

Superstition

She made a living investigating the occult, but Lilith had never been a superstitious person. Yet, when she saw the fallen owl, white wings brilliant against the trampled black petals, she couldn't resist the fluttering feeling of dread that nestled in her heart. It looked like it had been specially prepared, specially made for her, wilting flowers furred around wilting feathers. A gruesome bouquet serving as an unwelcome welcome gift.

She'd never liked dead things. Not since she was little and her grandfather lined the house with jars of dried flesh and bone. Not since her latter years of school and her cousin's fiance's books were filled with pictures of preserved cadavers. And certainly not now, when the eyes of the dead owl stared soullessly back at her, blood dripping from its beak, maggots gnawing at its tissue.

It had nothing to do with her, and it would never have anything to do with her, but as she eyed the crimson gash that decorated the creature's neck, she couldn't help but wonder what it would feel like, the cold terror of something sharp tearing at the soft flesh of the throat.

The eggs she'd eaten that morning on the train threatened to crawl back up her throat.

Gulping as she ran a hand through her black hair, Lilith forced her legs to move, each booted foot thumping against the cobblestone as the manor loomed nearer. The closer she got to it, the more the itching in her spine grew. She'd felt it ever since she'd entered town, the scrambling of ghostly fingers up her back, hands clutching at her, telling her to leave. Telling her something was wrong. Telling her something was missing.

Her arm was heavy as she lifted the mahogany door's silver knocker. It boomed once, twice, before Lilith stepped back to wait, knuckles white around her bag's strap.

Twelve unsettling heartbeats passed before the door opened without a creak.

Madame Neoma was a thick-boned woman who still managed to seem delicate. She greeted Lilith with a warm smile, golden flecks in her eyes. "Lilith Xu, I presume?"

"Madame Neoma." Lilith swallowed hard. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance."

She laughed--a heavy sound. "The pleasure is all mine. Please, come on in. It's awfully brisk outside."

As she said that, Lilith felt a shiver run down her spine. Strange. She hadn't noticed the chill earlier. It was probably just her nerves.

Madame Neoma led her through the house. But though it was beautiful, Lilith felt colder and colder the further she ventured. Perhaps it was the stained glass, people from years long gone immortalized in its surface, jagged eyes drilling down at her. Lilith knew it was stupid, but she felt judged, evaluated. It was like the specters of those who'd once dwelled in the abode were saying, *why is she here? She doesn't deserve to be here.*

Felix and Menae would berate her for saying this, but she didn't entirely disagree with the ghosts. Not for the first time in her life, she wondered why her cousins had sent her ahead.

"Lilith." Madame Neoma broke the silence. "That's a rather unusual name for someone of your profession."

"Indeed," Lilith agreed. "But my grandfather named me."

"Your grandfather. Wasn't he--"

Lilith smiled wryly though Madame Neoma couldn't see. "He was a man who loved irony."

"Irony indeed. One of the greatest Hunters named his granddaughter after a demon. And your parents let him?"

"The family profession skipped a generation. My parents never drew the connection."

Another weighty chuckle.

They arrived at a carved archway. Through it, Lilith spotted a massive dining table. Both women took a seat at either end, and Lilith was relieved the distance between them wasn't actually that great.

"Make yourself at home, dear. The housekeeper will be in shortly."

"Thank you, Madame."

"Now, Lilith, I'd like to outline the details of your assignment at once. Normally, I'd make your first day as a guest more comfortable, but I'm afraid the matter is urgent."

Lilith nodded, her racing nerves settling as she straightened up. This was familiar. This was business. This she could handle. "Of course, ma'am. I understand strange occurrences have been happening around town? And you believe there's a supernatural cause?"

Madame Neoma tilted her face toward the ceiling with a weary yet steely expression. "Erlheim is a lovely home. I may be biased, but I don't think there has ever been a more wonderful town. To know that something has disrupted its beauty infuriates me."

Lilith remained silent.

"There is no magic in Erlheim--never has been, and never will be."

Lilith opened her mouth. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but you must be mistaken. There is always magic. You might not always notice it, and it might not actually be active, but I assure you it's there."

The smile Madame Neoma gave her was as eerie as it was patronizing. "That may be true elsewhere, dear, but there is no magic in Erlheim."

So you say, Lilith wanted to mumble, but she bit back the words. Instead, she said, "Until now, that is?"

Madame Neoma's smile fell like the tumbling water of a roaring waterfall. "Of course, it is only mischief. Paranormal mischief from traveling sprites. But they are not welcome here, and I'm certain you can make that clear?"

"Yes, ma'am," Lilith said. "My partners and I will do everything we can to remove this unwanted magic. We'll personally oversee the transfer of any magical entities away from here."

"Transfer?" Madame Neoma leaned forward in her seat.

"Yes, ma'am." Lilith took a breath. "I'm sure you're aware that we don't kill."

Madame Neoma tapped a ringed finger on the table. "Ah, yes, that was in your contract, wasn't it? Hm..." She hummed to herself. "Very well then, that will suffice. I assume your partners will be here soon?"

"Yes, that's correct. They had to finish up our last case, so I went ahead to iron out the logistics of this one."

"You didn't finish the last case yet?"

The words weren't in an accusatory tone, but Lilith felt strangely defensive. There wasn't much she took pride in--and perhaps pride wasn't the right word for this emotion--but she knew she and her cousins did their job, and they did their job well. "No, we were successful. There were just some final matters to resolve. Normal matters."

"I see."

The sound of rolling wheels and clinking china approached. Lilith looked up to see a tall, blond man push a cart into the room. He parked alongside the long end of the table and daintily deposited a steaming cup in front of her.

"Thank you," Lilith said.

He gave her a small smile before moving toward Madame Neoma.

"Thank you, Charles," Madame Neoma said as she received her own cup.

The man dipped into a shallow bow before exiting the room. Madame Neoma took a sip.

She continued once she'd finished. "Once again, I apologize for the rush, but I have prepared a guide for you. The son of our town's head carpenter knows the surrounding forests well. He'll show you where the mischief has been occurring."

"Right now?"

"If you're able. I've yet to call him, for I was unsure at what time you'd arrive. But if you head into the village square, I'm sure you'll find him near the apothecary. Goodness knows half the things sold there are gathered by him." She tapped her cup with a neatly trimmed fingernail, a frown curling her features despite her suggestion. "Ask for Misael there. He'll be around."

The woman at the apothecary looked about Lilith's age and about three-quarters of her height, but the cunning glint in her glaring brown eyes intimidated Lilith anyway. She spent an embarrassing amount of time lingering around the corner before approaching.

When she finally did, it was the storekeeper, looking up under heavy lids, who spoke first. "You're new. What are you doing here?"

Lilith cleared her throat. "I'm here to investigate some disturbances. The mayor said I could find a Misael here as a guide."

"Ahhhhhh," the woman drawled, "you're with that bunch." She grinned, the suspicious atmosphere evaporating. "I'm surprised they hired you."

"You... are?"

"Mhmm, I know your clan. Don't kill, do they? That's funny, cause pretty much everyone here wants those tricksters dead."

"I did get that feeling earlier," Lilith admitted.

The woman still hadn't stopped grinning, white teeth glimmering like pearls as she leaned forward against the counter. "But don't worry; I'm not mad at *you*, anyway."

"That... thank you."

The woman, introducing herself as Channary, seemed more than happy to chat with an uncomfortable Lilith before Channary suddenly straightened up. "Yah! Misael! Someone's looking for you."

Lilith turned around to see a young man with dark brown hair approaching. There were stray twigs caught in his locks, and his arms, carrying two straw baskets laden with herbs, were covered with mud and scratches, but he was grinning, nonetheless, eyes crinkling into crescents.

"Channary," he greeted, giving the storekeeper a hug over the counter before turning to Lilith. "You must be Lilith. Welcome to Erlheim!"

She nodded. "Thank you for agreeing to show me around." Lilith was proud her voice didn't falter.

He waved a hand. "More than happy to help. Any excuse to spend more time in the forest is a win for me."

Lilith found herself smiling as Channary cackled.

"Now, if you don't mind," Misael said, "I know you've already been waiting, but I'd like to wash off this dirt before we begin. I'll be out in a moment."

The trek into the forest was nowhere near as uneasy as Lilith had feared. Misael moved with such graceful ease through the dark brambles, chattering lightly along the way, that Lilith couldn't help but feel that nothing could go wrong. Time passed so quickly that though they were deep in the forest, Lilith felt like they'd just begun their walk when Misael stopped at an expansive clearing.

"Here we are," he said.

Lilith instantly tensed, eyes narrowed as she examined the glade. Nothing seemed too unusual at first. The only things that caught her attention were a massive tree with gnarly, swinging branches on the other side of the clearing and a smaller tree with an X carved into its trunk. But all her senses were on edge, trying to detect anything that prickled her nerves the wrong way.

Misael watched her with interest. "Do you feel something?"

"It's faint," Lilith said, "too faded to be recent. Are you sure this is the right place?"

"That's what the reports say. A goat was hauled here a fortnight ago. Many people saw it. It was unconscious as an invisible hand dragged it by its scruff. Later, it was found against that tree, skull broken and body fluids drained." He pointed toward the X-marked tree.

Lilith pursed her lips. An invisible hand sounded like a specter, but only a strix would drain blood, and the two creatures never worked in tandem. "Has there been anything else?"

"There have been sightings of fae dancing here at night. I myself have stumbled across a few fairy rings in the surrounding perimeter, but I left them alone and they faded a day later. Oh, and one of the other foragers has heard strange mutterings nearby."

"That's bizarre," Lilith mumbled, more to herself than anyone else. "The different beings don't tend to operate in the same area. Perhaps there's something drawing them here? But the incidents are so recent, so it would have to be a new trigger."

"We can look around," Misael suggested. "Nothing will happen."

Lilith tentatively padded around the clearing, boots crunching softly among the bristly grass. She rested her hand against tree trunks, feeling for nymphic pulses she didn't find. The soil was cool to her touch, but no supernatural life squirmed within it. And the breeze brushed against her cheeks, but the telltale tingle of magic was absent in its caresses.

It wasn't until she'd reached the other side of the sprawling glade that the hair shot up on the back of her neck.

Underneath the largest tree she'd ever seen in her life, its leafless branches clawing at the sky like bony fingers, was a swath of sanguine-colored earth. If that were the only thing, Lilith wouldn't have been so alarmed, but as she approached, an inexplicable sense of dread washed over her, bathing her in a sickeningly sticky sensation, like strokes of blood were being painted across her body. She stopped in her tracks before her toes crossed into the discolored soil.

Lilith's voice wobbled. "Misael. Why is the ground there red?"

Misael, who had been rummaging through some underbrush, turned to where she was pointing. "Oh, that." He looked up at the long tree branch swinging above the spot, a glassy look in his eyes. "They hung a witch there. A couple years ago."

Lilith's head jerked so sharply her own neck almost snapped. "What?"

"It was a woman. Used black magic to endanger the town. So they hung her."

"I-I see..." No, Lilith really did not like dead things.

Misael must've noticed her discomfort because he faced her again with a warm smile. "But you wanted to know why the ground was red, correct?"

Lilith gave a nearly imperceptible nod. "If you're willing."

"I was there when they executed her, perhaps four years old. I don't remember much, besides that I thought she was pretty, but then again, a four-year-old thinks every woman is pretty." He looked up at the branch again. "I knew her and didn't believe it was true, but when she died, her body crumbled into ash and blood."

Then there was no doubt the woman had been a witch.

Misael continued, faraway eyes blinking slowly. "That's why the soil is stained. Her blood was so polluted the rain could never wash the curses away."

Lilith, as always, didn't know what to say.

Felix and Menae arrived the next day, Menae's ribboned hat fluttering like a butterfly as she waved it from a window.

Lilith waved back, putting more energy into her smile than she actually felt. But she had to admit, seeing her cousins lightened her mood an iota.

Felix's hair had the same golden glow she'd seen a few days ago. It had changed color during an unfortunate incident with a swamp troll some months before, and though the old creature, who'd eventually become rather friendly, had offered to fix it, Felix had liked it too much to accept. Lilith thought the glowing shade was a horrible idea--it made him look like a beacon, a target--but she trusted Felix would never let himself get killed for such a foolish reason.

He pulled her into a jovial hug as soon as his feet touched the ground. "Lilith! Long time no see."

Menae snorted, leaning in for her own embrace. "Yes, four days is a long time, indeed."

"Hey, four days is four generations for adult mayflies."

Lilith laughed for the first time in what felt like forever.

She brought them to the small restaurant she'd dined in the evening prior. They chatted briefly, Felix gleefully reporting on their previous case before the topic returned to the job at hand.

"So how's Erlheim been treating you?" Menae asked, cutting up a broiled pork chop. "It's a pretty little place, isn't it? A bit quaint, but that's to be expected, no?"

Lilith felt the dread that had temporarily dissipated begin to return. "About that..." She leaned forward, eyes darting around for eavesdroppers. "Did either of you feel anything... off... when you arrived?"

Felix tilted his head to the side. "Off?"

"Yes. The mayor told me there's no magic in this town, and I didn't believe her at first, but thinking back, I've felt that something was missing ever since I got here."

"No magic?" Menae's elegant eyebrows arched in disbelief.

"They hate magic here." Lilith hesitated before she spoke again. "They hung a witch here a few years ago. She did commit a crime, but I thought a hanging was... extreme."

Both cousins tensed, Menae dropping her fork. "A witch," she repeated.

Lilith nodded. She'd thought the same thing when she'd first heard of the hanging. Menae's soon-to-be-husband was a witch--a non-practicing witch who'd chosen to study human medicine instead, but a witch nonetheless. "And apparently, most of the townsfolk want whatever's causing trouble dead."

Felix's frown deepened. "They know we don't do that, right?"

"I made that clear, but I just wanted you to know what we're working with."

"Well, what's done is done," Menae said, crossing her arms. "All we can do is make sure nobody else gets hurt."

"Did your investigations turn up anything, Lilith?" Felix asked.

Lilith reached into her bag. "I've written down everything I've gathered."

"Perfect." The grin returned to Felix's face, and Lilith instantly felt reassured. "Let's get to work then."

The trio spent the rest of the day hunched over the notebook, whispering urgently as they scraped out a plan. By the time dusk had fallen, lavender hue bathing their faces, Lilith felt relieved in a way she hadn't felt in days.

But when she stood back up, hooking her bag over her shoulder, her eyes caught sight of the forest once more, the tips of the ancient trees curiously peeking over the town rooftops. Their skeletal fingertips waved at her, swaying smoothly in the evening breeze, bidding her goodnight. And as Lilith jerkily spun around to follow her cousins back to the inn, she swore she saw a parliament of white owls take flight, ghostly silhouettes emerging from the black shadows of the trees.

Lilith had never been a superstitious person, but she went to bed that night with hooting in her ears, blood in her mind, and unease in her soul.