explanations for these things that don't involve centuries-old vampires risking days of sunlight to travel from their domains to High Fen City."

"Sure, sure," the old man said. "But then... THEY'RE HERE! THEY'RE HERE!" Whatever he'd been planning to say was forgotten as he cried out in excitement, pointing at a nearby hill to the north.

From the streets of High Fen City, it looked as if the entire hill had caught fire. The light to the north grew brighter and brighter as members of the Glass Eyed Clan pointed out individual torches and lanterns clustering together before the entire mass of flame began to stretch and flow down the hill toward the North Gate.

The river of flame seemed endless, stretching for half a league before anyone saw the end of it as it snaked its way to the city. Faintly, those in the crowd with keen senses could hear the clatter of horses hooves on the cobblestone road and mingled with that sound, the deep, steady beat of drums and the steady march of boots.

Conversation among the people stilled to a whisper as everyone craned their necks out as far as they could, leaning over the velvet ropes and staring toward the North Gate, each of them hoping to be the first to witness the arrival of their mysterious guest...

Chapter 344: A Show Of Strength (Part One)

The sounds of the approaching army grew louder and louder until everyone in the northern districts of High Fen City could hear the steady beat of drums and the clinking of armor as soldiers marched toward the city. The glow from more than a thousand torches and lanterns lit the sky and dozens of wagons trundled across the canal bridges outside the city gates.

"Look, look! The Golden Eyed Clan," an excited young man from the Glass Eyed Clan shouted as he strained against the ropes, hoping for a better view of the approaching army. His sinuous neck stretched out far enough that one of the stone-faced soldiers from the palace rapped him on the back of the head with a mailed gauntlet before jerking a thumb in the direction of the side street the boy was standing in.

"Hey, look," a shorter boy from the Clan of Painted Masks said, tugging at his taller companion's tunic. "Look at the man leading them, the one with the pure white fur! He must be seven feet tall. Do you think he's High Lord Hamdi?"

"High Lords don't walk when others ride," a wizened, serpentine woman said from behind the young men who were jostling for a better view. She might never have seen another High Lord in person but when had anyone ever seen High Lady Erna slithering along on her own tail while others rode horses or stayed in carriages? The notion was preposterous!

"But he shouldn't be anyone weak," she added. "He might even challenge our arena champions."

After decades of watching fights in the arena, she knew strength when she saw it. More than that, her flickering tongue could all but taste the aura of blood that clung to the white-furred lupine man at the head of a long column of soldiers. Only champions who had slaughtered countless foes in the arena possessed the aura that this man did, so whoever he was, he couldn't be unimportant.

At the head of the column, Savis trotted forward briskly, stopping just outside the walls and drawing a deep breath. The words he was about to speak burned in his chest like the flames of the cursed Inquisitor and his tail hung limp with shame but there was nothing he could do about the position he found himself in. Now, he could only do as he'd been ordered to in the hopes that his obedience could purchase salvation for his sire.

"People of High Fen City," Savis roared in a voice so loud that it could be heard all the way to the palace gates deep within the city. "I am Savis, Eldest Progeny of High Lord Hamdi of the Tangled Wood, Slayer of Garibor and Talshafan, called the White Fang of the Tangled Wood!"

"What business do you have in High Fen City, Savis of the Tangled Wood?" The answering call from the guardsmen at the gate lacked the strength of Savis' powerful sorcery but it was still clear and resounding to all the gathered common folk pressing against the ropes.

"Today, this defeated dog serves as herald for the woman who toppled the Tangled Tower," Savis answered. His fur bristled with barely suppressed rage, but he had little choice in the matter. Lady Nyrielle's instructions had been clear, and this was hardly the first time she'd sent him out to serve as a visible symbol of the fate that awaited those who thought themselves stronger than the youngest True Vampire.

"Lady Nyrielle, Eldritch Lady of the Vale of Mists, called the Blood Princess of the Arena, Her Eternity the Harbinger of Death has come to visit her former student, High Lady Erna of the High Fen, and to secure passage for her army to return to the Vale of Mists," Savis said formally.

Behind him, Nyrielle's army continued to advance, showing no sign that they intended to slow for the gates that currently barred their way. Inside the gatehouse, however, several of the workers were too stunned by what they'd heard to notice their leader waving at them to open the gates.

"Did he say that Lady Nyrielle toppled the Tangled Tower?" one man said as he stared out the narrow windows of the gatehouse at the advancing army. "Then, are these all the men who are left from High Lord Hamdi's Black Wolf Brigade?"

"Shush, don't use her name so casually!" Another man scolded. "You heard what Master Savis called her! She's 'Her Eternity' now."

"She might be 'Her Eternity' but she'll always be our Blood Princess," the men's leader said proudly moments before his hands grabbed both slack-jawed men by the necks and shook them fiercely. "And you lot need to raise the gates to welcome her home!"

When the gates shuddered open, Savis stood perfectly still for a moment as he stilled his heart and fixed his gaze on the silvery crescent moon hanging high in the sky. Then, with an ear-piercing howl, he vented all of his rage and shame as he called out to the soldiers behind him.

Immediately, one hundred and sixty howls sounded as one, answering his cry as the men of the Black Wolf Brigade echoed their commander's outrage. Then, like hounds let loose after straining at the leash, they charged into the city in two neat columns.

In the streets, some people shrieked in fear, shrinking back from the velvet ropes and falling all over themselves in their desperation to escape the attacking army. The soldiers, however, only rushed a few dozen paces into the city before they began to peel off in pairs every ten paces, taking positions lining either side of the road and kneeling to welcome the remainder of the army.

The crowd's initial panic at the howling charge gave way to both respect and a bit of awe as they watched the disciplined movements of the Golden Eyed soldiers. Here and there among the crowd,

some children even clapped as though they were watching a performance of gladiators in the arena on a scale the likes of which they'd never seen.

After all, even when battles between two groups of gladiators took place there were rarely more than thirty or forty warriors on the sands. Yet now, under the watchful golden eyes of their white-furred commander, more than a hundred and fifty soldiers had moved not only with deadly swiftness but perfect harmony as though they were ready to envelop and pounce on any prey unlucky enough to be caught between the two jaws of wolf soldiers.

At the gate itself, Savis knelt with his head bowed, refusing to watch his soldiers execute their orders or the arrival of the people behind him. He had done as he'd been ordered. Now, like the defeated dogs he'd called them, they would yield their position in the vanguard to the people following behind. Only when the remainder of Nyrielle's army passed by would he be permitted to stand and join the procession once again.

The group that followed after the Black Wolf Brigade drew an entirely different reaction from the crowd. People cried out in shock and horror at the sight of the men entering the city. Mothers covered their children's eyes and countless people felt their stomachs churn in revulsion.

Were people like this really going to be allowed into their city?

Chapter 345: A Show of Strength (Part Two)

"Merciful Lords and Ladies, what, what are those?" A startled shopkeeper said, pointing at the group of strange, misshapen men who followed after the Golden Eyed Black Wolf Brigade.

"They're Clanless," a swordsmith from the Clan of Painted Masks said as he suppressed his urge to draw back in revulsion from the group of men and women who strode into the city with their heads held higher than they'd ever been and their backs as straight as they could make them.

Tausau, the vampire at the head of the Mongrel Horde, allowed a predatory aura of menace to seep from his burly body as his eyes swept the crowd, savoring the taste of revulsion and fear in the air. For too long, he'd allowed the judgment of outsiders to wear him and his mongrel progeny down, but since Nyrielle granted him a rebirth, reigniting the passions buried deep in his heart, he'd come to relish in the way his twisted appearance discomforted the more 'proper' people in the Eldritch world.

Who among them had the strength to endure a twisted birth and a cursed life? Who among them had worked half as hard as the least among his progeny, simply to survive another day? Rather than accepting the judgment of the common folk, he looked down on them as people too weak to survive what he and his progeny had endured. Now, with the opportunity his grand-niece had presented them, they would teach the world to shudder in fear not at the appearance of the Mongrel Horde, but at their strength!

"They're not just Clanless," a grizzled gladiator standing next to the swordsmith said when Tausau's Mongrel Horde passed by. "They're vampires. Thirty, thirty-one if you include the leader... How are there nearly three dozen Clanless Vampires, all in one place?"

"Atrice," the swordsmith said in very hushed tones. "Are Clanless Vampires as strong as other vampires? Or are they as weak as the Clanless?"

"I don't know," the gladiator whispered. "But from where I stand, I wouldn't want to fight them. At the very least, I'm not confident that I could win without suffering injuries that would end my career in the arena."

Around him, several people nodded. No one wanted to fight a vampire if they could avoid it. They weren't considered the ultimate predators for nothing. Perhaps the ill-fated Glimmerwing clan might once have enjoyed an equally fierce reputation, but their complete and utter destruction at the hands of Vampires had cemented the latter's place in most people's minds as the most deadly of all Eldritch beings.

The people breathed more easily after Tausau's Mongrel Horde passed, followed closely by dozens of men and women wearing dark silk robes, covered by ancient glyphs and symbols used by some of the oldest traditions of sorcery in Eldritch lands. The people seemed to come from more than a dozen different clans, but all of them carried an air of mystery that drew the attention of countless commoners.

"Nana," a young boy said, tugging on his grandmother's dress while his eyes strained to capture every detail of the robed men. "How do they make the writing on their robes glow? I want words on my tunic that glow, can you, can you sew words like that Nana?"

"You see them as glowing?" the stoop-shouldered tailor said, looking at her grandson in surprise. "Don't you lie to me about this boy," she said, her voice unexpectedly sharp. "If you see something on the robes of sorcerers..."

"I see it, I see it, I swear!" the boy insisted. "They shine in blue and purple and gold," he said, pointing at different robed figures with each color he named. "They're pretty, really pretty and..."

Behind the young boy and his grandmother, an artificer from the Clan of Painted Masks turned away rather than listen to the young man's growing excitement. It wasn't that he blamed the young man. Decades ago, he'd been much the same. But as soon as he recognized the robes worn by the group of sorcerers, he decisively left the crowded street, walking in the direction of the shop he knew he shouldn't have left.

"Perhaps I won't get to see Lady Nyrielle again after all," Artificer Erkembalt said sadly. He'd hoped to get her thoughts about the weapons he'd forged for the Willow Witch and the human boy, but seeing his former associates gathered under Lady Nyrielle's banner made him question whether or not she would welcome his presence. At the very least, it would complicate matters more than either of them would desire.

"I suppose if she wants to see me, she knows where I hang my hat," the artificer said with a defeated sigh. "But what in the world did she offer them to entice so many of those dogmatic fools to follow her?"

The Sorcerers of Sundered Earth weren't supposed to care for the troubles of the world, which was part of why he'd left in the first place. Yet now, marching in Nyrielle's army, they were certain to find themselves embroiled in a good many troubles, so what had changed their minds? Without a visit from the vampire herself, it was impossible to know, but the question was sure to gnaw at him for several months if he couldn't find an answer.

Behind the robed men came another unit of soldiers with thick, leathery skin that looked almost like armored plates. After them, a clan of people even shorter than the horned clan with pinched, mouselike features followed, many of them dressed in black and wearing deep hoods with slits for their saucer-shaped ears.

The march lasted for close to twenty minutes before a dark carriage marked by a crimson glyph pulled into view. Driving the carriage were two pale-skinned humans who radiated a strength and power unlike any of the other vampires they'd seen come before. Even Savis couldn't compare to the quiet, enchanting power that radiated from the amethyst-eyed woman driving the carriage or the slow-burning intensity they felt from the dark-haired man wearing red and gold robes sitting on the carriage next to her.

"The woman driving is Madame Zedya, she's one of the Blood Princess's direct progeny," a well-connected merchant said proudly, strutting off his knowledge to impress the people around him. "I saw her at the masquerade ball when the Blood Princess visited last time."

"I don't believe it," the man standing next to him said. "You're not important enough to attend an event that fancy. There's no way you had an invitation!"

"I didn't say I was invited," the man said in an aggrieved tone. "I just said I saw her there. I, I was delivering ice from the mountains," he added a touch awkwardly.

"Okay, so if you know so much then who's the man next to her?"

"I, I don't know..." the ice merchant said awkwardly. "I've never seen or heard of him before..."

While common folk pushed and shoved, many of them hoping to catch even the slightest glimpse of the famed Blood Princess of the Arena, Lady Nyrielle sat quietly in her carriage. With the curtains drawn and only a single lantern burning, casting its flickering golden light across her perfectly sculpted features, she never for a moment thought about indulging the commoners in their desire to glimpse her beautiful figure.

It wasn't that she looked down on them, rather, her slender fingers traced the place where Ashlynn had last sat in the carriage and her mind sank deep into memories of the night they'd met when she rescued Ashlynn in this very carriage.

"Soon, my darling Ashlynn," she whispered, her midnight blue eyes sparkling with barely restrained eagerness. "Just wait for me a few minutes longer..."

Chapter 346: Only Eyes For You

At the plaza outside the palace, Ashlynn presented a calm, stately appearance to onlookers as she stood beside High Lady Erna. Inwardly, however, her heart raced, seeming to beat twice as fast as the slow, steady rhythm of the drummers in Nyrielle's army.

For tonight's welcoming event, Ashlynn had dressed in a long green dress that hugged her lush hips and slender waist while a corset of dark lace offered up her full bust like fine melons to be feasted upon. Unlike her last visit, she'd abandoned local fashion, choosing to leave her shoulders and neck bare.

The attendants who helped prepare her wardrobe for today's reception looked somewhat scandalized that Ashlynn wouldn't wear any of the jewelry they offered. Necklaces, chokers, and elaborate chains of silver or gold and precious jewels were all rejected, as were the simplest of bracelets.

"You don't understand my Nyrielle," she told the scandalized jeweler. "To her, no gem or jewel could ever compete with the sight of my pulse beating beneath the surface of my skin," she said, tracing a finger over her delicate neck. "And if we must entertain, and I can only offer her something chaste, then she will feast on my naked wrist," Ashlynn added, gesturing to her slender wrist.

"But, your Dominion," the jeweler protested. "The most prominent people of High Fen City and even the surrounding towns will be present to welcome the Blood Princess back to the city. Even if you don't dress for her, think of the impression you'll make on them if you appear so... unadorned. You know what people will say," she hinted, reminding Ashlynn of the rumors that had circulated that she was an impoverished witch from the Vale of Mists, clinging to Nyrielle's thigh to elevate herself.

"She doesn't care," Heila said from the couch she'd been resting on. Her ninth victory in the arena had barely felt like a contest and she wondered if Yotsun was saving something special for the final day. Now, however, she was simply grateful that she had the energy to face tonight's festivities since she knew that there would be a great deal of work to do once she and Zedya were reunited.

"If you have to adorn someone to prop up my lady's station," Heila suggested. "You can layer as many of those jewels on me as you wish. Talauia too," she added, pointing at the excited Thistle Witch. "That should make it clear that my lady's lack of adornment is a choice and not a necessity."

"You see?" Ashlynn said with a smile as she looked at the poor jeweler's crestfallen face. "Every problem has a solution."

Now, the chill air of an autumn evening swept around Ashlynn's bare shoulders but she hardly noticed as her eyes tracked the progress of the river of torches entering the city. For months, the echo of Nyrielle's heartbeat in her chest had grown fainter with distance until she couldn't notice unless she listened carefully to reassure herself that her lover's heart still beat. Now, however, that they were only minutes apart, the echo of Nyrielle's heart thundered in her chest like the drums of her army, coming ever nearer.

"I should say 'As expected of my teacher,'" High Lady Erna said as she waited with Ashlynn for Nyrielle's arrival. "But I don't think my teacher of so many decades ago could have assembled an army so vast in just a few month's time. You've changed her, Ashlynn," she said with a broad smile.

"We've changed each other," Ashlynn said, resisting the urge to stand up on her tiptoes to watch the carriage draw closer. Nyrielle had already entered the city, she would be here in mere minutes but the wait felt so much longer than that. "I like to think we've both changed for the better."

"I like to think so," Erna said. In the time since Ashlynn arrived in High Fen City, the two women had spent several hours together every day, not only to observe Heila's battles in the Arena but sharing a morning or evening meal every day as well. In that time, the serpentine ruler had come to realize that Ashlynn had many more layers to her and was far more complex than the out-of-her-depth young woman she appeared to be just several months ago.

The Ashlynn that arrived in High Fen City in the spring still struggled with the Eldritch language and relied on Heila, Nyrielle, or others to translate for her when conversations became complex or nuanced. The Mother of Trees that arrived in the Autumn conversed with the same practiced grace that she possessed when speaking her native tongue.

When a messenger arrived with word of Nyrielle's impending arrival and limited details about the sizeable force she had assembled in the months since leaving, Ashlynn put herself immediately to work, settling the countless details required to receive the incoming army. From securing lodging for more than a thousand men and horses to arranging the grand entrance to the city, Ashlynn had played her role as Seneschal to the hilt and she'd executed it marvelously.

Now, as Nyrielle's dark carriage finally rolled into the plaza, all of that work felt like a dream, quickly forgotten as her emerald eyes locked onto the doors bearing Nyrielle's glyph. Dimly, she was aware of a strange vampire she'd never met sitting next to Zedya on the driver's seat, but even his antique Inquisitor's robes weren't enough to distract her from her single-minded focus as she awaited Nyrielle's emergence from the carriage.

Two very long heartbeats later, the doors opened, revealing a swirl of dark skirts as Nyrielle emerged from the dimly lit interior of the carriage like a creature of shadow and midnight descending to the earth. Her dress, crafted from black silk and velvet, flowed like ink spilled in water, drifting and rippling with every elegant movement, while delicate black lace stretched across her bodice revealing hints of pale, alabaster skin beneath the lace, stretching almost all the way down to her navel.

The flash of a pale, creamy calf beneath those billowing skirts drew every eye as she descended to the marble pavers, but it was her deep, midnight blue eyes that captured Ashlynn's gaze and the echo of her lover's heartbeat within her chest that drowned out every startled gasp or admiring whisper rippling around the plaza.

In an instant that was too brief for most eyes to follow, Nyrielle appeared before Ashlynn, wrapping her arms around the witch's slender waist and pulling her close until their bodies pressed together from the tops of their knees all the way up to their chests.

A brief moment of hunger flashed across Nyrielle's eyes and her fangs grew longer as Ashlynn's faint evergreen scent filled her nostrils.

"Not here," Ashlynn whispered, reaching up to caress Nyrielle's pale cheek and guiding her lover's lips to meet her own.

Time stopped and the entire world fell away from the two women as they savored the taste of their long-absent lover. The briefest prick pierced Ashlynn's lush, lower lip before a faint metallic taste added a surge of richness and a tingle of primitive danger to their tender kiss. A single drop of blood spilled from their lips, shocking onlookers as they watched one of the most powerful vampires in the world openly feeding on one of the greatest witchers in the land.

No one said anything. Few people even dared to breathe.

But Ashlynn and Nyrielle paid the onlookers no mind. As they held each other tight beneath the moonlight, they only had eyes for each other.

Chapter 347: Important Matters (Part One)

For several intense moments, nothing existed for Ashlynn beyond the feel of Nyrielle's lithe body pressed up against her own, the press of their lips and the dance of their tongues. The faint scent of Nyrielle's lavender soap filled her nose and the soft texture of silk lace beneath her fingertips reassured her that, even as her mind drifted on waves of pleasure that pulsed all the way down to the most sensitive of places between her thighs, this moment, this touch, this woman in her arms... was real.

The dream they'd shared months ago felt like a dim, pale imitation for the love of her life that teased and tantalized every sense as they held each other beneath the moonlight. No dream, not even a mystical vision that connected them across a distance of hundreds of leagues, could ever compare to the reality of the person their hearts most desired.

But no moment, no matter how intense, could last forever. Slowly, with great reluctance, the two lovers began to relax as their deep, sensual kiss melted into a string of soft pecks on the lips, as if they were promising each other that there was more to come before this night could end.

"I've missed you," Ashlynn said softly as she blinked away the moisture filling the corners of her emerald eyes. "My life has never felt so incomplete as it has since you went so far away."

"I waited centuries to find you, my darling," Nyrielle whispered, sliding her fingers beneath the band of Ashlynn's silky green witch hat to run her fingers through her lover's soft blonde hair. Briefly, her tongue traced over the stray drop of blood that had spilled down her lip, as if she was savoring the rarest, most precious flavor she'd tasted in hundreds of years of life. "But waiting even an hour longer felt like an eternity."

"You made an impressive entrance," Ashlynn said, her face heating slightly as she began to feel the stares of more than a hundred guests and dignitaries fixed on her and Nyrielle.

"And are you impressed, my darling?" Nyrielle teased lightly. "If not, I can have them do it all over again."

"Don't, don't you dare," Ashlynn giggled. "Look, we're being rude to our host," she said, stepping back and gesturing for High Lady Erna to join them.

"I'm sure that Little Snake doesn't mind if I greet the most important person present first," Nyrielle said, turning to give Erna a rare and gentle smile. "Thank you, for watching over my Ashlynn since she arrived," she said with a slight bow of her head.

"Teacher, if it were anyone else you'd ignored me for, I might have been hurt," Erna said with a fang baring smile of her own. "But since it's Ashlynn, I can hardly complain."

Around the edges of the plaza, several people stared with wide eyes and slack jaws as the fearsome Harbinger of Death teased and flirted with her lover before chatting idly with the powerful High Lady who ruled over one of the lushest, wealthiest territories in what had become the easternmost Eldritch lands.

Savis didn't know what to make of this kind, gentle woman who made resembled a young woman in her twenties just discovering love more than the terrifying vampire ruler who had imprisoned his sire and subjugated the entire Tangled Wood in a matter of hours.

It wasn't like he hadn't seen her outside of battle either. While she showed a bit of kindness and affection to her progeny, that was to be expected from most vampires. She didn't seem as indulgent as the twisted mongrel Tausau was with his progeny and in many ways her treatment of Zedya and Ignatious reminded him of the way Hamdi had treated him in the first century after he became a vampire.

But this gentleness and lovestruck expression... how could a vampire as old as Nyrielle was ever display such deep and tender emotions, much less the woman who had brought his entire world crashing to its knees?

The reaction from Ignatious was even more exaggerated. In the months since their reunion, Nyrielle had worked to help rebuild his strength and confidence and the image he had of the terrifying demon who plunged him into a world of darkness but seeing this almost girlish affection from his Mistress left him wondering if someone had taken her place on the carriage ride over.

"I told you that Lady Ashlynn was special," Zedya said softly. "Mistress would never have gone so far for you if not for the gift she received from her bond with Lady Ashlynn. When you have the opportunity, make sure you give her your thanks."

"I will," the former Inquisitor nodded numbly, still taken in by how much Nyrielle seemed to have changed as soon as she laid eyes on her Seneschal.

"Madame Zedya," Heila said, joining the two vampires and offering a polite curtsy followed by a wide, unguarded grin. "Thank you. If not for your words that night, I might never have had the chance to follow Ashlynn to the Briar..."

"I told you that there was an opportunity for you in the Briar," Zedya said, her amethyst eyes twinkling in delight as she looked at the diminutive witch in her silvery-green hat and dress, adorned with an intricate net of silver chains and glittering peridot. "I hear you've become the Willow Witch," she added with a gentle smile. "Congratulations."

"She has, she has," Talauia gushed happily. "Thank you, Zedya, for sending her to us. My little brother was wrong to try to keep her away! But now, look at her, she's amazing, amazingly strong. She's been fighting in the arena for days and..."

"All right, all right," Heila said, her face heating in embarrassment. "I came over for more than just saying hello. I know the most important thing is to get all of you settled," she said, nodding in the direction of Tausau and his Mongrel Horde.

With so many people staring at Ashlynn and Nyrielle's tender moment, Heila wanted nothing more than to shoo the gathered spectators out of the plaza, but doing so would have been incredibly impolite. Since she couldn't form a screen of fog around Ashlynn and Nyrielle without making things even more awkward and she couldn't simply tell the onlookers to leave, she focused on the people with the greatest practical needs and gestured for them to join her so she could get them in motion and in so doing, make it easier for Ashlynn and Nyrielle to make their eventual exit.

Chapter 348: Important Matters (Part Two)

Tausau had a stupidly happy grin on his face as he watched his grand-niece with her lover and it didn't seem like he had a care in the world, but seeing the diminutive witch gesturing at him and the other vampires, he turned his attention away from the lovebirds. After all, there were practical matters to attend to and as the leader of the Mongrel Hord, there was a limit to how much time he could indulge himself in his identity as Nyrielle's grand-uncle.

"You must be Sir Tausau," Heila said, welcoming the Clanless vampire. "Lady Ashlynn has made arrangements for you and your progeny to dwell in the cellars of the palace for the duration of our stay. I'm afraid it won't be comfortable, but it will be more secure than placing you somewhere in the city."

"I see," the portly vampire said as he pulled his gaze away from the young lovers. "Lead the way, Madame Witch," he said. "But once things are settled in, tell me, what hunting rights have you secured for us? Will we be feeding on willing donors as Her Eternity spoke of in the Vale of Mists, or must we hunt among the common folk?"

"Neither," Heila said firmly before a dangerous-looking grin spread on her lips. "Lady Ashlynn was told that you wouldn't need to feed the night you arrived so we've prepared something special for tomorrow night. Even Sir Savis should enjoy the evening's festivities then."

"I've been to the banquets of the High Fen before," the white-furred vampire growled. "What makes you think I'd enjoy this one?"

"Because Lady Ashlynn has heard of the traditions of His Eternity Bardas's lineage," Heila said simply. "And she understands the traditions of High Fen City as well. So, tomorrow, there will be a grand spectacle in the arena. As a prelude to the night's final fight, you may fight and feed to your heart's content."

A ripple of mixed reactions spread through the gathered vampires. Savis's golden eyes gleamed with barely suppressed eagerness and his lips curled back in a silent snarl, revealing his wickedly pointed fangs. For months, he had been forced to bow and scrape, to serve as a herald while Nyrielle steadily built her army of borrowed soldiers. While his fearsome reputation was mentioned frequently, he was never allowed to demonstrate his prowess, leaving many to wonder if the vaunted strength of the White Fang of the Tangled Wood had been greatly exaggerated.

The arena would give him a chance to put those rumors to rest. Few opponents could truly challenge the strongest vampires, and he promised himself that he would use this opportunity to show the world that being Nyrielle's captive hadn't diminished his strength or dulled his claws.

Behind him, several of his soldiers straightened their backs, already anticipating the chance to witness the greatest of their master's progeny displaying his might before the weak and unenlightened masses of High Fen City.

Not far from the grinning lupine vampire, Tausau's broad face split in a fierce grin. Ever since Nyrielle rekindled the passions in his heart, he'd been looking forward to a chance to show the world that he and his progeny weren't mutts to look down on but savage mongrels who would tear the faces off their foes if given the chance. This opportunity that Lady Ashlynn had arranged gave him yet another reason to be thankful to the Seneschal who had transformed Nyrielle's life.

The reactions among his Mongrel Horde, however, were far more subdued. Some of his progeny drew closer together, forming small clusters as though seeking safety in numbers. While a few of the stronger members looked forward to the challenge, many bore the marks of their mixed heritage in ways that made combat difficult. Some suffered from twisted limbs, impaired vision, or other physical deformities

that had forced them to rely on their brethren for survival even after making the arduous journey to reach Tausau's haven for the Clanless and surviving the frequently fatal transformation from broken mortal to undying vampire.

"Your Lady is generous," one of Tausau's older progeny said. Her posture was bent and crooked and it was difficult for her manner to appear as anything other than subservient but she stood up as straight as she could and spoke out for her companions nonetheless. "But perhaps some of us might serve better as attendants for the evening's festivities?"

"The arena is vast," Heila assured them, understanding their concern. "And there will be many ways to participate. Lady Ashlynn has arranged for some prisoners condemned for violent crimes to be released into the arena. The strongest among you may hunt them directly, while others might prefer to help corner prey or guard the exits. There will be a role for everyone who wishes to join the hunt."

"Remember," Heila added with an odd hint of pride that even she wouldn't have expected to feel just two weeks ago. "Events in the arena are more than just battles, they're spectacles for the entertainment of others. Opening matches often pit younger, less experienced gladiators against savage beasts or condemned criminals as a way to 'warm up' the crowd. But once you step foot on those sands, the blood that flows belongs to you and the crowd will cheer for every drop you spill. Savor both the moment and the blood and your victory will taste all the sweeter," she said confidently.

The tension among the Mongrel Horde eased visibly at this explanation. Even those who couldn't fight directly could still contribute to the group's success, just as they had always done under Tausau's protection, and there would be no shame in being one of the first to fight against weaker foes.

"Final event?" Zedya asked, raising an eyebrow at the diminutive witch as she listened to Heila's explanation. Clearly, there had been many more changes in her diminutive friend than she'd expected after leaving the young woman to follow Ashlynn into the briar. The softness and fear that had once lurked in the corner of her eyes was nowhere to be seen and now there was a flexible, adaptable strength that seemed to suggest that nothing could shake her, not even the famous arena of High Fen City.

"It's a surprise," Heila said with a twinkle in her eyes. "For now, I should take everyone to their quarters."

Meanwhile, Ashlynn and Nyrielle were making similar statements to High Lady Erna.

"Since you've made such a fuss with your arrival, it's impossible for me to let you off without a few days of feasts, celebrations, and events," the High Lady was explaining. "I know you'll want to cross the pass before the heavy snows arrive so I won't hold you long, but you must give me at least three nights."

"I'll give you five if you wish it," Nyrielle said. "Just not all in a row, and no more this night. This night," she said as she wrapped an arm around Ashlynn's slender waist and pulled the other woman close enough that she could feel every contour of Ashlynn's body. "This night belongs to us."

"Of course," Erna said, turning to leave the lovers alone. "Your Seneschal seems to know you even better than I do so I'll leave you in her more than capable hands."

"We have the same rooms as before," Ashlynn said, stretching up to whisper in Nyrielle's ears. "Carry me there, like you used to carry me in the Vale?"

"For you, my darling," Nyrielle whispered back, pricking the tip of Ashlynn's ear lightly with a fang. "I'd do anything you

Chapter 349: A Firm Hand (Part One)

Darkness swirled around Nyrielle as she took Ashlynn in her arms, scooping the young noblewoman up like a princess and carrying her away to the luxurious wing of the palace reserved for visiting dignitaries.

Inside Ashlynn's bedchamber, a fire crackled in the massive hearth, filling the room with soft golden light and dancing shadows that caressed the gilded furnishings of the room like with the lightest of touches as though the shadows were afraid to linger too long and spoil the view.

The scent of burning cedar filled the air, mingling with Ashlynn's evergreen scent and Nyrielle's own lavender to create a fragrance that felt as familiar as a night in the Vale of Mists even though they were on the opposite side of the mountains from the place they called home.

"You've been planning things," Nyrielle said with a slow smile when she spotted an assortment of items laid out on a table beside the hearth. "What sort of naughty thoughts have filled my Ashlynn's head in these few months that you would need to prepare so much?"

"I've learned more than just witchcraft," Ashlynn said. She leaned in close, giving Nyrielle the briefest of pecks on the cheek before she slid out of the other woman's arms and walked over to the table beside the hearth. "When I heard about the army you raised, I knew you must have pushed yourself hard," she added softly as her fingers traced over several different bottles of scented oils and herbal infusions.

"Tonight, before you feed, let me pamper you the way you once pampered me," Ashlynn said, setting down a bottle and turning to face Nyrielle. "The night's are longer now," she added as a light blush spread across her face. "We can take our time."

"What if I don't want to wait," Nyrielle said, vanishing from where she stood and appearing beside Ashlynn in the blink of an eye. One hand cupped Ashlynn's face and her star filled midnight eyes loomed large in Ashlynn's vision as Nyrielle leaned in to plunder from her lover's lips.

For a moment, Ashlynn melted into Nyrielle's kiss. Her knees went weak and only the hand that Nyrielle wrapped around her waist supported her as all thought was driven from her mind by the intense wave of pleasure that washed over her body at the vampire's touch.

The next moment, Ashlynn collected herself, pushing Nyrielle back and pinning the vampire against one of the bedposts. Ashlynn's hands roamed over the lace and silk of Nyrielle's dress, finding the fastenings one by one as she pulled her lover into an even deeper kiss.

"It's not so easy to have your way with me," Ashlynn whispered when she pulled back to draw a shuddering breath. "If you can't wait, then take me now," she said, tilting her head and pulling her long, blonde hair back to reveal her slender neck. "But you know that when you take me, the night will end," she said. "And I don't want our night to end so soon."

"My darling Ashlynn," Nyrielle said softly, leaning in to brush her lips ever so faintly across the tender skin of Ashlynn's neck. Within her chest she could feel the echo of the young witch's heartbeat, beating in time with the pulse jumping in her neck, just a hairsbreadth away from her fangs. "Always willful and having your way."

"Didn't you say that you'd do anything I ask?" Ashlynn asked, turning back to face the vampire and winding her arms around the other woman's neck, pulling her close enough for their foreheads to touch and their eyelashes to brush against each other when Ashlynn blinked. "So do this for me. Let me spoil you the way only I can..."

"If it's what my darling desires," Nyrielle said, relaxing into Ashlynn's embrace. "Then how can I refuse?"

"Then let me finish unlacing you," Ashlynn said, tracing her fingers down Nyrielle's lithe body until she found the laces of the other woman's corset. The sound of soft satin ribbon whispering through the eyelets of the corset filled the air, matching with the sound of their breathing and the gentle crackle of the fireplace to create an intimate symphony that seemed loud in the quiet, isolated wing of the palace.

For a moment, when Nyrielle's dark silk and lace dress fell away from her perfect, alabaster body, Ashlynn stood motionless, holding the silk ribbon loosely in her hands as she gazed at the perfect proportions of her lover.

No dream could compare to the sight of flickering golden light dancing across the trim, sculpted physique that seemed to have been carved from immaculate marble. Reaching out with hands that trembled, as if afraid that she would shatter a moment of perfection, Ashlynn traced her fingers over Nyrielle's icy, cool skin, caressing her way up from slender thighs to the crest of her lover's hip bones before wrapping her arms around her and pulling her in close, as though she was desperate to share the warmth of her body with the icy vampire.

"We can lie in front of the hearth, if you'd like?" Nyrielle offered. "Unless you've had a bath prepared..."

"No," Ashlynn said, pulling back from Nyrielle as her face heated in embarrassment. Nyrielle had always been so thoughtful about keeping herself warm before they were intimate that she'd almost forgotten how cold the vampire's skin could be, especially on a chill night like tonight. "I have something we can use," she said, slipping away from Nyrielle before returning with a soft black fur blanket.

"I wanted to use this in the carriage when we go through the High Pass," she said sheepishly. She'd meant for the blanket to be a surprise, along with several other things she'd acquired since returning to High Fen City, but it wouldn't hurt to reveal one of her surprises a little bit early.

"I thought it would be good to keep warm with you. But we can use it for this as well," she said, stretching the fur out in front of the hearth where Nyrielle could soak in its warmth. "Now, sit down here, and let me take care of you..."

Chapter 350: A Firm Hand (Part Two)

Before Ashlynn touched the scented oils and herbal infusions she'd prepared, she fetched a silver hairbrush and the dark silk ribbon from Nyrielle's corset.

"I love your hair," Ashlynn whispered from behind her lover as she ran her fingers gently through Nyrielle's long, dark tresses. Despite the days of hard travel, Nyrielle's hair always felt smooth and satiny in her hands, as though it refused to be stained by the dirt of the world. "But I don't want it to get in the way tonight," she added.

Gently, working with slow, unhurried strokes, Ashlynn started by brushing Nyrielle's hair. Her fingers wandered as she worked, dancing briefly across the vampire's pale shoulders whenever she gathered another section of her lover's dark tresses before returning to her work.

"Since you are my queen, let me treat you like one," Ashlynn said as she retrieved the silk ribbon. "This braid," she explained as her fingers wove the ribbon into Nyrielle's hair. "It's meant for the wives of dukes and kings. It circles your head like a crown and it's supposed to be able to support the weight of one."

"And would you have me wear a crown for you, my darling?" Nyrielle teased as she soaked up the warmth of the crackling fire and Ashlynn's gentle touch. "Or am I your queen alone?"

"You could be a queen," Ashlynn said, pausing to rest her head against Nyrielle's naked back. "But, right now, I want to be selfish," she whispered as tears sprang unbidden to her eyes. "I want you all to myself before I have to share you with the world."

"You never have to share me with anyone, my love," Nyrielle whispered, turning on the dark fur blanket to face Ashlynn. "You and I, together. Always."

"I know," Ashlynn said, wiping away the moisture from her eyes and returning to her braiding. "Tonight is just about right now, about you and I," she promised softly. "The rest can wait until tomorrow."

"Mmm," Nyrielle agreed, stretching herself out on the furs once Ashlynn finished her braiding.

For a moment, the sounds of soft, rustling fabric filled the air followed by the sound of Ashlynn draping her dress and hat across the back of a chair. A few heartbeats later she knelt beside Nyrielle, tracing her

hands across the vampire's slender back, feeling the faint ridges in the other woman's skin that marked the place her wings would unfurl from.

Slowly, Ashlynn curled around Nyrielle, holding her close and feeling the warmth of the fire enveloping them. Neither woman said anything, simply soaking in the heat of the fire and feeling the each other's shallow breathing and steady heartbeats through their skin as if they were drinking in the feeling of having nothing between them.

"Now relax," Ashlynn whispered as she returned to the table and retrieved a bottle of oil that smelled of fresh bergamot and lavender. Pouring a few drops of oil into her hands, she started from Nyrielle's feet, pressing her strong thumbs deep into the soles of the vampire's delicately arched feet before pulling toward her slender, dextrous toes.

Travel, whether in a carriage or on a horseback, was hard on the body and even though Nyrielle enjoyed the comforts of a luxurious carriage, nothing could stop days spent being jostled and shaken in the carriage from straining her muscles and building tension in her joints.

Now, Ashlynn used the same techniques on her lover that the Ancient Clan had used on her, loosening her muscles with long, slow strokes and easing her joints with steady, practiced movements. A month after her first visit to Crystal Lake City, Ashlynn had returned to rest but also to learn from the Ancient Clan and it had been for this moment that she invested so much of her time in studying with Jacques's cousin.

From slender, arched feet to smooth, supple calves and toned, trim thighs, Ashlynn worked her way higher, her fingers kneading every inch of Nyrielle's alabaster flesh with a tenderness and reverence that bordered on worship.

"Mmmhhhh." A soft moan escaped Nyrielle's lips when Ashlynn's hands reached the small of her back, applying a firm, gentle pressure that made her body melt like putty in the witch's hands.

The longer Ashlynn worked, the more Nyrielle felt the tension fading from her body. Even the hunger that burned within her seemed to die down as if it had been lulled to sleep, allowing her to enjoy the combination of the crackling hearth and her lover's soothing touch.

For a moment, Nyrielle felt herself drifting on the edge of falling asleep. For the first time in more years than she cared to remember, she felt so calm and at peace that even in the depths of the night when the moon still hung high overhead, she felt she could drift off to sleep and dwell in the memories that awaited her there.

Only the feeling of Ashlynn's steady pulse in her hands and the evergreen scent of her lover that blended with the lavender and bergamot oil kept her anchored enough in the present to resist the pull of relaxation and sleep.

"Now," Ashlynn whispered into her drowsy lover's ears. "Roll over and rest your head on my chest," she said, taking a seat on the dark fur blanket next to Nyrielle. "Just close your eyes and use me like a pillow," she added, resting Nyrielle's head on her full bust as her fingers sank into the other woman's hair and began to massage her scalp.

This time, it wasn't the scent of lavender and bergamot that filled the air, but an herbal infusion of rosemary oil and a trace of Ashlynn's own wood energy that melted not only the tension in Nyrielle's scalp but dulled the worries that plagued her mind and made them feel distant and unimportant when she was here in Ashlynn's embrace.

"You're using witchcraft on me," Nyrielle observed softly. Though she commented on it, she put up no resistance, basking in the feeling of gentle reassurance that flowed from Ashlynn's touch into her innermost being.

"Just as you used sorcery to ease my hurts the night we met," Ashlynn whispered, her mind flashing back to the way that Nyrielle had banished the pain she felt after Owain's savage beating. "So little can hurt your body, but so much can hurt your heart," she said softly. "Let me wipe those hurts away, even if it's just for a little while..."