

The Vampire 371

Chapter 371: Arena of Trees (Part One)

In the arena above, iron gates thundered open all around the arena floor. Not just one or two of them, but every single entrance at once. The sound of dozens of rolling wagons and clanking chains filled the air as an army of workers poured onto the sands. Tuscans, their towering forms making even fully grown men look like children beside them, followed close behind while hauling massive carts piled high with rich, dark soil. Behind them came scores of arena servants pushing wheelbarrows laden with young trees and sacks of seed.

"Weren't these men defeated by the Willow Whip days ago?" One person in the crowd asked. "What are they doing here now?"

"Look, they're acting like laborers," another man said, pointing to the group of ferocious soldiers who had given up their weapons and armor in exchange for simple tunics and gardener's tools. "Is this because they were defeated in the battle against the Willow Witch?"

Under the wide eyes of the crowd, the arena began to undergo a rapid transformation into something entirely new. Some in the crowd wondered if this was intended as an odd sort of decoration for the final battle, but if that was the case, the scale of the work being done was grander than any 'decoration' they'd ever seen for a single battle.

Whatever these servants were doing, it had clearly been planned with military precision. Each worker knew their exact role and duty. Some rushed about, scattering soil while others tamped it down, creating a foundation that would support what was to come. Arena staff who normally cleared away fallen fighters now carefully measured distances between saplings, calling out positions in voices that echoed off the arena walls.

Meanwhile, the Tuscan giants worked with surprising delicacy despite their massive size. Once they had finished digging deep holes in the sands with oversized shovels, their trunks carefully lifted precious young willows from their pots and settled them into the freshly dug holes with the precision of practiced gardeners.

What should have taken days of preparation was being accomplished in a matter of minutes through the coordinated efforts of nearly a hundred workers. The audience, who had been eagerly awaiting another bloody spectacle, found themselves watching an entirely different kind of performance as the arena was transformed before their eyes.

Seeing the scale of activity, many arena veterans were already anticipating that the scale of the final battle would be one unrivaled by any other fought in the arena this year if not this decade.

"For the final battle, ten tails, gold, on the Willow Whip!" one man shouted as his heart pounded in his chest. "No, make that twenty!"

"Twenty," his wife hissed next to him, her tail slapping nervously against the ground. "At least wait until we see the opponents and the bookmen announce the odds! How can you be so confident when you don't even know the odds?"

"Because," the man said while rooting around in his purse for several pieces of gold. "Those are willow trees down there," he whispered in his wife's ear. "There's no way the Willow Whip would lose when she has the strength of her own trees to call on!"

On the sands of the arena, Ipiktok supervised his men and dozens of servants employed by the arena as they rapidly changed the landscape before Heila's final battle could begin. From time to time as he worked, his long, flexible trunk retrieved a roll of parchment and held it up for him to inspect as he shouted orders, ensuring that everything was placed exactly as Lady Ashlynn had specified.

Technically, Ipiktok's agreement to serve Heila for two years following his defeat hadn't come into effect yet. If Yotsun's final champions defeated the Willow Witch today, then he and his Tuscan mercenaries would be free to go about their business. Ipiktok, however, believed in repaying his debts and the debt he owed Lady Heila for sparing not only his life but the lives of his men at the end of their battle was far more important to him than the debt he'd assume because of his agreement with the horned merchant.

When he'd presented himself at the palace to place his soldiers under Lady Heila's command, the Mother of Trees herself had asked for his help in preparing for her final battle. Ever since then, while the work that he and his men did wasn't glamorous, they all took a measure of pride in knowing that the days of back-breaking labor would allow the Willow Witch to stand on the greatest stage when she fought her final battle in the arena.

In High Lady Erna's private box, Ashlynn smiled as she saw the horde of workers transforming the arena. The preparations for this moment extended far beyond what was taking place on the surface, and that applied to the audience within the private box as well as the actions of the small army of people preparing the arena for what was to come.

Just as when Ashlynn had attended, two gilded thrones dominated the box, but this time, Nyrielle occupied the throne next to High Lady Erna while Ashlynn had taken a smaller, though still grand seat to Nyrielle's left. On High Lady Erna's side, they'd been joined by Erna's two surviving siblings, each occupying similarly grand chairs.

General Aleser looked like a larger version of his older sister, though some of that was due to his decision to attend tonight's battle in grand, ceremonial armor befitting his place not only as the commander of both the palace guard and the city's soldiers but as a champion of the arena as well. The long scar that passed through a milky white eye, however, made it abundantly clear that his sister had ended his days as a gladiator when she ended his participation in the competition for the throne.

Next to him, the delicate Nenet had looked vaguely uncomfortable for much of the evening as blood was shed in the arena, but now she seemed fascinated by the actions of the servants and laborers below. As the youngest of High Lady Erna's siblings, she'd removed herself from the battle for succession early on and instead focused on her interests in agriculture, eventually taking a position as one of Erna's chief ministers overseeing the farmers and ranchers of the High Fen.

"Why are they planting trees?" Nenet asked, turning to raise a brow at Ashlynn. "If they're worried about them being knocked over, they could just place them in heavy pots with iron rings. There's no need to bury them now, is there?"

"You'll see in a few moments, Minister Nenet," Ashlynn said with a mysterious smile on her lips. She'd told Ipiktok that he would only be given at most thirty minutes to complete the work while the audience enjoyed an intermission before the final fight, and now, it looked like his men were close to completing their work.

"My love," Ashlynn whispered, leaning close to Nyrielle. "Do you remember the night you taught me sorcery? When you used a trace of my power to give life to the raven you conjured from the mist?"

"How could I forget?" Nyrielle said, licking the point of a fang as she remembered the evening they'd spent together. It had been shortly after Ashlynn arrived in the Vale of Mists and it hadn't just been the first night she taught Ashlynn sorcery, it had been a night of many other firsts that defined the shape their relationship would take as their bond drew them closer together. "It was the first time I had a true taste of you," she added with a soft, affectionate smile.

"Yes, well," Ashlynn said awkwardly, her face heating as she remembered the feeling of Nyrielle's hands roving under her blouse, tracing along her skin as she helped Ashlynn to feel the flow of energy within her body. "What I meant is that I'd like your help doing something similar now," she said, forcing the memories of Nyrielle's gentle touch to the back of her mind so she could focus on the moment.

"I need to borrow a trace of your power," Ashlynn said, interlacing her fingers with Nyrielle's. "Will you help me?"

"Now?" Nyrielle asked in confusion. From the look of the work underway on the arena floor, what Ashlynn needed right now was a source of life, not death, so why would she turn to a vampire for help? "What do you need of me?"

"Just stand beside me," Ashlynn said with an eager smile and a twinkle forming in her emerald eyes. "Our bond is already enough for what I need from you. I just need to keep you close," she said, squeezing Nyrielle's hand and pulling her toward the railing of the private box.

What she was about to attempt would be a spectacle on a grander scale than any she'd undertaken before. In principle, it was no different than a chore she'd done countless times in Amahle's gardens when they were preparing another family meal. In practice, however, she would be stretching her hand across the entirety of High Fen City to complete her ritual tonight and she would need Nyrielle's help to ensure that nothing was wasted in the process.

Now, she gave the arena one last glance, ensuring that the trees, soil, seeds, and even channels for water were all in the right places, forming a grand design that would serve as an anchor and a guide for the witchcraft that she was about to begin. Then, when she was confident that everything was in place, she drew a deep breath to address the crowd.

Chapter 372: Arena of Trees (Part Two)

Behind her, High Lady Erna sat up straighter on her gilded throne, eager to see the demonstration of the Mother of Trees' power. If Ashlynn could do as she'd claimed, the value of maintaining an alliance with the Vale of Mists would become even more obvious to the ministers who constantly pressured her to either bring her teacher to the High Fen or limit the protections she extended to the few merchants who reached the High Fen from the Vale of Mists each year.

"People of the High Fen," Ashlynn said, her voice rippling with the power of the wind to carry it to every corner of the arena as she spoke. "Honored guests," she added. "Tonight, my child Heila, the Willow

Witch, will take to the sands for a final time. To honor the Blood Princess of the Arena, she has fought for nine days and defeated ninety men. Tonight, she will face her greatest challenge!"

In response to Ashlynn's words, several people broke out in cheers and a few scattered chants rippled across the crowd.

"For the Blood Princess!"

"Willow Whip! Willow Whip! Willow Whip!"

"But people," Ashlynn added, holding her hands up high to still the crowd. "You have not seen my Heila at her best. The arena sands are dry and dusty, soaked only in blood," Ashlynn said, lowering her head as though she was apologizing for Heila's poor showing. "Tonight, with help from my love, the Blood Princess of the Arena herself, you will have a chance to see the true power of a witch!"

"Were you always this good at addressing crowds, my darling?" Nyrielle whispered as she watched the people surge to their feet, cheering for Ashlynn's words.

"I've gained some practice here," Ashlynn admitted. "Mostly, I'm imitating my father. He was always good with crowds. Now, relax, and open yourself to me," she instructed as she drew herself up to her full height and gathered emerald energy to her palms. "I'll do the rest."

Drawing a deep breath, Ashlynn looked out across the arena floor, ensuring that all of the servants and even the Tuscans had left before she began to speak in a steady, even cadence that echoed across the arena.

"By autumn's crown and winter's night,

Through shadows deep and fading light,

In every fallen, withered reed,

In every scattered, broken seed,

I claim the strength of seasons past,

Until their power is mine at last."

As she spoke, Ashlynn cast her senses as far as she could extend them, reaching out across the entirety of High Fen City and to the nearest edges of the farmland beyond.

The harvest had all but come to an end and all across the High Fen, countless fallen plants had been heaped in piles to rot away after stripping their fruits, vegetables, and seeds. Within the city, in every park and garden, blankets of scattered leaves lay in piles where the wind blew them, some even falling into the canals and forming drifting clumps of leaves and twigs that threatened to clog drains and flood streets.

All of these things were fallen and had served their purpose in life, but they had yet to surrender the last of the energy they held. Over the winter and the rainy months, most would rot away, but now, Ashlynn fed those withering, dying leaves husks a trace of Nyrielle's dark, deadly energy, reaping what little life was left and gathering that energy to her hands.

At the moment, Ashlynn still lacked the strength to envelop the farmland surrounding the city, but that was precisely why she'd put Ipiktok and his men to work, gathering up the detritus of the harvest and storing it in the vast chambers under the arena for her use in this ritual. Now, as she gathered up the tiniest traces of energy from tens of thousands of fallen plants, brilliant emerald energy blazed around her like the flames of a torch, shining in the night and casting a green glow over the entire arena.

"Through mists of time and witch's ways,

By ancient bonds of endless days,

Let willows rise from barren ground,

Let years flow swift in time unbound,

While death and life together dance,

To give these trees their swift advance."

Nyrielle's eyes glowed a deep, midnight blue as Ashlynn wove traces of her power through the much greater volume of lush, emerald energy that spilled from her hands, enveloping the trees and soil of the arena.

The crowd fell silent and some even knelt in awe as they watched the power of the Mother of Trees transform the arena from a dusty, barren land that held only a scattering of hastily placed saplings into something else entirely, right before their eyes.

The earth churned and shook and two of the tanks of water used to flood the arena for battles on shallow boats spilled their contents across the rippling soil. The willow trees sent their roots plunging into the earth, drinking deeply of the water and the energy of life that Ashlynn spilled across the arena like glowing rain.

Moments later, the trees shook before they stretched upwards. Dozens of branches formed on each tree as it stretched ever higher until they began to droop and sway in a breeze felt only by the leaves and branches of the trees. Across the ground, grass seeds scattered by servants sprouted, growing several inches tall in less time than it took for the stunned crowd to draw a breath.

From start to finish, Ashlynn's witchcraft took less than fifteen minutes to completely transform the arena. Where there had once been only dusty, bloody sand, now stood a lush meadow dotted with nearly two dozen willow trees. Each of those willow trees stretched between twenty and thirty feet tall, some even reaching heights that allowed the people closest to the railing on the first floor of the arena to reach out and touch them!

"Now, Little Sister," High Lady Erna said quietly, leaning across her brother to speak to her slack-jawed younger sister. "You see why I insisted you leave the harvest to watch tonight? This is the power of the Mother of Trees."

"This, this shouldn't be possible!" Nenet exclaimed. "No sorcery can grow a tree like that, and if it could, it would nearly kill the sorcerer who made the attempt. At the very least, a single tree would leave them withered and aged!"

"Now," Erna said quietly. "Think back on the drought seven years ago. We finally got rains late in the summer but it was far too late to salvage crops that had withered on the vine. Can you imagine what would have happened if we'd been able to call on Lady Ashlynn's help at a time like that?"

"Sister," Nenet gasped. "You, are you saying that she can do this with things that aren't even trees? She could do this with wheat and millet?"

"I don't know," Erna said, looking at the emerald energy swirling around Ashlynn with eyes that held a great deal of respect and the slightest trace of wonder. "But think of all the things that are trees. The apple, pear, and plum orchards in the hills for one. When bellies are empty, anything that offers sustenance is worthy, even if we'd usually reserve it for cider, wine and sweets."

"And this is why you want me to prepare a contingent of soldiers to march with Lady Nyrielle when they leave for the Vale of Mists?" Alesar asked, never once taking his unblinking eye off the powerful witch and vampire standing at the railing. "You want to call on her support in times of crisis?"

"I want to call on their support more than just in times of crisis, Little Brother," Erna said, returning to her seat with a smile on her lips that fully revealed her venomous fangs. "The Vale of Mists hasn't looked like much for more than a hundred years, but its time of dormancy is coming to an end."

"Before it can rise," she continued, "the Vale of Mists must survive a crisis of its own, and I for one don't intend to stand idly by and hope that it does. The High Fen will stand with the Vale of Mists," she said firmly. "And tonight, those who have doubts will learn at least a portion of the reason why."

"Look! In the center of the arena!" A member of the audience shouted, snapping out of their dazed sense of awe when they noticed that the arena was no longer empty of people. The startled cry quickly gathered the attention of others who turned away from the wondrous trees to look at what could have drawn such a reaction after the miracle they'd just witnessed.

There, in the center of the arena, a single diminutive figure stood, looking like the guardian of a sacred grove. Her horns were hidden by her well-worn War Hat, but everyone recognized her for who she was as soon as they saw her on the floor of the arena.

This time, however, she had abandoned her borrowed coat of scale armor and replaced it with the signature midnight blue padded gambeson and chainmail of the Vale of Mists. On one hip she wore both her willow wand and glittering Snow Fang while the other held a coiled willow whip that had quickly become her signature weapon.

"Heila, my child," Ashlynn said in a voice that resounded off the walls of the arena. "Tonight, the stage is truly yours. Show them the real power of the Willow Witch!"

Chapter 373: Yotsun's Plea

Heila stood on the floor of the arena, allowing the cheers of the crowd to wash over her like the sound of distant rain as she soaked in the far more intimate feeling of Ashlynn's magic. She had known that Ashlynn was planning something, but once again, her lady had surprised her with a gesture so deeply touching that she struggled to find the words to respond when she heard Ashlynn's voice calling out to her to show them what she was truly capable of.

"Though I am small and unworthy," Heila said after a brief pause. Her voice was clear and echoed off the arena walls as she faced Ashlynn and Nyrielle's figures in High Lady Erna's private box, showing no sign of the turmoil she felt within her heart. "I dedicate my victory to the Harbinger of Death and the Mother of Trees, long may you rule!"

"Long may you rule!" the crowd echoed, taking up Heila's resonant cry. "Long may you rule!"

Just as the crowd's cheers began to subside, a lone, diminutive figure strode out into a private box on the opposite side of the arena from High Lady Erna's box. Though his hair was slightly out of place and he looked like he hadn't slept in several days, Yotsun still cut an impressive figure in his elaborately embroidered tunic. Standing with his hand clutching at the collar of his tunic while he puffed out his chest, it was impossible for the audience to miss the heavy golden chain hanging around his neck or the half dozen rings glittering from his fingers as he prepared to address the crowd.

"Willow Witch Heila," Yotsun began, his voice pitched to carry across the arena even if he lacked the strength of sorcery to amplify his words. "I was wrong to think that the Vale of Mists lacked the strength

to fight as the Blood Princess did all those years ago," he admitted, lowering his head humbly before the gathered audience.

"You have delivered clear and decisive defeats to everyone who has stood against you," he continued. "Tonight, I'm sure that everyone expects to see your heroism on full display! The Mother of Trees herself has blessed you with the greatest stage ever seen in this arena," he added, bowing in the direction of Ashlynn's figure in the opposite box. "I'm sure you would not wish to disappoint her."

"But, Lady Heila," Yotsun added as he felt the enthusiasm and excitement of the crowd begin to grow. "My final champions, they are not ordinary men. Before they enter the arena, it isn't too late. Some injuries are impossible to heal from, even with the support of the Mother of Trees herself. I do not wish to see you maimed," he said.

To the audience perhaps he appeared magnanimous, or perhaps he appeared arrogant and condescending. At the moment, he didn't care how he appeared. Sweat soaked his brow and if he were to pull his hands away from where they tightly clutched his tunic, he was certain that the wet handprints of his sweat-soaked palms would be clearly visible. This was his last chance, the very last opportunity he had to prevent disaster, and no matter what the people in the crowd thought of him, he had to try.

"Lady Heila," Yotsun pleaded. "Won't you consider surrendering this round before we begin? A record of ninety men defeated in nine days is still a legend that will echo throughout the ages. I will personally commission a statue to your glory if you can concede now without a fight. There is no shame in taking this offer to preserve your life," he said.

In the private boxes belonging to Yotsun's competitors, the lord mayors of outlying towns and even young socialites splugging on a night of fun, people muttered darkly at Yotsun's condescending words.

"If that was my man," a young woman from the Glass Eyed clan said sharply. "I'd pack up my jewels and flee the nest before he could drag his sorry self home tonight."

"Maybe he's trying to be merciful?" a shorter young woman from the Horned Clan said as she looked at the way Yotsun's horns seemed to quiver as he spoke. For his body to tremble so much that it was visible in his horns, his heart must be aching, but he had already lost nine out of ten nights... could losing one more really move his heart so much.

"If this is him being merciful," a scathing voice added as a third woman joined the conversation. "I don't want to see how he treats his woman. She's probably locked up in their manor, wasting away while this fool does whatever he thinks is best for her, even when he insults her to her face."

Elsewhere, similar conversations rippled through the crowd. Many speculated, trying to understand why someone like Yotsun, who stood at the end of nine days of losses, could believe he was even capable of demanding surrender. Most dismissed him as a fool, trying to salvage a measure of pride at this last moment before the battle, but a few began to wonder what exactly lay behind the heavy iron door to give Yotsun the confidence to make this strange demand.

The thoughts of the crowd and the rumors that were beginning to spread as a result of his speech were the least of Yotsun's worries. As far as he was concerned there were very few outcomes that favored Heila. The worst possible thing would be for her to suffer a defeat in the arena that left her alive, only to be taken as 'kindling' for the Cauldron of Flame. Compared to that fate, a defeat in the arena that cost the young witch her life was a relative blessing.

In Yotsun's mind, facing off against the scarred and self-mutilated men of the Cauldron of Flame, even a victory here in the arena could cost the young witch so much that she would curse this day for the rest of her life. If the wounds were too serious, she might even long for death and wish that she had died.

But if she would accept his offer... if she could retreat from the ledge they both perched on, then perhaps there was a chance that things could be resolved peacefully. If the men from the Cauldron of Flame never fought in the arena, then Yotsun could claim they weren't entitled to any spoils that resulted from Heila's surrender. He could keep her out of their clutches and still find a way to play the 'bigger man' in front of the people.

All of those hopes and fantasies burned away like dry autumn leaves in a bonfire the instant Heila opened her mouth to respond to his offer.

Chapter 374: Descendants of Cataclysm

"The people of the Vale of Mists are not cowards, Mister Yotsun," Heila said proudly from the arena floor. "We have faced unbeatable foes before and even if we lost a battle, we never lost the war."

Heila had no idea what Yotsun was playing at by talking of surrender or attempting to alter their wager at this late stage. They had both come much too far to back down now that what felt like half the population of High Fen City had gathered to witness this historic battle. Did he really think that she

would back down and surrender just because he asked her to without even revealing his final champions?

"I respect trying to resolve this without bloodshed," Heila said slowly from the floor of the arena. Her words shocked many in the crowd but she held up a hand to still their tongues before the noise could overwhelm their conversation. "The tradition of the Willow Witch has always been one that includes healing and care for others. As my lady's Willow Witch, I should deliver her victory, but if I can do so with less suffering, isn't that always better?"

"So I return your offer to you, Mister Yotsun," Heila said in a tone that was both respectful and challenging. "Withdraw your final champions and I will excuse them from our wager. They will not need to travel to the Vale of Mists with me when we depart and they will not be compelled to fight in our war against the Lothians and their Church. This is the greatest kindness I can offer, Mister Yotsun," she added with a pointed stare. "If you are concerned about your champions, you should take it."

"Willow Whip!"

"Willow Whip!"

"Willow Whip!"

The crowd thundered in approval, applauding at Heila's refusal to surrender for any reason. Some even began to whisper about taking a trip to see the Vale of Mists. After watching this diminutive witch stand taller than so many champions of the arena, they wondered... were the rumors about the weakness of the Vale really true?

A few of them, particularly the young men and women who were approaching the age when they could enter an academy to be trained as gladiators, began to wonder if they might receive even better training in the Vale of Mists than they could close at home. After all, if such a place produced not only the Blood Princess but also the Willow Whip... then what could they become if they learned to fight in the way the people of the Vale did?

"You don't understand," Yotsun said in a voice too soft for anyone outside the box to hear over the roars of the crowd. He wanted to do something, anything to avoid unleashing the men he'd been foolish

enough to entangle himself with but now, there was nothing he could do except continue as he'd begun. "I can't surrender on their behalf. They'd never let me. And if you won't surrender..."

"My champions will not surrender, Lady Heila," the merchant continued. His voice, though loud enough for the arena to hear, seemed oddly resigned leaving many to feel like he was already admitting defeat but unable to back down from putting up some form of token resistance. "May you find eternal glory on the sands today," he shouted before turning decisively away from the railing and returning to his seat to watch the tragedy that was about to unfold.

The silence that followed his retreat felt heavier than any that had come before during the past nine nights of combat. Even the bookmakers, who normally shouted odds until the moment combat began, seemed hesitant to call out their predictions. The strange tension in Yotsun's voice and his bizarre attempt at mercy left everyone uncertain about what was about to happen when his champions entered the arena.

That silence stretched for a handful of deeply uncomfortable moments before it shattered like glass when the heavy iron gate beneath Yotsun's box began to clank and rumble, slowly opening to reveal ten men wearing crimson and black hooded robes. The leather masks that covered their faces were gruesome and twisted, each in their own unique way. Some featured blackened and charred fangs at unnatural angles, while others resembled a face made of wax that had melted until it flowed into a distorted mockery of a once graceful visage.

All of them carried a scent of sulfur, charred wood and flesh, and the air of a funeral pyre. In their black-gloved hands, they carried long staves made of burnt, blackened wood. Each staff held a number of shards of dark, glittering volcanic glass, sometimes hanging from cords wrapped around the staff or in other cases, shaped like a blade and mounted to the head of the staff like a spear.

"Greetings, Willow Witch," Ropati said, lowering his cowl and removing his leather mask to reveal the twisted mass of scars that covered his face. "In the name of the Volcano Witch, the Cauldron of Flame welcomes you to your final battle," he shouted, throwing up his arms and unleashing a torrent of flame that soared high into the night sky, erupting into a giant fireball that momentarily lit the arena as brightly as the sun.

In the stands around the arena, children cried out in fear, burying their heads in their father's shoulders and mother's skirts. Several men who thought themselves to be strong of heart trembled in fear, feeling that a cataclysmic ball of flame was about to descend upon them, consuming every life in the arena like kindling for the hearth.

On the highest levels, where some of the poorest people had taken the only seats they could afford, people cried out in more than fear as they felt the intense heat of the ball of flame on their flesh. Members of the Horned Clan, the Clan of the Great Claw, and any other clan with fur felt the tips of the fine hairs of their fur begin to smoke and smolder.

Others, particularly young children with tender skin or scales that were still soft and developing, cried in pain as the heat of the fireball caressed their flesh leaving behind the kinds of burns a person would suffer after spending an entire summer day toiling under the hot sun.

The fireball lasted for less time than it took to draw a breath but the after-effects rippled through the crowd like a wave of fear and pain. People who had looked directly at the explosion blinked rapidly, trying to clear the afterimages that felt burned into their eyes as they checked on loved ones or random strangers they happened to sit next to, worried that someone might have been seriously injured by the blaze.

In High Lady Erna's private box, the color drained from Ashlynn's face as she watched the energy flowing not only from the unmasked man leading his cultists but from each of his followers as well.

These men weren't ordinary sorcerers... rather, they drew on power from each other in exactly the same way that Ashlynn and Heila drew on the power of trees. These men weren't like any sorcerer she'd ever seen... if anything, they were much more like witches... and there were 10 of them while Heila stood alone.

Chapter 375: Smoldering Tempers

The crowd was still blinking their eyes and reaching out to check on their neighbors when an explosion of fury and energy surged from High Lady Erna's private box.

"Scaly strength, entrap, entwine!" High Lady Erna shouted, unleashing a wave of scintillating, iridescent serpents that shot across the willow grove of the arena before coiling around members of the Cauldron of Flame, binding them in place with constricting restraints that not only restricted their movement, but completely bound their magic.

"You dare to harm the innocent," Nyrielle snarled, leaping to her feet as dark energy surged from her fully opened wings, coalescing into several deadly feathers formed of shadows so dark they seemed to devour the light.

On the arena floor, Heila had already drawn her wand, an invocation on her lips when she heard Ashlynn's voice from above.

"Save your strength, Heila," Ashlynn said as she strode forward, drawing her own gnarled wand carved from the branch of the Ancient Oak. "I will tend to the wounded."

"Through nature's heart and healer's grace,

Let soothing waters find their place,

Let healing waters wash away

The scars of fire's cruel display,

Till every child stands whole again,

Beneath this sweet and gentle rain."

Beneath the light of the moon and the twinkling stars, faintly glowing emerald clouds formed, swirling around the arena as Ashlynn turned her wand in a slow, lazy circle, gathering up the moisture in the air and infusing it with the pure, healing energy of living, growing things. Seconds later, the clouds dissolved into a gentle rain of faintly glowing water droplets.

Where the rain fell, burns melted away as though they'd been painted on, leaving behind fresh, tender skin and scales. Even singed fur healed and recovered under the gentle wave of healing light that soothed not only the flesh but quieted fears and eased troubled hearts.

"How dare you," High Lady Erna spat as she slid up to the railing of her private box. "To harm the audience by losing control of your sorcery during a fierce battle is already a grave crime, but to strike the innocent simply to demonstrate your might... do you think the people of the High Fen are fangless babes? Name yourself, knave. Who are you to behave so callously in my presence?"

"Forgive me, High Lady Erna," Ropati said with a dark smile on his twisted lips as though he wasn't bothered by her confining magic at all. "I am Ropati, Second Ember of the Cauldron of Flame. I didn't realize that your people were so weak that they couldn't endure a little light show," he added.

"I promise you, our battle will not harm even the weakest, most infirm of your citizens who have gathered on the lowest floor of this arena," he said with a pointed look at the wealthy merchants and powerful champions who had earned the privilege of mingling with the guests of honor earlier in the evening.

"Merchant Yotsun," High Lady Erna said, shifting her attention to the opposite private box where a pair of guardsmen had just arrived. "By law and tradition, you are responsible for the actions of your champions when they fight on your behalf. You will suffer alongside them for the harm they've already caused. Are you certain that you wish to allow them to continue representing you?"

Sweat poured from the balding merchant's brow and he had to clutch firmly at his tunic to resist the desire to tug even more at the hair he had left. That fool Ropati had just cost him thousands of tails of silver in reparations to be paid to the families injured on the upper floor, what was the fool thinking? If it had been anyone else, at any other time, he wouldn't have hesitated to yank such an unruly warrior back and take his losses out of the other man's hide.

But these men... if he backed out of his deal with them now, they'd have their retribution whether this whole mess was their fault or not. Yotsun was certain that they would wait, these men worshiped volcanos that simmered for centuries before erupting with cataclysmic force. They'd wait, and then one day, he'd return from a trading expedition to find his home and everything he owned burned to a smoldering heap, perhaps with his family trapped inside.

"For-forgive me, High Lady," Yotsun said, kneeling on the floor of his luxurious private box and bowing his head low. "My champion is a stranger to our city, he only wanted to establish his own prestige after witnessing the glory and power of the Mother of Trees and her Willow Witch. His display was excessive, but he means no harm."

"Very well," Erna said, waving a hand and releasing the sorcery that bound the men on the arena floor. "Mister Ropati, there are consequences for harming others outside of the arena, even if the Mother of Trees has done you the favor of healing the wounded. You should thank her for that, but when this battle is over, my men will come for you. An accounting is still due for your crimes."

"Don't bother," Nyrielle said as she stepped back from the railing and withdrew her dark, shadowy energy. "Lady Heila," she said loudly. "You have fought hard for the Vale of Mists, and you have secured many champions to join our fight. But these men, I could not trust them to fight beside us. They would kill our allies along with our enemies without care or concern for who they hurt."

"So, Lady Heila," Nyrielle said in a voice that was colder than the Frost Walker blade at Heila's hip. "You need not spare their lives tonight."

On the floor of the arena, Heila took only a moment to glance at Ashlynn for a confirming nod before bowing deeply to the woman who was the highest authority within the Vale of Mists. Her battle hadn't even started yet and already things were spiralling out of control, but seeing the faces of children on the upper levels as they clutched their parents and cried out for someone to protect them from the horrifying ball of flames... there wasn't any part of her that disagreed with Lady Nyrielle's judgment.

"As you command, Lady Nyrielle," she said, formally acknowledging the commands she'd been given before turning to face Ropati and his men. "Prepare yourselves," Heila said, drawing Snow Fang and taking a fighting stance with the icy blade in one hand and her willow wand in the other.

"Three points, three times," Ropati growled, his voice sounding rough and strained as he commanded his men into a formation. His nine companions quickly divided themselves into groups of three, each one forming a triangle, one in front of their leader and one to either side, as though they were preparing to protect him from any direction that Heila could attack from.

Seeing both parties in position, High Lady Erna wasted no time, holding her hand up high as she sat in her gilded throne. Already, she was worried about things spiraling out of control because of Yotsun's desperation to salvage victory at the end.

She should have offered to cover the cost of champions she selected herself, ensuring a spectacle and preventing this disaster but she felt it would have tarnished Heila's victories and insulted her teacher in the process. Now, like everyone else embroiled in this fiasco, she could only allow things to play out.

"Tonight, we honor the Blood Princess of the Arena with glorious battle," High Lady Erna said, her voice resounding in every corner of the massive coliseum. "Let this battle begin!"

Chapter 376: Incendiary Confrontation

The instant High Lady Erna gave the word, chaos erupted in the arena as everyone seemed to move at once.

The first group of sorcerers, standing behind Ropati and to his left side snapped off a terse chant in rough, strained voices that overlapped with each other so well that they could be mistaken as a single, dark entity speaking from three throats at once.

"Sacred ash of calamity's throne,

Rise and make this grove our own!"

Three obsidian-tipped staves pointed toward the sky, glowing with a deep red glow that seemed shrouded by smoke and shadow. With an explosive -CRACK- flames surged from the bases of their staves, incinerating the gently waving grasses at their feet to produce a billowing cloud of ash several times larger than should have been possible. All around the trio, a rotten, sulfurous wind began to blow with a stench so pungent that anyone seated on the lower levels of the arena immediately covered their mouths and noses in an attempt to block out the horrible smell.

Ash billowed and flowed, carried by the wind in a dirty, dusty cloud that made it difficult for Heila to see the actions of the remaining sorcerers as she dashed to the side, putting as much distance between herself and these men as she could while she sought an opportunity to go on the offensive.

Half a breath after the first trio began chanting, the second trio, standing to Ropati's right side, pointed their staves at Heila and snapped out an invocation of their own.

"Sacred glass from mountain's heart,

Rend the air, tear flesh apart!"

A sound like breaking glass filled the air when their staves struck the ground, cracking the recently scorched earth and lifting several shards of wickedly gleaming obsidian from the earth. In the blink of an eye, those shards of dark volcanic glass shot toward Heila's fleeing figure like two dozen arrows fired from an archer's bow.

"Willow's whips, guardian boughs,

Strike like steel, protect me now!"

Heila's counter fell from her lips almost before the men could complete their invocation as she dodged behind the trunk of one of the towering willow trees. Instantly, the tree shook and swayed, its branches striking like whips with unerring accuracy that shattered the oncoming storm of obsidian shards.

The third and final group, however, had been waiting for just this moment to unleash a spell of their own. Lurid red energy crawled over their robes like flames burning on oil before flowing through their staves and into the ground.

"By mountain's rage and volcano's might,

Split earth's flesh, let flames ignite!"

A resounding -CRUNCH- filled the air as the earth crumbled in a long, jagged line that stretched from the trio of cultists in front of Ropati all the way to the willow tree with whipping branches that stood as Heila's guardian. Dirty, sooty, and sulfurous flames followed an instant later, filling the narrow casm with blistering heat, feeding off the tender grasses of the willow grove and belching even more dark ash into the air, giving the entire grove the feeling that it had been plunged into a fiery abyss.

"Perfect," Ropati said as a twisted smile formed on his burned, scarred lips. "Run little witch, or perish with your tree!" Raising his own staff high, he pointed the obsidian-tipped weapon at the flames licking at the willow tree's roots and letting loose with a darker, crueller invocation than any used so far.

"Through volcano's breath and burning wrath,

Reduce this tree to naught but ash!"

Intense heat exploded from the base of the tree, blazing with enough intensity that the crowd standing against the railing of the first level took several steps back before they could suffer the same injuries that the people on the highest level had when this dark cultist first unleashed his magic.

"Father, father, what's happening to her?" A young girl on the first level said. The lurid red-orange glow of the burning willow tree filled her soft hazel eyes and her hands clutched a short chain whip, purchased from one of the street vendors outside the arena after Heila's third victory.

"Don't worry, Emmie," her barrel-chested father said as he reached out to stroke his daughter's half-grown horns. At barely twelve summers old, she was far too young to follow in her father's footsteps and dedicate her life to the arena, but seeing the Willow Whip's performance day after day ignited a passion within the small horned girl the likes of which her father had never seen, even after his own heroic battles.

"Look there," he said, pointing at a flurry of glittering white snowflakes melting rapidly in the ashen heat that had enveloped the arena. "Just like she did against the Tuscans, she's biding her time, hiding from them and looking for an opening to exploit."

"But why father?" Emmie said, looking away from the crackling, burning tree to meet her father's steady gaze. Her eyes brimmed with moisture and her hands brought the delicate whip she clutched to her chest as she sought some kind of explanation for what was happening. "She's brave and strong, but why? Why is she running away?"

"She's brave and strong, yes," her father said, raising his voice as he noticed several nearby merchants straining their ears to overhear a genuine gladiator's thoughts on the battle. "But she's at a disadvantage. She's spent nine days in the arena, showing all of us the things she's capable of, but what does she know of her opponent's sorcery?"

"You mean, she's at a disadvantage because she doesn't know how they will fight?" Emmie asked. "But why didn't she study them? You always study people before you fight them. She should have at least talked to someone who fought them before," she said in a voice thick with frustration.

The Willow Whip was her hero, the first woman of the Horned Clan she'd ever seen fight people outside their clan on the arena floor, but why did it seem like she'd forgotten how to be a champion all of a sudden? Why hadn't she whipped at least one of these men into submission yet so they could understand how mighty she was?

Chapter 377: Icy Retaliation

"It's not that easy, little hayseed," her father said, gently ruffling her hair while his eyes remained fixed on the battle below. "These men are strangers here, but look how well they know her. They covered the arena in dark ash so her white snow would instantly give away her position and stop her from hiding. They're attacking the trees she could rely on as allies and they haven't taken one step toward her, forcing her to leave the protection of her trees to come to them."

On the arena floor, there was no sign of Heila at all, leaving the audience craning their necks and peering through the smoke as they searched for a sign of the missing witch. Her opponents, however, seemed like they were in no hurry to approach the trees and search for her.

Instead, wave after wave of obsidian shards swept across the arena, shredding the bark of willow trees and snapping several of their branches that hung limply in the air, awaiting commands that never came.

Several new cracks split the earth, belching forth sooty, sulfurous flames until the air on the floor of the arena became difficult to breathe.

"Calamities are inevitable, Willow Witch," Ropati snarled after destroying a second willow tree with a burst of flames. "We will burn everything in our path until you have no place left to hide, so why drag things out? Take the sniveling merchant's advice," he said, pulling a fresh cigar from his robes and tearing off one end with his teeth. "Surrender while you still can."

For a moment, his men paused in their relentless assault, watching as their leader lit his cigar and took a deep breath of pungent smoke while he glared into the ash-filled air, looking for any sign of the Willow Witch.

That sign came a moment later when Heila's voice echoed out, not just from one place, but from six different willow trees as she wove her witchcraft through the delicate network of roots that had formed when Ashlynn guided the growth of every tree in the grove.

"Through morning mist and willow leaf,

Let water gather swift and brief,

Till every branch bears winter's crown,

Of crystal ice now weighted down."

Even in the scorching heat of the arena under the assault of the Cauldron of Flame, the rich, moist soil that Ashlynn had prepared still had plenty of water to offer up to Heila's command. In mere moments, a layer of dew collected on each of the six trees that seemed to speak with Heila's voice before freezing in an instant as the dew grew into long, wicked icicles.

"Now willow branches crack and sway,

Let frozen shards take wing and flay,

Through flesh and bone let winter bite,

As ice and wood bring death tonight!"

"No!" Ropati shouted as he realized too late what the insidious witch intended to do. "Shield us, now!"

"Through burning air and molten stone,

Let flames rise up to ..."

Too late, the trio of sorcerers charged with protecting the group realized they'd become complacent while the other trios hurled their flames and obsidian shards in a futile search for the cunning witch. Now that they tried to raise a curtain of flame that could melt the flying icicles, it was too late.

Blood spilled from dozens of wounds as the hail of deadly icicles tore through all three trios, but not a single drop of blood fell from those wounds. The ice summoned by Heila was no ordinary ice, rather, it contained a cold so intense that it penetrated their bodies all the way to the bones, freezing their flesh along with any blood that spilled from the wounds.

That same torrent of icy shards would have torn into Ropati as well if not for his quick thinking. With a sharp slashing gesture, he used his cigar like a wand, leaving a glowing arc of fire in the air before him as he unleashed even greater flames to burn away the few icicles that slipped past the trio standing between him and the attacking trees.

It wasn't a perfect defense, two icicles still tore through his robes, embedding themselves in his shoulder and thigh, but compared to his companions his wounds were much, much lighter. Still, the attack had achieved its purpose and then some.

The coordinated formations of his followers lay broken, their precise triangular positions scattered as each man struggled with wounds that burned with cold that felt like it had been borrowed from the peaks of the tallest mountains around their home. Worse, the bindings of energy that tied them together flickered and faded as each man fought his own private battle against the wounds, transforming them from three mighty triads into nine struggling individuals.

For several long moments, silence fell across the arena. The cultists' flames still crackled, consuming what remained of the willow trees they'd lit ablaze, but the relentless barrage of obsidian shards had ceased. Even the sulfurous wind died down as the wounded men struggled to maintain their sorcery through their pain. Ropati's eyes darted from tree to tree, trying to guess which one truly concealed his opponent.

"Didn't you hear," Heila's voice echoed from every remaining tree in the small willow grove. "The Vale of Mists does not surrender. We have no need of the word, especially not for people like you who can only bully children and the elderly."

Soft footfalls crunched over grass that had grown stiff with frost as Heila emerged from behind one of the towering willow trees. Blood flowed from several small wounds on her arms and legs, and she looked like she'd been forced to heal at least one serious injury along her ribs, but she moved with the same spry grace that she always had when she stepped out into the open.

"I return your words to you, Ropati of the Cauldron of Flame," she said, pointing her willow wand at the injured sorcerers. "Surrender, while you still can!"

Chapter 378: At All Costs

In High Lady Erna's luxurious private box, Nyrielle leaned back on her gilded throne, turning to look behind her at the other guests and waving one of them forward.

"Ignatious," Nyrielle said, her voice crisp and free from worry despite the inferno engulfing the arena below. "These men, how do they compare to members of your Inquisition? Do their flames approach the ones you wielded in your war against the Vale?"

"Their flames are strange, Mistress Nyrielle," the red and golden-robed vampire said as he moved to the private box's rail to get a better look. Behind him, Ashlynn glanced briefly at Nyrielle, raising an eyebrow in silent question. Though she had been briefly introduced to the former Inquisitor, she knew very little about the man and she was curious why Nyrielle had asked for his opinion now.

"Strange how," Nyrielle prompted, hoping to draw more out of him while she had the opportunity. She had her own opinion after fighting several Inquisitors and Templars over the years, but people in the private box like Erna's brother, General Aleser, had no such experience. "Strange in a way that makes them more dangerous than yours?"

"They're impure," Ignatious said, frowning at the dark, smoldering embers where the ground had split and burned or the cloud of dark smoke that poured from one of the willow trees still burned. "Their flames are mixed and muddled. Whether that makes them weaker or not, I cannot say until I've stood against them."

"They're flames of the earth," Ashlynn added, though her eyes never left the arena as Heila revealed herself to counterattack. "They form more complete devastation. The Inquisition is famed for Holy Fire that will burn anything to ash. These flames won't just burn you. The sulfur will choke you even if you can survive the heat burning your flesh and they've turned the smoke, soot, and ash into weapons of their own."

"Then you think that human Inquisitors are just as deadly as these men," General Aleser asked, rising to the bait that Nyrielle had laid before him. "But in different ways?"

"I'm not entirely sure," Ashlynn said, glancing at the former Inquisitor. "I've never fought an Inquisitor and the only demonstrations I've seen of their flames were from a time that I was too young to understand what I was seeing," she said, carefully concealing the fact that even a year ago, she wouldn't have understood the magic Inquisitors used.

"But I feel like the danger these men represent is their ability to share strength with each other," Ashlynn added. Her emerald eyes glowed faintly as she watched Heila's icy retaliation tear through the bonds that connected each trio to each other.

She had no idea how they established those bonds, but it was clear that Heila had recognized them as well, particularly when she watched Heila's icy magic form a frozen barrier over those very connections, preventing the men from drawing on each other's strength.

"Watch now," Ashlynn added, leaning forward with a smile on her face that resembled the predatory grin that Nyrielle so often wore. "Heila has just torn their connections apart. Now, we will see how strong they are as individuals."

In the stands, it seemed like everyone was on their feet. The cheers that echoed across the arena when Heila unleashed her storm of ice faded away into an eager, anticipatory silence as she demanded that the men from the Cauldron of Flame surrender while they still could.

"You're a bold one, Willow Witch," Ropati said, taking a long drag on his cigar and exhaling a fat plume of smoke. "One strike and you think we're defeated?"

"One strike to realize the difference between us," Heila said, her voice ringing off the arena walls. "Fighting a witch is already an achievement to boast of for years. All of these people," she added, gesturing to the thousands of people packed into the stands. "They bear witness to your strength. Isn't that enough?"

"We didn't come here to demonstrate our strength," Ropati sneered. "We came to capture a prize and we will not leave without you!"

Without... her? They hadn't come to fight on Yotsun's behalf, to earn fame, glory, or even gold, but rather, they came to capture the Willow Witch herself? Angry mutters spread through the crowd and

several people began to boo and jeer at the arrogance of these cultists, but a few had a different reaction entirely.

"They can't do that, can they, father?" Emmie asked, clutching her chain whip and tugging on her father's tunic. The moment Heila's storm of ice tore through the members of the Cauldron of Flame, she'd cheered louder than anyone around them and her voice still felt hoarse from her screams of triumph and joy. But now, doubt swam in her eyes mixed with fury that someone would take away her hero.

"I doubt it, little hayseed," her father said, gently stroking his daughter's hair. "Just watch."

On the arena floor, Ropati took a last, deep drag on his cigar before throwing the stub to the ground where flames consumed what little remained of it.

"She's sealed your power," he said in a low voice that only his companions could hear. "You cannot share it with each other, but that doesn't mean you can't give it to me. Without your aid, we will be slaughtered like sheep. Brothers, I will inscribe your names on my flesh to remember your sacrifice and carry them until calamity descends."

"Until calamity descends," the group echoed solemnly.

"I have failed to protect my brothers," one of the men from the triad who had failed to raise a barrier against Heila's icy assault said. "Succeed where I have failed. May the name Uksel adorn the flesh of the next Volcano Witch," he said as he strode forward, holding his staff high overhead.

"Through sacrifice of flesh and bone,

Let searing ash be yours to own.

My power bound in burning breath,

Ignites your strength through willing death."

A hundred paces away, Heila tightened her grip on her wand and Snow Fang, preparing an eddy of snowflakes that swirled around the Frost Walker blade, ready to respond to the cultist's next move in an instant. But no matter what she did, nothing could prepare her for the horror that unfolded when the man called Uksel completed his spell.

With a violent jerk, Uksel brought his staff down across his knee, decisively snapping the well-worn weapon in two. The moment he did, flames erupted from each shattered half, flowing up his arms and engulfing his body in flames that burned almost as brightly as Ropati's fireball before their battle began.

It took only seconds for the flames to reduce Uksel's body to motes of glowing ash, dancing in the still air of the arena. In the stands, people watched in horror as Ropati stepped forward, spreading his arms wide and taking a deep breath, inhaling the still glowing embers that were all that remained of the once powerful sorcerer.

"I too have failed my brothers," a second man from Uksel's trio said, stepping forward and raising his staff high overhead. "May the name Pavea adorn the flesh of the next Volcano Witch..."

Chapter 379: Uncontrollable Calamaty

While parents shielded the eyes of their children from the gruesome display that bore no resemblance to honorable combat, a deeper horror rippled through those members of the audience who had enough training in sorcery to understand what was going on.

Ropati hadn't suddenly become twice as strong, though he had gained at least half of the fallen Uksel's power. Like burning embers, that power would fade over time until Ropati was left little different than he was now. Any gains he harvested from his companion's death would only last for a single battle.

Captain Lennart and others from the Vale of Mists could see a familiar, fatalistic honor in such a sacrifice. In war against the Lothians, many of the Vale's soldiers felt that they could use such desperate magic if it allowed them to protect their homes and loved ones. But to see it used by people intent on capturing one of the newest protectors of the home they loved...

Words couldn't describe the palpable wave of anger and hatred that radiated from Lennart, Virve and any of their companions watching from outside of High Lady Erna's private box, but anyone standing within a few feet of them quickly moved aside lest they find themselves an accidental target of that explosive rage.

On the first floor of the arena, several guards stepped forward, tugging at the sleeves of their patrons and encouraging them to pull back from the rail and take seats towards the back of the venue if they insisted on staying to watch.

"I don't know what they're doing, master," one loyal servant wearing ornate but highly functional armor told the visiting lord mayor of a nearby town. "But if it's like the fireball from the beginning, there's a chance the people here could be badly wounded."

"I'm not a coward, Vestil," the mayor snapped, raising up on his serpentine tail and turning his dark, unblinking eyes on his bearish guardian. "I won't be seen cowering from these animals who profane the arena with their fanaticism!"

"Not cowering, master," his guard pleaded. "But remembering to preserve your own life so that you may continue to fight for your town and protect your people. Look, Lord Mayor Teague has already withdrawn to the refreshment tables. Perhaps you could join him there?"

"You're serious, aren't you Vestil?" The serpentine mayor said with a dark frown. "Very well, since Mayor Teague has already stepped aside, then I can join him for a cup of wine..."

Heila also recognized the nature of the cultist's sacrifice, but unlike the sorcerers in the audience, she knew what someone like the Mother of Thorns, Ashlynn or even Jacques and Talauia could do with the amount of magical energy Ropati would have at his command if all nine of his companions succeeded in their suicidal madness.

"Don't think I'll let you," Heila muttered as she tucked her wand away and drew the coiled whip at her hip. While flames engulfed the second cultist, Heila prepared to deal with the rest.

"By power bound in willow's heart,

Let supple branches weave and dart.

Nine tongues of wood to strike and bind,

Hurl rituals of ash far behind!"

A brilliant silvery-green light surrounded her whip as she lashed out at the remaining cultists. That energy twisted and grew until the single willow whip now sported nine distinct branches, each twisting and writhing with the grace of a striking adder.

In the stands, members of the scaled clan roared with pride, their tails thumping excitedly against the ground.

"Look, look," an enthusiastic man on one of the upper levels, holding his son up high so he could see over the crowd. "It looks just like High Lady Erna's spell when she bound those wicked men! The Willow Witch sees the strength of the Scaled Clan!"

The tendrils of Heila's nine tailed whip shot unerringly at the staves held by the seven remaining cultists while two others attempted to bind Ropati before he could do anything further.

-SNAP- -CRACK-

The sound of Heila's striking whip rolled across the arena like thunder and of the seven tails aimed at the staves of the cultists, six wrapped themselves around the dark, twisted weapons, wrenching them out of the hands of the cultists and hurling them over the arena wall, into the stands among the spectators who reached out with eager hands, catching them as if they were prizes offered by the Willow Witch herself.

Only Ropati and the final man from Uksel's trio escaped with their weapons in hand, lashing out with goutts of flame that seared away three of the whip's nine tails.

"Niave," Ropati spat. "Merciful, weak and naive."

"Into the mountain's hungering maw,

Your bodies fall, your spirits raw.

Through flame and ash you'll serve my need,

As power flows from those who bleed!"

Flames erupted around the leader of the cultists forming a ring of fire that resembled the gaping maw of an apocalyptic beast, poised to swallow his fellow cultists whole. The earth cracked, belching forth noxious, sulferous clouds that coiled around the remaining cultists, leeching their life and power from their bodies with every breath they took. And at the center of it all, Ropati stood, his arms held wide open while his eyes began to smolder with a hunted, infernal blaze.

In her private box, High Lady Erna slid off of her gilded throne, gathering iridescent energy to her hands as she prepared to intervene. Already, this battle had violated several traditions of the arena and only Heila's calm, capable handling of the situation along with Ashlynn and Nyrielle's reassuring presences had given her reason to allow this to play out.

But now, seeing the dark, gaping maw formed by a ring of noxious flames and feeling the power flowing toward the leader of these madmen, she felt that if she did not act, she would lose the only chance she had.

"Wait, please," Ashlynn said, leaving her own gilded seat to join High Lady Erna at the railing. "This moment is important for Heila," she said, looking down at her diminutive friend with a complicated gaze.

Thus far, Heila had won all of her victories without killing any of her opponents, and while she had been forced to kill many times in the corrupted trial she faced from the Ancient Willow and her predecessor Cecile, there was a difference between killing a person in a vision and taking a life in reality.

It was a cruel lesson, but one that Ashlynn had been forced to learn herself when she confronted Sir Kaefin at Owain's summer villa. Now, it was Heila's turn to face this dark right of passage, but at least she had made preparations to take this step. Ashlynn didn't know how it would affect Heila if they swooped in now to resolve matters on her behalf, but she was afraid that it would form a scar that could haunt Heila for years to come.

"Mistress Nyrielle and I will help safeguard the people if it is necessary," Ashlynn promised. "But right now, this is Heila's fight and I still believe that she can resolve it."

"You've already healed my people once tonight," Erna said, lowering her hands and dismissing the iridescent energy. "But she had better resolve this soon... I don't know how much longer we can give her before that man becomes an uncontrollable calamity."

Chapter 380: Medicine and Poison

"Please, please be fast enough," Heila whispered as she released her whip and pulled a vial of concentrated willow bark tea from a loop on her war hat. There wasn't enough here to serve as more than emergency medicine for a single person or to dull pain for half a dozen people with minor injuries, but she didn't intend to force the dark, bitter liquid down her opponent's throat. She only needed it to serve as a guide for what would come next.

"With power stored in willow's veins,

Where nature's mercy soothes all pains,

Let every branch pour forth its heart,

Till gentle cures tear flesh apart,

Let healing's flood rise swift and strong,

Till peace becomes death's endless song."

Despite the dire nature of her current circumstances and the deadly threat posed by Ropati and his men, moisture gathered in Heila's eyes as she used magic that she'd told Amahle she hated learning.

"It's wrong to use healing this way," Heila had protested when Amahle demonstrated the difference between a using a few small drops of numbing tincture on a feral rat after diluting them in water and the heart-stopping effect of giving the rat twice as much of the pure, undiluted medicine.

"Dead is dead, sugar," the older witch said, using her spider-like limbs to remove the deceased rat so she could focus her attention on Heila. "There is a line between cruelty and mercy, and it should rarely be crossed, but a man who dies of an arrow to the heart does not envy the man who died from the blow of an ax. Dead is dead."

"But if I use a healer's arts to kill," Heila protested. "Then who will trust me when I come to heal them? How... how can I grant mercy to my enemies when they don't need to die if they see me use my healer's arts as a weapon?"

"One day, you will be a great witch, little Heila," Amahle reassured her. "Your deeds will be known, among your allies and your enemies alike. But so long as you prepare to fight the humans and their Church, I doubt they will pay attention to anything beyond the horns on your head and the hooves on your feet. So pay them no mind and do what you desire. Their thoughts do not bind your hands."

At the time, she wasn't sure whether she believed Amahle or not, but she was at least willing to learn, even if she privately thought she would never use such magic. The difference between medicine and poison could be very, very slight and often times, it was simply a matter of dosage that determined whether something would bring about a healing miracle or a deadly curse.

Now, the willow trees in the grove shook, swaying their branches and offering up thousands of tiny glittering motes of energy as she gathered up more than one hundred times the amount of healing essence a man could endure and blew it on a gentle breeze toward the burning cultist.

Defeating a spell like this, for a trained sorcerer, and particularly a sorcerer with the power of wind or flames, would be far too easy. And yet, because Ropati had opened himself up to the flow of energy from his dying underlings, he was left vulnerable, unable to filter out the toxic overdose that flowed into his pores and smoke scarred lungs along with the energy he received from the minions he'd callously sacrificed.

Ropati had always imagined that when death found him, it would be accompanied by the searing pain of volcanic flames as he offered his body to the primordial flames of the earth, deep within their mountain home. Yet now that death finally found him, it wasn't pain he felt, but a calming, blissful numbness that enveloped his body and mind like a warm, cotton blanket on a cold winter's night.

Power surged and flared, running rampantly out of control as soon as the cultist leader lost consciousness. The ground beneath his feet seethed and boiled as the soft earth of the willow grove dried out and crumbled away, revealing bubbling, boiling sands of the arena floor, now hot enough to melt and fuse.

Flames engulfed Ropati's body as he collapsed, his charred remains trapped in the rapidly cooling liquid glass beneath him. For several heartbeats, the arena held its collective breath, watching as the infernal energies he'd stolen from his companions raged out of control, seeking new vessels to contain them.

Two of his companions, already grievously wounded by Heila's icy barrage, offered no resistance as that wild energy coursed through their bodies. The combination of their frozen wounds and their leader's final betrayal proved too much to endure. They collapsed where they stood, their bodies withering like leaves on the autumn wind as the last of their life force drifted away like smoke from a snuffed flame.

The remaining five cultists fared better, though none escaped unscathed. As the stolen power dissipated into the night air, each man slumped to the ground, their skin growing sallow and wrinkled as though they'd aged several years in mere moments. Their chests still rose and fell with shallow breaths, but the price of surviving their leader's betrayal had been etched into their flesh, aging them far beyond their years and leaving them too weak to practice more than basic sorcery for the remainder of their lives.

On the first floor, Emmie jumped up and down excitedly while the audience erupted into cheers. "Father, father," she said, tugging fiercely on his tunic. "Can I get another whip? One with nine tails, like the Willow Whip's lash. Please father, please, I won't ask for anything else all year!"

Inwardly, the veteran gladiator groaned. He had faced down countless champions on the sands of this very arena, but against this foe, he felt as helpless as a hornless kit, completely unable to defend himself against those soft, pleading eyes.

"We'll see what father can find," he said, reaching out to ruffle his daughter's hair. He was certain that within a day or two, the vendors outside the arena would have new replicas to sell. But maybe... maybe this time he would have to find something less impressive than the chain whip he'd bought his daughter the first time.

Nine tails looked impressive, but without any kind of witchcraft to guide them, it felt like a disaster waiting to happen and he couldn't bear to see his little hayseed injured while she struggled to learn such a difficult weapon.

"But wouldn't it be better," he said as he spotted a trio of merchants cheering nearby. They were the first people that Lady Nyrielle had met with yet they hadn't been invited to High Lady Erna's private box to watch the fight from the best seats in the arena which should mean that they hadn't been elevated beyond his means to approach.

"Wouldn't it be better if father could find a way for you to meet the Willow Whip?" He said, giving his daughter a confident look.

"Can you? Can you really?" Emmie asked, bouncing up and down enough that she was able to meet his eyes directly at the apex of her jumps. "Father, please, please, I'll do anything, I'll even..."

"Hush now," he said as he scooped her up into his arms. "Wait until I have results before you offer up something. Come, let me see if these fellows would be willing to make an introduction..."