

## The Vampire 391

### Chapter 391: An Unexpected Old Friend

In a quiet business district of High Fen City, inside a shop bearing a sign that read 'Things Made, Curses Broken,' an aging member of the Clan of painted masks hunched over his workbench, barely breathing as he used a small brass hammer to gently tap on a fine pointed engraver. His focus was so great that he'd placed a dark eyepatch over his left eye and wore a series of brass-rimmed lenses over his right eye, making the delicate silver butterfly wing under the tip of his engraver appear as though it were the size of his palm when in fact, it was only a quarter that size.

The sounds of bells ringing and the -CREAK- of rusty hinges complaining as his front door opened pulled his attention momentarily away from his work, though the only move he made was to step back from the delicate piece and let out a slow, shuddering breath before shouting at the door.

"If it's about the Willow Whip's blade, the answer is 'no'," Erkembalt shouted, not bothering to look up at the person who had entered his cluttered shop. By Heila's third day in the arena, it seemed like one out of every five people walking through his doors were asking about the Snow Fang he'd crafted for her, and by the end of her fifth day, when she felled the Tuscan mercenaries, that number had become one in three.

Now, in the days since her triumph over the Cauldron of Flame, it seemed like the only people entering his shop were in search of the famed artificer who created the frosty weapon, each one more desperate to obtain one than the last.

"If you people keep asking, I'll close up shop and move to Sapphire Depths on the coast," he said grumpily. "That way, at least you have to cross half a continent to hear me tell you 'no.' I won't touch Frost Walker horn again for five years or more, so save your breath asking."

At this point, more often than not, the bells on his door would ring again, announcing that the starry-eyed young gladiator or grizzled veteran mercenary knew better than to press their luck and left his shop empty-handed. This time, however, the sound of quiet footsteps filled the air, preceding a voice that Erkembalt hadn't heard in more than thirty years.

"I see you're keeping busy, old friend," his visitor said as they strolled casually among the cluttered shelves, pausing every few steps to examine one curiosity or the other. "Your recent work is quite impressive."

"Aspakos, weren't you supposed to keep away from me?" Erkembalt asked, looking up for the first time since the person had entered his shop and pulling off both his magnifying eyepiece and the eyepatch that blocked his other eye before replacing them with more ordinary-appearing spectacles.

The man before him wore stately blue robes, trimmed in glittering gold and covered in glyphs of power that were older than most of the current Eldritch nations. The dark feathers of his plumage still looked as inky and black as the day it had when Erkembalt left the Sorcerers of Sundered Earth and the man's cracked beak still bore the same vein of gold that welded the broken shard of his beak firmly back in place. In every way a person with ordinary vision could see, the old man of the Dark Feathered Clan hadn't changed at all since the day they last saw each other.

To Erkembalt's eyes, however, his former colleague had changed greatly. The aura of frequent use of sorcery that clung to the man had shifted from a brilliant, blazing halo of pale azure and soft green to one of dark purple with whorls of shadowy black that clustered around his heart and eyes. His taloned hands dripped with dark crimson energy and the smell of death clung to him in a way that Erkembalt had only seen from men who had so much blood on their hands that nothing could wash it away.

"Merciful Sovereign," Erkembalt whispered once he got a good look at his old friend. "What happened to you?" His hands trembled slightly as he pushed back from his workbench, the scrape of his chair against the wooden floor sounding unnaturally loud in the shop that felt like it had become two sizes too small to contain whatever had brought his dark visitor here.

Moving with deliberate care despite his racing heartbeat, Erkembalt crossed to the nearest window. Mid-afternoon sunlight filtered through the dusty windows and for a moment, he was struck by how ordinary everyone walking by outside looked, like they had no idea what kind of person had just walked into his workshop or what his presence in this city might mean for them.

But then, it was better that they didn't know, he thought as he sharply pulled the shades down, plunging the workshop into a dim gloom with only a few oil lamps burning near his workbench. When he reached the door, his fingers moved mechanically, turning not less than six locks on the heavy wooden door, ensuring that no one could intrude while he and his visitor spoke.

"Don't tell me that Lady Nyrielle did this to you," Erkembalt said as he finally turned back to his old friend. "No," he added, shaking his head. "There's no way she could do this to you in such a short period of time. So what in the Sovereign's name happened to you?"

"So you do still care about us," Aspakos said without bothering to answer the artificer's question. "Do you have anything worth drinking? My flask ran empty weeks ago," he said, reaching into his robes to hold up a worn metal flask with a simple cork stopper.

"That depends on your definition of 'worth drinking,'" Erkembalt said, returning to his workbench and gesturing for the feathered sorcerer to take a seat across the table from him. After several minutes of rummaging in the back of a cupboard, he returned with an old, dusty bottle and two simple metal cups.

"It tastes a bit of licorice," he said, pulling out the stopper and pouring two small measures of the potent liquor. "And I don't have space for barrels to age it, so it's a bit harsh, but the kick is there."

"Good enough," Aspakos said, clinking his cup against his friend's. "The stars above," he toasted.

"The stars above," Erkembalt answered as both men knocked back the heady liquor, savoring the burning sensation as it slid down their throats and the warmth that spread from their bellies a moment later.

"All right," Erkembalt said, firmly placing a stopper back in the bottle. Looking closely at the dark aura that clung to his friend, he placed an elbow on the worktable and leaned forward, adjusting his spectacles as if to make sure that he was truly seeing what he thought he was. "One shot is a polite enough greeting for old time's sake, but more than that requires an answer. What happened to you, Aspakos? And is that why you've come all the way out here following another vampire?"

"You've grown cruel," the feathered sorcerer said, snatching the bottle off the table and yanking out the stopper to pour two fresh cups. "Asking a man to speak when his tongue is dry."

"I had three little ones," Erkembalt protested. "Korine forbid me from keeping anything stronger than watered wine in the house until the boys were old enough to drink. And you're changing the topic, don't think I'll let you distract me."

"Fine, fine, I'll explain. But before I do," Aspakos said, holding up a sharp talon. "Answer me this. I see what you're dabbling in on the surface here. But have you kept your oath since you left? This," he added, holding up the cup of clear moonshine and draining it in a gulp. "It's not bad, but were you really able to do this the old-fashioned way?"

"I swore it when I left," Erkembalt said, thumping the table with a fist and sending half a dozen scraps of paper and small metal parts jumping into the air with the force of his blow. "Not once have I employed forbidden arts. No engine that powers itself, nor sail that flies without the wind, no weapon with its own power to kill or art to enslave another. Each of those and all the others," he said firmly, looking into the other man's dark eyes with an intense stare, as if daring the other man to doubt his word.

"It's good that you have, my friend," Aspakos said. "Though the time for such things may be coming to an end. The lock on the vaults has turned, Erkembalt," he said, pouring himself a third cup and staring deeply into the reflection dancing on the surface of the potent liquor. "Soon, the vaults may open and the world will come to know what we've kept hidden."

### Chapter 392: Forbidden Arts

"Hmpf," Erkembalt snorted, snatching the bottle from his friend and pouring another cup for himself. "You don't know what's in the vaults. No one does. Once something is lowered into the vault, all records of it are destroyed. For all we know, it's the same five ideas, locked away every time someone discovers them and we all panic."

"I might have agreed with you once," Aspakos said. "But things haven't been the same for more than fifteen years now. The first tumblers all fell together, just as the records said, and the second tumblers are moving much faster than the first. We may only have a few years before the first vault opens."

"But if the vaults aren't open," Erkembalt asked, shifting uncomfortably on his chair. "Then what is it that's come over you? You were never so dark before." Calling the feathered man 'dark' felt like an understatement but looking at the lurid red energy that clung to the man's talons like a bloodstain that could never be washed away, Erkembalt was hesitant to push too directly on the matter.

As young sorcerers, he and Aspakos had constantly challenged each other. Whether it was a race to be the first to translate an obscure and ancient text or the first to apply an ancient art, the competitive bond they'd formed in their youth had turned them into two of the greatest sorcerers of their generation. If not for a chance encounter with the woman who stole his heart, Erkembalt might still have been standing alongside his old friend... and might been coated in just as much darkness and slaughter.

"Philosar has withdrawn his order of protection," Aspakos said. His talons scittered across the surface of the table, leaving shallow grooves as he formed fists, glowering at the table as though a dirty rat had come to perch between himself and his friend, one that he was forbidden from striking at for fear of what its bite could do to him.

"In his decree, he said that there may come a time when humans reach the Forsaken Lands, and that the Sorcerers of Sundered Earth must prove we can defend our vaults from anyone who would pillage them, or watch as he destroys them himself."

"Scheming rat," Erkembalt spat, momentarily ashamed to belong to the same clan as the Gnawing Death. "His predecessor worked with us, why can't he just keep to the old accord? Do you really think it's because of the humans?"

According to some of the most ancient records, dating back to the founding of the Sorcerers of Sundered Earth, the Sovereign of Stars had forged an accord with the Gnawing Death to allow their order to preserve knowledge that the Gnawing Death felt was too dangerous to be allowed in the world.

The terms governing the use and preservation of that knowledge were very, very strict, and many things were lowered into the order's vaults, never to be seen again. Such knowledge was considered 'realized.' The practice and application of that knowledge could threaten to upend the current order of the world and anyone who possessed it would gain a tremendous advantage over anyone who didn't.

The propagation of that knowledge could have disastrous consequences if it wasn't managed well, but some things, once they were unleashed upon the world, could never be hidden away again, and so they were kept in secret, unavailable to even the sorcerers who guarded them.

Other knowledge, however, was only dangerous because it was 'unrealized.' Progressing through experimental stages posed so great of a threat and use of the incomplete ideas could harm so many that the Sorcerers of Sundered Earth worked hard to 'realize' that knowledge. If they could remove the dangers, then knowledge could be shared, and if they couldn't, then it would be relegated to the vaults as well.

Few people outside of the Sorcerers of Sundered Earth understood the knowledge they guarded or why it had to be kept away from the world. That was no accident. If the world believed they held secrets to great power, they would never know peace. Instead, to the rest of the world, they were an order of simple archivists, keeping old records purely because they were old.

But if the world still believed that convenient fiction, no one would ever venture into the forbidden lands to attack the reclusive sorcerers.

"I don't know if it's the humans or something else," Aspakos admitted. "The vampires are moving strangely. The Jaws of Death destroyed the Glimmerwing clan even though they never sought to expand their territory beyond the Endless Marshm and the Fangs of Death hunted the daughter of the last High Lord to come from that clan until she escaped into the Briar."

"The Gnawing Death is rumored to spend his days cloaked in shadows, gathering every scrap of information he can about the humans and the powers that drive them," the feathered sorcerer continued. "When he appears in Eldritch Lands, it's rarely been to act against the Eldritch lords, but instead to present warnings, propping up the border nations with his whispers before he vanishes back into the shadows."

"And now Lady Nyrielle is on the march to war," Erkembalt said, pouring another drink for each of them. "So you've picked her to defend yourself against the Gnawing Death? Do you think she'll defy one of her peers to protect you?"

"Perhaps she'll protect us from Philosar, and perhaps she won't," Aspakos said. "But you wanted to know what happened to me," he said, gesturing vaguely to the area around himself where his aura would be visible to people trained the way Erkembalt had been. "This is the result of practicing the founder's art, piercing the veil and searching for secrets hidden in the stars."

"That, that's forbidden!" Erkembalt exclaimed, so startled by the revelation that he spilled the contents of his cup across the table. "Aspakos, the founder's art isn't meant for sorcerers. It isn't supposed to be practiced by people like you and I. Why would you do such a thing?"

"Because we need to find a way forward," Aspakos said with a heavy sigh. "Because the founders words have grown more and more cryptic over time. It's been a thousand years," he said, shaking his head in helplessness. "Those few who can read the ancient tongue still argue about his intentions. Words have changed, meanings have shifted and what he thought was too obvious to write down at the time... we've forgotten entirely."

"You've done the work," Aspakos added, clicking his beak in irritation. "We translate translations, hoping to find new insight to the ancient guide, but without the ability to understand his intentions, we can only attempt to follow the path that led him to his answers in the first place, to see what is hidden in the stars that cannot be understood from all the ancient texts."

"You've done the work," Erkembalt countered. "I learned long ago that anything we believe about those texts has just as much chance of being wrong as it has of being inspired truth. I put my faith in my own hands these days, and they've served me well."

"It's good that you have, my friend," Aspakos said. "I know you don't care for the founder's words, and you care for my insights even less. But the facts remain. The vaults are opening, and the living will marry the dead. For both to occur together tells me that I should stand as close to the Harbinger of Death and the Mother of Trees as I can."

"Whatever is coming," the sorcerer said. "Those two will find their way to the center of it, of this, I'm certain. And when that time comes, it would be good to have as many friends as possible. Lady Nyrielle desires your help, my friend," Aspakos said, draining the last of the rough liquor in his cup and looking into Erkembalt's eyes. "I think she's wise to ask for it."

"That's why you're here then," Erkembalt said with a heavy sigh. "With you by her side, I can't imagine why she'd need me. Anything I can do, I'm sure you're even better at."

"That might have been true once," Aspakos said, standing up and holding out his hands in a gesture of helplessness. "But everything has a price that must be paid. The founder's art has revealed much to me, but the more it reveals, the more it binds me. These hands," he said. "They can no longer hold a tool. I can see more than I ever could before, but I can do so very little about it."

"That's why I came to you, old friend," he said, placing a hand on the artificer's shoulder. "For all of our knowledge, we are less useful to Lady Nyrielle than we appear. But you haven't been stained by our fight to adapt to the world. Your hands have raised children and forged brilliant blades."

"So you see, Erkembalt, in the end, it isn't us that Lady Nyrielle needs, but you."

### Chapter 393: A Magical Gathering (Part One)

That evening, Ashlynn dressed simply, wearing her plain emerald green Traveling Hat along with a simple green and brown dress that would have been suitable to wear for a long day riding a horse or visiting Eldritch villages in the countryside.

"Are you sure you this is the right tone, my lady?" Heila asked as she helped style Ashlynn's hair into a simple, thick braid that gathered her long, blond tresses at the base of her neck. "You are the Mother of Trees now. The others joining us will understand what that means better than most."

"I know," Ashlynn said with a light smile. "But it's because they understand that this is so necessary. As witches, you and I may be powerful, but we are both still beginners in our craft. A few months of training, no matter how intense, can never take the place of years of study, and everyone else tonight will have studied their arts longer than you or I have been alive."

"If I wore the Fancy Hat and the jeweled gown that goes with it, they could never forget who I am," she explained. "But this way, once we turn to discussions of witchcraft and sorcery, it will be easier for them to forget about my status and speak plainly if I don't try to over awe them with finery."

"I see," Heila said, placing a simple wooden pin in Ashlynn's hair to hold everything in place. "Then, should we eat family style, the way we did with Aunt Amahle?"

"Too casual for the palace," Ashlynn said with a sigh. She'd originally tried to make the suggestion but when she explained to the palace staff that she wanted to borrow a kitchen so that she and each of the attendees of this gathering could cook a dish, the horrified looks she received told her that some things were just too far out of the norm. Evidently, letting the Mother of Trees and the Harbinger of Death into the kitchens to cook was more than they could tolerate.

"And Mistress Nyrielle will be with us," Ashlynn reminded Heila. "We benefit from Big Sister Amahle's prestige here. Everyone knows the power of the Mother of Thorns and they respect her. Nyrielle is fighting to establish the prestige of the Harbinger of Death because her prestige as the Eldritch Lady of the Vale of Mists isn't what it should be here. I can diminish my own prestige in front of our guests, but I can't diminish hers too much."

"You know you don't need to worry so much about me," Nyrielle said from the door as she glided into the room. "But I appreciate that my darling is always considering so many things," she added as she swept Ashlynn into a tight embrace.

For a moment, their lips met and the world melted away, leaving Ashlynn aware of nothing but the press of Nyrielle's lithe figure against hers and the momentary prick of a fang on her lips that always preceeded the deepest of kisses. Her knees felt like jelly as Nyrielle's tongue danced with her own and only the supernatural strength of Nyrielle's tender embrace stopped her from falling to her knees while shivers of pure pleasure rippled through her body.



"Good morning, my love," Ashlynn said, wrapping her arms around her lover's slender shoulders and staring deeply into her midnight eyes. "You know if you're going to do that to me, you should at least give Heila time to excuse herself first," she teased, throwing a wink over Nyrielle's shoulder to the awkwardly blushing young witch. "She hasn't even had a chance to find a partner of her own among the strapping young gladiators signing up to fight for her hand."

"That's right, I haven't even... What?" Heila said, opening her eyes wide in shock. "Please, please tell me that they aren't actually fighting over me," she said, blushing slightly as she remembered Ashlynn telling stories about her father fighting a duel against a rival for her mother's heart.

At the time, it sounded sweet and romantic, but after spending several days in the arena herself, the idea that grown men were throwing themselves into the brutal world of the arena to win her as though she was a prize that could be possessed by the strongest provoked an entirely different reaction from her.

"It was a spectacle in one of the smaller arenas last night," Nyrielle said. "Zedya and Lennart were watching a fight when someone noticed them and thought they could bring back word of the strongest fighter among the Horned Clan. I don't think they really expected to win your hand, but there are many men fighting for a chance to prove themselves worthy of your attention."

"I think I've gathered all the attention I need," Heila said awkwardly. "But, should I meet with them anyway? If they're strong fighters, they might be willing to come with us," she said, looking between Ashlynn and Nyrielle.

"No, don't you dare," Ashlynn said with far more heat than she had meant to. "Heila," she said in a softer tone as she disentangled herself from Nyrielle's embrace and knelt beside her closest friend. "You are free to love whoever you wish, and one day, I hope you find love that fills your heart the way Nyrielle's love fills mine. But don't you ever, ever, think of using a marriage or the possibility of a marriage with you as a means of securing an alliance."

"My darling is right, little Heila," Nyrielle added, standing protectively over Ashlynn. "Trading your virtue for soldiers is something that only humans subject their people to. The soldiers you gained through your strength in the arena are all the help I could ever desire from you and more."

"It's fine," Heila said, flushing slightly in embarrassment at receiving Nyrielle's praise. "Besides, I already told Lady Ashlynn that I didn't want to think about romance right now. Not when everything is so..."

uncertain," she said softly. For a moment, the ghost of Andrus danced before her eyes but she firmly shook off thoughts of the excited young soldier to focus on the present.

"We should go," Ashlynn said. "The others are probably waiting already."

#### Chapter 394: A Magical Gathering (Part Two)

The trio didn't have far to go, Ashlynn had requested a private dining room from the palace that was near to both her quarters and the passage underground where the vampires found refuge from the sun during the day.

When they arrived, Virve and Ignatious stood outside to greet them before opening the doors to an intimate dining room suitable for groups of ten or fewer. Plants filled the space, making it feel alive and green even as autumn painted the world outside in dark oranges, brilliant yellows and dull browns. At Ashlynn's instruction, the normal table had been replaced by one that was round so as not to give higher status to any of the traditions present.

Two men stood from their seats as soon as Ashlynn and her companions entered. The first, she recognized immediately and Ashlynn put on a warm, welcoming smile when she realized how uncomfortable he seemed with the glitz and grandeur of the palace.

"Artificer Erkembalt," Ashlynn said, crossing the room to take his hands in greeting. "I'm glad you were willing to accept our invitation tonight."

"Well, it was hard to refuse considering who your messenger was, your Dominion," the aging artificer said with an awkward bow. Just months ago, this young woman had held only the faintest tinge of an emerald aura about her that carried a light scent of woodsap and evergreens. Now, only a few months had passed but he felt like her presence could easily envelop the entire room.

The young witch beside her was almost more shocking. From a humble servant girl to arena champion, Heila had not only taken on a silvery-green aura, but that aura felt like a leaf so thin that it could cut like a blade. She might not possess overwhelming strength, but what strength she did possess had been honed into a lethal weapon and she'd proven several times over how deadly it could be.

"Please, just Ashlynn will do, or Lady Ashlynn if you must. Tonight, we're all here to share in our craft and titles will only get in the way," she said politely before turning to the man beside him.

And this must be Master Aspakos," Ashlynn greeted the feathered sorcerer. "I've heard many things about you but the rumors don't do your presence justice," she said as she worked to keep a warm smile on her face.

She might not be able to see the dark aura that clung to him, but something about the man felt strangely detached, as though a piece of him had been ripped away and cast so far away that it could no longer be touched, only noticed for its absence. And in the place of that missing thing, something else lurked in the darkness, too shrouded by other powers for her to see or understand.

"Nor you, Lady Ashlynn," Aspakos said with a polite bow. "Though I must admit that the city seems to have far more to say about their newest champion than any of the rest of us," he added with another bow in Heila's direction.

"Please, take your seats everyone," Nyrielle interrupted, pulling Ashlynn away from the pair of sorcerers with a protective arm around her waist and gesturing for Heila to take a seat on Ashlynn's opposite side.

Surprisingly, Ignatious joined the others in taking a seat at the table beside Nyrielle, making it clear that he had come as a participant rather than simply filling the absent Zedya's place as Lady Nyrielle's attendant. The move left Virve as the only one standing, hovering over Heila's shoulder. If anyone needed protection tonight, it wouldn't be Ashlynn, Lady Nyrielle would see to that, and while Heila appeared to have regained her strength after several days of rest, Virve knew all too well how easily someone as strong willed as Heila could put up a strong front even when they were as weak as straw underneath.

She hoped that it was simple professionalism that drove her to take a defensive position, but as she looked at the dark figure of Aspakos taking his seat beside Erkembalt, she couldn't help but feel that a small measure of paranoia was justified. The man was supposed to be an ally, but even after months traveling together, his motives remained as cryptic as the ancient and forgotten glyphs that decorated his robes.

"We have much to discuss tonight, and there is one matter I'd like to get out of the way before dinner is served."

"If it's about traveling with you," Erkembalt began nervously, his bushy tail swishing behind him as he took his seat. "I've discussed the matter..."

"It isn't," Nyrielle said before he could say any more. "Whether or not you choose to travel with us is something we should discuss over a meal, but this is something that could spoil it. Truthfully, I feel uncomfortable just being in the same room with it," she said, gesturing to Ignatious.

Stepping forward, Ignatious retrieved a long, slender box wrapped faded crimson silk, embroidered with the emblem of a shining sun surrounded by golden flames. Just seeing it, Ashlynn's breath caught in her chest and her heart began to pound as the former Inquisitor slowly unwrapped the elaborately decorated wooden box.

"Is that what I think it is?" she asked, unable to hold back her curiosity.

"It is," Ignatious said, opening clasps at both ends of the box and removing the lid to reveal a gleaming sword.

The moment the box opened, a palpable tension swept through the room. Virve, who had maintained a relaxed posture as this was supposed to be a gathering of allies instantly snapped to attention. Acting on reflex, she took half a step backward and her hands dropped to her fighting gauntlets before her mind even finished processing what she was seeing. Her amber eyes widened, pupils narrowing to slits as the fur on her body stood on end before she reminded herself that Ignatious had more than proven his loyalty, but the rapid rise and fall of her chest betrayed how deeply the sight of the blade affected her.

"Sweet mercy," she whispered, so softly that only those with enhanced hearing caught it. "I've heard horror stories of what those do to our kind, but I never thought..." she said as she struggled to regain her composure.

The hilt alone was a masterpiece of metalwork, wrapped in braided gold wire and set with spiralling rows of rubies before giving way to a golden pommel shaped like a radiant sun. At the crossguard, form gave way to function but the patterned steel still held a unique beauty, with rippling layers that resembled the wavy patterns of a flame even though the blade itself was straight and true.

"This is a Holy Flame Sword," the former Inquisitor said. "It was once my most prized possession. But blades like these can only be wielded by the faithful, and without a strong, pure faith, the flames its wielder ignites will only be pale and weak."

"This is why I've asked you here tonight, Breaker of Curses," Nyrielle said, looking directly at Erkembalt while doing her best to repress the urge to slam the lid back on the case that held the 'holy' blade. Even now, she felt like standing near it was little different than standing outside while watching the sky grow brighter.

"A tool that cannot be used should be broken and remade into something that can be useful," Nyrielle said. "But I would like to find a way to put this weapon to use without breaking it. So tell me, Artificer Erkembalt. Are you up to the challenge? Can you unlock the power of this blade?"

### Chapter 395: Path of the Sun

For several minutes, no one said a word as the assembled witches and sorcerers examined the work of deadly airt that Ignatious laid before them. In the silence, Nyrielle stood up from her chair, retreating to the corner of the room to put more distance between herself and the uncomfortable artifact. Even taking a few steps away helped to relieve the growing sense of unease that crept along her skin when the former inquisitor opened the case that held it, but she wouldn't feel comfortable until the blade had been taken away and secured far from her presence once more.

"What," Erkembalt said at last, licking his lips when he realized that his mouth was hanging open and had been long enough for it to begin to go dry. "What happens if someone who isn't one of the 'faithful' touches it?" When he asked, his hands twitched with an eagerness that he hadn't felt in some time but that eagerness was balanced by an abundance of caution. Any relic as powerful as what this vampire described was certain to be dangerous, perhaps even deadly to people who weren't meant to tamper with it.

"Holding it will do nothing," Ignatious reassured the artificer. A slight smile of amusement tugged at his lips as he watched Erkembalt's bushy tail swishing in excitement even if he tried to maintain a scholarly demeanor. "If you attempt to wield it, it will burn your hand. If you attempt to attack one of the faithful with it, expect to be reduced to ash before the blade's edge can so much as scratch the person you attacked."

"Hmm, then it should be safe to handle," the artificer said, fishing in the bulging pockets of his vest to pull out his multi-lensed eyepiece. Securing it firmly in place, he walked halfway around the table, leaning over the blade without touching it as he brought his extraordinary senses to bear on the weapon.

"In the name of the Sovereign of Stars, reveal your nature to me," he murmured, holding his paws out over the blade and releasing a misty, silver aura that drifted through the air over the blade. The mist

swirled and danced before it slowly gathered in an elaborate pattern of lines and circles that ran from the sun-shaped pommel all the way to the blade's slender point.

"Bless his passage through the sky and his dance among the stars," Ignatious whispered when he saw the pattern revealed in the air above the blade.

"May he light our way through darkness, and lead us to the heavenly shores," Ashlynn finished from across the table. For a moment, her eyes met Ignatious's startled gaze and she gave the vampire an awkward shrug. "Would you believe me if I said that I have a distant cousin who is a Confessor? My parents hid me from the Church but they never hid the Church from me."

"Then, you still believe?" Ignatious asked hesitantly. Ever since Nyrielle had told him of her human Seneschal, he'd longed for a chance to meet with her. Zedya, for all of their similarities as humans who became vampires, had never been among the faithful and the only other human vampire he'd met was Thane... It was just that, at the time, Ignatious was too filled with rage at what Nyrielle had done to him to ever consider discussing his circumstances with someone who might truly understand.

"I don't know," Ashlynn said honestly. "I want to. Some of it at least. I want to believe that there is something greater than us in this world, and that there is a place for everyone who is worthy to find eternal rest on the Heavenly Shores."

"Is that what you think this is?" Erkembalt interrupted, furrowing his bushy brows and pointing at the pattern of lines and circles hovering above the blade. "Is this some superstition? A map to your afterlife?"

"That's not a map to the Heavenly Shores," Ignatious said with a light laugh. "It's a map of the sun's path across the heavens. If you mark the sun's position in the sky at the same time every day, it will form a pattern like the number eight. This arrangement of circles," he added, pointing to a cluster of silvery motes of light hanging above the blade.

"This describes the arc of the sun at high summer, when the sun's heat is the most intense," Ignatious explained. "If this was a Holy Light Blade, perhaps it would be marked with a different arrangement," he said, fetching a slate and piece of chalk to sketch a similar arrangement of circles. "This is the map for the sun at the five longest days of the year, when the sun is brightest and the nights are shortest."

"You see, old friend?" Aspakos said, placing a hand on Erkembalt's shoulder. "I told you. We share a common root with these humans. Perhaps you could even wield this blade yourself. That is, if you still have faith in the Sovereign of the Stars."

"Bah," Erkembalt snorted, waving his hand to dismiss the glowing motes of silvery light. He'd seen as much as the spell would reveal and the conversation was moving uncomfortably close to superstition, faith and nonsense. "You worship the Sovereign. I only apply his knowledge, and that knowledge is enough to tell me that breaking the restrictions on this blade won't be easy. But I doubt you need to. This blade isn't bound to faith at all."

"Explain," Nyrielle said sharply from her shadowed corner of the room. "I've seen these weapons in the hands of the faithful and I've seen men try to fight with them when the Templar carrying it falls. Ignatious has told me that the Church tests the faith of their Templars with these blades and those who waver in their faith cannot draw out the blade's flames."

All around the table, everyone's eyes gathered on expectantly Erkembalt. Ashlynn had grown up on stories written about the most pious knights and templars, paragons of faith who underwent a divine awakening when they passed the trails of faith to wield one of these weapons, now, the artificer claimed that faith wasn't required at all?

If not for personally witnessing the skill of his craft with Heila's blade, she might not have been willing to hear what he had to say, but after seeing first hand how skilled was, she couldn't help but extend a measure of trust to Erkembalt.

"These weapons are legendary among my people," Ashlynn said slowly. "They are seen as one of the most undeniable forms of proving the strength of a person's faith. For you to say that they aren't bound by faith," she said, her voice growing sharp. "Can you prove your words to us?"

## Chapter 396: The Power of the Blade

"Faith," the artificer snorted. "Faith is nothing more than a window dressing that disguises the strength of will. Give me that," he said curtly, snatching the slate and chalk from Ignatious's hands and wiping the diagram of the summer sky away so he could begin to sketch.

As he did so, Virve stiffened behind Heila's chair, her amber eyes narrowing dangerously. Heila's hand twitched, momentarily wishing that she had something to throw at the artificer the same way she'd found small seeds to pelt Jacques with when he said something both oblivious and uncouth. Only

Ashlynn's raised hand, moving in a quick, subtle gesture that nevertheless drew everyone's attention, prevented an immediate response to the artificer's rudeness.

"The hilt is the center of a trap, just like you believe," he explained, his gaze fixed too firmly on the slate to see the dirty looks his action drew not only from Ignatious but from Virve and Heila who bristled visibly at the sight of someone disrespecting one of Lady Nyrielle's progeny. Next to him, Aspakos raised his hands in a gesture of helplessness while giving the enthusiastic artificer a look that Erkembalt had always been this way.

"When a person grasps the blade and attempts to use it, the blade will attack them," Erkembalt said, oblivious to the dark stares his actions had attracted. "But the attack is actually very weak at the beginning. It's like arm wrestling," he explained, looking around for a volunteer.

"I think I understand," Aspakos said, placing his elbow on the table and holding up his taloned hand for Erkembalt to grasp. Ever since delving into the mysteries of the founder's art, his taloned hands had become increasingly bound, unable to touch any tool or weapon. When it came to examining the blade, anything he attempted was certain to cause a backlash, but this much, at least, he could still do to help his old friend. "Tell me how you want me to resist."

"Like this," the artificer said eagerly taking a seat and grasping his friend's hand. "When the sword reaches out to the wielder, it pushes, just a little," he said, demonstrating by applying light pressure to his friend's arm. "If my friend is weak and offers little resistance, the blade will press him gently to the table," he said, demonstrating with slow, even pressure.

"What happens when the sword wins the 'arm wrestling' contest?" Heila asked. "Is that when it burns someone?"

"Not if it's a proper test," Ignatious said before Erkembalt could speak. "If the Church went around burning the most promising Templars every time one of them faced the trial of a blade, they would be doing the next best thing to severing their own arms."

"Remember," he explained, speaking as though he were teaching a young class of acolytes, repeating something he had said many times. "The Church teaches that life is a struggle and a person must rise to meet their struggle, in this life or the next. Those who fail when struggling against the blade are only exhausted and unable to use any sacred arts, what you call sorcery, for a period of several days."



"You were speaking about the power of will?" Nyrielle prompted before Ignatious could fall back into his habits as a leader of the Church. Normally, she would have indulged in the conversation, particularly because she saw an opportunity for Ashlynn to resolve many of her own lingering doubts by spending time discussing them with someone who shared her faith.

At the moment, however, he already felt herself growing tired in the blade's presence. It wasn't enough to diminish her ability to fight, but it was more than enough to leave her irritable and impatient to conclude this part of their gathering.

"Right, right," Erkembalt said, his tail fluffing up with anxiety and his ears twitching nervously when he heard the sharpness in Nyrielle's tone. "In order to 'ignite' this blade, a person has to win the arm wrestling contest against the blade. But the more they push, the more the blade pushes back," he said, demonstrating by entering a tense stalemate with Aspakos.

"At some point," the feathered sorcerer said, taking over for Erkembalt. "The 'push' coming from the wielder will exceed the limits of the blade's ability to resist. When that happens," he said, ceasing his struggle and allowing Erkembalt to slam his talonned hand into the table. "The wielder's energy fills the blade and the weapon ignites."

"I see," Ignatious said, nodding in understanding. "When you say it isn't faith, it's because any sufficient determination would ignite the blade. For a person who is devout, the strength of their faith acts as a focus for their determination. But if a person was simply determined to use the blade at all costs," he said, his eyes going wide in horror.

"Then nothing would stop them from igniting the blade," Ashlynn said. Her face looked grim and her eyes were haunted as she remembered the visions that Claire du Gaal had shared with her. Powerful priests had used her younger brother to establish their holy kingdom and the templars they'd sent to kill the first king's own sister in order to cement their place in the new order. "Because the Church uses these blades as tests of faith, they open the door to men who are zealots or hungry for power, whether they have virtue or not."

"But if this is true," Nyrielle said, grinning widely and revealing her fangs as a predatory gleam sparkled in her midnight blue eyes. "Then my darling Ashlynn should be able to use the blade, shouldn't she? Given the trials she's faced, perhaps even Heila could master this weapon."

"Me?" Heila said, her voice cracking in a near squeak at Nyrielle's sudden suggestion. "I, I could never. I'm aligned with water and wood. I have no strength with fire at all. Even if I wanted to try, I'm sure the blade would repel me."

"Then, does Lady Ashlynn have the same restrictions?" Virve asked from her place behind Heila's shoulder. "Is this something that could only be used by witches or sorcerers like the ones Lady Heila fought in the arena?"

"If that were the case," Nyrielle said with a proud gleam in her dark eyes despite the discomfort she felt at being so close to the naked blade. "I would never have asked Ignatious to present this blade to her," she said with a slow, content smile. "Am I right, my darling?"

#### Chapter 397: Weapons and Symbols

"Mistress Nyrielle might be right about me," Ashlynn said softly. Slowly, she stood up from her chair and walked around the table until she came to stand before the gleaming blade. "Heila's gifts are almost exclusively related to wood and water, but I'm strongest in wood, earth, and fire. It's just that Jacques is the only witch in Big Sister Amahle's coven who has much strength in fire so I haven't learned very much."

As she spoke, her hand drifted forward, almost unconsciously hovering over the hilt of the blade. This close, she could feel the heat trapped within the blade, aching to be let free. To her senses, the blade resembled a wild stallion, demanding to be conquered before it could be ridden.

"I can teach you how," Ignatious offered, stepping up beside Ashlynn. "From what Mistress Nyrielle has said of you, I believe you're the kind of person blades like this were meant for. You may not be devout, but your heart is pure and that matters far more than blind devotion to the scriptures. So long as you would wield this blade in the service of those who struggle, aiding them in their quest to reach the heavenly shores rather than oppressing them and forcing them to fail in their struggle, I see no reason you shouldn't bear this blade."

"If she wishes it, and she can bend the blade to her will," Nyrielle said protectively. "Nothing else matters. Don't wrap your faith around this needlessly after Artificer Erkembalt has revealed that this weapon places no restrictions of faith on its wielder."

"Forgive me, Mistress," Ignatious said, bowing deeply to the powerful vampire before returning his gaze to the witch who seemed so well suited to the weapon that he was certain she would have found a high

place within the Church if not for their blindness, both to the strength of women and the truth of witches.

"My Lady," he said gently. "Would you like me to guide you in igniting the blade?"

For several moments, a tense silence filled the air as Ashlynn stared at the gleaming blade. It wasn't as long or as heavy as her darksteel falchion but the more she looked at it, the less she thought of it as a sword at all. Rather, it resembled a witch's wand in her eyes, something that could gather the power of flame and channel it to devastating effect.

With a blade like this in her hands, she could break down the gates of Lothian City and lay waste to the Lothian Fortress, but in the process, countless innocent soldiers would lose their lives to a raging inferno. Soldiers, servants... cooks like Ollie who had nothing to do with her conflict.

But as a symbol... As a symbol of faith, it could be even more powerful than it was as a weapon, so long as she dared to wield it that way. Before she left the Vale of Mists, she'd already demonstrated her power to a small group of captives. She'd hoped to show them that witchcraft was nothing to be feared, but instead, they'd taken her as a holy maiden.

Thankfully, she'd left the Vale before things could progress too far, but she'd never resolved the question of whether or not she was willing to use faith as a weapon against the common people. Now, an even more effective means to do so lay directly within her grasp but... was she willing to use it?

"I don't know," Ashlynn said, reaching out to place the lid back on the case that held the sword and securing the clasps at both ends. The instant she did so, she felt the echo of Nyrielle's racing heart within her chest begin to slow and the darkness that her lover had gathered in the corner of the room to protect herself from the weapon began to fade.

"I think we've learned enough about this weapon for now, Sir Ignatious," Ashlynn said firmly, picking the weapon up off the table and presenting it to him. "You and I can discuss it more another night. I'm not opposed to learning to use this weapon," she said, sweeping her gaze over everyone present and lingering on Nyrielle at the end.

"But even if the weapon doesn't require faith, there are still questions in my own heart I have to resolve if I'm to win a struggle against the blade," she said firmly. "Until then, I think it's best that Sir Ignatious holds onto this blade."

"My darling is wise," Nyrielle said, walking over to Ashlynn and wrapping her arms around her lover. As she drew closer, Ashlynn felt a subtle tremor in Nyrielle's normally steady hands, and the midnight blue of her eyes seemed dimmer than usual, with a hungry sheen that Ashlynn had come to recognize all too well.

The blade's presence, even dormant, had taken its toll. The blade had been crafted to embody the flames of the sun and every minute in its presence wore away at Nyrielle's strength in the same way that staying awake past dawn or rising before sunset would. Nyrielle had endured its proximity far longer than was comfortable for her, and she'd done it not just because Ashlynn needed to understand this weapon's potential, but to protect her from it if anything went wrong while they studied the dangerous weapon.

Leaning in, Nyrielle brushed her lips across Ashlynn's, touching ever so lightly with the tip of a fang. The touch was so light that it failed to break the surface of Ashlynn's skin, but the catch in her lover's breath told Ashlynn everything she needed to know about how much restraint it took for Nyrielle to maintain such delicate control when her need was clearly growing.

"Step outside with me," Ashlynn whispered, leaning up on tip-toes until her lips brushed against her lover's ear. Her hands found Nyrielle's, squeezing gently in silent acknowledgment of the sacrifice the vampire had made for her. "You've endured the heat of the Holy Flame Blade, even if it was dormant. Let me quench your thirst properly before we dine with the

#### Chapter 398: A Delicious Snack

A red and golden haze filled the edges of Nyrielle's vision, obscuring the edges of the dining room and limiting her view to Ashlynn, the sword of flame and the few people gathered immediately around her. For a moment, her heart skipped a beat when Ashlynn's hand hovered over the hilt of the blade. Just the presence of the blade had already weakened her to this extent, but if her love were to ignite the blade, she wasn't certain that she'd be able to tolerate its presence any longer.

At the same time, she dared not tell Ashlynn to stop. The weapon presented too many opportunities to ignore, and at the same time, too many dangers. As much as her body cried out for her to shatter the blade, hide it away, or flee from it, she refused to be absent when Ashlynn attempted to use the deadly

weapon. If anything went wrong, while she trusted that Ignatious and Heila would do their best to intervene, neither was as capable or as versed in sorcery as she was.

Finally, a wave of relief rippled through her when Ashlynn chose not to ignite the blade and instead handed it off to Ignatious for safe keeping.

"My darling is wise," Nyrielle said, gliding across the floor in her best approximation of her usual grace. The haze still clung to her vision but the echo of Ashlynn's heartbeat called to her like a church bell, guiding her across the room toward the warmth of her lover's embrace and the hot, pulsing force of life within her.

Those who had extraordinary senses or knew her well might see the uncharacteristic haste with which she rushed to Ashlynn's side or the tremble in her hands when she took Ashlynn in her arms, but if anyone other than Ashlynn understood what was happening, they said nothing.

Her throat burned with thirst, and each beat of Ashlynn's heart echoed in her ears like drums, calling her to the hunt. The scent of her beloved filled her nostrils, woody and green like spring leaves after rain, but beneath it pulsed the rich metallic sweetness that called to the predator within her. Each breath drew that scent deeper, until she could almost taste the crimson droplets on her tongue before they'd been spilled.

"Step outside with me..." Ashlynn's whisper fell on Nyrielle's ears like rain on the desert sands, calling out to her hunger and stirring the deep emptiness within her that ached for her lover's sweet, tender taste. The subtle flush beneath her beloved's fair skin called out to her and she barely heard Ashlynn's whispered plea to step outside before gave in to temptation. Her body shivered and it took every bit of restraint she had left to sweep her darling up in her arms and rush out of the room in a cloud of dark, swirling mist.

Ashlynn's room wasn't far and the iron-bound wooden door rebounded off the stone walls, quivering with the force of their sudden entry.

"Aah!" Ashlynn cried out, momentarily startled when Nyrielle pressed her up against the cool, marble walls of her sitting room. For a moment, memories of Nyrielle's nearly uncontrollable hunger the first night she'd seen her lover feed danced through her mind. That time, it hadn't been a wall but a mighty cedar tree that Nyrielle pushed her up against when she naively offered herself up to be her lover's meal. This time, however, she knew exactly what Nyrielle needed and what it would be like when she took it.

Nyrielle's hands trembled against Ashlynn's shoulders, pressing her back against the cool marble as she fought to maintain control. Her beloved's heat radiated against her own rapidly cooling skin as she used up what little strength she had left to hold herself back despite the overwhelming desire to pierce through all the barriers that separated them.

The scent of Ashlynn's answering desire mingled with the soft, earthy power that had only grown more intense since she began to master her powers, creating an intoxicating perfume that made Nyrielle's head swim. She could feel the racing -THUMP THUMP- of Ashlynn's heart through the thin layers of their dresses that infuriatingly kept her from drinking in the warmth of Ashlynn's body with every inch of her soft, alabaster skin.

"It's fine," Ashlynn whispered as she felt Nyrielle's body shake and quiver against her own. Once, Nyrielle had rushed through the night, desperate to reach a willing offering rather than touch her in this frenzied, hungered state, refusing to give Ashlynn any other reasons to fear her in the early days after they'd forged their bond. It seemed foolish now, how frightened she'd been that Nyrielle would trap and exploit her when in truth, all they had needed was the time to come to know each other.

But now, there was no fear in Ashlynn's emerald eyes as she turned her head to the side, exposing her delicate, tender neck and the strong, jumping pulse that ran just beneath the surface of her pale skin.

"Take what you need," she whispered, biting her lower lip and wrapping her arms around Nyrielle's slender waist and narrow shoulders before surrendering utterly to her lover's hunger.

The last of Nyrielle's restraint shattered like glass. Her pupils shrank and the midnight blue of her eyes bled outward until her eyes resembled the endless, glittering night sky. Her lush lips parted, revealing long, slender fangs while her fingernails grew sharp enough to rend flesh.

With a sharp tug, Nyrielle tore Ashlynn's dress away, revealing her full bust, slender waist, and the barest hint of her mark of the witch in her hip before she fell on Ashlynn's neck like a striking snake. Nyrielle's fangs sank into the tender flesh of Ashlynn's neck with a smooth, practiced precision. The initial shock of sharp, penetrating pain drew a gasp from Ashlynn's lips that quickly melted into a soft moan as Nyrielle's own dark energy flooded her body, carrying her mind away to a place filled only with soft, enveloping warmth and the faintest sound of sucking.

The first taste of Ashlynn's rich, hot blood exploded across Nyrielle's tongue like water breaking free from a dam. Sweetness burst in her mouth, rich with the flavor of honeyed desire mingling with the sharp tang of her lover's anticipation. As she drew deeper, the complexity of flavors unfolded like a perfectly composed dish.

There was a rich, oaky undertone to Ashlynn's blood, reminiscent of ancient forests, and deep devotion that had matured beautifully since they'd first formed their bond of blood. The steady foundation of loyalty and commitment gave the blood a resonant depth that satisfied yearnings deep in Nyrielle's bones that went far beyond simple hunger.

Nyrielle pulled Ashlynn closer, one hand tangled in her golden hair while the other pressed firmly against the small of her back, pressing their bodies together as if they could melt into a single being.

Ashlynn felt herself melting into Nyrielle's embrace, her arms growing limp, barely able to maintain her hold on her lover's lithe figure while her own heartbeat thundered in her ears. The sensation of giving herself, not just her blood or her magic, but offering up her very life created an intimacy beyond what any other physical act could achieve.

She could feel Nyrielle's gratitude and pleasure echoing through their bond, creating a circle of sensation that bounced back and forth between them, echoing in time with their heartbeats and growing stronger with each exchange. A soft whimper escaped her lips as Nyrielle's sharp nails traced patterns along her exposed skin, leaving faint red lines in their wake as if to mark Ashlynn as hers and hers alone.

For Nyrielle, every swallow brought new tastes, each one echoing the feelings that poured from Ashlynn's heart. yet no matter how she relished in the oaky flavor of devotion or the bright, almost herbal taste of anticipation, nothing could compare to the succulent, almost berry-like sweetness that could only be described as pure, unfiltered love.

And mingled through all of those things, what truly distinguished Ashlynn's blood from all others was the magical energy that coursed through it. A vibrant current that sang through everything like the finest champagne accompanying a perfect feast. It sparkled and danced across Nyrielle's palate, the witch's power manifesting as effervescent bursts of energy that tingled all the way down her throat and spread outward through her limbs.

Ashlynn's fingers dug into Nyrielle's shoulders, her body arching as the vampire drank deeply. The connection between them intensified with each swallow, their heartbeats melding into a single, strong

rhythm. Through their bond, Nyrielle could feel Ashlynn's pleasure mirroring her own, like waves crashing on the shore with the ecstatic relief of fulfilling her lover's deepest need.

Ashlynn's head fell back against the wall, her breath coming in short, shallow gasps. The world narrowed to just this moment, just this connection between them. Her fingers slid upwards, becoming tangled in Nyrielle's silken hair, alternately stroking and gripping as waves of intense sensation pulsed through her body. Between her soft, creamy thighs, a fire built that left her writhing and yearning for release as she pressed tightly against the soft, silky fabric of Nyrielle's dress, hating that it kept her from feeling more of her lover's touch.

Slowly, the weakness that had plagued Nyrielle since she stood in the presence of the Holy Flame Blade began to recede as strength flowed back into her limbs. Ashlynn's blood cleared away the red-gold haze that had clouded her vision, leaving her free to fill her gaze with the beauty of her lover's soft, tender flesh.

Before Ashlynn gave any sign that the pleasure threatened to turn to pain, Nyrielle slowed her drinking, savoring the final tastes like the last sips of a rare wine. She could sense exactly how much she could take without weakening Ashlynn, and she stopped far short of that.

Ashlynn felt the change as Nyrielle slowed her drinking, a gradual lessening of the intensity of sensations that shook her body dimming like the setting sun and allowing her to float gently back to awareness rather than being abruptly cut off. Her body still hummed with pleasure, but the overwhelming sensations began to recede, leaving behind a deep contentment that spread from the bite at her neck to the center of her chest before radiating out over every inch of her body.

With great reluctance, Nyrielle withdrew her fangs, her tongue gently sealing the twin punctures on Ashlynn's neck, leaving only two faint white dots and a trace of crimson blood that she quickly licked clean to mark the fact that she'd fed at all.

"Exquisite," Nyrielle whispered against Ashlynn's ear, her voice husky with satisfaction. The tremor in her hands had disappeared, replaced by the steady, confident touch that Ashlynn knew so well. "You taste more magnificent each time, my darling. Like a fine wine that only improves with age and experience."

Ashlynn smiled languidly, her eyes half-lidded with pleasure as she leaned against Nyrielle for support. The feeding had left her light-headed but deeply fulfilled. The last time she'd seen Nyrielle like this, it had been her fault as she depleted Nyrielle's own strength to fuel her growth as Nyrielle's Seneschal.



Then, she'd been unable to take responsibility for leaving her lover aching with hunger. This time, however, when Nyrielle had over-extended herself to protect Ashlynn while she examined the Holy Flame Blade, she was able to repay her lover and perhaps, to make up for what she couldn't do the time before.

"We should return to our guests," Ashlynn murmured, though she made no immediate move to step away from Nyrielle's embrace. Stripped to the waist with her bodice hanging in tatters around her hips, she leaned on the vampire, entwining her arms around her lover's back to hold herself up as she recovered. "They'll be wondering where we've gone for so long," she mumbled softly.

Nyrielle chuckled, her midnight eyes now clear and bright. "Let them wonder for a few moments more," she said, pressing a gentle kiss to Ashlynn's forehead. "Besides, I've ruined your lovely dress. We'll need to find you something else to wear."

"Next time, make it up to me," Ashlynn teased as soaked in the borrowed warmth that radiated from Nyrielle's healthy, glowing skin. "Next time, you let me be the one to rip your bodice out of the way," she said with a faint, glowing green light flickering across her eyes. "Don't think I can't do it."

#### Chapter 400: Daughter-In-Law?

A light rain fell across Lothian City, washing away the last, lingering signs of the previous week's Harvest Festival celebrations. Soon, the rainy season would begin in earnest, and the people of Lothian March would spend days at a time under a sky covered by a wet, gray blanket of clouds, rarely seeing the sun.

Across the march, demons would grow bolder, raiding farms for livestock or striking at poorly defended villages in the hopes of causing as much devastation as they could while defenders huddled in their homes and around fires to ward off the damp chills of the season.

In the summer, Lothian March resembled a lush paradise and its soldiers fought freely beneath the sun like the anointed champions of the Holy Lord of Light. But in the fall and winter, the demons fought back with the ferocity and tenaciousness of wolves and the world itself seemed to aid them with constant storms and long, cold nights.

"This will be your first winter in the Frontier, Lady Jocelynn," Marquis Bors Lothian said, turning away from the window to look at his guest for the evening while servants covered the dining table with several courses worth of food. "Are you prepared to weather the storm?"

"The winter squalls in Blackwell County can be very fierce, my Lord," Jocelynn said from her place next to the crackling hearth in the small, private dining room. "I not worried about myself," she added. "But I am worried about my sister. She should give birth by year's end, but she has always been weak and frail of constitution, rarely leaving her room in the winter months. I'm afraid that this winter will be especially hard on her."

"Then it's good that she has such a dedicated sister to care for her," Bors said calmly, though it took a measure of effort to keep impatience out of his voice while two of the servants fussed over the placement of large trays of roast boar and venison sausages.

If it had been any other occasion, he would have chased them out by now to enjoy a quiet meal with his guest, but tonight, it was important that the 'audience' heard the things that he and Jocelynn would say. After all, the gossip that would spread among the servants after this conversation was the first of his many goals for inviting the young Blackwell girl here tonight.

"I thank you for leaving the Summer Villa to help prepare for my son's return from Blackwell County," Bors continued, speaking more for the audience than for Jocelynn. "I hope you're satisfied with the protection we've provided for your sister during her stay? With so many soldiers, even if the demons were to attack, they would only be courting their own deaths."

"The defenses are more than adequate," Jocelynn said with a smile, giving a slight curtsy of thanks. "I know it pains my sister that she cannot return to give birth in Lothian City but the physicians say that she shouldn't be moved because her constitution is just too frail."

"Then it's even better that she has such a devoted sister to take up her duties in Lothian City when Owain returns in a few days," Bors said, striding across the small dining room to take a seat at the head of the table.

"You may go," he told the servants, waving them off before he lost his patience with the excessive fussing. Normally, they weren't this bad, but it seemed like several of them were worried about Jocelynn's ability to carry out her duties during this meal and they'd surreptitiously been trying to 'help' the young noblewoman on her first meal with her sister's father-in-law. "The things that Lady Jocelynn

and I have to discuss tonight concern the march, the conversation is more important than the food," he reminded them.

"Of course, my Lord," one of the servants said, looking embarrassed that he'd been caught trying to 'help' the beautiful Lady Jocelynn. If he were honest, just the sight of her flowing blonde hair and the grace she carried herself with was enough for him to entertain wild fantasies of forbidden love between a young noblewoman and a commoner and he'd hoped to make some impression on her tonight but...

Such things were only flights of fancy after all, he realized. The entire time he'd been arranging things, the younger sister of their absent future Marchioness hadn't looked away from the warm glow of the crackling hearth even once.

Now, as servants took the last of their serving trays and other tools away, they cast one last, furtive glance at the radiant beauty from the sea. They firmly fixed her delicate, youthful features in their minds, perhaps to ponder on in more private moments of idle fantasy, before bowing out of the room and leaving their lord to discuss important matters.

Outside, the wind howled, rattling the window and driving sheets of rain against the glass. Even the fire in the hearth momentarily bowed under the pressure of the wind whistling through the chimney before flaring up brighter as if to deny the dark, cold storm that raged outside.

"I assume you know your duties?" Bors said, his voice losing its warmth as he watched the blonde temptress cross the dining room to join him at the table. Now that the servants weren't present and no one would intrude for at least an hour, he saw no reason to be more courteous than necessary with the woman who had clearly wrapped his eldest son around her fingers.

"Of course, father-in-law," Jocelynn said with a brilliant smile. With practiced ease, she selected a long carving knife from the assortments on the table and began to carve thin slices from the roast boar, piling them up on Bors Lothian's plate without allowing so much as a drop of the rich, fatty juices to fall onto the table as she served him.

As the second daughter of a count, she had rarely been in a position that required her to take the role of servant in gatherings where common folks were forbidden but her mother had insisted she learn, regardless of her actual need. Now, she silently thanked her mother's forethought as she transitioned seamlessly from serving roasted boar to buttery squash and plump venison sausages, filling the Marquis' plate before placing so much as a morsel on her own dish.

"It's still a bit early to call me 'father-in-law' don't you think?" Bors said, spearing a thick sausage with his knife and gesturing for her to serve herself. "As far as the world knows, your sister is still alive, holed up in the summer villa and preparing to give birth to Owain's heir."

"What the world knows and what we know are not the same," Jocelynn replied smoothly, taking a seat at her own plate filled mostly with vegetables and a leg of a wild grouse. The people of the Frontier led harder lives than she realized and their meals were not only generous in portions compared to Blackwell County but rich in butter and fats as well.

Within a month of coming here, she'd found her dresses growing snug and quickly realized that without discipline about her diet, she would resemble a trading galleon by the time Owain returned. The thought of becoming plump enough to float across the sea and losing Owain's adoration terrified her so much that she'd taken to strolling through the forest outside the summer villa with a full complement of guards, just to ensure she could keep herself reasonably trim.

Unfortunately, with the onset of the rainy season, not even the Templars who had accompanied her from Blackwell County were willing to venture into the forests for a stroll in the wilderness, forcing her to be even more careful about what she ate while she was confined to the grounds of the small Summer Villa.

"Lord Owain will be returning soon," Jocelynn said after helping herself to a portion of wilted greens. "Once he does, you'll see how well we complement each other. I know you still have doubts, father-in-law, but I promise you, I'm nothing like my older sister. I will not lead Lord Owain astray," she said pointedly.

"And hasn't my advice been useful in concluding the preliminary negotiations with the merchant guilds?" Jocelynn asked with a bright smile. "I promise, I'll do everything I can to help Owain turn Lothian March into Lothian Duchy, and we'll do it fast enough that you'll live to see the day done."

"Speaking like that, you'll curse me to an early grave, woman," Bors spat, making a gesture with his hand to ward off evil and misfortune. He might not be as devout as his son Loman, but that didn't mean he wasn't cautious about things that could become ill omens. "But I'm pleased that you're willing to commit yourself to Lothian March and our long overdue elevation," he said as he forced himself to restrain his temper.

"What I want to know," the aging Marquis asked, pointing at Jocelynn with the point of his knife. "Is if you're committed to Lothian March and its future, or if you're committed to my son Owain and his ambitions?"

"Isn't it the same?" Jocelynn asked, blinking in surprise at the way her future father-in-law had framed the question. "Owain is the future of Lothian March and he carries the ambition of all Lothians since the founding of the march, to vanquish the neighboring demon lords and establish a proper duchy."

"But what if Owain isn't the future of the march?" Bors asked bluntly. "Loman intends to contest for my throne, and after spending the summer fighting against the demons with young Liam Dunn, he's proving himself to be a worthy contender."

"So," Bors asked, spearing a sausage and tearing into it, savoring the rich, fatty juices and the sharp spices along with the shocked and horrified expression blossoming on the young Blackwell girl's face. "Tell me, Lady Jocelynn. Are you committed to marrying Owain and helping him achieve his ambitions? Or are you willing to marry whichever of my sons I designate as my heir, and use your talents to help them achieve our dream?"