

The Vampire 641

Chapter 641: Love That Breaks All Rules (Part Two)

"I have forgiven Ignatious for his crimes of many years ago," Nyrielle said in a voice that was colder than the air had been when Ashlynn held Frost Fang in her hands. "I have forgiven him, but even I couldn't help him to forgive himself. For that, he required the help of the first person to join my Ashlynn's coven," she said, turning to smile warmly at Ashlynn.

At this point, every person in the great hall sat perched on the edge of their seats, hanging on Nyrielle's every word as they tried to imagine the kind of horrors an Inquisitor could have inflicted on a vampire to make them beg to see the sun. For many of them, their imaginations were several times darker than what had actually transpired, but that only made their image of the monster named 'Ignatious' more terrifying.

A few of the warriors present nodded uncomfortably at Nyrielle's words when she said that she had forgiven him. After all, any weapon that could threaten her progeny was a weapon worthy of using against their enemies, even if it was someone who had been her enemy in the past. As long as he had been brought to heel and could be counted on to turn his terrifying skills on the Lothians and his former brethren in the Church, then they didn't care what crimes he had committed in the past. All that mattered was his ability to inflict harm on their current enemies, and much could be forgiven so long as he piled up enough victories for his mistress.

But what then was this notion of forgiving himself?

"When I arrived," Ashlynn said, stepping forward to take over where Nyrielle had left off. "I said that there were two people who made me feel like the Vale was more than just a place to escape my former husband and plan my retribution," she said, glancing briefly toward Thane before she turned her gaze to the table of honored guests where Heila's father sat with other members of her family.

"Like Ollie, she is someone of humble origins with common duties," Ashlynn explained. "But I have never before seen so much courage and kindness packed into such a diminutive figure as I have in the woman who became my Willow Witch and the first witch to join my coven."

Sitting at the table of honored guests, Helga began to shift nervously in her seat, looking briefly around the hall as if to reassure herself that Heila wasn't standing among the servants while she listened to Lady Ashlynn speak. Her hand clutched tightly at Kaisen's as she felt the weight of the Mother of Trees' gaze

grow even heavier as she very clearly focused on their small, little family out of all the honored guests sitting at their table.

"She's a woman who would throw herself into the waters of a frozen lake, diving beneath the ice to stop an enemy from dragging me to my death," Ashlynn praised. "She's also a woman who would stand for ten days upon the bloody sands of High Fen City's arena, fighting to win recruits to our cause in the same way that Mistress Nyrielle once fought in order to gather forty-seven champions to retake the Vale of Mists from Lothian hands."

"But at her core, the willow is a healer's tree," Ashlynn said. "And Heila possesses a healer's heart, capable of mending wounds so deep within Ignatious's heart that he was able to transform his Holy Flames of wrath and judgment into a flame that is pure and untainted by greed, hatred, and ambition."

"She is my lady-in-waiting," Ashlynn said warmly as she looked at the stunned expressions on the faces of Heila's family. "She has been at my side nearly every step of the way since my arrival in the Vale of Mists. In the arena of High Fen City, she is a champion called the 'Willow Whip', and they have built statues in her honor. But more than that, she is the greatest friend I have ever known, and she has earned her place at this table a thousand times over," Ashlynn said firmly.

By this point, the people in the great hall were uncertain where they should look. From the way Lady Ashlynn addressed the people at the seat of honor it was clear that the members of the Horned Clan there had something to do with this Willow Witch, but those people seemed to be just as surprised at the news as everyone else in the room.

Others turned to the door, expecting the famed witch and Inquisitor to make an appearance any moment now. But the doors stayed firmly shut, and no one made a move until Lady Nyrielle began to speak again.

"Ignatious and Heila are both people of rare and extraordinary character and capability," Nyrielle said as the smile on her lips widened. "But they aren't the only ones shattering unspoken rules that have persisted for hundreds of years."

"Not once in two hundred years have my progeny founded a line of their own," Nyrielle announced. "Not because I forbade it, but because each and every one of my progeny has been driven by purpose, whether it is vengeance, service, or the protection of the Vale of Mists. None of them had encountered a reason to take in progeny of their own... just as none of them had found love great enough that they

could not bear to let old age and death rip their loved one from their tender embrace," she said in a voice that grew increasingly gentle.

"But now, I have borne witness to the first wedding among my progeny," Nyrielle said proudly. "And I have seen the first of them take the person they loved under their fangs in the name of a love that will last as long as they can resist the call of the abyss."

"Tonight," Nyrielle said as the heavy, iron bound doors began to open once again "We welcome not only Inquisitor Ignatious and Lady Heila, but also the first wedded couple among my progeny, Madame Zedya and Sir Lennart!"

Chapter 642: Power Couples

"Beware the savage fiends of old,

Who drape themselves in red and gold,

Flee their swords of flame and light,

Before they reap your life on sight."

The nursery rhyme was nearly a century old, and there wasn't a single person who grew up in the Vale of Mists who hadn't heard it. No one could say which person had whispered it now, but even if they didn't hear the words, nearly half the people gathered in the great hall were thinking them as they saw the horrifying figure of a handsome, dark-haired man enter the hall wearing the red and gold robes of the Inquisition.

At his side, holding his hand as though she were a young woman out for a stroll, Heila held her head up high under the wide brim of her wide-brimmed witch's hat. Tonight, she dressed in rich, forest browns trimmed with spills of bright, coppery lace. Her skirts were embroidered with more coppery thread, forming a pattern of willow branches blowing in the wind, with leaves that seemed to dance and come alive as she moved.

Ignatious' presence alone seemed enough to overwhelm the guests of the great hall and many guests began to whisper and point as he and Heila made their way to the high table, but several other startled gasps rippled through the hall when they noticed the couple walking arm in arm behind them.

Tonight, Zedya wore her finest dress with pale lavender silk that clung to her torso before flaring into wide skirts that hovered just above the floor, giving the impression that she was floating over the cedar boughs on the ground rather than stepping on them. For decades, Zedya dressed in quiet, subdued tones and worked to fade into the background beside Lady Nyrielle, but tonight, the bodice and skirts of her dress were adorned with hundreds of tiny amethysts, glittering in the golden light of the great hall as if to proclaim that she no longer belonged to the world of shadows behind her mistress.

At her side, Lennart stood tall and proud, moving with a strength and power that radiated from his body like a bear standing guard over its mate. To men like Savis and Tausau, it was clear that Lennart had yet to fully come to grips with the explosive increase in physical strength, speed, agility and endurance that came with becoming a vampire, but when they looked closely both men were startled to realize how much power he radiated for a vampire so recently made.

"He may match up to you one day, big brother," Tausau whispered, leaning over to speak to Savis. "Perhaps not as fast or agile, but in terms of strength, he might be as powerful as Torbin was."

"Hmpf," the white furred vampire snorted. "I doubt he'll match me or Torbin for strength," the older vampire said. "Look at his eyes. They've gone pale and purple, like Madame Zedya's. He's inherited her Mesmerizing Gaze. It's a gift for trickery and manipulating others, but in a direct clash, he won't be my match, or yours."

"You say that, brother," Tausau said as he gave Lennart an evaluating look. "But if Madame Zedya had commanded our soldiers to turn on you instead of sending them to fight their brothers, could you have fought her and twenty or thirty men at the same time? This man was a captain in Lady Nyrielle's guard before. If he can use her gaze the way Lord General Thane uses his voice..." he said, allowing his voice to trail off suggestively at the end.

Both men shuddered at the thought, and several other guests at their table looked horrified at the notion. Madame Zedya was already famed throughout the Vale of Mists for her ability to confuse and beguile, drawing people into waking dreams where they didn't even realize what they were doing until they woke from a trance. If all the vampires she created gained the same terrifying ability... it would be a nightmare for their enemies, but could it also become a nightmare for them?

At the other table for honored guests, all eyes were fixed firmly on the Inquisitor and the diminutive witch standing next to him.

"Father," Kaisen said, swallowing heavily. "He, he really is, really is an Inquisitor, isn't he? And he's holding, holding little Heila's hand. It's just for the ceremony of it, right? So he can escort her the way Sir Lennart is escorting Madame Zedya?"

"Shush you," Helga said, swatting her husband's arm before Achim could even answer. "He loves her. Or at least, he cares for her very, very deeply," she said without taking her eyes off of her daughter and the man she walked next to as they made their way to the head of the room.

"Love?" Kaisen said, his eyes opened so wide that for a moment, it looked like they might fall out of his head. "But he's a, he's," Heila's father sputtered as if he was unable to say the word 'Inquisitor.' "And besides, how do you know he loves her? You don't know him at all, so how can you tell?"

"See how slowly he walks?" Helga said with shining eyes. "He's nearly twice her height but he's matched his stride to hers perfectly. She's not walking fast to keep up the way most tall folks would make us. He's holding himself back for her. It's little things like that that tell you how a man really feels. Just like how you always cut those cute shapes out of apples for me told me that you were the man who would do anything to make me happy," she said, leaning against his arm and looking closely at the gentle smile on her daughter's face.

Kaisen's greatest concern was clearly the nature of the man Heila seemed to have attached herself to. Hadn't Lady Nyrielle just said that this Ignatious was so cruel with methods of torture that were so wicked that she turned him into one of her progeny just so he could suffer longer? How could any man be happy to see his daughter in the company of such a savage monster? He was certain that he'd have nightmares about how his poor little Heila was being treated, perhaps for the rest of his life!

Helga saw things differently from her husband. She saw the gentle look in Ignatious' dark eyes when he glanced down at Heila, and the reassuring squeezes and gentle touches she gave him as whispers about the horror of Inquisitors spread from the natives of the Vale to the visitors from across the mountains. To her eyes, things clearly weren't one-sided between this man and her daughter, and that was something that should be celebrated.

"Don't lose track of the important part," Achim said gently, tugging on his grey beard as he watched both couples reach the high table. "Little Heila has become 'Lady Heila,' the Willow Witch and the first witch to join the Mother of Trees' coven. She's been through a lot," he said as she watched how

comfortably she moved with a coiled whip hanging from one hip and a glittering dagger hanging from the other. A glittering dagger that greatly resembled the one that Ashlynn had just presented to Sir Ollie!

"So, you noticed my other bit of handiwork," Erkembalt said, adjusting his copper-rimmed spectacles as he followed Achim's gaze to the long-bladed dagger at Heila's hip. "That's 'Snow Fang', and it's a twin to the one I made for Sir Ollie. It, um, it should help to keep her safe, even against an Inquisitor's flames," he said awkwardly as he glanced at Heila's nervous-looking father.

"It can't form shields of ice the way Frost Fang can," he added, hoping to give Kaisen some reassurance before he hopped off his chair to snatch his daughter away from the dangerous torturer. "But it can smother flames with vast amounts of snow, and the Willow Whip has proven herself very adept at using it in other ways as well."

"If you ask me," the artificer said, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms. "I don't think you should be worried about Sir Ignatious hurting her. He's not really a bad man, and he's very well learned," he praised, thinking of the few occasions he'd had to compare what Ignatious knew about the heavens to what he and Aspakos had learned as members of the Sorcerers of Sundered Earth. "If anyone should be afraid, it's Sir Ignatious who should be afraid of Lady Heila's lash!"

Chapter 643: Disappointment (Part One)

The whispers filling the hall grew louder and louder until what had begun as a sound as faint as footfalls on cedar boughs became loud enough that even ordinary people could hear their neighbor's opinions on the couples that Lady Nyrielle proudly presented to them.

"I thought her human progeny would have chosen human lovers..."

"I don't care how it happened, do you see? Our Clan of the Great Claw has a vampire again..."

"My horns are lighter and thinner than hers, does he really expect to live a happy life with a woman who's horns are so... manish? If he doesn't want to find himself rammed into submission by his own wife he should look for someone a little more demure, don't you think..."

"Is he going to make her a vampire too? Can witches even become vampires?"

"Why are you all so excited, thinking about one of them falling in love with you? Don't you see what your children would turn out like, sitting right there at the front table? You want to give birth to one of the Clanless?"

"That poor dear, do you think she really has any choice in this? Or do you think that man tortured her until she submitted?"

Standing at the head of the great hall, it was impossible for either couple to miss the comments of the crowd and even more impossible for Nyrielle to fail to hear the thoughts that rippled through the hall.

"It seems as though you have many questions," Nyrielle said from the front of the hall, instantly silencing the whispers with a single sentence. "You are owed no answers," she said flatly as her gaze sharpened, seeming to pierce directly through a few members in the crowd who had cast doubts about the motives behind these unusual unions.

"You have doubts about their love and their intentions toward each other," she said as shadows began to gather behind her wings, making it appear that Nyrielle stood at the edge of a great abyss. "You are even less entitled to those doubts than you are to your questions about their relationships. I am disappointed," she said as she scowled at the people occupying most of the tables in the great hall.

For a moment, Nyrielle's last three words hung over everyone in the hall like a shadowy headsman's ax, ready to descend upon them at the slightest breath. Several people who had spoken openly to their neighbors of their doubts or concerns now swallowed heavily, sinking down into their chairs and casting nervous glances about.

"She wouldn't, wouldn't do anything to us just for speaking our minds, would she?" one man whispered nervously to his neighbor. After all, so many people had spoken, she'd need to kill almost half the people in the hall if she wanted to strike them down for their words!

"She's called the 'Blood Princess' for a reason, idiot," the man sitting next to him hissed. "I told you to hold your tongue for a reason!"

"M-my Lady," Marshal Jakob said, standing up from his seat next to Commander Bassinger. "There are many newcomers with us tonight. For some, it is their first time having an audience with you," he said,

clutching a napkin in his hands and fighting to resist the urge to mop the sweat from his brow. "Perhaps, even though we aren't owed an explanation for why you are disappointed, you could tell us, so the newcomers might learn our ways," he said, swallowing a lump in his throat that felt as large as a robin's egg.

Across the hall, many people nodded, resembling hens pecking at the ground in search of a meal in their eagerness to endorse the gray-haired marshal from the Horned Clan. Others still fidgeted nervously in their seats and a few glanced at the doors, wondering if they could dash for one of the side entrances used by the servants of the ancient keep in order to escape Lady Nyrielle's wrath.

"You wish to understand?" Nyrielle said as she swept her midnight gaze over the crowd. "Very well. When I returned to the Vale, I announced a festival to celebrate my betrothal, and this should be a joyous thing. Outside, the people of the Vale and our guests from across the mountains still cheer and celebrate in joy."

"You have heard of Lord General Thane's elevation and seen Sir Ollie dubbed a knight and you have cheered for them both," Nyrielle added, looking at the teacher and his student in turn, giving each of them a small smile. "But when I announce joyous reunions, forgiveness and the first wedding between vampires in the Vale of Mists in more than a century... there are no cheers for them."

Standing before the high table, Heila shifted her cloven hooves nervously, squeezing Ignatious's hand hard enough that an ordinary human would have cried out in pain. Ignatious, however, only smiled gently down at her, mouthing the words 'I'm sorry,' as if he could somehow take responsibility for the way the crowd reacted to the sight of him in his robes and at the knowledge of what he had done.

He had offered to put aside the robes of his order for this evening, donning more common garb like Thane or Lennart in order to avoid being a flashpoint during the celebration but both Nyrielle and Heila had rejected his offer. Ignatious had suffered for his faith and his crimes, and the fact that he still held to his beliefs while rejecting the corruption of the Church was something that Not only Heila and Nyrielle respected but Ashlynn as well.

To see him strip off the robes that represented such an important part of his life, just because they made other people uncomfortable, would have felt like a betrayal of everything Ignatious had endured while he languished in exile. If the day ever came that he rejected the robes of his Church, they would all support his decision, but no one wanted to see the decision forced upon him.

"I am disappointed," Nyrielle repeated, her voice landing on the crowd like an icy lash across the back. "Because I wished to make tonight a night of joy. Instead, I find myself wondering if my people are worth defending. If seeing love form between people of different origins is so shocking that you cannot even hold your tongues to applaud them, then what reason do they have to sacrifice anything for you?"

The silence in the hall became so heavy that no one seemed able to move. Many in the audience unconsciously held their breath and even the servants who had been moving about the tables to refill goblets paused, balancing their trays carefully and not daring to take another step forward.

One voice, however, shattered the silence, startling everyone in the room as someone finally gathered the courage to speak out, not in response to Nyrielle's disappointment but with a different message entirely.

"I am happy for them!"

Chapter 644: Disappointment (Part Two)

"I am happy for them!"

The small, feminine voice speaking from the table filled with honored guests startled everyone in the room, and all eyes turned to the figure of a woman who bore a striking resemblance to the Willow Witch as she climbed up onto her chair and then onto the table so the entire hall could see her.

"Look at how he holds her," Helga said, much to the horror of her husband who seemed torn between pulling her down off the table and crawling under it to hide in embarrassment at his headstrong wife who didn't seem to have the slightest regard for propriety.

"Look how she turns to him for reassurance, even now! My little Heila used to look at me like that whenever she got her horns caught climbing trees or playing hide-and-seek in the underbrush with her brothers," she said, completely oblivious to the way Heila's face began to heat at her mother's display.

"What woman here doesn't want a man to look at her that way?" Helga said, turning on the table to look out over the crowd. "How many of you knew you found the one when he held you like that? So I approve and I applaud because my daughter found someone she loves so much that even when everyone is staring at her and whispering, she hasn't looked once at her parents for support... she looks at him."

"Oh, damn it all woman," Kaisen grumbled as he hopped directly from the floor to the table, standing next to his wife, but this time facing Ignatious directly and pointing a finger sharply at the powerful vampire. "I don't approve of you!"

"Father!" Heila cried, breaking her silence at last as she stared at her father in open-mouthed shock. At this point, her face had turned as red as a cup of wine, and she desperately wanted to hustle her family into one of the side rooms to have a personal conversation, but how could she when they insisted on speaking up so publicly?

"Just wait a moment, little lambkin," Kaisen said patiently as he stared directly into Ignatious's dark, mysterious eyes. "There is a way to go about things, and I won't have anyone taking shortcuts or liberties with my most precious daughter. I don't care if you're older than I am," he said, shaking his finger at the former Inquisitor. "I expect a visit from you tomorrow night to ask permission to court my lovely Heila. You have to treat her right if you want to receive my blessings, do you hear me?"

Standing on a table and shaking his finger at a vampire known to have tortured Nyrielle's progeny beyond the breaking point of sanity, Kaisen felt that he must have gone mad himself. He didn't have the horns for this! But once Helga charged in, how could he let her stand up here all by herself? He couldn't! Not for even a minute!

At tables nearby, the looks falling on Heila subtly shifted as several young women found their faces heating in secondhand embarrassment. From the puffed up chests of their fathers, many of them felt they could almost hear the sounds of the grown men at the table slapping each other on the back, ready to congratulate each other for being the sort of man who would stand up against even a terrifying vampire Inquisitor to see that their darling girls were courted with respect and propriety.

Slowly, as the mood began to shift across the hall, Ashlynn began to clap, relieved that Heila's family had been the ones to step in, even if her Willow Witch's face seemed to be burning fiercely enough that she might catch fire.

Ashlynn's clapping was followed quickly by Ollie, Thane, Zedya, and Lennart. After a moment, Achim and his wife joined in, along with Old Nan, Milo, and Juni, who slapped their tails excitedly on the ground. Soon, a wave of applause filled the hall as the infectious joy gained momentum.

"I see," Nyrielle said, withdrawing her dark, threatening aura and smiling at the crowd. Some of them still held reservations, and she was certain that many of the people clapping with the greatest enthusiasm were doing it more to please her than for the happy couples, but it didn't matter. She'd said what needed to be said, and her people would have time to learn the lessons they needed to learn. It was enough, at least for now.

"It seems as though I was mistaken," Nyrielle said magnanimously. "You were only concerned for the propriety of it all. Ignatious," she continued, turning to the former Inquisitor. "I presided over Zedya and Lennart's wedding, but if you want me to preside over yours, then you should work quickly to obtain Mister Kaisen's approval. Otherwise, someone may snatch Heila away from you," she teased.

Across the hall, several people who thought they knew Lady Nyrielle nearly choked on their own tongues as they saw her sudden shift in mood. Her cold, tyrannical declaration of disappointment was something they were terrified of but none who knew her felt it was strange. They only regretted that something they hadn't ever considered she would react to had been important enough to draw her ire.

But this? Teasing and taking the sides of two people so unruly that they were literally standing on a table to chastise not only the other guests but one of Nyrielle's progeny as well? But as those thoughts occurred to them, another quickly followed.

Lady Nyrielle was disappointed because she wanted tonight to be a celebration of joy when she announced her betrothal. There had been rumors, ever since her return, that she had secured such a mighty army by offering her hand in marriage to one of the powerful High Lords or Great Lords across the mountains but... maybe the rumors were wrong.

Maybe, just maybe, this betrothal that Lady Nyrielle was so eager to announce didn't come in the form of a political alliance... but from the rarest of things among unions between the powerful. Perhaps Lady Nyrielle had found true love!

Chapter 645: Beginning to Grow

"Of course, I will treat Lady Heila with the greatest respect," Ignatious said, nodding briefly at Lady Nyrielle before he seemed to vanish from the spot where he stood, appearing in the blink of an eye at the table for the guests of honor where Helga and Kaisen had made their stand.

"That includes caring for Madame Helga," Ignatious said, smiling as he extended a hand to the diminutive horned woman whose cheeks had begun to show a hint of pink that suggested even she

could be embarrassed by her own actions. "Please, let me help you back to your seat," Ignatious said smoothly, as though there was nothing out of the ordinary about an honored guest standing on a table at the front of the banquet.

"You see?" Helga said lightly as Ignatious helped her down. "I told you that he's a good man who cares for our little Heila."

"I'll be the judge of that," Kaisen said as he hopped off the table, giving Ignatious a pointed look. "If you break her heart..." he said with the same level of menace he'd used when his oldest daughter came home with a man who had captured her heart. The next instant, however, his mind seemed to catch up to his mouth as he realized exactly who he was attempting to intimidate. Instantly, his face drained of color, and he wobbled slightly as if the world had tipped under his feet.

"I'm sure that Sir Ignatious will treat her well," Achim said as he caught his son and helped him back into his chair. "Lady Nyrielle's progeny may have bellies full of hatred for their enemies, but they've never once turned on any of our own. Whatever happened in the past, I'm sure that it's all over now, or he wouldn't have returned."

"It's fine," Helga insisted, gently patting Ignatious on the arm as though he were already her son-in-law. "Don't fuss over us old things, go be with her now," she insisted.

At the high table, Zedya and Lennart had already moved to their own positions, leaving a space between Zedya and Thane for Ignatious, but when Ignatious moved to take his own place after escorting Heila to her seat, Ollie stood up to stop him.

"Take mine," Ollie said with a gentle smile. "I don't mind sitting with Sir Thane for the evening," he said, giving Ashlynn a brief look, though he was certain she wouldn't mind the shuffle in seating arrangements.

"He's learning from you, my darling," Nyrielle teased quietly. "Cutting in line, trading seats, doing as he pleases. He compliments your coven well."

"He knows what really matters," Ashlynn countered softly before she stepped forward to address the audience once again. Soon, they would be able to relax and enjoy the banquet and the celebration

together, but there were still a few important announcements to make that would ripple across the Vale of Mists while they began their attacks against the Dunns and the Hanrahans.

"Tonight, we have much to celebrate," Ashlynn said, pitching her voice to be heard over the murmurs of the crowd. "Sir Thane has ascended to the position of Lord General, and his student, Sir Ollie Heartwood has formally become a knight. Sir Lennart has become the first of Madame Zedya's progeny, and we have all borne witness to the love that binds them. Sir Ignatious has returned from exile and Lady Heila can stand proudly before her family as the Willow Witch," Ashlynn said, acknowledging each person in turn.

"Already, the addition of multiple witches and the birth of a new vampire has transformed the strength of the Vale of Mists," Ashlynn said. "But do not believe for a moment that this is the limit of things. As the Mother of Trees, it is in my nature to plant seeds and nurture their growth, and both my coven and the strength of the Vale will continue to grow," she said, gesturing once again to the heavy, iron-bound doors.

This time, it was Virve who strode into the hall, walking side by side with the only member of Ashlynn's coven who could make the bearish woman seem small.

For the formal banquet, Virve wore an outfit that combined the softer, feminine side she'd shown during the excursion to the festival, along with echoes of her nature as a fierce warrior. She'd traded the flowing dress for loose, pleated skirts and a fitted bodice, but the pieces were clearly separate and easier to move in than Ashlynn or Heila's elaborate outfits should she have the need to fight.

Over her hips and shoulders, intricate silver chains had been woven together until they formed delicate chain mail tassets and pauldrons crafted from delicate, precious metals. On her feet, she wore silver sandals in the style of gladiators from High Fen City. The entire ensemble made her look like a warrior princess following in Nyrielle and Heila's footsteps, but her rich mane of coppery hair and the fierceness in her gaze made it clear that she was a warrior born rather than someone who had only taken up arms in times of need.

Standing next to such an intense presence, Hauke could almost have been overlooked if it wasn't for his height and the brilliant shine of his Iridescent horn. The frosty aura that surrounded him seemed to part around Virve, and his footsteps were light on the cedar boughs covering the floor, as if he didn't want to offend anyone by crushing them beneath his feet.

Several people in the audience began to whisper about the new arrivals as they instantly noticed what may have been the most significant difference between them. While Hauke had draped himself in dull grays accented by a crisp white scarf, reminiscent of the snow covered mountains of the High Pass, it was the absence of a witch's hat that drew the most attention.

"Is it because of his horn?" one guest asked quietly, hoping curiosity wouldn't be taken as offensive, while the two new arrivals walked toward the front of the great hall.

"How can that be? Lady Heila has horns and wears a witch's hat, and this newcomer, she has cutouts in her hat just for her ears. Maybe he's a vampire? But he doesn't look like Lady Nyrielle's progeny..."

"On a Frost Walker, how could you tell?" a third person asked. "He's already cold as ice, and his fur is as white as Commander Savis's. He could be a vampire..."

The speculations rippling through the great hall died down as soon as the odd-looking pair reached the dais at the head of the hall, bowing briefly in greeting to the Mother of Trees before Ashlynn spoke to introduce them.

"Captain Virve is unique among my coven," Ashlynn began. "The Ancient Oaks have stood watch over the Vale of Mists for longer than the Eldritch people have found a home here, and when the time came, I could think of no one better to bear a seed of witchcraft offered by the oldest of these ancient guardians," Ashlynn explained.

"But Virve is more than simply my Oak Witch," Ashlynn continued with a wide smile. "She is also the captain of my personal guard... a force that, at the moment, consists only of her," she said with a wry chuckle. "I spoke of planting seeds and growth, but lone saplings struggle to grow strong while seedlings gathered together can become a mighty forest," she said, nodding at Virve.

"What Captain Virve represents to all of you," Ashlynn said with a gentle, welcoming smile. "Is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity..."

Chapter 646: An Opportunity Or A Leash?

"As powerful as I am," Virve said loudly, speaking as though she was addressing a training ground filled with fresh recruits. "I can only be in one place at a time. When I served Lady Nyrielle as one of her guards, I fought shoulder to shoulder with some of the greatest soldiers the Vale of Mists has ever

produced in battles where people who should have been our allies betrayed us, offering one hand in hospitality while the other hand clutched a knife."

"To protect Mother Ashlynn will require more than just soldiers. We will need sorcerers, woodsmen and trackers... people who are comfortable watching over her and her coven from enemies while we call upon the power of the world in rituals and great workings. Not everyone here is suited for a place among her closest protectors but if you think yourself worthy, or if you know others who may be, then I welcome you to visit me and prove your capabilities."

Virve's announcement exploded through the great hall like a seedpod from a sandbox tree as many people felt for the first time this evening like there was an opportunity to be a part of the rising tide sweeping through the Vale of Mists.

Perhaps no one in the hall was more excited by the announcement than Eamon, the human hunter who had once tracked Ashlynn through the wilderness as she and Ollie fled from the Summer Villa.

"Did you hear that, Darragh?" the older hunter asked, slapping his younger companion's shoulder as his eyes blazed with freshly rekindled zealotry. "Her Holiness has a place for us by her side. She won't be protected by mere temple guards or Templars, but by men like us who can wade into the depths of the wilderness at her side. This is the chance we've been waiting for!"

"Is it?" the younger hunter asked as he furrowed his brow and tried to determine whether this opportunity was one he should latch onto or one he should avoid at all costs. Already, he had spent six months living among these demons and each day the intense feelings of unease within his heart grew stronger.

But even worse than the constant grating of wrongness that came from associating so closely with these unholy beasts was the slow erosion of his sense of what was normal. In the beginning, he'd avoided eating demon food as much as possible by focusing mostly on what he could catch and kill for himself. So long as he was free to forage in the wilderness, he would never go hungry.

But as winter drew closer, he spent more and more of his time behind the palisade wall of the refugees' village, and he shared more and more meals with heretics like Daithi who had converted completely to the demon's way of life. It was getting to the point that he even looked forward to the communal meals in the village where the different 'clans' of demons brought out their own unique dishes... several of which, well, they weren't nearly as revolting or profane as the priests had always claimed demon food was.

"If we become Lady Ashlynn's personal guards," Darragh said. "Wouldn't that be as good as fitting ourselves with collars and leashes? We'd never have a chance to slip out for an evening in the wild or hunt our own game for meals if we wanted to," he said.

What he meant, however, was that it would become all but impossible to slip away and escape. While it was true that being close to Lady Ashlynn might give him a chance to gather even more valuable and sensitive information, Darragh increasingly felt that he'd already learned more than enough about these demons to live a life of comfort once he returned to Lothian City and sold what he knew to Lord Owain or the Church.

Just coming to this banquet had allowed him to get close to demons he'd never even heard of before. Demons with tails like snakes, giant demons with tusks as long as a man was tall, and that strange demon sorcerer with the broken beak who resembled a raven, and not one of them had ever been seen in Lothian March before. Combined with the nearly mythic demon with the glittering horn who must be one of the fabled Frost Horn Demons, the things he'd learned would surely be worth a fortune... but he had to live long enough to escape, and he needed the freedom to move, or all of this would be pointless.

"Just come with me to speak to Captain Virve when this is all over," Eamon said, thumping his hesitant companion on the back, before dropping his voice to a whisper as it appeared that Lady Ashlynn was going to speak again. "You can decide if it's worth it if you pass whatever tests they have to determine who's worthy. Until then, the decision isn't even really ours."

"That's true," Darragh acknowledged, even as he privately began to consider what methods he could use to sabotage himself during these 'tests.' "I suppose I'll wait and see."

At the head of the great hall, Ashlynn turned her attention to Hauke, giving him a silent, questioning look and waiting for the subtle dip of his horn before she addressed the crowd again.

"Tonight, the Vale of Mists grows in other ways as well," Ashlynn announced, instantly regathering the attention of the crowd.

"I never intended to conquer the High Pass," she said slowly, giving a brief, almost guilty glance to Ritchel, sitting at the same table as Heila's family. "I consider young lord Hauke to be one of my good friends, and he fought at my side with Virve and Heila when we were attacked by Tuscans in the High

Pass. It was a cruel twist of fate that turned us into adversaries, but we have never truly been enemies," Ashlynn explained.

"In the High Pass, when I accepted the title of Eldritch Lady of the High Pass, I told the Frost Walkers that I would only keep the title for five years," she said, setting off a wave of startled gasps throughout the crowd. "At the same time, I sentenced Hauke to spend five years in exile, serving as my apprentice. At the end of those five years, it is my intention to pass the throne of the High Pass to him, so the Frost Walkers may be ruled by one of their own."

"Tell me, Hauke," Ashlynn asked. "You were unable to speak more than a few words during the trial where your sentence was pronounced. You have only recently been freed from the curse that bound your will," she continued, causing an even greater stir among the crowd as people wondered just what had happened in the High Pass to result in such a strange outcome.

"So, now that you can speak your mind," Ashlynn said as she adopted a far more formal demeanor. "Tell us all. Can you accept the arrangement I made in the High Pass? Or do you object to the decisions we made?"

Instantly, the whispers in the hall stilled as every person leaned forward, waiting to hear the young frost walker's words. Some of them tried to put themselves in his shoes, but the few bits they'd heard already sounded far too fantastical to imagine. A curse that bound his will? He was here as an exile, but in five years, he would be given a throne? Just what kind of punishment was that?

No one knew, and they had no idea whether they could accept it or not, leaving them all hanging on Hauke's next words.

Chapter 647: Accepting Reality

"Can you accept the arrangement I made in the High Pass? Or do you object to the decisions we made?"

Ashlynn's question stunned many people in the audience, but Hauke had been expecting it for the past few days. Frost Walkers tended to be more straight forward than most, but when she approached him on the second day of his recovery, she made it clear that handling an audience as large and diverse as the one they'd gathered in the Vale of Mists would require more 'theatrics' than the young Frost Walker lord was accustomed to.

Ashlynn gave him plenty of time to consider his answer, and he'd rehearsed what he needed to say several times, running through his lines in his mind right up until the moment that the heavy, iron-bound doors to the great hall opened and he entered alongside Virve.

He thought he was ready for the moment, but as he stood in the great hall, looking at Lady Ashlynn before him, all he could feel was the weight of his father's gaze on his back, like a glacier about to come crashing down on him. Feeling that weight, along with the countless stares from the crowd, Hauke froze, as if his mind was once again trapped in unbreakable chains of ice, stopping him from speaking.

"Whatever you rehearsed," Virve said quietly enough that only Hauke and Ashlynn could hear her words. "Forget it. Just speak from your heart. The truth is all that matters."

"Thank, thank you, big sister Virve," Hauke said as the quiet prompting broke him free of the momentary paralysis that gripped him. "I, I can do this," he said as he stood up as tall as he could, drawing a deep breath to speak loudly enough that the entire hall could hear his every word.

"Lady Ashlynn has been most kind in her judgments," Hauke started, shaking his head and filling the air briefly with a small flurry of ice crystals shaken free from his white mane as he spoke. "Kinder than I deserve after putting her and Lady Heila in so much danger and causing so many problems in the High Pass."

"You never deserved any of this suffering," Ritchel said under his breath at the table filled with honored guests. Ipiktok briefly raised an eyebrow at the former Eldritch Lord of the High Pass but said nothing as the father put all his attention on his young son. "Your elders failed you, Hauke, and your ancestors betrayed you, but that doesn't mean you deserve to suffer."

Ritchel's words were heard only by those few people at the table he shared with Heila and Old Nan's family, but every parent sitting there gave him kind, sympathetic looks as the fallen lord watched his son standing up straight under the weight that his father's shoulders could no longer bear.

"My lady has been kind to take me in as her apprentice," Hauke continued, finding the formal phrases awkward but doing his best to stick to the lines he'd rehearsed. "I know I have much to learn. But more than that, you've been kind enough to offer me a position in your coven. Assuming that I can survive the trials to become a witch, I will spend my entire life in your service," he said, lowering the tip of his iridescent horn in a sign of submission.

Several people in the crowd sat up straighter in their seats as they realized the implications of what Hauke had just said. They'd already seen the Willow Witch, the Cypress Witch, and the Oak Witch, but Lady Ashlynn was clearly still expanding her coven, and young lord Hauke would be one of the next to join her!

Already, the youngest attendees of the banquet, children and family members of more distinguished guests, were starting to imagine what they would do if they had the chance to join the coven of the Mother of Trees. A few had even gone so far as to begin rehearsing what they would say if they could introduce themselves to Lady Ashlynn in the hopes that she might consider them for her coven.

Only a few of them thought they had any great chance of success... at least, until they realized that a young lord only a few years older than them had somehow carved open a path. Hauke was an apprentice, whatever an apprentice to a witch was, and he would have a chance to take a test to become a witch! A test that, evidently, was dangerous enough that he might not survive it, but if he did, then he really would be a witch!

"That's why," Hauke continued after taking a deep breath. "That's why I cannot accept my Lady's judgment," he said, setting off a wave of sharp breaths and startled looks throughout the crowd. "My Lady, if you give the throne to me and I continue to serve you still, then am I truly the Eldritch Lord of the High Pass? If I cannot best you and tear the throne from your grasp, do I deserve to sit on it?"

"The people of the High Pass deserve to be ruled by the strongest protector of our people," Hauke said. "If I join your coven, I know I will become many times stronger than I am now, but I still won't be stronger than the Mother of Trees. So, instead of living a lie and sitting on a throne that is only mine because someone else has given it to me, I would have the High Pass submit to you forever more, so you may protect it for as long as you and Lady Nyrielle both live."

"You know I can't reside in the High Pass," Ashlynn pointed out. "The lands there are cold and barren. Nothing grows that can sustain my powers there. Perhaps of everywhere I have ever been, the High Pass is the place where I am at my weakest. And still, you would ask me to be its protector?"

"You and Lady Nyrielle are already the guardians of the High Pass," Hauke said, tipping his horn at Nyrielle, who stood silently over the proceedings. "Lady Nyrielle has guarded the High Pass from humans for more than a hundred years. We have lived our lives in peace, never knowing the horror of the Inquisition's Holy Fire because she kept the battlefield from ever reaching our peaceful homes," he said.

"It is time that the High Pass accepted reality," Hauke continued, turning to face his father and giving him a look that was deeply apologetic. "We can no longer stand on our own against the enemies who threaten us. We must join with those who are stronger than we are, and we must march to war as if your battlefield is our battlefield, because the truth is that if you fall, we will fall next."

"Lady Ashlynn," Hauke said as he lowered himself to one knee. "For as long as there is a throne in the High Pass, then you should be the Eldritch Lady of the High Pass. But in truth, I do not know if there should be a throne in the High Pass after today. You wish for me to be the next Eldritch Lord of the High Pass when my exile ends, but... I would rather see the High Pass become the westernmost border of the Vale of Mists!"

Chapter 648: A Dowry Like No Other

"Rise, Hauke," Ashlynn said, stepping forward and holding out both of her hands to the young Frost Walker before anyone in the crowd could truly react to the stunning declaration the young man had made.

Only Savis, sitting among the honored guests, possessed an understanding of how momentous this moment really was. The two rings in his ear marked not only the fall of mighty Eldritch Lords, but also the victories that brought their territories into the Tangled Wood, expanding Hamdi's reach and paving the way for his recognition as a High Lord rather than a mere Eldritch Lord.

Savis could have claimed those territories for himself, becoming the next Eldritch Lord of the Granite Spire or the Dark Warrens, but doing so would have been a betrayal of the gift of power and unending life that Hamdi had bestowed on him. Now, the oldest vampire in the room leaned forward with a slow grin spreading on his lips, eager to see how things would unfold here now that the future Eldritch Lord of the High Pass asked that its throne be shattered by the women who had conquered it.

"Hauke," Ashlynn said as she looked up into his calm, pale eyes. "You are the very best kind of protector for his people," she praised. "You recognize the true threats they face and you seek the best protection for them, even if it costs you the throne that could be yours. Few would have your courage or your selflessness in a moment like this."

"I promise you," Ashlynn said solemnly. "Your time will come, if not at the Eldritch Lord of the High Pass than as a witch in my coven and as my voice among your people. But to make the High Pass a part of the Vale of Mists, that requires a voice other than mine. Will you trust me to do what must be done?"

"Always, Teacher Ashlynn," Hauke said, lowering his horn in such deep submission that it pointed at the ground. "I'm your apprentice and I still have much to learn, so, if my teacher can help my people, I can only be grateful."

"Go join the others," Ashlynn said softly, glancing briefly at Virve to walk the young Frost Walker to his place on her side of the table with Heila and Ignatious. When he addressed the crowd, his voice was loud and clear, but when Ashlynn held his hands, she felt the tremors that rippled through his body and his fur as he struggled to meet the challenge of this moment. Now, however, it was time for her to play her role, and in so doing, change the Vale of Mists forever.

More than that, it was time to take a step that she and Nyrielle had been yearning for with increasing intensity ever since their return to the Vale of Mists. Thus far, she had played the role of loyal Seneschal and the Mother of Trees before the people of the Vale, but now, there was another role she wanted to fill, and she wanted the whole world to know how happy that role would make both her and Nyrielle.

"Everyone," Ashlynn said, sending a pulse of energy rippling across the cedar boughs on the floor, intensifying the rich, woody scent in the room and putting a stop to the few whispered conversations that had begun at the tables further back from the raised dais. Slowly, a hush fell across the hall as the crowd began to anticipate what would happen next.

Each new announcement that Lady Ashlynn and Lady Nyrielle had made this evening had dramatically shifted their view of the Vale of Mists and its changing place in the world. Now that it seemed like the Mother of Trees was preparing another announcement, they leaned forward in their chairs, straining their ears as though they were afraid they would miss even a single word of what she had to say.

"You all know, now, that I arrived in the Vale of Mists with nothing," Ashlynn said slowly as she fought to keep her breathing steady and her voice calm. "For a time, everything I had was a gift bestowed on me by Mistress Nyrielle. Even when I went to the market to shop for my own things, the coins in my purse were still gifts from her. So how could I, the cast out, broken, fallen noblewoman that I was, ever hope to match up to her?"

As Ashlynn spoke, she took several steps toward Nyrielle until she was close enough to reach out to the other woman, capturing both of Nyrielle's hands in her own and holding her tightly.

"And yet, as impossible as it should have been, she accepted me as I was and never once looked down on me," Ashlynn said as she stared into Nyrielle's deep, midnight blue eyes.

"No one in this world has the right to look down on you," Nyrille said. "Because even with nothing, even when you were the most broken and battered that you'd ever been, in the lowest moment of your life, you were still the most amazing woman I have ever known."

"Since the day our blood mingled beneath the Ancient Oak," Nyrielle continued, reaching up to gently stroke Ashlynn's cheek with the back of her slender, delicate fingers. "I have watched you blossom and grow. You have given me your trust and your heart, and you've healed the wounds in my heart that I thought would last until the abyss swallowed the last of my life. Even when you had nothing, you still found ways to give endlessly of yourself."

At the high table, Zedya leaned close to Lennart, resting her head on his furry shoulder while she smiled at the pair of lovers who seemed to be falling into a world of their own. She'd never thought that she would know this kind of happiness for herself, but now that she and Lennart had found each other, the joy she felt at seeing Lady Nyrielle and Lady Ashlynn grasping the same happiness was something so precious that she wanted to remember this moment forever.

On the opposite side of the table, Heila wrapped both arms around Ignatiou's arm and hugged him tightly as tears gathered in her eyes. She'd watched them, every step of the way, from the days that Ashlynn was still skittish and afraid to be alone with Lady Nyrielle shortly after arriving in the Vale, through the moments when it seemed like the Mother of Thorns and her coven would try to sever the bond of blood that bound Ashlynn and Nyrille together, all the way up to this moment.

To some people, the love between the vampire and her witch might seem sudden, or magical... perhaps even destined. But Heila knew how often they'd struggled to reach this point and how many things had tried to tear them apart before they could stand here. And now that they were, her heart was filled with warmth and beating fast enough that it felt like it would burst out of her diminutive chest.

"Tonight, I'm no longer a woman with nothing," Ashlynn said with a slow smile spreading across her lush lips. "Tonight, I come before you as the last Eldritch Lady of the High Pass," she said, stepping back and dropping to one knee. "Tonight, I present my throne to you as my dowry and my pledge to you. Everything that is mine in this world is also yours, be it my lands, my throne, my heart or my soul," she said as she stared into Nyrille's midnight blue eyes.

Just as she had on the night they formed their blood pact beneath the Ancient Oak, formal words and phrases Ashlynn had heard and practiced countless times blended with an outpouring of feelings from deep within her heart.

Kneeling on the dais, even though there were hundreds of people watching her, Ashlynn felt like she and Nyrielle were in a world of their own. The only sounds that she heard were the soft rustle of her skirts and the echo of Nyrielle's heartbeat within her chest, racing faster and faster with each word Ashlynn said.

"Tonight, I offer you my hand in marriage," Ashlynn said, holding out a hand for Nyrielle to take. "Not because I am the Mother of Trees and you are the Harbinger of Death. Not because I am the Eldritch Lady of the High Pass and you are the Eldritch Lady of the Vale of Mists," she added.

"Tonight, I offer you my hand in marriage because you already possess my heart and all the love within it," Ashlynn said as a tear rolled down her cheek, as if it held all the feelings that overflowed from her rapidly beating heart. "So will you take it?" Ashlynn asked. "And allow all the people gathered here to bear witness to our love?"

Chapter 649: Sealed With A Kiss

Perhaps to some, it would have been the most natural thing in the world. For a True Vampire to marry their Seneschal, a person whose life was bound to theirs until the end of their lives, made the kind of sense that any child who had ever read a fairy tale could understand. But fairy tales were the only places anyone could think of where vampires found love at all.

The Four Deaths were legends, some might even call them boogeymen, creatures that were all but spectres of death itself. A Seneschal was supposed to act like Death's servant in the world of the living, but in most fairy tales that included such a figure, they were little different than loyal hounds, side characters in the story who appeared as heralds for their mighty masters.

In the history of the Vale of Mists, since Nyrielle's birth, only one True Vampire had ever brought a Seneschal to visit, and that had been nearly two hundred years ago, not long after Nyrielle's birth, when Bardas, the Jaws of Death, last paid a visit. Few records of that visit had survived the fall of the Vale, and what records remained made little mention of the man from the Black Striped Clan who followed at Bardas's side beyond his name and his clan.

But as the crowd looked at the Mother of Trees, kneeling before the Harbinger of Death with tears in her eyes, they were shocked to find those tears answered by faintly pinkish tears running down Lady Nyrielle's alabaster cheek, though the powerful vampire didn't seem to be aware of them at all.

"I thought my heart died more than a hundred years ago," Nyrielle said as she lowered herself to one knee, refusing to stand while her lover knelt. "I thought it burned to ash when the Lothians tore our home apart and set fire to everyone and everything I had ever held dear. I thought that I would never know love again."

"But with you, my darling," she said, clutching tightly to Ashlynn's hands, "I feel so much more than just love. When you are in danger, I am afraid. When you are insulted, I am enraged. And when you are victorious, my heart is filled with warmth and pride."

For months, Nyrielle had tried to answer a question that had plagued her entire life. Had she always been capable of this kind of love, or was it only because she fed on Ashlynn that she could feel so deeply?

Her teacher, Shubnalu, had once said that True Vampires were born without real emotions. He believed that they only learned to imitate the feelings of others during their early years as children and that the sooner they cast off the thin, 'false feelings' of their childhood, the sooner they could take their proper place in the world.

At the time, Nyrielle disagreed vehemently with her mentor. She knew that she loved both her parents and her grandsire, even if Torbin was Eldritch while her parents had been human, and she found small joys and little sorrows in countless things. The fall of the Vale and the death of her parents had been so painful that she still believed that her feelings had to be real, but in the long years since then, those feelings faded more and more each year.

When Ashlynn entered her life, however, everything that had been sealed in her heart, all of the feelings she'd thought she'd lost, surged to the surface once again. Caught in the rising tide, Nyrielle asked herself again and again, was this real? Was this the way she was always meant to be, and she'd just forgotten? Or was it new?

Now that she knelt among the cedar boughs, holding her lover's hands and staring into her emerald eyes from just inches away, she realized that it didn't matter where the feelings came from. They were real, and those real feelings mattered more to her than any nation, any clan, or any throne.

Moving slowly, as if she were afraid that Ashlynn was made of porcelain, she drew her lover's fingers to her lips, kissing her delicate digits gently before opening her mouth to reveal her long, sharp fangs. With a gentle bite on Ashlynn's ring finger, Nyrielle drew out a single drop of blood, licking it off her finger as though it were a drop of honey and smiling sweetly at the taste.

"Your blood flows through my veins," Nyrielle said. "Just as my blood formed an unbreakable bond between us. Everything that is mine is also yours, my lands, my throne, my heart and soul," she said as she wrapped her wings gently around Ashlynn before standing and pulling her lover to her feet with her.

"Let it all blend together, and let nothing ever come between the love we share," she declared. Her heart pounded in her chest, and in the back of her mind, a voice whispered that there were other things that should be said in this moment, but Nyrielle couldn't bring herself to care.

Right now, Nyrielle stood surrounded by the closest people to family she had. Her great-uncles, Tausau and Savis, might not have any blood relation to her, but they had been like brothers to her grandsire, Torbin, and in their presence, she felt a ghost of her grandsire, savoring this moment in pride at what she had found. On the other side, Thane, Ignatious, and Zedya stood like beloved children, watching their maker find happiness that had been denied to her for longer than any of them had been vampires.

In front of those people, nothing mattered but Ashlynn and the purest demonstration of her love she could offer.

Gently, Nyrielle pulled Ashlynn into a soft embrace, leaning down to brush her lips across Ashlynn's. For a moment, there was nothing more to the kiss than that, just a soft, tentative brush of lips while their bodies pressed together, feeling each other's warmth through the layers of silk and brocade between them.

It was Ashlynn who took the kiss further, raising up on her tiptoes to capture Nyrielle's lower lip between her lips, drawing her deeper into the kiss and teasing at her soft, velvety lips with her tongue.

Darkness spilled from Nyrielle's wings, wrapping around them like a soft cloak as hunger mixed with desire, driving the kiss even deeper. Ashlyn's arms wrapped around Nyrielle's lithe figure, pressing her closer as her tongue danced with Nyrielle's between the sharpness of the vampire's fangs. A faint rivulet flowed down Ashlynn's chin as Nyrielle pricked her with a fang, but neither woman noticed as they lost themselves completely in the surge of power and pleasure that swept all other thoughts from their minds.

Right now, they had each other, and that was the only thing that mattered.

Chapter 650: Bearing Witness

"This isn't right, is it?" Darragh said, looking at Eamon with a dark scowl on his face. Perhaps this would help him convince his friend that Lady Ashlynn wasn't some kind of saintess descended from the heavens but a true heretic and a demon that they had to escape. "She's already married to Lord Owain," he whispered, leaning in close to his friend as Lady Ashlynn knelt before the powerful vampire, confessing her love.

"You think Lord Owain is still entitled to call himself her husband after what he did to her?" Eamon snorted. "The Church would never tolerate such an offense. Look, there's even an Inquisitor sitting next to the one they call the Willow Witch," Eamon pointed out as Heila snuggled closer to Ignatious while Ashlynn made her proposal.

"It's none of our business," Eamon said firmly, lest his younger friend get the wrong idea that he had any room to comment on Lady Ashlynn's affairs. "But I'm sure the Inquisitor, Ignatious, has already annulled Lady Ashlynn's marriage to Lord Owain. The real heretic is the one who stands to inherit the throne in Lothian March if you ask me," he said, unwilling to see any fault in Lady Ashlynn finding love and forming an alliance with the ruler of the Vale of Mists

"But will the Church even accept a vampire as an Inquisitor?" Darragh whispered too softly for Eamon to hear. He'd thought that Lady Ashlynn might finally have crossed a line that would allow him to snatch his former mentor back from her clutches but all her actions achieved was to prove that Eamon was completely mad. The old hunter had lost himself to worship of a witch posing as a saintess and nothing would shake his faith in the woman he saw as some sort of divine miracle.

Which meant that Darragh really was on his own in the Vale. There would be no one to help him escape and when he went, he wouldn't be able to trust anyone to keep silent about his departure... But that also made it essential that he find a way to escape the Vale as soon as possible. If he stayed much longer, he was afraid that Eamon would begin to doubt his 'conversion' to a life of heresy among the demons, and if that happened, he was truly doomed.

At the tables of honor, the reactions were as varied as the guests themselves.

"So, this is the prophecy you came all this way to see?" Erkembalt said, leaning over and whispering to Aspakos. "The marriage between life and death that will remake the order of the world?"

"Perhaps," the Dark Feathered sorcerer said as he shifted uncomfortably in his chair. For some reason, such a pure display of affection and love struck him like a spear of ice to the chest, twisting painfully as if to remind him that such a fantastical fate was forever denied to him.

"They certainly have the power to remake the order of the world, don't you think?" Aspakos countered. "A witch's growing coven and a true vampire's progeny.... They could sweep over the world if they didn't choose to restrain themselves and with the army they're building," he said, shaking his head gently. "You'll hear the news soon, my old friend, but these may be the last days of peace we enjoy for some time."

"That just means more work for me," Erkembalt said with a snort as his fluffy tail swished behind him and a gleam began to form in his dark eyes. "You know, Lady Ashlynn has already asked me to forge her a blade to replace the once that shattered in the High Pass. I'm sure that Virve woman will need something too since Lady Heila and Sir Ollie already wield my works."

"Being the artificer to the Mother of Trees for a few years... it won't be a bad thing for my business once I return to High Fen City," the artificer said as his eyes grew distant, imagining the sorts of things he might build for Lady Ashlynn and her coven over the next few years.

Beside him, Aspakos only shook his head as darkness enveloped Ashlynn and Nyrielle. A remaking of anything involved a period of destruction followed by a purge of impurities before anything new could truly be built. Ashlynn and Nyrielle were certain to usher in an era of unprecedented destruction, but once it was over, who would be considered impure and need to be purged for their new order to form? And what kind of order would emerge from a marriage between life and death?

Sitting two seats away, Milo and Juni's reaction was much less complicated than many of the people around them. They had fretted about returning to the Vale of Mists and while they put their faith in Sir Ollie and had seen no reason to doubt their decision since coming here, they were also well aware of the fact that they entered the Vale while the Eldritch Lady of the Vale was far away across the mountains.

The decision to take them in had been made by Lord General Thane and by putting a relative newcomer like Ollie in charge, Lady Nyrielle could have easily disavowed Ollie's actions, putting entirely new rules in place and seizing control of the village they had built over the course of the summer.

But now, as the couple from the Heartwood Clan watched Lady Ashlynn and Lady Nyrielle express their love for each other, Milo and Juni wrapped their tails around each other and held each other tightly,

basking in the warmth of the moment. For all the stories they'd heard about the terrifying and powerful vampires that ruled over the Vale of Mists, when they saw her here, Lady Nyrielle didn't seem that different from them. She was a woman in love and she would fight to defend the home that she and Lady Ashlynn would build together.

"We should make something special for them," Juni said softly. "This is only their betrothal. The wedding will come later. What... what do you think we should make for them?"

"We can ask Sir Ollie," Milo whispered. "I'm sure he'll have an idea of something they'll welcome. But I think, as long as it comes from the heart, they'll treasure it, even if it's just a decorative carving."

"If you want to carve something," Old Nan said, leaning in close to the couple. "Then remember this moment well. Remember the carving of Lady Nyrielle with her wings unfurled that my grandfather once made. It stood as tall as she did and the Black Merchant never stopped trying to buy it from me," she said, blinking back the tears she threatened to spring up when she thought of the way Owain Lothian's men had burned her grandfather's greatest piece of art.

"If you present them with a statue of this moment, I'm sure they'll treasure it for many years to come," Old Nan said. "And, if you'll accept an old woman's help, I'll add my touch as well," she added, hoping that she could do something to honor what was lost in the process of creating something new, carved with the feelings of warmth and love that this moment gave them.

"Of course," Milo said, his whiskers twitching in excitement. "I've never made anything so grand so please, teach us how," he said enthusiastically. With each passing day, it seemed like his mother walked a few steps further out of the darkness of the destruction of their home and the death of his brother Lako but this was the brightest he'd seen her eyes in a very long time. So, if his mother wanted to undertake an ambitious statue to commemorate this moment, then he would happily work beside her for as long as it took to bring her vision to life.

At the high table, as the darkness enveloping Ashlynn and Nyrielle began to fade, Heila leaped up onto the table, unconsciously imitating her parents just a few minutes ago as she began to applaud. Ignatious quickly stood, joining her in the applause and prompting everyone else at the high table to do the same.

Soon, the darkness surrounding Ashlynn and Nyrielle faded completely away, dispersing in a cloud of darkness that grew thinner and thinner like mist formed from shadows before revealing the slightly breathless couple holding each other in a loving embrace. When the darkness parted at last, they were

greeted with thunderous applause that filled the great hall. Every guest, even the towering Ipiktok, was standing, clapping, stomping or beating the ground with their tails.

As the applause began to fade, Thane stepped forward, holding up a goblet in one hand to offer the first toast to the flushed and radiant couple.

"To Nyrielle and Ashlynn," Thane shouted in a voice rippling with power. "May their love be eternal and their domain never fall!"

"May their love be eternal and their domain never fall!"