



NATURE REMEMBERS.
THE DEAD DECIDE.

THE
GRAVE
BENEATH THE
SPIRIT TREE

A TALE OF NYRELL ASHBOURNE
AND VYNDIS NIGHTSHADE

SHATTERED MYTHS STORIES

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The Grave Beneath the Spirit Tree

Chapter One

When the Forest Fell Silent

The forest had gone silent.

Nyrell Ashbourne noticed it first in the birds.



They fled eastward in great black clouds, abandoning nests heavy with unhatched eggs. Their frantic wings briefly darkened the morning sky before disappearing beyond the ancient canopy.

The deer followed soon after.

They crashed through ferns and bramble, ignoring trails they had followed for generations. Foxes emerged from their dens in daylight. Rabbits fled without hiding. Even the smallest creatures seemed driven by the same terrible instinct.

Run.

Nyrell stood in the middle of the woodland path and watched them disappear.

Something was wrong.

Very wrong.

She lowered herself beside one of the ancient roots twisting across the forest floor. Its bark was normally pale brown, marked by thin veins of green spirit light.

Today, those veins were black.

Nyrell placed her palm against the root and closed her eyes.

A Rune shimmered beneath her fingers.

Usually, the forest answered immediately.



She would feel the countless lives surrounding her, the slow pulse of ancient trees, the nervous heartbeat of a mouse beneath the leaves, insects crawling through damp earth, beasts moving between the trees, and beyond them all the quiet whispers of spirits.

Life and death.

Beginning and ending.

One endless conversation.

But today—

nothing answered.

Nyrell opened her eyes.

"Something is beneath us," she whispered.

A low growl came from behind her.

Nyrell turned.

Spiritpaw stood several paces away, its great body rigid. The beast's claws dug into the earth while its eyes remained fixed upon the oldest region of the forest.



The Spirit Tree.



Nyrell rose slowly.

"You feel it too, don't you?"

Spiritpaw growled again.

Nyrell tightened her grip around her staff.

"Show me."

The beast bounded into the trees.

Nyrell followed.

The Spirit Tree towered over the forest like a living mountain.

Its roots stretched hundreds of feet in every direction, disappearing beneath stones, streams, and neighboring trees.



Generations of Druidians came here to commune with spirits and return the lost peacefully to the cycle.

But when Nyrell entered the grove, she stopped.

The earth had been disturbed.

Spiritpaw lowered its head and sniffed.

Then it snarled.

Nyrell approached the nearest mound.

A grave.

She looked beyond it.

Another.

Then another.

Dozens surrounded the Spirit Tree.

Some appeared freshly open. Others had been concealed beneath roots for centuries.

Nyrell brushed dirt from a stone buried beside one of them.

There were markings upon it.

Not Druidian.

Older.

"An ancient battlefield," Nyrell whispered.

Spiritpaw looked toward her.

Nyrell stared at the countless depressions surrounding the tree.

"Thousands must have died here."

Something moved beneath the soil.

Spiritpaw immediately stepped in front of her.

"Wait."

Nyrell raised her staff.

The earth shifted.

A skeletal hand burst from the grave.

Then an arm.

A skull followed.

The corpse dragged itself from the soil wearing the rusted remains of ancient armor. Dirt poured from its empty rib cage.

Violet light burned within its hollow eyes.

Nyrell's expression hardened.

"Crux."

The Skeleton lunged.

Nyrell struck her staff against the ground.

Roots erupted from beneath the corpse and wrapped around its arms, legs, and chest.

The Skeleton fought against them.

Nyrell closed her fist.

The roots tightened.

Bones cracked.

The Skeleton collapsed into a pile of broken remains.

Spiritpaw cautiously approached.

Nyrell stared at the corpse.

"Someone brought you back."

The violet light disappeared.

For a moment, everything became still.



Then—

click.

Nyrell's eyes narrowed.

A finger moved.

Then another.

Crux crawled between the broken bones like
violet lightning.

The skull rolled toward the body.

An arm dragged itself across the dirt.

The corpse began rebuilding itself.

Nyrell stepped backward.

"Rise..."

Slow applause echoed through the grove.

Clap.

Clap.

Clap.

Nyrell turned.

A woman stood between two ancient trees.

Black robes hung from her slender figure,
untouched by the wind moving through the forest.

Her skin was pale.

Her expression was calm.

Six strands of violet energy extended from her fingers into the surrounding graves like the strings of some enormous invisible marionette.

Nyrell knew her.

"Vyndis Nightshade."

Vyndis smiled.

"Nyrell Ashbourne."

Spiritpaw immediately moved between them.



Vyndis glanced toward the beast.

"Charming creature."

Spiritpaw bared its teeth.

Nyrell leveled her staff.

"What have you done?"

Vyndis looked toward the graves.

"Nothing that wasn't waiting to be done."

Her fingers moved.

Behind Nyrell, the Skeleton snapped upright.

Spiritpaw spun and lunged.

Its claws smashed through the corpse and scattered the bones across the roots.

Vyndis didn't flinch.

Nyrell stared at her.

"These dead were beneath the protection of Nature's Hand."

"Protection?"

Vyndis gave a quiet laugh.

"You buried them beneath a tree and forgot their names."

"We gave them peace."

"Did you?"

Vyndis stepped into the grove.

"Did you ask them if they wanted peace?"

Nyrell's jaw tightened.

"They completed their lives. Their spirits deserve to pass on."

"How convenient."

Vyndis approached one of the graves.

"There's an army beneath your forest, Ashbourne. Thousands of warriors. Kings. Murderers. Heroes. Cowards."

She crouched and picked up an ancient fragment of bone.

"Men and women who died screaming because they desperately wanted one thing."

Vyndis looked at Nyrell.

"Another sunrise."

Crux crawled across the bone in her hand.

"And you call leaving them beneath the dirt *mercy*."

Nyrell stepped toward her.

"They are not yours."

Vyndis dropped the bone.

"Neither are they yours."

For several seconds, neither woman moved.

The forest trembled around them.

Finally, Nyrell spoke.

"Leave this place, Vyndis."

Vyndis sighed.

"I suspected you'd say that."



She lifted one finger.

"Rise."

The ground erupted.



Chapter Two

Spiritcall and Rise

The dead came from everywhere.

Skeletons clawed through the soil.

Greater Skeletons ripped themselves from deeper graves carrying broken swords and rusted shields. Awoken warriors crawled between the Spirit Tree's roots with violet fire blazing inside their skulls.



"Spiritpaw!" Nyrell shouted.

The beast charged.

Its shoulder slammed into a Skeleton and shattered it against the trunk of the Spirit Tree.

Nyrell spun her staff and smashed another corpse across the jaw.

Its skull flew from its shoulders.

But the dead kept coming.

One Skeleton rushed her.

Another nearby corpse suddenly collapsed.

Violet energy passed from the fallen creature into the attacker.

The Skeleton's movements became faster.

Stronger.

Nyrell recognized what was happening.

"Ravage."

The Skeleton swung.

Nyrell raised her staff.

Steel crashed against enchanted wood.

The force drove her backward.

Spiritpaw attacked from the side and tore the creature apart.

More Crux erupted from the fallen corpse.

Nyrell looked across the battlefield.

Vyndis hadn't moved.

She stood perfectly still among the graves.

Only her fingers moved.

One finger curled.

A Greater Skeleton that Spiritpaw had knocked down suddenly jerked upright.

Another finger moved.

Its broken arm snapped back into place.

A third.

The corpse turned toward Nyrell.

"Puppetry," Nyrell whispered.

Vyndis smiled.

"Again."

The Greater Skeleton charged.

Nyrell blocked its first strike.

Then it's second.

Its body moved unnaturally, joints twisting beyond anything a living creature could endure.

Nyrell caught its blade against her staff.

"You aren't speaking with them!" Nyrell shouted.

Vyndis raised an eyebrow.

"Speaking?"

The Greater Skeleton pushed harder.

Nyrell struggled beneath its strength.

Vyndis casually flicked another finger.

The corpse attacked again.

"Why would I ask permission?"

Nyrell's eyes flashed green.

A Rune appeared beneath
her feet.

Then another.

Then another.

The earth answered.

Nyrell drove her staff into the ground.

"Because they are not things!"

The Runes erupted.

One twisted upon itself, its ancient markings
changing as natural energy condensed into
something older.



Something stronger.

Rune became Khaladir.

Wind screamed through the
grove.

Leaves spiraled into the air.

A translucent warrior
emerged within the storm, its body formed from
pale blue spiritfire.

Vyndis stared.



Nyrell raised her staff.

"Spiritcall."

Wind Khaladir attacked.

Its weapon swept through the air.

Three Awoken warriors were hurled backward.

For the first time, Vyndis stepped away from her army.

Her eyes remained fixed upon the spirit.

"Beautiful."

Nyrell moved beside the Khaladir.

"You summon the dead, Vyndis, yet you understand nothing about them."

Vyndis laughed.

"That's rich coming from you."

She spread her arms.

More corpses emerged.

"You call them *Spirits*."

Spiritpaw destroyed another Skeleton.



"You carve pretty Runes into stones."

Nyrell raised her staff defensively.

"You dress your necromancy in flowers and pretend that makes you different from me."

"I ask."

Vyndis stopped.

The Wind Khaladir stood silently beside Nyrell.

Nyrell looked directly into Vyndis's eyes.

"That is the difference."

Vyndis said nothing.



Nyrell continued.

"When I perform Spiritcall, I open the door."

The Wind Khaladir raised its weapon.

"The spirit decides whether to walk through."

Nyrell pointed her staff toward the Awoken.

"You put chains on whatever you drag back."

Vyndis's smile slowly disappeared.

"And when they refuse to answer?"

Crux erupted around her.

Every corpse in the grove rose simultaneously.

Vyndis stretched out her arms.

Hundreds of violet strings appeared around her.

Her voice became a whisper.

"Mine never do."



The battle consumed the grove.

"Spiritpaw, left!"

Nyrell pointed.

The beast obeyed, crashing into a group of Awoken before they could surround her.

"Hedgebeast!"

Roots twisted together.

Earth and bark formed into another great beast.

The Hedgebeast charged.



The Awoken turned toward it as if compelled to face the new threat.

Nyrell attacked alongside her creatures.

Unlike Vyndis, she never remained behind them.

She fought with them.

She bled with them.

A Skeleton's blade cut across Nyrell's shoulder.

She staggered.

Vyndis noticed.

"You're slowing down, Ashbourne."

Nyrell pressed her hand against the wound.

A Rune glowed beneath her palm.

"Nature's Embrace."

Warm green light spread
across her shoulder.

The bleeding stopped.

Nyrell looked toward
Vyndis.

"I'm still here."

"For now."

Vyndis snapped her fingers.



"Rise."

A fallen Skeleton returned.

"Puppetry."

Another corpse stood.



"Components."

One Awoken gave its strength to another.

Nyrell destroyed them.

Vyndis brought them back.

Again.

Again.

Again.

Finally, Nyrell understood.

Every corpse she destroyed strengthened Vyndis's position.

Death wasn't weakening the Nightcrawlers.

Death was feeding them.

Nyrell turned.

"Spiritpaw! Fall back!"

The beast immediately retreated toward her.

Vyndis smiled.

"Finally figured it out?"

Nyrell breathed heavily.

"You're feeding Crux through their deaths."

"I'm doing much more than that."

Vyndis looked toward the Spirit Tree.

Nyrell followed her gaze.

Her eyes widened.

"No."

Vyndis closed her hand.

Crux surged into the Spirit Tree.

The ancient trunk groaned.

Black veins spread across its bark.

"No!"

Nyrell rushed forward.

Vyndis threw both arms outward.

Violet energy raced through every root beneath the grove.

Nyrell stopped.

She finally understood.

Vyndis had never come merely for the graves.

She wanted the tree.

"The Spirit Tree connects this place to the dead,"
Nyrell whispered.

Vyndis smiled.

"Precisely."

The ground began to shake.

Graves opened throughout the forest.

Hundreds.

Then thousands.

Nyrell could hear bones moving beneath the
earth.

Vyndis lifted both hands.

Her eyes burned violet.

"RISE!"

The forest floor exploded.



Chapter Three

The Dead Choose

An army began to stand.

Hundreds of corpses emerged first.

Then hundreds more.

Warriors from forgotten kingdoms climbed from beneath the Spirit Tree. Ancient armor covered some. Others wore nothing but remnants of cloth and roots.

Nyrell stared at them.

She couldn't fight this.

No army could.

Vyndis walked among the dead.

"Look at them, Nyrell."

Her voice carried across the grove.

"Your precious forest was built upon an army."

Nyrell said nothing.

Vyndis spread her arms.

"Do you understand now?"

Nyrell lowered her staff.

Vyndis frowned.

"Giving up?"

"No."

Nyrell closed her eyes.

Vyndis watched her carefully.

Nyrell knelt.

"I'm listening."

She placed her palm against the earth.

One Rune appeared.

Then another.

Then another.

Dozens spread through the grove.

Vyndis's eyes narrowed.

"What are you doing?"

Nyrell heard them now.

Not corpses.

Not soldiers.

People.

Thousands of voices.

Confused.

Afraid.

Furious.

Some begged to return to the darkness.

Others wanted to see the sky again.

Nyrell whispered to them.

"I will not command you."

The Runes glowed.

Vyndis pulled at her
invisible strings.

"Rise!"

The corpses moved.

Nyrell continued.

"I will not bind you."

Several Awoken advanced.

Spiritpaw stood protectively beside her.

Nyrell opened her eyes.

"But if you wish to be free..."

Rune became Khaladir.

"...then answer me."

The forest exploded with light.

Wind came first.



Wind Khaladir descended through the branches and swept its weapon through the Crux threads.

They snapped.

Vyndis recoiled.

"What?"

The earth shook.

A second presence emerged.

Earth Khaladir.

The massive spirit planted itself before Nyrell.

More Crux threads shattered.

Then Stone answered.

The ground split open.

Stone Khaladir rose beside the Spirit Tree like an ancient guardian awakened from the bones of the world itself.

Vyndis stepped backward.

"No."

Her fingers moved desperately.



"Rise!"

Nothing happened.

"Puppetry!"



A handful of corpses
twitched.

Nyrell stood.

"They can hear me now."

Vyndis glared at her.

"They belong to me!"

Nyrell's expression hardened.

"No."

The temperature suddenly plunged.

Frost spread across the Spirit Tree.

Nyrell looked upward.

Something stood among the highest branches.

Tall.

Silent.

Ancient.

Vyndis slowly raised her eyes.

"What is that?"

Nyrell breathed the name.

"Ice Khaladir."

The spirit descended.

It did not attack Vyndis.

Instead, it reached toward
the army.

Thousands of Crux threads
became visible.

Vyndis stared in horror.

"No."

Ice Khaladir's horn glowed.

The threads shattered.

All of them.

Silence consumed the grove.

Every corpse stopped moving.

Vyndis stared at her hands.

Her fingers twitched.

Nothing obeyed.

Nyrell walked toward her.

"The dead aren't weapons, Vyndis."



Vyndis looked up.

Nyrell stopped several paces away.

"They still possess will."

For a long moment, neither woman spoke.

Then—

one corpse collapsed.

Another followed.

Then another.

Across the grove, the ancient army slowly returned to the earth.

Vyndis watched them fall.

Nyrell lowered her staff.

"It's over."

Vyndis said nothing.

Nyrell turned toward the Spirit Tree.

Then she heard something.

Scrape.

Nyrell froze.

Spiritpaw growled.

One corpse remained standing.

An ancient warrior.

Its armor was broken. Roots hung from its shoulders. A shattered sword remained clutched in one hand.

But something was different.

Nyrell looked toward its eyes.

There was no violet light.

No Crux.

She turned toward Vyndis.

Vyndis's hands were lowered.

"Don't," Nyrell warned.

Vyndis slowly looked at her.

"I'm not doing anything."

The warrior moved.

Nyrell raised her staff.

"Stay back."

The corpse ignored her.

It looked toward the Spirit Tree.

Then toward Nyrell.

Finally, its empty gaze settled upon Vyndis.

It walked.

One step.

Then another.

Vyndis remained still.

"Vyndis," Nyrell said.

"I told you," Vyndis replied quietly. "This isn't me."

The dead warrior stopped directly before the Necromancer.

Silence.

Then—

it knelt.

Nyrell's eyes widened.

Spiritpaw stopped growling.

Vyndis looked down at the ancient warrior.

Nyrell searched desperately for any trace of magic.

There was none.

"No Crux," Nyrell whispered.

Vyndis looked toward her.

"No."

"You're not controlling it."

"No."

The warrior bowed its head before Vyndis.

For several seconds, Vyndis herself seemed uncertain.

Then the faintest smile appeared upon her lips.

"Interesting."

Nyrell tightened her grip around her staff.

"Don't mistake one spirit's choice for permission to enslave thousands."

Vyndis placed a hand upon the dead warrior's shoulder.

"And don't mistake your beliefs for theirs."

Nyrell's expression hardened.

Vyndis looked toward the graves surrounding them.

"You were right about one thing, Ashbourne."

The warrior rose beside her.

"The dead have wills of their own."

Darkness began gathering between the trees.

Nyrell stepped forward.

"Vyndis."

The Necromancer smiled.

"But apparently..."

Crux surrounded her.

The shadows swallowed both Vyndis and the ancient warrior.

Her voice lingered after she disappeared.

"...some of them choose me."

The grove became silent.



This time, however, it wasn't empty.

Nyrell could hear the forest again.

The trees.

The animals.

The spirits.

Thousands of quiet voices settled once more beneath the earth.

Spiritpaw approached and pressed against her side.

Nyrell rested one hand upon the beast's head.

"We stopped her."

Spiritpaw looked up at her.

Nyrell stared at the place where Vyndis had disappeared.

"We freed them."

The Spirit Tree's wounded roots slowly began glowing green again.

Nyrell should have felt victorious.

Instead, she remembered the warrior kneeling willingly before Vyndis.

She had entered this battle believing Vyndis was wrong.

The dead were not possessions.

They were not soldiers waiting to be claimed.

They were not puppets.

Today had proven that.

But the final warrior had proven something else.

Something Nyrell had never wanted to consider.

Freedom meant allowing the dead to choose their own path.

Even when she despised their choice.

Nyrell looked toward the Spirit Tree.

"What did you see in her?" she whispered.

No spirit answered.

Far beyond the forest, beneath a moonless sky, Vyndis Nightshade walked beside a warrior who had been dead for centuries.

No Crux bound him.

No invisible strings pulled his limbs.

For the first time that night, Vyndis did not walk ahead of one of her dead.

She walked beside him.



Vyndis glanced toward the warrior.

"Tell me," She said. "Why did you choose me?"

The dead man slowly turned his head.

And somewhere inside his ruined chest.....

Something began to beat.

NYRELL ASHBOURNE SKETCHES

1A



1B



1C



Phase 1

Relishing her serene moment in a tranquil land

2A



2B



2C



Phase 2

Wistful yearning for a once lavish land

3A



3B



3C



Phase 3

Reviving and restoring her homeland

*Ritual to revive the land,
flowers blooming around her*

*Endeavor to restore a once
barren land*

*Enjoying the moment after
the land has been restored*

THE GRAVE BENEATH THE SPIRIT TREE

The forest keeps its secrets.
The dead choose thier path.
And some battles are never truly over.

Between Nature and Death
stands a line older than memory.
When that line is broken,
the world must decide
what or who it will defend.



Not all legends are born.
Some are awakened.



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