

The Vampire 228

Chapter 228 228: Ashlynn's Mark

Ashlynn's hesitation lasted for only a few moments. Amahle had already revealed her own mark. Even if Ashlynn didn't understand how to interpret it now, she would eventually. The other woman had already taken the initiative to reveal her own weaknesses before asking to see Ashlynn's, exactly as a big sister should.

"It's on my hip," Ashlynn said, looking slightly embarrassed. Her mark was something that had only been seen by a very few people and over time, it had come to take on the same sort of taboo to her that revealing her naked breast would have held. Even though she'd made the decision to reveal it, when it came time to actually do so, her fingers hesitated at the hem of her dress.

"Here," she said, standing up and pulling up her skirts above the waist before sliding her underwear out of the way to reveal the complete tree shaped mark. She stumbled slightly as she moved but she felt like this was a bandage that she needed to rip off before she could really make progress.

"This, this is my mark of the witch," she said, catching her balance and posing awkwardly to show the mark to Amahle.

"No wonder you were recognized almost instantly," Amahle said in impressed tones. "Pardon my touch, darlin'," she added, reaching forward with two spider-like limbs to carefully and precisely measure Ashlynn's mark. From its overall length to the length of specific 'roots' on the tree shaped birthmark, Amahle took in every detail.

"Well?" Ashlynn asked, setting her clothing back into place and returning to her seat next to Amahle and the old book. "Where do my talents lie?"

"First, the size of the mark itself is impressive," Amahle said. After examining Ashlynn, she pulled a small notebook out of one of her many pockets along with a charcoal stick for sketching and began to roughly sketch the outline of Ashlynn's mark.

"Your mark is shaped like a tree, and its shape reminds me of an Ash or a Maple tree. The mark is long and slender, but there's still a good bit of width to it. This means that you'll be able to go far with your magic in the places where you are strong, but there are limits to how much you can extend beyond your core competencies."

"If your mark were shaped more like an Oak, with greater breadth, you would be a better general witch, unable to reach as great of heights but you wouldn't be as deficient where you are weak," Amahle explained. "Likewise, if your mark were shaped more like a Spruce, very narrow and tall, you would have unparalleled ability in one or two things, but almost no ability outside of that."

"So, my mark is a kind of middle ground," Ashlynn said, making sure she understood. "I can branch out a little but I shouldn't expect greatness outside of the things I'm best at. I can go far, but there are others who are true experts that I will never match up to within their specialty."

"Exactly so," Amahle said, giving Ashlynn a warm pat on her shoulders before she continued her explanation. "Now, the roots of your mark are a reflection of your talents. Like my thorns, each one corresponds to an element and tells us how great your aptitude is for each of them."

"Just remember, this is only an expression of potential," she said, her voice growing firm. "Without hard work to realize it, all of the potential in the world won't save you from defeat at the hands of people with a fraction of your talent who honed their abilities," she cautioned.

"I understand," Ashlynn said, nodding along with the explanation. "When I became Mistress Nyrielle's Seneschal, I had a 'Blossoming Period' just like Vampire Progeny do. I trained hard during that time to make the most of my potential while I was growing rapidly."

"It, it wasn't easy," she said, thinking back on the number of nights she'd returned from training with Thane, her flesh bruised and her body aching. "But the results of the hard work were worth it in the end. Don't worry that your little sister will count on her talent to get her though," she promised.

"It's good that you understand then," Amahle said with a complex expression on her face at the reminder of Ashlynn's vampiric abilities. She'd never seen a witch form a blood pact with a vampire and she had no idea how it would impact Ashlynn's development, but what was done was done. There was nothing she could do about it now other than to press onward and hope that they could avoid any tragedies.

"Your greatest talent is with wood, I imagine that doesn't surprise someone as clever as my darlin' little sister," Amahle said with a hint of pride in her voice. "After that, earth, then fire. Finally, water and air. Seeing your mark, I'm amazed you were able to channel ice and frigid wind as well as you did in the High Pass. That must have been very difficult for you."

"It was," Ashlynn said quietly. Looking down at the book, a complicated expression passed over her face. If she'd known better than to try using ice and wind energy, could she have saved Andrus? As quickly as the thought came, she shook it off.

Even if she had greater strengths with other elements, out in the middle of the frozen lake, there had been nothing to work with but water and air. Even if she'd known, there wasn't anything else in that barren place she could have used.

"How is the book going to help us?" Ashlynn asked, frowning as she looked at the table of contents in the book. From top to bottom, it contained a list of trees, though a few were repeated more than once. "Since you mentioned marks, does this describe marks that can be created for Heila?"

"Something like that," the older witch said with a smile that seemed a touch sad. "In order to transform an ordinary person into a witch, you need to plant a seed within them. A seed that you will nurture next to your own heart before you remove it from your chest and place it within their chest where the seed and the power you've selected for them can take root and grow."

"This book," the witch said, running a finger down the first page of the table of contents. "It records what is known of the covens of previous Mothers of Trees. From their names to the powers they developed, it should be able to give you a sense of what is possible for a member of your coven."

"Oak, Ash, Elm, Aspen, Fir," Ashlynn recited as her fingers traced down the list. Each entry on the list suddenly felt far more substantial than any information about a simple tree ever could. While many of the trees on the list were familiar to her, others were completely foreign. What was a Banyan tree? Or a Sweetgum?

"Does it also contain information about other people who have been the Mother of Trees?" Ashlynn asked suddenly, turning away from the book to look at Amahle with wide eyes. From how carefully the powerful witch had measured her mark, she was certain that there were more details that her 'big sister' had been able to glean from inspecting it. If this book held that knowledge...

"No," the Mother of Thorns said, dashing Ashlynn's hopes with a shake of her head. "I have other books for that and I'll share them with you later. For now, I want to look at these with you so you can select the type of seed you'll bestow on little Heila."

"You cannot speak with her about this," Amahle said, tapping a spider-like leg for emphasis when she saw Ashlynn begin to draw a breath. Her little sister was a good woman who would wish to share the decision with little Heila but this was a decision that couldn't be shared.

"You are to become the Mother of Trees," the powerful witch said. "A mother must make some decisions for her children and this is one of them. If you allow Heila to participate, I think you know well what kind of woman she is. Would she choose what is best for herself, or what she believes will serve you better?"

"The latter," Ashlynn said with a heavy sigh. "I'm trying to help her learn to speak up for herself more, and to prioritize her own wants and desires more, but she's dedicated her whole life to service. Breaking some habits is... difficult for her."

"And that is why you must choose this for her," Amahle said gently. "Come, we can read together and then we can discuss it. Just because you're a mother doesn't mean you have to come up with the answers all by yourself. That's why you have a big sister after all," she said with a smile.

"So, let's take a look together, and see what would be best for Heila."