

# The Vampire 401

## Chapter 401: Breaking Down

Strong winds buffeted the windows of Marquis Bors Lothian's private dining hall and hail mixed with rain, bouncing off the glass panes with a sharp -PING-PING-PING- sound that echoed like thunder across the small dining room in the wake of Bors's declaration that Loman might inherit his throne.

It took every bit of control Jocelynn possessed to keep her knife and fork firmly in hand, poised over her leg of grouse without moving as tremors rippled through her body. Just when everything had been going so well, why? Why would this old man pull the rug out from under her when she'd done so much to find her way to Owain's side?

"You can't," she blurted, her mind racing from one thought to the next like a frightened mare as she tried to latch on to a reason why Owain had to be the heir and she had to be the one to marry him. "Loman, Loman is a priest," she said, pointing out the first and most obvious barrier to Bors' apparent plan. "He can't inherit a worldly position."

"He can't inherit my throne and retain his position as a priest within the Church," Bors Lothian corrected, swirling the wine in his goblet before draining it to the last drop and holding it out for Jocelynn to refill. "Life is uncertain. Heirs die across the kingdom with some frequency. If a noble family had to cut ties with their sons within the Church and sever their own lines of succession should tragedy strike, do you think any family of note would allow their sons to enter the Church?"

"No, but," Jocelynn started, stumbling slightly as she stood from her seat to fill the Marquis' goblet with more of the heady, fortified wine that he preferred. "But Owain isn't dead. The line of succession isn't broken. There's no reason for Loman to step in as heir."

"Isn't there?" Bors said, taking a deep drink of wine and holding out his goblet before Jocelynn could sit down. As power games went, it was crude, but he needed to school this young temptress before she grew overconfident in her manipulation of Owain. "I love both my boys, but one of them murdered his wife on his wedding night and intends to take her younger sister as his bride in her place," he said bluntly.

"My, my sister, she, she bore the mark of the witch," Jocelynn said in feeble protest. The words that she'd once said so confidently into Owain's ear now sounded hollow and uncertain, even to her own ears. After months of speaking about Ashlynn with Confessor Eleanor, she was no longer certain that Ashlynn's mark was a genuine mark of the witch, but it was far too late to take back her words now.

The way that Bors looked at her, his thin lips curling into a sneer and shaking his head ever so slightly all but shouted that he didn't believe it either. Under that calm, calculating gaze, her hands trembled and she had to set the pitcher of wine down before she spilled any on herself, or worse, on Marquis Bors, but she had no idea what she was supposed to say to him when he seemed to see right through her.

"The Church examined your sister's body," he told her, revealing one of the secrets he'd gained from Loman. "They don't believe that she was a witch. They're keeping quiet at the moment because they're impressed by Owain's ability to fight against the demons."

"Then, isn't that a settled matter then?" Jocelynn said, using the edge of the table to support herself as she returned to her seat. "Since they need him to lead the Holy War against the demons, then he must be the next Marquis Lothian."

"You've miscalculated, Lady Jocelynn," Bors said with a heavy sigh. "Your advice in matters relating to the merchants of Blackwell County has been useful, but in matters relating to the Church and the Frontier, you still know far too little. Your sister was far more impressive in this regard," he added, cutting himself a portion of roast boar and dredging it through a thick brown gravy before tearing into the tender, nutty meat.

"Lady Ashlynn's greatest fault is that she possessed a birth defect that could be misunderstood and she concealed it rather than revealing it," the Marquis continued as his knife and fork moved mechanically across his plate, preparing his next bite. "She was naive and trusting, but she was also very diligent. She spent two years of her engagement studying the Frontier, our ways, our challenges, our relationship with the Church... She intended to be a capable Marchioness from the instant we agreed to a betrothal."

"Sister was always very studious," Jocelynn agreed quietly. Her sea-green eyes grew distant as she stared at the food on her plate without truly seeing it. "But she's gone now," she finally said, blinking back the tears that threatened to form and turning her attention back to the Lothian Marquis. "She's gone, and I'm here to take her place. To marry Owain and help bring the Blackwell and Lothian families closer together."

"Those are separate things, Lady Jocelynn," Bors reminded her pointedly. "You can serve your family just as well by marrying Loman. He's younger than Owain, closer to your age, and he may be a better match for you in the long run. He's clever and he appreciates people who are intelligent in a way that Owain has yet to manage. He isn't ugly either," he added. "Many ladies of the march have bemoaned the entrance of such a handsome nobleman into the Church. You wouldn't suffer a loss by wedding Loman."

"But I don't love Loman," Jocelynn blurted out only to immediately cover her pert lips with her delicate hands. "I, I mean..."

"I don't think your love counts for very much," Bors said bluntly. "You act like you loved your sister, but without your words in Owain's ears, she might still be alive today. You can act however you want in front of others," he said, his bushy brows lowering in a fierce glare. "But don't you dare tell me that you love my son. I've seen what you do when the people you love stand in the way of your own ambitions."

#### Chapter 402: Fighting Back (Part One)

"I never asked him to kill her!" Jocelynn shrieked, standing up from her chair with enough force to knock it over and slamming her petite fists down on the table hard enough to make the dinnerware jump. Tears flowed freely from her eyes and her heart thudded in her chest like the powerful storm raging outside the glass windows but she didn't care as she lashed out at the middle-aged Marquis.

"He didn't, he didn't need to kill her," she sobbed. "All he had to do was see the mark for himself and refuse to consummate the marriage. Then, then we could have fixed things. We could have talked about what to do, together, as one big family. But he..."

"And yet you say you love him anyway," Bors snorted.

"I do love him!" Jocelynn insisted. "I, I love him more than anything in this world and I would do anything for him. Anything to help him become the first Duke of Lothian March, to bear him sons to inherit his throne, I would do all of those things for him and more because I. I. Love. Him," she said, emphasizing her final words as strongly as she could while trying to reign in the tears that flooded from her eyes.

"Silly girl," Bors said. Slowly, he stood from his chair, walked over to her, and pulled a handkerchief from a pocket to dab at her eyes with. "What did my foolish son ever do for you to earn this much adoration and devotion from you? Hmmm? What has he done to capture your heart?"

"He, he's a hero," Jocelynn said, looking at the suddenly tender Marquis with moist eyes that trembled in confusion. "He's brave and strong and the greatest hero of his generation. No one can compare to him," she said. Her voice trembled as she spoke but she didn't understand why Bors would ask such a

question. The way he said it made it sound like he didn't think Owain was worthy of her when she was the one who had to work so hard, just to be worthy of him.

"He could have anyone in the world as his bride, but he wants me," she added in a very small voice.

"He's a strong fighter, I'll give him that," Bors said, stepping behind Jocelynn to lift her seat up off the floor and placing it back upright at her spot at the table. "Sit, Jocelynn," he said, gesturing to her chair.

"Don't try anything funny. No clever words, no pouting looks, I'm far too old for both of those. If you're going to marry one of my sons, then I will treat you like a daughter-in-law," he said as he returned to his own seat. "But at the moment, you're a daughter-in-law that has yet to earn my trust or approval. You understand?"

"Yes, my lord," she said, using the handkerchief to tidy herself up as best she could. "How can I earn your trust?"

"Start with plain words," Bors said, pouring himself a fresh cup of wine as he carefully regarded the young woman, trying to decide whether or not she had truly submitted after this brief bout of pressure. Her tears, when he wiped them away, felt real enough, but she regained her composure quickly for a woman so young. In the end, he still didn't know her well enough to be certain, but he could only press forward and look for other opportunities to test her.

"If I declare that Loman is my heir," Bors said. "Will you marry him to cement the alliance between the Blackwells and the Lothians? Or will you cling to Owain, whether he is to become heir or not?"

"I, I've never thought of it," Jocelynn admitted, refusing to give the answer that came first to her lips. Owain had to be the heir, anything else was impossible to accept, but arguing that would get her nowhere. Worse, the way Bors had framed his question, though he asked her for plain words, was clearly a trap.

"My duty to my family would compel me to secure the alliance with my marriage," she said carefully as her mind raced to find a solution. "But, I don't have to wed the Lothian heir to do that, do I? I could marry Owain and return to Blackwell County with him. He could marry into our family and our firstborn child could inherit my father's title. Until our son is old enough to reign, if my father must retire, then Owain could serve as regent..."

"You can't think it's that simple, can you?" Bors prodded her as he sipped his wine. "If I give Loman the throne of the march, I must give Owain to the Church to take Loman's place. You said it yourself," he pointed out. "My son is a fierce warrior against the demons. Some in the Church believe he would make an excellent Templar, no weaker than his former knight Tommin. If Loman inherits the throne, you will not be able to marry Owain."

"But I don't love Loman," Jocelynn protested. "My heart belongs to Owain."

"But does your body belong to him?" Bors asked bluntly. "Tell me truthfully, has Owain spoiled you?"

"He would never!" Jocelynn shrieked. Her face turned nearly as red as the wine in her cup as she protested her innocence. She wanted to say that she was Owain's woman, that he had ravished her in his bed chambers before he left for Blackwell County, but she'd held firm, believing that only by remaining chaste could she truly secure his love.

But now, it felt like Bors might tear her away from Owain since had no 'claim' over her body! If she'd known this would happen, she would have given herself to Owain their first night in the Summer Villa!

"Confessor Eleanor has been at my side to protect my chastity and...."

"Fine, fine," Bors said, waving off her startled protests. "Owain courted your sister for two years before we settled the marriage. If I ask him to, Loman could begin courting you now and you could see if he captures your heart," the Marquis suggested.

"And if my heart still belongs to Owain after Loman courts me?" Jocelynn said, staring defiantly at Bors and trembling with emotion. "What then?"

#### Chapter 403: Fighting Back (Part Two)

"Then you had best hope that Owain convinces me he can be a worthy heir," Bors said bluntly. "Not everyone gets a happy ending, Lady Jocelynn. If you cannot love Loman and he is a better heir, then I will look elsewhere for a suitable bride for him and you can return to Blackwell County to find a future of your own. One that will not involve marriage to a son of the Lothian house."

"But, if that happens, then your alliance with my family..." Jocelynn started.

"This was an alliance that benefitted your family more than ours," Bors interrupted. "And we've already all but secured the cooperation of the merchant guilds from Blackwell County. That Isabell woman is cunning, but she'll be arriving along with Owain in a few days. Once she's verified and accepted the lands and titles we're offering to her and her fellow guild masters, our need for an alliance with the Blackwells will diminish greatly."

"You used us as a wedge," Jocelynn muttered. "You just needed to get your foot in the door and now that you have, you're ready to cast us aside," she said, her voice growing stronger as she realized how badly they'd been out-maneuvered.

If her sister was still alive, then the Blackwells would also have gotten what they needed by now, an alliance secured by marriage. But since they'd gone ahead in their negotiations with the guild masters, it had left a window open for the Lothians to cast them aside.

"Don't say it like it's a foul or dirty thing," Bors chided her. "Your father used me, and I used him. This is the way that men barter power and favors. Your father is an honorable man and he never once backed away from our bargain, even after my son murdered your sister," he said pointedly.

"You should think of the kind of man that makes your father," the middle aged Marquis added. "His daughter's body was barely cold when he agreed to the charade and to allow you to take Lady Ashlynn's place. He might look soft with his comfortable life by the sea, but your father is as ruthless as a demon when he needs to be."

"Don't say that about him," Jocelynn said, glaring at her future father-in-law. "Don't you ever compare him to a demon. If my sister wasn't a witch then my father is no demon and I won't hear that word used on him," she insisted.

"I meant it as a compliment," Bors said with a slow shake of his head. "But I suppose it's inappropriate. But you see now, the position you're really in? You need to show me that you still have value. Convince me that you and Owain should inherit the march and I won't hesitate to abdicate in his favor at the end of the war. But fail in that," he said, allowing his voice to trail off.

"You're too much like my sons," Bors said with a heavy sigh. "You have potential, but you've squandered too many of your opportunities and you're not making the best of what you have. You're more thoughtful than Owain and more ruthless than Loman. You could compliment either of them as a Marchioness, but just like they are lacking, you are also far too deficient in your understanding of real power."

"What would you have me do, my lord?" Jocelynn asked, biting her lip and looking up at the imposing Marquis through moist eyelashes.

"You'll have to figure that out for yourself, Lady Jocelynn," Bors said, leaning back in his seat and returning to his meal. "But the time to end the charade about your sister living in the Summer Villa is rapidly approaching. It wouldn't do for you to be seen as someone fickle, courted by both my sons."

"Three months," Bors said, holding up three fingers. "In three month's time, we'll announce your sister's tragic death in labor. There will be a period of mourning during which you will represent the Blackwell family in all public functions. The roads are all but impassable in winter and no one will be surprised that your parents are unable to make the trip."

"Between now and then, show me that you're a worthy daughter-in-law who can strengthen the march, and help Owain find a way to prove his worth as my heir," he added. "Do that, and when the spring comes, you'll find a wedding awaiting you that's no less grand than the one we held for your sister."

"I understand. Thank you for the opportunity, my lord," she said, standing to curtsy. "I promise, you won't regret it," she said before excusing herself and returning to her chambers within the sprawling Lothian Manor.

It wasn't until she reached her room that a wide grin spread across her face as she began to carefully remove her makeup. Many of the tears she'd shed during their meal had been real, especially when he threatened to send Owain to the Church after installing Loman as his heir, but in the beginning, when she'd broken down over Ashlynn...

"I'm sorry, sister," she whispered. She'd already resolved not to shed any more tears over what had happened to her sister. It was impossible to take back her words that night, no matter how much she wanted to. Now, she could only move on with her life and hope that her sister smiled on her from the Heavenly Shores.

"I promise, I'll make up for your portion too," she said, retrieving her sister's string of pearls from her jewelry box and holding them tightly. She refused to leave them in the care of the bumbling imposter in the Summer Villa, and holding them brought her a sense of comfort, as if her big sister were still here to watch over her.

"I may not be as well learned as you were, but I'll make Owain happy in your place, and deliver an heir for father too," she promised.

She disagreed with Bors Lothian on many things, but he'd been right about one thing. Not everyone would receive a happy ending. Ashlynn had already lost her chance to live out a happy life, but that only made Jocelynn more determined to ensure that she secured a happily ever after for herself and for Owain.

As long as she could do that... then she was certain that everything else would take care of itself, one way or another.

#### Chapter 404: Tired

Deep below the Lothian Manor, Bors Lothian carried a small lantern down a twisting flight of spiral steps before entering a dimly lit stone chamber. Moisture beaded on the walls in some places and mice scurried into the darkest corners of the chamber at the sight of the soft golden glow of Bors' lantern.

The walls of the chamber had been hewn directly into the stone of the earth and while it was very long, the chamber itself was no more than twenty paces wide. Enough to accommodate two rows of crypts, holding the fallen heroes and departed loved ones of the Lothian family.

One crypt, engraved with a crest of lilies and an embroidery needle, held an oil lamp that cast a faint golden glow across the other crypts in the chamber, casting deep, inky shadows that danced like living things.

"Hello, Isla," Bors said, kneeling on the cold stone floor and placing his lantern on the ground as he folded his hands in prayer. "It's been seven years already since you left for the Heavenly Shores. The boys are grown now. I should be able to join you soon but... I worry about our sons," he said with a heavy sigh.



Moving slowly, he extinguished the lamp burning atop his late wife's crypt and began to meticulously clean the accumulated residue from the glass of the lamp while he spoke.

"I've done the best I could with them, but I know that I would have done better if you were still here beside me," he said. "Owain is strong and capable of defending our home from the demon hordes and Loman has held to his faith all these years. You would be proud of them my love," he said, pausing in his work as his mind filled with memories of simpler, happier days.

There had been a time when Isla brought the boys into his stately office every day. She'd sit in her embroidery chair near his desk, plucking away at her needlework while Loman read at her feet, breaking the silence of the office only when he needed to ask for help with one word or another in whatever book his tutors had given him most recently.

Owain had never been so well behaved, but in his father's office, even as a teenager, he would wander from one trophy to the next, reading the histories that accompanied them and imagining himself as a hero adding to the collection one day.

Now, Owain was already accumulating a number of trophies of his own, though none were worthy of a place in the office collection yet, he was certain to add to them one day. And Loman...

"I promised you that I'd look after them," Bors said, putting away his cleaning rag and pulling out a small bottle of lamp oil to refill the freshly cleaned lamp. In the first year after her passing, he felt like the oil had barely burned down between visits, but over the years, it had come closer and closer to running empty by the time he next visited. "At least until I've seen my first grandson born. When I know the future is secure, then I can join you on the Heavenly Shores," he promised.

"Only, I'm afraid the wait may be even longer than I imagined," he said. Using the flame of his own lantern, he relit her lamp and placed it back atop the cold stone crypt. "I spoke with the girl that Owain intends to take as his second wife. She's clever but very, very young. She thinks that the world will dance to her tune because her father is a count and she has some skill at enticing people into her schemes."

"Perhaps if she were her sister's age, she would have grown out of this foolishness, but I'm afraid that she will bring disasters down upon our boys before she learns the limitations of her power," he said, shaking his head as he recalled her performance at dinner this evening.

"Loman is contending for the throne," he added, his voice growing as heavy as the stones of the crypts. "He's improving, but he needs years more seasoning. And Owain... Owain has squandered so many years that I feel only a capable woman at his side will allow him to care for the march and keep it safe from the demons. I just don't know that this Blackwell girl is as capable as she thinks she is."

"You could have straightened her out," he said, pulling out a small bottle of wine and two cups that were barely larger than thimbles. "You always had a way with the ladies of the march. Now, I'm afraid that this Blackwell girl will turn our court into the kind of viper's nest that is common in the soft territories to the east. People will start squabbling among themselves and forget about the threat of the demons."

"I'll do what I can with her in the time I have left," he said, pouring a tiny cup for Isla and one for himself. He drank his own cup immediately but hesitated once he picked hers up. "Would you hate me, my love, if I stayed on longer? Long enough to pass the throne to a grandson instead of one of our boys?" Bors asked before pouring the second tiny cup of wine over the cold stones of Isla's crypt.

"I know you always believed in them," he said with a heavy sigh. "Owain is already five years older than I was when my father died. Maybe you were right all along and their true capability will only be unearthed when they have to face trials without me but... I just can't put my mind at ease."

Slowly, and with much more effort than it required of him seven years ago, Bors stood up from the cold stone floor and looked down lovingly at the crypt that held the remains of his departed Isla.

"Please wait just a bit longer," he promised, sliding his thick, calloused hand along the smooth stones of the crypt. "If this Blackwell girl reveals herself to be a threat to our boys, I'll put an end to her myself and damn the agreements with the Blackwells if that's what comes of it. But if you can, my love, watch over this girl and help me forge her into a tool that will serve our family well in the years to come. That way, when I come to join you, I can bring stories of our grandchildren with me."

For several minutes, Bors stood there, trailing his fingers across the surface of the crypt losing himself in memories of the past. The cold stone beneath his fingers felt nothing like her warm, gentle touch, but sometimes, when he visited her here, he could almost imagine her hand reaching back to squeeze his own, offering silent comfort the way she had so many times before when the weight of his duties felt like they threatened to crush him and all that he held dear along with him.

"I miss your counsel, my love," he said softly. "Now more than ever." Finally, after spending several minutes lingering at the crypt of his late wife, he moved to another crypt, not far away.

While his wife's crypt was simple, adorned only with her personal crest while awaiting her husband to join her in eternal rest, this crypt was covered in decorations befitting a powerful warrior and wise Marquis who ruled the Lothian March with courage and wisdom that filled Bors with a mixture of pride for the other man's accomplishments and shame at his own inadequacies.

"Father," Bors said, bowing his head and kneeling at the foot of the crypt. "For thirty years, I have held everything you left to me and taken more besides, but I have failed to conquer even one of the demon lords that plague us," he said heavily.

"Your grandsons are strong and clever, but they lack your gift to be both warrior and ruler," he said. "As a parent, I fear that I have overindulged them, especially since their mother passed. But as their ruler, I fear even more that they are unprepared. There may come a day in the future where brother turns against brother and our people are plunged into chaos because of it."

"Father," he said solemnly. "I've done my best to follow in your footsteps in raising my boys, but I didn't realize until you were gone that I needed your advice as a father far more than I needed your lessons in the sword. Now, I would give anything to hear your voice again, just this once. How would you choose? For the good of the march? Or for the good of the family? And what should I do when those no longer seem to be the same thing?"

Only the cold silence of the underground chamber answered his questions. Once the dead left for the Heavenly Shores, they were never heard from again without the use of dark, forbidden magic and Bors would slit his own throat before he used such heretical sorcery to disturb the slumber of his lost loved ones. Even if he would give nearly anything to hear Isla gentle encouragement or his father's sage advice, some lines should never be crossed.

Hours passed while Bors knelt at the foot of his father's crypt, searching for an answer to the dilemma that haunted him. In the end, he felt no closer to an answer than he had when he entered the crypt. For now, that was fine. He still had time. But when time ran out and he made his decision... he couldn't help but hope that the people buried here would approve.

#### Chapter 405: Ancestral Wisdom (Part One)

On the snow covered slopes of the High Pass, the night sky rippled with lights. Ribbons of pale, icy blue and soft, shining lavender bent and twisted like curtains in the breeze, bending and swaying at the direction of a young man standing atop an exposed ridge.

Further down the mountain, at one side of the ancient roadway that had guided travelers across the mountains for centuries, several Frost Walker sorcerers stood in awe as they watched Young Lord Hauke transforming the icy tower they'd constructed into something that felt infinitely colder and more dangerous than the simple structure they'd built during the day.

"You're doing well, young hero," a soft, feminine voice whispered to Hauke as he extended the reach of his sorcery as high into the sky as he dared. "Can you feel it? How much colder the air is at the top of your ribbons than it is at the bottom?"

"I c-can f-feel it," Hauke said, his teeth chattering as his sorcery brought him directly in contact with air that was several times colder than the worst winds to buffet the High Pass in the depths of winter. "H-have I, gone h-high enough?"

"It will do," the voice said. "Now, as I've taught you, allow that cold to flow through your ribbons and into the core of the tower. The colder the core becomes, the longer your Eternal Ice will last."

"I u-under s-stand," Hauke said, touching the shining, iridescent horn on his chest as he adjusted the flow of energy through his Sky Ribbons, forcing the temperature of the icy tower to plummet even more than it already had.

The horn's glow intensified under his touch, its light pulsing slightly as the remnant of the powerful ancestor dwelling within the horn helped Hauke to adjust and finetune the flow of his sorcery. Even after months of working with the honored ancestors who possessed iridescent horns like his own, that feeling of silent guidance and support still filled him with a mix of pride and unease. Pride in being trusted with such power, and unease at remembering how close he'd come to losing this opportunity entirely.

The glowing horn was the second in a row of five iridescent horns that the young Frost Walker lord wore on a bandolier across his chest. The first time he had appeared in public wearing the horns it nearly caused an uprising when Cator, one of the candidates to replace Elder Paulus on the council of elders, saw his actions as an opportunity to advance his own position and immediately decried Hauke's actions as heretical.

The aging Frost Walker demanded that he be captured immediately and that the ancestral horns be stripped from his body so they could be returned to an appropriate Ancestral Cave. Commander

Jannik had actually agreed with the shouted demand, ordering his warriors to surround the young lord. Only his father's swift intervention had prevented things from coming to blows, but he was still forced to stand before his father and the council of elders to explain the heretical arrangement.

"I'm not defiling our ancestors," Hauke had insisted when he was brought before the full council. Thankfully, Cator had yet to earn the right to occupy Elder Paulus's vacant seat, but there were still plenty of people who felt strongly that Hauke's actions were almost as vile as those of the Elder who betrayed them to Tuscan hunters.

"If we return their horns to an ancestral cave," Hauke said, "they will shatter and our ancestors' wisdom will melt away like snow on a summer day. I know it defies all traditions, but those traditions are incomplete because we've forgotten how our greatest ancestors with iridescent horns once served as our greatest guardians. Please believe that I'm doing this to preserve our ancestors!"

"Young Lord Hauke," Svenja said from her elevated icy chair. The glassy-eyed woman was one of the oldest living Frost Walkers who spent much of her time tending to the ancestral caves. In matters related to the ancestors, her voice often carried more weight than his father, Lord Ritchel's did.

"We understand that you have done a great deed by retrieving our ancestors' iridescent horns from the sealed cave that held them," she said patiently. "But that does not give you the right to determine their fate. You say this is an ancient tradition, but Lady Nyrielle claimed it to be the work of an ancient vampire, the Fangs of Death."

"We cannot blindly accept such sorcery as a tradition that must be preserved," the aging Frost Walker said, lowering her dimly glowing horn and shaking her head at the young lord who dared to carry ancestral horns on his body where they were vulnerable to the entire world. "What you're doing is still different from even that method. At least the Fangs of Death kept our ancestors enshrined "

"We have already begun to open a new cave for these most honored ancestors," Commander Jannik said, his dark fur twitching in agitation as he fought to restrain his desire to snatch the horns back from the arrogant young lord who felt like he could defy centuries of tradition. "Surrender them now so we can give them the honored rest they deserve."

"Fool, do you wish to erase us from this world when we've only just returned to it?"

The deep, resonant voice that resounded from Hauke's mouth sounded nothing like the gentle, unassuming Frost Walker that he'd been known as for most of his life. Instead, it spoke with heavy, unquestionable authority and a sharp sneer of contempt.

The moment the voice spoke, resounding through the icy great hall with a power and majesty that rivaled or perhaps exceeded the strength of Lord Ritchel's voice in the chamber, the assembled council froze in panic.

Never in hundreds of years had the voice of an ancestor been heard in a meeting of the living council. It was one thing if one or two members of the council visited the painfully cold chambers of the Ancestral Caves to consult with the ancestors and receive guidance, but no one would dream of allowing the remnant spirits of the ancestors themselves to speak before the council.

After all, if the ancestors could continue to speak in the ruler's hall, what would stop them from attempting to continue to rule, even after their death? The very idea was so blasphemous that as soon as it occurred to the gathered elders, several of them turned to Commander Jannik, expecting him to command his men to remove Hauke and the ancestral horns he carried so they could resolve this matter without interference.

The dark-furred commander, however, shared a knowing look with Lord Ritchel before gesturing for his men to hold their places. If the ancestor wanted to speak, then as dutiful descendants, the least they could do was listen.

#### Chapter 406: Ancestral Wisdom (Part Two)

"When we gave our lives to the service of our people, we gave up the possibility of entering a normal ancestral cave," the deep, masculine voice of the ancestor continued, forcefully using Hauke's body to make himself heard. "Young Hauke has taken up the burden of anchoring us in this world since only the statues formed of blood by the Fangs of Death could possibly sustain us in a sacred cave."

"You cannot afford the sacrifices required to remake our bloody statues," a softer, feminine voice followed the first, sounding deeply incongruous coming from Hauke's mouth. "Without Hauke's help, we would fade away in less than a year."

"Please father," Hauke said, snatching back control of his own body and voice. "Haven't you always said that we are much weaker than our ancestors were? That we could never rebuild our great fortress if we were to lose it because we've forgotten the methods the ancestors used to build it?"

"All they wish is for a chance to serve our people once more," he pleaded. "Those acts of service are what allow them to remain among us. If we seal them away again, even in honor, then we will lose them."

"Are they truly serving our people?" Commander Jannik asked skeptically. "Or are you binding them to yourself to harness their power, the way the Tuscans desecrate the horns of our people to use as weapons."

"I would never!" Hauke shouted before forcefully restraining himself. Passionate words would never carry the day here. He needed to do as Ines had advised him and make his case with cold, unassailable logic if they were going to have any hope of getting the clan to accept the arrangement he'd made with the ancestors.

"Let us prove to you that we're working for the good of our clan and the whole of the High Pass," Hauke said, trying to sound as logical and reasonable as he could. "Words will not weigh as much as deeds will, so give me a chance to work with the ancestors on something that will benefit everyone."

"What do you propose, my son?" Lord Ritchel asked from atop his icy throne. It was the first time he'd spoken since the proceeding began and he hated that he lacked the strength to simply force the others to accept his will.

Perhaps in another five years, his strength would have diminished so greatly that a younger member of this council would challenge him for his throne if he tried to overrule their desires. For now, he still had enough say to force them to give Hauke a fair chance but there was a limit to how far he could go with something as radical as allowing a member of their clan to walk around wearing the horns of honored ancestors as though they were trophies.

"I have spoken at length with Ancestor Ansgar, the Lord of the Seven Peaks," Hauke said, referring to the first of the ancestors who borrowed his body to speak to the council. "We've developed a plan to enhance the defenses of the pass against human attacks if the Vale of Mists or Airgead Mountain were to fall. Let us prove with our deeds that we're working to protect our people and that this arrangement benefits everyone," he said, gesturing to the row of horns across his chest."

Of course, it wasn't as simple as saying that he would labor to the benefit of the clan to convince the elders. It had taken several days of arguing, answering countless questions, and making several revisions

to the plan in order to convince anyone to change their minds. At times, Hauke felt like those discussions moved with less speed than an advancing glacier, but in the end, they'd agreed to allow him to demonstrate that he could revive lost arts with the help of the ancestors.

"You can stop now," Ines said softly, bringing Hauke's focus fully back to the present. "The tower's core is cold enough to sustain the tower for at least a hundred years now. You can revisit it again when we've finished constructing the others."

"How, how many times will it take before the ice becomes 'Eternal'," Hauke asked, panting in exhaustion from the effort of maintaining the sorcery but feeling much, much warmer as soon as he was able to dismiss his Sky Ribbons.

"Nothing is ever 'Eternal', young one," Ansgar said. "The larger the icy structure is, the longer it will last, but defenses like these will need to be renewed every century or they will eventually weaken and fail. That's why the fortress endures, even centuries after my death, but the other great works have crumbled away."

"So when I die, if there's no one else with an iridescent horn who can maintain these defenses," Hauke said as he began to hike down the ridge to join the other Frost Walker sorcerers. "They'll crumble away within a hundred years?"

"Everything fails eventually, young one," the ancient lord replied. "Some things come crashing down in an instant, others crumble away bit by bit. Even we are crumbling away. The strength you've provided us is only delaying the inevitable."

"But it's still worth fighting," Hauke said, clenching his fists in determination. "I've learned so much from you, just in these few months. When we're done with this working," he said, looking at the tower that would soon become a support pillar for a massive structure that spanned the entire pass. "We'll have a way to seal the pass against human invasion and it would have been impossible without your help."

For a moment, Ines's horn began to glow, the words already forming in her mind to remind the young lord that for every new defense, a new method of attack would be invented, but the sudden feeling of something great and powerful entering the pass from the west froze her thoughts before she could give voice to them.



"You feel that, young one?" Ansgar asked. "You should be sensitive enough by now to notice them, even at this distance."

"I do," Hauke said. His iridescent horn glowed brightly as he stood up high, feeling the currents of power carried by the fierce, icy winds of the High Pass. At the base of the tower, the other sorcerers had yet to react, either because they doubted their senses or because they had yet to perceive what Hauke and the ancestors he carried already had.

"Lady Nyrielle is returning to the High Pass... and she's brought several more people with her than she had when she left," Hauke said as a wide grin formed on his lips. "Come. They're far enough away that they won't arrive tonight, but when they get here tomorrow, we should be ready to receive them," he said, eagerly bounding down the ridge to rejoin the other members of his clan.

Soon, Lady Nyrielle would arrive, and with her, Hauke's friend, Ashlynn. They'd spent far too little time together and her stay had been marred with tragedy, but that shared tragedy had formed a bond between them that was far stronger than simple acquaintance or mutual interest. And now that he'd spent the entire time since she left studying with the ancestors and strengthening his magic, he couldn't wait to show his friend just how much he'd grown since her last visit!

#### Chapter 407: Impossible Dream? (Part One)

Two days later, Hauke stood nervously outside the gates, watching a snake of flame formed of countless soldiers carrying torches wind its way up the narrow road to the Frost Walker's icy fortress. When he first noticed the powerful energy of Lady Nyrielle and her forces entering the High Pass, he'd expected that she would make rapid progress through the pass, the same way she had during her previous visit.

He'd known she was coming and that she should be arriving soon. Both Lady Nyrielle and Lady Ashlynn had made it clear that they intended to return to the Vale of Mists before the winter snows sealed the pass to all but the most experienced winter travelers. He'd even been counting the days, trying to estimate how close they were to arriving and growing increasingly anxious that they wouldn't arrive before the winter snows.

Now that they were almost here, his heart had been filled to bursting with eagerness to see his friends again. Part of that eagerness came from a simple joy at a reunion with friends, and part of it came from a desire to show Lady Ashlynn and Lady Heila how much he had learned since they left. But underneath that, there was a question that had crystalized so deeply in his heart that he dared not speak of it to anyone but Lady Ashlynn herself. And now, he was only a day away from being able to ask...

A day later, however, they were surprised when a messenger arrived to arrange lodging, not for Nyrielle's small personal escort, but for an entire army more than a thousand warriors strong! Just hearing the size of the army shocked the elders and even Lord Ritchel shifted uncomfortably on his icy throne when he heard the number, but the list of very important guests traveling with Lady Nyrielle was even more shocking.

"Quite the sight, isn't it son?" Lord Ritchel said without taking his eyes off the approaching army. Last time, Lady Nyrielle traveled as the Eldritch Lady of the Vale of Mists, and sending Hauke to greet her new Seneschal felt measured and appropriate. This time, however, it seemed like much had changed, and Nyrielle marched under the banner of the Harbinger of Death rather than the Vale of Mists.

Some people might not understand the distinction, but combined with an army and its followers numbering in the thousands, Ritchel couldn't afford to ignore the implied meaning. Last time, they had met as peers and allies until Elder Paulus's treacherous actions forced her to assert her authority. This time, she left nothing to doubt from the very beginning and he could only lower his horn and personally greet her when she arrived at his fortress.

"The messenger said that Lady Heila became a witch," Hauke said, smiling crookedly as complex feelings rippled across his face. He was delighted to hear that his diminutive friend had earned the chance to join Lady Ashlynn's coven, and even more excited when the messenger mentioned that she'd stood for ten days in the Arena in the High Fen, facing increasingly powerful opponents every day.

When he heard that she'd done so using a blade carved from Elder Paulus's horn, however, and that many people in High Fen City praised not only the power of the witch, but the power of her weapon, it was hard to feel as proud as he had just moments earlier. Already, the council had begun to argue about what they should do if more hunters came to the High Pass, targeting the small clan for the power of their horns.

"Is that the part that has you fidgeting?" Ritchel asked his son quietly as they watched the army grow closer. Out of respect for the environment and the risk of causing an avalanche, there were no drums beating to herald their arrival, but the creak of hundreds of wagon axels and the sound of thousands of feet marching were hard to ignore, particularly when some of those footsteps were much louder than their peers.

High above the clouds, the light of the moon and stars reflected off the blanket of pure, white snow that covered the mountains, making anything moving through the pass stand out like a dark stain on perfect linens. The shapes of horse-drawn carriages and wagons were common enough, even if the number of them seemed shockingly large.

At this distance, it was impossible to tell the difference between the slightly hunched figures of the Golden Eyed Clan who were known to run as fast as horses when crouched low to the ground or the similarly sized figures of the Glass Eyed clan who might be marching next to them. There was one group, however, who towered so high above everyone else in the approaching army that it was impossible to mistake their tusked silhouettes for anything else.

"Or are you worried about the Tuscan mercenaries that Lady Heila has taken into her service?" Ritchel said pointedly, turning away from the army to meet his son's pensive gaze.

"Why would she accept them?" Hauke asked, his voice cracking. His hands tightened into fists and his horn swirled with dim shades of purple and azure. If he'd known what he knew now, if he'd actually been able to fight back against the Tuscans instead of cowering behind his icy shields and guarding Heila, then maybe it wouldn't hurt so much but...

The memory of giant shadows looming over him as he desperately tried to protect Ashlynn flashed through his mind, bringing with it the metallic scent of blood and the terrible crack of ice breaking beneath their feet. His horn dimmed and turned a pale white as a wave of cold anger replaced his initial shock and the overwhelming sense of shame.

"I understand they were bound to enter her service if she defeated them in the arena," he continued, in an even tone that felt as brittle as thin ice. "But she didn't have to accept them. She could have sent them away, or directed them to fight the very hunters that threaten our home." He turned to meet his father's gaze, his eyes reflecting the betrayal he felt. "After what they did to Andrus, after what they tried to do to us... why did she have to bring them with her?"

#### Chapter 408: Impossible Dream (Part Two)

"Because the Vale of Mists is still weaker than it needs to be," Ritchel said, placing a heavy hand on the younger man's shoulder and giving him a firm squeeze. "Her Eternity is borrowing an army. She has taken the Mongrel Horde, the Black Wolf Brigade, the Sorcerers of Sundered Earth... None of these forces belong to her, but she must make use of them to defend the Vale of Mists against the humans."

"Say what you will about the Tuscans," Ritchel continued, his grip on his son's shoulder growing tighter as he wrestled with his own conflicted feelings. "They are true giants who will accomplish almost as much by striking fear into the hearts of humans as they will by crushing them underfoot. That isn't the kind of resource that Her Eternity can easily turn away. Lady Heila may not have had a choice in the matter," he added.

The diminutive maidservant had made very little impression on Ritchel during her first visit. She'd been intimidated by Torsten at the gates, retreating from her duties as Lady Ashlynn's translator, and from Hauke's account, she spent most of the time they were under assault by Tuscans cowering behind his barriers. To hear that she had become a witch and a champion of the arena... He couldn't imagine what she must have been through in these few months to change so much.

"Shouldn't you be focusing more on Lady Ashlynn?" Ritchel prompted his son. "You were able to teach her at least a little of our sorcery when she last visited. Now that she's become the Mother of Trees, I'm certain she's looking for talented people to join her coven. Do you intend to become one of them?"

"Is that even possible, Father?" Hauke said, blinking in surprise that his father had been the one to bring up the topic. "Has there ever been a Frost Walker witch?" As much as the young lord tried to keep his voice neutral, the faint glimmer that rippled through his horn betrayed just how interested he was in an answer to the question. He'd searched the archives months ago after Ashlynn left but he never found anything in the public records.

Of course, there were things that were known only to Elders and the Eldritch Lord of the High Pass, but Hauke hadn't been willing to press his father for access to information that he wasn't entitled to have. If he'd asked, he was certain that his father would have told him, but by asking, he felt that it would have been as good as announcing his intention to abandon the High Pass to join Ashlynn's coven instead. Whether he intended to or not, or would even have to, just the thought of it was enough to keep his lips sealed on the matter.

"There was, in my great-grandfather's time," Ritchel said, giving his son an awkward smile. "He joined the coven of the Mother of Storms as her Blizzard Witch. He had a horn of the purest white and according to my grandfather, the mountain his horn was enshrined on is covered by a near eternal blizzard."

"But as far as I know, the only witch that Frost Walkers are suited to serve is the Mother of Storms," he said, gesturing at the barren landscape around them. "What do we know of trees or vines covered in thorns? Even the raging seas are far beyond our reach. It's best to prepare yourself, son. You've learned much from the ancestors, but I'm afraid that witchcraft may be beyond your reach. Or, if it isn't, it won't be as a member of her Dominion Ashlynn's coven," he said solemnly.

Hauke's gaze dropped to the snow at his feet, the glow of his horn dimming noticeably. His shoulders slumped as he exhaled a cloud of frost that hung in the air between them, lasting only a moment before

the stiff mountain winds tore it away along with the dream he'd held onto. He'd known, of course, that his father would say this.

The impossibility of his dream had occurred to him many times during his searches in the archives. If there had been a history of Frost Walker witches, if it was a common or easy thing, surely it wouldn't have been so difficult to find even a single mention of it. Yet hearing it spoken aloud made the stone of disappointment in his chest feel heavier somehow.

"I understand, Father," he said quietly, his voice as hollow as the ice caverns beneath the fortress. His fingers absently traced the row of ancestral horns across his chest as he worked to anchor himself in the present and banish the aura of disappointment that had settled on him like a dusting of snow. This was his path now. He was a guardian of precious ancestors, and the bearer of an iridescent horn. For the first time in his life, now that he could connect to ancestors who were like him, he felt like he had become part of a true lineage of sorcery that only someone like him was suited to. He should be proud. He was proud. And yet...

Ritchel watched his son's reaction with a mixture of sympathy and satisfaction. Dreams were a fine thing that could motivate a young man to find greatness, but some dreams were unobtainable. Thankfully, Hauke was still very young and he hadn't had long for this desire to turn into an unhealthy obsession.

Now that Hauke knew, Ritchel felt confident that his son could navigate his friendship with the Mother of Trees and the Willow Witch in a more healthy manner. His iridescent horn was his path to greatness, and he had no need of an outsider's traditions to find his own way in the world. The sooner he understood that, the sooner he could take up a position of leadership within the clan and eventually succeed his father's place on the throne of the High Pass.

"Two others, there have been," a childish voice whispered in Hauke's mind as one of the horns on his chest pulsed a faint, pale green. "A servant of the Father of Calamities, there was. The Avalanche Witch," the voice continued. "More important, my teacher, a witch was."

"You were taught by a witch?" Hauke thought, blinking in surprise at Eugen's revelation. The childish ancestor had been one of the greatest healers the Frost Walker clan had ever known, but to think that he'd learned from a Frost Walker witch... "Who's coven did he belong to?" Hauke asked, unable to restrain his curiosity.

"A servant of the Mother of Trees, he was," Eugen said lightly. "The Fir Witch."

## Chapter 409: A Devoted Fan (Part One)

The winds of the high pass tugged at Ashlynn's heavy fur cloak as she left Nyrielle's carriage to take her place at the head of the army. It had been one thing for Nyrielle to force the defeated Savis to act as her herald when approaching High Fen City, but now that Ashlynn and Nyrielle were traveling together again, it was time for her to take on the role of announcing Nyrielle's arrival.

She could have refused, and Nyrielle would likely have indulged her. As the Mother of Trees, her status wasn't any lower than that of the Harbinger of Death, and as Nyrielle's lover, if she wanted to demand equal treatment, she was certain that Nyrielle would have granted it.

In the years to come, Ashlynn was certain that there would come a time to discuss such an arrangement, but when she measured herself up to her lover, she still felt herself to be far too lacking. When she arrived in the Vale of Mists, she had nothing to offer, not even the clothes on her back, yet Nyrielle had taken her in, saved her life, and provided her with everything she could ask for and more.

At the start of their relationship, Nyrielle gave everything and Ashlynn could only accept it. Now that she'd begun to grow into her power, the scales were beginning to tip. Between the benefits Nyrielle gained from feeding on a powerful witch to the resources she was able to gather from High Fen City, she finally felt like she truly had something to offer to the woman who had brought her back from the brink.

But until the scales were closer to even, outside of the occasions where they existed purely as lovers, Ashlynn threw herself into her role as Nyrielle's Seneschal. As the first among all those who served the Harbinger of Death and her Mistress's chosen representative during hours between dawn and dusk, there were many places where Nyrielle needed Ashlynn's help and she gave that assistance gladly.

Ashlynn's final days in High Fen City felt like a frenzy of activity as she and Nyrielle worked tirelessly to prepare for their journey home. Because of Ashlynn and Heila's efforts, Nyrielle's army welcomed not only the ninety trained warriors that Heila defeated in the arena, but hundreds of merchants, tradesmen, and their families. The additions turned the military march into a small town on the move, requiring extensive support to make the march through the barren High Pass.

Amidst the flurry of activity, she found herself apologizing again and again for delaying things that felt important but weren't time-critical. Even though the nights were growing longer, she had yet to find an opportunity to speak more with Ignatious about the Holy Flame Blade. There would be plenty of time to speak at length about their complex relationship with their faith and the powerful artifact that

represented it once they returned home, and since that was the case, any further conversation had been pushed aside for more pressing concerns.

Artificer Erkembalt had agreed to accompany them to the Vale of Mists, though he was only willing to stay for the winter. Once the pass cleared again, he insisted on returning to his home and his shop. Privately, Ashlynn hoped he might find something charming about the Vale of Mists, or at least interesting enough to consider relocating his business and his family to the Vale permanently, but for now, gaining his assistance in preparing for the war was the most important thing.

Of all the matters that needed to be settled, however, one of the most surprising had come in the form of an experienced gladiator named Kurtz who offered his services as a bodyguard for Heila if she would consider taking his daughter, Emmie, as her student. When they met, it was clear that Heila's performance in the arena had a profound impact on the young horned girl who donned a midnight blue dress and carried a thin, metal whip in clear imitation of Heila's outfit during her battle against the Cauldron of Flame.

"Welcome, Master Kurtz," Ashlynn said when Heila led her two distant clansmen into the sitting room she'd been using as an office during the day. Even with Virve hovering in the background and a separate, smaller desk for Heila, the luxurious sitting room could have easily accommodated a dozen or more guests.

With comfortable chairs, sofas, and a well-stocked bar for refreshments in the corner, it gave her everything she needed to tend to her duties as Nyrielle's Seneschal, though the cold marble floors and paintings of heroic arena battles on the walls felt like constant reminders to Ashlynn that she was a guest in this place, and one that would be leaving soon.

She'd tried adding potted trees and other plants in order to make the space a little more comfortable but when she realized that the trees felt trapped in their pots without any other roots near their own to allow them to connect to each other or even ferns or underbrush, she suppressed her desire to repot them into small groups that wouldn't be lonely and asked them to be taken away instead, firmly reminding herself that she wouldn't be here to care for the trees afterward and she certainly wouldn't be taking them across the High Pass with her.

"I'm told that you have a proposal for Heila," Ashlynn continued with a smile on her face as the father and daughter took their seats. Though Ashlynn knew that he was a respected champion in the arena, one who had earned the right to attend the welcoming celebration on the first floor of the arena the night of Heila's battle against the Cauldron of Flame, the polished, refined appearance he presented

with his neatly braided beard and hair tied into a tight bun made him look more like a successful businessman than a mighty warrior.

Perhaps that history of success was why Kurtz seemed reasonably assured of himself despite the stature of people he was meeting with, but as calm as the father was, his daughter Emmie's eyes had been all but glued to Heila since she entered, barely blinking now that she was in the presence of her hero.

"Yes, your Dominion," Kurtz said formally, placing a hand on his daughter's shoulder. "Lady Heila has inspired my little Emmie like no one else," he said a touch awkwardly. "She's watched me in the arena since she was old enough to write her name, but even if High Lady Erna were to take to the sands, I doubt she'd be so enthralled."

"That's because High Lady Erna isn't one of us," Emmie said, finally tearing her eyes away from Heila to give her father a look as though she'd explained this several times before. "But the Willow Whip is a real Horned Champion. I want to grow up to be like her, Father," she said brightly.

"I told you, my little hayseed," Kurtz said, ruffling her hair and giving his daughter a doting look. "Lady Heila is a Witch and not just anyone can be a witch. But, if she thinks you have talent, and if she's willing to teach you a bit of sorcery or how she fights with a whip, then Father will serve as her loyal guard the entire time."

"I know it may be a bit much to ask," the horned gladiator said, turning to face Ashlynn with a look that said he expected to be rejected. "You've already done me a great favor by letting her come to meet Lady Heila in person," he added, winking slightly to Ashlynn in the hopes that she understood that the chance for his daughter to meet her hero was really all he came for.

"Well, little Emmie," Ashlynn said with a warm, welcoming smile. "Why don't you tell us what it is you hope to become by learning from Lady Heila."

#### Chapter 410: A Devoted Fan (Part Two)

"Why don't you tell us what it is you hope to become by learning from Lady Heila." Ashlynn's question sounded simple, but to the young girl, answering it felt as frightening as she imagined it was for her father when he walked out onto the arena sands to face a strong foe.



Ever since her father told her that he'd arranged a chance for a meeting with the Mother of Trees and the Willow Witch, she'd been trying to think about what she would say. Now that the moment was upon her, her mind went blank and it took her several seconds just to remember the etiquette her father had taught her for speaking to powerful witches like Lady Ashlynn.

"Y-yes, your domino," Emmie said awkwardly, sitting up as straight and properly as she could and doing her best to look as calm and composed as her father was.

"It's 'your dominion,'" Kurtz whispered in her ear.

"It's fine," Ashlynn said, holding up a hand and stifling a laugh that would only have embarrassed the young girl. "You can call me 'Mother Ashlynn' if you find it easier," she said. "Just relax and don't worry about finding the right words. Heila and I are more interested in hearing what's in your heart."

"You don't need to be nervous, Emmie," Heila added, walking over from the small bar with a hot cup of tea and a small plate filled with buttery, sweet biscuits. "If you want to have a little nibble first while you think about your answer, that's all right too," she added, taking a biscuit for herself before passing the plate over to her diminutive devotee.

Emmie's eyes lit up instantly when she realized she could share a treat with Heila. She took the plate gently, almost reverently, before snatching one of the biscuits and eagerly biting off half of it in one large bite. Soft laughter from Kurtz, Ashlynn and Virve rippled through the room, but Heila seemed to take it as a challenge, finishing her own biscuit in a single bite and giving Emmie a challenging smile to see if she would follow suit.

A few minutes later, when the plate of biscuits had been reduced to nothing but crumbs and Emmie seemed to have relaxed, she turned back to Ashlynn to answer her question.

"Mother Ashlynn, did you know," she began in a soft, hesitant voice. "They say that the strongest members of the Horned Clan escaped across the mountains to start new lives here, and the only ones who stayed in the Vale of Mists were the ones who were too weak to make the journey."

"I've heard people say that," Ashlynn acknowledged. The stories told by descendants of the people who fled the Lothian destruction of the Vale of Mists had changed over the years, colored by each generation's desire to find something to be proud of about the actions of their ancestors.

But by now, people like Emmie were so far removed from the ancestors who failed to return after Nyrielle recaptured the Vale that Ashlynn held no ill will toward people who believed the distorted stories they'd been raised on.

"Do you think it's true?" Ashlynn asked gently.

"No, not even a little bit," Emmie said, shaking her head fiercely. "Father is one of the best ever champions from the Horned Clan," she said proudly, wrapping both arms around her father's muscular upper arm and hugging it tightly. "He can even fight champions from the Scaled Clan and the Glass Eyed Clan, or champions from far away."

"Hush now, little hayseed," Kurtz said, tapping gently on one of his daughter's horns. "You don't need to make me look good."

"But it's true!" Emmie insisted. "Father is one of the strongest there is. But, but there aren't any girls who are as strong as you," she said, looking over at Heila. "Not from High Fen City or anywhere in the High Fen. There aren't any girls who are strong enough to fight other clans unless they're fighting in group battles, and even then, they only fight if they outnumber their opponents."

"Is that why you want to learn from me?" Heila asked. "Because I can fight people from other clans?"

"Well, um, not exactly?" Emmie said, twisting in her seat to look at her father before she continued. Unconsciously, her hand dropped to the metal whip she wore at her hip. She'd begged her father to buy it for her after seeing Heila use it not just to defeat her foes but to force them to surrender, proving that she had the strength to win even when she didn't have a powerful sword or mighty spear.

Now, as she traced her fingers along the cool metal links of the chain whip, she tried to imagine herself having even a fraction of the courage that the Willow Witch showed on the arena sands when she answered the question her hero asked.

"I was there," Emmie said softly, her voice gaining strength as she continued. "When you fought those men with fire in their hands. I was sitting with Father, and I saw how..." Her voice faltered as she clutched the whip at her hip even tighter until the knuckles on her petite fist turned white. "I saw how alone you looked out there."

"She's had a few nightmares since that day," Kurtz said as he gave his daughter a reassuring squeeze. "When we asked her what was wrong, she said that no one should have to face monsters alone and she asked if I would fight with you in the arena. I tried telling her it didn't work that way, that you chose that battle because it was important but..."

"Father says that if something is really, really important to someone, then they can fight ten men who are twice as strong," Emmie said, taking over before her father could say anything more about her nightmares. If there was one thing she didn't want right now it was for the Willow Witch to think she was frightened!

"And, he says that if something is more important than their life, they can fight a whole army," she said, turning to look back at Heila.

"I think that's why you're so strong," she said confidently. "Because you fight for something that's really, really important to you. But, but I'm scared," she added awkwardly, looking down at her hands and clutching her skirts tightly.

"What are you scared of, Emmie?" Ashlynn prodded gently.

"I'm scared that there's something so important that you'll fight for it until you die," Emmie said, looking up at Heila with bright, watery eyes. "But I thought, even though the girls of the Horned Clan here are weaker than you are, if there are enough of them, they can fight together against people who are stronger."

"So, so I thought, if, if you can teach me, then you won't have to fight alone against giants all by yourself anymore. And then, then you won't, won't..." Tears flowed from her eyes as she looked helplessly at Heila, and her breaths came faster and faster as the thought of her hero falling in battle filled her mind.

Emmie was no stranger to death, and her father made sure that she understood from a young age that the arena was a dangerous place and sometimes, people died there, even when they seemed very strong.

But the only times that Kurtz had seen his daughter become so emotional at the thought of someone falling in the arena had been on the two occasions where he'd been seriously injured and needed to

take months to heal. Seeing her reduced to tears at the idea of someone she didn't even personally know falling in battle... he just didn't know what to say.

"Emmie," Heila said softly. "You know that I won't usually fight alone like that, don't you? I only fought in the arena this one time because of a special reason. Usually I'd have Lady Ashlynn and Virve, or cousin Talauia the Thistle Witch or a bunch of other friends at my side to face whatever comes. So I won't be alone."

"But you don't have any of us at your side," Emmie said, her face hot with tears and shame. "You don't have your clan at your side. How's that right, that no one else will stand up for you? It's not fair, it's not fair to you at all," she insisted.

"So if there aren't any other girls in our clan that will stand up for you, then I want to! So you don't have to be alone out there anymore," she pleaded. "So please, can I please learn to be strong like you? I promise, I promise that I can help..."

For a moment, no one knew what to say. Even Virve seemed stunned by the young girl's genuine plea while Heila sat with her mouth agape at the outpouring of concern coming from someone she'd met less than an hour ago.

"Mister Kurtz," Ashlynn said, breaking the silence when it seemed no one else knew what to say. "How old is Emmie?"

"I, I'm twelve," Emmie said, wiping the tears away from her face and sitting up as straight as she could while looking at Ashlynn with red, puffy eyes. "Twelve years old this summer."

"If she was human, and we were in my father's county," Ashlynn began slowly as an idea took shape in her mind. "You'd be too young by a year. But you aren't human and the Horned Clan considers you an adult well before you've turned twenty, so perhaps we can bend the rules a little bit. Only if your father allows it though," she added.

Instantly, all eyes fell on Ashlynn, wondering what she had in mind for the courageous young girl who seemed to be willing to march to war, just to make sure that Heila wasn't abandoned by the Horned Clan. It was far too heavy of a burden for such young shoulders to bear, but the fact that she was even

willing to think about it said so much about her character that Ashlynn felt compelled to give her a chance, even if it was a small one.

"Tell me, little Emmie," Ashlynn asked. "Do you know what a squire is?"