

## The Vampire 207

### Chapter 207 207: The Dangers of the Briar

"You've already seen the High Fen," Nyrielle began as the carriage rolled through the night. "It's a vast plateau that's covered with crisscrossing streams and rivers flowing from the mountains to the east. Those streams will converge into the White River. We'll be roughly following the course of the river for several days to reach the Briar."

"Is the White River like the Luath that flows through Lothian City?" Ashlynn asked. "Will we be passing through several villages that are sustained by the river?"

"No, the White River is very different from the Luath," Nyrielle said with a mischievous smile. "The Luath is a gentle river that flows along the surface of the land," she said, tracing a fingertip over the gentle curve of Ashlynn's collarbone before following the lacy neckline of her lover's dress.

"The White River has cut deep canyons," the vampire teased, sliding her finger into the deep valley of Ashlynn's cleavage. "Only the daring would attempt to reach its waters or to plunge its turbulent depths," she said, leaning close enough to whisper into Ashlynn's ear.

"And have you ever been so bold?" Ashlynn asked, her face heating as she leaned into Nyrielle's touch.

"I've had no interest in the mysteries of the White River," Nyrielle said, giving Ashlynn a gentle kiss on the side of her neck before pulling back. "Once we've gone far enough south, the river pours off a cliff hundreds of feet high. The waterfall creates a cold flowing mist that's similar to the environment in the Vale of Mists."

"From the cliff top, it looks like the world below is divided in two," Nyrielle explained. "To the west, there's a large lake that glitters in the sun, giving birth to another river. It's surrounded by a lush forest and several small clans make their homes on the far shore of the lake. The western side of the falls, however, is much darker and more... twisted."

"What do you mean, twisted?" Ashlynn asked, leaning forward with an expression of intense interest on her face.

"The mists of the waterfall drift east, cloaking the area in an obscuring fog that makes it easy to lose your way once you descend from the cliffs above," Nyrielle explained. "You can still see some of the massive trees emerging from the mists from above. Almost every one of them is covered in so many thorny vines that you'd think someone tried to restrain the mighty trees with living chains."

"The Briar is a sodden, swampy place," Nyrielle explained. "The Mother of Thorns has surrounded her domain with a protective hedge filled with wicked thorns, anchored by sandbox and spiked olive trees. She nurtures the spread of thistle and sandburs, creating a labyrinthine barrier around the Briar."

"That sounds unpleasant," Ashlynn said. "But is it effective at keeping people out of the Briar? Couldn't a determined person just hack their way through it?"

"The barrier isn't for keeping people out, my darling," Nyrielle said with a light, musical laugh. "It's for keeping her pets in. Some of the most dangerous beasts on the continent have been carefully gathered and brought to the Briar. Giant Thornback Alligators, Spike Shelled Tortoises, Bone Piercing Moccasins, and more, she raises them all in the Briar."

"I've never heard of any of those," Ashlynn said, furrowing her brow as she tried to imagine the creatures Nyrielle spoke of. "Just how dangerous are they?"

"Dangerous enough that Zedya was cautious when she moved around the Briar while she visited the Mother of Thorns," Nyrielle said. "The creatures raised in the Briar aren't just dumb beasts. They've been raised for decades or longer and they have a certain rudimentary command over witchcraft."

"The Giant Thornback Alligator, for example," the Vampire continued. "It grows large enough to devour goats whole and its jaw is powerful enough to bite through the armor of one of the Lothian's fully armored knights. A strike from its tail can shatter the legs of a horse and in the water, it can move silently and almost invisibly toward its victim. It uses witchcraft to blend itself seamlessly into the environment, passing itself off as a patch of mud until its victims are too close to escape its bite."

"That, that does sound terrifying," Ashlynn said. She wasn't a stranger to tales of terrifying beasts. Sailors often brought tall tales of whales that could shatter a ship by ramming it or giant squid with tentacles large enough to wrap around a ship.

The stories were almost always told by survivors of a supposed disaster after spending several days at sea in a small boat or clinging to driftwood. It happened often enough that the tall tales never died away but hundreds of ships crossed the sea every year without ever encountering one of these monsters of the deep which made it hard to put great faith in the stories.

Hearing about these beasts from Nyrielle, however, was an entirely different thing. Survivors of shipwrecks were often half mad by the time they were rescued or washed ashore. Nyrielle, however, sounded like she'd encountered these beasts herself leaving Ashlynn no choice but to accept that such monstrous creatures roamed the earth, at least in the Briar.

"The beasts aren't the only thing you need to fear in the Briar," Nyrielle added. "While giant beasts can be terrifying, smaller insects can be even more so. Be particularly weary of the spiders that build webs in the Briar. They don't have to be large in order to have deadly venom."

"Poisonous plants are another danger in the Briar," Nyrielle continued. "Unless you've been told that it's safe, I wouldn't suggest eating anything that grows there. Some of the flowers produce scents that are dangerous to inhale, even the sap from some of the trees will cling to your skin and eat away at your flesh if it isn't removed quickly enough."

"Why?" Ashlynn asked, her mind reeling as she thought about all of the dangers that Nyrielle mentioned. Thorn-covered plants, giant beasts, venomous spiders, poisonous plants... was anything in the Briar safe or normal?

"Because she is the Mother of Thorns," Nyrielle said simply. "She embodies all of the dangers that nature produces. All of the ways that nature learns to protect itself. And because to a witch, all of the things that she's gathered are useful to her in the practice of witchcraft. The Briar isn't just her home or her garden. To her and the witches of her coven, it's no different than the armory of my castle."

"I think I understand," Ashlynn said after several minutes of consideration. "You're not just sending me to the Mother of Thorns to learn witchcraft. Everything there is vicious and deadly. If I can learn to handle the threats of the Briar, then when the time comes to collect on the debt that Owain owes me..."

"My darling, I treasure your gentle side," Nyrielle said, gently cupping Ashlynn's face with one hand. "But you still have much to learn when it comes to the use of violence. You've made a good beginning in your lessons with Thane and you did very well when the Tuscans attacked," she praised.

"But once Owain Lothian dies, you know the dangers we face will only grow," Nyrielle said softly. "I'm hoping that spending time with the Mother of Thorns will help to strengthen you in ways that I can't."

"I know," Ashlynn said, closing her eyes and resting her forehead on Nyrielle's as they held each other close. Ashlynn's stay in the Briar wouldn't be a matter of a few days but of several months. During that time, Nyrielle would continue to travel to other Eldritch Nations.

When her lover first outlined her plan for how they would spend the summer and early autumn months, it sounded to Ashlynn like simple efficiency. While Ashlynn studied, Nyrielle would meet with other Eldritch Lords to gain the support that the Vale of Mists would need in the years to come.

Now, however, Ashlynn felt like there was a second reason for Nyrielle's absence. The training she was about to receive sounded both dangerous and harsh. When Nyrielle said that she hoped the Mother of Thorns could strengthen her in ways that the vampire herself couldn't, Ashlynn felt like there was a second part of that statement.

The Mother of Thorns could strengthen her in ways that Nyrielle couldn't bear to watch.