

The Vampire 431

Chapter 431: Shattered Sword

The Ice Tomb shook with powerful impacts as the fierce battle between Ashlynn and the ancestral spirits became even more intense. Ashlynn's hands felt numb from repeated impacts on her sword, and her body screamed in agony with every move, yet she dared not slow down. She'd abandoned thoughts of fighting back, and for the moment, she focused only on exhausting her opponents, hoping to wear them down and find an opportunity to counterattack.

Outside the walls of ice, Heila's presence felt dimmer and weaker than it had just a few minutes ago, and as much as Ashlynn wanted to believe that help was coming for her, she was increasingly worried that her rescuers were running into their own difficulties.

More than anything, she wanted to break through the walls of this prison, to check on Heila and everyone else with the army, but the ancestral spirits had no intention of letting her escape. The best she could do was to keep one of the icy walls close at all times in the hopes that stray blows would fall on the increasingly brittle ice.

Trapped in his own mind, Hauke allowed himself to hang limply from the frozen chains that bound him as he helplessly watched Ashlynn's struggle. Already, a tingling pain had begun to spread through his body as the ancestors pushed his body to its limits, overtaxing his muscles and drawing more deeply on his reserves of magical energy than he'd ever dared to himself.

"Please," Hauke said in a defeated, plaintive tone. "If you keep this up, I'll die. I can't keep using energy like this."

"You can, you've just forgotten how," Eraric's gravely voice said. Ever since handing over the sword he'd crafted, he'd taken a seat on his pedestal, content to watch Ansgar and Ines making use of his work to subdue the young Mother of Trees. "There's a reason that even the Fangs of Death once feared those born with an iridescent horn, young Hauke. You're seeing it now."

"Seeing what?" Hauke asked as he carefully worked to free one of his wrists from the chains. The more of his energy that Ansgar and Ines spent fighting Ashlynn, the weaker the chains grew. The links themselves seemed to be melting away, and already they had grown thin enough for him to make small movements that would have been impossible when this madness began. "Why would the Fangs of Death ever fear us?"

"Ines has been teaching you, hasn't she?" Kimsel asked without taking her eyes off of the view of the battle raging in the outside world. Ines blizzard obscured much of what they were able to see through Hauke's eyes, but it was clear that the Mother of Trees was badly wounded, and her blood stained the snow in several places within the icy prison.

"Witches use the power of the world," the old woman continued slowly. "Vampires use the power of death. But to think that we are ordinary sorcerers," she said with a dismissive -tsk- noise. "We build up our power in layer after layer of ice, waiting to be unleashed in a powerful avalanche. Perhaps we are weak and vulnerable out there in the wider world," she said, gesturing vaguely in the direction of distant lands. "But on our mountains, standing atop centuries of accumulated power, we will never be defeated."

"Maybe that was true once," Hauke argued. "But not anymore. You said it yourself," he said, turning to face Eraric. "We've forgotten. No one knows how to use the power you use. But if you use that power to kill Lady Ashlynn, then Lady Nyrielle's army will destroy us. Instead of saving us by killing Heila, you'll doom us by killing Ashlynn!" Hauke shouted, straining against his chains and lunging at the architect who'd used them to bind him in his own mind.

"The fortress is stronger than you know," Eraric countered, sighing at his descendant's lack of confidence in his own people. "We'll retreat within its walls and wait for winter. The vampire might be able to survive the cold, but her army is another matter. We will never be driven from our homes."

"You're wrong," Hauke said, slumping against his chains again and looking even more defeated. Around his wrists, the chains slipped even further, but it still wasn't enough. Before he could make another attempt at disguising a mighty tug on the chains, however, he heard a resounding, cruel laugh from the wall that displayed the outside world.

Ashlynn stood in a wide, stable stance with both hands on her darksteel falchion. The weapon felt like it was colder than the water of the frozen lake and her gloves had grown stiff as the sweat seeping from her hands froze solid around her fingers. All across the blade, a spiderweb of cracks traced from hilt to point, clustered at the point two-thirds of the way up the blade where she struck the hardest.

"You fought well, witch," Ansgar said, chuckling darkly as he stalked out of the swirling blizzard with his glowing, runic blade raised high overhead. "But now, it ends," he said, bringing the glowing blade down in a powerful arc.

Ashlynn's eyes flicked over the surface of her darksteel falchion, taking in the web of cracks that covered the blade from hilt to point. The weapon wasn't some ancient artifact with a legendary name from the songs that minstrels sang during festivals, but it had been with her since Thane first pressed it into her hands. Back then, she was barely able to lift it, much less wield it properly.

The nameless blade had drawn her first blood in practice, saved her life against the Tuscan hunters in these very mountains, and stood between her and certain death again and again as she fought off the spirits who had taken control of her friend. Even when it wasn't on her hip when she trained in the Briar, she still reached for it any time danger appeared.

And now, she was certain that it would shatter if she tried to block Ansgar's heavy blow. Perhaps there was a chance that it could survive one more strike, but more likely than not, the ancestral spirit's runic blade would cleave through both steel and flesh in one unstoppable strike.

"Hauke! Help me!" Ashlynn shouted, making her decision in a heartbeat. Rather than raise the falchion in a futile block, she lashed out in a desperate swing, deliberately loosening her frozen fingers at the perfect moment. The falchion spun from her grasp, flying directly at Hauke's gleaming, iridescent horn, performing its final duty to buy her enough time to dodge away from the deadly blow.

"Ashlynn!" Hauke shouted, yelling within his mind even though Ashlynn couldn't hear him. With a powerful tug that felt like it would wrench his arms from their sockets, Hauke threw all of his weight against the chains, hoping to give Ashlynn even a moment of disruption to evade the fatal blow.

Hauke's desperate act of defiance worked, at least to an extent, as Ansgar felt a surge of pain in his shoulders that mirrored the injury Hauke had just inflicted on himself. For a moment, the pain was so intense that his eyes misted over, only to reveal a wicked blade spinning at his head the instant he blinked away the moisture.

"Traitor!" Ansgar shouted, slamming downward at the spinning blade with the most powerful burst of energy he could. In an instant, ice encased the darksteel blade, less than half a blink before the runic blade cleaved through it, shattering Ashlynn's sword like it had been made of nothing but simple, ordinary ice struck by a hammer.

On the ground, Ashlynn scrambled for distance, her hands scrambling at her belt to draw her Severing Knife. Unlike Heila's blunt tool, Ashlynn knew all too well the pain of being caught without a weapon to defend herself, and the curved bone knife in her hands came to a wicked point.

Against someone as large and skilled as Ansgar, even though he was unfamiliar with Hauke's body, it felt like a feeble weapon to bet her life on. But, if she could sever the bond between Hauke and the horns strapped to his chest...

A moment later, those thoughts shattered, just like her blade, when a powerful wave of magic slammed into one of the icy walls of the tomb. The temperature in the icy prison soared, and clouds of steam rolled off the trembling wall as another wave of flame descended on the prison like the light of the rising sun spilling across the valleys beneath the mountains.

Help had finally arrived...

Chapter 432: Flames of Salvation

"...I'll rescue Lady Ashlynn..."

Ignatious's promise gave Heila the strength she needed to keep her eyes open, even as she clung to the vampire for warmth. Her body felt as cold as the mountain winds after giving him most of her magic energy and more of her blood than someone her size had any business offering. But nestled in the fallen Inquisitor's strong embrace, Heila didn't feel the slightest trace of regret.

Rescuing Ashlynn was more important than anything but after touching his heart and helping to wash away the years of guilt and self-loathing that smothered his flames, she found herself almost as happy to have helped him heal as she was certain she'd feel when her closest friend escaped the icy prison that held her captive.

Walking with a gentle, flowing grace that no ordinary human could match on the rough, icy terrain, Ignatious took several steps away from the tomb of ice before kneeling in the snow where the Holy Flame Blade had fallen.

"Sir Ignatious, no!" Kurtz called, rushing over to block the vampire before he could lay a hand on the weapon that had nearly consumed him with its flames. Already, the veteran gladiator could tell that Heila had pushed herself far too close to the brink of death to snatch the vampire back from the wounds he'd suffered for trying to control the weapon.

If anything happened now, it was impossible for Heila to save him again. Worse, the way the vampire held her close to his chest, if the sword unleashed its flames again, it was likely to burn Heila along with the foolish, stubborn vampire.

"It's fine," Ignatious said, raising a hand to block the horned guardian before he could come close enough to touch the blade. "I know why I failed, thanks to Lady Heila," he said with a soft smile as he looked at the diminutive beauty in his arms. "I won't waste her gift and I won't put her in any danger, I swear it."

The vampire didn't wait for Kurtz to respond before shifting Heila in his arms, holding her tightly with his left arm while his right hand reached out for the ruby and gold hilt of the Holy Flame Blade.

"There's no time for foolishness," he told his companion of many decades. "I don't need your flames to punish anyone, but a good woman might die if we can't burn through her prison. Just this once, even if it's the last time you ever submit to me, help me to help her."

This time, when he reached for the blade and let the warmth of his magic flow into the hilt, he felt none of the searing hostility that greeted him the first time he touched the blade. Instead, he felt a familiar heat pushing back against him, refusing to submit to him without being forced to, but when he pushed back harder with the heat of the gentle, warming flames that Heila had stoked within him, the resistance melted away like snow brought before the hearth.

Brilliant red and gold flames enveloped the blade, dancing along its length casting a soft golden glow that lit the surrounding area more than dozens of torches would have.

"So warm," Heila whispered as she snuggled closer to Ignatious's chest, close enough to hear the slow, steady beat of his heart that pulsed with her blood in his veins.

"Stand aside, soldier," Ignatious said, standing up to his full height turning to face the cracking ice prison. Now, for the first time in decades, with a flaming sword in his hand and a 'horned demon' in his arms, Ignatious felt like he'd finally returned to the man he'd once been. Or rather, he felt like he'd become the man he always wished to be.

It didn't matter that he was a vampire or that Heila was from the Horned Clan. She reached out a hand to save him from himself when his refusal to address the burdens and scars in his heart nearly cost him

his life. Now, she was counting on him to rescue someone she treasured, and once again, it didn't matter that the person he needed to rescue was a witch.

The Church was wrong about who deserved to be hunted and who was worthy of salvation but it was very, very right about the duties of a person like him with the power to help those in need. That faith burned within his chest like a guiding star, giving him the strength he needed to put words to his needs.

"Flame that cleanses and holy light that saves,

Let fire free what ice enslaves!"

The prayer was simple and direct but it contained every ounce of Ignatious burning need to prove himself worthy, not of salvation from the Holy Lord of Light but of the trust that the diminutive horned witch had placed in his bloodstained, sinner's hands.

With a swing of his swords, a wave of flames leaped through the night, slamming into the walls of ice with the force of a charging bull. Cracks spread across the walls of ice and a cloud of steam drifted away on the icy mountain wind, but the still, the wall stood stubbornly in his path.

A second swing of the sword launched another wave of flames, but this time, the action was accompanied by a stabbing, icy pain that raced up his recently healed arms and neck. Gritting his teeth against the sudden pain, Ignatious's dark eyes remained fixed on the walls of the ice prison, waiting for them to collapse and crumble under their own weight as layer after layer of ice melted under his assault.

When the flames flickered out, however, the walls still stood, as though they were mocking the strength of the fallen Inquisitor's faith.

"What's wrong?" Heila asked, her brow creasing with worry as she watched the expression of pain and frustration flicker across the vampire's face. "I can feel it," she said, turning to look at the wall of ice. "It's thin and brittle, almost broken," she said as she struggled to lift her head away from Ignatious's chest. At the moment, her horns felt impossibly heavy but Ashlynn was so very close that if she could do anything, she had to try...

"I'm still weak," Ignatious sighed. "There are limits, my Lady, to how much even you can restore me in a single feeding. But one more," he added, pulling her back against his chest. "I have one more in me, at least. You've done enough," he reminded her as he strode across the frozen ground. "Let me finish what you started."

Stepping up to the ice wall, Ignatious fell into a posture that his teachers at the temple would have laughed at him for, but his long departed father would have praised. Swinging a sword like an axe in battle would have been the height of foolishness most times, but right now, when he wanted nothing more than to cleave through the wall before him, nothing felt more... right.

"Break!" Ignatious shouted as he brought the flaming blade down using every ounce of vampiric strength he possessed, combined with the power of the flaming blade and Heila's rich, powerful blood flowing through his veins.

The moment the blade struck the ice, the barrier exploded in a rain of frozen shards, dispersing the blizzard that had raged within the frozen prison and revealing a furious-looking Hauke holding a glowing sword made of ice and covered with cryptic runes.

More importantly, standing just a few dozen paces away, Ashlynn stood defiantly, her Severing Blade clutched tightly in one hand while blood spilled from half a dozen wounds.

"Ashlynn," Heila said, stretching a feeble hand toward the woman she'd fought so hard to reach. They'd made it. It wasn't too late to save her...

It was the last thought Heila had before the exhaustion of everything she'd done finally caught up with her, drawing her into a deep, darkness filled with the warmth of Ignatious's strong embrace and the soft, steady beat of the heart within his chest.

Chapter 433: Standoff

For a single frozen moment, it seemed like nobody moved.

Ashlynn's eyes darted about, growing wider and wider as she took in everything that had unfolded in the short amount of time she'd been locked in battle with the spirits possessing Hauke.

Her heart trembled at the sight of Heila's bloodstained figure lying slumped in Ignatious's arms, but the soft, protective way the fallen Inquisitor held her held very little anxiety for the diminutive witch. The vampire himself looked ragged, and the sleeves of his crimson and gold robes had been burned away, perhaps by the sword he held in one hand, but it was clear that whatever had happened had taken its toll on both of them.

Seeing Heila safe and sound, unfortunately, was the only bright spot in a snow filled world that contained far too much red.

Nyrielle's army was still obscured by the blizzard Ines had summoned before they were trapped in the icy prison. When Ashlynn looked closely at it, the magic sustaining the snowstorm seemed to be feeding off of a deep reservoir of magical energy, trapped under layers and layers of ice and snow on the mountainside, as if it had been prepared in advance for just such a use.

In the other direction, a different cloud of fat, fluffy snowflakes was swept aside by the explosion of the ice tomb, revealing half a dozen corpses soaked in purplish-red blood that were all that remained of Lord Ritchel's honor guard. The lord himself knelt in the snow, bleeding from dozens of small wounds. His hands were bound behind him, and Talauia hovered at his side with a long, glowing needle pressed into Ritchel's neck.

On the walls of the Frost Walker fortress, the men of the Black Wolf Brigade fought side by side with the Mongrel Horde, staining the icy battlements with blood and littering the ground below with bodies. Atop the gatehouse, Savis and Tausau stood back to back, surrounded by more than a dozen Frost Walker sorcerers who seemed to be doing everything in their power to prevent the powerful vampires from reinforcing their soldiers.

It hadn't been long since the ancestors seized control of Hauke, and Ritchel trapped her in the ice with the possessed young lord. Ten minutes, perhaps fifteen? But already things had progressed to this extent...

"You've chosen wisely, vampire," Ines's cold voice said, breaking the silent stillness that surrounded them. "Bring the defiler to us, and we can put an end to this," she said, turning all of her attention to Ignatious and the sleeping figure in his arms.

"My Lady," Ignatious said, moving with a quickness that few eyes could follow to arrive at Ashlynn's side. The instant he moved, the flames wreathing the sword in his hand flickered and guttered out like a

candle flame in the wind. He'd consumed virtually all of the strength that Heila had given him, but he had just enough left to make a final move if Ashlynn required it.

"Hold on to me if you can," he said quietly. "I can take you to safety until Mistress Nyrielle returns."

"Fool!" Ansgar's deep voice rumbled across the mountainside. "We've offered you a chance to escape destruction for the witch's crime. Give her to us now or suffer her fate alongside her!"

"Don't do it, don't even think about doing it!" Talauia shouted from her position near the bridge. Her wings fluttered rapidly as she raised herself up, putting even more pressure on the needle pressed into Lord Ritchel's neck.

"I didn't kill him, didn't kill your father," she yelled. "But I've poisoned him deeply! Give up now, or he'll die, I swear, he'll die!" Her words were sharp, rapid, and pitched high enough that some would find them comical, but her hands were as steady as the mountainside, and the energy that flowed from her hand to the needle didn't flicker in the slightest as she made her threat.

"Please," Ritchel said, too softly for anyone but Talauia to hear. "That's not Hauke. Not -CAUGH- not my son," he said, coughing up a glob of thick purplish blood as tears filled his eyes. "The horns. The ancestors have seized him... please," he begged, casting aside what little remained of his dignity to beg, not for his own life, but for Hauke's. "Please, save my son."

Despite his pleading, Talauia did nothing. Whatever excuses he wanted to make didn't matter. Hauke had attacked her friend, and then he seemed to have done everything he could to kill her Auntie, Ashlynn. Whether he was possessed or not, harming her family left only one ending, and if no one else was going to do it, then Talauia would kill Hauke herself to stop him from hurting any more of her loved ones.

Her father had taught her long ago that a careless assassin planted the seeds of their own undoing when they left survivors behind with a motive to seek revenge. If she couldn't accomplish her mission without exposing her identity, then anyone who might transform from survivor to avenger needed to die before they could become a danger to her and her clan.

Hauke might be possessed at the moment, but his people had died to her hands tonight, and his father might still join the pile of corpses at her feet. Perhaps he wouldn't blame her in the immediate

aftermath, but a year from now? Two? A man's heart could grow twisted and dark over the years following a tragedy, and Talauia had no intention to see Hauke stew in his resentment until he gained enough power to harm her or her coven.

Everything crashed over Ashlynn in a wave, from Ignatious and Heila's exhaustion and the obvious signs that they'd only recently healed their wounds to the battle on the walls, to Talauia's captive and the increasingly aggressive posture. Everything felt like it was balanced on the edge of a knife, and the slightest push in any direction would send them all tumbling into the abyss.

"Enough," Ashlynn said softly, shaking her head at Ignatious. Moving slowly with stiff, frozen hands, Ashlynn transferred her Severing Knife to her left hand before holding out her right hand toward Ignatious.

A few dozen paces away, a cruel, victorious grin appeared on Hauke's lips as the ancestors tasted victory at hand. Perhaps the vampire had no choice but to submit to a higher power, but now that the Mother of Trees was standing down, it seemed like she would be delivering the defiler to them with her own hands.

"Give me the sword," Ashlynn said quietly. "It's time for me to put an end to this."

She never expected to reach for the Holy Flame Blade in the middle of a battle, and she'd been hesitant about asking to see it again until she made up her mind about how she should use it in the coming battle against the Lothians. Now, however, after losing her darksteel falchion against the runic blade of eternal ice, she felt half naked and under-equipped to face off against the ancestors if they chose to press their attack again.

More importantly, however, the blade could still be a powerful symbol, even here among the Eldritch. They didn't need to revere the blade, its wielder, or the Holy Lord of Light in order to respect the power it represented. If she could put on a sufficient show of force, perhaps she could bring things to an end without anyone else losing their lives in this tragedy.

"My lady," Ignatious said, pulling the sword back reflexively before Ashlynn's hand could reach its gold and ruby encrusted hilt. "You've never tried to master the sword. I, I don't know if it will accept a witch. You're already badly wounded," he said, giving the numerous frozen wounds on her body a pointed stare. "If the blade harms you..."

"Give me the sword, Inquisitor," Ashlynn repeated more formally and with a cold, steely strength underlying her words. She wanted to argue, she wanted to tell him why she was convinced that she could do this but... There wasn't time for more words. Energy was already gathering around the runic blade in Hauke's hands, and any second, the ancestors might make their move.

"Lives are being lost, Ignatious," she added. "I have to put a stop to it. Please, give me the sword."

Glancing up at the fortress walls, Ignatious realized that Ashlynn was right. While everything on the ground between the bridge and Nyrielle's army had turned into a tense standoff, the battle on the fortress walls above them raged on as vampires and the Golden Eyed Clan tore at Frost Walkers and Frost Walkers unleashed a relentless counterattack of ice and snow.

Lives were being lost... and they were running out of options. If the sight of Lord Ritchel falling to the Thistle Witch hadn't stopped the Frost Walker's resistance, it was likely nothing short of overwhelming force would.

"It may not mean much from me," Ignatious said as he changed his grip on the hilt and presented the powerful blade to Ashlynn. "But I pray that the Holy Lord of Light stands with you tonight. Good luck, Lady Ashlynn."

Chapter 434: Midnight Sunrise

As soon as Ashlynn's hand touched the hilt of the Holy Flame Blade, the world around her seemed to slow to a crawl.

Dozens of paces away, Ansgar and Ines had clearly realized they'd misunderstood her actions. The Mother of Trees had no intention of surrendering the defiler to them, even after seeing her army stuck on the walls and unable to advance.

Certainly, Lord Ritchel's capture and inevitable death would be a blow against the young Hauke, but it was a trial that the young lord needed to overcome if he was going to succeed his father's throne and take his rightful place at the head of the clan. Perhaps, if the young lord watched his father fall to the schemes of outsiders, he would understand why generations of Frost Walkers had restricted themselves to ruling the icy peaks and never bothered conquering the lush lands below, even when they possessed the strength to do so.

More than anything, the ancestors wanted to spend what little time they had left to forge Hauke into the kind of lord who could lead their people back to the place they should hold as the undisputed rulers of the frigid world atop the mountains. As far as Ansgar and the other ancestors were concerned, Eldritch Lords like Ritchel who lacked an iridescent horn could serve, at best, as custodians for the clan until a suitable ruler could take their place at the head of the clan. The fact that so many generations had passed without an iridescent lord to rule them explained the clan's tragic state, but under their guidance, Hauke would soon return the clan to its former glories.

Even Ritchel knew that his time was coming to an end and that Hauke would soon take his place. And so, as a hostage, the ancestors felt nothing at all about Ritchel's life or death. But if the Mother of Trees defied them and took the defiler and her horn knife away... that was a declaration of war that could only be answered with the fury of a descending avalanche.

Ashlynn might not understand everything that went into the calculations of the ancient spirits possessing Hauke, but as soon as she reached for the sword, they began to move, making it clear that they wouldn't stay their hand for even a moment, despite the fact that Talauia held Lord Ritchel's life at the point of her needle.

Before her hand wrapped completely around the hilt of the sword, her hand already screamed in painful protest as she pushed her frozen fingers to stretch wide and grasp the thick, decorative hilt. Clearly the Church had never expected for a woman with such small and delicate hands to wield one of their holy swords, but at the moment, she didn't care whether or not she could fight with it as a sword, so long as she could channel the power of the blade, it would be enough.

The moment her hand wrapped around the hilt, a different kind of pain surged up her arm as the blade challenged her right to wield it. Flames wrapped around her gloved hand, melting the layer of frost encasing the glove in an instant, while hot steam seared the flesh of her hand as the frozen sweat in the glove boiled away in the blink of an eye.

"Aaaah!" A startled cry of pain escaped Ashlynn's lips before she could push back against the blade's cruel assault. Within the blade, she could feel not just the searing heat of the Holy Lord of Light's flames of punishment and judgment, but a hot, seething fury and a deep desire to cleanse the world in Holy Flames that defined the blade's existence.

"No," Ashlynn told the blade fiercely. "You serve a greater purpose than pure destruction, I know you do!" Despite the fact that a Holy Flame Blade was more destructive than a Holy Light Blade, in the end, Ashlynn still saw it as one of the greatest symbols of the intentions of the Church. To protect the people

who believed from anything that could plunge their world into darkness and to provide a burning light of hope even in the bleakest, most hopeless battles.

She wanted to push back against the blade's fury with her own faith, with her pure intentions to use its power in a way the sword itself could accept... but there was no time. She could not afford to meet the struggle offered by the sword in a 'fair' or 'proper' way. At that moment, she reminded herself of Artificer Erkembalt's words and treated the sword as nothing more than a tool, one that would bow down and submit as long as it was met with sufficient strength.

Here, on the barren mountainside, there were no trees or plants to offer their strength to the Mother of Trees, but there was a deep, virtually endless source of strength of the earth that dwelled in the mountain itself.

"Through stone's descent and earth's command,

Let mountain's will flow to my hand!"

Ashlynn didn't speak the words but formed them clearly in her mind, along with the image of a giant rolling boulder crashing against the sword's resistance. The mountain trembled slightly under her feet as if her action might provoke a landslide. If she'd had more time to prepare her witchcraft or more experience working with pure, barren earth, there might not have been any risk, but with the ancestors rushing toward her, Ashlynn spared no thought for the consequences and hurled all of her strength at the stubborn blade.

Faced with the power and focused desire of a powerful witch, the sword's defenses crumbled like a castle of sand facing the tide. The flood of energy was so great that the sword immediately blazed to light, shining like a bonfire in the dark of night.

The wave of heat radiating from the blade was so intense that Ignatious retreated nearly fifty paces away, turning his body to shield Heila's unconscious body from the heat. But even as he turned his body away, his eyes remained fixed on the sword that burned with a flame so bright that he momentarily felt like he was in the presence of an Exemplar.

Ansgar also stopped mid charge, holding up the runic blade as though it was a shield and summoning a thick wall of ice between himself and the mad witch who seemed to have lit herself on fire just to break his charge.

Ashlynn's body shook with the pressure of the heat, and the snow around her melted into puddles before quickly beginning to steam, filling the mountainside with a low, steamy fog. The blade in her hand burned, drawing deeply on her energy, as though she were nothing more than a pile of firewood, waiting to be consumed.

"You still belong to the Holy Lord of Light," Ashlynn said through gritted teeth. Her muscles screamed at the abuse, and several of her wounds reopened as she moved, but she knew that she had to do something with this power, and quickly before it would consume her. So, even though it hurt almost as much as it had hurt to pull herself from the shallow grave the night Owain's knights had dumped her body at the border of the Vale of Mists, she raised the sword high overhead and pointed the tip straight at the sky.

"Your light and flames, bring more than fear," she told the blade. "So give them hope and banish the night, burn like the sun and reveal what's right!"

Part witchcraft and part prayer, her words challenged the storm of fiery energy into a giant pillar of flame, stretching hundreds of paces into the sky.

The column of flame tore through Ines's blizzard, freeing Nyrielle's army from its wintery claws and revealing a sight like nothing they'd seen before.

Even on the walls of the Frost Walker fortress, deadly duels paused as both sides turned to look at the battered, bloodied woman holding a sword that burned like the sun and a pillar of flame that turned the night into day.

"Lay down your weapons!" Ashlynn commanded, her voice echoing off the fortress walls and the mountainside. The earth trembled, and in several places, sheets of ice and snow tumbled from the mountain in a series of sluffs. "Whether you fight for the High Pass or the Vale of Mists," she added. "No more blood will be spilled tonight!"

The pillar of flame began to fade as Ashlynn quickly reached her limits, but she'd accomplished the most important part. The battle that never should have been fought had ground to a halt, leaving only one final person standing with a weapon in hand and a furious gaze on their borrowed face.

"That includes you," Ashlynn said, lowering the still-burning sword to point at the ancestral spirits.

"Release my friend, or I will tear you away from him and burn your horns to ash!"

Chapter 435: Shubnalû's Trap (Part One)

Cold mountain wind caressed Nyrielle's dark feathers as she soared through the night sky, racing away from her army and her lover in the hopes of confronting her former mentor as far from the people she cared about as possible.

A year ago, she might have acted differently. She might have let him come to her, arrogantly challenging him to prove that she was no longer the young girl who sat at his feet to learn the mysteries of Blood Sorcery.

A few months ago, she might have attacked Ritchel's ice tomb directly, snatching Ashlynn out of harm's way before launching a combined assault on the Frost Walkers, ensuring that they understood their place and never dared to challenge the Vale of Mists again.

Now, too much had changed for her to take either approach. Shubnalû's moves against her among the Eldritch nations ruled by vampires had made it abundantly clear that she could no longer treat her former teacher as an ally, much less as a friend. There had been a time when each of the True Vampires had attempted to court her. On one occasion, they even joked about dueling each other for the right to seize her, but those jokes had ended when she bathed herself in the blood of the arena and took the Vale of Mists back from the Lothian butchers by force.

The jokes had ended, but Nyrielle couldn't help but feel that at least one of them hadn't given up on his desires to possess the only woman among their number. As the oldest among the True Vampires, very little could move his heart, and Nyrielle didn't think for a moment that the ancient vampire felt anything approaching love for her. Rather, at some point, he'd resolved to possess her, and that thwarted resolution had turned into obsession.

Exposing Ashlynn to the twisted obsessions of the oldest living being among the Eldritch was far too dangerous, but unlike months ago, Nyrielle could no longer simply snatch Ashlynn and flee. Months ago, her heart had only just begun to reawaken. She had always been deeply committed to the people of the

Vale of Mists and those she swore to protect, but now, beyond simple commitment, she cared about many more of them in a way that was impossible for her even a year ago.

Nyrielle couldn't bear the thought of losing people like Zedya, who was just beginning to explore her own newfound feelings for young Lennart, or her Uncle Tausau, who had just begun to feel again. Even Ignatious, her wayward, estranged progeny, had found a small but growing place in her heart as he tried to find a place in the nation she'd built.

For the first time since the night she fled the Holy Flames that consumed the Vale of Mists along with her parent's lives, it wasn't hatred or grief that gripped her heart and drove her to fly faster and faster toward her destination, but fear of losing the ones who had come to mean so much to her. And so, rather than risk any of them in a confrontation with her former teacher, she sought to head him off at the place she was certain he was waiting.

As Nyrielle arrived at the frozen lake where Ashlynn had once fought against Tuscan hunters, darkness swirled around her, twisting into the shape of a powerful headman's ax as she dove toward the frozen surface of the lake.

A single strike of the oversized blade shattered the foot thick ice like glass, sending broken chunks tumbling into the air along with a fountain of the coldest water in the world as Nyrielle plunged beneath the surface, returning to the under water entrance to the Ancestral Cave where Hauke and Ashlynn had confronted the abomination formed of Shubnalu's blood sorcery.

"Light, gather, to my hand," Nyrielle whispered as she entered the perfect darkness of the sealed cave. Sapphire blue flames gathered on her outstretched hand, casting their flickering light across the crude, hand-carved walls of the Ancestral Cave as she looked for any sign of her former mentor.

Water splashed and dripped from her dress as she walked deeper into the darkness, but she didn't bother to dry herself. The cold might bother Ashlynn, but Nyrielle had long ago grown numb to such things.

Through her bond with her lover, she could feel an intense cold along with occasional sharp bursts of pain, making it clear that whatever had forced Hauke to betray them, he wasn't holding back in his attempts to harm Ashlynn. But Nyrielle knew Ashlynn wasn't so weak and feeble now to be threatened by anything the young Frost Walker could do to her.

"Blood Seeker. Shubnalû," Nyrielle said, flicking her hand to make a small cut with a sharpened nail and spilling three drops of blood. Before her blood could touch the ground, each one hovered in the air, transforming until they took on the shape of small, blood-drinking insects. "If there is a trace of my former teacher here," she commanded. "Find him."

The blood-insects hovered before her for a moment as Nyrielle let herself remember the unique scent of Shubnalû's blood and being. No matter where the ancient vampire went, he carried with him the scent of fallen, decomposing trees and the rich loam of the Black Wood that he had ruled for close to a thousand years. The scent was so strongly tied to her memories of him that it was easy to pass it along to the insects as they searched through the tunnels of the ancestral cave.

It didn't take long for one of them to return to her, hovering eagerly before darting off down a side passage near the chamber where she'd fought the abomination of fused Blood Golems.

"So he really is here," Nyrielle said, gripping her shadowy ax tightly as she followed the insect. She didn't have to go far before she arrived at a narrow doorway cut into the stone cave and blocked by a giant stone slab. The tiny insect flew directly toward a small gap between the stone slab and the doorway, vanishing into whatever space lay beyond the barrier.

"That doesn't make any sense," Nyrielle said, looking at the floor around the stone slab. There were no footprints leading to this place, and even if Shubnalû had flown here, he would have needed to move the slab aside to enter the room within. "Unless there's another entrance?" Nyrielle mused.

Suddenly, the echo of Ashlynn's heartbeat within her chest grew much, much faster, and the spikes of pain that colored their bond grew sharper and more intense. Had Lord Ritchel joined his son in attempting to subdue Ashlynn? Or was something else happening to turn the tide in her fight against the young lord?

Nyrielle had no way of knowing, but one thing was clear. Whatever game Shubnalû was playing, he had prepared layers of traps to use against Ashlynn and her progeny. If Nyrielle couldn't find a way to force her teacher to call off his attack, then whatever else he had in store for Ashlynn and her army might prove to be more than they could handle without her help.

She was running out of time...

Chapter 436: Shubnalû's Trap (Part Two)

Standing before a stone slab blocking her path, Nyrielle hesitated, trying to sense what her teacher might be doing in the space beyond. The Blood Seeker had clearly found a trace of her former teacher, but at the same time, he had taken no action against the construct. Was he trying to lull her into a false sense of security, pretending that he hadn't noticed? Had he revealed himself to deliberately guide her here?

Any of it was possible. Shubnalû's moves were always carefully considered and planned well in advance to force his prey to stretch out their own necks. She was doing that right now, separating herself from her own forces and coming to meet with him alone. But the alternative, exposing her loved ones to the powers of the oldest among the True Vampires, was something she didn't dare to contemplate.

"There's no time for this," she muttered as another recently reawakened feeling overtook her. Impatience. Though Ashlynn still felt confident, the bursts of pain weren't only more intense, they were more frequent, and her lover's mind seemed to be focused not on victory, but on escape... or even rescue.

Taking her shadowy ax in both hands, Nyrielle cloaked herself in darkness, summoning all of her physical strength until nothing could be seen of her but two midnight blue eyes, glowing in the darkness like dark oceans of power.

"Break. Crumble. Collapse," she said, her dark voice reverberating through the stone chamber like a pronouncement from the abyss as her ax descended, splitting the stone slab cleanly from corner to corner. For a moment, the slab stood resolute as if it intended to defy death herself. Then, with a shuddering crash, the top half slid to the side, cracking and crumbling away as it fell to the icy stone floor of the cavern, leaving nothing behind but a pile of loose rubble.

"Teacher," Nyrielle said as she strode forward. "Your student has come to have a word."

Inside the chamber, the air was still and stale, giving the impression that anything that nothing living had trod these stone halls in centuries. It was the contents of the chamber, however, that stilled Nyrielle's heart when her flickering sapphire flames peeled back the darkness.

At the center of the chamber stood a massive stone altar, roughly carved from volcanic glass. Hooked glyphs that were among the oldest Nyrielle had ever seen covered the surface of the blood stained altar

and deep grooves in it's surface spoke of dark rituals used to guide the flow of blood from anything unfortunate enough to find itself atop the altar.

Chains and hooks hung from the ceiling, like the implements of a slaughterhouse, cast in bronze that had long ago lost its luster beneath a heavy greenish blue tarnish. Along one wall, rows of ceremonial knives, cleavers and saws for hewing bone were encased in blocks of ice that had endured for hundreds of years, perfectly preserving the deadly implements that awaited their next use.

The aura of blood in the chamber hung so thickly that Nyrielle was momentarily disoriented, as if she could feed simply by breathing the air in this dark, forsaken place. But despite the thick, heavy smell of blood that filled the place even after hundreds of years sealed behind the stone slab, she found no trace of her teacher. Instead, her Blood Seaker hovered patiently over a stone tablet, carefully placed on a pedestal to the side as if it refused to be the center of attention but demanded a place from which to watch.

"So you were like this, even then," Nyrielle said as she approached the stone tablet. The top of the tablet bore an ancient version of the Eldritch glyph for 'vampire' while the bottom of the tablet bore the symbol of a blade and fangs that had long represented the current Fangs of Death.

"Always standing in the shadows, watching as others executed your will." Slicing the tip of her smallest finger with a sharpened nail, Nyrielle pressed her finger to the glyph at the top of the tablet and spoke in the older form of Eldritch her former teacher still used for sorcery. "Blüd Scribë: RevæL."

Slowly, stroke by stroke, as if Shubnalû himself were standing here writing on the tablet, characters written in blood appeared on the tablet but the more Nyrielle read, the clearer it became that this wasn't a message he'd left for her, but something he'd written long before this place was sealed, leaving behind a message that only a fellow vampire could read.

"Successor,

Acat has broken the bloodline of the Frost Walkers, and with it, the curse of eternal winter and the age of ice has finally come to an end..."

"Acat?" Nyrielle paused, staring at the name of the long dead Jaws of Death in confusion. "What business did Shubnalú's teacher have with the Frost Walkers? Age of ice? Just how long ago did he lay this down?"

"... Nothing will remain suppressed forever. Those bearing an Iridescent Horn have begun to re-emerge among the seven bloodlines of the broken clan..."

"So this is why you turned those ancestors into Blood Golems," Nyrielle said as she quickly read the remainder of Shubnalú's message. "You forced them to sacrifice themselves without leaving any descendants behind, trapping them forever in ice and sealing away the bloodline that could have returned them to glory."

It finally made sense why the twisted ancestral spirits had seized so desperately on young Hauke when he and Ashlynn had stumbled on this place. Shubnalú had twisted the legacy of the Frost Walkers into one where any time the ancient bloodline of the iridescent horn reemerged, the 'eternal guardians' of the clan forced them into a role of power and responsibility that would last far beyond their death.

"But this was all long ago," she said, turning away from the tablet that held the only trace of her teacher's presence in this forsaken place. There were still questions that this place held answers to but none of that mattered right now.

She'd been wrong, she realized, tightening her fist until the sharpened nails of her claws bit into the flesh of her palms as the wave of realization washed over her. Months of moving through the Eldritch nations, remaining constantly on guard against the other vampire lords or Shubnalú himself had left her jumping at shadows.

She'd had centuries to watch his long, carefully executed schemes trap his victims, often without ever seeing the man who had orchestrated their demise and as soon as Hamdi revealed that her former teacher intended to capture her, she'd begun to see his hand behind countless challenges and setbacks along her journey but she'd never once found a trace of him.

Perhaps, if not for her teacher's involvement in this place centuries ago, she wouldn't have suspected him of being behind the Frost Walker's sudden betrayal. Seeing Hauke and Rtichel betray the understanding they'd forged during her last visit had almost been a relief. Finally, it seemed like Shubnalú had made his move in a place where he had long ago laid down the foundations to treat the Frost Walkers as his pawns.

Now that she'd seen this place, however, she realized she'd leaped to conclusions far too quickly and she'd left Ashlynn and the others alone to face the real threat while she chased after ghosts laid to rest long ago.

"I'm coming, my love," she said as she plunged back into the icy water to leave the ancestral cave. She only hoped that by the time she returned to Ashlynn's side, it wasn't too late.

Chapter 437: Cornered

"Release my friend, or I will tear you away from him and burn your horns to ash!"

Ashlynn's threat echoed across the mountainside, drawing all eyes, not only from the forces who had been fighting on the walls, but from those at the head of Nyrielle's army as well. Now that the blizzard had cleared, Zedya moved quickly, leaving orders for Lennart to martial the remainder of their forces while she raced to Ignatious's side.

"Ignatious, you," Zedya started in a whisper when she arrived at the fallen Inquisitor's side. "What happened to you? And to little Heila?" she asked, hovering nervously near the slumbering witch cradled in Ignatious's arms.

"I failed in my first attempt with the Holy Flame Blade," he said simply, keeping his eyes firmly fixed on Ashlynn who held the flaming sword like a lance, pointed directly at the young Frost Walker lord. "Heila healed me and... And she allowed me to feed on her," he said softly, hugging the sleeping witch tightly to his chest.

"I... see," Zedya said flatly. From the way Ignatious clung protectively to her diminutive protege she could tell there was more to it but now wasn't the time to ask. She wanted to celebrate that stronger feelings seemed to have returned to the tortured priest, but seeing Heila's sleeping figure, her heart couldn't help but tremble with worry.

Without Heila's help, who could heal Ashlynn's wounds? Zedya didn't know, but there was one thing that she was certain of. If Ashlynn died tonight because Heila couldn't heal her, then the torture Ignatious had endured from Hamdi would pale in comparison to the fate that Mistress Nyrielle would sentence him to.

Zedya didn't dare to contemplate further in that direction. If anything truly threatened Ashlynn's life, she was resolved to do whatever it took to protect her until Mistress Nyrielle arrived, and she knew she wouldn't be the only one. She only hoped that the stubborn young Frost Walker would see reason and surrender before they found out just how far Nyrielle's forces would go to protect their lady and her lover.

Within Hauke's mind, for the first time since this nightmare began, the towering figure of Ansgar appeared alongside the svelte figure of Ines. The former trembled with barely concealed rage, ready to lash out at the witch who dared to threaten their horns, while the latter wavered on her feet as she manifested within Hauke's mind, clearly suffering the after effects of having her blizzard torn apart by Ashlynn's display of power.

"Little to offer, have I," Eugen said, hopping off his platform and rushing to Ines side. "But what I have, yours to take is." As the childish Frost Walker spoke, a soft green aura surrounded him, gently soothing the pain that wracked Ines spirit and restoring a healthier glow to her horn.

"Please, let me free," Hauke begged, struggling against the reforged chains that Eraric had bound him with after his last attempt to disrupt the struggle. "Please, before anyone else is hurt, let me speak to her. I know she'll listen to my words. We can still find a way to resolve this," he said with hot tears streaming from his eyes.

"Please," he added in a voice that cracked under the intensity of emotions coursing through his heart. "Before it's too late for my father... please..."

"The witch is a spent arrow at the end of her flight," Eraric said, shaking his head at the young lord. "Her artifact is impressive, but I doubt she could repeat that display, much less fight with it. My runic blade won't lose to her sword. We have no reason to back down."

"Lord Ansgar," Kimsel asked, turning her stooped figure to face the mightiest warrior among them. "Can you defeat this witch with Eraric's blade?"

"Without doubt," the towering Frost Walker replied without the slightest hesitation. "Eraric is right. She's wounded and exhausted her power. I can overwhelm her easily."

"I agree," Ines said, resting a hand gently on Ansgar's solid figure. "She didn't seem to be fully in control of her artifact. I doubt she has much practice drawing out its power. Perhaps she only reached for it today out of desperation. We should be able to overpower her in a direct confrontation."

"But can you defeat her without killing her?" Kimsel asked, summoning a staff formed of ice and using it to prop herself up as she approached the wall that displayed the outside world. "Or if we kill her, can we also destroy the army that would descend on us to avenge her? And can we do all of this before her vampire mistress returns?"

"You want me to surrender?" Ansgar bellowed. "You want to give up and allow a defiler to go free with one of our horns? The Tuscans already hunt our descendants like animals. You want to add the rest of the world to the list of our clan's enemies?!"

"I want you to take a path that doesn't lead to mutual destruction and a victory that only the dead can celebrate," the aged Frost Walker snapped, rounding on Ansgar and pointing her icy staff at the center of his chest. "The young boy is naive but he isn't wrong. It isn't too late to choose another way."

"What way, you..."

"What would you have us do," Ines asked, placing a cooling hand on Ansgar's arm to smother his anger. "Of all of us, you spent more time alive before placing your horn in the ancestral hall than any. You know even more of the ways of outsiders than we do. We should listen to your counsel," she said, giving Ansgar a pointed look.

Each of them had their own gifts and not one of them had been less than the greatest Frost Walker of their generation. Ansgar had ruled over the largest territory and was the only one among them to ever be recognized as a high lord, but when someone grew too accustomed to absolute power, their ability to compromise and recognize when they were in a position of weakness diminished greatly.

Kimsel, on the other hand, had presided over the sunset of the Frost Walker's greatest age. The glaciers between the seven peaks had all retreated and the clan had fallen back to their greatest stronghold in the High Pass, watching as the lands beneath them grew stronger and more powerful while the strength of the Frost Walker's melted like ice in the summer.

"Let me speak," the old woman said. "I will try to open a path for us."

"It won't be too late to choose the sword if she fails," Ines said, wrapping both of her arms around Ansgar's muscular arm and pressing herself close to him. "You and I have had our turn and even Eraric has aided our battle. Let her try."

"So be it," Ansgar said. With a waive of his hand, the air around him froze, solidifying into a throne carved from solid ice. "Find us a path to victory," he said as he took his seat, deliberately turning his back to Hauke's chained figure as he stared out of the young lord's eyes at the witch and her flaming sword.

"But if you cannot open a path, then I will cleave one open myself," he added as the old woman vanished from the space within Hauke's mind and began to address Ashlynn and the growing crowd of onlookers.

Chapter 438: A Path Forward

"Tuscans, spread across the front, one man per column," Lennart bellowed, quickly arranging Nyrielle's army into a flexible formation for battle. "Captain Virve, gather our men directly behind the Tuscans. They are our breaching force if needed, but too many of the rest are irregulars. I want our men in the lead if we have to charge," he called, directing the flow of men to give them the best chances of responding if things turned violent again.

Whether he was preparing his men to assault the castle and reinforce Sir Savis and Sir Tausau on the walls or creating an opportunity for Lady Ashlynn to escape, he didn't know. At the moment, he badly wished that Commander Bassinger was here with his years of experience fighting in the previous war against the Lothians.

Even more than that, however, he wished that he was standing somewhere else on this battlefield. He didn't begrudge Zedya's move to join Sir Ignatious at all, and in fact, he was grateful that the mesmerizing vampire was closer to Lady Ashlynn if things fell to violence again. Only, in his heart, he hated that he wasn't able to face the greater danger together with her.

At the moment, they each had their roles to play and it fell to him to organize Nyrielle's ordinary forces while those with greater strength faced more immediate danger but in the future... In the future, his place would be wherever Zedya's place was.

"Now I understand what you meant about feeling like we're running out of time," he said quietly as his eyes turned to the space between the army and the fortress where Lady Ashlynn faced off against the young Frost Walker lord. Neither Zedya nor Ignatious seemed to be able to step within fifty paces of the burning blade in Lady Ashlynn's hand, but when it came to power like the pillar of flame that the Mother of Trees had unleashed, did fifty paces really count for anything?

Silently, Lennart resolved himself to give his answer to Zedya as soon as they returned to the Vale of Mists. For now, he could only hope that the Frost Walkers would see reason and stand down from further violence tonight.

"Your Dominion," Kimsel began politely, taking control of Hauke's body and offering a slight bow in Ashlynn's direction while placing the tip of Eraric's sword on the icy ground in a gesture that she did not intend to fight. At least, not at the moment.

"You have grown significantly since last I saw you," Kimsel added, her aged voice sounding even more incongruent from Hauke's youthful face than Ansgar's booming one had. As she moved, her posture shifted, becoming hunched and leaning slightly on the runic blade, treating it much like the old woman would have treated a cane, even though Hauke's body was young and full of vigor. "Six months ago, you would not have been our match."

"You've grown more lucid since last I spoke with you," Ashlynn replied, refusing to match the ancestral spirit's gesture of lowering her blade. "Six months ago, you were deranged and barely capable of speaking in complete sentences. My friend Hauke must have worked hard to restore you, but you've repaid his kindness with heartless treachery."

"I heard your argument with Lord Ansgar and Ines," Kimsel said, waving one hand dismissively as though she couldn't be bothered to debate with Ashlynn on topics they had already discussed. "You do not understand. I will not convince you, and it is a waste of both our time to try. What I want to propose is a resolution."

"If you want a resolution, then I will offer you one," Ashlynn said. "Drop your blade. Release my friend. Allow me to strip your horns from his body," she added, gesturing with the Severing Knife held in her left hand. "Do this, and we can negotiate your continued existence. There are no other terms."

"Don't be so hasty to demand capitulation, your Dominion," Kimsel chided. Her words might be proper and polite, but the tone she used was one that belonged to an elder addressing a young child. "If we are

backed into a corner where we have nothing to lose and must rely only on your mercy, then we might as well fight to the end, don't you think?"

"Then what do you propose?" Ashlynn asked. Her right arm had begun to tremble from the effort of holding the sword up, and her connection to the mountain was weakening by the minute, greatly diminishing the amount of energy she could feed to the Holy Flame Blade.

As much as she wanted to negotiate a peaceful surrender, if this dragged on much longer, she would lose her ability to fight back against the power of the icy runic blade that still rested in Hauke's hands, even if its tip had been lowered.

If it had been a clash between human lords, if her father had been the one standing in her place and it was another count facing off against them, just offering to enter into peace talks could halt fighting for weeks or months while both sides argued over a solution. There would be time to withdraw the army, to heal and recover, and by the time both sides had licked their wounds and cooled their heads, a reasonable agreement would emerge.

But the Eldritch weren't like that. Things on this side of the mountains were much more black and white. Victor and defeated with both glory and responsibility landing on the victor. At that point, whoever had emerged as the strongest was free to dictate terms to the loser.

"Ritchel, Eldritch Lord of the High Pass, stands on the edge of death," Kimsel began. "Even if he survives this night, he has been defeated on his own mountain and deserves to lose his throne for his failures."

As soon as she spoke, several Frost Walkers on the walls began to shout and object. They hadn't come here to fight a war, they had all been surprised by the sudden battle. To say that their lord had lost his right to rule when Nyrielle's army sent an assassin to slaughter his guard and take him hostage was an insult few of them could bear.

Commander Jannik, however, held up a hand to silence his men. He'd only just arrived at the scene of the battle when a messenger arrived in the great hall to tell the elders waiting to receive Lady Nyrielle with a grand feast that things had fallen apart when Hauke attacked one of the witches.

He'd been too late to do anything about the chaos that gripped the young warriors who were standing for what should have been a ceremonial gathering but now that he was here, he was determined to keep things from going any further out of control.

Besides, in Jannik's mind, the ancestral spirit possessing Hauke wasn't wrong that Ritchel had failed. Whatever had led to tonight's tragedy, as the Lord of the High Pass who was present during the disaster, Ritchel had to take responsibility for what had happened. Now that the ancestor pointed it out, he wanted to at least hear what the ancestor had to say.

The ancestors should always be consulted when the fate of the clan was at stake, and Jannik had a feeling that, since she was calling the leadership of the clan in question, whatever happened here would reshape the clan for decades if not centuries to come.

Of course, it was the role of ancestors to advise. The living would need to decide for themselves what to do with that advice, and so while Jannik perked up his ears to listen to the old woman's words, he resolved himself to defy them if her advice would push even more of his men into the chasm of death.

"Since the current Lord of the High Pass is incapable of ruling it," Kimsel said, looking from the soldiers atop the walls of the icy fortress to the army gathered behind the towering Tuscan mercenaries before giving Ashlynn a direct and challenging look. "I declare the Throne of the High Pass Vacant and open the field of honor for challengers!"

"Lord Ansgar wishes to face you in single combat for the throne, your Dominion," the old woman said, using the runic blade as a prop to gesture to the fortress and the mountains beyond it. "Win, and take control of the High Pass. Should you stand victorious, you may pass judgment on us as you wish, and we will not resist."

"But lose," she added, staring down at Ashlynn from her greater height. "And we will not only take the throne. We will pass judgment on you and the defiler who carries a weapon carved from one of our horns, and you will submit to that judgment."

"What say you, Mother of Trees?" Kimsel asked. "Will you contend for the throne?"

Chapter 439: I Refuse

For a moment, Ashlynn stared at Hauke's stooped figure, too stunned by the ancient spirit's proposal to articulate her thoughts. The cold wind blowing across the mountainside and the creak of weapons and armor from both Nyrielle's army and the forces on the walls were the only sounds in the barren landscape between the two.

"Ha ha, haha, ha, ha," Ashlynn laughed, finally lowering the Holy Flame Blade and allowing its flames to fade away. The muscles of her arm shook with relief and her whole body relaxed as she let go of the tension of maintaining her threatening posture to laugh at the ancient spirit's proposal.

"Drop your sword," Ashlynn told the old woman possessing Hauke. "I accept your surrender. Since you understand that you are defeated, we don't need to make this any uglier do we?" Ashlynn asked with a light smile on her face.

On the walls, Savis stared at the young witch in open-mouthed shock. She'd been offered a chance to fight for the throne of the High Pass. If she won, all of this would end. He'd already been forced to watch as several soldiers from the Black Wolf Brigade died to the Frost Walker's sorcery while he and Tausau were trapped atop the gatehouse. He knew that there had been casualties among Tausau's Mongrel Horde as well, yet their mighty Seneschal was laughing and treating their challenge like a surrender? Had she lost her mind?

"Young woma-, that is, your Dominion," Kimsel stammered, utterly confused by the witch's reaction to her solemn challenge for the throne of the High Pass. "Perhaps you have misunderstood..."

"I haven't misunderstood anything," Ashlynn said calmly, using the time to steady her breathing and regain a bit of her strength. Her wounds burned with the stinging cold of the mountain air, and her muscles ached from the abuse she'd subjected them to, but she could already feel Nyrielle's presence returning.

The echo of Nyrielle's heartbeat within her chest was going stronger by the moment and at this distance, she could feel Nyrielle's deep sense of worry for her and the all the people with her. Soon, this nightmare could come to an end, she just had to drag things out a little bit longer.

"Only someone in a position of weakness would demand single combat to conclude this matter," Ashlynn pointed out in a tone more cutting than the mountain air. "Your blizzard is broken. Our men have breached the walls of the fortress, and the rest of our army is now able to move. The sword you used to suppress me has been countered by an even more powerful artifact, one whose nature is more dangerous to you than yours is to me," she said, calmly ticking off her points.

"The prison of ice that stopped anyone from interfering with our battle is shattered and broken, and there is no one else coming to your aid," she said. "You are alone, fighting a battle no one else wants to fight for a cause no one else believes in. The only path you have forward is to declare Lord Ritchel unfit to hold his throne so you can seize it for yourself and force the Frost Walker clan to do as you wish."

"I respect the Frost Walker tradition of honoring your ancestors and seeking their advice," Ashlynn said, turning to face the Frost Walkers standing on the walls. Her voice was loud, and she used a subtle manipulation of the winds to ensure that everyone in the fortress could hear her words. "But these are not the first controlling ghosts I've had dealings with, and they are no different than the last one who tried to force a member of my coven to bend to her will."

Though Cecile's attempts to influence Ashlynn had been limited by her deference to the next Mother of Trees, the way the ghost of the former Willow Witch attempted to twist Heila into the same kind of witch that she had been in life was something Ashlynn and Heila had discussed at length. Ashlynn's encounter with the ghost of Lady Claire du Gaal had been even more concerning, and seeing the actions of these ancestors now, she was increasingly convinced that the dead should leave the living alone.

"Ghosts and remnants of people long dead may have wisdom that we can learn from," Ashlynn said, turning back to Hauke's stooped figure. "But you are little better than a book on a shelf. The world has changed since the days when you ruled, and your wisdom is increasingly divorced from the events of today, so I refuse your challenge and I refuse everything it's based on."

"I refuse to submit Heila to your 'justice' when she has committed no crime," Ashlynn said, positioning herself between Hauke's figure and the place where Ignatious held the sleeping Willow Witch. "I refuse to gamble her fate on a contest between us when I cannot you to act reasonably if you won, and since you know you are defeated, I have no reason to!"

"I refuse to believe that Lord Ritchel is unfit to hold his throne!" Ashlynn shouted, ensuring that everyone, including the weakening Frost Walker Lord, could hear her declaration. "Unless he is dead, he holds his throne still!"

"Auntie! Auntie, no!" Talauia protested, pressing her needle firmly into Ritchel's neck. "He tried to trap you, tried to trick you, tried to help kill Hiela. He can't, he can't be allowed to live!"

"I don't think he was trying to trap me," Ashlynn said, looking deeply into the eyes of the fallen lord of the High Pass. "You were trying to trap Hauke and the ancestors possessing him, weren't you?"

As much as it brought him great shame to admit because he realized how terribly his action had been misunderstood, Ritchel gave a slight nod at Ashlynn's words. He still didn't understand why Lady Nyrielle had unleashed her army before flying away. Or why the Thistle Witch had come so decisively for his head when they could have cleared up the misunderstanding and worked together to subdue the ancestors. But he didn't need to understand in order to admit that his mistake had contributed to this mess.

"Talauia," Ashlynn said. "Please remove your poison and let Lord Ritchel go. His eyes are filled with worry for his people and his son," she said, hating the way that the proud lord was being forced to watch his kingdom crumbling from the edge of death. "He isn't our enemy."

When she looked at Ritchel, it was hard not to see all the things he shared with her own father. Ritchel was struggling to hang on to his throne long enough to pass it to Hauke, while Count Rhys Blackwell had done everything he could to secure a way for a grandson to inherit his own throne rather than watch Blackwell County fall into years of bitter succession disputes.

Both of them were doing their best to be good rulers and good fathers in a world that kept forcing them to choose between the two. If her father could have handed his throne to her instead of needing a male heir, she was certain he would have. Or if he didn't because of her mark of the witch, he would have at least handed it to Jocelynn.

And if Ritchel could have promised his throne to Hauke, even though the young lorde needed a few years more to grow into his strength, then perhaps Hauke wouldn't have given himself over to these manipulative ancestors in a desperate attempt to become strong enough to assume the throne.

"But what about him, what about him?" Talauia asked, pulling back her needle and pointing it at Hauke. She hadn't forgotten who had started all of this, and as he currently was, treated like a puppet on the strings of his ancestors, she was afraid that even if he submitted now, it would only be a matter of time before someone else turned him into a weapon to use against her loved ones. "It's his fault, all his fault that this happened!"

"Enough of this," Ansgar's booming voice thundered from Hauke's mouth as the young lord abandoned Kimsel's aged, stooped posture. Now, the young Frost Walker lord stood with a warrior's pride, lifting the Runic Blade of Eternal Ice in his hand and pouring his energy into the weapon.

"We offered reasonable compromise," Ansgar snarled as several hooked runes on the blade began to glow in menacing shades of purple, dark blue, and brilliant white. "We offered a fair contest. But since you 'refuse' our kindness, then you can 'accept' your death!"

Chapter 440: Explosive Clash (Part One)

Within Hauke's mind, Kimsel sighed heavily as Ansgar wrestled control away from her. She had tried to give him the greatest stage and highest honor to salvage this situation for them and their descendants but pride and an inability to accept defeat was about to doom them all.

"Eraric," she said, leaning on her frozen staff more than ever before and looking exceptionally weary as she turned to face the architect who kept Hauke tightly bound. "Release the young man. We've lost and it's time to accept that defeat."

"Is this the wisdom of your years, Kimsel?" Eraric asked bitterly. "If you cannot win with words, then we are to lower our heads and present our horns for the hunter's saw to harvest? Ansgar was the greatest of us," he said, crossing his arms over his chest and refusing to move or do anything that would allow the young Frost Walker to escape the chains he'd doubled in strength since the young man nearly managed to escape them once before. "He will not fall here."

"We have done all we can," Ines added, looking helplessly through Hauke's eyes as Ansgar prepared to unleash all of his frustration and rage at the woman who dared to laugh at them. Part of her longed to emerge with him, to use Eraric's sword as her tool of destruction in a fight to the bitter end. It would have been so much more satisfying than the end she met at the hands of her own people when she surrendered her throne to become one of their eternal guardians.

"I'm afraid it's in his hands now," she said, sighing as she watched the young witch stepping back from Ansgar's burst of power. As much as she longed to fight once more against the witch, the backlash she suffered when the Mother of Trees shattered her blizzard had come close to cracking her horn. Now, any sorcery she attempted was likely to consume her assuming that the spell didn't go awry in the first place.

At the back of his mental space, Hauke hung his head, powerless against the chains Eraric had bound him with. His body moved under Ansgar's direction, drawing deeply on what little power remained in Hauke's body for a final all-or-nothing assault.

"Zedya, distract him!" Ashlynn shouted as she once again poured energy into the holy sword in her hands. The flames were weak and feeble compared to their earlier blazing glory, but she didn't have time to draw on the strength of the mountain again, and she wasn't certain that she could manage the magic even if she could.

Just a minute longer, she thought. All she needed was a minute longer, and Nyrielle would be here to help. But perhaps she wasn't the only one who sensed her approaching lover. If the ancestors had detected Nyrielle's approach, then it would explain the sudden outburst.

"Endless White, Empty Thoughts, Frozen World and Frozen Form," Zedya intoned in a rich, resonant voice as she strode forward. Her amethyst eyes glowed with all the power she could manage as she sought to draw the ancestral spirits into a world so empty and frozen that they would be unable to make a move against Ashlynn.

At the head of Nyrielle's army, Lennart's heart froze in his chest as he watched the normally purple energy that flowed from Zedya's eyes take on a dark crimson hue. Whether it was because she was exhausting the blood that sustained her life to pour more power into her technique or because she encountered fierce resistance, he didn't know, but it took all of his strength to hold his position at the head of the army instead of rushing to her side and offering up his own blood if she needed it to fight.

For a moment, Zedya's Mesmerizing Gaze seemed to work on the enraged ancestor. Hauke's figure stopped its rush, and the painfully cold energy that surrounded the icy blade began to dissipate as a blank, empty expression settled over Hauke's face.

Ashlynn didn't waste the opening, sprinting as fast as her abused legs would allow her to, not away from Hauke but toward him. She had no intention of letting the spirits force her into a one-on-one duel when she'd already rejected it, but with a little bit of help, she was certain that she could put an end to this insanity.

More than anything, she wished that Heila's Tuscan mercenaries were close enough to restrain Hauke, but by the time they arrived, it would already be too late. All she could do now was hope that Zedya's Mesmerizing Gaze would be strong enough for her to make her move.

It almost was. Ashlynn was only two paces short when clarity returned to Hauke's eyes. Ashlynn didn't dare to hope that Hauke had been able to free himself from the grip of his ancestors, and the bellow of fury that resounded from his throat as he spotted Ashlynn was all the confirmation she needed that the enraged ancestor had broken free of Zedya's gaze.

"DIE! WITCH!" Ansgar bellowed, pouring all of the energy he could into the Runic Blade of Eternal Ice. The weight of thousands of pounds of snow piled up behind his swing and the temperature of the air around him plummeted, instantly freezing the sweat on Ashlynn's body through several layers of clothing and making it almost impossible to breathe.

"BURN! GHOST!" Ashlynn shouted in return, swinging the Holy Flame Sword upward with all the strength she could manage, cloaking herself in a wave of flames and heat that freed her from the oppressive aura of frost that descended along with the sword of ice.

Both swords met in a collision of fire and ice that shook the mountain, triggering a number of small avalanches above and below Nyrielle's army. The stones beneath their feet cracked and shattered, along with centuries-old ice hanging from the nearby bridge, sending it tumbling into the chasm below.

On the ramparts above and among the ranks of soldiers watching opposite them, everyone held their breath as a wave of rapidly freezing steam enveloped the area, obscuring their vision and making it impossible to see the results of their collision.