

## The Vampire 461

### Chapter 461: Who to Hate?

"I'm just glad they're still letting my Ritchel's banner fly, even if it is at the back of the hall," Odette said, wilting slightly under the pointed gaze from Aspakos and trying to ignore the implication that came along with it. Instead, she pushed back as much as she dared, looking nervously in the direction of the white banner at the back of the hall that stood in stark contrast to either of the banners flown by their conquerors.

Ritchel's glyph was simple, a few strokes to form a mountain and a final one to represent his horn sufficed. In ancient times, there had been more mountains on the banners of his predecessors, but now, simply holding on to one mountain at the highest point of the High Pass was an accomplishment for the dwindling clan.

How long that banner would continue to fly, however, remained to be seen. As the sun slid toward the horizon, the final preparations were set in place. Tonight was an assembly of the court. There would be no tables and no feast, only two thrones upon the dias where Nyrielle and Ashlynn would sit in judgment and two rows of chairs beneath the dias facing each other where the leaders from each side would sit.

The rest of the hall had begun to fill with with Frost Walkers on one side and Lady Nyrielle's people on the other. All of the other tables and chairs had been cleared away, leaving a vast area that could hold more than five hundred people standing through the deliberation.

Some of those people were soldiers who had fought in the battle while others were common folk from either side of the conflict who had been given the opportunity to observe what would happen here tonight.

The dark furred Commander Jannik stood at the second of the Frost Walker seats, signifying that he intended to let Odette take the most senior of the seats to speak in her husband's place. Next to him, the stooped figure of Old Svenja had already taken a seat, unwilling to waste her strength standing when the people in charge of their conquerors had yet to arrive. Two other elders stood beside her, leaving three remaining seats empty.

One would have belonged to whoever succeeded Paulus's spot among the elders but two others belonged to elders who had stood as members of Lord Ritchel's honor guard. Looking at the empty seats, Odette's hands curled into tight fists and she lowered her horn in solemn respect. Without their

courage and sacrifice, her husband might have fallen to the Thistle Witch before he could consume the Blood Vitality Crystal and defend himself. Each one of his honor guard who had died bought precious seconds for her husband and so she silently thanked each one of them even as she fought back tears for their loss.

She wanted to hate Talauia for slaughtering them and she wanted to hate Nyrielle and Ashlynn for bringing their army to the High Pass in the first place but no matter how much she wanted to hate them... she couldn't. They hadn't been the ones to attack first.

She didn't understand why the Ancestors had possessed Hauke and forced him to attack the witches, but she was certain it hadn't been her son who had done so. He was too excited to reunite with Lady Ashlynn and little Heila to have done anything to harm them but... if the Ancestors were the ones to attack, then in their considerable wisdom, they must have a good reason why.

So, as much as Odette wanted to hate the ancestors for what they had done, she couldn't bring herself to hate them either. Yet still, her heart burned with hatred and it wouldn't rest if she couldn't direct that hatred somewhere... and so she directed it at the only place she could. At herself, her husband and the remainder of the council.

It was their fault that Hauke had been allowed to wear the iridescent horns of the ancestors. It had been Ritchel's voice that swayed the divided council and she had supported it as well, hoping that Hauke could grow into a greater and stronger lord even sooner. One who could relieve his father of his burdens.

Only now... because they had allowed him to do something that should have been forbidden, everything had gone so badly wrong. Silently, Odette resolved herself to offer up her horn as a prize to be made into a blade for the Mother of Trees herself if that's what it would take to secure her husband's life... or Hauke's.

She's asked Master Aspakos more than once what he had concluded after he and the Artificer examined her son, but the sorcerer said nothing, keeping his beak sealed about whatever they had learned and telling her only that they would hear his report when he gave it to the Harbinger of Death.

The one time she'd visited him, his vacant eyes seemed filled with tears he couldn't shed but no matter how many times she called out to her son, his body never moved a muscle and his horn refused to glow. If not for the healer's assurances that his heart still beat and he still drew breath, she would have taken him for a corpse.

It took all her strength to sit calmly next to his bed, whispering in his ear that she was still here, that his father was still alive, and that they were waiting with open arms for him to come home. Of all the people in this disaster, as far as Odette was concerned, Hauke bore the least blame, but whether or not she could convince Lady Nyrielle or Lady Ashlynn of that...

"Master Aspakos," she began, turning to look at the brooding sorcerer. "Do you think that..."

Before she could finish her question, however, the sudden sound of approaching drums filled the hall. The Tuscans at the corners of the hall began to pound the butts of their spears on the floor in time to the drum beat and the soldiers accompanying them quickly formed ranks, preparing to receive the people who would decide the fate of the High Pass.

"Never mind," Odette said softly as she turned to take her place at the head of the Frost Walker delegation. The time was upon them. One way or another, her questions about their future were about to be answered.

#### Chapter 462: Making an Entrance

In the Frost Walker's Great Hall, the sounds of drums grew ever closer and the gathered people began to mutter and stir, filling the icy chamber with the sounds of countless overlapping whispers. Odette and the other Frost Walker leaders turned nervously toward the door, awaiting the arrival of the leaders of those who had conquered them.

Rumors had swept through the fortress that the Mother of Trees was badly injured, hanging on the edge of death, and that the Willow Witch didn't fare much better. Some in the crowd believed that this moment might be their last before the whole clan was exterminated for the offense of murdering such prominent people when they came and presented themselves as guests.

Other rumors, however, seemed to say exactly the opposite. The Sorcerers of Sundered Earth had moved about the fortress, healing the injured on both sides of the battle. Some of those rumors were strange, suggesting that the sorcerers barely used magic at all after mending flesh with needles and thread and they were said to wash pain away with simple powders and ointments.

Surely, if the clan was meant to fall today, they wouldn't spend so much effort to heal the injured... would they?

Hundreds of murmuring voices quieted as one when the towering doors of ice shuddered open, making way for a procession unlike any that had entered in recent memory.

Even after spending the entire day resting, sustained by Nyrielle's gift of vital energy, Ashlynn was still weak and badly wounded. Walking in a long procession would have been impossible for the recovering witch and so Nyrielle ordered two grand chairs to be fitted with poles for carrying. Had she done so for Ashlynn alone, it would only have drawn attention to her lover's injuries, but instead, Nyrielle herself entered while seated on an elegantly carved throne made of ice and covered with rich furs.

When Nyrielle and Ashlynn entered, they came one behind the other, carried by towering Tuscans and looking down on the assembled masses as though they were reigning monarchs inspecting their subjects.

Both women dressed to impress, with Nyrielle donning a dress of flowing black silk so dark that it was difficult to tell where the dress ended and shadows began. Only the deep, plunging V-shaped neckline that reached nearly to her navel revealed enough of her alabaster flesh to suggest that she was a person and not a wraith wrapped in shadows.

Sitting on her own icy throne, Ashlynn looked every bit as regal though the emerald dress she wore was much looser than normal, appearing more like the robes of the Sorcerers of Sundered Earth than a dress and she had dispensed with her usual corset in favor of a simple emerald sash at her trim waist.

Most striking to the onlookers, however, were her hands, peeking out from the spills of gold lace at her wrists, each of her hands had been wrapped gently in layer after layer of bandages until they resembled hands encased in white mittens. Those who looked more closely noticed even more bandages peaking out from the high neckline of her dress and the skin of her face seemed fresh and tender, as though she had only recently recovered from frost burns.

Behind them, Heila walked next to Ignatious, her head held high despite the fatigue that dragged at her body. After waking to a ravenous hunger like none she'd ever experienced, she finally understood why Ashlynn ate the way she did after Lady Nyrielle fed on her and she marveled at her lady's ability to do as much as she did the day after serving as a vampire's meal.

At the moment, it took every bit of willpower Heila had to put on the appearance that she was a capable witch and warrior who the Frost Walkers should submit to rather than anger. She openly wore Snow

Fang on her hip and as her grass-green eyes panned across the Frost Walker delegation, she almost seemed to be challenging them to say something about the blade's presence.

No one inside the chamber needed to know that she'd been so tired after donning her best dress and heavy War Hat, she needed Ignatious to carry her all the way to the Great Hall. The elegant vampire had seemed almost relieved when she asked for his help and were it not for the seriousness of the evening, she might have drifted back to sleep in his arms before he set her down outside the massive doors so she could make her entrance.

Now, however, she summoned all of her strength for the challenges that would come. Too many people had died and even more were wounded. Nothing would come easily but she forced herself to be present tonight so she could speak up for Hauke. She hoped that, as the first person the ancestral spirits had attacked, a plea for mercy from her might carry more weight when it came time to judge the young Frost Walker Lord.

Some people might think that he should be blameless in all of this and she was certain that some of the Frost Walkers would try to argue that point. As a man possessed by his ancestors, it was difficult to say that he should suffer for the actions of others.

Heila's perspective on the matter was different. She'd fought against the actions of the former Willow Witch, Cecile, who tried to twist her into a specific kind of witch through manipulation of the Ancient Willow's trial. In the end, Heila triumphed over the remnant spirit, freeing herself and earning the right to grow into her own kind of Willow Witch.

Hauke confronted five spirits rather than one, but he did so in an attempt to harness their power. His attempt failed and he had to bear some of the responsibility for what happened as a result of his failure to defeat or subjugate the spirits he sought to learn from.

In Heila's opinion, Hauke didn't need to suffer the same fate as the ancestral spirits themselves. If someone insisted that he did, even if it was Lady Nyrielle herself, Heila intended to speak out in Hauke's favor, but the most she was willing to plead for was mercy in his sentencing. Anything more than that felt like a betrayal of Lady Ashlynn who had suffered far more than she had.

#### Chapter 463: The Demands of the Dead

While many people in the audience focused on the entrance of the Harbinger of Death and the Mother of Trees, with a few pointing and whispering at Heila's taboo blade or the terrifying sword of flame on

Ignatious's hip, the few whispers that had begun to ripple through the crowd died instantly with several jaws snapping audibly shut at the entrance of the next two individuals.

Behind Heila and Ignatious, Savis and Tausau exuded a dominating, almost feral menace that paralyzed many in the Frost Walker audience with fright. People who only saw Tausau caring for his Mongrel Horde or those who saw Savis's disciplined leadership of his soldiers were no doubt surprised at the bloody aura spilling from the two vampires but the reaction among the Frost Walkers was considerably different.

Some of them had seen the two powerful vampires, fighting against more than a dozen men at once atop the gatehouse during the battle and no one doubted that if they were to fight one on one, or even three on one, the vampires of High Lord Hamdi's line would tear them apart in an instant. A few of the sorcerers in the audience had an even better understanding of the danger the vampires represented, considering themselves lucky to have survived their confrontation with only minor wounds and deeply savaged pride.

Moreover, unlike Heila and Ignatious who had yet to fully recover from their actions during the battle, the two vampires behind them seemed to have recovered fully after a night of rest and an opportunity to feed when they woke. In the entire hall, perhaps only Commander Jannik and the Elders stood any chance of fighting against these powerful vampires.

Talauia brought up the rear of the procession, drifting along with wings that beat just fast enough to keep her feet from touching the icy floor. With so many injured on both sides of the battle, once she was certain that Ashlynn and Heila would be fine without her help, she'd thrown herself into helping those she could. The energy of nature was thin on the mountain top but she refused to let that stop her when there were still people she could help.

Now that she fully understood what had happened outside the gates, Talauia was doing everything she could to limit any further reprisals to the people who were responsible for this disaster. She'd survived the fall of her own clan and she heard too many whispers during the day from people who were afraid they were about to face the same fate.

She could tell them, she could tell them all she wished that it wouldn't be like that. That Auntie Ashlynn wouldn't slaughter a whole clan even if Lady Nyrielle might. But words were cheap and actions weren't, so she drove herself to help as many of the Frost Walkers as she could until she exhausted her energy and finally had to rest.

"The High Pass has fallen," Nyrielle said, her rich voice echoing through the hall and pulling everyone from their thoughts as she and Ashlynn reached the top of the dias where the twin thrones belonging to Lord Ritchel and his wife Odette stood empty. "These are the seats of power for the High Pass. Set them aside," she commanded the Tuscans carrying her and Ashlynn.

"There will come a day when someone sits upon these thrones again," Ashlynn added as the thrones of the High Pass were carefully moved off the dias to make room for her and Nyrielle. "But that day is not today. Today, we come as victims of treachery in demand of justice," she said in a strident voice that echoed off the back of the chambers.

"Last night, in retribution for betrayal, the Vale of Mists conquered the High Pass," Nyrielle said, making her perspective on the night's events clear to everyone who was present. If anyone still hoped that this could be covered up like rotten fish buried under fresh snow, their last hopes died with Nyrielle's words.

At the front of the Frost Walker delegation, Odette hung her head in shame, her white horn dimming so much that she could almost have been mistaken for a dead person ready to have their horn mounted in an ancestral hall.

'Someone' would sit upon the thrones again, but because of her family's role in what the Harbinger of Death called a betrayal, she doubted that it would be Ritchel or Hauke. After what had happened, the next Lord of the High Pass might not even be a Frost Walker. But the throne wasn't the important part, Odette reminded herself. So long as there was a way for her family to survive, even if they had to give up those thrones and leave the High Pass forever, she was willing... so long as her family could survive, she was willing to do almost anything.

"Tonight," Nyrielle said, looking over the crowd at the still open doors. "We will hear the demands of the dead who cry out for justice and vengeance. And before this night is over, the dead will have their demands answered!"

As soon as Nyrielle's final words spilled from her lips, another sound began to fill the hall. This time, the drummers tapped out a slow, steady beat that was accompanied by the clank of chains and the sound of armored boots striking the frozen ground in perfect unison.

When Zedya stepped into the hall at the head of another procession, the entire hall stilled at the sight of the usually unobtrusive vampire dressed head to toe in deep crimson with spills of lace that emulated the flow of blood. In a hall of icy white and blue, her choice of dress marked her instantly as someone standing apart even from the other dignitaries who took their seats before the dias.

Behind Zedya, rank after rank of soldiers from the Black Wolf Brigade acted as pall bearers, carrying nearly two dozen coffins in various sizes. One by one, each coffin was laid on the ice before the dias, forming a morbid 'third row' of dignitaries before the dias as each of the previous night's fallen were brought before Nyrielle to make their demands.

"Mistress Nyrielle," Zedya said, standing ramrod straight and allowing her voice to ripple across the entire hall. "I have come to act as a speaker for those who have fallen. Their deaths last night were needless and wasteful and their spirits cry out for justice. I have come to give voice to the demands of the dead."

#### Chapter 464: Giving Death Meaning

A fragile, crystalline silence filled the air after Zedya's pronouncement that she had come to speak for the fallen. Her appearance alone made it clear that she took the role very seriously, but there was something more to her entrance that gave everyone pause.

The coffins carried into the proceeding came in many different sizes and reflected the different traditions of their people. Even on short notice, the honored dead deserved to be cared for in a way that recognized who they were in life.

Four of the coffins were simple but effective daybeds. While they lacked the comfort of the darksteel lined vaults that Nyrielle or Zedya used, the vampire's of Tausau's Mongrel Horde couldn't travel without them and now that they had fallen, their bodies couldn't risk exposure to sunlight, and so those very daybeds became their place of rest until Tausau could bring them home for their final rest.

Another five coffins belonged to soldiers of the Black Wolf Brigade. They had been assembled quickly from supplies carried by Nyrielle's army and each one was marked with a red paw print representing the fallen soldier's courage to fight until death.

The remaining eleven, however, were the ones that shocked the audience the most. Eleven Frost Walkers had been encased in ice, their horns flickering with the last traces of energy that had yet to fade from their frozen bodies. Many of them bore signs of the viscous wounds that had claimed their lives and six of them possessed an odd purplish-red sheen to their fur that no amount of careful washing had been able to remove after they died to the Thistle Witch's curse.

Their mere presence, however, sent a strong message. Lady Nyrielle had promised that the dead's demand for justice and vengeance would be answered tonight, and she included the Frost Walker's fallen in that tally.

"Who are the dead who demand justice and vengeance?" Nyrielle asked formally, her voice shattering the stillness of the room. "What are their grievances?"

"The first of the dead are Shu, Kuupi, Ropart and Laya of the Mongrel Horde," Zedya said, moving to stand next to the coffins that held the vampires. When she learned that Nyrielle herself had flown into the chasm outside the fortress to retrieve the body of the fallen Laya, she knew that she needed to bring closure to these wounded, misshapen vampire's lives and she needed to ensure that those who lived understood how noble the frequently despised Clanless truly were.

"As Clanless, not one of them has lived an easy life, and many of them were tormented by the pains of their own bodies. Few could live to become adults, yet these few found a way to survive even as their own bodies betrayed them."

"Most died in the attempt, but these few found a second chance to live. Since reaching the safety of their Sire's side, they have never left his domain and never known the danger of the battlefield. Moreover, everyone knew that they were too weak to fight in battles against the Eldritch nations. Yet for you, Mistress Nyrielle," she continued, turning to face the powerful vampire sitting impassively on her throne of ice.

"For you, they traveled a great distance so they could use dull fangs and feeble claws to tear away at the flanks of our human foes, dragging them down to protect the lives of our soldiers. They came to offer themselves as living weapons, using their own twisted appearances to strike terror into the hearts of our enemies even as they reaped the lives of those who would have supported the Lothian armies arrayed against us."

"But last night, they died without ever facing a human foe, broken in a battle against an ally who should have guarded our back. They died bitter and unfulfilled, my lady," Zedya said, lowering her head and speaking solemnly. "The treachery of our allies cost them a noble death and deprived us of the strength they could have used in the war to come. They demand that their deaths be given meaning and purpose or they will not rest."

Around the Great Hall, several people on both sides of the hall broke out in quiet mutters or whispers to their neighbors. How did someone even compensate for such a senseless, meaningless death? How did someone make amends for this?

If a hunter died, his spirit might rest if the guilty party took up the burden of feeding his children until they were grown, taking up the burdens that would leave a spirit restless. When a child died unjustly and nothing could fill that hole it left in the spirits of their parents but the death of the murderer then the child would be avenged and the murderer put to death.

But how did you give a senseless death meaning? The Clanless members of the Mongrel Horde already had next to no one. No parents to mourn them, no children to care for, just a life filled with pain and a death bereft of meaning. So how could anyone give them what the dead demanded?

All eyes turned to the small delegation representing the Frost Walkers with many of the gazes collecting on Odette, expecting her to speak in Lord Ritchel's place. But what could she say? Even as she sat there, nothing occurred to her that would answer the challenge they had been given.

As she drew breath to speak, hoping she could figure out something once negotiations began, she was interrupted by a sharp look from elsewhere in the delegation. 'Save your words for your husband' the figure mouthed to Odette before turning to address Nyrielle and Ashlynn atop the dias.

"Your Eternity," an aged voice said as Old Svenja stood to address their conqueror. "Your Dominion, Speaker Zedya," she continued formally, bowing to each person in turn. "I know more of our ancestors than any living member of our clan. I know how we have treated the Clanless. We have pitted them, exiled them, even granted them merciful deaths as children rather than subjecting them to the cruelty of their own lives."

"Last night, the Mongrel Horde taught us that even the Clanless can fight with courage and ferocity," she continued, turning her gaze to the collection of coffins at Zedya's feet. "More than that, these people, Shu, Kuupi, Ropart and Laya of the Mongrel Horde, have shown us that the Clanless can die bravely, fighting for a cause or a leader they believe in. Their deaths' have meaning."

"They died so that we might see their courage and remember it," the old Frost Walker said, lowering her horn until it pointed at the ice beneath the coffins. "So in their names, I make this promise. For as long as the Mongrel Horde accepts the Clanless, the Frost Walkers will protect any of the Clanless who wish to make the journey to join Tausau's Horde, including any of our own who are born Clanless."

The declaration was a reversal of hundreds if not thousands of years of tradition and when she said it, it seemed like half the hall burst into outraged mutters. Many among the Frost Walkers leaped to their feet with icy energy swirling around their horns and hot words on their lips. So few people visited the Frost Walkers that affairs of love between clans were extraordinarily rare, but the child of an unwilling union was far more common. This alone was reason enough to maintain the tradition of granting a merciful death to any child born of such a union but now their Elder was promising to allow them to live?

"The Clanless are always blameless," Svenja said, holding her head up high and glaring at the younger members of her clan until they stilled their tongues and the aura of icy menace filling the Great Hall faded. "The Mongrel Horde have fought hard to survive their own births. And these four have fought hard and died so we might learn to treat them differently."

"I am an old woman," Svenja continued, turning back to Zedya. "Soon, I will die, but I swear to you that I will carve this lesson into my horn so that I may speak of it to a thousand years of descendants. Shu, Kuupi, Ropart, and Laya have earned this with their deaths. I hope that they may rest knowing that their deaths held meaning."

"Young woman," Tausau said, wiping a pinkish tear from his eyes as he stood to address Svenja. "All the Clanless have ever wanted was to live their lives and perhaps, chase their dreams. For this simple wish, they have been hunted, murdered, and scorned by the world."

"But if you will send them to us, and protect the ones you find who seek us out," he said. "Then the Mongrel Horde will find a way to take them in. To die for such a gift," he said, forcing the words out through a throat that wanted to clench tighter than his fists. "To die for such a gift is a worthy death indeed. In the name of my fallen progeny, we accept your gift in the hopes that their spirits may rest."

"If Uncle Tausau is at peace with it," Nyrielle said, giving her tearful great-uncle a momentary soft smile. "Then I am at peace with it. Let it be carved in stone and ice that there is an understanding between the Frost Walkers of the High Pass and the Mongrel Horde," Nyrielle pronounced, her face growing solemn again as she turned to Zedya's solitary figure standing among the coffins.

"Who else among the dead cries out for justice and

"Who else among the dead cries out for justice and revenge?"

Nyrielle's words once again brought all eyes to Zedya's crimson figure. Some looked next to the coffins holding the bodies of the Black Wolf Brigade, marked by their red paw prints as though promising violence to anyone who failed to honor their deaths. But while most expected Zedya to move on to the next victims on Nyrielle's side of the tragedy, she moved instead to a cluster of six giant blocks of ice, each holding the body of a venerable and respected Frost Walker.

"While few at the time knew for certain what had happened to young lord Hauke," Zedya began as she prepared to reveal a truth that few knew for certain even if many had already heard rumors. "Lord Ritchel understood the moment he attacked that his son had been possessed by the ancestral spirits of the horns he carried."

"For a brief moment during the battle, the Mother of Trees had been suppressed, the Willow Witch had retreated, and Young Lorde Hauke stood alone," Zedya explained, painting a clear picture for those in the audience who hadn't been able to witness the outbreak of hostilities. "Lord Ritchel attempted to seize that moment to imprison his son before the violence could escalate."

"If he had succeeded, the entire tragedy that followed may have been averted," Zedya said with a heavy sigh. "Six men stood beside him and aided in the construction of that prison of ice. Gunter, Hrosskel, Artur, Sturla, Hulda, and Daldis," she said, reciting each name in turn. "These men of honor stood by their lord and took action against one of their own in the hopes of preventing further bloodshed. Their honor at that moment shone as pure and brightly as fresh snow."

Hearing Zedya's words, Talauia squirmed uncomfortably in her seat. Now that there had been an opportunity for Zedya to interrogate the captive lord, the truth of his intentions was being laid out before everyone. Moreover, in Zedya's retelling, Ritchel and his honor guard were clearly honorable heroes, which meant that she was doomed to play the role of the villain.

Briefly, for perhaps all of two wingbeats of time, Talauia thought of fleeing the proceedings before the crowd could turn against her. It was only when she received a gentle, reassuring look from Heila that she stilled her trembling wings and forced herself to remain in her seat. She wasn't alone this time, she reminded herself.

She had friends here, and her strongest friends were the strongest ones present. Nothing would go wrong, nothing could go wrong, she told herself again and again until she almost believed it was true.

She believed it, but her hand still gripped the wand at her waist and her multifaceted eyes never stopped tracking the people in the room who might pose a threat to her.

"Lord Ritchel failed to isolate Hauke," Zedyia continued, telling the complex story as simply and directly as she could. "And in his failure, he trapped the Mother of Trees in a prison of ice with the most powerful ancestral spirits the Frost Walker Clan has ever seen. Spirits who were hostile to her and the Willow Witch for the 'offense' of carrying a blade carved from the horn of a traitor to the Frost Walker Clan."

"That failure cemented the perception that the Frost Walkers had become traitors in the minds of many, including the Thistle Witch, Talauia," Zedyia said, turning to face the winged assassin. "The Thistle Witch who had already seen her dear friend gravely injured and one of the most important witches outside of her own coven imprisoned," Zedyia emphasized. "She didn't know then that Lord Ritchel and his honor guard were only trying to help. But she knew that if they died, it would allow her friend to break free from their prison."

Across the room, people's expressions grew complex as they looked at the anxious, fidgety witch. Among the Frost Walkers, many looked on with gazes that showed a trace of sympathy while others burned with icy fury. None of the sorcerers in Lord Ritchel's honor guard had been young men and some of the Frost Walkers gathered in the crowd were their wives, children, or even grandchildren. For some of them, nothing less than the death of the Thistle Witch would satisfy their need for revenge.

"Gunter, Hrosskel, Artur, Sturla, Hulda, and Daldis," Zedyia said, repeating the names and turning to face Nyrielle and Ashlynn on the dias. "These six men fell one by one to the needles and poison of the Thistle Witch. Each of them died a hero, buying time for Lord Ritchel to absorb the power of a Blood Vitality Crystal without which he never would have survived battle with the Thistle Witch."

"But these men have died with their work unfinished," Zedyia said, returning to the six men frozen in ice. "They died so that their lord might live, but now he lays in the cells below the fortress, balanced on the edge between life and death. In a few day's time, when the Blood Vitality Crystal's energy is exhausted, he will likely become crippled for the remainder of his days."

At those words, the restraint that had prevailed in the hall shattered like a thin sheet of ice as several young warriors among the Frost Walkers surged forward.

"Save Lord Ritchel! You can't let him die!"

"He did nothing wrong! He tried to save us all!"

"If Lord Ritchel dies, the Thistle Witch must die! Justice for Lord Ritchel!"

"Justice for Lord Ritchel and death to the Thistle Witch!"

"Justice for Lord Ritchel and..."

"I WILL HAVE SILENCE!" Nyrielle said, infusing a trace of the deep abyss into her voice and instantly robbing the young men of their momentary surge of courage. Her midnight eyes had become deep wells of darkness like the depths of the chasm outside the keep and anyone who met her gaze felt their knees weaken while their innards turned to jelly.

"Young Ritchel is my friend," Nyrielle said into the deafening silence that followed her command. "As was his father before him and his grandfather before him. Or have you all forgotten? Do you think I am happy to see him wounded and in pain?"

"Now is not the time to decide whether or not he did anything wrong last night," Nyrielle said firmly, directing her cold stare at the young men who insisted that Ritchel did nothing wrong. "Now it is time to find peace for the fallen. We will discuss Lord Ritchel's future and the future of the High Pass once the dead have had a chance to have their grievances heard and answered. Zedya," she said, turning back to the vampire in crimson. "Please continue."

"Yes Mistress," Zedya said with a polite curtsy before she swept her amethyst eyes over the gathered Frost Walkers. "These heroes who sacrificed their lives so their lord might live need not die bitter and unfulfilled. Their sacrifice can still have meaning if Lord Ritchel's life can be preserved. Lady Talauia," she said, turning to look at the witch who looked like she was about to rush for the nearest exit.

"Will you heal Lord Ritchel," Zedya asked. "Will you restore him from the wounds you inflicted and honor the last wish of those who died so that he might live?"

Odette's heart raced in her chest, beating so hard that she thought it had transformed into one of the drums that announced Nyrielle's arrival. Her pure white horn glittered with half-formed snowflakes as

hope began to build within her that her love could still be saved. Lady Nyrielle refused to talk about the fate of his throne, but if they could secure his life... Her hope, however, was short-lived when the Thistle Witch gave her answer.

"I can't, I can't restore him from what was done," Talauia said with misty eyes as she watched the gazes of the Frost Walkers grow increasingly hostile. "Some things, some things, once you break them, they can't ever be fixed. I didn't... didn't leave a way out for Ritchel..." she said in a voice that grew quieter and quieter the more she spoke.

Heila had told her that they needed to ask him questions, she was supposed to keep him alive long enough to ask their questions, but... she'd never intended for him to survive for more than a few days. It would have been enough time to get all the answers they needed, but now, to change her mind and grant him life because he hadn't died yet... She really couldn't do it!

#### Chapter 466: How Can You Understand?

Sitting atop her frozen throne, a cold chill gripped Ashlynn's heart when she heard Talauia's words. Some things, they really shouldn't be healed, even if it was possible. She'd learned that lesson with painful clarity during the trial the Ancient Willow subjected her to.

In her vision, Ollie was brought before her with horrible wounds and a severed arm. She and Heila had combined their power to restore his lost limb, unknowingly inflicting harm on the Ancient Oak that it might never recover from. Moreover, because Heila had exhausted herself to heal Ollie, later on, she wasn't able to help heal anyone else and several more people died from their wounds because of Ashlynn's selfish decision.

Just because a thing was possible didn't mean the price was one that should be paid. As Ashlynn looked at the trembling figure of Talauia, her wings trembling with the weight of countless angry stares and the even heavier tears flowing from Odette's eyes, Ashlynn wondered whether Ritchel's wounds were truly impossible, or the price was simply too high for Talauia to pay.

"That's not right!" a young hunter among the Frost Walkers shouted. "My father died to protect Lord Ritchel, but this witch won't heal him? She's just going to let him die? Where is the justice in that? There isn't any!" he shouted, his dark purple horn swirling with furious energy. "If there is no justice, I demand vengeance for the dead! If Lord Ritchel dies, then the witch dies!"

"Yes! Justice or vengeance," another young Frost Walker standing nearby shouted. "Kill the witch!"

"Justice or vengeance!"

"Kill the witch!"

"Save Lord Ritchel!"

"She killed my husband! Where is my justice? I will have my vengeance!"

The shouts grew louder and louder, particularly those coming from the family members of Ritchel's fallen Honor Guard and icy energy began to gather in the hall once again.

At a look from Nyrielle, Savis, and Tausau both moved from their seats, taking up positions to either side of the Thistle Witch and radiating bloodthirsty menace outward, making it clear to everyone that to attack her meant attacking everyone who Nyrielle had brought to the High Pass.

Talauia jumped in surprise, having momentarily expected the powerful vampires to seize her and offer her up to the Frost Walkers in order to secure their cooperation. It would hardly be the first time she'd found herself confronted by ancient vampires trying to rob her of her freedom, but when these two arrived, it was the Clanless Tausau who gave her a reassuring look before he faced the angry crowd.

"You fought with us," Tausau said softly. "That makes you a sister in battle. We will not give you over to these cowards who can only shout for someone else to give them justice."

"I don't know, I don't know what to..." Talauia began to say, taken completely off guard by their actions but before she could say anything further, the hall began to still as Ashlynn made her move at last.

Unlike Nyrielle, she didn't demand silence. Her powers were weak enough at the moment that she saved what energy she had for things that were truly important and shouting down a crowd wasn't among them. Instead, she simply stood and raised one bandage-wrapped hand high above her head.

The effect wasn't immediate, but it didn't take long for the people who were shouting and glaring hatefully at Talauia to realize that their companions had gone quiet and turned in the direction of the

dias. One by one, people turned in the direction of the dias, waiting to hear what the Mother of Trees had to say.

Or at least, most people did. There was still one person, the young Frost Walker who had started this outburst, who dared to step forward and address the Mother of Trees directly.

"Your Dominion," he said, his voice echoing off the distant walls and high ceiling of the Great Hall. "The Thistle Witch isn't of your coven, but you are the greatest witch here. Please, grant us our revenge. Give her over to us and let us claim her life for the lives of our fallen fathers and grandfathers. Give us our vengeance!"

"You want to be given vengeance?" Ashlynn said, looking down at the young man and shaking her head. "What grave did you crawl out of to be owed vengeance? What crippling wounds have you suffered to need someone to claim your vengeance for you? You want vengeance?" Ashlynn asked in a mocking tone.

"Tell me your name, young man," she commanded. "Tell me who dares to ask the Mother of Trees for vengeance."

"I am Darfrir, son of Daldis who died at the Thistle Witch's hands," the young man shouted, refusing to back down. "My mother lost her husband and my father will never see me take a mate. He will never rest if he died a meaningless death, so I am owed this vengeance!"

"Very well, Dafrir, son of Daldis," Ashlynn said calmly. "Clear a path for this young avenger. Captain Virve," she added, looking into the crowd of Nyrielle's people behind the formal delegation and finding the head of her guard there. "If he lacks a blade, give him one so that he may fight to claim his revenge."

"Auntie Ashlynn, Auntie Ashlynn," Talauia said, turning multifaceted purple eyes on her friend that were filled with hurt. "I won't let him, I won't let him kill me. He'll die if he tries, he'll really die!"

"I know he'd die," Ashlynn said, startling the young Frost Walker who had just begun to make his way through the crowd and stopping him in his tracks. "He's weak and angry, and crying out in hurts. He wants revenge because he thinks it will stop the pain he feels and so he's flinging himself forward like a madman to die at your hands, achieving nothing other than adding to the tragedy of a battle that should never have been fought."

"Shut up," Dafrir barked only for his horn to dim abruptly when he realized who he'd just snapped at. "Your Dominion, you don't know! You don't know what it's like to see the person who killed your father standing right there, and to be able to do nothing about it! But if you give me a chance, even if there are nine chances in ten that I die without taking her down with me, I'll still turn my life into a spear and hurl it at her heart!"

"You think my darling doesn't know what it is to burn in the fires of hatred that drive revenge?" Nyrielle said with a light, musical laugh. "If your father was the sort of person my Ashlynn was, he would have crawled out of his own grave, refusing to die until he'd had his revenge."

"After that," Nyrielle continued in a voice filled with pride. "He would have driven his body to the breaking point again and again, turning himself into a weapon and an instrument of vengeance that could tear through the walls of thorns of the Briar, stopping at nothing until he tore the Thistle Witch's heart from her chest."

All around the hall, many eyes opened wide with shock. For the few who knew Ashlynn's story, people like Heila, Virve, and Lennart, their hearts filled with the same pride as they heard from Nyrielle as they thought of everything they had seen Ashlynn endure on her path to claim her revenge against Owain Lothian. To hear her used as an example now, before so many people, brought mist to their eyes as they watched comprehension begin to dawn on the remainder of the audience.

"I met my darling Ashlynn the night of her marriage to Owain Lothian. The night that he beat her to death before dumping her in a shallow grave with nothing more than a bedsheet," Nyrielle explained with dark eyes that seemed to suck the light out of the young hunter's horn as she glared at him.

"She crawled out of that grave on her own, and she walked to the edge of the Vale in the cold and the rain. When I offered her the power to obtain her revenge, she paid with an unending life of service to obtain the chance, just the chance, of claiming her revenge."

"Next to her, what are you?" Nyrielle asked coldly. "Jumping about, shouting about trading your life for revenge when there isn't even a wound on your body. And you say she doesn't understand? Boy, it's you who doesn't understand. But if you'd like," she said, standing from her throne and gathering dark energy around her hands. "I can wound you the way she was wounded and then you can fight for your vengeance..."

"Enough, my love," Ashlynn said, stepping next to Nyrielle and placing a hand gently on her forearm. "I think young Dafrir understands the point now," Ashlynn said, turning her attention back to the slack-jawed young man.

"I won't deny you your vengeance," Ashlynn said, lowering her head and hiding her eyes behind the brim of her witch's hat as if she couldn't bear the sight of watching him try to claim it. He might give himself one in ten odds of succeeding but anyone who had seen or heard what Talauia was capable of put his much, much lower. If he were truly to try, the scene that followed might dye half the hall red with his blood.

"Your heart can burn and drive you to madness, but ask yourself something first. Go and stand beside your father's body and ask yourself this question. Would his spirit rest better if you were to die senselessly today? Or would he rest better if you found that mate you mentioned and brought a grand child to pay respects to his horn in the ancestral cave?"

"But before you even ask that question," Ashlynn continued. "Ask yourself if there's any need for vengeance in the first place. The Thistle Witch said that she could not heal Lord Ritchel to allow your father's spirit to rest, but that may not mean that his life is lost," she said, turning her attention back to Talauia.

"Tala, my friend," Ashlynn said gently. "Will you answer a few questions for me?"

#### Chapter 467: Finish What Was Started

"I will answer, I will answer," Talauia said as soon as Ashlynn asked. "But I won't be bullied," she said, rounding her multifaceted gaze on the assembled Frost Walkers. "I won't be shouted at. I won't be threatened. If you do, if you do, then I won't just stand for it again!"

"No one will shout at you," Ashlynn promised, raising the brim of her hat and looking out over the assembled Frost Walkers. "We've heard the words of the living and their demands. But right now, I want to address the demands of the dead," she said, nodding slightly at Zedy's crimson figure before touching Nyrielle lightly and returning to her throne.

"Tala," Ashlynn said, trying to relax the formal atmosphere as much as she could, as though she and the Thistle Witch were once again sitting on the floor around Amahle's table and sharing a meal they'd cooked together rather than holding court formally before hundreds of onlookers. "You said that some

things can't be fixed, but you didn't tell us why. Is it because Lord Ritchel's wounds are too severe or is it because this mountain is a barren place that lacks the resources you need to make him well."

At the head of the Frost Walker delegation, Odette trembled in her seat, trying to contain the glimmer of hope that Ashlynn's words rekindled. None of them had considered it when Talauia first spoke but to ask a member of the Mother of Thorns coven to perform a healing miracle in this desolate, icy place... it might really be too difficult.

"It's both, it's both things that are a problem," Talauia said slowly, keeping an eye on the crowd to see if they would do as Ashlynn had commanded and remain silent while she explained. "I pulled back my poison, I did, but it already tore at his whole body. My poison, it's like putting thousands of tiny needles in his blood. They poke and tear all over until he bleeds on the inside or the poison collects in his heart and tears it apart."

"Lord Ritchel, Lord Ritchel fought off the poison with Lady Nyrielle's Blood Vitality Crystal," Talauia explained. "His blood is strong right now and that's keeping him alive. He's constantly healing to remain young and in his prime. But when that stops, when that stops then everything that was cut and torn will tear open again. He'll bleed and bleed and bleed until his body fails."

"But isn't there a chance that he might survive, even if he's crippled from his injuries?" Ashlynn asked. She'd heard the Frost Walker healers speculate that such a dismal fate might be the best that Lord Ritchel could hope for but she wanted to hear it from Talauia directly.

"He might, he might," the Thistle Witch said without much hope. "But only because of Lady Nyrielle's blood sorcery. I don't know, I don't know if it will be enough to let him live but he won't live well, not well at all if he survives. And... and not for very long," she added quietly. "Maybe only a few years."

"You can't heal him," Heila said, gingerly sliding off of her icy seat and walking over to stand next to Talauia. "But cousin, the Willow is better at healing than the Thistle. If I help," she said, turning to look briefly at Ashlynn before continuing. "If Mother Ashlynn and I both help and if we take Lord Ritchel to the Vale of Mists for healing... is there a chance?"

"It won't matter, won't matter at all," Talauia said, shaking her head fiercely. "It's just like pouring water into a sieve. You can keep pouring and pouring and it will hold for a moment before it all empties again. The holes and tears, there are too many of them. Even if all three of us try, even if I could heal a hundred wounds and together we could heal five hundred wounds, he has thousands of tiny wounds," the Thistle Witch said. "It's not enough. Not enough at all."

"I see," Ashlynn said solemnly before turning to face Odette. "I cannot promise to save your husband," she began, drawing a clear line before she offered the fragile woman any more hope. "But I think there is a way that we might. It will require even more sacrifice on top of the sacrifice that Gunter, Hrosskel, Artur, Sturla, Hulda, and Daldis have already made," she said, gesturing at the bodies of the fallen honor guard. "Are you willing to make an offering if it might save your husband's life? Or would you prefer to let him pass peacefully?"

"I do not wish to see my young friend lose his life so soon," Nyrielle added from her throne beside Ashlynn. "But he fought against the greatest assassin of the Glimmerwing Clan, the Thistle Witch herself. It isn't a shameful death to be defeated by such a powerful witch. In his place, you will have to choose, Castle Mistress Odette."

"If it will save my husband's life so that he can return to his duties and protect our people as a lord should," Odette said firmly. "Then I will offer up my life in his place. Our people need his strength more than they need mine. Take whatever you need from me to give him back his life."

"I never promised that he could return to his throne," Ashlynn said carefully. The time for that conversation was approaching but the moment wasn't upon them yet. "Only that we would try to save his life. Young Dafrir," Ashlynn continued, turning to face the young hunter who had demanded vengeance.

"Will you insist on the vengeance your heart burns for? Or will you follow in your father's example and stake your life to save Lord Ritchel? Will you and all your brethren," she said, gesturing to the other children of the fallen Honor Guard. "Will you do as your honored dead have done and risk your lives to finish the mission they started?"

"I will," a young, childish voice said from among the gathered Frost Walkers. "Grandfather said we could only ever do our best. He did his best," she said, pushing her way forward until she stood beside the frozen figure of her fallen grandfather. "But it wasn't good enough. So, since he couldn't finish, then I'll help him do it. Then, then you can rest, can't you grandfather?" She said, lowering her shining blue horn until it touched the ice that contained her grandfather's body.

"What would you require from us, Your Dominion?" Odette asked, stepping forward and resting a hand gently on the young girl's shoulder. "How can we help to save my husband?"

"Tala said it herself," Ashlynn said with a smile at the winged witch. "Alone, she might heal a hundred wounds, but together, if we return to the Vale of Mists, we could heal five hundred. She also said something else important," Nyrielle said, turning to face Nyrielle.

"Mistress," Ashlynn said formally. "If we brought enough of his people with us and you could feed on them frequently, could you prepare more Blood Vitality Crystals for Lord Ritchel? Your magic is what's sustaining him now. He still has four crystals more from the gift you gave him before. If we can sustain him for long enough that he no longer deteriorates between healing sessions..." she said, allowing her voice to trail off.

In order to create a single Blood Vitality Crystal, Nyrielle would need to gorge herself on far more blood than she needed to survive, until she was all but overflowing with the energy of the blood she'd consumed. Condensing that power into a single crystal was an act of sorcery that only True Vampires like her were capable of and the effects were truly miraculous, restoring even an aging man like Lord Ritchel to the prime of his life and infusing him with the restorative power of blood purified and fortified by a vampire's power to defy death itself.

Once she laid it out before everyone, it seemed like such an obvious solution, but before Nyrielle could give an answer, someone else spoke out.

"I know that the dead demand justice," Commander Jannik said, giving Odette a complicated look as he stood. "But there is a limit to what the dead can demand of the living. You already wish to take Lord Ritchel away to receive healing and this much I can understand. I can even accept it," he said, striding forward to stand between the gathered Frost Walkers and Nyrielle.

"But I cannot stand idly by and allow my people to be turned into food! There has to be a limit," the dark-furred Frost Walker said. "If Lord Ritchel's family wishes to sustain him in this way, then that is their choice. But beyond that, no more! No more of our people will be allowed to fall to vampire fangs for this tragedy. And if someone wants to insist that they do, then they must defeat me first!"

#### Chapter 468: An Honor

Commander Jannik stood defiantly on the icy floor of the Great Hall, his dark blue horn blazing with determination as he stood his ground between Nyrielle and the assembled Frost Walkers behind him. Inwardly, his heart pounded in his chest filling his limbs with power and fury that he'd thought he'd left behind along with the tempestuous days of his youth when he contended with Ritchel for the title of Lord of the High Pass.

Ever since that bitter defeat, Jannik honed himself into the best weapon he could, growing from a powerful warrior and fearless hunter into a steady commander who could both lead his men and stand back to see the larger picture. With each year that passed, though his body softened ever so slightly, his mind sharpened by twice as much, turning him into a spear that Ritchel could rely on to vanquish their enemies and protect their people.

It hadn't happened over night, but the years of rivalry between the two men had slowly melted before refreezing in the shape of an unshakable friendship. Seeing the bodies of Ritchel's Honor Guard was hard enough, but the visit he'd paid his friend and the sight of his wounded, powerless body was even worse. He'd promised then that, whatever it took, he would fight for his friend and more importantly, fight to protect their people now that the mighty Ritchel no longer could.

At first, Jannik's heart shuddered in relief when the Mother of Trees said there might be a chance, but when she explained her plan, everything that had been joyous in that moment twisted like a snake, sinking its fangs into the hand that dared to hold it.

"You have already crippled Lord Ritchel," Jannik said, glaring from the Mother of Trees to the Thistle Witch. "Six of our greatest sorcerers have fallen and five more of our young warriors lay not far from them. Our Young Lord lays broken and mindless in the cells below and there is no one else who can practice the fearsome sorcery he learned from the ancestors. Our greatest strengths have all been broken like ice hurled upon the stones," he said.

"But even this isn't enough for you!" Jannik shouted, clenching his fists until the tips of his claws pierced the thick flesh of his palms, spilling a trace of blood into his dark fur. "Now you would feed on our people, draining away our literal lifeblood and for what? A chance that you might restore Lord Ritchel? A hope that you can hold over us for as long as you like?"

"We are not sheep like the Horned Clan to be grazed upon like livestock!" he roared, his voice growing louder with every sentence. "We will not stand for this!"

"Childish," Nyrielle said, shaking her head at his outburst and raising a hand shrouded in dark, shadowy energy as she prepared to 'defeat' the disruptive commander before he could further derail the proceedings.

She was willing to invest as long as it took to create however many Blood Vitality Crystals were necessary to save Ritchel's life. Even if the Frost Walkers didn't supply her with blood, she would seek offerings from within the Vale of Mists or prey on human villages if she needed to in order to save the

grandson of the man who had sheltered so many of her people when the Vale of Mists fell to Cellach Lothian.

All those years ago, it had been Ritchel's grandfather who led Frost Walker hunters into the low lands to gather lost refugees fleeing across the mountains. Even though he did nothing to fight the humans, the safety he provided to her people had earned him generations of thanks from Nyrielle. Thanks that had, over the past several decades, turned into an enduring friendship with his descendants. A friendship that meant even more to her now, after Ashlynn reawakened her slumbering heart, than it had just a few years ago. She wasn't about to throw away one of her few friendships over this, but why did this fool have to make things so difficult?

"My love," Ashlynn said, placing a hand over Nyrielle's before she could strike the defiant commander down. Her emerald eyes were soft and pleading as she looked at her lover but her voice was firm and confident. "Let me speak a little more. They need to understand or we will stumble and fall later."

"I blame my recent impatience on you, my darling," Nyrielle said, withdrawing the shadowy energy, lowering her hand, and giving Ashlynn a brief smile. "But see that they do not test what patience remains. I know that you don't want to see more blood spilled," she said, turning her midnight gaze on the dark-furred Frost Walker commander. "But I do not share your commitment to non-violence here."

"This won't take long," Ashlynn said, returning Nyrielle's smile before turning back to Commander Jannik. "You speak of feeding vampires as though it makes us less than you. As though the act of giving something of ourselves so that another might continue to live is something to be ashamed of, afraid of or run from."

"The people of the Vale of Mists do not see it this way," she said, pulling down the collar of her dress to reveal two very faint scars on her neck from the very first time Nyrielle fed on her. Within another few months, those scars would be gone entirely, but in the chill air of the Great Hall, her flushed skin revealed the marks clearly.

"Generations of people in the vale have grown up knowing peace and comfort in their lives because of the vampires who protected them," Ashlynn said, gesturing at the people assembled on Nyrielle's side of the Great Hall. "Since coming to the Vale of Mists, I have offered up my blood to Mistress Nyrielle many times. She has never once taken it from me when it wasn't a gift freely and lovingly given," she said. As she spoke, she reached out a hand and quietly gripped Nyrielle's, interlacing their fingers and holding tightly.

"People of the Vale, who among you have offered up blood and life to sustain our guardians and protectors?"

"I have," Heila said instantly, stepping forward and raising a wrist bearing two fresh pink bite marks. "I have learned so much from Madame Zedya and I offered myself up in thanks during our journey to the briar. Later, during the battle, I offered myself to Sir Ignatious so that he might heal from his wounds and help to rescue Mother Ashlynn from the prison of ice."

"I have never been harmed by a vampire who fed on me and, and if they asked," she said as her face began to grow warm. "If they asked, then I would offer myself up again," she said in a quieter voice as she carefully avoided meeting Ignatious's warm, gentle gaze.

"I have offered blood and my life, more than once on this journey," Lennart said, stepping forward from the crowd with several soldiers around him stepping forward as well. "Lady Nyrielle will only feed on her own people just enough to slake her hunger but when she was injured in the battle for the Tangled Tower, I would have given all of my life's blood to heal her wounds. She has done far more for us than the sacrifice of one life."

"I have given my blood..."

"I fought to be the best in my unit to earn the right to offer myself to Sir Thane last year..."

"Madame Zedya once asked for my help..."

The stories flowed like water, spilling from the lips of the people from the Vale of Mists in an unending flow that left the audience on both sides of the hall stunned. Those who had joined Nyrielle's army in High Fen City had yet to experience the traditions of the Vale and a few of them wondered if they had joined an army of madmen or worse... fanatics.

Others, however, saw the genuine compassion and even concern that came with the stories that Lady Nyrielle's people told. Some spoke of times when the vampires in their midst were injured, while others were proud that they'd earned the privilege of offering themselves up but not one of them sounded unwilling.

"You see, Commander Jannik?" Ashlynn said after everyone from the Vale of Mists had a chance to tell their tale. "In the Vale of Mists, we know that there is more than one way to offer your life to help another. You do not need to take up arms and fight to your dying breath to do something noble that sustains a life."

"My coven and I are offering to use our witchcraft and Mistress Nyrielle's blood sorcery to save Ritchel's life if it can be saved," Ashlynn said. "But the Vale of Mists is still small and every person that Nyrielle must gorge herself on will take at least a month of rest to recover afterward. If we must, we will bear this burden ourselves to save Ritchel's life and help the fallen members of his Honor Guard to know peace in death..."

"But it would mean much to both the living and the dead if some of your own people would share in this burden," Ashlynn said, turning away from Jannik to address Odette and the other family members of the fallen men directly. "No one will compel you, but the dead demand justice. You can fight for vengeance, or you can bleed to save a life. The choice is yours."

#### Chapter 469: The Final Demand of the Dead

"Enough, Commander Jannik," Odette said, leaving her chair and striding forward to place a hand on the powerful commander's shoulder. "How often have we said that the ice is melting and we must learn to live in a world that is different from the ones our ancestors knew?"

"The Vale of Mists of today is not the Vale of Mists of our father's era," she said, lowering her pure white horn in a show of respect to Nyrielle. "Or perhaps they are and we never truly knew their strength. But today, their army is already camped within our walls. Our forces have already been defeated. It is good to speak up if you feel like we are being taken advantage of in our moment of defeat, but it's clear that Her Dominion doesn't see matters the way we do."

"You can let this one go, Commander Jannik," Old Svenja's brittle voice followed Odette's. "You have stood for what is right and that is good, but anything more would only be foolish defiance for the sake of pride... And the High Pass cannot afford to lose any more of our strongest warriors to foolish pride."

Standing out in front of the delegation, Jannik closed his eyes and drew a deep, shuddering breath while he wrestled with his conscience. In his entire life, the High Pass had stood resolute and unconquerable, bound in ice that protected it from the world outside. There had been battles to be sure. The threat of Tuscans and other raiders who sought to plunder horns from their Ancestral Caves was constant.

But defeat? The fall of their mighty fortress? How many generations of commanders had preceded him without anyone facing this humiliation and shame? How many had stood where he stood now, fighting for the honor of the dead and arguing over whether or not the price to save their fallen lord's life was too high? He couldn't think of a single one who had faced such a challenge.

"Promise me something, Your Eternity," Jannik said, opening his eyes and staring directly into Nyrielle's midnight gaze. "Promise me that you will not kill my clansmen who offer their blood to you. Promise that Lord Ritchel won't find that his recovery came at the cost of young men like Dafrir."

"I cannot give you that promise," Nyrielle said, holding up a hand before the impulsive commander could object. "But I promise you that I will teach them the way an offering is to be made, and if it gives you comfort, then my darling Ashlynn will remain by their side while I feed to pull them free if they fail to tell me when they've reached their limit."

"You are not a child, Commander Jannik," Nyrielle continued, speaking in a tone that carried the weight of her considerable years. "You should know that any great working that would defy death itself carries risk. I will not give you false hope just as Ashlynn will not promise success, even if I believe in her ability to save Ritchel's life with this method. We will all do our part, we will do our best. We can promise no more than that," she said firmly.

"Then, I have no further complaints," the dark-furred warrior said, returning to his seat in defeat. "Castle Mistress, I leave this matter in your hands," he said formally, leaving the final decision to Odette.

"These brave men died so that my husband might live," Odette said, returning to the young girl's side and scooping her up into her arms so she could look down and see her fallen Grandfather's face one last time. "As Her Dominion said, it falls to us to finish what they started. I will offer myself and I will bring any others who wish to do the same with me. Lady Ashlynn, if we do this thing, how soon do you think my husband could be healed? And can he make a full recovery?"

"This will not be fast," Ashlynn cautioned. "At least a month. Perhaps two. More than that I cannot say until we've returned to the Vale and begun to treat him. But we will do everything we can, and in the end, I hope that he will be just as strong as he was before this tragedy."

"Two months is not such a long time to be away from his throne," Odette said with a smile.

"Commander Jannik, we'll be relying on you to protect it in his absence."

"Don't get ahead of yourself, Castle Mistress Odette," Nyrielle said. "We will do all we can to save his life. Whether or not he returns to his throne is another matter. For now, Zedya, there are still those among the dead who must be spoken for."

"Yes, Mistress Nyrielle," Zedya said as she moved to stand between two different groups of coffins. On one side, several young Frost Walker soldiers lay encased in ice, and on the other, the men of the Black Wolf Brigade in their wooden coffins marked by a blood-red paw print.

"Sadagares, Patza, Berig, Teias, and Braga of the Black Wolf Brigade," Zedya intoned formally. "They fought under the banner of Hamdi's Defeated Dogs, covered in shame for their failure to defend the Tangled Tower, they traveled across several nations, assigned the most menial of duties, awaiting the day they could redeem themselves in battle against the humans. Yet instead of redemption, these five died deaths without glory fighting a battle over a misunderstanding. The only men who fell to their claws were our friends and allies."

When Zedya put it that way, several people in the crowd couldn't help but shake their heads at the tragedy of these brave soldier's deaths. To be defeated by the Harbinger of Death and her forces shouldn't be as shameful as they made it out to be. Those who had fought at the Tangled Tower, however, could only tuck their tails between their legs at the memory of their failure to defeat Nyrielle's soldiers even when they outnumbered them by more than three to one. The shame that these men carried to their deaths hadn't been exaggerated in the slightest.

"Urho, Pekka, Eljas, Jalo, and Torsti of the High Pass," Zedya said, moving to stand next to the frozen Frost Walkers. "Young men all of them, eager to prove themselves in the first real battle they'd ever faced. They came dressed in their finest, expecting a ceremony, and were plunged into a brief, bloody war. They died in the first charge, before anyone took command of the battle or gave any orders. They died not as soldiers or as men, but as boys too young to lose their lives so tragically when there was no worthy cause demanding their sacrifice."

"Both groups of warriors cry out at the waste of their deaths," Zedya said. "They demand justice from the person responsible for this tragedy. In the end, it was the actions of a single person who caused so much violence and bloodshed and robbed them of their chance to fight for something that mattered," she concluded, her words echoing off the ceiling high above.

"Mistress Nyrielle," Zedya said, turning to face the dias. "It is the demand of these fallen warriors that Young Lord Hauke stand before them, to be tried for his crimes and punished for his wrongs. Only then will the dead rest peacefully."

"The dead are within their rights to demand a trial," Nyrielle acknowledged. "And whether it was Hauke himself or the spirits of ancient ancestors acting through him, the guilty must be punished for what happened last night."

"Bring the prisoner before us," Zedya called loudly enough to be heard outside the Great Hall. The moment she spoke, the massive doors shuddered and slowly began to open revealing Artificer Erkembalt standing beside a glassy-eyed Hauke.

The Young Lord looked no more aware of his surroundings than he had at the end of the battle, but now he had been bathed and dressed in his finest robes before he was chained to a wooden chair to be carried into the chamber.

Standing behind him, five sorcerers in elaborate flowing robes bearing the symbols of the Sorcerers of Sundered Earth each carried a single metal box containing the iridescent horn of one of the ancestors who had possessed Hauke.

"Your Eternity," Erkembalt said formally as he strode forward, leading the strange procession that included 'captive' horns and the bound but helpless young lord. "By your command, I have brought the prisoners to stand trial for their crimes."

#### Chapter 470: Hauke's Stars

For Hauke, time seemed to pass incredibly slowly in the aftermath of the battle. Trapped in the frozen cave of his own mind, it seemed like his struggles were utterly futile against Eraric's sorcery. The ancestor most famed for the constructs he birthed from Eternal Ice hadn't held back when he retaliated against Hauke for the young lord's interference in the battle against Ashlynn.

Now, with his hands and feet frozen in place, after what felt like hours of struggling even if it had only been dozens of minutes, the captive Frost Walker finally gave up in his struggles against the ice that held him captive. No matter how much strength he expended, it seemed like the ice only grew thicker in response to his struggles. If he wanted to defeat the ice and free himself from the prison within his own mind, he would have to outthink it rather than overpowering it.

In the world outside, Erkembalt and Aspakos carefully transferred the young Frost Walker to a litter in order to carry him into the castle. While there were times when everything should be left exactly in

place before disturbing anything that might have been an important part of a ritual, Hauke's circumstances amounted to battlefield injuries and the best thing to do would be to take him somewhere out of the cold.

Or at least, that's what the two sorcerers told themselves as they hurried into the shelter and relative warmth of the icy fortress. Nothing in this frozen world could ever be called 'warm' but at least with shelter, they could escape the biting mountain winds that sliced through their clothing like countless freezing needles.

"Do you want me to examine him, old friend?" Aspakos said once they'd been guided to a cell in which they could do their work. "I can still do at least that much."

"Can you?" Erkembalt said as he sat a heavy leather case on a nearby table and began pulling out tools, neatly arranging them on the table as he gathered his thoughts about the curse that seemed to have taken hold of the young Frost Walker. "That bloody aura of yours won't taint the work?"

The artificer paused in his preparations, looking at his dark-feathered friend with eyes that barely concealed the pain he felt behind a layer of professional skepticism. In the days since their reunion, he'd seen how often Aspakos restrained himself from what should have been simple, ordinary actions because of the smothering aura of crimson darkness that had settled over him.

When Aspakos said that his hands could no longer hold the tools of their trade, he'd been understating the limitations he suffered for attempting to use sorcery meant for the founder of their order alone. It wasn't only the tools of creation that he'd been forbidden from, even common cutlery, forks, and spoons were impossible for his taloned hands to hold.

Weapons, however... nothing prevented the sorcerer with a broken beak from picking up weapons, as if the only power left to him was the power of destruction.

"I have lost some things, but I see more clearly now," Aspakos said as he knelt beside Hauke's glassy-eyed figure. Heavy iron shackles bound his wrists and ankles, binding his movements in case he recovered enough to pose a threat, though both men in the cell thought that it was exceptionally unlikely. Whatever bound Hauke, it wouldn't release him easily or the young man would have broken free of it by now.

"Do not disturb me, old friend," Askapos said as he used one taloned claw to pierce the flesh of his brow in several places, forming the pattern of the constellation of Sitka the Weaver in tiny drops of blood.

"Celestial eyes that watch and wait,

Unveil the threads of woven fate.

Through starlit night and endless days,

Into tomorrow's tomorrow I cast my gaze."

Steel clattered on wood and stone as tools fell forgotten from Erkembalt's hands the moment Aspakos's words reached his ears. He wanted to shout at his friend to stop, to tell him that this young lord wasn't important enough to harm himself even further with the founder's art, but the words caught in his throat as he watched the air above Aspakos darken until it resembled a patch of the night sky, filled with tiny twinkling lights.

"For this sight, I yield my path,

Freely accept dark aftermath.

One step deeper into night,

One truth closer to the light."

An inky darkness blacker than the night sky swirled in Aspakos's eyes, reflecting the hundreds of twinkling lights above. Then, ever so slowly, several of the lights within his eyes grew dim before winking out entirely. Meanwhile, above him, a series of lights grew brighter, twinkling in colors of pale blue, dark purple, pure white and soft green before the entire scene faded away as though it had never been there at all

But to Erkembalt's eyes, the darkness enveloping his friend had grown greater still and his shoulders slumped as though he'd picked up another burden to bear.

"Aspakos, why?" Erkembalt asked. His tail hung low, nearly tucked against his legs as he watched his friend stand up, shaking his shoulders as if adjusting to a new pain... or a new absence. "What did you trade away this time?" the artificer asked flatly. "What did you need to know so badly that you couldn't even wait until I'd had my turn?"

"Be easy, old friend," the dark-feathered sorcerer said, crossing the room to place a taloned hand on Erkembalt's shoulder. "This young man, he's only just begun his journey. That's what I needed to know," he said with a slight smile.

"I said it outside, didn't I? That it might be justice for him to be left this way," Aspakos said slowly. He didn't regret his words, they'd been the right words to give to the Harbinger of Death after she'd seen what this young man had done to the Mother of Trees, but he didn't want those words to become a prophecy all their own.

"Whether it is justice or not," he continued. "If his journey ends here, then so will many others in the years to come. Many lights will fade before their time and the world we live in will grow darker still."

"Whether it is just for him to recover or not," the sorcerer said, looking at Hauke's slack-jawed, shackled figure. "It would be better if he does. Now, it's your turn old friend. Find a way to mend the broken," he said, as though he were talking about fixing broken pottery like nothing could be more simple. "Young Hauke's future is in your hands."