

## The Vampire 421

### Chapter 421: Hidden Threat?

At the head of the caravan, Nyrielle's carriage had the best view of the chaos as it erupted. Nyrielle herself relaxed into the soft satin cushions of her luxurious carriage like a cat with a bowl of cream as she watched Ashlynn collect Heila before striding out to meet with Lord Ritchel, young lord Hauke and their honor guard.

Six months ago, she had seen tremendous promise in the broken and battered young woman, but even after more than two centuries of life, nothing she'd experienced could have prepared her for how quickly Ashlynn would grow into her power, or how much the young witch would change her own life.

The last time they entered the High Pass, Ashlynn carried herself with pride but very little power. She was vulnerable, unfamiliar with Eldritch ways, and reliant on Heila and Captain Lennart just to be able to speak with the Frost Walkers. Now, the pride she carried herself with wasn't just an artifact of her noble upbringing, but something she deserved to cloak herself with, earned by overcoming danger and mastering her own power.

The Ashlynn she'd collected from the roadside in the spring was a delectable treat, a rare treasure to be savored and a potent tool to be used. The Ashlynn before her, however, radiated an intoxicating blend of strength and self assuredness that Nyrielle found herself unable to resist.

For some, the act of sending her lover out into the cold to act as her herald could be interpreted as an act of dominance, and perhaps there was an element of that at play tonight. More importantly, however, Nyrielle wanted to watch the woman whose heart echoed within her chest as she came into her own power, commanding with authority where she had once had to fight just to assert her place in the Eldritch world.

The slow, lazy smile on Nyrielle's lips vanished a moment later when Hauke launched his explosive attack at Heila. Both witches responded beautifully, and for a moment, Nyrielle wondered if the young Frost Walker lord intended to make a show of the strength he'd gained in an attempt to win back some prestige after the way his clan had been humbled during their last visit.

That notion shattered like an icicle falling to the frozen ground the instant Hauke's icy spear exploded, tearing into Heila's back and splattering the pristine, white snow with drops of crimson so large that they were visible even under the pale light of the moon and stars.

"Lady Heila!" Ignatious shouted from the driver's seat of the carriage, standing in panic as things began to go very wrong, very quickly.

As quickly as Nyrielle moved, events unfolded rapidly and Hauke's blizzard was descending on her army by the time her feet touched the ground outside the carriage.

"Young Ritchel, just what do you think you're doing," Nyrielle whispered as she watched him work with the sorcerers of his honor guard to trap Ashlynn in a tomb of ice along with the clearly murderous Hauke. Darkness spread across her eyes and her hands curled into wicked claws as black, feathery wings unfolded behind her.

"We've fallen into a trap," Nyrielle said coldly, her mind working rapidly to put together the limited information she had available to her. Pain flared briefly through her bond with Ashlynn, but whatever injuries her lover had suffered affected Ashlynn much less than the confusion, hurt, and betrayal that flowed through their bond as she found herself trapped with the young Frost Walker Lord.

"What are your orders, Mistress," Zedya said, dropping from the driver's seat of the carriage to kneel at Nyrielle's feet. Her Amethyst eyes already glowed fiercely, shining in the dark like glittering jewels and even as she knelt, the vampire maidservant was pulling on her darksteel fighting gauntlets.

"Ritchel knows better than to confront me directly like this," Nyrielle said as her eyes swept across the Frost Walker forces, pausing slightly when she saw the darting figure of the Thistle Witch racing to Heila's side. For a moment, a warm glow of pride enveloped her heart and a small smile appeared on her lips. Her Ashlynn truly had come into her own during this journey. Even without making a move herself, Ashlynn's own allies were already coming to her aid.

That realization allowed Nyrielle to put aside the last of her worries about her love and focus on the larger picture. Everything had happened suddenly but the sequence felt too well orchestrated to be anything other than a well planned attack. Hauke had knocked Heila aside and attempted to eliminate her ruthlessly before Lord Ritchel sealed Ashlynn with the young lord.

It was a good opening move if your goal was to make the best possible use of disposable pawns. Ritchel had to know that this ambush, even if it succeeded, would never gain him victory, and whatever hatred he might feel over the way she had treated him on her previous visit, it wasn't enough to provoke him into a suicidal attack that would only doom his people.

All of which suggested that someone had forced Lord Ritchel's hand, binding him to a plan in which he and many of his people were certain to die, but in the process they might be able to seriously weaken Nyrielle's forces, particularly if they could capture or kill Ashlynn.

The list of people who would wish to do such a thing to the Harbinger of Death was very short, and while Hamdi or his sire Bardas might be out for revenge after what she had done to them in the Tangled Wood, both of them were too proud of their own forces to make use of the Frost Walkers as disposable pawns like this.

And if it wasn't either of them, that left only one person who was both cunning enough and cruel enough to attack her in this way, and once she considered that it might be him, too many of the pieces fit together to consider anyone else who might be behind the sudden attack.

#### Chapter 422: Counter Attack

"I fear my teacher is behind this attack," Nyrielle said, coming to the only conclusion that made any sense. Before, she never would have considered it, but after learning about Shubnalu's involvement in turning powerful Frost Walker ancestors into deadly Blood Golems, she couldn't deny his apparent ability to control this isolated clan.

She'd heard from Hamdi that the Fangs of Death had ordered her capture and she avoided the other vampire Eldritch Lords for the remainder of her journey through the Eldritch nations precisely because of that, but now it appeared that her teacher had come for her himself.

Given everything he must have heard during her travels, perhaps it was unsurprising. The barren High Pass would weaken Ashlynn and the other witches traveling with them, and the cold itself, combined with the narrow roads and the rough terrain would allow even a weaker force like the Frost Walkers to cause significant damage to her forces.

Moreover, it was one place that he could guarantee she would pass through on her way back to the Vale of Mists. All he had to do was take control of the puppets he'd neglected for a few centuries and then wait for her to arrive. In the months since Nyrielle had defeated Hamdi, Shubnalu had plenty of time to make his move here.

"If he is here," Nyrielle said, flapping her wings and shooting into the air. "He will be in a place where we can speak alone. If he thinks that my people are so weak that they'll be decimated by the likes of Ritchel's Frost Walkers, however, he's sorely mistaken."

A sudden, intense surge of anger and frustration flowing through her bond with Ashlynn momentarily pulled Nyrielle's attention away from her surroundings as her mind sank into the bond that grew stronger every day that she and Ashlynn shared together.

This close, she could faintly hear the clash of Ashlynn's sword against ice that cracked and shattered under the force of her blows along with the sounds of a bitter argument between the two people trapped beneath the ice.

Clearly, Ashlynn thought there must be some way out of this that wouldn't require killing the young lord or she wouldn't waste her words on him, but Nyrielle was much less confident in finding a solution to this without spilling blood, particularly if her suspicions were right about the person behind this sudden attack.

Pulling her attention back to the world around her, Nyrielle did her best to push her concerns about Ashlynn to the back of her mind so she could do what must be done. If her love was able to produce a miracle and find a solution to this that saved as many of the Frost Walker's lives as possible, then that was obviously ideal, but Nyrielle's first responsibilities were to her own people. Whether they were captured pawns in a greater game or not, since Lord Ritchel had moved against her, he and his clan would have to face the consequences of their treachery.

"Zedya, secure our people," Nyrielle commanded, her mind moving rapidly as she prepared her counterattack. Part of her wanted nothing more than to rush to Ashlynn's side, but if Shubnalu was truly present, doing so might only make things worse. At the moment, she had to trust in Ashlynn's strength to endure, at least for a short while.

"Search among the ones who joined us most recently," she told Zedya. "Ensure no one is attempting to sabotage us from within. Ignatious," she continued, turning to the former Inquisitor who had already retrieved the box containing the Holy Flame Blade. "I see you already understand."

"I will remove the blizzard, Mistress," Ignatious said, holding off on opening the box containing the sword until Nyrielle departed. "Then I will break Lady Ashlynn free of the ice prison."

"Assuming she hasn't already done it herself," Nyrielle said with a confident smile. "Uncle Tausau, Uncle Savis," Nyrielle shouted to the Mongrel Horde and Black Wolf Brigade who had already begun to gather together under the orders of the two elder vampires.

"I fear the Fangs of Death may have brought his progeny with him," Nyrielle said, worried that there might be more powerful forces lurking in reserve. Shubnalû had always had a fondness for skilled assassins among his progeny and she didn't expect to find them openly joining the battle if they were present.

In fact, if her teacher had brought his progeny with them, they were most likely holed up deep within the Frost Walker's fortress, likely holding Ritchel's wife and the wives and children of the elders hostage as a method of compelling obedience from their unwilling pawns.

"Seize the fortress," Nyrielle commanded. "If Shubnalû's minions are here, find them! If they have taken prisoners, you may bring this to an end by freeing them, but you should expect that any one of Shubnalû's progeny are just as strong as Hamdi was. Do not spend your lives foolishly protecting people who have betrayed our trust. Retreat if you must," she added after a brief hesitation. "Your lives are more important to me than a swift victory."

"The Black Wolf Brigade will not fail you," Savis said, kneeling formally in the snow and offering a salute with both of his claws pressed across his chest. Though he kept his eyes firmly on the ground, he didn't do so out of a true sense of submission to Lady Nyrielle. Rather, he did it to hide the gleam of eagerness and hunger glittering in his golden eyes.

For months, Savis and the Black Wolf Brigade had been the defeated dogs of the Tangled Wood, forced to act as common heralds and ordinary guards. Now, they would finally be let off their leashes, released to hunt and wash away the stain of their defeat with the fresh blood of victory!

"Come, Brother," Tausau said eagerly as he peered through the drifting cloud of snow between the carriages and the bridge. With his sharp senses, even though much of his vision was obscured, he could see the Frost Walker soldiers pouring onto the bridge.

Despite their impressive layers of woven armor and icy weapons, to the man who sired the Mongrel Horde, the white fur of the Frost Walker soldiers made them resemble a flock of fat sheep, rushing ignorantly to the slaughterhouse.

"Tonight," Tausau said as Nyrielle shot off toward a lonely mountain lake in the distance. "We hunt!"

## Chapter 423: Across the Bridge

A heavy wool cloak hung from Laya's shoulders as she tried not to shiver in the cold of the High Pass. When she became a vampire, she thought her days of fearing the cold were over. As a descendant of both the Ancient Clan and the Scaled Clan, she preferred to bask in heat and warmth whenever possible, and her thin, weak scales only made her aversion to the cold worse.

Since becoming a member of the Mongrel Horde, she'd left behind some of the weakness that plagued her as one of the misshapen Clanless, but even in death, bitter cold still seemed to be just as great an enemy as any she'd ever faced.

Underneath the heavy cloak, she clutched the heavy, flagged mace that she'd taken from her night in the arena in High Fen City. Lady Heila, the Willow Witch herself, had given her permission to keep the weapon after the battle she and her fellow Mongrels fought against convicts and condemned criminals when they arrived in High Fen City. At the time, Laya was considered one of the weakest members of the Mongrel Horde, but that night, inspired by the diminutive witch's words, she'd lead the charge against the vile criminals who had been condemned to die.

It was the first time she ever tasted the sweet blood of victory, and since then, she'd fought in smaller arenas twice more. Neither battle was fought to the death, and she didn't win both of them, but her chest filled with pride nonetheless. For years, she'd been cared for by the stronger members of the Mongrel Horde, but now, she'd proved that she could fight on her own. She'd even earned a purse full of silver by fighting in the arena and purchased a few simple treasures for herself before they left High Fen City.

All of this was something she owed to Lady Ashlynn and, more specifically, to Lady Heila. It wasn't just the opportunity Heila bestowed on the Mongrel Horde, allowing them to prove their strength on the sands of the arena, but her words that night that had given Laya the courage to fight for herself instead of depending on her brothers and sisters within the horde.

Which was why, when she saw the Frost Walkers they'd traveled to this barren, cold place to meet with, Laya's normally quiet heart exploded with rage and hatred she didn't know she could still feel the instant Hauke attacked Lady Heila. Seeing the woman who had transformed her life, with her blood splattered across the snow, filled her heart with fury and painted a red haze across her vision.

The mace trembled in her hand as she listened to Lady Nyrielle snap out calm, clear orders to her sire Tausau and uncle Savis. Finally, she could do something!

"Mongrels!" Tausau shouted when he joined his progeny alongside Savis. "Our goal is the gate. Seize the gate and keep it open for Savis's Black Wolf Brigade. We are the point of the spear! Do not stop, do not feed, but tear your way through these traitorous sheep until the gate is ours!"

A ragged cry rose from the vampires of the Mongrel Horde as they charged into the drifting cloud of snow that made it impossible to see what was happening beyond the bridge across the chasm separating Nyrielle's army from the Frost Walker's towering fortress carved from ice and snow.

As the horde charged past Lady Heila, and the icy prison that held Lady Ashlynn captive, the brilliantly glowing blade in the Willow Witch's hand pulsed brightly. What she said, even Laya's enhanced hearing couldn't make out over the noise of the Horde's charge, but a soft, white point of light, no larger than a single snowflake, began to glow on Laya's shoulder, and a similar point of light appeared on the rest of the Horde.

When they reached the cloud of lazily drifting snowflakes, the snow seemed to move aside for them, as if it was clearing a path to the bridge, and the balls of ice and snow that Heila formed within the snow cloud to pelt Lord Ritchel and his guards completely ignored the Horde as long as a glowing snowflake clung to their body in one place or another.

The distance to the bridge wasn't far, and before she knew it, Laya and the others had emerged from the cloud of snow, coming face to face with an answering charge by Frost Walker hunters and soldiers, rushing desperately to reach the side of their beleaguered lord as he and his honor guard fought off the combined assault of two witches.

Before the Mongrel Horde could reach their first enemies, the Frost Walkers attacked, hurling heavy spears made of ice or pelting the rushing vampires with a rain of frozen arrows. Cold blood flowed from dozens of wounds, dying the frozen stones of the bridge a dark red as each drop of vampire blood froze instantly where it splattered on the ground.

Pain flared in Laya's cheek as she barely avoided an icy arrow and a long, thin cut appeared on her delicate face an instant later, but she had no time to care as there were still more arrows of ice to endure before she could crush the skulls and horns of these vile cowards who wouldn't face her weapon to weapon.

More pain wracked her body, this time accompanied by a deep, penetrating cold as an icy arrow buried itself in her left shoulder, easily penetrating her heavy wool cloak and the thin, tender scales of her

misshapen body that had never hardened into a protective layer of armor the way they would have if she'd been a pure descendant of the Ancient Clan or Scaled Clan.

Cold blood flowed down her tunic, and red haze obscured Laya's vision as she pressed forward despite the pain. Sire Tausau had already reached the Frost Walkers, tearing into their ranks with a heavy darksteel blade despite his disproportionately short, misshapen arms.

The rain of icy spears and arrows didn't stop, but it slowed, giving Laya the precious breathing room she needed to mark a target of her own and rush toward the young looking Frost Walker hunter with a pale blue horn and a heavy glaive held in both hands.

The young hunter's pale blue horn glowed with a dim radiance as he gathered his magic, and a snarl formed on his lips, bearing his rows of sharp teeth at the short, misshapen Clanless vampire who dared to threaten him and his home.

"Die, traitor!" Laya shouted as she leaped into the air, propelled by a strength that no ordinary Clanless person could possess. With both hands on the heavy mace, she prepared to smash the horn that looked so perfectly pure, set in the brow of a man whose handsome face had never known the agony of struggling against a body that tried to kill the person cursed to be born in it.

The Frost Walker's eyes narrowed at her approach as he refused to panic and began to counter the sloppy, amateurish attack. He shifted his stance, pivoting the glaive in a graceful arc that sliced through the air with a faint whistling sound, all but lost in the clash of battle around them.

"Filthy Clanless," he spat, his pale blue horn pulsing brighter. The air around him crystallized, forming a momentary shield of ice that Laya's mace shattered with a thunderous crack, sending shards of ice scattering across the bridge like broken glass.

For a heartbeat, triumph surged through Laya's chest. She'd broken through his defense! Following that moment of triumph, Laya's heart was filled with anger, rage, hurt, and a desire to shatter the perfect, gleaming horn atop the head of a man who was lucky to be born the way nature intended. He'd been arrogant, confident that the Clanless could never hurt him, that she hated him more than she'd ever hated before and...



And none of her fury mattered. The shattered ice shield had been a feint to begin with, forcing her to make a move and commit fully to the attack. Even as her mace completed its arc, the hunter was already moving, sliding to her left with practiced ease, his glaive, no longer defending, but sweeping upward in a vicious thrust.

Laya tried to twist away, her vampire reflexes giving her just enough time to recognize her mistake but not enough to escape it. The cold metal bit into her chest, sliding through cloak and scales as though they offered no more resistance than fresh snow. Cold blood splattered across the young hunter's white fur, and her heavy mace clattered to the ground without ever coming within an arm's length of his glittering horn.

Shock filled Laya's eyes, but strangely, there was no pain. For the first time that she could remember, the pain of her poorly formed body faded away. The world shifted and spun, and the red haze that had filled her vision turned slowly black as she tumbled through the air.

A moment later, as her vision narrowed, she saw a heavy darksteel blade slice through the neck of the handsome Frost Walker, sending his head tumbling after her as a furious Tausau appeared behind the man who had flung her into the darkness of the chasm below the bridge.

As she fell, Laya wanted to shout to her sire, to tell him that he didn't need to be so angry for her. The pain that had plagued her for so long that she didn't know what life was like without it was finally gone, and now... Now, as darkness claimed her, she could finally rest.

#### Chapter 424: Flickering Faith

When Tausau and Savis led their soldiers in an assault on the Frost Walker fortress, Ignatious followed along with them, separating from the group to dash to Heila's side by the ice prison that trapped Lady Ashlynn with the treacherous Hauke. When he arrived, the diminutive Willow Witch was already in a heated argument with her gladiator-turned-guardian, Kurtz.

"... understand, my Lady," Kurtze pleaded in the face of an intense glare from the woman he'd come to rescue. "Even if I ran into the blizzard, I might not be able to find your Tuscan soldiers. It's almost impossible to see anything in that snow, and I'm no vampire or witch to blow the snow aside."

"And even if, if somehow I could find them," he added, trying to convince the stubborn young witch that sending him away to fetch the giants was a fool's errand. "Leading giants through the caravan when we can't see, we'd only trample our own people beneath their feet."

"Tuscan's have their own magic for handling snow and ice," Heila insisted. Snow Fang trembled in her hands, and she was nearing exhaustion from maintaining the snow cloud. Talauia had already reached Lord Ritchel and his honor guard, and she'd used the snow cloud to provide cover for Savis and Tausau's charge, but she still needed to maintain the barrage of snowballs or Talauia would find herself outnumbered and overwhelmed before she could finish dealing with the sorcerers keeping Ashlynn prisoner.

"Just go find them," Heila insisted. "We need their strength to break these walls!"

As she spoke, the walls of the ice prison shook and trembled, with cracks spreading across the surface of several walls. Just a few minutes ago, nothing seemed to damage the walls, and it was clear from the fading magic supporting them that at least a few of the sorcerers who trapped Ashlynn had fallen to Talauia's assault, but they weren't failing fast enough!

"Lady Heila," Ignatious interrupted as he knelt down in the snow, placing the box containing the Holy Flame Blade on the frozen ground before him. "Mistress Nyrielle sent me to dispel the blizzard and break Lady Ashlynn free," he said, his hands already moving from one lock on the case to the next before revealing the gleaming blade.

The temperature around them seemed to grow several degrees warmer as soon as Ignatious removed the lid, and everything more than a few feet away from them seemed to grow darker, as if all the light of the world were gathering around the sacred blade.

"Sir Ignatious!" Heila cried, relief washing over her now that they had the support of one of Lady Nyielle's progeny.

"Can that sword really dispel the blizzard?" Heila asked, trying to suppress the surge of hope that wanted to erupt in her chest, just because Ignatious had arrived. All her life, she'd put her faith in Lady Nyrielle and her immensely powerful progeny to protect the Vale of Mists, and part of her wanted to believe more than anything that Nyrielle's progeny wouldn't fail.

But now that she'd become a witch, she knew much more about how difficult it was to destroy someone else's working once it was fully formed. Armed with a powerful Severing Knife, she might have been able to unravel the magic that sustained the blizzard, but there was no way she could do that and support

Talauia, not without trees or growing things to draw strength from. But perhaps, in Ignatious's hands, the Holy Flame Blade could act like a Severing Knife and destroy the heart of the blizzard's magic.

"Have faith," Ignatious said, his hands hovering over the hilt of the blade. Whether he meant it for her or for himself was hard to say, but Heila accepted it, returning her focus to her snow cloud and the onslaught of snowballs.

Slowly, Ignatious wrapped his hands around the gold and ruby hilt of the blade, lifting it out of its case for the first time in decades. Nyrielle took the blade from him when she captured him, but it had followed him from the Vale of Mists to the Briar when the Mother of Thorns studied it, and once again, the blade followed him when Nyrielle handed him over to Hamdi's tender mercies.

Once, Ignatious had dreamed of breaking into Hamdi's vaults to retrieve his treasured blade. He believed that, with the power of the sword, he would be able to take his revenge on his tormentor before turning the blade on himself and bringing his cursed existence to an end.

The dream died slowly, inch by inch, as the High Lord of the Tangled Wood tortured every last shred of humanity out of his prisoner. By the time he laid eyes on his sacred treasure again, when Nyrielle retrieved it from Hamdi's vaults, Ignatious questioned whether the blade would accept him at all.

Since then, he'd faced the blade dozens of times, gaining a measure of confidence that he could stand in its presence without facing destruction, but he'd never found the courage to place his hands on the blade. Instead, he'd pinned his hopes on Lady Ashlynn and the artificer that Mistress Nyrielle said might be able to release the blade from the chains of faith that allowed only the most devout members of the Church to wield it.

"Even if Erkembalt says faith isn't required," he whispered as he turned the point of the blade toward the west and the Heavenly Shores that lay beyond the sunset. "I still believe."

Closing his eyes, the former Inquisitor drew deeply on the well of energy that coursed through his body, forcing that power into the sword to ignite the blade. The struggle with the blade that a Templar or Inquisitor faced every time they tried to draw on the blade's power was supposed to represent the Struggle of life. Only by rising to meet one's struggle could one find peace in the Heavenly Shores at the end of their life, and only by meeting the struggle with the blade could one hope to wield its power.

It was a struggle he'd relished in countless times before he fell to Nyrielle's fangs, becoming one of the only Inquisitors to ever master a Holy Flame Blade. In life, there had been few Inquisitors or Templars who could outshine his zeal. But now, as he forced himself to once again struggle with the blade, the response he received from the sword was very, very different.

The sword pushed back against his attempt to ignite it with overwhelming force. Unlike the slowly escalating arm wrestling match that Erkembalt had demonstrated, the power of the sword slammed into him with not only tremendous force but searing heat!

On the hilt of the blade, Ignatious's hands felt like they were wrapped around an iron questioner's rod pulled straight out of the fires of the forge. The smell of burning flesh filled the air, and wisps of smoke drifted away on the bitterly cold mountain winds.

Already, blisters rose on the backs of his hands, and the flesh of his fingers cracked and blackened. Ignatious's heart trembled in his chest and pain flooded his mind, nearly robbing him of his senses as the blade burned his flesh with the fires of judgment.

"Aaaaaarrrrgggg!" Ignatious cried out in anguish as the fires seemed to reach even deeper within him, burning not only his flesh but his spirit as well. Forcing his eyes open, the vampire stared at the sacred blade in horrified realization. While the Holy Flame Blade would not bar him from its presence, he was no longer worthy of wielding its might.

Worse, for having the hubris to even attempt to bend the blade to his corrupted will, it intended to not only reject him but destroy him!

#### Chapter 425: Stubborn (Part One)

Heila's concentration on her snow cloud spell shattered when Ignatious's deeply anguished howl of pain split the night. Fat, fluffy snowflakes still hung in the air, drifting slowly toward the ground but the barrage of snowballs ceased as she turned her attention to the injured vampire.

Pale yellowish-gold flames ran along the length of the blade, turning a darker reddish-orange where they spilled from the hilt of the sword onto the former Inquisitor's charred and blackened hands. Already, the flesh on the backs of his hands and a few of his fingers had begun to crack and split, revealing pale white bone and tendon beneath the charred and blackened skin.

"Ignatious!" Heila shouted, instantly gathering a handful of snow from the ground at her feet and rushing toward him. "Drop the sword!" she yelled, flinging the snow on his hands in the hopes of doing something to counter the heat. The snow, however, did nothing to improve matters, melting before it could even reach the blade and turning into a cloud of steam that froze in the air as it drifted away.

"I, c-can't, let g-go," Ignatious said through gritted teeth. Blood ran down his chin from where his fangs had pierced his lips as he tried to summon the will to fight back against the flames of the blade but nothing he did seemed to help.

In fact, the more he fought, the worse matters became as the blade drank in his energy like a vampire consuming blood, turning it into its own strength and feeding it back to him in the form of hotter, more penetrating flames. Already, the flames were spreading up his forearms, burning away the red and gold robes of the Inquisition and revealing pale flesh that had begun to blister and crack.

"You have to!" Heila cried, wracking her brain for something, anything that she could do. Strangely, the heat of the blade had done nothing to the snow around Ignatious despite the fact that it's flames were hot enough to boil the blood in his veins. The only time it seemed to do anything to the environment was when Heila tried to use snow to fight the flames or soothe his wounds.

"What if you give up?" Heila asked as she tried to recall everything the artificer had said about the Holy Flame Blade. "Didn't Erkembalt say that if the sword won the struggle, it would leave you exhausted but unharmed? Why is this happening?"

"I can't give up," Ignatious said through clenched teeth. He'd already tried surrendering to the blade once and that decision had allowed the flames to spread almost to his elbows. If he gave the blade any more ground, it would only drink more deeply from the vast pool of energy he carried and it would use that energy to immolate him until nothing remained but bones and ash.

"I'm sorry, little Heila," the vampire said as a defeated expression appeared on his face. "Perhaps I can endure until it's drained me dry," he said as he pushed back against the blade, forcing the flames to halt their advance beyond his forearms. "But I'll be no use to you or Lady Ashlynn."

"No!" Heila snapped, lowering her head and slamming into the defeated looking vampire with both of her horns. The blow knocked him to the ground, falling awkwardly on his back as Heila forced him down to a level where she could reach the burning blade. "You don't give up! Not when Lady Ashlynn needs you," she said.

"My Lady," Kurtz snapped, his eyes wide in horror as he rushed forward to pull his daughter's hero away from the burning vampire before the flames could consume her. He'd come all the way to this frozen, barren nowhere to keep her safe from the enemies that were massing even now on the fortress walls but he'd never imagined that the person he would need to protect her from the most was herself! If anything happened to her here and he did nothing...

"Stay back!" Heila snapped, not even looking in Kurtz's direction as she focused all of her attention on Ignatious. Tears of frustration froze on Heila's lashes in the freezing winds of the mountainside, limiting her vision but she paid it no mind as her hands fumbled at her waist for her Severing Knife.

The blade of her knife wasn't very sharp, in fact, it was deliberately dull. Jacques and Amahle had helped her to carve the knife from the the tooth of a Giant Thornback Alligator after she and Ashlynn hunted it for their 'graduation exam.' To Heila, the knife wasn't a weapon but a tool that was only intended to cut through magic.

The knife alone, however, wouldn't be enough for what she had in mind but she had very little time to compose an effective spell for what she had to do. Instead, she focused on the feeling deep within her chest and let the most fervent desire in her heart form the words she used.

"From snow and ice, my guard now form,

Let water's chill quench fire's storm!"

"Heila, what are you..." Ignatious started to ask, only for his eyes to go wide in shock as Heila stabbed her curved, bone blade between his fingers and began to pry.

"Please, Lady Heila," he pleaded, watching the flames begin to dance over her tiny hands, slowly burning through her own protective magic. "If the flames reach you..."

"They won't," Heila said fiercely. She might not have any trees or even weeds to draw on to power her wood and healing magics, but there was plenty of ice and snow which meant there wasn't just an abundance of water energy trapped on the mountain, there was an abundance of very cold water energy.

Now, she opened herself up to the bitter cold of the mountain, drawing the energy into her body and using it to create a barrier between herself and the sword's flames as she worked frantically with the Severing Knife.

She only hoped that the knife's magic was strong enough to resist such an ancient, powerful artifact, because if it wasn't... then there was truly nothing else she could do but watch as Ignatious was consumed by the flames of his own sword.

#### Chapter 426: Stubborn (Part Two)

Now that she was cutting away at the bonds that had formed between the vampire and the blade, she realized that Ignatious possessed far more energy than any simple sorcerer she'd ever encountered. Even Mistress Zedya, her first mentor in matters of mysticism and sorcery, hadn't possessed even a quarter of the deep well of magic energy that seethed within Ignatious.

But that well of energy was rapidly running dry as the sword poured even more heat into his body, fighting back harder and harder as Heila pried each additional finger loose. By the time she'd freed all the fingers of his right hand, the flames had broken through the vampire's defenses, consuming his left arm all the way to the shoulder in brilliant crimson flames that cast dark, dancing shadows across the snow.

On the ground beneath her, Ignatious had ceased his protests, focusing instead on stopping the flames from spreading even further. He'd given up on conquering the blade or gaining any ground. Instead, he placed his face in the diminutive witch who had come to rescue him, fighting back only to buy her the time she needed to free his remaining hand.

The blade seemed to resent his decision, growing even hotter in his hand as his faith turned further away from the Holy Lord of Light, but pain had long ceased to matter to the former inquisitor. Instead, the deepest desire in his heart was to escape this moment so that he could find a way to atone for his failure when Heila, Lady Ashlynn, Mistress Nyrielle, and everyone else was depending on him.

Guilt wracked him, and the flames fed off his guilt like lamp oil thrown on a hearth, searing the flesh of his chest, neck, and jaw. The intense eruption of flames ended an instant later as Heila's frantic prying finally pulled the blade free of his charred and blackened hand, sending it clattering to the cold, frozen ground. Deprived of Ignatious's deep well of power, the blade fell utterly lifeless, looking as cold as ordinary steel lying in the snow.

"Ignatious, Sir Ignatious," Heila called, clutching at the charred robes that covered the vampire's chest as his eyes drifted closed. "Don't go, you can't go now," she cried, afraid that his wounds were so severe that even one of Nyrielle's progeny couldn't endure them. More than anything, she wanted to use what little healing energy she could manifest in this barren place to tend to his wounds or at least ease his pain, but the magic of the living was unable to do anything for those who were already dead.

"I won't die," Ignatious said in a voice that had grown strained and raspy. "Not from these wounds," he added, weakly lifting the burned husk of his right hand. "Go now. Save Lady Ashlynn."

"I can't," Heila said. "I can't break the ice, and I can't get to the Tuscan, and I can't do anything to help her," Heila said, balling her fists in frustration and clutching her Severing Knife so tightly that her knuckles turned white.

"But you can, can't you?" the Willow Witch said, looking at the fallen Inquisitor with watery eyes. "You're strong like Sir Thane and Madame Zedya. You, you can break through the ice, can't you? Even, even without the sword, you're still one of Lady Nyrielle's progeny so..."

"It doesn't work that way," Ignatious said, turning away from Heila and staring at the shaking, cracking ice prison. Despite the tremendous forces being unleashed within the tomb of ice, the walls held firm, losing only a few shards of ice from the outer layers at seemingly random intervals when something inside the prison struck one of the walls.

"Sir Thane was always strong, that's why, even when Lady Nyrielle gave him the Voice of Command, he still grew stronger as a vampire," Ignatious explained. "And Madame Zedya trained her body in the ways of the Clan of the Great Claw when Lady Nyrielle took her in. I, I poured all of my energy into my rage when I found out what I became," he admitted as the shame of the ways he'd squandered Nyrielle's gift burned him with shame that was every bit as hot as the flames of the blade he'd just been freed from.

"So what can you do?" Heila asked. "What strength do you have?"

"Lady Nyrielle gave me the Well of Power," Ignatious said with a bitter laugh. "It's the vast reserve of power for sorcery that the Holy Flame Blade fed on to do this to me," he said, gesturing at his burned face and neck. "But now, the well is all but dry."



"But, but what if it wasn't?" Heila said hesitantly as an idea began to occur to her. "Could you save her then, even if you didn't have the sword? Is your sorcery strong enough?"

"I don't know," Ignatious admitted. "But it's impossible to know. I'd have to feast on a dozen Frost Walkers to regain my strength and heal my wounds, I..."

"Just me, just feed on me," Heila said, rolling back the sleeve of her dress to bare her left wrist to the vampire. "They, they say that the blood of a witch is powerful so, so, feed on me," she said. "And use that strength to save Ashlynn."

"My lady, no!" Kurtz shouted, stepping in at last to snatch the young Willow Witch away from the vampire before he could even think of accepting her offer. Kurtz wasn't that much bigger than Heila, but he was much, much stronger, and even though she struggled, he wasn't about to let a vampire as injured as Ignatious sink his fangs into her.

"Lady Heila, you can't," the former gladiator insisted, trying to reason with her as she fought to free herself from his grasp. "You're too small. He's too injured. He'll drain you dry. You'll die!"

"But he won't," Heila insisted, staring deeply into the vampire's dark, haunted eyes. "He could never hurt me because he'd never forgive himself for it."

"Don't you mean because Lady Nyrielle and Lady Ashlynn would never forgive me?" Ignatious said with a dark laugh. "I've failed them enough already, I wouldn't dare to take this risk."

"No," Heila said, her voice suddenly as cold as the mountain air around them. For a heartbeat, she stared over her shoulder at Kurtz, seeing the genuine fear in his eyes. Not for himself, but for her, and perhaps a little bit for his daughter, who would never forgive him if anything happened to Heila while he could have protected her. In any other moment, his concern would have touched her, but now it was just another obstacle between her and saving Ashlynn.

"I'm sorry," she whispered just before slamming the hilt of her Severing Knife into Kurtz's ribs. The impact was precise, she had learned enough as a healer to know where to hit him in order to send a shock through his body that would allow her to escape without hurting him enough to truly injure the seasoned gladiator. As his arms slackened, she twisted free and darted across the frozen ground to the

injured vampire's side, feeling a twinge of guilt from hurting the man who was only trying to keep her safe, but Ashlynn's need outweighed everything else.

"It's not failing others you're afraid of," Heila said when she arrived at Ignatious's side, staring at him with her soft, grass-green eyes that were surprisingly gentle for someone who had been so fierce when prying him free of the blade. "Or maybe it is, if your Holy Lord of Light is real," she added. "Then he's the one you won't ever let down."

"So don't," Heila said, kneeling down at the vampire's side and extending her wrist again. "If that's what it takes for you to do this, then do it for him. Do it for your Holy Lord of Light. Save her because she's a good person who needs your help. Save her because no one else can. Save her without killing anyone because you don't want to hurt anyone else anymore... but you can do this... can't you?"

#### Chapter 427: So Warm (Part One)

"Save her without killing anyone because you don't want to hurt anyone else anymore... but you can do this... can't you?"

Heila's simple, pleading words fell on Ignatious with the weight of an avalanche, knocking aside his defenses and excuses until the only thing he could accept was the truth he'd been avoiding.

"I've hurt innocents before," he said, reaching out hesitantly with his charred, blackened hands. Each movement caused new cracks in his burned flesh to form and a small rain of ash fell to the white snow beneath him with each movement until he very gently brushed the surface of Heila's hands. "How can you trust me now?"

"Because when you joined us, you came to me and asked if the Tuscans would be willing to provide your meals," Heila said softly. "You said that you needed to feed on the strongest prey available. You sounded like Sir Savis, like you were borrowing his words. But, you weren't satisfied when I brought you to them the way that Sir Savis was when we let him fight his prey. You were relieved."

"The Tuscans are very large," Ignatious explained almost absentmindedly as he stared into Heila's soft, grass-green eyes. "I think it's impossible, even for me, to accidentally kill one of them while feeding. But Lady Heila, you're very small. It takes so much restraint to feed on the Horned Clan that, before Mistress Nyrielle exiled me, she never allowed me to try. One last time," he said, glancing at the trembling walls of the icy prison that held Ashlynn hostage. "Are you certain that you wish to do this?"

"You're restraining yourself now, aren't you?" Heila asked gently. It took all of her will to keep her eyes on the trembling, injured vampire instead of looking anxiously in Ashlynn's direction, but right now, the only thing that would help her lady was helping Ignatious and so she would not look away from him.

"Please," she said, extending her wrist. "Take what you need, and rescue Lady Ashlynn before it's too late," she said, unable to keep a tremble of urgency out of her voice.

With a stiff nod, Ignatious pulled her wrist to his lips, opening his mout wide to reveal loing, sharp fangs. In his burned and blackened hands, her wrist looked as pure and white as the snow on the ground and smaller and more delicate than the neck of a swan. Yet beneath that soft, pale flesh, he could see the powerful pulse of a woman whose heart quickened with a mix of anxiety and fear as he prepared to strike.

"This will hurt," he whispered. "But only for a moment," he said, giving her a final warning before sinking his fangs into her soft, tender flesh.

Heila thought she knew what to expect when she offered her wrist. She had never been selected as an offering for Lady Nyrielle, but once on the journey, before she became a witch, she'd offered herself to Madame Zedya as a gesture of thanks for all that the older woman had taught her.

When Zedya fed, her amethyst eyes glowed with power, pulling Heila into a world that was peaceful and calm. She only felt the slightest prick before it was over. When she finally woke, several hours had passed, and she felt weak and ravenous, but there was nothing else to remember about the process, only a brief prick and then nothing.

Ignatious's bite was nothing like Zedya's. The pain that surged in her wrist felt like someone had taken an axe to a tree, chopping into her flesh as if to sever her hand from her wrist. For a moment, her eyes opened wide in panic, afraid that she'd made a terrible mistake.

Then, she felt a warmth flow through her body as the vampire took his first swallow of her blood and the pain she felt vanished, consumed by a feeling so warm and cozy that she reached out with her other arm to wrap herself around him, pulling their bodies closer together as if she was seeking shelter from the cold and snow.

In life, Ignatious had been a terrifying, raging inferno. His flames consumed the lives of countless Eldritch people as though they were kindling for a pyre whose flames would reach the sky. Even in death, as a newly made vampire, his flames had consumed anything they could reach.

But the heat that Heila felt from Ignatious was different from those flames of righteousness and fury. It wrapped around her like a warm blanket on a cold day, burning dimly like a hearth choked with soot and filled with nothing but the last embers of a fire that had exhausted its fuel long ago.

Connected to Ignatious in a way she had never before imagined, her healer's heart ached at the realization of how years of wielding the cruel, punishing flames of a zealot had choked out the gentle warmth at the core of a man who always struck her as gentle and kind, weighed down by tragedies she was too young to understand. But even if she was too young or too inexperienced to understand his anguish, that didn't mean she couldn't do anything to soothe it.

Gently, with each swallow of her blood, Heila drew on the water trapped in ice and snow around her, warming it in the embers of Ignatious's flames before guiding it over the soot and ash that buried his heart.

She had to work carefully, and no matter how much her body wanted to surrender to the faint warmth that Ignatious offered and drift off to sleep, she couldn't let herself be passive while he fed. If she let water pour over him freely, she might extinguish the embers that still burned within, but if she surrendered to his feeble warmth, while he might feed from her, he would never heal.

And so, even though it was difficult, she clung tightly to the fallen Inquisitor and did her best to wash away the years of pain, doubt, and self-loathing that had all but extinguished the gentle flames that were his true source of power.

And underneath all of that, she hoped that there was still enough of him left to heal, or else, washing away all that soot and ash would reveal that there was nothing of the original Ignatious left to save.

#### Chapter 428: So Warm (Part Two)

For Ignatious, the moment his tongue first tasted Heila's blood, he realized that nothing he'd ever been told about the power of a witch's blood compared to the reality of what she offered him. The taste of her blood was sweet, cool, and soothing, like a cup of crystal clear water from a mountain spring on a hot summer day.

The first mouthful he swallowed eased the pain of his burns and soothed the raw, sharp hunger that burned within him, but it did nothing to slake his thirst for more. It was the second mouthful of blood, however, that made him pause with the realization that Heila was feeding him more than just her blood.

Tears burst unbidden from his eyes as Heila's soft, cleansing energy washed over parts of his innermost being that he'd thought long buried and burned to ash by the torture of time. Ghosts of his victims drifted behind his dark eyes as he relived the maddening days when Hamdi drove him to the brink of starvation before hurling a fresh, innocent victim into the dark cell he'd been trapped in.

And as the ghosts appeared before Ignatious, they appeared in Heila's eyes as well. Cecile had once warned her that a healer must experience the pain of the wounds they wished to heal as part of the price of curing that which nothing but a witch's magic could cure. At the time, she'd thought it applied only to physical wounds, but it seemed like she would have to face Ignatious's ghosts along with him.

"This isn't you," Heila whispered softly as she directed more of her healing waters toward the painful stains of guilt and self-recrimination that haunted him. "You didn't choose this," she added in an even softer voice that only a vampire's hearing could have heard over the bitter winds sweeping across the mountainside.

Ignatious made a soft, helpless noise as he swallowed again, taking in both the strength that Heila offered and the gentle waters of absolution that soothed his wounded soul. Again and again, they faced the ghosts that haunted the fallen Inquisitor, whether they were the victims who fell to his claws and fangs as a vampire or the innocent humans caught up in the Inquisition's relentless search for wickedness, they faced them all together.

Beside them, Kurtz watched in open-mouthed amazement as the powerful vampire wept in the diminutive witch's arms. He didn't understand what she was doing to him to cause the older man to weep like a babe, but whatever she was doing, it went far beyond simple tears.

Already, the burns on Ignatious's neck had vanished, replaced by flesh so smooth and perfect that it looked like it had never been touched by the horrifying flames of the Holy Flame Blade. Even the vampire's arms had begun to recover. Bone was no longer visible underneath the blackened flesh, and his muscles and tendons were growing back fast enough to be seen by the naked eye.

Unfortunately, Heila's outpouring of cleansing water could only do so much for the injured vampire, and she was already approaching her limits after scrubbing away less than half of the filth and soot that clung to the fallen Inquisitor's heart. Some stains had been ground so deeply into him that they seemed to have become a permanent part of who he was, and even if she wanted to, there was nothing Heila could do to wash them away.

"Show me something else," Heila whispered as she tightened her grip on the feeding vampire. Her body had grown colder and colder as she used the frigid water energy of the mountainside to wash away what hurts she could, but now she desperately needed to feel more of Ignatious's warmth.

Her arms felt heavy as lead, and the hand not currently offered to Ignatious's fangs had begun to tremble uncontrollably. Each beat of her heart now seemed to come slower than the last, pumping blood that felt thin and cold through her increasingly pallid flesh.

Dark spots danced at the edges of her vision, and it took all her concentration just to maintain the connection between them. The air around her no longer felt cold, her body had grown too numb to register the difference between the cold within her and the chill of the mountain air.

At this point, she knew that she could pull back before the faint warmth of Ignatious's bite turned into unbearable pain. The healer in her, however, refused to give up when she had yet to give him the strength he truly needed. Everything she'd done so far was little more than washing a wound, there was still more that he needed before she could stop and rest.

"You were proud of your flames once, weren't you? Show me that," she whispered as she closed her eyes and rested her head on his freshly healed neck and shoulder. Her diminutive body lacked the strength to keep her head up, and even keeping her eyes open felt like too much effort. Thankfully, the things she needed to see were sealed deep within Ignatious's heart, and so she let her eyes drift shut, and her mind sank fully into his memories of the past.

Slowly, a new scene began to form in Heila's mind. She was on a street corner in a city that she'd never seen before, standing next to Ignatious, watching an opulent-looking building wreathed in flames as it burned to the ground.

"This place was filled with wicked men," the vampire in her vision said as the shadows cast by the burning building flickered across his youthful features. "Women who went missing in 'demon attacks' wound up here, forced to... you can imagine what they were forced to do," he said, unwilling to sully

Heila's ears with stories of the nightmares he'd witnessed when he followed the trail of 'demons' back to this corrupt den of filth and perversion.

"You burned more than just the building," Heila said, turning her eyes to the Vampire's expressionless face. "Are you really proud of this?"

"It needed to be done," Ignatious said in a voice that was flat but filled with conviction. "Without the flames to light their way, these men's victims would never find their way to the Heavenly Shores. If I couldn't save their lives, at least I could do this for their souls. And those men will never harm another soul."

Slowly, as he spoke, Heila added a bit of her own wood energy to the fires burning within Ignatious, stoking the embers of his heart with the fuel to burn brighter.

"What else? Even if you didn't use your flames, you did things that you were proud of, didn't you?" she asked.

"Before I was an Inquisitor," Ignatious said as the scene shifted around them. This time, he was much younger, wearing the pure white robes of a temple acolyte and standing beside a giant hearth where similarly dressed boys turned several spits of roasting meat or tended giant cauldrons of soups and stews.

"This way," Ignatious said, leading Heila outside to a large open area where crowds of people gathered, sitting on the grass and holding out their hands to receive loaves of bread or holding up hollowed-out bread as acolytes ladled hearty stew into the edible bowls.

"You like to cook?" Heila asked, giving Ignatious a strange look.

"No, not really," Ignatious said. "But it brought them warmth," he said, guiding Heila to a stack of simple wool blankets and passing her several before he took a stack for himself. "This was part of the Harvest Festival in the Holy City. People could come from anywhere to receive a meal, medicine, and blankets for the winter," he explained as he began passing out the warm wool blankets to eager-looking people wearing threadbare clothing.

"My father was a wood cutter," Ignatious explained as the scene shifted again, this time to a simple hut near the forest where an even younger Ignatious helped a strikingly similar-looking man to pile stack after stack of freshly chopped wood into an ox-drawn cart. "For every eight carts we filled, we filled another for the baron's manor and another one for the church. The church shared that firewood with families who had nothing to heat their homes with through the winter."

"This is you," Heila said, wrapping her arms around the childish Ignatious, who smiled proudly at the cart he'd finished filling. Finally, she had found the heart of the flame that needed to be nurtured. Reaching out with one hand, she touched a broken, splintered log and let the feeling of rich, wooden energy fill her heart before she gave it to the feeding vampire, reigniting a flame that had been smothered for so long that only the dimmest embers remained.

"So warm," Heila whispered as the vision faded away, and she found herself held tightly in Ignatious's arms.

The vampire pulled his lips away from her wrist, licking the last drop of her sweet, healing blood from his lips as he stood, cradling the diminutive witch to his chest. The flesh of his arms had healed completely, appearing perfect and pristine underneath the burned and tattered sleeves of his red and gold robes, and he used those arms to hold Heila as gently as he'd hold a priceless relic made of the most delicate porcelain.

"Rest now," he whispered to her as he began to draw deeply on the flames she'd reignited within him. The energy that coursed through his veins was different than anything he'd felt before, but even as his heart sang with joy at the feelings of miraculous healing that swept through his body and soul, he hadn't forgotten why Heila went so far to make him whole again.

"Rest, and I'll rescue Lady Ashlynn," he promised with passionate flames burning in his eyes.

#### Chapter 429: Runic Blade of Eternal Ice

"You've stalled me long enough, witch," the spirit possessing Hauke said. "But now, this ends!"

Ashlynn's heart sank as she watched a glowing sword covered in strange, hooked runes appear in Hauke's outstretched hand. The blade was easily as long as Heila was tall, and it glowed with a shifting pattern of multiple hues that matched Hauke's iridescent horn. Snowflakes and ice crystals seemed to dance in the air around it like moths around a candle flame, and the temperature of the air within the icy tomb grew so cold that it was painful to breathe in.



"Wait!" Ashlynn shouted, placing a hand on the spine of her sword and holding it up over her head. "Please. Hauke is my friend, and I don't want to hurt him. But if you use that sword," she said, her emerald eyes narrowing as she studied the intricately arranged magic within the blade. "If you use that sword, I don't think I can avoid harming him."

"If you don't want to hurt him, then stand aside," Ansgar snapped. "Surrender your witch to us, along with the blade she carries, and we can stop this madness once and for all."

"I won't surrender her to you," Ashlynn said firmly. "But we can surrender the blade if that's what it takes. No matter how powerful a tool is, it's only a tool. It isn't worth losing a life over."

"Surrendering the blade is insufficient," Ines frosty voice said, her feminine voice sounding in deeply incongruous coming from Hauke's handsome face. "An example must be made so that others will not follow in her path. She must suffer before she dies as a warning to everyone who follows after that our horns are not to be defiled."

"Then at least let me tell him goodbye," Ashlynn said as she lowered the darksteel falchion into a defensive position intended to ward off blows from above. She had been holding her ground against the imposing ancestor when he fought with ice covered fists, but now that he'd added the advantages of reach and leverage that came from a powerful blade, she'd lost what little confidence she had that she could defeat the ancestral spirits without harming the young lord they possessed.

"He's heard your words," Ines said coldly. "And witnessed your insistence on this path. Whatever else you have to say is meaningless. Your words are nothing more than whispers in the wind. Whether he mourns you or not depends on your actions, not your words."

"So you haven't destroyed him," Ashlynn said with a slow grin. "If all you've done is suppress him, then there's still hope."

"Enough!" Ansgar roared, charging forward with the point of the slender icy blade leveled at Ashlynn as though it were a lance. The rush was explosive and faster than anything she'd seen from the ancient spirit since the fight began, though whether that was because the gleaming runic blade in his hands gave him extra strength or because he'd been holding back, she couldn't say.

Ashlynn's falchion swept up in a blindingly fast arc that should have possessed more than enough strength to beat the thrust aside. Should have. The instant she began to move, one of the runes on the blade glowed a brilliant ice blue before Ines's voice spilled from Hauke's lips.

"Field of ice," the ghostly woman said, summoning a patch of ice beneath Ashlynn's feet that was as smooth as glass and as slick as oil.

-CLANG- -Riiip!-

Ashlynn's feet slid on the ice, and the collision of her blade against the sword of ice only threw her further off balance. She pushed her reflexes to the limits, twisting in the air to move herself out of the way of Ansgar's relentless thrust, but the tip of the blade still tore through her fur-lined cloak and the sleeve beneath it, opening a long gash on her left shoulder.

Bitter cold flooded the wound, stabbing deep into Ashlynn's arms like thousands of needles as the wound froze, sending shivers down her arm that she felt all the way to the tips of her fingers despite the warmth of the gloves she wore.

Stabbing her blade into the frozen ground for stability, Ashlynn pushed herself away from the slick patch of ice before letting loose with a spell of her own. The oppressive sealing magic that weighed down on her like hundreds of pounds of snow had weakened as Ansgar directed his attention to the battle, giving her just enough freedom to make use of her limited energy.

"By forest's heart and winter's bane,

Let roots reach deep where I remain!"

The spell was simple and secured her footing against further attacks, but it came with a heavy price. No tree could easily uproot itself, and now, neither could she. Her feet moved ponderously, just enough above the ground to let her shift her position but not enough to do more than shift her upper body out of the way if she needed to dodge another thrust.

"Foolish. You're too young by decades to face us, witch," Ansgar said, his deep voice sounding strange coming from Hauke's youthful lips and even stranger for the scornful derision that dripped from every

word, making a mockery of Hauke's gentle, respectful demeanor. "Your strength may be impressive, but skill comes with years, not months."

He punctuated his point with a simple, direct thrust aimed at her throat that would end the fight instantly if Ashlynn failed to deflect it. Her blade moved swiftly, spinning in her hands to parry the lethal thrust, but the moment before their blades met, the tip of Ansgar's runic blade dropped low, circling under Ashlynn's hilt and continuing its thrust straight for her throat!

Desperately twisting sideways, Ashlynn gained just enough room to escape the deadly point, letting the blade glide past her cheek as she struggled to bring her falchion back in line to defend against the lethal runic blade. Even that near-miss cost her. Frost formed instantly on her skin where the blade passed, numbing her flesh and covering her cheek in frost from just beneath her emerald eye all the way to the point of her chin.

"Maybe you know more," Ashlynn acknowledged, striking back with her falchion in a wild arc aimed at the Frost Walker's knees that forced Ansgar to take several steps back to evade.

"But I don't need forever. Just long enough," she said with a confident, almost mocking grin on her face.

#### Chapter 430: Running Out of Time

"I don't need forever," Ashlynn said with as much confidence as she could muster. "Just long enough."

The words were more bravado than truth. She'd already been fighting for what felt like hours inside this crystalline prison, and her enhanced strength was beginning to falter. Already, she was denied any source of living growth to fuel her witchcraft, and at night, she couldn't even draw on the sun's faint warmth as a source of flame. The Ice Tomb only added to her troubles, isolating her from the mountain wind and the vast reserves of ice and snow.

In the end, only the solid stone ground under her feet offered any source of strength, but Ashlynn had long ago found that there was a vast difference between lush, living soil and cold, barren earth. What the mountain offered her, it offered only grudgingly, as if it knew that the right to command it belonged to a different lineage of witches.

"Long enough for what?" Ines's cold, feminine voice echoed through Hauke's mouth. "For your vampire mistress? She's abandoned you to chase shadows." Hauke might not have noticed, but Ines still

maintained the faintest of connections to the blizzard she'd summoned outside the Ice Tomb. Not enough to know what was occurring outside, but more than enough to have noticed Nyrielle's hasty departure, as though she were hunting something far away in the direction of the ancestral cave that once held Ines and her fellow spirits hostage.

Perhaps the vampire had seen through them and was even now searching their former tomb for a method of unraveling their bond to the young Hauke, but those efforts would only prove futile. The only records that remained in that ancient cave told of their creation. None of them were foolish enough to leave behind a method to destroy them.

Ashlynn said nothing, conserving her breath as she drew steadily on the power of earth beneath her feet, hardening her flesh until she felt like she'd wrapped herself in a thin layer of armor. It wasn't much protection, especially not against Ansgar's runic blade, but it was all she could manage.

She could feel Nyrielle through their bond, and her lover's heartbeat echoed in her chest. It had grown distant, but it felt strong and determined, focused on something that troubled Nyrielle so greatly she dared not confront it close to Ashlynn.

Heila's presence was fainter. The bond between a witch and her coven was lighter and less... imposing than the bond between a True Vampire and her Seneschal, but Ashlynn felt her friend close at hand, perhaps only a few feet from the other side of the icy walls. Her presence was faint, flickering like a candle flame in winter, but still there. Still trying to reach her.

All she needed was time.

Ansgar charged again, but this time, Ashlynn was ready. Instead of dodging or parrying, she crouched low, dropping underneath Ansgar's swing in a move that was completely bereft of dignity but made every possible use of the power she'd gained when she rooted herself to the ground. As Ansgar's blade passed overhead, she sprung upward, lashing out with her falchion and scoring a long cut across Hauke's thigh.

"You're predictable," Ashlynn taunted. "You might handle your sword well, but you overcommit constantly. Who am I really fighting? The mighty ancestor or his sword?"

The ancestral spirit's eyes narrowed with a cold fury that had nothing to do with his ice sorcery. Hauke's arms were much shorter than the ones he'd possessed in life, and no matter what he did, he found himself constantly re-adjusting his distance, making up for the shortfalls of his powerful blows with deeply committed lunges to close the gap between them. He knew it was a technique rife with flaws, but he hadn't expected such an amateurish witch to perceive it so clearly.

"Ines," he commanded, his voice tight with barely contained fury. "Since she wants to play tree, let her bear up under your blizzard while I chop her down!"

After so many years bound together, Ines didn't need clearer instructions to understand Ansgar's intentions. The runes on the blade glowed with a bright, radiant white light moments before the icy chamber filled with swirling snow, dense enough that Ashlynn could barely see her own hand in front of her face.

In the dense cloud of swirling white, Hauke's figure vanished entirely from her sight. Her heart raced, pounding in her chest at several times the pace of the echo of Nyreille's strong, steady pulse as Ashlynn realized she would have to give up the spell that kept her rooted to the earth if she wanted to have any chance of countering an enraged ancestor who could appear from anywhere.

Slowly, releasing the energy of her binding spell, Ashlynn backed against one wall, using it as an anchor and reference point in the whiteout conditions. Her ears, already bright red in the bitter cold of the intense wind and beginning to go numb, strained to hear even the faintest sound of movement that might tell her where the ancestral spirit would attack from.

"You should have surrendered the defiler, little witch," Ines said, her voice seeming to come from everywhere at once in the swirling, dancing snow. "You're too far from your trees and growing things. You have no power here except what your vampire gave you, and you're far too inexperienced to protect your fledgling coven from the punishment that accompanies their crimes. Now, instead of losing a branch, the whole tree will fall."

Suddenly, the snow parted for the briefest moment, revealing Hauke's form just as the runic blade swept toward Ashlynn's ribs. She managed to block the heavy strike with her falchion, but the impact jarred her entire body and nearly knocked the blade from her hands. Worse, where the weapons met, frost immediately spread across her darksteel blade, making it painfully cold to hold even through her gloves.

"You think you're the first to face us with borrowed power?" Ansgar's voice boomed from within the whirling snow as he vanished from her sight once again. "We've fought the greatest arena champions to ever ascend from the High Fen to test their might on our mountains, armed with artifacts the likes of which made them the equal of a dozen men. We've faced sorcerers and cultists who channeled the fiery spirits of broken, burning mountains."

Another slash came from the blizzard, this one catching Ashlynn across the right shoulder before she could fully evade it. Blood froze instantly in the wound, preventing loss but sending an agonizing chill through her arm.

"In the end, they all fell," Ines added, as a spike of solid ice erupted from the ground, forcing Ashlynn to dive sideways or be impaled on its wickedly sharp point. "Just as you will."