

The Vampire 331

Chapter 331: Predecessor

Drifting in the darkness, Ashlynn had very little sense of direction. Her mind sank deep into the mud and the soft soil beneath it before following the roots of countless trees, moving from on to the next until she'd heard faint sounds and followed them here, but now, it felt like she could move no further and yet the voice was still very, very far away.

"Who are you?" Ashlynn asked hesitantly. "And what do you mean I've inherited your curse?"

"I? Who am I?" The voice asked as though she found the question somehow strange. The sound of rhythmic clicking that had accompanied paused and when the voice spoke again, she did so in a tone that was far more commanding and... regal than before. "I am the Mother of Trees, the first human born a witch. I am Claire du Gaal of the house du Gaal," she said. "Surely time has not forgotten my name so soon?"

As she spoke, a vision appeared in the darkness of a regal woman in her middle years, dressed in rich sapphire blues with dark hair tied in intricate braids. A crest embroidered across the chest of the woman's dress in thread of silver looked familiar for a moment, but there was something subtly wrong about it that left Ashlynn momentarily confused about the woman's house before the vision faded away.

"Claire du Gaal?" Ashlynn said, rolling the unfamiliar name around in her mind as she struggled to place it. The crest closely resembled the one used by the Royal Family but it lacked the crown at the top and the crossed swords behind the crest that marked the royal lineage.

"Were you a princess then?" Ashlynn asked, wondering if this woman might have been outside the line of succession. "Or perhaps a member of the royal family's cadet branches?"

"Royal family?" the voice said, this time sounding surprised itself before it let out a heavy sigh that felt like it was filled with too many emotions to name. "So the old men of the Church pushed little Charles onto a throne in the end."

This time, when she spoke, the vision that appeared in the darkness showed a young handsome man, perhaps a year or two younger than Jocelynn, surrounded by white haired men draped in the gold and white robes of Exemplars or the blood red and gold of the Inquisition. The men of the church seemed to

treat the young man with incredible respect when they faced him, but the looks that passed between them were anything but kind.

"They said they saw it written in the stars," the ghostly voice said as the vision faded away. "They claimed that he would be a king whose line would rule for hundreds of years. Has it? Have my little brother's descendants ruled for hundreds of years since my death?"

"Little Charles," Ashlynn said, shaken as she heard the name, finally understanding why the crest in the vision had looked so unfamiliar. It was the crest of the house of du Gaal before Charles du Gaal ascended to the throne!

"Charles the First?" Ashlynn asked, seeking confirmation as she struggled to accept what the ghostly witch had said. "Charles the Unifier, the founding king of the Kingdom of Gaal was your little brother? The brother of a witch!? But how? Nothing in the history books ever mentioned him having a sister."

Ashlynn had always loved history. Her tutors frequently mentioned that solutions to the problems of the future could be found by thoroughly understanding the past. As a woman who intended to help her husband rule Lothian March, she'd studied the royal family extensively, learning from both the triumphs of the greatest kings and the follies of the worst. But in everything she'd read about King Charles the First, there had never been a mention that he had a sister. There was, however, quite a bit written about his battles with a witch and her coven.

The pieces began falling into place in her mind like a puzzle box finally unlocking. One of the things that always stood out in the history books was that the witch herself wasn't as powerful as some of the other Eldritch Lords of the era but her attacks were always devastating, striking at the most vulnerable places at the worst possible times.

Now that she understood who the witch had truly been, the timing of the great witch's attacks, the way she always seemed to know the king's movements in advance, even the specific noble families she chose to target while leaving others untouched... What had seemed like random acts of cruelty in her history lessons now looked like...

Like the cold, calculated actions of a woman who had chosen her targets for revenge, Ashlynn realized with a shudder. In much the same way that she had vowed to kill Owain, Sir Broll, Sir Tommin and whoever had betrayed her to Owain in the first place, this woman had systematically destroyed the families that moved against her. It had never been random, rather, it had always been deeply personal.

"You're the Night Terror," Ashlynn whispered, her voice trembling as she realized what drove the other woman to commit such acts of wonton cruelty, and how greatly it resembled the path that Ashlynn herself was on. "The Witch of the Black Forest. They called you the Queen of Evil. I always thought it was because you ruled over a coven of terrifying witches but, if you were Charles' older sister..."

"Queen of Evil," the voice said with a dark chuckle. "They must have been eager to bury my name beneath a mountain of epithets to prevent people from ever discovering my real name and my connection to the puppet king they turned my brother into."

"They say you slaughtered tens of thousands to stop Charles from unifying humanity on this continent," Ashlynn said in a carefully neutral tone. When she had studied her history, nothing seemed more important than the unification of the dispersed human colonies so they could fight against the native demons.

She hadn't questioned those lessons until she met Nyrielle and learned that there were many human colonies and even noblemen like Nyrielle's own parents who were able to coexist with the Eldritch natives. That change in perspective made her view the founding of the Kingdom of Gaal in a very different light and left her questioning the accuracy of what she'd read.

"Of course I did," the ghostly voice said with a hint of pride.

Another vision filled the darkness, this time of burning trees that pulled their roots from the earth to march like soldiers against an army flying the banners of the Kingdom of Gaal and the Church of the Holy Lord of Light. Wind whipped around the burning crowns of the trees, sending torrents of flame through the air to fall on soldiers, horses and even the village behind the army. Men and horses burned and died, screaming in pain and begging for the priests to save them from the evil witch.

"I slaughtered tens of thousands in order to stop the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Eldritch Clansmen," Claire said proudly as the vision faded away. "You can understand why I would do such a thing, can't you? Or am I wrong about the scent of death that clings to you like a well-worn cloak?"

Chapter 332: A Warning

Ashlynn paused for several minutes while she considered what the ghost had said. Without doubt, she would fight to protect Eldritch lives from human aggression. But seeing the indiscriminate destruction

the other witch had unleashed that spread as far as a village full of people who weren't trying to fight her... Men, women, children... innocents who had never threatened anyone were consumed by the flames unleashed by this righteous-sounding Mother of Trees.

War was war and in war, death was inevitable no matter how well a person fought. No amount of careful preparations or clever tactics could stop horrible things from happening once the first arrow was loosed from a bow. But innocents? She didn't think she could ever put whole villages to the torch the way Claire du Gaal had done.

But then, Ashlynn even though the other witch had shown her a vision of a village in flames, she wasn't sure that all of the atrocities attributed to the first human witch had actually been committed in the first place. There was often a bit of truth in the lies the church told. Nyrielle might not feast on the blood and bones of her victims but she did drink their blood. Likewise, Claire may have been responsible for some genuine tragedies, but was she really the cruel and wicked woman the history books portrayed her as? Somehow, Ashlynn doubted it.

"I understand protecting Eldritch lives," Ashlynn said slowly. "If you smell death on me then you know I am bound to a True Vampire. I... don't see the world or the Church the way I once did," she admitted.

This time, as Ashlynn spoke, she focused on one of her own memories, filling the darkness with a scene from the night she'd killed Sir Broll in a trial by combat. It had been a gambit originally intended to preserve her life and the lives of Ollie and Harrod when they were caught and outnumbered, but once she reunited with Captain Lennart, the ploy had allowed her to smoothly capture Sir Broll's men without risking the lives of Eldritch Soldiers.

"There are people who need to die for what they've done," Ashlynn said firmly. "But the common people shouldn't suffer for their leader's mistakes."

"Niave," the ghostly voice said in a tone heavy with disappointment. "Niave, but it's still a beginning. Better than if you believed in the lies of the Church even after awakening to your own power. But you are too far from me to do much more than begin. What is your name, young Mother of Trees? Who are you?"

"I'm Ashlynn Blackwell," Ashlynn said almost automatically, introducing herself the way a noblewoman should, though she showed none of the deference that was due from the daughter of a Count to the sister of a King. As far as she was concerned, they were both the Mother of Trees and that made them equals no matter what their more worldly stations might be.

"I am the eldest daughter of Count Rhys Blackwell, and the Seneschal of Lady Nyrielle of the Vale of Mists," she said smoothly. "Most importantly, I am the current Mother of Trees."

"Ashlynn," the voice whispered as though she were tasting the name like wine to see if she liked it. "Do they have things that they call you yet? Death's Harlot perhaps or some other distasteful epithet?" Claire asked in a tone that concealed several barbs.

"No," Ashlynn said sharply. "No, nothing of the sort. As far as the human world is concerned, I might as well be dead," she said. She could have said more and for a moment, she considered explaining. In the end, however, she knew far too little about this woman and the faint familiarity of her magic wasn't enough to prove everything she claimed.

"I've disturbed your rest," Ashlynn said politely, trying to move the conversation away from the direction the ghostly voice was trying to take it. Ashlynn might not have trained as much in the art of conversation as Jocelynn had, but she'd learned enough from her father to recognize when a fellow noblewoman was trying to draw her into a trap and the barbed epithet the woman had chosen told her much about the other woman's intentions.

"Before I withdraw, can you tell me about the curse you believe I've inherited from you?" Ashlynn asked, already preparing to withdraw herself from the strange state she'd fallen into when she allowed herself to follow the magic flowing through the roots of trees.

"Don't you find the mark on your skin to be curse enough among your own people?" Claire said. "You said the human world thinks of you as dead. I assume that your family has already turned against you, haven't they?"

"My parents hid me away for more than twenty years," Ashlynn said quickly, forcefully suppressing her doubts about who might have betrayed her to Owain on the night of her wedding. Whoever it was, she would find them eventually and there would be a reckoning, but until then, she chose to believe that it hadn't come from her immediate family.

"I will see them again one day," she said, more as a promise to herself than as a comment to the ghostly woman.

"Perhaps," the other Mother of Trees said. "If you return to human lands, to the kingdom my brother founded, then seek me out in the forests outside my family's lands. I can tell you much more and give you real help, but only if you're close enough."

"Perhaps," Ashlynn said, echoing the other woman's noncommittal word. "But if there's nothing more, then I should leave you to your rest."

"There is one more thing," the ghostly voice said. "It is inevitable that the Church will come for you. Their Exemplars are forces to be feared, as strong as any member of your coven, but the real person you must fear is the one who calls himself a 'Saint' in their Holy City. Do not allow yourself to be captured by the Church!" Claire said, her voice growing louder and louder with every word.

"If they get their hands on you and you cannot escape then you must, you must do as I did," Claire said with a voice that shook with fanaticism. "It is better that you turn your magic on yourself, burn your body to ash, and scatter the ashes on the wind before you let them do to you what they've done to the Oracles. You cannot, cannot let them control witches as well!"

This time, the vision Ashlynn was treated to was even more brutal than the one where she witnessed Claire destroying an army. More than a dozen Inquisitors had surrounded a battered and bloody Claire, binding her in heavy chains and dragging her down a long stone staircase beneath a golden, gleaming temple, grander even than the one in Lothian City.

The closer they came to wherever they were taking her, the more Claire struggled, shouting, cursing, and even pleading with the stone-faced Inquisitors who dragged her toward whatever inexorable fate awaited her. Eventually, as they approached a heavy iron-bound door carved with scenes depicting the first Prophet of the Holy Lord of Light preaching to the masses, a look of grim determination settled over Claire's face before her power surged, wreathing her in flames that consumed her hair, clothing and eventually her flesh and bones.

"Do not let them take you like they took the Oracles," Claire repeated as the disturbing vision faded.

"Oracles?" Ashlynn said, her mind reeling from witnessing the other witch's violent death. All her life, from the youngest age when her parents taught her that no one could ever be allowed to see her mark of the witch until the day Owain beat her half to death, she'd been afraid of what the Church would do to her if they ever captured her and found the mark of the witch upon her skin.

Now, seeing the Inquisition dragging Claire away and knowing that being the king's own sister offered her no protection, she shivered involuntarily as she imagined herself in Claire's place. If it came down to it, at the last moment, would she have the courage to do what Claire had done? Or would she struggle and fight to the last breath? She liked to believe that she would fight but...

"What did they do to these Oracles that would make you do... do that... to yourself?" Ashlynn asked in a soft, trembling voice.

"Better to die than let them capture a Mother of the Earth," Claire repeated. "Find me and I will tell you why."

Chapter 333: Shaken

Heila was dimly aware of Ashlynn's energy sinking into the mud and earth along with hers, but much like Ashlynn, while she felt the brush of the other witch's energy, she followed her own path as her consciousness sank into the earth.

More than the roots of the trees around her, Heila's mind traced along the roots that connected to trees long fallen, stumps beneath the gentle waves on the surface of the lake. Here, there were a few trees that held on to life despite being almost completely submerged beneath the lake, but if she extended further out, beyond even those hearty trees, she could feel the roots of trees that had stood in places that were once dry land and now lay beneath the water's surface.

A feeling of calm peace enveloped her, nurturing her body with the gentle power of water that collected in the soil and roots of trees for hundreds and thousands of years.

Heila always felt small. It was the fate of everyone in the Horned Clan to feel like people from most clans towered over them and some, particularly the imposing giants like the Tuscans, made them feel so small that they dared not move for fear of being crushed beneath the feet of the powerful giants.

The lake also made her feel small, but this time, it wasn't a threatening or imposing kind of small. Rather, she felt connected to something so deep and so vast that she could never possibly contain all of the power it offered. The energy that flowed through her strengthened and nurtured her body like the waters of a river nurturing crops, but the power wasn't hers to keep and she couldn't take it away from here if she tried.

For the diminutive Willow Witch, it was enough to allow the waters of the lake to offer up what they had kept waiting for someone like her to claim. Not all of it, but a large enough portion that the Heila who emerged from the mud hours later felt as though she had grown to more than twice her previous size. Before, if she could have held a single bucket full of magical energy and put it to use for her, now she could manifest an entire bathtub. Moreover, she felt that if she repeated this process after some rest, she could make even more progress!

"My lady," Heila said as Aledia helped to pull Ashlynn from the thick, cloying mud. "We should return here when... My lady!" Heila cried, stunned by the boneless and limp appearance that Ashlynn presented when they pulled her from the mud. Worse, when Aledia wiped away the mud from Ashlynn's face, her complexion beneath the mud was pale and sickly.

"Dis, dis isn't right," Aledia said in a trembling voice. Moving quickly, she emptied a bucket of water over Ashlynn's body, abandoning courtesy in her haste to wash the mud and the glyphs beneath it from the skin of the Mother of Trees. "I, I don't know what dis is..." she said, giving Heila a panicked look.

Without thinking, Heila reached out toward the lake. The power she'd absorbed during her meditation thrummed through her body, making her feel larger than her diminutive frame. With a grasping motion of her hand, she felt the water rushing to meet her will, almost like an eager hound wishing to please its master.

A wave rose from the surface of the lake like a rolling wall of water that reached as high as most men's knees. It swept onto the beach, knocking aside the comfortable lounge chairs, dining tables, and fresh towels that waited for her and Ashlynn as it surged toward the pair of witches.

At Heila's direction, the water flowed over Ashlynn, briefly submerging her as it washed away the mud from her face and body. With another wave of her hand, Heila sent the wave back toward the lake, leaving Ashlynn's skin as fresh and bare as the day she was born among a collection of puddles glittering in the afternoon sun.

"My lady," Heila called out to Ashlynn, wrapping her arms around the other woman's torso and pulling her close.

-CAUGH- -GASP-

Ashlynn sputtered for a moment, expelling a mouthful of lakewater before she drew a deep, shuddering breath and opened her emerald eyes to meet Heila's worried gaze.

"I'm all right," Ashlynn said weakly. "Just very, very drained."

"Lady Ashlynn," Aledia said as she knelt in the mud and standing water. She placed her hands on her knees and lowered her body until her chin nearly touched the surface of the water before she spoke again. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. Dis ritual, it's never harmed no one before. It, it shouldn't have..."

"It's not your fault," Ashlynn said, raising an arm that felt like it had the strength of a three-week-old kitten to wave off the other woman's apology. "Your ritual helped me reach something... someone, very far from here. It's not your fault that I wore myself out doing so. You didn't hurt me at all," she said sincerely before offering a weak smile. "You may even have done me a great favor. So please, don't bow down like that, and hold your head and tail up high."

"Ashlynn," Heila said softly. "What happened to you? I didn't feel anything dangerous when I was in the mud but..."

"I encountered something like Cecile," Ashlynn said quietly. "I'm starting to believe that this is a power that belongs to our coven, to the Mother of Trees and her coven rather. I met a previous mother of trees who planted some kind of remnant of herself in another forest, far from here."

"The same way Cecile planted a portion of herself in the Ancient Willow?" Heila asked. It shouldn't be surprising if she thought about it, but somehow, she'd assumed that the power to preserve a ghostly remnant of Cecile had come from the Ancient Willow rather than the other way around. If this was actually a power that came from the Mother of Trees rather than the trees themselves, then did that mean that one day she would become something like Cecile had?

"I'll tell you later," Ashlynn said, giving Heila a gentle squeeze. "Right now, it's a little cold here in the water," Ashlynn added with a faint smile as she gestured to the puddles left by Heila's hasty magic. "Can we dry off? Maybe Aledia has something else for us to eat?"

"Of course," their reptilian host said, her tail swishing back and forth rapidly in embarrassment. "Let me help you up and get you properly washed and dried," she said, reaching out as gently as she could to

scoop Ashlynn up in her arms. "I have a chilled soup of smashed vegetables and herbs that should be gentle on your stomach and then we can work on restoring you."

Ashlynn wanted to protest that she didn't need anything more than the meal and a chance to dry off, but Aledia insisted on doing everything they could to help her recover from her exhaustion.

"Mother of Trees," Aledia said, bowing deeply as she presented a tray filled with a collection of smooth, polished stones, each one twice the size of a hen's egg. "Dese are bloodstones," she said, pointing to the red-veined green stones. "If you feel like you can trust yourself wit' us for one more ritual, den I can stimulate your blood and reinvigorate your body. I, I understand if you do not trust our ancient ways," she said humbly.

"I told you, didn't I?" Ashlynn said as she placed a hand on the other woman's scaly hand. Despite how draining her conversation with Claire du Gaal had been, the treatments that Aledia had provided so far had done a remarkable job of softening Ashlynn's skin, and the other woman's hand felt even rougher than usual under the tender skin of her palm.

"Your ritual helped me, even if I was exhausted afterward," she said in a firm tone that wouldn't accept argument, no matter how well-meaning. "If you believe that this will help, then I will accept it."

"Thank you, Mother of Trees," the reptilian woman said. "I'll heat the stones at once. Once dese are nice and warm, you jus' need to lie dere while I place dem on your body. De warmth of de earth will flow through you and I'll guide it where it needs to go wit' my hands on your skin. It won't hurt none, I promise you dat."

While Ashlynn waited for Aledia to prepare hot stones and a soft cushion for a ritual massage, complete with scented oils that smelled of fresh herbs and cypress needles, she explained her encounter to Heila whose brow furrowed in worry the more Ashlynn spoke.

"I've heard mention of Exemplars in old stories," Heila said as her mind struggled to recall stories that had once felt like distant tales told by her parents to frighten their pack of children before bedtime. As a child, they had been frightening tales but as an adult, she'd dismissed them as exaggerations told to keep her rebellious brothers in check. Perhaps there was more truth to those tales than she thought.

"But I've never heard anything about 'Saints' or 'Oracles.'" Heila added in a worried tone. "Just how many more horrors does the Church have to attack us with?"

"I don't know," Ashlynn admitted. One of her tutors had once said that many records regarding the Church were difficult to find and some texts were banned entirely. Just possessing a forbidden book could land someone in the hands of the Inquisition and given her own status, Ashlynn had never dared to investigate beyond the warning her tutor gave her.

"But Amahle may know more than we do," Ashlynn added. "Particularly about this other human Mother of Trees. So when we get back, I intend to see what she knows..."

Chapter 334: Seeking Answers

Compared to their first day in Crystal Lake City, the rest of their vacation suited Talauia's description of the city very well. It was comfortable and... sleepy. Aledia's ritual with bloodstones had done a great deal to restore Ashlynn's energy and by the time they left as day turned to twilight, Ashlynn had recovered enough that Jacques didn't even notice anything amiss. Though, in truth, that could have been Jacques's lack of observational skills more than anything else.

The one luxury souvenir that the witches treated themselves to was a pair of hammered copper bracelets set with polished stones in the shape of trees. They weren't expensive items, they spent a handful of silver tails on each of them, but to Ashlynn and Heila, they were a precious reminder of the time they spent together.

"Will you have one of these made for the next person to join the coven?" Heila asked as she inspected the wide bracelet closely, admiring the way the sun glittered off the pale blue stones arranged like willow leaves blowing in the wind. The pattern had been designed to mimic the mark of the witch on her left shoulder blade. Since she couldn't see the mark itself without using a mirror, Ashlynn had suggested a keepsake patterned after it as a token that they could share visibly.

In truth, Ashlynn didn't want Heila to harbor the same complex feelings she held about her own mark of the witch. After years of hiding it in fear, it was difficult to see the mark as beautiful the way Nyrielle often praised it. At best, she was somewhat ambivalent about it. For Heila, however, she hoped that her diminutive friend would feel only pride and a sense of connection to their coven.

"I don't think it will be the same for everyone," Ashlynn said as she thought about who else might be joining their coven. "These aren't just about being part of the coven. They're also about being here, in

Crystal Lake City, together. So if I had something like this made for someone else, I would want it to be something that meant just as much to them as our vacation together meant to us."

"I see," Heila said with a warm, glowing smile on her face as she clutched the bracelet to her chest. "Thank you, Ashlynn."

"Mmm," Ashlynn said, ruffling Heila's hair affectionately. "You're welcome."

In the end, the witches spent four days in Crystal Lake City. It was sufficient to rest and recover with plenty of time to see the few attractions that the city had to offer outsiders, but in the end, Ashlynn's encounter with Claire du Gaal weighed on her. Though they'd intended to stay for an entire week, no one complained when she said she wanted to return early to speak to Amahle about the strange warning she'd been given but the first human witch.

The journey back through the Briar felt longer than the trip out to Crystal Lake City had been, with each bend in the waterway increasing Ashlynn's desire to find answers to the questions that plagued her since her encounter with her predecessor. By the time they reached Amahle's home, questions about Claire's warnings had coiled so tightly in her chest that she barely took time to settle their belongings before seeking out the Mother of Thorns.

"I've been expecting you for several days now, Little Sister," Amahle said when Ashlynn returned to the Mother of Thorn's home within the Briar. "Come, sit a spell with me and have some lemonade," she added, pouring a tall, cool glass of the sweet and tart beverage for Ashlynn. "Little Heila can settle your things while we talk."

"It's fine if she stays," Ashlynn said, holding up a hand. "I don't like keeping secrets from my family. If I can't trust family..."

"This isn't about trust, darling," Amahle said as she folded her spider-like limbs behind her and took a seat at the table across from Ashlynn. "It's about choices. After I tell you, then you can choose to tell Heila everything or nothing. That's your choice to make. If Heila stays, then I'm taking that choice away from you."

"Right now, it may not matter," Amahle added, giving Heila a gentle look. "You two are close, and you always will be. Little Heila is your first after all. That will always make her different. But there are habits

you should learn now, and this is one of them. It will serve you well when you return home to expand your coven."

"My lady," Heila said softly. "It's fine. You can tell me later, or not. Since it concerns another Mother of the Earth, you should discuss it together first," she added with a slight curtsey to the Mother of Thorns.

"I'll tell you later then," Ashlynn said, returning her attention to the Mother of Thorns and sipping at the cool, refreshing lemonade. "You said you've been expecting me to come back early? Did you feel what happened?"

Darling," Amahle said with a light laugh. "My webs extend all across the Briar. When you stretched past the lake, it was impossible to miss it. You must have buried yourself in the earth up to your neck to reach so far away, didn't you? You surprised me, I didn't think you'd be so eager to 'take root' to feel the great web of trees."

"Great web of trees?" Ashlynn asked as several questions immediately occurred to her. "You mean the feeling that the roots of trees are all interconnected? Is that similar to the web you've woven through the Briar?"

"Slow down, slow down," Amahle said with a smile. "The roots of trees, they're rarely touching each other, they try to avoid each other more than anything, but they come very close sometimes, close enough for energy to flow from one to the next. You've seen the canals in High Fen City."

"It's the same with trees," the older witch explained. "Energy moves easily from one to the next as long as there are trees nearby. The further you follow it away from your own body, though, the greater the burden it places on you to make use of it."

"I met someone else when I reached out over the 'great web of trees,'" Ashlynn said, her hands tightening on her cup as she recalled her encounter with Claire. "She said she was the first human witch and a previous Mother of Trees."

Strangely, Amahle didn't seem surprised by what Ashlynn had to say. Instead, the look that passed over her face was one of resignation, as if she had expected this moment to come sooner or later.

But if that was the case, if Amahle had always known that there had been another human witch who had been the Mother of Trees, why hadn't she mentioned it until Ashlynn found out for herself? So far, the Mother of Thorns had never given her any reason to suspect that she held hidden motives, but now that Ashlynn made it impossible to keep the secret any longer, would Amahle tell her the truth? Or had she found something that the older witch truly didn't want her to know?

Chapter 335: Children of the Heavens

"Ah, so it's come to her has it?" Amahle said with a heavy sigh. With a series of clicks as she used her spider-like limbs to stand, Amahle walked across the room to a bookshelf, sorting through some of the least used tomes on the top shelf before retrieving an old and dusty leather-bound book and returning to the table.

The book itself bore no title and the leather cover on the book looked like it had suffered a number of abuses over the years. From the scars and creases on the cover that had worn smooth with time, Ashlynn guessed that it was more of a notebook than a formal publication of any sort. But to be kept around for so long and from the reverent way that Amahle handled it, it was clearly no ordinary journal.

"I always intended to tell you about her," Amahle said as she took her seat. "Maybe not as soon as you came back from vacation, but certainly before you could leave the Briar. This isn't a secret that should be kept from you after all."

"You can't escape confronting these things once you return home," the older witch added. "I wouldn't ask you to, and if I thought that you had any hope of living the rest of your life away from other humans, I would ask you to avoid getting involved in these matters."

"I know that's impossible, and unreasonable to ask as well," Amahle said with a heavy sigh. "You have unfinished business in human lands and family there as well. Staying apart from this is impossible, so I will tell you everything I can in the hopes that the knowledge will help to keep you safe when you return."

"Then, did you know her? The human Mother of Trees?" Ashlynn asked. Amahle had never revealed her age to her, but the Kingdom of Gaal was as nearly the same age as Nyrielle. It had been the First Crusade, launched by Charles the First, that drove Nyrielle's parents from their homes to seek shelter in the Vale of Mists in the first place. But even though Nyrielle was almost as old as the Kingdom of Gaal, she had yet to be born at the time of Claire du Gaal's death. If Amahle was even older...

"I didn't know her," Amahle said with a shake of her head. "She can be considered my 'big sister' in the same way that you're my 'little sister.' We were both taught by the previous Mother of Storms, but Sister Claire died decades before I was born. It was a long time ago," she said, brushing her fingers across the surface of the ancient book before she opened it to reveal page after page of precise eldritch script in an older dialect than Ashlynn had seen outside of Nyrielle's library.

Ghosts danced among the many pupils in Amahle's eyes and her gaze grew distant as if she could see the steel-haired woman of the Gull Wing Clan who had patiently tutored her in much the same way that she now tutored Ashlynn.

She had always found the meticulous precision of her teacher's methods at odds with the wild, often chaotic energy she commanded but that very contradiction had helped her to understand that as the Mother of Thorns, she could define for herself what it meant to surround herself with sharp, often deadly power. The power didn't have to define the kind of person that she would become.

"Tell me," Amahle said quietly, her crimson eyes never leaving the words written in her teacher's neat, precise hand. "What did you and Claire talk about? If she's preserved a portion of her spirit and her power, she must have had some purpose in doing so."

What Claire and Cecile had done was certainly possible for members of Amahle's coven. Thorns could dig themselves into the earth and take root just as easily as trees, though it was hard for many to endure as long.

The difficulty, however, was so great and the price was so high that even Amahle couldn't imagine something that would drive her to use such a dark ritual. For a human raised in the traditions of their Church to do so, knowing that they were binding themselves to a land far from the Heavenly Shores... Surely there must have been a powerful reason to go to such lengths.

"I don't know about her purpose," Ashlynn said slowly. "She told me that if I wanted more answers, I would need to find the forest near her family's lands in the Kingdom of Gaal. She did give me a warning though. About the Church, the Saint, and the people she referred to as 'Oracles.' Do you, do you know what she was talking about?"

"So it really was the Church that took her in the end," Amahle said, closing her eyes and sighing heavily. "We thought as much but the Church keeps their secrets close. By the time my teacher learned of Claire's death, it was both too late and far too dangerous to search for answers in human territory."

"This book," she said, tracing a finger gently around the edge of the well-worn journal. "It contains all of my teacher's notes, everything she was able to learn about the Church before she passed the task on to me."

"The latter half of the book contains my notes," she added, opening her eyes and flipping through the book. "I spent years interrogating a captured Inquisitor before I began to fill in the missing pieces. Lady Nyrielle has brought me the occasional Templar or High Priest over the years as well as part of our bargain. In exchange, I tutored Zedya for a number of years."

"Nyrielle captured people from the Church and gave them to you for... interrogation?" Ashlynn said, shaken by the concept. The entire time she'd spent with Amahle, she'd taken her for a kind and nurturing older sister who worked hard to keep her coven safe. Now, however, seeing the cold look in the other woman's crimson eyes, she wondered just what had happened for the Mother of Thorns to harbor so much hostility toward the Church.

Perhaps it shouldn't have surprised her. With as much hostility as Amahle's coven had reason to have toward vampires in general, there must have been some kind of basis for cooperation between them or Zedya would never have studied here and Nyrielle wouldn't have left Ashlynn alone with Amahle as easily as she had.

But to think that their relationship had been forged through an exchange of prisoners... It was the kind of cold, calculated move that she expected of the Nyrielle who had ruled over the Vale of Mists through generation after generation of Lothian wars. The Nyrielle who had lost many of the feelings that once gave warmth to her heart could certainly do something so calculated. The Nyrielle that had won her heart, however... Ashlynn couldn't help but wonder if today's Nyrielle would be capable of making the same decisions.

"We are called Mothers of the Earth, and we are born as Children of the Earth," Amahle said, pulling Ashlynn's attention back to the present as she flipped through the book until she found a page that looked like a map of the night sky. "As Mothers of the Earth, we hold the power of Witchcraft. But there are others who hold a different power," she said slowly.

"In times long past, they were called the Children of the Heavens," Amahle said, her voice growing darker as crimson energy began to flicker along the tips of her spider-like limbs. "They were the Oracles who held the power of Prophecy."

Chapter 336: Holding Power

"In times long past, they were called the Children of the Heavens. They were the Oracles who held the power of Prophecy."

Amahle's words struck Ashlynn like a bolt of lightning. She had never heard the term 'Oracle' before, but no one who had been raised within the Church of the Holy Lord of Light was unfamiliar with the term 'Prophecy.'

"You, you're talking about Berosus, the Great Prophet of the Holy Lord of Light," Ashlynn whispered in a voice that still held a hint of reverence for one of the most holy figures within the Church. "The Great Prophet who foresaw the rise of mankind and, with his disciples, used the stars to chart humanity's path to the Heavenly Shores."

"I suppose I am," Amahle said with a heavy sigh. Her spider-like limbs twitched in agitation but she took several deep breaths and forced her heart to slow, banishing the crimson energy that threatened to rampage as she thought about the human's 'Church' and the damage it had done to the natural order of things.

"In the history known to your Church, there was a time when witches and Eldritch clans walked the lands that humans came from," Amahle said slowly. "Has your church taught you what happened to them?"

"The Church teaches that the Great Prophet unified mankind against the evils of the land, purging witches and 'demons' alike," Ashlynn said slowly. "Then, the disciples of the Great Prophet founded the seven nations, ushering in more than a century of peace. There are more than seven nations now, but every king who rules in the old countries claims to be descended from the Great Prophet or his disciples."

"True enough," Amahle said as she left the table to fetch a bottle of fortified wine and two small wooden cups. Some conversations, it seemed, required something stronger than lemonade in order to wash the bitterness from her tongue. "At least, true enough according to the ones I interrogated. The Inquisitor referred several times to 'sealed histories', though it seems his access to those records was incomplete."

"Are you," Ashlynn started before a knot formed in her throat as she struggled to put her turbulent thoughts into words. "Are you saying that the Great Prophet Berosus was like us? That... that he wasn't an emissary of the Holy Lord of Light, but that he was just a person with strong magic?"

"Oracles have as much in common with Witches as Witches have in common with Vampires," Amahle said, emptying her cup of wine in a single swallow before pouring another cup and one for Ashlynn as well. "But there is something that should be true of all of us. How is it you came to be the Mother of Trees, Ashlynn? Where did your power come from?"

"I, I was born with it," Ashlynn said, taking a polite sip of wine before setting the cup farther away from her than the lemonade. She knew her own weakness when it came to strong drink and she wanted to be clearheaded for this. "Nyrielle once said that the world chooses us. She was born a vampire the same way I was born a witch. No one knows why it happens, only that it does."

For Ashlynn, that had been explanation enough. She wasn't deeply concerned with 'why' she had the power she'd been born to. Instead, she directed her focus on how to master the power she'd been given and once she did, what she could do with it. Questions about why were much less important than questions about what she should do.

"The Vampires believe that they have a role to play in the natural order of things," Amahle said. "Witches believe that we are part of the natural order but that nature holds no desire for how we shape the natural order. Whether either of them is right, who's to say? But there is one thing that we do know."

"Whether it is our marks or the nature of our powers," Amahle said as her crimson eyes began to glow with a trace of lurid red energy. "There is only one of us at any given time with dominion over our power. There are many Mothers of the Earth, but for a new Mother of Trees to be born, the old one must die. The power must return to the world before it can find its way to the next person who will bear it. There has never been an instance recorded anywhere of two people holding the same power at the same time."

"So, if the Great Prophet was an Oracle, then he was the person selected to hold whatever version of an Oracle's power he held at the time," Ashlynn said as she fit the pieces together in her mind. "And he used that power to establish the Church of the Holy Lord of Light?"

"Remember when I said that the Oracles were once called 'Children of the Heavens'?" Amahle said, tapping the map of the night sky in the well-worn journal with one of her spider-like limbs. "My teacher

and I, we believe that your 'Great Prophet' was the Oracle of the Sun. He is said to have had a disciple who could read the future in the stars, but we don't believe that this person was a subordinate Oracle the way Heila is a member of your coven."

"We think that he was the 'Oracle of the Stars'," Amahle explained. "Why he chose to serve without the recognition given to your 'Great Prophet', we can only guess. But there is something strange about Oracles ever since the establishment of the Church of the Holy Lord of Light. Within a few hundred years, Oracles stopped being born on this continent. At the same time, according to the histories of the Church, Witches stopped appearing in their lands."

"You think that the Church did something to prevent witches from challenging their rule in the old countries?" Ashlynn said. She wasn't entirely sure that such a thing was possible. Rather, she thought that when witches were born in the old countries, they were killed as infants as soon as their marks were seen.

If any witch survived to grow into their powers, the Inquisition would likely hunt them down and potentially erase any record that they'd ever existed. That felt far more likely to her than the idea that the Church had the power to stop a witch from being born in their lands. After all, if they had that power, then how was it that she was born as a witch in the first place?

"I think the world is trying to protect us from the Church," Amahle said. "Because the Inquisitor told me something that shouldn't be possible. When a witch dies, our power returns to the earth. The same is true when a vampire is slain. But when the Saints of the Church grow old and approach death, a successor is chosen to inherit their power."

"The reason that your predecessor gave you the warning she gave you," Amahle said after taking another deep drink of strong wine. "Is likely because of something else I learned from the Inquisitor I spoke with. If the Inquisition ever captures a witch like Heila or Jacques, they will kill them without hesitation."

"But if they capture either of us," Amahle added darkly. "They have been ordered to capture us alive at all costs and to bring us before the Saint in their Holy City. Now, just why do you think it is that they would do such a thing?"

The answer seemed obvious. The way that Amahle had explained everything, there was very little room for doubt in her mind about what had happened to the Oracles. What she struggled with, however, was the way Amahle had framed parts of it.

To Amahle, the return of a person's power to the earth was natural and normal. But Ashlynn had grown up in a world where fathers passed their titles and lands to their sons. Even merchants worked hard to pass on more power and wealth to their children than their parents had handed to them.

So if the Church wanted to pass on the power of an Oracle to a chosen heir, then, didn't that make sense? After all, the Great Prophet had died long ago, but he had written that there would always be a chosen few who would watch over the children of the Holy Lord of Light, guiding them to reach the Heavenly Shores and protecting them from evil. From the perspective of the Church, this must have felt like something that wasn't just good and godly, it was necessary.

But if they wanted to capture witches like her or Amahle alive... if the Church wanted power that had nothing to do with the Holy Lord of Light, then what could their reason be? Did they want to take it for themselves? Or were they trying to keep it out of the hands of others? Perhaps it was both.

"I don't know," Ashlynn said, refusing to draw the conclusion that Amahle wanted her to reach without a chance to learn more for herself. "But I intend to find out," she added in a voice that held all the strength and resilience of a mighty oak. "And I will not let our covens be subjugated by the Church, no matter what."

"Good. It's a good place to start," Amahle said, unknowingly echoing Claire du Gaal's words. "You've only just returned. Tonight, we should have a welcome home feast to celebrate, even though you weren't gone for long," the Mother of Thorns said as she used her spider-like limbs to stand.

"But after that, it's time to put a sharper edge on your training," she added. "We only have a few months left before you need to return home. Between now and then, I will do everything I can to help you and Heila prepare for what you may face from the Church if they learn the truth of your existence. At the very least, I expect you to handle something as simple as a Giant Thornback Alligator by yourselves before I let you go."

"I lost an elder sister that I never knew to the Church," she said in a voice almost too soft to hear. "I won't lose you to them as well."

"It won't come to that," Ashlynn said softly, leaving her seat at the table to wrap her arms around Amahle in a gentle hug. "Whatever happens, we'll get through it together. Your coven and mine, Nyrielle and her progeny too. All of us," she said softly.

It was a simple promise and one that seemed feeble after everything she'd just heard about the powers that shaped the Church, but she meant it. First, she would return home and deliver her long overdue retribution to Owain. Everything else, she could only face after that, but when the time came, she knew that she wouldn't face it alone.

Chapter 337: Entering the Arena

A chill autumn breeze swept through the streets of High Fen City, dancing over the city's many canals and tugging at the cloaks of people who hurried to warmer places or at least found shelter away from the wind. In the fields outside the city, workers loaded the last of the fall harvest onto heavy barges bound for the city, piling them high with everything from bright orange pumpkins to dull brown potatoes.

Inside the city, however, throngs of people clustered together, flowing like water through the canals on their way to the massive arena that served as the city's beating heart. The towering marble-covered structure had been expanded several times since the establishment of the High Fen, and each time, the collection of larger-than-life marble statues depicting champions of eras long past grew until it resembled not only a grand fighting arena but a temple dedicated to the worship of bloodsport.

"You really believe it?" a tall, gangly man from the Glass Eyed Clan said, lowering his head to talk to his shorter, serpentine companion. "Yotsun isn't giving up is he?"

"It's only day five," the serpentine man beside him said as he glided effortlessly through the crush of people. "There's no way that greedy old goat will give up this soon, especially when none of the men he's sent have been killed. I hear that Yotsun brought in outsiders at great expense to put a stop to this as soon as he can. He doesn't even care about winning anymore, he's just terrified of losing."

"Serves him right," the first man said. "He's lucky that he hasn't provoked a slaughter yet, but if you ask me, I'd rather be dead than have an arm torn from its socket. It's one thing to look down on the Vale of Mists for losing the wealth it had centuries ago, but anyone betting against their strength is a fool who deserves what they get!"

Elsewhere in the crowd, several eager spectators shouted at the ticket sellers, each vying for opportunities to secure a prized seat.

"I want to be in the east rose rows," one man shouted, holding up a pouch full of silver tails. "It doesn't matter how high up it is, as long as I'm on the east side. I'll pay double for the front seats of East Rose!"

"Idiot, why do you want to pay extra for the east rose seats?" A man next to him said. "If you can pay that much, pay for the hyacinth seats, or the orchid seats even!"

"Who's the idiot," the man sneered as she shouldered his way forward to buy his tickets. "East Rose faces the High Lady's personal box! I don't care about the fight, I want to see High Lady Erna and the witch! What's important about a fight when you could have a chance to gaze down on the most powerful women in all of High Fen?"

"I'm sorry," a stone-faced serpentine man said as he looked at the eager customer. "The only seats I have left for you on the upper levels are on Western Rose, above the High Lady's box. The view of the fight will be just as good, but I'm afraid you won't be able to see into the box."

"What! That's not fair! Didn't you tell the fellow three men ahead of me that there were plenty of seats?"

"As I said," the serpentine attendant said. "The only tickets I have for YOU are in Western Rose. Do you want the tickets? Or should I move to the next patron?"

"I, I... I want the tickets," the man said, opening his purse to begin counting out silver tails. "Maybe... maybe I can find someone to trade..."

Inside the Arena, in a large private box located halfway up one side of the arena, directly in the center, High Lady Erna watched the seats fill with her enthusiastic citizens with a smile on her face that revealed a hint of her venomous fangs.

Four hearths burned in the private box, giving its occupants the illusion that they were luxuriating in the summer sun rather than finding shelter from the cold autumn wind as they watched a pair of veteran gladiators fighting on the sands below.

While the private box held many seats for watching the fight below, two gilded thrones occupied the very front of the box, placing Lady Erna and her distinguished guest in full view of the thousands of people rushing to their seats.

Some of those people stopped and stared once they reached their seat but no one dared to look too long. After all, one of the thrones was occupied by High Lady Erna herself, while the other held the newborn Mother of Trees.

While some might be bold enough to stare at the blond beauty sitting next to their High Lady, most had heard rumors that she wasn't only a witch, but the Seneschal of the Blood Princess and that she had already been claimed body and soul by the powerful vampire. A man must be bold in life, but there were limits to how bold he could be, and coveting the Blood Princess's woman was as good as courting death.

"Is it me, or are the crowds even larger today?" Ashlynn asked lightly as she sipped at a sparkling apple cider. The beverage was light and crisp, like biting into a tart apple with bubbles that tickled her nose. Most importantly, while it was possible to become intoxicated on the fizzy beverage, it was much, much more difficult than if she tried drinking High Lady Erna's fortified wine.

The crowds gathering in the arena weren't just large, they were staggering. If every seat were filled, with people standing in the galleries and filling the isles the way that High Lady Erna said happened during Nyrielle's bloody battles in the arena, it could hold more people than the entire population of the Vale of Mists.

Already, more than ten thousand people had packed into the arena today, and the last arrivals were still making their ways toward their seats. When Ashlynn compared it to the tournaments where knights contested for honors and trophies, the contests she'd witnessed in human lands paled in comparison to this grand spectacle. Perhaps the annual tournament in the Royal Capital could draw such crowds, but outside of that, very little would, and very few common folk would even be allowed to attend.

Yet here, this grand spectacle was taking place not because it was an annual event or because the local ruler had enticed the people to watch. No, all of this was happening because one old man, the descendant of members of the Horned Clan who fled from the Vale of Mists, had insulted the Vale of Mists in front of Heila at the banquet where she and Ashlynn were welcomed back to the city.

One stubborn old man who wouldn't back down from insistence that no one else in the Vale of Mists was worthy of fighting on behalf of the Blood Princess... and one equally stubborn young witch, not

more than four feet tall, had created a sensation that consumed High Fen City and drew thousands of people to this arena.

Some of them came to see a stubborn merchant humbled, others came to see a proud young woman rise, but all of them, every last man woman, and child, had come to see blood on the arena sands.....

Chapter 338: Can She Win?

"Is it me, or are the crowds even larger today?"

Ashlynn's simple question prompted several people in the private box to crane their necks, looking out at the gathering crowds and trying to compare them to yesterday. Perhaps the crowd was larger, but in a space so vast, it was hard to say. Perhaps there were another thousand people? Two thousand? No one dared venture a guess, though one person felt it was more likely than not.

"Tomorrow is a rest day for the field workers," High Lady Erna explained as she sipped on a wine that was such a deep red that it appeared almost purple. "Since they don't have to work tomorrow, they're more willing to indulge today. I expect the crowds will be even larger tomorrow."

"High Lady, you sound very confident that our friend will win again today," a light, feminine voice said from the row of seats behind the thrones. "She's fought forty men already. Do you really think she can win again today? They say that Yotsun hired some extraordinary mercenaries to fight in today's battle."

"Too easy, too easy," Talauia said. Her wings hummed with a faint, high-pitched wine that matched her excitement and she hovered an inch or two above her chair before she realized what she was doing and forced herself to calm down. "Heila won't lose, she'll never lose. Not in something like this," the Thistle Witch said confidently.

"I know she's already one four times," the serpentine woman said. "But shouldn't she be getting tired by now? She can't keep this up forever, can she?" If the first day's victory could be attributed to people underestimating the diminutive young witch, then the fights from the second day on could only be considered increasingly desperate attempts to break her down and find some weakness that could be exploited.

The injuries that Heila sustained on the third day were fairly light and she was able to use her own witchcraft to recover from them easily enough. It was yesterday's bloody battle that combined sorcerers

with gladiators to besiege the young witch that seemed to have pushed Heila to the edge, requiring Ashlynn to personally tend to her wounds afterward.

"There's too much at stake for Heila to back down now, Nereida," Ashlynn said, addressing the woman that Heila had befriended when Jacques brought her to one of the smaller arenas in High Fen City during their last visit.

It had surprised Ashlynn a bit to learn that Heila had made good enough friends in such a brief period of time that she insisted on visiting Nereida, Eusebia, and Delmatia the day after their arrival in High Fen City. It turned out that Heila wasn't only acting out of friendship, there had been some practical purpose to her decision to engage with the women, but the more time Ashlynn spent with the trio of wealthy women from the Scaled Clan, the more she understood why Heila liked them.

Ashlynn's first impression of Nereida at the Masquerade Ball had been mild. She struck her as not being very different from the countless wives of wealthy merchants she'd seen in her father's court in Blackwell County. She was exceptionally well mannered, well educated, and had a refined taste that prized the finer things in life. When she'd met Jacques, the man had instantly dismissed her as a blood-sucking mosquito and tried to keep her away from Ashlynn.

The more Ashlynn came to know her over the past few days, the more she came to respect the woman. Certainly, when Heila asked for Nereida's help to find a hatter who could craft traveling hats and a fancier hat for Ashlynn, there had been an element of currying favor in the effort the serpentine woman put into pleasing them. But that kind of social maneuvering was so expected that Ashlynn would have been more hesitant if Nereida didn't try to take advantage in small ways than if she did.

But beneath the social climbing habits that seemed like second nature to the wives of many wealthy and well connected men, Ashlynn found a genuine charm and a touching sense of honor and loyalty. It couldn't have been easy to pick sides between an annoyed Heila and a prickly Sandbox Witch, but when the two had been at odds, Nereida made her decision and stuck by Heila's side.

In the end, the whole conflict had been a misunderstanding, one that was mostly Jacques' fault. But Nereida had no way of knowing that when she chose to accompany Heila and even now, she was risking offending one of her husband's business rivals just by coming to sit with Ashlynn and watch Heila fight.

"This would have been fine if that fool hadn't tried to use Mistress Nyrielle as a way to shame the rest of the Vale of Mists," Ashlynn said, continuing her conversation with the serpentine woman. "But once he

claimed that the only way the Vale could rise again would be for Mistress Nyrielle to fight another ten days in the arena to assemble another band of champions from among the warriors here..."

"Oh?" High Lady Erna said with a teasing smile. "So do you in the Vale look down on our gladiators here in the High Fen?"

"A little bit, yes," Ashlynn admitted directly. She might have tried to put things more tactfully before, but after spending so much time around the Eldritch, she had learned that it was better to challenge power directly rather than to attempt to flatter those with significant strength.

"Your gladiators are very strong," Ashlynn acknowledged. "But they fight for money and for the entertainment of the crowd. This fight right now," she said, gesturing to the men fighting in the arena below. "They may not have choreographed the fight in advance, but they're clearly giving each other chances to recover and they're not attempting fatal blows, even when there's an opportunity."

"The strongest people in the High Fen aren't the gladiators in the arena," Ashlynn said. "Gladiators are entertainers. It may be deadly entertainment at times, but they still fight to entertain. No one in the Vale of Mists fights for entertainment. They aren't gladiators, they're soldiers and they fight to win wars. I would be more nervous if Heila was fighting the soldiers of the High Fen, but as long as they're gladiators, I'm not very worried."

"Perhaps today there will be some reason to worry," the High Lady said with a wicked smile. "I've confirmed the identities of the warriors that Yotsun has hired today."

"Who are they, who are they?" Talauia said eagerly. "Are they famous from somewhere else? Sorcerers from the High Pass maybe? They can't be vampires," she said, glancing at the sun high overhead. "So what kind of warriors could they be?"

"The challenge was that she had to fight ten men, every day, for ten days," High Lady Erna said. "Since the only limit is on the number of men facing her, Yotsun has decided to recruit the most individually powerful men he could find. In this case, he's hired a Tuscan hunting party to challenge your Willow Witch."

The moment Erna mentioned Tuscans, Ashlynn's blood ran cold. Visions of the towering, shaggy men with giant ivory tusks and long flexible trunks thundered through her mind along with the sickening

sound of ice cracking beneath their feet. The last time they'd fought Tuscan hunters, one of their group had died, and everyone else only barely survived.

Now, Heila would have to face ten of them... and she would have to do it alone.

Chapter 339: Taking the Stage

Beneath the arena, Heila settled her hat in place and gave the rest of her tools a cursory examination while she waited for the match before hers to conclude.

The hat itself had been a project that she could never have completed without help from Jacques. Her 'War Hat' had been made from the leathery hide of the Giant Thornback Alligator that she and Ashlynn hunted for their 'graduation assignment.' Not only did the alligator skin give it an imposing look, but Jacques had also used a bit of his own thorny magic to empower a ring of bony thorns around the center cone of the hat, giving the hat's protective aura a sharp edge.

At her hip, she wore a long, coiled willow whip on one side, balanced by her wand, and a slender small sword on the other. The sword, named Snow Fang, had been carved from the horn of Elder Paulus, the traitorous Frost Walker who schemed against young lord Hauke, Lady Ashlynn, and everyone else in their group.

Heila hadn't had long to practice with the small sword. She'd explained to Artificer Erkembalt when they commissioned the weapon that she didn't know how to fight with a sword. The eclectic artificer, however, had never intended for the blade's edge to be its most deadly feature. Instead, he'd preserved as much of Elder Paulus' sorcery as possible within the horn-blade in the hopes that Heila could eventually learn to challenge it.

At the time, perhaps only Zedya had expected that Heila would one day become a witch, capable of using it to even greater effect, but she doubted anyone expected that she would be more attuned with water and therefore snow than even Ashlynn was. Because of that, the Snow Fang in her hands was far more dangerous than it would have been in the hands of anyone else in Nyrielle's household, including the highly skilled Zedya.

After yesterday's harrowing battle, Heila wished that Captain Lennart and his men had already arrived so she could borrow an appropriate set of armor from one of the Horned soldiers in his troop. Since she couldn't, High Lady Erna had indulged her with a tunic made of fine steel scales that made her feel as though she'd temporarily joined the Scaled Clan. The armor protected her every bit as well as a coat of

mail from the Vale of Mist would have, and for that, she was deeply thankful. Still, she couldn't help but feel like she wasn't representing the Vale well while wearing borrowed armor.

Suddenly, the crowd began to roar as the 'warm up' match came to a close. From where she stood behind a massive iron gate, Heila couldn't see who had won or lost but it hardly mattered. After four days in the arena, she'd become accustomed to the spectacle.

"If Jacques had come with us, what would he say about me now?" Heila wondered. After the way she'd teased him for using a staged battle in a smaller arena to demonstrate that he was capable of defending Ashlynn, even from the men who were already guarding her... Heila's opinion of bloodsport had been very low at the time.

"He'd probably cheer for me," she said with a faint smile on her lips. Jacques wouldn't hold the old grudge against her. He'd let go of far worse. Perhaps, one day, she'd learn from his example, but right now, as chains began to clank and strain and the iron gates rose, her blood couldn't help but boil as she recalled the smug face of the rotund merchant who provoked this mess.

When they arrived in High Fen City, they didn't resemble important dignitaries at all. After weeks on horseback with nothing more than a pair of pack horses to accompany the mares they rode, they resembled common peddlers more than powerful witches. At the time, after spending the entire summer under the relentless training of the Mother of Thorns, neither Ashlynn nor Heila cared much for appearances.

When they announced themselves at the gates and requested an escort to the palace, only the presence of Talauia managed to convince the guards they really were the witches they claimed to be. By the time High Lady Erna held a welcoming banquet for them two days later, rumors had already flown across half the city that the Mother of Trees and the Willow Witch were poor beggars from the Vale of Mists, clinging to the fame of the Blood Princess in the hopes of finding some charity in High Fen City.

Ashlynn ignored it. Her lady was always better at rising above, as if no insult could reach the lofty hearts where her heart dwelled. Heila tried to do her best to do the same until she encountered the detestable Yotsun, praising his great-grandfather's foresight for abandoning the Vale of Mists when High Lord Torbin fell and Nyrielle was forced to retreat across the mountains to gather allies to retake the Vale. He even boasted that, were it not for Nyrielle's status as the Blood Princess, he would brave the squalor of the Vale of Mists to bring his distant cousins home to civilized lands.

One thing led to another, and the next thing Heila knew, she was shouting that she would show the people of High Fen City that Lady Nyrielle wasn't the only one who could fight for ten days in the arena to find champions to fight against the Vale's enemies. Perhaps, after this, she would follow Lady Ashlynn's example and avoid drinking anything that the serpentine High Lady served at her parties unless it was fruit juice. The wine had clearly been a mistake!

"High Lady Erna baited me into this," Heila muttered, lowering the brim of her War Hat and striding out onto the bright sands of the arena. A sound like thunder rose as she walked calmly towards the center of the arena, the sounds of thousands of feet stomping and tails slapping the ground in excitement.

"Willow Whip!"

"Willow Whip!"

"Willow Whip!"

The moniker the people had chosen for her wasn't as grand or fearsome as 'Blood Princess' but that suited Heila just fine. If anyone had a grand title in this place, it should be the Eldritch Lady of the Vale, and after her, only Ashlynn was deserving of a grand title. For Heila, it was enough to know that people knew she was different from her predecessor.

Cecile had been a staunch pacifist who believed that the gifts of the Willow Tree were only to be used to treat the sick and heal the wounded. But Heila knew all too well that it took people with the courage to stand up and fight to prevent innocent families from being injured in the first place.

In the stands, some people whispered and pointed, many of them amazed to see Heila moving so easily and standing so tall and proud at the center of the arena.

"They carried her out on a stretcher yesterday," one man said to his companion. "I thought it was a hollow victory. You know those thugs nearly crushed her chest yesterday!"

"She coughed so much blood," a young woman nearby said. Her eyes glittered as she looked down on Heila's shining figure, resplendent in her scale armor and looking cool and composed in the shade of her wide-brimmed hat. "They must have broken half her ribs, but still..."

"They say there is no injury that the Mother of Thorns can't heal, and the Mother of Trees is supposed to be an even greater healer," a third man interjected. "People say she hadn't awakened to her powers yet when she visited in the spring, but look at her Willow Witch, standing there as good as new..."

"Do you think that the Mother of Trees would heal my wounds?" A fourth man said, only to draw an immediate punch from his muscular companion.

"Stop complaining about your 'wounded heart', it's dangerous talk," he added, his eyes darting around to make sure they hadn't drawn the ire of anyone working for the arena. "Just stay away from folk so far above you if you know what's good for you!"

Suddenly, as Heila stood in the center of the arena, letting the chants and cheers of the crowd envelop her like the waters of the sea, the gates on the opposite side of the arena began to clank and move.

The crowd went quiet as the audience turned to stare at the towering figures who lumbered out of the iron gates. Long shaggy hair covered their bodies and gleaming ivory tusks had been studded with polished iron spikes that glittered in the midday sun like deadly jewels.

Deep rumbles echoed from the long, flexible trunks of the towering giants before all ten men pointed their trunks at the sky and unleashed a mighty trumpet blast.

-BRRRRUUUUUUMMMMMM-

The sound shook the arena and people looked on in horror as the shaggy giants arranged themselves into a loose formation. Ten men. Ten men, and each of them stood at least twelve feet tall, arrayed against a single woman standing alone in the center of the arena.

Angered shouts began to fill the air and some people began to throw food at a private box on the opposite side of the arena from the one where High Lady Erna and the Mother of Trees sat. Wasn't this too much? Did Yotsun have no shame?

But suddenly, people noticed movement in the High Lady's box. A hush fell over the crowd as a dazzling woman with blonde hair wearing an emerald green witch's hat stood up from her throne and strode to

the edge of the box. Everyone collectively leaned in her direction, waiting to hear what the Willow Witch's master would say about the obviously unfair fight.

"Heila, my child," Ashlynn said, her emerald eyes flashing with a pale glow as she called on the wind to carry her voice to every seat in the arena. "I only have one question for you..."

Chapter 340: Very Useful

"Heila, my child. I have only one question for you..."

Ashlynn's calm, clear voice swept over the crowd like a soothing balm, easing troubled hearts who were afraid they were about to witness the merciless killing of a rising champion. Clearly, the Mother of Trees was about to ask if her Willow Witch wanted her to intercede. With a request from on high, it would give Yotsun a dignified means of backing down and everything would end well.

Truly, this Mother of Trees was both powerful and kind! It was no wonder that she had easily captured the hearts and minds of so many common folk in High Fen City.

"But first, I have a question for friend Yotsun about these warriors you've hired," Ashlynn said, shifting her gaze to the far end of the arena. "Tell me, master Yotsun, since these Tuscan Hunters aren't gladiators of High Fen City, have they accepted the terms of your wager? When my Willow Witch defeats them, they will serve in the army of the Vale of Mists for two years?"

At the end, it had been this concession that tipped Heila over the edge. She refused to fight a 'meaningless battle' in the arena. Lady Nyrielle had fought to bring champions home to reclaim the Vale of Mists from the Lothians. High Lady Erna had been the one to suggest that Yotsun could just hire Heila's defeated foes for a few years if that was what it took to draw the young witch into the arena, but no one had thought for an instant that Yotsun would leap at the offer.

"Of course they will!" The voice of the short, pudgy merchant from the Horned Clan didn't carry nearly as well as Ashlynn's magically augmented voice did and the gray-haired merchant managed to sound both shrill and hoarse when he tried to make himself heard across the arena but he stood up tall and proud despite the indignity of the situation.

"If your Willow Witch defeats ten men a day for ten days, then of course I will contract all hundred men to her! Why? You aren't thinking of withdrawing her from this battle after seeing my newest champions, are you?"

Yotsun couldn't hold himself back from throwing out a barb of his own. This whole thing had gone badly out of control, but now that it had started, there was no way out but to see it through to the end. Since that was the case, he refused to be belittled in this arena by an outsider, even if she was a powerful witch.

"Remember," Yotsun added. "If she fails to obtain her victories, she must serve my household for two years! If you do not wish to see her harmed today, I might be persuaded to reduce that to twenty-two months. It's a good deal, Your Dominion," he said, giving an almost polite bow. "You should consider it."

"Heila, my child," Ashlynn said, turning her attention to the seething witch on the arena sands. She hadn't intended to goad the old goat into provoking Heila but the affect of him talking down to her in any way lit a fire in Heila's heart that Ashlynn could feel all the way in High Lady Erna's private box.

"These men could be useful to us," Ashlynn said with a smile as cold as any that Nyrielle had ever shown. "Can you capture them alive? Or do you need to kill them to secure your victory?"

Behind her, Talauia's wings fluttered even faster, filling the air with a high-pitched hum as she realized what Ashlynn intended.

"Oh my, oh my," she whispered, covering her mouth to hide her delighted grin. For months, she'd watched little Heila pushing herself forward and Ashlynn even more so. Now, looking at her friend's confident demeanor on the arena sands, she could barely see a trace of the woman who hadn't been certain that she was worthy of the seed of witchcraft that Ashlynn bestowed on her. Instead, she saw a witch coming into her power who was about to teach these people why they should never underestimate a witch.

Even Nereida, who had been so concerned about Heila's stamina moments ago, straightened in her seat, her chest puffing up with pride at the way neither her new friend nor the powerful woman she served was willing to back down from the challenge. Seeing this moment, she knew, knew to the tip of her tail that she'd been right to befriend the diminutive lady-in-waiting even before she became a powerful witch.

"If Mother wants them," Heila said formally as she offered Ashlynn a deep bow. "How can this child be disobedient? I will take them alive," she said, before turning to face the towering Tuscans. "But if they do not surrender quickly enough, they may be beyond my ability to heal. I hope Mother won't mind," Heila added with a challenging smile of her own.

The crowd burst into cheers at Heila's deliberate provocation. Feet and tails hammered the ground and another chorus of "Willow Whip! Willow Whip!" thundered through the air as everyone realized that not only was Heila refusing to back down from the fight, she welcomed it!

At the far side of the arena, Ipiktok, the lead Tuscan hunter, frowned as he looked at the diminutive witch glaring at his men with hatred that seemed far too personal for a woman he'd never met.

He'd heard that witches were powerful with many rivaling the power of Eldritch Lords, but for this little lass to stand against him and his entire hunting band with such a murderous glare... was there something wrong with her?

"Hunters," Ipiktok shouted, raising a large spear high in the air. "Kill your prey! The man who lands a killing blow may claim her hat as his prize!"

-BRRRRUUUUUUMMMMMM-

The sounds of the Tuscan's answering trumpet blasts filled the air and shook the walls of the arena. Massive feet thundered across the sun-bleached sands and the ground trembled with the force of their passage as they rushed the diminutive witch. They held their weapons high, chains, mauls, spears and axes glinting in the light like deadly jewels thirsting for blood.

Heila, however, didn't move an inch from where she stood. With only seconds to respond, her hand dropped to the ivory hilt of Snow Fang, carved from the tusk of one of the Tuscans who had attacked Ashlynn's companions in the High Pass. A slow smile spread across Heila's lips as the weapon began to glow with a brilliant white light, visible even from within its sheath.

"Ancient peaks of endless snow,

Let winter's curtain 'round us flow.

Through blinding white and arctic gale,

Let frozen mists my form now veil."

Suddenly, the temperature in the arena plummeted as Heila's witchcraft amplified the Frost Walker sorcery bound within the deadly blade. A whirlwind of white energy gathered around her feet before exploding outward in a flurry of snowflakes, momentarily blinding the startled Tuscans and leaving everyone in the audience leaning forward at the edge of their seats.

The dark fur and considerable bulk of the Tuscans made them easy to pick out, even in the blizzard that had consumed the arena, but... where had Heila gone?