

The Vampire 281

Chapter 281: Explosive Power

In the Briar, six days had passed since Ashlynn and Amahle bestowed the seed of witchcraft on Heila, and still, she showed no signs of waking up. Her body lay still within the stone circle on the barren island, though Ashlynn had covered her with a soft blanket and placed a pillow beneath her horned head.

-BOOM- -CRACK- The sounds of a fierce confrontation filled the air as magical energy flared, casting its flickering light across the island and adding a variety of hues to the diffuse light that filled the Briar.

At the opposite side of the narrow island, Ashlynn stood panting, her hands balled into fists and her arms raised before her in a defensive posture to guard her head and body. Facing her, Jacques stood in a similar pose, flexing his clawed hands as if he'd just struck something painfully solid. Around his hands, a flickering orange glow danced between his fingers, ready to explode again in an instant.

"You see, Auntie?" Jacques said with a toothy grin. "When you have de strength of de oak tree, you don't need any fancy armor. Jus' wrap dat solid trunk 'round yourself and de forest, she'll be all de armor you need, non?"

"I still don't like it," Ashlynn said. Deep gouges scarred the ground between her and Jacques and the sleeves of her dress had long since been torn so badly that she'd removed them entirely, revealing arms that were bruised and bleeding in places from her confrontation with the Sandbox Witch. Overlaying her body, a faint green energy shimmered like the bark of an illusory tree.

"If I have to draw on the strength of the forest to protect myself when a suit of armor would do the same thing for me, then I'm wasting the forest's gifts," Ashlynn said as she changed her posture to one that was more relaxed and released the energy that sustained the ephemeral armor.

In a real fight, she would never close her eyes in battle, but when sparring with Jacques, she felt it was more important to do things correctly rather than forcing herself to fight as though it was 'real combat.'

Amahle had sent her a collection of invocations used by various witches of the forest and their covens for personal combat to accommodate her desire to train with Jacques while they waited for Heila's transformation to finish. Now, Ashlynn reached for a simple one as she stretched her hands out before herself.

"From oak heart's core to battle roar,

Call forth the staff that felled of yore."

In her hands, emerald green energy flowed twisting itself into a short, dark wooden staff with a heavy, rounded end that revealed the lighter inner wood of the staff. Drawing on the power of the cypress and sandbox trees around her, she poured more energy into the head of the short staff until it glowed with menace.

"Dat's a potent-looking stick, Auntie," Jacques said, taking an involuntary step back from Ashlynn as she gave the weapon a few experimental swings.

"You have a thick hide and thicker skull," Ashlynn teased as she took a stance similar to what she would use when fighting with a falchion. "It'll take a potent stick to get through to you."

This time, when Ashlynn and Jacques clashed, she poured all her effort and energy into landing crushing blows on the reptilian witch. The gifts she received as Nyrielle's seneschal gave her speed and strength that matched or exceeded what the Sandbox Witch could bring to bear and she used them both to avoid his powerful fists every time he struck out.

It took only a single blow from the head of Ashlynn's staff for Jacques to learn that blocking it with his forearms, no matter how strong his scaly hide and solid bones were, was a recipe for disaster.

The instant the staff made contact with a meaty -THWACK- his entire forearm down to the tips of his claws went numb. Worse, the flicking orange energy that danced around his fist faded away as he lost his ability to extend his explosive aura to that hand.

-BOOM- -CRACK!-

The sound of an explosion followed by a violent spray of sandy soil filled the air as Jacques slammed his other fist into the ground, triggering an explosion ten times as violent and powerful as the explosion of a sandbox tree's seed pods.

"All right," Ashlynn said, raising the staff up high before letting it fade away. "Any more of that and we'll disturb Heila," Ashlynn said, rubbing sand out of her eyes before glancing in the direction of her sleeping friend.

"Dat's true I suppose," Jacques said, walking over to her and raising his hands while he recited a brief healing invocation for Ashlynn. By now, she knew enough to heal herself, but to Jacques, it was a sign of respect that he tended her wounds after their sessions ended.

If he didn't and left cuts and bruises on the Mother of Thorns for her to heal herself, that would be more shameful than he could bear. The moment the energy washed over her, however, his tail almost dropped to the ground when he felt the pain his blows had inflicted upon her body.

The longer they had been waiting, the more fiercely Ashlynn threw herself into training, as if she was preparing herself to charge into Heila's trial to rescue her friend, despite the impossibility of such a notion. More likely, she was using the intense training to force any other thoughts out of her mind and giving vent to the feelings of powerlessness that plagued her while they waited for Heila's transformation to reach its end.

Today, however, Ashlynn had pressed Jacques hard enough that he'd cracked several of her bones and left injuries deep beneath the surface of her skin. It wasn't until his magic began to heal her injuries that he realized how badly she'd been wounded and yet she stood there looking calm as if they didn't bother her at all. Or, perhaps she welcomed the pain as a way to suffer alongside Heila.

Jacques couldn't say for sure, but there was one thing he was increasingly coming to realize. The combination of the powers she gained as the Seneschal of a True Vampire blended with her powers as The Mother of Trees to create a terrifying power that, even if it hadn't already, would very soon match the strength of most Eldritch Lords, and that was with barely any training.

Part of him was terrified at what she and Nyrielle might accomplish together. If they set their minds to it, perhaps the world would welcome a new Eldritch Empress. Perhaps only one of the other True Vampires would be able to stand in their way.

But, as much as the notion of the power they possessed frightened him, when he thought of the type of woman Ashlynn was, her fierce protectiveness and compassion... a larger part of him hoped that nothing would hold her back.

There were far too many people in the world using their power for far worse ends. If Ashlynn had the chance to grow and if she stayed true to the path she was on... wouldn't that be a wonderful thing?

Chapter 282: Growing Concern

"Thank you," Ashlynn said, setting a hand on Jacques' scaly forearm and giving him a genuine smile as his gentle, protective energy washed over her, washing away not only the traces of their aggressive sparring, but a good measure of the fatigue she felt as well.

The wounds she'd suffered weren't light and knowing that he had to feel the same pain she felt in order to heal those wounds, she worried that accepting his healing might impose too great a burden on the scaly witch. Seeing him quietly endure, she couldn't help but feel guilty for pushing things so far in their recent sessions.

"I didn't hurt you too badly when I hit you with the staff, did I?" Ashlynn asked, worried that she might have done more damage than she meant to when she struck his arm. They might be able to heal and recover quickly but all of these things still hurt immensely and the strain on their bodies from the frequent use of healing magic wasn't light either.

"Just enough to turn my arm numb, Auntie," Jacques said, wagging his fingers as though it wasn't a big deal. In truth, he planned to heal his own arm once he finished with Ashlynn because even a few minutes later, he still hadn't regained feeling in his fingers, but he didn't want her to think that he couldn't match up to her strength in their sparring sessions.

It was clear to Jacques that Ashlynn's power exceeded what he could gather. She had the support of every tree in the Briar, whether they were sandbox, cypress, willow or anything else. For Jacques, he could only draw a fraction of the power that he could get from a sandbox tree from any other tree in the forest.

Normally, that would be enough and he frequently managed to keep up with Talauia when she drew on the strength of countless thistles in the briar. But against Ashlynn, even though it had only been a few days, she was already beginning to feel similar to fighting the Mother of Thorns.

As soon as Jacques finished with his healing, Ashlynn crossed the short distance to the stone circle where Heila lay sleeping.

Each day, Heila's face showed greater signs of strain as she struggled to meld with the power of the seed of witchcraft and the Ancient Willow tree. At times, she tossed and turned violently in her sleep, crying out in pain or fear. Now, her eyes were screwed tightly shut and tears leaked from the corners of her eyes as she fought against the effects of the witchcraft coursing through her body.

"It's been six days," Ashlynn said, fetching a cool wet cloth and wiping away the sweat on Heila's brow. "Was it like this for you?" Ashlynn asked, turning to look at Jacques.

"Not dis bad, Auntie," he said, shaking his head. "I'm not talented de way big sister Tala is," he said. "She only took three days, but I took five. Dis... dis goes farther den I've seen."

Six days. According to Amahle, it took at least three days for the roots of the seed to spread through a witch's body. Those roots would follow along the veins and arteries of the body, forming an entirely new network through which the energy of the world could flow and binding the witch to the world just like a tree planted in the soil.

Beyond three days, however, the 'roots' grew strong enough to draw energy from the body of the would-be witch. The more they fed, the greater the chance that they would consume the witch, bursting forth into a different sort of magical plant that contained a remnant echo of the person the seed had sprouted from.

Six days had already passed while Ashlynn and Jacques took turns watching over her and practicing to fill the time and take their minds off of Heila's struggle. Three more days. From all of the records Amahle had ever seen, any witch who failed to meld with the power of the world and the seed of witchcraft within their body after nine days had no hope of becoming a witch.

"I wish there was a way for me to help her with this," Ashlynn said, her voice thick with frustration and helplessness as she knelt next to her friend. "I'm supposed to be the Mother of Trees, to be her mother in the coven," she said. "How is it that a mother isn't able or allowed to help her daughter when it matters most?"

"Dis is de way of tings," Jacques said, taking a seat opposite her and gently stroking a finger along the curve of Heila's horn. "It's harder when you use de power from an Ancient Tree because she's not just your daughter, she's also the daughter of de Ancient Willow. She has to face de trails from dat flow from your power and from de tree."

"I should have waited and grown a seed the right way," Ashlynn said bitterly. "This is my fault for trying to rush things too much."

"Auntie," Jacques said softly. "It ain't dat way. It ain't dat simple. Maman, she had to do de same ting for me wit' de Bloody Sandbox Tree. Dis, dis was de best choice you could make at de time, non? So don't be so hard on yourself right now."

Seeing the way Ashlynn had all but tortured herself with intense training these past six days, with each day growing harsher than the one before it, Jacques' heart couldn't help but ache at the way this was tearing her up.

He didn't know what it had been like when Amahle had to wait for him to pass his trial but seeing Ashlynn's anguished face as she looked at the sleeping Heila, he couldn't help but feel grateful for the care and kindness he'd been shown when Amahle made a seed of witchcraft for him.

"Come back to us, Heila," Ashlynn whispered into the diminutive woman's ear. "We're waiting for you to show us how amazing you are. And even if you aren't," Ashlynn said softly. "I'm still waiting for you to come back."

"I need you," she said, gently stroking Heila's sweat soaked curls. "I need my friend back more than I need a witch beside me. So come back to me soon, Heila. Come back to me soon."

Chapter 283: Something Is Very Wrong

Six days turned into seven, and seven days turned into eight as Ashlynn and Jacques continued to wait for Heila to reawaken as the Willow Witch, though her success seemed less likely with every passing hour.

At this point, Amahle and Talauia returned to the barren island. Whether Heila succeeded at the final hour or succumbed to the power of the seed of witchcraft, Amahle would be there. She still held hope that she had come to witness the birth of this generation's Willow Witch, but if she was wrong, then Ashlynn would need her support to come to terms with what would come next.

When the two witches arrived at the island, they both took several moments to stare in shock at the state of the island.

The barren island wasn't very large to begin with, but in the time they'd been gone, one half of the island had been completely reshaped. Deep trenches and craters marked its surface and an earthen berm had been raised between the savaged end of the island and the one on which Heila lay.

"What is this, what is this? What happened here?" Talauia said, hovering over the transformed island.

"I'm sure we'll learn soon enough, sugar," Amahle said, exiting the flat bottomed boat and picking her way carefully across the scarred terrain while Talauia fluttered along behind her. In the dim early morning light, nothing disturbed the misty air but the sound of their boat rocking and the low hum of Talauia's wings.

"Maman?" Jacques said when Amahle reached the top of the berm. "You came," he said as a sad, relieved smile formed on his lips.

The reptilian witch sat next to a small campfire, stripped to the waist and wearing ragged looking pants that he'd cut off at the knees when it became clear that the shredded remains of his pants would only entangle his movements. While there were no signs of injuries on his powerful, muscular body, it was clear from the stiff way that he moved that he was both tired and worn from his time watching over Heila.

Behind him, Ashlynn lay on the ground next to Heila with an arm draped across the diminutive horned woman as she slept. Her sleeveless dresses and tattered skirts bore numerous bloodstains and her blond hair seemed to struggle to escape the tight braid she'd tied it in with several wisps floating around her face as she slept.

But as bad as the two witches looked, it was Heila who captured Amahle's attention. Her complexion had turned a sickly silvery-green and darker green veins crawled up her neck and across her cheek. Most concerning of all, a layer of bark had formed over her horns and delicate leaves had begun to sprout at the tapered ends of her horns.

"She, she's going to fail," Talauia said. Her wingbeats became erratic and she tumbled to the ground, dropping to her knees with tears filling her multifaceted eyes. Every detail was clear to her, from Heila's

shallow breathing to the way the curls of her hair had begun to resemble the drooping branches of a willow tree... she was still Heila, at least, she was mostly Heila, but by the time the sun set... there might be nothing left but... Sister Willow.

"She hasn't failed yet, sugar," Amahle said softly. Moving quietly so as not to disturb Ashlynn, she knelt beside the ailing woman and reached out to her with her spider-like limbs, each one tipped with faintly glowing red energy that delved deep beneath the surface to feel the flow of the world's energy through her body.

The spider-like limbs of the Night Weaver Clan were known for their ability to create silks that were both luxurious and, in some cases, as strong as light armor. The clan was famed for their caution, patience, and ability to move through the forests and swamps where they made their homes.

They were much less known for their uncanny ability to multitask, something that elevated Amahle's manipulation of the energy of the world to an art. Four additional limbs that could move with the precision of a master embroiderer combined with multi-pupiled eyes to give her an unmatched view of the world and the ability to maneuver through it while splitting her attention between multiple tasks.

Now, Amahle used all of that skill to gently tease at the edges of the magic pulsing through Heila. The tips of her spider-like limbs were like the fingers of a musician on the chords of a harp and her crimson eyes flickered rapidly, observing the flow of energy from every angle.

"Were we wrong to press forward so fast?" Amahle whispered as she inspected the magic that was slowly and inexorably transforming Heila into a willow tree. "I don't believe that Heila would fail here, so what has gone so wrong?" As her senses swept over the sleeping witch she found the roots that grew out from the seed of witchcraft had become tangled and... obstructed?

Something had formed a blockage within Heila that stopped her from receiving the full support of the Ancient Willow and even interfered with her connection to Ashlynn. As Amahle looked closer, she found the thinnest tendril of emerald green energy flowing from Ashlynn into Heila, battering at the blockage even while Ashlynn slept.

"Jacques," Amahle said, turning to look at the exhausted-looking witch. "Tell me, what happened here? Something is very, very wrong."

"I don't know, Maman," Jacques said helplessly. "Last night, little Heila, she started to change. Auntie Ashlynn, she said dat something was pullin' Heila away from her, like when de Ancient Willow tree, she tried to pull Auntie away from Lady Nyrielle, only dis, she said, was much weaker. Only, little Heila, she's so much weaker too."

"So Ashlynn has been trying to reach her, even though there should be no way to interrupt the trial of an Ancient Tree," Amahle realized, turning back to the pair in wonder. "My little sister is a fearless one, ain't she? But now, with things so tangled, I don't dare to interfere. Just what is going on in there?"

Trapped within the visions of the trial, Heila stood panting and alone in the middle of a vast battlefield. Blood covered her body, plastering her simple dress to her skin though very little of the blood was her own.

A lash formed from braided willow branches dangled in each of her hands, shorter than they'd been when this vision began again and dripping with blood but still singing faintly in her ears with the thirst for more.

The bodies around her seemed to come from every force imaginable. Some were humans, dressed in the colors of the Lothian army, or the Temple Guard of the church. A few were even knights, Inquisitors, and Templars.

Others were Eldritch, spanning every clan Heila had ever met and several that she hadn't. There were vampires among the dead, as well as people that Heila would have considered friends like the High Pass's young lord Hauke.

"Still, dis is what you want, yeah?" Cecile's weathered voice said as the former Willow Witch made her way across the battlefield to the bloody and ragged Heila. "Dis is de fate you want to choose for y'r self?"

Chapter 284: Heila's Fate

During Ashlynn's trial with the Ancient Willow, the specter of Cecile had appeared to guide her in the Willow's Way, teaching her the healing arts she needed to master in order to face the Ancient Willow's trial.

Now, that very same specter had appeared before Heila, once again coming to guide her through the trial. This time, however, the specter took a much heavier hand with Heila than she could have with Ashlynn. After all, Ashlynn was the current Mother of Trees. There were limits to what a Willow Witch could do against the person who was born to lead all witches of the forest.

But Heila, Heila was supposed to be her successor as the next Willow Witch and Cecile refused to allow her to pass this trial if she wasn't up to her standards.

"I've done shown it to you, now," the elderly witch said. "You've seen de good you can do, yeah? De power to snatch back y'r friends and loved ones from de very edge of death. To cure de sick and restore de lame, you can do dese tings, yeah?"

"I know I can," Heila said. She'd spent what felt like weeks following at the old witch's side, learning to treat the wounded, and witnessing the joy and even worship that followed when she performed acts of healing that were beyond the capabilities of any sorcerer. Things that only a witch could do, and even among witches, not everyone would be so capable.

"I told you, Madame Cecile," Heila said in a voice that was thick with exhaustion. "Your coven may have granted you a peaceful life, but mine will not be so lucky. These people," Heila said, pointing one of her whips at the humans on the battlefield. "They will bring war to my home no matter what. My lady, my Mother of Trees, will fight them."

"She won't ever run from that fight, even though she hates the idea of killing people who didn't do anything wrong," Heila said, tears spilling from her eyes as she shouted at the old witch who had put her through this trial again and again and again. She'd lost count of how many times she faced this battlefield and every time it became worse.

According to Cecile, Ashlynn's bond with Nyrielle would invite great jealousy and fear. That humans would attempt to destroy them was a given, but Cecile said that even Eldritch nations would turn against them in the days to come. A warrior fighting at Ashlynn's side could never escape the ensuing chaos, but a skilled healer would be welcomed wherever she went.

In Cecile's mind, there was no reason for Heila to die alongside a Mother of Trees who invited calamity. Heila, however, refused to accept Ashlynn's fall as 'inevitable.'

"If she won't run, I won't run, no matter how much I hate it," Heila cried. "No matter how much it hurts, no matter how much I want to do anything else. Because if I can do this," she said, shaking her whip at the piles of bodies. "If I have all this power to do all this, and I don't stop them. If I let these, these, butchers hurt my family and friends... if I let them hurt Ashlynn... then tell me, Madame Cecile, why do I even need this power?"

"Dis isn't de Willow's way child," the old witch said, clicking her tongue in disapproval. "De Willow, she's a healer's tree, yeah? You ain't treating her right. Now, look what you done wit' y'r hands. I helped you feel de pain y'r whips inflict, you know how much you hurt dem, yeah? But you call dem de butchers?"

"You're wrong," Heila said. Her whole body ached and her flesh felt like it was on fire from the sting of thousands of blows from her whips but that had ceased to matter to her days ago. "Earth has no joy, fire has no hate, water has no sorrow, air has no worry and wood has no desire," she said, repeating one of the very first lessons Amahle had given her.

"The willow doesn't want me to be a healer," Heila said as she took one slow step after another toward her predecessor. "The willow doesn't want me to be a butcher," she added as she came to stand before the reptilian witch. "Those are your desires, left behind in the Ancient Willow and clinging to my seed of witchcraft."

"Y'r wrong, little girl," Cecile said. "Dis is de way, de way it's always been..."

"The way it's always been for you," Heila said. "I'm not like Lady Ashlynn," she said, her hands tightening on the handles of the whips. "If I was half as smart as she is or half as brave or... if I wasn't so convinced that I should listen to my seniors and serve them obediently," she said bitterly.

"I wanted to respect you so much, Madame Cecile," she sobbed, tears clouding her eyes. "I wanted to learn so much from you. To treasure everything you could teach me. I would have done whatever you asked because you were a great Willow Witch and I thought I could only dream of being half as good as you were."

"You still could be," Cecile said gently. "Jus' drop dose lashes and come away wit' me. Dere's still time, yeah? Time to put dis all behind you."

"No," Heila said, blinking the tears out of her eyes. "No because even though I'm slow. Even though it took me all this time and pain to figure it out, I realized that I was wrong from the very start," she said as she stared up at Cecile with fury in her eyes.

"It isn't me who couldn't be half the witch you were," Heila said. "It's you who wasn't half the witch I'll become, Madame Cecile. Now, Lady Ashlynn needs me. She needs me to be a healer when there are wounded to care for and sick to nurse back to health. But she needs me to fight beside her too. She needs me to go everywhere you went and everywhere you refused to go."

"So let me go," Heila said, her tone more commanding than the pleading it had been in the days before. "My lady is waiting for me and I need to go back to her side. She needs me. My coven needs me. It's time for me to go."

Deep within her heart, she knew that it was true. Ashlynn needed her. Dimly, she almost felt like she could feel her lady's presence calling to her. Even over the overpowering stench of blood and fouler smells on the battlefield, her nose caught the faintest trace of Ashlynn's unique evergreen scent. And if she listened very closely, she could hear her lady's voice, begging her to come home.

That little bit, that faint presence and the deep desire Ashlynn had for her to return gave Heila the final push she needed to make her stand.

"Ah, such a failure," Cecile said, turning to walk away. "Perhaps, if I let you see dat dis path of y'rs, it only leads to more of dis. Maybe den," she started to say only to be silenced by the -CRACK- of Heila's whip striking the air beside her ear.

"Let me go, Cecile," Heila said, for the first time addressing the old witch without an honorific. "I won't ask again."

"Your Mother of Trees, dat she rejects de Willow's Way is her right," Cecile began. "But you," she said, raising her walking stick and gathering silvery-green energy to her hands.

"I'm going home," Heila said, striking out with one whip to knock the staff from the old woman's hands while the other coiled around her neck. "You had your time. You had your ways. But I'm sorry," she said as her hand jerked hard on the whip, snapping the old woman's neck like it was nothing more than dried kindling.

"But I have to go back to Lady Ashlynn," she said, finally dropping the whips in her hands. "She's waiting for me, and if I don't go now, I'd never get the chance. Good bye, Madame Cecile," she said, offering a final curtsy of gratitude for all she had learned from the woman's spirit as the vision began to fade. "I promise, I'll be the best Willow Witch I can be."

Chapter 285: Joining Ashlynn's Coven

The diffuse light in the Briar had begun to dim as Amahle and her coven stood in silence, waiting through the final hours that would determine Heila's fate.

Ashlynn still lay next to Heila, wrapped comfortingly around the diminutive horned woman like a mother cradling her child. A thin, steady stream of emerald green energy flowed from Ashlynn's hand into Heila's heart, sustaining and strengthening the prospective witch as she continued to struggle with whatever seemed to be obstructing her trail.

"Mother, mother, look," Talauia cried, pointing excitedly as her wings began to beat rapidly with a high-pitched hum.

The sound of a soft -crack- broke the still silence that enveloped the island and a piece of willow bark that had grown over one of Heila's horns cracked a second time before falling to the ground. The first piece was followed by a second and a third as the transformation gained speed.

A healthy pallor returned to her face and the green tendrils that had crept up her neck faded away as though they'd never been there. While the process wasn't instant, it took only a few minutes for the diminutive woman's transformation to completely reverse, leaving her even more radiant and healthy than she had appeared before the start of her trial.

Behind her, an ethereal willow tree took shape, starting as a sapling and growing rapidly until its branches drooped over Heila and Ashlynn. The branches moved and swayed in the wind for a moment before the tree transformed into a stream of silvery-green energy that flowed into Heila.

No sooner had the glow faded than Heila drew a deep, shuddering breath, opening her soft, grass-green eyes and blinking several times in surprise when she found herself in Ashlynn's warm, comforting embrace.

"Welcome back," Ashlynn whispered from behind her diminutive friend. Her arms wrapped completely around Heila, drawing her in close for a fierce hug. Tears dripped down Ashlynn's eyes and her heart trembled with relief. "I was afraid we would lose you. That I would lose you," she whispered.

"No," Heila said softly. "No, no, no, no, no. You need me," she whispered fiercely. "And, and I need you too. So I'll never go. I, I'm sorry I took so long," she added, closing her eyes and hanging her head low. "If I was just a little bit smarter, I would have,"

"Enough of that," Amahle interrupted as she knelt by the two women. "You are here, Little Heila," she said gently, reaching out with a hand to brush sweat-soaked curls out of Heila's face while her less mundane senses examined the flow of magical energy through Heila's body. "You did your best and your best was good enough. You're a witch now," she added. "Whether it took three days or nine, that you passed your trial is all that matters."

"Nine? Has it really only been nine days?" Heila asked, sitting up and pulling away from Ashlynn as she looked around in confusion. "My lady!" Heila exclaimed when she saw the state of Ashlynn's torn and stained dress. "What happened?"

"Nothing important," Ashlynn said, sitting up before she recaptured Heila and pulled her into another embrace. "I felt like something was stopping you from passing your trial when even the Ancient Willow felt content with you. I didn't realize it until it was almost too late," she said in a voice that was rough with emotion.

"Now, now," Amahle said, using her spider-like limbs to pull both women into an embrace. "Y'all have both been through an ordeal. We can talk about the details later, but right now, I think both of y'all could use a good soak in a bath, some fresh clothes, and a home-cooked meal."

"Tala, honey," the Mother of Thorns called. "Get the boat ready to go. Jacques, help your auntie and cousin to get settled but when we get home, you need a long bath yourself. Let Tala and I take care of the cooking and everything else tonight. You've done enough."

"Yes, Maman," Jacques said before he took her place kneeling next to Ashlynn and Heila. "Ma petite," he said reaching out to gently stroke Heila's hair before his hand froze awkwardly in mid-air. After spending so many days watching over her, he felt closer to the newly born Willow Witch and even more so now that she was a real 'cousin' but... Heila had been asleep all this time.

"It's fine," Heila said, smiling at his awkwardness. "You've been standing guard all this time, haven't you? Go ahead."

"I didn't make it easy for him," Ashlynn added while Jacques affectionately ruffled Heila's curls. "I asked him to help me with my training since we're so far from Thane but the longer things took, the rougher things got. Jacques," Ashlynn said, placing a hand lightly on his forearm. "I took out much of my anxiety on you, and you never once complained. You had every right to refuse me. I'm sorry."

"Dis ain't a ting to worry about, Auntie," Jacques said with a toothy grin. "I was anxious too. Little Heila, she's too precious to say goodbye to so soon, non? Now, we're all together in de end, jus' like it should be."

"Just like it should be," Ashlynn agreed.

When Heila tried to stand, her legs trembled beneath her and refused to support her weight. The long days spent lying motionless had left her muscles weak and unresponsive. Before she could fall, Jacques was there, kneeling beside her with gentle hands ready to help.

"May I, ma petite?" he asked softly. At Heila's grateful nod, he scooped her up carefully, cradling her in his strong arms while his scaly hands held her with surprising gentleness. "You're looking drained too, Auntie Ashlynn," Jacques added as he looked at the exhausted young Mother of Trees. "I'll come right back for you, jus' wait a spell."

"No, I'm fine, if, if you can lend me a shoulder," She said, pushing herself to her feet. Her body ached and she felt like she was a towel that had been rung out but she was no worse off than she'd been at the end of her grueling training sessions with Thane during her blossoming period. "I want to stay close to Heila," she added softly.

"Den, my shoulder is all yours, Auntie," Jacques said. As they picked their way carefully over the earthen berm and the ground that had been torn asunder by their intense training sessions, he also lifted his tail, wrapping it around Ashlynn's other side to help steady her when she stumbled over the rough terrain.

"Let me help you, jus' dis bit," Jacques added after settling Heila in the back of the boat. Standing ankle-deep in the water he gently lifted Ashlynn up and placed her in the boat next to Heila before fetching a blanket for the two of them.

In the oppressive heat of the Briar, most people would reject anything that would have kept them warmer, but there was something comforting about being under a blanket together with someone, even if it just lay across their laps. For all his exterior was rough and thorny, even Jacques understood this much and from the relieved look on Heila's face when he held out the blanket, he'd made the right decision.

"Take these, take these," Talauia said, holding out cups of cold, crisp lemonade that had been muddled with mint and other herbs. "It'll help perk you up on the way home. Mother's potion helped you to last this long, cousin Heila, but even Mother's witchcraft has limits."

"Thank you," Heila said, gratefully accepting the cool, refreshing beverage that wet her parched lips. Along with the sweet and tart beverage, her senses detected the slightest trace of wood energy that she would have missed before her ordeal.

Clearly, Talauia had been worried about her too if she'd gone so far as to add a bit of witchcraft to the simple beverage, but in the state she was in, Heila could only admit that she likely needed it.

The boat ride back to Amahle's home in the Briar passed in relative quiet. It was clear that both Heila and Ashlynn and to a lesser extent even Jacques, were still processing the events of the past several days. But this, to Amahle's eyes, was the foundation of a good covenant.

Ashlynn had done as a mother should. She had provided a way for her daughter to grow and realize her potential, even though doing so was painful and carried risks to herself. Then, she'd let Heila do everything she could to take advantage of that opportunity and when it was clear that something was preventing Heila from succeeding, even though there was little she could do to help, Ashlynn hadn't hesitated to step in.

The difference between being a Child of the Earth and becoming the Mother of trees was the ability to take this step. To create a covenant that was bound together like a family and could face the countless trials to come together.

However hard it had been on them, in Amahle's eyes, they had succeeded in the most important part. If Ashlynn could continue this way, then Amahle felt like there was hope that the darkness that clung to the Harbinger of Death wouldn't swallow her.

And if it tried to... well, Ashlynn wasn't just the Mother of Trees now. She was also someone that, after seeing how she'd responded to her trials, Amahle felt proud to call her little sister. And if someone came to hurt her little sister, whether it was vampires or the human crusade, Amahle wouldn't stand idly by to let it happen.

As she watched Ashlynn wrapping a blanket around herself and Heila so they could continue to comfort each other on the way back home, Amahle made her own promise. It was rare for her to take sides in any conflict, after all, nature itself was neutral in the conflicts between men and nations, but if anything came after Ashlynn and her coven... the Mother of Thorns would take her stand alongside the Mother of Trees.

Chapter 286: First Hat

Though Amahle had intended to offer a small celebratory dinner in honor of Heila's return, seeing how worn both Heila and Ashlynn were after their ordeal, she postponed her plans, sending them both to wash up before preparing a thickened lentil soup with a healthy portion of dark leafy vegetables from her garden.

By the time they'd washed and eaten, neither of the young witches possessed the energy to do more than return to Ashlynn's hut. This time, however, Heila had a slightly guilty look on her face as she looked in the direction of the small hammock on the balcony.

"It's okay if you want to join me tonight," Ashlynn said, holding out a hand as she stood beside her own hammock. "You don't have to go so far away."

"It should be enough to be nearby," Heila said awkwardly, shifting her weight from one cloven hoof to the other. "But right now, I just want to be held a bit. Is it really okay? Lady Nyrielle won't mind, will she?"

"It's not like that between us," Ashlynn said before using the strength she'd gained from Nyrielle to scoop Heila up into her arms and carry her into the hammock. "You becoming part of my coven, it created a bond between us, similar to the one I share with Mistress Nyrielle," Ashlynn said.

"Mmm," Heila said with a nod. "I can feel something when we're close. Like, we're tangled together, even when we're barely touching."

"Exactly," Ashlynn said, wrapping her arms around the diminutive witch. "It's not the same as my bond with Nyrielle. It doesn't feel as strong or as intimate, but it's real. It isn't something you're imagining. And... and I'm glad that you're the first person I get to share it with."

"I am too," Heila whispered as she snuggled closer to Ashlynn, drawing comfort from the other woman's touch. For a moment, she felt like she had returned to her days as a little girl, pleading for affection for her mother and clinging to her for affection before she went to bed with her siblings.

Only this time, it was Ashlynn who gave her that warm sense of security and comfort. And right now, she had no siblings to contend with. In the future, she knew that there would be others, but for now, as her eyes drifted closed, she was happy to indulge in her lady's affection.

The following day, as the sounds of buzzing insects filled the air and the fog of the Briar began to thin, Ashlynn and Heila made their way to Amahle's home for breakfast. It was amazing how much a single night of rest had done to revitalize both women, and Ashlynn privately wondered if there had been a little bit of witchcraft in the previous night's soup but if there had been, she wasn't about to complain.

When they entered Amahle's large home, Ashlynn paused in surprise at the festive decorations that covered the space. Colorful silk streamers in greens, silvers, and blues hung from the ceiling and bows of the same colorful fabric hung on chairs or covered tables.

Even more impressive, however, was the spider web-like banner that stretched across the space, like a giant knitted banner that read 'Congratulations Heila & Ashlynn.' Clearly it was something Amahle had made personally but just how long had she spent to create such an intricate decoration that would only be used once?

"Y'all just settle yourselves at the table," the Mother of Thorns said as she emerged from another room with a pair of large packages. "Tala, sugar, go ahead and bring in the crepes you've made so far and everything else, I know you want to see this part."

"I'm coming, I'm coming, don't start without me" the excited witch said, fluttering into the room with a plate piled high with delicate crepes and a tray bearing wide variety of fresh berries and whipped, sweetened cream.

"Dis is jus' ready too," Jacques said, turning away from the fire to carry over a large cast iron skillet filled with a dish of scrambled eggs, sweet peppers and coarse ground sausage. "De pan is very hot," he warned as he set it on a small trivet in the center of the table. "Jus' let it sit and keep cooking a spell and it'll all be fine when it's time."

"Ashlynn, Heila," Amahle said sweetly as she used her spider-like limbs to hand one of the large packages to Ashlynn and the second one to Heila. "This is a proud moment for both of you. From now on, Ashlynn can truly call herself the Mother of Trees, and Heila has become the Willow Witch. I know that it wasn't easy for either of you," she said a touch more solemnly than she'd meant to.

"This is a gift from my coven to yours, to celebrate what you've both become," she said, tapping the tip of a spider-like limb on each of the packages. "But I need to explain something before you open them," she added.

Immediately, both Ashlynn and Heila sat up a little straighter in their seats, adopting the demeanor of attentive students.

"You've seen the hats we wear," Amahle explained, touching the edge of her wide brimmed hat as she spoke. "A witch's hat is like her badge of office. The traditions for these hats may be as old as witchcraft on dry land, maybe even invented by Jacques's Ancient Clan. By now, they've become so intertwined with the identity of being a witch that anyone caught wearing them who isn't a witch might be accused of a crime in some nations."

"You've made hats for us?" Ashlynn said, feeling deeply moved as she ran a hand over the surface of the package.

"Not just any hat, but the first hat that a witch needs," Amahle explained. "Every witch needs three hats, Ashlynn, as the Mother of Thorns, and especially as Lady Nyrielle's Seneschal, I suggest you get a fourth as well."

"The first hat is your Hedge Hat," Amahle said, pointing at the hat that Talauia was currently wearing which had been festooned with all manner of flowers, bits of leaves and other things seemingly picked at random. "Go ahead and open them," she said with a wide smile.

Inside the round boxes, they found two hats that were both unique and bore many similarities. Ashlynn's had been crafted of a dark, pine-green silk with a hat-band that looked to Ashlynn's eyes like a net meant for fishing.

More netting ran around the edge of the brim and the hat had countless small loops across its surface clearly meant to hold something, she just couldn't understand what. Heila's hat looked much the same save for the color that was a much lighter sage-green and, because of its smaller size, held many fewer loops.

"A Hedge Hat is meant for working in your gardens or foraging in the wilderness," Amahle explained. "Even if you add deep pockets to your skirts and carry a basket for gathering things, there are always items that are too special to be packed away with everything else. A Hedge Hat is a working hat but it also keeps the most precious things you've collected in easy reach. In time, you'll learn how important that can be when you're foraging in places that civilized folk don't dare to tread."

"Thank you," Ashlynn said, setting the hat on her head before throwing her arms around Amahle in a tight embrace. The closeness bumped both her and Amahle's hats askew but neither woman cared.

To Ashlynn, who had grown up in the court of her father the Count of Blackwell County, this was the least formal ceremony she'd ever seen. If she compared it to the pomp and circumstance that surrounded the bestowal of a knighthood or peerage then the simple gifting of hats in Amahle's living room would have been seen by her parents as insultingly casual.

The last time her father had conferred a knighthood on someone, businesses opened two hours late in order to give time for a grand procession to ride from the city gates all the way to Blackwell Manor. As the procession passed, sweets made of honey and nuts were thrown to the children while a minstrel sang of the newly raised knight's glorious deeds.

The celebration for the common folk ended when the procession reached Blackwell Manor, but for Ashlynn's family and the gathered knights and barons of the county, the procession was followed by a solemn ceremony, the bestowal of a new sword and coat of arms, and then a lively banquet and ball that lasted until late into the night.

By contrast, though the status that went with the hats was as great as an Eldritch Lord or greater, it was presented as a simple practical gift, even when it carried such significance. Yet to Ashlynn and Heila, it was everything they could have wanted and more. With this, Amahle had recognized their coven and they'd truly become something more than just witches. They'd become family.

Chapter 287: Wearing Many Hats

Breakfast, once they started eating, was one of the most casual, intimate and delightful meals Ashlynn had ever had. The crepes were light and delicate and everyone filled their own with whatever they wanted.

Ashlynn felt like she was eating festival treats as she filled a second crepe with sweet whipped cream, fresh-cut strawberries, and a dusting of crushed nuts that added a mild earthy flavor to the treat that felt just as indulgent as Georg's desserts.

"Watch out for dat bit, ma petite," Jacques warned Heila as she browsed toppings for her savory crepe. "Dat's a sweet and spicy blend, de scotch bonnet, she's de mother of sweet heat and she'll burn your lips right off if you're not careful."

"Why do you eat such painful things?" Heila said, jerking her hand back from the berry and pepper chutney and giving it a look like it had transformed into a venomous snake. "There's no one to impress here by proving you can eat it," she said, thinking of how Ashlynn had described Owain using spicy peppers as a contest of sorts among his friends.

"Because, because, Little Brother's tongue is as thick as his tail and just as good at tasting things," Talauia said while scooping up a large spoonful of the spicy chutney for her own crepe. "If it's not this hot, then he can't taste anything at all."

"Then why do you do it?" Heila said, still perplexed at some of the things Amahle's coven considered 'tasty treats.'

"Because, because," Talauia said, hiding half her face behind the crepe and giving Heila a mischievous look. "Sometimes, I like the pain," she said, flashing a smile that was full of sharply pointed teeth.

"Anyway," Ashlynn interjected before the conversation could go any further down that road. "Big sister," she said, turning to Amahle. "You said a witch needed three hats and the Hedge Hat is the first one. What are the other two? Or three? Didn't you say I might need an extra one?"

"Just as nature isn't just one thing," Amahle said, loading up her own crepe with dark, juicy blackberries and an extra drizzle of honey. "A witch is a person with many facets. A Hedge Hat is for working and foraging. It isn't practical outside of that unless you're like Tala."

"Oh?" Ashlynn asked, giving the winged witch a curious look. "Is it because you're the Thistle Witch?"

"Nope, that's not it, not it at all," Talauia said. "I get distracted when I notice useful things. It's hard to go somewhere on my own without collecting at least half a dozen new ingredients on the way. Um, and, that's why, that's why, I'm also very bad at time," she admitted, blushing slightly in embarrassment.

"But big sista Tala, she's always finding de rarest of 'tings," Jacques praised. "If she spots something dat's so distracting she can't resist, four in five times, it's something so rare dat I ain't seen one almost ever. She spots tings better even den Maman does, non?"

"Tala does truly have a gift," Amahle agreed with a wide smile. It had taken years to retrain that gift from spotting anything the winged witch might consider 'prey' to spotting valuable flora and fauna alike, but once she'd gotten the knack for it, she'd become a frighteningly successful forager.

"But we've wandered off the topic," she added, bringing the conversation back to Ashlynn's question. "The second hat you need is an everyday hat, what tradition calls a Traveler's Hat. In the old days, witches spent quite a bit of time traveling, looking for people with the talents to join their covens or searching for other witches. Some of our traditions go back so far, I don't think they were even written down, just passed on from one witch to the next."

"Is there anything special about a Traveling Hat?" Heila asked between bites of her savory crepe. At her size, she normally couldn't have eaten more than two, but after spending so long on the barren island for her trial, she was already eyeing the berries for a third crepe after she finished this one.

"Some witches put special things in their Traveling Hats, but I never saw the point," Amahle said, using a spider-like limb to tap her own dark hat. "Simple, comfortable, recognizable, and water repellant are all I cared about for my Traveling Hat. You can tuck a few things in it if you want, and it should absolutely reflect who you are as a witch, but it doesn't need to do anything more than that."

"Durable," Jacques added around a mouthful of sausage-stuffed crepe. "And easy to clean. Mine, she gets all kinds of dusty on de roads between here and anywhere."

"Which is exactly the opposite of the sort of hat that I think you might need as an extra, little sister," Amahle added. "Most witches, we can't be bothered with the burdens of ruling territory. I keep the Briar for myself but this is more of a large garden and a wildlife preserve than a true territory to rule."

"Other witches take up the mantle as Eldritch High Lords or Great Lords," she added. "I think it's a distraction, but when you have those burdens, there's a need for a Fancy Hat, one that will impress people and holds up when paired with whatever grand outfit you need to wear. Since you're the Seneschal of the Harbinger of Death who is herself an Eldritch Lord..."

"I'll probably need one," Ashlynn agreed. "But, it's just fancy, right? Nothing else to it?"

"It should be special, it should be extra, extra special," Talauia said in a tone that was surprisingly emphatic. "You never know, never know, when fancy people will betray you or surprise you. You can't be defenseless just because you're at a fancy party or, or," her voice faltered as her amethyst eyes grew distant.

"It's all right, sista," Jacques said, gently reaching out with his tail and wrapping it around the winged witch to pull her closer. "Dose people, dey can't get you here, and dey'd never offend maman just to get at you."

"I know, I know," Talauia said softly, blotting the moisture from her eyes before it could roll down her cheeks. "But Auntie Ashlynn, you know, don't you? That you can't always trust the people that come together at fancy places? Even when you're supposed to be celebrating...."

"My husband tried to murder me when I was still wearing my wedding dress," Ashlynn said, stretching across the table to clasp Talauia's hand. For a moment, neither of them said anything, but as Ashlynn's emerald gaze met Talauia's amethyst eyes, both women recognized familiar ghosts lurking in the depths of their dark pupils. Ashlynn still woke from the occasional nightmare about the night she nearly died, and looking at Talauia, whatever haunted her was every bit as dark. "I think I understand what you mean."

"It's good to prepare for a contingency," Amahle agreed. "When you have your hats made, since you walk a much more dangerous path than mine at the moment, you may want to hide a few extra things in your hat band or inside the cone. I hide a small wand in my hat when I'm going somewhere that might be dangerous but I've only needed it twice."

"I hope my life won't always be this dangerous," Ashlynn said. Looking around the room, with the joyful family gathering and the cozy meal, it was easy to forget that Owain Lothian was preparing to wage war.

By this time next year, she would likely be embroiled in battles that stretched across the length of the border between Lothian March and the Eldritch lands. Whether he attacked the Vale of Mists first or tried to directly assault Airgead Mountain, there would be a day soon when she would learn how close the visions she'd been shown would resemble reality.

"As much as I wish that you could stay here and enjoy peaceful days for decades to come," Amahle said with a trace of sadness in her voice. "I know that your enemies will come for you, whether you make trouble for them or not. When they do, that's when you and little Heila will need your last hats."

"A Witch's War Hat is meant for battle," Amahle explained. "Most are crafted from leather or other more durable materials. It's a place to store some of your most powerful potions and elixirs that you need to keep handy, but more importantly, it's a hat that you should cover with powerful totems and tools that can aid you in a fight."

"You've seen mine, ma petite," Jacques said. "Dat time in de arena, de hat I wore was a War Hat. De feather in my hat helps give me speed I'd lack otherwise. De crystals in de band, dey store up a bit of de energy of de Bloody Sandbox Tree so I can draw on it wherever I go."

"A good hat, she is like a whole suit of armor and a sword and shield combined," he said, giving Ashlynn a look that called to mind their conversations about wearing armor while training. "Before you leave, I'll show you how I build mine, Auntie."

"There are so many things that you need to learn, Little Sister," Amahle said. "I wish I had more time. The Hedge Hats will help you the most for the next few months as we prepare, but now that little Heila has become the Willow Witch, I want to put a stop to the fighting practice you've been doing with Jacques."

"For the next month," Amahle said, taking on the demeanor of a teacher speaking to her pupils instead of a sister or aunt talking to her family. "It's time that you learn about the fundamental tools of witchcraft. You've been doing far too much with your own energy or the pure energy of the world. It's time that you learn why a witch on her own is a fearsome thing, but a witch who has made thorough preparations is a nightmare from which her enemies will never awaken."

Chapter 288: A Witch's Tools

While Talauia and Jacques cleared away the remains of their indulgent breakfast, Amahle took the opportunity to give Ashlynn and Heila a glimpse into the month ahead.

"Sorcerers can get away with simple invocations and crude rituals because they don't work with much power, but for us, as the amount of power you draw on grows, your need for supportive implements will also grow," Amahle explained. "Like a craftsman, a witch is far more capable when she's working with all of her tools."

"Like the items you put around the circle at the start of the seed-planting ritual?" Heila asked attentively.

"No, those are anchors or supplemental materials," Amahle said. "Let's compare to a woodworker since we all have some affinity for wood," the elder witch said. "A carpenter has his hammers, saws, rasps, and so on as the vital tools of his trade. But he also needs timber, nails, glue, and other materials that are consumed in the practice of his craft whenever he builds something."

"So, when you say tools," Ashlynn said. "You mean things like wands? I brought a branch from an Ancient Oak to craft into a wand for myself. I imagine we may need to ask the Ancient Willow for a branch for Heila?"

"Wands are the first tool we'll work on," Amahle agreed with a smile. "Today, we can visit the Ancient Willow to ask for a branch and tomorrow I can help you both begin your wands. A wand is essential if you want to perform any large-scale witchcraft, or if you want to be very precise with your witchcraft. Both the very large and very small benefit from a wand's ability to gather energy and give it direction."

"But, I've never seen you use a wand, Aunt Amahle," Heila said with a frown. "I haven't seen Jacques or Talauia use one either."

"I have my own advantages for doing delicate work," Amahle said. Her spider-like limbs reached out in front of her, each one coming to rest precisely next to a finger the Mother of Thorns placed on the table. A moment later, the tips of each limb began to glow with a dark crimson energy.

"If I'm attempting to raise walls of thorns, flood the Briar, or do something of a similar scale, I'll still need a wand," Amahle explained as she withdrew the spider-like limbs. "But for delicate work, I essentially have four of my own wands to work with. It's one of the reasons that sorcerers of the Night Weaver Clan are so feared, and witches from my clan are even more so."

"So the reason we haven't seen Jacques or Talauia use a wand is because nothing we've seen them do is of the right scale to require it," Ashlynn said with a nod. "That makes sense. When I was practicing with Jacques, he said we needed to be very careful to restrain ourselves or we would disturb Heila and that if we got carried away, we might accidentally fell trees."

"It's good that you two were able to restrain yourselves," Amahle said with an awkward smile. From the look of the barren island when she arrived, the word 'restraint' could only barely be used. They'd erected an earthen barrier to protect Heila from the aftershocks of their training! That might have been prudent but she'd hardly call it restrained.

"Wands accompany you everywhere, but the second tool is a bit harder to travel with, though a small one will do in a pinch," Amahle continued. "The products of a witch's cauldron are among the most valuable and treasured commodities we can produce. Never undervalue the work you can do with a mortar and pestle, a cauldron, and a good fire."

"Wait," Heila said, startled by the way Amahle had phrased things. "Commodities? You mean you make things with witchcraft that you sell? Isn't that... wrong? A misuse of nature's gifts?" During her trial, she'd been presented with visions of many places where Cecile guided her in using the gifts of nature to cure the sick and heal the injured, but she had never set a price for her services in those visions.

"I would never sell my services cheaply," Amahle said. "Nor would I withhold them from someone who I desired to help simply over a matter of money. But child, trade, even if it's simple barter, is a way of life. We are not hermits to completely withdraw from the world despite how isolated I may appear here."

"Take this salve, for example," the witch said, pulling a small bottle from the pouch at her waist. "This bottle contains enough for three applications to a relatively large and deep wound or two smaller wounds. Applied once a day at the same time each day and the wound will completely heal within a day of the last application. How valuable do you think such a medicine is?"

"To a warrior, it might not be priceless, but it's life-altering to be sure," Ashlynn said as she thought back on her visions of the battle. Four days to heal a wound sounded impressive and it was, but it wouldn't

turn the tide of a single pitched battle. It might turn the tide of a prolonged war if the enemy didn't have similar means to restore their soldiers.

The more she thought about it, however, the more uses she found. Scouts and hunters might need healing while far from a place where they could reach a physician. And even small villages would pay handsomely to have such a medicine on hand in case emergencies happened.

"How difficult is it to create that salve?" Ashlynn asked.

"There you are," Amahle said with a smile. "You can't set a price for it until you know what it costs to make. I can make twenty small bottles in a single batch. Between preparing the ingredients, concocting the salve, and bottling in a way that preserves it against contamination from dust or strange energies, it takes two full days to produce."

"But the herbs required are also difficult to cultivate," she added. "With what I grow in my own gardens, I can make a batch every month or two."

"It still can't be cheap," Heila mused. "It's just too miraculous to people who have nothing else like it. You must be able to ask for at least a full gold coin for each of them. Even if you only sold a few every year, it would pay for almost anything you could need."

"That's the idea, sugar," Amahle said with a smile. "But there is far more than just this that you'll rely on your cauldron for. Cures for toxins of all sorts, potions that can strengthen and sustain the body and many more things can spill forth from your cauldron. "I wouldn't suggest setting up a shop, but there are witches in the past who have."

"Remember, the earth doesn't care about how its treasures are used," Amahle said. "But we must ensure that we don't do too much or we risk upsetting the balance of things. If you set up shop, you may be tempted to have others harvest herbs for you. Your harvesters may become overzealous to supply you and before you know it, the herb you need has been harvested to extinction in the area within a hundred leagues of your shop."

"I don't think either of us plans to make a business out of witchcraft any time soon," Ashlynn said with a light laugh. "But it's good to know that we could, one day if we wanted to. If we can bring the wars to a stop, running a shop wouldn't be a bad life, would it, Heila?"

When Ashlynn mentioned it, she wasn't really thinking about Heila, but rather about Ollie. She'd talked to him when they met about simple ambitions, like opening a shop or working as a butcher in town instead of slaving away in the Lothian Kitchens. To the humble kitchen-boy, they seemed like grand and distant dreams, but in the future...

"I'll never leave your side, my Lady," Heila promised while clutching Ashlynn's arm. After what she had been through and what she had seen, she knew Ashlynn would need her help in all manner of ways in the years to come. Besides, with the wealth of the Vale of Mists, making money for Ashlynn was the least useful thing she could think of doing to help the woman who had given her so much. "I don't need to think too much about selling potions and running shops when I'll always be your lady-in-waiting."

"Still," Amahle interjected. "Even if you never sell a potion for a large quantity of gold, you may find a day where you need to trade them for the kinds of things that can't be bought for money. Favors between nations," the witch said with a pointed look at Ashlynn. "Bartering for the life of a captive. I'm sure you can imagine all sorts of uses for what you called a 'life-altering' item. Think beyond healing for a moment. How many men have you met who are deeply troubled by their inability to produce an heir? A witch could restore a man's virility, or help a woman ensure that she conceives after the man has sewn his seeds. How much would men of power give for that kind of help?"

"You're right," Ashlynn said, her voice strained as she recalled her parents' struggles with fertility. Her marriage to Owain had occurred, in large part, because of her father's lack of an heir. Moreover, if she'd been able to concoct a potion for her mother that would have prevented the stillbirth of her last child... she shuddered to think what her family would have given for such a miracle.

"Mistress Nyrielle is out there right now," Ashlynn said softly, forcefully turning her mind away from thoughts of her own family and trying to focus on things that were closer at hand. "She's searching for allies who can help us in the upcoming war. If I could produce a few useful items for her, even if they were just tokens to ease a negotiation..."

"I'm glad you see the applications and how useful it is to have a cauldron," Amahle said with a smile. "Don't neglect the gardens that feed your cauldron. You'll find that you spend as much time in the gardens as you do in your workshop to care for everything you need if you find yourself concocting for trade."

"Still, there's one other tool that you'll need to acquire," Amahle said, her tone growing sharper. "It's important that every witch equip themselves with a Severing Knife."

Chapter 289: The Severing Knife

"It's important that every witch equip themselves with a Severing Knife," Amahle said in a tone that was much sharper than what she'd use to describe cauldrons and wands.

At her waist, Amahle wore a bone-handled knife that Ashlynn and Heila had assumed was a simple utility knife. After all, despite her vaunted status, within the Briar Amahle presented herself as a very mundane and ordinary woman who just happened to have a few extraordinary abilities.

Now, however, when the older witch pulled the bone-hilted knife from its sheath, the entire room dimmed as if the light itself had been frightened away by the fearsome blade. The blade itself was also made of bone, as though the entire knife had been carved from a single piece of a large beast's arm or leg. Along the blade, sharp, angular Eldritch Glyphs emitted a lurid red glow that filled both Ashlynn and Heila with an ominous sense of dread.

Ashlynn's heartbeat quickened and in the presence of the bone knife, both her bond with Heila and the far stronger bond tying her to Nyrielle trembled like a rabbit in the presence of a pack of starving wolves.

"This is a Severing Knife," Amahle said, placing the terrifying weapon on the table. "The edge is not sharp. This knife isn't meant to cut physical things. Rather, it severs the ties of magic that bind things together."

"You could destroy my bond with Nyrielle with that knife," Ashlynn whispered in horror. Her heart trembled and it took all of the strength of will she had to stay seated at the table within striking distance of the bone blade. "Or my bond with Heila. Why? Why would you carry such a thing?"

"This is a tool, no different than a wand or a cauldron," Amahle said, retrieving the knife and returning it to its sheath before it caused further distress. "Everything that can be made with sorcery or witchcraft can be unmade with the right tools and skills," she explained.

"Something interfered with Heila's trial," the Mother of Thorns continued. "Something seeped into the bond between the two of you and the Ancient Willow and formed a barrier that prevented her from completing the trial."

"It was Cecile," Heila said, her grass-green eyes narrowing as she thought about the remnant spirit of her predecessor. "She was another Willow Witch. She wanted me to dedicate myself to a path of peace and selfless healing as she had," Heila said, looking up to meet Ashlynn's eyes with a gaze that was firm and filled with resolve.

"I refused," Heila said in a tone that was filled with her conviction. "My lady needs someone who can fight beside her as well as heal the wounded. I won't leave you to carry the entire burden of fighting for us by yourself, Ashlynn," she said.

"I'd hate to see you hurt," Ashlynn said, reaching out to pull Heila into a brief embrace. "But we've faced danger before and we will again. So, I'm glad that you'll be beside me when the danger comes."

For a moment, no one said anything. Ashlynn could see how genuine Heila's desire to fight alongside her was and she accepted it completely. After her trial, though Ashlynn hadn't heard the details from the first member of her coven, as far as Ashlynn was concerned, Heila had earned the right to serve as she wished.

"I also encountered a ghost of Cecile," Ashlynn said, changing the topic. "She didn't seem to approve of me and my relationship with Nyrielle but she never tried to force my hand. Perhaps because I am the Mother of Trees there were limits to what a Willow Witch could do against me, but against Heila..."

"Exactly so, darlin'," Amahle said. "If you hadn't entangled yourself in the magic of the trial by supporting Heila with your own energy, I would have used this knife to cut away this remnant spirit who interfered with the trial," she explained. "Though, I'll admit that even without Ashlynn's magic in the mix, it would have been delicate work and my chances of success wouldn't have been more than one in five."

"There exist all manner of curses, bindings, and bonds in this world," Amahle continued. "A Severing Knife isn't a weapon to be used against people like you who have bonds formed willingly by both parties."

"Just because that isn't its purpose doesn't mean it can't be used that way," Ashlynn pointed out, giving the knife at Amahle's waist a nervous glance. "A table knife isn't meant for killing men, but in a pinch, it will do the job," she said, thinking back on her confrontation with Kaefin.

While she was posing as a servant, she'd used whatever was at hand, shattering a water pitcher over his head in order to turn the tide against him. If something could be used as a weapon, even if that wasn't its purpose, that didn't mean she never had to fear someone attacking her with a knife that could sever her bond with Nyrielle.

"That's true," Amahle admitted. "But, as uncomfortable as this tool may be, you should carry one of your own, just like a seamstress carries a seam ripper. I know the one I wear feels a touch... overpowering. Yours won't be like this for years, perhaps decades."

Heila nodded in understanding as soon as Amahle mentioned the seam ripper. She had done plenty of mending on everything from curtains to clothing and there were times when, even though you'd done your best, you still had to backtrack and rip out stitches in order to make things whole again.

If witchcraft was the same, then perhaps it wasn't uncommon to need to 'unmake' some of their own workings when things had gone awry in order to make sure that the final working was as good as it could be. But, as she thought about it, something else that Amahle had said caught her mind.

"Is it like Darksteel?" Heila asked, sitting up straighter as the idea struck her. She had never used a Darksteel weapon herself the way Ashlynn had, but she'd grown up around plenty of people who did and she'd heard many stories about how older weapons were treasured because of the strength they accumulated over time. "Darksteel weapons grow stronger the more they're used, don't they?"

"That's not entirely true," Ashlynn corrected as she thought about the lessons she'd received from Thane. "They grow stronger the more blood they drink. But, maybe it is the same sort of thing?"

"You can think of it that way, though it's slightly more complex than that," Amahle said. "It's enough of an understanding for now. The important thing, right now, sounds like paying a visit to the Ancient Willow. If there is any more of this lingering Willow Witch that's interfering with the ancient tree, we should free the tree from her influence."

"I'm not fond of things that attempt to corrupt sacred rituals," Amahle said with a hint of crimson light gathering at the tips of her spider-like limbs. The lurid glow matched the earlier radiance of her Severing Knife, giving the pointed tips of her spider-like limbs the feeling that they had transformed into wicked thorns that would pierce and rend flesh. "And even less so when they threaten my family."

For a moment, the Mother of Thorns seemed to truly embody her name, radiating an aura of protective menace that curled around Ashlynn and Heila in the same way that Jacques's aura often enveloped Ashlynn, providing protective comfort within while radiating sharp, thorny menace outward. Only, unlike Jacques, the bloodthirsty menace radiating from the Mother of Thorns was several times more intense.

Then, like the dense fog of the Briar melting to reveal the light of day, Amahle's demeanor shifted. The crimson light faded from her spider-like limbs and a gentle smile blossomed on her face that restored her appearance as a kind and gentle matron, leaving both younger women wondering whether this was Amahle's true face and the other was just a mask or if it was the other way around.

"Once we've ensured that the Ancient Willow is free of any lingering ghosts, we can retrieve a branch for Heila's wand," Amahle said, her voice warm and encouraging.

"And then," she added, her smile brightening the room as if to chase away the last remnants of the knife's darkness, "we can finally begin your formal training."

Chapter 290: The Tangled Wood

Two weeks had passed since Nyrielle entered Ashlynn's vision and spent an intimate evening together exploring Ashlynn's memory of the Holy Festival of Light. Since then, Nyrielle had concluded her business with her uncle, Tausau before turning her carriage northwest and heading deep into the territory of her great-grandsire.

The Tangled Wood was a massive domain, larger than the Vale of Mists had been even under her grandsire Torbin's rule. At its core, the Tangled Wood was a densely overgrown forest with massive pines and towering hemlock trees that stood hundreds of feet tall and crowded close enough together to cast the ground under their canopy into perpetual twilight.

Sword ferns, climbing ivy and hooked blackberries covered the ground in a dense underbrush that made much of the Tangled Wood impassable. The roads that connected a scattered network of villages and small towns had to be cleared at the end of each growing season or they would quickly vanish beneath the invasive undergrowth.

"Should we expect another welcoming party, my lady?" Zedya asked as their carriage clattered through the night.

"We should, but don't expect to notice them until we reach the Tangled Tower," Nyrielle said, staring out into the darkness of the night. Her great-grandsire's men couldn't be compared to Tausau's Mongrel Horde other than to say that Tausau's Mongrels stood as far beneath them as newborn babes stood beneath the Horde.

"This is your first time coming so deeply into the western territories, isn't it?" Nyrielle said with a nostalgic smile. "From now until we leave my great-grandsire's territory, the rules for feeding have changed. Unless you want trouble from his progeny, leave Lennart and his men alone. Feeding on our own soldiers would be seen as a sign of weakness."

"How is that weakness?" Zedya asked. "The people of the Vale of Mists offer themselves up willingly as tribute. What more proof of your strength and right to rule could people ask for?"

"That isn't how it works here," Nyrielle sighed. "You must hunt your own prey. You will be seen as strong if you are able to prey on the warriors of the Tangled Wood and you will be seen as weak if you prey on the sick or elderly."

"Will they fight back?" Zedya asked, tilting her head in confusion at the custom. How could a vampire as old as Nyrielle's great-grandsire rule for so long if his progeny preyed upon his people?

"Some may, but I don't expect anyone to be capable of fighting you," Nyrielle said with a laugh. "Just be aware of the stocky fellows with an earthy aura. The Stone Skin clan have flesh that is nearly impenetrable, even to our fangs. They make their homes in the hills near the Tangled Tower, so when you need to feed, head into the forest villages."

"You speak as if we'll be here for an extended period of time," Zedya said. "How long do you plan to stay?"

"That depends entirely on my great-grandsire," Nyrielle said. "Hamdi is one of Bardas's direct progeny, much like you are mine. He has been a High Lord for nearly five centuries and he is set in his ways. He may not be willing to bend to my desires now that I've fully taken up the mantle of the Harbinger of Death."

"If he cooperates, then he will summon neighboring Eldritch Lords to meet with us here at the Tangled Tower," Nyrielle explained. "Our men are tired. We've pushed hard ever since leaving the Vale of Mists and they could use several weeks to recover. It would be best if people come to us here."

"But Hamdi may not recognize your authority," Zedya said, shaking her head with a sour expression on her face. "Does he really look down on you for not retaining great-grandsire Torbin's status as a High Lord?"

"It's an embarrassment, to be sure," Nyrielle sighed. In the Vale of Mists, the distinction barely mattered. With the High Pass between her and the High Fen and Airgead Mountain between the Vale of Mists and the Southern Steppe, the nearest High Lords were at least one domain removed from her, and both of them had their own reasons to respect her strength.

Here in the interior of the western lands, wars were still fought between Eldritch Lords and High Lords vying for territory or seeking to advance their status. The human threat had yet to displace the old rivalries and people cared far more about the strength and status of their Eldritch neighbors than how many wars someone had fought against the incomprehensible humans.

"We'll know more when we retrieve Ignatious," Nyrielle said with a dark smile. "It's been some time since I handed him over to Hamdi and the Mother of Thorns to study. Now that we're this close, he feels much... milder than he did before."

"Will you bring him home with us when we leave?" Zedya asked, frowning at Nyrielle. Of all of Nyrielle's progeny, there was only one who had ever attempted to harm their Mistress or showed any signs of rebellion.

Ignatious lived in exile in the Eldritch lands for the past seventy years while Nyrielle allowed time to scour away his worldly attachments. By now, even the children he had known before Nyrielle took him as one of her progeny had withered and died of old age, leaving nothing and no one for him to attempt to return to. But did that mean that he'd given up on his desire to take vengeance on the woman who tore him away from the world he'd grown up in? Or would he still be just as volatile as he was before?

"We'll know soon enough," Nyrielle said, sitting up straighter as the carriage began to slow. "It seems like my wayward child is among our welcoming party. Remember, Zedya," Nyrielle said, placing a hand lightly on her handmaiden's arm. "No matter what he or anyone else does, you let me deal with it. Insults can be ignored, but challenges must be answered with overwhelming strength. Hamdi's progeny will respond to nothing less."

A few minutes later, the carriage rolled to a stop in a large, torch ringed courtyard. The Tangled Tower soared hundreds of feet into the air, taller than the tallest trees of the Tangled Wood and made entirely out of a local black stone that made the tower dark even when viewed against the night sky.

Before the massive gate, a small delegation of soldiers from the Golden Eyed Clan stood at attention, many of them looking ready to pounce. Their sharp, wolf-like features and pert, alert ears combined with intense yellow gazes to make them look like a barely leashed pack of wild animals, ready to tear intruders to pieces at the slightest provocation.

As members of Hamdi's own clan, the lupine Golden Eyed Clan had always occupied the positions of highest honor in the Tangled Wood. In the dark, densely wooded environment of Hamdi's domain, no one could match the predatory prowess of their well coordinated warriors and the few who possessed the power to resist their dominance quickly succumbed to Hamdi's progeny.

For the High Lord of the Tangled Wood to send a delegation of his best soldiers was a mark of respect for Nyrielle's status, but if she considered the size of the delegation, it was somewhat lacking. Still, there were others present who made up for the lack of numbers in the welcoming party.

One person in particular completely captured Nyrielle's attention when she stepped out of the carriage. Walking across the courtyard with an elegant, almost stately grace was a human with skin as pale as her own and short hair that was nearly as dark. Both features were incredibly striking against his deep crimson and gold robes as he stopped five paces short of reaching Nyrielle to kneel on the ground.

"Mistress Nyrielle," he said in a voice that was smooth, dark and silky. Her title dropped from his thin lips without the slightest hesitation and his dark eyes held none of the fury she'd once witnessed from him. Instead, the corners of his lips tugged in a slight smile as he extended his greeting. "Welcome to the Tangled Tower."

"Inquisitor Ignatious," Nyrielle said with a dark smile as she greeted the second oldest of her human progeny. "You look well. Please, lead the way," she commanded. "It's been a long time since we last spoke and we have a great deal to discuss."