

## The Vampire 242

### Chapter 242 242: Planting the Seed

Standing before Ashlynn, Amahle swept her crimson eyes across the entire island, taking in every detail and ensuring that there was nothing present that could interrupt their ritual. Now would be the worst time for a disturbance, but when she looked, her eyes found that the Ancient Willow hadn't taken even the smallest of mice as residents of its island.

The willow stood alone, perhaps because it had been hurt so badly in the past. Even a tree as placid as the willow could grow unwelcoming if it was abused. Whatever the reason, it meant that there was nothing present that could disrupt her ritual once she began.

"Cross your hands in front of your body and touch your hips," she said. "This is the gentlest way I know to bind you for a long period of time," she explained as her spider-like limbs moved rapidly around Ashlynn securing her arms and legs in place, affixing her to the trunk of the Ancient Willow tree.

For a moment, accounts of the burning of vampires and witches flashed through Ashlynn's mind. The Church was no stranger to lashing those it deemed heretics to a post when it purified them with fire, but in every image she'd seen of those grizzly executions, the prisoner's hands had been bound above their heads in a manner that looked like their arms would be torn from their sockets if they were stretched any further.

Amahle's bindings were much gentler and Ashlynn felt more like she had been secured in place than restrained. The ritual would require her to stay in close contact with the Ancient Willow for days but as Amahle carefully checked each loop of spidersilk to ensure that it produced no discomfort, Ashlynn felt confident in following the older witch's instructions.

"This part will hurt," Amahle cautioned. She drew the polished knife and placed the tip directly above Ashlynn's breast bone, holding it in place while she looked deeply into Ashlynn's eyes. "It's okay if you

cry out. Pain is part of this process. Anything I do to dull the pain would also dull your mind and increase the risk of losing control of the energy. Please endure," she said.

Without waiting for ascent or even acknowledgement, the powerful witch made a deep cut in Ashlynn's chest, directly over the breast bone.

Of all the injuries Ashlynn had endured since suffering a brutal beating from Owain on their wedding night, this was one of the most severe, but also one of the least painful. The knife was incredibly sharp and Ashlynn only became aware that Amahle had made the cut when the tip of the knife scraped against her breast bone and a rivulet of bright red blood began to spill down her chest, staining the bodice of her dress before dripping to the ground.

Before she could comment on the lack of pain, however, two of Amahle's spider-like limbs moved with gentle precision, holding her skin in place above the cut while tugging beneath the cut like she was holding open a pocket.

Burning pain flashed through Ashlynn's mind and for a moment, she struggled against the silk threads holding her in place, but Amahle's bindings gave her no room to move or interrupt the delicate process as it unfolded.

"I am Amahle, Mother of Thorns," the witch intoned, her eyes glowing a deep crimson as she began her right. "In the name of my younger sister, Ashlynn, the Mother of Trees, I plant this seed within her so that she may grow her first seed of witchcraft." As she spoke, she held the small, fluffy willow seed up high.

The Ancient Willow, as if in response to Amahle's actions, began to radiate a pale, silvery green aura. The gentle breeze blowing through the leaves grew stronger and the leaves themselves changed in tone,

no longer rustling, they tinkled like metallic chimes in the wind, each shimmering with a silvery-green light as it danced on the breeze.

"With her body as the soil, and her blood as the water, she will nurture the Seed of the Willow Witch," Amahle intoned, her voice growing rich with power as her sharp, crimson energy began to swirl around the seed. Rather than flowing into the seed, however, the deep red glow grew thorns that caught at the silvery-green light of the Ancient Willow, tugging the energy toward the seed taken from the tree only moments ago.

"May her life shine like the sun, giving warmth and light to the seed so that it may grow," the witch continued as the seed began to glow brighter and brighter with a silvery-green glow of its own.

Ashlynn struggled to keep her eyes open, watching as Amahle slowly brought the seed down, tucking it underneath her skin before her spider-like limbs shifted, pressing the edges of the wound against each other as Amahle moved on to the next portion of the ritual.

"In the name of my sister, I beseech the Ancient Willow to lend your strength to nurture this seed and strengthen the future Willow Witch," the powerful witch said as one of her spider-limbs retrieved a sharp looking spindle of wood that curved in opposing directions like two hooked thorns joined at the center. Working quickly, she pierced one end of the wooden spindle into the soft bark of the Ancient Willow, and the other end into Ashlynn's left shoulder.

This time, while Ashlynn expected even more pain, what she felt instead was a cooling energy, flowing along the wooden spindle, easing the pain of not just the wound to her shoulder, but the one in her chest as well.

"My part in this is done," Amahle said, her crimson aura fading as she released her power. Her spider-limbs moved again, passing her the long, hooked needle Ashlynn had seen earlier. "Now that you have

been bound to the Ancient Willow, you must guide its energy toward the seed. You will feel a growing tightness in your chest as the seed gains strength," she explained, her hands moving with expert precision to stitch the wound in Ashlynn's chest closed.

"When you feel like a hand has seized upon your heart tightly enough that you can barely draw breath, it will be time to remove the seed from your chest and bestow it on little Heila," the witch said. "Because you are receiving the aid of the Ancient Willow, it may test you. Be strong, I do not believe someone who has survived all that you have would succumb easily."

"What, what kind of test?" Ashlynn said weakly. Now that Amahle was no longer tugging on the wound, the pain had faded and she could feel the strength of the Ancient Willow flowing toward the injury, helping her to heal even now, and yet, when she tried to banish the haze that filled her mind in the midst of that pain, she found that she couldn't.

"That's up to the Ancient Willow," Amahle said gently, her voice sounding distant and far away in Ashlynn's ears. "But I have faith you will pass," she said, placing a hand gently on the younger woman's cheek as she slipped from consciousness.

"This will be good for you," she added, turning away from Ashlynn to collect her tools before stepping into the boat. "One way or another, so long as you come through this, it will be a good thing. And if you don't," she said before heaving a heavy sigh.

"A True Vampire with a Mother of Trees for a Seneschal," she said, shaking her head. "I'm still not certain such a thing should be allowed to exist. If you fail here because of your bond to the Harbinger of Death, I can only see it as a judgment of the trees that they will not allow such a thing to befall their Mother of Trees."

"Either way, it isn't my place to decide," she said as she pushed the boat away from the island. "Little Ashlynn, your fate is in your own hands now."