

## The Vampire 451

### Chapter 451: Pride Comes Before the Fall

Sitting in Owain's lap made the meal somewhat awkward, especially when a certain appendage made its presence not so subtly known. At a certain size, some things were simply impossible to ignore, and when Jocelynn realized that it wasn't the hilt of Owain's dagger that pressed up against her thigh, she had to suppress a deeply satisfied smile at the knowledge of the effect she was having on the man she would soon marry.

For now, however, she adjusted her position to face him more directly, one arm draped casually around his broad shoulders while she did her best to outline her plans to exploit the Hanrahan Barony's weaknesses in order to entice the Guild Masters into accepting grants of land at the edges of the Barony.

"Baron Ian Hanrahan hasn't expanded his holdings by more than a few fields of weat in all the years he's been baron," Jocelynn explained, shifting slightly in Owain's lap and drawing a shuddering breath from him in response as her thigh pressed up against what certainly wasn't the hilt of his dagger.

"He's been riding high on the gains from your father's campaign against Airegead Mountain from before I was even born," she continued, pretending not to notice the effect she was having on him as she stretched to reach her own cup of wine, revealing the expanse of her pale bosom in the process. "But his treasury is dwindling every year, and he doesn't have much to offer to his son Bastian beyond a lack of debts."

"You don't have to look further than my Steward Hugo to understand that the Hanrahans are soft," Owain snorted, fighting to maintain his focus on the conversation while Jocelynn squirmed in his lap. "His brother barely survived falling off his own horse for light's sake!"

"They get by because the cat demons rarely leave their mountain," Jocelynn said, sharing the opinion she'd formed after listening to the gossip from the other ladies of the Lothian court. Despite turning thirty, Bastian Hanrahan remained unmarried, and he wasn't known to have collected any trophies from slaying the fiercely predatory cat-like demons who stalked the wilderness of Airegead Mountain as though it was their private hunting preserve.

Because he made for such a pathetic seeming heir, there were persistent rumors that the Hanrahan Barony would be stripped from their family after the next war in order to reward some new generation of heroes who would fight more aggressively to expand the march.

None of the other barons were willing to gamble their daughters, even if they were second or third daughters, on a house they felt was doomed to fall in the next few years. A few aging knights had made the attempt to offer their daughters, but Baron Hanrahan seemed offended at the notion of his heir 'marrying down', creating a situation that was increasingly grim for the Hanrahan family. It was no wonder they tried hitching their cart to Owain's horses, sending their bastard Hugo to serve as his Steward in the hopes that it would earn enough of the future Marquis's favor to change their fate.

"The Hanrahans lack industry," Jocelynn explained, tracing a finger lightly along the lower edge of Owain's pectoral muscle as though it marked the boundary of the Hanrahan's terrain. "Even if Airgead Mountain is beyond their domain," she added, tracing her finger briefly across the firm nipple that crowned his powerful chest like a summit to be conquered.

"They still have opportunities to mine more common ores in the western hills," she said, tracing her hand back lower. "But they're too frightened to do it. They clear-cut the lumber from the hills years ago, but ever since then, the land lays all but untouched," she said, resting her hand on his firm muscles as if to encompass all of the available lands.

"There's a good reason to be frightened," Owain pointed out, tapping Jocelynn on the nose before his hand snaked around her waist, pulling her body up close against his chest as he lowered his head to whisper directly in her ear.

"The Crimson Knight who dwells on Airgead Mountain," he said solemnly, as if telling a ghost story. "It's said that he can tear a man's breastplate clean in two and that he dyes his arm red with the blood of his victims. An undying vampire knight who slaughters anyone who tries to dwell near the mountain isn't something easy to ignore, and no one has been able to drive this demon back to the Vale of Mists that it crawled out of for decades. "

"That's why it's important to get Master Isabell's help," Jocelynn explained, shivering at both the terrifying image Owain's words conjured and the feeling of his hot breath against the fine hairs of her neck. "Not everyone is as brave and strong as you to face demons like the Crimson Knight in direct battle. But you said she drew up plans for a fortified mining camp," she said, pulling back slightly to look at Owain's heroic visage in the flickering light of the room's oil lamps. "Hanrahan Barony is the perfect place for her to prove that it can work before the war begins."

"But Jocelynn, my sweet little pear," Owain said, pinching her waist. Her face was so serious and earnest that he couldn't help but find her adorable, even if some of her thoughts were ones that he'd already

tried and failed with. "The guild masters won't accept the lands in the western hills. They called them 'speculative gains at best' and 'little better than promises of gold and jewels from a demon-infested mountain.' They won't accept those lands."

"And we won't offer them to them," Jocelynn said with a coy smile. "We'll offer them lands along the western road, as far to the east of the Barony as possible. Far enough that they might as well be out of Baron Hanrahan's domain. But it needs to be a large parcel of land, two or three times the size of what you could offer near Lothian City."

"She won't budge," Owain said. "She's too proud of her skills as an engineer, and that Tiernan fellow follows her around like a pecked hen, doing whatever she says unless it relates to mining and smelting or forging. She says that as masters of their trades, they need to stay close to the city and its people."

"I remember from your letters," Jocelynn purred, picking up a bit of sausage from Owain's plate and playfully feeding it to him. "But I think she hasn't heard the message the right way. We just need to show her the lands and blame it on your father's insistence. Then, Baron Hanrahan can make a big show during the reception banquet of apologizing for wasting her time because he knows it's impossible for any engineer, but especially a woman like her, to accomplish what your father is demanding."

"You want Baron Hanrahan to insult her? Do you really know this woman?" Owain said, looking at Jocelynn with a puzzled frown. "Do you have any idea how sharp her tongue is when she feels slighted?"

"Of course I do," Jocelynn said with a playful wink, her seafoam eyes sparkling with mischief. "You said she's proud didn't you? Just explain things to Sir Hugo and make sure his father is ready to act as your foil. Baron Hanrahan will do anything to strengthen his barony, even if it means taking in a few 'knights' that are really just promoted tradesmen, especially when you tell him that besides these two, you want to grant lands to a Master Weaponsmith and Master Armorer. He'll be falling all over himself to make a deal with these merchants."

"Doesn't your plan seem a little backwards then?" Owain asked, puzzled by the young woman's circular reasoning. "If he's eager, why would he insult them? It doesn't seem like a good way to get what he wants."

"Trust me, my brave hero," Jocelynn said, running a finger down the center of his chest. "When you insult a woman like Master Isabell and tell her that no man could do something, much less a woman, all you need to do is give her a chance to prove you wrong, and she'll leap into the trap you've set. That's

why you, my dear, need to be the voice of reason who can offer that chance while securing her interests with lands in the rear of Hanrahan barony...

Owain was skeptical at first, but the more Jocelynn spoke, the more convinced he became. He'd pushed too hard on the intractable merchants, and like stubborn mules, they'd dug in their heels and refused to budge. Now, Jocelynn was offering a way to use their pride and business sense against them and, best of all, even if Master Isabell 'proved them wrong' by building a fortified mine, the only lands he'd need to give away belonged to Baron Hanrahan.

It would never work on an ambitious and calculating man like Liam Dunn's father, who could already expand his lands through his own military capabilities. But for a weak man like Baron Ian Hanrahan, at the end of his rule, a last gamble to pass on something better to his son and secure it against vultures might just work.

The details needed work, and there were preparations to be made, but as Owain put the pieces together, he realized that it didn't matter even if none of it worked. He'd said that he would deal with his father, one way or another, and this trip would give him a convenient excuse to take Jocelynn on a trip to the countryside, conveniently removing them from Lothian City while his other plans had a chance to unfold...

#### Chapter 452: The Price of Betrayal

As much as he hated sending her away, at the conclusion of their meal, Jocelynn's constant shadow since her arrival in Lothian March came to collect her after nearly precisely one hour. The stern-faced Confessor Eleanor gave Owain a stern look that suggested she realized how close he'd come to robbing Jocelynn of her virtue before they could even be publicly betrothed, but she seemed to know her place well enough to keep her lips sealed about anything she witnessed.

"I'll begin making preparations to visit Baron Hanrahan with you and the Guild Masters, my lord," Jocelynn said with an overly proper curtsy that nonetheless gave Owain a tantalizing view of her pert bosom as she left his dining room. "I look forward to being able to help you more now that I can be at your side while you negotiate with the merchants," she said, smiling warmly at him before schooling her features into an expression more appropriate for a sister-in-law than someone who would soon become his bride.

"We shouldn't tarry, my lady," the raven-haired confessor said as she stepped smoothly between Owain and her young charge. "Young Lord Owain may be your brother-in-law, but so long as your 'sister' is in the Summer Villa, idle tongues may give rise to inappropriate rumors if you linger too much."

"Confessor Eleanor is correct as always," Owain said, visibly adjusting himself and giving the clergywoman a polite nod. "I have other business to conclude this evening, Sister-in-law, so I'll leave you in the Confessor's capable care rather than walking you back to your chambers myself."

For a moment, Owain stood in the hall, admiring the way the elegant blue dress Jocelynn wore clung to her retreating backside before spilling in waves at her feet as though she were a native goddess returning to the sea from which she came.

"Soon," he muttered under his breath as he returned to his chambers. "But rushing would only spoil the feast before she's ready to be devoured," he said, shaking his head and walking quickly to a wash basin to douse his head in cool water before he let thoughts of her ripening body drive him to distraction. There was work to be done tonight, and thoughts of women would only distract him from doing what needed to be done as quickly as possible.

Half an hour later, a refreshed Owain Lothian paced in his chambers, awaiting the arrival of two of his knights. While there were many people he trusted to see his will done or even to fight beside him against demons, there were few he could trust to execute his will without questioning his intentions and even fewer that he could trust to keep their mouths shut when it mattered. Whether or not these two truly qualified... well, tonight's discussion would provide a fitting test to see if they could truly fill the shoes of their predecessors.

Ever since Jocelynn had left, he'd turned things over in his mind again and again as he replayed every word she spoken during their dinner. The more he paced and the more he thought, the more he trembled with the desire to lash out at his traitorous father or his scheming brother.

His father had warned him in the past but, Owain had never once considered that the old man would actually strip him of his position as the heir. Each time his father had warned him, he'd put on a show of obedience or crushed another demon village, returning with trophies and glory to satisfy the old man's desire to recapture his own glory days. It had worked every single time in the past, so why was the old man digging in his heels so badly this time?

The answer had to be that his backstabbing brother had made a move he hadn't seen coming. It was bad enough that Loman rode in on top of the relationship that Owain had begun to cultivate with Liam Dunn, swooping in after Owain helped the Dunn heir apparent to raise his army for a summer campaign and stealing the glory that would have been Owain's if he hadn't been sent away to Blackwell County.

But Loman's deeds seemed to be greater than just a single summer campaign against the demons. Jocelynn had been very clear that Loman had been seen making the rounds with the eastern barons and the knights who had once served their father in the last war. The snake hiding within priestly vestments seemed to have no shortage of ears to whisper in since Owain left for the coast.

"Tommin," Owain realized, slamming a fist into the opposite hand as he recalled the looks that had passed between his conniving former guard and his usurper of a brother. "I don't know what that bastard said, but I know he's had a hand in whatever turned Loman into someone who would snatch the throne from me."

A knock at the door interrupted his thoughts before two men he'd come to know quite well over the past several months entered his chambers. Sir Hugo Hanrahan still didn't seem to have grown a spine, hunching slightly away from the portly figure of Sir Rian Aleese next to him even as they entered the room and knelt before their lord.

The entire time they'd been stuck in Blackwell County, when they weren't mired in the endless and often circular negotiations with the Guild Masters, both Sir Rian and Owain himself had attempted to whip the bastard Steward into shape, but even after months of practice, he still wasn't fit to march in battle against the demons. His mind might be keen and sharp, and his head for figures remained impeccable even after taking countless blows from Sir Rian's wooden sword, but as a knight, Owain still found him contemptably lacking.

"You can stand," Owain said with an offhand wave as he dropped into a plush, overstuffed chair and looked at the two men. "This won't take long. Hugo, I need you to buy something for me," he said, tossing a bag stuffed with gold sovereigns and a few loose jewels at his steward.

The pouch represented two years of earnings from his own estate, taken from the strongbox kept in his chambers, but at the moment, for what he wanted, he would spend thrice as much and still wouldn't wince at the cost.

You could never put a price on revenge, and when that betrayal came from within your own family, no amount of gold was too much to see betrayal repaid

#### Chapter 453: Forbidden Goods

"What, what do you need me to buy that would cost this much?" Hugo said as he peeked within the pouch, his eyes widening at the amount. At a quick glance, Hugo estimated that it was more than four

times the amount of wealth they'd taken to Blackwell County to cover the expenses of their journey. With that much coin, a family could retire and live the rest of their days in modest comfort even in expensive cities to the east, to say nothing about how far the coin would go in the still-developing Frontier.

"Something for Lady Ashlynn that you weren't able to obtain in Blackwell City?" Hugo offered, trying to think of what could be so extravagant that his lord would need to reach so deeply into his personal funds. He knew that Owain had been frustrated when they ran short during the trip, but wasn't this an excessive overcorrection?

"I need the venom of a spider demon," Owain said bluntly, lacing his fingers together and giving both men a hard stare. "You understand that no one must learn of this, don't you? Sir Rian has earned a bit of my trust on the battlefield against the flat tailed demons, but Hugo, with this, I'm trusting you with far more than you've earned. You know what that means, don't you?"

"Don't worry a bit, m'lord," Rian said, his thick, meaty hand landing solidly enough on Hugo's back to knock the wind out of the slender man before he could answer. "I'll watch over him while he does this thing for you. No one will learn of it. You have my word. His, too," he added, slapping Hugo on the back again.

"But, but my lord," Hugo said, gasping for air and taking half a step to the side to put some distance between himself and the portly knight. "Spider demon venom is prohibited by the Church as an unholy evil. Just possessing it is a sin worthy of one hundred lashes in full view of a congregation. Using it..."

"That isn't your concern, Hugo," Owain said sharply. Seeing his steward sniveling like this only made his temper worse. Sir Kaefin would never have whined or sniveled or mentioned punishments for anything that Owain needed done, but this bastard wasn't even a quarter of the man Sir Kaefin had been. "You just need to buy it and deliver it to me. Then, you're to forget you ever touched it. You understand?"

"I understand," Hugo said, giving a formal bow, though his shoulders were slumped as he did. "But my lord," he added hesitantly. "I wouldn't begin to know where to look for something so..."

"Of course you wouldn't," Owain interrupted. "You're far too useless for that. But you don't need to worry, it isn't as hard to obtain as you think. Tell me, do you know of a man called the 'Black Merchant'?" Owain asked. Hugo shook his head, but a slow smile appeared on Sir Rian's unshaven face.

"He's real then, m'lord?" Rian asked, restraining himself from rubbing his hands together in anticipation. "A man who can sell you anything? Essence of poppy or cigars raided from demon strongholds or..."

"Oh, he's real enough," Owain said with a laugh. "Whatever you've heard about him, though, it doesn't come close to the truth. Sir Kaefin," he said, his voice catching slightly as his hand clenched into a tight fist. "Sir Kaefin dealt with his intermediary more than once. Horned demon bone powder that can give a man the virility to bed a dozen women in a night, wine from the royal cellars, even treasures from across the sea."

"He seems to have men in every city across the country and maybe even in the old countries as well," Owain said. "But here at home, you'll need to find a crooked young man named Marcel who frequents ale houses and upscale inns as a silkpant."

"Tell him that I need enough venom to handle three people," Owain said, revising his plans slightly as he thought about the days when Kaefin would have handled all of this for him and the man who would have watched over his favored steward while he did so.

"Well, two people and a child," he corrected himself, recalling that Sir Tommin's brat couldn't be more than ten summers old and wouldn't need half as much venom as it would take to kill his own father. For that matter, Sir Tommin's woman probably wouldn't need as much either, but it never hurt to have a little extra on hand as long as the price wasn't too high.

"And Sir Rian," Owain added, looking at the man who had increasingly proved himself capable of ferreting out surprisingly useful people who hid themselves away from the authority of both their lords and the Church. "See if you can find someone skilled in handling such things. When this is all over, it needs to look like the work of demons."

"I understand, m'lord," Rian said with a dark smile. Whoever had crossed his lord was about to suffer an excruciating and slow death that only miracle workers from the Holy City could save a man from. The portly knight had no idea what had happened to enrage his lord to go to such extremes, but he firmly reminded himself that he never wanted to make the sorts of mistakes that could earn him such a harsh punishment.

"Is there anything else m'lord needs?" Rian offered, placing a hand firmly on Hugo before the young man could think of slipping away or running from the task they'd been given. At this point, it was far too late to grow squeamish about serving Lord Owain, but he wouldn't put it past the cowardly bastard to slip into a Church confessional at the first opportunity if someone didn't watch over him.



For a moment, he considered shoving Hugo out so he could have a private word and offer to dispose of Hugo after this was all over. After all, neither he nor Owain particularly liked the coward. But perhaps this was Owain's way of giving Hugo a chance to redeem himself. If the scrawny bastard could at least manage something this dark and kept his lips sealed over it, then perhaps there was some hope for him yet.

"Make sure that this Marcel doesn't put his hands on Hugo in an inappropriate way," Owain said, shaking his hand at his easily cowed Steward. "Kaefin said that sometimes, the things I wanted couldn't be bought with coin and that the Black Merchant was always willing to trade for secrets. I don't want this Marcel sinking his claws into my Steward and learning things he shouldn't."

"But if it comes down to it," Owain said after a moment of thought. "I still have the flat tailed demon bitch and her spawn in a cell at the summer villa," he said with a dark smile. "I won't let go of the pup easily, but perhaps the Black Merchant would be more interested in the bitch than gold in exchange for the venom. I'll be done with her once the pup is weaned anyway, but if she can serve one more use before she dies..." he said, his voice trailing off darkly.

Neither man needed more explanation than that. Whether Owain would be successful in taming a pet demon remained to be seen, but letting its mother remain alive would only complicate things once Owain set his hand to the task of breaking the demon pup's will. Better to get rid of the mother soon while she still had some value than allow her to turn into a greater problem later.

#### Chapter 454: Both Prisoners

That same night, long after the sun had set and the moon stood high overhead, at an hour when most people would be sound asleep, a dim golden glow began to peel back the darkness that filled the cells underneath the Summer Villa.

Water from the constant rains seeped through cracks in the ancient mortar, and the entire dungeon smelled of damp, rotting straw and unwashed bodies. In decades past, when the cells beneath the Lothian stronghold had played host to members of the Lothian family who couldn't be trusted with their freedom during disputes over succession, the room would have been warm with a crackling fire burning in the central hearth and luxurious furniture behind the stout iron bars.

Now, however, the dungeons hosted only two people, and one of them had been born in these very cells. There had been several times since her village fell to Owain Lothian's savagery that Noomi

considered ending her own life before she could even give birth, but every time she brought a sharp claw to her neck, she swore that she could feel the arms of her fallen Esko wrapping around her.

"Our little kit will be born soon," she'd hear his voice whispering in our ear. "What should we name them?"

Every time she had that thought, her resolve crumpled, and she couldn't bring herself to slice into the tender flesh beneath her soft brown fur. The Lothians had burned their burrow to the ground and with it, everything that Esko had ever carved with his own two hands. Now, the only trace of him that remained in this world was the child they'd made together.

Saku, their son, now lay curled in the only clean blanket in the filthy cell the Lothians rarely bothered to clean, snuggling tight against his mother's body for what little warmth she could offer in the cold, damp cell.

"Noomi?" a soft, feminine voice called as a woman carrying an oil lamp entered the musty cells. "Are you awake?"

"I am awake, Lady Jailor," Noomi said, more politely than she had months ago when the strange human noblewoman started visiting her cell.

At first, the woman had said nothing, simply visiting in the company of several guards to stare at her. The soldiers had called the woman 'Lady Ashlynn', and they attempted to persuade her to leave the cells where the air was foul and the 'aura of a demon' was unescapable, but the strange noblewoman had insisted on not only staying for nearly ten minutes, but on returning several times later, especially as the birth of her child approached.

"I brought food for you, Noomi," Samira said as she walked carefully across the uneven cobblestones of the cells, holding out a small cloth-wrapped bundle. "I hollowed out the bread and filled it with tonight's mutton stew. The meat might be a little tough but..." she trailed off, glancing at the wickedly sharp front teeth that protruded from the flat tailed demon's mouth. "I, I suppose tough meat isn't a problem for you."

"There's cheese too," she added. "I'm told that it helps to sustain your milk while you're nursing so..."

"Lady Jailor," Noomi said, looking at the nervous noblewoman with a complicated gaze. It had become increasingly obvious as the months progressed that the noblewoman's belly was growing heavier by the month as a child of her own grew within her belly. Even if she hadn't been more and more visibly pregnant as time went on, the questions she asked the captive member of the Heart Wood Clan made it clear that she was nervous about giving birth to her own first child.

At first, Noomi hated the way her 'lady jailor' plied her with food when she asked questions about what it had felt like to give birth, or how she'd known that the time was upon her or a dozen other questions that she surely could have asked one of her own kind but for some reason didn't.

Over time, however, she'd begun feeling like there was something deeply unusual about this human noblewoman. Bit by bit, her curiosity had grown while her fear and distrust dwindled, leaving her with a strange mix of emotions tangled in her heart like a burl wrapped around a tree trunk, spiky and strange with a growing curiosity about the character of wood that lay trapped within.

"Why are you doing this?" Noomi asked for what felt like the dozenth time. "And don't say that it's because we're similar," she added as she took the bundle from the blonde noblewoman and began to carefully set out the meal that her captor provided. Not only was there cheese to go with the bread and stew, but her captor had even brought a small crock of fresh ewe's milk, just in case Noomi's milk had diminished too much to feed little Saku.

"But, we are the same," Samira said, leaning against the bars of the cell and pressing a hand into her spine to ease the ache she felt after taking her midnight stroll down to the kitchen. Thankfully, the head cook, Otis, seemed to know frightfully little about the needs of a pregnant woman.

When Samira said she got hungry in the middle of the night and didn't want him to force a servant to remain awake all night long to tend to her, he'd objected at first but he quickly relented when Lady Jocelynn returned to Lothian City taking many of the servants with her.

Now, he thanked the Holy Lord of Light that Lady Ashlynn wasn't as demanding as her younger sister and that he didn't need to keep the kitchens running all night long. Already, he'd begun to wish that he'd fled to wherever Ollie disappeared to when he vanished with that Lynnda woman after Otis set fire to the kitchens for the young couple to escape.

After enduring the beating from one of Lord Owain's soldiers for allowing two of his kitchen servants to kill Sir Kaefin, set fire to the kitchens, and escape into the wilderness, it was a miracle he'd been allowed to stay on as a cook at all. He'd almost been grateful when one of Lady Jocelynn's servants took over the

kitchens during her stay until he realized that the 'head cook' didn't expect to get his hands dirty and only intended to sit in the kitchens giving directions while everyone else worked.

Now that Lady Jocelynn was gone, he was glad to be back to serving the far more understanding Lady Ashlynn. She seldom asked for much and at night, it was enough to set out a few items for the pregnant noblewoman that she might retrieve on her own, or not, depending on her mood each evening.

"Noomi," Samira said softly as she wrestled with what she should say to the captive demon who had strangely become her only friend in this lonely villa. She'd all but given up on the idea of befriending Lady Jocelynn, who seemed to resent her for resembling her late sister. The strained relationship between the real noblewoman and the one impersonating her fallen sister would likely be impossible to mend, especially when...

"Noomi," Samira said, taking a deep, shuddering breath. "You shouldn't call me 'Lady Jailor'," she said, finally making up her mind to cross the line she'd been afraid to cross. "I, I'm not really a lady. It's just pretend," she said, staring into the demon's soft hazel eyes and trying to find the words she had been struggling to say for the past month.

"My name is Samira," she admitted with a heavy sigh. "I'm not really 'Lady Ashlynn', I'm just pretending. And, and even though I have a little freedom to move around this villa, I'm every bit as much of a prisoner here as you are."

"Why?" Noomi asked, narrowing her eyes skeptically at the woman standing outside the bars, wearing fine silks with gold and jewels hanging from her neck. "Why would you do such a thing?" Noomi asked, pausing as she dipped the corner of the cloth into the ewe's milk so she could squeeze a few drops into little Saku's mouth.

"Is this why you asked me so many questions about what it's like to be with child?" the captive woman asked, feeling like she'd finally bitten into a corner of the truth. "So you would know how to act like a woman who was really with child?"

"No, no, that isn't it at all," Samira said quickly. "I, I was supposed to be pretending. I have padding that I wore under my dress in the beginning but... but before Lord Owain left, he, he and I..." she said, lowering her head awkwardly and blushing. "So, even though I'm not really the Ashlynn he married," she stammered. "The child in my belly is his."

## Chapter 455: A Simple Stick

It took several minutes for Samira to explain everything that had happened to bring her to this point, long enough for Noomi to finish her meal and to tend to little Saku as well. Thankfully, her baby boy was well behaved and nodded back off to sleep as soon as he'd finished nursing, though she wasn't sure how much longer that would last.

"I don't know what you expect me to say, Lady Jailor," Noomi said at the end of it as she folded away the cloth that had contained her meal and handed it back through the bars to Samira. It was a measure of the disdain that her captives held for her that no one had noticed Samira's routine trips to the dungeons at night to supplement the meager meals she was given by the guards each day, but she wasn't about to be careless enough to keep things around that could expose the other woman's actions.

"You seem to think that the man who murdered my husband and killed anyone he could find in my village will somehow be kind to you for bearing his child," she said, her tail thumping the cold ground of her cell in disbelief. "That man has no kindness in him. Only a mask he wears to conceal his cruelty from the world."

The look of satisfaction on Owain Lothian's face when he drove his sword through her husband's chest before turning to her and commanding his men to take her alive was one that she would never forget for the rest of her days. He wasn't triumphant or exultant at winning a victory against a challenging foe. He'd slaughtered a basket weaver and captured a pregnant woman and, doing so, left him... satisfied, as though he'd done a good day's work in the forest chopping down trees.

"I, that is," Samira started with some difficulty. "He was kind to me at first," she said awkwardly. "Sometimes, when he made love to me, I felt like I was already his wife..."

"But you said he called you that other woman's name," Noomi said, shaking her head. "Any man who cries out another woman's name in the depths of pleasure should have his three treasures bitten off," she said, snapping her sharp teeth fiercely to make her point. "That's a man who doesn't see you at all, just a convenient field to plow."

"I, I think... I think you're right," Samira said softly. "Once Lady Jocelynn arrived, he stopped seeing me. Not, not immediately," she added quickly. "We still made love once or twice more, and he said that he'd keep me at his side along with Lady Jocelynn, but... I don't think she likes the idea. And now, now that he has a real Lady at his side..."

"He has no need of a fake," Noomi said with a conflicted look at the other woman. "So run away from here. Raise up your child to remember your dream of him. But I doubt you'll be as lucky as you think you are," she added, choosing to pay back the sustenance she'd received with a small measure of advice. "If he wants this other Lady to be his 'public wife,' then you won't enjoy being a 'little wife' if you have the oldest child. That other lady won't stand for it."

"And that man," the captive woman said, remembering the look of flames reflected in Owain's eyes as her village burned. "That man won't hesitate to burn you and your little one alive if he thinks he needs to."

"I still have some time," Samira said, gently stroking her belly. "Three months more before the little one is due. Just after the new year begins. Maybe, maybe he'll visit me, and I can see what he thinks," she said, though her voice was uncertain.

"I think you're a fool for it," Noomi said, shaking her head. "But who knows. Perhaps you can keep me company from the cell next door if you try," she said with a dark laugh. "Then we'd really be a perfect pair."

"I, I don't want that," Samira said, clutching at the bars as she felt her knees go weak at the thought of being confined to this damp, abysmal place, forced to give birth to her child on a bed of soiled straw the way Noomi had been. "I, I'll think of something. Something for both of us," she added.

"You don't have to pretend with me, Lady Jailor," Noomi said, leaning back against the cold stone wall of her cell. "You saving yourself from him would already be an impressive feat. You don't have anything to save me with. You can't fight, and you'll either be even more pregnant or carrying a wee one of your own. It's impossible for you to escape and trying to bring me with you..."

"But you can fight, can't you?" Samira interrupted. "Aren't demons all terrifying warriors who can slay armored knights? Can't your tail crush a man's skull and your teeth tear through armor? If I can get the keys to your cell, I can even carry your little one while you fight and..."

"And nothing, Lady Jailor," Noomi said with a shake of her head. "I'm not a 'demon.' I told you that before. That's your word. The Eldritch are people, not nightmares from your holy books. My Esko, he, he was just a basket weaver," she said, thinking back on how proud her husband was whenever people came to him asking for one of his baskets instead of making their own. "I made fish traps. If I could fight off knights, do you think I'd be here like this?"

"I know I'm done for," Noomi said, closing her eyes and shifting herself to find the most comfortable spot on the damp straw that she could. "But maybe you really aren't. If you ever do find a way out of here," the captive woman said. "Would you take little Saku with you? I don't want that man of yours to get his hands on my little man and twist him into something as wicked and heartless as he is."

"Don't, don't give up," Samira said as her eyes grew misty. Reaching into the cloak she wore to ward off the chill of the dungeons, she retrieved the other item she'd fetched from the kitchens and stretched her arm through the bars to offer it to Noomi. "Here, I got this for you," she said.

When Noomi opened her eyes, she was shocked to see her Lady Jailor clutching a short, splintered piece of red cedar. It wasn't very large, less than the length of her forearm, and there was a large knot halfway along the stick of wood, but it was a piece of wood nonetheless.

"What is this for?" Noomi said without taking her eyes off the piece of cedar. "You think I can fight knights with this?"

"No, no, that's not it," Samira said, shaking her head fiercely. "Didn't you say that you'd have to wean Saku soon? And that you should have carved a weaning spoon for him by now? I, I know it's just a stick of firewood from the kitchens. There's not much here, but I thought... if you wanted, if it would help..."

"Why?" Noomi said, turning away from the stick to look directly at her Lady Jailor. "Why would you give me this thing when you know they won't let my claws touch wood? They're all afraid I'll make some kind of 'demon weapon' if they give me even a splinter to pick my teeth, but you're giving me this much? Aren't you afraid of what I'll do?"

"I'm not afraid of you, Noomi," Samira said, placing the stick in the captive woman's outstretched hand. "You just want to make a spoon to feed your little one with, don't you? A spoon that holds your feelings of love for him and your memories of his father, right? Isn't that what you said?"

"So, make him a spoon," Samira said as she turned to leave. "And, and I'll try to find a way to get you out of here. Maybe, maybe even both of us out of here," she said as she began to walk toward the door.

In her heart, she'd already begun to believe that Owain wouldn't let her keep her child. Not with Lady Jocelynn around. But it wasn't until now, until she had a chance to say everything aloud to someone

who saw the other side of Owain, that she realized that the fears she hadn't wanted to face weren't just idle fears of a day that would never come to pass.

"Samira," Noomi said, clutching the small stick of cedar while her eyes filled with moisture. At the very least, even if she died in the days to come, her son wouldn't become an orphan. He'd have something carved with his mother's own claws to feel for himself just how much she loved him. It was a small stick of cedar, but in her hands, it felt like a mighty tree that could prop up the world, or at least a little corner of it. "Thank you."

#### Chapter 456: Warm and Tender

Sometime after Nyrielle enveloped Ashlynn in her sorcery, offering up her own strength to speed Ashlynn's recovery from her grievous wounds, Ashlynn found herself drifting somewhere warm and calm. Nyrielle's sorcery wrapped around her like a thousand hands, softly caressing her body and bringing soothing warmth as they drew out the strength of her healing gifts to soothe her body's aches and pains.

Time slipped away from her in the warm, floating darkness where the only sound Ashlynn could hear was her own heartbeat and the echo of Nyrielle's heartbeat alongside hers. Each soft -thump thump-faded into the next, reassuring her that no matter how bad the battle had been or how severe her wounds were, she still lived and Nyrielle did as well. As long as that was true, nothing else mattered.

Eventually, the drifting feeling changed and the sounds of gently splashing water joined the beat of her heart, followed by the soft -lap, lap, lap- of waves reaching the edge of a pool. Next came the sounds of a crackling hearth and the faint scent of cedar woodsmoke and the lavender soap that always reminded her of Nyrielle.

"Hello, my darling," Nyrielle whispered in Ashlynn's ear. Water splashed and Ashlynn felt Nyrielle's soft skin sliding over her own as her lover pulled her floating figure closer, enfolding her in a gentle embrace in the middle of a pool of water so perfectly warm on this chilly night that steam rolled just above its surface.

"We're dreaming," Ashlynn whispered, opening her eyes and finding herself in the luxurious marble bath that adjoined Nyrielle's bedroom, deep underground at her fortress in the Vale of Mists. It had been months since the days that Nyrielle brought her here for a restorative bath after Ashlynn pushed herself to exhaustion training with Thane but tonight was hardly the first time she'd dreamed longingly of sharing a bath with Nyrielle in this place again.



"We're not so far apart right now," Nyrielle said softly as she pulled Ashlynn over to one of the marble benches that ringed the steaming pool, keeping her injured lover close as she drew Ashlynn into her lap. "The last time we shared a dream, the sun rose even in your dream, pulling us apart."

"This time, we can take our time together," the vampire whispered. Her soft lips brushed across Ashlynn's ear and she let the point of a fang trace ever so slightly against the soft morsel of flesh at the base of Ashlynn's ear before pulling herself back. At the same time, Nyrielle's slender arms tightened around Ashlynn's trim waist, pulling her tightly against Nyrielle's body as if she was afraid her lover would be torn away from her.

"Will you hold me like this the whole time?" Ashlynn asked, smiling slightly and wrapping her arms around Nyrielle's, savoring the feeling of her lover's protective desires and the security she felt in the vampire's embrace. "Or can I look at you while you hold me?"

"Stay like this," Nyrielle said, burying her face in Ashlynn's soft, pale blonde hair and clinging even more tightly. "Just for a little while."

Holding Ashlynn like this, feeling her soft, smooth skin and smelling the warm, evergreen scent that clung to her, Nyrielle wanted to blot out the memory of Ashlynn's frostbitten flesh and her badly burned arm. Her darling had been cut by so many shards of ice that it took layers of bandages wound tightly over each other before the blood stopped seeping through, and even Tallauia's healing hadn't been able to completely suppress the pain Ashlynn must have been feeling from her wounds.

The wounds were just as bad as the ones she'd suffered from Owain on the night of her wedding to the Lothian heir, but this time, her bond with Nyrielle gave her the strength and the durability to keep fighting long past the point where she would have succumbed to her wounds before. Part of Nyrielle was grateful for their bond because without it, her Ashlynn would surely have died tonight.

Another part of her, however, cursed at how Ashlynn must have suffered under the relentless assault of the spirits possessing Hauke. Nyrielle knew all too well how little the dead cared for the living and how little they understood the suffering that often accompanied their actions. For what those spirits had done to Ashlynn alone, she intended to grind their horns to dust, but one feeling clawed uncomfortably at her heart whenever she considered what Ashlynn had endured.

"I'm sorry that I didn't come for you," Nyrielle said softly. "If I had broken you free from the beginning, then none of this..."

"Hush," Ashlynn said, turning in Nyrielle's arms and brushing a stray lock of the vampire's dark hair out of the way so she could look directly into her lover's midnight eyes. "We're both alive," she said, pressing her forehead against Nyrielle's and looking directly into the deep, midnight abyss of the other woman's eyes. "That's all that matters, isn't it?"

"No," Nyrielle said, pulling back and pushing Ashlynn away enough that she could truly look at her. In the dream, Ashlynn's skin was smooth and flawless. Beads of water ran down from her wet hair, gliding over the full swell of her breasts before sliding into the steaming water below. Her hands were soft and her limbs unbroken. Her chest rose and fell freely, without a wince of pain or shallow breath taken to spare her from the pain from cracked and broken ribs.

The Ashlynn in the pool with her bore none of the wounds that the witch's body currently bore, but that didn't stop Nyrielle from remembering them when she looked at her lover here in this dream.

"I'm sorry that you suffered so," Nyrielle said with deep feeling and meaning every word. Much of what happened tonight was her fault for jumping at shadows and dashing off to hunt Shubnalu when, for all she knew, he was still on the opposite end of the continent, sleeping away the years in his domain or waiting for the other vampire lords to capture her. But there was more that she had to say than just a sincere apology.

"Ashlynn," she said, taking the other woman's hands in hers and squeezing them tightly. She struggled for a moment with how to say what she needed to say next, and looking at Ashlynn's gentle, loving expression didn't make it any easier. But if she didn't, if she couldn't speak the words now, when everything was so fresh, she was afraid that she never would.

"I'm sorry, but I'm also upset with you tonight. I want to give you the world," she said, reaching up to cup the younger woman's face gently while the tenderness in her voice faded into firm resolve. "And I never want to take your freedom away from you. But if you keep acting like you did tonight, then I swear to you, I'll never let you leave the Vale again."

Chapter 457: Why Didn't You...?

"...I'll never let you leave the Vale again..."

The words Nyrielle said, accompanied by the stern tone of her voice, washed over Ashlynn like a plunge from the hot tub directly into the ice and snow outside their shared dream. Her entire body trembled, and her emerald eyes quivered as she realized that when Nyrielle said the word 'never,' she really, truly meant 'never.' She wasn't just prepared to hold Ashlynn back in the Vale of Mists for a few weeks or months, but for years and centuries if they couldn't resolve this problem.

"What? Why?" Ashlynn said with a voice that held none of her usual confidence. The notion that Nyrielle might try to control her, that the powerful vampire might one day turn on her, had long ago faded from Ashlynn's mind as the two drew closer together during their journey and even during their time apart.

But for Nyrielle to threaten to imprison her... It cut far deeper than even her lover might have realized. For more than twenty years, almost all of her life, Ashlynn had been a prisoner in a gilded cage, rarely allowed out of the Blackwell manor. While it would have been impossible for her parents to completely isolate her from the outside world, it wasn't an exaggeration to say that she left her home fewer than a dozen times a year for most of her life, and even then, she was almost always tightly supervised.

Those rare occasions when she slipped out of the house late at night, taking Jocelynn up to the cliffs to watch the sun rise and the ships setting sail were her most precious tastes of freedom until Owain had begun to court her. But even then, the stiff, semi-formal, and always supervised outings she had with her former husband couldn't compare to the taste of true freedom she'd gained after binding herself to Nyrielle.

In the six months since she'd dug herself out of a shallow grave and fell into life as both Nyrielle's Seneschal and the Mother of Trees, Ashlynn had seen more wonders of the world than she'd ever imagined existed.

Whether it was the bustle and liveliness of High Fen City and its towering arena, or the natural beauty of the golden waterfall at dawn where the White River spilled off a cliff before becoming the waters of the Briar and the Crystal Lake, each new destination brought countless new experiences and wonders into Ashlynn's ever expanding world.

Even the cold, frozen lands of the High Pass had their own moments of warmth and crystalline, icy beauty that gave her world texture and depth that it had never had before. But now, Nyrielle was talking about snatchign that away from her, trapping her once again within a tiny portion of the world, held within a gilded cage, because she had... had what? What was it she had done that would upset her lover so?

"Is this because of Hauke? Because I didn't kill him when I had the chance?" Ashlynn asked, thinking back on their very first conversations about the High Pass when Nyrielle had warned her that she would need to be ruthless with the Frost Walkers if she was going to succeed here.

"That wasn't really Hauke," Ashlynn said, clutching Nyrielle's hand and hoping she would understand. "I told you, he was possessed by those ancestors and..."

"You think I don't know your tender heart by now?" Nyrielle said, sliding the hand cupping Ashlynn's face over to her full lips, placing a finger there to interrupt Ashlynn's explanation before her hand slid lower, coming to rest high on Ashlynn's chest, above the swell of her full breasts and where she could best feel her lover's heartbeat.

"I know that you would do everything in your power to rescue a friend," Nyrielle said gently, though her midnight eyes still lacked the warmth they usually held when she looked at Ashlynn. "I'm not upset at you for trying. I'm upset that you suffered so much by fighting him with one hand tied behind your back."

"Our bond of blood goes both ways, my darling," Nyrielle said as her resolve to be cold crumpled into an expression of deep concern and... hurt. "Why, when you were hurting so badly, when you were fighting at such a heavy disadvantage, why didn't you draw on that bond for the strength you needed? Even if I am not by your side," Nyrielle said, clutching tightly at the hand she still held and interlacing her fingers with Ashlynn's. "You can still draw on my strength."

"I, I didn't dare to," Ashlynn confessed. The moment she said it, her head dropped, and she turned her gaze away, looking to the great hearth crackling in the corner and filling the room with the faint smell of cedar smoke or the small fountain in the wall that continued to pour fresh, hot water into the bath. Anywhere but at the wounded expression on Nyrielle's face.

"You didn't come for me," Ashlynn said softly. "You didn't break me free from the ice prison. But I still felt you," she said, forcing herself to look back at Nyrielle with emerald eyes that didn't contain the slightest trace of accusation. Instead, while Ashlynn's eyes brimmed with tears, they overflowed with a deep, unwavering trust in the other woman.

"I felt your worry and your fear as you raced away," Ashlynn said as she fought back the sobs that wanted to erupt from her chest. "You were worried about something even more dangerous, so how could I weaken you when you were hunting a greater threat?"

"I'm not so fragile that I can't support you more when you need my strength, my darling," Nyrielle said before biting her lower lip and reconsidering her words. "But how could you know? You've never once drawn on me consciously. The only time you've ever drawn on my strength directly was during your blossoming period, and you were barely in control at the time."

"I can accept that you feared for me," Nyrielle said, letting out a soft sigh as she regathered her resolve. "And I can forgive you for not relying on me when you didn't know it might affect me or what kind of battle I might be facing."

"But I'm not the only resource that you refused to draw on, and while I can forgive you for not drawing on me, it's harder to forgive you for ignoring this," she said as the hand resting above Ashlynn's chest slid lower until Nyrielle's index finger traced along a faint pink scar between Ashlynn's breasts.

None of Ashlynn's other wounds were visible on her skin in this dream, but the fresh, pink scar stood out clearly against her pale, creamy flesh, looking even more visible in the heat of the bath.

"How long have you been nurturing this seed of witchcraft, my darling?" Nyrielle asked. "How many months have you been showering it with the rich energy of life and growing things? You could have used all of the energy you stored there to fight back against Hauke, trapping him from the beginning, and it would have cost you nothing but the time you'd invested in forming this seed."

"Or is the person you're growing this seed for more precious to you than I am?" Nyrielle asked. "Is it more important to give this person the seed you're growing right now than it is to keep yourself safe?" Nyrielle asked as her eyes began to cloud over.

"You suffered so much," she said, pulling Ashlynn forward and wrapping her arms tightly around the young witch. "So what was so important about this seed that you would suffer so much just to preserve it when its power could have brought you victory or, or even just to heal your wounds."

"Who is it, if it isn't me?" Nyrielle said in a strained voice that was bereft of any of her earlier strength and dominance. "Who is it that you would suffer so much for?"

For a moment, Ashlynn sat stiffly in Nyrielle's tight embrace, stunned by the powerful vampire's words. The seed of witchcraft she was growing beside her heart had been there for several months now. She placed it there not long after Heila completed her trials so that she could take the time to nurture this seed properly, without subjecting its recipient to the added strain that came from attempting to receive a seed from an Ancient Tree.

The seed had been there for so long, in fact, that Ashlynn herself barely thought about it. She showered it with her own energy and strength in the same way that she watered her herb garden in the Briar of her vegetable garden at Blackwell Manor. It was something simple and routine that she did with little thought.

When it came to the battle against the spirits possessing Hauke, the idea that she could reclaim all of that energy from the seed and use it in the battle or use it to heal herself had never occurred to her. Not once did the thought enter her mind. She hadn't chosen to make her battle harder in order to preserve the seed, it had just never occurred to her to use it that way.

But Nyrielle was much older than her, and while she knew little about witchcraft, her knowledge about sorcery was extensive, and her experience with battles was much, much greater than Ashlynn's.

To Nyrielle, it must have seemed like the most ordinary of things to use the energy contained within the seed like using water carried from a well. It didn't matter what you had drawn the bucket of water for originally, if you happened on a fire, using the water in the bucket you already had to put out the fire was so obvious that a child would think of it.

But Ashlynn, who in many ways was still very new to using her powers, hadn't thought of it, and because of that, Nyrielle came to believe that her lover valued the seed more than she valued her own safety.

"My love," Ashlynn said as she finally came to understand. Gently, she wrapped her arms around Nyrielle and shifted her position in the warm, steaming waters so she could pull the other woman's head close to her chest. "I just realized something," she said with a slight smile tugging at the corner of her curved lips.

"All this time," Ashlynn said softly as she stroked Nyrielle's raven dark hair. "You've always been the strongest person I could imagine. The wisest, most knowledgeable, most perfect person," she said, leaning down to bestow a kiss on the crown of Nyrielle's head. "But you're so, so much more than that."

"You're avoiding the question," Nyrielle said in a tone that was a touch petulant. Pulling back from Ashlynn, she stared into her darling's eyes with eyes that had grown red and puffy, something that Ashlynn had never seen from her before and the vampire herself hadn't felt in countless years. "Why was the seed more important than protecting yourself?"

"Is it for..." Nyrielle started, trembling as a name fluttered through her mind. Ollie, the former kitchen boy, came to mind first, but she quickly dismissed the notion. Her Ashlynn might care for the stray she'd taken in, but did she really have feelings that ran so deep that she would endure such agonizing wounds for him?

Other notions occurred to her and were discarded equally quickly. She had promised to take Ashlynn home to her family this winter, but it felt much too soon to prepare a seed for any of her family members... unless she thought it might resolve her father's issues with the succession by extending his life? But even then, it didn't feel like something she would endure so much for when she didn't know whether her family could accept her witchcraft or not.

And yet, the notion that she might use the seed to resolve a political problem facing her own family triggered a thought that was much, much darker and burrowed into Nyrielle's mind like the roots of an insidious weed, refusing to let her look away from it once it had slipped into her thoughts. Ashlynn had proposed many methods to build peace with humans, but one thing she had never suggested was repairing her relationship with the man she had married.

The idea of it alone should have been unthinkable, but when Nyrielle tried to think of who or what could be so important to Ashlynn to suffer so much, there were very few names that she could come up with. But there was one, one horrifying possibility of a world where Ashlynn was willing to return Owain Lothian with a seed of witchcraft as a means of securing an alliance...

The idea of it was so revolting that for a moment, Nyrielle went completely still in Ashlynn's arms. It should have been too absurd to be possible, but Ashlynn was a woman who suffered horrific wounds in order to protect people she cared about and things she felt were important.

She had already sacrificed herself once, offering herself up as a bride to Owain Lothian in order to secure a path to survival for her family. What if, this time, she was preparing to do the same thing again in order to give Nyrielle and the Vale of Mists a peace that couldn't be bought with anything else?

"You aren't preparing to sacrifice yourself and this seed for me or the Vale, are you?" Nyrielle asked, her voice trembling with cold, heart-gripping fear as she spoke. "Is the seed for..."

"It's for Ollie," Ashlynn interrupted, reaching out and cupping Nyrielle's face the same way her lover had touched her just minutes ago. "I've torn away the life he had by involving him in my escape from the Summer Villa. By now, Owain may already have slaughtered anyone related to him in retaliation for what happened at the villa."

"I hope he hasn't, and if he has, I can't replace the family that he's lost," Ashlynn said softly. "But a coven is like a family. The things I owe him aren't enough to give him a seed, but he also wants to help protect me during the day when you can't. When I'm most vulnerable, he wants to stand up and help keep me safe, despite what I've done to him. Don't you think that's worth protecting?"

"It's noble and kind," Nyrielle agreed. "And everything I expect of you," she added. "But it's not enough to endure what you endured," she added firmly, refusing to let the point go. She could accept that Ashlynn wanted to do so much for Ollie, and it was just that sort of kindness and compassion that kept drawing her back to her young lover, but there were limits to what simple kindness could explain.

"You could have grown him another seed," Nyrielle pointed out before her mind began to conjure other explanations for why Ashlynn might have fought so hard to protect this seed for Ollie. "Or is this one irreplaceable? Or is it because there is something more growing between the two of you that..."

"No," Ashlynn said firmly, moving her hand to place a finger over Nyrielle's lips. "No, never. I am yours and yours alone," she said, wrapping her arms around Nyrielle in an embrace and pulling the other woman close.

At the moment, Nyrielle's lithe body felt almost thin and fragile in her arms. She had none of her domineering presence, and in the warmth of the bath, there was none of the coolness to her touch to remind Ashlynn that her lover wasn't truly alive. At the moment, she felt like any other woman, with fears and troubles that most women knew all too well.

But when had Nyrielle ever had a chance to know these feelings? When had she ever worried that she might lose her lover to another partner, or that political necessity might force one of them into a marriage that no one wanted? When had Nyrielle ever been allowed to simply be a woman with a woman's heart and fears?

"I love you," Ashlynn whispered as she held her trembling lover tightly. "And I would do anything, give anything, just to make you happy," she added. "But last night... I made a mistake. I didn't even



remember that I had a seed that I could draw on. I'm still not very good at fighting battles but last night, I wanted to show you," she said with hot tears filling her eyes.

"I wanted to show you that I was strong enough to fight without you coming to my rescue. I wanted you to see that you didn't have to worry so much about me," Ashlynn said softly as her arms tightened around Nyrielle's slender, fragile feeling body. "I tried, and I got it so very, very wrong that I nearly died," she said, finally admitting to herself how close she had come to falling in her battle against the ancient spirits.

"So please," Ashlynn said, pulling back to look at Nyrielle with emerald eyes that had grown just as red and puffy as her lover's. "Will you forgive me? Because I want to live the rest of our days together and I want to see the big, wide world with you. And I couldn't bear it if... if...." her voice trailed off, unable to finish the statement as she gazed longingly into Nyrielle's midnight eyes, desperate to hear an answer that would soothe both of their hearts.

#### Chapter 459: The Shadows In Our Hearts

"I've done it again," Nyrielle said, splashing in the warm water to wash the tears from her eyes. "I'm leaping at shadows again where there was nothing to fear in the first place."

The wave of relief that washed over her left her knees weak and her face flushed, and if she hadn't been clinging to Ashlynn, she might have slipped beneath the steamy surface of the water as the tension melted from her body.

She was upset at Ashlynn for pushing herself so hard and taking so many risks, but she'd forgotten that even though her lover had begun to wield powers like her own, there was still a wide gap between them in terms of experience and the ability to use that power effectively. Rather than treating Ashlynn like a young woman still growing into her power, she'd tried to treat her like a true equal before she was ready for everything that went with that.

Ashlynn had impressed her so much with her progress in High Fen City, navigating the politics of the city in ways that Nyrielle herself had never thought to delve into, that she'd forgotten how new to all of this Ashlynn still was... and how hard she must have been pushing herself, even in things as 'ordinary' as negotiations with merchants, in order to accomplish as much as she had.

"Promise me that you'll treasure yourself more," Nyrielle said solemnly. "That you'll reach out for help sooner and more often. And, and tell me when the burdens on your shoulders have become too heavy," she added softly.

"You talk of snatching young Ollie away from the life he's known as though you haven't suffered the same and worse. For all the grace you give him," Nyrielle said, stretching up in the bath to gently kiss Ashlynn's brow. "Extend some of that same grace to yourself. If not for your own good, then do it for me."

"I will," Ashlynn said, trembling under the brush of Nyrielle's lips. "For both of us. Now, let me make it up to you," she added, wrapping her arms around the other woman's lithe frame and relishing in the feeling of Nyrielle's silky soft skin sliding over her own. "You said that we have the whole day. Savor it with me," she said, leaning in to brush Nyrielle's lips with her own.

What started as a chaste kiss quickly grew deeper as the vampire responded with enthusiasm, drinking in Ashlynn's taste as though she were a fine wine. Their tongues darted back and forth, rolling over each other in a constant back and forth of hunger and desire. In the dream they shared, their kiss lacked the sharp edge of Nyrielle's fangs and the familiar taste of blood and power that mingled with so many of their shared moments.

Instead, each woman drank deeply in the other for physical proof of the words they'd spoken. Hands sliding from shoulders to hip or fingers getting tangled in each other's wet hair while warm, steaming water splashed around them acted as constant reassurances of desire that went far beyond primal lust.

Nyrielle's heartbeat echoed in Ashlynn's chest, falling perfectly in tune with her own racing pulse as she used her body to tell Nyrielle that she truly belonged completely to her. At the same time, Ashlynn's hands clung to her lover, and her legs wrapped around the other woman's, trapping her lithe figure as if to say, 'I belong to you, but you also belong to me.'

Words were completely unnecessary as their gentle back and forth became more and more intense, sending waves of water splashing against the marble edges of the tub as wave after wave of pleasure enveloped their bodies.

Eventually, hot passion gave way to tender care. The scent of warm cedar smoke from the crackling hearth mingled with soft lavender and jasmine soaps as Nyrielle focused all her attention on her wounded lover. In the dream, Ashlynn might not feel the pain her body was feeling, but the strain of it

piled up on her mind and soul, creating an ache that couldn't have been more obvious to her midnight eyes if it had been painted on Ashlynn's skin.

"When you wake, there will be pain," Nyrielle said gently, her hand pausing at the center of Ashlynn's chest, barely touching her with a soft, soapy cloth. "I wish I could take it from you, but for now, this is the best I can do."

"I know," Ashlynn said. She was dimly aware of her body, sleeping beneath a single fur blanket in the Frost Walker's ice fortress. The sensations of her body were distant and far away but already she could tell that Nyrielle's blood sorcery had reduced her healing time from more than a month to a mere week or two, and she would reduce that time even further once they returned to the Vale of Mists and she could draw on the strength of the forest to complete her recovery.

"When night falls, I thought you would want to join me," Nyrielle said, returning to washing Ashlynn's body, sliding the soft cloth along her lover's generous curves and leaving behind the faintest sheen of soap on her smooth, flawless skin. After cautioning her lover about pushing herself far beyond her own limits without finding help, she was reluctant to give her a chance to push herself harder, but she knew her love too well to deny her the opportunity.

"If I'm wrong, I can send you with Talauia and Zedya to ride through the night and day until you return to the Vale," Nyrielle offered, though her hands stilled as she forced herself to make the offer genuinely. She didn't just want Ashlynn to stay because she thought Ashlynn would want to be present when she held court in judgment over the Frost Walkers. She wanted Ashlynn's sharp mind and keen insights during the proceeding as well. She wouldn't go so far as to say that she needed Ashlynn to be there, but she wanted her to be there very badly.

"Your friend, the Thistle Witch, was very... insistent about getting you back to the forest as soon as possible," she added with a wry smile. "She seemed almost ready to fight me just to protect you."

"Thank you," Ashlynn said softly, trapping Nyrielle's hand and bringing it to her lips for a soft kiss. "If we can settle things in one night, then we can leave in the morning. But you're right," she said, closing her eyes and remembering the glassy look in Hauke's eyes when he fell to the ground after she cut the ancestral horns away from him with her Severing Knife.

"I can't leave until I've had a chance to at least try to bring things together," Ashlynn said as she firmed up her resolve to do what needed to be done. "I can't call that night anything other than a tragedy," she

said. "But if we work together tonight, I hope we can grow something beautiful out of the wreckage of the battle."

"It's early," Nyrielle said, setting the cloth aside and fetching a softer soap for Ashlynn's hair. "Do you want to begin anyway? It isn't what we discussed but..."

"But if we don't take this opportunity, then all we've done is sow meaningless slaughter over a misunderstanding," Ashlynn said. "We always intended for Lothian March to be the first, but if we have to begin in the High Pass, then so be it," she said.

A younger Ashlynn would never have thought of exploiting a tragedy like this to advance her own plans, but Nyrielle had taught her much about being ruthless when you needed to be, and Amahle had taught her even more about how to approach things practically. After all, nature didn't care why a person had died, only that their body returned richness to the soil, fueling new growth in its place.

For some parts of their discussions tonight, 'why' would matter more than anything else. But for the final outcome that Ashlynn and Nyrielle hoped to achieve, all that mattered was that the Frost Walkers had been overwhelmed by superior force, and both their Eldritch Lord and their most powerful sorcerer had fallen in battle.

Ashlynn didn't want to be cruel to the people of the High Pass, but one way or another, their lives would never be the same after suffering this defeat.

#### Chapter 460: A Strange Banner

In the Great Hall of the Frost Walker's frozen fortress, Odette stood nervously on the first step of the great dias, watching as countless servants swarmed over the hall, ensuring that everything was in place for the trial that would begin once the sun slipped beneath the clouds that blanketed the pass beneath the fortress.

The passage of time had been kind to Odette, once considered a great beauty among the Frost Walkers, traces of her former splendor remained in her lithe, powerful figure and the graceful aura of soft snow that enveloped her.

While her strength had begun to fade with the advancing march of years, like her husband, she carried herself with the quiet dignity of one who had fought for the right to marry the strongest Frost Walker of

her generation and now possessed the wisdom that came with the fading of that power. In the fading evening light, her pure white horn pulsed with a quiet anxiety as she fretted about the final arrangements taking place under her supervision.

As Lord Ritchel's wife, she wanted nothing more than to rush back to his chambers and sit at his bedside while the healer's tended to his wounds. The Thistle Witch might have withdrawn her poison, but the battle she'd fought with the Frost Walker lord had been so intense that he had consumed one of the Blood Vitality Crystals that Lady Nyrielle gifted him, just to have a chance of surviving.

Now, while he looked healthy, young, and as full of vigor as he had on the day of their wedding, his body was riddled with needle thin wounds that pierced his veins, tore at his ligaments and crippled his muscles.

Already, one of the best healers among the clan was at his side, but even the best among those who possessed a pale green horn could only manage to prevent Ritchel's body from deteriorating further. If he wasn't truly healed by the time the Blood Vitality Crystal wore off, no one knew if he would ever walk again, much less return to his throne.

With her husband in such dire straits, Odette wanted to remain close where she could help tend to him, even if she could do nothing more than what was already being done. But she wasn't just Lord Ritchel's wife, she was also the Mistress of the Castle.

As such, responsibility for arranging tonight trial fell on her slender shoulders, pressing down on her like she was trying to carry the mountain itself. The presence of four towering Tuscans and more than twenty Golden Eyed soldiers from the Black Wolf Brigade made it impossible for the Frost Walkers to ignore the fact that their fortress had been thoroughly conquered.

The banners hanging in the great hall made it even clearer that the Frost Walkers would have little say in this evening's deliberations. The stark red glyph on a black field that represented the Harbinger of Death was one that most people in the High Pass would recognize.

When she'd first seen it years ago, Ritchel told her that Lady Nyrielle's glyph was shaped to resemble a raven's wing on one side and the blade of an ax on the other. Perhaps the only surprise she felt at seeing it was that there weren't any drops of red to symbolize the blood she spilled in her days in the arena of the High Fen.

It was the other banner, however, that felt very strange to her, and Lady Nyrielle's soldiers had hung just as many of the strange banner as they had of the familiar one.

"Is that the banner of the Mother of Trees?" Odette finally asked after staring at the banner for a number of minutes. Standing not far from her, looking like an ink-stain in the midst of the icy white and blue setting of the Great Hall, a sorcerer from the Dark Feathered Clan supervised the work of Lady Nyrielle's people as they made their own preparations in the hall.

"I'm told that it's made in the human style," Master Aspakos said as he turned away from the servants to join the agitated Frost Walker. "Each color and symbol is supposed to carry a meaning of its own but it all feels rather busy doesn't it?"

"It does," Odette said. "I can understand why the Mother of Trees would represent herself with a mighty tree on her banner, but why are there flowers around the base of the tree? And the blue and green," she added, frowning at the banner. "If the blue is the sky and the green is the earth, then I understand, but the colors aren't divided across the middle like that, they're divided diagonally, and the border is silver? Why so many colors?"

"I think, perhaps, only Lady Nyrielle and a few of their inner circle truly know," the broken beaked sorcerer said with a twitch of his feathers. "Lady Ashlynn had several of these made in High Fen City and I'm told that Lady Nyrielle is very pleased with their design. From what I've learned of Lady Ashlynn, however, each choice is made carefully and I believe that she's doing it to honor Lady Nyrielle and her place in the Vale of Mists."

"Oh?" Odette asked, grateful for the distraction from the preparations, even if it was over something relatively trivial. "There is neither a wing nor an ax on the banner, so how is she honoring Lady Nyrielle and the Vale of Mists?"

"I can't say for certain," the old scholar said, refusing almost reflexively to speak in absolute terms when he lacked a proven answer. "But Tausau of the Mongrel Horde mentioned that the flowers on her banner were favored by Lady Nyrielle's mother. The blue and the green are also interesting if we assume that the blue represents Lady Nyrielle and the green represents Lady Ashlynn."

"Lady Ashlynn is Lady Nyrielle's Seneschal," Odette said with a frown. "Since she's a subordinate, shouldn't the green be completely beneath the blue? Or contained within it like the way the silver wraps around the whole thing?"

"If she was an ordinary Seneschal, perhaps," the sorcerer said, now speaking completely as an academic who had studied countless cultures and their rituals over his many years. "But Lady Ashlynn is the Mother of Trees. In some places, she has to be able to reach the very top, even if she must yield most of the time. I've heard from Captain Lennart that human heraldry is like this, densely packed with meaning that is intended to convey many messages to the nobles and powerful figures of the human world."

"Perhaps one day," he added, tapping the vein of gold that welded the shattered pieces of his beak together. "We'll find ourselves adapting to customs like this, taking on traditions from those who forge peace with us rather than waging war against us," he said, giving the Frost Walker a pointed