

## The Vampire 231

### Chapter 231 231: The Right Reasons

"That's not why you pulled the Yew tree aside, is it?"

Amahle's words hung in the hot humid air like a gentle admonition. Ashlynn's explanation hadn't been a lie but it hadn't been a complete truth either and her 'older sister's words made it clear that her omission hadn't gone unnoticed.

"No," Ashlynn admitted, sighing as she looked at the page. "There was another reason as well. The Yew Witch receives blessings of longevity. I, I'm going to live for hundreds of years alongside Mistress Nyrielle," she said heavily. "If I grant Heila the power of the Yew tree, then she'll be able to accompany me for much, much longer."

"It's good when you're honest with yourself," Amahle said, standing up from the table and moving across the room to retrieve a fresh pitcher of chilled mint tea and a tray of ginger and molasses cookies.

"Have a cookie, hun, you've been at this for longer than you think," she said gently. "The heat is taking a toll on you and it's starting to show. Slow down, refresh yourself and then we can keep going."

"How long has it been?" Ashlynn asked, glancing out the large, mesh-screened window. Time seemed distant in the heart of the Briar. In the Vale of Mists, the fog might linger for much of the day and rain clouds frequently obscured the sky but there was a distinct sense of the day growing brighter and dimmer.

In the Briar, the fog combined with the dense tree canopy to keep the place in a near eternal twilight during daylight hours. Lamps were lit even at mid-day and it was difficult to say how much time had passed since breakfast.

Once she sank her teeth into the moist, sweet, spiced cookie, however, she realized how empty her stomach felt. Clearly, they'd been at this longer than she realized. A second cookie quickly followed the first, along with more of the chilled mint tea before Ashlynn felt an ache she didn't realize had begun to form behind her temples began to recede and the fog that had seeped into her mind started to clear.

"We'll keep at this for another hour or two," Amahle said, taking a long drink of the chilled tea and adjusting herself on the seat next to Ashlynn until she felt comfortable. Despite her youthful appearance, there were limits to how long even she could sit in place at the table, pouring over tomes like she had returned to her days as an apprentice.

If they didn't come to a conclusion by the time they needed to prepare dinner, that would be fine. The work could continue tomorrow if it needed to. The important part was to give this decision the careful consideration it required.

Watching Ashlynn sip her tea, Amahle's crimson eyes studied her little sister thoughtfully. There was something telling in the way Ashlynn kept returning to certain pages, in how her fingers lingered over specific passages that left her feeling like Ashlynn herself didn't fully understand the implications of meddling with longevity.

Living with a vampire had thrust her into a world of people with immeasurable life spans but Ashlynn herself was still very young and clearly still grappling with the topic. Perhaps this was a good opportunity to plant a few seeds and address what was truly weighing on the younger witch's mind. It might be years or decades before she could empathize with the truly long lived people in the world but as a big sister, Amahle could at least help her see some of the pitfalls ahead.

"Do you think Heila would be happy, living as long as you will?" Amahle asked, gazing at Ashlynn with her crimson eyes. "Will you take her as a concubine and turn your coven into your undying harem?"

"What? No," Ashlynn said, nearly spitting out her tea at the question. "I, I don't think Heila even likes women that way. She's always been... oh, I see," Ashlynn said as she realized where Amahle was leading her.

It wasn't something she talked about often, but she'd spoken with both Nyrielle and Thane about what it was like to live for so long. Thane's entire family had died out, and none of the people who had known him before he became a vampire were still alive today.

For Nyrielle, while her family circumstances were different, it was clear that she'd lost friends to simple age time and time again. Just in this trip she'd seen Nyrielle talking with Lord Ritchel about his father and grandfather, and she'd praised the statue erected in the honor of High Lady Erna's father for capturing a side of the man that few living people remembered.

If Ashlynn gave Heila the power of the Yew tree, she could stay at Ashlynn's side much longer. But, if Heila ever did find a man that she loved... if she ever started a family, then she would be doomed to watch those people grow old and die, long before she would.

"Heila is still a very young maiden," Ashlynn said. The same could be said of her, though she didn't consider herself to be a maiden any longer. She was still fairly young, especially when compared to people like Nyrielle, but as the daughter of a count, Ashlynn had never been free to choose her life partner to begin with.

Now that she was bound to Nyrielle, whether she was young or not, one of the greatest decisions and uncertainties in a young woman's life had already been resolved. They only had Thane, Zedya and the

Ancient Oak for witnesses, and her parents hadn't even met her bride, but Ashlynn considered herself to be married nonetheless.

"I've seen Heila express interest in a few young men over the past few months," Ashlynn admitted. "I don't think she's found love, but I do think she's looking for it, even if she says she isn't. For Nyrielle and I, it's different. Our lives are linked. Neither of us will have regular children either," she added, finally putting to words something she'd slowly come to accept over the past few months.

"She'll have her progeny and I'll have my coven, but we'll never have children the way a normal couple would," Ashlynn said. "I, I don't want to deprive Heila of the chance to know that joy if she finds it. And I don't want to subject her to the pain of losing everyone and lingering on."

"A witch will naturally live longer than most of their kind," Amahle said, wrapping a comforting arm around Ashlynn. "Not as long as you perhaps, but the Horned Clan often live into their sixties and seventies. As a member of your coven, it wouldn't be strange for Heila to cross a century, but not much more than that. She'll have a long life, but not an endless one."

"I see," Ashlynn said, sinking into her own thoughts. Until now, she hadn't realized how much the change in her own lifespan had come to weigh on her. Perhaps it was because she'd been traveling with Nyrielle, listening to the number of people the vampire had outlived that it had come to occupy such a large space in her mind.

When she'd seen the records of the Yew Witch, her first thought had been that she might not have to say goodbye to Heila so soon. But... a century was still a very, very long time. She shouldn't be selfish and demand more, especially when that time could impose such a high price on a person she'd quickly come to treasure almost as much as she treasured Jocelynn.

"I guess it comes down to what kind of decision I need to make," Ashlynn said. "I don't want to make a selfish decision that's best for me, especially if that decision would be harmful to Heila," she said. "Thank you, big sister, for helping me realize just how harmful the Yew tree could have been for Heila."

"But just like I'm not choosing what's best for me, I'm also not choosing what Heila wants the most," she continued. "You're right, sometimes people need to eat their vegetables. I can't pick something just because I think it's what she might want, I need to pick what's best for her," she said, leafing through the stack until she had two remaining sheets of paper."

"That leaves me thinking about what would be best for the coven and the skills and talents that I want to nurture in my coven," Ashlynn said, mentally comparing the composition of her coven to the diverse skills Nyrielle had cultivated in her progeny. "Or, if I don't choose for the good of the coven, then I accept that I'm placing what's best for Heila as the most important thing, in which case, I think my decision is clear."