

## The Vampire 351

### Chapter 351: Feather Light (Part One)

Soft golden firelight flickered across Ashlynn and Nyrielle's entangled bodies as they lay on a dark fur blanket, luxuriating in the warmth of the fire and the feeling of their skin sliding over each other with a faint oily slickness after Nyrielle's massage.

"My darling," Nyrielle whispered after several moment of quiet, comfortable touch. "You've left me feeling as light as a feather, but I hunger for more. Now that you've worked your witchcraft on me," she teased. "Will you submit to my whims?"

"Of course," Ashlynn said. "I will always submit to your will," she added, gently caressing Nyrielle's cheek with the back of a finger. "It's you who allows me to be so willful," she teased, turning Nyrielle's head toward her so she could bestow a gentle, chaste kiss on her lover's lips.

"Then indulge me in a game," Nyrielle said as she scooped Ashlynn up and carried her toward the large, four poster bed that dominated one wall in the room. "You worked hard to sharpen your senses, didn't you, my love?" Nyrielle asked as she set Ashlynn down atop the satin bedspread. "How much do you trust your them?"

"I can hear an insect hunting more than a thousand paces away," Ashlynn boasted playfully. "And I can smell one stalk of tymme in a basketfull of rosemary. Why, do you want to test me?"

"Yes, I do," Nyrielle said playfully before she sauntered across the room to retrieve a few items from a pouch she wore with her dress. The first was a dark, midnight blue silk handkerchief and the second...

"That's not one of your feathers, is it?" Ashlynn asked when she saw the long, slender feather in Nyrielle's hands. The feather was so long, in fact, that it had to be curled back on itself just to fit in the small pouch.

"No, I wouldn't dream of using one of my feathers on you like this," Nyrielle said as she returned to the bedside. "But, if it pleases you, you can pretend that it is. Now, are you ready to play a game?" Nyrielle asked with a glint of challenge in her eyes.

"For you, I'm willing to do anything," Ashlynn replied, echoing Nyrielle's earlier promise.

"It's simple," Nyrielle said as she began folding the handkerchief into a makeshift blindfold. "I'm going to blindfold you and then we're going to play a game of Fangs or Feather," she said. "It's better if I can tie you to the bed but I will not push you if you aren't willing. I know that you have been hurt before and..."

"You would never hurt me," Ashlynn said firmly, locking eyes with Nyrielle so the other woman could see the strength of her conviction. "But you have to explain to me why it would be better if you can tie me to the bed," she added, her face turning a bright shade of red. "You haven't ever done this with someone before, have you?" Ashlynn said, suddenly horrified at the thought.

Of the many things she had discussed with Nyrielle, Ashlynn had been very open about her past with Owain. They had courted for two years with the intention to marry and though Ashlynn had shared only a single kiss with him during their wedding ceremony, she'd been very open about how she felt about the man she thought she loved enough to marry.

But never once had Nyrielle mentioned loving someone the way Ashlynn thought she loved Owain. She'd mentioned being courted by the other True Vampires but she claimed to have rejected them all before. So just who exactly could Nyrielle have played a game of 'Fangs and Feathers' with?

"Of course, I've never done this with anyone," Nyrielle said solemnly. "But I was inspired by our last evening in this palace," she said with a naughty grin. "As to how I know it would be better if I could tie you up," she teased as she leaned in closer to her anxious lover.

"It's because, I happen to know that my darling Ashlynn," Nyrielle said as her hand blurred and the feather she held traced ever so lightly across the back of Ashlynn's knee. The young witch jumped immediately, pulling her leg back and looking at the vampire with an aggrieved look. "Is ticklish," Nyrielle finished with a light laugh. "If I bind you and your body betrays you, you won't spoil the game."

"You still haven't explained the whole game," Ashlynn said with a slight pout. "What is it that you'll be doing with your Fangs or Feather?"

"It's simple," Nyrielle said. "Once you're bound and blindfolded, I'll touch you... somewhere. You have to guess whether I touched you with my fangs or the feather. Simple enough, isn't it?"

"What do I get if I get it right?" Ashlynn asked. "Will you kiss me?"

"If you wish," Nyrielle said slyly. "But if you get it wrong then I'll nibble on you."

"Just a nibble?"

"Just a nibble," Nyrielle said. "The game ends if you can endure longer than I can resist my hunger, or if you break down and beg for my bite," she added, running her tongue over her lush lips and pointed fangs. "So, what say you, my darling? Are you willing to play?"

"You spent some time thinking about this, didn't you?" Ashlynn said, stretching herself out on the bedspread and putting on an act of looking helpless. "When you ask like that, and give me so many opportunities to say no, how could I refuse?"

A few minutes later, Nyrielle had repurposed a spare set of sheets to use as bindings and secured Ashlynn to the bed posts before gently tying the blindfold across her eyes.

For a moment, she stood still, much as Ashlynn had, admiring the figure of the woman who had brought more warmth and joy into her life than she'd thought it was possible for her heart to contain.

Where Nyrielle's body was lithe and lean, Ashlynn's was curvy and lush. From her petite feet to her full thighs, Ashlynn's legs all but begged for Nyrielle to rest her head in the other woman's lap and sleep the night away. Her curvy hips and trim waist drew Nyrielle's eyes ever upward until they came to rest on her lover's generous bosom and once again felt the desire to fall into Ashlynn's soft embrace and rest until the end of days.

When Ashlynn arrived in the Vale of Mists, she'd been soft and delicate but that had slowly begun to change during her blossoming period as she undertook rigorous training to make the most of Nyrielle's vampiric gifts. Now, after months of training in the depths of the Briar, her body had transformed even further.

Before, her figure had been soft and tender like a perfectly ripe peach, but now, there was a core of strength beneath the softness. The faintest lines of defined muscles could be seen on Ashlynn's trim waist as she lay there trembling in anticipation and the muscles in her arms quivered against her restraints as she strained her senses for the slightest touch.

For Nyrielle, who's body had experienced few changes in the past century, the subtle transformation was its own kind of magic, revealing her lover's drive and dedication in every sculpted line and straining muscle. Perhaps she would continue to change in the years to come and Nyrielle would enjoy each subtle variation so long as it was a manifestation of her lover's desires.

And if anyone ever marked that perfect, pristine body again, if anyone ever harmed her the way Owain Lothain once had... For a moment, darkness swirled in the vampire's eyes and she nearly crushed the delicate feather in her hand before she caught sight of the mark of the witch on Ashlynn's hip, the ash tree that had first drawn her to this remarkable woman.

The sight of that mark served as a potent reminder of the power it represented and helped ground her racing thoughts. Ashlynn wasn't the same vulnerable noblewoman she'd rescued that night. She had grown into her power, fighting back against the people who dared to threaten her, and while Nyrielle would always protect her, she no longer needed to dwell on past hurts or future threats. When the time came, they would face their enemies together, as a vampire and a witch bound together with bonds of blood and love that no force in the world could shatter.

But right now, at this moment, the woman who mattered more to her than anything else in the world lay quivering with anticipation, biting her lower lip and squirming slightly as she waited for Nyrielle to make the first move.

A slow smile spread on Nyrielle's lips and her fangs grew longer as she prepared to do exactly that...

#### Chapter 352: Feather Light (Part Two)

The fire had burned low and the moon had begun its inexorable journey toward the horizon by the time Nyrielle and Ashlynn began their game of Fangs and Feather. The few moments that Nyrielle spent appreciating her lover's beauty left Ashlynn squirming in anticipation as every sense strained to feel the slightest touch.

Goosebumps rose on her skin as the faintest whisper of a breeze from the shuttered windows drifted through the room. The muscles of her abdomen clenched as she tensed for a faint touch that never came. No sooner had she begun to relax, however, than Nyrielle climbed into the bed. The movement tugged at the bedspread beneath her, triggering Ashlynn's sensitive body yet again as she tensed, waiting for Nyrielle to make her move.

Slowly, like a great cat stalking its prey, Nyrielle crawled across the bed, hovering just above Ashlynn's tender sides. Slowly, moving with a combination of grace and precision that would be impossible for most humans, she reached out with the tip of the feather's quill, lightly prodding her with a faint, sharp pressure.

"Fangs," Ashlynn said confidently as her body shivered at Nyrielle's touch. She'd imagined she could at least feel the vampire's breath on her skin before a fang made contact but she'd forgotten that, if she didn't wish to, Nyrielle didn't need to breathe at all. It was only due to years of habit that the vampire did so, but now that very habit had turned into a surprising advantage!

"Wrong," Nyrielle said with a wicked smile. Leaning in close, she brushed her lips across Ashlynn's side before pricking her skin ever so lightly with her fangs. The instant she did, a wave of pleasure rippled through Ashlynn's body, pulling a startled gasp from her lips before she bit her lower lip and allowed the sensation to consume her until she felt Nyrielle's tongue lapping up a few drops of blood like a kitten lapping up cream.

"Let's try again," Nyrielle said, shifting on the bed to approach Ashlynn's opposite side, this time, hovering just above her mark of the witch. While she wouldn't risk biting into the mark itself, the smooth, creamy thigh beneath the mark offered a perfect target for the tip of her fang.

"That was a fang," Ashlynn said, clutching at the sheets that bound her wrists to stop from flinching away from Nyrielle's feather-light touch. "This time, that really was a fang."

"Oh?" Nyrielle said in a slow, languid tone. "How do you know?"

"When you pricked me with the quill, I felt the faintest brush of the soft strands at the base of the feather," she said proudly. She hadn't noticed it at first, but now that she had something to compare it to, she was certain that she'd noticed something different from the first time. "I'm right, aren't I? Fangs?"

"My darling Ashlynn is very clever," Nyrielle said, moving further up to brush her lips and the point of a fang ever so gently beneath the swell of Ashlynn's breast. "And that time?"

"I, I don't know," Ashlynn said, her body trembling in the wake of the light, delicate touch. "Feather?"

"Not this time," Nyrielle said, her midnight blue eyes swirling with hunger as she lowered her lips again to prick Ashlynn's skin with her fangs. This time, Ashlynn's entire body shook as the feeling of Nyrielle's bite coursed through her. The wooden posts of the bed groaned as Ashlynn pulled against her restraints and Nyrielle felt her fingernails lengthening into claws as the sweet, earthy flavor unique to Ashlynn's blood filled her mouth.

A moment later, when Nyrielle pulled back, both women were trembling with a mixture of carnal desire and decadent fulfillment that left them craving more. Licking the last drop of Ashlynn's blood from her lips, Nyrielle began to suspect that her lover's blood had become even richer with the energy of life after training under the Mother of Thorns and the intoxicating taste clouded her mind with a desire to drink much, much deeper than she had.

"Ashlynn, my darling," Nyrielle said in a voice that had grown hoarse with desire. "Are you still willing to keep playing?"

"No," Ashlynn said with a contented smile spreading across her lips. Nyrielle wasn't begging to feed on her but it didn't matter. She could hear her victory in the other woman's voice. Nyrielle's pride wouldn't let her admit defeat so soon but Ashlynn had no desire to push her lover to her limits. Nyrielle's hunger was dangerous enough and they were already playing with fire.

"Bite me, my love," Ashlynn said, flicking her wrist to free herself from the bedsheet that bound her and beckoning for Nyrielle to join her. "All of me is yours to feast upon," she added, gesturing to her voluptuous curves.

"Then prepare yourself, my darling," Nyrielle said as she dropped the feather to descend on Ashlynn's body like a bird of prey falling on her prey.

Nyrielle's midnight blue eyes seemed to swell in Ashlynn's vision until they became liquid pools of the night sky reflecting only the woman that completely consumed Nyrielle's heart. With carefully restrained strength, Nyrielle wrapped her arms around Ashlynn's body, pulling her close enough that they could feel each other's heartbeats through their chests.

Then, gently, delicately, with as much restraint as she could manage, Nyrielle sank her fangs into Ashlynn's neck, drinking deeply for the first time in several days as she savored the flavor of her one and only love.

Ashlynn's body trembled as wave after wave of pleasure spread from her neck to her toes, enveloping her in a haze that felt warm and comforting at the same time as it was intense and stimulating. The sound of wood snapping echoed in the luxurious room as Ashlynn pulled her other arm free of the binding, shattering a bedpost in the process as she wrapped her arms around Nyrielle, clutching at the other woman's back with enough strength to crack the bones of an ordinary person.

Both women trembled as hot, metallic blood slid down Nyrielle's eager throat. Her tongue danced across Ashlynn's neck, savoring a taste that was as sharp as a knife and as smooth as honey.

Several heartbeats later, both women felt themselves falling toward a dark abyss that lay deep within Nyrielle's heart, but this time, brilliant emerald energy surged from Ashlynn's hands as she pushed back against the darkness.

"Enough, my love," Ashlynn said as her act of resistance took the last of the strength remaining in her body. "I can't take much more," she whispered.

Slowly and with great tenderness, Nyrielle pulled back from her lover's neck, licking the wound until it sealed, and not a trace of blood remained to mar the perfect, pristine beauty of Ashlynn's tender neck.

"You've grown so much stronger, my darling," Nyrielle said as a swirl of emerald green energy danced within her eyes before it was devoured by the midnight blue depths of her gaze. "Before long, I'll pose no threat to you."

"You could never threaten me," Ashlynn said, raising a hand weakly to cup Nyrielle's face. "You would never choose to harm me, and one day, I'll catch up to where you are..." she said, her voice growing quieter and quieter until she lost the strength to keep her eyes open and her hand slipped from Nyrielle's face.

"One day, not long from now," Nyrielle agreed, wrapping herself around her sleeping lover and holding her close. The darkness within her still threatened to consume them, but perhaps, one day, they truly would have nothing to fear and could surrender themselves to the pleasure they both craved. One day when there was nothing in the world that could threaten them and all they needed was each other...

Outside, there were still several hours left before dawn, but just as Ashlynn had warned, once Nyrielle fed, certain things would have to end. For Nyrielle, however, the hours she spent holding Ashlynn's

sleeping figure were just as precious as the moments they spent locked in the bliss of her bite. They'd been apart for far too long and her body craved far more from Ashlynn than just her lover's blood.

"Soon, my love," Nyrielle whispered as she gently stroked Ashlynn's hair. "Soon, your enemies will fall and we can wipe away one of your worries, the way you've wiped away so many of mine..."

### Chapter 353: Smaller Reunions

For Ashlynn, the night passed with the most blissful, relaxed sleep she'd enjoyed in months. In time, she became accustomed to the hammock in her small hut in the Briar, but no matter how comfortable it was or how welcoming Amahle tried to be, the Briar never felt like home.

The High Fen wasn't home either. Ashlynn had been here for close to two weeks and she had yet to rest as peacefully as she had the night before. It wasn't about the soft, pillowy mattress on the oversized bed or the warm crackling hearth that kept the evening chill at bay. Those were certainly more familiar things than dangling from the ceiling in the middle of a swamp, but they couldn't make a place feel like home.

Nyrielle's arrival had changed everything for Ashlynn. Her lover's presence provided more than just a sense of physical safety and security, or the soft comfort of intimacy. Now, she had someone she could share her burdens with. She didn't have to be the imposing and strong Mother of Trees around Nyrielle the way she was when she toured High Fen City. She didn't have to carry the weight of planning for their return to the Vale of Mists... at least, she didn't have to carry those things alone.

She didn't want to be rescued from those burdens. Owain might have thought that it was his duty as the husband to relieve her of all burdens but that wasn't the kind of woman Ashlynn wanted to be at all. She had no desire to be a beautiful songbird in a gilded cage, kept for the enjoyment of a select few. She wanted to share her burdens with Nyrielle and for Nyrielle to share them with her.

With that in mind, when Ashlynn rose in the late afternoon, she asked Heila to bring company to share a late lunch with her. Unlike her previous visit, this time she'd made sure that the palace staff understood her need to replenish herself after Nyrielle fed on her and by the time she had washed and dressed, not only had her oversized meal arrived, but her guests had as well.

"Captain Lennart," Ashlynn said with a welcoming smile that faltered when she saw the ragged scar that distorted the bearish man's face. "Things must have been hard for you since we last saw each other," she said simply.

Her hand twitched at her side and it took every ounce of restraint she possessed to keep it there. After months under Amahle's tutelage, her first reflex had been to offer to heal the old wound, fading or even erasing the scar. But for most Eldritch clans, including the Clan of the Great Claw, scars were either badges of honor or marks of deep shame, depending on how they were received.

In either case, erasing them was taboo, and offering to do so would only offend the man who had guarded Nyrielle this whole time. And so, rather than comment further, Ashlynn turned to the other warrior who entered the room, giving her a wide smile when she saw no obvious signs of injuries, whether they were honorable ones or not.

"Virve, it's good to see you again," Ashlynn said before gesturing at the small table in her sitting room. "Please, join me. Take as much as you'd like, there's no way I'll eat all this, even after Mistress Nyrielle drank her fill last night."

The food on the table consisted of several dishes of spiced and roasted meats, sliced thin, and served alongside a large pile of flatbread and nearly a dozen small bowls of dipping sauces. For a moment, both soldiers looked uncomfortable with the casual atmosphere.

After months of formal negotiations with more than a dozen clans and almost as many Eldritch Lords, the relaxed, comfortable relationships they'd previously enjoyed with Lady Nyrielle and her progeny felt like memories of a different time. Too many times, they'd been reminded of their stations while Nyrielle pushed forward ruthlessly to secure what she needed to defend the Vale. Neither soldier blamed her for that, but the way Ashlynn acted as if nothing had changed caught both of them off guard.

"We're all family here," Heila said, reaching out to add a few pieces of rich, herb-crustured pork belly to the pile of vegetables on her flatbread. "I told cousin Talauia that this was time just for us from the Vale, so you don't have to act like there are outsiders watching," she said with a smile.

"In that case," Virve said, leaning forward eagerly to pile succulent beef that smelled of warm cinnamon and hot peppers onto her flatbread before slathering it with a bright green sauce so spicy that Heila's nose twitched at the mere thought of eating it.

"To family," Virve said with a smile before taking a hearty bite, flashing Heila a challenging look before licking a stray bit of green sauce from her lips.

"I wish you could have stayed with us, Virve," Ashlynn said between bites of her own sweet and spicy pork. "I think you would have enjoyed some of the sights in the Briar."

"It wasn't a bother, was it my lady?" the bearish woman asked. Both Ashlynn and Heila seemed to be in high spirits, but she couldn't help but notice when she saw them the night before that the Sandbox Witch was missing and the Thistle Witch, Talauia, had appeared in his place. "That leather-skinned brute didn't do anything inappropriate, did he?"

"Jacques was fine," Ashlynn said, giving Heila a knowing look. "He's just a bit awkward. There were misunderstandings between us when we first met but those have long since become water under the bridge."

"He's really not that bad," Heilla added with a warm smile of her own. "He stood guard over Lady Ashlynn while she prepared my seed of witchcraft, and he stood guard over me while I faced my trail to master it."

"He's a good man," Heila added a touch wistfully. Despite everything that had been rough and the ways he could occasionally be infuriating, she'd come to find a strange sort of comfort inside the prickly bubble he surrounded himself and his loved ones whenever he felt that there might be a threat to a person he had resolved himself to protect. Now that he'd stayed behind in the Briar, she found that she missed his reassuring presence more than she expected to.

"But he didn't accompany you?" Captain Lennart said with a raised brow as he tried to understand the implications behind Heila's description of the Sandbox Witch as a 'good man.' "Did something happen?" Lennart asked as he finished adding sauces to the plate he balanced in his large hand.

Unlike everyone else, the bearish captain had filled his plate with what seemed like one or two pieces of every dish on the table along with a spoonful of every dipping sauce and he was slowly working his way through the combinations of flavors in a way that made Ashlynn wonder if he and the chef Georg were somehow related.

"It's nothing complicated," Ashlynn said lightly. "The Rose Witch and Blackberry Witch are each away on business of their own. We'd hoped that one of them could have returned before we left, but we couldn't wait any longer if we wanted to ensure that we could cross the mountains before the pass became blocked with snow. Someone had to stay behind with big sister Amahle and since Taluia came with us..."

"I've heard the Thistle Witch only leaves the Briar when someone has offended the Mother of Thorns so greatly that they have to be killed no matter where they're hiding," Lennart added moments after his face contorted around a particularly sour combination of vinegared grouse and a pale yellow sauce that glistened like honey but tasted like lemons and ginger. "She's not here on some business of the Mother of Thorns, is she?"

"Talauia will be accompanying us back to the Vale of Mists," Ashlynn said carefully. "We believe it might be wise to put some additional distance between her and certain individuals who wish to capture her. The Briar is a safe place most of the time, but even big sister Amahle has limits."

"I see..." Lennart said delicately. "Is there anything I should do to prepare defenses for her while we travel?" he asked, instantly regaining a measure of his professional demeanor.

"No, I think we should be fine between myself, Mistress Nyrielle, and everyone else you've brought along," Ashlynn said confidently. "But, on the subject of the people who have come with you," she said slowly. "Can you tell me what happened that you came to possess such a large army? I knew that Mistress Nyrielle was looking for allies but this... this was a bit more than I think any of us expected."

"It may take a while to explain," Lennart said carefully. "And Lady Nyrielle will likely be able to provide you with many details that I can't. If you'd like to hear the general shape of things, I think I can tell you that much at least."

"Please," Ashlynn said, leaning forward eagerly in her chair. For months, she'd had almost no news of how her lover had fared in her mission. She only had the faint echo of Nyrielle's heartbeat in her chest to reassure her that her love was still alive and that her heartbeat was strong and vigorous.

But beyond alive and healthy, she knew almost nothing, and now, she wanted to hear as much as she could about the victories that Nyrielle must have won to return with such an impressive fighting force.

"Anything you can tell me will be welcome, Captain," Ashlynn said, a touch more formally than she had been now that the topic had become more serious.

"In that case," Lennart said smoothly as his demeanor shifted to match Ashlynn's tone. "I think I should start with what happened at the Tangled Tower..."

## Chapter 354: Alliance of the Broken

Heila and Ashlynn had to remind themselves on more than one occasion to continue eating as Captain Lennart and Virve narrated the intense battle to capture the Tangled Tower. While neither of them had been present for the confrontation between Nyrielle and High Lord Hamdi, Inquisitor Ignatious had been very forthcoming with Nyrielle's inner circle of loyal soldiers and servants from the Vale of Mists about what happened.

"I'm still struggling with this bit," Ashlynn said at one point during the narration. "Lady Nyrielle took an Inquisitor as one of her progeny and he's been living in exile this whole time?"

She knew, intellectually at least, that Nyrielle had been at her coldest and most cruel in the years following the death of her parents but she never imagined that Nyrielle would take a member of the Inquisition as one of her progeny, just to inflict immortal suffering on him as retribution for what he had done to one of her first forty-seven progeny.

"I spoke with Inquisitor Ignatious last night, my lady," Heila added. "He's quiet and he defers to Madame Zedy in all things, but he seems to have a genuine reverence for Lady Nyrielle."

"I'm told it wasn't always that way," Captain Lennart said. "Evidently, he destroyed the south tower of the fortress in the Vale in a fit of rage when he discovered what Lady Nyrielle had done to him. Now, it seems like he's a different man, and Lady Nyrielle said that he used his Holy Flames to burn High Lord Hamdi's flesh all the way to the bone."

"I see," Ashlynn said, pausing as she wrestled with the implications of taking one of the Church's holy inquisitors captive. Or rather, turning him into a strange sort of ally. "I'll speak with him myself in the coming nights," she finally said. While she had many questions, including how a vampire could call down Holy Fire on another vampire, Captain Lennart couldn't answer any of them and her curiosity would have to wait.

"After the battle, Lady Nyrielle arranged a summit of local Eldritch Lords and notable figures," Virve said, taking over the explanation so her captain could finish his meal. "From comments she made, I gather that she expected any other vampires we reached out to would resist us in much the same way that High Lord Hamdi did."

"Isn't Hamdi the sire of Lady Nyrielle's grand-sire, High Lord Torbin?" Heila said, blinking in confusion. "I thought they were on good terms. She wanted to bring him to visit High Lord Torbin's tomb..."

"I think the reasons are something you'll need to hear from Lady Nyrielle," Virve said helplessly as she licked a few stray drops of sauce from her claws. "But after the battle at the Tangled Tower, our plans changed. Lady Nyrielle asked us to show visitors how she'd imprisoned Hamdi at the top of the tower where the sun could penetrate the cracks between boards of the pine box she trapped him in."

"Everyone understood the message," Captain Lennart said. "None of them had the power to fight back against High Lord Hamdi if he set his sights on their domains, so seeing him fall to such a wretched state made it clear that Lady Nyrielle couldn't be resisted."

"So she demanded a tribute of soldiers?" Ashlynn asked. When Nyrielle had left, Captain Lennart had less than twenty soldiers under his command, but when they returned, Nyrielle's army had swelled to more than a thousand soldiers and likely just as many servants and skilled tradesmen.

"Not exactly," Virve said in a tone that was as awkward as the expression on her face. "She offered to solve their problems for them. She demanded the right to hunt rebels or rivals for their thrones within their territory."

"The people in our army," Captain Lennart said. "With the exception of the soldiers taken from High Lord Hamdi's territory, they're the rebels, misfits, and traitors that were too strong for the local Eldritch Lords to eradicate and too weak to overthrow their local lords."

"Those men," Lennart said, his eyes growing distant as he recalled the look on those men's faces when they fell into Nyrielle's hands. "Something died within them when Lady Nyrielle put her hands on them. Something about them is horribly broken now."

"Lady Nyrielle snuffed out the spark of rebellion in them," Virve said, shuddering as she recalled the blank, lifeless stare she'd seen on the faces of men who had been proud, arrogant, and defiant only moments before Lady Nyrielle whispered in their ears.

"She hasn't done it to all of them," Lennart added. "Just enough to bring them under control. Now, they obediently follow orders and they're generally fairly competent but..."

"They're no longer capable of taking initiative," Virve said. "We've trained with them, many times. The warriors are strong enough and they fight with skill, especially when they're pressed to the edge of life and death. But they fight mechanically most of the time, and they don't offer up any ideas."

"So she's gained an army of foot soldiers," Ashlynn said as she suppressed a shudder of fear at the way the two bearish soldiers described the men who had fallen prey to the sorcery of the Harbinger of Death. Nyrielle had explained in the past that she could destroy a man's soul, snuffing out the fires of ambition and desire like the flames of a candle. She'd even felt the power when Nyrielle demonstrated it for her, but hearing about it put to use like this...

"And Mistress Nyrielle did this to every group she conquered?" Ashlynn asked hesitantly. "Was no one able to resist her?"

"There are a few special cases," Lennart explained. "The soldiers taken from the Tangled Wood have submitted willingly. If they rebel against Lady Nyrielle, she'll kill the greatest progeny that Hamdi has ever made. You should have seen him yesterday, Lady Ashlynn, the white-furred vampire called Savis."

"I don't recall," Ashlynn admitted, lowering her head and fidgeting with her hands as her face turned a deep shade of crimson. Last night, once she'd seen Nyrielle exit her carriage in a swirl of flowing black silks and delicate lace, she'd completely lost track of everything else occurring around her.

"Well, Sir Savis has been well-behaved," Virve said, leaning back casually in her chair now that she'd eaten her fill and then some. "He keeps his men under control, I think because he's afraid that Lady Nyrielle will do to him what she's done to so many others. And Sir Tausau can be considered a brother of High Lord Torbin," she added.

"He's been nothing but loyal since Lady Nyrielle offered a place for him and his Mongrel Horde to fight against the humans," Virve explained in a tone that was uniquely devoid of revulsion for the twisted men born of forbidden unions. Rather, she seemed to have built up a bit of respect for the misshapen vampire and his unique progeny. "He wants to prove that there is strength to be found among the Clanless."

"There is another exception," Captain Lennart added. "Since you've been studying with the Mother of Thorns, you might already have some knowledge of them. Tell me, my lady, have you ever heard of the Sorcerers of Sundered Earth?"

## Chapter 355: Unclear Motives

### The Sorcerers of Sundered Earth.

Very little was known about the secretive organization that hid themselves away at the bottom of a canyon in a region the Eldritch called the 'Forsaken Lands.' It was an area of desolation where the sun baked the earth to brick during the day and froze what little water could be found at night. The land was criss-crossed with deep canyons that looked like they had been gouged into the earth by a being of tremendous size.

No Eldritch Lord laid claim to the Forsaken Lands and no one saw any reason to fight for them. However, some groups, like the Sorcerers of Sundered Earth, found the isolation offered by the brutal, unforgiving environment to be worth the heavy toll the climate took on any settlement that established itself there.

"I don't know much," Ashlynn admitted when Captain Lennart asked about them. "Big sister only told me that, if I ever wanted to study the oldest sorcery in the Eldritch world, I should visit the Sorcerers of Sundered Earth. She said they had libraries that could rival Philosar's and that even the Gnawing Death coveted some items in their collection."

"It goes a bit beyond just having a vast library," Lennart said. "These sorcerers see themselves as custodians of sorcery and learning. They seek out information about lost and fallen clans, they rescue people from clans on the brink of destruction and they horde relics of fallen nations."

"That sounds... nice?" Heila said, cocking her head to the side as she considered the mission these strange sorcerers seemed to be on. "It's good that knowledge isn't lost. But, aren't the Forsaken Lands far to the west? They shouldn't have been close enough to respond to Lady Nyrielle's summit invitation."

"That's just the thing," Virve said, straightening in her chair. She paused for a moment to delicately work a bit of meat from between her teeth with a claw, earning a disapproving look from Captain Lennart. The bearish woman either didn't notice or chose to ignore his reaction as she continued, acting almost as if this was a family dinner and not a working meal shared with Lady Nyrielle's Seneschal and a powerful new witch.

"They weren't invited, my lady," Virve said as she flicked the piece of gristle onto her plate. "I don't think Lady Nyrielle intended to exclude them, but the day before the summit, they just... showed up."

Creepiest thing. They didn't seem to know what was happening, but they came for the 'important gathering' and said they'd been traveling for weeks in order to make it on time."

Lennart's stern expression softened as he watched Ashlynn hide a smile at Virve's casual manner. Ever since that desperate battle on the ice in the High Pass, Lady Ashlynn had treated Virve with a particular warmth that went beyond simple appreciation for a capable soldier. While part of him still wanted to enforce discipline, in Virve's case, he needed to make himself let go. If the Seneschal herself wasn't bothered by it, then he was in no place to make a fuss.

"As near as I could find out," Lennart added, pulling his mind away from Virve to focus on the conversation at hand. "They left the Forsaken Lands the day after the Tangled Tower fell to Lady Nyrielle and they headed straight to the tower. I tried asking a few of them how they knew where to go to reach the 'important gathering' but the answer everyone gave me was useless."

"Don't tell me," Ashlynn said. "They threw a feather into the air and followed the wind," she said, making fun of an old sailor's superstition for men who were lost at sea. It was said that the lost could always find land if they followed feathers on the wind but most people who understood traveling by sea knew the saying meant to look for birds.

Yet somehow, there was an image among people who lived inland of sailors as mystic navigators who literally threw feathers into the air and set their course by the way it blew on the wind!

"No," Lennart said, scratching his head at the reference. "They said that their leader has a map. His name is Aspakos, I'm sure you'll be meeting him soon," the bearish soldier said. "But he makes even less sense than his followers. I asked him why they came and he said 'Because a wedding shouldn't be a funeral,' and left it at that."

"That is bizarre," Heila said, giving Ashlynn a strange look. If anyone's wedding should have been a funeral, Ashlynn's marriage to Owain certainly counted. She'd been extremely lucky to survive Owain's assault and if not for Lady Nyrielle's timely rescue, Ashlynn would likely have died that night, even if she escaped the shallow grave Owain's knights buried her in.

"What did Mistress Nyrielle say about them?" Ashlynn asked. She understood her lover well enough to know that Nyrielle wouldn't just accept the help of strangers without having a reason to trust them. Clearly, she'd used her powers to cow several rebels into submission, but what had she done to gain the loyalty of these sorcerers?

"Almost nothing," Lennart said with a frustrated sigh. "Only that they may not be useful in a confrontation with the Lothians, but they will be welcome in the battles that follow. For now, our orders are to treat them as auxiliaries within the army. They are to be given no orders and no responsibilities. If we have need of them, we are allowed to make requests for their services but they're permitted to refuse."

"That sounds... very permissive," Ashlynn said. Arrangements like these weren't unknown in human traditions. If she had to compare it to something, it sounded very similar to traveling with a company of Templars or other orders within the Church.

A captain might take men of the Church onto his vessel, even fighting men, but even if they were besieged by pirates, he could never order the Templars to fight. A captain might be the highest authority after the Holy Lord of Light aboard his vessel, but the Church answered to no secular authority and so everything was a request rather than an order, even if the Templars did as the captain asked.

For Nyrielle to offer the same treatment to these sorcerers was beyond strange. Perhaps there were things in this world that even Nyrielle felt the need to bow down before. They'd only just begun to discuss the other True Vampires before they parted and there was still much that Ashlynn didn't know.

"I'll ask Mistress Nyrielle about it when she wakes," Ashlynn finally said. "I may not be able to share what I learn if there are secrets that must be kept, but knowing this much will help me to ask the question. Is there anything else strange that I should know before tonight's festivities begin?"

"Not exactly something strange," Lennart said with a knowing gleam in his eye. "But Lady Nyrielle asked me to reassign someone from my unit on a more permanent basis. With the way things have been going, she wants you to take on a personal guard."

"I see," Ashlynn said with a warm smile. "Virve, I assume that congratulations are in order?"

"If you'll have me, my lady," the bearish veteran said. Moving with more grace than someone of her age and size would be expected to possess, she stood up from her chair before kneeling in front of Ashlynn.

"These claws of mine are weak and growing old," she said, holding up her palms in front of her chest. "But there's strength enough in them to fight for several more years. If you accept me, I'll take

command of your personal guard when we return to the Vale of Mists. I promise to recruit only the most capable to ensure your safety."

"I couldn't ask for anyone better," Ashlynn said, placing a hand over her heart and feeling the faint pulse of the seed she nurtured beneath her skin. The seed of witchcraft she currently carried was intended for someone else, but perhaps, once her coven had accepted its second witch, she would begin to nurture a seed for Virve.

Heila's eyes widened slightly in surprise at Ashlynn's seemingly casual gesture. The soldiers in the room might not know what lay beneath Ashlynn's skin, but as the recipient of the first seed of witchcraft that Ashlynn had grown, it was impossible for Heila to miss the significance of the gesture.

But, seeing the way that Virve acted so casually around them, sharing a meal with them in much the same way they'd shared meals with Amahle's coven in the Briar, Heila couldn't help but give a small nod of approval in Ashlynn's direction.

The woman had more than proven herself in their battle on the ice against the Tuscans. After hearing the story of the battle against High Lord Hamdi's forces, it was clear that she had proven herself capable enough for Nyrielle to entrust Ashlynn to her care.

Ashlynn knew that there was still a bit of time before she would be able to nurture another seed, this wasn't a decision that she needed to make on the spot. She also wasn't certain that it would be right to bring a member of her personal guard into her coven but she firmly planted the idea in her mind. Now that she had, she would see how things progressed with Virve before she made her decision. Whether the idea sprouted and grew or died without blossoming would be up to Virve's actions in the next few months.

"So, since you're to be my new personal guard," Ashlynn said with a warm smile as she placed her hands on the woman's outstretched claws, formally accepting her service. "Let me tell you about what's going to happen tonight. Since I won't have Heila with me, I'll be counting on you to stay at my side..."

#### Chapter 356: Final Preparations

At the arena, a veritable army of servants had labored almost non-stop since Heila's ninth victory on the bloody sands. The work had paused only briefly when Nyrielle's army appeared and marched into the city like a snake made of flame with the torches they carried to march in the darkness. Once the

spectacle had ended, however, frantic supervisors had urged their staff back to work in order to transform the mighty stadium in time for the following evening's festivities.

Outside the arena, every marble statue had been cleaned and polished. In honor of a visit from the famed Blood Princess of the Arena, every fountain surrounding the arena as well as those within its more opulent spaces had been drained, scrubbed, and refilled with water and copious amounts of red coloring that made it appear as though the fountains had been filled with blood.

Inside the arena, the lowest level had undergone a startling transformation. Where common folk normally stood shoulder to shoulder, jostling for the best view of blood spilled on the sands above, now elegant tables draped in deep crimson linens formed intimate circles throughout the space. Ice sculptures of famous arena champions towered over the gathering, their crystalline forms catching and scattering the light from hundreds of oil lamps that had been hung to illuminate the normally shadowy space.

Common benches had been cleared away, replaced by elegant chairs and luxurious sofas that ringed the arena, offering the best view of the bloody battles below to the powerful and prestigious guests who would fill this space tonight.

Normally, the lowest level of the arena could accommodate nearly two thousand people, and as many as five hundred more were known to crowd into the space when popular champions met for the most anticipated battles of the year. Now, however, after arranging personal invitations for a small, select group of people, a mere four hundred tickets had been auctioned off to those wealthy enough or influential enough to rub elbows with the visiting dignitaries.

In High Lady Erna's private box, Ashlynn stood with Heila and her newly appointed personal guard Virve as they watched the final preparations being made. Overhead, the sun had already sunk low enough in the sky that it couldn't be seen from within the arena and the sky itself had turned a brilliant shade of pale orange with rosy highlights on the few wispy clouds that dotted the sky.

"I wish Nyrielle could watch sunsets like this," Ashlynn said softly as she looked out across the arena. Though the shade wasn't quite the same as the sunrise she'd watched with Nyrielle in the dream they shared, it was close enough to the vampire's favorite color that Ashlynn briefly wished she'd made arrangements to create a shadowed corner that was dark enough for her lover to emerge early, just to witness the sight together in person instead of in dreams.

"I'm told that, in the winter, there is a tower that she uses to watch the sunrise on days that the mist is thick enough to shield her from the early light," Virve said softly. "According to Captain Lennart, whenever she does, we have to block off all the hallways between her tower and her chambers so no one delays her when she returns to her bed to sleep away the day."

"I suppose I'll have to look forward to it this winter then," Ashlynn said with a soft, wistful smile. This winter she also intended to travel back to Blackwell County with Nyrielle. If something like what Virve mentioned could be arranged in the Vale of Mists, perhaps they could find a way to do something similar in the place where she'd watched the sunrise in their dream.

"You should slip down there and steal a bite to eat while you can, Heila," Ashlynn added, changing the topic and pointing to the tables on the lowest level that were heaped with food.

The richness of the autumn harvest was on full display, as was High Fen City's incredible access to rare spices and ingredients from all across Eldritch lands. The scents of roasted meats, fresh baked bread and heady alcohol reached all the way up to High Lady Erna's private box and the aromas were sure to be much more tantalizing once someone entered the level on the arena where they were being served.

"I can't," Heila said, her cheeks heating in embarrassment. "My stomach is too full of butterflies. It's been like that before every fight in the arena. The lunch we had was big enough for me," she added, placing a hand on Ashlynn's wrist to reassure her. "As long as everything goes well, I'll eat a big meal after the battle."

"Young soldiers are the same way," Virve said, placing a hand of her own on Heila's shoulder. "Captain Lennart has to scold them to eat so they don't fall faint when they stand their first night watches on the walls."

"I'm not that bad!" Heila protested. "It's just... this time, Lady Nyrielle will be watching, along with all the soldiers and leaders she brought with her. I can't shame Lady Ashlynn in front of them by falling short tonight."

"Have you been able to learn what Yotsun has prepared tonight?" Ashlynn asked. "I can't imagine he's given up on defeating you, even if the past few days have been fairly mild compared to the day he sent Tuscans after you."

"It doesn't matter," Heila said as she watched the servants bustling about below. Several kegs of fine ale had just been wheeled into place and a staggering number of smaller wine casks had been placed next to collections of expensive crystal goblets, ready to serve the refined palettes of the most notable patrons who would visit the arena tonight.

"Whatever Yotsun has in mind, there are still things he hasn't seen from me yet," the diminutive witch said confidently. "When the time comes, I promise, I'll deliver a victory that will make Lady Nyrielle proud."

"You don't need to do anything to make her proud," Ashlynn whispered. Moving slowly, she knelt on the ground next to Heila and wrapped her arms around the diminutive witch who was currently the only member of her tiny coven. "You don't have to do anything more to make me proud either. Whatever that slimy merchant has in store for you tonight, so long as you survive it, nothing else matters."

"I know," Heila said, burying her face in Ashlynn's chest as she embraced the woman who felt just as close to her as her own mother. She knew that Ashlynn never demanded victory from her and that her love wasn't contingent on whether she performed well or not.

But that was why it mattered even more to Heila that she achieved something tonight. Lady Nyrielle had returned with an army of more than a thousand soldiers, many of them elite warriors from their nations or clans. Now, if Heila could defeat the opponents that Yotsun had selected for their final confrontation, she'd be able to add one hundred champions from the arena to that force.

In the end, it all came down to tonight's final battle...

### Chapter 357: Ashlynn's Efforts

After leaving Heila to prepare for the evening's main event, Ashlynn returned to High Lady Erna's palace to prepare herself for the grand spectacle of Nyrielle's reception. Unlike her previous visit to High Fen City, this time Ashlynn had several days in advance to make her arrangements and there wasn't a single detail that she neglected.

She started with a green dress several shades darker than her usual emerald tones, opting for something in a stately hue similar to the great pine trees that covered the mountain slopes between the High Fen and High Pass. She paired it with spills of delicate black silk lace and a cutout panel across the bodice in the same black lace that emphasised the fullness of her pale bosom.

Tonight, while she was the Mother of Thorns, she was also Nyrielle's Seneschal and she wanted to send a strong message that they stood together. Last night, she'd dressed for Nyrielle, wearing a sleeveless dress that bared her shoulders and neck to arouse her lover's hunger. Now, on the high collar of her full-sleeved gown, she wore a string of blood-red garnets spilling from one side of her neck to make her allegiance clear to everyone who looked.

Even her hat was something she'd had prepared just for occasions when she attended grand events with Nyrielle. The dark green fabric paired with her dress but in place of black lace, she'd adorned it with long, slender, black feathers that held a hint of blue or green depending on how the light struck them.

"You look stunning, my lady," Virve said with genuine praise as Ashlynn settled her wide-brimmed hat in place. "Even more so than you did on our first visit."

To the newly elevated soldier, Ashlynn seemed almost as otherworldly as Lady Nyrielle. Seeing them together the night before, she'd glimpsed a hint of it, but she'd been too embarrassed at the very public display of affection to look too closely. Now that she had a chance to see Lady Ashlynn up close, however, she had to admit that the transformation her lady had undergone went far beyond the physical.

If Virve were to put on a fancy dress, she might pass for modestly charming but no one would use words like 'beautiful' or 'enchanting' to refer to her, even if she were a decade or two younger. She knew that she was a soldier with a soldier's strong build and there was little that people found conventionally attractive about that kind of power no matter how you dressed it up.

When Ashlynn donned her gown for the evening, however, the impression she gave was very similar to the aura Virve radiated when she donned her armor and weapons. The evening ahead would be a different kind of battlefield, one that Ashlynn had studied as a young woman but had far too little experience fighting on. Now, however, it seemed as though she'd taken a significant step forward as she prepared to play host to the elite of High Lady Erna's nation.

"Stunning doesn't begin to describe it," Nyrielle said as she swept into the room. "My darling looks as though she's ready to conquer in my name, whether I attend or not," she said with an amused smile.

After several months of either feeding on the unwilling or only taking the bare minimum offerings from her own people, Nyrielle had looked increasingly inhuman over the past several months. Among the

vampires and the Eldritch, no one would comment, but those who knew her best knew that she had been holding herself back for quite a while.

Now, after a night with Ashlynn, her alabaster skin seemed to glow with an ethereal radiance that stood out like soft white clouds against the midnight blue of her evening gown. Here again, Ashlynn had applied her skills, requesting a dress that made Nyrielle's complex identity clear.

When they'd visited before, Nyrielle accepted gifts befitting her status as the 'Blood Princess of the Arena', but now, Ashlynn wanted to diminish that title as much as she could while presenting the powerful Harbinger of Death. To that end, Nyrielle wore a figure-hugging bodice in deep midnight blue silk, accented spills of soft, gossamer fabric intended to remind people of the omnipresent mists in her home.

Much like Ashlynn's hat, the loose, flowing skirt she'd selected for Nyrielle had been accentuated with a spill of dark feathers that trailed from her slender hips all the way to the floor. Intermixed with those dark feathers were occasional accents of bright red plumage, marking the only concession Ashlynn made to Nyrielle's title as 'Blood Princess.'

For too long, the people of the High Fen had come to look down on the Vale of Mists. They'd been dismissed as impoverished and weak, unable to recover while under the constant threat of their enemies. The Eldritch people who had never in their lives faced the might of the human armies or the powerful sorcerers of the Church had no idea why the border nations continued to struggle, but as long as danger remained far away, their minds were unlikely to change.

Ever since her return to High Fen City, Ashlynn had been pushing back against that narrative. Heila's string of victories in the arena, echoing and honoring Nyrielle's own famed ten-day stand in the arena, were just one part of Ashlynn's campaign.

Nyrielle's arrival with a powerful army, including the subjugated forces plundered from High Lord Hamdi, made for another point in favor of the Vale of Mists. But just these two things were far from enough to reshape how people thought about the Vale. To gain the support they would need, not just for the next Lothian attack but for everything that was sure to follow, Ashlynn needed to do much, much more.

"If I'm going to conquer," Ashlynn said, taking her place next to Nyrielle and snaking her arm around the other woman's. "Then I will conquer in your name. But wherever I conquer, whether you are there or

not, people should always see the shadow of your wings hovering behind me," she added, stretching up on her tiptoes to give Nyrielle a chaste kiss.

"This was your doing?" Nyrielle asked, gesturing at the elegantly tailored dress she wore. "It doesn't seem like the sort of thing that Little Snake's people would have prepared for me. How long have you been making arrangements for tonight?"

"Since a few days after I arrived," Ashlynn said as they began to walk to the waiting carriage. "The outfits and the venue are just preparing the stage," she explained. "There are already whispers about the rise of the Vale of Mists. Tonight, I intend to turn those whispers into shouts that can be heard in the hills. The people on this side of the mountains need to use the winter to prepare themselves to seize opportunity in the spring."

"Opportunities? To join the battle against the Lothians?" Nyrielle said with a raised eyebrow. She'd already gathered more soldiers than she ever expected to after crushing Hamdi in the Tangled Wood. But it seemed like her lover wasn't content with this much strength.

"Tell me, my darling Ashlynn," Nyrielle asked. "I've never managed to convince the warriors of the High Fen to come fight in any of our wars against the Lothians, no matter how dire the circumstances were, unless I defeated them individually in the Arena. Just what is it you've done to make these men fight for us?"

#### Chapter 358: Mercantile Power Struggles

"I haven't pulled them along that far, they won't fight for us yet," Ashlynn said with a sad shake of her head. "It doesn't matter to them whether the Vale rises or falls. It's too far away and nothing is at stake. The few who still trade with us only trade in meager quantities. It's not enough to fight a war to defend."

"The Vale of Mists was once a gateway to trade between the eastern lowlands and the western highlands," Ashlynn continued. "Blackwell County is the same. It's one of three gateways between the Kingdom of Gaal and old countries across the sea. People will pledge soldiers to protect their wealth," she said firmly. "We just need to give enough people on this side of the mountains a reason to tie their wealth up in the Vale of Mists."

"This is a human way of conducting business," Nyrielle said, shaking her head at her young Seneschal. "The Eldritch bow down to strength. Strength is what gained me the army that will march home with us and strength is the only language that the people of this arena mad nation will speak."

"You're wrong, my love," Ashlynn said, giving Nyrielle a gentle poke. Behind her, Virve nearly stumbled as they walked along when she heard the casual way that Ashlynn told Lady Nyrielle that she was wrong in such a blunt way, but Nyrielle only seemed curious, cocking her head slightly as she listened to Ashlynn's explanation.

"High Lady Erna's family has ruled for too long," Ashlynn said. "Their strength has become unassailable. It's the same in the Kingdom of Gaal, especially in the eastern lands like Blackwell County."

"In the Frontier, places like Lothian March, humans are fighting to conquer new land," Ashlynn explained. "They want to use strength to seize opportunities they're denied anywhere else. In a way, the humans along the Frontier are the most similar to the Eldritch traditions that you're familiar with."

"I don't entirely approve of that comparison," Nyrielle said, frowning at Ashlynn. At the moment, there was no one around them as they walked through the portion of the palace that had been reserved almost exclusively for their use, and she was willing to indulge Ashlynn's choice of phrases but a time would come not long from now when they would need to be united in both words and actions. "But go on..."

"The Eldritch people in the High Fen have more in common with Blackwell County than they do with Lothian March," Ashlynn said confidently. "There are three paths to power in the High Fen. A person can amass great personal strength and challenge High Lady Erna and her family for the rule of the High Fen. Fewer than one in one hundred thousand people have that kind of strength so no one even thinks about that anymore."

"The more open path is in the arenas scattered across the High Fen. The arenas in High Fen City are the greatest, but there are other small towns that still have their own arenas, and even the most humble villager with dreams of greatness can find themselves on a road that leads to the great arena in High Fen City."

"As I said," Nyrielle said, giving Ashlynn's hand a gentle squeeze. "The High Fen is arena-mad. They value the strength they see proven on the sands. That's why I needed to take to the sands myself to win over the champions I needed to retake the Vale."

"But there's a third contest that is every bit as vicious as the one between gladiators on the sands," Ashlynn pointed out. "In fact, it even influences the battles in the arena. The High Fen is still a tremendous hub for trade flowing up and down the length of the mountains, or heading from anywhere along the mountains to the western interior. That's given rise to merchants who are no less calculating or ambitious than the Guild Masters I knew in Blackwell County."

"The merchants here share the same frustrations I saw in Blackwell County," Ashlynn added. "In Blackwell, even the wealthiest merchant can't hope to become a knight unless one of the existing noble families falls from grace or dies without heirs. All the good land was carved up generations ago, and what little remains isn't enough to support a proper noble title."

"And that's why your father was so eager to marry you to that vile man?" Nyrielle said, her expression darkening as a trace of dark, shadowy energy flickered across her eyes. "He risked his eldest daughter for a chance to raise his station because he couldn't do it himself in Blackwell County?"

"That, that isn't quite it," Ashlynn said quickly. Now that everything had happened, it was easy to blame her father for the arrangement he had brokered with Bors Lothian but in the end, Ashlynn had volunteered so long as she felt that she could trust Owain after a few years of courtship. Much of the blame for what happened next belonged to her and she didn't want Nyrielle to judge her father unfairly before she even met him.

"My father was suffering a different pressure," Ashlynn explained. "He didn't have an heir. But the Lothians haven't had difficulty siring multiple sons in every generation," she said. "Bors Lothian offered that, so long as my firstborn son could inherit the Lothian throne, my second born could return to Blackwell County to inherit my father's title."

"It still seems foolish to me," Nyrielle said, her expression softening as she felt Ashlynn's heart quicken when she raced to defend her father. "All of that time spent waiting for someone who can claim a blood relationship and to what end? Not every descendant is fit to rule. The people of Blackwell County would be better off if your father invested his time in training a successor who isn't related to him, but instead, he's sold you off in the hopes that you could deliver him a child to thrust upon his throne."

"That..." Ashlynn began awkwardly. "That's something that humans see differently. But the desire to enter the nobility, or to preserve one's position as a member of the aristocracy, is a powerful motivator. That's why, when I wrote to Master Isabell and the other guild masters in Blackwell County, I encouraged them to press Owain for titles and lands. By making them believe he could offer those

concessions, they should be willing to put aside their differences with each other to cooperate on an opportunity that is unlikely to occur again in their lifetimes."

"And you say that these human merchants, who squabble among each other for wealth, are similar to the merchants in the High Fen?" Nyrielle asked, not entirely sure she believed Ashlynn. "Since when did the people of the High Fen care so much about wealth when they should be seeking glory in the arenas?"

"You know," Ashlynn said, shifting her approach slightly. "Heila's battles in the arena aren't being fought between her and the champions of the arena. Not really, though a few have stood forth to meet her on the sands," Ashlynn said. "The person that Heila is really fighting against is the spice merchant Yotsun. In fact, the first groups of men that Yotsun sent after her were all gladiators who had their training funded by Yotsun and his shipping company."

"You're saying that the people without the ability to fight for themselves will use piles of gold and jewels to dictate the actions of those with the strength to fight?" Nyrielle asked, giving Ashlynn a quizzical look.

"More or less," Ashlynn agreed. "Fighting men are expensive. Weapons, armor, food, lodging, training, salaries, death benefits... All of it adds up. The merchants of the High Fen are competing to control the strongest gladiators, but it goes further than that. Countless gladiators, raised and trained by these merchants, retire from the sands to take up positions in the mercenary forces these merchants rely on to protect their caravans of goods."

"So winning the battle to develop the greatest champions means gaining the strongest protection for their business," Nyrielle said with a slow nod. Because she possessed the strength to not only dominate the arena but to challenge High Lady Erna if she wished, she'd never concerned herself with the 'lesser' struggles for power within the High Fen but now that Ashlynn laid it out for her, she could see the way that the web of interests could distort the struggle for real strength.

"And you've been waging war with these merchants since you arrived?" Nyrielle asked. "You seem to have developed a very deep understanding of them in a very short period of time."

"I told you, didn't I?" Ashlynn said with an impish look as if she'd been caught at some piece of mischief. "These people are very similar to the merchants in Blackwell County. Once I understood the game they were playing, it was easy enough to join them."

"Tonight, I've picked the very best seeds to present to you," Ashlynn said. "None of them will bring us soldiers in the fall, and even if we plant them carefully and shower them with attention for the next year, they may not sprout. For some, it could be two or three years before they bear fruit. But I promise you, my love," she said with deep, genuine feeling.

"If you trust me tonight, and you trust the value of the people I've gathered," Ashlynn said. "Then the Vale of Mists will reap a harvest like none it's seen since the Lothians built their temple."

#### Chapter 359: Not Our People?

By the time they reached the carriage, Nyrielle had a much better understanding of Ashlynn's intentions. More than that, she began to wonder if she knew the Eldritch people as well as she had once believed.

For more than a century, the Vale of Mists had very little to do with Eldritch nations other than their immediate neighbors. Moreover, when Nyrielle dealt with other Eldritch Lords, she most often dealt with the extremely long-lived vampire lords that could be considered relics of an era that was beginning to fade. Now, it seemed like wealth and commerce were becoming as important to the Eldritch people as the raw strength to defend them from their enemies.

"When we met, I said that I believed you would help me break the stalemate with the Lothians," Nyrielle said as they settled into her carriage. "At the time, it was because I believed in the strength you would wield as a witch once you came to understand your powers. Now, however, I'm coming to realize that even if you were a powerless human, you would be an extraordinary agent of change."

"Strength still forms the best support," Ashlynn said, summoning a faint swirl of emerald energy that danced around her palm like leaves blown in the wind, filling the carriage with the rich scent of new growth. "If I wasn't the Mother of Trees, how many merchants would have met with me? If I couldn't offer them things they couldn't receive from anyone else, how many would be willing to discuss a deal?"

"If I wasn't a witch, if I hadn't been strengthened by my bond with you," Ashlynn said, dismissing her magic and reaching out to hold Nyrielle's hands. "This wouldn't have been possible at all."

"I still don't know if any of your seeds will bear fruit," Nyrielle said, hoping to temper Ashlynn's optimism. "Or even if there will be time for them to do so. But so long as you believe, I'm willing to give new things a try."

"That's all I could ever ask and more," Ashlynn said, snuggling up to Nyrielle in the comforting darkness of the carriage. The single oil lamp cast soft shadows over both women, creating the illusion that they blended into each other as they enjoyed the moment of peace and solitude before plunging into the crowds that would surround them when they reached the arena.

Outside the massive structure, crowds filled the plaza, pressing up against barriers and straining for a glimpse of the arriving dignitaries. Shouts of adoration and pleas for attention could be heard from innumerable throats as everyone from famous champions of the previous generation to the wealthiest merchants emerged from their stately carriages and made their way to the converted first floor of the arena.

As soon as one carriage arrived, however, the crowds went completely silent. Everyone pressed forward and the lightly armored guards dispatched from both the arena and the palace had to press people back behind barriers lest someone find themselves trampled beneath the crowd.

Drums sounded from the entrance of the arena, accompanied by the triumphant peels of trumpet blasts.

"We welcome the Blood Princess of the Arena!" A barrel-chested man from the clan of the great claw shouted from the top of the steps. "We welcome the Harbinger of Death!"

"We welcome the Blood Princess," the crowd echoed loudly. "We welcome the Harbinger of Death!"

"It seems I've been forgotten already," Ashlynn teased as she prepared to proceed Nyrielle out of the carriage.

"Should I give them a reminder?" Nyrielle asked in a tone that was light but held a sharper edge than Ashlynn expected. "No one should disrespect my darling Ashlynn, especially not when I'm present."

"No need, my love," Ashlynn said, her face heating slightly as she felt Nyrielle's protective fierceness echoing within her chest alongside the echo of her lover's heartbeat. "They've already seen me and they know me. Tonight, they've gathered to welcome you."

The women's emergence from the carriage created a stir among the people and several bowed or knelt where they stood. As soon as she exited the carriage, Nyrielle unfurled her black, feathered wings, stretching them out wide for a moment as the crowd collectively gasped before wrapping one wing protectively around Ashlynn as the women ascended the stairs.

"All of this is your doing too?" Nyrielle asked quietly, gesturing at the crowds of people. Compared to her previous visit when the only crowds present at the theater where they watched the opera were other attendees, this seemed somewhat... excessive.

"They will talk about seeing you tonight for years to come," Ashlynn said lightly. "Look, see the children riding their parent's shoulders? That's how much your legend means to them. Those children should be in bed by now, but look at the proud looks on their parent's faces. They were able to see you tonight, even if they couldn't afford a ticket to be in the arena. They want to remember this, and they want their children to remember you as well."

"And this too, you've done for a reason? You court the wealthy for the power of their purses," Nyrielle observed. "But why is it that you're courting the common folk of the High Fen? These aren't our people. If they aren't swayed by Little Snake's strength or the coins of the merchants, what will sway them?"

"Stories are powerful, my love," Ashlynn whispered. "Stories of courage, hope... love. They're very powerful. Even more so when they're true. Inviting them to see a legend in the flesh may not achieve much at the moment, but what do you think would happen if we returned in the spring, seeking people to help us strengthen the Vale of Mists?"

"To the people of the High Fen, you're one of theirs, a champion of the arena," Ashlynn explained. "But I want them to see you as you are, as the Lady of the Vale. Right now, they yearn for you to return to the arena. But look out there," Ashlynn said, pausing to point outside now that they weren't as easily observed by the people in the crowd.

"Notice how many of them are from the Horned Clan, or the Clan of the Great Claw," Ashlynn said, leaning close enough to whisper in Nyrielle's ear.

Near the front of the crowd, a cluster of children from the Horned Clan, so young that their horns were only small nubs barely visible through their hair, had already begun to play in the plaza under the watchful eyes of their parents. One waved a stick in one hand and held a coil of thin rope in the other, clearly imitating the new rising star of the arena.

Another young girl, with eyes that were as bright and shining as the stars, wrapped a cloak around her arms and flapped it like vast wings, even going so far as to wrap one arm around a younger sibling before declaring that she would defend her little brother, no matter the cost!

"They might not be your people right now, but they were once," Ashlynn continued, subtly directing Nyrielle's attention to where a grizzled veteran from the Clan of the Great Claw stood at rigid attention.

The man's scarred face and minimal armor marked him as a former arena champion who had likely donned his old armor to pay respects to a fellow champion. But the look in his eyes when he saw Virve following closely behind Ashlynn and Nyrielle betrayed a deeply suppressed desire to protect people who meant far more to him than the warehouse full of grain he guarded for his current employer.

"And seeing you, and the splendor around you," Ashlynn said softly. "Perhaps some of them will wish to rejoin their long-lost kin within the Vale."

"I doubt you'll succeed, my darling," Nyrielle said, turning away from the crowds outside to face the considerably more sophisticated crowd that had gathered within the arena. "But I'm always willing to let you try," she said in a voice that contained more yearning than she'd thought she could feel over the descendants of people who had abandoned her more than a hundred years ago.

But... if those descendants wanted to return... even if they didn't choose to fight in the wars to come, Nyrielle made up her mind on the spot that she wouldn't reject them. Whatever resentments she might have for their unwillingness to return once she sacrificed so much to retake the Vale of Mists...

None of that could compare to the feeling of having her people return, especially if they returned because Ashlynn encouraged them to do so.

## Chapter 360: New Partners

On the first floor of the arena, the small crowd of influential locals gave much more restrained applause when Nyrielle and Ashlynn made their entrance. There was a round of soft applause and a scattering of shouts from former champions of the arena, but there were no spontaneous acts of kneeling or other demonstrations of subservience from this crowd.

"Teacher, our reunion last night was too brief," High Lady Erna said as she slid gracefully across the stone floor to greet Nyrielle.

"Little Snake, you don't need to call me teacher anymore," the powerful vampire said, momentarily leaving Ashlynn's side to embrace her former student. "We're old friends now, each with our own territories to rule."

The gesture was simple and the embrace didn't last long, but the wave of whispers it set off couldn't have been louder if one of the women had slapped the other. Less than six months ago, when Nyrielle had passed through the High Fen, they hadn't been so close and companionable and the only event they'd held was a masquerade ball in the palace. It could be said that High Lady Erna had paid proper respects to a visiting Eldritch Lady and her former teacher but nothing more.

Yet now, on what was supposed to be the first of many nights of celebration, they embraced so readily... None of the people gathered here were simple but if you asked them to speculate about what the apparent closeness between these two powerful rulers meant for the future of the High Fen, none of them could say for certain.

"The entertainment will begin soon," Erna said as Ashlynn joined them. "I'm sure your seneschal has arranged for several people to bend your ears tonight so I won't delay you. We can watch the final match of the evening from my private box when the time comes."

"This feeling of being passed from one thing to the next, like a puppet on a string," Nyrielle said with a wry smile on her face. "I can't help but wonder if the Mother of Thorns taught you how to bind people in webs with the way you're doing this to me, darling."

"Don't blame her too much for that," Erna said with a light, musical laugh. "My first minister does the same to me. At times, you would almost think he had usurped my throne!"

"I could never usurp Mistress Nyrielle's throne," Ashlynn protested with a light laugh of her own. "What's hers is hers and will always be hers, me included," she added as she stepped close enough to Nyrielle for the other woman to wrap an arm around her.

"All right, enough, you two," the esteemed High Lady said, shaking her head at the youthful displays of affection between the two. "You make me feel like I'm the old one when you do that, and I'm still far too young to feel old in this company."

Ashlynn, she could understand, but the more time she watched Nyrielle with the young witch, the more the image in her mind of her wise and powerful teacher crumbled, replaced with a woman who wasn't all that different from herself. Though, perhaps that had been Nyrielle's point when she said they were old friends now.

"Mistress Nyrielle," Ashlynn said, tugging slightly on Nyrielle's arm to lead her toward a group of waiting tradesmen. "There are a few men I'd like to introduce you to who have agreed to accompany us back to the Vale of Mists when we leave. If you'll entertain them?"

"Ha ha, it seems my Seneschal has everything well in hand," Nyrielle laughed. "Little Snake, we'll meet again later tonight. My darling, it seems that tonight, I'm in your capable hands."

"In that case," she said, gesturing to a trio of men standing anxiously nearby. "Let's begin with Master Benouet, Master Wimund, and Master Aubin," Ashlynn said, pointing first to a short, dignified fellow from the Clan of Painted Masks who resembled a more refined and well-to-do version of the Artificer Erkembalt.

Next to him stood Master Wimund, a towering fellow from the Clan of the Great Claw who, despite his luxurious tunic, kept his well-muscled arms bare, making it clear he wasn't above doing some manual labor himself. Finally, Master Aubin of the Glass Eyed Clan looked like the most delighted of the three when he saw Ashlynn's approach, his long, flexible neck nearly turning in a complete circle as he watched her approach.

Nearby, at one of the elegantly laid tables that Ashlynn and Nyrielle directly bypassed, a distinguished master whose family had controlled the silk trade along the mountain passes for three generations, watched with barely concealed irritation as Ashlynn guided Nyrielle toward three decidedly less distinguished merchants.

"A ditch digger," he muttered to his companions, recognizing Master Benouet's silver spectacles and the practical boots the man wore even to a gathering as important as this. "The Blood Princess returns to High Fen City after months away, and the first person they present to her is a man who builds ditches for a living."

"And that oaf Wimund," said an elegant woman from the Scaled Clan who wore more jewels across her smooth chest than Ashlynn had in any of her public appearances. Her tongue flickered in distaste and she had to force herself to look away before Lady Nyrielle caught the unsightly expression on her face.

"My cousin commissioned stone for a statue from his quarry last year," she said quietly to her fellow guests as they wallowed in the feeling of being snubbed. "The man smelled of stone dust even at the contract signing." She coiled her serpentine form higher, cocking her head slightly and straining her ears as if trying to catch what could possibly be so important about these three that warranted such immediate attention.

The whispers spread through the gathering as other notable guests, whether they were arena champions, wealthy merchants, or even the mayors of nearby villages, found themselves pushed aside in favor of what appeared to be a thoroughly middling trio.

"Masters," Nyrielle said politely. "Of everyone present, my darling Ashlynn seems to feel like you three are the most important for me to spend time with before I greet anyone else," she said, her midnight blue eyes twinkling with a bit of mischief as she watched an invisible pressure descend on the poor tradesmen. "I'm curious, what is it exactly about you three that has so thoroughly captivated my darling?"

"Airgead mountain," Aubin blurted after a heavy, unconscious gulp. "Her, her Dominion, that is to say, that we have an idea and, together if we can..."

Though Nyrielle hadn't done anything to apply extra pressure to the long-legged fellow, just standing in her presence made his knees want to buckle and when her eyes sharpened at the mention of Airgead Mountain, he felt like his knees had turned to soft mud, barely holding him upright as he struggled to articulate anything at all.

Meanwhile, those few who were in earshot shook their heads and sipped at their wine, waiting for the spectacle to unfold. Perhaps it was for the best that they hadn't gone first. With this fool to set the tone, anything they had to say would look a thousand times better by comparison. A few of them only hoped that Aubin wouldn't make such an exaggerated mess of things that the Blood Princess claimed his head for wasting her time.

Others, however, held the opposite hope. They didn't expect to gain much from this event to begin with, but a chance to see the Blood Princess smite someone for making a fool out of her... that would be well worth the ticket price!