

The Vampire 241

Chapter 241 241: Beginning the Ritual

"The first step to forming a seed of witchcraft is to place it within your body," Amahle said. "I'll place the seed in your chest, close to your heart. There, it will sprout roots that will surround your heart, drawing on your energy to empower the seed."

Ashlynn's hand unconsciously moved to her chest, fingers pressing against the spot where her heart beat steadily beneath. Within her chest, she could feel her own heartbeat, steady and strong, along with the echo of Nyrielle's heartbeat, slower, fainter, but no less present than it had been on the first day she woke after forming her blood pact with the vampire.

This was the farthest apart they'd been since that night, and Ashlynn could feel the echo growing fainter still, but when she focused on it, her bond with her lover felt just as strong as it ever had. Quiet and faint didn't mean weak.

Now, she was confronted with even more magic that would wrap around her heart. The idea of roots growing around her heart should have been terrifying, and yet, when Amahle explained it, it sounded only right and natural. Her heart was the center of life within her body. The only other place she could nurture a seed would be within her womb, yet somehow, perhaps because of what she had been through with Nyrielle, her heart and the blood pumping through it felt like the most fertile ground in which to plant a seed of witchcraft.

"Will it hurt?" she asked, watching as Amahle began to make her preparations. Not that the answer would change her mind. She was prepared to endure whatever was required to complete this ritual. Part of that came from a desire to do the very best she could for Heila. Her friend deserved this opportunity and Ashlynn would do everything she could to deliver it to her.

Another part of her refused to back down because this was a necessary step on the road to claiming her vengeance against Owain Lothian and his family for all that they had done. If she couldn't form a coven, she would have no power of her own to call on in her war against the people who betrayed her, she would have to depend completely on Nyrielle to obtain her vengeance. The idea of being so helpless against the people who wronged her was so appalling that it formed another pillar of her resolve to face this moment head on, no matter how much pain it would bring.

"There will be some pain, yes, but I doubt the pain will be the hardest part of what's to come," the older witch replied. As Amahle spoke, she began removing several implements from a simple canvas sack, placing them on the ground next to the roots of the Ancient Willow tree.

A slender knife with a blade polished to a mirror finish was the first thing that caught Ashlynn's eyes, along with a small bottle of clear liquid that Ashlynn was certain wasn't water. The other implements, however, included long, hooked needles and several other items that she wasn't certain what purpose they would serve.

"Once the seed has been planted in your body," Amahle continued. "I will bind you physically to the Ancient Willow. Your hands and feet will be bound, along with your body. This part will be very hard to endure," she said, her crimson eyes flashing Ashlynn a sympathetic look.

"I'll pierce your skin and the bark of the tree to allow its sap and energy to enter your body," the powerful witch explained. "This is the fastest way for you to form a seed of witchcraft for Heila. Some of the energy will come from you, but much of it will come from the Ancient Willow tree. This way, you'll be able to nurture a seed in mere days instead of weeks or months."

"I see," Ashlynn said. She'd been on the verge of asking if there was a better way but hearing her big sister's words, she understood that the harshness of the method was the price to be paid for going so quickly. "How long will it take?"

"That depends on you," Amahle said, standing up from her preparations and standing in front of Ashlynn with a gleaming silver blade in her hands. "Each seed is unique and this is your first one. I've only used this method once, when my first attempt to create a seed for Jacques failed abysmally."

As she spoke, Amahle pulled the bodice of her loose, bell sleeved top aside to reveal an ugly, twisted scar in the center of her chest, directly between her breasts.

"The seeds of the Sandbox tree are explosive," she explained. "By nurturing one in my body for months, I accidentally gave the seed the energy it needed to erupt. If little Saini, the Rose Witch, hadn't been at my side with healing magic then I likely would have lost my life in the attempt."

"That's why, when I tried again, I relied on one of the strongest Sandbox trees in the Briar to help me form his seed of witchcraft. It took five days, and the results were more than satisfactory," the powerful witch said, her fingers absently tracing the twisted scar on her chest before she let her clothing fall back into place.

For a moment, Ashlynn stared at the spot where the scar had disappeared beneath Amahle's clothing. The older witch spoke of her near-death experience so casually, yet the size and shape of the scar made it clear how horribly wrong things had gone. To Ashlynn, it looked like someone had attempted to forcefully tear the witch's heart from her chest and it was only through a miracle of magical healing that she had survived.

Once again, she was struck by the lengths to which her 'big sister' went for the members of her coven. As cruel as she'd been to the Ancient Aspen to save Talauia, she'd been even more cruel to herself in order to create Jacques seed of witchcraft. Faced with such an example, Ashlynn only hoped she could grow into a witch with a fraction of the strength of will and love for her close ones that Amahle kept beneath her thorny exterior.

"So I should expect to be here for a while," Ashlynn said. "Will you, will you stay here with me? Just in case something goes wrong?" she asked hesitantly.

"No, I won't stay," Amahle said firmly. "I think the Ancient Willow has made it clear that I'm not welcome here. I won't leave you alone though. Witches have covens for more than one reason. I'll make sure you're safe and I feel like the Ancient Willow will defend you as well."

"Now, ready yourself, little sister," the older witch said as she guided Ashlynn to stand at the base of the Ancient Willow. From this point forward, Amahle would take direct control of the process, or, at least as much of the process as any witch could control.

She would see to a flawless beginning. After that, no amount of preparation, no special elixir or additional ritual could do anything to improve Ashlynn's chances of survival. Whether she succeeded or failed in the end would be up to her strength alone.