

The Vampire 411

Chapter 411: Squire (Part One)

"A square?" Emmie asked, wiping the tears away with a sleeve and stumbling over the unfamiliar human word. "What's a square?"

"A squire," Ashlynn corrected, emphasizing the middle of the word. "Where I come from," she said, standing up and walking around her desk so she could sit on the floor and be on eye level with the young, horned girl. "Brave warriors who serve lords and rule over villages in their name are called knights. Some people become knights because their parents were knights or lords, but others earn their title through bravery and valor."

"Are, are you a knight then?" Emmie asked Heila. "Because you're the bravest warrior I know besides Father. But he doesn't serve any lords so he can't be a knight," she added, trying to make it clear that she didn't think that her father and Heila were the same kind of warrior.

"I'm not a knight," Heila said, shaking her head and holding back a small laugh at the idea. What would Sir Thane think if he heard that she'd been mistaken for a knight? "I'm Lady Ashlynn's lady-in-waiting. Just like she's Lady Nyrielle's Seneschal and serves her, I serve Lady Ashlynn."

"But you're a witch! And a champion," Emmie protested. "How can you be a servant?"

"I was little more than a chambermaid when I met Lady Ashlynn you know," Heila pointed out. "I used to fetch and carry water, wash the linens, scrub the floors. I wasn't always so powerful," she said, reaching out to rest a hand on the young girl's knee. "When I was your age, I never thought I'd be like this, but sometimes, you meet the right person and everything changes."

"I take it then that this 'squire' is a kind of servant?" Kurtz asked, frowning slightly at Ashlynn, uncertain whether or not he liked the direction the conversation was taking. He'd only planned on letting Emmie meet the Willow Witch but now things seemed to be getting quickly out of hand. "One that normally serves these 'knights'?" he asked.

"In a manner of speaking," Ashlynn said, focusing her attention on Emmie rather than Kurtz. In a way, this was a test for both of them. Emmie needed to understand what Ashlynn was offering well enough to make her case to her father.

At such a young age, Ashlynn would never pull a child away from their parent unless it was to rescue the child from an unfit parent, but Kurtz seemed to be overly doting on his young daughter more than anything. Since that was the case, Emmie would need her father's permission before she could do anything.

"A squire follows a knight, tending to his weapons and armor," Ashlynn explained. "They also tend the knight's horse, mend his clothes and ensure that the knight is always ready to do his duty when the time comes. In exchanges, the squire learns the ways of weapons and armor, how to fight, how to ride, and eventually, when they're old enough, they learn the other things a knight must do as well."

Though she kept her explanation simple, Ashlynn hoped that that Kurtz and his young daughter could understand the tradition. The Vale of Mists had already adopted a number of distinctly human traditions, particularly since Thane, Nyrielle's first human progeny, had been a knight himself. Now, Ashlynn hoped to build on that by inviting someone who had grown up outside of the Vale of Mists to participate in a timeless human tradition.

Eventually, she wanted this kind of sharing to go both ways, introducing Eldritch customs to human communities to break down the barriers of ignorance that made it so easy for the Church to sow the seeds of fear among her own people. Perhaps, if humans saw Eldritch knights with their loyal squires in tow, they could learn how both groups of people respected the strong and passed on their traditions to the next generation...

"But you said that Lady Heila isn't a knight," Kurtz pointed out, interrupting Ashlynn's musings and pulling her back to the present. "So what would Emmie do? What would she learn?"

"That's up to Heila to decide," Ashlynn said. "But in the years to come, Heila's responsibilities will only grow. She will need someone at her side that she can trust, just as much as I trust her at my side."

"Emmie," Heila said as all eyes fell on her. "Do you know how to mend clothing? Or use a hot iron to press out wrinkles? Can you count money and shop in a market?"

"Um, I can count money, but I can't go to the market by myself," Emmie said, looking at Heila in confusion. "But I know the eight lines of attack and defense with a sword, and I know the four postures with a spear, and, and I've been trying to learn how to use a whip," she said, clutching at the chain whip at her hip. "Father taught me lots of things about fighting so... so... can you just teach me more of that?"

"I can't," Heila said, shaking her head. "I know less about fighting than your father does. I'm strong because I'm a witch, because I have a seed of witchcraft that Lady Ashlynn nurtured just for me," she said, placing a hand lightly over the faint scar in the center of her chest. "I don't know how to use a whip that isn't alive in my hands, and even though I have a small sword, I use it more like my wand than a true sword."

"If you follow me, sometimes, it will be dangerous, and there will be battles," Heila said. "But most days, there will be chores. Not fun, exciting, magical chores, but simple, boring chores. I will promise you though, if you follow me, I will teach you some of the magical things that I can share with a person who is not a witch. You can still learn simple sorcery so I can teach you that as well."

"Really? So I can learn sorcery like when you made the trees throw icicles?" Emmie asked, sitting up straighter with shining eyes.

"No," Heila said flatly. "I'll teach you how to pick herbs and tend a garden. You may even be able to help me brew potions, and there are some medicines that don't take much magic to make at all. You could learn to make a few of those. But you'll still need to learn how to be careful about plucking very small leaves from stems or petals from flowers. It isn't very exciting," she said, trying to be as honest as she could.

In the Briar, she and Ashlynn had spent countless days wading through shallow water in the oppressive, humid heat of the Mother of Thorn's home, collecting herbs, picking flowers and searching for traces of elusive insects. For all of the excitement of a hunt for a powerful beast, most days were filled with simple work, preparing the way for the magic to come.

Perhaps for Emmie, everything that happened in the arena was exciting. Her father was a champion, covered with glory and celebrated wherever he went in High Fen City. Even his practice sessions between battles likely looked exciting to someone as interested in arena battles as Emmie was.

But Heila's life wasn't glamorous or glorious, even though she'd achieved some fame in the arena. If Emmie really wanted to follow her, she would have to accept a life that was very different than whatever she'd imagined when she came here today.

Chapter 412: Squire (Part Two)

"You know, little hayseed," Kurtz said as he finally caught on to what the two witches seemed to have in mind. Their offer was so obviously unappealing to his adventure-seeking little treasure that they

wouldn't have to reject her outright, she would turn them down herself. All he had to do now was create a different opportunity that wouldn't see his daughter running off to follow the witches into the Vale of Mists before she was old enough to live on her own.

"You can still learn to fight and become strong enough to fight for Lady Heila one day," he pointed out. "You don't have to become her 'squire' and study chores. In two years, I'll enroll you in the best school for gladiators, and I'll train you myself until then," he promised.

"By the time you're sixteen, you can go across the High Pass and visit Lady Heila yourself to show her what you've learned," the veteran gladiator said. "I'm sure that if you've worked hard, you can earn a place at her side, just like, um, I'm sorry," he said awkwardly as he looked to Virve. "I'm afraid I didn't catch your name."

"I'm called Virve," the bearish woman said with a smile. "I'm the captain of Lady Ashlynn's guard. I don't know if Lady Heila will require an entire company to protect her, but she may have need of a few loyal retainers in time. But if you wish to fight at her side, I don't recommend training as a gladiator," she added with a frown.

"I have seen the way that the champions of High Fen City fight," Virve said candidly as she looked at the young girl. "They fight for glory and the entertainment of the crowd. Fighting against humans and people who are hunting you is a very different kind of fighting. If you want to become a guard or a soldier in the army of the Vale, you should come to us when you turn fifteen so you can learn to fight with your brothers and sisters of the Horned Clan."

"You know, you don't have to decide anything right now, my treasure," Kurtz said, pulling his diminutive daughter up into a tight hug. "Her Dominion even said that people don't usually become squires until thirteen. It's okay to grow a little older before you make a decision."

For a moment, Emmie wanted to shove her father's hands away. Everyone kept talking about how she needed to be older to do anything. Older to join an arena school, older to learn to be a soldier, older, older, older! But if she waited... if she waited...

"If I'm not your squire," Emmie asked, struggling slightly against her father's hug and trying her best to look serious. "If I'm not your squire, will you find someone else to be with you? To help you when you need help so you're not alone anymore?"

"I don't know," Heila said honestly, casting a glance at Ashlynn before she continued. "I never thought about it until today. I give most of my time to Lady Ashlynn or sometimes to things Lady Nyrielle and her progeny need help with. I still learn things from Madame Zedya. I never thought about having someone to help me."

"But, but you said it," Emmie said, slipping free from her father's hug to stand in front of Heila, clutching at her chain whip with both hands. "You said that sometimes, you meet someone and they change things. But, if you meet the person who could change everything, and you don't.... Wouldn't that just be too sad? If you had to wait to find someone else who could help you, even if it's just with chores, wouldn't that be too lonely?"

"Are you sure?" Heila asked, looking between Ashlynn's gently smiling face and Kurtz's panicked one before looking back at the young, horned girl. "Even if it's boring?"

"I'm sure," she said, nodding her head resolutely. "I'll help, I promise."

"I'm glad that you're willing to help Heila," Ashlynn said warmly. "She's a very important friend to me, and I'll feel better when she has someone who can watch out for her the way she watches out for me. But before you can do that, there's still one more thing you need to do."

"What?" Emmie asked, completely forgetting Ashlynn's exalted status in her eagerness to grasp this opportunity with both hands and never let go. "I'll do anything!"

"You need to go home," Ashlynn said, pointing at the panic-stricken Kurtz. "You need to talk to your parents, and they need to give you their permission. We won't leave for another three days," she added, giving Kurtz a reassuring look. "You have until then to change your mind or convince your parents that this is what you really want."

"I won't change my mind," Emmie promised, bouncing over to grab hold of her father's hand. "And Father never says no to me about anything I really want, so I just know he'll say yes," she added excitedly to her pale-faced parent. "Come on, Father," she said, tugging his hand in the direction of the door. "We have to tell Mom right away! I'm going to be the Willow Whip's squire!"

Emmie's declaration at the time had sounded bold, and Ashlynn couldn't imagine getting away with telling her father that she knew he'd say yes to whatever she asked for, not now and certainly not when

she was only twelve, but in the end, the diminutive horned girl had thoroughly defeated her gladiator father and even gained her mother's enthusiastic support.

Now, several days later, as Ashlynn walked through the blowing wind and bitter cold of the High Pass, she paused to watch an eager Emmie placing a foot stool at the door of the carriage that Heila shared with Virve, Talauia and Lennart. Of the four, only Heila exited the carriage, trotting quickly across the snow to join Ashlynn as she walked toward the awaiting Frost Walker delegation.

"It seems like your squire is adjusting well," Ashlynn said with a smile when Heila reached her side. "Are you?"

"I think I understand you better now," Heila said, smiling at Ashlynn as she recalled her own first days as Ashlynn's personal servant. "There is so much to teach her that for now, the only 'duties' I can think to assign her are things that I'm used to doing for myself. When we met, it used to bother me that you wouldn't let me help you dress or prepare your outfit for you. But now the shoe is on the other foot, and it feels... awkward," she admitted.

"I never had many servants attending me because they might see my mark," Ashlynn said, speaking just loudly enough to be heard over the crunching of snow beneath her boots. "Maybe if I had, it wouldn't have been so easy for you to become such a dear friend. I'd have been too stuck in what was 'proper' to do what's 'right.'"

"I'm glad you weren't proper," Heila said, walking respectfully half a step behind Ashlynn and forcefully holding herself back from waving at Hauke as they approached. She'd still been a bit stiff and awkward when they last spent time together, trying hard to live up to Zedya's teachings and become a worthy attendant for Ashlynn.

This time, however, she was looking forward to greeting Hauke as a peer, especially since her own witchcraft drew so much on the power of water. Perhaps this time, she'd be able to learn a few things from the talented young Frost Walker soldier that would help her in the days to come. And even if she wasn't, just spending time together again would be a treat now that the cloud of Elder Paulus's treachery was no longer hanging over their heads.

Stopping twenty paces away from the Frost Walker delegation, Ashlynn and Heila schooled their features into calm, composed masks appropriate for the formal meeting between the two parties. Later on, there would be feasts and drinking and time to celebrate a reunion among friends. But this moment

wasn't about friendship, it was about alliances and demonstrating to the onlookers that the High Pass and the Vale of Mists stood together.

"People of the High Pass," Ashlynn said, carefully pitching her voice to be loud enough to be heard on the fortress walls but not shouting so loudly that it would trigger an avalanche of snow. "I am Lady Ashlynn Blackwell, Daughter of Lord Rhys Blackwell of Blackwell County, known far and wide as the Mother of Trees and as the Seneschal of Lady Nyrielle, the Harbinger of Death!"

She'd considered carefully how she would modify the traditional structures to reflect her unique status, and here again, she chose to push the line. She honored her human heritage and presented her place in the human world in a way that the Eldritch could understand. It was a small thing, but her heart swelled with pride that her father's name would circulate among the Eldritch, not only as the father of the Mother of Trees, but as a powerful lord to be respected in his own right.

"Today, Her Eternity, Lady Nyrielle, Eldritch Lady of the Vale of Mists has come with her retinue to visit..."

"DEFILER!"

Before Ashlynn could finish the formal greeting, a deep, resonant voice echoed across the mountainside. But more shocking than the outraged shout was the person it had come from.

Hauke's horn had turned a deep, icy blue, swirling with energy as a look of outrage contorted his face. The snow at his feet erupted into a small cloud as he charged forward, gathering his icy sorcery into a long, slender spear of ice with a razor sharp point that glittered with a swirling current of bright icy blue and something sinister, dark and purple aimed directly at Heila's chest!

Chapter 413: Possessed

In an instant, what should have been a brief formality before a joyous reunion turned into something far more dangerous. High upon the walls of the Frost Walker's icy fortress, hundreds of hunters and warriors who gathered for the welcoming ceremony stared in mute shock as the ascendant young lord bared his teeth at the very guests they were here to receive and unleashed sorcery more ominous than anything they had experienced in their entire lives.

Before Lady Nyrielle and Lady Ashlynn's visit in the spring, Hauke had been something of a tragic figure in the High Pass, envied by many for his iridescent horn and his position as the son and presumed heir of Lord Ritchel. But until recently, he had been too young and too weak to command respect that outweighed the bitter envy.

All of that changed as their young lord delved deep into the lost arts of the ancestors. While the Elders who sat on the council were unconvinced about the wisdom of allowing Hauke to carry the horns and lingering spirits of his ancestors, the younger soldiers and hunters standing on the walls now found their bitter envy replaced by growing admiration and genuine respect as Hauke not only gained great strength of his own, but began to share techniques that made each of them more powerful, no matter whether their inclinations were toward snow, ice, wind or water.

The impact he'd had on them was so great that many had begun to look forward to the day that Hauke could succeed Lord Ritchel, believing that they would be part of a new era where the people of the High Pass could fight back against the Tuscans or anyone else who preyed upon them, finally gaining a measure of freedom to travel the world beyond their icy peaks.

And now, their young hero was charging forward, bearing his claws and unleashing icy fury at the supposed 'allies' who had arrived with Tuscan mercenaries. No one on the walls knew why Hauke had attacked so suddenly, but many of them began to prepare their own weapons and magics, awaiting their young lord's order to join the attack!

Heila was the first to react to Hauke's charge. Her days in the arena had left her with a keen sense of danger, and while her fight or flight instincts might calm given enough time, it had only been a handful of days since her last battle in the arena.

Before Hauke's feet left the ground, Heila's hand dropped to the hilt of Snow Fang, summoning a flurry of snowflakes and retreating rapidly away from the charging Frost Walker and his murderous spear.

Ashlynn's reaction was almost as fast, drawing the darksteel falchion at her waist and charging to meet Hauke's attack head on. There was nothing artful or elegant about her movements, and witchcraft was the furthest thing from her mind as she sought to position herself between the strange, dark sorcery at the tip of Hauke's spear and her closest friend.

-CRACK- -FWUMP-

The sound of a dark steel blade biting into the ice of Hauke's frozen spear echoed across the mountainside, followed an instant later by a sound like hundreds of pounds of snow falling to the ground all at once.

"Oof," Ashlynn gasped as an unspeakably heavy force slammed into her with a wave of dark, purplish sorcery. Even with the blessings of strength she'd gained from Nyrielle, the impact was so sudden and so unexpected that it knocked her from her feet, sending her sprawling on the ground and gasping for air.

Worse than the physical impact, however, was the dark, oppressive feeling of her magic being smothered, as if it were trapped under an avalanche of snow. The power of life and growing things was already paper-thin on the bleak, barren mountainside, leaving Ashlynn reliant almost entirely on her own energy like an ordinary sorcerer, but under the pressure of the intense, smothering magic unleashed by Hauke's icy spear, even channeling that power felt almost impossible.

If the blow had landed on Heila, there would be little the Willow Witch could do to escape the ensnaring magic, but Ashlynn was no ordinary witch. Drawing deeply on the physical strength she possessed as a result of her bond with Nyrielle, Ashlynn stabbed her darksteel blade into the icy ground beneath her and struggled against the oppressive magic, returning to her feet through an act of pure determination to protect her closest friend.

"Stay down, witch," the deep, unfamiliar voice said as Hauke turned his attention to the fleeing Willow Witch. Across the young Frost Walker's chest, two of the iridescent horns glowed brilliantly, one a deep icy blue and shadowy purple while the other pulsed with a bright, cold white light.

"This doesn't concern you," a second, feminine voice echoed from Hauke's mouth as the young Frost Walker lord reached out with his free hand, gathering swirling white energy as he spoke.

"Do not play with snow before its master, little girl," the cold, feminine voice said moments before the storm of swirling white energy exploded from Hauke's fingertips, tearing away the cloud of snowflakes that Heila had used to escape.

Heila had only made it halfway back to the wagons and the remainder of Nyrielle's army when the cloud of snow beneath her cloven hooves dissipated like smoke on the wind, sending her tumbling to the snow and ice below. Her cloven hooves landed awkwardly on the icy road, sliding out from underneath her and dropping her painfully on her hands and knees.

"Storm of shards!" Hauke bellowed in that strange, deep voice, hurling his spear of ice at the fallen witch. The spear whistled through the air before exploding with a loud -CRACK-, transforming into dozens of shards of ice, each one sharper than a butcher's knife and all of them raining down on Heila's exposed back.

"Hauke!" Ashlynn shouted as she struggled against the weight pressing down on her. "What are you doing?"

Chapter 414: Panic

Only seconds had passed since Hauke made his first move, and among the wagons, carriage doors slammed open while soldiers shook themselves out of their shock and began to rush forward.

Standing beside one of the carriages, Emmie looked on in horror as shards of coldly glittering ice rained down on Lady Heila. While her thick, fur cloak saved her from many of the shards, others sliced through the sleeves of her dress and skirt and even ricocheted off her horns, cutting into her scalp and splattering the crisp white snow beneath her with a lurid wave of hot crimson blood.

"No, no, don't hurt her! Father," Emmie cried out, tears forming in her eyes as she tried to understand why this was happening. Just a few hours ago, Lady Heila had told her that if she did her duties well, she would introduce her to the young Frost Walker lord who would likely be the next ruler of the High Pass. But now, nothing made sense at all as that very same young lord looked at Heila with a dark, murderous expression, unleashing a storm of deadly sorcery.

Looking to the driver's seat, her father Kurtz was already preparing to rush to Heila's defense, but as he collected his sword and buckler, he seemed like he was moving far too slowly to the young and panicked squire.

"Father, save her!" Emmie cried.

As much as he wanted to reassure her, Kurtz spared no words for his daughter as he carefully gauged the distance before jumping down from the carriage and rushing to help the injured witch, but by the time he moved, several others were already rushing past him.

On the opposite side, blood drained from Ritchel's face as he heard the same ancient voices that had spoken through Hauke during the council meeting once again echoing from his son's mouth. Old Svenja

had said then that they couldn't blindly accept the sorcery used to preserve those ancient horns. She and Commander Jannik had both argued that they horns should be placed within an ancestral cave, even if that meant that the presence of the ancestors might dissipate within a year.

Now, horror gripped his heart with icy claws as he realized that those long-dead ancestors were capable of doing far more than simply borrowing his son's body to speak. Already, Nyrielle's forces were gathering to attack, and if he didn't act quickly, his son's life would likely be forfeit before they could save him from the very ancestors he'd fought so hard to preserve.

"Men, to me!" Ritchel shouted to his honor guard. His voice boomed across the ice, snapping his men out of their own shock and drawing them instantly into defensive postures surrounding the Eldritch Lord of the High Pass. "Combine your sorcery with mine," he commanded. "Form a tomb of ice!"

In the center of the storm, Ashlynn's emerald eyes hardened as she realized something strange had come over Hauke. Seeing the different voices that spilled from his lips and seeing the imperious, arrogant demeanor that couldn't be further removed from the humble, kind, and eager young sorcerer she remembered, combined with the eerie, glowing horns strapped to his chest, only made it clearer.

The first time they ventured into the sealed ancestral cave, buried beneath the ice on an island in the middle of a lake, the spirits of the ancestors had possessed Hauke, using him like a puppet and a mouth piece, threatening his life while demanding that she help them break through the seal that held them captive. Now, for some reason, it seemed like they'd been able to take even more control of her young friend.

But even if the person attacking Heila wasn't the friend she remembered, she was certain that he was still in there somewhere. That thought cost her precious seconds while she tried to find a way to protect Heila without harming Hauke, and in those seconds, one of the spirits possessing Hauke made their own move.

"Blinding Snow, Swirling Winds!" Ines said, channeling her sorcery through the young Frost Walker she'd patiently tutored these past several months. In life, she had borne the moniker 'the Unending Blizzard' and the magic she unleashed now proved her right to carry the title.

Snow spilled from the mountain top, caught by swirling winds that enveloped Nyrielle's army, blinding anyone without superior senses and limiting the vision of those who could still see to just a few feet in front of their own frozen noses. The hundreds of torches that lit their way through the darkness were

snuffed out in an instant, transforming the world into a land of darkness filled only with the storm of dancing white snowflakes.

The sounds of panicked horses and braying mules filled the air, and wagon drivers quickly fumbled their way forward, trying to calm their fear-stricken beasts before they bolted in panic at the sudden change in weather.

"Damn it," Ashlynn swore, giving up on resolving things without harming Hauke and rushing forward with her darksteel blade drawn. The weight of dark magic still clung to her, trapping her own magic and limiting her to what she could do with the strength and speed of her body, but that alone was enough to slash at the backs of Hauke's unprotected knees.

"Do not interfere," Ansgar, the proud former Lord of the Seven Peaks, said, his deep, booming voice sounding jarringly incongruous with Hauke's youthful, innocent features. He spun as he spoke, covering a fist with a layer of thick ice and punching downward to block Ashlynn's blade.

-CLANG-

The sound of darksteel ringing off ice filled the air, reverberating around them as Ashlynn realized that even more sorcery was at play than what the ancestral spirits had unleashed.

She didn't know when it happened, but at some point, while Ines had been unleashing her blizzard and Ashlynn had struggled against the oppressive sorcery that sealed her magic, cold, crystalline wills of ice had formed around her and the possessed Hauke.

If one sorcerer had created the entire structure, the walls would have been thin enough and weak enough for her to smash through them and make her escape, but if that was true for her, it was certainly true for the ancestors possessing her friend. Now, as she looked at the hazy, six sided prison she found herself in with a ceiling that was less than a dozen feet above her head, she realized that this wasn't just an icy prison... it was the combined working of seven sorcerors, each one creating just one of the thick, sturdy walls turning it into more than just a prison.

Trapped inside it with a host of malevolent spirits, she suddenly felt like she'd been sealed in an icy tomb.

Chapter 415: The Battle Within (Part One)

In a space that greatly resembled the ancestral cave where he had once confronted an abomination formed of blood and ice, Hauke struggled against heavy chains of ice that bound him to a stone slab at the center of the vast cavern.

Rather than the crumbling and neglected shrine to his clan's greatest protectors that he had entered with Ashlynn, the ancestral cavern constructed in Hauke's mind appeared the way it had in the memories of the ancestors who were entombed there. Powerful weapons hung on the walls, waiting for the hands that had once carried them in battle to pick them up again.

Five platforms ringed the space, each one large enough to hold an oversized ice statue bearing the iridescent horn of a powerful ancestor. Only, within this mental space, the platforms didn't hold statues but the spirits of the ancestors themselves. At the moment, two of those platforms, the ones belonging to Ines and Ansgar, stood empty while their owners shared control of Hauke's body to fight against Ashlynn, Heila, and the rest of Nyrielle's forces.

The sounds of battle filled the cavern, and one of the walls was missing entirely, displaying instead the view from Hauke's eyes as the icy walls of Lord Ritchel's Ice Tomb closed around the young Frost Walker lord and the Mother of Trees.

"Please," Hauke pleaded, straining against the chains that bound him. "Please, you have to let me go before it's too late! This is all just a misunderstanding," he said. "Just, just let me go, and I can talk to Ashlynn. She'll understand, and she can put a stop to this before it gets worse."

"It's already irreparable," an old woman said from a small stool made of ice. Kimsel the Wise Crone was the oldest and most fragile of all the ancestral spirits that had formed a bond with Hauke, and arguably one of the weakest, but when it came to teaching, she was second only to Ines in her ability to persuade the young Frost Walker lord.

"Once they taste the power of weapons crafted from our horns, nothing stops the greed of hunters who wish to possess another," she said in a tone that sounded desolate and forlorn. "Perhaps this little horned witch is not a wicked person. Perhaps she would never desire another weapon for herself, but so what?"

"Witches gather in covens," Kimsel pointed out. "And this little girl will use her blade around her brothers and sisters within the coven. How long, then, until the others of her coven desire a blade of their own? How long before they return to us, seeking a horn to craft into a wand or a severing knife?"

"But Lady Ashlynn is the Mother of Trees," Hauke argued. "She doesn't need our power, and she would never hunt us for our horns. She only has two because Elder Paulus and his grandson betrayed us to the Tuscans. She nearly died stopping the Tuscans from killing me for my iridescent horn!"

"Did she protect you? Or did she reserve your horn for herself," a heavy, gravely voice said. Eraric the Frost Architect had once been the greatest shaper of Eternal Ice, not just of his own age but of any age. During his life, he'd laid down the foundations for what eventually grew into the Frost Walker's current fortress guarding the High Pass. He was also the person who had crafted the chains that bound Hauke's mind to this place, leaving his body available to the ancestral spirits to ride like a well broken horse.

Where Kimsel felt greatly diminished, reduced in stature with dull gray fur that hung limply on her scrawny frame, Eraric was almost as tall and physically imposing as Ansgar. Standing on his platform, he paid no attention to the battle taking place outside and instead focused his attention on the block of ice he'd willed into existence. With a hammer in one hand and a chisel in the other, he slowly worked at the block, slowly shaping it into a sword that was far too large for anyone but a Frost Walker or Tuscan to use with a single hand.

"I know you'll deny it, young Hauke," Eraric said as the sound of his tapping hammer filled the cavern. "You haven't lived as long as we have. You haven't watched young heroes turn into corrupt and vile elders. You haven't seen time scour away a person's morals and principles until nothing is left but their core of avarice and desire."

"You said Elder Paulus betrayed you," Kimsel said, shaking her head as though she'd seen it happen with her own eyes. "But at one point, surely he was like you are now. Bright as the light falling on fresh snow and pure as ice formed beneath the surface of the lake. Time changed him into something that could betray even his own clan. You think that these witches are immune to the wearing away of time?"

"I do," Hauke insisted. Even though he'd only known them for a brief period of time, he'd seen the resolve in Ashlynn's eyes when she charged out onto the ice to protect him and Heila from the Tuscan hunters, and he'd witnessed the fury in her eyes when she demanded justice for Andrus's death. He was certain that he hadn't misjudged her.

"Besides," Hauke added. "She's the Seneschal of Lady Nyrielle, a vampire who's already centuries old. If anyone can ensure they keep their promises to not hunt us for our horns, it's Lady Nyrielle. She was fair in her judgments, and she only demanded the horns of the people who did wrong."

"Vampires, worse than elders are," Eugen said, his childish voice contrasting sharply with his grim view of vampires. "Vampires like Lady Nyrielle, well do we know. Time, the millstone on their soul is."

"Remember, young Hauke," Eraric said as he cleaved off a large hunk of ice, freeing the sword from the ice that held it in place while he worked. "We've had dealings with a True Vampire before. None of us would exist without the sorcery of the Fangs of Death."

Chapter 416: The Battle Within (Part Two)

"Shubnalu was a hollow man when I was still alive," Kimsel said, looking at Hauke with flat gray eyes that felt empty and devoid of life. "He cared nothing for the lives of people or the families and communities they built. All he ever cared about was... was what?" Kimsel said, her voice trailing off as she found her memories of the ancient vampire were riddled with holes.

"I don't remember what he wanted either," Eraric said as he inspected the icy blade in his hands. "But I do remember that he cared very little about the world with the exception of people who had become powerful enough to challenge his rule. Anyone who might challenge him, he killed without question or remorse."

"And anyone useful to him," Eugen said from his seat on the cold stone floor. "To his will he binds. Just like us, just like her master," Eugen said, pointing at the image of Ashlynn on the far wall.

"This is why you must find the things that you will fight for at all costs, young Hauke," Eraric said, resting the icy blade across his knees so he could begin inscribing hooked runes into it's surface, each one glowing with a unique shade of blue, green, white or purple.

"We may be bound to the service of our people," the craftsman said as he worked. "We may even be bound to the service of a more powerful lord. But the instant that someone wishes to strip our horns from us, turning us into beasts to be hunted for their meat... Then we have become less than people in the eyes of the world."

"It has happened before," Kimsel said. "The Frost Walker clan almost vanished from the face of the world until we struck our bargain with the Fangs of Death to slay those who hunted us. Now, the Harbinger of Death has come with her witches, bearing blades forged from our horns."

"Swore to protect our people, we all did," Eugen said. "Right now, all your people, protecting we are. Over soon it will be," he said, pointing in the direction of the wall that showed what was happening in the world outside.

Through the missing wall of the ancestral cavern, Hauke watched helplessly as his body engaged in brutal combat with Ashlynn. The crystalline ice clinging to the cavern walls reflected their the seen more than a dozen times over, making it impossible to look away from once he'd turned away from the stubborn ancestors.

Ansgar, wielding Hauke's body with frustrated impatience, had encased both of his fists in thick gauntlets of ice that extended halfway up the forearms. There was nothing remotely elegant about his choice of weapon, nothing that could compare to the sword Eraric had painstakingly carved from a single block of ice, but even crude weapons could be effective when used by a warrior as experienced as Ansgar was.

"You should have stood aside, witch," Ansgar's deep voice bellowed through Hauke's mouth as he launched a thunderous overhead strike that would have crushed Ashlynn's skull had it connected.

"You didn't have to involve yourself in this. Now, how many of your people will die because you chose to protect a defiler?" Ansgar asked as he lashed out with a series of even more punishing blows that would have crushed even Owain's armored knights beneath his icy fists.

But Ashlynn was no longer the sheltered noblewoman who had arrived in the Vale of Mists with nothing but her determination and the faintest hint of how to use her magic. Months of training with Thane and countless hours sparring with Jacques, Talauia and even Amahle had transformed her into someone who was both formidable and cunning.

For a moment, she feigned a stumble, sliding on the icy ground and drawing the furious ancestor into an over-committed punch before she sidestepped the blow with supernatural speed. The punch missed by less than a handbreadth but it was enough as the ice gauntlet shattered against the stone ground where she had stood just moments before.

"Heila is family," Ashlynn spat back, her emerald eyes flashing with determination even as her breath frosted in the increasingly frigid air. "If you think that I'd stand aside and let you harm her or any member of my coven, then you don't understand witches at all," she spat.

She lunged forward, her darksteel falchion slashing in a wide, powerful arc that lacked finesse but carried enough force to cleave through almost anything in its path. There was nothing of Thane's careful training in her movements now, instead, she more closely resembled Jacques in one of his intense, explosive rushes combined with the primal need to protect what was hers.

Ansgar formed another gauntlet instantly, catching the blade between layers of ice that glowed with a dark purple and sapphire radiance. Sparks of blue light erupted where darksteel met enchanted ice, neither yielding to the other.

For a moment, they stood locked together, strength against strength, but the longer they stood pressed together, the more obvious Ansgar's advantage became as Ines added her own skills, pouring the cold of a blizzard into Ashlynn's blade and covering her hands in a layer of frost that could cost the witch her hands if she didn't find a way to escape it.

"You see?" Kimsel whispered within the mental cavern, pointing toward the struggle. "No witch should possess such strength. It is the vampire's blood that gives her this power, but even with all of her gifts, she cannot resist against Ines and Ansgar working together."

While the ancestral spirits thought the outcome was inevitable, Hauke held a different opinion. He could see that Ansgar was struggling and without Ines timely aid on more than one occasion, Ashlynn might already have overpowered him. The ancestral spirit was used to commanding a body as strong as the mountains themselves, accustomed to overwhelming opponents with sheer physical might combined with the power of his nearly unbreakable ice. But in Hauke's more modest frame, against an opponent enhanced by vampire blood, and without the same ability to bend ice to his will the way he had when he was alive, the former Lord of the Seven Peaks found himself merely evenly matched with a witch who was barely in her twenties.

Or perhaps, Hauke thought, clinging to hope that the tide would turn even further as the battle wore on. Perhaps even with the combined forces of Ines and Ansgar, it was they who weren't Ashlynn's match....

Trapped within his own mind, Hauke watched helplessly as Ashlynn and stood in a deadlock with Ansgar and Ines until she kicked off of the frozen ground, wrenching her blade free and spinning. Ashlynn used pure momentum more than technique to bring her weapon around for another strike, trying to force an opening where there was none.

Ansgar blocked again, staggering slightly, ice cracking under the impact and sending fragments flying through the air like diamond dust in the dim light of their icy prison.

"She has no training," Eraric observed clinically from his pedestal. The entire time they'd been watching, his hands never stopped working on the blade in his lap. When the first side of the blade had been covered from hilt to point with dimly glowing, hooked runes, he simply turned the blade over and began carving another set on the opposite side. "All she seems to possess is raw power and determination. In life, Ansgar would have dismantled such an unprepared opponent in seconds."

Indeed, as he watched the battle heating back up, Hauke could see Ansgar's growing frustration as his attempts at trickier combat maneuvers failed against Ashlynn's brutally effective swings. When he tried to brush her blade aside to create an opening, even if it was a narrow one, Ashlynn simply powered through, ignoring his subtle positioning and forcing Ansgar to defend against her direct assault.

"Your body is not responding as he expects," Kimsel said, paying more attention to the fight occurring in the world outside of Hauke's mind. "His memories tell him he should be stronger, faster, with greater advantages of reach and size. If he doesn't adjust quickly, young Hauke may be badly injured."

"So let me talk to her," Hauke snapped bitterly. "Let me put a stop to this before he gets me killed and we all die!"

"Told you already," Eugen said. "Some things, more important than life are. Protecting your people, worth sacrificing your life is," he said with a grim determination that should never have come from someone who looked and sounded as young as the fabled Greenwind Healer did.

In the vision of the battle, a particularly vicious clash sent both combatants staggering backward. Ansgar's ice gauntlet shattered completely this time, while Ashlynn nearly lost her grip on her falchion as the bitter cold numbed her hands. Both of them panted heavily in the frigid air, their breath creating clouds that hung between them like the ghosts of the ancestors watching the battle from within Hauke's mind.

"No one can be allowed to wield a weapon made from our horns. You're a witch, why can't you understand this?" Ansgar demanded, his voice still resounding powerfully despite Hauke's heaving chest.

"If one person cuts down a Frost Walker to make a blade, then another will do the same until the world treats us like we're no different from trees to be cut down to build something else with," Ines cold, feminine voice added, hoping that cold reason would prevail where Ansgar's brute force had failed.

"But we are not like your trees," the sorceress emphasized in a voice that was so cold it cut like the winter wind. "We cannot be replanted or spread across the world simply by scattering our seeds on a summer breeze. There are so few of us left that we must protect every single one."

"Just give up the witch who carries a blade plundered from one of our people," Ines said, trying her best to sound reasonable. "She wields a weapon that should never have been made, stolen from someone who deserved a chance for his horn to rest among his honored ancestors."

"She wields a traitor's horn, claimed as compensation for the crime Elder Paulus committed," Ashlynn responded fiercely, readjusting her grip on her blade and doing her best to banish the cold from her limbs. After several minutes of fighting, she'd pushed off most of the oppressive, icy magic that sealed her own energy, but she was still too inexperienced with wielding fire to do more than banish the frost from her extremities.

"Even if that horn hadn't been crafted into a weapon," Ashlynn said, using the opportunity of what might be a reasonable conversation to recover her breath and some of her strength. She didn't believe that these ancestral spirits could be convinced with reasoning, or they never would have attacked without asking questions in the first place, but as long as she could keep them talking, she might be able to find an opportunity or even drag things out long enough for help to arrive. "Lord Ritchel himself intended to destroy the horn. It never would have found a place of honor among the horns of his ancestors."

For the first time, Hauke felt a flicker of uncertainty ripple through the ancestral spirits in the cavern. The mention of Ritchel's approval had created a momentary doubt, the tiniest crack in their convictions, but the spirits quickly buried the thought as if it had been covered by fresh snow.

"She lies," Eraric declared, but his eyes held a hint of uncertainty as he looked toward Lord Ritchel's son, wondering if there could be any truth to the witch's words.

Before anyone could respond, however, Ansgar seemed to notice Ashlynn's efforts to purge the icy energy that trapped her magic and threatened to freeze her extremities. With a bellow of frustration and rage, Ansgar charged again, forming not just gauntlets but forearm guards of ice that extended nearly to the elbow.

As Ashlynn met the charge with her own frustrated cry, Hauke renewed his efforts against the chains that bound him. That single moment of doubt might be all he needed to begin reclaiming control of his body before this tragic misunderstanding spiraled beyond repair.

Chained in place, Hauke felt utterly incapable of convincing these stubborn ancestors that things were different than what they knew. They were older, wiser, and had seen far more of life than he had. No matter what he said, at this point, he was convinced they wouldn't listen. But if they wouldn't listen to words, then he could only take control of the situation by breaking free of these chains.

"There must have been some time when we could accept justice that required the sacrifice of a horn," Hauke said, altering his approach to escaping the chains. Seeing Ashlynn stall for time to thaw her hands by keeping Ines talking inspired him to try something similar.

If he couldn't break them by force, he would find a way to slip free, but to do that, he needed the ancestors who kept him captive to focus more on his words than they did on his actions.

"Are you just refusing to speak of them?" Hauke asked in an accusatory tone. "I don't believe that in all your lifetimes you never found an ally you could trust with our horns."

"Even when we ruled Seven Peaks," Eraric said, standing up and holding his rune-covered sword aloft. "We never would have traded away our horns, not even the horns of criminals, no matter what our most trusted allies might have promised."

"In my era, we let it be known far and wide that if anyone found a member of our clan who had fallen in distant lands, we would give something far more valuable than a weapon crafted from our horns, so long as they returned the body to us with the horn intact," the Frost Architect said.

"After all," he said as the sword in his hands flashed with brilliant light before vanishing from the ancestral chamber. "A horn can only grow so large. But a sword forged of Eternal Ice..."

As soon as he mentioned the blade, the situation in the vision changed dramatically. Ines unleashed a brief but potent flurry of snow and wind, pushing Ashlynn away and giving Ansgar precious seconds to banish an icy gauntlet moments before Ereric's runic blade appeared in Ansgar's outstretched hand.

"You've stalled me long enough, witch," Ansgar spat. "But now, this ends!"

Chapter 418: Not Again

The sudden blizzard and loss of their torches paralyzed much of Nyrielle's army. While they looked impressive on the march, and many of them were impressive warriors as individuals or small groups, too little time had passed to weld them together into a truly cohesive force.

Wagon drivers and horse handlers fought to calm their panicked beasts, and hundreds of ordinary people hunkered down where they stood or sheltered inside the nearest wagon or cart to wait out the sudden storm or to receive instructions from someone who knew what was going on. Those at the back of the long, winding caravan hadn't heard anything at all since the Seneschal's formal greeting cut off halfway mere moments before the storm descended on them.

Those at the front of the caravan, however, had a clear view of Hauke's treacherous charge, followed by Lord Ritchel's insidious trap, sealing Lady Ashlynn in a prison of ice along with the surprisingly powerful Hauke. If there was one saving grace in all of this, it was that Lord Ritchel appeared too hasty, sealing Hauke and Ashlynn away before Hauke succeeded in killing the Mother of Trees' most loyal protector.

"Not again, not again," Talauia said as she shot out of the carriage like an arrow from a bow. Dark ghosts danced through her mind, bringing with them memories of the formal gathering the Jaws of Death had exploited to massacre her clan. Everyone had been there, dressed in their festive best and ready to drink and dance the night away, when the doors of the ballroom slammed open and a pack of Bardas's murderous jackals descended on her uncles, aunts, cousins, and childhood friends like wilde beasts lost to their own bloodlust.

The scars she carried from that night of carnage haunted her to this day, and it was precisely because of this that the Thistle Witch insisted that Ashlynn craft some potent defenses into any Fancy Hat she wore. But today, standing on the windswept mountainside to act as a herald before entering the Frost Walker fortress, Ashlynn wasn't wearing a Fancy Hat or a War Hat, only a simple Traveling Hat that kept her head warm against the bitter chill and held a few of her most essential items.

Now, Talauia's multifaceted purple eyes burned with cold, calculating fury as she threw herself into the fierce winds of the blizzard. Her wings hummed as she tumbled through the air, not resisting the sudden gusts or icy winds but riding them like a thistle seed on the wind. Fighting the wind to fly straight would only exhaust her before she crossed even half the distance to her target.

Halfway between the lead wagon and the bridge leading across the giant chasm that served as a moat for the Frost Walker fortress, Talauia emerged from the blizzard only a hundred paces away from the wounded Willow Witch. Bright red blood stained the snow around her, but Heila was far too fierce to be defeated by the few wounds she'd suffered in the initial clash. Already, she was surrounded by a pale silvery-green light of healing energy that both purged the cold from her body and sealed the dozens of small cuts across her diminutive figure.

"Heila, Heila, are you fine?" Talauia shouted as she darted toward her friend, concealing herself behind the icy walls of the prison that trembled with the force of Ashlynn and Hauke's battle.

"Tala!" Heila exclaimed joyously before wincing at the pain her sudden exclamation brought. Every intake of breath hurt unless it was slow and steady, and her sudden shout tugged at half a dozen still healing wounds that split open again as soon as she drew breath. "Tala, I'm fine," Heila insisted, despite her pale complexion and blood-stained clothes.

"Who did this, who did this, and why did they do it?" Talauia asked. Her wings vibrated rapidly, humming with the desire to sink her wickedly pointed teeth into the flesh of whoever dared to hurt her loved ones. Why they'd done it didn't matter much to her, but like a ghost at her shoulder, she heard the echo of her father's voice ringing in her ears.

"If you understand what your target wants, little Tala," he'd said on more occasions than she could count. "Then you can understand how he'll move. Understand what he wants, and you can make him chase it, stretching his own neck out so far across your blade that all you have to do is tug to claim his life."

Her father had taught her many things, but the most important among them hadn't been the methods of applying poison or the way to wield a knife. The most important lessons were how to reach your target when they were vulnerable and escape with your own life intact.

"I don't know what's happening," Heila said. "Hauke, Hauke isn't like that," she insisted. "He's kind and gentle and he protected me from the Tuscans when they attacked us on the lake. Something, something has to be making him do this," she concluded.

"His father? Is it his father, Lord Ritchel?" Talauia asked. "The sorcery that sealed Auntie Ashlynn in with Hauke, is it his? Is he the one making Hauke do this?"

"That doesn't make any sense," Heila said, pounding a tiny fist into the ground in frustration. None of this made any sense! "Lord Ritchel is afraid of Lady Nyrielle. He would never attack her or Lady Ashlynn unless... unless someone was making him do it?"

The notion that someone powerful enough to bend an Eldritch Lord to their will might be lurking out there, pulling the strings on Lord Ritchel like a puppet master, sent a chill down both women's spines, but if that was true, then they could only face it head-on. Besides, it wasn't like they didn't have strong reinforcements on their own side to fight back with either.

"Right now, we need to break Ashlynn out of this prison," Heila said, refusing to get caught up in worries about hidden threats. Her lady was in danger, and nothing was more important than breaking her free.

"I don't have anything that can break those walls, and it's hard to manipulate the ice without any trees to bind it to my will," Heila admitted, hot tears of frustration forming in the corners of her eyes as she found herself too weak to rescue the person who mattered more to her than anyone else in the world.

Ashlynn was the lady she served, the leader of her coven, the woman who had transformed her life from humble and ordinary into something extraordinary, but more than any of that, Ashlynn was her dearest friend, and nothing she had thought of could do anything to break the icy walls that held her prisoner.

"Can you?" Heila asked, looking at Talauia with pleading eyes. She knew the odds were slim. Talaua was the Thistle Witch, and like Heila, she depended on the energy of living, growing things to fuel her witchcraft, but she had to ask, nonetheless. "Can you do anything to break her free?"

Chapter 419: Death on the Wind (Part One)

"I know, I know what to do," Talauia said, standing up now that she had a clear goal in mind. "If the sorcerers maintaining this ice prison die, their sorcery will crumble," she said with a bloodthirsty grin. "I just have to kill the sorcerers trapping her."

"Wait!" Heila cried. "Don't," she started to say 'don't kill anyone', intending to ask Talauia to simply render the men unconscious, but she knew firsthand that capturing people alive in the middle of a battle was much, much harder than simply ending their lives. "Don't kill Lord Ritchel," she said instead. "We have questions, and he may be the only one with answers."

"I know, I know," Talauia said, mentally preparing her plan. "Can you use your Snow Fang for me? Just a little, just a little snow in the air would make it easier for me to catch them by surprise."

"I can do much more than a little snow in the air," Heila said, drawing the blade carved from Elder Paulus's horn. Somehow, the symmetry of using the traitor's horn to once again attack the people who should have been as close to the treacherous elder as his own kin tickled her, and an odd smile formed on her lips as she began to chant.

"Through Snow Fang's call and winter's breath,

Let whiteness dance like whispered death,

A veil of snow flakes, soft and deep,

Where hidden paths our secrets keep,

Let swirling snow obscure all sight,

As Tala moves through blinding white."

As soon as Heila completed her first verse the white horn blade in her hand began to glow with a brilliant white light, casting stark shadows on the frozen ground before a flurry of snow filled the air, filling the space between the icy prison and the chasm with a cloud of gently drifting, fat, fluffy snowflakes that made it all but impossible for most people to see more than a few feet in front of themselves.

But Talauia, with her multifaceted hunter's eyes, had no difficulty tracing a path through the dancing flakes that seemed to drift and sway out of her way, as if they were opening a path just for her while hiding her from anyone who might notice her approach.

"Good hunting," Heila whispered as her friend and mentor vanished into the swirling snow. A simple snowscreen, however, was far from enough to give Talauia the opportunities she needed and Heila herself hated how much she'd been forced to be passive because she hadn't wanted to hurt Hauke while she tried to understand what was happening. Now, however, she took the opportunity to strike out at the first real targets to appear before her, the sorcerers maintaining the prison of ice that trapped both Ashlynn and Hauke, isolating them from anyone who could stop this madness before it was too late.

"Now winter's gentle dance gives way,

To weapons formed from snow's array,

Let growing spheres of frozen might,

Crash down upon our foes with spite,

Force those who stand against our power,

To cower beneath this frozen shower."

This time, as she finished speaking, a flurry of soft white motes of lights fell from the glowing Snow Fang, drifting into the cloud of snow like dandelion seeds on a summer breeze. Each one of them seemed to meander through the cloud of fat, fluffy snowflakes without purpose until it made contact with one of those gently drifting flakes.

As soon as a mote of light touched a snowflake, it became ravenous, dancing on the currents of cool air from one flake to the next, building up volume until it seemed like it could bear it no longer and hurled itself directly at Lord Ritchel and his honor guard.

The first snowball was no larger than Heila's fist, and it impacted with the force of a snowball hurled by a small child, but the second one was a third again the size of the first one and struck with twice the force. The third one was even larger and faster, and the fourth one was nearly as large as an adult Frost Walker's fist and slammed into its target with as much force as a trained warrior's punch.

Meanwhile, in the cloud of dancing, drifting snowflakes, hundreds of motes of light gathered even more snow into tightly packed balls while Talauia made her way into striking distance of her unwitting victims.

On the opposite side, Lord Ritchel maintained his focus on the crystalline Ice Tomb, channeling his sorcery through both hands while his honor guard formed a protective semicircle around him. When he prepared for the welcoming ceremony, he did everything he could to avoid a repeat of the previous disaster.

This time, instead of sending Hauke to lead the delegation along with the best and brightest among the young warriors and hunters, he brought six of his most trusted sorcerers. All of them were veterans who had weathered decades of incursions from Tuscans and other unsavory characters who attempted to hunt Frost Walkers for their horns or directly plunder from their ancestral caves.

Now, each of those men stood firmly before him, each one maintaining one side of the hexagonal tomb that contained both his son and the Mother of Trees. A complicated look rippled across his features, and for a moment, he considered commanding them to dispel the Ice Tomb, freeing the Mother of Trees.

But if he did, it was almost certain that his son would die in the ensuing battle. No matter what, once Nyrielle herself took the field, there would be no stopping the Harbinger of Death from slaughtering as she pleased. The more damage Hauke caused, the more her army suffered from the chaos he unleashed, and the worse the outcome could be.

Now, faced with rapidly worsening conditions, doubt wracked Ritchel's mind, and for perhaps the first time in his life, he prayed, hoping against hope that the Mother of Trees could subdue the raging spirits controlling his son before the situation spiralled beyond anyone's ability to salvage.

Chapter 420: Death on the Wind (Part Two)

Lord Ritchel had acted without hesitation when he saw Hauke's sudden attack. The ancestral horns strapped to his son's chest had pulsed with an ominous light that he recognized immediately. The nightmare that haunted him since the day the spirits addressed the council of elders using his son's mouth had finally come true. The spirits were in control, not his son.

He hadn't intended to capture Ashlynn along with Hauke. The sorcerers of his honor guard were all experienced enough to follow his lead, placing the center of the icy tomb on a spot that should have trapped Hauke and the ancestral spirits alone, giving him the ability to regain control of the situation. The dark suppressive magic that knocked Ashlynn to the ground, briefly pinning her in place had been the perfect opportunity.

But fate made fools of men who thought everything would unfold as they desired. The ancestral spirit's attack on the diminutive Willow Witch had been so cruel that Ashlynn escaped the grip of the icy magic that held her down, clashing directly with Hauke and the ancestral spirits just as the Ice Tomb came into being, sealing her inside its icy walls along with him.

Now, everything was spiralling rapidly out of control and a new flurry of snow had appeared. This one, however, felt much gentler than the icy blizzard tormenting Lady Nyrielle's army, filled with fat, fluffy snowflakes that drifted harmlessly on the wind. Or at least, it started that way.

The first impact against his shoulder felt like nothing more than a ball of soft, fluffy snow hurled by a young child, barely enough to register through his thick fur and ceremonial robes. He dismissed it without a glance, maintaining his concentration on the complex weave of sorcery that kept the walls of ice from shattering under the force of the battle raging within while taking a brief look at the fortress behind him.

Already, the walls had begun to empty of young soldiers as men drew their weapons and charged towards the gate, rushing to be the first ones across the bridge to reach their lord's side. Within a minute or two, a force of several hundred men would be able to surround him, offering real enough protection from the forces of Nyrielle's army that he could consider unsealing the ice tomb. Until they arrived, he just had to hold on.

The second snowball struck Gunter, one of his senior aids and a candidate to replace Paulus on the council of elders, with enough force to make the man grunt in surprise. Larger than the first snowball and more tightly packed, it left a spray of white powder across the man's silver-blue ceremonial robes.

"My Lord," Gunter started, but fell silent as a third snowball struck him squarely between the eyes with enough force to make him take a step back, covering his face with one arm and quickly wiping away the snow that blocked his vision. For a moment, a loud -CRACK- echoed from the Ice Tomb as the wall Gunter was responsible for lost his active support, but the veteran sorcerer quickly redoubled his efforts, reinforcing the wall and bringing his sorcery back under control.

Ritchel's eyes narrowed, searching the swirling snow that had appeared seemingly from nowhere. He hadn't paid it much attention at first because the magic felt so familiar, carrying a subtle flavor and scent that reminded him of snow melting on the tongue, just like dozens of Frost Walker snow masters he'd known over the years.

With all of the soldiers descending from the walls, he assumed it had been a move made by one of the sorcerers remaining atop the fortress walls to conceal their movements from Nyrielle's forces. But now, as he peered through the dancing flakes, he caught a glimpse of the small horned witch, the one the ancestral spirits had attacked at the beginning of this disaster, standing near the Ice Tomb with a glowing white horn-blade in her hand.

"Hold formation!" he commanded as the fourth snowball struck with enough force to shatter the decorative ice embellishments Gunter wore across his chest. "It's just snow. Maintain the Ice Tomb until reinforcements arrive!"

If things continued at the level of the most recent snowball, he was certain they could endure for the minute or two they needed until his soldiers could form a solid barrier against the strange snow cloud and it's almost childish assault, but the bombardment they'd felt so far was only the beginning.

What had started as isolated impacts quickly became a barrage, each snowball larger and faster than the last. His men shifted uncomfortably, their concentration wavering as they were pelted from all directions.

"My Lord," Hrosskel, the oldest member of his honor guard called out. "Something is moving within the..."

Whatever words he'd been about to use died in Hrosskel's throat, replaced by a strangled gasp. Ritchel turned just in time to see the man he'd long considered an old friend stagger sideways, dropping first to one knee before toppling sideways and sprawling at Lord Ritchel's feet.

Emerging from behind the fallen sorcerer, a slender figure with iridescent wings seemed to dance on the wind, withdrawing from the toppling figure with the slightest shove to ensure that he didn't fall on her as he died. Something glinted between delicate fingers, needle-thin and gleaming with an unnatural purple sheen that froze Ritchel's heart the instant he saw it.

Before Ritchel could shout a warning, the winged figure vanished back into the swirling snow, already hunting her next target.

"Close ranks!" Ritchel bellowed, his voice carrying over the increasing barrage of snowballs, some now as large as a man's head and striking with the force of a war hammer. The snowballs had become so densely packed that, despite their fluffy outward appearances, each one contained a core as solid as the icicles hanging from the walls of the fortress and almost as deadly.

On the ground Hrosskel clutched at his neck where a tiny puncture wound no larger than a pinprick leaked a thin trickle of blood, staining the dull white fur of his beard a dark, purplish-red. His face contorted in agony as veins around the wound swelled and throbbed, filling his body with the feeling of being stabbed hundreds of times.

The sensation started in his neck but it quickly spread outward from the wound, following his veins like the roots of a malevolent plant. His eyes bulged, mouth opening in a silent scream as the poison raced through his system. Moments later, his veins began to rupture as hundreds of pinpricks covered his flesh, dying his white fur and ceremonial robes a dark, purplish-red as more and more pinpricks pierced every vein in his body.

"Thistle Witch!" Ritchel snarled, finally recognizing the signature of the deadly toxin. He should have known when he saw the iridescent wings but his mind refused to believe. Now, he couldn't help but accept that death truly had descended on them as the sole survivor of the greatest clan of assassins to ever live vanished into the snow, searching for the next man to die from her poisonous thorns....