

The Vampire 240

Chapter 240 240: The Ancient Willow

Ashlynn's boots sank slightly into the soft sand as she stepped from the boat onto the island's shore. Unlike the other islands they'd passed, where even a few steps would have left her feet coated in dark, clinging mud, the sand here was clean and pale, and the tall grass growing on the island felt softer to the touch than the sharp-edged blades of grass elsewhere in the Briar.

The island itself wasn't very large, no more than a hundred paces across, but even if the island were twice as large, it would have felt too small to play host to the majestic tree that awaited them.

Rising from the center of the island, dominating the space with a sense of quiet, reserved majesty, stood an ancient willow tree. A gentle breeze stirred its silvery-green leaves, which hung like a curtain from long, thin branches, creating a sound like a sigh from a breath long held.

The prickly, dangerous aura that permeated the Briar faded away entirely, replaced by a cool welcoming presence that wrapped around Ashlynn like a soft, gossamer shawl, draping her in a protective barrier against the oppressive environment of the Briar.

"Hello," Ashlynn said, gently parting the drooping branches of the Ancient Willow like a curtain so she could approach its trunk. As soon as Ashlynn passed through, however, the branches fell back into place, seeming to form a barrier preventing anyone from following her.

"You'll welcome my big sister too, won't you? We've come to seek your help," Ashlynn said, looking from the tree to Amahle and back again.

"Don't get your branches twisted," Amahle told the tree as she stood on the opposite side of the drooping branches. "I'm not here for your bark and I've left you alone for quite some time since the last time I needed anything from you. This time, I've brought my little sister to you, so let the old hurts go."

"Old hurts?" Ashlynn said, turning to face the older witch. "What happened?"

"Talauia was half dead when she arrived here," Amahle said as she pointed at several deep scars in the tree's trunk with the tips of her spider-like limbs. From the depth of the wounds on the tree, the powerful witch had taken far more than a piece of bark when she'd last visited the tree.

"You don't understand how much people hate her kind," Amahle said softly. "They're a clan with no nation that welcomes them. To save her required sacrifices from more than just this Ancient Willow." As she spoke, her eyes grew distant, recalling the terrifying sight of the young girl who had arrived in the Briar in the hopes of escaping her pursuers.

Talauia's wounds weren't just extensive, they were cruel. Her fingers and feet had been broken, leaving her with nothing but her needle-sharp teeth to tear at anything she could hunt in order to survive. If not for the fact that her captors desired her wings as trophies, she'd never have managed to flee once she escaped her confinement.

Nursing her back to health had taken all of the skill that Amahle possessed and without both the bark and the pulp of the Ancient Willow's heartwood, Talauia would have succumbed to pain and infection long before Amahle could stitch her wounds closed and begin to mend her shattered bones. In her haste to save the dying girl, she hadn't been kind to the Ancient Willow, cruelly taking what she needed from it and leaving the tree's survival to fate.

"So that's how it is," Ashlynn said. Taking a few steps forward, Ashlynn knelt at the base of the tree, drawing a small knife from its sheath on her belt and slicing into the palm of her hand to spill several drops of blood on the tree's roots.

"Please take this as payment for my big sister's debts," Ashlynn said. The action looked simple on the surface, but she went beyond an offering of blood alone. The magic she used was borrowed from Nyrielle and relied on the same technique the vampire used to infuse her blood with her own life energy.

Nyrielle had used it to make an offering to the Ancient Oak on the night that Ashlynn became her Seneschal and Ashlynn used the same technique now to give her blood power beyond what it already carried. The magic allowed her to give of herself in the hopes of at least easing the Ancient Willow's suffering.

A complicated expression flickered across Amahle's face, seeing her little sister using vampire blood magic instead of her own power as the Mother of Trees in order to soothe the Ancient Willow. There were better ways to accomplish what Ashlynn was trying to do, but the young witch could hardly be blamed for reaching for the only tools she'd learned how to use.

When the tree drank deeply of Ashlynn's offering, absorbing the potent blood directly into its roots, Amahle redoubled her resolve to teach Ashlynn the proper way to use a witch's power. The sooner she could break her little sister free of such sacrificial vampiric methods, the better.

Despite Amahle's distaste for the method, however, it was effective. A shimmery silver curtain of light spread from the silver-green leaves of the Ancient Willow before the branches blocking the older witch's way parted, allowing her to approach the scarred trunk of the tree.

"I think it would help if you apologized," Ashlynn said, tracing her fingers along the rough bark of the tree. "I wouldn't want there to be any lingering animosity between you."

"I won't apologize for what I took," Amahle said, reaching up with her spider-like limbs to gently touch the Ancient Willow in the places where it still bore the scars of her rough treatment. "Nor will I apologize for how roughly I treated you," she told the tree.

"But I will thank you for helping me to save a life," she continued. "And I apologize for not making amends earlier. Trees like you are outside my purview. Properly, my darlin' little sister should be the one to tend to your needs, but I could have done more to help you heal after taking from you so roughly, and I didn't. For that, I'm very sorry."

As she spoke, Amahle's spider-like limbs began to move in a complicated pattern over the surface of the tree, leaving behind delicate threads of spider silk that formed into a sharp, angular glyph on the surface of the tree.

"If anything tries to harm you, this glyph will protect you," the powerful witch promised. "If you wish it, it will even protect you from my coven, though I'm incapable of giving you protection that would work against me. Please, accept this gift as proof of my good intentions in bringing my little sister here for help," she said, bowing her head toward the tree.

A cooling breeze blew through the leaves of the Ancient Willow, filling the air with a musical sound of leaves rustling and branches swaying. In the perpetual twilight of the Briar, the sound felt bright and cheerful.

"Thank you," Ashlynn said with a smile. She didn't think the tree needed Amahle's offer of protection, but the lingering pain she felt from the Ancient Willow dissipated like the seeds of a dandelion in the wind, leaving the air of the small island clear and welcoming.

"You should ask it for a seed," Amahle said as she turned to face Ashlynn. "I brought an older seed, but a fresh seed, freely given, would be better."

"You heard my big sister," Ashlynn said, caressing one of the tree's delicate, spindly branches. "I need your help to bring a very dear friend into my coven. She's a gentle woman who has done much to care for me. I think you'd like her very much."

While she spoke to the tree, Ashlynn closed her eyes and sank into her memories of Heila, summoning a trace of her emerald green magical energy and allowing her memories to flow along with it to her fingers that twined around the willow branch.

Whether it was the simple kindness Heila had shown her when she first woke to the foreign environment of the Vale of Mists or the selfless dedication Heila had shown when she plunged into the icy waters of the frozen lake to help rescue Ashlynn, she shared it all with the tree in the hopes that it would approve of the woman who would bear its seed.

The process was neither slow nor quick, but after several minutes, Ashlynn opened her eyes to find a light, fluffy seed pod growing between her fingers.

"Thank you," Ashlynn told the tree. "Once we're done, I'll be sure to bring her here to say her thanks as well."

"Now that we have the seed," she said, turning to face Amahle. "What do we do next?"