

The Vampire 229

Chapter 229 229: Visiting Sister Holly

"So? They said yes, they said yes, right?" Talauia said as soon as Heila emerged from Amahle's home. The excited witch hovered just above the wooden walkway, her wings humming with excitement as she looked at Heila, eager to hear the news.

"They said yes," Heila said weakly. Her body was still trembling and her hands tightly gripped the railing next to the walkway for support. It wasn't until now, when the decision had been made, that she realized how frightened she'd been that Ashlynn would say no because it was too dangerous.

Months ago, when Zedya had first selected her from among all of the servants to tend to Lady Ashlynn's needs, she'd never dreamed of a moment like this coming to pass.

At first, things had been awkward between them. Lady Ashlynn was accustomed to doing many things by herself which left Heila doubting whether or not her work could even be counted as fulfilling her duties. She didn't feel like Ashlynn was allowing her to be an attendant and that it wouldn't be long until she was sent back to work alongside everyone else, tending to the basic needs of the ancient fortress in the Vale of Mists.

It was only later, when Ashlynn began to grow curious about Eldritch life, that Heila started to realize that she needed to provide a different kind of support to her new lady. Ashlynn didn't need someone to help her bathe or select a dress, she needed someone who could tell her about the traditions of the Horned Clan, the history of the common people in the Vale of Mists, and dozens of other things that Heila herself never thought much about because she grew up knowing them.

Once she'd realized that, things began to change between the two women as Heila slowly learned to be the kind of person that Ashlynn could rely on. More than that, even though clear boundaries imposed by status within Lady Nyrielle's household remained, they developed a sort of friendship.

Given her humble origins, becoming Ashlynn's lady-in-waiting should have been enough of an elevation in status for her to be content for a lifetime. And yet, when Zedya mentioned a possibility for her to join Ashlynn's coven, to become a witch alongside her... Heila's heart had seized on the notion with a strength that surprised even her.

If Ashlynn had said 'no' at this moment, it would have crushed her. She would never have argued with the decision, but... somehow, an idle possibility had come to represent the brightest future she could have and she didn't want to lose that dream. Now, she wouldn't have to.

"Aunt Amahle said that you would tutor me for the next few days?" Heila said, looking at the hovering witch. Now that she had this chance, she intended to make the most of it.

"I will, I will," Talauia said. Slowly, she drifted over to the walkway and stepped onto the well-worn wooden planks. "But first, I should take you somewhere to meet someone. Come with me," she said, her tone growing somber.

"Someone else in the Briar?" Heila asked. "I thought it was just Aunt Amahle and her coven that lived here."

"It is, it is," Talauia replied as she guided Heila into a flat-bottomed boat and began to push it through the water with slow, steady movements. "I'm going to introduce you to... to the Holly Witch," she said softly. A name almost spilled from her lips but she held it back, tucking it away in a corner of her heart where the sharp thorns wrapped around the name wouldn't hurt as much.

Talauia didn't speak as she guided their boat through channels between the massive cypress trees. Their route was marked by patches of luminescent moss that cast a sickly green glow across the murky water along with the occasional glimpse of brighter red and deep purple flowers barely visible through the thick morning fog.

At several points along the way, the Thistle Witch changed their course, pushing off the trunk of a tree here or a clump of dry ground there. Each time she did, her movements were smooth and almost absent-minded, as if she didn't even need to look at their surroundings in order to find their way.

Partway through the trip, Heila gasped as something large, barely glimpsed out of the corner of her eye moved beneath the surface, creating ripples that gently rocked their flat-bottomed boat. Unlike during their journey in, however, Talauia didn't bother to warn it away, rather, she seemed too distracted by whatever thoughts she'd been consumed by to bother with the creature of the swamp.

After several nearly silent minutes spent navigating the murky waters of the Briar, the two women arrived at a small island that radiated such a fierce sharpness that Heila wouldn't have been able to approach it without Talauia's help to shield her from the intense, needle-like energy.

In the center of the island, a single holly bush dominated most of the available land. It stood close to a dozen feet tall and was half again as wide as it was tall. Despite being months away from the time it should bear any fruit, countless crimson berries pulsed with a dull red glow, nestled among the prickly leaves of the bush.

"Sister Holly, Sister Holly," Talauia said, pulling Heila by the hand as they left the boat to set foot on the small island. "I brought a friend. A cousin," she said. "This is Heila, and... and she's about to join the coven of the Mother of Trees."

As the witch spoke, the bush seemed to tremble, its leaves shaking with a dry, almost rattle-like sound as a breeze unfelt by anything else shook the bush. The berries grew brighter and for a moment, the intense, needle sharp aura around the bush grew so intense that several drops of blood formed on the skin of both women as they were pricked by the bush.

"Don't be like that, don't be like that, Sister Holly," Talauia admonished gently. Slowly, moving with practiced motions, she stepped forward to prick the tip of her on the bush, spilling three drops of blood that were quickly absorbed by the berries.

"It's okay, Sister Holly. It's Thistle, you, you remember me," she said gently, holding her hand just inches from the bush the way a person might hold their hand out to a loyal hound to be sniffed and recognized. "Heila, come here, come here," the witch said softly, her usual enthusiasm entirely absent as she waved Heila over to join her.

"Prick yourself and drip three drops onto the berries," she said, placing an arm gently around Heila's shoulders to help steady her against the needle-sharp aura and sense of threat radiating from the holly bush. "That way, Sister Holly will know you and know that you mean no harm."

"'Sister, Sister Holly?' Heila asked, her eyes darting from the strange bush to the witch and back again. Growing up in a castle ruled by vampires, Heila was no stranger to blood magic, but something about this felt different from the casual way Lady Nyrielle or Madame Zedya used blood in their magic.

The way Talauia spoke to the bush, as if it was truly a person sent shivers down her spine. It hadn't escaped her notice that Talauia referred to herself as 'Thistle' when speaking to 'Sister Holly.' Did that mean that this was blood magic intended to commune with the dead? It wasn't something she'd ever heard of in her lessons from Zedya but that didn't make it impossible.

Taking a deep breath to steady herself, she pricked her finger and carefully counted out three drops of blood onto the nearest berry, just as she'd been instructed. Once Heila made her offering of blood, the sharp feeling of needles pressing into her skin receded. It never went completely away, but it diminished to a level that stung her skin much less than the frigid winds of the High Pass.

"In order to become a witch, Auntie Ashlynn will need to plant a seed of witchcraft in your body," Talauia explained in a quiet voice while reaching out to gently stroke the waxy leaves of the holly bush. "For me, it was a thistle seed. For Jacques, a seed from the sandbox tree."

"You'll have to nurture the seed within your body in order to grow your connection to the energy of the world," Talauia explained. "But you have to keep it under control. To be a witch means to be in control of yourself and by controlling yourself, you control the energy of the world. If you lose control of yourself and your desires," she said, her voice becoming soft.

"This is the fate that awaits you," the witch said, her wings drooping as she spoke. "Sister Holly was consumed by the seed of witchcraft that Mother planted in her. This," she said, gently stroking one of the sharp, needle points of a leaf. "This is all that's left of Sister Holly after she failed to control the power of the seed."

"For the next few days," Talauia said, turning to face Heila. "I'm going to teach you everything I can. It may not make sense, but please believe me, it's all very important. Otherwise..." she said, her voice trailing off as she glanced back at the bush.

The message couldn't be more clear. If Heila failed in this process, there wouldn't be anything left of her but a sad lonely tree, trapped forever within the Briar.