

The Vampire 551

Chapter 551: A Quiet Evening On The Terrace

In the Vale of Mists, the waning moon overhead cast a dim, silvery light through the blanket of fog that covered the valley. In the distance, the faint sounds of night birds hunting and larger animals rustling through the undergrowth added texture to the otherwise still night for those with ears sharp enough to hear them.

On her terrace, overlooking the valley, Ashlynn luxuriated in Nyrielle's touch, snuggling close to her lover and basking in the contentment that followed one of Georg's sumptuous meals.

"I missed these moments," Ashlynn said softly as she closed her eyes to relax into Nyrielle's comforting embrace. This close, the scent of lavender soap and the subtle touch of honeysuckle perfume that the ancient vampire wore mingled with the misty air and the distant scent of cedar to create an aroma that comforted Ashlynn just as much as the smell of salty ocean air, seagrass and her father's more rugged, almost leathery scent had comforted her as a child.

It was a scent that blended thoughts of home with safety, security, the freedom to be herself with the knowledge that she was loved, sheltered and protected. After so many months away, she had returned to the Vale and now life was returning to something she recognized as normal.

There were still several burdens weighing on her but having the space and time to enjoy dinner alone with Nyrielle was something more precious than she'd realized all those months ago when she insisted on having meals somewhere less formal than Nyrielle's underground dining room.

"I missed them too," Nyrielle said as she gently ran her long, slender fingers through Ashlynn's pale blonde hair. While much of Ashlynn's body had become firmer and more toned as she transformed herself from a sheltered noblewoman into a powerful witch who could fight for her place in the world, her hair had become much softer since she left the salty air of Blackwell County behind.

The resulting softness was so luxurious that Ashlynn's hair was quickly becoming her second favorite part of Ashlynn's body to touch.

"Was Ollie well when you visited him today?" Nyrielle asked gently. It had been four days since the young man had begun his vigil and according to Ashlynn it wouldn't be worrisome unless his trial extended beyond seven days, but that didn't mean her lover had no reason to be concerned.

"His aura is strong and the world is nurturing him," Ashlynn said without opening her eyes. Heila and the archer Milo had been taking turn standing guard over Ollie's vigil and Ashlynn visited at least once every day but unfortunately there was no way to know how he was fairing in the depths of his trial. What he was experiencing now was something only he could know and Ashlynn wouldn't know anything about it until he succeeded... or failed.

"If I compare him to Heila at this time, then he's doing much better," Ashlynn said. "Or at least he seems to be under less strain. The seed I prepared for him is a normal one and he doesn't have to endure the pressure of an Ancient Seed possessed by a remnant spirit of a previous witch the way Heila did. I think he'll emerge in the next day or two but there's no way to really know," she said.

Ashlynn tried to keep her voice light, but an echo of her heartbeat echoed within Nyrielle's chest. Given that, even if the vampire didn't have senses that were far beyond human limits to feel every tremble of her lover's body and see every jump of her pulse in her neck, it would still be impossible for Ashlynn to maintain a confident face when her heart trembled with worry.

"What about Virve?" Nyrielle asked gently. "She isn't undergoing a trial, but she is... transforming, you said. Like a butterfly?"

"I carried Virve's seed for three days," Ashlynn said. "It should take about the same amount of time for the seed to transform Virve into a witch. Even if there is no trial, her body still needs to adjust and atune itself with the energy of the world. It's just... Virve's seed feels strangely," she paused for a moment as she tried to find the right word.

"Aggressive," she finally said when she thought about the swirl of autumn colors that enveloped the seed. Everyone else in her coven possessed energy in some shade of green and Ashlynn had expected Virve to inherit the Ancient Oak's golden-green hue, but when she pulled the seed from her chest, she saw hues that ranged from gold through burnt orange to deep crimson all swirling around like leaves caught in a whirlwind, but no trace of green.

"Virve's seed is potent, but there's a fury to it that makes me nervous," Ashlynn said, shifting in Nyrielle's embrace so she could gaze into her lover's midnight eyes. "I may need you to help me watch over her if anything goes wrong."

"If it would help, I can suggest that she spends some time with Lennart," Nyrielle said. "Zedya's husband is adjusting well to his existence as a vampire but he and Virve are old friends. It might be best for both of them if they can support each other through their changes."

"I'd like that," Ashlynn agreed quickly. "Our families are growing," she said with a warm smile. "Now that Zedya has taken her first progeny, will your other children take on progeny of their own?"

"Ha ha," Nyrielle chuckled. "Did Thane tell you that he'd considered taking Ollie in a few years? I think you took him by surprise when you made him a member of your coven so quickly."

"That's only because Thane is so old and he's used to thinking in terms of years and decades," Ashlynn said. "He should know by now how close we are to war with the Lothians. I don't have years to wait. Even if some people aren't quite ready, I have to move now before I lose the chance to take people in."

"Thane is 'so' old?" Nyrielle asked, raising an eyebrow playfully. "Then what does that make me? You know I'm more than twice his age..."

"You, my love," Ashlynn said, stretching languidly in Nyrielle's embrace until her lips were close enough to her lover's to feel the other woman's cool breath on her face. "Are like a fine wine, aged to perfection until you've become the woman who fills my heart with joy and my dreams with... with naughtier things," she whispered, her face growing hot with embarrassment as she recalled her most recent dreams of her lover and the things they'd done.

Taking Ashlynn's closeness as permission, Nyrielle leaned ever so slightly forward, brushing her lips across Ashlynn's lush, bow-shaped lips, sliding her tongue tantalizingly across the seam between her lips, gently prying them open to fully savor her lover's taste.

The moment their tongues caressed each other, gently dancing back and forth in the shared space between them, Ashlynn's heart began to race and the echo of Nyrielle's heartbeat within her chest raced right along with it. The cool night air suddenly felt ice cold against her skin as a fire burned within her body that ached for more than a simple kiss.

"Take me," Ashlynn whispered, pulling back from the kiss long enough to whisper in her lover's ear. "Take every inch of me and make me yours."

Chapter 552: Power Play

The night air in the Vale of Mists carried a crisp autumn chill, whispering through the shutters with promises of frost by morning. But within Ashlynn's chambers, the roaring fire crackled and popped, sending dancing shadows across the stone walls as the occasional -POP- from the fire sent a flurry of sparks dancing on the air, glowing like tiny stars before they faded into the shadows.

The heated gazes exchanged between the two women as they moved from the terrace to the bedchamber and the soft, wet sounds of quick, stolen kisses created a warmth that radiated between them, feeling hotter than the depths of summer in the Briar. Faint cedar smoke from the burning logs mingled with Nyrielle's subtle perfume of lavender and honeysuckle, creating an intoxicating blend that made Ashlynn's head swim.

Nyrielle moved with slow, deliberate tenderness as she pressed Ashlynn up against one of the ornately carved corner posts of her bed. The rough wood caught at the delicate lace trim of Ashlynn's dress, gently tugging at her in a way that made her feel ever so lightly restrained, sending shivers down her body as she felt 'trapped' by her own dress.

Gazing at her lover with midnight blue eyes that burned with passion, Nyrielle savored the feeling of her lover's supple body, yielding yet firm against her own. The silk of Ashlynn's delicate dress slid whisper-soft against the heavier brocade of Nyrielle's gown as she pressed herself close enough to bring her lips from Ashlynn's delicate mouth, along her gently curving jawline and down to her sweet neck.

The vampire's tongue traced a delicate path along Ashlynn's neck, tasting salt and sweetness mingled with the faintest trace of the rosewater Ashlynn had dabbed there earlier. The pulse beneath that tender skin jumped wildly against Nyrielle's lips, like a drumbeat of desire that echoed in both their chests.

"No," Ashlynn said softly as she drew a ragged, shuddering breath. Her heart pounded in her chest, racing with anticipation that she could feel echoed within Nyrielle's heart, but she forced herself to cool things down before she fully roused Nyrielle's hunger.

"No biting," Ashlynn whispered, placing a finger under Nyrielle's chin and drawing her lover's lips away from her neck, enveloping the other woman's lips with her own and drawing her into a deep kiss.

Ashlynn's fingers laced their way through Nyrielle's raven-dark hair, feeling each silken strand slide between her fingers like cool water. She tightened her grip, firmly anchoring her lover in place, relishing the slight catch of breath she pulled from the powerful vampire's lips.

As she extended one leg, the rustling of her skirts against her thighs whispered like an anticipatory lover, urging Ashlynn to press even further. Her stockinged calf wrapped around Nyrielle's long, slender legs, the friction of silk against silk adding to the ever building aura of desire between them as she pulled their bodies even closer together.

The heat building between them intensified where their hips met, and Ashlynn's fingertips tingled with the magical energy that always rose within her when they touched like this, filling the air with an intense, evergreen scent that briefly called to mind the first time Nyrielle had pinned her against something as firm and unyielding as the bedpost behind her.

It had been a cedar tree in the forest then, on the first night that she offered herself to feed Nyrielle's hunger. Back then, Nyrielle had held herself back, afraid she might harm Ashlynn or frighten her with the reality of a vampire's dark hunger, but now there was no restraint in her lover's midnight eyes as the powerful vampire trapped her against the unyielding firmness of the bedpost.

The fire in the hearth cast soft, flickering shadows over both women, painting them in gold and amber one moment, deep crimson the next. The dancing light caught the contours of Nyrielle's pale alabaster skin, giving it an almost translucent quality that reminded Ashlynn of moonlight filtering through the mists of the vale at night.

Where their bodies pressed together, the light created deep valleys of shadow, rippling with each breath and movement as if they were melting into darkness and into each other. A drop of perspiration traced its way down Ashlynn's neck, catching the firelight like a diamond as it slid toward the deep valley of her cleavage before Nyrielle wiped it away, resting her delicate hand on Ashlynn's full bust and delighting in the rhythmic beat of her lover's heart beneath her hand.

The kiss and the feeling of being tightly held, almost controlled by Ashlynn, sent shivers along Nyrielle's spine, teasing at the warring hungers within her. Ashlynn's pulse sang in her ears like a primitive drumbeat summoning her to hunt, and it took every ounce of willpower that she had to keep her fangs from growing long and sharp, ready to feed on Ashlynn's sweet blood.

An entirely different hunger drove her hands as they slid along Ashlynn's rounded hips, cupping the firm cheeks of her perfectly sculpted buttocks before sliding higher where her slender fingers began to work at the knots of Ashlynn's corset laces.

"No ripping clothing tonight either," Ashlynn said, pulling back from the kiss long enough to gaze lovingly at Nyrielle's delicate features, admiring the flush of warmth and passion that spread across her lover's cheeks.

"You're being awfully strict tonight, my darling," Nyrielle whispered, wrapping her arms around Ashlynn and lifting her ever so slightly off the ground as she pressed her against the bedpost. "No biting, no tearing, what's next? I thought you wanted me to take every inch of you tonight," she breathed, pressing her forehead against Ashlynn and gazing into the other woman's emerald eyes from mere inches away.

"How am I to do that if you put so many rules in place?"

"You belong to me," Ashlynn said, gently tugging on Nyrielle's dark hair, pulling her head back and exposing the vampire's long, slender neck. "And I belong to you," she whispered, brushing her lips over the same spot on Nyrielle's neck where the vampire had sunk her fangs into Ashlynn's. "But that doesn't mean I want to go easily every time."

"Oh?" Nyrielle asked, quivering as she felt the strength of Ashlynn's grip tugging gently on her hair. The blend of power that she'd gained as both Seneschal and Mother of Trees made her nearly as physically powerful as Nyrielle herself, and the gap between them was shrinking every day. Already, she found that she couldn't overpower Ashlynn's hold on her without using enough force that she worried she might hurt the other woman.

"I want you," Nyrielle whispered as she made her move. Spinning quickly, she pulled Ashlynn away from the bedpost, using the moment of startled surprise to pull Ashlynn down onto the soft feather mattress. The bed's wooden frame creaked in faint protest of the sudden movement as she rolled over on the bed, trading places with Ashlynn and pinning the witch beneath her.

"But I don't want to be too forceful with you, my darling," Nyrielle said as the hunger within her surged, warring with her restraint and genuine concern. Ashlynn's pale blonde hair lay across the dark blankets of her bed like a pale golden waterfall, drawing Nyrielle's eyes to her lover's flush face and the gentle sway of her heaving bosom, trapped beneath her like the world's most enchanting meal, waiting to be devoured...

Chapter 553: Getting Rough

Soft firelight filled the room with flickering shadows, highlighting every curve of Ashlynn's body as Nyrielle pinned her to the soft satin bedspread. Midnight blue energy swirled within the vampire's eyes and her pupils quivered with hunger, fixed on the jumping pulse in Ashlynn's soft, delicate neck while the sound of her lover's racing heart thundered in her ears like a herd of wild horses, ready to carry her restraint and leaving behind nothing but the primal desire to feed.

"The night we met," Nyrielle said, closing her eyes and turning her head away from Ashlynn as she fought to control herself, restraining her hunger and the darkness that lurked behind it through sheer force of will. "The night we met, I made a promise to myself that I would never hurt you the way he had," she said as visions of Ashlynn's battered body flickered through her mind.

She'd fought back her hunger that night as well, even though the bruises and scratches that covered the young witch's body had blended to create an enchanting tapestry of the perfect prey, weak and vulnerable, ready to fall under her spell and under her fangs. Nothing in the world was as tempting or as intoxicating as the blood of a witch, but Nyrielle refused to reduce the woman she'd selected as her partner for the rest of their lives to little more than a convenient delicacy.

"You're worried that you'll hurt me," Ashlynn said, reaching up to capture Nyrielle's face between her hands, turning her lover's gaze back toward her. "But Nyri, my love," she said softly as she ran her fingers gently through the other woman's soft, silky hair. "I'm not as weak as I was then. I, I don't mind if you're a little rough," she said, biting her lower lip and squirming in embarrassment as she put her feelings into words.

"I want you to take me," she whispered. "I want to struggle, to feel my own power and to feel your strength meeting it. I want... I want you to want me," she said, pulling Nyrielle down on top of her and using both legs to wrap around the other woman while her arms wrapped around her lover's slender shoulders, pulling her in tightly so she could whisper in her ear. "But I don't want to feel like a crystal ornament that you can only touch delicately..."

"You want me to be rough with you," Nyrielle said, her hand trembling slightly as she reached out to brush a lock of hair away from Ashlynn's face. "But you deny me the chance to feed," she said, parting her lips to reveal a hint of fang. "Ashlynn, my darling, if you tell me 'no', I will always listen, but this... If I am to be 'rough' with you, but I must constantly restrain myself..."

"Oh," Ashlynn said, her face heating in embarrassment as she realized her mistake. She'd told Nyrielle 'no biting' but that hadn't been entirely what she meant. Only, to Nyrielle, the moment Ashlynn withdrew permission for her lover to take so much as a nibble from her, it was as good as fitting her with shackles. Nyrielle had promised Ashlynn that she wouldn't feed from her without her permission unless she had a great need to do so, and no matter how intense their actions in the bedroom were, they wouldn't rise to a 'great need.'

"Then, I take back when I said 'no biting,'" Ashlynn said. "I mean, no biting yet," she said, reaching up to cup Nyrielle's delicate face. "I want you to be forceful with me. I want you to overwhelm me until I beg for your bite. I want you to take me and make me ache for you, but I don't want it to be easy. Is that... too much?" she asked hesitantly.

"No," Nyrielle said, smiling wickedly and flexing the fingers of one hand to reveal nails that had grown longer and sharper. "But are you taking back what you said about no ripping of clothing as well?"

"No, absolutely not," Ashlynn said, crossing her arms in front of her bodice. "I like this dress, I, I wore it just for you tonight," she said, puffing out her chest and highlighting the way the soft satin fabric clung to her full bosom. "You like it, don't you? So don't, don't tear it like you did the last one..."

"Haha," Nyrielle laughed musically and smiled widely as she watched all of Ashlynn's aura of might and majesty as the Mother of Trees fall away in a young woman's concern for her favorite dress. "In that case, the best thing to do with that dress would be to get you out of it!"

Moving with the speed of a striking snake, Nyrielle flipped Ashlynn over, pressing her lover firmly down into the mattress while her nimble hands caught the laces of the other woman's corset. For a moment, rather than untying the laces, she pulled them tighter until Ashlynn gasped in surprise beneath her.

"You asked for rough," Nyrielle reminded her, whispering into her ear from inches away as she held the corset laces tightly in her hand. "So I'll be nice to the dress, but you, my darling..." Nyrielle allowed her voice to trail off, leaving the last words unsaid as her dextrous fingers untied the knots in the laces.

The sound of silk laces sliding through metal eyelets filled the air with a brief, high-pitched whistle as Nyrielle pulled the laces away, freeing her lover from the tight binding of the corset and allowing her to draw a deep, shuddering breath.

"My turn," Ashlynn said, spinning beneath her lover to capture the other woman's slender waist, working at the knots of Nyrielle's corset lacing with clumsy, hurried movements as she tried to replicate the vampire's feat of stripping her laces away in a single smooth movement.

"No you don't," Nyrielle said, capturing Ashlynn's hands and sliding out of her grasp before winding Ashlynn's own laces around her wrists, tying them in a tight knot that the young witch wouldn't easily be able to struggle free of. "You're mine tonight, darling," she said forcefully as she slid a hand up Ashlynn's stockings leg, tracing her way up soft, creamy thighs as she sought the top of her lover's underskirt.

"I won't go that easily," Ashlynn countered, pressing her hands together as though she were praying before brilliant emerald light spilled from her palms. Moments later, the sounds of tearing laces filled the air as Ashlynn used strength that no ordinary human would possess to free herself from the improvised binding, scooting away from Nyrielle and casting a taunting look at her lover.

"If you want to eat me up tonight, you'll have to do better than that," she teased, knowing full well that she was provoking Nyrielle and her hunger. "Come and get me," she said playfully, savoring the look of cold hunger blending with burning desire in her lover's eyes.

"If that's what my darling desires," Nyrielle said mischievously as she clutched the satin bedspread in her hands, giving it a sharp tug to bring Ashlynn back toward her. "Then how can I refuse?"

Chapter 554: While I'm Breaking Things...

The following day, Ashlynn's face burned a brilliant shade of crimson that Nyrielle would have found adorable if she had been present to witness it. Her dress, the green satin and brocade one with the daring, plunging neckline that she wore to tempt Nyrielle into ravishing her, hung haphazardly across a high-backed chair halfway across the room where Nyrielle had thrown it to 'get the delicate treasure out of the way.'

Remarkably, the dress had survived with only a minor snag of a bit of lace that would need a bit of mending when it was laundered. Her bed, however, couldn't make nearly the same claim.

One of the bed's four intricately carved bedposts had snapped clean in half when Nyrielle used twisted sheets to bind Ashlynn's hands above her head. Ashlynn had expected that her struggle against the binding might tear the sheets, but she'd never in her wildest dreams imagined that she'd become strong enough to snap a bedpost that was thicker than her wrist, or that the bedpost would snap before the silk sheets tore.

The bedpost wasn't the only casualty of their 'rough' evening either. The bedpost in the opposite corner had cracked and now stood at a slight angle after Nyrielle aggressively pinned Ashlynn against the post while plundering the young witch's lips. Gingerly, as Ashlynn traced her fingers across the space between her shoulder blades, she found tender bruises that likely matched up to the carvings on the bedpost.

If they had only cracked or shattered two of the bed posts in their excess the night before, she might not have been as embarrassed as she was presently, but when she slid out from beneath the sheets, she found that one side of the bedframe had collapsed, leaving the feather mattress to sag almost all the way to the floor.

Even more embarrassing was the fact that she couldn't recall which of them was responsible for the damage, though she had vague memories of losing control of her body when she finally begged for Nyrielle to sink her fangs into her and Nyrielle responded by drinking deeply from the artery that ran along the inside of her upper thigh.

Of all the places that Nyrielle had fed from her, while a bite on one her full, ripe breasts felt the most adoring and affectionate, just above her heart that pulsed with love, a bite to the thigh filled her body with the most intense, mind shattering pleasure that left her too overwhelmed and disoriented to move until she finally fell asleep in her lover's arms.

"I wish Heila were here," Ashlynn muttered, covering her still crimson face with her hands as she thought about how she would explain the damage to the staff who were tending to her needs while the first member of her coven watched over Ollie during his extended vigil. "At least I could tease her about what Ignatious has in store for her if she said anything about this..."

Not that the servants in the castle would say anything they shouldn't when Ashlynn asked them for help, but she was certain that rumors would fly within hours of her request, especially with a formal engagement dinner rapidly approaching on the night of the new moon.

It was one thing for the staff to know that she and Nyrielle were intimate, that wasn't a secret they kept from anyone, and their open affection should have made things clear long ago. But for people to see the... aftermath of last night's intense activities was something else entirely.

"It's fine," Ashlynn told herself as she padded across her bedchambers to the washroom to clean herself up and prepare to face the things she still needed to do today. Her steps were unstable as she walked, and more than once, she had to pause to steady herself as she found that her movements put unexpected strain on one of the many bruises scattered across her body.

The shape of Nyrielle's hand could clearly be seen in a brilliant purplish-yellow bruise on her left breast with five dark red lines at the tips of each finger where her nails had bit into Ashlynn's tender flesh. Another handprint marked the hip opposite of her witch's mark and both of her wrists bore rope burns from Nyrielle's efforts to restrain her as the evening escalated.

Of course, Ashlynn had left her own set of marks on her lover's alabaster skin, including a perfectly shaped handprint on Nyrielle's slender, toned buttocks following what Ashlynn claimed was a perfectly deserved spanking for how naughty Nyrielle's hands had been. Nor had Ashlynn stopped there, choosing to leave several 'bite marks' of her own on her lover's pale, alabaster skin as if she was extracting some kind of revenge for every small bite Nyrielle had ever left on Ashlynn's tender flesh.

None of the marks on her body were serious injuries, and by this time the following day, the rapid healing she received along with her other gifts from Nyrielle would erase all but the deepest of marks from her skin but that didn't mean that they didn't sting at the moment as she gently washed her body with a soft cloth and rose scented soap.

A short half hour later, she had dressed in a high-necked dress with long, flowing sleeves in a shade of dark maroon that always made Ashlynn feel more like a vampire's seneschal than a witch. The spills of dark lace that fell from her wrists, throat, and hips only added to the feeling of a gothic beauty who had fallen into a world of darkness and blood.

"I wonder what Jocey would think if she saw how my wardrobe has changed," Ashlynn mused as she finished the outfit with a simple black traveling hat that complemented the darker hues in her wardrobe. "I suppose I'll find out soon enough," she said, setting the hat in place and giving herself a final inspection in the mirror.

"Once I deal with Owain, I'll bring her back to the Vale. And who knows," she added. "Maybe I'll get a chance to take her shopping in High Fen City for a few new outfits of her own before the real battles begin. Hopefully, if I can show her enough of the bright side of the Eldritch world, it will be easier for her to adjust to the changes that are coming for our family."

For now, however, Jocelynn's rescue would need to wait, and Ashlynn firmly pushed down the butterflies that tried to form in her stomach when she thought about what her sister must be enduring in Owain's company as she was forced to take her sister's place in the marriage her father had arranged.

One way or another, she would never allow Owain to actually wed Jocelynn. Thankfully, based on the information she'd been able to gather from Samira during her visit to the Summer Villa in the spring, she still had several months before Owain would declare her dead to the public. Then there would be a period of mourning before her former husband could announce that he was taking a new wife who had 'consoled him through his grief.'

There weren't many months left before she would need to make her move, but Ashlynn intended to use each and every one that she had to train her coven and prepare for the conflicts ahead. Originally, she had intended to leave with Nyrielle to visit her family in Blackwell County, but it would take weeks of travel in each direction, and she no longer felt like she could indulge in such a selfish desire when so much was at stake.

For now, while Ollie and Virve underwent their trials, there was still one more person she needed to speak with about adding his magic to their own strength. But to do that, she would have to break the curse that kept young lord Hauke trapped as a prisoner of his own mind...

Chapter 555: Substitute Physicians

On the far side of the castle, in an area that had become much busier since the arrival of Nyrielle's army, Ashlynn made her way through the crowds of people toward the guest chambers where Artificer Erkembalt and the sorcerer Aspakos had taken Hauke as they continued to study the curse that bound him.

Two days ago, they had sent word that they'd made significant progress, but they needed the help of a witch's Severing Knife if they were going to make any more progress. Any other time, Ashlynn would have rushed immediately to Hauke's side, but at the moment, she had to prioritize Virve's transformation and the transfer of her seed of witchcraft.

Even now, Ashlynn felt guilty for asking Talauia to watch over her newest witch as she underwent her transformation beneath the branches of the Ancient Oak. She wanted to be there for Ollie, she wanted to be there for Virve, but there were only so many places she could be at once, and right now... right now it was Hauke's turn.

Inside a large guest chamber that had clearly been sized for members of the Clan of the Great Claw or other large-sized Eldritch visitors, Ashlynn found herself stepping into what resembled a chaotic blend of magical laboratory and scholarly study rather than any kind of sickroom.

Slate boards leaned haphazardly against every available wall surface, each covered with intricate diagrams, some depicting patterns of chains labeled with the names of horrifying curses, while others illustrated the internal structures of Frost Walker horns.

All of the diagrams were accompanied by dense mathematical formulas written in at least three different scripts, some in Erkembalt's precise, angular notation, others in Aspakos's flowing, feathery script, and a third that looked like it had been faithfully transcribed from directly from ancient texts, as if the person doing the copying was afraid that re-writing it in a more modern script would result in misinterpreting the original meaning.

The room's central table, large enough for a party of four to dine at, had been repurposed as a research station, its polished surface barely visible beneath stacks of leather-bound tomes borrowed from Nyrielle's personal library of texts pertaining to sorcery. Many of the books were still open to pages marked with scraps of parchment covered in hasty annotations. Loose pages of calculations and observations littered the floor around it, some half crumpled and left to lay wherever they fell when the ideas expressed on them proved fruitless.

Near the window, where the light was strongest, a collection of small braziers burned with flames in unnatural colors. One emitted a pale blue glow that reminded Ashlynn of Hauke's horn when he used ice magic to create intricate shapes, while another produced a green smoke that curled into the shape of glyphs associated with healing before fading away.

In the far corner of the room, behind a folding screen with panels of intricately carved cedar, lay Hauke himself, feeling less a patient being tended to and more a puzzle these two scholars were determined to solve. Other than a small potted plant that had clearly been placed there by one of the maids in order to bring some life into the room, his bed was surrounded by measuring instruments, crystals that seemed to pulse and glow in different colors that correspond to the colors of Hauke's iridescent horn, and even more slate boards covered with observations about his responses to the two men's attempts to unravel his curse.

On the opposite side of the guest room, sitting as close to the hearth as possible, as if to avoid the faintly frosty aura that clung to Hauke even here, Artificer Erkembalt sat hunched over a game board, staring at a fiendishly clever arrangement of stones that Aspakos had set in his way.

Faint magical energy could be felt radiating from the game board, and glowing crystals embedded in the edges of the board itself flickered and pulsed as Erkembalt delicately reached into the arrangement to move a single piece.

Sitting opposite him, the darkly feathered sorcerer Aspakos seemed to have little interest in the game, turning away from it as soon as Ashlynn entered the room, rising smoothly from his seat and offering her a graceful bow.

"Your Dominion," the sorcerer said smoothly. "Thank you for making time to help us resolve this impasse. I know how busy you are with important matters."

"Hauke is a friend," Ashlynn said, looking toward the far side of the room where the young frost walker lord lay in bed. "This is an important matter," she added as she moved to his side. "And one I should have attended to sooner."

"I'm sure your young friend is grateful to have you here," Erkembalt said, his tail twitching in agitation as he realized he would need to give up on solving the puzzle Aspakos had set for him. It wasn't the interruption that irritated him so much as the realization that he didn't even know where to begin with solving it.

"You know that this old bag of feathers has been giving lectures to keep your friend entertained while we wait?" Erkembalt said, giving Aspakos a withering look. "I've had to endure his 'fundamentals of energy systems' and 'unique sorceries of the Eldritch Clans' lectures for the past several days as he prattles on endlessly."

"I'm sure he appreciates your efforts," Ashlynn said as she stood beside Hauke, looking at the calm features on his face and the unblinking stare he'd worn since she severed the bind between him and the ancestral horns.

The young lord's powerful physique had begun to lose some of its bulk as the days slipped by and the aura of frost that clung to him had faded to a shadow of its former self, though whether that was an affect of the curse or his absence from the frigid environment of the High Pass, Ashlynn couldn't say for certain.

"I'm sorry for making you wait," Ashlynn said softly, gently stroking the soft locks of Hauke's snow-white mane. "I promise, we'll free you soon."

As she spoke, Hauke's iridescent horn did something it hadn't done the last time she saw him. The horn pulsed with a faint, bluish hue that carried a hint of icy resilience and determination, and for a moment, his eyes seemed to focus on Ashlynn before they clouded over once again.

"He heard that," Aspakos said with a warm smile forming beneath his cracked beak. "I think he's eager to rejoin the world of the waking."

"Do you mean that you've been able to communicate with him?" Ashlynn said, her eyes opening wide in surprise. "In the High Pass, when he spoke to us, it seemed to take considerable effort just to say a few words, and he risked damaging his horn in the process."

"I don't know that I'd call it communication," Erkembalt said, walking across the room to examine the condition of Hauke's horn with a small monocle. "We've worked as delicately as we can to widen the gaps between the curse that binds him and his horn, and we've worked out a rough system of sharing thoughts using the hues of his energy. Simple things like yes and no, pain, danger, discomfort, fear..."

"It hasn't been enough to have a real conversation," Aspakos said, interjecting before Ashlynn got the wrong impression about the system they'd developed to communicate with their cursed patient. "The most important thing was to understand if our techniques were making things better or worse, or if we were placing undue strain on him."

"He's a stubborn kit," Erkembalt snorted. "Far too willing to suffer for the slightest hope of progress. We had to threaten to stop treating him before he would admit when we were causing him pain."

"Don't lie to her Dominion," Aspakos countered. "You threatened to cut off his horn to free him from the curse, since nothing seemed to cause him pain. That seemed to terrify him so much that he stayed up for two whole days answering Erkembalt's questions, just to be sure my friend here didn't reach for his bone saws again."

"I can imagine!" Ashlynn said, giving the artificer a dark look. She appreciated everything he was doing for Hauke on top of her immense gratitude for the pair of weapons he'd forged from the horns of the

Frost Walkers who had conspired against them, but his methods... Perhaps the best she could say was that he lacked a good bedside manner.

"Then, let me do my part so you can move on to other things," Ashlynn said, feeling like the artificer would be happier in a workshop with his tools than he was tending to a single cursed Frost Walker. "Your note said that you needed my Severing Knife, so how can I help?"

Chapter 556: A Complicated Plan

"We have a plan that I think will make the best use of each of our skills," Aspakos said, gesturing to one of the slate boards sitting nearest to Hauke that depicted an intricate series of chains wrapped around the young Frost Walker's horn.

"We have two plans, if the Mother of Trees is willing to hear me out," Erkembalt said. "But it depends entirely on her ability to regrow a severed horn. I've been told that witches possess a unique magic that can regrow..."

"No," Ashlynn said, immediately putting a stop to the artificer's train of thought without letting him finish his sentence. "I do know the magic that you speak of, but the costs to use it are far beyond what anyone should be asked to pay. Unless you're willing to sever your tail and blind your eyes to pay the cost, you should forget any notion of solving this problem by severing his horn," she said firmly, giving the artificer a very pointed look until he nodded in understanding.

"As I was saying," Aspakos said, placing a reassuring taloned hand on Hauke's shoulder when he noticed the bright white sheen on the young Frost Walker's horn. "We have a plan that will make the best use of each of our skills."

"The curse that binds Hauke is like a knot tied with seven strands," the feathered sorcerer explained, tapping on the diagram. "Each strand binds one of the core magics that comprise Frost Walker sorcery, and they have been pulled together into a braided knot with strands passing over and under each other in an intricate pattern that's held under constant tension."

"The tension is the hard part, and it's why I keep suggesting, er, that is," Erkembalt stammered when he felt the dark look from both Ashlynn and Aspakos. "The tension has to be released gradually, or the backlash of severing one of the chains binding him may burn out his ability to use that form of magic. If enough of them rebound, then even if he keeps his horn, it will become half dead, and he'll be no different than a goat when it comes to using his horn for sorcery."

"You could be kinder, Friend Erkembalt," Aspakos said, giving Hauke another reassuring squeeze. "But that is the gist of it. In order to untie this knot, we have to sever each strand multiple times, working from the tip of his horn toward the base, severing them in sequence to release the tension until we can cut away the last of it."

"I'll pull at the web of chains," Erkembalt said, waving his sharply pointed claws, revealing that each of them had been sheathed in an intricately carved silver blade, turning simple claws into precise surgical instruments with enough sharpness to tear through even the most stubborn curses. "All I can do is create a little space between the horn and the binding curse, the rest is up to you."

"I'll guide the working," Aspakos said. "My eyes are keen, and these days, I can see the non-physical world better than I can perceive the physical world. I'll tell you where to cut and when, guiding you through every step of the process."

"Then all I need to do is cut where you tell me to, and we can release Hauke from his bindings," Ashlynn said, smiling at the simplicity of her role. Amahle had once compared the use of a Severing Knife to the use of a seamripper, pulling out stitches and allowing a seamstress to work backwards to correct a mistake. Now, it felt like she would be doing exactly as her big sister had described, carefully cutting through the magic that held Hauke captive.

"Will this be painful for Hauke?" Ashlynn asked as she examined the notes on the slate board. Some of the notations were things she recognized after studying with Amahle in the Briar, but much of it was far too complex, referencing laws and theories that she had never heard of, much less studied enough to make sense of.

"I could apply soothing magic to ease him to sleep," she offered, unable to discern whether it would be beneficial or not from her study of the notes. "Or I could apply gentle healing magic if you feel like this will place undue strain on his body."

"I had assumed that he'd want to be awake," Erkembalt said, frowning at Ashlynn's offer as he tried to decide whether or not Ashlynn's witchcraft would interfere with the process. "If Hauke can signal to us how he feels during the process," he mused. "Then I would have better notes about how to use this process in the future. It's a rare opportunity to..."

"Please, your Dominion," Aspakos said quickly. "If you can ease Hauke to sleep, I'm sure he would experience much less distress," he said, giving his old friend a withering look. "And I'm sure that with you here, he'll rest well knowing that you'll safeguard his horn and ensure that no harm comes to it during this process."

"I agree," Ashlynn said, resolving to never again involve Erkembalt with a living patient if she had any other choices. Clearly, the man had spent far too long fussing over lifeless objects to have much consideration for the feelings of the people who struggled with curses that only he could break. Or perhaps, if the artificer spent more time with Aspakos, he could be trusted around people again in a few years time.

"Rest well, my friend," Ashlynn said, raising a hand that gleamed with a brilliant emerald aura. "When you wake, we'll have a proper conversation. I'm sure you have many things on your mind, but for right now, the only thing you should concern yourself with is recovering from this curse. So sleep now and we'll talk soon..."

Though Hauke's eyes remained glassy and unfocused, within a few minutes his breathing became slow and steady, his chest moving up and down with the regular motions of deep, dreamless sleep.

"Now," Ashlynn said, drawing the Severing Knife from its sheath at her waist. "Tell me where I should begin."

Chapter 557: Free At Last

Hauke had completely lost track of time in the days since the spirits of the ancestors used his body like a puppet and trapped him in a frozen prison within his own mind.

At first, every hour had been precious as he fought against the curse that bound him, struggling to escape from its icy grip before Artificer Erkembalt, the madman with a bone saw, could hack off his horn in an attempt to 'cure' him. That desperate struggle alone had kept him tethered and fighting until the night that he spoke during the trial, which ultimately sealed the fate of the ancient ancestors and dramatically changed the destiny of the High Pass.

Since then, the world outside his eyes turned into an ever-changing series of small plays, each one unfolding on the stage of the world without action or reaction from the cursed Frost Walker. Hauke was left with no choice but to listen and observe as his mother clung to his body and wept bitter tears when

she told him that she had been commanded to remain in the High Pass while Hauke and his father were taken to the Vale of Mists to receive healing from the witches.

He was as motionless as a frozen sculpture when they loaded him into a carriage next to his wounded father, unable to offer the slightest comfort to the man who had given him everything he could have asked for in this life and more. Now, when he would have given almost anything to give his father a few words of reassurance and a youthful promise that things would get better soon, his lips wouldn't move, and his jaw remained firmly shut, trapping any words he would have said within his chest.

Worst of all, however, had been the news that the artificer and his sorcerer companion would be placed in charge of determining a method of freeing him from the curse. The man with the broken beak from the Dark Feather Clan wasn't the worst part. He at least tried to offer reassurance, from time to time making statements like "The world isn't done with you yet, young hero," and "the darkness of a world without you in it is too great for my shoulders to bear."

The feathered sorcerer always spoke as if Hauke had some great purpose but he never once mentioned what that purpose might be, and the more often he repeated the same cryptic reassurances, the more Hauke began to wonder if the man might be going mad.

Compared to Artificer Erkembalt, however, the sorcerer was a model of sanity and rational thought. No matter what Aspakos said or did, he seemed to have Hauke's best interest at heart, and restoring him was the sorcerer's highest priority.

Erkembalt seemed more interested in using Hauke and the curse that bound him as a research subject, and some of his experiments turned out to be entirely irrelevant to the task of removing Hauke's curse! He just wanted to better understand Frost Walkers and the unique magic of their horns.

Finally, after an unknown number of days had passed by under the agonizing questioning, poking and prodding by his 'physicians', Ashlynn wandered into his dark and muddled world like a ray of sunshine peeking through endless clouds of blowing snow, instantly rekindling his hopes that he would soon be free of the magic that kept him prisoner.

"Rest well, my friend," she'd said as she wrapped him in an aura that felt like a soft, snowy blanket lying atop the branches of evergreen trees. "When you wake, we'll have a proper conversation, so sleep now and we'll talk soon..."

For the first time since this nightmare began, Hauke allowed himself to truly rest. What little sleep he'd had was fitful and shallow, plagued by nightmares about the aftermath of what the ancestors had done, but under the effects of Ashlynn's magic, no dreams lurked in the shadows of his mind to torment him. Only calm, restful sleep.

Several hours later, Hauke's eyes slowly fluttered open as he found himself in a familiar room that was lit only by a small oil lamp sitting on the table and the dim glow of a hearth that had been allowed to burn down, leaving the room cooler than it had been since Hauke arrived and far more comfortable.

The room was quiet without the bickering of Artificer Erkembalt and his companion Aspakos, and the slate boards, books, pages of notes and strange equipment had all been cleared away, leaving the room feeling oddly empty after so many days of their active bustling while they studied his curse.

One person, however, remained in the room, sitting at the central table with stacks of paper to one side while the pen in her hand moved in slow, steady strokes over whatever the page currently in front of her. A thin blanket around her shoulders hung slightly askew, and it was impossible for Hauke to say how long she'd been there, but the pile of dishes sitting beside her suggested that it had been at least long enough to take one meal.

"Ashlynn?" Hauke asked. His voice sounded weak and hoarse even to his ears, but it was his voice, and when he lifted his head to get a better look at her, his head and body moved as he willed! It felt like a very small accomplishment, saying one word and moving his head and shoulders to sit up in bed, but to Hauke, it was enough to bring tears to his eyes.

"Hauke!" Ashlynn said, immediately setting down her pen and rushing across the room to help the young Frost Walker lord sit up. She'd never really thought about how heavy a man who stood nearly nine feet tall must be until she slipped an arm behind his shoulders and helped lift him into a sitting posture, but the moment she did, she was immensely grateful to Nyrielle for the gift of strength that allowed her to help her friend.

"How, how is my h-horn?" Hauke asked anxiously. He wanted to check for himself but when he tried to raise an arm it felt so weak that he was barely able to lift it off the bed, much less reaching his own horn.

"Your horn is fine," Ashlynn said with a gentle smile. "I'm sure you heard everything we said before I helped you rest, but the curse-breaking went more or less as expected. I've just been sitting here waiting for you to wake."

She made it sound easy, but what had sounded like a simple task of cutting the thread of magic that Aspakos pointed to was much, much more difficult than Ashlynn had expected. At times, she needed to make cuts that were so precise that a needle would have been a better tool than her Severing Knife, and moving more than the thickness of a fingernail to either side would have resulted in cutting the wrong thread.

Ashlynn's shoulders ached from the tension of wielding the Severing Knife for several hours, and her eyes had only recently begun to focus on small details without difficulty again after the strain of staring so intensely at such subtle distinctions in magic between the seven chains that bound Hauke. But despite the difficulties, she would have done it several times over if that's what it took to free her friend from the prison that trapped him within his own mind.

"I have food and drink for you," Ashlynn said, wiping joyful tears from her eyes as she stood to retrieve a tray that Georg had delivered to Hauke's room hours ago. "I'm certain you're hungry, but I want to keep your meal small while your body finishes waking up," she said, sitting next to him and fetching a bowl from the tray that had been resting in a larger bowl filled with ice.

"What, what is it?" Hauke asked, his nose twitching as he inhaled the strangely complex aroma that accompanied the chilled dish in Ashlynn's hands.

"It's the same thing we've been feeding your father," Ashlynn said, taking a spoonful of the bright red dish and offering it to Hauke. "The fish in the river aren't suitable to enjoy raw, but this is a raw dish made with the meat of cows," she explained. "It's called 'tartare' and there are spices, herbs, a raw hen's egg, and a few pickles mixed in there to enhance the flavor of the raw beef," she said. "It's considered a luxury in High Fen City, but for Frost Walkers, Georg thinks it can function like soups and porridge for helping the body recover its strength after a long period of inactivity..."

Ashlynn's voice trailed off when she realized that Hauke wasn't paying attention to her description of the dish. His eyes shook, and tears flowed down the soft fur covering his cheeks as he fought to summon the strength to ask the most important question that consumed his mind in the days since the battle in the High Pass.

"Father," he whispered hoarsely. "How... how is he?" The last Hauke had seen his father, his body had been covered by terrible wounds inflicted by the Thistle Witch, and whether or not he could ever be healed was something no one knew. Even Ashlynn had only promised that they would 'try.'

"And, can I, can I see him? Before he, he..." Hauke's voice trailed off, as if the words at the end of the sentence were too painful to speak into existence, but his shining, watery eyes made it clear how worried he was. If his father was going to die from his wounds, then he wanted, no, needed to see him at least one more time before... before there was nothing left of his father but a horn in an ancestral cave.

Assuming that the Frost Walker elders even allowed the former Lord of the High Pass to have his horn placed in an ancestral cave. After presiding over the fall of the High Pass, his father might find himself unwelcome among his people, even in death...

Chapter 558: A Place for Hauke

"Of course you can see him before we finish healing him," Ashlynn said, deliberately misinterpreting Hauke's tear-filled question. "But you have to be strong enough to do so. That means eating while I explain things to you, you understand? You don't want him to worry that you've wasted away when he gets to see you, do you?"

"No, I," Hauke began before shaking his head slightly. "Thank you. I, I feel bad, making you feed me like you're my mother," he said, his horn glittering a pale lavender shade of embarrassment. "I'll eat. Just, just tell me what's happened..."

"I could be your mother, you know," Ashlynn said with a light laugh when she saw the puzzled look on the young Frost Walker's face. "Ritchel is as comfortable as we can make him right now," Ashlynn said, moving on from the comment before Hauke could ask about it and firmly placing the spoonful of tataré in front of Hauke's mouth until he took a bite of the rich, meaty dish.

"Talauia and I have visited him every day to help with his healing," Ashlynn explained. "And Mistress Nyrielle has formed a fresh Blood Vitality Crystal for him to further sustain him while we work to heal him completely."

Hearing Ashlynn's words, the tension in his body instantly melted away like ice before the summer sun. Her next words, however, startled him so much that he momentarily forgot to swallow the tartare in his mouth.

"I expected that with three witches working to heal him, we could have him restored to health by the end of winter," Ashlynn said, hoping that good news would help Hauke focus on his own recovery. "But with two more witches joining my coven, we may be able to move even faster than that. A circle of five

has special significance according to Big Sister Amahle and with Talauia's help, we'll be able to place five witches around your father to heal his wounds."

"Two? Two more witches joined your coven?" Hauke said, swallowing the tartare along with a lump in his throat. He'd dreamed of joining Ashlynn's coven until his father made it clear that Frost Walkers likely had no place in the coven of the Mother of Trees.

Hearing that two more people had joined her coven came as a shock, along with a complex wave of emotions... Faint hope warred with bitter jealousy and a forlorn sense of helplessness. Even if there had been a place for him in her coven before, what kind of place could he hope to find in it now that he'd brought about the disaster in the High Pass when the ancestors took possession of his body to attack Ashlynn and Heila?

"You remember Virve from our fishing trip," Ashlynn said with a gentle smile as she held out more of the tartare. "She'll be my Oak Witch once she completes the transformation she's undergoing under the branches of the Ancient Oak."

"I see," Hauke said, offering a weak smile. "Virve was very brave fighting the Tuscans. She, she deserves a place in your coven."

"You'll have to wait to meet Ollie," Ashlynn added, gently prodding Hauke with another spoonful of tartare. From the look in Hauke's eyes, wistful and yearning, she had the feeling that her coven meant more to him than just a group of witches who could heal his father, but she refused to make assumptions about his feelings until she'd heard from him directly.

"Ollie is on the fourth, no, I suppose it's the fifth day of his vigil now. He's human, like me," she added. "He's been training with Sir Thane and Sir Marcel to become a knight. He's also the person who will receive Ice Fang, the companion blade to the one that Erkembalt made for Heila, so I hope that, when the time comes, you'll be willing to help him master its powers."

"Sure," Hauke said with a trace of sullenness creeping into his voice before he shook it off. "I mean, of course I can help Ollie," he corrected himself. "It's the least I can do after... after all the harm I caused to you and Lady Heila."

"Hey, none of that," Ashlynn said, lightly bopping Hauke on the nose. "What's done is done. Your 'punishment', is to spend the next five years learning what you can here in the Vale before you return to the High Pass as its next local lord," she explained. "Until then, I'm just keeping your throne warm, or, cold, I guess," she said, chuckling at the bemused look on the young man's face.

"Hauke," Ashlynn said, setting down the half-finished bowl of tartare and assuming a more serious demeanor that carried a trace of the majesty and aura of the Mother of Trees. "Before things went so badly in the High Pass, I was intending to invite you to join my coven."

"You were?" Hauke asked, lurching upright in bed and staring at Ashlynn in wide-eyed amazement. "But, but I thought that there weren't any trees suited for Frost Walkers, except, except maybe a Fir tree," he said, his voice growing quiet and uncertain.

The only person who had heard of a Fir witch outside of the coven of the Mother of Storms was Eugen, the Greenwind Healer, one of the Frost Walker ancestors who had betrayed his trust to attack Heila in the High Pass. As much as Hauke wanted to believe it was true, that there was a possibility, he had been forced to question everything the ancestors had told him in light of the way they'd abused his trust at the end.

"I suppose that some fir trees might suit you," Ashlynn mused. "But I had something else in mind, a tree I found writings about in Amahle's records, though I don't know that there has ever been a witch who mastered this tree. I think you would be the first."

"The first?" Hauke said, blinking intensely as his horn glowed soft shades of green and pale icy blue that mirrored his rising excitement. "What kind of tree has never been claimed by a witch?"

"Let me show you," Ashlynn said, returning to the table to collect copies she'd made of the sketches in Amahle's books. The tree that she showed Hauke was short, with a squat trunk that quickly branched into several gnarled limbs and a bark that peeled away in layers like paper wrapped around the branches of the tree. Its leaves were slender and rounded with softly sawtoothed edges that reminded Hauke of ice crystals and snowflakes.

"Why is it so... short?" Hauke asked as he frowned at the strange tree, little more than a large bush, in the sketches that Ashlynn shared with him. It hardly seemed like the mighty sort of tree that could belong to a witch from the Frost Walker Clan who towered over at least three quarters of the other Eldritch clans.

"This tree is called Polylepis, and it grows high up in the Great Shield Mountains in the west. It may be short, but it stands higher up the slopes of mountains than any other tree in the known world," Ashlynn explained. "So, even if it's short, it still looks down at every other tree in the world. In the West, they call it the tree that connects the sky to the earth with tenacious roots that can break through stone to grip the mountain and tough limbs that can capture clouds. It's a tree that thrives in a place that would otherwise be barren, and when I read about it, I thought that you would be the best person to discover the depths of its powers."

"I don't have a seed from this tree," Ashlynn admitted. "But there's a witch in Big Sister Amahle's coven who travels the world, collecting exotic seeds to bring back to the Mother of Thorns for study. Months ago, I asked if she could bring me one of these seeds so I could offer you a place in my coven. That offer is still open," she said, reaching out to gently stroke the soft white fur of his forearm. "You just have to tell me you want it, and I'll prepare your seed as soon as it arrives."

"Months ago?" Hauke said, his voice trembling as he looked at Ashlynn with wide, hopeful eyes. "You, you made plans for me months ago? But, but that must have been right after you arrived in the Briar! How could you have known all the way back then that you wanted me to join your coven?"

"Because, when I saw how things were going for you in the High Pass, I thought that you and I, we're not that different from each other," Ashlynn said, giving the young Frost Walker a smile that contained a hint of sorrow. "This made you different from everyone around you," she said, pointing at his iridescent horn. "It also gave you great power. Just like my mark of the witch came with great power, but it kept me isolated and away from everyone around me."

"I learned from Amahle that covens are like families," Ashlynn said, taking Hauke's large, furry paw in both hands and looking directly into his pale, watery eyes. "And I thought, maybe you were someone like me, who needed to find family that would lift you up for the things that made you different instead of trying to tear you down the way I saw people like Torsten doing."

"It's a big decision," Ashlynn cautioned before Hauke could respond. "And it isn't one you have to make until the seed arrives. It may take until spring for your seed to get here, but that doesn't mean you can't move in with the rest of the coven while we wait. That is, if you want to join us," she said.

"You still have a throne waiting for you in the High Pass," she pointed out. "So if you would prefer not to have more to do with this and to walk away instead, then I wouldn't blame you or resent you, and I would still call you my friend as long as you think of me as one."

"How?" Hauke asked with a voice that trembled with excitement and eyes that glistened like ice beneath a cloudless sky. "How could I turn away from this when it's everything I wanted ever since I learned you were forming a coven? Yes," he said, squeezing Ashlynn's hands tightly with his large, furry paws. "Yes, of course, yes. Nothing would make me happier than being part of your coven."

Chapter 559: Purgatory of Two Suns

"AAAAAARRRRGGGG!!"

While Hauke celebrated his escape from the prison of his mind, Ollie roared in anguish and frustration as he experienced the pain of burning to death in the searing flames of the Inquisition's sorcery... again.

The world of the vision shifted around him, returning him to the very beginning as he lay in a curled-up, fetal position on a grassy hillside outside of a quiet village that overlooked rocky hills and a dense forest of cypress trees. The village in his vision wasn't exactly identical to the one he had helped to construct in the Vale of Mists, but it was similar enough to feel hauntingly familiar, especially when he realized that it was populated by many of the same people.

"Well, Ollie," Ashlynn's voice called while the aspiring knight and witch shook and trembled on the ground. "Do you accept your results as the best outcome you could achieve?"

"No!" Ollie spat as he struggled to rise from the ground. Each time he failed, the trial reset, but the memory of the pain and suffering lingered with him for several minutes until his mind caught up with the changes.

"No," he repeated as he regained his footing and slowly pulled himself upright before the vision of Ashlynn who had become his personal tormentor for... for more days than his pain-addled mind could recall.

Ashlynn had told him that the trial would end within nine days, one way or another, but it had become very clear that in this vision, time moved much, much faster than it did in the real world and he had already spent dozens of days struggling against the devilish scenario that the Ashlynn in his vision had devised for him.

"If I cannot save my people," he said between ragged breaths. "With all the gifts and knowledge you've given me. And all the powers at my fingertips. Then I don't, I don't deserve to be the Cypress Witch."

"Have you ever considered that this might be a test that you cannot pass?" Ashlynn asked, perching on a nearby stump and giving Ollie a careful, evaluating look. "That this might be about learning the limits of a witch's power?"

"That, that can't be right," Ollie said as he thought back over the loop that he'd been stuck in for what felt like months on end.

In the beginning, the vision of Ashlynn had guided him in unlocking the power of a witch, using the energy of the world to help plants to grow. He'd learned to draw the life out of weeds and provide it to vegetables that could help sustain the ever-growing village. The magic had been so immediately relevant to his struggles over the summer that he applied himself with vigor, practicing until he could easily maintain whole fields of crops, though Ashlynn was careful about teaching him that at a certain scale, there wouldn't be enough 'weeds' to sacrifice and he would have to make choices about taking some away from the grove of Cypress trees to sustain the crops.

She had even let him find out firsthand that some levels of abundance could only be achieved once before the sacrifice he required of the trees was too great for the mighty guardians to recover from.

She had told him in the beginning that he might one day need to choose and that he would have the power to make decisions that impacted an ever-increasing number of lives... and she hadn't been wrong. The first time Ollie watched one of the mighty cypress trees crumble under its own weight as the heartwood rotted from within, it became obvious that, while he could create great boons, the power to do so had to come from somewhere.

In the end, when he had completed the lesson, Ashlynn had asked if he was ready to face his trial. And then, with an abundance of confidence, he had agreed to undergo her devilish test.

The instruction she'd given him was simple. "Take care of your people." Nothing could be more fundamental to Ollie's existence after the months he'd spent working to help the refugees from the outlying villages build a new life. But nothing was as simple as it seemed.

His first night in the strange village, a second sun had blossomed in the sky, turning night into day and bringing with it the scorching heat of summer at midday. The new sun, according to Ashlynn, was a powerful act of sorcery by the Inquisition, one that would suppress the vampires who watched over the nation, keeping them confined underground during all hours of the day and night.

It was a nightmare of unending day. Within a matter of days, crops began to wilt and die, the irrigation channels emptied, and even the pond that the village relied on began to recede. There was no rain and no respite from the endless, scorching heat that blanketed the valley as far as the eye could see.

Ollie tried to fight back, to use what he had learned to salvage the crops and sustain the village, but as five days turned into ten and ten turned into fifteen, he began to run out of sacrifices to make. Worse, the villagers themselves couldn't work in the heat, and many in the village, especially the weak and infirm like Old Nan, had faltered, succumbing to the heat when their frail bodies could no longer endure the strain.

"Do you accept your results as the best outcome you could achieve?" Ashlynn had asked when Ollie knelt beside the dry, dusty grave in which they'd buried Old Nan. "Did you do everything you could do to take care of your people?"

"Of course I did everything I could!" Ollie raged. "But no, I can't accept this," he cried, slamming his fists into the bare, baked earth. "How can I accept that this is the best I could do?"

"If you had it to do over again, what would you do differently?" Ashlynn asked in a voice that was carefully neutral.

"I sacrificed too much too early," Ollie said. "I, I wasn't willing to be hard on the villagers because I thought we only needed to hang on long enough to be rescued. But... rescue didn't come in time. If I were more careful, if I was less wasteful, I know that we could hang on longer..."

"Then try again," Ashlynn said, gesturing to a village that had returned to the way it was on the very first day of the trial. "Use what you've learned and do better this time."

As painful as it had been to see the results of his failures firsthand, Ollie was grateful for the lesson. At least this way, he could learn without risking the people he cared about. Ashlynn had called this both a

trial and a lesson, and he was beginning to truly understand what she meant. It was a trial that he had to pass, but failure had already taught him many things.

Next time, he promised himself, next time the village would hang on long enough for rescue to arrive. In hindsight, he'd had no idea how wrong he'd been, or how much worse things would become...

Chapter 560: The Bigger Picture

The second time he faced the trial, he understood from the beginning that this would test his endurance and the endurance of the people in the village. He started immediately by looking for ways to preserve the crops without using witchcraft.

The people of the Heartwood clan were skilled at woodworking, so the first thing he asked them to build was screens made of wooden slats that would shade the crops in their fields and gardens. They were something that he'd come up with half way through the first trial, when he was looking for ways to make use of the wood they'd salvaged from the fallen cypress trees, but it had been too late by the time they'd gotten them into place to make much of a difference in the end.

The shades wouldn't completely block the light, but they would reduce the intensity of the twin suns' fury, and the water in the irrigation channels wouldn't dry up as quickly either. The gains might be small to start, but over the weeks of the trial, he was certain that they would add greatly to their survival.

The shades were just one of the changes Ollie made. Some crops, he gave up on entirely, harvesting them early rather than trying to sustain everything through the long drought. Others, he defended fiercely, knowing that they would need them when other sources of food became scarce.

He also sent every hunter in the village out as soon as the second sun appeared, giving them orders to catch and kill every deer, rabbit, grouse, pheasant, or other game animal they could find. The unending day would quickly become unsettling to beasts who would flee the area, making game scarce in the days to come, but with the knowledge of what was coming, he decisively overhunted the area, preserving anything they didn't eat for the leaner days to come.

His choices worked, at least for a time. The village lasted for more than a month, hanging on for several days longer than it had the first time, but still, rescue never arrived. Food still began to run out, bellies shrank, and both the old and the young succumbed to the heat. In the end, though they lasted much longer, the result was no different.

"Why?" Ollie asked when the vision of Ashlynn appeared before him again. "Why hasn't anyone come to rescue us? Even if Lady Nyrielle is suppressed by the suns, you would never abandon the people like this, would you?"

"Who told you that help was coming, Ollie?" Ashlynn said, raising a brow at him. "Doesn't this village already have the greatest help imaginable in you?"

"What? But, but I'm only a beginner. I've barely learned any witchcraft at all! Compared to you, I'm far too inadequate for this," he said. "I know I could have done better, I could have lasted longer if I'd done a few things differently. If I knew how long we needed to hold on for, I could make more adjustments. Just tell me when you'll be coming, or when you'll send someone to help and I promise I'll make sure we hang on long enough..."

"Ollie," Ashlynn said, kneeling down beside the pleading young man. Even though it was only a vision, he'd watched the villagers suffer and die more than once, and the tears that spilled from his eyes carried a mixture of grief, loss, and deep frustration as he castigated himself for his repeated failures.

"Ollie, there are more than twenty villages in the Vale of Mists, plus the fortress town," Ashlynn pointed out. "How many of those villages enjoy the luxury of a witch who is only trying to help one village survive? The Inquisition's attack isn't limited to this village alone, so while you are here, how many other places need help?"

"Do you understand now why no help is coming for you?" Ashlynn asked.

"I, I understand," Ollie said as he scrubbed the tears from his eyes. He'd been wrong from the beginning. He thought that, because Ashlynn had told him to "take care of your people", all he needed to worry about was this one little village. But he hadn't for even a minute considered what else might be happening beyond it, of the bigger picture that people like Ashlynn would concern themselves with. He'd expected help to arrive, but help had already arrived, and he was it.

"Let me try again," he insisted. "If the other villages need help too, then I can at least alleviate the burden somewhat by taking care of them. Or, maybe we can find ways to help each other. I'm not satisfied with this kind of ending," he said firmly. "Let me show you that I can do better."

"As you wish," the vision of Ashlynn said, waving a hand and resetting the trial back to the first day the horrifying second sun appeared in the sky.

This time, Ollie pushed himself further, sending messengers to the neighboring villages with instructions to aid them before making the rounds to visit each of them himself. Immediately, the strain he was under increased fivefold as he struggled to bestow as many gifts on each village as he could before moving on to the next one.

When he only had a single village to care for, the greatest constraint he faced was a fundamental lack of resources and the accumulated drain caused by the endless days. Now that he had expanded his efforts to cover the surrounding villages, he found himself struggling against exhaustion, dragging himself out of bed after only a few hours of rest and rushing to the next impossible task.

On the twenty-first, or perhaps it was the twenty-second day of this trail, Ollie staggered into the village where he'd begun, looking for signs of whether they were doing better or worse than they had in his last attempt.

"Milo," Ollie asked, calling out to the archer who had become his strongest supporter among the villagers. "How is Old Nan? The heat must be getting to her," he said, reaching into his pack for a treasure he'd brought from the neighboring village. "I have some fresh melon for her. The flesh should be soft and easy to chew, and it's easier to manage in this heat than the dried meat that..."

"Ollie," Milo said, his tail hanging so low that it dragged on the ground as he approached the young man. "Ollie, she, she's left behind her final carving. Two nights ago now..."

"Two, two nights ago?" Ollie said, dropping to his knees in confusion. How had she succumbed so early? This was the earliest yet, before he even had a chance to... to... He didn't even know what he would have done to save her this time when he'd failed twice before. But he hoped that by helping the other villages, he could reduce the strain enough that they might get help... But still, nothing changed, and help never came.

"Why? Why didn't you send someone to let me know?" Ollie asked, tears running down his face as he struggled to think of what he'd done wrong this time. "If she was struggling, I could have come back early, I could have, could have done... done something..." he said faintly, his voice trailing off as the melon fell from his hands, shattering on the parched ground below.

"Why is it worse?" he asked helplessly. "I did so much more this time. I helped so many people, but this time, why? Why is it worse?"