

The Vampire 247

Chapter 247 247: A Willow's Lesson

This time, when Ashlynn's mind slipped into the darkness, she expected more familiar visions, of painful memories or dark possibilities. The Ancient Willow, however, seemed to have other things in mind for her. Once the darkness swept over her, it faded away almost immediately, leaving her standing underneath the boughs of the Ancient Willow tree, bathed in the dim silvery glow of its silver-green leaves.

There was no sign of Jacques on the island. The campfire and boat were missing as though he had never been there. Further, Ashlynn herself was no longer bound to the tree. Her body bore no wounds from the double ended thorn and she felt comfortable and free of pain.

"You should give up now," a frail, elderly woman's voice said. The voice came not from the tree itself, but an aged reptilian woman from the Ancient Clan. Her features were hidden beneath the wide brim of her conical hat, and the moss colored dress she wore was worn and faded with age.

"Y'r too young," the woman drawled, in an accent even thicker and more pronounced than Jacques. "Cher, you know too li'l to pass dis trial. Stop now, pull dat seed from y'r heart an' come back when you got some sense in y'r head, yeah."

"It doesn't matter if I'm too young or not," Ashlynn said, refusing to give up now that she'd come this far. "I came here for good reasons. I need to face this trial."

"Good reasons?" the old woman scoffed, her voice gravelly and sharp. "What good? What good reasons, I ask you? All I see from you is dat rush-rush an' dat foolish belief dat 'you gonna find a way.' You t'ink dis gonna go well jus' 'cause you want it? Mais non! Dat's pure nonsense," she finished with a derisive snort.

"Are you... are you the Ancient Willow then? Are you the spirit of the tree?" Ashlynn asked. Whoever this woman was, she clearly knew about the visions the tree had given her so far. If the tree could speak and reason, she was certain that she could find a way forward. As long as the tree had an open mind...

"Ancient Willow," the woman said with a self-deprecating laugh. "I done planted dat tree myself," she said, poking the trunk with a gnarled finger. "Name's Cecile, de previous Willow Witch, I suppose, if you manage to pass this trial, dat is."

"Next to de Mother of Trees who gave me a seed of witchcraft and marked me a witch, y'r just a wee little babe," she drawled, her voice sharp with dismissal. "I don't think you'll make it. Better to give it up now, yeah."

"Cecile," Ashlynn said, frowning at the scaled woman. Jacques might be prickly but this woman felt uncomfortably stubborn. "Are you the one testing me, or is it the Ancient Willow?"

"You can't pass dis trail as you are, girl," the woman said, standing up and brushing off her faded dress. "I'm jus' a shadow of de woman who planted dat tree, and I'm giving you a chance. Not dat I think you should take it. Dis trail, it ain't for them soft-hearted types who go putting all their trust in others to fix things. If I help you out, it'll only make de path harder, yeah."

"It doesn't matter," Ashlynn said firmly. "There are too many reasons that I need to do this now. Heila is counting on me for this. There are others who depend on me more. You might be right that I can't pass the trail as I am, but if that's the case, then tell me what I need to do to pass it. I won't just walk away to come back later."

"Fine, fine," Cecile said, grabbing Ashlynn's upper arm with a scaly hand and pulling her along. "Don't go sayin' dat I didn't warn you though. Once you start, you have to see it through, yeah?"

Before Ashlynn could respond, the world shifted around them. The Ancient Willow had vanished along with the island they stood on. Now, Ashlynn found herself in a large but simple rush hut. From the look of the furnishings scattered around, this had been a space for gatherings and meals, perhaps for a large family of more than a dozen people. At the moment, however, it was serving a far more important purpose.

Cooking implements and storage baskets had been pushed against the walls to make room for several wounded people laying on rush mats that now covered most of the packed earth floor. The ceiling was shorter than she was accustomed to but not low enough to force her to duck, though it made every injured person feel much closer to her than they actually were.

The air was thick with the scents of blood and sweat, mingling with the earthy smell of crushed herbs from quickly applied poultices. A fire pit at the center of the hut burned with a soft, crackling sound, its flickering flames casting jumping shadows across the walls and making every pained expression or bloody wound look more severe.

Those people all seemed to be members of the Ancient Clan and the closer Ashlynn looked at them, the worse their wounds appeared. In total, there were half a dozen grown men, two smaller women and a single young child. Despite the thick, scaly hide of the Ancient Clan, each of them bore deep gouges as if they had been savaged by something with large, sharp claws.

The men wore stoic faces, groaning only occasionally when the pain of their injuries became too great to bear. Neither woman made a sound, suffering in both silence and stillness, while the young child whimpered constantly, his voice high pitched and pleading for help.

"De Willow is a healer's tree, yeah?" Cecile said, pulling Ashlynn along with her before stopping at the bedside of the first man. From his strong, muscular build and the collection of scars on his body, Ashlynn assumed that he was a warrior of some kind.

Now, however, instead of standing tall and proud as a warrior should, he curled around a grievous wound on his stomach. His reptilian face contorted in pain and his hands clutched at a deep gash that threatened to spill his entrails from his body.

Moving slowly to kneel at the man's side, Cecile whispered softly into the man's ear. It took her some time to convince him, but after a few minutes of reassurances, she was able to convince the man to move his hands aside, revealing the horrifying wound. As soon as he allowed her, Cecile wasted no time in placing her hands directly on his bloody, torn flesh as she began to speak.

"Sweet willow's mercy, runnin' deep,

Take dis pain and let him sleep.

As your branches bend and sway,

Wash de wounds of flesh away.

Let healing rain, like drops from leaves,

As I will, so must it be."

Within the hut, Ashlynn felt a warm, gentle breeze, softly caressing her skin even though it never touched the fabric of her dress or the fire in the pit. When the breeze reached Cecile, it gained strength, and began to glow a soft, silvery-green.

Above the kneeling witch, the ghostly form of a willow tree took shape, its long, drooping branches hanging over the wounded man. Then, as Cecile finished her recitation, drops of shimmering light began to rain down from the leaves of the ghostly tree, splashing on the wounded man's flesh before sinking into him like water poured on dry soil.

Ashlynn's eyes opened wide in shock as a wound that should clearly be fatal began to close on its own. Flesh moved beneath Cecile's scaly hands, knitting back together and leaving behind only the blood that had already spilled from his body and soft, tender flesh where there had once been a hideous gash.

"He, he looks like he's at peace," Ashlynn said, marveling at the way the wounded man seemed to have drifted effortlessly off to sleep. The strain of resisting the pain that had contorted his face just moments ago had vanished, replaced by the calm, serene expression of peaceful sleep.

"Dat's de least of what you must do to pass de trail," Cecile said, standing up from the man's bedside. "Watch me once more and learn, de next one after, you'll take care of him, yeah?"