

The Vampire 73

Chapter 73 73: You're a Witch!?

When Ashlynn spoke, offering to pay whatever price the Ancient Oak demanded of her, the wind grew in intensity, whipping through the branches and shaking the leaves of the mighty oak. The spring chill in the air gave way to a warmer breeze that felt like it blew in from early summer, shaking the tree fiercely until a loud -CRACK- sounded, high up in the branches of the tree.

A moment later, a small branch, roughly the length of Ashlynn's arm, came tumbling down through the tree's canopy before a gust of wind brought it to land at her feet. Three leaves clung to the branch and with them, a small cluster of acorns.

"I understand," Ashlynn said, picking up the branch with a warm smile on her face. It was hard to hide the relief in her voice that the ancient tree wanted something so simple. Still, just because it seemed simple didn't mean that she would be careless about fulfilling it's request. "I'll find a good place to plant these so they can grow up as strong and mighty as you. I'll put this to good use, I promise," she said, holding the branch to her chest.

"Come on Ollie," she said, turning to walk back down the hill. "We got what we came for, we shouldn't disturb the Ancient One any longer."

"What just happened?" the former kitchen boy asked, still confused by why Ashlynn had taken him on a long hike in the forest to get to this tree. It was beautiful and impressive, but had she really come all this way for a branch?

"I'm getting ready for a trip across the mountains," Ashlynn explained, slowing down to let Ollie catch up with her. Despite his advantage in height and the length of his stride, Ashlynn's physical abilities continued to grow and if she didn't remind herself to slow down, she'd leave the young man quickly behind.

"Before I meet with the Mother of Thorns, I should carve a wand for myself," she said, holding up the branch. "Heila found a woodworker to help teach me how to carve a branch into the shape I need but when it comes to making the wand itself, I have to do it with my own hands. I can receive guidance but I have to do all the work or it will lose its connection to me."

"And the tree understood that, and it just... just gave you one of its branches to turn into a wand?" Ollie asked, scratching his head in confusion. "But I thought only evil witches used wands. Shouldn't you have a scepter or a censer like the other saints and heroes of the church?"

"Ollie," Ashlynn said, stopping to face the young man, her expression becoming complex. "It's fine if the captives think that I'm a holy woman, but you should understand the truth. I am a witch. Or at least, that's what the Church calls people like me who are born to touch the power of the earth. The Eldritch call me a 'Child of the Earth.'"

"But, you summoned a holy light!" Ollie protested. "I saw it, we all saw it. You used the power of the Holy Lord of Light to..."

"No, I used a bit of sorcery to create light. Any sorcerer could do what I did, it's a very simple trick. It's just that, the Church calls anyone outside of the church who uses sorcery a heretic," Ashlynn explained.

"I don't think that 'witches' are very different from the 'miracle workers' of the church. At least, I don't think so anymore," she continued, watching the young man's eyes tremble in confusion. "I'm sorry, I thought you'd understand," she said, her face crumpling in sadness when Ollie took a step back from her. "I, I shouldn't have said anything. I should have..."

"No, no, I'm sorry," Ollie said, rushing back forward and putting his hands on Ashlynn's upper arms. He hadn't meant to step away, but when she said she was a witch, for a moment, all of the horror stories he'd ever heard as a child had flashed through his mind and he'd taken several steps back before he could remind himself who was really in front of him.

Growing up, he'd heard of the witch who filled a forest with the severed heads of the king's family and all the soldiers of his army, displaying them like the gruesome fruit of a wicked orchard. He'd heard of a witch changing the tides, summoning giant waves to crush the ships of holy crusaders against the rocks and drowning them before they could set foot on the soil of the new world.

In the story tales his mother told him, witches were gruesome and twisted people who had traded away their humanity for power. They were corrupt and wicked beings who had sold themselves to the demons and would never be allowed to reach the heavenly shores when they died.

But now, here was Ashlynn, and she said that she was a witch. It was hard to accept, but whether she was a witch or a holy woman, she was the woman who pulled him away from the summer villa to keep him from suffering the blame for her actions. He might have helped her, but she'd protected him. If that was the case, then why should he be afraid of her?

"I'm sorry," he repeated. "It just. You just surprised me. So, um, tell me about the wand. What does it do and what do you need it for?"

"Are you sure you want to hear?" Ashlynn asked, searching the young man's eyes for any sign of falsehood. "If it bothers you, you don't have to."

"No, I, I want to," he insisted. "I'm still learning but I want to be part of this place," he said, gesturing to the misty vale with a sweeping arm. "That tree, it's magical, right? And there are more like it here. The

Eldritch people are different and they feel magical too. So, if this is going to be my new home, I should learn about it right?"

"Please," he added softly. "I don't know what I'm supposed to say or do all the time. You always seem like you have the best words already picked out. I'm just a kitchen boy. So, if I use the wrong words or do the wrong thing... just... I still want to be your friend. Holy lady, witch, whatever. I still want to be your friend."

"Oh, Ollie," Ashlynn said, wrapping one arm around him and giving him a hug from the side. "Don't ever change. Just be you, that pure, genuine you who speaks his mind even if he says the wrong thing. You have no idea how precious that is."

"All right," he said, flashing her a toothy grin. "Then, does that mean you'll tell me what the wand is for?"

"Of course," Ashlynn said, pulling him along and continuing their hike back toward the ancient castle. "But first, you have to tell me about which reward you're going to choose. You've had two days to think about it, so, what do you want?"

"Well, I think..."