

## The Vampire 249

### Chapter 249 249: Paying the Cost

Outside, Ashlynn found herself in a sprawling village with dozens of rush huts like the one she'd emerged from. In the distance, she could hear children laughing and chasing after each other along with the sounds of people splashing into shallow water and rustling through the tall reeds.

It was the sight behind the hut, however, that drove every other thought from Ashlynn's mind. Her senses had told her that life was plentiful here and when she looked at the wilderness beyond the village, that seemed true.

Tall cypress trees rose in the distance and several bushes and vines grew nearby as well. The grass was tall and lush, swaying gently in the warm summer breeze and small birds could be seen wading through the ponds in search of small fish swimming in the murky water.

But in the center of all that life, one mighty cypress tree hung limp. Its needles had turned brown and fallen in great numbers, leaving it looking stark and naked among its greener peers. Branches hung low and many of them looked brittle, ready to snap in a stiff wind. Roots, protruding above the soil, looked dried and withered, as if they'd been afflicted by a terrible blight.

"You must have been taught, cher," the Willow Witch said from behind her. "Energy comes from somewhere. Dis tree was mighty and close and you done used her all up. You see, now, yeah? You ain't ready for dis trial. I give you one more chance. Do de right thing, cher."

For several moments, Ashlynn stood silent. She was horrified at what she had done to the mighty tree. No wonder it had been easier to find and to draw from than anything else. But once she had, she hadn't thought about where the power was coming from and just kept reaching for what worked.

And yet... even if she had killed this tree, she wasn't certain whether or not she would feel remorse over it. She'd saved the lives of seven people in exchange for this. If she had to do it again, if there was only one great tree and she had no choice but to destroy it to save the lives of her loved ones, she wouldn't hesitate to make that trade.

But this time, there had been an alternative. She could have reached farther to the other cypress trees. She could have taken a bit from the grasses and the bushes and the other growing things. A little bit from all around and everyone would have been able to recover. What she had done... it wasn't the right way.

"I'm sorry," Ashlynn said, walking forward to the stricken cypress tree. Kneeling at its roots, she placed a hand on its dry and cracking bark, feeling deep within the tree to see if there was the faintest trace of life.

Much of the tree felt brittle, or hollow, as if it was a towel that had been thoroughly wrung out before being left to bake in the sun until it became stiff. Deep within the core of the tree, however, slumbering within the heartwood of the mighty cypress tree, she found something that still felt fresh, tender, and alive, like the outer layers of the tree had protected its most vital essence.

"Thank goodness," she whispered. Her shoulders slumped in relief when she found that the tree hadn't completely died. Without help, it would likely fall over in a strong wind, or crack and die under its own weight. But at the moment, she felt like there was still time to correct the wrong she'd done.

"I cannot give back everything I have taken," she told the tree gently. She'd only just learned to heal people and she had no idea if she would be successful in recovering the tree or not. She only knew that she had to make the attempt. "But even if I can't give back everything, I know that I've wronged you, and I will do what I can to help you survive," she promised.

Mirroring Nyrielle's actions with the Ancient Oak, Ashlynn once again took a small knife and spilled a bit of her blood, dripping it onto the roots along with an offering of her energy. Unlike Nyrielle, Ashlynn went further, drawing on what she had just learned to give the ailing tree the best chance she could.

"Everyone," she said, addressing the other trees and plants. "I've wronged your brother. Help me to heal the hurts I've caused. With my blood as my promise and my energy as an offering, please join me. Offer what you may so that your brother may thrive."

Three red drops splashed on the dry and cracked root before a wave of green energy flowed outward from Ashlynn. The energy quickly changed shape, turning into thick green roots that plunged into the soft, moist soil, searching out the roots of the other mighty trees, the small grasses, and anything else that would help.

Once again, an answering surge of energy slammed into her body, but Ashlynn stubbornly bit down on her lip, using the pain to strengthen her will to stand up against the surging tide of energy, to give it direction and shape, funneling it into the tree that she'd wronged in her ignorance.

When Ashlynn's magic touched the tree, rather than feeling the tree's pain, she was assaulted by a bone-deep fatigue. For a moment, she felt as though her bones had become brittle and weak, her joints stiff with age and just holding her head up and keeping her eyes open felt like an incredible effort.

Then, bit by bit, like a wilting flower perking up when watered, the mighty cypress tree began to display signs of vitality. Brown needles dropped from the tree in droves as they were pushed aside by new growth. Branches grew, sending out new shoots or becoming thicker and sturdier. The tree itself seemed to stretch toward the sky, growing taller by as much as a man's height under the influx of energy freely given to it by its peers.

"Thank you," Ashlynn whispered, kneeling on the ground and bowing deeply to the other trees. The results had been better than she dared to hope. Her body still shook with the after-effects of using such strong magic and her legs were too weak to stand even if she wanted to stop kneeling, but at the moment, she didn't mind.

According to her father, when lords made mistakes, they rarely bore the consequences of their actions. It was the people within a lord's domain that would suffer for their lord's mistakes long before the lord themselves personally felt the pain caused by their actions. The truth of it was something she accepted long ago, even if it never sat well with her.

Now, as she knelt in pained exhaustion, she felt that this way was better. The mistake had been hers and she should be the one to pay the price for it.

"So dis is your decision," Cecile said, shaking her head as she watched the strange witch blend a vampire ritual with her own witchcraft. Her intentions might be good and her willingness to take responsibility spoke well of her but her methods...

"Dis will not have a good end, cher. But I will not stand in your way. Now, de real trial begins."

No sooner had Cecile spoken than Ashlynn found the world shifting around her. Once again, she'd returned to the Vale of Mists. This time, however, she stood on a familiar hilltop, beneath the branches of the Ancient Oak tree where she'd sworn her oath and formed a pact of blood with Nyrielle.

This time, Nyrielle was nowhere to be found and the early morning light of dawn spilled across the fortifications of the Vale of Mists. Behind the wall, hundreds of soldiers of the vale stood ready, organized neatly beneath banners bearing sharp Eldritch glyphs. A few familiar figures were visible at this distance. Ollie, with his flame-red hair, was nearly impossible to miss, as was the imposing figure of Commander Barringer, shouting his orders from atop the ramparts.

On the opposite side of the wall, the tents of the combined army of the Lothians, their vassals, and the Church of the Holy Lord of Light disgorged a seemingly endless wave of soldiers preparing for battle.

The smoke from countless campfires drifted lazily on the still morning air while the sounds of armor clanking and shouted orders carried even to this distant hilltop. At the moment, both armies possessed a clean, orderly demeanor but Ashlynn could feel a burning, blinding hatred and barely contained fury radiating from several knights wearing tabards belonging to the Church. Perhaps if the Lothians practiced any kind of sorcery, she would be able to feel them at this distance as well.

"Everything is ready, my Lady," Heila's voice said from behind her, pulling her attention away from the impending battle. "Tents for the wounded, herbs, bandages... We've prepared everything we can. Do you think," she added, her voice quivering with uncertainty. "Do you think it will be enough?"

"I don't know, Heila," Ashlynn said as she turned away from the battlefield to face her closest friend since coming to the vale. "I don't know..."