

The Vampire 511

Chapter 511: Traditions

"Welcome home, Sir Ollie," an old woman's voice said as the villagers began to cluster around the wagon. "Your people have missed you," Old Nan chuckled as she walked forward, her intricately carved wooden cane clicking on the stone pavers of the village square as she led the others forward.

"I was only gone for a few days, Old Nan," Ollie said bashfully, placing a hand awkwardly behind his neck as he realized that even more villagers had paused their evening activities to watch or wander over to the carriage and its occupants. "Um, this is Lady Ashlynn, the Mother of Trees," he said, quickly turning to provide introductions.

"And this is Lady Heila, the Willow Witch," he added as the diminutive witch stepped out of the carriage, followed by Virve's powerful figure. "And Lady Virve," he added. "She, um, she'll be the Oak Witch in the future, so please, grant her the same honors you would grant to me."

"With sap in our veins and splinters in our fur, the people with wood in their hearts honor the Mother of Trees," Old Nan intoned formally, bowing as deeply as her aging bones would allow her to. Behind her, Milo and the other members of the Heartwood clan fell to their knees, pressing their tails flat on the ground and holding up the tips of their sharp claws in silent supplication.

Members of the other Eldritch clans looked briefly puzzled before they too offered simple bows as appropriate for their own traditions, but it was clear to everyone that a visit by the Mother of Trees meant more to some of their neighbors than they had previously understood.

"You don't need to lower yourselves so much," Ashlynn said, striding forward and helping Old Nan to stand upright. "Tonight isn't about me, it's about Ollie. If you're going to honor anyone, honor him for what he has done for this village," Ashlynn said, briefly glancing around at the dozens of villagers who had wandered over to the large square.

Ollie had told her that several whole villages had emptied themselves completely to flee from Owain Lothian and Liam Dunn's attacks this summer but she'd never imagined just how many of those people had come to settle in Ollie's village. Many had chosen to build homes in the rapidly growing town outside Nyrielle's ancient fortress, but it seemed like nearly half of the refugees had come here, to the place that he had helped to build.

"You honor us, your Dominion," Old Nan said, her eyes widening slightly as she spotted a simple wooden hairpin carved to resemble a pinecone among the decorations in the hatband of Ashlynn's wide-brimmed hat. "Thank you for accepting Juni's gift."

"How could I refuse something made by one of Ollie's good friends?" Ashlynn said with a twinkle in her eye as she watched Ollie's awkwardness with the ceremony and the formality of the moment. In time, she was certain that he would get used to navigating these moments with the grace of a man raised to be a knight, but at the moment, she enjoyed seeing this side of him.

"Milo," Ashlynn asked, turning to the cloaked figure who looked almost as uncomfortable as Ollie in the overly stiff gathering at the village square. "Is everything ready?"

"It is, your Dominion," the Heartwood archer said, still feeling stiff and formal even after spending several days with Ashlynn and her coven in Orava village. "Ollie, I can take you to wash up when you're ready."

"Take this," Virve said, retrieving a neatly tied bundle of fabric and a block of soap that smelled of rich cedar and pine. "Sir Thane's instructions said that you should change into this after you wash, before he arrives," Virve told Ollie as she passed the bundle to Milo to carry.

"I'll talk to everyone here while you clean up," Ashlynn said with a playful wink. "Take your time. The others won't arrive until the sun has set for at least half an hour."

"In that case, shouldn't I stay here until sunset?" Ollie asked hesitantly. "I can take you on a tour and..."

"Old Nan can take us on a tour of the village," Ashlynn said, giving Ollie a polite shove. "Go. The water isn't getting any warmer while you stall."

"Yes, my Lady," Ollie said dejectedly when he realized he'd been caught stalling.

"Come, Sir Ollie," Milo said, wrapping a strong arm around the taller human. "The water isn't even that cold, and the pool we've made for you to bathe in doesn't cycle very swiftly, so it's warmer than plunging into the stream itself. You'll be fine, even without a layer of fur to keep you warm," he said as

he guided Ollie away from the village to a private area that Milo had helped build just for tonight's ceremony.

Tradition in the Kingdom of Gaal dictated that a knight begin their vigil scrubbed clean of the filth of the world that clung to them, preparing themselves to receive the grace of the Holy Lord of Light when they ascended to knighthood. Some knights in modern days turned this act into an opulent and luxurious experience, soaking in hot water while attendants scrubbed them with perfumed soaps before anointing their bodies in scented oils blessed by priests of the Church.

Thane, however, felt that the older traditions should be kept, and the instructions he provided for Ollie's vigil offered no comforts to the soon-to-be knight. A small dam created a deep pool to one side of a swiftly flowing mountain stream, screened by a simple wall of branches that did more to protect Ollie's sense of modesty than they did to protect him from the chill evening breeze.

The rich, earthy scent of damp soil mingled with the sharp scent of cedar and the musky sweetness of decaying leaves that had fallen into the water, creating a complex scent that Ollie had increasingly come to think of as 'home.'

If they were closer to the village, the trace of woodsmoke and the smell of roasting meats would have made it perfect, but Milo had prepared his bath far enough away from the villagers that only the croaking frogs and the birds watching from the cedar trees disturbed the pure tranquility of the moment.

"This sounded like a much nicer tradition when Sir Thane described it from the warmth of his office," Ollie muttered as he stared at the rushing waters of the cold stream tumbling down the hillside before they flowed into the pool that Milo had prepared for him. "I don't suppose I can just dunk myself in the water and call it good, can I?" he asked, raising a brow at his furry companion.

"If you do, I won't tell anyone," Milo said, setting down the bundle of fabric along with a rough towel before turning to face his young friend. "But you'll know, and if you know that you cheated at the start of this journey..."

"I know, I know," Ollie said as he unbuckled the belt that held both his fighting knives and placed it in Milo's outstretched paw. "It's just cold water," he said. "As traditions go, I'm sure there are some that are much, much harder than this," he said, though he didn't mention that some of those harder traditions were still waiting for him when it came time for Lady Ashlynn to bestow a seed of witchcraft on him.

For now, he only needed to face the simplest of traditions on his road to becoming a knight. A simple bath. A very, very, very cold bath perhaps, but if he turned back over a little cold water, then he truly didn't deserve to call himself a knight.

"You know that humans can get sick if we're in cold water for too long, right, Milo?" Ollie asked as he stared at the frigid water.

"I've heard that your skin will turn gray and your lips will turn blue if you're in the cold for too long," Milo said lightly, as though it wasn't a concern. "If that happens to you, I promise to pull you out and carry you back to the Mother of Trees."

"Well, when you put it like that," the young man said awkwardly. "I guess there really is no reason to put it off any longer. Traditions exist for a reason, right?" Ollie said, looking at his friend and offering a confident smile. "Let's show everyone that I can follow in the footsteps of the great knights before me."

Chapter 512: Coming Clean

Stripping out of his tunic and breeches, Ollie shivered for a moment while he folded his clothing and set it neatly to the side before plunging into the deep pool. The moment his body slipped into the frigid water, he let out an explosive gasp as the chill penetrated all the way to his bones. The next instant, he slipped beneath the surface of the water, surprised at the depth of the pool and completely forgetting to hold his breath or close his eyes before the water enveloped him completely.

-GASP-

It felt like he'd been underwater for minutes even though it had been only seconds as Ollie struggled to the surface, splashing and flailing around for the edge of the pool to steady himself in the water.

"It's shallower on the other side," Milo pointed out, concealing a friendly grin as his whiskers twitched in amusement and his tail slapped the ground with the force of the laughter he dared not let slip past his lips. "I was about to warn you but..."

"Sure you were," Ollie said, swimming across the pool to the shallow end and finding his footing in waist deep water. "You can laugh, I know you want to laugh," he said, holding out a hand and gesturing for Milo to toss him the block of soap.

"No, no, if I laugh now then I'll pay for it when you're a powerful witch," Milo teased, tossing the soap to the shivering young human. "You have to remember my kindness when you become the Cypress Witch," he insisted.

"Pfft," Ollie snorted, catching the soap and beginning to scrub himself clean. Here again, Thane held to the old traditions. The soap was coarse, packed with fine sand that scoured away not only dirt and grime but what felt like the top layer of Ollie's flesh as well.

A knight was supposed to be a symbol of purity and the filth of the world was said to seep into a person's skin until they were mired in debauchery and sin. To become a knight, one had to strip away any of those worldly obsessions and face their vigil with skin as pure and untainted as when they were newborn babes.

For Ollie, the process wasn't just uncomfortable, it took an excruciating amount of time and for the first time in his life he wished he'd been born just a little bit shorter. More than that, however, he realized just how much dirt and grime seemed to have embedded itself into his flesh over the years.

As he scrubbed, the pure white suds that clung to the soap became darker and darker as he scrubbed away the soot from countless cookfires that seemed to permanently cling to the tips of his fingers around his nails. After spending so many years in the kitchens, the familiar mixture of cooking grease and cookfire soot that covered his skin felt like it had become a defining characteristic of his.

That slowly changed as the rough, forest-scented soap peeled it away along with the surface layer of his skin, leaving behind a gleaming white figure that appeared like its muscles had been sculpted from marble rather than honed through years of manual labor.

The dirt and grease took with it years of worry and hunger pangs that no longer defined his day to day life. He still had worries, some might say that the worries on his shoulders were even greater than the ones he'd born in the past, but those shoulders had become broader in the past several months, and they were more than capable of holding up the burdens that Ollie was preparing to take up.

"You can leave your back to me, Sir Ollie," Milo said, slipping into the chilly water alongside the human when he saw the young man begin to struggle.

"I know I can," Ollie said, handing over the soap. That was something else that sloughed off the flame-haired youth's body along with the dirt as Milo began to scrub at his broad, well defined shoulders. In the kitchens of Lothian Manor, Ollie constantly had to be on the lookout for rivals who fought over scraps among the staff, or who might blame mistakes on someone else to escape the punishment of the head cook.

Here, however, in a place that should have been a thousand times more dangerous than the kitchens deep within Lothian Manor at the heart of the well defended Lothian City, Ollie felt even safer and more secure than he had 'among his own people.' When he thought about the dangers that lay ahead of them, the oncoming threat of war with the Lothians and the Church, there was only one person who he felt he could trust to stand with him in the face of danger.

Otis, the army cook who had taken over the Summer Villa's kitchen when Ollie first met Ashlynn had been willing to set fire to the kitchens to cover their escape. Looking back, if Ollie had one regret it was that they were forced to leave the older cook behind when they fled the villa and they had never been able to return to repay the debt they owed the man.

But now, when he thought about who he could trust to stand with him against danger, the list held more names than he could quickly count, from Harrod to Georg, Sir Thand and Sir Marcel who had taught him so much, and even Lady Ashlynn and the other members of the coven he was about to join. But one name stood out more than others as he thought about the people he'd grown close to since coming to reside in the Vale of Mists and the village filled with refugees.

"Milo," Ollie said softly as his friend scoured his broad, pale back in the quiet of the pool. "During my vigil, Heila will stand for me but this take days instead of a single night and day. I don't have any family in the Vale who can stand at my side but..."

"I already planned to stand for you," Milo said. "But, Sir Ollie, please, don't ever say you don't have any family in the Vale," he added, pausing his scrubbing to turn the young man around and looking directly into his pale eyes. "Mother and I, and so many others, when we were too consumed by our losses to care for each other as family should, you cared for us."

"So please," he said softly. "When the time comes to free your birth family so they can join your family here, just call upon us and we'll fight our way into the heart of Lothian Manor if we have to. But, until then, remember that we're your family too."

"Thank you, Milo," Ollie said, reaching out with his palms held upward and his fingers slightly curled. The next moment, Milo returned the gesture, setting his sharp claws gently on Ollie's wrists while the tips of Ollie's fingers brushed his. Among the Heartwood Clan, it was a gesture that meant you trusted the other person with your lifeblood beneath their claws and it wasn't something Ollie did casually.

But Milo, Old Nan and the others of the village really had become a part of his family here in the Vale, even more so than the women of the coven he was preparing to join. He knew that Heila would defend him fiercely if needed and she would be an important part of his trial as a witch in the days to come as well.

But when it came to feeling safe and protected, few could give him that feeling more than brave archer who had turned down service in Commander Bassinger's army in order to remain at Ollie's side.

"Now, am I scrubbed enough to get out of the watter?" Ollie said as he fought to keep his teeth from chattering. "The sun has almost set," he pointed out, looking at the darkening sky above as the evening mists rolled in.

"I think you're fine," Milo said, slipping out of the pool to fetch the bundle of cloth that Virve had passed over, opening it to reveal a pure white robe with laces across the chest. "Dry off first, and then I'll walk you back to Lady Ashlynn."

The walk back didn't take long, but by the time Ollie had dried himself, dressed and hiked back through the evening gloom, it seemed like Ashlynn had completed her tour of the village, returning to the square to await the arrival of the final participants in tonight's ceremonies.

"You look refreshed," Ashlynn said when she saw Ollie's figure enter the village square. His skin was slightly pinkish from a combination of the chill and the scouring soap, but he also looked like the scrub had done what it was intended to do. The Ollie who approached her now stood up straighter, walking confidently with Milo at his side, as if he had set down some worries or scrubbed away some doubts along with the dirt when he bathed in the frigid waters of his outdoor pool.

"I feel more refreshed than I thought I would," Ollie said. "I know that Sir Thane said things weren't done this way anymore, but in a way, I'm starting to feel like that's sad. I feel... better now," he said, though he couldn't find a word that entirely expressed the way he felt.

"As you should," Thane's rich voice said as the mist cloaking the village seemed to solidify before revealing the figures of two men striding out of the darkness and fog. "Your feet are on the path, Ollie," the vampire-knight said proudly. "Are you ready to take the next step?"

"I am, I..."

Whatever Ollie was about to say, however, was lost as several of the villagers shrieked in fear, their eyes glued to the man dressed in crimson and gold standing next to Sir Thane.

"In-In-Inquisitor!" a panicked voice cried as women snatched their children, darting for their homes while others snatched at weapons, preparing to fight for their lives to prevent humans from burning down yet another village.

"Sir Thane," Old Nan said, glaring at the powerful vampire with eyes that held a heartbreaking blend of fear and betrayal, laying over a fierce determination to fight for what they'd built in the place that had slowly become their new home. "Why have you brought this man here? Have we wronged you somehow that you would punish us like this?"

"Please," Ignatious said, raising his hands helplessly and looking to Ashlynn and Heila for help. "I'm just here for young Ollie, it's..."

"You can't have him," Milo said fiercely, stepping in front of the startled youth and drawing a wicked, curved blade. "Ollie is one of ours, and we won't give him up to the likes of you!"

Chapter 513: A Man of Faith (Part One)

"That's enough," Ashlynn said, her voice rippling with power and echoing from every tree surrounding the village square. Branches shook as though caught in a mighty wind, and the tender trunks of recently planted saplings bowed in the presence of the Mother of Trees.

One misunderstanding had already cost the lives of dozens of people in the High Pass and resulted in tragedies that she was still working to help people recover from. In the High Pass, standing on a barren mountainside amidst the ice and snow, she could do very little to keep the situation from spiralling out of control. But here, in the forest of the Vale of Mists, there was no way that she would let another tragedy like the one in the High Pass unfold again when she had the power to suppress anyone who might fight.

Ashlynn's exercise of power went beyond a simple demonstration of force. While she wasn't willing to draw deeply on the strength of the forest to apply a powerful binding, she had more than enough strength to infuse the stiffness of wood and a feeling of being deeply rooted to the ground into everyone present.

The magic was weak, and if anyone was determined to commit violence, it would only slow them for a moment or two before they broke free of her suppression, but those moments would be all she and people like Thane would need to take additional actions. Right now, she wasn't trying to trap anyone, she just wanted to hold everyone back from making a hasty move before they had a chance to sort matters out.

Moving quickly while Ashlynn drew everyone else's attention, Heila darted to stand between Ignatious and Milo, drawing Snow Fang to match the Heartwood archer's own wickedly curved blade and giving him a look that said she was willing to use the frosty weapon if someone forced her hand.

"Your Dominion," Old Nan began as she struggled to pull herself up to her full height under the stiffening pressure of Ashlynn's witchcraft. Before she could say more than two words, however, she was silenced by Ashlynn's next words.

"Sir Ignatious isn't just someone that Sir Thane brought along for tonight's rituals," Ashlynn explained, her emerald eyes flashing with power that flowed from every tree within a dozen paces of the place she stood. "He's one of Mistress Nyrielle's progeny, recently returned from exile."

"I know you've suffered at the hands of the Church," Ashlynn said, walking calmly to Heila's side and placing a hand on her shoulder before shaking her head slightly at the drawn blade. "But Sir Ignatious had nothing to do with those tragedies."

"It's fine if they resent me, my Lady," Ignatious offered, stepping out from behind the women who had moved to shield him and facing the angry and fearful villagers directly. "I have wronged the Eldritch

people in the past and I do not blame them for mistrusting me on the basis of my faith. Some of these people may even be the descendants of people I killed during the Brother's War."

"Little Brother," Thane said, placing a comforting hand on the younger vampire's shoulder. "You've suffered greatly during your exile and the crimes you committed then have been atoned for several times over. You don't need to..."

"I do, though," Ignatious said, casting Thane a brief glance over his shoulder before he walked forward to face Old Nan at the head of the villagers. "I cannot take responsibility for the things my misguided brethren have done in the name of the Holy Lord of Light," he said, dropping to both knees before the aging woman.

"But I can accept the hatred and fear these people hold toward me and my order," he said, lowering his head to Old Nan. "Mistress Nyrielle will not permit you to strike me down," he said with slow, deliberate words. "But if you wish to turn your torches against me to burn my flesh, then I will stand on behalf of the ones who hurt you and I will suffer in their stead."

"Dislikeable," Old Nan muttered as she looked at the kneeling priest. "You come here dressed like this but we dare not kill one of Lady Nyrielle's progeny. You say we can wound you but what satisfaction is there in wounding someone like you who did nothing to us?" Old Nan said, turning around and thumping her tail on the ground in front of him as if she had just made some form of declaration.

"It's dislikeable for such a man to come among us," she said, her whiskers trembling as she fought to suppress the memories of her village in flames while men wearing robes like these called down balls of flame from the skies to reduce her precious memories to little more than ash. "But I refuse to harm him in place of the ones who harmed us!"

"You cannot suffer in their stead," Old Nan said, turning around to face the kneeling priest. "But if you wish us to withdraw our hatred for the robes you wear and the god you serve, then bring the men who burned our village to the ground before us. Let us avenge ourselves on the men who robbed us of our kin and the legacies of our families and then you will be welcome among us."

"Mother," Milo said, lowering his knife and looking anxiously at his mother. Her tail was stiff and straight with determination that extended all the way to the tips of her whiskers but the ghosts of his fallen brother lurked behind the moisture in her eyes and the flames that consumed the carvings left behind by her parents still hadn't faded from her heart. And yet...

"Those who have been led astray by the corrupt leaders of the Church have failed to meet their struggle," Ignatious said simply. "If I can capture them, I will bring them before you to atone, and if they will not atone, then I will send them on to their next lives myself," he said, standing to offer the villagers a deep bow.

"The Holy Lord of Light entreats us to shine the light of truth into places filled with darkness and deceit," the former Inquisitor explained. "He also demands that we cleanse the world of wickedness wherever we find it. For too long, my brethren have believed that the Eldritch are creatures of darkness, filled with cunning wickedness and deserving only of death. But saying this is denying truth, and the only ones steeped in wickedness were the ones who brought violence to your homes," he said.

Chapter 514: A Man of Faith (Part Two)

Around the village, several eyes widened in shock. Did this Inquisitor truly believe that his people were wrong to attack them? Would he really turn against his own Church to help them obtain their vengeance? The idea of it seemed preposterous, but once they got over the shock of seeing an Inquisitor among them, much less one who professed to be on their side, several people in the crowd began to mutter in grudging approval of the strange priest.

"No wonder Lady Nyrielle took him as one of her progeny," one woman said, resting back on her spider-like limbs while her crimson eyes cast a deeply evaluating look at the strange vampire. "Maybe she hopes to conquer the human's church from within with this one."

"Did he say he fought in the Brother's War?" an aging man from the Clan of Painted Masks said, cocking his head to the side and quickly counting the years on his fingers, recalling the stories his father told about that terrible war. "Old, he must be very old. Older than Madame Zedya, maybe as old as Sir Thane... tsk, tsk, tsk, and in exile all this time? There has to be some story there..."

"Thank you, Sir Ignatious," Ashlynn said, withdrawing her emerald energy from the trees around them and nodding slightly at the fallen priest. "And I apologize to you," she added. "I should have warned the people of the village about your attendance. Your return to the Vale will be announced during the festival, but..."

"It's fine, my lady," Ignatious said, returning to an anxious-looking Heila's side and reaching down to take her hand in his. "Tonight, I came to speak to Sir Ollie about faith, and to pray with him at the start of his vigil if he wishes it," he said, smiling at the flame-haired youth who had faded into the background during the conflict.

It wasn't that Ollie didn't want to intercede earlier when Milo first drew his knife. It was just that, by the time he'd realized what was happening and started to make a move, events had already moved beyond him, and so he held his tongue, ready to speak up if need be or to restrain Milo if it looked like things might become violent.

The fact that all he could do during the tense standoff was consider ways to protect Milo by stopping him from fighting against the powerful vampire was a frustrating reminder of just how weak he currently was compared to people like Thane, Ignatious, Lady Ashlynn, and Lady Heila. If a conflict had broken out between the villagers and the vampires, even if he drew the darksteel cleaver from the belt he'd surrendered to Milo, he had no confidence in fighting back against such overwhelming foes.

But that would change soon, so long as he was able to pass the trial ahead of him to become the Cypress Witch. That thought, combined with the shameful feeling of helplessness in this conflict, strengthened his resolve even more as he looked from Ignatious to Thane and finally to Lady Ashlynn.

"It's tradition that much of a knight's vigil is spent in prayer," Ashlynn said, more for the benefit of the villagers than Ollie, who had already received an explanation from Sir Thane. "But those of us who have left the Kingdom and the Church behind exist in a space outside the rules and traditions that bound us in the land of our birth."

"So the choice is yours, Ollie," Ashlynn said. "I have spent some time conversing with Sir Ignatious, and I believe that he understands matters of faith better than most who have never been forced to reexamine the things we were taught as children. But your heart belongs to you, and no one can force you to cling to a faith that would label you a 'demon' for joining my coven."

"I think," Ollie began, looking at Ignatious and finding the vampire to be very different from every priest or Inquisitor he'd ever seen in his years at Lothian Manor. He possessed the same unnatural stillness that Ollie had come to recognize as common among vampires, but there was something even more significant that made him curious about the fallen Inquisitor.

"I think that Sir Ignatious is very different from the Inquisitors I've seen before," Ollie said. "Most of those men were very proud, even arrogant. I can't imagine them kneeling at the feet of anyone, much less offering to suffer in the place of someone else."

"Sir Ignatious," Ollie said, extending a hand to the strange vampire. "I'm not planning to take 'Faith' as one of my virtues, but I do intend to make 'Humility' part of my oath. Maybe, maybe we can talk about how someone with as much power as you have can be so humble. I think that would be good for me tonight."

"If you can already be that thoughtful," Ignatious said, taking the soon-to-be knight's hand in his and giving it a firm squeeze. "Then I think I can share a few thoughts with you. And," he said, glancing down at Heila's diminutive figure next to him. "I think you're the sort of man who will protect the other members of his coven well."

"In that case," Ashlynn said smoothly. "We should move to the water's edge. Everyone, I know many of you have come to show your support to Ollie as he faces his trial, but as the Mother of Trees, I insist that you keep your distance during this ritual. If it is interrupted, or if he is disturbed, the consequences could be dire."

As the group began to walk toward the water's edge, a chill, snowy aura enveloped Ignatious, piercing the aura of warmth that surrounded the vampire even now and making the hand that held Heila's feel as though it had been plunged into a bucket of ice water.

"What you did was very brave," Heila said through tight lips as she tried to keep from embarrassing Ignatious after the intense encounter. He had been brave, and as they left, she saw many people casting glances toward the fallen priest that were filled with more curiosity than fear and even a trace of grudging respect. And yet...

"But please remember that you aren't alone in Hamdi's Tangled Tower anymore," Heila added, keeping her eyes straight ahead in the gathering gloom rather than looking up to see Ignatious's face. "There are people who would miss you if something happened to you, and people who would ache to see you suffer."

"Heila, I," Ignatious started, only for the feeling of frost to grow even sharper as Heila's free hand clutched the hilt of Snow Fang until her knuckles turned white.

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"I didn't heal you to watch other people hurt you," she said with a fierceness to her voice that surprised even her. "The blood, um, the blood I gave you, it's very precious. So don't, don't waste that gift on something like that," she said, her voice faltering and her face heating slightly as she thought of the moment on the slopes of the mountain when she offered Ignatious her wrist to save him from the terrible wounds the Holy Flame Blade inflicted on him.

"I'm sorry," Ignatious said, uncertain how else he should respond to Heila's feelings. "I, I don't know what to say," he admitted. After years of suffering at Hamdi's hands, very little remained of the former Inquisitor's pride, but if there was one thing he could say, it was that he had an unparalleled ability to endure. In his mind, so long as he didn't die, enduring a bit of pain in order to help the villagers move on from their hatred and grief was a more than fair trade.

But it seemed like Heila saw things differently... and perhaps, he should see things differently as well.

"Just promise me that you'll be kind to yourself from now on," Heila said softly as they walked. Slowly, she withdrew the icy aura, removing her free hand from the hilt of Snow Fang and placing it alongside her other hand, overlapping it with Ignatious's hand between hers. "Promise that you'll remember that there are people who care about you, and don't let yourself suffer when you don't have to."

"All right," Ignatious said softly, reaching out to gently caress the curve of Heila's horn with his free hand. "I promise."

Chapter 515: Nurturing Life in Darkness

Across the Vale, in a secluded corner of the ancient fortress, preparations were underway for an entirely different ceremony.

By Nyrielle's order, several corridors had been sealed and stood under heavy guard. Commander Bassinger personally supervised the arrangements of dozens of soldiers with each one swearing on pain of death that nothing would pass their defensive line. Behind them, heavy oak doors, bound with iron and barred with heavy timbers stood firmly shut against any intruders.

News of what would be happening beyond those sealed doors had been shared with only a select few, and of everyone assembled before the doors, only Commander Bassinger knew the truth. That knowledge was both an honor and an incredible weight as he considered who should be standing in his place at the head of the guard.

On any other night, Thane would have stood as the final protector before the doors, ensuring nothing could interrupt an event that had taken place less than a dozen times since Nyrielle retook the Vale of Mists. Now, however, with both Thane and Ignatious attending to Ollie's vigil of knighthood, it fell to the merely mortal members of Nyrielle's most trusted soldiers to fill the gap left by the undying knight.

Beyond those strong defenses lay one of the carefully preserved natural treasures of the ancient fortress, a cave cut by a mountain spring high above the fortress itself. Centuries of erosion had opened a hole in the ceiling of the cave, allowing a steady stream of silvery water to carve its way through solid rock before splashing over a large boulder at the center of a pool nearly twenty paces across.

The water from the pool flowed onward from the pool, eventually reaching the ancient fortress's vast cisterns, and for centuries, that alone was enough to make the water source an invaluable treasure to every Eldritch Lord of the Vale of Mists. Two hundred years ago, however, this cave transformed when Orla, the former Baronness Willowcreek, chose to cultivate a garden filled with plants that could thrive in the limited light that poured into the cave through the opening in the ceiling.

Orla had struggled to let go of life, even though she accepted High Lord Torbin's condition that she and her husband both become his progeny in order to be granted refuge against the Church and their crusade against human lords who advocated for cooperation with the Eldritch instead of conquest. In the days after she became a vampire, the cave at the back of the ancient fortress had become her place of refuge where she tried to fill the shadows and darkness with life that still yearned for just a bit of light.

Not long after her arrival, this cave also witnessed the birth of her daughter, Nyrielle, the first True Vampire born in centuries. The plants that Nyrielle's mother cultivated in those days had withered and died long ago, but Nyrielle tended the garden still, taking seeds and cuttings and ensuring the space was filled with echoes of the life of growing things her mother had nurtured in darkness.

Now, however, the space was anything but dark. Dozens of candles burned around the periphery of the cave, filling the space with a warm golden glow as if the setting sun had come to bestow a few minutes of fading, gentle light on the lush vines and gently swaying ferns that filled the cave.

The gentle mist flowing from the waterfall caught just enough of the flickering light to soften it, giving the entire chamber the feeling that events occurring here were seen through a gossamer veil, as if it were a glimpse of a dream and not something happening in the real, waking world.

It hadn't been like this when Nyrielle brought Thane here. There had been no warmth in Nyrielle's heart when she forced him to stand at the center of the pool, watching as the frigid waterfall robbed his body of the warmth of life. She'd promised him vengeance and he'd offered himself as her tool.

There had been nothing warm about the start of their relationship and she used this place to strip him of any warmth his body still possessed before she drank every last drop of rich, vigorous blood his body contained, leaving him no warmer than the corpse he resembled before she gave him back the tiniest breath of life.

Neither had there been warmth in this place when she brought Zedya here, nor Sybyll or Wolstan, and there'd been no light here when it was Marcel's turn. The candles would only have interfered with his ability to receive the Cloak of Darkness that came with his transformation into something balanced between life and Death.

But now, Nyrielle had changed, and the the person who would die tonight wouldn't become her progeny, but Zedya's instead. Moreover, the bond between Zedya and Lennart wasn't one forged on the basis of power and vengeance in her endless war against the Lothians and the Church. This was a bond that was only possible because of the gift that flowed through her bond with Ashlynn, making it something far more rare and beautiful.

For a moment, Nyrielle wished that Ashlynn could be present for this moment. The birth of a new vampire was something few would ever witness and at some point, it was something that she hoped to share with her lover. Perhaps one day, she would even extend an offer to take in the Count and Countess Blackwell, giving Ashlynn's parents a chance to escape from death and find security in the Vale of Mists the way her grandsire Torbin had taken in her own parents.

But for now, such decisions, like Ashlynn herself, were far away. Tonight, Ashlynn would begin the process of bringing Ollie into her coven, while Zedya would welcome the birth of her first progeny.

"Lennart," Nyrielle said, calling out to the loyal captain of her personal guard. Tonight, he had dressed formally, wearing a midnight blue tunic emblazoned with Nyrielle's personal glyph of a raven's wing and ax blade directly above his heart. A midnight blue and silver sash of rank crossed his chest, secured in an intricate knot at his waist, highlighting his broad, powerful chest just as much as the well tailored tunic's sleeves accentuated his powerful arms before giving way to a spill of pure white lace, concealing his wickedly sharp claws behind delicate softness.

"I know you've given your answer to Zedya already, but I'll hear the words from you myself tonight before I release you from my service," she said, trying to maintain a trace of cold aloofness in this solemn moment, even though her heart was filled with warmth at what was about to happen.

"Once you accept Zedya's bite," she said formally, "your days in the sun will end forever. Your life will end and you will be confined to the darkness of night for as long as you can resist the pull of death. The flesh of unthinking, unfeeling beasts will no longer sustain your life and only the blood of other thinking, feeling people will offer you the sustenance to ward off the endless call of the abyss."

"I understand, my Lady," Lennart said, turning to look at the sole other occupant of the room.

For tonight's ceremony, Zedya had dressed herself in black from head to toe, wearing a dress humans might have mistaken for funeral attire if not for the way the dress clung to her body with a corset that emphasized both her slender waist and thrust her humble bust upward like an offering of delicate peaches, ripe for the plucking. Long lace gloves covered her hands, extending all the way up her arms before vanishing beneath the flowing satin of her butterfly sleeves.

"I've been uncertain about many things in life, my lady," the bearish soldier continued, peering through the black lace veil that hid Zedya's face from view, revealing only her faintly glowing amethyst eyes. "But about this, I have no doubts."

"Zedya," Nyrielle said, turning to her progeny and smiling as she lost her ability to hold back the joy she felt at seeing one of the children she'd nurtured for so many decades finding the same sort of happiness she found in Ashlynn's loving embrace.

"I have faith in you," she said gently. "But if he fails in this, you will lose this man tonight. He is still young and you could enjoy many more years together without taking this step. Are you certain that you wish to take this risk?"

"Nothing is certain in life, Mistress," Zedya said without looking away from Lennart's soft, kind brown eyes. The scar on his face from his recent battle at the Tangled Tower still pained her and it would serve as an eternal reminder of the wounds he suffered protecting her and Nyrielle over the decades they had known each other. It was also a reminder of just how close to death he had come, and how close she'd been to losing someone who meant more to her than she'd understood until recently.

"Nothing is certain," she repeated. "But I believe that my Lennart is stronger than I was when you brought me here, Mistress. And if he fails, then at least we have both done everything we can for a chance at lasting happiness together instead of flinching in fear over what we might lose. So long as he will take the risk, I will give him the chance so that we may be together for as long as we can resist the call of the abyss."

"Very well," Nyrielle said, smiling at them both. "Then, let us begin..."

Chapter 516: Vows

Standing before the waterfall, surrounded by the misty golden glow of dozens of candles, Lennart's heart thudded in his chest like a drum, beating out the last march of his life. Zedya had insisted he take time to consider his decision well and by now there wasn't even the slightest doubt in his heart about what he wanted.

Fear, certainly. Every soldier feared death and it was that fear of death that drove him to fight his hardest any time he was forced to don his fighting gauntlets and wade into the fray of battle. But now, death had come for him and he couldn't fight it with fists or claws, only with a will of iron and a determination to remain at Zedya's side that was greater than his deeply ingrained desire to stay alive.

His palms were damp with perspiration and his ears twitched nervously as Nyrielle took her place beside them, acting as a witness for the first part of tonight's ritual.

"Zedya," Lennart said, breaking the silence that formed between the three of them once Nyrielle drew close. "I have known you all my life. You have advised me, protected me, fought beside me... I know that by any measure, I have never been your equal. Should you have desired a man in your life, you could have chosen countless people who are stronger and more worthy than I..."

"Stronger, perhaps," Zedya said softly, reaching out with a hand wrapped in lace to cup his scarred cheek gently. "But none are more worthy than you."

"Zedya," he whispered, leaning into her touch and relishing in the feel of her delicate fingers as they caressed the soft fur of his face. "I know that I lag behind you in years and power, but I promise to be worthy of the trust you've placed in me and the care you've showered on me," he said as he dropped to one knee.

"Tonight, I will fight for the power to stand at your side for as long as we may both resist the call of the abyss," he said. "But if I fall tonight, I would prefer fall as your husband, having given you my everything," he said, reaching into a small pouch at his waist and producing a lustrous silver ring, shaped like the paws of a bear wrapping around a brilliant amethyst jewel.

"I'm told that it's human custom to exchange rings as a sign of your commitment," he said, speaking slowly around the lump that formed in his throat. "I offer this one as a promise, that my claws will always fight for you, to shelter you from harm and my arms will always hold you, to cherish you as the only love in my life. Zedya, will you be my wife?"

"Lenny," Zedya said softly, tugging at the fingers of the lace glove on her left hand, pulling it off to extend her hand. "My dearest Lennart," she said as he slipped the ring onto her slender ring finger where the amethyst jewel sparkled in the golden light, standing out brightly against her pale alabaster flesh. "I will be your wife, your one true love for the rest of our lives, until the abyss tears us from this world."

Reaching into a the folds of the dark satin sash at her waist, Zedya pulled out a simple braided leather cord that held a small piece of pure white horn, carved into the shape of a bear's claw. The simple token had been carved from a remnant of Paulus's horn and though Erkembalt had been reluctant to part with one of the few remaining scraps of the powerful horn after completing Heila's Snow Fang, once Zedya explained why she wanted it, he'd been happy to accommodate her request.

"This trophy comes from one of the most powerful foes I've ever slain," she said, reaching out to tie the leather cord around his neck. "I offer it in the ways of your Clan as proof that I will add my strength to yours, fighting at your side to protect all that we hold dear in this world. I can never offer you children, but together, we will build a home and we will fight as one to defend it. As your wife, I swear this to my husband," she said.

For a moment, Zedya's powerful amethyst eyes failed her as tears burst forth from behind a dam she hadn't realized was there. The words she used weren't part of any ceremony her parents would have recognized and she was certain that her sisters would have been horrified at her choice of husband, but at the moment, none of that mattered.

Zedya had walked in darkness from the her sister fell at the hands of an entitled baron who wouldn't accept 'no' from a lowly servant girl. She'd stayed in that darkness as she brought death to his family, one by one, taking away from him the people he'd taken from her until he had no sons, no heir, no wife, and no method of escaping her retribution.

For decades, she had served Nyrielle in darkness, finding purpose in her new life, and deep satisfaction in her work, even as her heart forgot what it was like to feel joy. She had avenged her fallen family and sent them on to the heavenly shores long ago, but she herself had remained forever in the shadows of her own past.

Now, however, standing in the warmth of dozens of candles and their soft golden glow, she felt like she had finally walked out of the darkness that clung to her heart. She wasn't only a part of the family that Nyrielle had built, the collection of avenging ghosts and dangerous misfits who served as her weapons of war. Now, she was finally living for herself, forming a small family, even if it would only be the two of them, and it was a family that she would sacrifice anything to protect.

"Zedya. Lennart," Nyrielle said, standing over the smiling couple as they exchanged their vows and tokens. "Tonight, I bear witness to your love and your promises. No matter what happens next, from this day forward, the Vale of Mists will know you as husband and wife, your fortunes and fates bound together for as long as you both endure."

Gently, with paws that trembled more than they had holding any weapon and facing any battle, Lennart reached out to lift the black lace veil, revealing Zedya's sparkling amethyst eyes and soft, delicate features. By human standards, many would have considered her plain or ordinary, but to Lennart, there was no face in this world that could match hers at this moment.

From her soft, gently rounded features to her alluring almond shaped eyes, her slender, slightly upturned nose and curved, bow-shaped lips all combined to create a face that came alive with warmth and affection when she looked at the man who had finally found a way into her walled off heart.

The stone beneath Lennart's knee was cold and rough, but he barely noticed as he leaned forward, finding himself at the perfect height to caress her soft lips with his as he ran the tips of his claws through her silky brown hair.

The kiss grew deeper and hotter as Zedya stepped forward, pressing herself up against her husband, yes, her husband's powerful body, wrapping her arms around him and cling tightly to him before pricking his lip with the point of a fang, filling her mouth with the taste of his rich, powerful blood that carried echoes of unwavering courage and determination to fight until his dying breath... first for his lady, and now, for her.

The kiss sent shivers through both of them as Zedyá's amethyst eyes began to glow with borrowed strength and vitality. Of all the people she'd ever savored, none could compare to the deep warmth that flowed into her body along with Lennart's love and the sweetness of his blood that accompanied his unwavering dedication to her.

It was a taste that awakened a hunger deep inside her, intoxicating her and pushing her to take more in a way no one else ever had, and when she finally pulled back from their kiss, that hunger burned in her eyes like a brilliant amethyst flame.

"It's time, my dearest Lennart," she said, gently cupping his face with her hands. "Are you ready?"

Chapter 517: In His Arms

Lennart's body trembled with the aftershock of Zedyá's kiss. His powerful muscles felt weak, and her sweet taste mixed with the faint coppery flavor of his own blood lingered on his tongue, like the aftertaste of their vows carved in the flesh of their lips.

"I'm ready, my Zedyá," Lennart said, placing his paws over her hands as she cupped his face before tracing his way along her arms, barely brushing her alabaster skin with the tips of his claws until he could hold her by the shoulders.

Zedyá's eyes burned with a pale amethyst flame unlike any Lennart had seen from her before, and she radiated a predatory hunger that he'd previously only seen from other vampires, like Savis or Tausau. But mixed with that hunger was a deep desire that left Lennart yearning to throw himself into her arms, answering the heat of her desire with his own.

"Bare your wrist for her," Nyrielle commanded, hovering in the shadows behind Lennart's burly figure. "It takes longer to feed from the wrist than from the neck or the thigh, but this is the first time she will need to stop just short of death. The wrist is slower, and the pain will last longer, but the risks are lower," she explained.

"I understand," Lennart replied, folding the spills of lace back as he rolled up his sleeve. "Zedyá, my wife," he said, savoring the sound of the word 'wife' as it slipped from his tongue. "Will you bite, or should I use a blade to open my veins for you?"

"You should come with me," Zedya said, taking the hand he offered and pulling him to his feet, tugging him in the direction of the cavern wall. "Sit here on the floor," she said, tapping gently on the cold stone ground. "Then let me sit in your lap," she added, continuing to hold his hand as he lowered himself to the ground.

For a moment, her hunger subsided as she wished that she could do something to ease this moment for him. To use her Mesmerizing Gaze to pull him into a world of soft blankets, or a field filled with flowers, or anything that would have felt warmer and more welcoming than the cold stone of the secluded cave.

Using her gaze on him, however, would dull his senses and his ability to keep his wits about him as she pulled him closer to death than he'd ever been. One moment of inattentiveness, one relaxed moment of surrender and acceptance of death, and he would plunge forever into the abyss, dying in her arms before she could offer him everlasting life.

"Hold me," Zedya commanded softly as she settled herself across Lennart's thick, meaty thighs and leaned against his broad, muscular chest. Sitting there as he wrapped his powerful arms around her, she momentarily felt like a doll held in the loving arms of a gentle giant. Everyone from the Clan of the Great Claw was larger than most humans, and Lennart was nearly two feet taller than her, but in all the years she'd known him, she never felt as small as she did right now.

For Lennart, it was a moment that he wanted to last forever as he enveloped Zedya's slender figure in his furry arms. He almost enveloped her torso completely in the embrace as he pulled her close against his body, deeply inhaling the scent of lavender and midnight dew that clung to his petite wife.

"Now," Zedya said slowly, taking hold of his wrist and gently stroking his hand as she brought it to her lips. "You will feel pain, then a deep, relaxing pleasure. When that pleasure turns to pain, you must stay still. You must resist the urge to struggle, to fight, to flee. You must remain just as you are until I've drunk down to the very last drop of blood within your body."

"I will stay just as I am," Lennart promised, gently nuzzling the top of Zedya's head with his nose. "I am ready."

Standing off to the side, Nyrielle said nothing as the newlyweds savored a moment that might come to be their last. It took careful preparation to make another vampire, and Nyrielle had confidence that the pair would succeed. Lennart had offered himself to her or her progeny many times over his long years of service. He was familiar with what it felt like to become food under the fangs of a powerful vampire.

And Zedya had lived as a vampire for decades. Accidents in feeding affected almost every young vampire, and for that reason, Nyrielle had carefully guided her progeny in their hunts during their first year as vampires. But accidents were almost unheard of by the time any of her progeny reached Zedya's age. She should know herself well in this, and she should stop at the appropriate moment.

And yet, two things made this different from anything Zedya had ever done before. This time, she wasn't stopping at the moment where pleasure turned to pain, but at the moment where even pain faded away, and life all but flickered out underneath her fangs. More importantly, this time, she was drinking from a man whose deep love for her would fill his blood with the rich flavors of devotion and self-sacrifice. It would create an intoxicating flavor that was hard to resist consuming until the very last drop was gone.

And so, Nyrielle cloaked herself in darkness and shadows, leaving the couple with the illusion that they were alone in this most intimate moment, yet hovering nearby in case she needed to intervene. Zedya meant too much to her to see her fail at this delicate moment and the scars that would form on her healing heart might never heal again if they lost Lennart tonight.

And even Lennart himself had come to mean more to her than a simple captain of her guard. He might not have become part of her family in the way that her progeny were, but he was someone who had earned her respect and confidence as well as her deep gratitude for the feelings of love and joy he inspired in her beloved Zedya.

And so, if Nyrielle detected the slightest chance that the couple might fail tonight, she vowed to intercede, even if it meant taking Lennart as her own progeny to save his life. It would deny him an intimate connection to the woman he loved, but it was far, far superior to the alternative of watching helplessly and doing nothing.

For several minutes, Zedya drank in the warmth of Lennart's body along with the rich scent of cedar soap and natural musk that felt so unique to him. After tonight, his body, like hers, would be cold unless he'd recently fed, and the heart that beat so fiercely for her would slow until it appeared that it didn't beat at all.

But underneath the scent that was so strongly his, the faintest scent of blood trickling from his lip reignited the hunger that burned deep within her, fueling the need to make him hers, now and forever more. The fangs in her mouth grew longer as her lips parted and she brought his naked wrist, striking

with the speed of a snake to spare him as much pain as she could before she could drink her fill of the intoxicating nectar that gave him life.

Chapter 518: Death And Rebirth

Zedya's fangs bored into Lennart's wrist like a pair of white hot awls, searing deep into his tender flesh as she pierced his veins and arteries, spilling hot blood into her hungry, eager mouth.

The white hot pain lasted only for a moment before a soft, comforting pleasure flooded through Lennart's body. His muscles felt like they were filled with wet sand, quickly losing the strength to do more than maintain his upright posture and the gentle embrace of his arms wrapped around his feeding wife.

Wife. That thought alone filled his mind with a thousand ripples of joy as his mind drifted in the golden haze of the underground cavern. His eyelids grew heavy, making it difficult for him to keep Zedya's enchanting beauty in his sight as she drank her fill from his wrist. The last thing he saw as his eyes drifted shut was the slight movement of her delicate neck as his blood flowed down her throat.

But even if he couldn't keep his eyes open to watch her, his mind lingered on her figure. Clad in a black wedding dress, her enchanting face and mesmerizing eyes hidden behind her dark veil. Her lips moved behind that veil, speaking words that brought tears to his eyes but within the echoes of his mind, the words themselves felt distant and far away, too hard to hear even though she'd spoken them just minutes ago.

Slowly, the vision of Zedya within his mind seemed to beckon him forward, guiding him toward that dark, cold pool beneath the waterfall at the center of the cave. Before he realized it, Lennart found himself standing nearly waist-deep in the water as a bone-deep chill spread through his limbs.

The pain began as sharp pins and needles, prickling all over his feet, his hands, legs, and arms, before it enveloped all of his body. His chest felt heavy, and each new breath was harder and harder to take, forcing him to focus all of his effort just on filling his lungs with the biting cold air of the cave.

Still, the Zedya in his mind smiled at him, saying nothing as she took his hands in hers, pulling him deeper and deeper into the water until he stood up to his chest in water so deep that he felt like his feet could barely brush the bottom.

"Zedya. My wife," he struggled to say, staring at her glowing amethyst eyes that were the only part of her face he could make out behind her black lace veil. "I. I love. You," he said, struggling to kick with his legs enough to keep his head above water.

But Zedya said nothing as she held his hands while the water rose higher and higher. The candles in the cave went out one by one, and each time a light faded away, Lennart sank deeper, his head plunging briefly beneath the surface of the water before he bobbed back up just enough to draw a shuddering breath.

Then, between the moment the last light went out and the moment he plunged beneath the surface of the pool one last time, everything changed. Terror gripped his heart as he could no longer recognize the shadowy figure with the predatory amethyst eyes who held his hands. Her figure twisted and grew until she was three times the bearish man's size, looming over him with a burning gaze that held only hunger.

The looming figure's shadowy hand twisted into a claw that plunged into his chest, gripping his heart in talons of ice and squeezing, as if it wanted to wring every last drop of blood from his body.

This was wrong, his mind screamed. This wasn't his Zedya at all! This was a terrifying creature spawned by the abyss, sent by death itself to reap his life! His heart trembled in the creature's grasp, and pain flooded his body, sharp, shooting pains that pierced every limb and every organ, tearing through his innards like the claws of a wild beast, ripping at his flesh with savagery whose only purpose was to cause greater and greater pain.

"Zedya," he whispered as the horror from the abyss tore into him. "I. Love. You."

The words he spoke were his last as the creature ripped his heart from his chest, casting it aside and staring at him with cold, cruelly burning amethyst eyes before both hands struck like snakes, piercing through Lennart's soft brown eyes and shredding his mind until nothing remained but darkness and two haunting amethyst flames.

In the cave, Lennart's body twitched, one leg thrashing about before it suddenly stilled as the valiant soldier fought for control over his body. Each moment was clearly more painful than the last, and his face contorted in agony with hot tears spilling from his tightly shut eyes. And yet, no matter how much torment he endured, the arm holding Zedya to his chest remained calm and still, as if even in the depths of agony, he could not bear to disturb the woman he'd given his heart to.

Slowly, his limbs went still, and the tremors that rocked his body began to subside. His head hung low, and only the cavern wall that he leaned against prevented him from toppling completely to the ground. Warmth faded from his limbs and his chest, and the heart that had beat with such vigor just minutes ago slowed, trembled, and stopped.

Atop him, Zedya's amethyst eyes had grown clouded in a euphoric haze as strength and vitality like none she'd ever felt filled her being. The rich taste of a complete life flowed endlessly across her tongue, seasoned by moments of great joy and deep sorrow, victory and defeat, pride and shame, and wrapping around all of that, soft, silky, decadent love and dedication.

Her body shivered in uncontrollable ecstasy as she savored everything that had made Lennart the man he was, and in that moment, she felt like she had reached deeper into the abyss within herself than she'd ever dared to look, finding a vision of herself filled with the power of death and the ability to reap any life she chose. This, her body sang, was what it meant to be a vampire, and in this moment, she felt like she understood her power more than ever before.

"Zedya," Nyrielle said sharply, her voice rippling with the power of the Voice of Command. Precious seconds ticked by, and she could feel Lennart's presence in this world growing weaker by the instant. Soon, it would be too late, but she refused to believe that Zedya couldn't see this through to the end. She only needed a little bit of help to set her feet back on the path that would lead to an eternal life with the man she loved.

"Withdraw your fangs and feed your love," Nyrielle commanded. "Before it is too late."

Nyrielle's words tore through the haze that clouded Zedya's mind, dragging her back to the present where Lennart's body had grown cold and still, unmoving even as he held her close in his final embrace.

"Lenny," Zedya said, pulling back from his wrist and staring at him with shaking eyes. Had she taken too much? Had she become so lost in the intoxication of her feeding that she had... No! Her mind refused to accept that she might have failed him for such a stupidly selfish reason as becoming lost in her own ecstasy!

"Live, my husband," Zedya said, slicing deeply into her wrist with a sharpened nail and bringing it quickly to Lennart's lips. One drop fell, dark and crimson against Lennart's pale, bloodless lips, joined a second later by another drop and then a third. "Drink from me," she said. "And walk forever at my side."

A fourth drop fell, then a fifth, but still nothing happened. Lennart's eyes remained closed, looking peaceful, as if he was sleeping, without the slightest twitch of dreams or nightmares to disturb his eternal rest. A sixth drop fell, followed by a seventh, and still nothing happened as the powerful soldier lay unmoving, immune to his wife's desperate plea.

"Zedya," Nyirelle said, stepping out of the darkness at her progeny's side. "I have given you the Mesmerizing Gaze," she said, kneeling beside Lennart and carefully lifting the lids of his eyes with the gentlest touch she could manage. "If he cannot hear your voice now, then look deep within him and see the man who waits for you. Guide him back to you so he will drink."

"Yes, Mistress," Zedya said, shifting in Lennart's embrace to cup his soft face with her free hand and blinking away the tears that filled her vision. "Lennart, my love," she whispered. "Share a vision with me. A vision of our home together."

As she spoke, powerful energy surged within her as she drew on not only all of her own strength, but the strength she'd taken from Lennart as well, fueling her power to draw someone into a world of her making.

Drifting in darkness, Lennart struggled to remember who he was or how he'd come to be in this strange, endless darkness. In the distance, he felt an irresistible pull tugging at him, urging him to sink deeper and deeper into the darkness, but somehow, even though he didn't remember why, he knew that surrendering to that pull would be the worst thing he could do.

Before he could consider what he should do instead, two soft amethyst flames intruded in the darkness, filling it with a soft glow that felt otherworldly and unreal.

"Lennart, my love," a pure, pleading voice called out to him, giving him back the name he'd forgotten in the endless darkness. "Share a vision with me. A vision of our home together..."

Chapter 519: The Life We Could Have

Drifting in darkness, the two floating amethyst flames took shape, becoming a pair of brilliantly glowing eyes in the darkness before bathing the world of infinite shadow in a soft lavender light.

The world illuminated by the strange light was still dark, appearing as a mist-shrouded forest in the depths of night. Sturdy cedar trees stood like sentinels made of shadow, their branches blocking out the

pale moonlight from above. In one direction, however, the lavender light was brighter, revealing a small clearing and a strange cottage built next to the base of a towering cliff at the forest's edge.

The cottage looked like it had been constructed in a human style, with a sharply slanted roof and a large stone chimney on one side, but the proportions of the house were clearly designed for much taller occupants than any humans Lennart had ever met.

A wide, covered patio wrapped around the cottage, offering space for several visitors to take their ease on simple wooden benches, but in this strange world, only a single person occupied the patio.

Lennart's breath caught in his chest as he glimpsed Zedy's delicate figure, rocking in a simple wooden chair with a set of long knitting needles held in her hand. The blanket she was knitting looked soft and comfortable, sized for an infant or small child, and a faint smile hung on her face as her hands moved methodically from one stitch to the next.

But it wasn't the blanket that filled her gleaming amethyst eyes with joy, rather, it was the actions of the clearing's other occupants that held all of her attention.

"Come at me together," a strong, confident-looking Lennart said as he tapped his chest with a pair of dulled fighting gauntlets. "Two people to bind and one to deliver a killing blow," he coached the young men before him. There were three young men on their feet, one from the Horned Clan, one from the Clan of the Great Claw, and one human, all dressed in padded training gear and holding blunted weapons while seven other youths sat on the grass nearby, waiting their turn for a lesson.

"This is the life we'll have?" Lennart asked, turning to look at the amethyst flames in the shape of eyes, floating beside him as he stood among the trees. "Teaching young men to be soldiers?"

"I said that I couldn't give you children," Zedy's voice said softly. "But if you want to pass down your skills, then we can take in young ones for teaching. As many as you'd like," she said before the vision of the clearing shifted slightly and a second building, built as a small barracks or student's dormitory, appeared next to the cottage. "You could train the very best and the most talented, or those who have lost their own mothers and fathers to tragedies we couldn't prevent..."

"I cannot give you children," she repeated. "But if you wish to raise a family of a different sort, then I will raise them together with you. It would be a good life, wouldn't it?"

Zedya poured all of her strength into creating the best vision of this possible future that she could. In her vision, the young men and Lennart fought with intensity punctuated with laughter as her husband used vampiric strength and speed to outpace young warriors in the prime of their lives.

He fought with careful, deliberate technique, spilling no blood and leaving only the occasional painful bruise to ensure that a lesson was learned. The young men watching did so with eyes filled with respect and admiration, watching every move with the intensity of a student seeing a precious lesson from a master.

When the lesson ended, however, that reverence fell away, replaced by friendly slaps on the back and good natured teasing, while the Zedya in the vision set aside her knitting to fetch cups of chilled water and hearty snacks for the young, would-be warriors.

"It wouldn't be a bad life," Lennart admitted. "But you and I decided long ago, before we ever gave our hearts to each other, that children weren't part of our lives. I've accepted that. There are others who can raise and teach the next generation of soldiers, they don't need me for that," he said.

When he spoke, the vision of the clearing shattered, breaking into hundreds of shards before fading into the darkness of the void, returning him and the burning eyes to the world of endless emptiness. This time, however, Lennart felt less substantial than he did before, as if a part of himself had faded into the void along with the vision of a simple life caring for a different sort of family.

"Then, perhaps something more like this," Zedya said, fighting to keep the growing strain from her voice as another scene bathed in lavender light took shape in the darkness. She'd poured so much of her strength into the first vision that the force of its destruction hit her like a physical blow, with shards of the broken vision cutting into her mind like a rain of shattered glass. Still, if she couldn't give him a vision of the future worth returning for, if she couldn't entice him to drink the blood she was dripping on his lips even now, then it would be Lennart who faded away into darkness, lost forever from this world.

This time, Lennart found himself staring at a version of himself dressed richly in a silk tunic and fine lace, his arms wrapped around Zedya's alluring figure while sitting on a luxurious sofa in an opulent theater. On a stage before them, musicians played a stirring requiem while dancers dressed as ghosts moved gracefully across the stage.

"Is this High Fen City?" Lennart asked, blinking at the sudden shift from the humble cottage to the rich life of luxury. It wasn't that he hadn't seen such places before, in fact, he'd often been present while on duty while Lady Nyrielle attended such events, but it was the first time he'd seen himself as a member of the wealthy audience with no duty other than to enjoy the show before them.

"It's High Fen City, or Dark Wood City, or wherever we want to visit," Zedy's voice said from beside him as the Zedy in the vision selected a tasty morsel of peppered lamb from a tray beside her and fed it to the husband she adored. "We have all the time in the world to seek out any part of life that we wish to enjoy. All you need to do is come with me on the journey, and we can fill our nights with whatever we please."

"Zedy," Lennart said, looking at the happy couple in the private box as they enjoyed the show. "Is this because you want the kind of life that Lady Nyrielle is giving Lady Ashlynn?" he asked, raising a brow at the glowing eyes. "Is this the life you want?"

The vision of the future she presented tugged at his memories of the nights they'd spent together in High Fen City, enjoying what may have been their last days of peace before plunging into war against the Lothians and the powerful church behind them. They had been magical evenings filled with unique delights, but the most delightful part hadn't been the exotic meals or the dazzling shows... it had been the mesmerizing woman who held his arm and snuggled close to him on each and every one of those evenings.

"It's a life worth living for isn't it?" Zedy said, her voice getting caught in her throat before crumbling into a series of soft sobs. "But right now, you're fading away," she forced herself to say, fearing that Lennart had lost track of what was happening to his body as his spirit grew ever closer to being devoured by the abyss. "You don't have to come back for theaters and fancy dates, you can come back for a simple life in a quiet place, or..."

Distantly, the sounds of battle filled the air as the scene shifted once again. This time, it revealed Zedy and Lennart, each wearing darksteel fighting gauntlets, wading into the front ranks of a human army, leading a charge to reach the powerful human inquisitors hurling flames from their hands alongside Templars wielding blinding blades of violet light.

"If this is the place where we belong," Zedy said in a voice filled with sadness and determination, her figure fully manifesting next to Lennart's as she wrapped her arms around his muscular upper arm and holding him tightly. "Then I will fight by your side in every battle so you're never alone when we face our enemies, whoever they are."

At this point, to step so fully into his world that she appeared beside him, she knew that she was risking her own life in an effort to reach him. If he fell here, devoured by the abyss that awaited all of those who fell beneath her fangs, then she would fall with him, perishing together as a husband and wife whose love was fated to end as soon as it began.

"As long as I have you," she whispered, clinging to his arm and pulling, as if she could haul him physically back to the world of the living, even though she knew such a thing was hopeless. "As long as you'll come back to me..."

"But Zedya," he said softly, turning to look at her with gentle, chocolate brown eyes. "This isn't what I want from life with you either..."

Chapter 520: The Life He Chose

This entire time, the apparition of Zedya floating next to him had felt so vague and distant, it was hard to feel drawn to the visions of their future that she presented. He felt like he was watching a play on a stage, but the people he watched were only actors, and toward the end of the vision of the battle she presented, they had become little more than puppets. It wasn't really him, and it wasn't her either.

Now that Zedya had pushed even further, however, fully immersing herself in this space between life and darkness, he finally glimpsed the woman he'd given his heart to. The woman that he would give anything for and that he wanted to offer a lifetime of companionship to.

"Zedya, my wife," he said, licking his lips and speaking with a voice that had grown hoarse and strained. His body felt weak and frail, lacking the strength it should to protect and hold his love close, and he had no warmth to offer her even as he wrapped his large, furry arms around her. But even if he lacked warmth, there was still plenty of him left that he wanted to give to her, to share with her, now and forever after.

"It doesn't matter where we are," he said, licking his lips again and tasting a strange metallic sweetness when he did. The taste reminded him of the kiss they'd shared after they spoke their vows, but somehow it was... softer. More delicate. It evaporated from his tongue like spun sugar as soon as he licked it, leaving him wanting more. More of her taste, more of her touch, and much, much more of her time.

"It's enough if I'm here with you," he said, his voice gaining strength as a pale amethyst flame, resembling a reflection of Zedya's eyes, began to glitter in the depths of his soft, brown eyes. "It would be enough to have time with you all to myself," he said, reaching up to caress her cheek, wiping away the faintly pink tears that spilled from her eyes.

Around them, the faintest of illusory walls shimmered into existence, holding back the darkness of the void as they transformed into a simple, familiar room. Cold stone walls, a neatly made bed with crisply folded sheets, a single dresser, and a desk were enough to make it clear that it was the room of a soldier, one who had spent a lifetime in service to his Lady rather than building a life for himself.

"Just you," Lennart said, reaching out with trembling hands to unlace the corset that trapped Zedya in her dark wedding dress. His hands shook and his fingers fumbled with the laces before he turned a sharp claw on them, cutting his way through the laces as the amethyst flames of desire within his eyes grew brighter.

"Anywhere, anything, as long as we're together..." he said in a voice that grew deeper, husky with hunger and desire.

"Oh Lenny, my dearest Lenny," Zedya said softly, cupping his face with one hand and drawing his lips toward hers. Their lips brushed against each other for less than a breath before she redirected his face, placing her bleeding wrist before his lips and squeezing out several drops of intoxicatingly sweet, deep crimson blood.

"I will give myself to you," she whispered. "I will give all that I am to you, but it has to start here," she insisted. "Drink deep, my husband. Drink deep and I will be forever yours."

In the soft glowing light of dozens of candles in the cave where the ceremony had been held, Nyrielle hovered behind Zedya. Her eyes had become inky pools of darkness filled with countless tiny motes of light as though her eyes contained the infinite night sky. On one finger, a small pinprick was slowly healing, leaving behind the faintest trace of blood.

A matching crimson stain adorned the corner of Zedya's lips, all that remained of the offering Nyrielle had given her when it became clear that Zedya intended to risk it all to pull Lennart back from the darkness of the abyss.

Now that things had come so far, there was little that Nyrille could do to protect her progeny and the man Zedya had given her heart to, but if it was this much, giving her the extra strength to reach more deeply into the abyss than should have been possible for anyone other than a True Vampire... After everything Zedya had done for her in a lifetime of service, it felt like far too little, but she hoped it would be enough.

Suddenly, the temperature in the room plummeted as a dark wind began to swirl through the room. Plants that lost their leaves in winter wilted early, curling back into a slumber that would last through the months of darkness and protecting themselves from the inescapable death promised by the abyss.

Moving slowly, as if she was only barely aware of her body in the waking world, Zedya brought her bleeding wrist to Lennart's lips, squeezing out several fresh drops of blood that fell directly into her dying husband's open mouth. This time, however, Lennart drew a deep, shuddering breath before licking his lips, savoring the metallic sweetness that contained his wife's enduring love and her deep anxiety that this night together might be their last.

The next moment, Lennart's eyes snapped open, burning with the hot violet flames of hunger and desire. His arms twitched, regaining the strength to fold themselves around Zedya's slender figure in a gentle embrace while his mouth locked onto her bleeding wrist, drinking deeply of the life and power his wife offered freely.

The dark wind in the room spun faster and faster, turning into a tempest that shrank in size even as it increased in intensity until the winds wrapped entirely around Zedya and the first of her progeny. Amethyst flames spilled from Zedya's eyes, swirling in the darkness like a dancer with a torch in the dark of night.

With each swallow of potent blood that flowed past Lennart's lips, the whirlwind grew faster, and the pressure of its power grew greater. The hunger burning in his chest grew greater and greater, but with every passing second, that hunger turned further and further away from Zedya's bloody wrist and toward the dark, intoxicating power swirling around them.

"Breathe it in, my dear," Zedya whispered, stroking the soft fur of Lennart's face with her free hand. "This is the power you've called from the void. This is the strength you need to resist the pull of the abyss. Breathe it in. Make it yours, and live with me forevermore."

It took an act of tremendous will to pull free of Zedya's wrist, but when he did and took a deep breath, the power of darkness poured into his body, filling his lungs, his muscles, his bones, and every fiber of his being with a strength and vitality greater than anything he had ever felt before.

The surge of power was followed by brief, searing pain in his eyes as the dark, chocolaty pigment in his gentle eyes burned away, leaving behind irises that were pale lavender with flecks of darker amethyst that gave them an enchanting, otherworldly depth and marked him as one of Zedya's progeny.

"Raaaaaaaaawwrrrrrr!"

Lennart lifted his head up high, his lavender eyes fixed on the darkness of the night sky above. He roared in pain and adulation, and his heart finally beat again. One powerful pulse for every ten it would have beat before, but strong and resonating with an echo of the heartbeat of the woman who gave him this rebirth.

"Lenny," Zedya whispered, cupping his face and turning his gaze back to her. "My husband," she said, a smile forming on her lips even as pinkish tears spilled from her eyes. "You've done it."

"We've done it," Lennart corrected, holding her tightly in his arms as he lowered his lips to hers. "We've done it together. Now and forevermore," he whispered before his lips brushed hers, savoring her taste as they fell into a world that belonged to them and them alone.

"Congratulations," Nyrielle said softly as she faded into the darkness. In the nights to come, there would be much for Lennart to learn as he entered his blossoming period, but those things could wait for another night.

Now, it was the lucky couple's wedding night, and Nyrielle had no intention of lingering to disturb them when they no longer needed her. Now, she only hoped that things were proceeding as smoothly for Ollie as they had for Zedya and Lennart... The Vale of Mists had just welcomed its first new vampire in more than two decades.

If it could also welcome a new witch... It would change the fate of the Vale just as much as Lennart's transformation, if not more. But more importantly, it would add a pillar of strength and a precious guardian at her darling Ashlynn's side, and it would help to fill the hole in her lover's heart that had formed when she was torn away from her family by someone's callous act of betrayal.

It shouldn't have mattered as much as it did, and the Nyrielle of old would certainly have laughed at the anxious woman who flew through the night to reach her lover's side, but the Nyrielle of tonight was a different woman than she had been before.

Tonight's Nyrielle didn't care whether or not the Vale of Mists gained a powerful witch, as long as Ashlynn didn't have to suffer the loss of someone she had chosen to welcome into her coven and her family... that would be enough to fill Nyrielle's heart with warmth for several nights to come.

But unlike what she was able to do with Zedy, offering a bit of her strength to ensure her success, there was nothing she could do to help Ashlynn tonight. She could only put her faith in the former kitchen boy and hope that Ollie was as capable as Thane said he was.