

The Vampire 361

Chapter 361: Ambitious Engineering

"Aubin," the bearish Master Wimund said, clapping the flustered man heavily on the shoulder. "Let Benouet explain, it's his plan, he should be the one to unfold it. You and I, we just need to answer questions if Her Eternity has any questions for us. Apologies," the burly master said, turning to look at Ashlynn and Nyrielle a touch sheepishly. "My friend here isn't accustomed to working for such important clients."

"And you are?" Nyrielle said with a raised eyebrow.

"Mistress might be interested to know that Master Wimund trades in stone. The statue of you that stands in the plaza was sourced from his marble quarry when his grandfather ran the family business," Ashlynn added helpfully. "Though he trades in far more than just marble."

"Your Eternity," Master Benouet said, adjusting his silver-rimmed spectacles as he stepped forward. "I know your time tonight is very valuable, and Lady Ashlynn has already spoken with us at great length about this venture. If you're willing, I can present the essential outline and we can speak more on the journey, if you approve." Seeing the vampire's slight nod, the tradesman didn't hesitate to launch into a description of the wild notion that he and Ashlynn had put together over the past week.

"Lady Ashlynn was very impressed by the canals that serve the High Fen, not just in High Fen City, but the ones that transport the harvest from the fields," he explained.

"We used barges that carried grain downriver to the harbor in Blackwell County," Ashlynn explained. "But wagons still have to bring everything a considerable distance over land before it reaches the river. The High Fen seemed much more efficient and I wondered if we could bring this kind of efficiency to the Vale of Mists."

"That seems unlikely," Nyrielle said. "The Vale is steep-sided with many creeks and streams that feed the River Luath. The High Fen is virtually flat. Besides, the villages in the Vale of Mists don't produce much to trade beyond their own needs. What little is sent to trade in the fortress town is best transported over trails by hand cart, or just carried on the backs of men of the Horned Clan."

"Yes, yes, we talked about this problem at length," Master Benouet said eagerly. "I don't think that canals between your villages are impossible, but they aren't necessary. Not yet at least," he said,

glancing briefly at Ashlynn who shook her head so slightly that it was almost imperceptible. Their discussions had covered considerably more than what he was about to present but clearly, Lady Ashlynn wanted to keep things focused on the most immediate proposal.

"Instead," the spectacled master continued. "I showed Lady Ashlynn a special set of canals we've constructed in the foothills of the mountains that service the silver and copper mines."

"That's why you brought up Airgead Mountain," Nyrielle said, nodding along as she understood the logic. "So you want me to act as an intermediary with the Lord Jalal of Airgead Mountain to help him extract the minerals there? He may not be interested. Most of the mines have been closed for generations, in part to make it harder for the Lothians to raid them."

"The issue," Ashlynn said, stepping into the conversation. "Is that Lord Jalal has little ability to refine what he mines. From what I have been able to learn, much of that work was done at the base of the mountain in territory that has now fallen under the control of Baron Hanrahan. Lord Jalal and his clan have treated Airgead Mountain as their personal hunting preserve and they refuse to allow smelting or the processing of ore on their sacred mountain."

"I don't know that I'd call it sacred," Nyrielle said. "But it's true that his clan values their forests and their hunting much more than they value the rich mineral deposits under the earth."

"The problem with getting at the minerals of Airgead mountain, from our perspective," Ashlynn said. "Is that the terrain is much too challenging. The best route would be to leave the vale and travel across the lowlands, through Baron Hanrahan's territory before approaching Airgead Mountain. Doing so is all but impossible, and so is transporting heavy ore all the way from Airgead."

"But," Master Benouet interjected. "It's very, very easy to move ore by boat. Master Aubin is the man who designed boats for my canals in the foothills. We use either strong men or mules walking alongside the canal to pull them, but compared to using wagons, it's much, much easier."

"And just where would this canal go?" Nyrielle said as she tried to envision the enormity of this plan. Her love certainly hadn't started small!

"Orava Village," Ashlynn said, mentioning the village that stood at the edge of Nyrielle's territory closest to the High Pass. "The forest thins there, which leaves ample room for creating smelting pits, but there

is still plentiful wood to burn. Even better, once we've refined ore, it can either be passed downhill to the fortress town, or traded directly across the High Pass."

"Mistress Nyrielle," Ashlynn said, puffing her chest up with pride. "The Lothians have made Airgead Mountain their priority in the upcoming offensive. They're going to exert considerable pressure on Lord Jalal. You and High Lord Dirar in the Southern Step have been helping him to hold on, but he needs reinforcements and supplies."

"If we can construct a canal that will allow him to sell his gold, silver, and jewels to the markets of the High Fen and beyond, it could be the difference between his nation standing tall or falling to human greed," Ashlynn explained.

Of course, she had reasons beyond that one. Building a conduit to trade ore was only the beginning of the plan that had taken root in her mind. But this step, if they did nothing else, would still be incredibly important. And if they were able to go further, then the sooner they could take this step and deliver results, the easier the steps that followed would be.

"No doubt this wouldn't be easy," Nyrielle said, looking at the three men. "But you're each willing to pack up your lives and visit the Vale of Mists to see if it's possible? I can't even promise you that Lord Jalal will agree to this plan you know."

"Your Eternity," Master Wilmund said, placing a clawed hand on his solid, muscular chest. "My grandfather could have returned to the Vale of Mists after you reclaimed it. No doubt he would have been able to help to rebuild your fortress and your walls. Instead, he struck out on his own in the hills of the High Fen and he never once spoke of going home."

"I'm a proud man, Your Eternity," he said, lowering his head in deep respect. "My family's quarries have supplied the greatest artisans of the past five decades. Countless champions have been immortalized in our stone. But I've been watching Lady Heila in the arena these past few days. When today's fight ends, someone will likely commission a statue in her honor, maybe even High Lady Erna herself will commission the statue, but whoever makes it, I'll likely sell them the stone."

"But that's as close to Lady Heila's saga as I'll ever come," he added, looking up to meet Nyrielle's midnight blue eyes with an unflinching gaze. "You don't need statues in the Vale of Mists. You need walls that can't be breached, towers that can see for leagues, and right now, a canal to open a source of wealth that can secure all the other things you need to fight your enemies."

"I can't fight in a war," the bearish man said. "My strength is meant for other things. But for once, I'd rather help someone win a battle than wait until it's over so I can help commemorate it."

"I appreciate your honesty, Master Wimund," Nyrielle said, extending a hand to shake the bearish man's meaty paw. "Since you're willing to make the trip, I'll do what I can to help it succeed."

Before she could comment further or say anything to the other masters, however, a youthful, excited voice from closer to the railings shouted in excitement.

"Look! They're starting, they're starting!" an excited teenager from the scaled clan said, bobbing up and down on his tail and clutching the railings in excitement as he pointed to the gates of the arena. "But what... what are those," he said, suddenly going still as he watched the misshapen forms of Tausau's Mongrel Horde making their way onto the sands. "Are they, are they here to be executed?"

"No," Nyrielle said with a dark smile forming on her lips as she pulled Ashlynn toward the rail overlooking the arena.

"They're here to feed."

Chapter 362: Rallying the Weak

In a waiting chamber within the arena, several members of Tausau's Mongrel Horde milled before the large iron gate, waiting for their turn to enter the arena to fight and feed.

"Remember everyone," Heila told the anxious-looking, misshapen vampires. "Even though the people you will encounter in the arena have been given weapons to fight for their lives, they have been sentenced to die here for their crimes."

At first, Heila had been uncomfortable with the tradition practiced in High Fen City. Executions in the arena weren't common, but they weren't uncommon either. Once a month, the arena would serve as a convict's last hope of saving their own life, but the arena always chose the opponents of these convicts carefully. Upsets, where a convict won their freedom, were so rare that they were talked about for years.

The entire situation struck her as a farce, a show of pretend mercy while the truth was that criminals were executed in a slow, cruel manner for the entertainment of the crowd. When High Lady Erna discussed offering up this batch of convicts to Nyrielle to feed the vampires who had come under her banner, Heila's first reaction had been to reject the notion, fearing that it would upset Lady Nyrielle and Ashlynn as well.

It wasn't until High Lady provided a list of crimes that Heila lost her hesitation about the manner in which these beasts parading as people would be made to die.

"Are they, are they strong fighters?" the timid voice of a woman named Laya asked from among the vampires. "Master Tausau and the stronger vampires of the horde used to hunt bandits and raiders to bring back to the weaker members of the Horde," she explained, gesturing at herself and the other vampires around her. "But we could never take down such violent men by ourselves."

The woman who spoke wasn't much taller than Heila and her deformities were particularly severe. She possessed the elongated jaw and stocky build of the Ancient Clan but her scales were light and delicate, like the scales of a newborn member of the Scaled Clan, and from the look of her, she'd never shed the soft scales she was born with.

She was thinner than any member of the Ancient Clan that Heila had ever seen and would likely be overpowered by children from the powerfully built clan who were little more than a dozen summers old. Her glittering golden eyes, however, seemed to hold a deeper intelligence born of the years of suffering that she must have endured to reach Tausau's sanctuary for the Clanless.

"Not everyone who deserves to die is guilty of crimes that only a strong warrior could commit," Heila said gently, placing a hand on the trembling vampire's shoulder. "One of the men standing against you preyed on children. I won't speak of the things he did to them, but he was most fond of tender young boys," she said in a tone that was fierce and dark.

"Another man was caught using the lifeblood of women to perform his sorcery," Heila explained as she turned to the other vampires. "He hired women for a night of companionship before consuming their flesh and making totems from their bones in an attempt to regain his lost youth."

"Each of the people you're about to face tonight is guilty of the most unspeakable crimes," Heila said loudly. "Their deaths tonight are a warning that some things will never be tolerated. They are a reminder that those who relish in the suffering of others will die suffering for the entertainment of the crowd."

"They will fight back," Tausau said from a corner of the room before striding out in front of his people. "But they will be untrained and feeble warriors. Kill them however you wish, but do not play with your food," he cautioned. "Even a starved rat can still bite. Protect each other," he added with a firm look that swept over all of his people.

"Lady Nyrielle is giving us a chance to tear down the human invaders who almost destroyed my brother Torbin's nation," Tausau said with freshly awakened rage smoldering in his eyes. "Don't die on these sands. Tonight, these people aren't your enemies," he reminded them. "They're your food!"

"Tonight, you feast," Heila told them as the gate began to rise. "Take whatever weapons you wish," she added, gesturing to a rack of well-worn weapons. "Or use your own claws and fangs. Whatever you do tonight, I promise you, the people will learn that the Mongrel Horde should never be pitied, only feared!"

Heila's words served as a rallying cry for the quartet of vampires who were preparing to rush out in the first wave of battles. Some grabbed swords or axes, but Laya knew nothing about using any of those weapons. Instead, she grabbed a heavy flanged mace as she strode out onto the bright sands of the arena.

Heila's words had sparked something in Laya's chest. It wasn't quite courage, but more of a desperate need to prove the diminutive witch right. The heavy flanged mace she selected felt awkward in her grip, but its weight promised to make up for her lack of strength and it didn't take much skill to hit someone with a weapon that was effectively a heavy metal club.

Torches and oil lamps burned everywhere, transforming the nighttime scene into one that felt as bright as day and for several moments, the vampires of the Mongrel Horde stood blinking in the bright lights, uncertain about what they should do.

"Mommy, mommy, what are those? Those aren't people are they?"

"This is cruel, isn't it? Executing the Clanless for sport in front of everyone?"

"Won't it offend the Blood Princess to see such weaklings in the arena? Why are these freaks even here?"

The words spoken by the crowd were hushed, though a few children were quite a bit louder with their unguarded words. None of that mattered to the sensitive ears of the vampires on the sands. As Tausau's progeny, no one in the Tangled Wood or any of the territories it controlled dared to speak those words in the presence of the Mongrel Horde and it had been decades since any of his progeny had felt themselves subjected to the all too familiar ridicule of their childhoods.

That ridicule lit a fire deep in Laya's heart, a heart she'd felt had grown too small over the years to feel such abject humiliation and anger. That fire only grew hotter when the iron gates on the far side of the arena opened to admit the convicts who had come here to die.

There were eight of them all told, from the Horned Clan, the Clan of Painted Masks, the Glass Eyed Clan, and more. Some of them looked worse for wear after spending close to a month in captivity while others looked relatively fresh, wearing white tunics and dark trousers that wouldn't draw much attention if you were to pass them on the street.

It wasn't the men themselves that lit Laya's heart ablaze. It was the cheers that accompanied their arrival. The audience didn't know who the heroes were or that the villains, men guilty of unspeakable crimes, were the ones they were cheering for!

How twisted and unfair did life have to be for the crowd to cheer these beasts masquerading as people over the vampires of the Mongrel Horde who had come to execute them? She wouldn't stand for it!

Chapter 363: Unleashing the Horde

"Death to the murderers!" Laya shouted as the rage in her heart boiled over. Before she knew it, she was sprinting across the sands as fast as her disproportionately short legs would carry her. Heila's voice seemed to echo in her mind as she let loose another blood-curdling scream. "Make them fear the Mongrel Horde!"

"Fear the Horde!" her companions shouted from behind her as they too let loose all of the anger and humiliation they had stored up inside, some of them for decades since they first became one of Tausau's progeny.

In the stands, people who had been cheering for the criminals just moments ago went still in shock. Mouths hung agape and a few people even dropped the delicate morsel of one delicacy of another that

they were about to eat as they stared, wide-eyed, at the eruption of power from what should have been a group of feeble Clanless mutts.

"They, they're vampires!" someone on the first floor said in shock, turning to look at Lady Nyrielle and seeing a predatory grin on the woman's face. "But, but if they're the vampires, then, those other people..."

All eyes in the arena turned to the convicts, seeing them with fresh eyes now that they realized the Clanless vampires were the ones who stood forth to execute the criminals who had just entered the arena. Normally, there would have been cheers for the executioners or slurs and insults hurled at the condemned men facing execution.

Now, however, they weren't sure whether they should be cheering or not. The Clanless were hunted almost everywhere they went and their parents were put to death for the crime of giving birth to one of the ill-fated offspring. Yet now, these pitiable figures were sprinting across the sands of the arena with the ferocity of future champions. Were vampires this strong? So strong that even one of the Clanless could pose a threat?

On the sands of the arena, Laya cared nothing for the confused stares of the crowd or the lack of cheers. In her eyes, the world had narrowed to just one man. He was short, like her, though he was a member of the Horned Clan. There was a look of mockery on his face when he raised a short sword and took a simple, amateurish fighting stance as if to meet her charge.

Laya didn't know what this man's crime was. Had he been the one preying on small boys? The one sacrificing ladies of the night to his dark sorcery? She didn't know and she didn't care. That smugly superior look on his face was all she needed to decide that this man would be the first one to die tonight!

"Hunter's leap," she whispered, using what little sorcery she was capable of to launch herself into the air, soaring above the horned man's outstretched blade before falling on him with all of her weight, the heavy head of her mace leading the way.

The man had only a moment to panic, realizing that he'd badly underestimated the Clanless vampire before his right horn exploded in a shower of horn, bone, and blood from a blow so forceful that it knocked him to the ground.

"No one mocks the Mongrel Horde!" Laya snarled, reaching down to drag the man back to his feet. As soon as she had a hold of him, the mace fell again, slamming into his handsome face with a sickening crunch and splattering blood across Laya's chest and torso.

In the stands, the audience watched in shock as the vampires of the Mongrel Horde descended on their prey. No criminal died a quick or painless death as even the strongest of the Horde required several blows before the light faded from their victim's eyes.

That shock turned to horror when the thin-scaled woman who had led the charge lifted up the body of her victim, bringing his battered, bloody face close enough to hers to kiss. For a moment, the audience thought she might have some final words for the man, some kind of condemnation for whatever crimes had brought him here...

Instead, she moved with the speed of a striking snake, twisting his head to the side and sinking her fangs deep into his neck as she began to feed.

It had been more than a decade since Laya became one of Tausau's progeny. She had long grown accustomed to the hot, metallic taste of another person's blood as she drank the only thing that sustained her life.

But it wasn't until now, until this moment as she feasted for the first time on someone that she'd hunted herself, that she thought that this beast masquerading as a man possessed blood that was... sweet. For several moments, there was nothing in her world but the rich, almost intoxicating taste of sweet blood and the faint sounds of her brethren taking hold of their own meals next to her.

"What is this?" A clear, musical voice said from the edge of the first level of the arena, pulling Laya out of her momentary trance as she realized who was speaking. "Does the arena no longer cheer for its champions?" Nyrielle asked as she cast her midnight gaze around the crowd of spectators.

Most in the audience were staring in shock at the spectacle that had unfolded before them and many weren't sure whether they were supposed to applaud or not. Several were quietly whispering that the Clanless vampires would likely be forced to fight until they died in the arena, giving Nyrielle an opportunity to rid herself of the shameful creatures while preserving some honor for their power as vampires but... perhaps this wasn't the case?

"These are the progeny of my grandsire's brother," Nyrielle said loudly in a voice filled with pride. "They are Tausau's Mongrel Horde and they can be considered my younger aunts and uncles. Surely the arena won't withhold its applause for my family?"

Shock rippled through the crowd, followed moments later by scattered applause as a few people moved mechanically in response to Nyrielle's request. It wasn't until a young gladiator on one of the levels above stepped forward to give his cry that people truly processed what they had witnessed.

"Death to the wicked!" the young gladiator shouted. "And glory to their executioners!"

His words seemed to shake people free from their confusion, reminding everyone that these had been very wicked men who died upon the sands and the people who carried out their execution carried literal swords of justice. Soon, shouts and cheers of 'Death to the wicked' and 'Glory to the executioners' exploded from the crowd as spectators leaped to their feet.

Only when they'd broken free of their shock did they realize that they'd nearly slighted the people that the famed Blood Princess recognized as family. As soon as they did, new cries began to fill the arena as people rushed to ensure that the Blood Princess didn't feel like her 'younger aunts and uncles' had been slighted.

"To the Mongrel Horde!"

"The Mongrel Horde and the Blood Princess, Champions of the Arena!"

"Death to the murderers! Glory to their executioners!"

The cheers and exclamations of the crowd washed over Laya and her fellows like soft, cleansing rain, but the short, misshapen vampire didn't care what the common people thought or said... not anymore.

Lady Nyrielle, Her Eternity the Harbinger of Death had spoken up for them and called her, the discarded girl who barely survived being born, an aunt. Her own birth parents wouldn't recognize her as family and both of her clans would kill her on sight to cleanse the shame brought by her mere existence but this woman, this powerful Eldritch Lady who brought the entire city out to honor her... This impossibly strong existence had just declared her family.

As far as Laya was concerned, even the sweetness of her first kill couldn't compare to the warmth she felt when Her Eternity Nyrielle spoke up for the Mongrel Horde. She'd wondered, all throughout the long journey to come here, if it was worth leaving behind everything she knew to risk her life fighting someone else's war.

Now she knew. Tausau hadn't lied to them when he called it the opportunity of a lifetime and after tonight, she finally felt like she could seize that opportunity. To do anything less would be letting her family down and if there was one desire in her chest that burned as hot as her desire to keep living... it was the fervent desire to never, ever, give Lady Nyrielle a reason to regret her words tonight.

Chapter 364: Changing Together

"I'm surprised, my darling," Nyrielle said as staff from the arena cleared away the bodies once Laya and the other Clanless vampires had finished feeding. "I didn't think you would be so calm around such a bloody spectacle. You were much less comfortable when we left the Vale," she added.

Ashlynn had stood next to Nyrielle for the entire battle, gently holding her lover with one hand around her waist while the other hand gripped the rail. All through the fight, Nyrielle had listened carefully to the beat of her lover's heart and watched her hand on the rail, but Ashlynn's heartbeat never faltered and her grip on the rail remained loose and comfortable, as if she wasn't disturbed in the slightest.

"I've come to the arena every day for the past ten days while Heila has faced challengers sent by the merchant Yotsun," Ashlynn said mildly. "I may have been uncomfortable at first, particularly when High Lady Erna suggested 'feeding' the condemned criminals to Tausau's progeny but..."

"But?" Nyrielle asked, picking up the slight hesitation in Ashlynn's voice. "What changed your mind?"

"Hearing about the crimes those men committed," Ashlynn said, pointing as she spoke to the next group of condemned men being led into the arena. This time, they were violent criminals who would be fighting the stronger members of the Mongrel Horde, but Ashlynn had no intention of paying much attention to the battle. "I'd be lying if I said that I hadn't dreamed once or twice about hauling Owain into the arena so he could face me for what he did to me. Part of me," Ashlynn said, her voice growing quiet as she turned to look into her lover's midnight-blue eyes.

"Part of me wants to toy with him on the sands," she said softly. "To watch him realize that the crowds are cheering for his death and that all his strength means nothing in front of the power of nature," she said, clutching the rail tightly as she imagined planting one of Jacques's Heart Seeker seeds in the Lothian heir's chest only to fuel it's growth and watch a bloody sapling burst from his heart.

"I still have nightmares," Ashlynn whispered, leaning her head against Nyrielle's shoulder. "I don't think they'll stop until he's dead. I didn't know what that meant on the night he nearly killed me, but I understand now."

"There's nothing wrong with wishing for his death, or for wishing for that death to be as brutal and humiliating as the one he attempted to bestow on you," Nyrielle said, raising her wings to shield them from the eyes of others. She might not care for the thoughts of the strangers gathered here, but her darling Ashlynn had labored ever since she arrived to befriend and propose alliances with them and Nyrielle refused to allow a moment of vulnerability to spoil her darling's work.

Gently, she pulled Ashlynn close and gently kissed the young witch's forehead, ignoring the surprised looks from any onlookers who happened to see before her wings blocked their view.

"If you wish to kill him here, then I will have little snake announce his execution to the whole of the High Fen so everyone can witness his cowardice before the woman who was so, so much better than he ever deserved," Nyrielle whispered fiercely. For a moment, her wings trembled with quickly suppressed rage as she recalled Ashlynn's bruised and battered appearance on the night they met.

"And when it's over, I will still be here, and I will still welcome you home," Nyrielle said as gently as she could as she forced the pent-up hatred back into the depths of her heart where she kept it. She had promised Ashlynn that she could take her revenge with her own hands, but at times like this, when she saw her lover struggling, it was very, very difficult to resist the temptation to fly to Lothian March and drag the man before her Ashlynn now, just to soothe her lover's heart.

"I know, I know you'll never leave me," Ashlynn said, looking up at Nyrielle with a complicated expression. A trace of a smile clung to her bow-shaped lips and her eyes were soft and gentle despite the dark topic. "Sometimes, I wonder if I'm still me, or if I've become someone else," she said, unconsciously shifting as one hand traced against the soft sating of her dress directly over the witch's mark on her hip.

"Someone who doesn't flinch at the sight of violence and doesn't hesitate to stain her own hands anymore," she added softly, clutching at her loose skirts as if to hide her hand away from view.

"You are still you," Nyrielle said softly, placing the tips of her fingers on Ashlynn's chest, just above her heart. Unlike the night before, Nyrielle's touch was warm, her body filled with the energy of Ashlynn's blood and in this moment, she felt more... human than Ashlynn had ever felt her to be before.

"You've changed," Nyrielle added softly. "I've changed too. I don't know if it's our bond or our lives, but you aren't wrong if you feel like you've grown colder, or harder. Those things come with growing stronger."

"But you're the opposite," Ashlynn said, gently wrapping her fingers around Nyrielle's slender fingers. "You've grown warmer, and softer, but you aren't growing weaker," she said, pulling Nyrielle's hand closer and pressing her cheek softly against the back of her lover's hand. "If anything, you're even stronger now than you were when we met."

"I know," Nyrielle said. "But even if we're changing, you're still the woman you've always been. Intelligent, compassionate, loving, and as kind as the world will allow you to be. None of the important things have changed."

"And you?" Ashlynn asked, looking up at Nyrielle through eyelashes that glistened with moisture. "Are you still the same woman you were?"

"Perhaps," Nyrielle said gently. She'd spent many nights over the past several months examining herself and the memories she had of the past hundred years... and the hundred years before that. "I'm different from the woman I was when we met. And I'm different from the woman I was before my parents died."

"I thought that the younger me was dead and gone along with Mother and Father," Nyrielle said softly. "But you seem to have breathed life into a ghost I thought long gone. Now, I'm finding my way between the two."

"I'll stay with you," Ashlynn promised. "For as long as it takes to find your way, and forever after too."

On the sands of the arena, the intense battle between violent criminals and the stronger members of the Mongrel Horde had reached its inevitable conclusion. This time, the crowd needed no prompting to rise from their seats and cheer for the victorious vampires.

Behind Ashlynn and Nyrielle, a wide grin formed on Virve's face as she imagined that the cheers were directed not at the victors on the arena sands, but at the witch she'd sworn to protect and the vampire she'd dedicated her life to serving.

Nearby, Zedya shared a knowing look with Ignatious before she reentered the crowd of distinguished guests. Her eyes glowed with the faintest hint of amethyst radiance as she nudged people ever so slightly out of the space surrounding Nyrielle and Ashlynn.

Politics would intrude eventually. Ashlynn and Heila had clearly worked hard to set the stage for a number of important conversations and the small group of merchants that they'd met so far were only the beginning of what promised to be a long night of first meetings. But for now, such things could wait, and if anyone was fool enough to disturb Lady Nyrielle's private moment... Zedya was more than happy to hand them over to the Inquisitor's tender mercies for committing an unspeakable

Chapter 365: Brothers in Chains

The sounds of chains clanking and low growls filled the waiting area under the arena where Savis glowered at the diminutive young witch who seemed to be in charge of the spectacle that was being made of their need to feed.

"I have never in my life been bound in chains," the white-furred vampire snarled, glaring at Heila and shaking the thick, heavy chain that bound his left arm. "This is an insult to the dignity of High Lord Hamdi's line!"

"No one cares, big brother Savis," Tausau said, hefting his end of the chain and feeling its weight with his disproportionately small arms. "And besides, chaining you to me is an honor for you and a mark of respect for your strength. If they weren't worried that we'd destroy these fallen champions in an instant, they would never shackle us like this."

"Sir Tausau is correct, Sir Savis," Heila said as she strode toward the powerfully built men with another set of shackles and chains, this time intended for their ankles.

The two men were so different from each other that for a moment, Heila struggled to believe that they were both the progeny of the same vampire. Savis was tall and regal, with a body that was perfectly proportioned. From his broad shoulders and powerful arms to his trim waist and sprinter's legs, the light

coat of white fur on his body did nothing to hide the perfection of his physique. In all the world, if there was a more perfect member of the Golden Eyed Clan, she couldn't imagine how they could possibly be superior to the eldest of Hamdi's progeny.

Tausau, on the other hand, embodied the many problems that plagued the Clanless. He was taller than his older sibling by a full head and possessed a barrel-chested physique common to many from the Clan of the Great Claw. Unfortunately, for all the strength and power of his core, he lacked the long, powerful arms of his father's clan and instead possessed almost comically thin limbs that matched with the delicately striped features on his face, both serving as clear markers for his mother's Clan of Painted Masks.

"In the Tangled Wood, vampires are addressed as 'Master', little girl," Savis snarled as Heila secured a shackle to his left ankle. "You should..."

"I should what?" Heila said, her voice sounding in the stone chamber like the sharp crack of a whip. "Cower before you? Respect my elders?"

"You are the servant of a servant," Savis growled. His fur bristled at the feeling of being chained and this little girl who wasn't even a tenth of his age only made the humiliation worse. In a single movement, he could reduce her to a lifeless corpse, draining the blood from her body before anyone could move to protect her, but she acted like he was a harmless pup!

"I am the first witch of the Mother of Trees," Heila said, securing a heavy shackle to Tausau's leg. The younger vampire gave her a soft, apologetic smile but did nothing to defend her while his elder brother vented his ire on the diminutive witch. "You are the first progeny of a High Lord. If nothing else were true, that would at least make us equals," she said firmly.

It took an incredible amount of willpower for her to stand up to a vampire. Growing up in the Vale of Mists, vampires had stood at the very pinnacle of her world. The most revered Eldritch Lady of the Vale was a vampire and the previous High Lord of the Vale had been a vampire as well. Even the most powerful, revered members of Nyrielle's inner circle were her own progeny.

To be selected to become a vampire was an honor that no one born in the Vale had ever earned since the death of High Lord Torbin but that didn't mean that the people of the Vale forgot what it meant to strive to be worthy of the ultimate honor. So when she squared off against the powerful Golden Eyed vampire, the eldest progeny of High Lord Hamdi, it took every bit of strength that Heila had honed under the watchful eyes of the Mother of Thorns to stand up straight and speak to him as if he was her equal.

"Tonight, you hold a place of honor," Heila continued, refusing to back down from the towering lupine's golden-eyed stare. "You and Sir Tausau represent the greatest strength of High Lord Hamdi's forces. Your soldiers have been given places on the second level so they may watch your battle. You and Sir Tausau will be chained to each other, hand and foot, because even though you will face off against three times your number, hobbling you like this will only barely give your opponents a chance."

The more she spoke, the closer Heila came to the sulking vampire until she stepped up onto a bench to look the tall man directly in the eyes from inches away. From up close, Heila could feel the chill of the grave that clung to his powerful body and the scent of blood that radiated from him with every exhale of cold breath.

And yet, when she compared him to Sir Thane or Madame Zedya, somehow, he came up short, lacking the otherworldly menace that Lady Nyrielle's progeny possessed. That feeling, more than anything else, gave her the strength to hammer home her last points. Savis was powerful, to be sure, but she wasn't weak either and she refused to let Ashlynn down by cowering in front of Lady Nyrielle's defeated foe!

"All of this honor is given to you, according to the traditions of the place we stand," Heila said. "Despite the fact that you are Her Eternity's prisoner," she said, hoping that a reminder of Nyrielle's status would get through to him when kinder words hadn't. "Tonight is Lady Nyrielle's grand welcome, and on this night, only the two of you are granted the honor to display your strength before the crowds. Madame Zedya has not received this honor, nor has Sir Ignatious."

"Lady Heila is right, big brother Savis," Tausau said at last, standing next to the white-furred vampire and placing a hand on the man's shoulder. "Our grand-niece has seen fit to acknowledge us as family, despite the actions of our sire. She's honoring us, and she's honoring High Lady Erna's traditions by requiring us to feed in a way that is acceptable in her territory. Surely you understand how accommodating she's being for all parties involved."

"The politics of accommodation are tools for the weak," Savis snapped at Tausau almost reflexively. "Or the magnanimous," he added reluctantly. "You're made of sterner stuff than I thought, little Lady Heila," he added, turning his gaze back to Heila. "The number of people who would dare to chastise me can be counted on two hands. I did not expect you to be one of them."

"But if I am to be bound to this mongrel," he added, tugging on the chain that bound his left arm and pulling Tausau off balance. "At least give me a spear so I can fight without becoming entangled with this awkward oaf."

"You have your claws," Heila said with a shake of her head. "And Sir Tausau will have a shield and a net to help defend your flank and trap your prey. That should be enough to let you have your hunt and give the crowd their show."

"It will be fine, Big Brother," Tausau said as he stretched to reach the shield and net Heila mentioned. Between the short chain binding his leg to Savis's and the longer one binding their arms, he could barely reach far enough without pulling the smaller man along with him, but he managed.

"Now, what say you Big Brother?" Tausau asked, the fire of challenge flickering to life in his eyes. "Shall we show these men why the progeny of High Lord Hamdi should never be underestimated?"

"Since when are you this bold, Little Brother?" Savis said, looking at the misshapen vampire with a raised brow. "You've been like this ever since Her Eternity summoned you."

"Perhaps, one day, she'll do for you what she has done for me," Tausau said, nodding his head at Heila in silent thanks. While he didn't know how Nyrielle had managed to rekindle the emotions he'd thought long burned away, he was certain that her association with witches had something to do with it. He would never give voice to that speculation but that didn't mean he wouldn't give thanks where thanks was due.

"For now, put it out of your mind and focus on the fight to come," Tausau said with a smile that revealed his long, sharp fangs. Inwardly, he wished that Nyrielle had rekindled the fires that once burned in his eldest brother's heart. Hundreds of years ago, what a force they'd been when they charged out from the Tangled Wood and slaughtered anyone who thought themselves mighty enough to resist. Now, even though Savis was stronger, his thirst for battle was a shadow of its former self.

"Tonight," Tausau said, hoping to rally at least a remnant of his elder sibling's fighting will. "We fight and then, we feast!"

Chapter 366: What the Vale Lacks

On the first level of the arena, Ashlynn and Nyrielle had returned to the crowd of people after the second battle between condemned men and the Mongrel Horde. Tausau had brought so many of his progeny that there would be a total of six battles before they had all received an opportunity to fight and feed.

Not all of the opponents for the later matches were condemned criminals. There existed a few brave souls who were willing to risk their lives for the opportunity to claim victory over a powerful vampire. Perhaps some of them understood how slim their odds truly were, but many who had come thought that the 'weaker' vampires of Tausau's Mongrel Horde represented an opportunity to claim a once-in-a-lifetime victory.

Within a year, people would remember that they had slain a vampire, but the 'mongrel' nature of the vampire would be long forgotten. By the time they realized that the members of the Mongrel Horde who would fight trained gladiators were among the strongest of the horde, it was too late for regrets.

Rather than watch these tragic battles play out, Ashlynn took the opportunity to progress her own plans for the evening. As much as she would have been content to spend the entire evening at the railing, sheltered from the press of people by Nyrielle's wings, she'd put too much work into tonight to let go of her plans now.

The crowd's excitement over the Mongrel Horde's victories had created the perfect atmosphere for introducing potential allies to Nyrielle, and she'd arranged for several of her most promising contacts to be readily available.

Little would be truly concluded tonight, but Nyrielle's impressions of the people she introduced her to and the plans they proposed would determine who they would meet with in the following days to form more formal agreements. With a gentle touch to Nyrielle's arm, she guided her lover toward a group of wealthy people from the Scaled Clan who had become increasingly familiar over the past several days.

"Nereida," Ashlynn said warmly as she greeted the woman that Heila had befriended on their first trip to High Fen City. "I know that you'll be joining us in High Lady Erna's box when it's Heila's turn to fight, but I wanted to introduce you and your husband Beilan to Mistress Nyrielle," she said smoothly.

"Mistress Nyrielle," Ashlynn continued. "Nereida is a good friend of Heila's from our first visit and she's been very welcoming since we arrived. She even helped to find someone to make my hat," she added, tugging at the brim of her emerald green witch's hat. "And her husband Beilan is someone else who may become a valuable partner for the Vale of Mists. He trades mostly in rare and luxury items from all across the continent."

"Your Eternity," Beilan said, bowing deeply for a moment before the tip of his tail twitched in surprise when his wife didn't imitate his gesture. Instead, she reached out and took Ashlynn's hands in her own, clasping each other's wrists as though they were old friends.

"It seems that my Nereida has left me far behind," the serpentine merchant said, chuckling as he straightened up. "When she told me that she'd befriended a 'lady-in-waiting' of the next Mother of Trees, I wasn't certain that I believed it, and yet, here we stand. I've been completely eclipsed by my wife's radiance these days."

"Your wife has excellent taste in companions," Nyrielle said lightly.

"You won't find me arguing that!" Beilan said with a hearty laugh. Reaching out, he fetched a goblet of wine from a passing servant and raised it in a toast to Nyrielle. "To the companions who brighten our lives."

"Flatterer," Nereida said softly as she thumped lightly on his tail with the tip of her own tail. "Please don't mind him, praise falls from his lips like leaves from a tree in autumn. After so many years of buttering up his customers, I'm afraid the only words that can be trusted from his mouth are insults."

"I haven't found him to be that bad," Ashlynn said, stepping in before the couple could say something that Nyrielle might misinterpret. While it was true that Beilan was a consummate salesman, he was also a frank and honest businessman when it came to the balancing of scales and the exchange of interests. "Master Beilan, perhaps you can explain to Lady Nyrielle the problem you were discussing with me the other day about a lack of industry in the Vale of Mists."

"This, um," the serpentine merchant said, hesitating to broach the topic of the Vale's shortcomings in front of its powerful and imposing ruler. When he arrived at the arena tonight, he'd been full of confidence and his tail swung in wide arcs as he claimed the space around himself, distancing others until he could have his turn with the powerful Blood Princess. But now that he stood in the shadow of her dark wings, he found it very difficult to begin the proposal he'd spent days preparing.

On the floor of the arena, the iron gates opened yet again, this time to admit the chained figures of Savis and Tausau. Cheers erupted from the audience as they beheld the perfection of Savis's muscular physique, glittering like the moon under the lights of the arena.

From the floor above, deep-throated howls rose from the section of the arena where the Black Wolf Brigade had been seated. Though some were furious to see their commander shackled to the sire of the Mongrel Horde, others shouted their approval.

"This is how men should fight!" one Golden Eyed soldier shouted. "The younger brother may be weaker but he can still carry a shield for his older brother!"

"One to kill and rend, the other to catch and defend!"

Who said it first was impossible to say but the chant caught on quickly with the crowd, soon echoing across the arena as the brothers walked toward the center to prepare themselves for the appearance of their opponents.

"You don't need to worry, Master Beilan," Nyrielle said with a teasing smile, pulling the serpentine merchant's attention back from the interruption of the crowd and the spectacle that was about to begin in the arena.

"I won't bite. I've already fed," Nyrielle added, tracing a finger along Ashlynn's tender neck and sending a shiver down the young witch's spine. "I know the Vale of Mists lacks many things that it once had. Tell me what you see as our challenge and how you think we should address it."

"Since, since you've asked," Beilan said, his tail twitching nervously.

On the arena floor, the second iron gate shuddered open, revealing six strong champions wearing gleaming, ornate armor and carrying a wide variety of weapons. They seemed to come from every local clan, whether they represented the Scaled Clan, Clan of Painted Masks... even the toad-like Muckin's seemed to possess a toxic champion carrying a powerful bow and a quiver full of arrows that were certain to be tipped in the man's own venom.

None of these men had been condemned to die but all of them had reached a frustrating point in their careers. Their fame echoed through the city for days after a victory only to fade to whispers when the next champion delivered a victory that was just as stunning. Now, they'd come here to gamble their lives against the chance to achieve a victory like no other or to die at the hands of the greatest opponents they would ever face.

"Just tell her," Nereida said, wrapping her tail around his and giving her husband a reassuring squeeze. "You've spoken with Lady Ashlynn already and she brought you here. If she didn't value your words, you would have been forced to bid instead of receiving an invitation."

"Well, when you put it like that," the serpentine merchant said, raising himself up a few inches higher. He'd spent days discussing this matter with Ashlynn. If it weren't for the friendship that his wife had nurtured with the Willow Witch, Heila, she might never have trusted him enough to develop a proposal this bold.

There was a safer proposal that he'd prepared, one that carried much lower risks, both in terms of business and a much lower risk of offending the powerful Harbinger of Death. But... glancing at the six men walking out onto the sands to face near-certain death for a chance of everlasting glory, Beilan redoubled his resolve and prepared to make the boldest pitch of his life.

Chapter 367: Unique Treasures

"The Vale of Mists was once like the High Fen," Beilan began. "It was valuable because of its location. The river flows all the way to the sea and goods from across the lowlands flowed through the Vale to reach customers west of the mountains. But the Vale of Mists itself produced very little of value. Now that it is no longer a path for the flow of treasures from afar, it has little to offer the rest of the Eldritch world."

"In the short term," he continued. "It's possible that you could profit off the refining and shipment of goods from Airgead Mountain. I have already proposed a trade in jewels through the Vale of Mists that should be sustainable even if Lady Ashlynn's plan for an ore canal doesn't work out."

"It's much easier for a courier to slip through the wilderness with a bag of jewels than it is to transport tons of ore," Nyrielle acknowledged. "Marcell has proposed doing so in the past, but the results haven't been spectacular."

In fact, the Vale of Mists regularly received a trickle of gemstones from Airgead Mountain as part of the agreement Nyrielle had forged to help defend the valuable mountain from Lothian raids. Those gemstones paid for everything from Darksteel weapons to shipments of cotton or salt from the lands west of the mountains. But the prices the jewels fetched were only enough to fill the gaps in the Vale's needs, and treasures that could finance widespread reconstruction were once a decade rarities.

"This problem is likely because you lack artisans who can turn raw jewels into rare treasures," Beilan said confidently. "I am connected with a few masters who may be willing to send an apprentice to do rough cutting work that could significantly increase the value of anything you can retrieve from Airgead Mountain. But in my opinion, relying on the wealth you can extract from Airgead Mountain is only a short term solution to the lack of trade that keeps the Vale from returning to its former glory."

Before he could elaborate further, a roar from the crowd drew their attention to the arena below. People leapt to their feet, many pointing and shouting as the battle between the vampires and champions began with an explosive display of power and cunning. Facing off against six veteran champions, Savis and Tausau displayed cold, ruthless efficiency in eliminating their opponents. Shackled together at the wrists or ankles, it should have been impossible for the vampires to move with their usual speed.

The gladiators clearly planned to utilize that handicap as they slowly advanced under the cover of the Muckin archer. They never expected, however, that the Vampires would refuse to let their chains constrain their movements. Rather than taking slow, hobbled steps around the arena, Savis pounced directly on Tausau's back, riding upon his shoulders while the Clanless vampire hunkered behind his shield and charged the archer like a maddened battering ram!

Arrow after poisoned arrow slammed into Tausau's shield but it did nothing to stop the charge that directly bypassed the remaining gladiators in order to slam into the Muckin archer with enough force to send the man sailing through the air like a broken doll, crashing limply into the sand of the arena more than thirty feet away.

"Yes, Little Brother!" Savis snarled as he hopped down from the towering vampire's broad shoulders. The skin of the Muckin was far too toxic to risk attacking with his claws, but now that the only warrior he couldn't shred had been crushed by Tausau's claws, he felt truly free to tear into the remaining warriors. "Stay close to me now and watch my back as I tear them limb from limb!"

"Just like the old days, Big Brother," Tausau said, grinning as the years of distance between them fell away and they returned to an earlier era when they had been called Hamdi's Claws. If only their brother Torbin and sister Birsu were here to fight with them, that would have been even better.

It wasn't perfect, but after Torbin's death at Lothian hands, and with Birsu taking up the mantle of ruling the Tangled Wood until their master was free from his punishment, it was the best that Tausau could hope for in terms of a reunion. Now, as he charged across the sands, side by side with Savis, he only hoped the remaining champions could last longer than the Muckin archer had, to give him even more time to relish in fighting beside his brother once again.

"Then what do you see as a long term solution?" Nyrielle asked Master Beilan. The sight of her great-uncles fighting together brought a smile on her lips and made it easier to keep her tone light with the serpentine merchant, but her gaze was still sharp as she pressed him for solutions to the problems he presented. "We are unlikely to have many trading partners, even if we are able to extend a secure trade channel all the way down to the Southern Steppe," she added.

This was a problem that had plagued the Vale of Mists ever since she retook it from the Lothians. For several decades, she hadn't cared. As long as she was able to protect the people who acknowledged her rule and everyone was able to live a comfortable enough life, there was no reason to push for change.

In hindsight, she'd been wrong to accept the status quo for so long. She'd truly underestimated what generations of continued failure would do to the Lothians and their thirst for conquest, and she had never fully understood what it would mean for the Vale if the humans launched another one of their Crusades.

It had been her mistake for not learning more from Ignatious when she had the chance, but now that Ashlynn had helped to fill in the gaps in her understanding, she was eager to make up for lost time before it was too late.

On the arena sands below, both sides had come to feel that they'd overestimated themselves, or underestimated their opponents. Two powerful fighters from the Clan of the Great Claw bled from wounds so numerous that their fur had been dyed red with their own blood, but despite the severity of their injuries, they swung their two-handed swords with precision, battering Tausau's shield aside to land blows of their own on the pair of vampires.

Tausau had already lost his net and the time it gained them allowed Savis to tear the throat from the spry member of the Horned Clan who seemed like the only threat who could approach his speed, but with two heavy warriors pinning Tausau down, he was left to square off against the spearman from the Scaled Clan and the Glass Eyed warrior wielding a halberd with deadly accuracy.

Both men held such a strong advantage in reach that by the time Savis had knocked aside one man's defenses to strike, the other was able to land at least a glancing blow, covering Savis's pristine white fur with nearly a dozen small injuries that stood out sharply against his pale body.

"Witchwood, your Eternity," Beilan said, pulling his eyes away from the fight in the arena. He knew he couldn't compare to the brave gladiators on the sands, but at the moment, he felt like he needed just as much courage to say the word 'Witchwood' as those men must have needed to set foot in the arena with a pair of vampires. Holding himself as rigidly upright as he could and exchanging a brief look with Ashlynn to make sure she was still willing before he plunged ahead with his radical proposal.

"If her Dominion is willing to plant a stand of trees to be harvested as a trade good instead of receiving the worship reserved for Ancient trees," the serpentine merchant explained. He said it like it was a simple thing, but the previous Mother of Trees had planted fewer than one hundred Witchwood trees her entire life, or at least, fewer than one hundred of them had ever been found. Privately, he expected that there must be a reason why such trees were both scattered and rare, but Ashlynn had assured him that she could manage this feat.

"With an entire forest of Witchwood trees," he said, "then the Vale of Mists would become the source of wood that is as valuable as its weight in gold."

"No, absolutely not," Nyrielle said, her wings fluttering protectively around Ashlynn as she cast a disapproving stare at the serpentine merchant. "I trade in Blood Vitality Crystals when I need to make deals with other Eldritch Lords. No lesser demand could force me to trade in magic that's so powerful."

"That kind of sorcery carries a cost," Nyrielle said, her eyes growing darker and her nails lengthening into claws as she imagined her Ashlynn turning into a withered husk to create trees that would be felled for something as common as lumber. "I will not have my darling's magic treated the way men treat lumps of precious stone, dug out of the earth and carved into pieces like ornaments that are only valuable when they've been shaped into what some hoarder of wealth desires."

"I thought my Ashlynn had found the very best of those who dealt in the power of wealth instead of finding true strength," Nyrielle said. The light around her dimmed and the people nearby were so startled that they looked away from the fight below to see who had provoked the ire of the Harbinger of death.

"But if you are an example of the people I have yet to meet," Nyrielle said, her face becoming blank and expressionless as a mask as all the warmth that had filled her seemed to drain away. "Then perhaps I should cleanse this floor of the vultures who would only pick at her flesh until there was nothing left of the woman I love!"

On the second floor of the arena, the men of the Black Wolf Brigade howled and cheered for their commander and his brother as they faced off against opponents who seemed to directly counter them. Blood flowed from wounds on both the vampires' bodies and the gladiators alike. More than once, Savis had been thwarted in his attempts to kill one of the remaining man when his lunge stopped short and the chains binding him to Tausau pulled taut, allowing his prey to slip away.

"We won't win like this, Brother," the white furred vampire snarled. His voice was low and barely audible but the ears of a vampire had no difficulty understanding his words, even over the din of the crowd and the clank of chains as they moved.

"I can buy you an opportunity," Tausau said in an equally quiet tone. His arm ached from repeated heavy blows rained down on the shield he carried and the leather-wrapped wooden shield itself had cracked and splintered in more than one place. "Polearm or spear?"

"Polearm," Savis said decisively. The thrusts of the serpentine gladiator wielding the spear were powerful and swift but the halberd wielded by the Glass Eyed warrior was several times more difficult to deal with, hooking his chains and always landing its blows more precisely than he would have thought possible for someone without an extraordinary gift like the one he had received from Hamdi.

"Now," Savis roared, lunging toward the spear wielding gladiator.

"Raaaarrrr!" Tausau roared, using his stunted arms to flip the failing shield through the air and sending it careening at the face of a bearish swordsman with enough force to knock the man off his feet. The move looked desperate at best, foolish at worse, but it created half an opening for the Clanless vampire to lunge at the halberd wielding gladiator.

But even as Tausau lunged toward his target and Savis rushed beside him, aiming for the serpentine spearman, the final remaining swordsman was left completely unimpeded. With a roar of his own, his heavy two-handed sword came down in a brutal arc, slicing across Tausau's back from one shoulder to the opposite hip, spilling vampire blood across the sands to the excited roar of the crowd.

On the first level of the arena, in a pocket of growing darkness surrounding Nyrielle, however, everyone had ceased paying attention to the battle below as the negotiation between the terrifying Harbinger of Death and the humble purveyor of luxury goods took a turn for the worse that no one had imagined.

"Perhaps I should cleanse this floor of the vultures who would only pick at her flesh until there was nothing left of the woman I love!"

Nyrielle's words sliced through the idle chatter and even the people who had begun to speculate about Beilan's impending fall from grace felt their blood go cold. Just what was it that this careless merchant had said to doom not only himself but all of them who gathered here today for the opportunity to befriend the woman who conquered the Tangled Wood in a day? Didn't he know that such powerful lords could never be offended?

"It's not like that, my love," Ashlynn said, stepping between Nyrielle and Beilan and placing a hand on her lover's chest. "There is a cost, yes, but I don't need to bear it alone. I'll have a larger coven soon," she said, lightly touching her own chest directly above the seed she'd been nurturing since before she left the Briar. "We can do this in a way that doesn't overburden anyone."

"Please," Ashlynn said, stepping close to Nyrielle and looking up at her with pleading eyes. "You have built the walls that defend our home. You've resurrected the fortress town and the villages from the ashes. You've kept the Vale of Mists alive when many would have given it up for dead."

"When I needed it, the Vale gave me safety, shelter, and the love of my life," Ashlynn said softly. She had spent more time in the Briar than she had in the Vale of Mists, but she had always been a guest in Amahle's swamp.

When she thought of 'home' she thought of Georg's delicate pastries, or Thane calling her 'little sister' and spending just as much time listening to her troubles as he did helping her to develop her new abilities as a vampire's Seneschal. Now, though she ached to see her sister and her parents again, she ached even more for the place that had given her a new life when the world she came from nearly dragged her to her death.

"Let me give something back to the Vale and its people," Ashlynn whispered. "Let me do something no one else can do."

All around them, the assembled crowd waited with baited breath. A few with sharper senses had heard some of what Ashlynn had said, but most hadn't heard a word after she spoke of Nyrielle's rebuilding of the Vale of Mists. Only Beilan and his wife Nereida were close enough to hear Ashlynn's heartfelt plea, but neither of them felt strong enough in the face of Nyrielle's dark fury to add their pleas to Ashlynn's. For the moment, they could only wait and put their faith in the woman who had placed herself directly

in the path of that fury and hope that Lady Nyrielle wouldn't simply sweep her aside to kill them for offending her.

"Aren't you already doing enough?" Nyrielle whispered. Slowly, her claws withdrew as she wrapped one arm around Ashlynn's waist and gently stroked her lover's cheek with the other hand. "Why must you push yourself this hard?"

"I've seen how the Vale falls if we fail to transform it," Ashlynn said, her emerald eyes flickering with the ghosts of her visions in the trail of the Ancient Willow. "Without allies, we are overrun by the Lothians and the Church. Without the resources to take the war to them, our walls will crumble, and that's just the battle against Owain and the forces he can assemble. A Crusade will be much, much worse," she said as a tear spilled down her cheek.

"I nearly lost everything to Owain Lothian," Ashlynn said, stepping back and wiping the moisture from her eyes. "I didn't know how to fight back then. And now, someone is threatening my everything again and I have much, much more to lose."

"But I refuse," Ashlynn said, turning to look at Nereida and Beilan. "Master Beilan can find a way to trade in more than just Witchwood. There are other things that only witches can make. The Mother of Thorns showed me the way," she explained. Making potions to trade in Crystal Lake City had been a lesson in more ways than one, and Ashlynn had learned even more in the months since her first visit to the oldest city of the Ancient Clan.

"So you intend to treat my darling Ashlynn like another mine full of unique treasures," Nyrielle said, her face returning to a cold, impassive mask as she looked over Ashlynn's head to meet the gaze of the serpentine merchant. A trace of power flowed along with her words, giving everyone who heard her speak the impression that she spoke from a place beyond the grave...

And that she might drag them to that place if the answers she heard displeased her.

Chapter 369: Two Victories

"So you intend to treat my darling Ashlynn like another mine full of unique treasures."

Nyrielle's words exploded among the onlookers like a crack from Heila's whip, shocking them to silence and bringing even the nearby servants to a halt. Could Beilan truly have been that audacious? Some

shook their heads while others turned away, afraid to see the moment of a friend or business partner's gruesome death at the hands of one of the most powerful vampires to walk the earth.

"Never!" Beilan said with more heat than he'd intended. "The wonders that her Dominion can create are not just treasures, they're living manifestations of her love for her home and her desire to protect it," he said. His hands clenched into fists at his sides and a thin rivulet of blood trickled from one fist where his nail had pierced the soft scales of his palm.

Ashlynn hadn't just described the treasures she could create when he met with her. Because of Nereida and everything she had done to help the pair of witches when they arrived in High Fen City, Ashlynn had taken out a bottle of Thornback Egg Paste. As a man and a husband who had always asked his wife to wait 'one more year' while he secured one business deal or another, the look on his wife's face when that bottle appeared told him that his days without children of his own were about to come to an end.

But when he'd asked Ashlynn the price for such a life changing elixir, she'd shaken her head and asked only that he lend the might of his business empire to her cause whenever he could. What she'd asked for hardly seemed like sufficient repayment for the boon his yet hatch children would reap, but now that he stood before the cold and ruthless Nyrielle he realized why Ashlynn might feel the need to compensate him so well. The things she would ask of him would not be easy, but if he couldn't succeed here, at this very first hurdle, then he had no business calling himself her ally and working on her behalf.

"I will not trade such treasures for gold or jewels," he swore. Holding out the hand he'd accidentally pierced with his sharpened nails he squeezed his fist and let blood drip to the stone floor, breaking the tense silence with the steady splat of falling drops of blood. "I swear to you, there is no price that could match up to the value of these things, and I will never dishonor the gifts that her Dominion is willing to entrust to me. For every wonder she sees fit to birth, I will return something that could not be obtained with lesser means or I will return to her what she entrusted to me."

"My husband knows many powerful people," Nereida said quickly, slithering up beside her husband and holding tightly to his other arm. "What he's offering to do is to give you and Lady Ashlynn access to his network of those people and to broker the kind of support from them that normal money can't buy."

"And, and if you demand it," Nereida said a touch awkwardly, feeling like she had to match up to her husband's grand gesture. "Then I will remain at Lady Ashlynn's side, as servant and hostage to ensure my husband never breaks his oath."

"Nereida," Ashlynn said softly with a complicated expression on her face. She understood that Heila's friend was attempting to offer herself up as a hostage, but she'd been an aggressive social climber for far too long and her habits had betrayed her. Perhaps Nyrielle would hear the offer to become a hostage for what it was, but it was more likely that she would see it as an attempt to insert herself more permanently into Ashlynn's growing inner circle.

"Ashlynn, my darling," Nyrielle said, softening her tone and turning to look at her anxious lover. She could feel the echo of Ashlynn's heart racing within her chest and she knew that despite the way she'd reacted, Ashlynn both wanted to protect this merchant and wanted to continue her plan. "You're being willful again," she said with a soft smile.

"I know," Ashlynn said, stepping close and wrapping her arms around Nyrielle so she could look up into the other woman's midnight gaze from inches away. "So indulge me this time."

Suddenly, thunderous applause broke out across the arena on the floors above and anywhere on the first floor that was far enough away from Nyrielle to avoid getting caught up in the frigid darkness of her anger.

On the arena sands, Savis and Tausau stood proudly, covered in blood and victory. Their victory alone, however, wasn't enough to stir the fervor of the crowd. Instead, it was the sight of the two vampires lifting the final surviving combatants to their feet. One was a swordsman from the Clan of the Great Claw and the other was the halberd wielder from the Glass Eyed Clan.

"These men," Savis roared in a voice so loud it could be heard even over the cheering of the crowd. "Fought to the last, like true champions should! Tonight, we not only spare their lives... we offer them a place!"

"Join us, champions," Tausau said in a voice almost as loud as his elder brother's. "Take a place in my brother's Black Wolf Brigade and fight to cover yourselves in more glory than this arena can ever offer you."

"Join us," Savis echoed. "And one day, you may earn the right to become our progeny!"

Both gladiators stood in stunned silence while the audience erupted in shouts and mutters. Some chanted loudly that the honored warriors should accept the offer while others begged that they stay to bring even more glory to the arena.

Both men shared a single look, each one understanding that the opportunity they obtained had been won with equal parts luck and skill. If Tausau had thrown his shield at the other man, or if Savis had targeted the man with a halberd instead of the one with a spear, the outcome would have been entirely different.

Now, if they stayed, the crowd's expectations of them might be greater than they could ever fulfill, but if they came under the command of the men who gave them this opportunity, who surely knew that they obtained this chance through no small measure of luck... The look they shared lasted for the briefest of moments before both men knelt before the powerful vampires who spared their lives.

"We pledge our lives to serve!"

On the first floor of the arena, Nyrielle turned away from the spectacle and gave the serpentine merchant and his wife a deep, evaluating stare that made the couple feel as though the vampire could see through their very scales. And who knew, perhaps she could. It was said that the Harbinger of Death could destroy a person's soul, so who was to say what she was looking at when she stared at them like a judge pondering whether or not they should be executed.

"My darling told me that merchants must have courage similar to warriors," Nyrielle said slowly. "And that the wars you wage are no less dangerous than the battles fought on the sands. I still don't know that I believe her," the vampire said in a very cold tone before her voice softened and she withdrew the last of the dark energy that pooled around her.

"But today, I have seen a man who fights for wealth stand before me with courage and conviction great enough to rival the men who just fought my great-uncles on the sands," Nyrielle said with a gentle smile. "So I will accept your sincerity, and your company when the Willow Witch takes to the stands in the evening's final battle."

"I'm not yet convinced that this plan of yours is a good idea, my love," Nyrielle said as she wrapped one wing around Ashlynn, leading her away from the crowd and gesturing for Beilan and Nereida to follow. "But I'm willing to give these two a chance. If nothing else, I will accept their aid for the lesser challenge of improving our returns on what we obtain from Airgead Mountain. Does that satisfy you, my love?"

"A chance is all that I would ever ask for," Ashlynn said sweetly as they headed toward High Lady Erna's private box. The other arrangements she had in mind would need to wait until the days to come, but if the cannal project had been the most ambitious, this one had been the riskiest. Having gained at least some support for both, Ashlynn considered this to be her own victory for the evening.

Now, all that remained was for Heila to triumph over Yotsun's challengers and the night would be a complete success...

Chapter 370: Turning Up The Heat

Underneath the arena, a short, horned merchant paced back and forth nervously in one of the many preparatory chambers reserved for champions of the arena. In the ten days since Yotsun's unintentional feud with the Willow Witch had begun, his salt and pepper hair had turned even more gray and he swore that the bald spot at the crown of his head had doubled in size from all the stress that piled up on him is the pressure mounted.

At first, he'd thought little of the diminutive witch's claim that she could do as the Blood Princess had done, standing for ten days in the arena and fighting at least ten men a day. He had never expected that High Lady Erna would be standing near enough to overhear their increasingly boastful spat or that she would step up to act as a witness to their wager.

The morning after the banquet, though he quickly assembled a team of arena regulars, Yotsun was prepared to laugh the whole thing off as a joke once he taught the little girl from the Vale of Mists why his ancestors had never once considered returning to a place filled with weaklings and cowards that sheltered under the wings of the Blood Princess.

While the men he hired were by no means famous champions in High Fen City, they were capable enough to fight in the largest arena in the entire High Fen rather than being relegated to the smaller venues within the city or worse, the much smaller dueling grounds that were common in the outlying towns and villages. They should have been more than sufficient to put the newly born 'Willow Witch' in her place.

After that, Yotsun intended to make a great show of being the bigger man. He would disregard their wager or perhaps ask for a single favor. Either way, he would remind everyone watching that both he and the young witch had consumed a great deal of alcohol and that he, as the older and wiser party, wouldn't hold the rash words of youth against a promising young witch.

The old merchant expected that such a grand display of magnanimity would raise his stature in the eyes of many of his peers and his act of mercy might even earn him additional rewards from the new Mother of Trees. In the end, it should have taken a single day in the arena to conclude this entire affair.

Yet now, ten days later, he'd pulled his hair in frustration so often that he knew he would be bald within a year from the stress of this disaster alone. If the first defeat could be forgiven for using a random collection of common fighters, then everything that happened from the second day on could only be considered an exercise in throwing good money after bad.

Now, ten men in dark crimson and black robes stood before him as they awaited the signal that they could enter the arena. The sounds of battle had faded long ago, yet for some reason, they had yet to be allowed to take to the sands, leaving Yotsun to fret about what might be happening on the floors above.

"Sit, little man," a slender figure in dark robes growled. The man's voice was hoarse and rough, and when he spoke, he sounded like each word had been pulled through a throat that refused to let more words escape than was absolutely necessary.

"I hired you, Ropati," Yotsun snapped, glaring at the leader of the strange cult he'd brought here at considerable expense. "Don't tell me what to do!"

"Then calm yourself," the robed man said with a shrug. Reaching into one of the pockets in his robes, he withdrew a long, slender cigar the thickness of his first finger and twice as long before biting off one end and spitting it onto the stone floor. Pursing lips together that had long been scarred by horrific burns, the man blew gently on the opposite end of the cigar until a brilliant, glowing ember formed and the room began to smell of pungent tobacco smoke.

"Try one," Ropati said, pulling out a second cigar and holding it out toward the fretting merchant. "Calmer that way," he added as he placed his own cigar between his burned lips and drew a deep breath until he filled his lungs with the pungent smoke.

For a moment, he held his breath, savoring the feeling of warmth that suffused him along with the gentle, calming sensation that permeated through his body as the smoke clung to his lungs before finally exhaling in a long stream of smoke that coiled around his head and seeped into the fibers of his robes. For a moment, he felt a deep kinship with the smoldering crater he called home but that sensation faded all too quickly.

Standing just a few feet away from him, Yotsun hesitated to step close enough to the dangerous man to retrieve the offering but... given the choice between coming close enough to touch Ropati's burned, scarred flesh and the possibility of offending his temporary employee, the balding merchant crossed the gap in two quick strides to retrieve the offered cigar.

Every time Yotsun looked at Ropati or any of the men he'd brought with him, he wished he knew which clan they'd come from so he could understand how he should treat them. For a businessman who prided himself on knowing the customs and rituals of more than fifty clans, it was unnerving to confront men who hid most of their features behind robes, gloves, and even dark leather masks.

Only Ropati revealed his mutilated, burned visage, showing the world proof that he had seared away his affiliations to his nation and clan when he joined the Cauldron of Flame.

Yotsun knew little about the reclusive cult who dwelled near the summit of a broken, hollowed-out mountain to the north other than that they worshiped the Volcano Witch as a near deity and that they had been searching for the successor to their god for more than two hundred years.

Most people considered them lunatics who mutilated themselves in search of understanding the 'primordial flames of the earth.' But those who dismissed them as mere madmen overlooked an uncomfortable truth about the origin of their power. These weren't ordinary sorcerers, rather, they were the last remnants of an order who once served the Father of Calamities, a witch whose connection to nature's destructive forces rivaled the power that witches like the Mother of Trees held over nature's growth.

Even after two centuries without their master, the cult's magic retained a smoldering ember of that terrifying, cataclysmic power. Yotsun had thought that the only way to stop a witch might be to send another witch after her, but witches were far too rare and the closest ones all seemed to be her allies. Without the ability to call on the children of the Mother of Storms or the even more distant Mother of Tides, Yotsun had turned to the next best thing; the deranged worshipers of the Volcano Witch.

"Mast- COUGH - Master Ropati," Yotsun said, nearly choking after taking a single puff from the cigar the cultist handed him. "Master Ropati, about your terms of payment," the balding merchant said as sweat broke out on his brow. "The Harbinger of Death has arrived, so, it may be, may be difficult to send her away with you when you leave. If, if I could retain her until, until the vampires have left then..."

"Do not change our deal, little man," Ropati said roughly, his gravelly voice growing stern as he blew a stream of smoke in Yotsun's face. "Your wager is that the Willow Witch serves you for two years if we defeat her."

"Yes, that's it exactly," Yotsun said. "She's expected to serve me, so sending her away with you as soon as she's entered my service. It may be, may be a bit unexpected, and..." And how could he say that he worried that the diminutive Willow Witch might not survive a visit to the harsh, broken mountain these men called home? It was said that molten rock spilled from the crater where the mountain's top once stood, searing anything that stood in its path. To bring a Child of Trees there... "It, it may appear to them that I've sold off one of the important servants of the Mother of Trees, and..."

"Not my problem," the cultist interrupted, directing a dark, smoldering look at the short, horned merchant. "She serves you. You send her with us. This is our deal."

"Then, then how long will it be before you send her back to me?" Yotsun worked up the courage to ask. Dealing with these men, he was afraid that the Willow Witch would be traumatized from her stay with them. If he had to leave her with them for the entire two years, then by the time he sent her back to the Mother of Trees, the powerful witch and her even more powerful vampire lover might return for his head.

"The Child of Trees is nothing but kindling before the Primordial Flames of the Earth," Ropati said after taking a deep drag on his cigar. Smoke curled around his lips as he spoke, filling the air with not only the pungent aroma of tobacco but a sharper, more acrid scent of burning flesh when he spoke. "If there is any kindling left after two years, we will return what remains to you."

"But do not hold your breath, little man," the cultist said. A dark, eager gleam flickered across his eyes as his scarred lips pulled into a tight smile. "This 'Willow Witch' will be an offering for the return of an even greater witch. It is an insult to the divine to ask for an offering back once it's been given, don't you think?"

All around him, the other men in dark red and black robes chuckled, filling the room with the sounds of their twisted, distorted voices and the oppressive heat of their eagerness to obtain a worthy sacrifice.

Soon, they thought. Soon they would shake their long-dormant volcano back to life, calling forth the Father of Calamaty and proving that this time, one of them was worthy of bathing in the Primordial Flames to become the first Volcano Witch in hundreds of years.

All they lacked was a bit of kindling to stoke the flames....