

The Vampire 381

Chapter 381: The Weight of Victory (Part One)

Time passed, though Heila wasn't entirely sure how much. Everything after she unleashed her killing spell on Ropati felt blurry and indistinct, leaving her unsure what had been a dream and what really happened. She had vague memories of Ashlynn descending directly from High Lady Erna's private box to the arena below, walking on a stairway made of drifting willow leaves, but perhaps her mind had been playing tricks on her at that point and she'd already lost consciousness.

All she knew was that she'd won, and more importantly, she stopped the men from the Cauldron of Flame before they could unleash any truly devastating magic that threatened the lives of everyone in the arena that night. That realization had been enough for her to slip into a deep slumber filled with hazy, half remembered dreams for the past... well, she wasn't sure how long had passed.

When her pale, grass-green eyes fluttered open, she found herself lying in an ornate bed that seemed to stretch forever in all directions, its luxurious size making her diminutive form appear even smaller amid the sea of silk sheets and plush pillows. A fire crackled softly in the hearth, its warmth keeping the brisk autumn day at bay while heavy curtains had been drawn tight against the bright midday sun. Near the fire, Ashlynn sat at a small writing desk, her quill moving steadily across several important-looking letters until she noticed Heila stirring.

Heila's body felt stiff, like she'd been in the oversized bed for more than just eight to ten hours since the conclusion of her battle in the arena and the dry feeling in her throat made it even more apparent that she'd been asleep for quite some time. All of which suggested that this wasn't the day after her fight in the arena, but, perhaps the day after that? Had she really worn her self out so much that she'd slept an entire day away?

"Good morning," Ashlynn said gently, setting down her pen and leaving the small writing desk in Heila's chambers to come to her friend's side. "Here," she said after pouring a small cup of weak herbal tea. "It's not hot, but it's one of Amahle's blends to restore strength after a long rest."

"How long of a rest?" Heila asked after drinking almost the entire cup of tea at once. Now that she was awake, her memories of her final moments in the arena came back in a flood, pulling another, far more pressing question from her lips.

"Those men, the ones Ropati tried to... harvest. Was I able to...?" Heila's voice trailed off as she couldn't bring herself to ask the words. In her final moments before she lost consciousness, she'd done her best

to ensure that Ropati's horrific ritual was completely dispersed and that it couldn't claim the lives of his companions but she had no idea whether or not she'd succeeded.

"They survived," Ashlymm said gently while she refilled Heila's cup with more tea. "They will never recover what that man took from them, and their lives will be much shorter because of it. They are lucky to have had you for an opponent," Ashlynn added.

Her hands trembled slightly as she set down the pitcher, remembering how she'd found Heila after the battle. Heila lay where she'd collapsed on the arena sands, her face pale as milk while silvery-green energy still flowed from her fingertips as she tried desperately to heal the surviving cultists.

Even at the edge of unconsciousness, Heila continued reaching out with her magic until Ashlynn wrapped her in a tender embrace and smoothly took over Heila's connection to the wounded men. Restoring what they had lost was impossible, and even if it was possible, Ashlynn had learned how painfully high the price could be for healing truly grievous wounds when she'd been confronted by visions of Ollie losing an arm in the Ancient Willow's trial.

Now, she was willing to do what was necessary to preserve these men's lives, since Heila wished to do so, but there were limits to how far she would attempt to go, and it seemed that Heila had yet to learn where those limits lay for her.

"Heila," Ashlynn said in a voice that held firmness she rarely used with her close loved ones. "I don't mind that you tried to heal them after the battle was ended. You wouldn't be the woman I know if you hadn't. But I need you to be more cautious when you do. Ask me for help. Have them brought away to a place where they can be treated and take some time to tend to your own wounds first," she said, taking Heila's small hand in her own and holding it tight.

"You've been asleep for three days because you pushed yourself when you had very little left within you," Ashlynn explained. "I won't ever tell you not to show mercy, but please, please ask yourself whether or not you can afford to before you do."

For a few moments, Heila said nothing there as she pondered Ashlynn's words. Part of her wanted to argue. The longer a wound was left to fester, the more difficult it was to heal. Acting immediately might be the only chance she would have. But, Ashlynn was right that she could have asked for help. If she'd turned to her friend and asked that those men's lives be spared, the result might have been exactly the same.

"I'm sorry," Heila said after thinking for several minutes more. "I, I think I wanted to do it myself... to, to make up for hurting them. If, if they died fighting," she said with tears welling in the corners of her eyes. "That would have been one thing. But what was done to them, that was far too cruel, and if it wasn't for me interrupting their first ritual then maybe..."

"No, none of that," Ashlynn said. Gently, she pulled back the blankets and slid into bed next to Heila, gathering the diminutive witch into a tender embrace. "You aren't the one who used that cruel ritual on them, so don't blame yourself for that. You fought openly in a clear match of strength. That night, you embodied what the people of the High Fen expect a Champion of the Arena to be, so you have nothing to feel shame over, all right?"

For several moments, Ashlynn gazed deeply into Heila's grass green eyes. She knew that this battle, particularly with Nyrielle's instruction that she didn't need to leave these men alive, had been a heavy challenge for the first member of her coven.

Now, as she watched a whirlpool of complex emotions swirling in her younger friend's eyes, she only hoped that she hadn't pushed her too far when she stopped High Lady Erna from interfering in the fight. This battle had been a test for Heila in more ways than one, and Ashlynn held her breath as she waited to see if her friend could learn what she needed to. Otherwise, the price of victory would be far, far higher than anything that they had gained from it and Ashlynn would blame herself forever for breaking the heart of her closest friend.

Chapter 382: The Weight of Victory (Part Two)

"I know," Heila said, closing her eyes and snuggling into Ashlynn's warm, comforting embrace. "I used healing magic to kill a man," she said, opening her eyes and looking briefly at her petite, delicate hands. "I filled him so full of healing magic that his body failed him, and I just, I just wanted to..."

"It's all right," Ashlynn said softly as sobs shook her friend's petite figure. "I understand wanting to use your hands to do something good after doing something that felt so bad."

"It wasn't like in the visions," Heila sniffed. "In the visions, no matter how real it felt, I knew it wasn't real. So I just, I just wanted to do whatever it would take to make the visions stop. But this time I felt... I felt like I was connected to him while he died. I could feel the energy flowing through him, destroying him bit by bit. Because of me. Because I was doing it to him."

"And?" Ashlynn asked gently as she stroked her friend's horns in long, slow strokes from the base of the horn all the way to the tip, just the way Heila said her parents once had whenever she felt sad or lonely. "Do you think you made the right decision?"

"Mmmm," Heila said with a slight nod. "If I didn't stop him then, he might have done something far worse. He might have hurt the spectators again or lashed out at you or... or something even worse."

"But it still bothers you, doesn't it?" Ashlynn asked.

"It does," the diminutive witch reluctantly admitted. "Did it bother you? When you fought Owain's knights or the Tuscans on the lake?"

"It did," Ashlynn said. "Time helps. Memories fade with time. The feelings aren't as sharp. You gain perspective too. I thought a lot about what happened between me and Sir Kaefin at the Summer Villa, and about what happened between me and Sir Broll when we fought afterward."

"There are other things I might have done at the time, if I'd thought of them," Ashlynn admitted. "In hindsight, I wasn't a very good spy, even if I thought I was being very clever. I wasn't a very good warrior on the lake either."

"But you did your best," Heila protested, squirming in Ashlynn's embrace until she could turn around and face her friend. "You protected me and Hauke and even Virve in the end. You saved us from them."

"And you saved countless people in the arena that night," Ashlynn pointed out. "Because of you, the children in the audience weren't harmed. In fact, there's one that would very much like to meet with you. I told her that when you're feeling better, then if you'd like, she can join us for a meal at one of the smaller arenas. She said that you're her hero."

"Me?" Heila asked, confused that someone would want to meet her and that they would consider her worthy of being a hero. "Why does she want to meet me so badly?"

"Because she's a young girl whose horns haven't grown in yet," Ashlynn said with a smile. "And you're the first woman from the Horned Clan that she's ever seen fight so many strong men in the arena. She

even pressured her father into buying her a chain whip so she could practice with your signature weapon," Ashlynn teased lightly.

"So, it's all right if you feel different things about your battle," Ashlynn said gently as she tousled Heila's soft curls. "You can feel bad that you had to use healing arts as a weapon, and that your opponent had to die to bring things to an end. You can feel glad that you protected a little girl and her smile. You can feel sad for the men who had their life and sorcery stripped away from them. You can feel all of those things and more," she said. "Because those are all feelings that flow from your heart, and you wouldn't be you if your heart couldn't feel all those things."

"Thank you, Mother," Heila said, settling back into Ashlynn's tender embrace. "Did you learn all this from Aunt Amahle? You feel even more like a second mother to me than when I first received my seed from you."

"Some of it," Ashlynn admitted. "Big Sister Amahle had many things to teach me about leading a coven of my own, and taking care of all of my 'children' is part of it, even if you're not that much younger than me," she said with a soft smile.

"But much of what I've learned about killing," she added. "That comes from long conversations with Nyrielle. If it would help you, you can talk to her about this as well."

Heila's first thought was to refuse immediately. Growing up, Lady Nyrielle had been the highest, most important, most unapproachable existence in the Vale of Mists. Even after becoming Ashlynn's personal servant and then her lady-in-waiting, she'd spent most of her time in Lady Nyrielle's presence standing or sitting quietly with Zedya, ready to serve in whatever way might be required.

But now, as the Willow Witch and a member of Ashlynn's family, the gap between her and Lady Nyrielle wasn't quite so large. In which case...

"I think I'd like that," Heila said. "But, I don't need to rush. We'll have time together on the road home, won't we? I can talk to her then."

"I think that's a very wise decision," Ashlynn replied, giving Heila a final squeeze before she slipped out of bed. "Plenty of time once you've had a chance to sort out your own thoughts first. For now, even

though I've given you some rich broth the past few days, I think you'd feel much, much better after a bath and a meal, don't you?"

"I would," Heila said, pulling the blanket up all the way to her nose as she tried to hide her embarrassment under the blankets. She hadn't washed for three days while lying in bed! And her lady had slipped under the blankets to comfort her even then. Her face burned with embarrassment and she wanted nothing more than to hide before she could embarrass herself more, but Ashlynn ruthlessly pulled back the blankets and tugged Heila out of bed.

"Come, we can both wash up," she said with a bright smile. "And then we can have a nice, big meal. You want to hear about everything else that's happened while you were asleep, don't you?"

"Has a lot happened?" Heila asked, firmly pushing down her embarrassment as she followed Ashlynn to wash up. "What have I missed?"

"Well, where should I begin?" Ashlynn asked with a mischievous glimmer in her emerald eyes as they walked side by side into the marble-tiled washroom. "You know, Zedya..."

Chapter 383: Night Off

The night following Heila's victory, Captain Lennart roused himself from an afternoon nap and prepared to greet the setting sun before a long night of work began. Last night's events at the arena had left the men from the Vale of Mists on edge, each of them recalling the suicidal madness in the eyes of the cultists who willingly sacrificed themselves for the chance that one of their members could defeat Heila and bring her under their control.

The High Fen had always been welcoming for Lady Nyrielle and after the grand welcome they received on their first night, both he and his men had begun to relax. After months of travel, fighting, and assembling Nyrielle's ragtag army of defeated zealots and cryptic devotees, they were just weeks away from home.

Tonight, according to the agenda that Heila had provided him with, he hoped that things would be quieter. Nyrielle and Ashlynn were due to dine with High Lady Erna and several lord mayors of the High Fen in what should be an evening far removed from the danger of places where powerful champions gathered.

Still, he wasn't comfortable until he'd donned a light coat of mail and secured his fighting gauntlets in place at his hips. He hoped that he wouldn't need either, but if violence broke out at what was supposed to be a dinnertime negotiation, it wouldn't be the first time it happened on this trip.

When he presented himself at Nyrielle's chambers, however, he was surprised to find Zedya waiting outside Nyrielle's door wearing an elegant fur coat over a modestly cut dress in deep, rich purple silk and crimson lace, looking like she was prepared for a night outdoors.

"Hello, Lenny," the amethyst eyed vampire said. Her voice was warm and gentle and her pale skin held the healthy glow that said she'd fed the night before, but even a recent feeding couldn't account for the... softness he felt from her tonight.

"Has there been a change in plans tonight, Madame Zedya?"

"There has," Zedya teased, placing a finger underneath the bearish man's chin and leading him back the way he'd come. "You won't need your armor tonight, or your weapons. Tonight, you'll accompany me. Come," she said with a smile that lit up her plain features as though the moon had appeared from behind clouds just to shine on her. "You should get changed."

"Where are we going, Madame Zedya?" Lennart asked as he fell in comfortably behind and to Zedya's left side, taking a position to protect her vulnerable side even if she had little need of his protection. "Should I dress for the cold?" he added, hoping to get some details from her.

"A warm coat would be a good idea," she acknowledged. "But please, Mistress Nyrielle isn't here. It's fine if it's just 'Zedya' tonight. Unless you'd prefer I call you 'Captain' all night long?"

"Zedya then," he said, still puzzled by what she was up to this evening. If Lady Nyrielle had sent Madame Zedya on an important errand tonight, he could understand why he was being sent with her, especially if they would be retrieving something valuable from one of the merchants that Nyrielle had met with the night before. But if that was the case, why tell him to change out of his armor?

Fifteen minutes later, as Zedya led him into one of the small carriages reserved for guests of the palace, he was no closer to understanding her intentions. She'd nodded approvingly at his choice of midnight blue tunic and the long-waisted, fur-trimmed coat he wore over it, but she'd given him no other hints about where they were going or why.

"You can relax, Lenny," Zedya said as she relaxed into the cushions of her seat in the carriage, watching the flicker of warm golden lamplight and cooler moonlight spill across Lennart's features as the carriage navigated its way through the busy nightlife of High Fen City.

"Lady Ashlynn and the Thistle Witch are taking turns watching over little Heila," Zedya explained. "Brother Ignatious is watching over Lady Nyrielle tonight and Captain Virve agreed to take your place since Lady Ashlynn has no need of her while she's tending to Heila. Tonight, you and I have been given the evening off to enjoy ourselves in High Fen City."

As their carriage turned onto one of the broad avenues leading away from the palace, they passed a smaller arena that catered to those patrons who were wealthy enough to recruit champions from outside of High Fen City. At the moment, several members of the Black Wolf Brigade surrounded two of their companions, egging them on and all but shoving them toward the reception counter to register themselves as fighters for the evening.

"Do it, do it! Coward! Show these city folk that Master Savis isn't the only strength the Black Wolf Brigade possesses," one man said, poking his companion's large, muscular arms. "Didn't you say that you were the strongest in the squad? Prove it!"

"Come on, boss," another Golden Eyed soldier said, his tail standing straight up as he joined the dogpile on his nominal superior. "Show us young bloods how it's done!"

"But, we've only just arrived," Lennart protested as the carriage rolled far enough away that the boisterous soldiers were no longer in earshot. Some people might be able to enjoy a night off so soon after arriving, but when he thought of the number of things that Lady Nyrielle needed to accomplish during their short stay, he couldn't help but feel a twinge of guilt at rushing off to some kind of recreation while others were still working so hard. "There are still so many things that need doing, even if we're not tending to Lady Nyrielle then..."

"Lenny," Zedya interrupted, leaning across the gap between the carriage seats to place a hand on his shoulder as her amethyst eyes softened. "How long have you served Lady Nyrielle now? How long have you gone wherever she goes, barely sleeping so you can protect us while we sleep and then standing by all through the night."

"It's not as bad as you make it sound, Mada-, er, Zedya," Lennart said, waving it off as though it was only a minor inconvenience. "When I was a young man, twenty years ago or so, all I ever had to do was stand where Captain Bassinger told me to, before he became the Commander of the Vale. Once it was my turn to tell the young ones where to stand, I only need to spend a few hours during the day attending to matters so that I can be at My Lady's side all night."

"Twenty years you've done this," Zedya said, a complicated expression flickering across her face as she watched the sights of the city passing by outside the windows. Their carriage slowed as it navigated through a busy market square. Children from the Clan of Painted Masks darted between stalls, wielding toy whips as they reenacted Heila's victories. One small girl had even painted her face with markings meant to look like the Willow Witch's horns.

"In all that time," Zedya said softly. "You've never married. You have no children at home waiting for your return, no lover writing you letters or looking after your home... you've given all of those things up so you can remain at Lady Nyrielle's side."

"The Vale of Mists would have been lost without her long ago," Lennart said with a gentle shake of his head. "Every time she travels, whether it's to Airgead Mountain and the Southern Step or here across the mountains, it's because she needs to obtain something for the Vale that will help keep our people safe from the humans and their constant thirst for conquest."

"Some of us have to take up this burden, supporting her while she does so much to care for us," he said, placing a large paw over Zedya's hand on his shoulder. "I may have given up things that most men would want, but in return, I've seen more of the world than almost anyone born in the Vale in more than a century. There are wonders out here that my childhood friends have never seen and could barely understand. It hasn't been a bad trade."

"But how much longer can you do it," Zedya said softly, pulling her hand out from under his to trace it along the still tender scar on his face from the battle at the Tangled Tower. "How many more times will you venture across the mountains with Lady Nyrielle and I? How many more chances will you have to take a night off in a city like High Fen City?"

"Did Virve tell you?" Lennart asked as he felt like he was starting to understand what Zedya was up to. "This is likely the last time I'll ever visit High Fen City," he acknowledged. "If I survive the coming war, then it will be time to name a successor and retire. I still have a few good years left in me," he added, flexing a powerful arm that was only slightly softer than it had been five years ago when he entered his thirties.

"But even if Commander Bassinger retires after this war, I won't be the one to succeed him," he said. "The Vale of Mists is changing now that Lady Ashlynn has joined us. Nothing will be as it was. Lady Nyrielle and her Seneschal can select the new leaders they'll need after we finish this war. I know it's different for you," he said, gently taking her hand between his two large paws.

"But this is the way life is for people like me. It might be too late to find a wife and start a family by the time it's all said and done, but there's still plenty of time to choose a village, build a cottage while away my days on more idle pursuits," he said.

His voice caught at the end as he tried to imagine being content with 'idle pursuits' like fishing or keeping a garden, but he was certain that by the time the day arrived, he'd be ready to hang up his claws and enjoy a rest. Assuming the coming war didn't claim his life before he got there at least. But then, that might not be a bad way for his story to end. To spend his life in battle after so many years as a soldier... a man couldn't ask for a better ending than that, could he?

"But is that, is that really what you want?" Zedya asked. Her amethyst eyes studied him intently as she listened to the subtle changes in his heartbeat. At times, it faltered slightly and the arteries in his neck jumped when he realized she'd heard about his upcoming retirement. Other times, when his eyes grew distant, she felt a stillness settle over him as he contemplated a future he wouldn't put into words.

Even if he wouldn't say it, she'd known him for far too long to miss the fate that must be running through his mind when he glanced out the window at the radiant, silvery moon hanging in the cloudless night sky. They both knew that, as a soldier on the frontlines of the coming war, he might not survive to enjoy those 'idle pursuits' he mentioned and from the way his fur twitched and quickly settled down, the notion didn't seem entirely uncomfortable to him.

"What if..." she hesitated, briefly uncertain about what she had brought him out tonight to say. He seemed comfortable with the places his life might take him in the end but... that didn't mean she was comfortable with them. There were some things, however, that were taboo for any person of the Vale of Mists to ever ask a vampire and after so many years, she knew that Lennart would never ask what he shouldn't. That meant that if she didn't broach the topic, no one else ever would.

"What if there was another option?" Zedya asked, staring directly into her bearish friend's eyes and watching them tremble as his mind began to process what she was saying. "What if... what if it didn't have to end that way?"

"What if it didn't have to end that way?"

Zedya's words hung heavily in the carriage and for what felt like several minutes, Lennart forgot to breathe, uncertain if he was hearing the offer he thought he was. His mind raced, conjuring images of Savis, Tausau and the misshapen Clanless progeny he'd created. Despite their defects and deformities, Lennart only dared to face off against the weakest among those vampires, to say nothing of someone like Savis. But, was that really what Zedya was implying?

Before he could open his mouth to ask, the carriage clattered to a stop outside of a well lit, upscale establishment.

"We can speak inside," Zedya said as she smoothly exited the carriage with a fluid grace that left Lennart feeling momentarily awkward, as though he had grown a size too large for the delicate palace carriage that clearly hadn't been designed for people with frames as large as members of the Clan of the Great Claw.

"Madame Zedya," he said, trying to recover his composure as he held out an arm to escort her through the artistically coiled, wrought-iron gate. The entire establishment, despite its location in one of the busier districts of High Fen City, was ringed by well tended gardens and at this time of year, the leaves of several ornamental trees seemed to have draped themselves in the colors of flame from deep yellow to brilliant orange and even dark crimson.

"As beautiful as the gardens are at night," Zedya said as she allowed Lennart to escort her inside. "I think it would be better for us to dine inside tonight. They've prepared a private room for us," she added when they stepped inside the building.

Polished wooden floors paired with long swaths of soft fabric hanging from the ceiling to give the restaurant a sense of warmth and closeness. Despite the number of patrons occupying the tables, the sounds of conversation were dull and indistinct, broken only by occasional outbursts of laughter or delight as well dressed servants moved about, delivering platters heaped with tasty delights from all corners of the Eldritch world.

The private room that Zedya requested for them was decorated with simple, refined taste. The oil lamps that hung above the table were dim, casting a circle of gently dancing golden light over the small table for two while leaving the rest of the dining space in shadow. Plants in the corners gave the room a hint of life, as though they'd brought the gardens inside to escape the cold evening breeze to enjoy the comfort of each other's company.

"I visited here once with Lady Nyrielle," Zedya mentioned. "The owner retired some years ago, but her daughter assured me that even if the menu isn't the same as it once was, their standards haven't fallen from where they were. I hope you don't mind an evening of tastings with me," she said with a gentle smile.

"Of course I don't mind," Lennart said almost automatically as he took his seat. "But, Zedya, what you said in the carriage..."

"Hush, Lenny," Zedya said with a smile as she relaxed into the soft, overstuffed armchair. "At least until we've had our first taste of tonight's delights," she said, hoping to give him some time to sit with the idea before she made it more real than it had been in the carriage. In truth, she needed some time to steady herself as well. She'd meant to wait to broach the topic until they'd at least sampled a few cups of wine but with the flow of conversation in the carriage, she'd gotten ahead of herself.

"That's not fair," Lennart protested with a wounded expression on his face. His ears twitched awkwardly as he tried to sort out the storm of feelings sweeping through his heart while they waited for a servant to arrive with their first course. "At least tell me what prompted this. After all these years, why now when Lady Nyrielle hasn't taken any Eldritch progeny since the fall of her forty-seven champions?"

"You said it yourself, Lenny," Zedya said, pausing as the door opened to admit a servant carrying a tray with nearly two dozen small cups. Half of the cups contained a small measure of wine, little more than a single swallow, while the other half held artfully arranged morsels of fresh autumn vegetables, cooked in half a dozen different ways and placed in a way that made it clear that each morsel was to be enjoyed with a specific cup of wine.

"The Vale is changing now that Lady Ashlynn has arrived," Zedya said as she helped herself to a spoonful of soft parsnip puree followed by a sip of bright, fruity white wine. The puree itself was sweet and nutty with a hint of pepper that clung to the tongue until the fresh, fruity wine cleansed her palette, leaving her wanting more. But tonight, there would be no more of anything as the chef served only a single bite of each dish.

"The Vale is changing and some things that feel like they've 'always been that way' will be that way no longer," Zedya continued, her eyes shining in delight as she caught Lennart becoming momentarily distracted by the explosion of flavors on his tongue when he sampled the second dish, a delicate piece of roasted squash rolled in honey, walnuts and savory spices.

"I'm sure you've noticed how Lady Nyrielle is changing," Zedya added after savoring her own portion of squash and the sharp, almost citrus-like wine that had been paired with it. "Lady Ashlynn has brought priceless gifts to all of us and as long as she is at Lady Nyrielle's side, nothing will be as it has been for the past hundred years."

"Ha ha," Lennart chuckled with a warm smile. "So love really does change a person. I'm happy for Lady Nyrielle. She's been more, alive I suppose, than I've seen her before. But that's all the more reason to admit when my time has passed," he said with a heavy sigh.

"The future they build will belong to the heroes of the next war and people like you," he concluded, taking a sip of a rich, chocolaty red wine that seemed to suit the bitterness that accompanied the statement. "If Lady Nyrielle is going to offer a chance to become one of her progeny to any of us, it should be one of the younger up-and-coming soldiers like Harrod who stayed behind to defend young Ollie."

"Lenny," Zedya said, reaching out and taking his free hand before he could reach for another bite of food. "This isn't about Mistress Nyrielle. Truthfully, I don't know if she'll ever take another person as her progeny unless one of us falls. But Lenny," she said, her amethyst eyes growing moist as she clutched his large paw with both her hands. "Mistress Nyrielle isn't the only one changing because of Lady Ashlynn's gifts."

"And... Mistress Nyrielle isn't the only vampire who can create progeny of their own," she added in a voice that was so soft, that Lennart almost asked her to repeat herself.

For as long as Lady Nyrielle had ruled the Vale of Mists, her progeny had occupied almost all of the positions of leadership in the Vale, but not once had any of her progeny given rise to progeny of their own. There were always rumors. Some said that Lady Nyrielle had forbidden it, others speculated that, because her progeny were originally human rather than Eldritch, they weren't capable of making progeny of their own.

But now, Lennart realized, Zedya was talking about breaking with more than a century of tradition and taking someone as her first progeny. And the person she'd chosen, was him!

Chapter 386: Confession

"Madame Zedya, I, I don't, I mean, why, but..." Lennart stammered as he looked into the vampire's shimmering amethyst eyes. Two desires welled up in his heart, one born of years of service, all but

screaming that he should kneel before immediately rejecting the honor that he knew himself to be unworthy of.

But another desire, one he'd long suppressed when engaging with Lady Nyrielle, Madame Zedya, or any of the rulers of the Vale of Mists, came roaring up even stronger. Slowly, with a paw that trembled slightly at the audacity of the gesture he was about to make, he reached out and gently brushed a tear away from the corner of her eye.

Zedya might stand far above him, but tonight, she'd reminded him in more ways than one that she didn't want to be 'Madame Zedya' she wanted to be 'Zedya.' She took his arm when they walked into the restaurant and walked beside him, not in front of him. And now, they ate together in a way that was more like, old friends, than superior and subordinate.

"Zedya," he said gently, forcing himself to discard her title even as he desperately wanted to cling to the comfortable distance that formality brought with it. Quickly, he organized his thoughts and mustered the courage to say what needed to be said.

"Lady Nyrielle chooses people for their unique skills. Sir Thane is a capable knight and commander, Sir Marcell has a vast network of contacts in the human dark market, Sir Ignatious," his voice trailed off as he released a heavy sigh.

"Zedya, I'm a common soldier," Lennart said, hanging his head low. "A common soldier who is past his prime and will soon be irrelevant. I have more experience than the younger soldiers under my command but anyone you bestow your favor on will rapidly accumulate that kind of experience. So, why? Why choose me?"

"Not because of what you can do," Zedya said, looking down at the table and taking a drink from a random cup of wine to distract herself before she continued, though her watery amethyst eyes remained firmly on the remaining artistic morsels on the table. "I'm asking you because everything is changing, but, there's something that I don't want to change."

"I would miss you," she said, blinking back the tears that threatened to overwhelm her whenever she thought of continuing their travels without Lennart's steady, reassuring presence beside her. Her heart had nearly exploded in her chest during the battle for the Tangled Tower when she saw a Golden Eyed soldier's knife barely miss Lennart's neck, skittering across his jawbone instead. An inch lower and he might have bled out before anyone could reach him to preserve his life, especially after she'd been so badly wounded in her first clash with Savis.

Memories of that night had haunted her more than once during the trip, and every new conflict, every minor scuffle with a local Eldritch Lord and their elite guards only added to her fears that one day soon, this man would be torn from her world.

"You'd miss me?" Lennart said, cocking his head in confusion. "I still don't understand. Before me, you traveled with Commander Bassinger and I'm sure there were others before him as well. You've seen at least a dozen men like me come and go, so... why do this now? Why me?"

"You don't understand what time does to us," Zedya said. Carefully, she selected a morsel of lightly pickled cucumber that had been cut into a ribbon and then shaped like a flower beginning to bloom. "Eat this," she said, reaching out with her delicate fingers to offer up the bite directly.

"I, all right," Lennart said, taking a bite and savoring the complex interplay of sweet cucumber, sour vinegar, and a hint of something spicy that tingled across his tongue.

"Now, keep chewing," Zedya commanded. "Don't swallow, just keep chewing."

"Mmm?" Odd as it was, he did as he asked, chewing on the cucumber until it was little more than a wet paste that rapidly lost all of the brilliance and complexity of flavor it had when he took his first bite.

"I can see it on your face," Zedya said with a sad smile. "You can swallow, you should understand now. For years, our lives were like that. Time wore us down. Everything we felt became dull and faded. Only a few things could still reach the distant places our hearts retreated to in those long years."

"I didn't know," Lennart said softly, reaching out to take her hands again. Everyone understood that vampires were cool, distant, and rarely expressed emotion, but he hadn't realized what it must have felt like to have been as vibrant and... alive as the sweet, sour, spicy flavors of the cucumber had felt and then to slowly see that fade away. "It, it must have been hard."

"Sometimes, you don't notice until something is gone," Zedya said. "When you realize that nothing will ever taste like it used to or that your heart will never beat as loudly. But you always reached me," she said, giving his hands a gentle squeeze.

"Remember when we first met? When you were just a young cub, lost in the dark tunnels of the castle?" Zedya asked. "You were worried because you were lost, you were even scared of being in trouble if you got home too late, but you were never once afraid of me."

"How could I be afraid of you?" Lennart said. "Your eyes were the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen, and they still are. You stepped out of the darkness like a guardian and showed me the way to get home. My parents were so honored that you visited that they told me I'd have to earn a position in Lady Nyrielle's guard, just to pay you back for the kindness you showed me back then."

"You didn't need to," Zedya protested. "I would have done it for anyone who was lost near Mistress Nyrielle's chambers, but especially for someone who has never once looked at me with the fear that others do. You know," she added, lowering her head again and looking anywhere but at the warm, gentle eyes that seemed so anxious for her from across the table.

"After the battle at the Tangled Tower, there are soldiers and drivers who give me that look," she said. "The look that says 'I'm glad she's on our side' or 'I hope I never upset her.' After seeing me fight, just once, they don't see me as Mistress Nyrielle's handmaiden anymore. They won't even meet my gaze," she said, looking back up at her bearish companion. "It's like, they're afraid that I'll mesmerize them the way I mesmerized the soldiers of the Black Wolf Brigade."

"But you would never do that," Lennart said. With one large paw, he held her hands while the other reached across the table to gently caress her cheek, wiping away another tear that threatened to spill from moist eyes. "You'd never hurt the people of the Vale. I've seen how much you do for Lady Nyrielle and the people of the Vale. If people think you would hurt them then I'll..."

"Hush, Lenny," she said, placing a slender finger on his lips. "Let them say what they will. They aren't the ones who are important to me. You are. You, who have never looked at me with fear. You, who have given up your chance to be with any women from your clan so you can do as I have done, and dedicate your life to serving Mistress Nyrielle. You who have tirelessly protected me while you've been protecting her."

"Lenny, you have to promise me something," she said, pulling her hands back and growing very stern and very serious. "The secret I'm about to share with you is very, very dangerous. But... you need to know, or you won't understand... so can you promise for me? Promise that you'll keep this secret?"

"Promise that you'll keep this secret?"

"You have my word," Lennart said, without the slightest moment of hesitation. "On blood oath if you require it," he added, pulling his hands back to place a sharp claw directly over his own wrist.

"No, no blood oath," Zedya said quickly, taking his paws in her hands before he could make a move. Right now, as much as she's stirred up long dormant feelings, she didn't entirely trust herself if Lennart were to spill blood in front of her. "I trust you, just like I've trusted you all these years to watch over us when we sleep. Just understand that this secret isn't dangerous to me, but to Mistress Nyrielle and Lady Ashlynn if anyone were to hear of it," she said.

"Then, should we go somewhere else?" Lennart asked, looking around the private dining room. Between the soft fabric wall hangings and the thick walls, the privacy here felt very good but if the secret were truly dangerous then perhaps they should return to the palace.

"I'll hear anyone who comes close enough to overhear," Zedya said, though she still stood up from her chair, her silk skirts whispering as she crossed the small dining room to stand next to Lennart. Warmth radiated off his body, and for a moment, she placed a hand on his strong, muscular shoulder just to steady herself as she inhaled the complex scents that clung to him. His fur smelled soft and warm and standing so close to him felt momentarily like the days long past, when she'd been able to laze about in the tall grass under the sun on days she wasn't working in the Baron's castle. Underneath that warmth, he carried the sharper, metallic scent of his armor while the faint scent of the oil he used to maintain his equipment clung to him like an echo of the duty he'd carried for so many years.

Standing this close to him, she was almost the same height standing as he was sitting down, and her entire torso pressed against his sculpted, muscular arm as she leaned in close enough to brush her lips across the light fur covering his round ears.

"It isn't Mistress Nyrielle's love of Ashlynn that's responsible for her change," Zedya whispered. "It's the act of feeding on the blood of such a powerful witch that has restored Mistress Nyrielle's ability to feel... and she's discovered how to share that gift with other vampires. I was the first one that she shared Lady Ashlynn's gift with," she said quietly before returning to her seat.

"That's why I'm saying this now," Zedya explained. "Because, even though you've been one of the most precious people to me for the longest time, I couldn't feel anything strongly enough to break out of our separate roles. I was always going to be a handmaiden, you would be a soldier and we would live out the lives that fate had given us."

"But now, you don't feel that way anymore?" Lennart said as he took Zedya's hands back in his own. "And that's why you want to take me as your first progeny?"

"My only progeny," Zedya said with a slight shake of her head. "I don't intend to be like Tausau or Hamdi. I don't need to build a whole new family. But when this happened," she added, reaching up to gently trace the tender scar along his jaw. "I started to worry that something would snatch you away from me. I feel like, all of the sudden, I'm running out of time. And with the war coming," she said, her voice trailing off as she looked deep into Lennart's warm, soft eyes.

"I want you to have a chance to be as strong as I am, or even stronger," Zedya said. "I want to do everything I can so you and I both get through everything that's about to happen. And then, when Mistress Nyrielle and Lady Ashlynn rebuild the Vale, I want to share that with you, how ever far in the future it is. I, I don't want to miss you," she finished in a voice that had grown as quiet as a whisper.

For several minutes, Lennart sat there quietly, holding Zedya's hands and wrestling with everything she had told him. After twenty years, from the time he was a fresh recruit until now, he had served near Lady Nyrielle and he knew Zedya and the other vampires of the Vale fairly well. He'd even become acquainted with other vampires outside the Vale and so he had noticed the changes in Nyielle months ago.

But it was one thing to notice changes, it was something else entirely to understand them. Especially understanding that the changes had occurred because Lady Nyrielle had fed on the blood of a powerful witch.

Before he could put any of his thoughts into words, a soft knock at the door announced the arrival of another flight of small dishes, accompanied by even more small cups of wine. This time, it looked like a flight of small meat dishes, some of which were entirely raw while others gave off a rich, fatty aroma after having been slow cooked until the meat was tender enough to fall apart on the tongue.

"These changes," Lennart asked after savoring a spoonful of chilled beef tartar that felt so rich on his tongue that he wasn't sure he could have eaten a second bite if there had been one available. "Will they fade with time? If something happens to Lady Ashlynn..."

"Likely," Zedya said, poking at her own tartar before taking a bite. While the flavors were good, she never found herself able to enjoy raw dishes the way Lennart seemed to enjoy this one. Something

about raw meat was close enough to feeding that it felt somehow lacking. If she truly wanted raw, she would sink her fangs directly into someone's flesh and savor the sweet richness of their blood. But perhaps this was as close as someone could get to understanding what it was like for vampires to sink their fangs into the flesh of someone still alive.

"Nothing is truly eternal," Zedya said. "Even we can be killed and die. We may need to receive regular infusions of her gift in order to keep feeling the way I do now. Perhaps every year, or decade. We don't know yet."

"And if I become one of your progeny, this will work on me?" Lennart asked hesitantly, trying to cover the awkwardness of the conversation by focusing on which dish to try next.

"It worked on Tausau," Zedya said confidently. "There's no reason it wouldn't work for you."

"Do you need an answer tonight?" Lennart asked, scooping up a spoonful of succulent pork belly in a sticky red sauce that melted as soon as it touched his tongue.

"I wouldn't accept any answer you gave me," Zedya said, shaking her head vigorously enough to send her light brown tresses dancing. "If you said no, I would ask you to spend a few days thinking and then, I'd talk to you again to see if I could respond to your doubts. If you said yes, I would ask you to spend a few days thinking, to see if any doubts appeared, and then we would discuss those too."

"So either way, you won't take any answer from me tonight," Lennart said with a belly shaking laugh. "You've always been the wise one I can turn to for advice, and taking time to think it over sounds wise. But if I become your progeny, what does that make us? Will you be a wise old councilor for the rest of our days?"

"Right now, you'll be my very best and dearest friend," Zedya said with the same radiant smile she'd displayed when Lennart first arrived outside her door. "You'll be the first person I trusted with my whole heart and the only one I want to spend the rest of my days with, no matter how many days the future holds."

"But, if you say yes, I don't think things will stay the same between us forever," Zedya added with a mischievous grin. "I've seen how a bond of blood has drawn Mistress Nyrielle and Lady Ashlynn together

much more quickly than most couples form. Maybe you and I, we'd be the same," she said in a tone that felt teasing, but held a core of genuine feeling beneath that.

"Time to think about it," Lennart said after nearly choking on a piece of pepper crusted beef when he heard Zedya's answer. "But, if we were closer," he said after taking a swallow of wine. "I think that would make me very happy, whether I was one of your progeny or not."

Chapter 388: Comfortable Companions

After the intense conversation, both Zedya and Lennart pulled back a little, enjoying the small bites of their meal until they were once again interrupted by a knock at the door and the return of their server, this time bearing a flight of artfully prepared fruits and small cups of ale and cider.

"Master Lennart," the servant said, offering a deep bow. "Of all the dishes you sampled in the previous flight, the chef would like to know which was your favorite?"

"Just me?" Lennart said, blinking in surprise. "Perhaps you should ask Madame Zedya first," he said, feeling a touch uncomfortable with the attention. Zedya had made the arrangements, and given the level of luxury and service here, he was certain that they understood which of them was more important, so why start with him?

"It's fine, Lenny," Zedya said with a light, musical laugh. "I asked them to serve things out of order for us tonight so you could pick a favorite meat dish. The chef will prepare a full portion of that dish for you as a main. I might be fine with single bites," she said with a smile that revealed a hint of her fangs. "But this isn't an ideal menu for you. So choose what you like and I'll keep you company during the next course. Then we can have desserts together."

"Oh," Lennart said with a hearty, belly-shaking laugh. "In that case, the pepper-crusted steak was perfect. But are you really fine just sitting there and watching me eat?"

"I'm fine spending time with my friend," Zedya said, reaching across the table to briefly hold his hand. "And I'll sip on a full cup of something rich, full-bodied, and red," she added with a wink at the servant.

Once the servant departed, the two fell into a quiet, comfortable conversation as they worked their way from a dish of thin-sliced apples served with goat cheese and sweet syrup to a miniature plum tart

shaped to resemble a plum blossom and several other delicate arrangements that blended sweet, tart autumn fruits with rich, savory herbs or sharp, funky cheeses.

By the time Lennart's pepper-crusted steak arrived, they'd fallen into a more comfortable rhythm of conversation. Sometimes they chatted about the food, picking favorites and reminiscing about childhoods long past when one flavor or another felt nostalgic. At times, the conversation turned more serious as moments of nostalgia provoked worries about the days to come.

Though they had known each other for close to thirty years, during that entire time, they'd remained rigidly locked in the roles that defined their relationship. Some things, they came to know about each other in passing while others were heard only through rumors overheard by others.

"So what is it that you occupy your free time with?" Lennart asked, leaning back and resting a hand on a belly that felt very, very full after the flight of six decadent confections that followed his hearty portion of steak. "I've seen Lady Nyrielle's paintings hanging a few places in the castle, and I've been told that Sir Thane writes poetry, but I've never heard a whisper of how you pass the idle time in the long years."

"You'll laugh," Zedya said, hiding her smile behind her cup of wine. "It's nothing impressive like Thane or Marcell or any of the others."

"I still want to know," Lennart protested. Digging in a pouch at his hip, he pulled out a half-carved wooden pipe. The bowl of the pipe had been roughly shaped to resemble an oak leaf curling around an acorn, though the stem of the pipe was still very, very rough in form. "This is what I keep busy with on the wagons during the day," he said, passing the pipe over to Zedya.

"I'm nowhere near as clever about wood carving as the folks from the Heartwood Clan," he said. "I can't manage that kind of detail with just my claws, but there's something soothing about needing to put all your focus on the knife in your hand so you don't cut yourself or ruin the piece while the wagon is jostling about. I can shut out the world for a little while when it's not my turn to watch the horizon."

"This is lovely," Zedya said as she carefully inspected the pipe before handing it back. "You might have seen a few of my pieces. Every year, I collect a small tribute of wool from each village that herds sheep. I spend the year making baby blankets for them to give back the following year to any expecting mothers in the village. The way the Horned Clan is, there's usually at least one expecting mother in the village every year," she said with a light laugh.

"How is it that I've never heard of you making blankets for children?" Lennart said, looking shocked that something could have gone unnoticed for so many years. "Someone would have said something to me by now, surely."

"Oh, no one knows that I'm the one doing the knitting," she said, looking wistfully at the last dregs of wine in her cup. "I told them once, but then I found out that receiving a blanket knitted by one of Lady Nyrielle's progeny was akin to receiving a family heirloom. They hung them on walls and talked about passing them down to their descendants, but they never gave them to the poor little babes."

"So after a few years, I told the villages that my duties had grown and I couldn't knit the blankets myself anymore, but that I would still take the tribute and I would have someone else knit them for me," she explained. "Now, they're precious, but not so precious that they go unused."

"That sounds... lonely," Lennart said. "No wonder you," he started to say only to cut himself short and get up from his seat instead. Crossing the small dining room in two quick strides, he knelt next to Zedya and wrapped her in the gentlest bear hug that he could manage. Her slender figure felt cool against his chest as he pulled her close, even though she'd fed the night before, it seemed like borrowed warmth never lasted long.

Almost unconsciously, Zedya shifted slightly in his embrace, pressing closer as though seeking the warmth that radiated from his body. Even though his formal coat and her silk dress, the warmth held close by his soft fur made him feel like a living blanket taken fresh from the fireside to bundle her up against the cold.

"I'll stay with you," he whispered as he tucked her head under his chin, enveloping her in a soft, fluffy embrace. His heart thundered in his chest, and he was certain that she could hear every beat. "As long as you want me to. I'll be your friend who's never afraid of you, and if I ever treat you like you're too far above me to accept a gift from, then you go ahead and beat me for it until I come to my senses," he teased lightly. "Because I know you can."

"Thank you," Zedya said, closing her eyes and sinking deeper into Lennart's warm embrace. She pressed her ear against his chest, letting the steady rhythm of his heartbeat and his slow, even breaths wash over her like music. The heat from his body seemed to seep into her very bones, making her feel more alive than she had in countless years. "That's all I wanted."

"So Madame Zedya is really going to take Captain Lennart as her first progeny?" Heila said, grinning from ear to ear when Ashlynn finished recounting the story.

Once Heila had a chance to clean up after several days in bed, it was her turn to experience one of the giant meals the staff had learned to prepare for whenever Nyrielle fed on Ashlynn. Though the magical exhaustion she felt wasn't the same as the anemia that plagued Ashlynn after Nyrielle fed on her, the simple act of sleeping for several days while Ashlynn gave her thin broth was enough to leave her ravenous.

Now, after nearly an hour of eating and stretching as Ashlynn relied on the techniques she'd learned from the Ancient Clan to help work the aches and stiffness out of her diminutive friend's body, the two women sat comfortably in Heila's sitting room while nibbling on the sweet pastries the staff served after their meal.

"Probably," Ashlynn said. "I've only gotten the details second hand when Captain Lennart discussed it with Virve. Evidently, the two of them were out till nearly dawn, taking a boat ride through the canals to admire the city lights and strolling through the shops. They've been spending their idle time together ever since, and I understand that Captain Lennart spent several hours during the day looking for unique yarns for her."

"But Zedya is holding firm on her rule that he takes the time to think about it," Ashlynn added. "It's a big decision and we're not home yet. From what I've heard, if Captain Lennart is still willing when we return to the Vale of Mists, then Zedya will take him as her progeny."

"We should think about a gift for them," Heila said, already running through a list of possibilities in her mind. "It's probably going to be a really big deal when it happens. The whole Vale might turn up to join the celebration."

"Why do you say that?" Ashlyn asked, surprised that it would be something that attracted the attention of the entire Vale of Mists. "There weren't any big celebrations when I became Mistress Nyrielle's Seneschal. Was there a big celebration for Nyrielle's other progeny?"

"I don't know," Heila said, frowning slightly as she tried to recall what she'd heard about the year that Marcell, the youngest of Nyrielle's progeny, had become a vampire, but even that had occurred years before she was born. "But Captain Lennart would be the first vampire from the Clan of the Great Claw in the Vale of Mists since High Lord Torbin fell. It will mean the world to all of them."

"Ah," Ashlynn said as the pieces fit together. "I'm still struggling with the overlap between the pride of a clan and the pride of a nation," she admitted. "It feels like the latter is more important most of the time, and I forget that a person's sense of belonging to their clan doesn't just escape the borders of their nation and tie them to the rest of their clan, it also echoes within their nation as a different form of pride."

"For someone who couldn't even speak the language a year ago, I think you're doing really well keeping it all straight," Heila praised. In truth, when she thought of everything Ashlynn had been through and how far she had come in such a short time, it made her own accomplishments look much smaller, even though she knew that she'd done more than anyone would ever have imagined she could.

"I had really good help," Ashlynn said as she wrapped an arm around her diminutive friend and pulled her into a brief embrace. "I imagine that your parents are going to be very proud of you when you get home. Have you written to them since we reached the High Fen?"

"No," Heila said, shaking her head. "I want to make it a surprise. Besides, the letter would only arrive a week or two before we do, and hiring someone to carry anything across the mountains is still too expensive. But maybe it won't be that way for much longer. Is there any news from the merchants? Did Lady Nyrielle agree to their terms?"

"There are some matters we still need to settle, but for the most part, yes," Ashlynn said with a wide smile. "Also, I have a surprise for you," she said, standing from her seat and walking across the room to retrieve a long, slender, cloth-wrapped bundle from its place near the hearth.

"Well, two surprises really," Ashlynn said once she'd set the bundle on the table in front of Heila. "I didn't want the other one kept in your room though. Of the seven surviving staves used by Ropati's men, you hurled six into the crowd, but one fell to the ground when he attacked his men. I declared it your trophy rather than returning it to the man who owned it. Even if he could use it again, High Lady Erna is in agreement that we shouldn't let those men return to their cult unless the cult is prepared to pay reparations for the insult and the injuries they caused."

"I don't think I'd want that staff in my room," Heila said, pulling her hand back from the cloth bundle on the table. It was long and slender and for a moment, she worried that it held one of the broken staves but given what Ashlynn had said, that didn't seem right. "The staff can be broken or disposed of. I don't need it."

"You might want to rethink that," Ashlynn cautioned. "You don't have to keep it near you, but it might be useful when displayed on the right wall among other trophies. You may not value the achievement, but there may come a time when you need to impress others with your strength, and displaying the trophies of your defeated foes seems to be a tradition that both humans and Eldritch clans have in common."

"Then I'll give it to you," Heila said resolutely. "And you can decide what to do with it."

"That's fair enough," Ashlynn said with a smile, rubbing her hands together in anticipation as she looked at the gift waiting on the table for Heila. They'd brought very little with them from the Briar, mostly focusing on practical matters like their cauldrons, books, and other tools. Many of the things they had made in practice, or the momentos they gathered in the Briar remained there, waiting in their huts should they ever visit their 'second home' under Amahle's thorny protection.

"Now, open that," Ashlynn said eagerly. "And let me explain why it's here."

Chapter 390: Truly Unique

Slowly, like a child on midsummer's day, Heila pulled the bundle into her lap and began untying the laces that held the fabric in place. Once the fabric fell away, her breath caught in her chest as she looked at a piece of heartwood taken from a young willow tree. The piece wasn't large when compared to a twenty or thirty-foot tall willow tree, it was only four feet long and barely thicker than Heila's arm, but it was warm in her hands and felt much lighter than it should.

Her fingers trembled slightly as she cradled the wood, her eyes growing distant as she remembered the magic of that night. The willow trees had fought alongside her, no different than when she and Ashlynn faced off together against the dangerous beasts in the Briar. They danced at her command, their branches striking like whips to protect her from obsidian shards, their roots intertwining to fill the arena with her magic without giving the cultists a chance to discover where she hid.

These trees had fought beside her, had protected her, had helped her save countless lives in the arena when it became clear that the Cauldron of Flame would stop at nothing to take her captive, even if it meant unleashing suicidal, sacrificial sorcery to do so. And now, a piece of them lay here, in her hands, still holding echoes of that battle.

"Is this..." she whispered, her voice thick with emotion as she traced her fingers along the wood grain. Each loop and whorl seemed to pulse with familiar energies, whether it was Ashlynn's emerald power

that had given the trees life, the soft, snowy chill from Snow Fang's frost magic, or her own silvery-green shimmer that pulsed silently in time with her heartbeat, echoing her connection to the willows. And all of that was trapped within the willow tree's heartwood, like memories preserved in amber.

The wood felt alive under her touch, not in the way a growing tree was alive, but like an echo of that vitality, preserved at the moment when their magic had been strongest and carrying the very faintest desire to resist the cataclysmic flames and devastation wrought by her enemies. It was something special, uniquely created in that moment that could never be made again.

"The trees I grew for your battle would never have survived for more than a week, even if we'd done everything possible to sustain them," Ashlynn said. "They were grown to participate in the battle, they protected you and fought alongside you and I couldn't have asked for more from them."

"Is this, is this all that's left?" Heila asked as she traced her fingers gently along the loops and whorls of the wood grain. There had been a dozen trees that night and while two of them had burned to ash under the relentless assault of the Cauldron of Flame and the others had suffered their own share of damage from uncontrolled flames and wild sprays of obsidian shards, she would have expected more to have survived than this small piece.

"Just this?" Heila asked, her eyes turning misty at the thought that so little remained of the mighty willow trees Ashlynn had raised to help her in the most difficult battle she'd ever faced.

"No, there was much, much more than that," Ashlynn said. "I spoke with Nyrielle about it and we gave it to Master Beilan as a test to see if he could effectively leverage such a treasure and if he could do it in a way that respected everything that went into it. But that piece was the best of what remained when the trees were cleared from the arena and I wanted to give it to you."

"Another trophy?" Heila said, raising a brow in curiosity. The captured staff she could understand, but this wood felt both precious in a way an enemy's weapon never would and... in a way, too useful to waste leaving it as it was.

"I expect you'll find a use for it," Ashlynn said with a smile. "Which brings me to another piece of news. I didn't get a chance to speak with him while we were at the arena, but I'm told that Artificer Erkembalt accepted my invitation to meet with us here at the palace. Nyrielle was impressed with the blade he made for you, and the one he made for Ollie is just as good."

"Now, the question is," Ashlynn said with a slow smile forming on her face. "Can we entice him into leaving his workshop in High Fen City behind to help us build weapons to fight the Lothians with, and more importantly..."

"You want to see if he can make a counter to the Holy Swords of the Templars," Heila realized as she thought about the strange swords she'd seen in the visions she faced during her trial. "A blade of ice or snow like mine could be a perfect weapon against the church but... can he make something like that without the use of a Frost Walker horn?" Heila asked.

After what she had been through in the High Pass, it didn't bother her to use a weapon made from the horn of the treacherous Elder Paulus. He and his grandson had deserved their punishment as far as she was concerned. But if they had to harvest horns from other Frost Walkers...

"I don't know," Ashlynn said. "If the only way is to use Frost Walker horns then that's a line I'm unwilling to cross. Hauke and his people are our friends and allies," she added firmly. "I won't risk that over a few enchanted blades. But, if you're feeling up to it, you can join us for dinner tonight when we discuss it. I'm sure he'd love to hear what you have to say about his work."

"Mmm." Heila said, happy to hear that Ashlynn shared her sentiments on how they should treat the Frost Walkers. She expected nothing less from the kind, compassionate Mother of Trees that Ashlynn was growing into, but it still felt reassuring to hear.

"I hope he'll come with us," Heila said. "If things are as bad as what we saw in our visions," she added, her expression growing grave and her voice becoming somber. "We'll need all the help we can get."