

The Vampire 471

Chapter 471: Practical Methods

"Young Hauke's future is in your hands."

Aspakos's words weighed on Erkembalt like an anvil strapped around his tail, dragging him down to the ground and forcing him to look at the captive Frost Walker like a person rather than a puzzle to be solved. The aging artificer would have preferred to treat Hauke's condition as nothing more than a challenge to his skills, one that he could succeed or fail at without real consequence. After all, Lady Nyrielle had only asked that they try, she had never demanded results.

But now, his old friend had not only reminded him that this was a painfully young man, younger even than Erkembalt's own children, but he was a young man who could be incredibly useful in the days to come.

It didn't take a prophet to understand that Lady Nyrielle and Lady Ashlynn likely hoped to use the Frost Walkers to blunt the fire sorcerers, the so called priests of the invading human army. One look at the Holy Flame Blade had been enough to show both men the sort of enemy they were up against and a sorcerer like Hauke formed a natural counter to those sorcerers.

But beyond that, he was a young man... one who was suffering a curse that was far too cruel for someone who seemed to have blundered into the schemes of ancient spiritual revenants.

"You take the joy from my life with words like those, old friend," Erkembalt said, collecting the tools he'd dropped and returning them to their place on the table. "Be a second pair of eyes for me while I work," he said gruffly as he brought a cone of incense and a burner to Hauke's feet. "Tell me if you notice anything that I don't."

Pulling a small mechanical striker from one of his vest's many bulging pockets, the artificer quickly lit the incense before lowering a set of colored lenses over his ordinary spectacles, blocking out the light cast by torches and focusing only on the flow of faintly visible energy as it circulated thorough Hauke's body.

Within his icy prison, Hauke watched carefully as the sorcerers performed their work. He didn't know what the strange feathered sorcerer had seen in his vision but the feeling of great power pulling aside a vast curtain reached Hauke even in the prison of his own mind. The brief brush with power gave him a

feeling of an immense world of possibilities and at the same time, the heavy feeling of dozens of hopes and dreams dying all at once.

Sorcery like that was far beyond anything that Hauke had ever experienced but since it seemed to have convinced the man called Aspakos that he should spare the young Frost Walker lord, Hauke was inclined to at least respect the power of the sorcery even if he didn't know what kind of revelation it had provided.

Right now, however, he was watching Erkembalt work as the artificer carefully fanned incense until a cloud of haze enveloped the Hauke from the tip of his horn to the ends of his toes.

"Look here," Erkembalt said, pointing at a swirling pattern in the smoke above Hauke's head. "It's like his energy has been broken into two distinct flows. His mind and his body are nearly completely separated from each other."

"Not completely," Aspakos said, hovering far enough away that he wouldn't disturb his friend's delicate work but close enough that he could see things from a different perspective. "Look closer. There are three flows. One for his body, another for his head, and a third, a paper thin shell surrounding the two and holding everything together. But his horn has pierced into the shell."

"Mmm, and it's doing more than that," Erkembalt agreed, watching the flow of the smoke. "If I didn't know better, I'd say this was a vampire's curse. His horn is drawing energy away from his body to fuel the curse keeping his mind sealed away..."

"That's not how vampire curses work at all," Aspakos snorted. "This is Frost Walker sorcery, very old Frost Walker sorcery. It's like it's using cold wind to steal the heat from his body and giving that heat to the curse that binds him," he muttered before walking over to the table and peering through Erkembalt's tools. "Do you have Silver Leaf Purity Powder? Or have you prepared any Thief's Revealing Mist?"

"Do I have any Silver Leaf Purity Powder," Erkembalt muttered with a disgruntled -humpf- sound as he padded back across the prison cell to his tools. "Wouldn't be much of a curse breaker if I couldn't look for corruption beneath the surface would I? It's in the canister labeled 'dirt samples.'"

"Dirt samples?" the dark feathered sorcerer said in surprise. "Why do you keep your purity powder with dirt samples?"

"I don't," Erkembalt said, opening a wooden canister to reveal several neatly stored vials, each one containing a different unique, glittering powder. "You think I've never had burglars rifle through my things? The outside world isn't like things were back in the Forsaken Lands. Even children will try to snatch things that look like they're valuable if they think they can get away with it. A starving man will snatch anything labeled 'silver' even if it's just ground up plants that are worthless outside of the trade, but no one snatches 'dirt samples.'"

"Now look," Erkembalt said, his tail standing up straight in anticipation as he carefully withdrew a pinch of the silvery powder and sprinkled it over Hauke's iridescent horn. As soon as he did, the bright silvery powder turned dark, settling on the horn in patches that slowly grew larger as the artificer added more powder until a pattern began to emerge.

"Chains," Aspakos said, clicking his tongue in disgust. "His horn is the anchor of the curse that binds him. This is intricate," he added as he examined the chains, noticing patterns in the chains that almost resembled glyphs from an older form of Eldritch. "This would never work on someone who wasn't a Frost Walker... and maybe it would only work on another Frost Walker with an iridescent horn like his."

"That makes it fairly simple though," Erkembalt said, walking across the prison cell to retrieve a saw that would cut through the limbs of a person just as easily as it would cut through the limbs of a tree. "All we have to do is remove his horn and the curse should completely unravel..."

Chapter 472: A Good Student

"Noooo!" Hauke shouted from deep within his mind. He'd been listening attentively and observing while the two men worked but now, what was this madness? They wanted to cut off his horn to break the curse? He would rather die!

"No, you can't!" Hauke roared, his voice echoing off the icy walls of the cavern within his mind. "Why can't you hear me! Do something so you can hear me first, old man! Do something so you can talk to me before you start cutting on me!"

The cave that held Hauke prisoner shook and trembled with a combination of his fear and anger as he threw himself once again at Eraric's binding spell, trying to do anything, anything at all to demonstrate how unwilling he was to suffer such an extreme mutilation.

"You can't touch his horn," Aspakos said, stepping between Hauke and the smiling artificer. "I promised that we wouldn't treat him until Lady Nyrielle passed judgment and she's not going to do that until she holds court tomorrow night. Put the saw down and think of what else could be done to free him from this curse."

"You know that my sign says 'curses broken', not 'curses gently removed' right?" Erkembalt said with a huff as he put down the saw. "I'm not a healer. My methods aren't delicate and my customers understand that."

"I doubt your customers would come to you if they had any other alternative," the other sorcerer said ruffling his feathers and heaving a heavy sigh of relief that his friend hadn't been insistent about following the quickest path forward. "But we have alternatives. We're traveling with witches now, aren't we? If you can reveal the intricacies of the curse, then the Severing Knife of a witch is the perfect tool for gently prying it out."

"Reveal it's intricacies? Do you know how long that would take?" Erkembalt says, shaking his head. "We have at most a day. In that time, I can find one or two other methods to remove the curse by force but if you want me to reveal it's intricacies well enough to unravel it..."

"Then, not enough to unravel it," Aspakos suggested, thinking of a different approach he could take with his stubborn friend. "Understand it well enough to explain to Lady Ashlynn and Lady Nyrielle. When they sit in judgment, they will want to know what we've learned. Since you've found one solution already," he said, charitably referring to the notion of cutting off the young Frost Walker's horn as a 'solution.' "Let's see how many more we can find."

Inwardly, Hauke heaved a huge sigh of relief of his own. He'd started to notice something when they applied the strange, silvery powder to his horn but before he could consider it, the mad butcher had picked up a saw and started talking about cutting off his horn!

Now that the man with the broken beak had managed to once again talk sense into the saw wielding madman, Hauke returned his attention to the strange sensations he felt from his horn since Erkembalt applied the powder.

Before, he'd only noticed the way the curse manifested on him within his own mind. He could feel the ice surrounding his hands and feet, binding him in place, trapping him between two pillars of ice within

his mind, but the mental space he'd shared with the ancestral spirits was so realistic he'd forgotten that it was only a manifestation of imagination.

This space was his own mind, and within it, he should be its master. The actions of the ancestors had robbed him of his ability to control his own body, but his mind was still his to do with as he pleased. While he might not be able to free himself from the ice that bound him, he could still do a great deal to change the space around him.

"Polished Ice. Reflect My Truth." They were simple words for what should have been a simple act of sorcery but drawing on his energy felt like cutting open his own veins and filling them with ice water. Freezing pain tore through Hauke's mind, nearly breaking his concentration before he could complete the working. Closing his eyes, he poured all of his will into the simple act of sorcery until finally, he felt the space within his mind shift around him.

When he opened his eyes, the vision of the ancestral cave that the ancestors had constructed in his mind had vanished, replaced by a brightly lit chamber of ice. The walls of ice around him were polished so smoothly that each one acted like a mirror, reflecting back images of the young Frost Walker lord trapped in the center of the chamber.

Now that he could see himself, he realized that the men examining him were right about the chains on his horn. The patterns of chains stood out starkly thanks to the Silver Leaf Purity Powder that revealed any trace of corruption and the curse certainly counted as a corrupting influence.

More importantly, however, while the men examining him might not recognize the ancient runes formed by the patterns of chains, Hauke did. A slow smile spread on his face as he thanked Kimsel for her many lessons in the ancient symbols used to shape eternal ice. Eraric might have been a master of using the runes to form constructs, but no one compared to Kimsel in terms of accumulation of knowledge and her lessons were particularly useful now.

"This binding isn't something Eraric designed," Hauke realized as he inspected the runes. All this time, he'd thought himself trapped by the mightiest architect to ever be born into the Frost Walker Clan but he'd been wrong. This binding was not only something that Eraric had learned from someone else, it had been hastily applied to restrict Hauke's attempt to escape!

"There are flaws in this," Hauke said as his eyes darted around the room, examining reflections of the binding from every possible angle. "I just need to find a way to attack those flaws," he said as he grasped

the first glimmer of true hope that he'd had since this nightmare began. "Now, what else do you know, old men," he said, returning his attention to the conversation between the two sorcerers.

It was clear that they have very little experience with ancient Frost Walker sorcery and both men worked carefully, making their observations as they studied the magic holding Hauke captive. Hauke, however, soaked in their observations like a sponge, fitting them into the lessons he'd taken from Eraric, Ines, Kimsel and even Eugen.

As the hours wore on with night turning into day and even daylight beginning to fade, Hauke began to despair that he could shatter the binding from within. There were cracks in the binding, or rather, there were gaps.

Those gaps allowed him to hear and see what happened in the outside world and they had likely been left there deliberately in order to let the ancestors observe what happened while Ansgar treated Hauke's body like a weapon to wield.

"Escaping is too difficult," he admitted when the men finally left in order to rest before night fell and the trials were to begin. "But just because I can't escape, that doesn't mean I can't do something else," he mused, carefully considering the lessons he'd received from the other ancestors.

"What I need is a way to talk to people," he reasoned. "If I could speak to them... then there might be a way out of this without letting that butcher saw off my horn."

There was still time. Only a few hours perhaps, but as long as he had any time at all, Hauke resolved to spend every last moment applying everything he had learned to find a way out of this unending nightmare.

He was the last student of the five greatest Frost Walkers to ever live, or at least the five greatest to pass down their horns. If he couldn't find something to use to take control of his own destiny, then what had been the point of becoming their student in the first place?

Chapter 473: Hauke's Trial Begins

Sitting on her frozen throne in the Great Hall, Ashlynn felt ice grip her heart when Hauke was carried in. Chains bound his body, securing him to the chair that was so heavy it took several men to move, but even if he wasn't bound, there was nothing the young man could do.

His wounds from the battle the night before had been washed and bandaged but with healers in such short supply, no one had done more than provide minimal care for the young Frost Walker lord who many felt was responsible for starting the night of tragedy. If he could feel, the pain of those wounds would likely be immense but at the moment, seeing his vacant, glassy-eyed stare, Ashlynn could only hope that he wasn't suffering.

"The dead cry out for justice," Zedya said formally when the soldiers set Hauke at the front of the hall and Erkembalt joined Aspakos with the remainder of the delegation. "Many witnesses saw how last night's tragedy began. Young Lord Hauke cried 'defiler' and launched an unprovoked attack at Lady Heila. Because of that action, what should have been a simple, ceremonial greeting between two allies turned into a night of blood and death."

"Lady Ashlynn," Zedya said, turning to face the Mother of Trees on her throne of ice. "You understand what happened better than anyone, and while the Willow Witch suffered at his hands, you suffered far more grievous wounds. Will you tell everyone gathered here, living and dead, what happened last night?"

"I will," Ashlynn said smoothly as she tried to assess the mood of the crowd. Several of the youngest Frost Walkers present glared at Hauke with open hostility while the elders among them wore far more complicated looks that contained a measure of guilt and sorrow. Surprisingly, the hostility was far more intense on Nyrielle's side of the Great Hall, though Ashlynn wasn't sure if it was hostility on behalf of the fallen soldiers or for something else entirely.

"But not yet," she said. "Last night's tragedy comes near the end of a story and too many here, including the honored dead, have never heard it," she explained, casting a glance at Nyrielle and giving her lover's hand a gentle squeeze. "Let my love speak first."

"Some secrets should stay buried with the dead," Nyrielle said with a heavy sigh. She'd discussed whether or not to reveal these secrets with Ashlynn and she'd been strongly opposed to doing so, but her lover wanted to build toward something greater and insisted that lies and secrets would only undermine the foundation of anything they tried to build in the aftermath of this nightmare.

Nyrielle, however, was worried that a poorly understood truth could do more harm than good, and while she knew more of the truth now than they had before, there were still many questions that only her mentor, Shubnalu, could answer. Without his cooperation, some things could never be fully understood, even if the fragments they possessed were revealed. In the end, they'd compromised, and

Nyrielle agreed to reveal a portion of what she had learned in the ancestral cave where they had first encountered the Blood Golems.

"My darling Ashlynn has asked me to share a piece of history long lost to your people," Nyrielle said, looking out over the Frost Walkers. "But understand that this comes from a time long ago. So long ago that my teacher, the Fangs of Death, was a young man under the tutelage of Acat, a True Vampire who bore the title of 'Jaws of Death.' Acat fell more than five hundred years ago, leaving his seat vacant until Bardas was born into the world to inherit his title and traditions."

Several mutters swept through the crowd at the revelation, particularly among the Mongrel Hord. Savis and Tausau shared an even more troubled look. Hamdi was one of Bardas's progeny so they had some interaction with the famed Jaws of Death of the current age, but to hear that events last night began with their progenitor's predecessor cast things in a very different light for every vampire in the room.

"At the height of your clan's power, the Frost Walkers brought about an Age of Ice that covered the world beneath a blanket of ice and snow," Nyrielle explained. "By rights, according to the traditions of the Jaws of Death, your clan should have been exterminated for what they had done. Those who threaten the lives of all people cannot be allowed to continue their rule."

"But instead of slaughtering your people," Nyrielle continued. "Acat sealed away the power that threatened the world, breaking the bloodline of Frost Walkers into its component parts and ending the tyranny of a clan where almost everyone possessed an iridescent horn like Haukes."

"Tyranny?" Commander Jannik said derisively, unable to contain the storm of emotions that engulfed his heart at Nyrielle's words. "You mean to tell me that this Acat stripped us of the chance to grow into greatness the way Hauke could have, breaking the power of our clan and turning us into prey for the likes of Tuscans and artificers who would turn our horns into weapons, and yet we were the tyrants?"

"Jannik!" Odette cried out, rushing from her chair to his side to hold him back before he could do anything impulsive again. "Please, hear what Her Eternity has to say before you speak. I'm sure there is more to this."

"There is more," Nyrielle said calmly as she looked down at the troubled commander who had already demonstrated his poor opinions about vampires and their traditions once during this evening's proceedings. "But you should understand one thing first. The Frost Walker clan of today is not the Frost Walker clan of old. That power was broken because it caused untold deaths and devastation. So when I

call the Frost Walker clan of old 'tyrants' I mean it. They deserved the label for nearly exterminating every other clan on the continent," she said in a voice dripping with condemnation.

"I will say it again," Nyrielle said as her eyes filled with a deep darkness and her voice grew distant as though she spoke from the depths of a limitless abyss. "The Frost Walkers of old deserved their eradication, but they were spared by Acat's hand all those years ago. Instead of destroying your clan, he stripped your clan of the power to destroy the world."

"But you can see that even then, your clan wasn't left without hope for a bright future," Ashlynn added, squeezing Nyrielle's hand gently before she pointed at Hauke, sitting in chains at the foot of the dais. "Iridescent horns are still born into the Frost Walker Clan. It is too much power for everyone to have," she said, nodding at Savis and Tausau who quickly nodded in agreement.

"But in the hands of the right person, that power can still pave the way to a brighter future for the entire clan," Ashlynn said. "I know that that's what Hauke was trying to do," she added in a softer tone. "And he was trying to learn how to do so from ancestors who shared his unique gifts, because no one could understand what it really takes to master an iridescent horn other than the people who possessed one before him."

"If only it were as simple as learning from those who came before," Nyrielle said, calming herself enough to continue telling her tale. Inwardly, she worried that what she had to say next would draw even more ire from Commander Jannik and those who thought like him, but... she had promised Ashlynn that she would try.

If words failed, there was still the option to use force... she only hoped that, for Ashlynn's sake, it didn't come to that so soon in their attempts to forge something greater.

Chapter 474: Twisted Ancestors

Hauke watched in stunned silence from within the prison of his own mind as Nyrielle laid out a history of his people that he had never heard, even from the ancestors who had dwelled within his mind.

From Ansgar, he had heard of the era of Seven Peaks when the Frost Walkers ruled not just the High Pass but Airgead Mountain and several other nearby mountains whose summits rose above the clouds. In that era, Ansgar hadn't been the Lord of High Pass but the High Lord of Seven Peaks and Frost Walkers held power for nearly the entire length of the eastern mountains.

Each generation after that dwindled as the ice and snow of the glaciers retreated and by the time Kimsel ruled, only the High Pass remained within the Frost Walker's domain. This was the history that they'd shared with him but they said nothing of an age of ice before, nor of a vampire breaking their bloodline!

But now, as he listened to Nyrielle's words, Hauke felt like the powerful vampire was about to explain something even more important, and even more relevant to people like him who managed to manifest the iridescent horn that belonged to the broken bloodline of his clan.

"It's true that Acat's sorcery, however it functioned, made it possible for people with iridescent horns to be born again," Nyrielle said, continuing her explanation. "But I doubt that this was deliberate, even though it might be fortunate," she said with a brief glance at Hauke's listless figure.

"It was my mentor Shubnalu who responded to the reemergence of the iridescent horns among your people, when a powerful High Lord used his strength to extend the glaciers for the first time in hundreds of years, linking seven mountains together in a world of ice that lasted through even the hottest summers," Nyrielle explained.

"The Fangs of Death exist to reap the lives of individuals who have grown so powerful that they can shake the foundations of the world with their will," she said, turning her gaze back to the crowd who now hung on her every word. "But once again, vampires showed mercy. Shubnalu offered a choice to this powerful High Lord. Rule as a man for the remainder of his life, or preside over his people for eternity as a powerful guardian who could ensure that the nation he built never failed."

The account of the 'bargain' that Shubnalu had made with High Lord Ansgar wasn't outlined in great detail on the tablet Nyrielle found in the ancestral cave. Her mentor left behind just enough information for whoever followed after him to continue the legacy in order to suppress the Frost Walkers and contain their threat, but it was enough to understand the many lies Shubnalu must have told the High Lord of Seven Peaks for him to agree to what happened next.

"Shubnalu never offered to take this High Lord as his progeny," Nyrielle said. Or if he had, the offer had been rejected and her mentor hadn't written of it. "Instead, he offered to turn him into an immortal guardian formed of frozen blood. A guardian who could watch over his people for all time."

"I have seen the records of the sorcery used to create these 'Frozen Blood Guardians,'" Nyrielle said as she suppressed a shudder. "You cannot imagine the cruelty and sacrifice that was required to produce

just one of these immortal guardians, let alone five of them. Before I leave the High Pass, I will shatter the records of the ritual so that it can never be attempted again."

"Why?" Commander Jannik asked, though he did not shout or stand from his seat. "Vampires took away our strongest bloodline, and when it reemerged, they gave us the gift of these guardians. Now you would take away the gift that your own teacher gave us? Just how far must our people be ground down for what happened centuries before any of us were born?"

"Still childish," Nyrielle said, glaring at the dark-furred commander. "I spare you the horrors but you demand to hear them for yourself. So be it," she said, narrowing her midnight eyes as she looked at the assembled Frost Walkers.

"If I drained your body of blood, do you think there would be enough blood to form a statue of ice the same size as you?" Nyrielle asked bluntly. "Of course there wouldn't. So to craft the body of a Frozen Blood Guardian, more blood must be obtained. Only it isn't enough to take just the blood," she added.

"A Blood Golem is a simple construct formed from blood around the heart of a creature. The heart provides a 'will', a desire strong enough to give the construct purpose. Defend this place. Attack people from your most hated enemy. The desires of blood golems are not complicated because have no mind, only hearts filled with a single purpose."

As she spoke, comprehension began to dawn on the faces of the sorcerers among the crowd as they realized that, unlike the willing offerings given by Nyrielle's people when a vampire needed to feed, the formation of these 'Frozen Blood Guardians' would require a much greater sacrifice.

"You begin to understand," Nyrielle said as she watched comprehension turn into horror on more and more faces. "These 'immortal guardians' were much like blood golems. They existed for the singular purpose of protecting your people. Everything else they either cut away or lost to the millstone of time after giving their lives in ritual sacrifice to take their place in the ancestral cave with their companions."

At this point, Ashlynn stood up from her chair, gathering all eyes on her while she gave Nyrielle a brief smile of thanks. Everything that had happened before brought them to the tragedy of the night before, but without understanding what had really happened to the ancestors, the people gathered would never be able to understand what had happened to Hauke.

Now that they understood, Ashlynn could begin her own part of the story. One that she hoped would result in not only understanding, but a willingness to step forward on a different path than the dark one that had haunted Frost Walkers since the end of the Age of Ice.

"By the time the Fangs of Death was done with them," Ashlynn said, taking over the explanation. "They weren't the same as the ancestors you visit in your ancestral halls. They had been turned into weapons little different than the one my Lady Heila wears at her waist. And after centuries spent sealed away in a flooded ancestral cave with sorcery that unraveled with each passing year, they had transformed from immortal guardians into weapons that hungered to be used..."

Chapter 475: A Broken Pawn

Standing before the assembled men and women of Nyrielle's army as well as hundreds of Frost Walkers, Ashlynn tried to summon a fraction of the calm, self assured demeanor she'd seen so often from her father when he sat upon his throne in Blackwell Manor. Nothing ever seemed to phase him when he sat in judgment, no matter whether he was overseeing a dispute about a fence line or pronouncing the sentence for a convicted murderer.

Whether he could maintain that calm in front of this audience or not, she had no idea, but just the thought of him sitting here beside her, watching her do as he had done so many times helped her to firm up her resolve as they approached the critical point in this trial. Perhaps one day, he truly would be able to watch over her, but for now, she would have to continue on as he taught her.

"Old Svenja," Ashlynn said, turning to face the oldest of the Frost Walkers present, the woman who was considered to be closest to the ancestors. "I encountered the ancestors who had become 'Frozen Blood Guardians' when they were at their worse. When I left, Hauke said that he intended to preserve their horns in order to learn from them. In the time that I've been away, can you tell me what's happened?"

"What would you like to know, your Dominion?" Svenja asked carefully. Already, her spirit felt restless and her body trembled with a dozen contradictory feelings. Shock at what Nyrielle had revealed, outrage at what had been done in the name of their honored ancestors, and wrapping around all of that, more fear and anxiety than she knew where to put.

Already, she wanted to call a recess to this entire proceeding, withdraw into her chambers for a week or more to think through everything she had heard in the past hour and try to form some semblance of a scap of wisdom she could offer her people who were doubtless struggling even more than she was at the moment. But the dead would not wait for justice and the living would wait even less for vengeance.

"Many of us were anxious about allowing young Hauke to learn from the ancestors in the way that he wished to," Svenja said, lowering her horn in shame. "There were voices that were opposed to it. Hauke said that he needed to keep their horns close and he wore them on his body. He said that if he did not sustain them in this way that the ancestors would crumble away now that they had lost their purpose."

"He did not lie to you," Nyrielle said, speaking up for the young lord who couldn't speak for himself. "Without the frozen blood that sustained them, they would suffer all the ravages of time that the blood held at bay. Years would pass in days and centuries in months until there was nothing left but dust."

"So he said, your Eternity," Svenja said. "Others still disagreed. We wished to place them in an ancestral cave of their own, mounted on traditional statues so that they could be sustained by ordinary sorcery. From your words, I assume that we were wrong and our attempt would have failed?"

"I'm sure they would have endured for a time," Nyrielle said, choosing her words with care. "Whether you were wrong or not is a different matter. After all, if you had done so, last night's tragedy would never have occurred. There would be no dead to demand justice and your lives would continue much as they had before."

"Who made the final decision?" Ashlynn asked, taking back control of the conversation so she could nudge it in the direction that it needed to go. "Was it left to Hauke to choose? Or were the elders persuaded?"

"Lord Ritchel made the final decision," Svenja said, casting an apologetic glance at Odette. "As Lord of the High Pass and Hauke's father, he judged it acceptable if it would allow Hauke to harness the powers of the ancestors for the good of our people. Perhaps, he hoped that doing so would allow young Hauke to succeed him sooner."

"And do you think that was likely?" Ashlynn asked. From her experience fighting against the spirits controlling him, it certainly felt like it would have helped Hauke to secure his position as the next Lord of the High Pass but she didn't know how much of that power Hauke had mastered in the time she'd been away.

"I'll speak to that, Old Svenja," Commander Jannik said as he stood to address not only Ashlynn but all of the people assembled as well. "In just a few short months, Hauke transformed into a different kind of person. Before, we would have called him exceptional for his age and it was clear that he was first among his peers."

"But once he began to learn from the ancestors," Jannik said, shaking slightly as he recalled the way Hauke had stood over him at the end of their last sparring match. Never in all his years competing against Ritchel had he felt so... inadequate as he did when he faced off against the young lord just a few weeks ago. "Once he began to learn their arts, he became a terrifying force with no equal among our clan," he admitted.

Saying that Hauke had no equal was selling things considerably short. When Commander Jannik faced off against the young lord, in the first two of their bouts, he never made it past Hauke's blizzards or storms of icy projectiles. He'd been blinded, disoriented and pummeled into submission without ever brushing a claw through the younger man's fur.

When they fought hand to hand it was even worse. Hauke's movements had gained a refinement that they'd lacked, as if he was receiving guidance on even the slightest of mistakes when he practiced and ruthlessly eliminating him until he could fight with brutal efficiency that left Jannik breathless. The transformation was so extreme that at times, he wondered if he was really fighting against Hauke, or if one of the ancestors had taken over his body to teach the current commander a painful lesson about his own inadequacies.

"So, in learning from the ancestors, he gained great power," Ashlynn said as she prepared to ask her next and most important question. Thus far, she only had suspicions. There hadn't been enough time to gather much information while she slept away the day, recovering from her wounds, but the few things that Virve had learned and reported back to her gave her an idea of what had been happening.

"Now tell me, Commander Jannik, Castle Mistress Odette or Old Svenja," Ashlynn said, looking at the three foremost leaders among the Frost Walkers in Ritchel's absence. "Did Hauke ever speak of plans for the future, or a purpose that he needed to fulfill with the power he gained? Had he begun to express ideas that might not have been his own, that would have reshaped the High Pass or the clan itself?"

"He, he did," Odette said, trembling as pieces fell together in her mind. Things had seemed so innocent then, but now that she heard about the way the ancestors had ruled... "He was learning a powerful protective magic, one designed by the ancestor who designed this very fortress," she explained slowly.

"He would have transformed the pass into a tunnel, covered by a vast sheet of Eternal Ice that spanned between the two mountains," Odette explained. "He said that it would allow us to close the pass to humans, even in the summer months, if humans ever made it past the Vale of Mists. He also said that in

time, after a decade or two, it would make it easier to traverse from here to Airgead Mountain without having to descend into the warmer lowlands."

"So it's true," Ashlynn said, nodding as she heard confirmation of one of the stranger rumors that Virve had brought her when she woke. "Hauke was trying to reverse the retreat of the glaciers," she said, thinking back to the conversation she'd once had with Hauke during her first visit.

The young lord was very concerned with the shrinking of the glaciers and the warming of the world that reduced the Frost Walker's territory by inches every year. Knowing how much he cared about his people, it wasn't hard to guess how quickly Hauke would have jumped at the suggestion that there was something he could do to reverse the trend. He might even have believed that it was his responsibility to do so.

"His actions were likely paving a way to restore the Seven Peaks," Ashlynn said with growing confidence as she considered the unwavering, intractable positions the ancestral spirits held when she talked to them during their battle. They seemed frozen in their thinking, products of an age that no longer existed, but what if it was more than that? What if they wanted to bring about a return to that very age?

"And maybe," Ashlynn said, speaking aloud as wondered if the ancestors had been as unaware of their own history as everyone had assumed as well. "Maybe, the magic Hauke was learning from the ancestors would have been capable of ushering in the return of the Age of Ice."

Chapter 476: All I Wanted To Do...

Hauke watched in frozen horror as Ashlynn methodically built her way to what seemed like the only logical conclusion. By the time she arrived at the end, everything seemed to fit neatly in place. So neatly that any other explanation wouldn't make any sense at all.

Nyrielle had explained what the Frost Walkers had lost over the years. She even told them who was responsible for it! And now, hundreds of years later, the rulers of the once mighty Frost Walker nation of the Seven Peaks had returned, finding a ready-made pawn who was eager to participate in their scheme to restore their fallen empire.

But for Hauke, it hadn't been like that at all!

He'd shared with the ancestors everything that Ashlynn had told them about humans, their church, and the power of their Crusades. He explained the threat facing the Frost Walkers and how much they

needed strength to face the battles to come. It was only because of those threats that the ancestors had offered up ways he could use his powers to rebuild ancient defenses for his people.

Everything he learned from them had a purpose. Ansgar taught him how to fight against mighty champions while Eraric taught him how to create strong fortifications. Though he'd had little opportunity to use the healing arts he'd studied with Eugen, Hauke struggled to see how those or the lessons in managing a nation he'd received from Kimsel...

Suddenly his mind froze as he began to look at those lessons from Kimsel from a different perspective.

"You will need these methods for now," she had told him in one lesson when she spoke of methods to advance while seeming to retreat when negotiating with more powerful nations. "But in time, strength will accomplish what honeyed words can not. By the time you are as old as I once was, perhaps no one would dare to suggest you give way to them."

Other lessons also sounded different if he listened to them again with fresh ears.

"The air above us contains vast pockets of even greater cold," Ines explained during her first lesson on Sky Ribbons. "When you can connect the peak of a mountain to those pockets of cold, you can do far more than simply prevent a glacier's retreat..."

When he'd heard her explanation, he'd been eager to apply her lessons to his home mountain as soon as possible. Anything that would stop the shrinking of their glacier and preserve the ancestral caves that were in increasing danger of being exposed each summer would be a welcome boon. If it did more than that, then that was all well and good, but he never expected to be as great a man as people like Ansgar were.

For Hauke, it would have been enough if he could protect his people from the human threat and forge an even stronger alliance with the Vale of Mists. If he could have gained the qualifications to become a witch and join Ashlynn's coven, that would have been even better but he never expected such an outlandish dream to come true.

Every time he spoke with the ancestors, he thought he understood them better. He believed that they were making the best of what little time they had left to help him grow into the kind of guardian for their people that they had once been. But was it really that simple?

"Would you really have faded away?" Hauke asked the empty chamber of ice, his voice trembling with fear. "Or would I have been the one to be locked away," he wondered, taking another look at the reflection of the binding on his horn.

It wasn't Eraric's work and it had been applied in haste but... The powerful architect had recalled such a complicated working in an instant and applied it with brutal efficiency. Had he been studying the thing, perhaps with the other ancestors? Had this been the fate they always intended for Hauke?

"I've been such a fool," he said, slumping against the ice that held him prisoner. "This whole time I thought they were my teachers. I thought I gave them a purpose that they could hang on to but... they had their own purpose all along."

Maybe they hadn't all agreed on it yet. Maybe Kimsel and Eugen were still trying to teach him so that he could resurrect their once mighty nation and rule it in his own right. But Ansgar... Ansgar controlled his body like a puppet, wielding Hauke like an unfamiliar weapon in his hands. In time, however, Hauke was certain that the unfamiliarity would have gone away until no one could tell the difference between Hauke and the ancestor who he had unknowingly surrendered his life to.

Now, as he turned his attention back to Ashlynn who had returned to her seat on the icy throne, he realized that the time had almost arrived for Nyrielle to render her judgment and yet he had never been able to say a single word in his own defense or anyone else's.

"No, no, no, no, no, no," he muttered as he tried to calm his mind and regather his composure enough to use what little sorcery he felt he could manage.

His mind remained his to control but his body was closed to him, leaving him as limp as a rag doll and helpless to do anything. He dared not dream of defeating the binding placed on him, he already knew that was futile, but if he could expand the area that he had control of, just a little bit then perhaps he could at least speak.

"Healing Wind of Gentle Warmth," he said, guiding the thinnest ribbon of warm green energy around the bonds at the tip of his horn. "Bitter Cold, Sudden Freeze," he said a moment later, instantly freezing the energy that gathered at the tip of his horn.

The world around him shook and trembled, going from warm to cold in the blink of an eye, but Hauke wasn't done yet. Again and again, he summoned the opposing forces, pushing the warmth further and further into the spaces between the links of the chain each time before freezing them again.

Like ice wearing away at stones as it melted and froze again, Hauke battered the edges of the bonds that held him in place, struggling for a moment of freedom, just one chance to speak before the chains snapped tightly around him again...

"Mistress Nyrielle," Ashlynn said, turning to look at her lover with a faint, hopeful expression. The people seemed to accept the story they'd unfolded, though there was a great deal of speculation filling the gaps between solid facts.

Whether they were right or not, it was impossible to say, but given her own experience with ghosts who wouldn't easily give up any chance they had to control or influence the living, she felt it was more likely than not.

"I think that..."

"Wait!" Hauke's trembling, strained voice cried out, shocking everyone present in the hall. His appearance hadn't changed much, his body still hung limp against his chains, but now he held his head up high and his eyes had gone from unfocused and glassy to clear and filled with purpose while the tip of his horn pulsed with a feeble green and blue flickering light.

"Before you. Pass judgment," he said slowly as he struggled against the curse that bound him. "Please, let me speak!"

Chapter 477: A Few Words

"Hauke!" Ashlynn cried, jumping down from her throne and stumbling down the icy steps of the dais in her haste to reach the young Frost Walker's side. All thoughts about her dignity as the Mother of Trees, her role in presiding over the trial and the path she'd been carefully building toward the future left her mind as she focused on the only thing that mattered. Her friend.

Odette moved just a handful of seconds later, similarly abandoning decorum at her son's first sign of movement since they brought his listless, unresponsive body into the room. Seeing him like that had

crushed what little resolve she had left, but now she cast aside all of her worries as she dashed across the icy floor to join the Mother of Trees at her son's side.

"Hauke, you're alive," Ashlynn said, reaching out gently to stroke the soft white flowing fur of Hauke's mane. Alternating warm and bitter cold magic rippled across her fingers as soon as she came close to his face and she quickly snatched back her hand as she realized that the young lord wasn't nearly as free of this curse as she thought he'd been.

When she met Hauke before, his magic had always felt fresh, joyful, even playful when he created an ice house on the lake or showed off his ability to form complex constructs from pure ice. Now, however, the feeling of warm wind that brushed against her fingers felt like the steaming breath of an overworked beast of burden in the cold winter air while the cold energy felt like a howling mountain wind that pierced through clothing and stung the flesh.

More than that, his magic felt... desperate and barely under control.

"Step back, Lady Odette," Ashlynn said, holding out an arm to block the older woman's path and taking a step back herself as she did. "Hauke," she continued, not taking her eyes off her friend's for a moment. "You're struggling, I can feel it. How can we help you break free?"

"Need to say. Say something," Hauke said through gritted teeth as he struggled against the magic holding him back. Freeing even a portion of himself from the binding took as much effort as holding a man his father's side above his head and that effort grew greater every second as he exhausted the limited reserve of energy he'd been able to gather during the day.

"Yes, you need to tell us how to help you," Ashlynn said, frantically waving at Erkembalt and Aspakos to join her at the young man's side. "How are you speaking to us? We can at least make it easier for you."

"My fault," Hauke said, ignoring Ashlynn's pleas to focus on what he needed to say. He might be young, but even he could tell that Ashlynn had been working hard to force the blame for the disaster onto the ancestors and onto his father for granting him permission to wear the horns. She'd been working hard to build a way out for him by casting him as a puppet of the ancestors but if he let her do that then even if he escaped responsibility for what happened, his father wouldn't.

"My fault, for trusting them," he said, looking from Ashlynn's worried face to his mother's tearstained visage. "Father. Didn't know. Enough. To say no. And I," Hauke said, struggling for every word. "I didn't. Tell him. Enough."

"Save the explanations for when you can speak freely, young lord," Erkembalt said as he stepped around Ashlynn to examine Hauke, pulling a series of lenses from one of his many bulging pockets and fitting them carefully over his spectacles before carefully inspecting Hauke's horn.

"Mother," Hauke said, ignoring the artificer's advice. "I'm sorry," he said as his faltering strength failed at last and his eyes once again turned glassy and unfocused.

"Hauke!" Odette cried, pushing past Ashlynn and flinging her arms around her son as she sobbed. "Hauke, come back! Come back to me," she wailed, sobbing into her unresponsive son's tunic.

"Well?" Ashlynn asked, stepping back from Hauke and his mother and addressing the pair of sorcerers. "Were you able to see how he slipped free? I only felt a moment of warm and cold energy from him but what he was doing with it, I couldn't say," she said helplessly.

It was her first time getting a chance to examine the magic that held Hauke's mind captive but one look was all it took for her to realize that it was much, much more complicated than anything she'd ever dealt with in the past.

"He's cracking the chains that bind his mind using alternating heat and cold," Erkembalt said, shaking his head in wonder at the young man's recklessness and at the courage required to endure such a painful method, just to speak a few words in his father's favor. "It won't free him. At most, it let him have a few minutes of freedom to speak."

"What do you mean a few minutes of freedom to speak?" Odette asked, looking at the artificer with eyes that were red and swollen from her tears. "What chains that bind him?"

"This..." Aspakos began, trailing off as he turned to look at Nyrielle atop her frozen throne. He and Erkembalt had come to explain Hauke's condition but only after Nyrielle revealed her judgment, or if it seemed necessary to gain acceptance for what she and Ashlynn planned for the evening. To reveal it now...

"Go ahead," Nyrielle said, smiling softly as she felt the warmth and concern flowing from Ashlynn's trembling heart. Whether it undermined their goals or not no longer mattered to her lover. Six months ago, Nyrielle would have chastised Ashlynn for being naive and wasting an opportunity, but now, she sat back on her throne and let events play out as they would. And who knew, perhaps her love was right that sometimes, even politics had to give way to matters of the heart.

Chapter 478: The Curse Laid Bare

"Hauke is cursed," the dark-feathered sorcerer said, addressing not only Odette but all of the gathered people in the Great Hall, speaking as though he was giving a lecture to a gathering of researchers and scholars. "He was cursed sometime during the battle, perhaps from the very beginning of the battle."

"He is trapped within his own mind," Aspakos continued, raising his voice to speak louder over the sudden whispers and exclamations from the crowd. "He can see and he can hear, but he cannot control his own body and until this moment, he could not speak. He has been this way ever since Lady Ashlynn used her Severing Knife to free him from the control of the Ancestors."

"She did this to him?" an outraged voice from the crowd of Frost Walkers shouted. It should have come as no surprise that it came from Darfrir, the young man who had spoken out initially against Talauia before his right to avenge his father's death was denied to him. Now, it seemed as though he'd turned his ire on the next witch to give him an excuse to vent his bottled-up grief as he once again attempted to gather the support of the crowd to denounce Ashlynn for what she'd done to their young lord. "She crippled him like this!"

"This is the outcome, young man," Aspakos said, glaring at the youth with dark eyes that radiated a hint of barely suppressed bloodlust. "Do not misunderstand and do not interrupt again. You do not wish to anger me and you should wish to anger Her Eternity even less," he said, giving the young man a not-so-subtle reminder of the person he would ultimately offend if he tried to decry Ashlynn over this affair.

Instantly, the few young men who had begun to move forward to support Darfrir took several steps back, putting distance and as many other people as they could between themselves and the young troublemaker. It was one thing to join in as the hands pushing a spear forward, but none of them wanted to be cut down when the Harbinger of Death decided that the spear should fall into the abyss, never to be seen or heard from again!

"Please understand," Ashlynn said quickly, before the young man could build momentum among the crowd again. Aspakos thinly veiled threat had intimidated a few among the youths, but what one person

said, ten other men thought and Ashlynn wanted to dispel any lingering feelings among those who hadn't spoken before they could cause problems.

"The alternative was either killing him, or allowing the ancestors to continue using him as their puppet," she said, omitting the other outcomes where continued attempts to spare him resulted in her own death or worse. "Severing the ancestors was the best I could do in the time that I had."

"A warrior understands that decisions made in the heat of battle may not be judged by the same standards as those made while planning for war," Commander Jannik said, adding his voice to support Ashlynn and glaring at the youths who seemed eager to stir up trouble.

"But I want to be clear about what has just been said," the dark-furred commander said, looking between Ashlynn and the sorcerers. "You're saying that the ancestors whose horns Hauke wore are the ones who placed this curse on him? That he was unable to control his own body for the entirety of the battle?"

"Yes, that's what we're saying," Ashlynn said firmly. "When I fought him, he didn't feel like the 'Hauke' I knew at all, even allowing for anything he had learned while studying with the ancestors. He felt like a puppet on strings, and at times, a poorly controlled puppet. He did break free for a moment," she added as she thought back on the battle. "That moment likely saved my life, but after that moment, there was nothing else from him, even when things were at their most desperate."

"Now, Master Erkembalt," Ashlynn said, shaking off her memories of the way Hauke had been abused by his own ancestors and focusing on how to help him as she turned to face the artificer. "Can you replicate what Hauke has done in order to free him?"

"Not likely," the artificer said bluntly. "You don't want me to try either. What Hauke did, it might have cracked his chains a bit, but it also cracked his horn. Look here," he said, pointing at the tip of Hauke's iridescent horn with one claw.

"You can't see them with the bare eye, but if you want to borrow a jeweler's loop, the cracks are visible, plain as day," he explained. "Hot and cold, hot and cold, it cracks anything that's hard, horns included. If I did enough of that to break his chains, I might as well take off his horn with a saw," he said, giving Aspakos a pointed look as if to say 'if we were going to end up here anyway, you should have let me do it in the first place.'

"But his mind is intact, and a way can be found to free him from this curse," Nyrielle said from the throne, inwardly relieved that the worst outcomes had already been avoided. But now, Hauke's presence presented a host of problems, not the least of which was that he would harm himself further if he felt compelled to speak out when she delivered her judgment.

"Since we know those things, there is no more reason for him to suffer here. He must have suffered greatly to speak those few words," Nyrielle said formally. "So I will consider them carefully when I deliver my judgment."

"For now, Master Erkembalt, please take him away. I trust that you can concoct something to soothe him to sleep?"

"Easy enough, Your Eternity," the artificer said with a brief, awkward bow. "I might even have something here," he said, fishing in an overstuffed vest pocket before moving to a different pocket in his coat and then a pouch at his waist...

"Take him away, Master Erkembalt," Nyrielle said, suppressing a sigh at the artificer's antics. "Let him rest without chains, though his door must be barred. Lady Odette can visit him after we've finished here. If she wishes, he may rest alongside his father."

"Please," Odette said, clutching at Hauke's limp hand before forcing herself to let go. "And, thank you, your Eternity. For being so kind."

"Don't thank me yet, Castle Mistress," Nyrielle said, gesturing for Ashlynn to rejoin her on the dais overlooking the crowd. "After everything we've heard tonight, I'm ready to give my judgment so the dead may rest and so we may decide the fate of the High Pass."

Chapter 479: Nyrielle's Judgment

Nyrielle's words echoed through the Great Hall, bringing everyone's attention back to the uncertain future of the High Pass while a group of soldiers helped Erkembalt to take Hauke away from the proceedings. The departure of the cursed young lord seemed to be a signal that reminded everyone how far the Frost Walkers had fallen in a single night.

Along the walls, the Nyrielle's black and red banners alternated with Ashlynn's blue and green ones, with only a single banner at the back of the hall to represent the fallen Frost Walker Lord. At the

beginning of the evening's proceedings, many people thought that the banners were only here to honor the powerful visitors who had come to negotiate a conclusion to the previous night's hostilities.

By this point, however, Nyrielle and Ashlynn had made it clear that they weren't negotiating. While the Frost Walker delegation had been permitted to speak, it had been Zedya who spoke on behalf of their dead. While it might not have been their intention when they arrived, the forces of the Vale of Mists acted like conquerors and now they were going to pronounce their sentence on the conquered.

"The world is changing," Nyrielle said once the hall had settled down. "In the east, more humans arrive from across the seas every year and their appetite for new lands to conquer knows no bounds. Here in the mountains, the ice is retreating and the shape of the High Pass is nothing like it was in ancient times. Everything is changing," she said in a voice that was heavy with the weight of her long years of life.

Her words rippled through the Great Hall, creating distinct waves of reaction among the gathered Frost Walkers. The older members of the clan exchanged knowing glances, their fading horns glowing with dim energy as they dipped in acknowledgment of truths they'd witnessed across decades.

The winters were already shorter than they had been in their youth and the summers weren't only longer, they also felt warmer. The children among them had never once experienced a year when the pass remained closed all year, but they remembered.

In stark contrast, several younger warriors stood behind Darfrir, their spines rigid with defiance while their horns pulsed with vibrant, stubborn energy as they refused to accept what they perceived as a complete surrender dressed in pretty words.

Near the back of the hall, the mothers and widows of the fallen Honor Guard pulled their children closer, hugging them tight as they waited to hear the fate that awaited them now that the greatest pillars of their clan and their families had fallen, leaving them at the mercy of the powerful vampire sitting atop a throne of ice in the place their own lord should sit, handing out the justice he should have.

"Last night, the High Pass was struck by an avalanche that will change its future just as much as the end of the Age of Ice and the fall of the Seven Peaks," Nyrielle pronounced, invoking the two greatest changes to the fate of the Frost Walker clan in its long history.

The moment she did, several people on the Frost Walker side grew restless and Commander Jannik's face contorted into a mask of barely contained fury. It seemed that once again, a vampire had come to grind down their clan, as though it was a right of passage for the mighty vampires, each one following in the wake of their teacher to further suppress his people. At this point, he only wondered how much further they would fall. Would they be taken away in chains to fight against the humans? Or did the vampires intend something even worse for them.

"Before we can consider the future, we must grant justice to the dead, and in this matter, it is clear who bears the greatest guilt and who bears the least," Nyrielle said, sweeping her eyes across the gathered crowd.

"Young Lord Hauke bears the least guilt in all of this," she said, fixing her eyes on Odette and offering Hauke's mother a gentle smile. "He was not in control of his own body from the moment last night's disaster began and as such, he cannot be held responsible for everything that occurred."

"Thank, thank you, your Eternity," Odette said, kneeling on the frozen floor of the Great Hall and bowing at the waist until the tip of her pure white horn brushed against the ground. "Thank you for sparing my son and our hope for the future."

"It would be an even greater tragedy if he was made to bear the blame as a scapegoat for a tragedy that he wished to prevent," Nyrielle said gently before her face lost most of its warmth.

"Still, he isn't blameless in this. By his own admission, he withheld knowledge about the ancestral spirits' actions from his father, Lord Ritchel, and garnered support for providing those spirits a method to influence the world of the living directly. This is his crime and the ruler of the High Pass must hand down a sentence for it," she said.

"The, the ruler of the High Pass?" a confused elder Frost Walker said, turning to look at the other elders around them. "Does that mean that Lady Nyrielle doesn't intend to rule over the High Pass?"

"Hush, do you think she can't hear you?" another elder hissed. "Listen first. If we have objections, I'm sure she'll let us speak our minds. She's been kind enough, even when young brats spoke out of turn."

"While Hauke wasn't fully in control of himself and therefore bears the least guilt for what happened last night," Nyrielle said, pulling the crowd's attention back to her and quieting those who were

whispering with a dark look. "Lord Ritchel cannot make the same claim. As the Lord of the High Pass, he is charged with protecting the High Pass from all threats, whether they come from outside enemies or forces within his own nation."

"Lord Ritchel's failures are many, including his failure to detect traitors in his own ruling council that led to an attack by Tuscans on his son and my seneschal in the spring," Nyrielle explained as she began to firmly establish Ritchel's guilt as a Lord in the minds of the crowd. "He also failed to detect the treachery of the ancestral spirits, allowing them to gain power over his son and the presumed heir to his throne."

"Such failures might be forgiven if he was a capable war leader," Nyrielle said, giving a pointed look at Commander Jannik. "But here too, Lord Ritchel failed. He failed in his determination to keep Lady Ashlynn trapped with the ancestral spirits, sparking the misunderstanding. He failed further when he led his Honor Guard to their deaths before finally suffering defeat at the Thistle Witch's hands."

"In every way that an Eldritch Lord must be strong and capable, Ritchel has failed every extraordinary test he was given," Nyrielle said, looking down at Odette's kneeling figure with dark eyes that held deep sorrow.

Each of Nyrielle's words landed on Odette like a stone tumbling from the top of the mountain. The Ritchel that Nyrielle described was oblivious to cracks in the ice beneath his feet, clumsy in his defense of his people, and weak when confronted with a powerful foe.

But that didn't describe her husband at all. Ritchel's rivalry with Jannik for the throne had been a legendary struggle between two of the greatest warriors their generation had ever seen and the friendship they established kept the Frost Walker Clan safe from most threats for more than two decades.

Ritchel hadn't been perfect. There had been losses, and each time they lost a member of the clan to raiders intent on claiming their horns, the entire clan had seen their lord's fury and his strong reprisals. But only Odette had seen his better tears and helpless cries in the privacy of their own chambers.

To everyone else, Ritchel had to be a flawless pillar of polished ice, strong enough to hold up the mountain. To Odette, he hadn't just been a lord who struggled each day to do his best for his clan. He had been a husband who brought her every joy her heart desired and gifted her the most wonderful, compassionate child she'd ever known.

Ritchel had his failures like any man did. But now, as Nyrielle prepared to hand down her judgment, it seemed like Ritchel's failures, small though some of them might be, had finally crossed an invisible line, adding just enough to trigger the avalanche that would bury him.

"To atone for his failures, Lord Ritchel must be stripped of his title as Lord of the High Pass," Nyrielle said, giving the only sentence that she felt the living and the dead could accept.

"This changes nothing about my feelings for Ritchel as a friend and an ally that I have trusted with my back for many years," Nyrielle added softly. Her sudden change in tone startled Odette enough to lift her head, gazing at the top of the dais where she was shocked to find the powerful vampire looking at her with a gentle smile. "It also changes nothing about my promise to help the Mother of Trees and her witches in their attempt to preserve his life.

"Thank you, your Eternity," Odette said. Her throat was tight and her heart felt like it was holding back all the snow atop the mountain, preventing her from saying more than those few words without breaking down completely. But to Nyrielle and to everyone else watching, the tears freezing on Odette's cheeks said more than words ever could.

"Come," Zedya said softly, appearing at Odette's side in a flash of crimson faster than most eyes could follow. "There is more that must be said, but you have done your part," she said, lifting the towering Frost Walker gently off the floor and guiding her back to her seat.

"Ritchel and Hauke both played their part in last night's tragedy," Nyrielle said formally once Zedya finished helping the third member of the small Frost Walker family back to her seat. "But the greatest responsibility lies with the people who conspired behind Ritchel's back and treated Hauke like a puppet."

"Master Aspakos," Nyrielle said, turning to the sorcerer with the broken beak. "Bring forth the horns of the ancestors who caused this disaster. It is time that the lingering dead learn that there are consequences to their actions and prices to be paid, even among the dead..."

Chapter 480: Sentenced To The Void

A chill settled over the hall as five soldiers from the Black Wolf Brigade stepped forward, each of them carrying a sealed case that contained one of the ancestral horns containing the last remnants of the greatest Frost Walkers of their respective eras. Carefully, working on one case at a time, the soldiers

removed thick locks and heavy chains that secured each of the cases, opening it to reveal the icy horns within.

At the center of the row of horns stood a powerful horn twice as thick and half again as long as any other in the collection, radiating a powerful and oppressive chill that momentarily froze the breath of the men opening the cases.

The horns that followed were each distinct, ranging from slender and delicate with a soft, snowy presence to one so small it could have belonged to a young child, surrounded with a pure, almost innocent energy that made the heart feel lighter just to stand near.

Yet for all of their differences, each of the horns radiated the same sense of power and majesty, instantly commanding reverence from the Frost Walkers in attendance. Opposite the Frost Walkers, however, Heila and Talauia stepped forward instantly, raising their wands to ward off the powerful influence of the horns and shielding those behind them from the whispers that tickled the back of their minds.

On her icy throne, Ashlynn shifted slightly as pain flared along her skin where flesh that had yet to recover from extreme frostbite grew even colder under the pressure emitted from the horns. They hadn't felt this... overwhelming when she first encountered them, nor when Hauke wore them, but now that they had been given an opportunity to strengthen themselves, it was clear that the horns contained even more power than they'd first realized.

"Kiss of the Void," Nyrielle intoned, raising her hand and releasing a surge of dark energy that swept over the horns. "Fading Presence."

The moment her energy collided with the horns, a formation of ice crystals began to shimmer into existence before them, momentarily pausing the advancement of Nyrielle's dark power. The layer of ice lasted for less than a heartbeat, shattering under the force of Nyrielle's assault and leaving the horns defenseless against the oppressive sorcery that robbed the horns of their powerful, majestic auras.

People on both sides of the great hall sat with mouths agape at how instantly the Harbinger of Death had suppressed the powerful horns. But then, moments later, the Frost Walkers shuddered in a different kind of horror as they realized how close they had come to bowing before the majestic relics of their ancestors, all but prostrating themselves in supplication to the heroes of old.

"Now you all see what Hauke endured in order to learn from these 'revered ancestors,'" Nyrielle said with a voice filled with admiration for the young Frost Walker's endurance. "How many of you could have faced all five of them for weeks and months on end, just for the chance to learn something that might be of use to your nation?"

"I can see now why he kept secrets," Odette said, trembling in her seat. If this power had been directed at her, or Ritchel... or any of the elders on the council, she didn't believe for a moment that they could have resisted it. "He must have thought he was sheltering us from them..."

"Whatever he thought, and whatever his reasons were," Nyrielle said. "It is a fact that he endured more than most of you will ever understand in order to seize an opportunity. An opportunity that nearly cost him his life more than once. Do not forget the risk he took in dealing with these ancestors, or the reason why he did it."

"We will remember," Old Svenja promised as she struggled to regain her composure. As the woman who knew the ancestors better than anyone, she thought she understood the power of the ancestors. But, compared to these five horns, the power of every horn gathered in five separate ancestral caves couldn't compare, not even by half!

"Good that you will remember," Nyrielle said with a slight smile directed at Ashlynn before she turned to face the horns. "Relics of the past, you stand before the Harbinger of Death. You stand convicted of high crimes against the High Pass Nation, of conspiring to possess the heir to its throne and to plunge the world back into an age of ice."

"Because of your actions, dozens have died and dozens more have been severely injured," Nyrielle continued in a voice that carried the dark condemnation of the grave with every word, stilling the hearts of everyone who listened to her speak. "Ritchel, Lord of the High Pass, fell because of your schemes and Hauke, his heir, remains trapped by your curse. These crimes can never be forgotten or forgiven."

Pressure mounted in the hall as Nyrielle stood from her throne, extending her dark wings behind her and enveloping half the Great Hall in a darkness deeper than the sky on a moonless night. Shadows bent and twisted around her hand, forming a long handled executioner's ax that dripped with midnight blue energy.

"As the Harbinger of Death, I condemn your souls or whatever remains of them to the depths of the void," she said formally, striding forward to the waiting row of horns. The instant she moved, the

soldiers standing beside the boxes quickly moved aside, leaving Nyrielle alone at the base of the dais, directly confronting the horns.

"Your Eternity, please wait!" Old Svenja cried when she realized what Nyrielle was about to do. "Right or wrong, they are our most honored ancestors. May we... may we have a moment to send them off? To thank them for all they have done for us while they lived and for the centuries they endured as immortal guardians? We, their descendants, owe them that much at least..." she said, her voice growing weaker and quieter to the end as she saw the darkness in Nyrielle's eyes turn toward her.

"Grant them this moment, my love," Ashlynn said from her icy throne as she felt Nyrielle's heart begin to tremble with irritation at the interruption. "Whether the ancestral spirits deserve it or not is irrelevant. Old Svenja has served her people well for many decades and has the right to ask for this boon. We can grant them a few moments to pay respects to the people these horns once belonged to, even if they have been twisted into something that no longer deserves those honors."

What Ashlynn said was true but it wasn't the only reason to grant them this moment. The Frost Walkers were losing too much after the fall of Ritchel and Hauke along with several of their greatest sorcerers. At the moment, Svenja had asked for a small moment of dignity, something so easy to grant that Nyrielle would barely have to lift a finger to grant their wish.

If Nyrielle denied that request, she could assert her dominance over the Frost Walkers, proving once and for all that she intended to reshape them into something new that obeyed her authority in the wake of Ritchel's removal as Lord of the High Pass. But if she gave ground now, the message she sent would be something different entirely.

"Then I will indulge you, Svenja," Nyrielle said, temporarily withdrawing her dark energy and stepping back from the horns. "But I will not release the binding of the void. Left unchecked, I cannot say what sort of new tragedy they might provoke."

Moving slowly, both out of reverence for the ancestors and fear of Nyrielle's menacing presence, Old Svenja gathered up the Frost Walkers who wished to pay respects to their ancestors and brought them to face the horns.

Some, like Darfir and the young men who followed him, held themselves back, casting dark looks at the relics of the ancestors who had upended their lives. Most of the Frost walkers in the Great Hall, however, nearly two hundred in total, gathered behind Old Svenja to lower their horns in respect to the relics of the ancestors.

In a fleeting, ephemeral space hastily woven together by the weakest and smallest among the horns, five spirits gathered to witness what looked like the final subjugation of their once mighty empire.

"So this is how it ends," Ansgar said in a voice that dripped with scorn and disdain for the people prostrating themselves before them. "Thousands gathered to mourn the day I sacrificed my horn to guard our people. Now, even brats refuse to lower their horns in our honor."

"Do you regret it, my love?" Ines said, pressing her body up against the towering figure of the mightiest High Lord of the Seven peaks. "Do you regret trying to lift them up again?"

"Regret is a useless thing to fill your heart with at the end," Kimsel said, shaking her head at the lovers who had never known the softness of each other's fur in life. "We have done all that we could. Now, they are on their own."

"Not entirely on their own," Eraric said with a complicated expression as he gazed out at the bowing Frost Walkers. "The relics we've left behind may still be of use to young Hauke. There will be a chance for our people to rise again if he manages to overcome my binding. If he does that, he should have the strength to lift our people up again."

"Not as high as we would have," Ansgar said as he wrapped an arm around Ines and pulled her close. "The world we'd have created... he could have ruled like an emperor. Now, the best he can manage is to hug the thighs of vampires and witches, hoping for scraps from their table."

"Any different, were we?" Eugen asked softly as he watched the assembled Frost Walkers withdrawing, giving way before the dark presence of the Harbinger of Death. "For Shubnalu's plans, much did we do. But here at the end, where is our master? Our sacrifice, has he really honored it?"

"One to rule and one to serve," Ines said, repeating the Fangs' of Death's ancient promise. "Perhaps one day the ones he took will come to avenge what happened here."

"Whether they come or not," Ansgar said, turning to gaze one last time at Ines's cool beauty. "At least we were able to..."

"Kiss of the Void. Oblivion's Embrace," Nyrielle said, swinging her ax in a wide horizontal arc that severed the horns cleanly in two, shattering the fragile space that allowed their spirits to connect for one last time and sweeping everything that remained of the once mighty Frost Walkers into the darkness of the void.

Perhaps, if Ashlynn's Heavenly Shores truly existed, then what little remained of Ansgar, Ines, Eraric, Kimsel, and Eugen would be born again someday to make their way toward the land of light far to the west. But in this life, all they had earned from her was an eternal slumber in the infinite void that lay beyond death.

After what they had done to Ashlynn, it was the most merciful fate she could grant them and more than they deserved by far!