

The Vampire 226

Chapter 226 226: Heila's Resolve

The following morning, after a simple family-style breakfast of eggs and oat porridge, Jacques and Talauia retreated from Amahle's cottage to leave her alone with Ashlynn and Heila.

"Now," the powerful witch said as she poured hot tea for her two young students, filling the room with a fragrance that was warm and slightly minty. "You've had the night to think on it. I've done told you that it's plenty dangerous. Success is not guaranteed. Little Heila," she said, turning her attention to the diminutive horned woman.

"Jacques told me last night that the notion of you joining Ashlynn's coven only came up because he tried to make you stay behind when it came time to enter the Briar," she said, her dark, sculpted brows lowering as her gaze took in a hint of penetrating sharpness.

"If all you want to do is stay close and serve Ashlynn, I will bend the rules for you and allow you to stay," she offered. "You do not need to join her coven just for this moment." While Amahle didn't think that the diminutive woman would take such an offer, it was still an offer that had to be made. After all, Heila wasn't the only one being tested.

"Even if you let me stay as just her lady-in-waiting," Heila said hesitantly. Once she began, however, a fire ignited in her eyes, blazing with determination. "I'd still choose to join her coven. Please, now that I have the chance, don't take it away from me," she said, offering a seated bow from her place at the table.

"I'd like to hear your reason why, sugar," Amahle said. Her expression was still somber even though her words were light and friendly. As she watched, the pupils of one eye focused entirely on Heila, ready to catch the slightest tremble in her voice or shift in her eyes that might betray falsehood. The other eye

focused on Ashlynn with just as much detail, ready to see how the future Mother of Trees would respond to this young applicant to join her coven.

"I can see the fire in your eyes," Amahle said flatly, withholding any praise that might normally accompany such words. "But fire isn't enough to survive what will come. Tell me why you've made this decision despite the risks."

"Because once the sun comes up, Ashlynn is all alone," Heila said, giving Ashlynn a complicated look. She wasn't sure that this was the sort of answer they wanted to hear, but it felt true to her, she just hoped that would be enough for them.

"I think, I may have misunderstood Jacques," she continued. "Now that we're here, he doesn't seem as mysterious and cryptic in what he does. More... He seems awkward and like he has difficulty speaking his thoughts well."

"That's true," Amahle said with a light smile, her sharp aura relaxing slightly as she considered the youngest member of her coven. "Jacques tries his hardest but he isn't the most well-spoken of my coven and he struggles with some parts of his nature. That doesn't answer why you want to become a member of Ashlynn's coven."

"I, I was getting there," Heila said, struggling to maintain her posture under the intense crimson gaze of the powerful witch. Somewhere, in the back of her mind, a timid little voice cried out to her to run and hide before she was caught in the spider's web, but she firmly scolded that voice to be silent and pressed on with her answer.

"For a little while," she said. "We thought that Jacques might try to take Ashlynn away from us. We talked about it with the captain of Lady Nyrielle's personal guard. They thought that they could protect her from him, but if he was serious, then people would die."

"During the night, no one can take her from Lady Nyrielle," Heila said, her voice growing firmer as she recovered her momentum. "But during the day, she doesn't have Lady Nyrielle, doesn't have Madame Zedya or Sir Thane or any of the others. But she always, always has me. It's just, I'm too weak and useless to help her fight her enemies."

"You're not useless," Ashlynn protested, reaching out to wrap Heila in a tight hug from behind. "You're brave and you've done more than almost any lady-in-waiting could ever be asked to do."

"It doesn't matter if it's more than others though," Heila said, turning in Ashlynn's arms to look at her from just inches away. "It might be enough for a dozen other ladies, but that doesn't mean it's enough for you. You're different. You will always be different. What you need is different too. More than what anyone else would ever need."

"So, I want to be there for you. I will always be at your side," Heila promised. "So, let me be the best lady-in-waiting that I can possibly be. You're going to go farther than almost any lady ever would. I need to go just as far or I can't stay by your side anymore," she finished, tears forming in her eyes.

"Oh, my little Heila," Ashlynn whispered, hugging her friend close to her chest and gently stroking the horned woman's long, curly hair. "You can always stay. I will never send you away." For a moment, she almost said more. The words were right there at the tip of her tongue. That Heila was her first friend among the Eldritch and that she mattered too much to her to be placed in harm's way.

And yet, she couldn't say it. If she did, it would mean rejecting everything that Heila had put into her earnest plea. It wasn't just the loyalty of a servant that gave birth to Heila's words, or even the loyalty of a friend. It was a genuine desire to be a greater partner in their relationship. Heila wanted to face danger together with her instead of being sheltered from it.

She was willing to put her life in danger because, to Heila, Ashlynn's life had come to mean just as much to her as Heila's life had come to mean to Ashlynn. Those were feelings that would leave deep scars on both women if Ashlynn were to reject them now.

"And, since this is what you want," Ashlynn said, summoning up her own resolve to say the words confidently so Heila could hear the acceptance in her voice. "Then I won't refuse you, even if I am worried for you. We'll face the dangers together."

"Well done, sugar," Amahle said, this time with genuine warmth in her voice and a smile on her face. The first hurdles were often the hardest, but since these two had resolved themselves to walk this road together, she would give them all the support she could.

"Now, go find Tala," she said. "She'll help you get settled into your own place. For the next few days, she'll be your tutor while I help my little sister prepare to welcome you into her coven."

Even though Heila would be incapable of practicing real witchcraft at the moment, there were still several things that she needed to learn before the summer ended and winter's approach pulled them away. The more book-learning Heila could manage in the days while she awaited her transformation, the stronger her foundation would be once the powers of a witch took root within her.

"I can stay to help her too," Heila said almost reflexively before she realized that in this case, there might not actually be anything she could do to help. "That is, I can still tend to anything you need, my Lady," she told Ashlynn.

"I can take care of myself," Ashlynn said gently, ruffling the horned woman's hair. "Go. I imagine the things that big sister Amahle has to say to me are for me alone."

"Thank you," Heila said, her eyes brimming with tears. The night before, she'd barely slept, and it hadn't been the unfamiliar hammock that kept her awake until the sun had nearly risen. Her biggest fear had been that Ashlynn would refuse to let her take the risk.

The explanation she'd given hadn't been intended to convince Amahle at all, it had been intended to overcome any objection Ashlynn might raise in the name of keeping her safe. Thankfully, it seems her words had been successful in persuading both women. Whether it was the logic of having her available to protect Ashlynn during the day or her genuine feelings of wanting to help her friend didn't matter to Heila.

So long as they accepted her, that was enough.