

## The Vampire 291

### Chapter 291: Returning Insults

After offering a brief bow, Ignatious turned to the collection of Golden Eyed soldiers who stood at the gate. There were nine in total, six wearing dark green tabards over coats of mail while three wore more ceremonial tunics, each with a number of braided cords over their left shoulders to denote their rank.

Seeing the assembled welcoming party, a faint frown flickered across Nyrielle's face. Other than Ignatious, there were no vampires present in the honor guard. And while the officers looked impressive, no matter what positions they held in the Tangled Wood, she doubted any of them stood higher than the High Lord's own progeny.

"Mistress Nyrielle," Ignatious said, his voice rich and smooth like smoke over water as he made introductions. "High Lord Hamdi regrets that he's unable to receive you directly but he's sent Commander Stoll of the Dark Wolf Brigade, along with two of his captains to receive you."

"Commander Stoll, is it?" Nyrielle said, her eyes flashing with a midnight blue and darker, shadowy energy. "And which of these captains is your second in command?"

"Lady Nyrielle," the commander said, placing his right fist over his heart in a simple salute before gesturing at the man to his right. "Captain Gruen is my..."

Whatever else he'd been about to say cut off in a strangled cry as Nyrielle vanished from sight only to appear a moment later at the commander's side with her fangs buried deep into his neck. Dark wings unfurled, cloaked in a shadowy energy, unleashing a flurry of feathers formed from the shadows of her wings.

Seven feathers struck out like daggers hurled with unerring precision, each piercing the neck of an armored soldier or the heart of Captain Gruen. Only the final, yet-to-be-introduced captain was spared from the fury of Nyrielle's assault.

"Ah, ah," Zedya said, stepping forward when she saw the captain reaching for the heavy saber at his hip. Her eyes glowed a brilliant amethyst, completely filling his vision as she advanced on him. "In this world, you are the lucky one who gets to live, but only if you stay still and wait for Mistress Nyrielle to tell you why you were spared. Do you understand?"

"Yes, lady..." the captain said numbly with a glazed look in his eyes.

Zedya might not understand why Nyrielle had been so ruthless with the welcoming delegation, but she didn't need to understand in order to play her part. Since her Mistress had spared the life of this man, she had a use for him and it wouldn't do for him to force someone to kill him in a misguided attempt at heroics. After decades at her lady's side, she knew her role without being prompted and she wasted no time in securing the fortunate captain until Nyrielle was ready to deal with him.

For several minutes, Commander Stoll hung limply in Nyrielle's arms as she drank her fill of his rich, vigorous blood. The commander had been a soldier for most of his life, doubtlessly he was one of the best of his cohort a decade ago. Now, his vitality had begun to fade, losing the fresh potency of the young. Instead, his blood tasted like a rich, aged wine, steeped in decades of bloody combat before being placed on the shelf to mature.

Ignatious and Zedya watched with calm, unflinching gazes as Nyrielle fed. Neither batted an eye, even when Commander Stoll began to thrash and struggle in her grip. Yet, for all of the man's vaunted strength, he was as helpless as a newborn cub in her grip, powerless to resist from the start of his struggles until the light faded from his eyes and Nyrielle dropped him unceremoniously to the ground in a heap at her feet.

"You there," Nyrielle said to the remaining man. His eyes began to tremble the second that Zedya released her hold on his mind, darting from the corpses of his commander and companions to the winged vampire and back again before he took two halting steps backward and started looking for a way to escape the nightmare he'd been plunged into.

"Take a message to Hamdi," Nyrielle said as her eyes returned to their normal midnight blue pools, losing the menace of her darker, shadowy energy. "Tell him that he is to come to my chambers one hour before dawn to pay his respects to the Harbinger of Death," she commanded. "And tell him that he should thank me for cleaning up his trash."

"You should run, Captain Aiss," Ignatious added, his voice startling the soldier out of his paralysis. "Mistress Nyrielle's words are as precious as gold and just as heavy. It wouldn't do to hold them too long before they're delivered," he said, sending the Golden Eyed soldier scampering back into the Tangled Tower.

"I've seen to the preparations of your chambers personally," the former Inquisitor added as he gestured for Nyrielle to precede him into the tower. "Sister Zedya can attend to your belongings once I've shown you the way," he said, stepping over a fallen soldier's body without so much as a glance at the unfortunate man.

Whether the man had met his struggle in this life or not, Ignatious couldn't say, but he found it unlikely. He could only hope that the man had done enough in this life to be given greater opportunities in the next one. Those thoughts, however, were as fleeting as the man's life had been, quickly fading from Ignatious's mind as he led Nyrielle to the Tangled Tower.

The tower itself had been constructed of black granite with a subtle twist to its pentagonal structure. The entire exterior of the tower was wrapped with a twisted iron structure that emulated a wild climbing rose on a massive scale. Wicked metal 'thorns' protruded along the length of the twisted ironwork and every dozen feet or so a 'rose' of blades blossomed, ready to slice flying predators to ribbons if they dared to attempt to perch on the massive iron structure.

Inside the tower, oil lamps burned at regular intervals interspersed with faded tapestries depicting glorious battles fought centuries ago along with well-preserved paintings of notable men and women of ages past. From the clear depictions of fangs in each of the paintings, it was obvious that only Hamdi's progeny received the honor of a portrait in his grand entry hall.

After descending two flights of spiral stairs into the levels of the tower beneath the ground, Ignatious opened a heavy iron-bound wooden door and gestured for Nyrielle to proceed him in.

The sitting room was opulent and well lit with dozens of oil lamps burning quietly and casting a soft, golden light over the luxurious furnishings. Despite the antique design of everything in the room, not a speck of dust could be found and the cushions and upholstery on the sofas and chairs looked freshly washed and restuffed, even if the fabric itself was somewhat faded from age.

"Your bed chamber is through those doors," Ignatious said, pointing at another heavy, iron-bound set of doors. "And I've moved myself into the room next door for the duration of your stay. I hope Sister Zedya won't mind sharing a common room with me," he said, flashing the other vampire a smile that revealed a hint of his fangs.

"Since you've made the arrangements, I'll naturally follow them," Zedya said, offering a shallow curtsy. "I'll see to your belongings, my Lady," she added, turning to Nyrielle. "I'm sure the two of you have a great deal to discuss."

"Zedya," Nyrielle said before the youngest vampire in the room could leave. "If anyone slights you, so long as they aren't Hamdi's progeny, kill them directly for the offense. Feed if you're hungry and if they're worthy, but don't hesitate to kill until your dress is stained red."

"As you command, my Lady," Zedya said, her brows furrowing slightly at the instruction. "But, may I ask why?"

"Because Hamdi has chosen to welcome me like an Eldritch Lord, and one that he is too busy to waste his time to welcome personally," Nyrielle said, her eyes growing dark as her fingers sharpened into claws. "I can forgive a High Lord for being preoccupied with matters of their domain. I cannot forgive him for failing to send even one of his progeny to receive me."

"If he still thinks of me as the naive little girl I was two centuries ago, it's time to teach him otherwise," Nyrielle said. "If Hamdi wishes to keep the old ways then it's time someone reminds him that the old ways are a two-edged sword."

"Now, Ignatious," Nyrielle said as she withdrew her dark aura and relaxed her hands. Her wings remained unfurled and her presence was still much less human than normal but she made every effort to present a welcoming attitude to her exiled progeny. "There are many things I wish to ask you, but the most important one is this."

"From your attire, I assume you have yet to forsake your faith," Nyrielle said, leaning forward and regarding the former Inquisitor with a predatory gaze. The red and gold vestments he wore may be in an antiquated style, but they looked like they had been made recently. While he could have dressed himself in anything, clearly he'd gone through some effort to maintain the attire that functioned as a badge of office in his former life. It was a choice that Nyrielle wasn't willing to dismiss as a simple habit.

"What I want to know," she said with eyes that seemed to pierce through his heart to examine his very soul. "Is if you still have command of your Holy Flames..."

Chapter 292: Inquisitor Ignatious

"What I want to know is if you still have command of your Holy Flames..."

Nyrielle's words pierced directly to Ingatious's heart, inflicting a wound he had long thought he'd become numb to. Once, his flames had been his greatest pride, or perhaps, they had been the fuel for his unbridled arrogance. Of all the Inquisitors summoned to fight beside the Lothians in the War of Undying Demons, he had stood in the Church's vanguard, bathing the land in cleansing flames and leaving nothing but sacred, purified ash in his wake.

At the time, he'd felt that he was destined to join the ranks of the Exemplars at the end of the campaign. The war was a crucible for him in which he tempered his faith against the greatest threat humans had faced since the end of the second crusade. Deep in his heart, he felt that he was answering his calling and that the Holy Lord of Light himself had placed him on a path to unparalleled glory.

All of that ended the night he captured one of Nyrielle's progeny. He didn't understand at the time how great of a transgression he committed. Day after day, he worked with white hot irons, screws, lashes and even pure holy flame as he tore secrets from the lips of his captive. In the end, the poor demon begged him for salvation, to be released from their dark pact with the Demon Lady of the Vale so they could walk under the sun again.

That moment felt like his greatest triumph until the doors of church shattered like kindling and the dark, winged figure of a demonic executioner stormed into his temple. In that moment, when he stared into her midnight eyes and darkness enveloped him, all of his pride felt meaningless. His accomplishments were worthless. None of the secrets he'd learned in the days of torture seemed to matter. Nothing mattered...

It would have been a kindness if Nyrielle had ended his life that night. Certainly, in the last moments of his life, he failed to meet his struggle. When confronted by the most terrifying demoness known to mankind, he had faltered, as helpless as a babe before her shadowy ax. And yet, she denied him a merciful death.

There would be no opportunity to present his achievements to the Holy Lord of Light. He would not be judged and his merits would not be weighed. Perhaps he could have entered his next life as a nobleman or, if his merits had truly been great, one of the royal families in the old countries. He had served with all his heart and given everything to the Holy Lord of Light... if he could not reach the Heavenly shores, surely he had still earned some reward.

Instead, Nyrielle inflicted the greatest cruelty on him that he could imagine. That night, she granted a merciful death to her progeny and condemned him to take their place.

Sighing heavily, Ignatious raised his hand and closed his eyes as he attempted to recall the way he'd felt, all those years ago, when he unleashed the wrath of the Holy Lord of Light on all the enemies of his church. The righteous confidence, the arrogance and inherent sense of justice he felt every time he reduced a sinner, heretic or demon to little more than ash.

When he opened his eyes, the dimmest embers of his former zeal could be seen in the dark depths of his gaze as words of power tumbled from his lips.

"Lord of Light, thy flames descend,

Let sinners meet their burning end."

In his hand, a brilliant ball of golden flame sparked into being. The ball of flame was small by his former standards, no larger than an apple or pomegranate, and the edges of the flame flickered with a deep, dull red of wavering intensity.

The light from his ball of flame banished shadows across half the room and light from the ball of flame cast no shadows of its own. More than just a source of illumination, the light Ignatious held in his hand was the antithesis of darkness. Only Nyrielle and the furniture in the room behind her still cast shadows when Ignatious held up his ball of Holy Flame.

"The Holy Lord of Light has not forsaken me in this land of darkness, Mistress Nyrielle," he said as he held the ball of flame aloft. "But, I am not the man I once was. I still believe and perhaps, one day, a fallen sinner like me may still reach the Heavenly Shores, but that day is farther away than I can imagine."

"It would be a waste for someone like you to pass from the world too soon," Nyrielle said as she stared at his flickering flame in wonder. "You are not burned by your own flames? Does conjuring them bring you pain," she asked.

"I've never been harmed by my own flames," the former Inquisitor said with a heavy sigh. "Even when I attempted to light myself ablaze, to bring my existence to a worthy end, my flesh would not burn though my robes were reduced to ash. I believe that the Holy Lord of Light may still have some purpose for me, but what it is, I cannot begin to imagine," he said, waving his hand and banishing the flickering ball of flame.

"You have changed greatly, Ignatious," Nyrielle said as she stared at the man she'd kept at arms length or further for decades. "The man I exiled would have hurled that ball of flame at me, just to see if there was the slightest chance that he could die together with the woman who cursed him to this unending existence."

Of course, time had changed things for her as well. There had been a time when she couldn't look upon his handsome face without seeing the horrific wounds he'd inflicted on one of her champions. There had been a time when she wanted nothing more than to sink her claws into his handsome visage and tear it away until he appeared as hideous to the outside world as he did to her on the night they met.

Time, it seemed, had worn away at both of their hurts, leaving only the bond of blood that tied them together and distant memories that both of them had worked hard to leave buried deep within their hearts.

"It wasn't easy," the former Inquisitor admitted. "The Mother of Thorns gave me perspective that I lacked. The years I spent as her... research subject, they brought many revelations that helped me to reexamine my faith. I was reluctant to admit it, but there is a difference between my faith and the Church that preaches it."

"So, you have kept your faith but turned your back on your Church?" Nyrielle asked with a raised brow. If that was the case, then bringing him back to the Vale of Mists might be even more important than she had originally imagined.

She and Ashlynn had discussed the power of the Church many times, and Nyrielle had all but given up on breaking humans free of their faith, but if Ignatious had succeeded in separating his faith from his Church... perhaps he had found a path that could be shared.

War, after all, wasn't only a contest to determine who had the greater strength of arms. Sometimes, the reasons that an army fought were just as important as the weapons and armor they fought with. When she took him as one of her progeny, she had never had much hope of controlling or commanding him. At the time, she'd only wanted him to suffer. But now, perhaps enough time had passed that they could reexamine their relationship.

"I think that the Church has lost its way," Ignatious said, a hint of the flames of old sparking to life in his dark eyes. "They have become distracted by the powers and politics of this world and ceased to strive toward the Heavenly Shores, acting as if they have all but arrived."

"In this, they are the greatest sinners because if they falter at their final step, they can never lead anyone to the Heavenly Shores," he said, his deep voice regaining a passion he'd thought was long lost.

"Sinners like those can only lead people astray," he said, as though he was issuing a proclamation from the pulpit. "And those sinners deserve to burn."

### Chapter 293: Estranged Son

Seeing the spark of passion rekindling in Ignatious's eyes brought a cold smile to Nyrielle's face. It had taken seventy years of exile, but it seemed like the former Inquisitor had turned his fury away from her and onto the Church that made him the man he'd been when she captured him.

"You seem resolved to your fate," Nyrielle said, leaning back in her chair as she studied her progeny's reactions. "Has Hamdi had a hand in that?"

"High Lord Hamdi grew bored of me within a few years of my arrival," Ignatious said with a resigned shake of his head. "Lately, I see him once a decade or less. My years in his care were... hard," he said as his eyes gazed into the distance.

When Nyrielle brought him to the western lands, it was originally to loan him to Amahle so that the witch could study the magic practiced by humans. Nyrielle wanted the insights that a witch could offer and there were things that Amahle wanted to understand beyond just the methods that humans used to practice their strange magics.

When she'd finished with the Inquisitor, rather than allow him to return to the Vale of Mists, Nyrielle had asked Hamdi to give him a home and an opportunity to learn what it meant to live his life as a vampire.

At first, the aging vampire seemed delighted by the human zealot. He took great pleasure in pushing Ignatious to the brink of starvation before throwing him into the wilderness, or confining him in a cell with young innocents, eager to see if the human's hatred of all 'demons' would allow him to feed on such forbidden fruit or if his morals would assert themselves even in the face of his hunger.



These games had only lasted for a few years, however, before the High Lord passed responsibility for Ignatious on to his own progeny. There was nothing interesting about stripping the broken man down further and since he expected Nyrielle to reclaim him one day or another, he saw no point in investing in rebuilding Ignatious into a functioning person.

"Rathin was my keeper in the darkest years," he said, returning his gaze to Nyrielle. "He left me in the dark and brought criminals for me to feed on. Eventually, he took me out, I think out of boredom more than anything else, but I learned much from him about hunting and the rules of the Tangled Wood."

"I do not expect that your existence here was comfortable," Nyrielle said. Though her tone was neutral, a very small part of her was relieved that the years had been unkind to him. While she no longer held a grudge for what he had done, at least, not enough of one to act upon, his crimes couldn't easily be forgiven.

"It wasn't," he agreed. "That changed when you allowed Marcel to send reports about my colleagues. Without those, I might never have found my way out of the dark again." It had been more than twenty years into his exile when the letters began to arrive. They were infrequent, but the man who came to manage Nyrielle's spies was thorough, even with the smallest leads.

Over the years, Marcel had learned the fates of the men who fought alongside Ignatious in the war. Many had died there, but the Black Merchant left no stone unturned, tracking down acolytes, personal disciples, even his teachers.

"I told him that he should let you know when your former associates died," Nyrielle said, giving the fallen Inquisitor an odd look. She couldn't deny that there had been some cruelty to the task she'd set for Marcel. It had also been a test of her youngest progeny's ability to turn his network of mercantile contacts into a useful intelligence gathering tool.

"It wasn't a kindness," Nyrielle said, tilting her head in confusion. "Yet you say they helped you to find your way out of the darkness?"

"It was hard to accept at first, Mistress, but it helped to ground me," the younger vampire said. "I had lost all sense of time. Getting reports, even years apart, that my mentor had died in his sleep of old age, or that one of my disciples became an Inquisitor in his own right even if he died in the Lothian's next war... It not only gave me a sense of time again, it also gave me closure."

"Do you," Nyrielle started only to pause as she considered her words carefully. At this point, it was clear to her that Ignatious had suffered in every way that she could have wished for him to, and for far longer than the woman he'd tortured had. Now, as she let go of the last lingering bits of resentment, she found herself with a strange feeling of connection to her exiled progeny.

In a way, Ignatious was like an estranged son to her. The bond that connected them was palpable and very real. It wasn't something that could be broken easily and in his presence, she felt an undeniable closeness that she felt with all of her progeny. At the same time, it had been decades since she last laid eyes on him.

Now, sitting in front of him, she realized how little she truly knew about him, even after all these years. Even if he hadn't changed greatly, he still would have felt like a stranger to her. Looking at the worn down and... tamed man that Ignatious had become, the storm of emotions that Nyrielle felt were too varied to name, but there was one thing she was certain of. She no longer had any desire to see this man suffer.

"Do you regret missing their funerals?" Nyrielle forced herself to ask. "Do you resent me for leaving you here for so long?" A few months ago, before she met Ashlynn, she not only wouldn't have cared about his answers, she wouldn't even have asked the questions. But now... now things were different.

"Perhaps at one point I did," Ignatious said, raising his brows in genuine surprise at Nyrielle's question. All he had known of her in the past had been her righteous fury at what he had done to one of her progeny, combined with her enduring hatred for the actions of his former Church.

At first, he'd returned that fury in full measure for what she'd done to him. It was hard not to hate what he'd become, especially when Hamdi delighted in starving him to the point that he became a savage beast only to be confronted by the magnitude of his crimes after he gorged himself on blood. The moment when lucidity returned amidst the carnage he'd wrought seemed to delight the ancient vampire more than anything else he did to Ignatious in the years he treated the former Inquisitor like a plaything for his amusement.

But now, was this really sympathy that Nyrielle was showing him? Of the many things he expected from her visit, an expression of genuine care and concern was along the last of them, If so, if she really was showing kindness that wasn't just an imitation of real emotion, then it was more sympathy than he'd encountered from any vampire since coming to reside in the Tangled Tower.

"Mistress," he said as a ghost of concern stirred within his chest. "Are you well? You seem much softer than you were at the gates. I've taken confession from many men who are approaching the end of their life, towering brutes who find softness only when they realize that they've lost the chance to share that softness with anyone. It isn't my place to pry, and I know that you care nothing for the Holy Lord of Light, but if you need an ear to listen, I still remember how to."

"So this is the face the mighty Inquisition shows their own kind," Nyrielle said with an ironic laugh. "Perhaps, the day will come when I turn to you for just such an ear, but that day is not today. For now, all you need to know is that I've found someone who has breathed life anew into my withering heart, and I've taken her as my Seneschal. She's studying with the Mother of Thorns at the moment, but you'll meet her when we reunite in the High Fen this autumn."

"I see," Ignatious said, lowering his head while a sad smile tugged at the corners of his lips. From the sound of her voice, this woman was much more than a simple Seneschal and he couldn't help but wonder what sort of woman could make such a profound impact on the merciless reaper who had cast him into the depths of torment so long ago.

"I'm glad that you've found someone who has brought light into your life and rekindled the fires of your heart," he said, though not without some difficulty. As much as he told himself that his heart had been ground down too far to harbor resentment for what had been done to him... If living well was the best revenge then Nyrielle had certainly proved the statement with the feeling of contentment that radiated from her languid posture and shining eyes.

"The gift she's given me is great," Nyrielle acknowledged, sensing the shadow that seemed to have fallen over Ignatious ambivalence and shifting her posture to give him more direct attention before his thoughts could spiral further in the dark direction they'd turned. Nothing, however, could prepare her estranged progeny for the words that came next.

"But, Ignatious, tell me. If I could bestow her gift on you and reignite the fires of your own passions, could you still make the offer you just made me? Could you join Thane, Zedya and the others and direct the flames of your fury at our enemies and the Church you once served?"

"Or," she asked, leaning forward and resting her chin on her hands as her midnight eyes stared deep within the fallen Inquisitor. "Would giving you back your passion return you to the raving beast that attempted to set the Vale of Mists ablaze when you discovered that I had turned you into the very thing you despised?"

## Chapter 294: Insolence

For several minutes, Ignatious didn't know what to say in response to Nyrielle's question. His Mistress didn't press him either. Instead, she retrieved a bottle of wine from the table nearby and poured a goblet of the crisp, sweet white wine that was favored by High Lord Hamdi favored to wash the taste of blood from his mouth.

The wine tickled her nose with notes of fresh fruit and hints of oak that made her wonder if she should raid Hamdi's cellars for a few bottles to share with Ashlynn when they reunited. The thought of Ashlynn's giggling and slightly confused drunkenness, when they met with High Lady Erna, put a smile on the vampire's lips that would have brightened the room if it weren't so at odds with the rest of the woman wearing it.

The lingering scent of the late Commander Skool's blood still clung to her, and her features combined with her wings to turn even the gentlest of smiles at least somewhat predatory.

Ignatious, however, was oblivious to his maker's musings as he sank into introspective contemplation. He hadn't thought of himself as human since the days when Hamdi repeatedly reduced him to savagery, and for many years, he'd thought of himself as less than human. Perhaps, lower even than the beasts that roamed the Tangled Wood.

Only after years of piecing himself back together had he rebuilt his nearly shattered faith and with it, a semblance of the man he had once been. It was impossible to miss the pieces of himself that were still missing, lost forever to the inexorable millstone of time, but if he had them back... who would he be? The man he had been was dead and lost forever. The man he'd become shared much in common with the Ignatious of old but he lacked the pride, the arrogance, the blind faith... and the passion that drove him to be one of the most outstanding Inquisitors of his generation.

If Nyrielle reignited those flames, he was certain that he wouldn't return to the man he once was, but her second question stopped him from immediately accepting her offer. That moment of bitterness and jealousy when he saw her contentment. The pain he felt at her joy. Those feelings lurked within his heart like embers in the hearth. If she came to fan the flames of those embers, could he really retain his rationality and the acceptance he'd found in his existence as one of her progeny?

"Mistress Nyrielle," the fallen Inquisitor said after more than ten minutes of silence. "The gift you offer is a priceless treasure but, even if I was confident in retaining my current disposition, I couldn't accept it," he said, standing up from his chair before dropping to one knee at her feet.

"Mistress, I have done nothing in all these years to be worthy of the gift you offered. I have not fought your enemies, tended to your subjects, provided you with council, or done any of the other things a person like me should have been capable of doing for you," he said in a voice that had lost its dark, smokey timbre and gained instead the rough edge of bitter regret.

"So you reject my offer because you think yourself unworthy?" Nyrielle said, raising an eyebrow at the kneeling vampire and setting her empty goblet down on the table. "It is for me to judge who is worthy and who isn't. What makes you think that you can reject a gift I've deemed you worthy of receiving?"

"Mistress, it is because I have given you nothing that I believe I cannot receive your gift without returning to the 'raving beast' who once destroyed an entire tower of your ancient fortress," he said. As much as he wanted to raise his head, to see the way she was looking at him, the weight of shame pressed down upon him, keeping his eyes fixed firmly on the faded rug beneath their feet.

"In time, it would please me greatly to accept the gift you offer," he said. "But before that, please, let me serve at your side as one of your progeny should. Let me build a foundation of loyal service so that when you rekindle my heart's ability to burn with passion, it can burn for passion for the woman who has allowed me to be reborn."

"I know you meant it as punishment," he said, closing his dark eyes as memories of that terrifying night danced behind his eyelids like ghosts. "But it's allowed me to gain perspective I never would have obtained any other way. That much alone is worth a century or more of loyal service and yet I've never given you a day. Please, reserve this gift for me until I've proven that I can bear it."

"You have surprised me many times this evening, Ignatious," Nyrielle said. Standing up from her chair, she placed her hands gently on his shoulders and pulled him to his feet before lifting his chin so she could meet his gaze.

"I'm willing to give you an opportunity," she began only to trail off as her ears heard the sound of approaching footfalls. Zedya and the others of her retinue were still on the floors above handling the baggage and it had been less than an hour since her arrival yet the presence she felt approaching was just as potent as Zedya's... though as it drew closer it became clear that it belonged to a vampire that had balanced on the edge between life and death for much, much longer than her handmaiden had.

"Well, that didn't take long," Nyrielle said with a slow smile. "It seems that Hamdi isn't content to wait until his appointment an hour before sunrise. If you wish to serve me, do so now," she said sharply. "Is

there anything I should know before I meet with Hamdi that would explain his current state of agitation and impatience?"

"He clearly intended to treat you like an Eldritch Lady from a weak nation," Ignatious said quickly, taking a place at her left side where an advisor should stand with a familiarity that came from many years serving senior priests outside of the Inquisition. "Still, the man he sent, Commander Skoll, was being groomed as the first progeny he would have taken in over a century."

"So I didn't just kill an easily replaceable soldier whose life would have guttered like a candle flame in a few years," Nyrielle realized. The revelation didn't change anything. Even if she had known, she would have done the same, but now that she knew, it changed how she would handle Hamdi's reaction. "No wonder he's irate. Anything else?"

Before Ignatious could respond, however, the heavy, iron-bound door opened with enough force to slam into the wall and rebound back toward the man who knocked it open.

High Lord Hamdi represented the very best of the Golden Eyed Clan more than five centuries ago. His fur was still as crisp and black as the day the Jaws of Death had taken him as one of his progeny and his golden eyes gleamed with a predatory fierceness that no amount of time could dim.

His pointed ears were pierced with half a dozen heavy rings, each one covered with the glyph representing the Eldritch Lord or High Lord who had fallen beneath his fangs. His tunic, embroidered with thread of gold and silver depicting nine wolf heads howling at a crescent moon, bore clear signs that he'd belted on armor over the garment many times over the years and a heavy-bladed sword hung from a leather belt at his side, clattering against the doorway in the haste of his entry.

"Leave us, boy," Hamdi snarled when he spotted Ignatious at Nyrielle's side. "This girl and I have matters to discuss."

Reflexively, Ignatious's shoulders slumped and his head bowed. He'd taken two steps toward the door before he felt Nyrielle's hand on his shoulder, holding him firmly in place.

"This girl?" Nyrielle said in a voice that was colder than the winds of the High Pass. Shadows danced around her and her wings spread wide as she drew herself up to her full height to match gazes with the snarling High Lord.

"Impudence!" Nyrielle shouted as dark flames flickered in her midnight blue eyes. "Do I need to remind you of your manners?" Nyrielle asked with a sneer. "Old man?"

## Chapter 295: Crossing Lines

"The boy knows his place, young pup," Hamdi snarled as his golden gaze flickered between Nyrielle and Ignatious. In a movement that would have been too quick to be seen by anyone who wasn't a vampire, the High Lord's hand dropped to the hilt of his sword, baring an inch of cold Darksteel while he took half a step toward the trembling Inquisitor.

Caught in the middle between Nyrielle's cool, reassuring darkness and the seething violence of High Lord Hamdi, Ignatious's knees buckled and were it not for Nyrielle's hand taking hold of his robes, he would have fallen to his knees.

Visions of Hamdi's cruel, smiling visage filled his mind. In his mind's eye, he could already see Hamdi's tongue licking blood from a skinning knife after tossing chunks of Ignatious's flesh to a pack of hungry wolves. The wounds healed, each and every time, as if they'd never been there before. At times, Ignatious wondered if he'd gone mad and the gruesome torture had been a fever dream but every time he convinced himself that it hadn't been real, Hamdi returned with his skinning knife and that sickening grin.

"Out with him," Hamdi said. He let his sword slide back into its sheath but his hand never left the large basket-hilt of the weapon. "This one never should have been let loose from his mother's teat, but now isn't the time for him to hide behind your skirts. No matter how reprehensible your behavior has been, I won't discipline an unbridled descendant in front of her own progeny."

"The words you're looking for," Nyrielle said coldly. "Are 'Your Eternity, I request a private audience.' Since you are the sire of my grandsire, I will grant you the privilege of making your request from your feet instead of your knees."

As she spoke, Nyrielle reached out with her free hand, extinguishing half the lamps in the room with a flick of her fingers and drawing on the greater darkness to wrap a cloak of cool, soothing shadows around Ignatious.

For any of her other progeny, she could conjure the same sensation as the joyous moment she sank her fangs into their necks, triggering memories of her bliss filled bite. For Ignatious, however, every moment of his transformation had been deliberately agonizing, and conjuring those feelings within him would only drag him from one trauma to the next.

Since she couldn't give him a grounding memory of pleasure, she instead wrapped him in the cold detachment of the grave, quashing his ability to feel pain or fear. It wasn't much comfort for the tormented vampire, but facing off against a vampire hundreds of years older than her, it was all she could offer her traumatized progeny.

"A puffed up title doesn't mean anything without the strength to rule," Hamdi said, his lips curling back in a fang baring sneer. "You're barely holding on to the tiniest corner of Torbin's territory, playing games with these pathetic humans and falling victim to their laughable sorcery. But now, I see how it is. You favor these superstitious fools. No wonder your parents burned at their hands. My most talented progeny died so you could make nice with the invaders."

"Impudent fossil," Nyrielle snapped. With a twitch of her dark wings, half a dozen shadowy feathers shot out from her wings like bolts from a crossbow, streaking across the small sitting room faster than an eye could blink.

Yet for all their speed, Hamdi moved just as quickly. Drawing the sword at his hip would have taken far too long, but his hands conjured long wicked claws of pale silvery light that tore through the air and shredded four of her six feathers. The fifth feather went wide as the older vampire moved to strike and only the sixth feather inflicted any harm, slicing through the sleeve of his tunic and spilling a few drops of blood before Hamdi stopped the flow of blood through sheer force of will.

"My parents were your descendants," Nyrielle said darkly. "As was my grandsire. They deserve your respect for what they endured to prevent an even greater tragedy. I'll have your apology or I'll have your claws," she said.

This time, as she spoke, darkness gathered to her hand, forming a familiar executioner's ax while her eyes turned from midnight pools into orbs of pure darkness as if she had become a creature of the abyss, gazing back at her ancestor from the depths of an unspeakable void.

"Ridiculous posturing before your progeny," Hamdi snapped as his right hand dropped to the hilt of his heavy bladed sword. This time, however, the blade slipped completely free of its sheath as he lunged



forward. His aim wasn't Nyrielle, however, but the trembling former Inquisitor that she tried to shelter from his presence.

If his wayward descendant wouldn't remove the offending wretch, Hamdi would take care of the man himself. In the end, perhaps it was even better this way. Since Nyrielle had taken Skoll from him, he would remind her what it felt like to lose one of her prized progeny and at the same time put an end to the inflated ego she seemed to have developed in the past century since retaking a portion of Torbin's Vale of Mists and declaring herself an Eldritch Lady.

Nyrielle moved through the shadows of the room like smoke. In a blink, she'd shoved Ignatious into the chair she'd occupied just minutes ago and placed herself firmly between her progeny and the charging High Lord.

Shadows danced with pale silvery moonlight as Nyrielle's axe met Hamdi's sword with a resounding - CLANG- that rattled the wine bottles and knocked over the goblets on the table, spilling the wine that Ignatious had never touched.

"You think you can harm my family while I'm standing here?" Nyrielle said as they separated from their clash and eyed each other with growing hostility. "If you're senile enough to think you can bully Ignatious in my presence, then perhaps I should take more than just your claws," she goaded. "Perhaps I should take your head!"

The first collision was met by another and a third before the two vampires began moving too quickly for even Ignatious's eyes to follow. Yet, as he watched the flickering shadows fighting to envelop the terrifying silvery radiance, Ignatious found his heart beating with a warmth it hadn't felt in more years than he cared to count.

Family... Nyrielle was fighting one of the most powerful High Lords on the continent to keep him safe. His heart warmed at the notion that she cared enough to protect him but at the same time, his hands began to tremble as he watched their fight move back and forth across the sitting room.

Was he really going to sit here and watch while she risked herself for him? His hands clenched into fists as shame and gratitude warred within his chest. After decades of exile, after lashing out and destroying a portion of her ancient fortress in his grief and hatred for what she had turned him into, she still called him family. She still found some portion of him worthy of her protection.

The realization seared the core of his being like the condemnation of the Holy Lord of Light himself, urging him to stand and fight at her side. If any man could be called his true enemy, if anyone in the western lands could be considered a 'demon' then surely it was Hamdi. Not because he was Eldritch or because he was a Vampire but because the only thing that seemed to bring the man any delight was the look of suffering on the faces of people caught between his claws.

But as the battle raged on, his body betrayed him. No matter how much his mind screamed at him to move, to help, to do anything at all, his muscles remained locked in place, while every flash of silvery light conjured memories of Hamdi's skinning knife and that terrible, gleaming smile. No matter how much he wanted to, the chair Nyrielle had flung him into might as well have been a prison cell, wrapped with the same thorny twisted iron as the Tangled Tower.

Hamdi didn't even need to lift a finger to pin Ignatious in place... he'd constructed a cage around the fallen Inquisitor long ago, and now, even as he watched Nyrielle fight on his behalf, he felt powerless to escape it.

#### Chapter 296: Shaking Foundations

The entire Tangled Tower trembled with the force of impact and magical energy unleashed by Nyrielle's confrontation with Hamdi. On the floor above, Zedya had just finished seeing the last of their luggage removed from the carriages and was preparing to bring it down to Nyrielle's temporary quarters when she felt the surge of her lady's dark energy from the floor below.

"Little Lenny," the amethyst-eyed vampire said as she took a seat on her coffin-like daybed. "Send four of your men to escort our drivers and the wagons to the stables and then bring everyone here as quickly as possible. I want all of our people where I can see them."

"At once, Madame Zedya," the bearish captain said, quickly giving orders to a few of his men. "Madame Zedya," he asked a moment later as he took a position behind her where he could guard her back should the need come. "What's happening?"

"I don't know," the vampire said. "Mistress Nyrielle can borrow my eyes whenever she wishes to see through them, but I can't do the same with her unless she chooses to show me something. All I know is that our host has ascended from the deeper levels and..."

As the tower shook, a loud rumble and a rain of dust from the ceiling interrupted their conversation, prompting the two to share a concerned look. The tower had been built from tens of thousands of tons

of black granite, reinforced by iron-bound timber, and it had stood as an icon of the strength of the Tangled Wood for centuries. Just what was happening below to make the entire tower tremble?

A floor below, the sitting room had transformed from a place of fading opulence into a scene of carnage and devastation. The chair that Ignatious sat in had become a strange island of the room's former stately appearance as Nyrielle fought to keep Hamdi from reaching him, but very few of the room's other furnishings remained intact after several minutes of intense confrontation.

Bookshelves had fallen from the walls, their contents strewn across the floor. Many of the oil lamps in the room had fallen to the floor, some shattering and spilling burning oil onto the loose pages of books that had been shredded by Nyrielle and Hamdi's fight. Dark smoke had begun to fill the room, lit from below by the flames reflecting off the broken crystal and crumpled silver serving ware.

At the moment, Nyrielle and Hamdi stood a few feet apart, both of them breathing heavily and covered in wounds.

Hamdi's embroidered tunic had been torn from shoulder to the opposite hip and a deep, bloody gouge marred his powerful chest. The wound was by far the most dire and had he not abandoned his dignity to throw himself aside at the last instant, Nyrielle's ax would have buried itself so deep in his chest that his heart would have been cleaved in two.

Dozens of smaller wounds covered his arms and legs and thick blood matted the dark fur of his head from a blow that had nearly severed one of his pointed ears. As is, one of his prized conquest rings had been torn free of his ear, now lost somewhere against the burning wreckage of the sitting room.

From his seat in the middle of the room, Ignatious watched with wide eyes as blood dripped from Hamdi's body. The wounds she'd inflicted were much less severe than anything he'd suffered from the Golden Eyed vampire but they were far greater than anything he'd seen inflicted on the vampire in all his years as a captive of the Tangled Tower.

Moreover, from the slight shudder when the High Lord drew breath to the wince as he raised his sword, Ignatious realized that Nyrielle wasn't just injuring his tormentor, she had reawakened the ancient vampire's ability to feel pain, almost as if she wanted to revisit on him a portion of the suffering he'd inflicted on her progeny.

Deep within Ignatious, cracks began to form in the prison of fear that kept him pinned in place. Nyrielle was doing something he never could have, she was fighting back against his tormentor in a way that had real consequences for the High Lord. More than that, she was proving that, with enough power, even Hamdi would bleed...

Of course, Nyrielle herself hadn't escaped unscathed as she dueled with the ancient vampire. She'd paid a price in blood for the wounds she inflicted on Hamdi's body. True to the methods of the Golden Eyed Clan, Hamdi's first priority had been to cripple her movement. His habits betrayed his intentions as he focused on her legs, tearing through Nyrielle's flowing skirts to inflict deep wounds on her alabaster thighs and calves leaving them slick with crimson blood.

Only her deft use of her wings combined with sorcery that allowed her to flow through the darkness like mist allowed her to ignore the wounds and continue to press her assault on the older vampire.

The entire time they fought, no matter how hard Nyrielle pressed him, Hamdi never lost sight of the trembling vampire trapped in a prison of his own making in the center of the room. He had no hatred of Ignatious, if anything he found the man to be contemptibly weak and unworthy of his time and attention.

And yet, because Nyrielle had chosen to defy his will, the man had to die. Once he made his decision, there was no changing it. In a few hours, the sun would rise, and by then, Ignatious would be dead. As far as Hamdi was concerned, both things were inevitable.

"Give it up, young pup," Hamdi said. Holding up his heavy-bladed sword, he licked Nyrielle's blood from his blade, savoring the smooth, fresh taste of the younger woman's blood. The scent of it alone was intoxicating enough to momentarily distract him and the taste sent shivers of delight down his spine in a way he hadn't felt in well over a century.

"Offer up the useless wretch's head and I can forgive this," he said, gesturing at the devastation around them. "Otherwise, I won't stop with just him. You brought your maid too, didn't you?" Hamdi said with a dark grin as he licked his lips. "It took a decade for this worthless child of yours to completely break. How much longer do you think she would last?"

"Is this all that's left of you after all these years?" Nyrielle asked. Shadowy energy swirled around her, dancing like dark flames drinking in the light of the fire and spreading the chill of the grave wherever they went. "The mighty progeny of the Jaws of Death has become nothing but a force of malevolent cruelty poured into flesh and fur," she said derisively.

"Ignatious is already twice the man you currently are and he will rise to greater heights than you can imagine," Nyrielle said as she adjusted her grip on the headsman's axe in her hands, pointing the oversized blade at Hamdi's chest. "Who shakes in fear at your name, Hamdi? What powerful nation have you cowed into restraint?"

"Or is this all you're capable of," she said, glancing at her paralyzed progeny. "Preying on the young before they grow into their power to prop up your illusion of power and strength."

"Rich words from the failure of an Eldritch Lady who holds less than a quarter of what your predecessor would have entrusted to you," Hamdi said, his tone dripping with scorn. "No nation has stood against my pack in the past three hundred years. The Tangled Wood, the Black Hills, the Sage Fields, and even the Blood Sands have all come under my rule."

"My rise is as inexorable as your fall," the older vampire said, looking down his long nose at the winged woman before him. "In another century, the last remnants of your Vale of Mists will address me as Great Lord Hamdi, and you... you they will curse for failing them when they needed you the most."

"No wonder His Eternity Shabnalû wants you returned to his side. He must be ashamed of the failure his student has become," Hamdi said as the silvery light enveloping his sword expanded to form long claws on his free hand.

"This is your last chance, pup," the older vampire said. "Offer up your progeny's head and submit yourself to me and I promise to deliver you back to your teacher in one piece. I'm sure he'd pay handsomely to receive you delivered back into his care."

Hamdi's words hit Nyrielle like a dagger to the chest. After seeing Hamdi's antagonism, she'd all but concluded that he had been the one to order Tausau to withhold aid from the Vale of Mists. He and his progeny were the closest vampire lords to her domain and she would have to spend at least a month traveling to reach another powerful vampire lord who might be able to provide aid. Just his action of denying her would cost her tremendous amounts of time in rallying support for the Vale of Mists.

But, if the order had come from the Fangs of Death Shabnalû himself... if her mentor was the one to make a move against her, then it was possible that she would find no help from any of the vampire lords. After all, Hamdi wasn't one of Shabnalû's progeny, he was one of Bardas'. For her mentor to

effectively command Hamdi meant that at least two of the other three True vampires had taken a stand against her...

"So you've become a lapdog," Nyrielle said, as she gathered even more power to her hands. "You will bark for anyone who gives you a command, wagging your tail and hoping for scraps from the table of your betters. The instrument of your fall is already at hand, Hamdi," Nyrielle said.

"It's just, that your master never taught you how to recognize when a single man had grown too powerful and too ambitious to be allowed to continue to exist," Nyrielle said. "Since you see fit to invoke my mentor's name, then let me teach you what the Fangs of Death does to men like you."

#### Chapter 297: Lessons Written In Blood and Fire

"Let me teach you what the Fangs of Death does to men like you."

With a flick of an elongated fingernail, Nyrielle spilled a drop of blood from the tip of a finger before flicking the drop of blood across the room where it sailed toward one of Hamdi's many open wounds.

"Blood Curse: Lethargy," Nyrielle intoned, filling the drop of blood with a swirl of dark crimson energy just before it splattered against the wound on Hamdi's chest. Instantly, the rich, bloody energy burrowed into his flesh like maggots, drilling into his muscles and leeching strength from his limbs.

Hamdi's knees buckled and he slammed the point of his heavy-bladed sword into the floor, piercing through the thick rug beneath his feet and sinking more than three inches into the stone beneath it before his blade bound and he leaned on it like a cane, holding himself up with what little strength remained in his body as he struggled to resist Nyrielle's insidious curse.

"This will not hold him for long," Nyrielle's voice whispered, seeming to come from a place only inches from Ignatious's ear. "He's too old to be easily overcome by myself. I need your help, Ignatious. I need your Holy Flames to weaken him for me when he breaks free of this curse. Can you do it?"

"Mistress, I," Ignatious started only for the words to catch in his throat. Holy Flames? Against Hamdi? Did she think he'd never tried before? He'd never get the chance to finish an invocation! The instant he started, Hamdi would rain down a storm of flesh-rending silvery light that made his currently diminished flames look like candlelight before the light of the full moon.

"I will distract him," Nyrielle's voice came again. "But I cannot defeat him without your help," she said.

On the far side of the sitting room, standing among the burning books and dark smoke, Hamdi roared in pain and triumph as he wrenched his sword from the stone floor. With a shake of his left hand, a drop of dark, cursed blood sailed into the flames, sizzling as the heat of the fire burned away every trace of the toxic drop of Nyrielle's blood and the dark magic it carried.

"You think you're the only one to learn a few tricks from their Eternities?" He sneered. Holding his left arm out in front of his chest, parallel to the ground, the ancient vampire sliced deeply into his own arm with his sword, making a fist and spilling three drops of blood onto the singed carpet beneath his feet.

"Blood Pledge: Strength of the Pack!"

As the Fangs of Death, Shubnalû knew a great deal about tearing the lifeblood from the bodies of the strongest people to walk the face of the earth. His Blood Curses were notoriously vicious, capable of felling High Lords and even Great Lords if he chose. Bardas, however, relied on the strength of his followers to tear down entire groups that threatened to tip the balance and dominate the world.

But just because Bardas relied on the strength of many to overpower even larger groups didn't mean he was never confronted with powerful leaders who stood atop seemingly invincible armies. In cases like those, he summoned the strength of his progeny to give himself an overwhelming edge against his opponents.

Now, Hamdi used the same invocation to summon the strength of his progeny, filling his body with renewed stamina, power and more than anything else, the bloodlust of much younger vampires who had yet to lose as much to the millstone of time as their sire had.

"When I deliver you to His Eternity Shubnalû, don't say I never gave you a chance to go the easy way," Hamdi snarled before leaping at Nyrielle with twice the speed he'd possessed just minutes ago.

Nyrielle said nothing in response, meeting the ancient Vampire's charge directly with a powerful swing of her ax. The stone floor beneath their feet trembled and cracked with the force of the impact as both vampires drove themselves past their previous limits.

The battle between them had become so heated that Hamdi had forgotten about avenging Skoll and had almost completely disregarded Ignatious. No matter what he had done, it was impossible to move around Nyrielle to kill her progeny, even if the wretched human was too weak to offer any resistance.

Since he couldn't slip past her to do the deed, he could only batter her down until she had no choice but to watch as he took his time demonstrating how futile her efforts to protect her progeny were. First with Ignatious and then with her handmaiden, Zedya.

Strengthened by his bond with his progeny and his Blood Pledge, the ancient vampire used his enhanced strength to batter Nyrielle's ax aside again and again. Each time, the tip of his sword slid inside her guard immediately after the beat, piercing deep into her arms, slicing along her ribs or forcing her to fall back to avoid a more serious blow to her head or chest.

From his chair, Ignatious watched helplessly as Nyrielle gave ground again and again. She had been right. For all that she was the mighty Harbinger of Death, there was still too much of a difference between her and a vampire more than twice her age who could draw upon the complete strength of his progeny, even when some of them were hundreds of leagues away.

Nyrielle was alone. Even Zedya seemed unable to reach her to offer any support. Given the trembling of the tower and the deafening sounds of combat, even Ignatious had enough presence of mind to realize that someone must be interfering with Zedya's ability to come to their Mistress's aid.

This meant that while Hamdi could draw on the strength of his progeny, the only person Nyrielle could rely on... was him.

"Oh Holy Lord of Light," Ignatious said as he slipped from the chair at last, falling to his knees amidst the burning rubble. This smoke crawled along the ceiling and flames drew ever closer to his place in an island of calm at the center of the destruction but he ignored both as he lowered his head in prayer for the first time in... in he'd forgotten how many years.

"In my darkest days, in that man's claws I prayed many times that you would send one of your champions to end my suffering," he said. "I prayed even more that you would reclaim my soul, giving me the strength to bathe in the light of day and return to your embrace."



"Now, I will not ask you for help, or for strength," he whispered, clasping his hands tightly together. "I have seen the strength it takes to meet my struggle and only in seeing her take a stand have I realized that I was wrong to turn to you for the strength I lacked. Now, I only ask that you bear witness."

"If I die today, let it be because, at least this once, I worked to meet a greater struggle than I have ever known. Not for you or for my own misguided desire for glory, but because she showed me the way, and I choose to follow."

Bowing his head low, Ignatious flung his arms out wide, stretching out with senses long unused to feel the flames around him. Their flickering light danced across his red and gold robes and their heat caressed his skin like a long lost lover as he began to speak, calling out to the power in the room in a rich, steady tone.

"Sacred flames that dance and play,

Hear your faithful servant pray.

Through years of pain I kept my faith,

Now gather and form my vengeful wraith."

All around the room, whether the flames were large or small, they leaped from the pages of charred books, the broken limbs of shattered furniture and the tattered remains of carpets and tapestries, floating through the air like embers on the wind as they coalesced before the kneeling man, taking on the shape of a ghostly Inquisitor formed of solid flames.

"Years of anguish end tonight,

As justice burns with holy light.

For every wound that marked my soul,

Now let my flames extract their toll.

Your darkness dies in sacred light,

As vengeance burns with holy might."

"Mistress," he shouted as his flaming wraith swelled to nearly twice his size as he fed it with all of his anger, his hatred, and his pain after years of suffering under Hamdi's cruelty. "Get out of the way!"

For several minutes, Nyrielle had gradually lost ground to Hamdi. Blood flowed down her alabaster skin from countless wounds and her dark dress clung to her body in blood soaked tatters. Yet all this time, she'd never once lost sight of Ignatious as he struggled to break free of the shackles that bound his soul in a world filled with torment inflicted by the ancient vampire.

Now, seeing his flaming wraith take shape, Nyrielle abandoned the pretense of fighting with her mentor's methods and let loose with power that belonged to the Harbinger of Death alone.

"Kiss of the Void: Acceptance of Fate," she said in a voice that seemed to echo from the depths of a dark abyss. For a moment, the light in the room dimmed and Nyrielle exploited the resulting moment of hesitation from Hamdi to melt into shadows, re-emerging from them standing next to the kneeling figure of Ignatious.

The moment she fled, Hamdi rounded on her, a mocking retort already forming on his lips until he saw the wraith of holy flame descending on him while a dark shadow fell across his mind. Suddenly, it was as if a thousand years had passed in an instant, wearing away his will to resist, his will to fight back, his will to escape the burning wraith of vengeance that had come to bestow retribution on him.

Shrouded in the magic of the Harbinger of Death and facing Ignatious's flaming wraith, the only thing he could do... was to stand there numbly, and accept his fate.

## Chapter 298: Capturing The Tangled Tower

On the ground floor of the Tangled Tower, Captain Aiss stood with three columns of the fiercest fighters from the Dark Wolf Brigade as they prepared to execute the orders Hamdi had given him after he delivered Nyrielle's message.

"Captain, isn't this excessive?" one of the soldiers standing nearby asked. "Three columns is already sixty men, why do we need to wait for Captain Gawel to rouse and arm another three columns?"

"You don't understand," Aiss told the young soldier. "Our masters may look down on the vampires of the Vale of Mists but we cannot. Even if they were as weak as the vampires of the Mongrel Horde, we would still send at least two columns to subdue a single vampire."

"The woman in the servant's dress," the Golden Eyed captain said, shuddering as he remembered the way she'd frozen him in place with a single look. "She's not simple. Remember, our job is to take them captive if we can and to buy time for Master Savis or Madame Birsu to return."

"Don't worry kid," a grizzled veteran with a pair of rings in one ear said reassuringly. "I've fought against the Mongrel Horde before. It's possible to overcome a vampire with numbers as long as you don't lose your head. Follow your seniors and you'll be hanging your first ring before you know it!"

A few minutes later, the sound of a high-pitched whistle, inaudible to most people, pierced through the night, announcing that the other force had arrived at the opposite stairwell and was ready to begin their half of the assault on the people who followed Nyrielle and the vampire she had left to watch over them.

On the floor above Nyrielle's battle, Zedya's ears perked up when she heard the sound of approaching footsteps and the clink of armor and weapons. There were only two entrances to the large hall they had gathered in while awaiting permission to bring Nyrielle's baggage to the lower level.

One entrance lay in the center of the long, north wall and the other in the center of the narrower east wall. From the sounds she heard approaching, the enemy intended to enter through both sides of the hall to catch them in the middle.

"Keep your men back to defend the drivers and servants," Zedya told Captain Lennart as she hopped off her daybed and walked towards the entrance to the hall where she heard the loudest sounds of soldiers approaching.

By sound alone, there were at least fifty of them, if not more. More than enough to overpower Captain Lennart's less than twenty men even if all of the wagon drivers and attendants joined them to fight back.

The only saving grace was that the coordination between the two hastily assembled forces was poor and one of them seemed to be advancing significantly faster than the other.

"I can watch your back, Madame Zedya," Captain Lennart said, pulling on his darksteel fighting claws and stepping up next to the simply dressed vampire. "You don't need to face them alone."

"Barricade the east door," Zedya ordered as she took her position in front of the north door. "Don't use any of our baggage, but a few of the benches and other furniture should suffice to buy me a few moments."

"After that, pull back and watch over the people who can't fight back," Zedya said with a shake of her head as she pulled out a set of darksteel fighting gauntlets of her own, much to the surprise of her bearish companion. "Don't give me that look, Little Lenny," she said. "I can move more freely if the only people around me are enemies."

"Besides," she added as her amethyst eyes began to glow. "I don't intend to fight fair."

"As you command, Madame Zedya," Lennart said with a brief salute. "But one of these days, I would be honored if I could help you for once."

"Lennart," Zedya said, catching the bearish soldier's sleeve before he could return to the rest of the soldiers. "You are helping," she said with a sincerity that would have been difficult before Nyrielle had begun to restore pieces of her heart she'd felt were long lost.

"You may not share the same dangers," she said. "But what you're doing relieves me of burdens that would otherwise prevent me from doing my best. Please, don't ever diminish how much I rely on your support."

"Thank you," Lennart said, flashing a slight smile before he turned away and returned to his men. There was more he wanted to say, but those words would have to wait until after the battle.

With a thundering crash, the north door banged open as Aiss and his men charged into the hall.

"Tangled nets of briars bind. Thorns pierce into your mind," Zedya intoned as the Golden Eyed soldiers stormed into the hall. Her eyes glowed brilliantly and her hands made a grasping gesture before a cloud of faint purplish energy descended from the ceiling onto the heads of the charging soldiers.

Zedya was no witch, but in the time she had studied with the Mother of Thorns, she'd learned a number of methods of empowering her Mesmerizing Eye,s and the sorcery she'd just unleashed was one of the most cruel.

"Thank goodness you've come," Zedya said, putting on a helpless appearance. "Traitors are charging the east door, they intend to bring an end to the rule of vampires in the Tangled Wood. Raise your weapons high and stand with me against the traitors!"

As she spoke, her words wove through their minds, combining with her sorcery to distort and confuse their minds. Was this why their captain had exhorted them to rush here so quickly? They had to stop the traitors?

Many in the front ranks faltered in their charge only to stumble when the ranks behind them ran into them. The once-organized columns fell into immediate disarray as several stopped to raise their weapons while the ones behind were still struggling to reconcile the conflicting instructions they'd received.

Unlike when she used her Mesmerizing Gaze to interrogate Torsten or to strip away the Frost Walker's sense of self, this time, she only sought to distort their perceptions slightly, pulling them into a world that was little different from the real world by planting a suggestion in their minds that many would find reasonable, especially under the confusing and chaotic circumstances of a sudden attack by enemies within their own fortress.

A few managed to resist, finding her suggestion so laughable that they instantly rejected it. But when those men pushed back against the distorted world that Zedya tried to pull them into, their heads were wracked with piercing pain as the thorns conjured by her sorcery dug into their minds. The harder they struggled to resist her attempts to drag them into her twisted world, the worse the pain became!

"Traitors in our midst!" Zedya shouted, rushing into the crowd of soldiers and catching the throat of a man who was clutching his head in pain. "Death to the traitors!" she screamed as she used the claws of the fighting gauntlet to tear the man's throat from his neck in a spray of blood and thicker fluids that quickly stained the white lace on her black dress a deep, crimson red.

The instant she made her declaration, madness ensued as sixty men of the Dark Wolf Brigade turned on each other like maddened dogs, alternately convinced that they had discovered traitors in their midst or horrified that their companions had been turned into puppets by the vampire sorceress.

Zedya used the chaos to her advantage, flowing through the tangled mass of soldiers with inhuman speed as her hands tore weapons away from their wielders, blinded soldiers who had removed their helmets to clutch their heads in pain, and tore limbs from those who were strong enough to resist her mind destroying sorcery long enough to take a swing at her.

Behind them, Captain Lennart and his men looked on in shock and a small measure of horror as the mild-mannered maidservant followed the last orders Nyrielle had given her and soaked herself in the blood of their enemies. What shocked most of them is that, unlike Thane, Marcell, and Nyrielle's other human progeny, Zedya fought with her claws in the same manner that the Clan of the Great Claw would, laying about her enemies with the power and fury of a rampaging bear.

Thane had trained for years to become a knight before Nyrielle took him into her household and Marcell's business dealings with the human underworld had honed his skills with easily concealed weapons in a way that only became more deadly when he gained a vampire's enhanced physical abilities.

Zedya, however, had been nothing more than a maidservant when she arrived in the Vale of Mists. Her implements of vengeance against the nobles who destroyed her family had been poison and deception. So when the day came for her to learn how to fight for herself and master weapons in case she should ever be required to defend her Mistress, she had turned to the Clan of the Great Claw and learned to fight the Eldritch way.

No words could describe the carnage of those few moments but by the time the door in the east wall began to shudder and shake under the assault of the other team trying to force their way into the hall, only twenty-six of the sixty men who had charged the hall from the north were still alive... and each and every one of them possessed the glowing amethyst eyes of a man who had fallen fully under Zedya's spell.

## Chapter 299: Charred Husk (Part One)

In the wreckage of a sitting room one floor below the battle unfolding around Zedya, a wraith formed of vengeful holy flames descended on the helpless figure of Hamdi. Under the effect of Nyrielle's Kiss of the Void: Acceptance of Fate, the ancient vampire stood helpless with a calm, welcoming expression on his face as Ignatious flames enveloped him.

His tattered and bloodstained clothing were reduced to cinders and ash in the blink of an eye and his dark fur followed a second later, filling the air with the sharp, acrid stench of burning hair. Moments later, the searing pain as his flesh bubbled and blackened finally broke Nyrielle's hold on his mind and the sound of his anguished howls filled the air.

"You've done well, Ignatious," Nyrielle said, resting a hand on the kneeling vampire's shoulder. Though she stood tall and proud, her touch wasn't light as she used the kneeling vampire for support to remain standing while she watched Hamdi burn. As powerful as Ignatious's flames were, they were far from enough to kill such an ancient vampire and Nyrielle refused to relax until she was certain that Hamdi was no longer a threat.

"And I'm sorry," she added softly. "That you had to wait so long for this moment to arrive."

"Mistress, you..." Ignatious started only to stop when Nyrielle shook her head slightly and pressed a finger to her lips. Some things, it seemed, shouldn't be spoken aloud but that didn't mean he didn't know what had happened.

Blood flowed from countless wounds on Nyrielle's body and her once elegant dress had been reduced to blood stained tatters that barely protected her modesty. It was clear that her fight against Hamdi had extracted a heavy toll from her, and yet, she hadn't used her Kiss of the Void until the very end when Ignatious launched his wraith of vengeance.

All of those wounds, and many of them could likely have been prevented but she endured all of it, just to give Ignatious a chance to realize a portion of his revenge with his own hands. To see his tormentor burn before his eyes instead of watching Nyrielle handle Hamdi's venomous insults herself.

"Mistress Nyrielle," Ignatious said, turning completely away from the burning vampire to bow deeply to Nyrielle. "Thank you, for this gift, I, I will do everything in my power to prove worthy of what you have given me today."

"I haven't given you anything," Nyrielle said as she watched the flames engulfing Hamdi begin to gutter out and die. His flesh had turned to a bubbled and blackened mass, and in some places on his face, hands and ribs, white bone could be seen where thin skin had burned away entirely.

The holy flames flickered and died, leaving behind wisps of smoke that coiled around Hamdi's charred form. Despite wounds that would have killed any lesser being, the ancient vampire remained standing through sheer force of will, his golden eyes blazing with fury even as bits of charred flesh crumbled from his face.

"Because you are my ancestor and the ancestor of my parents, I will give you one chance to receive mercy," Nyrielle said sternly as she strode toward the charred vampire. Despite the wounds on her body, many of which were still bleeding, there wasn't the slightest tremble or sound of pain in her voice. Rather, thick disdain dripped from her words as she spoke to the High Lord of the Tangled Wood.

"Kneel at my feet," Nyrielle commanded in a tone that left no room for argument. "Apologize for your rudeness and hostility, and then beg for my forgiveness. When you do, you will address me properly as 'your Eternity' the way you should have from the beginning."

For a moment, Hamdi said nothing as his golden eyes tracked slowly between Nyrielle and Ignatious. A little girl and a broken toy had laid him so low. The idea was ludicrous. If not for the fact that he'd lost the ability to dream long ago, he would have thought himself in some kind of fever fueled nightmare. He couldn't accept it. And kneeling? Apologize? To these pups? The idea was even more ludicrous.

"You think," Hamdi said, his voice hoarse and raspy as he strained to speak. "That I would break. For so little? Kill me. If you dare. But my progeny. Will slaughter your men. Before you finish with me," he said with a wicked smile. As dire of a state as he was in with gruesome wounds and pain wracking his body, he still had presence of mind enough to know that Nyrielle didn't dare to kill him.

Perhaps she would kill his progeny. She had already killed the man he intended to take as his next progeny after all. But killing him would provoke a war with Bardas and Hamdi knew she wasn't stupid enough or crazed enough to provoke a war with his master. So instead of kneeling and cowering like she wished, he glared at her and dared her to kill him with complete confidence that she wouldn't dare to do so.



"I gave you a chance," Nyrielle said. "The consequences are yours to bear." Before Hamdi could respond, she waved her hand, once again using a sharpened fingernail to spill a small drop of blood. While her mentor would always have superior skills and higher attainments in the practice of blood sorcery, Nyrielle had long come to a point of using any and every weapon in her arsenal when fighting the Lothians and she didn't hesitate to use one of Shabnalu's curses now.

"Blood Curse. Desiccation," Nyrielle intoned, flicking a drop of shadowy cursed blood onto one of Hamdi's many burned and blistered wounds.

This time, rather than seeping into him, the dark drop of blood quickly swelled in size as it soaked up the blood of his body like a sponge, leaving his flesh dry, cracked and burned, ready to crumble at the slightest touch. And yet, still, the power imbued by the vampire who made him stopped him from tumbling into the dark abyss of death.

"Kiss of the Void. Timeless Slumber," Nyrielle said in a voice that was distant and ageless.

Dark shadows flowed from her outstretched hand, wrapping around the charred husk of Hamdi's body and carrying him into the deep sleep of those who had forgotten their sense of time and all of their cares in the world. The vampire's last thought as the darkness took him was that he had been right... Nyrielle wouldn't dare to kill him. And as long as he still lived, there would come a time to revisit this humiliation on her a hundred fold.

It was only after the light faded from Hamdi's eyes that Nyrielle allowed herself a moment to relax, dropping to one knee as the strength to maintain her dignified posture failed her and the pain of dozens of wounds rampaged through her body like an unleashed stampede.

"Mistress Nyrielle!" Ignatious cried as he rushed to her side to offer support. While his sorcery had taken a great deal of his energy, the exhaustion he felt paled in comparison to what Nyrielle felt after her intense confrontation with the ancient vampire.

"I'll be fine," Nyrielle said. Gently, with two fingers, she touched the deep wounds in her thighs and the long gashes along her ribs. Finally, now that he'd lost consciousness, the lingering energy that accompanied Hamdi's sword strikes had dissipated from her body, allowing the wounds to begin to heal. But with so many wounds to heal, it would still be several days before she returned to her full strength.

Even as she assessed her own injuries, her midnight eyes grew distant, focusing on something beyond the room as an amethyst light flickered briefly across her gaze. Nyrielle's brows furrowed with concern and she pushed herself to her feet despite the surge of pain that accompanied the motion as her wounded legs protested the abuse she subjected them to.

"We need to move quickly," she said, in a tone that was clipped and urgent. "Zedya is holding her own against Hamdi's soldiers, and she has things well in hand at the moment, but I can sense more of his progeny approaching."

Perhaps Hamdi had deliberately given his progeny tasks to perform away from the Tangled Tower in order to have an excuse about why they weren't available to greet her when she arrived. If that was the case, then his attempt to slight her had bought Zedya invaluable time. Now, however, at least one of those progeny had entered the tower on the floors above, and another wasn't far behind.

#### Chapter 300: Charred Husk (Part Two)

"The battle isn't over yet," Nyrielle said, taking Ignatious' hand for support as she forced herself to stand. "Collect Hamdi's body. He isn't dead, but he shouldn't wake easily after what I've done to him. I'm afraid that his progeny has finally arrived. If we don't stop the battle upstairs soon, tonight will be even more of a tragedy for both sides."

She was certain that Hamdi would hate her for decades to come for what she'd done to him, but at the moment, it was still possible for things to recover. Matters could begin and end between them.

If the damage to his household grew much greater, however, she was afraid that things would turn into a blood feud that would never end until his entire lineage had been exterminated and that was something she wanted to avoid almost as much as she needed to avoid losing any of her own progeny in this battle.

"Battle upstairs? How do you know what's happening up there?" Ignatious asked in genuine confusion as he scooped up the much-diminished figure of Hamdi.

The charred body felt impossibly light in his arms. It, or rather, he was nothing like the towering presence that had dominated his existence for decades. Holding his body, in its charred and desiccated state, it was hard to even think of him as a person.

Each time Hamdi's limp head lolled against his chest, Ignatious trembled in a combination of shock and disbelief and he had to look down to remind himself that this moment was really happening.

How many times had he imagined it? How many hours had he spent imagining reducing his tormentor to ash and cinders until he'd given up all hope and lost the ability to imagine anything different than his current suffering? For decades, the only thing he had desired more than the sight of this man's death was finding a way to end his own life and for much of that time, the only thing that kept him from staking himself out for the sunrise was the idea that one day, he might live to see Hamdi fall.

Yet now, holding what was little more than a burned and blackened corpse, he felt none of the satisfaction he'd imagined. Instead, his heart swelled with a long-forgotten warmth as he watched Nyrielle push herself forward despite her injuries.

Seeing her determination, the hatred and bloodlust that had fueled his vengeance seemed to have burned away with his holy flames, leaving behind a deep desire to live on at his Mistress's side, serving the woman who had touched his soul in a way that he realized the Holy Lord of Light never truly had.

"I gave Zedya her Mesmerizing Eyes," Nyrielle said, her voice pulling Ignatious back out of his thoughts as she began walking toward the door. With a slight smile, she tapped next to one midnight blue eye to reveal the slightest hint of an amethyst glow. "Since I gave her that power, I've long been able to see what she sees."

"I expected that Hamdi might order his men to cause some trouble for our people," Nyrielle explained as she picked her way carefully across the floor. The flames had all gone out when Ignatious drew on the flames within the room to construct his avenging wraith, but the floor was still littered with the debris of her clash with Hamdi, and navigating through it while she was injured was more difficult than it appeared.

"That's why you gave Zedya orders to kill anyone who offended her," Ignatious realized. "You knew that Hamdi would send his men to move against her." He'd always known that Nyrielle was a powerful force and a skilled strategist. If she wasn't, she wouldn't have been capable of delivering so many crushing defeats to the combined forces of Lothians and the Church of the Holy Lord of Light.

After spending so many years being ground down under Hamdi's cruelty and witnessing the power and might of the Tangled Wood, he realized that his impression of Nyrielle as a strong and cunning leader had also eroded. It was only now, as he held his former tormentor's unconscious body in hand and

realized the depths of her foresight that he remembered why the Church had dubbed her the 'Demon Lady of the Vale.'

In a single night, with nothing more than herself, a handmaiden, a few soldiers, and a badly broken progeny, she was bringing the mighty Tangled Wood to its knees. And in the midst of everything she was doing, she still made space to help heal the wounds that Hamdi's skinning knife had carved deep into his soul. The more he thought about it, the greater the sense of awe and admiration he felt as he gazed upon his Mistress.

"It was always my intention to provoke Hamdi," Nyrielle said, picking up her pace as they entered the corridor that was clear of debris. The empty hallway was easier for her to walk through with nothing in her way and only the stones worn smooth by centuries of footsteps beneath her feet.

She still couldn't move as quickly as she wished and she trailed one hand along the cold, stone walls to support herself as they walked. Once she reached the floor above, she was certain that she would need every ounce of strength she had remaining if she was going to put a stop to this.

"Without a clash, I was certain that he would keep treating me like the little girl I was when I was when we first met," she explained as they walked. In truth, her only goal for this evening was to clash with enough intensity to compel Hamdi's cooperation.

She wanted to borrow the power and prestige of the Tangled Wood to summon other local Eldritch Lords to meet with her here, rather than approaching each of them as a visitor, like a beggar with her hat in hand.

Hamdi's support could have made it much easier to sway the Eldritch Lords who dismissed the human threat and saw her as weak for failing to defeat the Lothians after so many years. Those plans had suffered a severe blow because things had gone so far but she hoped that her ultimate goals could still be salvaged. Before she could think about those adjustments, however, she needed to finish dealing with Hamdi's forces.

"Then, you expected all of this to happen?" Ignatious asked, holding up the ancient vampire's slumbering body.

"No," Nyrielle said, shaking her head. "His reaction was much, much worse than I expected." She hadn't realized that Skoll held special significance to Hamdi and that had been the first miscalculation of the evening, pushing him harder from the start than she meant to, but there had been other missteps along the way as well.

Each of those small mistakes added up to create an avalanche that it was almost too late to avoid. Or perhaps it was already too late for everyone who accompanied her on this journey to escape this conflict unscathed.

"Now, if we don't reach Zedya in time," she said as she pushed her battered body to move faster. "I'm afraid that my miscalculation will cost too many of our people their lives. Now hurry, we don't have much time."

Amethyst light flashed again in Nyrielle's eyes, giving her a glimpse of the chaotic battle above... and the terrifying figure who had arrived to rescue Hamdi's soldiers from Zedya's overwhelming power.