

## The Vampire 232

### Chapter 232 232: Making the Decision

After spending several hours reviewing possibilities and talking with Amahle, Ashlynn found herself at a crossroads of two very different choices, each one landing at the top of the pile for very different reasons.

"I strongly considered the Red Cedar for her because both Cedar Witches in the records were able to develop shapeshifting powers," Ashlynn said. "I thought it might be useful to help Heila travel with me through human lands, but while it's useful, and it would help meet her desire to stay close to me wherever I go..."

"Little Heila is poorly suited to the powers of a shapeshifter," Amahle agreed. "She is not a spy, nor is she a trickster or assassin. Shapeshifting is a solution to the problem of human hatred, but you won't live among humans as long as you're bound to a vampire."

"If there was someone in my coven like Marcell, perhaps they'll be suited to become the next Cedar Witch," Ashlynn said, finally setting the page firmly aside. "The Cedar tree is so dominant in the Vale of Mists, I think I should look for someone who can bear its seed, but that person isn't Heila."

"Oh?" Amahle asked, raising a sculpted brow at Ashlynn and looking carefully at her expression when she set the page with the Cedar tree on it aside. "You've yet to welcome the first member of your coven and you're already starting to plan for the next ones?"

"I am. I have to," Ashlynn said, turning to look at Amahle. "Tell me something, big sister. You're very close and familiar with Jacques and Talauia. Were they people who meant something to you before they joined your coven, or were they more distant at first?"

"Ask what you're really asking," Amahle said, poking Ashlynn gently with the tip of a spider-like limb. "I know you consider this roundabout way of asking questions to be polite, darlin', but its just the two of us here, no one else to overhear your doubts and worries. Come out and ask what you mean directly."

"In that case," Ashlynn said, taking a deep breath. "Is it wrong of me to think that, one day, maybe even one day soon, I'll need to recruit people into my coven for their skills rather than because of their relationship with me? Because, one way or another, I will claim Owain Lothian's life, and there will be a war between the Lothians and the Vale of Mists. Maybe even a larger war if the humans ever launch another Crusade."

"Mistress Nyrielle once took in forty-seven progeny in order to retake the Vale of Mists from the Lothians," Ashlynn said, her eyes looking pained as she thought of what Nyrielle had looked like when she talked about losing those progeny. "I don't intend to raise an army of witches, but I feel like I need to find at least a few people who can join me in the fight."

"Remember what I told you yesterday," Amahle said, giving Ashlynn a reassuring squeeze. "Air, Earth, Fire, Water, Wood, none of these things have wants or desires. They do not judge things as right or wrong. You are the one who brings these concepts into your witchcraft and therefore, you are the one who decides what's right and wrong for your coven."

"I rescued Talauia and Jacques from fates that would have been far too cruel for my heart to accept," the older witch said. "But not every witch in my coven started as part of a warm and loving family. We've all changed over time. Members of your coven will change as well."

"If you make the decision to bring someone into your coven and your family because you need them to fight for you," she said, holding up a finger to emphasize what she felt the most important point was. "Remember that they are more than just soldiers. They are a part of your family and you must be prepared to treat them as such, even if you adopt them so they can carry your banner in battle."

"Thank you," Ashlynn said, feeling a tension melt from her shoulders. Just knowing that she could build her coven through both natural connections of love and family as well as acts of colder necessity lifted a weight she hadn't realized she'd been carrying.

Nyrielle had given her advice a number of times about making decisions for colder, more practical reasons and she was coming to accept their necessity but those decisions could wait - right now she had someone precious to care for.

"That day isn't today," she continued with a heart that felt more at peace with her decision. "Today isn't about building an army or preparing for war. Today is about doing what's best for Heila," she said, sliding a carefully chosen sheet of paper across to Amahle. "And I think this is the right tree for it."

"Good that you recognize the difference, and that you're not trying to accomplish both doing the right thing for Heila and preparing your coven for war at the same time," Amahle said warmly. "When you try to do that, the justifications and rationalizations pull you away from making the best choice for either goal and compromising on something that fails to achieve either."

"But this other tree you've selected," Amahle said, looking at the sheet of paper. "Do you think it suits her better than the others? Even better than the Black Locust?"

"I do," Ashlynn said. "It's gentle and mild the way Heila is, but it has an undeniable strength that refuses to be defeated even when it must give way. It's well suited to nurturing others and matches well with Heila's nature. She's happy when she's able to help in ways that are visible and can be felt by the person she cares for. This will give her an opportunity to do that."

"This won't be an easy seed for you to nurture," Amahle pointed out. "The Black Locust is rooted in Earth, but this tree is tied more closely with Water. You're not as well suited to Water magic as you are to Earth magic. This would be a stretch for you."

"Why not consider the Magnolia instead?" the older witch suggested, flipping through the pages to point out another option that Ashlynn had discarded earlier on. "A Magnolia Witch would still be skilled in healing arts, but the seed would be easier for you to nurture."

"I thought about it," Ashlynn admitted. "But the Magnolia Witch in the book used her talents to charm and sway others, manipulating people with supernatural beauty. If I grant Heila a Magnolia seed, I'm afraid I'd be thrusting her into the center of the stage where she could command the attention of the masses."

"That's not Heila," Ashlynn said. "She doesn't want the adoration of many, she wants the genuine appreciation of the few people who matter to her. That's why, even though it will be harder for me, I think this is the right choice."

"As long as you've thought it through, darlin'," the powerful witch said. Slowly, she began to gather up the book and the pages of notes. "Now that you've decided, let the idea stew in your mind for a spell. Help me with dinner tonight and if you still feel the choice is right when you've slept on it for an evening then I'll help you start nurturing the seed tomorrow."

"All right," Ashlynn agreed, standing up to clear away their cookies and cups of tea. Now that she'd made a decision, while there were still challenges ahead, her body felt lighter and the room didn't seem quite so dim. Challenges ahead could be faced, it was uncertainty that made the road seem dark.

"Since we have several hours, I have an idea for my own dish tonight," Ashlynn said, turning her mind to the evening meal. "Before we start cooking, could you show me around your vegetable garden?"

"Of course I can," the powerful witch said as she collected a hat that seemed to be covered with pouches and bits of netting where odds and ends could be affixed to the hat. "What are you planning to make?"

"Fire roasted vegetables on puffed pastry," Ashlynn said with a wide smile. "But I need help with one other thing if I'm going to make it. In the Vale of Mists, there are caves built deep underground that stay cold all year long. It's very easy to keep butter cold. But here..."

"Ah, you want to learn the trick I've been using to keep our tea cold in this miserable heat," Amahle said with a laugh. "Of course I'll share it with you, but if you're going to make a puffed pastry and you need my help then I want you to make a sweet one with fresh berries to go with your vegetable dish. Deal?"

"Deal," Ashlynn said with a smile. Tonight, she wanted to make things she knew Heila would enjoy, and the rich, savory flavors of one of Georg's roasted vegetable tarts was something she hoped Heila would find a pleasant reminder of the tastes of home.

Tomorrow, she would face the challenge of preparing Heila's seed, but tonight, they could enjoy something that was just a simple family dinner. After all, from what little Amahle had already told her about this process, it would be the last meal she and Heila would share for several days.

She just hoped that it wasn't the last meal they would ever share. And if it was... then it had better be a good one.