

The Vampire 223

Chapter 223 223: Uncaring Nature

"Now, let's start with something just a little simple," Amahle said. Reaching into a pouch at her waist, she produced a small, rough stone, no larger than a robin's egg, and placed it on the table. "What would you do to make the stone happy darlin'?"

"Make the stone happy?" Ashlynn said, puzzled. "Keep it close, I guess? Like the way you kept it in a pouch on your body? Maybe keep it warm?"

"And what about you, sugar?" Amahle said, turning to face Heila. "How would you make the stone happy?"

"Um, clean it? Maybe polish it?" Heila said though she lacked any confidence in her answer. "Can you really make a stone happy?"

"Let's try a different one," Amahle said, putting the rock away. "You two were both in the High Pass recently. When you were there, all out in the open, what did the wind want?"

"Nothing," Ashlynn said with much more confidence than she felt about the idea of making a stone happy. "The wind didn't want anything, it was just cold."

"Exactly," the older woman said with a smile as she sipped her lemonade. "This is your first lesson in witchcraft. Earth has no joy, fire has no hate, water has no sorrow, air has no worry and wood has no desire. The five elements themselves do not care about anything, they simply are."

"But we care, we can care," Talauia chimed in from the side as she scraped the bottom of her wooden bowl with a spoon for the last bits of the saucy gumbo. "We have hearts to care."

"Yes darlin'," Amahle said, reaching out gently to ruffle the younger witch's hair. "But don't get us ahead yet," she added, turning back to Ashlynn and Heila and giving them a serious look.

"Your Mistress taught you that vampires 'serve' life, as if life cared," Amahle said, shaking her head at the notion. "Maybe they have decided that it does. Perhaps they have a better feeling for life and death than we do. But the power of a witch comes from the five elements, and the elements themselves simply exist. The rock desires nothing and, hard as it may be to accept, neither does the tree. They simply are."

"That doesn't sound right," Ashlynn said. "I, I was able to commune with an Ancient Oak in the Vale of Mists. It offered me a branch to craft into a wand and in exchange, it asked me to help spread its seeds."

"Also," she added, thinking back on other instances where she'd touched her magic. "The night I first touched my power, the night I nearly died. I felt like the earth and trees were helping me to stay alive. Like they didn't want to let me die."

"No, darlin', that was your want, your desire to live," Amahle said gently. "Tala rushed ahead a bit, but that's the essence of witchcraft for you. Nature, it's there. The wind, the rain, the plants, the rocks, all of it is there but none of it desires anything. The rock will sit endlessly, unfeeling. If it is moved, then it is moved, and if it stays then it stays. It makes no difference to the rock."

"But it makes a difference to you darlin'," the witch said, standing from the table to walk over to a window, looking out into the fog. "All a witch ever does, is share their desires with nature, so nature can help realize their desires. That's it. It's that simple. And it's that hard."

Ashlynn opened her mouth to respond, then closed it again as she sank deep into thought. The night Owain nearly murdered her, she thought that the forest wanted her to live and pulled her out of the earth, but could it have been the other way around? That made sense but...

"What about the Ancient Oak?" Ashlynn asked. "Are you saying that I'm the one who wanted to spread its seeds? That it gave me a branch and a task because I desired both?"

"Things like Ancient Oaks are a bit different," Amahle said, turning back from the window. "Some plants become more like beasts, and beasts are filled with wants and desires. Beasts live in our domains, but our domain doesn't control beasts. Five elements are more than enough for us to concern ourselves with."

"In time," she added. "We'll discuss things like the Ancient Oak, tools, all of the other things you need to know, but for now, it's enough to know that, whatever you have been told about grand purposes, we have no such things."

As she spoke, she strode across the floor, her spider-like legs clicking on the ground behind her as she moved until she knelt beside Ashlynn and took the young woman's hand in both of hers.

"That's why we form covens like families," Amahle said gently. "Because if we do not form a core of healthy desires to love each other, care for each other, and protect those we hold dear, then our desires will become warped and twisted. Once that happens, we will warp and twist the world around us," she said, her dark red eyes meeting Ashlynn's emerald gaze directly.

"You are a person who has suffered," she said, tenderly stroking Ashlynn's cheek. "You have lost. You know bitterness and hatred. But, you also know love and loyalty," she added, glancing at Heila.

"As a witch, all of these things will become greater," she explained. "Your ability to act on what you feel will grow beyond what you can imagine. You need to surround yourself with the kinds of people who will help you from becoming twisted by your darker desires, or from forgetting the pain of others when your heart is fulfilled."

"I think I understand," Ashlynn said as pieces began to fit in place in her mind. "When I learned sorcery from Mistress Nyrielle, she said that a sorcerer imposes their will on the world, using their own energy. She said that witches used the energy of the world instead of their own energy and I thought that was the only difference."

"But, the times I've used witchcraft are the times when I had the deepest feelings of desire for something," she said. "The desire to survive. Or, when I was on the frozen lake, I borrowed the power of the ice and wind because my heart had filled with hatred for the people who killed a friend. I wanted vengeance and the world helped me obtain it."

"Now you're starting to understand," Amahle said with a sad smile. Given how she'd come into her power, perhaps it was unavoidable that Ashlynn's earliest uses of witchcraft had been for survival and vengeance but she wished it wasn't that way. There was so much wonder for her to find, but her journey had begun in pain and blood.

"Now, that's enough of a lesson for today," she said, standing and helping Ashlynn to her feet. "Tala can show you where to stay. Wash up and take a short rest. This evening, we'll have dinner together as a family and you can tell me about all the things that never feel important. I want to know my new little sister as a person and not just a witch."

"Tomorrow, we'll talk about Heila and forming your coven," she promised. "I should warn you, the process of bringing a person into your coven is dangerous and painful," she warned, her voice growing stern. "If you harbor any doubts in your heart, either of you could die. Even if you don't, there will be many days of agony before the ritual is complete."

Looking at Ashlynn and Heila, she saw a trace of anxiety on the face of the former but only fierce determination from the latter. Knowledge could both soothe anxiety and erode determination.

Right now, they barely knew enough to decide anything but it was better that way. Once they had details, it would be too easy to use details to hide fears behind. If they could make a decision on the cold truth, that it was painful and dangerous to both of them, then that was for the best.

If they needed more knowledge to make the decision than that, then it might be months or years before Ashlynn would be ready to invite someone into her coven.

"You have today to think about it," she said. "Tomorrow, I'll expect your answers."