

The Vampire 441

Chapter 441: Explosive Clash (Part Two)

No matter where people stood, everyone with a view of the clash between Ashlynn and Ansgar seemed to lean forward, some taking involuntary steps and many stretching out their necks, hoping to see what had happened when two powerful artifacts, one formed of the coldest ice in the world and the other forged to call upon the heat of the sun, met in a ground shaking collision.

-CLANG- -TING- -TING-

-CRUNCH-

The Holy Flame Blade clattered to the ground, dropped by a hand so badly abused by the battle that it couldn't possibly endure the force of Ansgar's heavy overhand blow. An instant later, the Runic Blade of Eternal Ice cleaved into the stone and ice beside Ashlynn, embedding itself in the ground just inches from the witch's feet.

"Let my friend go!" Ashlynn shouted, ignoring the fallen sword and lunging toward Hauke with her Severing Knife held high. Everything from the moment she charged forward to her desperate deflection of the icy blade had been for this moment, but if she couldn't cut the horns away from Hauke's body then all of this would have been for nothing.

"Frozen Sleep," Eugen's childish voice echoed in Hauke's mind as the juvenile Greenwind Healer made his move at last, unleashing a powerful burst of soothing wind that enveloped Ansgar's mind, dulling his senses and trapping him within a moment of perfect, restful sleep.

"Eugen! Traitor," Eraric roared, summoning chains of ice to bind the youngest of the ancestors in place.

"Already decided, you have, and acted already too," Eugen said softly. Originally, he'd spoken in support of capturing the witch who bore a forbidden blade, carved from the horn of one of their descendants. Once the walls of the ice prison shattered, however, and the young healer had a chance to see the bodies piled up by Hauke's father or tumbling from the walls above, he realized that the price Hauke's clan was paying for their actions was already far too high, and everything he'd seen since then only made his earlier support feel like a greater sin.

"Wrong we were, to choose for Hauke. The witch, for him she fights, but for whom do we? For whom did we do this?" he asked, staring at the wall that showed the world outside Hauke's mind and watching the young witch give her all not to obtain victory, but to rescue a young Frost Walker from his own ancestors. "Asked to do this, we weren't..."

Before anyone could respond to Eugen's words, a tearing sensation filled Hauke's mind. Ashlynn's knife was wickedly sharp and sheared instantly through the leather bandolier that held the Ancestral horns firmly to Hauke's chest. Along with the leather, the curved knife descended rapidly, cutting away the bonds of magic that allowed the ancestors to control Hauke as they pleased.

Given time, Ashlynn could have removed the horns one by one in a way that was both gentle and respectful, but at the moment, she cut through everything, unable to care about the storm of energies that rippled through Hauke's mind as the ancestors were torn from him, one after another until he was left alone, imprisoned in his own mind and watching helplessly as his body tumbled to the cracked and broken ground like collapsing snow.

Ansgar, Ines, Kimsel, Eraric and Eugen. For months, they had accompanied Hauke during every waking moment of his days and at times, even appeared in his dreams while he slept. He had grown accustomed to being one among many as he listened to their wisdom and studied their techniques. But now, Ashlynn's knife had severed their bond, tearing them away and leaving him alone, still bound by Eraric's sorcery, chained within his own mind as nothing more than a spectator.

He wanted to cry out, to tell Ashlynn that he wasn't free yet, that she had to break the chains that held him prisoner, but no matter how much he shouted in his mind, his lips didn't move and his eyes remained unfocused, staring up at the sky as a figure on dark, raven wings descended to the shattered ground of the battlefield.

Dimly, Ashlynn heard a ruffle of feathers, blowing away the surrounding cloud of freezing steam as Nyrielle arrived at last. The wind of her wingbeats revealed to the world that Ashlynn still stood while Hauke had fallen and lay helpless on the ground below. Then, after only the briefest hesitation while her midnight eyes roamed over Ashlynn's battered, bloodied figure, wrapping her arms and wings around her lover in a gentle embrace.

"My darling," Nyrielle's gentle voice said, soothing Ashlynn's hurts with her simple presence. "I should never have left you alone here," she said, holding back the fury she felt at Ashlynn's battered state in order to give her love all the comfort she could.

More than fury at the Frost Walkers, her heart trembled with the thought that Ashlynn might have fallen here, and it would have been her fault for jumping at shadows and leaving her alone. She never would have imagined in a hundred years that Hauke could learn enough from the ancient, nearly broken horns to threaten Ashlynn so much, but clearly she had been just as wrong about the threat her lover faced as she was about the cause behind Hauke's betrayal.

"Mistress Nyrielle," Ashlynn said, dropping her Severing Knife to the ground and turning in Nyrielle's embrace to gaze longingly into the other woman's midnight blue eyes. In her mind, a brief fantasy of kneeling before her lady while two armies watched flickered past, like a scene from a story book, but now that she was here in just such a moment all she could think about was how she could cool the simmering rage she felt underneath the surface of Nyrielle's gentle affection.

"I, I give you this victory," she said, feeling the weight of hundreds of gazes on her from every direction. After everything she had done to establish herself as a powerful, commanding presence in Nyrielle's absence, one who could stop the fighting with the power of her words alone, she now felt like a trembling kitten, clinging to Nyrielle as her strength finally failed her.

"Hauke was possessed," she tried to explain. "The ancestors, their horns," she added, pointing to the gleaming iridescent Frost Walker horns that lay in a heap on the ground where they had fallen, still secured to each other by the leather bandoleer that she'd cut off of Hauke. "They wanted to kill Heila," she explained haltingly. "Because, because of the blade made from Paulus's horn.

"I-I've severed their connection to him," she added, rambling on as she saw Nyrielle's gaze becoming increasingly complex as the vampire realized how greatly she'd misunderstood things. "But there is still, still so much, much..."

Ashlynn's words trailed off as exhaustion overtook her even though she was certain that there were things, important things, that she needed to say. Things about Ritchel and the leadership of the High Pass, and, and... And her mind couldn't summon anything else that was important enough that she had to force herself to remain awake to say it.

In the end, it seemed, all that mattered was that she had returned to Nyrielle's cool, comforting embrace. Anything that was important, she knew that Nyrielle would handle it well, and anything that dared to threaten her or her loved ones would never survive her lover's fury.

Standing in the middle of the shattered battlefield, Nyrielle gently stroked Ashlynn's hair while cradling her lover close to her chest. Her heart ached at the wounds that had begun to bleed again after Ashlynn's second use of the Holy Flame Blade melted away the ice that froze them shut.

"Why must you be like this, my darling?" Nyrielle whispered to her sleeping lover. "Why must you push yourself to your absolute limit every time?" She had been like this when she was training with Thane, pushing her body until she was too weak to stand or hold a sword at the end of her sessions. She was like this when she spied on Owain, killing one night after interrogating him and fighting a duel to the death with another one. And she was like this still, placing her own life in the greatest danger rather than risk the lives of others.

Moving with a speed that was too fast for almost anyone present to follow, Nyrielle vanished from the place where she stood, appearing next to Zedya and Ignatious in the blink of an eye.

"My darling is infecting others," Nyrielle said with a sad smile as she reached out with one hand to cup Zedya's face, gently wiping away a trace of blood that had spilled from her progeny's eye. "Is Heila following in her footsteps too? Were her wounds so serious?" she asked, turning to Ignatious, who held Heila in much the same way that Nyrielle was holding Ashlynn.

"She tended her own wounds before tending mine," Ignatious said, lowering his head in shame at how much it had taken for Heila to rescue him from himself. "Without her blood, I would have fallen to my own sword and without her healing, I could never have used it to free Lady Ashlynn from the ice. She didn't do it for me," he added, giving the diminutive witch a sad smile. "She did it for Lady Ashlynn."

"As is proper," Nyrielle said, gently brushing aside one of Heila's curls to confirm the young witch's condition for herself. She was exhausted and had given more blood than someone her size should have, but her heartbeat was strong and steady even if her body was greatly depleted.

"But we shouldn't put them in positions where they have to," she added, returning her hand to Ashlynn's back and pulling her lover closer as if she was afraid that she would slip away if she didn't hold her tightly.

"Thistle Witch," Nyrielle said, turning to face the woman holding Ritchel hostage and speaking in a voice that was loud enough to reach the men on the walls as well as the head of her army. "Captain Lennart will send men to take your prisoner into custody. Will he die if you leave his side?"

"He won't die, he won't die now that I've taken back my poison," Talauia said, though a trace of bitterness colored her voice. Leaving a defeated lord alive was an invitation to disaster but she couldn't kill him, no matter how much she wanted to.

"Auntie Ashlynn, Auntie Ashlynn wants him alive," the thistle witch explained. "She wants him to remain Lord of the High Pass too," she added, with wings drooping in defeat.

"Alive, I can grant, at least for now," Nyrielle pronounced as a pair of powerful Tuscan mercenaries came trotting across the frozen ground to retrieve the injured lord. "Whether he retains his throne or not is a question for tomorrow night. In the meantime, your Auntie Ashlynn needs a healer. Can you help her?"

"Help her? Of course, of course I can help her," Talauia said, roughly dropping Ritchel's body on the frozen ground and flying to Nyrielle's side as quickly as she could. While Ritchel still managed to cling to consciousness, after his body was ravaged by the Thistle Witch's poison, every muscle was as limp as wet rope, and he fell in an undignified heap before the Tuscans could arrive to carry him away.

"Zedya, take care of my beloved," Nyielle said, gently handing Ashlynn over now that another witch had arrived who could do more for her wounds than simply blocking the pain. She hated doing it, and her hand lingered over Ashlynn's body for a moment before she forced herself to turn away. Her love had delivered her victory while Nyrielle herself had chased after shadows. Now, it was her turn to make all of Ashlynn's pain and suffering in this tragedy worth something.

Slowly, Nyrielle locked away the warmth that she felt for Ashlynn and everyone under her command, concealing them behind the cold, expressionless mask she'd worn so often when she and Ashlynn first met. Not only Ashlynn but many others who followed her had paid in blood for this victory, and if she wanted to reap the best harvest for their efforts, she couldn't face their defeated foes as an ordinary person in a position of power.

Instead, when she turned to face the Frost Walker fortress, she projected the full might of the Harbinger of Death, the unfeeling reaper who had come to collect what she was owed.

"Lord Ritchel is incapacitated," Nyrielle said, pitching her voice to reach the walls of the Frost Walker fortress. "Young Lord Hauke has fallen in battle," she added, looking at the unmoving figure who stared blankly at the sky. "Who will speak for the High Pass to arrange your surrender?"

"We do not surrender!" Commander Jannik shouted from atop the walls, his dark furred form standing out starkly among the other Frost Walkers. His voice shook as he spoke, and he had to take a deep breath to steady himself as he faced the intimidating figure of the Harbinger of Death, firmly reminding himself that no matter what his racing heart felt like, she couldn't simply reach across the chasm and snuff out his life.

"I am Jannik, Commander of the hunters and warriors of the High Pass and I will speak for us in Lord Ritchel's absence," he shouted. "The High Pass and the Vale of Mists have always been allies, and whatever happened here, it changes none of that! But we have wronged you," he added, swallowing his pride and refusing to look in the direction of the fallen Frost Walkers on the wall.

Jannik had no idea who would pay the price for everyone who had lost their lives tonight, but his fists clenched tightly as he forced himself to ignore that question while he searched for a way to ensure that the rest of Nyrielle's army didn't descend on them.

Now that Hauke and Ritchel had fallen, even though neither Nyrielle's progeny nor her witches looked like they could still fight, there were still two more vampires standing atop the walls right now, and who knew how many other strong warriors among her army. And that assumed that Nyrielle herself didn't raise a hand against them. No, there was no victory to be had in fighting, so Jannik could only attempt to maintain their right to rule the High Pass while lowering their horns in defeat.

"We would have welcomed you with open arms and a grand feast but for the actions of a few who caused all this," Jannik said with a pointed look in Hauke's direction, though whether he directed his glare at Hauke or the collection of iridescent horns piled on the ground beside him was impossible to say. "Now, we welcome you still, though the feast will have to wait until we resolve all this."

"Your open arms are insufficient," Nyrielle said coldly. "Your empty hands and an empty wing of your fortress are required. Our people will not mingle with yours until the sun sets tomorrow. If my men see so much as a servant approaching our quarters while I sleep, they will slaughter without mercy. Am I clear, commander Jannik?"

"Perfectly clear, Your Eternity," Jannik said, bowing so low that his horn pointed toward the ground before giving directions to his soldiers to tend to the wounded, and open the gates to receive their 'guests.'

"And Commander Jannik," Nyrielle added as menacing shadows spilled from her wings, momentarily creating the illusion that she stood at the edge of a terrible abyss that they would all fall into if they

defied her orders. "Let me be clear. The Frost Walkers have fallen tonight. Your lord has fallen, his heir has fallen, and you cannot resist the strength of the army at your gates."

"Tonight, I will see my people settled and our wounded tended," she said, as though it was an act of magnanimity that she didn't march her army forcefully through their gates to occupy their fortress. "But tomorrow night, when I hold court in your great hall, it will not be as your guest but as your conqueror. Ensure that your people understand the difference."

Chapter 443: Those Who Fell

Outside the Frost Walker fortress, there was still a great deal of work for Nyrielle to do. Zedya and Ignatious were taking Ashlynn and Heila into the fortress so the Thistle Witch could tend to them in a place better suited for healing, but Nyrielle herself couldn't join them until everything outside the fortress had been settled.

"You there, stop," Nyrielle said to the horned warrior who had been hovering at an awkward distance, seemingly torn between returning to the army and following after Ashlynn and Heila. "You've been attending to Heila, haven't you?"

"Yes, Your Eternity," Kurtz said, stopping where he stood and instantly turning to kneel before the powerful vampire. "My, my daughter Emmie is her squire and I've sworn to stand as Lady Heila's personal guard."

"Ignatious will look after Heila for now," Nyrielle said as her mind ran through the things that demanded her attention. "Do you know the Artificer Erkembalt and the leader of the Sorcerers of Sundered Earth, Aspakos?"

"I don't know them, your Eternity, but I know their features enough to recognize them," Kurtz said, keeping his head lowered and hoping the answer was good enough to keep the Harbinger of Death from deciding that he was more useful as a late night snack than as a guard for Heila. "Should I, should I fetch them here, your Eternity?"

"Yes," Nyrielle said, looking from the iridescent horns on the ground to the icy sword and finally at Hauke's strange, vacant eyed stare. She didn't know what had happened to the young lord but it was clear that he wasn't well in a way that went far beyond physical ailments and before she dealt with him or the artifacts around him, she wanted the help of an expert.

"Tell them to bring containers for dangerous relics," she added, as Kurtz stood to leave. "And perhaps tools to break a curse."

As Shubnalu's pupil, Nyrielle was intimately familiar with her teacher's personal collection of Blood Curses and she'd employed several of them herself over the years. As the Harbinger of Death, her own Kiss of the Void could be used to bestow a number of haunting curses that would slowly grind a person's sense of self and purpose away.

When Nyrielle looked at Hauke, he reminded her of someone afflicted by one of her curses, as though he had given up entirely on life or had his soul completely hollowed out, leaving nothing but a shell. But if that was the case, she would have expected his horn to have dulled, growing paler than the glittering iridescent horns next to him that indicated some life still remained in them, even after Ashlynn severed their connection to the young lord.

Unfortunately, with a rich heritage of vampiric curses, she'd never had a need to study the curses employed by Frost Walker sorcerers or anyone else for that matter. While she could have probed at Hauke to determine if there was anything left of the young lord to save, she'd seen enough traps woven into curses set by Shubnalu to know that it was better to rely on an expert as long as she had one available.

Once she heard what Erkembalt had to say, then she would make a decision about how to handle the young Frost Walker lord, the dangerous ancestral horns and the powerful sword they had bestowed on him. Until then, she resolved herself to wait, no matter how much she wanted to rush through things in order to return to Ashlynn's side.

Moments later, while Nyrielle stood waiting for the Kurtz to return with Artificer Erkembalt and Aspakos, a worn and bloody figure approached her, breaking the silence that surrounded Nyrielle since she Kurtz left at a run.

"Your Eternity," Tausau said, kneeling before his grandniece and lowering his head. "I've come to beg a favor."

"You don't need to beg anything from me Uncle Tausau," Nyrielle said, holding her hands out to take his small, dexterous hands in hers, lifting him up off the ground. "You fought hard for me tonight," she said, gently running a hand over his bloodied fur. "Whatever you need, just ask."

"Four of my progeny died tonight, your Eternity," Tausau said with more heat in his voice than he'd meant to use. His ears twitched in frustration as feelings that had been long dead warred within his chest. He'd known when he joined Nyrielle that some of his progeny would die, many of them were weak even by the standards of ordinary Eldritch warriors, much less vampires, but he hadn't expected them to fall so soon, before even reaching the Vale of Mists.

"We've taken three off the walls," he continued in a voice that shook with the strain of holding back the tears he wasn't willing to let fall yet. "But Laya fell into the chasm below. If we cannot retrieve her body by sunrise..."

"I understand," Nyrielle said, interrupting her granduncle before he could continue. If they didn't retrieve her by sunrise, her body would burn to ash the moment the first rays of light fell into the chasm below, leaving nothing to be retrieved the next day.

"Do you have a tradition for your progeny?" Nyrielle asked gently. The traditions for handling the dead among the Eldritch varied greatly by nation and clan, and vampires were no different. Some clung to the traditions they'd known in life while others invented entirely new traditions to honor those who finally tumbled into the abyss from the edge of the blade between life and death they'd danced on as vampires.

"The Clanless never knew the kindness or acceptance of their birth families," Tausau said softly. "Near my castle, there's a lake deep enough that light won't reach the bottom. We follow the tradition of the ancient clan, sending our dead out to the deepest part of the lake on a boat before sinking it so their bones can rest among their siblings who died before them."

"You've been taking in the Clanless for centuries," Nyrielle said, hesitating before she asked the question that might seem insensitive. "Will Laya have a large family waiting for her?"

"She will," Tausau said, his face crumbling as the dam holding back his tears finally burst. "Not just those who survived to become my progeny, but all the ones who died in the attempt as well. When this is over... I'll take them all home..."

"I'll find her," Nyrielle promised, folding her arms around her weeping uncle and wrapping her soft wings around his large, bearish frame. "And until you can return her to her family, she can rest in Grandsire Torbin's crypt. My family will watch over yours for as long as you need."

Atop the walls, Savis watched his younger brother crumple into Nyrielle's comforting embrace with a complicated expression on his face. Years ago, he would have known what to do to comfort the younger vampire in times like this.

As the first and strongest among Hamdi's progeny, he had once cared for all of his siblings like true family, but he'd been closer to Tausau and Torbin than any of the others that came along in the centuries that followed.

But now, as he watched his soldiers clear away the bodies of their own fallen he felt nothing but frustration that they had died in battle against an ally, weakening them before they could bury their claws in the flesh of the humans Nyrielle had brought them here to fight.

He'd forgotten, he realized, what it meant to mourn a loss. Frustration he could understand, shame and anger as well. But when was the last time he mourned? He didn't know, but he was certain it had been so long ago that Nyrielle was little more than a child at the time. Until today, that hadn't bothered him.

Yet now, standing atop the walls and watching Tausau and Lady Nyrielle share a tender moment he realized that there was another feeling in his heart that hadn't quite died yet. Now, more than ever in the past several centuries, Savis felt alone.

In High Fen City, he'd looked down on Tausau when his younger brother said that Lady Nyrielle might one day share the gift with him that she'd shared with Tausau. Now, he was beginning to wonder what he might need to do to receive that blessing from her as well.

Chapter 444: Neither Living Nor Dead

Within the cold, icy world of his mind, Hauke struggled against the chains that bound him. He needed to find a way. Any way, to break free of the shackles that Eraric had placed on him. His wrists ached and blood dripped from his ankles but nothing he did produced any change in the thick chains of ice that kept him stretched between two pillars of ice as though he were a skin hung for drying.

Worse, since the ancestors were torn away from him, he'd come to a cruel, sickening realization. Eraric had used, at most, one fifth of Hauke's own strength to bind him within his own mind, preventing him from interfering with the battle between the others and Ashlynn. But now that the ancestors were gone, Eraric's lingering sorcery could use as much of Hauke's energy as it needed to.

At the moment, Hauke felt like he'd been wrung out like a wet rag, leaving very little energy left within his body to power the trap. But rather than fading away with time, as his body slowly began to recover, the chains actually felt thicker. Right now, it seemed like the chains were the weakest they would ever be.

The idea that the bindings would only grow worse over time was enough to push the young Frost Walker lord well beyond his limits, thrashing about wildly in an effort to free even a single arm or leg. Just breaking one limb free would let him use more strength against the others but so far, the only thing he had accomplished was to add a thin layer of frozen blood to the links of the icy chains around his wrists and ankles.

"AAAAARGGGG! WHY. WON'T. YOU. BREAAAAK!"

Despite his cries of fury, the ice cave that had once been host to five additional minds remained completely still and silent but for the fading echoes of his own screams. The chains didn't care for his shouting and there was no one else capable of hearing it.

As his cries faded into breathless sobs, Hauke became aware of a faint sound. More of a vibration through the floor of his mental prison than an actual sound, but carrying with it the occasional - CRUNCH- of footfalls breaking through fragile ice. The sensation grew stronger, accompanied by muffled sounds that seemed to come from impossibly far away, understandable only when he strained the limits of his hearing.

Voices! The sounds were faint and unfamiliar at first, but as they grew closer, he was certain that someone was close, perhaps examining his body while they spoke to someone else.

The far wall of his icy prison seemed to dim momentarily, as though a vast shadow had fallen across the world. Through his physical eyes, the eyes he could no longer control, a figure that was both enchanting and intimidating moved into his field of vision.

"Lady Nyrielle!" Hauke cried, instantly recognizing her pale features and imposing black wings as well as the aura of darkness that spilled from her, casting even the world within his mind into dark shadows, as if he had been enveloped by an infinitely dark abyss.

He wished she could hear his voice or sense his condition as he called her name again and again. She was famed as a powerful sorceress, so surely she could do something for him. For a moment, his heart leapt with joy as she seemed to linger above him, but rather than examining the sorcery that held him prisoner, she instead backed away from him, speaking to someone he couldn't see.

"...Do you know the Artificer Erkembalt and the leader of the Sorcerers of Sundered Earth, Aspakos?" Hauke heard Lady Nyrielle say a few moments later, as she gave instructions to the person he couldn't see.

The name 'Erkembalt' sent a chill down Hauke's spine, and his horn turned an ugly, dark purple as he trembled against the chains. Madame Zedya hadn't hidden their intentions when they left. Erkembalt was the name of the Artificer whom they intended to recruit to turn the severed horns of Paulus and Torsten into powerful weapons.

Did everyone think he was dead already? Was she preparing to have his iridescent horn carved from his head as punishment for what the ancestors had done?

"No, no, please! Please," he begged, even though she clearly couldn't hear him. "It's not my fault! I didn't want to harm anyone! Please," he said with hot tears forming in his eyes. "Please..."

"...And perhaps tools to break a curse..."

Nyrielle's words cut through Hauke's sobs like a knife, jolting him out of his momentary panic as he realized she had realized something was wrong. She wasn't summoning Erkembalt to harvest his horn but to break him free!

Each moment that passed while Hauke awaited the arrival of the artificer and sorcerer felt like hours, but he forced his racing heart to still and ceased his struggle against the chains. They knew something was wrong, and they were going to do something to help him. Knowing just that much was enough to give him tremendous comfort.

Moments later, his heart leapt with joy when he heard a new voice addressing Lady Nyrielle, only to plummet moments later when he realized that not only did the voice belong to someone other than the artificer and sorcerer who were supposed to break his curse, but the news it brought was tragic beyond words.

"...Four of my progeny died tonight, your Eternity."

A vampire had lost four of their children in the battle tonight. The number alone was shocking, but the longer Hauke listened to Tausau and Nyrielle speak, the dimmer his horn grew and the heavier his heart felt.

One vampire had lost four of their children in battle. How many of his clansmen had fallen? How many of Nyrielle's other soldiers had died? During the battle, after the walls of ice shattered, Hauke noticed a strange human holding Heila's bloodied figure, but was it because she had survived the attack of the ancestors?

Or was that strange man like this Tausau, holding the body of someone who had died while he tried to process his own grief?

Chapter 445: For The Rest Of His Days

The notion that he might have killed little Heila, the sweet, dedicated servant who had once helped the fallen Andrus to catch a giant fish from beneath the ice, unleashed a wave of cracks in the ice that formed Hauke's mental world. All this time, he'd thought she survived, that things might still be all right, that he could be forgiven for what the ancestors had done with his body, but if Heila had died...

No, even if Heila survived, would she ever look at him again with the eyes of wonder she'd possessed when he built an ice house on the lake that day? Would she tremble in excitement while helping to haul a giant sturgeon above the ice?

As the son of Lord Ritchel and the first Frost Walker born with an iridescent horn in several generations, Hauke had few people he could consider friends. He'd hoped that Ashlynn and Heila would be two friends that he could grow alongside for years, especially when he learned that Heila had become the Willow Witch.

The ancestors had shown him just how much power he could wield by mastering his iridescent horn, and while he might never rival the Mother of Trees, he was certain that he could match up to Heila, maybe even enough to join Ashlynn's coven... But now, even if they freed him from these chains, he would be trapped by the hurt and resentment created by what the ancestors, no, by what he had done to them today.

"Artificer Erkembalt, Master Aspakos," Nyrielle said, her words interrupting Hauke's downward spiral. "Something important requires my attention before the sun rises. This is Hauke, he is Lord Ritchel's son and in a sense, the one responsible for tonight's bloodshed," she said, immediately making it clear that she expected Hauke to bear at least a portion of the blame for what happened tonight.

"Ashlynn says that he was possessed by the spirits of his ancestors," Nyrielle continued in a voice that was cold, clipped, and carried a trace of impatience. "The Fangs of Death used those horns to create Blood Golems that allowed them to live on after death, more fully than a normal Frost Walker ancestor, and the iridescent horns contain fearsome power on their own."

"Do you know what happened to the young lad?" Erkembalt asked as his face suddenly filled Hauke's vision. The man's whiskers twitched, and his silver-rimmed spectacles glowed with a faint trace of energy as he studied the fallen Frost Walker, peeling his eyes open even wider and making 'mmm, mmmhh' sounds as he worked.

"That is for you to determine," Nyrielle said as she unfurled her dark wings. "Ashlynn cut him free of the spirits that possessed him, but perhaps the real Hauke is already dead, or ground away into fragments so miniscule that he may never be made whole again. His body is alive, but whether or not there is anything left of the person he once was..." her voice trailed off as she let out a heavy sigh.

"If he is already dead, then the body should follow the soul," Nyrielle pronounced coldly. "But if he is alive and bound by some form of curse, then I expect that my vaunted Breaker of Curses can release him from it, even if only a portion of him remains."

"And these horns and the sword?" a third, distant voice asked, likely belonging to the sorcerer Aspakos. "You want us to take them as prizes?"

"That remains to be seen," Nyrielle said. "Both are dangerous. For now, seal them away. Tomorrow night, we can decide what should be done with them. The Frost Walkers are our conquered foes," Nyrielle added. "Once you have secured these dangerous relics, you may bring Hauke inside their fortress to examine him, but gentlemen, make no mistake."

"Hauke is a prisoner, whether you cure him or not," she said in a voice much colder than the mountain air. "Ashlynn and Heila are recovering from their wounds, but Hauke is not to be placed anywhere near them. You can examine him from within the confines of a cell."

"As you will, Your Eternity," the sorcerer said as his dark, feathered countenance and cracked beak entered Hauke's vision. "At the very least, this man has been used as a tool of our enemies. We will not harm him until he has been judged, but I will go one step further. Should we find a method of treating him, we will not apply it until you give us leave to do so. Perhaps, this state that he's in, neither alive nor dead, is a fitting punishment for his crimes. If that is your judgment, then he will be left as is for the remainder of his days."

"...for the rest of his days..."

The words fell on Hauke's struggling spirit like an avalanche, crushing his hopes and sapping away his strength to fight back against his slowly strengthening chains. The shadows in the world of his mind receded as Nyrielle soared into the night sky, likely to retrieve the body of the fallen vampire Laya, but all Hauke could hear was the resounding echo of the sorcerer's last words.

"...for the rest of his days..."

Outside, he could hear the two men discussing as Erkembalt separated the ancestor's horns from each other and placed them into darksteel lined wooden boxes one by one, ensuring that even if the ancestors remained connected to each other after Ashlynn severed their bond with Hauke, they would become isolated and unable to conspire to act once more on the world of the living.

"Ha, ha ha," Hauke chuckled as he heard the man who had carved Paulus's horn into a blade for Heila talking about keeping each of his ancestors walled away from each other. The ancestors had been fused together for centuries in their flooded ancestral cave, but now, they were little different from him.

Trapped. Isolated and unable to speak to anyone in the outside world. It was cruel, but after everything they had done, Hauke couldn't help but laugh until the walls of the icy prison within his mind echoed with thundering laughter.

If he had to be trapped all by himself, alone in his mind for the rest of his days... at least he wasn't the only one. At least the people who had done this to him could share the same sad fate, at least until their horns crumbled away.

The thought of their horns crumbling away brought Hauke's laughter to a sudden stop. They'd already told him that even with his help, they could hang on for a few years at most before the magic that sustained them crumbled away, leaving him alone to carry on their legacy.

But if their horns crumbled away in a few years, how long would he last? How much longer would he survive like this? Perhaps his torment would last even longer than his body would, enduring as long as his horn survived.... Centuries, until his horn crumbled away.

"...for the rest of his days..."

His hands formed into fists, and his horn began to glow a faint, determined shade of blue. Whether these sorcerers would help him or not, he couldn't allow himself to be trapped here like this forever. One way or another, he had to break free!

Chapter 446: Wounded Witches

Hours later, with little more than two hours before the sun would cast its harsh rays on the icy world of the High Pass, Nyrielle finally approached the chambers that Talauia had converted into a small clinic for Ashlynn and Heila.

The corridors leading here were lined with soldiers, many of them gladiators who had been defeated by Heila in the arena of the High Fen. Once, they had been the diminutive witch's opponents, but many of them had come to possess a deep respect for the small, horned woman who fought with everything she had.

Now, hearing that something had finally brought her down, none of them felt even the slightest satisfaction at seeing the woman who defeated them suffer a similar fate. Instead, many shuffled nervously where they stood, adjusting their weapons in their sheaths or repeatedly checking the straps of their armor as if to ensure that it was still buckled firmly in place.

None of them had fought against the Frost Walkers. That honor had gone to Tausau's Mongrel Horde and Savis's Black Wolf Brigade. The implication that some of the greatest gladiators of High Fen's current generation weren't strong enough to fight in this battle spurred many more of them than were needed to show up here, where they could stand and protect the woman to whom they'd pledged their service...

But many of them wondered, what if their leaders had been right? What if they really weren't strong enough to face the Frost Walkers at their strongest?

"Kurtz," Nyrielle said, more warmly than she'd spoken while outside the fortress, when she spotted a familiar figure standing next to the door. "Did you arrange all this?"

"Your Eternity," the horned gladiator said, dropping to one knee as soon as he realized Nyrielle was addressing him. "Madame Zedy and Captain Lennart have taken charge of securing the fortress. I asked a few of the big fellows to join me," he explained, gesturing to a pair of nearby Tuscan mercenaries. "The rest just volunteered."

"See that some of your men are able to rest, Mister Kurtz," Nyrielle said as she brushed past Heila's loyal guard. "You are guarding my darling Ashlynn as well as your Lady Heila. The day is always more dangerous than the night," she said, entering the room and closing the door without waiting for a reply.

While the hall outside felt crowded with so many guardians, only a select few had been allowed inside while the Thistle Witch tended to her patients. To one side, Ignatious sat on a simple folding chair, holding Heila's hands as she slept peacefully under a large pile of furs.

At the foot of the oversized bed, another small figure lay in an undignified heap, half covered by a small blanket of her own. Emmie had worked hard to fetch Heila's things, helping Talauia to dress the Willow Witch in fresh clothes for sleeping and even following the Thistle Witch's every direction to help wash away the blood and dirt of the battle while Talauia tended to her wounds but the night had been long and the young squire finally collapsed before she could return to a room of her own.

When Nyrielle examined Heila closely, it was clear that the diminutive witch's complexion had improved under Talauia's care, but she was still far too pale, with cheeks that looked sunken and a brow that trembled with the worries that haunted her sleep.

Ashlynn, on the other hand, looked much, much worse for wear. When Nyrielle entered the room, Virve and Talauia were carefully laying a thick fur blanket over Ashlynn's torso, but her arms and legs were both left uncovered. Thick bandages wrapped around her feet and shins, and a strong smell of medicinal herbs filled the air as Nyrielle approached the foot of the bed.

The further up Nyrielle looked, the more her heart ached at the sight of her beloved. Wooden braces had been secured to her right arm, and bandages extended from the tips of her fingers all the way to her shoulders. Even more bandages circled her torso, and a thin layer of medicinal paste covered her frost-burned cheeks.

And yet, despite the severity of these wounds, Ashlynn seemed to be breathing easily. Her face looked calm and composed, as if she had set down her worries when Nyrielle arrived. The echo of her heartbeat in Nyrielle's chest felt fainter than it should, but still beat with a strong, steady pulse.

"Thank you, Thistle Witch," Nyrielle said, folding away her wings and withdrawing as much of her dark aura as she could in this hostile place. "For everything you've done for her."

"Not enough, not enough," Talauai said, shaking her head while her wings trembled with anxiety. "Used up too much, and there's no life here to give to her. No trees or plants to help her heal. If she wasn't, if she wasn't your Seneschal," the anxious witch forced herself to admit. "She'd have died, died from these wounds."

"That bad?" Nyrielle said, shocked at the Thistle Witch's assessment. "I didn't think that even ancient spirits could manifest the strength to hurt her so badly."

"She did it to herself, did some of it to herself, at least," Talauia explained, gesturing at Ashlynn's right arm and the brace that held it firmly in place. "That sword, that flaming sword," she added, pointing at a box in the corner of the room behind Ignatious. "It burned her. Her gloves were wet and frozen, but the sword boiled the water inside her glove. She, she cooked her own hand just to hold that cursed sword!"

"Then, the hot and cold, hot and cold, it shattered her arm," the witch continued. "She has burns and frost burns on the same arm and her torso too. Her feet were frozen black and blue, and she bled in so many, so many places," Talauia said, tears filling her multifaceted amethyst eyes.

"When the sun rises, I want to put her in a wagon, put her in a wagon and take her to the forest in the Vale," she said firmly as she hovered protectively over Ashlynn. "She needs to heal, needs the forest to fully heal."

"I'm sure she does," Nyrielle said, reaching out to gently stroke her lover's hair. "But not in the morning. Tomorrow night, we'll sit in judgment of Hauke and the Frost Walkers. She needs to be there."

"No she doesn't, no she doesn't!" Talauia insisted, circling around the bed to confront Nyrielle directly. "Auntie Ashlynn doesn't need to be there. You can be there. You're still stronger than her, you can force the Frost Walkers to do whatever you need.

"And you can make them pay, can make them pay for doing this to her," she cried, her wings beating fast enough to fill the room with a high-pitched hum.

Chapter 447: Honoring Her or Respecting Her?

"It's true that I'm strong enough," Nyrielle acknowledged. "But that doesn't mean she doesn't need to be there. "Tonight is her victory, and yours as well I suppose, since you defeated Lord Ritchel and his guards. Tomorrow, we must settle matters before we can leave, and her voice must be heard."

"Why? Why does she have to speak?" Talauia asked. "You're her 'Mistress' aren't you? Auntie Ashlynn says that she's like your wife, that forming a pact with you was like marrying you. So if you're married to her then you know what she wants. You know what she'd say," the agitated witch said, each word coming faster and faster than the one before it.

"So honor her," Talauia said, folding her arms across her chest. "If you're married, then honor the woman you married by saying whatever she would say instead of what you want to say. Speak in her place while she goes to get healed!"

Behind her, Virve stood open mouthed in shock, unable to comprehend the audacity of the Thistle Witch to chastise Lady Nyrielle, especially the way she had. For a moment, she'd reached out to pull Talauia back, but once the hovering witch started talking about Ashlynn and Lady Nyrielle being married, she was afraid that if she interrupted, it would only make things worse and so her hand hovered in the air almost entirely forgotten as Virve tried to figure out how she could save the Thistle Witch from her own actions.

Ignatious, on the other hand, was far too familiar with the kind of grief and anxiety that gripped people when their loved ones lay injured in the healer's tent. He'd seen it from brothers in arms during the war, from mothers fretting over their husbands and fathers lashing out with threats of bloody murder for whoever had hurt their sons. And now, seeing that same uncontrolled outpouring from the Thistle Witch told him everything he needed to know about how important Ashlynn was to the older witch.

"Madame Talauai," Ignatious said calmly, giving Heila's hand a soothing squeeze as he spoke before Nyrielle could respond. "Mistress Nyrielle loves Lady Ashlynn more than life itself. So if she needs Ashlynn here tomorrow night, before you scold her, you should ask her why. You both care for Lady Ashlynn, so let that be a bridge between you instead of a bone of contention."

"It seems my wayward progeny has remembered that he's a priest," Nyrielle said, taking a deep breath in the moment that Ignatious had given her and forcing herself to respond calmly. Without realizing it, her hands had already elongated into sharp claws, and she'd been ready to put the Thistle Witch in her place with the simple act of superior strength that she seemed to feel would be so effective.

But Ignatious was right. They both cared for Ashlynn, and it was hard to blame the agitated witch for trying to do the best she could to heal the person they both cared for.

"You say I should honor her," Nyrielle said. "But what I'm trying to do is much, much harder than that. I'm trying to respect her, and respect her wishes," she said, stepping forward to take a place at Ashlynn's bedside. Slowly, Nyrielle sliced open the tip of her finger and used it to draw a pair of sharp, angular glyphs on Ashlynn's brow.

"You say I should speak the words she would speak, but I do not know them," Nyrielle said softly. "She wants to try a different way. A way that's much, much harder than a simple contest of strength and dominance. She wants to do what I haven't been able to do for centuries, and part of that has to be done tomorrow night."

"Blood Pact: Vitality's Gift," Nyrielle intoned, surrounding herself and Ashlynn with a brilliant crimson glow as she poured all of the strength she could offer into Ashlynn's body. It wouldn't be enough to heal Ashlynn's wounds, not when those wounds covered so much of her body, but by the time night fell again, she would likely be strong enough to join Nyrielle in holding court, even if she had to be carried there.

When the glow faded, Nyrielle's face looked pale and drawn, and her fangs had begun peeking out from her pale, thin lips. The transformation was so sudden that both Virve and Talauia retreated in shock and a small measure of fear before Virve strode forward to kneel at Nyrielle's feet.

"My Lady," she said, bowing her head low. "I should have been at Lady Ashlynn's side tonight. I failed her and failed in the mission you gave me. My blood and life are yours to claim if it will slake your thirst and help you to care for Lady Ashlynn," she said, turning her head to the side and baring her neck.

"I've already given Ashlynn the strength she needs," Nyrielle explained. "Ashlynn has always been able to draw on my strength through our bond in times of great need, but she refuses to do so, even when she is pushed to this extent, because she understands the toll it takes on me. This is not healing, but since she cannot draw upon the strength of the forest to accelerate her own recovery, and she will not willingly draw on me, then just this once, I will do this for her, even if she doesn't ask."

"Besides, if I feed from you," Nyrielle said, turning toward the door and visibly holding herself back from pouncing on Virve's exposed neck. "Who will protect my darling while the sun is up? Watch over her, Virve. There are others more deserving of becoming my meal tonight," she said, turning away from Ashlynn and darting through the door in a cloud of dark, figure-shrouding mist as she began to hunt.

With a -THUMP-, Talauia's wings stopped beating as she dropped to the ground, landing flat on her backside while her mind finally caught up to how close she'd come to turning herself into Nyrielle's next meal. It took several minutes before her heart calmed enough for her to get back to her feet and check on Ashlynn's health.

The wounds didn't look much better, but when Talauia pulled back the bandages, she found a faint, crimson glow clinging to Ashlynn's frost-burned flesh, slowly infusing it with the strength that Nyrielle had shared with her lover. And, more importantly, she found a faint smile on Ashlynn's face, as if she were wrapped in her lover's tender embrace and enjoying blissful dreams.

Chapter 448: For A Taste Of Home

For days, an oppressive gloom had settled over Lothian March. The rains often came in the morning, filling the air with a sodden mist that seeped into everything, clinging until well past midday and casting a pall over the entire day. Tempers grew short across the march, and in Lothian City, the ale-houses quickly became overcrowded with people looking for a place to warm their bellies and escape the gloom.

Along one wall, a dark-haired youth moved with surprising grace as he dodged the press of wagon drivers, off-duty soldiers, and merchants that filled one of the most popular ale houses in the shadow of Lothian Manor.

His clothing was neat and well maintained with a dark maroon tunic that had been unlaced enough to reveal a hint of his pale, muscular chest and black breeches so tight that they left some patrons who glimpsed the youth wondering if he'd come to advertise 'services' that the Church was known to frown upon.

Thankfully, few people were paying attention to the young man who seemed to fade in and out of the dark shadows at the edges of the ale house while someone at the bar was garnering significantly more attention, though if the young man was going to learn anything useful this evening it appeared that he would have to pull the man at the bar away from his currently floundering venture.

"I'm telling you," a coarse man with a broken nose was yelling at the hostess behind the counter. "I have two short casks, fresh from Blackwell City. Pear wine! Genuine Blackwell County pears, aged over a year. You don't know how hard it is to get them all the way here when every wagon is loaded up full for the journey. A sovereign each is a steal! You'll get a silver penny a cup or more for them."

"Hogs piss," the woman behind the bar spat, snapping a wet rag at the broken-nosed man. "No one 'ere will pay a silver penny for a cup of anything. 'Sides, you think this lot can tell the difference 'tween hard apple cider and Blackwell Pear wine? Ey boys!" the woman shouted. "Three snips for a cider, two snips for an ale, or a penny for some fine, lordly wine? Who wants t' pretend t' be a rich man t'night?"

"Booo!"

"Fer a silver penny, does the wine come wit you, Bonnie?" a drunken man at the bar said, raising his head up and fumbling for his purse. "I'll buy two cups if it buys your bed to go wit' it!"

"Oy!" another man at the bar shouted, slamming a fist into the drunken man's ribs. "Don't go is-sulting Bonnie that way. Five silver pennies at least! One for your wine, one for her wine, one for her bed, one for her..."

"Oy, shut it all of you!" Bonnie snapped, turning back to the broken-nosed wagon driver and pointing her finger at his weathered face. "You're a fool, Cen. If you wanted t' smuggle something back from yer trip all t' way t' Blackwell, you shoulda brought back something common folk will buy. Or go try one of them fancy inns where the moneyed men drink. Why is you selling t' me anyway?"

"Because the moneyed men in Cedar Square won't buy wine without a stamp and seal," Marcel said smoothly, sliding through the crowd to lean against the bar next to Cen. "Laughed you out, didn't they?"

"No, none of that!" Cen said, his face turning crimson with embarrassment as he recalled the way the polished servants at those upscale inns looked down on him as if they were lords themselves instead of common men like him. "I'm just sweet on Bonnie 'ere and..."

"That's enough, friend," Marcel said, wrapping an arm around the man's shoulder and pulling him back before Bonnie could snap him with her towel again. "How about this," he said, flashing a charming smile that made him look even younger and more coy. "I don't have two sovereigns to rub together, but I might manage a small bag of silver for your wine if it's real."

"A pitcher of cider and two cups," the youthful-looking vampire said, winking at Bonnie and bouncing a silver penny off the counter before he turned back to the wagon driver. "And I'll hear your story of how you got this wine and smuggled it all the way here without getting whipped by Young Lord Owain's wagon master."

"You better speak the truth," he added with a look that turned from playful to surprisingly dangerous in an instant before becoming playful again. "Tall tales are only for bedroom deeds, not business."

"No tall tales," Cen said, stepping back awkwardly and trying to restrain himself from scrubbing away the feeling of the young man's touch. After all, this might be the only chance he had to sell his wine before someone ran across his stash, and he'd already wasted two days trying to find a rich snob to buy it. It wouldn't do to offend a man with money just because he was buggered that way.

"Just a good bit of fortune and the thought that something common there might be worth something here," he said, tapping on his temple.

"Then let's talk about your travels and toast to our dealings," Marcel said as he took the pitcher and cups from Bonnie and guided the wagon driver to a table as far from the bar as he could find a place to talk. The shadows around the table grew deeper as he approached, but few, if any, were sober enough to notice. With a flourish of his long, drapy sleeves, Marcell gestured for the man to take a seat, pouring a cup of cider for each of them while adding a few drops of something extra to the wagon driver's cup.

More than half an hour later, Cen's face was flushed and he was struggling to remember what he had already said but the charming young man across from him had already placed a pouch full of silver pennies on the table and the conversation seemed to be going well, he just needed to keep answering questions about their trip and the wine would be sold in no time!

"So, you were saying that some of the merchants are going to be knighted?" Marcel asked, toying with an empty cup in his hand. By now, he had a rough understanding of how Owain's negotiations had gone, and it seemed like Lady Ashlynn's letters to the guild masters had achieved their goals and more.

Not only had Owain struggled to secure the support of the merchant guilds, but he'd also been forced to grant titles and lands to the four people that Ashlynn most wanted to bring to Lothian March.

Unfortunately, two of the four remained in Blackwell City while the others came to finalize the terms of the deal, but just knowing that Master Isabell, the engineer, and Master Tiernan, the ironmonger, were present would give Ashlynn a substantial advantage when she began to make her moves in Lothian March.

"They are, lucky bathtards," Cen slurred. "That Isabell, she's real particular 'bout everthing, not one that you can take for a toss in the stables ya' know? Last fellow what tried got her hat pin in his hand for being handsy because she's a picky lady that don't want just anyone or anything or... what was I saying?"

"That she's very particular," Marcel said, smiling as he refilled the other man's cup. By morning, Cen would no doubt have a horrible headache, and he'd curse the day he let Marcel pour for him but he was unlikely to remember anything beyond the fat bag of silver he'd received for his troubles. The few drops of greatly diluted venom he'd added to the wagon driver's drink would ensure that his memories of the past few hours would fade like dimly remembered dreams once he finally fell asleep.

"So particular," Cen continued after taking a gulp of his cider. "She and that other fellow, maybe he's the one ruffling her skirts, he's a muscular sort for a rich man. You think she likes that type? The type with the big muscles under the silk shirts? You know I could put on a silk shirt and..."

"Cen," Marcel interrupted. "What was she being so particular about?"

"What? Her lands," Cen said. Hadn't he already explained this part? "Lord Owain, he wants her to take her lands in Hanrahan Barony, nearest to Airgead Mountain. She wants to be close to Lothian City, away from the demons and the danger. I hear the Marquis his self had t' step in t' make her an offer, but she's particular, right? Won't sign anything until she sees her new lands. She and her muscle-silk man both, coming to inspect their lands."

"I see," Marcel said with a slight smile. If they were touring the countryside, there might be an opportunity to arrange a meeting... "Tell me, Cen, will you be driving them around the countryside?"

"Me? Does this nose belong on your face? My face? The face of a man what drives fancy carriages for knights and nobles?" Cen rambled. "No, that bastard Rudin gets to show the pretty lady around, and he doesn't even have almost any muscles..."

"You're a good man, Cen," Marcel said, feeling like he'd reached the limit of what he could learn from the wagon driver. It was time to move on to his next target before he hid himself away during the daylight hours.

"Come," he said, helping the drunken man to his feet. "Show me where you stashed this Blackwell pear wine," he added, guiding the man toward the door. The wine likely wasn't very good by the standards of the Blackwell family, but after nearly half a year, he imagined that Lady Ashlynn would appreciate a taste from home. And who knew? By the time she arrived, he may even have arranged another gift from home for her if he could find a way to meet with Masters Isabell and Tiernan.

The night outside might have been gloomy and grey, but for Marcel, it looked as bright as pockets full of silver and gold.

Chapter 449: Shells and Glass

That same night, in a warmly lit dining room adjoining Owain's quarters in the Lothian Manor, Owain gave a dramatic bow of welcome as he greeted his guest for the evening. After months of chasing ghosts through the brothels and seedier districts of Blackwell City, he was finally once again in the presence of the genuine Jocelynn Blackwell.

Seeing her again made the long months in Blackwell County feel like exile, toiling away without the sight of the sun. Her soft blonde hair shined like spun gold, and she carried herself with the natural confidence of her impressive height, standing tall enough that few men in court could look down on her.

She moved with a grace and elegance that no common or even uncommon whore could immitate, as her pale blue dress clung to a classically proportioned figure that struck the perfect balance countless artists sought to capture in their portraits of noble ladies. And when she smiled at him, the gloom that had settled over his heart lifted like fog retreating before the sun.

"My Lady Jocelynn," he said, extending his hand to escort her into the dining room. The servants had already prepared their feast for the evening before he'd sent them away. Tonight, he would dine privately with the woman he longed to possess more than any other. "I've prepared something special for us this evening," he said in a voice that was rough with barely contained desire.

Ever since his return two nights ago, he'd been bound to a formal dance of banquets, working lunches, and even garden tea parties where he introduced Master Isabell to the wives and daughters of the local barons, despite the fact that there was nothing blooming in the gardens and they never left the covered gazebo to stroll between the seemingly endless cups of tea.

Everything had been so stiff, formal, and public that he didn't dare greet Jocelynn the way he wanted to, with a firm embrace and passionate kiss, but even now that they were alone, he had to restrain his pulsing desires.

Soon, they would announce the tragic death of Ashlynn Blackwell in labor. Only afterward could he be seen to grow close to her younger sister, and if he touched her now, he was afraid that he wouldn't be able to hold himself back when it mattered. Soon, he would have his reward for all of the suffering he'd endured since the disastrous night he married Ashlynn, washing it away with the sweet taste of her youthful sister, but until then, he could only court Jocelynn covertly in private moments like this.

"My hero," Jocelynn said, taking his arm and pressing her modest bosom against it as she pressed close enough to him to feel the warmth of his body through the fabric of their clothing. She was tall enough that lesser men could never measure up to her, but next to Owain's mighty frame, she felt secure and protected by his knightly stature and powerful physique. "You must have suffered away from home for so long," she said, gazing up at him with limpid eyes the color of seafoam. "I hope the journey wasn't too hard on you."

"Nothing was harder on me than being away from your radiant beauty," Owain said, giving her a bright smile that melted her heart and warmed her to her toes. "I brought a gift for you," he added, pulling a small, velvet-lined wooden box from his tunic and presenting it to her with a flourish. "I'm told these have special meaning in Blackwell County."

Jocelynn's heart leaped at his words, and her fingers trembled as she took the slender box from his hands. There were few traditions in Blackwell County that involved jewelry, but there was one that would fit in just such a box.

Among noblemen, a man who intended to court a woman would present her with a strand of pearls and jewels. The center point of the necklace should be the largest pearl of the strand, symbolizing the light of the Holy Lord of Light shining on their union. After that, jewels of two colors that represented the couple would alternate with an increasing number of pearls, symbolizing the ever-growing length of time their relationship would endure.

When she opened the box, however, her heart sank, and she struggled to keep a look of disappointment from appearing on her face. Owain had, indeed, found her a necklace that spoke of a couple's love, but in place of lustrous pearls, the strand contained simple seashells, while the jewels had been replaced with bits of polished sea glass in common green and brown.

"It, it's lovely," Jocelynn said, closing the box and setting it aside. "But it can't compare to how lovely it is to see you again, my hero," she said, lightly touching his arm and feeling the strength of his muscles beneath the finely woven tunic. "And the feast is an even greater treat," she said, noticing a hearty fish stew and fillets of pickled herring set out alongside local lamb and venison sausage. "Shall I serve you, my Owain?" she said, stepping up close to him and fluttering her eyes slightly before glancing away, as if she was embarrassed to be so close to him while they were alone.

"Please," Owain said, taking a seat and doing his best to pretend he hadn't noticed her disappointment. It was entirely his father's fault! Negotiations with the merchants had dragged on for months, but when he finally wrote to his father to resolve the points of contention, his father only sent back instructions, without sending any additional pocket money for comforts during his journey.

If not for the stiff, almost obligatory hospitality provided by Count Rhys Blackwell, Owain might have found himself unable to pay for a place to stay and meals for himself and his men toward the end of his mission. The necklace he'd bought from a common street shop had consumed nearly a quarter of his remaining pocket money before they left, and while it would have been an extravagant gift for the daughter of a tradesman, it was far, far beneath Jocelynn's standards, and they both knew it.

"You know," Jocelynn said as she prepared Owain's plate, filling it with a portion of stew and extra venison sausage that she imagined he would prefer after being away from home for so long. "I served a private meal for Father-in-law not long ago," she said, changing the topic to the one she was most desperate to discuss with him after she had met with the Marquis.

"With Father?" Owain asked, pausing as he settled into his chair. "What did Father want with you?"

"You should calm yourself," Jocelynn warned him, pouring a large cup of wine and passing it over before she set the plate before him. "We still have time to obtain everything we desire and more, but we must move quickly before the year ends."

"Just say it, my radiant Jocelynn," Owain said as a pit of dread formed in his stomach. He'd already endured one tongue lashing from his father for the number of concessions he'd made to the merchant guilds and his failure to secure an agreement in time to prepare for next year's campaign season. His supposed 'blunders' had, in his father's eyes, cost them an entire year of delays, and the Marquis hadn't been restrained about voicing his disappointment with Owain in private.

"Father-in-law, he," Jocelynn started, hesitating slightly and biting her lip. "He is considering naming your brother Loman as his heir," she said in a rush as she watched Owain's face begin to darken. "And he, he wants me to let Loman court me in the spring."

"He WHAT!?" Owain exploded, his face turning purple in rage. "How dare he give my throne away! And to offer up my bride as Loman's prize when he's done nothing to deserve you... Does he intend to take everything from me?"

"What else did he say?" Owain asked, rounding on Jocelynn and clutching the knife beside his plate in a clenched fist. "And what did you say to his offer?"

Chapter 450: Heart's Desires

For a moment, Jocelynn was frozen, like a deer startled by hunters, as she looked at Owain's furious gaze and the knife gripped firmly in his right fist. Looking at him, her mind flashed back to a time several months ago, at the Summer Villa, when she asked if her sister suffered before she died.

"Of course she didn't suffer," Owain had told her, as he stroked Jocelynn's hair. "She may have been a witch, but for a few hours, she was my wife. I gave her a clean death. A single stroke of my sword. Swift, merciful. She was your sister after all," he said gently. "She deserved that much."

"...a single stroke of my sword..."

The knife in Owain's hand filled her vision, and she wondered if he could kill her with a single stroke of his blade.

"Did she use witchcraft on you?" Jocelynn had asked that night, so many months ago. "If she hurt you in any way..."

"As if I would give a witch the chance," Owain said fiercely, as if he was insulted that Ashlynn could threaten him in any way, even with the powers of witchcraft.

"... as if I would give her the chance..."

The words echoed through Jocelynn's mind, and for a moment, her world trembled as Owain's furious gaze broke open the lock on her doubts about what had happened that night between him and her sister. But now wasn't the time to doubt, nor even the time to ask. Now, as she saw his normally warm gaze growing colder by the second, she had to act before... before he decided not to give her a chance.

"My lord," Jocelynn said, dropping to one knee beside him, resting both her hands on his knee and leaning forward to look up at him through quivering lashes. "You know my heart is yours, now and forever more. Loman is kind, handsome even," she admitted, only to tremble when she saw Owain's eyes narrow at her honest appraisal of his brother.

"But he is no hero," she added quickly. "He cannot lead the people of Lothian March, no the future Lothian Duchy, because he lacks your strength, your drive, and your courage," she said, piling up heartfelt praises on the man she loved lest he doubt her genuine affection. "No man in the world is more perfect than you, my lord," she said, lowering her gaze to the floor as if she couldn't bear to see him looking at her with hostility. "I would never betray our love," she added softly.

For what felt like an eternity, Owain said nothing, simply looking down at the kneeling figure of Jocelynn Blackwell as he struggled to suppress the surge of rage that overwhelmed his heart and senses. After all that he'd done for his father, all the battles he'd fought against demons on the Southern Steppe or even in the dark forests outside the Vale of Mists, after traveling the entire breadth of the country just to negotiate with merchants on his family's behalf...

After everything he had done to show his father that he was strong enough to take up the throne, to win the battles that even his mighty father couldn't, it had come to this. His father wanted to give the throne to the sniveling coward who had run into the safe shelter of the Church's mighty walls while his brother risked life and limb against the demons.

And to make matters worse, he wanted to give away his precious Jocelynn, who adored him like no woman ever had, seeing his courage and brilliance in equal measure. Jocelynn never doubted him, never scolded him, or told him that he should have done something better.

During the long negotiations with those scheming, greedy merchants, she'd written to him several times to reveal their wicked thoughts and seemingly harmless demands that would have placed him at an even greater disadvantage but she'd never once suggested that he should have noticed their devious ploys the way his father insisted he should have. Instead, she made it clear that it was because he was too upright and honorable that the deceitful and power-hungry merchants sought to take advantage of him.

"Oh Jocelynn, my Jocelynn," he said, relaxing his grip on the knife and reaching out to gently stroke her hair in much the same way he had during their conversation at the Summer Villa. Only this time, she wasn't sitting next to him, pressed up against him and filling his nose with the soft scent of the sea that clung to her like an exotic perfume.

This time, she was kneeling before him, offering him a view of her perfect, pert assets nestled in the soft pale silk of her dress like a pair of prized Blackwell pears, and her enticing vulnerability trembled with a hint of intoxicating fear that stirred his desire to conquer her this very moment.

"How could I ever doubt your love," Owan said smoothly, though he made no move to lift her from the floor of the small dining room. Jocelynn was as beautiful and regal as a proud swan, and he would never see her kneel like this in public, but he couldn't resist the feeling of power that swelled within his loins when he looked at such a proud beauty lowering herself to her knees before him.

"Now tell me, by sweet pear," he said with a smile that didn't manage to appear as affectionate as he perhaps thought it did. "How deep is this betrayal? If Father intends to give my throne to Loman, then what does he intend for me?"

"He, he said that the bargain with the Church must be kept," Jocelynn said with a slight catch in her voice as she was caught off guard by the gentle smile on her love's lips that never reached his cold, piercing gaze. "He intends to offer you to the Templars to take Loman's place if Loman ascends the throne."

"But, my lord," she said quickly, hoping that Owain wouldn't misunderstand and lash out at his father because of her words. She was already walking a fine line with the Marquis, and if Owain confronted him directly, she was afraid that even if Owain could still secure the throne, his father might not bless their union.

"He hasn't made up his mind," she explained. "We still have time to help him see that there's only one choice if he wants to see Lothian March reborn as the sixth Duchy. He's given us until the end of the year to show him that we're capable of leading the march to greatness. Together," she said, moving her hands from his knee to his muscular forearm, pulling his hand from her soft hair to the center of her chest so he could feel the heart that beat for him and him alone. "I've been making plans. Would you like to hear them?"

"I told you before, my sweet," Owain said, relishing in the feeling of her soft skin beneath his fingers. "You don't need to worry yourself with such matters. I will find a way to deal with my father, one way or another." Even as the words left his mouth, he recalled how her subtle warnings about the merchant guilds had saved him from several embarrassing missteps. A woman's place wasn't in politics, he reminded himself firmly, and his dealings with the sharp-tongued Isabell only reinforced his opinion, yet somehow, Jocelynn's insights often proved useful in ways he couldn't explain.

"But," he added, pulling her up to her feet and into his lap, delighting in the feeling of her soft thighs and firm buttocks pressing against him. "If it would delight you, my Jocelynn," he said, reaching out for a piece of pickled fish and spearing it with his knife to offer to her. "Then I will listen to the music of your every word while you share your thoughts with me."

He would, of course, be the one to determine which parts of her plan were worth implementing and which were merely the fanciful notions of a woman's mind. After all, listening to her had a way of helping him to form the most successful plans, though he'd never say as much where others might hear. If she'd thought of something that had been beneath his notice, it could save him quite a bit of trouble later on.

"In that case, my lord," Jocelynn said as she pressed herself up against Owain's sculpted chest, feeling his warmth through his tunic and drowning in the rich scent of sweat and sandalwood soap that clung to his body. "I think we should plan a trip to visit your Steward Hugo's father, Baron Hanrahan. He may have just what we need to draw things to a close with the Guild Masters..."