

The Vampire 591

Chapter 591: The Secret of Thane's Power (Part Two)

"Would you dare to take it?"

Her offer was a challenge, but it also required Thane to believe that the strange woman who had come to him several nights a week for sword lessons was actually capable of threatening the height of power within Lothian March.

"You've never told who you really are, your ladyship," Thane said, relaxing casually with one foot on a low bench while he used a towel to wipe sweat from his neck and broad, muscular chest. "You're quicker than me and surprisingly strong for your size, but it will take more than that to threaten the Lothians. What gives you the confidence to deliver on your promise?"

"It's simple," Nyrielle said, summoning the darkness and shadows of the dimly lit school to wrap around her like a cloak before slowly unfolding her dark, feathered wings. "I've killed one Marquis already," she said with a smile that bore a hint of wickedly pointed fangs. "With you fighting at my side, I have every confidence in killing another."

"One bite," she said, appearing behind him faster than his eyes could follow her motion. "One bite on your neck, and one drink of my blood and you'll gain strength like few humans have ever possessed. Strength enough not only to destroy the Marquis who condemned your sister, but to destroy the barony that fostered a vile beast who tried to defile her. Your enemies are my enemies, Thane," she whispered against his neck.

"Say the word, and everything will change," she promised. "You can have your vengeance, and an eternity of days afterward to live free of the oppression and disdain that the rulers of this wretched place subject you to," she said, gesturing at the rundown school that he'd barely been able to keep open without her assistance.

"You," he started to say before his voice caught in his throat and it felt like the beads of sweat on his body turned into tiny crystals of ice. "You're the Demon Lady of the Vale..."

"Shhh," Nyrielle whispered against his neck. "We don't like the word 'Demon.' But you, if you accept my offer, can call me 'Nyrielle.'"

"And if I refuse," Thane asked as his heart beat wildly in his chest, urging him to run, to flee, to escape the monster whose mere presence meant certain death. "Will you kill me to hide your secret?"

"I don't like the idea of killing a friend, Thane," Nyrielle whispered. "Refuse, and you will never see me again. But if you refuse, the offer will never come again. Or accept, and gain the power to take revenge for yourself with your own hands..."

In the end, it had been an offer that the fallen knight couldn't refuse. She had been searching for a partner who could fill the aching void within her heart and she thought that she finally found him, even if there wasn't love between them yet, there was at least friendship.

When she took Thane back to the Vale of Mists, bringing him to the hidden waterfall where her mother had once worked to nurture life in one of the most shadowed places in the ancient fortress, she did everything she could to transform him into a vampire that could be worthy of standing next to her, reigning above any of her other progeny as a true equal to her power. She chose to give him the Voice of Command so that no one in the Vale could disobey him, intending to share her power equally with him and rule the Vale together.

At the time, she had naively believed that if she allowed him to drain her to the point of death, he would gain strength close enough to her own that they could truly become partners, equals, and in time, perhaps lovers, giving birth to a relationship filled with warmth like the one she had seen between her parents.

Reality, however, had no intention of indulging such childish fantasies. Two hearts that knew only a thirst for vengeance and death could never find love and no matter how much of her power she poured into Thane, it was always her power that gave him strength. No matter how close to him she drew, there was always an uncrossable gulf between them, and he was never able to step out of her shadow to cast one of his own.

Neither of them ever spoke of how close they had come to becoming more than a loyal servant and his mistress. Over the years, Nyrielle had come to see him more as a prodigal son than a potential lover while Thane treated her as the greatest liege lady a knight could ever dedicate his sword to.

The closeness they shared never became romantic but if either of them regretted that fact, those regrets had been ground to dust decades before Ashlynn's arrival could wash away any lingering notions

of such a relationship. It had been a fanciful idea then and now that she knew what it meant to find someone who could be a real partner for her, it was one that Nyrielle no longer regretted leaving in the past.

"Just because Thane is special," Nyrielle said, shaking herself out of her memories and returning to the conversation at hand. "That doesn't mean you should underestimate the others. You saw Ignatious at his weakest and most broken. Now that he has begun to mend his faith and found meaning in his life again," she said, giving Heila a brief, knowing look before she continued. "I expect that his flames will burn hotter than the Inquisition's in the war to come."

"I understand, Your Eternity," Savis said, bowing his head in acknowledgement. "But, Lord General," he said, returning his attention to Thane in the hopes of moving the conversation on to a different topic, any topic, that would shift the attention away from him and allow him to recover from the crushing defeat he'd just suffered. "You said you needed three men to join Bassinger as commanders of the army. He will lead the common soldiers and I will lead our elite warriors, but what else does that leave?"

"I'm glad you asked," Thane said, pulling his gaze away from Nyrielle and taking a moment to allow the memories she'd stirred within him to subside. All the things that had happened between them and all of the things that hadn't belonged to the past and he had no regrets for the choices they'd made or the things that had never been, and seeing Nyrielle's genuine happiness with Ashlynn now only made him grateful that his Mistress had finally found the partner she sought after so many years.

Those old memories, however, stirred other thoughts within the Lord General as he looked down the table at the bearish figure sitting next to Savis.

"I'm sure that High Lord Torbin would be proud that one of his brothers has come to fight alongside the Vale against the enemies that sent him into the dark embrace of the abyss," Thane said, nodding briefly at Savis. "But I think it would be an even greater comfort to him if Commander Savis was joined by another brother."

"So what say you, Tausau?" Thane asked, raising a brow at the Clanless vampire as he tried to imagine how the great-grandsire he'd never met would feel about seeing this younger brother of his sitting here now.

"You and your Mongrel Horde are ideally suited to form the core of the Vale's third pillar of strength," Thane said, trying to shake off thoughts of the past to focus on the present. "While Commander Bassinger's men are well organized and disciplined soldiers and Commander Savis's men are elite

professionals, sometimes, we need to make use of far less organized forces led by a commander who can bring out the most of their individual and unique strengths."

"You would put me and my Mongrel Horde on equal footing with Commander Savis and Commander Bassinger?" Tausau said, blinking several times in surprise. "I had thought that I would serve as one of Savis's captains when he formed his army."

"If you wish to serve under your elder brother, we won't force you," Ashlynn said, stepping up beside Nyrielle and resting a hand on her shoulder as if to reassure the vampire that she was still here and to provide a moment of warmth through the touch of her fingers on her lover's cool skin.

Ashlynn might not understand everything that had passed between Thane and Nyrielle in that gaze but she understood how her lover felt when the vampire stumbled into a memory from long ago that carried emotions Nyrielle had only recently begun to understand.

Feeling the echo of her lover's fluttering heartbeat in her chest as it refused to slow even as the conversation moved on from Thane's uniqueness made it clear that something powerful had stirred feelings long buried within Nyrielle's heart and it was clear that the look she'd shared with Thane had stirred up distant memories in him as well. So, rather than forcing either Nyrielle or Thane to explain the details of their plan, Ashlynn smoothly inserted herself to take over part of the explanation.

"But before you refuse, I'd like to explain how we'd like to use the army we're asking you to build," she said with a faint smile as she walked across the room to the wall behind Nyrielle where a detailed map of the Vale of Mists and the surrounding territories had been hung expressly for this meeting, drawing attention away from Nyrielle and Thane as she took the lead explaining this part of their plan.

"I think that you'll find we need your talents even more than you may suspect and that your army will be a vital part of the opening phase of this war," Ashlynn said as ghosts of her own began to dance behind her eyes. After all, if all went well, it would be Tausau's men who struck her first blow of vengeance against Lothian March.

"Your army will also be the sharp spear we rely on to solve one of the most pressing issues weighing on Mashal Jakob's mind," she added with a nod of acknowledgement toward the horned marshal at the far end of the table.

"So," she asked, giving the Clanless vampire an encouraging smile. "Will you hear us out?"

"When you put it like that, Your Dominion," Tausau said, puffing up his thick chest with pride he'd only recently regained the ability to feel and smoothing out the ruffles on his tunic. "How can I refuse?"

Chapter 592: An Irregular Commander

"Before I begin, I want to make something clear when we talk about your irregular forces, Commander Tausau," Ashlynn said, addressing the elder vampire as a commander even though he had yet to accept the title.

Her father had often said that when you spoke as if a decision had already been made, by the time you asked them to formally make the decision, their minds had already been shaped to accept the outcome you desired. While it felt slightly underhanded to use such a technique on one of their own allies, in this case, she felt more like she was helping Tausau to overcome his own lack of confidence rather than manipulating him against his own interests.

"During our time in High Fen City, Lady Heila secured the services of ninety gladiators and mercenaries who fought against her in the arena," Ashlynn reminded the gathered leaders of the Vale. "As useful as it would be to have that force under her command in the months to come, as a member of my coven, Heila's duties lay elsewhere. If we have need of them, we may request that they return to her side, but for now, especially for the next few months while my coven trains and prepares for what is to come, these men would be more useful serving in an army like Commander Tausau's."

"You mean to say that you'd transfer ninety of these gladiators to my command?" Tausau said, looking slightly startled as he considered the number of warriors who had pledged themselves to Heila as part of her wager with a merchant in High Fen City. "That's three times the number of Mongrels I brought across the mountains," he said as he struggled to think of how he would use such a sizable force.

"Not only them," Ashlynn added. "There are several former refugees with unique skills for defending their villages, but just as Heila can't be spared to lead her gladiators, Ollie has even greater need of this time to train," she said, nodding at one of her two new witches. "The hunters, trappers, and guardians of his village, some of whom helped in Commander Bassinger's summer campaign, would also come under your command while Ollie learns his craft."

Neither Ollie nor Heila looked surprised at Ashlynn's decision to pull soldiers away from them in the months to come. While both of them felt varying levels of attachment to the people whose trust and

service they'd worked hard to gain, they also knew that compared to the likes of Savis, Tausau, and Lord General Thane, they were far too young and inexperienced to lead soldiers effectively in battle.

It would be better not only for Hiela and Ollie to focus on mastering their witchcraft in the months to come, but for the people who relied on them to have competent and capable commanders in the battles ahead. Things might change in the years to come as they grew into their powers and their roles within the Vale, but for now, both of the young witches readily accepted this arrangement.

Across the table from the witches, hearing Ashlynn describe what sounded like an increasingly powerful force, Tausau's gaze flickered briefly toward Savis, looking for a sign of support or approval from his elder brother.

Sitting here in the depths of the Vale of Mists, in Torbin's old castle, the Clanless vampire missed his fallen brother's wise council more than ever. Of the three of them, Torbin had always been the master of reason. Since his death at the hands of the human crusaders, Tausau had fallen under the sway of the strongest of Hamdi's progeny, depending on him for guidance for more than a hundred years.

The white-furred vampire's jaw tightened almost imperceptibly, his golden eyes narrowing at the edge of Tausau's vision. Even as he struggled to process his own defeat, Savis radiated a quiet displeasure seeing the way his Clanless little brother seemed to be rising rapidly in Lady Nyrielle's favor while he was subjected to a humiliation at the hands of her progeny.

In the end, however, he held his tongue. Both Thane and Nyrielle had made it clear that, while he would be respected as a commander, the decisions of the ruling trio weren't to be defied. If they wished to offer Tausau a position equal to his... he could only accept it.

Tausau held his breath for a moment as he watched subtle twitches in his brother's fur and slight shifts of his eyes convey more about his conflicted emotions than a dozen books could contain. Clearly, he wasn't in favor of his younger brother stepping forward but... neither was he making a move to stand in opposition.

For Tausau, who had spent centuries being reminded of his place at the very bottom of Hamdi's collection of progeny, the offer of equal standing with his pure-blooded brother felt almost like a trap, one that, if he accepted the position, would only prove to the powerful people gathered in this room just how far beneath them and how much less capable the Clanless vampire truly was.

"I understand your hesitation," Ashlynn said with a confident smile, either missing or deliberately ignoring the silent exchange between the brothers. "But many of the vampires in your Mongrel Horde are still individually stronger than most of the gladiators we would be sending your way. I doubt you'll have any trouble maintaining the dominance of your Horde, or your own authority as the Commander of your army."

"The only group who might cause you some trouble are the Tuscans who previously fought as mercenaries," Ashlynn continued, working to bolster the vampire elder's confidence. "But since they are more professional soldiers, we'd prefer to assign them to Commander Savis's elite forces. Unless you object?"

Tausau straightened slightly, as if Ashlynn's words had given him a path forward that he felt confident he could take. The corners of his mouth twitched upward in the first hint of confidence he'd allowed himself to display since entering the room.

"Your Dominion," Tausau said diplomatically. "I think it's wise to assign the most capable, professional mercenaries to big brother, er, Commander Savis," he said, using his brother's newest title deliberately to show his acceptance of his brother's new position within the Vale. "Brother Savis," he continued, his voice growing firmer and more confident as he spoke.

"I think you'll make better use of the Tuscan mercenaries than I will, but you remember how uncoordinated even the champions of the arena were when they were forced to fight against us as a group," he said, reminding his brother of their battle in the arena. "Even though we were chained and they outnumbered us three to one, they still couldn't present a serious threat. Let me take up the trouble of the irregular soldiers who would only get in your men's way."

"You don't need my permission," Savis said tersely. "But," he added after taking a deep breath. "You're right that these amateurs would only get in my men's way. You've been sorting out people with the strangest mixes of talents and weaknesses for centuries," he continued, offering rare praise to his younger sibling's talents. "If anyone can turn these 'irregulars' into an army, then I'm certain you can," he said with grudging respect.

"In that case, Your Dominion," Tausau said, returning his attention to Ashlynn and the map. "I'll take every man you send me and I'll make sure you get the best out of them that they can offer," he said, sitting up straighter and prouder than he had even when he first entered the room.

"Good, because I'm afraid that we're going to spread your men a bit thin," Ashlynn said with a somber expression on her face. The plan she had devised with Nyrielle and Thane would accomplish several of their goals as long as they moved quickly but even with all of the extra forces they could muster, the area they needed to cover was incredibly vast. That meant that Tausau's men would have to work in smaller groups that could easily be defeated if they encountered significant resistance.

"The mission we have in mind for your irregulars will require you to split your forces into several small groups in order to achieve all of our goals," Ashlynn continued. "Let me explain what we're hoping to achieve by unleashing your expanded horde on the unsuspecting March..."

As opening moves went, what Ashlynn had in mind would land on Owain and his father, Bors, like a tight slap delivered before the full court. It would sting, and it would embarrass them in front of their peers, but it wouldn't truly hurt either man. But Ashlynn knew Owain well, and she knew enough about his father to have a good idea how he would respond. Neither man could accept this kind of insult easily and when they responded to her provocation, she would be waiting to deliver an even heavier blow.

Chapter 593: An Opening Gambit (Part One)

"There are five 'western' barons in Lothian March," Ashlynn continued, gesturing at the map. Much like a sailing ship needed to haul in several lines in order to adjust to the wind, Ashlynn intended to 'tug' on a few of the barons of Lothian March in order to pull the rest of the March onto the course she desired.

On the map, they looked like powerful domains ruled by capable men with borders that had only expanded over the years since they were first drawn, but to her, they were little different than the spokes of a ship's wheel, unaware that the force that was preparing to descend on them was only intended to cause a greater power to move.

"But of the five, only three directly border lands controlled by Eldritch nations. Baron Dunn to the north-east is the closest to the Vale, Baron Hanrahan to the south-east is closer to Airgead Mountain than to the Vale, and Baron Aleese, even further south, borders the Southern Steppe," Ashlynn explained, tapping each territory in sequence.

Sitting in their seats, Savis and Tausau perked up at the mention of the 'Barons' who controlled the territory neighboring the local Eldritch Lords. From what they could make out on Ashlynn's map, each of these men controlled a swath of land roughly the same size as the Vale of Mists, which should mean that these 'Barons' should be perched on the same level as an Eldritch Lord.

For Tausau, such powerful foes were a risk that his Mongrel Horde would need to avoid at all costs, but Savis's eyes took on a predatory gleam as he imagined adding a third or even fourth Ring of Conquest to the piercings in his left ear.

The lesser soldiers in the Black Wolf Brigade marked significant kills with small rings and their ears often held five or even six slender rings, but Savis only marked his ears when he defeated an Eldritch Lord or greater foe. The two thick, heavy rings in his ear bore delicate inscriptions and the glyphs that represented his conquered foes, standing out as a mark of pride that no one could ever strip from him.

If he could add another ring for killing one of these 'Barons', then the shame he felt from his humiliating encounter with Thane and the defeats that brought him here would fade like fog in a stiff breeze.

"Commander Bassinger's men have just finished a summer campaign against the Dunns forces in the foothills, here," Ashlynn said, pulling the bloodthirsty vampire's attention back to her briefing. "And this will be the one of the first places we begin our attack after tomorrow's festival."

"It wasn't much of a campaign, my lady," Commander Bassinger said humbly. "We mostly fought to buy time for the people in the outlying villages to evacuate to the Vale of Mists and to give the Dunn's enough of a bloody nose to train our own men," he explained.

As much as he wanted to stand up tall and proud for what they had accomplished, just being in the presence of the bloody and aggressive aura that radiated from his white-furred 'fellow commander' was enough for the veteran soldier to recognize that there was a gap he still had to cross before his 'ordinary' soldiers could meet the standards that would be necessary in the war to come.

"Still, your delaying campaign set the stage for our plan," Ashlynn said, nodding her head in genuine thanks, and not just for the way his actions improved their military footing. Without his efforts over the summer, far fewer people would have made it to the safety of Ollie's village and there would have been many more people with the haunted eyes of those who had lost loved ones than she'd seen when she visited the village for Ollie's trials.

"Without your efforts this summer," Ashlynn said. "The attack we have planned would be much, much more difficult."

"My lady," Marshal Jakob said hesitantly. "Of all the humans we have fought, I thought that the Dunns were only barely weaker than the Lothians. They have nearly a dozen knights under their command, at least five times as many soldiers as the Hanrahans. Should we really be attacking them when they're already on alert after Commander Bassinger's campaign? Wouldn't it be better to pursue the Hanrahans instead?"

"Instead?" Ashlynn said, giving the marshal a very flat look. Was he looking down on her and the forces they'd gathered to suggest they couldn't afford to fight a single baron? Or perhaps he simply hadn't adjusted to the idea of going on the offense after Nyrielle's people had spent so many generations fighting mostly defensive campaigns.

After all, she'd spent months considering how she would lash out at the Lothians and their vassals when the time came and she'd had weeks to discuss these matters with Nyrielle once they reunited in High Fen City. By the time they'd arrived to begin sharing their plans with Thane and adjusting to recent events in both the Vale and the March, she had long come to accept that the first war they fought would be an offensive one. The Marshal, however, was hearing about these things for the first time. In which case, perhaps all he needed was a few pointers in the right direction to adjust his thinking.

"Marshal Jakob," Ashlynn said, subconsciously drawing herself up to her full height and smoothing out the faint wrinkles in her crimson and black gown. "We intend to attack the Dunns and the Hanrahans at the same time. As I said, Commander Tausau," she added with a nod at the Clanless vampire. "We'll be spreading your men a bit thin, sending them in small groups to strike several places at once."

Tausau frowned slightly as he examined the map. Even though the Mother of Trees had promised him the support of the former gladiators along with the hunters, trappers and warriors of the outlying villages who had resettled in the Vale of Mists, the territory Lady Ashlynn was talking about was vast.

And yet, when he thought about it, the thing his 'irregular' forces were the least suited to was participating in a large battle that required close coordination between troops. Spread out and acting as small squads of men with one of the locals to act as a guide for his Mongrels and the gladiators from High Fen City might just be the best use his warriors could be put to.

"Marshal Jakob isn't wrong, the Dunns have more men under their banner than any other baron. Their forces are nearly as powerful as my father's and many would consider him to be a Count in all but name. But he isn't a count," Ashlynn said pointedly. "He is forbidden from naming barons to serve him and by royal decree, a baron may not be served by more than ten knights."

To the Eldritch, these artificial sorts of restrictions were utterly foolish. But to the Kingdom of Gaal, preventing a lord from amassing too many knights under his banner was a method of preventing him from bullying his neighbors or challenging his own liege lord. A knight was entitled to privileges that few common soldiers could enjoy, and no matter how much the Dunns wished to prop up their elite 'captains' they were still lacking when compared against properly trained and equipped knights.

"The Dunns have been skirting the restrictions placed on barons by building dozens of small hamlets, tiny fortified farming and ranching communities tied together by a network of simple roads that cavalry can move swiftly along during the dry months, though the dirt roads become treacherous in the rainy season," Ashlynn explained as she traced a finger along a network of dotted lines on the map.

"Commander Tausau," Ashlynn said with a predatory smile. "These hamlets are your first target."

Chapter 594: An Opening Gambit (Part Two)

"You want me to destroy their settlements?" The Clanless vampire said, scratching a furry eyebrow with the tip of one of his small, dexterous fingers that looked so incongruous on his large, bearish frame.

"It's easier to burn a village to the ground in the summer when the thatch is dry and the streams are running low," he said, thinking of the occasions over the years when he'd been forced to teach a lesson to smaller Eldritch settlements for picking on the Clanless trying to make their way to his manor. He'd learned long ago that dealing with them immediately might be the most satisfying, but choosing the right time could be far more devastating.

"No, we don't care about the people or soldiers in the Hamlets," Ashlynn said, shaking her head lightly. "We want you to steal from them. Sheep, goats, cattle, chickens... In the dark of night, when the living are huddled around their fires and sheltering from the rain, we want you to empty their barns and coops, carrying away as much of their livestock as you can."

"If you're lucky, you may not need to fight at all," Thane added. "But if you do encounter the soldiers protecting these hamlets, you can expect as many as two dozen men under the command of one of the Dunns' 'captains,' men who are training to become knights if a position ever becomes available to them."

"This, this is how you intend to solve the shortage in foodstuffs?" Jakob said, unable to hide his astonishment at such an underhanded move as the opening of their war. "By stealing livestock from common folk?"

"Not just livestock," Ashlynn said, tapping further south on the map around the Hanrahan Barony. "The Dunns have spread themselves thin in order to raise more head of cattle than any other barony, and their herds of sheep produce more wool than anyone else in the march as well. That makes them an ideal target for small raids by irregulars, but men can't feast on beef and mutton alone," she pointed out.

"But Hanrahan Barony is lush with vast fields of wheat and barley," Ashlynn added. "And their farms produce dozens of other useful crops that fill up storehouses in their villages, waiting to be carted to Lothian City to be sold each market day. Commander Tausau, your Mongrel Horde won't be very useful attacking those caravans of wagons hauling grain and produce because they move during the day, but the other irregular soldiers should be more than capable of overcoming a single knight and his escort."

"My Lady," Commander Bassinger interjected, pursing his lips together as he tried to imagine what these raids would look like for the soldiers carrying them out. "We allowed the Dunns to keep the territory they claimed in the summer campaign. Even though we made them pay a price for it, they still built camps to hold the positions of several fallen villages. If Commander Tausau's men have to detour around the Dunn's advanced positions in order to conduct these raids, they may not be able to return to the Vale by sunrise."

"We only need the Mongrel Horde to be present for the initial raid," Ashlynn said smoothly. She didn't intend to get so far into the details of their plan in this meeting when there was still so much to cover. They hadn't even talked about the fourth person they needed to take on a leadership role yet and in her mind, these were questions that should be resolved between Lord General Thane and Commander Tausau, but since the question had been asked, she answered for the entire group.

"The vampires of the Mongrel Horde can withdraw once they've ensured that there are no soldiers in pursuit that could threaten the rest of the raid," she added. "We only need them to provide an overwhelming individual power during the moments of greatest danger."

There were other reasons to use the Mongrel Horde as well. The Lothians and their vassals had been fighting the Vale for so long that they were accustomed to encountering the Horned Clan and the Clan of the Great Claw, or perhaps a few of the smaller clans from the outlying villages like the Nightweaver Clan or the Heartwood Clan. But Ashlynn and Nyrielle had brought warriors from clans that the humans had never fought before, and none were more visually terrifying than Tausau's misshapen Mongrel Horde.

The appearance of such terrifying looking 'demons' alone would be a shock to the defending soldiers and when it was paired with the unexpected strength that came with being Tausau's progeny, Ashlynn was certain that it would provoke those who had studied their history or listened to the songs of old to remember tales of Nyrielle's forty-seven progeny during what humans had called the War of Undying Demons.

If she could provoke the Lothian's Vassals into thinking that new, unspeakable horrors were spilling forth from the Vale, that would make some of her next objectives even easier to achieve.

"Still," Marshal Jakob added, frowning as he looked at the map. While he appreciated that Lady Ashlynn was trying to solve their immediate crisis, when he considered the logistics of pulling off such an ambitious raid, it felt like there were too many details that hadn't been carefully considered. "You're talking about hundreds of heads of cattle, sheep, chickens... It's going to be very noisy, and those beasts can be very skittish about strange smells. Many of them may be frightened the moment they catch the scent of Eldritch people, how will you..."

"Everyone, hold your questions," Thane said, holding up a hand before the aging Marshal could further pick things apart. He appreciated the time that Lady Ashlynn had given him to recollect himself, but people like Jakob and Bassinger had yet to adapt to just how much Ashlynn had changed since she first entered the Vale. Perhaps if they'd seen the battle in the High Pass that Nyrielle had told him about, or if they'd spent more time with her in the days since her return, things would be easier for her, but for now, he allowed a trace of his power to seep into his voice as he chastised the Marshal.

"When you understand the fullness of our plan, then you may raise questions, but if you speak out of turn, you'll only confuse matters. Lady Ashlynn," he said, giving an artful bow from his chair. "Please continue."

Beside him, Nyrielle gave a slight, almost imperceptible nod. There had been a time when she never would have tolerated questions like these. It would have been enough to tell people her intentions, and they could accept them or they could leave her service. She had no use for subordinates who would not follow orders.

Ashlynn, however, insisted that this method of building consensus would be important when they began to integrate more human leaders into their growing nation. While it was somewhat foreign to Nyrielle, the lessons Ashlynn received by watching her father hold court for many years were clearly useful, even among a mostly Eldritch audience, leaving Nyrielle with little to do other than sit back and watch her lover with pride as the young Mother of Trees used words and the logic of her arguments to sway the leaders in the room, without relying on her considerable strength to force anyone to bend to her will.

Still, if the resistance to her darling's ideas grew too strong, Nyrielle thought as her fingers briefly lengthened into wickedly sharp claws, she wouldn't hesitate to make her own position known... as forcefully as the situation

Chapter 595: Targeting The Innocent?

"Thank you, Lord General," Ashlynn said with a warm smile for Thane before she surveyed the other leaders gathered around the table. Savis seemed to be recovering from his earlier clash with Thane and was looking at the map as if it were a side of beef, ready to be carved up into choice targets that he would be able to sink his claws into. Tausau, sitting next to him, had been very attentive, listening to the plan as Ashlynn unfolded it and committing each piece to memory.

Several of the people around the table who knew Ashlynn the best were waiting to learn their own roles to play in what was to come. Zedya knew that these opening moves weren't the right place for her to contribute, though she wondered if her Lenny would be called to assist with Tausau's Mongrels. As a veteran captain, he could be useful in coordinating, while a low-risk hunt might also be ideal for the new vampire to exercise his newly awakened powers.

Silently, Zedya made a mental note to speak with Ashlynn and Thane about it if neither of them brought up a need for Lenny in this opening phase of the war. She didn't expect that they would neglect him deliberately, but if they thought he needed to train in the Vale the way Ashlynn seemed to intend on training her witches, Zedya was willing to speak up for something different for her progeny. After all, though she hated to see him face danger, she hated the idea of him going into battle with dull fangs that hadn't been honed in the hunt even more.

Of everyone gathered at the table, however, Ollie looked the most uncomfortable, shifting nervously in his chair and appearing at several moments as though he wanted to speak but held himself back instead.

"Ollie?" Ashlynn asked before she resumed her explanation. "You seem troubled by something."

"Mother Ashlynn," Ollie said, sitting up straight in his chair and struggling to choose his words with exceptional care. During his trial to become the Cypress Witch, he'd been haunted by a nightmarish sun that burned in the night sky, destroying crops and slowly starving his people to death. Now that it seemed like Ashlynn was about to inflict the same cruelty on their enemies, he found it difficult to accept such a cruel form of warfare, even if it was needed to fill the bellies of their own people.

"This isn't so much a question about the plan. I understand what we're hoping to achieve and why, and I believe that we'll be able to succeed," he began, wanting to distance himself from the older men in the room who seemed to question the viability of Ashlynn's plan.

"But, what will happen to the common folk in the baronies?" Ollie asked hesitantly as all eyes in the room gathered on one of the youngest men present. Of everyone attending the meeting, only Hauke was younger, and the future Frost Walker lord had already worked to diminish his presence as an observer rather than a participant, leaving Ollie as the youngest person here with a right to speak.

"Are we condemning the farmers, the servants, and tradesmen of the baronnies to a slow death this winter in order to feed ourselves?"

Just asking the question, particularly phrased the way it was, felt like a test of his virtue of courage as he felt the weight of everyone's gaze. Savis's golden eyes and raised brow seemed to be silently asking Ollie if he was concerned about stepping on ants, while Marshal Jakob seemed to nod a bit too eagerly, as if he had found an unexpected ally in the conversation. It was the burst of hostility from the seat directly next to his, however, which put the most pressure on the young knight.

"Those common folk include the common soldiers who drove hundreds of villagers from their homes this summer," Virve pointed out, tapping loudly on the table with the sharp tip of a claw. "Even the farmers are grazing their cattle on lands that once belonged to our clansmen and neighbors, little more than a hundred years ago. If they suffer for choosing to settle on stolen land, why should we be bothered by it?" the Oak Witch said bitterly.

"Many of those people were born there," Ollie countered. "Their grandparents or great-grandparents stole those lands, but the people born into life as bondsmen on those farms had no more choice in their futures than I had when I was born into service in Lothian Manor. The most I could do was choose my vocation, but leaving was out of the question."

"And yet here you sit," Virve pointed out. "When the choice was upon you, you made the right one. Why shouldn't we hold them accountable for refusing the opportunities that came their way to do the right thing instead of helping the Lothian dogs to devour even more of our people's lands..."

Around the table several people shifted awkwardly, particularly as a dull, russet energy seemed to gather around the edges of Virve's claws as her temper flared even hotter. Hauke's horn began to glow with a faint ice blue radiance as the young lord debated whether or not he should create a barrier between the two new witches while across the table, Savis leaned forward as if he was anticipating an

explosive display that would reveal which of these two members of Ashlynn's coven possessed the strength to back up their words.

"Virve, Ollie," Ashlynn said sharply, holding up a hand and letting a trickle of power carry a soothing scent of earthen softness, like the smell of the forest at night, to calm the tension in the air before the argument between the two witches grew even more heated. "I understand your perspectives, but this is a plan that aims to achieve many things at once, and in order to obtain all of our objectives, we need to wage a war that will be felt by everyone in the neighboring baronnies, not just the knights and lords who could cower behind their walls in their manors."

"Obtaining more food for the winter to come is an important goal," Ashlynn acknowledged. "But it's far from the only one. The way everyone else in the March will react to our attack is almost more important than the immediate gains of food for the winter."

"Never forget who our real enemy is," Nyrielle added from the head of the table. "The Lothians and the Church are the ones directing the men at the front lines, and even they have masters who they answer to in even more distant lands."

"Think of them like rows of tiles, all standing on end," Ashlynn said. "Push the first one over gently and it will fall alone without disturbing any of the others. Hit it hard enough and it will tumble into another tile, prompting that one to fall as well. But hit it too hard and you'll knock over tiles you aren't ready to deal with yet."

"What we're trying to do," Ashlynn explained. "Is to use our attacks against the western barons to provoke the Lothians and the local Church officials, without alarming the King in the royal capital or the Saint in the Holy City. Ollie, I know you dislike harming the common people," she said gently. "I don't like it either. That's part of why we're targeting crops and livestock rather than burning homes and slaughtering people. I understand that an empty belly can be just as deadly as a sword through one, but the number of common folk who suffer greatly in this will be much less than what would happen otherwise."

"At the same time," she continued. "Sparkling a small uprising of dissatisfied commoners who must demand protection and restitution from their lords for failing to safeguard them and their goods is exactly the sort of trouble that will force the Lothians' hands without alarming the powers behind them."

The opening act of this war would be finely choreographed, like the dances in the opera halls of High Fen City, but Ashlynn never lost sight of who her real enemy was. In order to bring Owain down, she first needed to cut his legs out from under him, and that would require decimating the knights who were most willing to answer the call to fight against 'demons' in the name of the Lothians.

She expected to draw a number of knights from the baronies farther to the east, and if she was very, very lucky, she might even draw out a few promising templars like the recently elevated Sir Tommin. It had been months since he and Sir Broll had stood over her body in the rain, piling shovel after shovelful of damp earth on her broken and barely breathing body after Owain's savage beating, but she had never forgotten the pair of knights who had so eagerly done her former husband's bidding.

One of those men had already died at her hands, and the other... Whether he fell into this trap or not, he would fall into her hands eventually.

"And then," she said as the image of Owain's knights falling into shallow graves to become mulch for trees danced behind her eyes. "We'll be ready to draw them into the jaws of our next trap..."

Chapter 596: A Trap for the Lothians

"You all understand the first purpose of our raids," Ashlynn continued a moment later as she shook off the memories that tried to drag her back into the shallow grave Owain's knights had buried her in. "We need supplies, and if we can't grow or raise enough on our own, we will raid them from our enemies. Not once or twice, but continuously until we manage to provoke a response from the Lothians themselves."

"What if the Lothians don't respond?" Ignatious asked, breaking his silence for the first time in the meeting. "The Dunns are proud men. They may attempt to resolve things themselves instead of looking weak in front of the Marquis."

It had been that way eighty years ago when Ignatious was still part of the Inquisition, fighting alongside the local lords. At the time, not only the Dunns but all of the minor lords vied for advantages, whether it was in the assaults they led or the castles they defended, there was constant competition to exit the war better and stronger than their rivals while setting those same rivals up to suffer even greater losses.

For Baron Dunn and Baron Hanrahan to face assaults on their farms and livestock would be an embarrassment that they should work to conceal until they had resolved the problem. Even if it caused a shortfall in their winter tithe to the Marquis, showing up with a sack full of trophies taken from

'demons' and an excuse of excessive raids was far better than appearing before your liege lord with your hat in hand, hoping he would help to solve the problem plaguing your lands.

"If we only attacked Baron Dunn, that might be true," Ashlynn acknowledged. "But I've studied Baron Hanrahan well. He only set foot on the field of battle once during the War of Inches, and his Barony has been struggling ever since the funds from that war dried up a few years ago. If we put pressure on him, he'll demand that Bors Lothian dispatch knights and soldiers to protect his caravans."

"Ah, I see," Ignatious said as he caught on to Ashlynn's plan. "If the Lothians send men to reinforce the Hanrahans, then Baron Dunn will demand the same treatment for his own barony. He won't be willing to expend the lives of his own men when he can force the Lothians to expend theirs."

"Bors Lothian will never risk the lives of his own men over something as petty as this," Nyrielle interjected. "Especially not since the visit I paid him at the end of his pathetic excuse for a war," she said with a dark smile. One of the secrets to the Vale's ability to weather wars that seemed to flare up each generation lay in her bestowal of the Kiss of the Void on the rulers of Lothian March.

She had learned the hard way that killing a Lothian Lord only resulted in a new heir ascending to the throne, sometimes with more ambitions than his predecessor. Even if she left behind nothing but children, an uncle or elder cousin would declare himself the regent, and a war of revenge would begin just a few years after the last lord died.

If, however, she stalked the current Marquis carefully during the war, waiting for a moment when he had reaped a measure of success that would allow him to back down after a declaration of some form of victory, she could drain away what ambition and thirst for conquest remained within him before delivering a series of defeats that made continuing the war look pointless.

Once she'd reduced the current lord's ambitions to a shadow of what they had once been, he would safely retire from the field, giving the Vale of Mists and the neighboring Eldritch nations decades of respite while the Marquis turned his attention inward to matters within his own domain. Only when the old lord relinquished his throne would a new lord start the cycle anew, seeking a way to achieve what his predecessor never had.

"Bors has lost what drive he had for personal glory long ago," Nyrielle explained, smiling slightly as she remembered the look of terror on the human lord's face when she appeared in his command tent one night during the War of Inches.

To this day she didn't know whether he was more terrified of her or of the fact that the High Priest who had been at his side for the duration of the war had proven to be utterly incapable of stopping her from reaching the Lothian Lord, but the sight of the priest's broken body at her feet certainly hadn't done much for Bors' courage when he faced her.

"For years, all Bors has cared about is how he can pass on the March to his son," Nyrielle said definitively. "It's become his last lingering obsession since the death of his wife. So Bors won't risk the men that he wants to pass on to Owain," Nyrielle concluded. "He'll demand that the Eastern Barons send some of their men to reinforce the border, borrowing the power of his vassals without risking his own men."

"What about Lord Owain?" Ollie asked as he thought back on the ruins of the Heartwood Clan's village and the stories he'd heard from Milo about the summer campaign against the Dunns. "When Lady Ashlynn embarrassed Lord Owain at the Summer Villa in the spring, wasn't it Marquis Bors who sent Owain to assault the outlying villages in order to 'redeem' himself? What if he sends Owain or Loman to deal with the raids?"

"Then we count ourselves lucky that he delivers himself into my hands early," Ashlynn said with more venom in her voice than she'd meant to. Taking a deep, shuddering breath, she reigned in the white-hot surge of anger that flooded her heart and tried to focus on the things that were most likely.

"In the end, it won't matter whether Owain comes or the Eastern barons," Ashlynn insisted. "The goal is to force them to spread their forces across the frontier, sending men in every direction without knowing where we may strike next."

"You're fattening them up for me, aren't you, Your Dominion?" Savis said as he caught on to Ashlynn's plan. "You want to use little brother, to use Commander Tausau's raids to force them to commit enough men and soldiers that it's worth letting my men off their leashes to crush them."

"We need to hand the Lothians a crushing defeat," Thane said, tacitly agreeing with Savis. "Two or three would be even better. We need to fracture the lords of the March in order to give Lady Ashlynn an opening. At the same time, we need to thin the ranks of the Lothian's knights. In wars past, we've lost between five and ten Eldritch warriors just to pull down one heavily armored knight. The fewer of them who can take the field later on, the better," the Lord General said.

"What sort of opening are you trying to produce?" Virve asked, cracking her knuckles in anticipation. "Is the goal to draw down the defenses of Lothian City enough that we can strike directly at their heart?"

"None of this ends until we topple the Lothians from their throne," Ashlynn said. "We do that one of two ways. Either we lure them out of the turtle shell of Lothian City and the defensive sorcery of the Church..."

"Or we bleed them enough to crack their defenses wide open," Thane added, finishing Ashlynn's sentence smoothly as he turned to a dark figure who had been silent throughout the meeting. "Aspakos, the fame of your Sorcerers of Sundered Earth and their vast knowledge of the arcane has reached us even in this faraway corner of Eldritch lands. I can think of no one better to take command of the fourth pillar of the Vale's forces."

"You want me to lead the sorcerers I've brought with me against these Lothians and their little vassal lords?" Aspakos asked in a voice that was thick with disdain. "Lady Nyrielle should already have informed you of my answer. This war is no business of ours. We did not come here to take sides in your blood feud. It is better if we stay to the side while you wage this war," the broken-beaked sorcerer said.

All around the table, several people stared at the powerful sorcerer in open-mouthed shock, but little seemed to ruffle Aspakos's feathers. The multicolored glyphs adorning his dark robes shifted slightly in hue, each of them turning darker as the sorcerer's presence seemed to grow thin, as if he was no longer worth paying attention to now that he'd said his peace.

One person, however, saw through his sorcery clearly and didn't hesitate to voice her disapproval.

"You said that we share an enemy among the humans," Nyrielle said as her midnight eyes focused on the mysterious sorcerer. "You said that you wouldn't participate in a battle between our armies, but if their sorcerers and mystic warriors take the field, if we face Inquisitors and Templars in the battles to come, do you truly intend to stand on the sidelines and do nothing, just because this isn't the 'war you came to fight?'"

Nyrielle's question hung heavily in the air, and a dark wind seemed to blow from behind her, stripping away the magic that allowed Aspakos to remain unobserved and unobtrusive for much of the meeting. He might have held himself apart successfully so far, but in Nyrielle's mind, the ability to stand aside was withering like grapes left too long on the vine.

If Aspakos couldn't even be counted on to face the enemy they shared, then she might have to reconsider the terms of their... arrangement.

Chapter 597: Those With Darkness In Their Hearts

The dark breath of power that Nyrielle unleashed might have stripped away Aspakos's attempt to conceal himself by diminishing his presence in the meeting, but it did nothing to strip away the bloody aura of power and mystery that clung to the Dark Feathered sorcerer. The veins of gold that held the shards of his broken beak glittered in the flickering light of the formal dining room's many oil lamps, providing a singular bright spot in his otherwise dark appearance and drawing all eyes as he responded to Nyrielle's question.

"My Lady," the aging sorcerer said in a resonant tone that commanded the attention of the entire room. "The Sorcerers of Sundered Earth cannot take part in this war. The blood that will be spilled if we do will be enough to turn rivers red and make the heavens weep," he said. "Do not force our hands. It is unwise for you and your people for us to become involved too early."

Sitting next to the ominous sorcerer, Hauke shifted awkwardly, trying to put a bit of distance between himself and Aspakos. The way the man spoke was eerily similar to how he'd spoken after using strange sorcery to divine Hauke's destiny, as if he could see certainties of what was to come rather than speculating about possibilities.

When he'd spoken of Hauke, he'd said that the world would be a darker place without him in it, and at the time, the young lord was grateful that whatever vision Aspakos had obtained had swayed him to help the cursed Frost Walker. Now that he was speaking of rivers of blood and the heavens weeping, the mysterious man's dark sorcery felt much less reassuring.

"Don't resort to parlour tricks and cryptic phrases in front of me, sorcerer," Nyrielle said as darkness gathered around her with midnight blue energy swirling in her dark eyes. "A mended beak may break again, never to speak again if its owner can't keep his promises," she said. "You said you came to face the ones who had followed the stars across the seas, to fight against the misguided children of the heavens who had seized power they weren't meant to hold. Now that we're preparing to face them, do you intend to go back on your words?"

With each word she spoke, Nyrielle's presence in the room grew colder and heavier, and her voice sounded more and more distant, even as it grew louder, as if she spoke from the depths of the void.

Seeing the faces of Ollie, Heila turning ghostly pale, along with the faces of the remaining living members of the council, Ashlynn moved quickly, returning to stand behind her seat, summoning a faint aura that resembled a vast oak tree, sheltering the people at the table from the cold winds of the void that flowed through the room when Nyrielle spoke.

Even Thane moved, allowing shadows to gather around his shoulders, forming a great cloak that shielded the vampires in the room from the call of the void that accompanied Nyrielle's display of power. Though Zedya barely seemed to suffer under the effects of Nyrielle's power, Lennart slumped in clear relief when Thane unfurled his cloak of shadows, and even Savis and Tausau looked relieved that they weren't the target of Nyrielle's ire.

"I will not be intimidated, Lady Nyrielle," Aspakos said, raising a taloned hand that was shrouded in a dark crimson aura. With the point of one talon, he tore through the dark flow of energy that blew from Nyrielle, parting it like a stone in a river and allowing it to flow harmlessly around him.

"I have told you already," he continued firmly. "The Sorcerers of Sundered Earth are not for you to command against puppets and misguided sheep. You have more than enough strength to slaughter the lambs with the other forces you've gathered here," he said, gesturing to Thane, Tausau, Savis and Bassinger in turn. "My men will not move for this."

"Not your men," Ashlynn said, inserting herself between her lover and the dark sorcerer. The instant she did, the dark wind blowing from the void seemed to ripple through the leaves and branches of Ashlynn's own aura becoming something that was both dark and haunting while at the same time possessing a life and will of its own to stalk around the room, wrapping around Aspakos like the roots of a tree winding around a stone.

"Not your men," Ashlynn repeated. "Just you, for now. We have plenty of sorcerers from half a dozen clans, each with their own traditions and talents. They need leadership, and they need to learn from each other if we're to make the best use of them in this war."

"You think I would rain down less blood and fire without the remainder of the Sorcerers of Sundered Earth marching under my banner?" Aspakos said with a dark, self-deprecating laugh. "Mother of Trees, my men are my shackles. They restrain the darkness that clings ever tighter to my soul and remind me of the promise our order made to the Sovereign of the Stars so many years ago."

"Without them to hold me back," he said, flexing his talons that seemed to drip with an aura of blood and darkness. "Do you truly think I can be trusted on the field of battle?"

"You can be trusted," Ashlynn said, slowly walking down the length of the table until she stood before the Dark Feathered sorcerer, close enough that his murderous, bloody aura brushed against her skin as he loomed over her. "This darkness that clings to you," she said, reaching out and running a hand just over the surface of his cracked and broken beak before gently stroking his feathered head. "It doesn't belong to you at all."

"What..." Aspakos said, momentarily so flustered that his dark aura began to recede beneath Ashlynn's gentle touch.

"You aren't like the rest of us," Ashlynn said, glancing briefly back at Nyrielle, Thane, Zedya, and Ignatious.

Ghosts of suffering, long-lost loved ones, and hurts that no amount of revenge could heal lurked in each of their shadowed eyes as Ashlynn confronted the mysterious sorcerer. When she spoke, her voice carried the pain not just of the savage beating she suffered at Owain's hands or the burial that happened afterwards, but the years of isolation and fear of discovery that made her a prisoner within her own home, constantly guarding herself against discovery by the Church and their Inquisition.

"Your world has never been torn apart, no matter how sharp your talons are," she said, gently taking his dark talons in her hands and holding them as gently as she would hold a delicate flower. "Even though the men leading the Church of the Holy Lord of Light are your enemies, you don't hate them the way we do," she said softly.

For a moment, Aspakos wanted to protest. His quiet life as a researcher had ended the day rumors of the 'treasures' in their vaults began to spread across the Eldritch lands, sending dozens of would-be conquerors to their doorstep. He'd stained his hands with blood, unsealing the potent sorcery of the Sorcerers of Sundered Earth for the first time in centuries, slaughtering any who dared to invade their ancient fortress in the Forsaken Lands.

But had he really lost anything the way these people had? His order had yet to face a threat that could breach their walls, much less claim their lives. Certainly, he'd lost his ability to see the world in with the distant gaze of someone who had long ago removed himself from its concerns, but who in this room hadn't faced harsher realities when they left their childhoods behind and took up the burdens of their people?

When he made the decision to practice the Founder's lost art, he'd cloaked his own destiny in blood and darkness, surrounding himself with a mantle so fearsome that even children ran from his presence, but did that darkness really belong to him? Or was it just a spectre of events that had yet to unfold that led him into acting as though he was already a man who had lost the light of the stars and wandered beyond redemption?

"So yes, I trust you to lead our sorcerers in battle," Ashlynn said, looking directly into the powerful sorcerer's eyes and pulling him out of his inwardly spiralling thoughts. "Because you're still trying to avoid conflict that would force you to kill the men you call 'puppets and misguided sheep.'"

"We want you to lead our second most dangerous force," Ashlynn said firmly. "Because the others we might place in command have far too much reason to give in to the darkness that dwells within their own hearts, while you only contend with the darkness that you've dipped your talons into," she said to a shocked-looking Aspakos.

He had been completely seen through, he realized. Perhaps seen more clearly than he'd been able to see his own reflection in the mirror, and by a woman less than half his age. It was a humbling feeling that left his feathers twitching in disbelief but it was also one that contained a thread of hope.... Hope that maybe, just maybe, this witch could find a path forward that wasn't as dark as the one he'd seen.

"So," the young witch asked the Dark Feathered sorcerer. "Will you take up this burden, along with the darkness that clings to you, Commander Aspakos? Or will you leave the destiny of our sorcerers in someone else's claws and accept whatever horrors they choose to unleash upon your long-lost brethren?"

"I..." Aspakos started to speak, only to be surprised that his mouth had gone dry and his throat closed up when he began to see the faintest glimmer of a brighter future leading from this moment. Not just brighter for the extraordinary woman in front of him, but perhaps, for himself as well.

"I would be honored to, My Lady," Aspakos said as he slowly descended to one knee before the Mother of Trees. "I still have my reservations about joining the Sorcerers of Sundered Earth to your cause against these minor lords," he added as he lowered his head in submission. "But so long as you only wish to command me, then my talons are yours to guide."

"Good," Ashlynn said in a voice that seemed to have grown strangely flat and distant as a blend of her own earthy power and Nyrielle's dark wind swirled around her. Her face had grown pale and her emerald eyes seemed to harbor ghosts beyond the ones that had haunted her ever since the night of her wedding to Owain Lothian.

"Rise, Commander Aspakos," Ashlynn said formally, almost mechanically as she reached out to take his taloned hands in hers, helping him to stand even as the power she held made him feel as though he was standing at the edge of a dangerous precipice. "We respect your reservations," she added in the hopes of reassuring him. "We won't ask you to do more for now than training and organizing the sorcerers under our banner. You won't need to lead them in battle against the Lothians unless the Church sends their mightiest of Miracle workers."

As the last words left her lips, Ashlynn's shoulders sagged almost imperceptibly and a fine sheen of sweat appeared across her brow. In her chest, her heart began to beat rapidly, falling out of sync with the echo of Nyrielle's heartbeat within her chest as it struggled to regain its own rhythm.

"Commander Aspakos," Nyrielle said with a calm voice and the barest of smiles as she withdrew her dark aura and the thread of power that flowed from her to Ashlynn during the tense exchange with the mysterious sorcerer. Instantly, the room seemed to brighten and the pressure that had kept anyone else from interjecting in the intense exchange faded away.

"I'm grateful that you have agreed to join us," Nyrielle said simply. "But now, the evening is already growing late and there are precious few hours before dawn. Lord General Thane," she said in a tone that was both warmer and softer as she faced the greatest of her progeny. "I'm sure you have many details to discuss with your new commanders as well as Marshal Jakob."

"Of course," Thane said, noticing a subtle shift in Nyrielle's eyes as she spoke. "Gentlemen, I have more detailed maps available in my office. Before tomorrow's celebration, it would be good if we can pin down a few last details and I value each of your insights to make final adjustments to our opening moves," he said smoothly, gesturing toward the door.

"Ollie," he added with a warm, inviting smile filled with so much charm that it made it difficult to reconcile the affable appearing vampire knight with the terrifying figure who forced Savis to his knees with little more than words. "You and young lord Hauke should attend as well, if for no other reason than to learn a few things that may be useful to you later."

"If Lady Ashlynn permits it," Ollie began, only to be interrupted by Nyrielle who seemed to materialize from the darkness directly beside Ashlynn.

"I have a few more matters to discuss with my darling," Nyrielle said as she slid around a startled looking Ashlynn who seemed to have become so distracted that she hadn't even noticed Nyrielle's movement. "If she has instructions for you, she can deliver them after."

"I'll make sure everyone is settled and prepared for the beginning of the festivities tomorrow," Heila said helpfully as she all but tugged Ollie out of the room by the sleeve of his tunic. "And I'll see that we have everything we need to prepare a hearty lunch before joining the festivities tomorrow."

"What was that all about?" Ollie asked Heila after she ushered him rapidly out of the room. "Is something wrong?"

"Hush," Heila said, quietly pulling Ollie to the side as everyone else filed out of the room. "You felt Lady Nyrielle's power when she confronted Aspakos, didn't you? How intense it was?"

"I did," Ollie whispered, briefly glancing in the sorcerer's direction. "But Lady Ashlynn stopped it from affecting us, just like she weakened Sir Thane's voice when he... Ow!" Ollie yelped as Heila stepped on his foot with a cloven hoof.

"Now that you're one of Mother Ashlynn's close ones," Heila said quietly. "You have to learn to pay attention to these things. Mother Ashlynn has been too busy with you and Virve to attend to Lady Nyrielle much since we returned to the castle. Even if she could have tended to Lady Nyrielle, because she was nurturing Virve's seed after bestowing your seed on you, her body was too weak to offer up much blood to Lady Nyrielle."

"I... don't understand," Ollie said, blinking in confusion. "Doesn't Lady Nyrielle take offerings from the villagers the same way that Sir Thane, Sir Marcel and the others do? Why would she need to feed on Lady Ashlynn?"

"Because a witch's blood is powerful," Virve said quietly as she joined the conversation. "And because there is meaning to the sharing of blood between them. Heila, do you think confronting Aspakos put as much strain on Lady Nyrielle as exposing herself to the Holy Flame Blade did? Is that why she wanted to hurry everyone out?"

"I don't know," Heila said honestly as her diminutive hands clutched at the folds of her skirt. "I think this was something different. I've only seen Mother Ashlynn do this once before," she said slowly as she recalled the way Ashlynn had transformed the arena in High Fen City into a lush Willow Grove by collecting the last wisps of energy from dying and decomposing plants all across High Fen City following the harvest.

"Mother Ashlynn wasn't just using her own power when she stepped in to speak to Aspakos," Heila explained. "She was blending her power with Lady Nyrielle's. It's something that..." For a moment, she almost said 'something that no other witch could do' because she was certain that the bond between a True Vampire and her Seneschal was what allowed Ashlynn to do it but, was that really true? Already, Heila felt a growing closeness with Ignatious and she couldn't help but wonder if she might one day be able to achieve something similar to what Ashlynn had.

Heila's face began to turn a brilliant shade of crimson as she imagined sharing the kind of closeness with Ignatious that she'd seen between Ashlynn and Lady Nyrielle. Would he shower her with kisses as sweet and all encompassing as the ones she'd glimpsed Lady Nyrielle bestowing on Ashlynn? Would he carry her away again, the way he'd held her closely during their battle in the snow at the Frost Walker Fortress?

The thought of it was enough for her knees to grow weak and the blush on her face only grew hotter when she spotted a knowing smile on Virve's lips that suggested the older woman had followed the trail of her thoughts.

"It's something that, for now, belongs to the two of them alone," Heila said, putting aside questions about herself and Ignatious for the moment to focus on what had happened in the dining room. "Lady Nyrielle didn't feel hungry, but when she looked at Mother Ashlynn, the feeling there was almost as intense as when she needs to feed, so... So we should make sure that lunch tomorrow is hearty in case Mother Ashlynn needs to replenish herself," she said with a determined nod.

"Do you need my help in the kitchens?" Ollie asked, casting a conflicted look over his shoulder as Thane led the newly appointed commanders towards the tower where he kept his office. "I should..."

"Oh, just go," Heila said, placing her hands on Ollie's waist to turn him around and give him a gentle shove. "Go with the other boys and plan your battles," she said firmly. "Virve and I can tend to Lady Ashlynn's needs in the morning."

"But I," Virve began, looking in the direction of the departing warriors. She hadn't been invited to attend, but if even Hauke was attending in the name of learning more then it shouldn't be a problem for her to attend as well, should it?

"Fine! Go, I'll make the arrangements myself," Heila said, throwing up her hands and shaking her head at her 'younger' siblings. The three of them formed a trinity of healer, warrior and guardian and she could hardly blame the other two for focusing more on the battles to come, but she couldn't help but hope that Ashlynn's next witch would be somewhat less focused on the battles ahead even though she knew it wasn't likely.

At least not as long as the war was looming over them. But perhaps, one day, there would be someone to take up a plum seed, or an apple... someone bright and sweet who could help to feed other rather than fight them. For now, however, Heila was certain that Ashlynn would want help recovering from the intense meeting and she intended to make sure that her lady had whatever she needed, even if she had to rouse Georg from sleep to make something special for her.

With a last glance over her shoulder at the closed door of the formal dining room, Heila set off in the direction of the kitchens. Even though the hour was late, she was certain that the cooks would be busy with preparations for tomorrow's celebration. Even if Georg wasn't there, someone should be able to help her to prepare something that Ashlynn could easily eat before bed when Lady Nyrielle carried her back to her bed chambers after feeding and she could leave instructions for a hearty morning meal as well...

Meanwhile, inside the formal dining room, Nyrielle wrapped her arms around Ashlynn's shivering body, giving her strength and support even though she couldn't offer warmth.

"Talk to me, my darling," Nyrielle whispered. "You've never borrowed my power like that before. What is it that you needed it for?" she asked softly as she gently stroked Ashlynn's long, pale blonde hair. "And what price did you pay to use it?"

Chapter 599: Ashlynn's Growing Darkness (Part One)

..."And what price did you pay to use it?"...

Nyrielle's words pierced through the veil of gloom that clung to Ashlynn like a shroud, startling her out of the dark world she'd glimpsed and bringing her fully back to the present. Slowly, she drew a deep,

shuddering breath, followed by another as she fought to get her disordered heart back under control and restore the natural flow of energy through her body.

"I, I'm fine," Ashlynn said as she slumped into Nyrielle's embrace, allowing herself to rely completely on her lover for support. "This, this will pass," she said a moment later as fatigue washed over her. "I just need a few minutes to recollect myself."

"Should I carry you away?" Nyrielle whispered softly. "The air here isn't fresh and nothing grows here. Dawn is hours away. I could carry you out into the forest if it would be better, or just to your terrace if that's enough for you," she said as she turned Ashlynn around so she could gaze into her lover's tired, haunted eyes.

"Just tell me what you need," Nyrielle said gently as she pulled a handkerchief from her dress and began to gently dab away the beads of cold sweat on Ashlynn's brow. "You know how I hate to see you like this."

"Fresh air," Ashlynn said softly, burying her face in the soft fabric of Nyrielle's dress and taking a deep breath of her lavender and jasmine scent. She didn't want to admit how far she'd pushed herself and she was certain that once she recovered, Nyrielle would be cross with her, but at the moment, the thought of fresh, cool air in her lungs and the soft loam of dirt between her toes appealed far too much to reject for a moment of stubborn pride. "And growing things. But we don't need to go far. The gardens will be fine."

Gently, moving as though Ashlynn was a delicate piece of porcelain, Nyrielle scooped her lover into her arms before shrouding them both in darkness. She swept silently through the corridors of the ancient fortress at a speed too quick for most people to observe, leaving behind only the slightest breeze to mark their passage until they arrived in a dark, quiet rooftop garden.

Of all the gardens scattered around the grounds of the ancient fortress, this one was the most private, belonging originally to Nyrielle's mother and filled with the lavender, lilac, wisteria and primroses that had been among her mother's favorites when she was alive. It was also the garden where Nyrielle and Ashlynn had taken their meals together, sharing fleeting tender moments until Ashlynn trusted Nyrielle enough to invite the vampire into her bed chambers and dinner moved onto Ashlynn's terrace.

"Thank you," Ashlynn said as Nyrielle set her down next to the wooden trellis that supported a climbing wisteria. The feeling of the cool, damp night air did more good for her than she'd imagined as she took

one long, steadying breath after another while running her fingers ever so lightly over the rough surface of the wisteria's gnarled branches.

For several minutes, neither woman spoke as Ashlynn allowed her senses to envelop the garden, feeling a supportive, nurturing offer from many of the trees that dotted the garden. Though she didn't need the energy of the trees in the garden in order to recover, the fact that they offered so readily told her a great deal about how close she'd come to touching the source Nyrielle's dark, deadly power and how dangerous it was to use so carelessly.

"I'm sorry," Ashlynn finally said when she felt she'd recovered enough to stand on her own, without leaning on the wisteria's trellis for support. "I overdid it tonight. It, it wasn't intentional, but once I stepped forward I felt... caught up in a dark wind," she explained awkwardly. "Once my sails were filled, it was all I could do to steer around the rocks and shoals. I, I think I avoided the hazards but I had to go forward."

"And where did this dark wind carry you?" Nyrielle asked gently, running her slender fingers through Ashlynn's soft blond hair and caressing her cheeks that had turned rosey in the cool autumn night air. "What is it you were trying to do by blending our power tonight?"

"You told me once," Ashlynn began as she tried to put words to something that had been more feeling than deliberate intention. "You told me that you caused the death of the soul. That your power could destroy part of what made a person who they were."

"That's true," Nyrielle said slowly. "The Kiss of the Void will cause anything it touches to wither. Sometimes, whatever part of a person I've touched withers away completely and dies. Sometimes, so little is left that it can never recover to what it was," she explained.

"If a person is strong, or if I try to envelop too much of their soul, then it lasts for moments at most, though those moments can prove lethal," she said, thinking of the moment of utter helplessness she'd bestowed on Hamdi to allow Ignatious to claim his vengeance against the powerful High Lord.

"I've seen your power up close, when you used it on the Frost Walker's ancestors," Ashlynn said. "Ever since then, I wondered if Aspakos had touched something similar. He's lost his ability to touch tools and it seemed like such a strange thing, but it's also bound up in the aura of darkness and violence that clings to him, like a layer of oil paint."

"When you pushed back against his power, for a moment, I felt like the aura clinging to him loosened," Ashlynn said. "Like I could see a glimpse of the man beneath the miasma. And I wondered... I wondered if I could reach out to the man he'd been, to help him regrow what had been lost."

There was more to it than that, of course. What she'd seen in Aspakos had been a pain that reached so deeply into his heart that she couldn't help but sympathize with the broken-beaked sorcerer. After all, her own heart and spirit had suffered wounds so grievous that they still felt raw and tender, even after all these months. Worse, the pain she felt only seemed to grow greater with the passage of time, as if someone had left a twisted barb in her wounds when they heaped shovelfuls of damp earth into her shallow grave.

In that brief, fleeting glimpse of the man beneath the aura that clung to him, she'd seen something so painful in Aspakos that she wondered... if it could be healed, if she could find even a sliver of relief for him... could she find relief for herself as well?

Chapter 600: Ashlynn's Growing Darkness (Part Two)

"You thought that if you healed him, he would join with us more willingly," Nyrielle said with a heavy sigh as she listened to her lover's explanation. "My darling, you are already pushing your coven to its limits to care for Ritchel. You have healed young lord Hauke much sooner than anyone expected and Heila has done more for Ignatious in a few weeks than I was able to do for him in months. The healing ability of witches is far more powerful than I imagined, but even you have limits," she chastised.

"I know," Ashlynn said as she wrapped her arms around Nyrielle, resting her head above her lover's slowly beating heart. "I can't heal Aspakos," she said in a voice so quiet that only people like Nyrielle with extremely sensitive ears would be able to hear, even from inches away. "He, his wounds feel like a cloak laying over him, and when I look closely, I can almost see through them, like they're reflections of wounds instead of real ones. There's nothing there for me to heal."

"That's why you said that his darkness doesn't belong to him," Nyrielle said. "But you also said that he wasn't like me, or Ignatious or Thane... or you," she whispered as her hands stilled, resting gently on Ashlynn's back and hair where she'd been gently stroking her lover. "The three of us are vampires and we've long been wrapped in the darkness of the abyss, but what about you, my darling? What darkness is it that belongs to you?"

"It's not the darkness of being a vampire," Ashlynn said, biting her lower lip and closing her eyes against the memories that tried to float to the surface of her mind. "It's the pain of loss and the thirst for

vengeance. It's the nightmares that," she started, only to cut off abruptly as her fingers clutched at the fabric of Nyrielle's dress.

"The dreams have come back?" Nyrielle asked, pulling back slightly from Ashlynn to lift her lover's chin up. Ashlynn's eyes were still screwed shut against memories that haunted her while her body trembled and her hands clutched at Nyrielle's dress like a drowning woman clutching a rope and the sight of it was enough to pierce the vampire's heart like a sword thrust by her most hated enemy. "Ashlynn, my heart, why didn't you tell me?"

"They, they never really went away," Ashlynn admitted after drawing a deep, shuddering breath. "They were less frequent before. When I was in the Briar, everything happening in Lothian March, my worries about Jocelynn and the hot, burning need..."

The need to see Owain's body, broken and battered at her feet before she dumped it into a shallow grave in the wilderness where no one would ever celebrate his accomplishments or mourn his passing... Ashlynn might not have said the words, but Nyrielle knew her lover too well to need to hear them.

And even if she hadn't known Ashlynn so well, the words weren't much different from the ones she would have spoken all those years ago when her parents were burned alive for their crime of 'heresy.' Some wounds cut so deeply that the only balm that would soothe the pain was seeing the person responsible for inflicting the wounds suffer the same fate or one even worse.

"But now that we've come home," Nyrielle said softly, gently brushing a loose strand of hair from Ashlynn's face. "Now that we're so close to the sister you must rescue and the man you must kill, it's much, much harder to keep the worries away and the nightmares have returned along with them."

"I'll be fine," Ashlynn said firmly, opening her eyes and staring at Nyrielle with an emerald gaze filled with tears she stubbornly refused to shed. "Soon, this will all be over. Nothing will stop me from claiming his life. I just hope," she said, her voice catching as her confidence faltered. "I just hope I'm in time to save Jocey before something happens to her. If he defiles her or worse, does to her what he tried to do to me... If she suffers because I waited until the time was right for my vengeance, then the nightmares will never stop."

"And," she said in a very soft, very small voice. "And if that happens, then I'll deserve them."

Nyrielle's midnight blue eyes darkened when Ashlynn whispered words reached her ears and a flash of long buried pain flickered across her pale features. For decades, she had been haunted by a very similar guilt after failing to protect her parents from Cellach Lothian and the Church's executioners.

The wound their deaths left in her soul had never fully healed, even after she claimed her vengeance against everyone who bore even the slightest amount of responsibility for that tragedy. Now, as she watched Ashlynn teetering on the edge of her own personal abyss, she refused to allow Ashlynn to walk down the same path of endless self-recrimination.

"Never say that," she whispered fiercely, cupping Ashlynn's face between her cool palms. "The only one who deserves suffering in this tale is Owain Lothian. Anything that happens to your sister, you lay at his feet, not your own," she said fiercely before her expression softened and she continued in a much gentler tone.

"Ashlynn, my darling," Nyrielle said, making up her mind on the spot to take a step she'd still been hesitating to take. Now, however, it was obvious that her discomfort was leaving her lover vulnerable to needless pain and she refused to allow Ashlynn to suffer even one more night if she could prevent it. In one swift movement, she swept Ashlynn off of her feet, holding her close as she carried her away from the garden.

"If your dreams are tormenting you, then I will protect you from them," she said as she carried her lover toward the deepest, darkest reaches of the castle where her own bed chamber lay. "I had meant this to be a surprise for after we announced our betrothal tomorrow," she said softly as she paused outside the heavy, iron-bound door that protected the place she rested when she was at her most vulnerable.

"But if it will ease your suffering even a little," she said. "Then I will show you a night early..."