

## The Vampire 621

### Chapter 621: A Culinary Adventure (Part One)

Several minutes later, Ashlynn was munching happily on a fish fritter that was still piping hot from the boiling lard it was cooked in. The exterior was perfectly crisp while the interior was soft and pillowy though she had to admit that each fritter seemed to contain more bread, herbs and vegetables than flakes of tender, flakey fish, and they contained far less of the spicy peppers that Jacques added to his, but they were still a nostalgic treat that reminded her of her time in the Briar and the unexpected family she'd found there.

Ollie was the first to return, awkwardly juggling a platter piled high with skewers of spiced, roasted meats and half a dozen small bowls of brightly colored sauces. The scents of sweet onions and fresh parsley mingled with fatty beef and pork to create a simple, welcoming aroma that all but cried out for one of the dark red, bright orange, or vibrant green sauces stacked around the edge of the platter.

"That was fast," Ashlynn said as she blew on another hot fritter, waiting for it to cool slightly before she began to nibble again. "Why did you pick those?"

"I wanted to try something new," Ollie admitted as he held a skewer and eyed the colorful sauces, trying to decide which one to try first. "I've never seen minced meat roasted on a skewer over a fire like this, and there were so many different sauces to try, so I thought this would be a good time for a little food adventure," he said with a wide grin.

For so long, his focus on food had been figuring out ways to turn the scraps he foraged in the Lothian kitchens into something palatable. From off-cuts of meat to slightly burned bits that couldn't be served on a lord's table or odd combinations of leftovers, he'd tried just about everything to make an enjoyable meal out of the castoffs of the noblemen's tables.

Ever since coming to the Vale of Mists, however, Georg had been slowly expanding Ollie's knowledge of food, adding not only to the young man's repertoire of techniques but enhancing his sense of flavor and what made food truly enjoyable. Now that he found himself confronted by so many different dishes cooked by people from so many different Eldritch Nations, he felt like he couldn't possibly taste everything he wanted before the end of the festival, so he set out to find something that offered as many different flavors as possible.

"The green one," Virve said, sitting down next to the young knight with a heavy -THUMP- as she set down a platter of her own, this one laden with thick sausages and crumbly blocks of pale cheese with

blue veins of mold. "You want to slather the skewer with as much of the green sauce as you can, and then take a big bite so the juices of the meat mix with the sauce in your mouth," she said with a wide smile.

"No, no, no, no, no! What are you doing?" Heila cried as she walked up in time to see Ollie spooning the chunky green sauce over a skewer. In her arms, she carried a basket filled with deep-fried pastries drizzled in honey that she nearly dropped in her haste to stop Ollie from following Virve's helpful 'advice.' "That much spicy sauce and you won't be able to taste anything but pain," she said, giving Virve a pointed look.

"It's fine," Virve countered, leaning forward to snatch the sauce-laden skewer from Ollie's hand, biting off nearly half the meat in a single large bite and smiling broadly as she savored the savory, spicy treat. "See?"

"Don't trust her, Ollie," Heila said, stepping between the young knight and the bearish warrior like a comically small guardian. "I don't think Virve can taste anything unless it has so much seasoning that it burns your tongue."

"I can eat spicy food you know," Ollie said, reaching out for another skewer and preparing to scoop even more of the fiery green sauce on it. When he noticed a subtle headshake from Ashlynn, however, he significantly reduced the amount of sauce he added before taking a bite. The instant he did, he felt like his tongue had been stabbed by hundreds of needles, as if he'd unleashed the cypress needle magic he'd learned during his trial, only in his own mouth and set on fire.

The rich, fatty meat didn't do anything to make the flavor milder, in fact, the juices of the meat only made things worse, carrying the intense spice to every corner of his mouth and throat as he swallowed, gasping for air.

"Drink this, drink this," Talauia said, descending from the air with several large tankards of cider that smelled of sweet apples with faint notes of clove and citrus. "The bubbles help to get the spices off your tongue," she explained as she passed over a large, frothy tankard of chilled cider.

"It's not that bad," Virve said with a hearty chuckle as she began using a sharp claw to slice the sausages into smaller pieces. "You just have to eat enough of them that you don't notice the burning anymore."

After chugging down nearly half the tankard of cider, Ollie shot Virve a look that said he wondered if the Oak Witch really deserved the moniker of 'demon' for encouraging him to use even more of the potent, painfully spicy sauce... or if she was a demon because the torture-food apparently had no effect on her.

"I like the thick red sauce," Ashlynn said, leaning over and retrieving a skewer before spooning a bit of the sauce on it. "They use sweeter peppers to make this one, along with tomatoes dried in the sun and crushed nuts. It has a little spice, but it's mostly sweet and earthy," she said between bites as she savored the rich, meaty skewer.

Before Ollie could respond or consider choosing his next 'food adventure' a sudden flurry of snow swept over the group as Hauke arrived at last, carrying several large bowls made of ice holding something that looked soft and creamy in an assortment of colors.

"Sorry I took so long," the Frost Walker rumbled as he sat down on the grass. His iridescent horn glowed a pale, icy blue, and the mist around him froze into a small flurry of snow as he joined the group. "I didn't think the line would be so long," he said sheepishly.

In truth, while the line had been long, the length of the line alone didn't entirely account for how long it had taken him to return. Seeing the long line of children, eagerly looking forward to tasting one of the sweet treats of the High Pass filled Hauke's heart so full with pride and joy that he'd let several of the children cut ahead of him in line, relishing in the musical laughter and eagerness as people from across the Vale and beyond devoured the flavorful, frozen cream.

"You're using sorcery to keep the food cold?" Heila said, looking at Hauke in mild concern. "Won't that tire you out without the cold of the mountains around you?"

"This much is no big deal," Hauke said proudly as he sat up straighter. While it was true that his powers had diminished once they left the bitter, frozen lands of the High Pass, he could easily have covered the entire festival with snow and kept it cold for children to play in without feeling too much strain. Something like chilling a few bowls of ice cream was no big deal, but for the witches who were used to drawing on the energy of the world to fuel their magic, perhaps they didn't realize how much power he still carried all on his own.

"Besides," Hauke added with a wide smile. "Ice cream should be enjoyed last, after everything else, so I'll just keep it cold until everyone is ready for it."

"Well, don't hold back, dig in," Ashlynn encouraged, trying to draw the awkwardly distant Frost Walker more into the group. "Just don't take Virve's advice on spicy things and help yourself to a skewer."

"No, no, I tried it and it seems like everyone else has tried it," Ollie said, spotting a chance to share his misery with someone else. "Hauke, you can try a spoonful of the green sauce on a skewer too!"

## Chapter 622: A Culinary Adventure (Part Two)

"That's even worse, that's so much worse," Talauia said, looking at Ollie in shock as he suggested inflicting the terrifyingly spicy sauce on the group's youngest member. "You know that it hurts and Frost Walkers eat most of their food raw! He doesn't eat spicy things at all, why would you do this to him?"

"Is this like the knight's ritual where you bond through pain and suffering?" Hauke asked, looking sideways at the strange dish. "I'm supposed to do something that hurts so we become closer?"

"You don't have to," Ashlynn said as she moved on from the skewers to one of the rich, smokey sausages Virve had brought over. "Ollie wanted a 'food adventure' and he found one," she teased. "He just didn't expect that his first adventure would be quite so painful."

"I'm sorry, Hauke," Ollie added quickly. "I don't want to pressure you..."

"It's fine, I'll try it," the young Frost Walker lord said, his horn glittering a faintly embarrassed shade of lavender as he served himself a large spoonful of the 'painful' sauce. "I'm farther away from home than most of my clansmen go in their entire lives. I should try adventures or what's the point of coming all this way to be Lady Ashlynn's apprentice?"

Moments later, however, as he steadily chewed on a large bite of spicy beef, slathered in the chunky green sauce, he failed to show any sign of discomfort or displeasure at the taste. In fact, he seemed more confused than anything else.

"Did I pick the wrong one?" Hauke asked, blinking in surprise. "It's a little bitter but... it isn't painful."

"Aaah! That is so unfair," Ollie cried. "It doesn't feel hot at all? Like your mouth is on fire?"

"No, not at all," Hauke said as he sniffed the sauce, but unlike Ollie and the others, he seemed completely unbothered by it. "But I think the sausages Virve has smell better," he said, turning to look at her expectantly.

"I got a big one, just for you," Virve said, passing over a thick sausage thicker than her thumb and as long as her large paw. "The meat is raw when they start fermenting it so I thought it might suit you more. If you like it, I got two," she added.

"Now I'm jealous," Heila said from the side as she meticulously sliced through one of the smaller sausages, preparing a stack of bread, sausage and the crumbly blue cheese before nibbling on the rich, salty, creamy, savory and slightly funky combination of intense flavors. "I can't eat as much as everyone else, so how am I going to try everything?"

"Just eat like Nyri and the other vampires do," Ashlynn offered helpfully. "One bite of this, one bite of that, and keep going until you've run out of things before you start over. Practice for when you take Sir Ignatious out to dinner," she added with a wink.

"Really, really?" Talauia said, looking at Heila with shining amethyst eyes as her wings hummed in the air behind her. "So you really like Sir Ignatious? And not just because, not just because you let him feed on you in the High Pass?"

"What, what's not to like?" Heila stammered, her face heating all the way to the tips of her ears. "Sir Ignatious is a gentleman, and he's really sweet and warm. All that fire and fury that the Inquisition burned into him... it wasn't really ever his to begin with. So, now that he's free and he can just be who he always should have been... He's nice," she said quietly, hiding behind the tankard of cider as she took several large gulps.

"I want to find something for him at the festival," Heila said after she put down her tankard. "He, he doesn't really have many things in his chambers. Mistress Nyrielle never gave him a chance to collect his belongings after she brought him to the Vale so the only keepsakes he has of his old life are things that came from the Church," she explained.

"And then, when he was with High Lord Hamdi... things were, were really hard for him," she said, shuddering at the memory of the things she'd glimpsed in his memories when she healed him during the battle in the High Pass. "That's why, I want to help him to collect a few things that he can treasure, so that he always has a reminder that someone treasures him."

"Heila, you really are growing sweet on him, aren't you?" Virve said with a strange look in her eyes. The former Inquisitor made many people in the Vale uncomfortable but after seeing him fighting so hard for Ashlynn and Heila in the High Pass, it was hard for Virve to cling to the same hatred that filled her heart whenever she thought of the human's Church in general and their Templars and Inquisitors specifically.

The closest she'd come to reconciling her feelings was to put Ignatious in the same box she put Ollie in, Ignatious wasn't truly a member of the Inquisition after becoming a vampire any more than Ollie was a human after becoming a witch.

"So," Virve asked without waiting for the diminutive Willow Witch to answer. "Are you just going to buy him a few things? Or are you going to try to win him prizes by playing the games at the festival?"

"Oh, I'll buy things for him," Heila said as a faintly competitive light began to shine in her eyes. "But I don't just want to give him things that come from me. I want to show him that there are many more people who care enough about him to give him something that couldn't just be bought."

Ashlynn smiled, recognizing the look of determination on Heila's face. She'd seen it before in the arena when Heila faced opponents more than four times her size in the arena, but it was tempered by a gentle affection that had only really blossomed in the Willow Witch in the days since the battle in the High Pass.

"I saw some game booths near the northern section of the festival," Ashlynn said as she wiped oil and crumbs from her delicate fingers. "Ring tosses, pin bowling, all sorts of things. I'm sure they have prizes that can only be won by people who are very skilled," she said with a wink at her coven.

"I saw them too!" Talauia said as her wings hummed with excitement. Technically, she was the oldest person here, but today, she had given herself completely over to childish fun that she'd lost the opportunity to enjoy years ago, embracing Ashlynn's family as an extension of her own to join in the revels. "And there was one where you throw knives at painted targets, and another with little bottles you have to knock over with cloth balls!"

"Half of those games are always rigged, you know," Virve chuckled, licking a few drops of spicy sauce from her claws. "The bottles are weighted, the rings barely fit over the pegs..."

"That's why I need all of you," Heila said, pointing at everyone in the group with a hand that held a sticky, honey pastry. "Between all of us, I'm sure we can collect plenty of prizes, and even if they aren't the biggest ones, just knowing that we did it for him will mean more than the most expensive treasures for sale at the festival," she said firmly.

"In that case," Ashlynn said, standing up and brushing grass from her skirt. "Let's see what we can win for Sir

#### Chapter 623: Hauke's Puzzle (Part One)

"Come up, come up and try your luck! Three tries to a tail, bloodstone bracelets and charm necklaces for your lady or your man!"

"Test your mind and your body, solve the puzzle to free the scarf and keep your prize, just a tail to try!"

"Hunters, archers, warriors bold, take up this bow and..."

The northern fields between the fortress walls had become a sprawling, boisterous, and chaotic free-for-all where shopkeepers pitched tents and set up stalls to present all manner of games for prizes large and small. Children raced from booth to booth, some dragging parents with them while others carefully counted the handful of coins in their purses with conflicted expressions as they tried to decide which game they should play next.

Kneeling on the ground at one such booth, Hauke did his best to drown out the noise of the crowd as he put all of his attention on the bits of twisted metal arranged on the table in front of him.

Blacksmith's puzzles like this one were uncommon in the High Pass but the challenge presented by this shopkeeper looked deceptively simple. Take three twisted iron rods and arrange them in a manner that they could support themselves without falling over. Anyone who could do so would win a small silk purse in a bright color of their choice.

Hauke had initially intended to win a crimson or gold colored purse for Sir Ignatious, feeling like it would compliment the former Inquisitor's wardrobe and that a new purse would represent a new opportunity to fill it with treasures as he began a new life after returning from exile.

What Hauke hadn't expected, however, was that after solving the first puzzle, the shopkeeper immediately presented a second one, this time with four twisted iron rods, and the chance to select a better purse with a fine brass clasp as long as Hauke was willing to pay another silver tail for the right to keep playing. And if he kept winning, there were even greater prizes to be won. Of course, if he failed, then he lost anything he might have won before, and he would have to start over from the beginning if he still wanted the best prize.

Now, frost covered his horn as he focused all of his attention on the seven twisted rods as he struggled to recall everything he had learned from Eraric about stable structures and mutual reinforcement. The Frost Walker Architect might have been the person who forged the chains that made Hauke a prisoner in his own mind, but he was also one of the greatest architects of his era and perhaps the greatest in the history of the Frost Walker clan, and the lessons he'd given Hauke over the summer were still priceless treasures to the young lord.

Standing next to him, Heila and Talauia held hands and all but held their breath, not daring to make the slightest movement that would disturb Hauke as he carefully threaded an iron rod through a gap between three others that he held loosely in place with one hand while the other manipulated the rod.

Further back, Virve looked at Ollie with a slight grin before elbowing him in the ribs and leaning over to whisper in his ear.

"I'll bet you ten tails that he fails on the fifth rod," Virve said as she watched Hauke struggle to make the fourth rod lock into place. "This one is much, much harder than the last one."

"I won't bet against my friends," Ollie said, frowning at Virve's suggestion. "So my bet is ten tails that he succeeds on this one, just like he did on the last one."

"It's okay to bet against your fellows, you know," Virve said with a laugh. "Soldiers gamble on everything, just to pass the time. Nine days out of ten are spent marching somewhere that we might fight, maintaining our weapons and armor in case we fight, or sleeping and recovering because we just fought. It's a lot of idle time to fill, and even cards and dice get boring after a while."

"But knights aren't common soldiers," Ollie insisted. "We have to set an example for the people who follow us and we should lift each other up instead of cheering to see one of our own fall. Look at Heila and Talauia," he said. "They'd be cheering him on if they weren't so worried about distracting him."



"You don't get it," Virve said, shaking her head at the young knight. "I'm not cheering for Hauke to fail, I'm creating a reason to cheer no matter what the outcome is," Virve said, surprising both Ollie and Ashlynn standing beside them. "If I win because he loses, then I at least owe him an ale to celebrate my good fortune. He'll also see that you believed in him enough to wager coin of your own on his success, and that's a good thing too."

"This is why I knew I picked the right person to become the Captain of my guard," Ashlynn said proudly. "I never thought that gambling among soldiers was so meaningful."

"I'm just repeating the lesson I got from Captain, I mean, from Sir Lennart, when I told him that I thought the gambling was getting out of hand years ago," Virve said, her ears twitching slightly as Ashlynn praised her. "Really, I was just bitter about losing so often. I barely had enough of my wages left at the end of the journey to buy a nice dinner and an expensive bottle of wine to drown my sorrows in, and some of the others had made what felt like a small fortune betting on fights in High Fen City's arena."

"Wisdom is wisdom, wherever it comes from," Ashlynn said with a wide smile. "And I'll join Ollie," she added as she watched Hauke successfully set the fourth rod. "I think Hauke can't lose at this game."

"What?" Virve asked, blinking in surprise. "Is he really that skilled with these sorts of puzzles?"

"He's very clever," Ashlynn said, nodding in pride as she watched Hauke's confidence grow when he quickly set the fifth rod. "I can't wait to introduce him to my friend Isabell when she arrives in the Vale. Marcel sent a message that he's arranging to bring her to the edge of the Vale tomorrow night."

"Ollie," Ashlynn added, as if a thought had just struck her. "Master Isabell may not be able to escape Lothian City without an escort of Owain's guards. It might be best if we could limit our party to just humans to receive them. We can handle any trouble that arrives with her ourselves, but if her escort notices Eldritch folk around, they may try to run away before we can stop them, and we can't risk word getting out. Are there any of the men we captured from the Summer Villa that you trust enough to act as our 'guards' and escort when we meet with Master Isabell?"

"I can think of a few who were very helpful in building the village, and hunting for food to feed the refugees in the early days of the crisis after Lord Owain attacked the Heartwood Clan," Ollie said with a firm nod. "

"Eamon might be a bit... eager," Ollie said, choosing his words with care as he thought about the woodsman who had become an increasingly devout believer that Lady Ashlynn was a divine messenger blessed by the Holy Lord of Light. "He's a good man, though, and he and Darragh were both helpful this summer. Daithi too," he added after a slight pause. "I think you met his wife and daughter when you visited the village."

"Good," Ashlynn said with a genuine smile. "I'm glad to know that we didn't destroy their lives when we took them prisoner. I was worried when I left that they would cause all manner of trouble but it seems like you've helped them to integrate well into life in the Vale. Well done, Ollie," she praised.

"Six, that's six rods!" the shopkeeper shouted loudly, startling several of the people who had gathered to watch Hauke attempt to complete the most difficult puzzle he offered for a chance to win the greatest prize. "But the last one is the hardest. What do you say, young lord Hauke?" the shopkeeper said warmly.

"If you stop here," the shopkeeper offered loudly, pitching his voice to be heard by Ashlynn and anyone around her. "I'll still give you your choice of silk satchels. You said your friend was a scholar, right? Nothing better for a scholar than a good satchel to carry around their precious books. I'll even add a basic coin purse for each of the ladies in your party since you've made it this far."

"It's a good deal, isn't it, friend?" the shopkeeper asked. "Why don't you just quit while you're ahead?"

#### Chapter 624: Hauke's Puzzle (Part Two)

"Quit while I'm ahead?" Hauke said, frowning at the shopkeeper's underhanded seeming offer.

Looking at the puzzle in front of him, placing the seventh rod would certainly be a challenge. The puzzle already looked complete with just six pieces, and it seemed like the whole thing would collapse under the weight of the seventh no matter where he added it. Whoever had designed the puzzle was clearly a master of their craft, and Hauke had nothing but respect for the distant master who had produced the puzzle.

For a moment, Hauke paused, wondering if the shopkeeper was actually trying to do him a kindness instead of encouraging him to stop short. He still had plenty of silver in the purse that Ashlynn had given him, but there were only so many hours left before they would need to leave the festival to attend the evening's banquet.

If he spent all of his time here, holding everyone else back while they watched him, then too much of their limited time would slip away because he was too proud to recognize when a puzzle couldn't be beaten.

Hauke had listened with complete focus when Ollie recounted his experiences in the trial to become the Cypress Witch. The young Frost Walker might not face exactly the same lessons or tests in his own trial when Lady Ashlynn received the seed she was waiting for, but Hauke would take any information he could in order to prepare himself for his own trial when the time came and Ollie's lesson about recognizing his limits had struck a note with the young Frost Walker.

But, looking at the puzzle in front of him, he wasn't entirely convinced that it couldn't be beaten. He'd studied each of the pieces carefully before beginning, visualizing the completed structure just the way Eraric had taught him and working backwards from the conclusion before he picked up the first piece of metal. He might not have perfect confidence that he could hold all the pieces still enough to place the final rod, but as long as he went slowly, he felt like his odds were very good.

"Didn't you say that the prize for this puzzle is a silk rug that the Ancient Clan uses to bask in the sun's warmth?" Hauke asked, glancing briefly at the beautifully embroidered yellow and green rug hanging in the back of the shopkeeper's stall. The pattern was simple, resembling the ripples of sand on a beach after the tide receded, and it looked very soft and comfortable to lie on.

"That's right," the shopkeeper said, looking at the gathered crowd who were eagerly waiting to see if Hauke could win the grand prize. "Properly, rugs like this sell for at least twenty-five silver tails, but you'll get it for just seven if you can complete this puzzle. This one was woven in Crystal Lake City, where the summers are so miserably hot that the people of the Ancient Clan spend half their days lazing about and doing nothing because it's too hot to even move," he explained. "But friend," the man added in a quieter voice. "I have only seen three people beat the puzzle of seven rods in the past ten years, and I've traveled to more than a dozen great cities west of the mountains. The satchel is still a good prize for your friend, isn't it?"

"The satchel is a good prize," Hauke agreed as he renewed his focus on the puzzle in front of him. "But the rug is better for my friend," he added. "Sir Ignatious worships the light of the sun and its warmth, but he can never bask in its rays again. He's trapped, unable to see the beauty of a sunrise or its warmth on his skin," he said in a voice that grew quiet.

"So, to give him a rug like this, that he could rest on during the day, feeling the warmth it was made to feel... I think it would mean more to him than a satchel for books," he said in a firm, determined voice.

Working carefully, with all of his focus on the puzzle in front of him and aura of frost around him so thick that his white fur started to shimmer with tiny ice crystals, Hauke carefully threaded the final rod through a tiny gap in the structure, twisting the rod ever so slightly as he went to prevent it from disturbing the other pieces until it finally locked into place.

"There," Hauke said, sighing in relief as he backed away from the table, standing up from his kneeling posture for the first time since he attempted the simplest puzzle and holding his hands up to indicate that he was no longer supporting the structure of twisted metal. "That makes me the fourth person, doesn't it?" Hauke said proudly as he grinned at the shopkeeper.

"You did it, you did it," Talauia said, fluttering up on wings that hummed in the damp, misty air, wrapping her arms around one of Hauke's thick, muscular arms and hugging him tightly. "I knew you could do it! Didn't you know, didn't you know he could do it, Heila?"

"Of course I knew he could do it," Heila beamed, blotting away the moisture in her eyes that gathered when Hauke explained why he wanted to have the rug for Ignatious so badly. It was exactly that kind of thought that had inspired her to turn to the coven for help in welcoming Ignatious back to the Vale, but even she had been surprised to hear that the person in their group most aligned with the bitter cold of ice could understand someone who craved the sun's warmth so well.

All around the young Frost Walker lord, the crowd of onlookers cheered and pressed inward with many of them hoping to catch a glimpse of the completed puzzle.

"Did you hear?" one young man from the Horned Clan said to another. "That rug is worth twenty-five silver tails, but he'll get it for just seven! What do you think, do you think I can do it too?"

"You don't have his talent, Berg," his friend said, instantly quashing his hopes. "But you might be able to win one of those purses with the bronze clasps, and aren't they supposed to be worth at least four or five silver tails? Get one of those and I'm sure Sara will spend a night with you!"

"Hey you," the first man said, shaking his fist at his friend. "Sara's not that kind of woman. She's sweet and kind, like that Miss Heila over there," he said, pointing at the Willow Witch as she lavished praise on

Hauke for winning the prize. "But, it would be nice if I could catch her eye... Shopkeeper," he called, digging in his coin purse for a silver coin. "Let me give it a try...."

"That's ten tails I owe each of you," Virve said loudly to be heard over the crowd's cheering, and opening a pouch filled with silver coins before counting them out carefully. "Hauke! You owe me an ale for costing me so much money," she called, startling the young Frost Walker lord with her sudden declaration. "I bet that you would fail, but Mother Ashlynn and Ollie wouldn't hear of it. They never doubted that you'd succeed for a second!"

"I always believe in my friends," Ollie said, walking over to give Hauke a congratulatory pat on the back, even though he had to stretch onto his tip-toes just to give the towering Frost Walker a thump on the shoulder. "But even I had my doubts when he said that only three people had ever finished it. Well done, Hauke!"

"You never doubted, did you, Mother Ashlynn?" Virve said quietly as everyone else gathered around Hauke to celebrate. "What did you see that I didn't?"

"It's a secret," Ashlynn said, placing a finger across her lips as she smiled at her Oak Witch. "But mostly, it's because I know Hauke better than I should, and he knows Ignatious the same way, even though they've only met once or twice since we returned to the Vale," she said a touch wistfully.

"My lady?" Virve said, raising an eyebrow at Ashlynn's cryptic comment.

"Hauke wasn't imprisoned as long as I was kept on what amounted to house arrest by my parents," Ashlynn said. "And his torment wasn't nearly as severe as what Sir Ignatious faced at High Lord Hamdi's hands. But he was trapped in a way that could be considered every bit as horrifying as what Hamdi did to Ignatious."

"When Hauke heard that the rugs were for basking in the sun, he made up his mind right then that he was going to give one to Sir Ignatious," Ashlynn said. "Because Hauke understands that even brief moments of escape from the chains that bind you can mean more to a prisoner than an outsider might ever understand," she said quietly.

For a moment, memories of late nights spent creeping through the tall grasses outside Blackwell Manor, guiding Jocelynn to the top of the cliffs to share a pilfered breakfast of bread and cheese that even a commoner would find plain filtered through her mind.

The food she snuck from the kitchens wasn't fancy, but it tasted better than anything because she felt free when she ate it, and she felt the most loved when her sister ate it with her, especially after Jocey grew old enough to have more refined tastes.

Jocelynn had complained once or twice that they should at least get a few honey cakes that had been baked the night before, or another more luxurious treat but when Ashlynn explained that they would get caught and lose their freedom if they took anything too fancy, her sister had never broken Ashlynn's arbitrary seeming rule about the simple breakfasts.

After all, the precious thing wasn't the meal itself... It was the time they spent together that mattered the most.

#### Chapter 625: Real Places, Lost & Found

Following Hauke's success at the iron puzzle, Ashlynn's coven moved on from one stall to the next, competing in everything from ring tosses to knife throwing and puzzles that challenged their ability to find matches among rows of face down cards.

There were dozens of games and hundreds of people clustered around cheering for successes and crying out in frustration at failures, but Ashlynn's group seemed to consistently fair better than most. Though their talents differed, everyone played the games together, quickly accumulating enough prizes and treasures that Heila had to fetch a sack to carry it all, though Hauke insisted on being the one to do the heavy lifting as the bag began to bulge with their winnings.

"Thank you, everyone," Heila said, bowing deeply in gratitude to the other members of the coven. "I can't wait to see Ignatious's face when we surprise him with all of this. Do you think, do you think we could invite him up to the tower in a few days to surprise him?" Heila asked, turning to Ashlynn for permission to invite an outsider into their private tower.

"I think it's fine to invite him in," Ashlynn giggled. "We'll have to cook something special that night to help you sweep him off his feet."

"But, he's the one sweeping me off mine," Heila said, blushing furiously. "And I'm too little to carry him," she said, looking dejected before her face broke into a wide grin at the expressions of the other witches.

"Joker," Virve said, giving Heila a playful shove. "I didn't know you had it in you to be so coy."

"She's using us to practice for Ignatious," Ashlynn teased. "But truly, I'm happy to see everyone having so much fun while doing something to help a friend. But we only have a few hours of daylight left," she said, noting the gathering gloom and the thickening mists rising up from the forest around the ancient fortress. "So, I think it's time to head for the inner wall."

When Nyrielle rebuilt the defenses of the ancient fortress after the Vale of Mists fell to Cellach Lothian, she'd opted to build human-style defensive walls instead of the simpler walls that had been intended mostly to keep wandering beasts from entering the city and grazing on the resident's gardens.

Each wall in the Vale of Mists stood at least thirty feet high and they were wide enough for soldiers to fight atop with small defensive towers spaced every hundred paces along the wall. During the festival, however, the tops of the walls became home to two distinct markets, each one bustling with people moving from shop to shop exploring wares that were both locally produced and carried from across the mountains.

The outer wall held shops that were suitable for most residents of the Vale of Mists. The prices were much lower with very little costing more than four or five silver tails and most items selling for half a tail or less. It was the inner wall, however, that Ashlynn led her coven to where the most prosperous of merchants sold goods that would fetch a high price no matter which Eldritch nation they were sold in.

"Everyone," Ashlynn said when they arrived at a shop selling intricate tapestries that depicted scenes that varied from majestic mountains to tranquil lakes, bustling cities or mighty fortresses standing guard over nations that no one in her coven had ever visited. "Take this as a gift from me," she said, handing one of her pouches of silver coins over to the shopkeeper. "You all have new rooms to decorate and make your own, so choose something that makes you happy and I'll have it hung for you."

"Mother Ashlynn," Ollie said, his eyes growing wide in shock when he saw the slate board with carefully written prices displayed based on the size of the individual tapestries. The cheapest of them was twelve silver tails, and some cost as much as twenty! "Isn't this a bit too much just to hang in our rooms? These are finer than the ones hanging in the great-hall at Lothian Manor," he said as he reached out gently to touch one of the intricate tapestries depicting a vast marsh filled with cypress trees and hanging moss.

"Good sir," a well dressed shopkeeper wearing an elegantly embroidered tunic said when he saw Ollie's reaction. "These are all woven by great masters from the Night Weaver Clan. Each one of them is a faithful reproduction of a real place, representing the most beautiful views from across the whole world, and they're treasures that will last for a hundred years or more if you care for them well. I promise, they're worth the price."

"These are real places?" Ollie said, blinking in surprise as he returned his gaze to the tapestry depicting the grove of Cypress trees. "Then, Mother Ashlynn, is this the Briar you told me about?"

"No it's not, no it's not," Talauia said, standing almost perfectly still and unable to take her eyes off the tapestry. "That's my," she started, only to correct herself almost immediately. "That's the Endless Marsh. My father was, he was the High Lord of the Endless Marsh before he, before..."

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," Ollie said, turning away from the tapestry to gather the Thistle Witch into a tender embrace. Ashlynn hadn't given him many details about Talauia's personal history but she had mentioned that the Thistle Witch was lucky to have escaped the destruction of her clan and the pursuit of Shubnalu, the covetous Fangs of Death who sought to turn Talauia into a vampire assassin.

"You should take this one then," Ollie offered in a quiet, soothing tone. "Since it's a depiction of your home..."

"No it's not, no it's not my home," Talauia said, shaking her head fiercely as she pulled back from Ollie's tender embrace. "Not anymore, it isn't. It hasn't been in a long time," she said as she wiped tears away from her multi-faceted amethyst eyes. "It just surprised me, that's all. My home is in the Briar with Mother Amahle and my coven. So, if you like this because of the trees, then, you should have it, you should have something that speaks to you."

"Are you certain?" Ollie asked, looking from the Thistle Witch to the tapestry and back again. "That was just the first one that caught my eye. There are others I would like just as much," he offered.

"It's fine, it's fine," Talauia said, pointing at a different tapestry entirely, one that depicted a majestic golden waterfall spilling over a cliff into a cloud of mist below. "I want that one," she said, looking to Ashlynn to confirm that it was all right to select such an expensive tapestry that made extensive use of gold thread.



"I remember that waterfall," Ashlynn said, standing next to the tapestry and thinking back to the day she'd been so entranced by it that Nyrielle had to rescue her before she stepped off the edge of the cliff to immerse herself in the powerful energy that surged along with the waters of the White River as they spilled over the cliff above the Briar. "I think it will look beautiful in your room," Ashlynn added, hoping that it would also provide some comfort to their coven's guest witch.

The news that Shubnalû had ordered High Lord Hamdi to capture Nyrielle for him had shaken several people in Ashlynn's small but growing family, but only Talauia had a reason to feel a deep, personal fear at the news. If the Fangs of Death was willing to make a move against one of his peers, attacking another True Vampire because he wanted to possess her, what would happen when he learned of the power that could be gained by taking a witch as his Seneschal?

For decades, Talauia had taken a certain amount of comfort in the knowledge that becoming a witch meant she was 'spoiled' as a candidate to become one of Shubnalû's progeny. Turning her into a vampire would destroy the powers she gained as a witch and even if she gained a different power as his progeny, she would still be damaged in ways that she wouldn't have been if she never became a witch.

Now, however, Ashlynn was living proof that there was a different way for the powerful Great Lord of the Dark Forest to make use of one of the greatest assassins to ever live, and if he wanted to come for Talauia, even the Briar might not be able to keep her safe.

Escaping across the mountains and taking shelter under Nyrielle's dark wings was the best idea that Ashlynn and Lady Amahle had been able to come up with to keep Talauia safe from the possessive vampire lord, but it wouldn't keep her safe forever. Eventually, they would have to confront the Fangs of Death and put an end to his covetousness, one way or another or it would be too dangerous for the Thistle Witch to rejoin her coven in the Briar.

But for now, if a tapestry depicting the waterfall that fed the waterways of the Briar could help reduce the feeling of pain and separation that haunted the Thistle Witch, even just a little bit, then Ashlynn wouldn't begrudge a single silver tail, even if it took all she had planned to spend today and more.

It wasn't the freedom from fear that she wanted to give the winged witch who had made her feel so welcome in the Briar, but at the moment, it was something concrete that she could do to make her friend's life just a little bit better... and that would have to do until she and Nyrielle could do more.

## Chapter 626: Investing in the Coven (Part One)

Ashlynn's gesture of purchasing a fine tapestry for each member of her coven subtly transformed the dynamics within the group as her companions reevaluated their goals for this shopping excursion.

"Mother Ashlynn," Ollie said as he watched the shopkeeper rolling up the tapestries, carefully tying them with thick cords and promising that they would be sent to the witch's tower by the end of the evening. "You said that you wanted us to cook together for at least one meal a day in the tower, didn't you?"

"I do," Ashlynn said. "It's something I learned from Big Sister Amahle. Everyone cooks a dish of their choosing and brings it to share with the coven. I also learned about eating at tables that are low to the ground from the Mother of Thorns. She says it stops gatherings of the coven from ever feeling stiff, formal, and hierarchical."

"If we need to meet to plan a war or govern the Vale," Ashlynn added. "Then, Mistress Nyrielle has places that function far better for those purposes. The coven gathers as a family, and sitting on cushions on the floor helps us remember that. Why? What brought that to mind?"

"Will you let me take charge of equipping our kitchen?" Ollie asked before he turned to the others in the group to explain his idea. "Some things in a kitchen are common. We'll want hooks for hanging roasting meat, pots for stewing, pans for searing, and all of those things. But some dishes may need tools that are less common. If everyone can tell me the sort of food you want to cook, I'll make sure we have the tools for it. That way, everyone has what they need in order to make the dishes they want to share with the coven."

"You don't need to spend your festival money on this," Ashlynn pointed out. "I had planned to let Georg make recommendations for our supplies once we have a proper hearth built in the room atop the tower..."

"I'm sure Georg would be happy to help," Ollie said, smiling at the notion of the unexpectedly wise friend he'd made in the castle's kitchens helping them to set up a kitchen of their own at the top of the tower. "But I've learned recently that good tools can make cooking... joyous, I guess. Or at least less of a chore. Georg has tools for stuffing sausages that I wish we'd had when we were in the Summer Villa...."

"Ugh, don't remind me," Ashlynn said, rubbing her fingers together as if to rid them of the memory of handling the slimy venison while the fat seemed to melt all over her fingers as she tried to stuff the minced meat into a length of freshly washed intestine. "I couldn't eat sausage for a week after that."

"I want a short table," Heila said, stepping up next to Ollie and looking at him with shining eyes. "I don't like using sharp knives when I have to stand on a stool so I want a table I can cut and prepare things on that's my height. And I want some of the rolling pins that put patterns on your dough when you roll it out so my pastries can look as pretty as Georg's do," she said firmly.

"All right," Ollie said, reaching out to ruffle Heila's curly hair. "A short table and some carved rolling pins. What else?"

"A long knife, for cutting delicate fish," Hauke said, drawing surprised looks from several people. "When you eat fish raw, it shouldn't be hacked up or sawed at," he explained. "You need a long knife to cut delicate pieces, especially on a big fish."

"You know the fish in the river aren't as big as the monster fish in your mountain lakes," Virve pointed out. "You might not need such a big knife."

"But, we aren't that far from my home," Hauke protested. "I can go visit long enough to fish from time to time, can't I? And if I freeze the fish before I bring it back, it will last long enough to enjoy, even if I have to use sorcery to keep it frozen in mid-summer."

"Officially, you're an exile," Ashlynn reminded the young Frost Walker lord, though her tone was light when she said it. "But, as the Eldritch Lady of the High Pass, I hereby grant you permission to visit your homeland to fish as often as you want, so long as you aren't socializing with anyone while you're there. Is that fair enough, Hauke?"

Ashlynn didn't want the young Frost Walker to suffer for his exile, and she knew just how much a taste of home could mean while you were living in strange lands. At the same time, she was afraid that if he returned too early, the elders among the Frost Walkers would seek to bring him under their sway, using him as a pawn in an attempt to reclaim power.

It felt like a fine line to walk, between friendship, family, and the duties of a ruler, but she felt like the compromise she offered was reasonable. For a moment, she wondered what her father would have

done before giggling at the absurdity of it. Her father would never have found himself named the lord of a neighboring nation at the end of a single battle, and she doubted he'd choose to act as a lord for the Eldritch even if he was presented the opportunity.

Or at least, he wouldn't now. Soon, she would 'return from the dead' and one of the first things she intended to do was reach out to her parents in Blackwell County. Whether they could accept her and the woman she'd become was yet another nightmare that plagued her from time to time, but since she couldn't do anything about it at the moment, she pushed those worries firmly to the back of her mind and focused on the important things.

"That's more than fair," Hauke said as his horn turned a faint shade of lavender. In truth, he'd forgotten his status as an exile as he got caught up in the Vale's preparations for war. He'd thought it would be a simple thing to hike back up into the mountains any time he felt a little homesick but 'home', it seemed, would remain a distant place that he could only briefly visit for the next five years until his exile ended.

"Thank you for your kindness, my lady," he said, lowering his horn formally as he realized that Ashlynn had worded her 'proclamation' very carefully. He was forbidden from socializing with his clansmen while visiting the High Pass for fishing... but she never said he was forbidden from socializing with them outside of the High Pass.

He doubted that many people would make the long hike down into the Vale of Mists just to visit him, but if his mother or father wanted to see their son, Ashlynn wouldn't force them to shun him during his exile. A crueler ruler, especially one in Ashlynn's circumstances who was cut off from their own family, might choose to enforce a harsher exile. But Lady Ashlynn was different, Hauke realized. When she suffered, no matter what she suffered, she worked hard to prevent others from experiencing the same pain.

She was a very different kind of leader from Ansgar, the Lord of the Seven Peaks, who had ridden roughshod over Hauke to attack Heila and otherwise attempt to restore the Frost Walkers to their days of glory under his rule but... Compared to the tyrannical force he'd seen from his own ancestor, Hauke much preferred to learn from Lady Ashlynn's example.

#### Chapter 627: Investing in the Coven (Part Two)

"So, a short work table and rolling pins," Ollie said, hoping to lighten the conversation back up rather than dwelling on the topic of Hauke's exile. "A long knife for cutting fish, and what else do we need. Virve?"

"I don't know how to cook much of anything," the veteran soldier admitted. "I can manage to roast meat over a campfire, and I can mix flour and water for travel bread, but don't expect much from me."

"I wonder if I can find someone selling books then," Ollie said as he rubbed his chin in thought. "You've traveled more places than most of us. If someone is selling recipes for things you've eaten elsewhere that you like, I can help you learn how to make them. That way we can both learn things together," he offered.

"I'd like that," Virve said, reaching out with a heavy paw to clap the young knight on the back. Lately, it had seemed like the two of them were on opposite sides of everything and they clashed frequently, but Virve had a hard time disliking the flame-haired human. He was trying to do his best, each and every day and even when they disagreed, he'd never once tried to distance himself from her.

"But Ollie," she warned with a teasing grin on her face. "I might want to make spicy things. Are you sure you're up to learning the recipes together with me?"

"Oh, that's fine," Ollie said with an answering grin of his own, finally seeing a way of getting back at the witch with the iron stomach. "I'll learn to eat spicy things, but you have to taste your failures to learn from them," he added, thinking of a few of the horrible failures concocted by the head cook in Lothian Manor.

Growing up, Ollie had been too poor to see any food go to waste, even if it was extraordinarily sour, salty or otherwise off. Knowing Virve, she would likely eat anything that was properly cooked, but what about the things that weren't? Would her iron stomach hold up even then?

"All right you two, that's enough," Ashlynn said, clapping her hands lightly before they fell into another round of teasing, though this one seemed friendlier than a few of their recent arguments had. "Virve, Ollie is planning to shop for our kitchens, what are you going to shop for?"

"Well," the veteran soldier said, pausing for a moment in thought. "You said that one of the hats we need is a Hedge Hat for foraging in the wilderness and I've seen Big Sister Heila's hat," Virve mentioned. "But the Briar is a different kind of wilderness than the Vale of Mists. We'll want good cloaks to keep the water off and even better socks and boots to keep your feet dry in the woods," she mused.

"Let me help make sure everyone is well outfitted for the days and nights we need to spend in the wild," she said, thumping her chest as she realized just how many things they would need to spend several nights in the wilderness if they needed to trek to where different trees or herbs could be found. "And Sir Ollie can help me pick out the tools we need to cook together in the wilderness," she added with a wide smile.

"Oh, I can help, I can help too," Talauia said, fluttering up and looking out over the market. "Bottles and jars for potions and cauldrons for concocting. Oils for infusing and sharp, sharp, sharp scissors for trimming delicate plants and all the things, all the things you need for witchcraft. I helped set up Auntie Ashlynn and Cousin Heila's huts in the Briar with all the things they needed, so I can help here too," she promised.

"I, I want to help too," Hauke said, looking at the group as he furrowed his brows in thought. "But I think I need everyone's help because I don't know what you'll like."

"Just say it, Hauke," Ashlynn said. "And remember, you don't have to spend your money on the coven if you don't want to. I know you're far from home, so if there are things that will make you more comfortable then you should take care of yourself while we're here."

"No, it's fine," Hauke insisted with a shake of his head that caused a brief flurry of snow to form in the misty air around him. "I might make my room extra cold. I learned how to make Eternal Ice from the ancestors and I can place blocks of it in my room to make it colder instead of lighting a fire in the hearth. We don't have many fancy things in the High Pass and I don't need much to be comfortable."

"But, looking around," he said, pointing out several of the finely dressed festival goers who were wandering through the expensive marketplace on the inner wall. "I see many people wearing silver, gold and cut jewels. But Lady Ashlynn, I rarely see you wearing many ornaments, and even fewer on sisters Heila and Virve or brother Ollie. So, I thought, since there is a banquet tonight and many more fancy events to follow, maybe I could help purchase some ornaments for everyone?"

"Hauke, men don't really wear jewelry like women do," Ollie started, only for Ashlynn to cut him off with a sharp look.

"You're a knight now, Sir Ollie," she reminded. "When have you seen Owain or his knights without a heavy ring or two on their fingers, a cuff around their wrists or a necklace hanging across their chests? Or cloak pins, hat pins, belts with carved and gilded buckles," she said, ticking things off on her fingers as

she thought about all of the things that not only Owain but her own father had worn for formal occasions or even more casual meetings with other lords.

"We're returning to human lands soon, Ollie," Ashlynn promised. "Hauke wants to help you equip yourself as a knight for the battles that are fought with words over banquet tables. Don't you think it would be good to accept his gift?"

"When you put it like that," Ollie said, blushing slightly. "I guess it's hard to refuse."

"Let me fill the cupboards," Heila offered, having finally arrived at a conclusion. "There are many different kinds of teas in the Eldritch nations, so please taste things with me and let me know what you all like. And everyone needs their own tea-cup too," she added. "I saw someone with hand painted porcelain so please, pick out what you like so I can make tea for everyone in their cups," she said, looking very serious about tea.

Of course, she intended to go far beyond just tea when she took charge of the cupboards. Plates, bowls, goblets for wine and a dozen other things flickered through her mind as she thought of the places she could help make meals an experience that belonged to the coven instead of just a time to fill their bellies.

Overlooking the group, Ashlynn wore a broad smile as each member of her coven looked for ways to put their mark on the newly forming group. She would have been just as happy to see them indulging themselves, or shopping for gifts to give their friends and loved ones. So long as they were enjoying the afternoon and their time together, she would have been completely content.

But seeing them each putting time and thought into how they could use their unique knowledge and experience to help build the coven's foundation... it filled her heart with warmth and pride. The days ahead would be hard, but as long as they had the memories they built today and many others like it, then the coven that emerged from the coming crisis would grow into something much greater than a trained squad of warrior witches.

This was the path to nurturing a coven that was a family, and Ashlynn was determined to ensure they never lost their way, no matter what storms shook them in the days to come.

Chapter 628: Restored Glory

The great hall of the ancient fortress had seen almost no use in more than a century since the Vale of Mists fell to Cellach Lothian. Even when Nyrielle returned to the Vale, staining the waters of the River Luath red with blood as she and her forty-seven prodigy purged every human conqueror and settler from their lands, there had been no feasts or grand celebrations in honor of their victory, only the long, bitter years of reconstruction as a trickle of Nyrielle's people returned to the lands of their birth.

For decades, the great hall had been carefully maintained along with other unused areas of the ancient fortress, awaiting a day when the Vale of Mists returned to its former glory... or faded at last into the oblivion of history.

Now, however, while the entire fortress had undergone tremendous changes to accommodate the sudden arrival of an army more than a thousand soldiers strong along with more than twice that number in family members, merchants and allies recruited to Nyrielle's cause, the great hall seemed to have become the center of all of that change, shining in a way it hadn't for over a century.

The stone walls had all been freshly washed, then painted a soft, subtle grey reminiscent of the Vale's mists before skilled artisans added harlequin patterns of alternating midnight blue and emerald green to sections of the wall that stretched from floor to ceiling. Where the walls weren't painted with bright colors, they displayed tapestries pulled from storage rooms and carefully cleaned so they could be displayed in all their glory.

Some said that the tapestries had been woven by Madame Zedya herself, and they depicted scenes from around the Vale of Mists and far beyond. Notably, one tapestry depicted a dark, foreboding swamp, filled with trees covered in thorns, supporting vibrant vines with even sharper thorns. Another tapestry prominently displayed something that seemed to be the exact opposite, presenting the frozen vista of a Frost Walker fortress, though the bright whites and icy blues of the tapestry conveyed a feeling that was every bit as dangerous and foreboding as the dark swamp of the Briar.

High above, more than a dozen gilded chandeliers had been polished until they gleamed, each one filled with enough oil to burn for an entire night and hung with more than a hundred crystals to reflect and refract the lamps' soft, golden light. On the floor below, fresh cedar boughs covered the cold stone floor, filling the room with their sweet, earthy scent and muffling the footfalls of hundreds of people moving about to find their places.

At the entrance of the great hall, Kaisen stared in open-mouthed awe at how much the ancient fortress had transformed since his own days serving in its halls. Next to him, Helga fidgeted nervously with her simple blue dress, adjusting the polished amethyst pendant hanging from her neck while her eyes darted around the great hall for anyone dressed as plainly as they were.



They had already spent several minutes standing in line, waiting for one of the servants to guide them to their assigned seats, and Helga was already feeling incredibly underdressed after seeing the glamorous dresses and elaborate jewels worn by a trio of women from the scaled clan, to say nothing of the palpably mysterious aura that radiated from a group of sorcerers whose robes were embroidered with cryptic runes in thread of silver and gold.

In fact, ever since their arrival at the Ancient Fortress, she hadn't seen a single person attending who wasn't at least the Village Elder of a village or a proud warrior carrying weapons that looked impressive enough to be the work of master smiths from far across the mountains. Her eyes searched the crowds constantly, hoping to find a sign of some other common folk who had entered the prestigious banquet because of a family connection, likely seated at a table far to the back of the great hall, but she had yet to see a single person who fit that description.

"Relax," a gruff voice said from behind her as her father-in-law cast his own gaze around the hall. "You saw how the guardsmen at the front gate reacted to our invitation. No one will look down on us for how we're dressed tonight. We aren't here to impress these people anyway," he added pointedly as he tugged on his gray beard.

"Most likely," the old man concluded. "Little Heila just wants a moment to introduce us to the Seneschal. We'll have a few minutes of polite hellos and then she'll be too busy tending to her mistress to bother with us."

"You say that, Father," Kaisen said, frowning as he inspected his father's unexpectedly refined appearance. The midnight blue tunic had faded a bit with the passage of years, but the silver buttons running down his chest were bright and freshly polished, and the small sword he wore at his waist gleamed with matching silver adornments. "But you look like you actually belong here. Where did you even get that sword anyway?"

"This? It's just a ceremonial sword, it's not even sharp," he said, tapping the hilt of the sword as though it were a simple fashion accessory. "It was a gift from a friend when I retired from Lady Nyrielle's service. It's been collecting dust under my bed since you were in diapers," he said with a warm laugh.

Standing next to him, a white haired woman with horns grown heavy and dull with age smiled brightly at her husband's dashing appearance, seeing once again the handsome rogue who had stolen her heart and convinced her to leave the outlying villages behind to return to life in the Vale of Mists.

For all he said that the sword had been collecting dust, she knew very well that he pulled it out at least once a year, carefully maintaining the treasured weapon... just as she knew that it wasn't the dull, ceremonial accessory he pretended that it was.

Kaisen was about to press his father for a better explanation, wanting to know how a simple trader who wandered the outlying villages before settling down in the Vale of Mists had come to be gifted such an expensive looking weapon but the arrival of a breathless and flustered young servant interrupted them before he could ask any more questions.

"I'm sorry for the wait," the young man with short horns said as he bowed deeply to Kaisen and his family. "May I have your names?" he asked as he glanced at the slate he carried in one arm, covered with a diagram of the great hall and dense notations.

"Kaisen," Heila's father said, feeling a bit awkward at the young man's excessive courtesy. "This is my wife, Helga, and my parents as well. The invitation that my daughter, Heila, sent mentioned we could bring other family members, so I hope it's no trouble that there are four of us," he said nervously.

"L-lady Heila is your daughter?" the young man stammered, color instantly draining from his face as he realized that such a venerable personage had been left to wait in the same line as Village Elders and wealthy merchants. "Honored guests, I'm so sorry, so sorry for the mixup. I'll take you to your seats right away, right away," he gulped, bowing so deeply that he nearly overbalanced, and he would have fallen to the floor if Kaisen's father hadn't caught him.

"Don't worry yourself over us, young man," the gray-bearded senior said, helping the young man to stand upright. "These bones aren't so old that I can't stand in line for a bit," he said, holding his cane up as if to imply that it was mostly for show and not something he needed just to move around. "Now, why don't you show us to our seats?"

"Of course, of course," the young man stammered. "If you'll follow me down the center aisle, your seats are on the left side of the hall at the table in the front with the other Honored Guests. Please, if you'll follow me," he said with sweat dripping down his brow.

"There's another Honored Guest at your table who is very eager to meet you," the young man added as he guided the surprised-looking couple toward one of the tables at the front of the great hall, just beneath the high table on the dias that overlooked the entire hall.

Inwardly, the young man hoped that the other guest had exaggerated when he described Lady Heila's prowess with whips. Or, failing that, that the 'Willow Whip' wouldn't take offense that her family had been left waiting in line instead of receiving the courtesy they should.

Behind him, Kaisen and his father exchanged puzzled looks as they walked toward the table at the front of the hall. Who among the 'honored guests' could possibly be interested in meeting them?

#### Chapter 629: Honored Guests (Part One)

The tables in the great hall had been arranged like stacked Vs split down the middle by a central aisle. Guests were only seated on one side of the narrow tables, ensuring that every guest was angled to face toward the high table at the head of the hall.

Kaisen's cloven hooves unconsciously slowed when he began to recognize some of the figures sitting on the right hand table opposite the one the young servant was leading his family to. Commander Bassinger's presence was difficult to miss, but both he and Marshal Jakob seemed oddly diminished compared to the men sitting beside them.

It was only after he looked closely that Kaisen realized that both the white-furred warrior from the Golden Eyed Clan and the hulking, misshapen Clanless man sitting next to him were vampires! Even more strangely, both men wore the same blood red and silver sashes across their chests as Commander Bassinger, implying that they held the same status in the Vale of Mists as the man in charge of Nyrielle's army.

"Mister Kaisen," the young servant said, interrupting Kaisen's thoughts as he gestured to a set of seats at the table on the left hand side. "May I introduce you to your companions for the evening?" he asked, pausing for only a moment before he continued.

"To your left, I present Commander Aspakos of the Fourth Army," he said, gesturing to a Dark Feathered man with a broken beak that had been pieced back together with what looked like molten gold rather than any sort of glue. When his dark eyes fell on Kaisen and his family, they were struck by a momentary feeling that he wasn't looking at them as much as he was somehow looking into them, seeing their deepest, darkest secrets, hopes and fears as easily as ordinary people might read a book.

The feeling passed quickly however, leaving them wondering if it had been real or something they imagined because of his disconcerting, slightly menacing aura. But as striking as his appearance was, it

was the title 'Commander of the Fourth Army' and the presence of yet another blood red and silver sash worn over his intricately embroidered robes that deeply shocked Kaisen and his family.

"This is Artificer Erkembalt," the servant continued, gesturing to a smartly dressed man in a tail-coat whose pockets bulged with a number of small tools even at this formal occasion. Hearing his name, the distracted looking artificer looked up briefly from the polished piece of wood he'd been examining to offer the briefest of nods before returning to the object that occupied his attention.

"He's the crafter of Snow Fang," the servant added, placing emphasis on the weapon's name as if it held deep significance. "And finally, Ritchel of the High Pass," he said gesturing to a slender, nearly emaciated looking Frost Walker who seemed much more frail than someone of his height and apparent age should be. Hearing his name mentioned without any sort of honorific, a wry smile tugged at the corner of the Frost Walker's lips as he lowered his horn in polite greeting to the Willow Witch's family.

"To your right, Elder Nan, Milo and his wife Juni of the Heartwood Clan," he added, showing them the same level of respect he gave to the group on the left, despite the fact that the trio from the Heartwood Clan were the first people that Helga had seen who were also dressed simply.

Both Milo and his wife Juni smiled broadly, their tails lightly thumping the ground in excited greeting as they welcomed the latest arrivals. Old Nan's eyes, however, narrowed as she surveyed the gathered members of Heila's family, lingering on the figure of the gray-bearded man wearing a distinctive sword at his waist for several moments before turning her gaze to the old man's son and comparing him to her memories of a strikingly similar, handsome individual who she hadn't seen in many years.

Combined with the lack of impressive titles, Kaisen's family quickly assumed that they had finally found kindred spirits, people who were here at the invitation of someone who used their connections to secure an invitation. Helga offered a warm smile and was about to speak up to greet their fellow tag-alongs when the servant turned to someone so massive that Heila's diminutive family had mistaken him for a pile of fur cloaks sitting at the end of the table.

"And finally, at the end of the table," the servant said, swallowing deeply and gesturing to the woolly Tuscan, wrapped in layers of furs as though he had descended from a snowy mountain just to attend this banquet and towering over everyone present despite sitting directly on the ground. "This is Captain Ipiktok of the Second Army. Captain and honored guests, may I present Mister Kaisel, father of Lady Heila, along with his wife and family," he said bowing deeply to everyone present.

"So, this is the family that gave birth to the whip cracking terror who humiliated my men and shamed me into surrender," Ipiktok said, using his flexible trunk to set down an oversized tankard of ale and leaning forward to peer at the new arrivals. "You know she didn't even leave me with a scar to boast of when I tell people how close I came to death that day! How utterly humiliating," he said with a powerful snort of air from his long, flexible trunk

From his position sitting on the floor, Ipiktok's long, curved tusks crashed through the cedar boughs on the floor, scraping along the cold stone underneath, giving the feeling that only the awkwardness of his position prevented him from descending lower to devour the diminutive members of the Horned Clan beneath him.

The instant the Tuscan spoke, Kaisen's gray-haired father moved, almost without thinking as he placed himself between his son and daughter-in-law and the tusked giant at the far end of the table. His hand dropped to the hilt of his 'ceremonial' sword, though it only rested lightly on the pommel as the gray-bearded man's eyes inspected the looming giant.

All around them, even at the adjacent tables, conversation stilled as everyone looked at the strange scene of a diminutive man from the horned clan facing down a powerful Tuscan warrior. But the instant whispers spread through the crowd that the old man was Lady Heila's grandfather, the mood of the entire crowd shifted, becoming almost... eager? As if they couldn't wait to see if the old man would bring down the powerful Tuscan in an even more humiliating defeat.

Hearing the whispers of the crowd, Kaisen began to look around in panic. His father was just an old man! A simple trader who retired years ago to help Kaisen and Helga raise their own children. So where did all these people get the idea that his father could somehow defeat a mighty Tuscan Captain?

#### Chapter 630: Honored Guests (Part Two)

The whispers of the crowd grew louder as they watched the standoff between the short, grey-bearded man from the Horned Clan and the giant Tuscan warrior. A few tables away, a few veteran soldiers even began to place bets with many favoring the old man.

Looking down at the cluster of diminutive figures and hearing the whispers of the crowd, Ipiktok couldn't help but laugh at himself for the position he found himself in. If he wanted to, he could easily crush all four members of Heila's family with a single swat of his massive hand, and even if the old man was one of the greatest swordsmen to ever live, he had little reason to fear for his life. But in truth, he bore no hostility toward the Willow Whip's family.

He'd given his word to follow her after she spared him and his men in the arena and in the days that followed, he'd never once regretted that decision. Even though she had passed command of his soldiers over to Commander Savis for the duration of the upcoming war, he could only respect her for choosing to place him and his men where they could do the most good, rather than clinging to them and using them as some kind of ostentatious personal guard.

Now that he saw the Willow Witch's grandfather staring him down with nothing but a sword that was no longer than the palm of his hand, Ipiktok felt like he finally understood a piece of where his mistress's strength came from.

"Ha!" Ipiktok laughed loudly. "Blood runs true indeed," he thundered, retrieving his tankard with his long, flexible trunk and raising it as though he were offering a toast. "Sit, sit. Be welcome," he said warmly, much to the disappointment of the members of the crowd who had begun to wager on the outcome of a confrontation between the two men. "My men and I are still alive because of your granddaughter's mercy, mister...?" Ipiktok asked, trailing off and raising an eyebrow at the grey-bearded man.

"His name is Achim," Old Nan said warmly from the opposite side of the family. "And whatever you do, Captain Ipiktok," she warned, shaking a finger at the looming Tuscan before pointing her finger at Heila's grandfather. "Don't praise this fool. He'll take every compliment like it's a solemn truth carved in oak, and he'll have you believing it's all true before you finish your second cup of wine."

"Nan, you wound me," Achim said, giving the old woman a deep bow. "I'm an old man now. All I have left are old stories. You wouldn't begrudge me even those, would you?"

"You know, I thought you were dead," Nan said, giving the distinguished-looking man an evaluating look. "You could have visited when the war ended," she said sourly, even though her face wore a gentle smile.

"I didn't die," Achim said, pulling out a chair for his wife to take a seat next to Old Nan. "I retired. My little ones had little ones! How could I keep traipsing around the outlying villages when I had my very own grandchildren to watch running about? My darling Lorena would never have forgiven me for leaving them all to her, and family always comes first. It's the same for you, isn't it, Nan?"

"Smooth talker," Old Nan chuckled. "You haven't changed a bit."

"Mister Achim, Mister Kaisen," Ritchel said in a voice that was pure and strong despite his apparent frailty. "You have my deepest gratitude for teaching Lady Heila to prioritize family and value mercy. If not for her friendship with my son, I doubt she'd have ordered the Thistle Witch to spare my life."

"Spare your life?" Kaisen said, blinking furiously at the emaciated Frost Walker before his eyes widened in shock. "Lord Ritchel of the High Pass! You, you..."

"It's just 'Ritchel' now," the former Eldritch Lord of the High Pass said, raising his hand in a gesture that was a little helpless while his expression was bittersweet. "My son will take up my throne in a few years' time. For now, I'm just a 'guest' of the Vale of Mists while I recover from the Thistle Witch's poison."

"You should be more than a guest," Ipiktok said, giving the former Frost Walker lord an appraising look. "I've seen the powers of flame that Sir Ignatious commands. This 'Inquisition' is said to possess flames that are even more terrifying. If you brought five or ten of your men and led them under Commander Aspakos's banner, I'm sure you would make a difference in the battles to come."

"There's no need to pressure him," Aspakos said, holding up a taloned hand. "Let him heal from his wounds and watch over his son for a time. A parent or grandparent should have a chance to see their child rise instead of clinging to what little glory they can still find on the field of battle. Isn't that right, Mister Achim? Miss Nan?"

"I never cared for battles and nonsense," Old Nan said. "I've seen the only one I ever intend to, and that one was almost the death of me. But my Milo here," she said, placing the tips of her claws lightly on Milo's shoulder as her tail drooped slightly before firming back up. "Milo's heart is of a different color, and he will follow Sir Ollie wherever he goes, into any battle he fights for as long as he can."

"Mother," Milo started, only for his mother to grip his shoulder firmly to interrupt him.

"Did I say it was a bad thing?" Old Nan teased. "You're much like Sir Ollie, and Lady Heila too," she said proudly. "Even if I tease this old goat," she said, shooting a brief, knowing look at Achim. "He helped raise a good granddaughter, and I'm proud that you'll have her watching over you when you go to war with Sir Ollie. Knowing she's on your side... it puts an old woman's heart at ease."

Sitting in the middle of the table, Kaisen and Helga exchanged deeply puzzled looks as the conversation flowed around them. Heila had done something to humiliate the giant Tuscan warrior and his men, forcing them to surrender?

As one of his youngest daughters, Kaisen still remembered the days when he had to watch over her playing in streams. She'd taken an extra year or two to grow out of the clumsiness that came with her horns growing in, and she had a tendency to get her horns caught on things in the water where she might not be able to breathe. It didn't feel like enough time had passed for her to do something that would reduce such a powerful warrior to surrendering... in shame and humiliation, no less!

Helga wore a similarly stunned expression on her face. Her daughter had ordered a powerful witch to spare Lord Ritchel's life? The same daughter who struggled to raise her voice in arguments with her siblings, who backed down from conflicts instead of hurting another person's feelings, had become someone who could command the life or death of an Eldritch Lord?

For a moment, both parents began to wonder if there had been some kind of mistake. If there was another Heila from another village who had done all of these things, and the wrong family had received the invitation. But Kaisen's father had personally said that the seal on the invitation was legitimate and the handwriting on the outside of the parchment had clearly been their daughter's, so there shouldn't be any mistake.

Somehow, their darling daughter, who had only left the Vale of Mists for six short months, had transformed into... into what? Hearing the way everyone at the table spoke about her, as if they not only respected her, but placed their faith in her to keep their own loved ones safe, left her befuddled parents wondering. Just what had happened to her while she'd been gone?