

The Vampire 239

Chapter 239 239: The Importance of Rituals

In the Briar, after sharing a sumptuous dinner with Heila, Talauia, and Jacques the night before, Ashlynn and Amahle left early in the morning following an abbreviated breakfast of oats left to simmer overnight and a cold, smoked sausage.

When they entered the wide, flat-bottomed boat, the fog of the Briar had only begun to lighten for the day. Despite that, the witch who had made the Briar her home navigated smoothly through the mist shrouded waterways toward their destination, providing a lesson as they went.

"The practice of sorcery rarely requires elaborate rituals or the use of external focuses," Amahle explained. "The amount of power a sorcerer can use is limited to the energy of their own body. You can think of it like serving tea to a small group of friends. The pot of tea represents your own body and the tea itself is the energy within you. How difficult is it to pour tea?"

"Not very," Ashlynn said, looking out into the mist as she listened to Amahle's lesson. "A bit of practice to make sure you don't accidentally drip while pouring, maybe more practice to make sure everyone's cup is filled exactly the same amount, but it isn't difficult."

"Now, if you were to serve tea at a fancy ball, like the one where you met little Jacques," Amahle continued. "And everyone at the ball needed to have their tea at the same time, and it needed to be just as hot and perfectly steeped as the tea you served for just a few friends, how difficult would that be?"

"Much more difficult," Ashlynn admitted. "I'd need to have the help of several servants just to pass out the tea if everyone had to have their tea at the same time. Just keeping track of all the pots of tea and making sure everyone had a cup ready for the tea would take more work."

"It's more than that, darlin'," the older witch said. "You'd need a large cauldron to boil the water before you pour it into all of the tea pots. If you don't steep your tea in the cauldron, but steep it in the tea pots, then you need scales to weigh your tea, just to make sure every tea pot gets the right amount..."

"So, witchcraft requires more elaborate rituals or tools like wands because we work with the energy of the world?" Ashlynn asked, turning to look at Amahle to make sure she understood correctly.

"My little sister is a clever one," Amahle said with a smile. "A wand is a focus for gathering the energy of the world. It makes it easier to summon power. A ritual is a method of guiding that power. The tea analogy isn't as good for understanding how ritual works, but it gets us close enough," the witch said, pausing to maneuver the boat into a narrower channel before continuing her lesson.

"If your small tea party is sorcery, then you can easily think through the steps as you go, there's no need to write down instructions because you can see everything that needs to be done all at once," Amahle said. "The more tea you need to serve, the more steps you need to follow, the more important it is to write everything down and follow the instructions so nothing goes wrong."

"So it's not just about needing the instructions to get everyone their tea on time," Ashlynn said, continuing the analogy. "With sorcery, with a small tea party, if I spill the tea, then it's easy to clean up and it won't do much damage."

"You still have to be careful with sorcery," Amahle said, nodding in agreement with Ashlynn's statement. "But if it goes tragically wrong and you pour scalding tea on yourself or one of your friends, there's only one person getting hurt. With witchcraft, because the energy you're working with comes from all around you, it's possible to cause incredible devastation when you lose control," she said, her eyes growing distant.

"A mistake in a ritual could cause every plant or creature living in the Briar to die, all at once," the powerful witch said flatly as ghosts danced behind her crimson eyes. "A witch who loses control is akin to a natural disaster."

"One of your predecessors in the heartlands to the west absorbed the energy of an entire forest, pouring it into a single seed. Now, you can ride for an entire day and still not cross the field of death she created. If you ride to the center of it though, you'll find a single Spruce tree, more than five hundred feet tall with a trunk more than thirty feet across."

For several minutes, Ashlynn sat silently in the boat, processing what Amahle had just said. By now, she knew the older woman well enough to know that her choice of example wasn't random. It was more likely than not that the predecessor that Amahle was mentioning had been using this very ritual when she lost control of her witchcraft.

"You said that the mark of the witch shaped like a spruce tree allowed one to be very powerful in a single aspect of their witchcraft," Ashlynn said, assembling the different pieces of information she had into a disturbing idea. "Was the, the previous Mother of Thorns trying to create an extra powerful Spruce Witch?"

"She was trying to create a seed of witchcraft for her husband," Amahle said, dragging her pole along the sandy bottom of the swamp, slowing the boat as they approached their destination. Around them, reeds grew thicker and long legged birds stalked through the murky water and the dense reeds in search of their morning meals. "She wanted to rule as witch and Eldritch Great Lord, giving her husband the strength to conquer their neighbors."

Amahle left many things unsaid, but the parallels between Ashlynn's circumstances and this unnamed predecessor were uncomfortably clear. At the same time, the missing details left Ashlynn wondering what could have driven the previous Mother of Trees to attempt something of such a grand scale. Her love for her husband was clear, but why go so far in attempting to create such a powerful witch? Were they threatened? Or was it ambition?

For several minutes as Amahle navigated the narrow waterways of the Briar, Ashlynn sank into deep contemplation. She had a hard time relating to the idea of engaging in such grand and ambitious magic purely for the sake of ambition. Perhaps people like Owain would use her power for those ends, but to Ashlynn, the idea of trying to become some kind of Eldritch Witch Lady for personal ambition just felt strange. The gains could never be worth the risks.

But then, when she thought about how far she would go to defend the Vale of Mists that had become her new home... or, more than that, how far she would go to defend Nyrielle, the answer suddenly changed. If she had to wager her life in order to defend the people who depended on her and the people she loved, she wouldn't hesitate.

That, she realized, was the real danger. Not that she would lose herself in the pursuit of power for its own sake, or naked ambition, but that something would threaten her bottom line and she would go to far and risk too much in order to protect what she held most dear. Perhaps the previous Mother of Thorns had felt the same way when she attempted to create a supremely powerful Spruce Witch. Maybe she thought that, if she didn't, her losses would be even greater.

In the end, at least for this lesson, she supposed it didn't matter what the reason had been. Whether it was a noble attempt that ended in failure or an instance of succumbing to the thirst for power beyond one's means, her intention had been to bestow great power on her husband and not only had she died in the process, but she'd destroyed an entire forest.

While Ashlynn sat deep in contemplation, Amahle guided their boat toward a small island that seemed to rise slightly higher above the water than the others they'd passed. Unlike the cypress-dominated islands they'd seen so far, this one was ringed with tall grass and swaying cat-tails that created a natural wall between the water and whatever lay at its center.

The morning mist seemed to curl and drift differently here, staying low and carrying a refreshing coolness that was absent from the warm, muggy fog that blanketed the rest of the Briar. The water under the boat had changed as well, losing its dark, murky tones of gray and brown and becoming crystal clear, pure enough for Ashlynn to see small silvery fish darting through the water and deep, reddish brown crawfish crawling along the sandy bottom.

Moments after passing through a curtain of cool mist that seemed to mark a sort of barrier between the murky, muggy briar and the shelter of this specific island, the boat lurched to a gentle stop as Amahle carefully ran it aground on the sandy shore.

"I'll be careful," Ashlynn said firmly when the sudden stop of the boat jolted her free of her thoughts. "I want to do everything I can for Heila. I want to give her the best start that I possibly can. But I don't think that means transforming her into the most powerful witch possible," she said.

"I know that we're starting at the wrong point," Ashlynn said as she stood to leave the boat. "I know I should learn many other things before attempting to create this seed and that by rushing, Heila may not become as great a witch in the end as she could if I waited until next year or the year after that to form her seed."

"For me, success isn't about making her as powerful as possible," Ashlynn promised. "As long as I can give her the greatest possible chance of success, then I'm content."

"That's the right mindset," Amahle said as she joined Ashlynn on the small island. "Come. There aren't many of these trees in the Briar, but there are a few and this is the oldest of them. Binding yourself to this tree will help you to create her seed in the fastest way possible. It may not be as wise as the Ancient Oak you've met in the Vale of Mists, but if you treat it the same way, you may even gain the support of a willing partner for your ritual."