

The Vampire 252

Chapter 252 252: More Than A Healer

This time, Ashlynn knew what to expect when the first injured soldiers began to pour into the tent. As much as it pained her to ignore the suffering of several men who were injured with wounds that were serious but not life threatening, she held to the instructions she'd given Heila. Their healing was reserved for people injured by the Templars and Inquisitors or with injuries so severe that they would perish without the aid of a witch.

"Heila," Ashlynn said after several hours. "Stop and rest, I'll take care of things by myself for a while," she said, glancing outside of the tent and trying to gauge the time of day. When had Ollie come into the tent? Was it afternoon? She couldn't remember.

"I can keep going," Heila said. Her eyes darted around the tent, taking in the dozens of wounded before rolling up the sleeves of her dress and preparing to treat another wounded soldier.

"No, you need to rest," Ashlynn insisted. "We haven't seen the worst of it yet. If you exhaust yourself now, it will be harder later. Eat something and sit with the Ancient Oak. In an hour or so, you can come and relieve me."

"Yes, my Lady," Heila said, clearly unhappy but submitting to Ashlynn's instructions nonetheless.

The day wore on, much like before, but this time, Ashlynn and Heila paced themselves much more conservatively. In addition, Ashlynn used one of her breaks to repeat her actions with the cypress tree, making a blood offering to the Ancient Oak and drawing on the surrounding trees to strengthen it after a morning of relying on the sturdy tree to help cleanse the injuries inflicted by the Templars and Inquisitors.

"I have to find a better way to fight this magic," Ashlynn muttered as she tended to yet another soldier suffering from gruesome burns. "I can't keep relying on the Ancient Oak like this."

The longer she worked in the tent, the more impatience began to build within her heart. Already, the trial had revealed several weaknesses to her but there was nothing she could do at the moment to address her lack of knowledge. More than anything, she wanted to turn to Amahle or even Nyrielle's library to find other ways to solve these problems.

Unfortunately, trapped within the visions that left her questioning reality at times, there was nothing she could do to extend her knowledge. Once again, Cecile's words echoed through her mind, that she was too young and wasn't ready, but those words only offered doubts. There were no solutions in them so she pushed them to the back of her mind and focused on the person in front of her, healing as best she could, one person at a time.

This time, when Ollie arrived before her, missing most of a limb and fading in and out of consciousness from the pain, she hardened her heart and summoned Heila to help her. Nyrielle had often told her that she needed to be more ruthless and at the moment, Ashlynn wished she could summon a fraction of her lover's calm detachment in the face of a crisis.

"We'll need the help of the Ancient Oak to preserve his life," Ashlynn said. "Perhaps one day we can find a way to help him regain his arm, but right now, his life comes first."

"Are you sure?" Heila asked hesitantly. "We could..."

"I'm sure," Ashlynn said firmly. "The price for doing anything else is too high."

This time, Ashlynn worked with Heila to use a simpler healing spell, covering the end of Ollie's severed limb with tender flesh that saved him from danger but did nothing to restore the missing limb.

"Thank you," the former kitchen boy said, his watery eyes filled with gratitude to the women who had saved his life. Those eyes, however, pierced Ashlynn's heart like icy knives, colder than any Frost Walker sorcery.

Saving Ollie still drained a significant amount of strength from her and Heila, forcing both of them to rest beneath the Ancient Oak as the daylight began to fade and night approached.

The entire time they rested, Ashlynn's eyes never left the battlefield. The gates smoked and smoldered but they still held firm, at least for now. Bodies littered the ground both atop the walls and beneath them, but the Lothians had failed to breach the Vale's defenses, at least so far.

In the rear of the invading army's camp, Ashlynn could feel brilliant energy gathering at the command of the Church's miracle workers. Clearly, she and Heila weren't the only healers using magic to keep people in the fight.

From what little Ashlynn could see of the battlefield, the Templars and Inquisitors had suffered few deaths. Their heavy armor made it difficult to kill them before they could retreat to the protection of the rear where the miracle workers of the Church would save their lives, returning the most powerful combatants of the invading army to the battlefield, refreshed and free of injuries.

"This is wrong," Ashlynn muttered, looking out at the fierce battle. "Where are our allies? Where are the Frost Walkers to counter the flame wielding inquisitors? Where is Jacques to knock down those Templars? Surely he would come if I asked. He must understand how important this is..."

The more Ashlynn looked at the battle, the more she found holes in the scenario playing out in front of her. This wasn't the real world, it was a vision and a test. A test that wanted to put her under pressure as a healer.

Perhaps it was trying to teach her that even with the power of the willow, she couldn't save everyone. It was a bitter lesson, but one she admitted that she needed to learn. But was there more to the test than this?

"Heila," Ashlynn finally said, standing up from the grass at the base of the Ancient Oak. "Send for my sword and armor. When night falls, I'll join Mistress Nyrielle, Thane and the others on the field of battle."

"My Lady?" Heila asked in stunned surprise. "But, the wounded..."

"You'll do for them as much as you can, and no more," Ashlynn commanded firmly. "But too many people are suffering grievous wounds because we don't have anyone on the field that can suppress the Templars and Inquisitors."

"You're the Willow Witch," Ashlynn said, turning to smile at Heila. "Even if it isn't really you," she added quietly. "You've shown me the kind of witch that Heila can become. If she can do all this then it's all I could ever ask for from her and more. If this is Heila's future then I have no regrets about giving her a seed of witchcraft."

"But I'm not the Willow Witch," Ashlynn said firmly, looking to the Ancient Oak and then to the forest of cedar trees beyond. "I'm the Mother of Trees. If I limit myself to this, then I can only weep over the wounds inflicted on my loved ones."

"Bring me my sword and armor," she repeated firmly. "The best way to treat a wound is to stop it from being inflicted. This time, I will fight at Nyrielle's side."

"Is that your answer?" Heila asked, her voice strangely echoing in the vision. The moment she spoke, the battle paused, time coming to a stop while the two of them spoke. "You refuse to complete the trial of a Willow Witch to earn the seed of witchcraft for your friend?"

"I never said that I refused to complete the trial," Ashlynn said firmly. "I said that I would fight in a different way. I will guide Heila as best I can and I will make sure she learns the lessons I've learned in this trial. But I'm not the Willow Witch and I will not confine myself to that place when there is more I can do to help my loved ones," she said, her emerald eyes glinting with determination.

"So dis is de heart of de Mother of Trees," a second voice said as Cecile rejoined them. A wave of fog washed over them, whisking away the battlefield, the Ancient Oak, and Heila before returning them to the small island of the Ancient Willow.

"De lesson you was meant to learn is dat a willow, she may bend but she may never break, yeah?" Cecile said. "Bend too far, yield to everyting' dat comes to you for more, you going to run yourself dry too quick. After you snap, who can mend de Mother of Trees back together?"

"Nyrielle will be there for me," Ashlynn said without a moment of hesitation. "And Heila, and the others who will form my coven. I won't be alone."

"Vampires deliver only death, cher," Cecile said with a frown. "You can't be going to de likes of de Harbinger of Death for hope and life."

"She rescued me from the brink of death once already," Ashlynn countered. "Whatever you think of her, I know her heart. You don't. Maybe she's different from other vampires. Maybe were're the ones that are different together. It doesn't matter. I can trust her with my life."

"You ain't jus' sayin' dat on account of your blood pact with her, yeah?" Cecile said, her thick tail swishing through the fog in agitation. "You done said it y'r self. If she dies, she takes you wit' her, yeah? Dat seed in y'r chest, it can be used for someting' else. An Ancient Willow can pull de pact into de seed, stripping it from you and transferring it onto the tree dat grows from de seed when you plant it."

"Don't you dare," Ashlynn said, her hand dropping reflexively to her hip as if to draw a sword that wasn't there. "Nyrielle and I, we made our oaths and I stand by mine. My heart belongs to her for as long as she lives and I wouldn't have it any other way. I love her and she loves me. Our pact helps strengthen that love. Why would I want anyone to strip me of something so wondrous?"

"I still tink y'r being young and foolish, cher," the old woman said. "But I won't speak of it no more. Since dis is y'r will, de Ancient Willow and I won't deny it. Y'r little Heila will face her own trail when she takes de seed, but you, maman... you truly are de Mother of Trees."

"Now go on, cher," the old woman said, fading into mist. "Y'r coven is waiting for you."