

The Vampire 217

Chapter 217 217: Coven (Part One)

"Heila is my lady-in-waiting," Ashlynn said firmly, her emerald eyes flashing as she locked gazes with Jacques. "Where I go, she goes. Always, unless she's been sent somewhere else on my behalf."

"Cher, I don't want to make no trouble," Jacques protested, holding up his hands. "But da Briar is a place for witches. Not lords or ladies, not servants nor retainers. We tend to our own selves here," he said. "You enter da Briar as a Child of de Earth, not as a lady wit her servants in tow."

"You don't understand," Ashlynn said, refusing to back down. She was already placing tremendous trust in a powerful witch that she'd never met by staying here while Nyrielle traveled far away. She was even staying without a single member of Captain Lennart's escort force. Not even Virve would be accompanying her here. But to be completely alone among strangers... It was a step too far.

"Heila stays with me, or I can turn around and leave," Ashlynn said defiantly. It was a difficult to believe declaration but she wanted to draw a very clear line in the sand. She would give up much in order to learn from the Mother of Thorns, but she would not enter the Briar alone. "I've already made some progress in my studies. I can learn on my own if I need to."

"You don't know what you're saying, cher," Jacques said helplessly. He'd seen her progress first hand and while it was impressive for someone who was entirely self-taught, she could have come just as far in a day or two of proper instruction as she had in months of self-exploration.

"Maman makes da rules," he added, hoping she wouldn't push back anymore once he made it clear that he was powerless to change this. "I can't argue them wit her, and neither can you. You understand dat, non? Don't force dis, I can't give in to you if you do. You'll jus' have wasted your whole trip."

"People died so you could come here, ma petite," he said, not bothering to hold back now that they were at the edge of the Briar. "Don't go making dat a useless ting dey did for you."

"Jacques," Zedya interrupted sharply before Ashlynn could collect herself to respond. "That's low, even for you. Don't drag Lady Ashlynn down to your level."

"I jus speak de truth as it is, cher," Jacques protested, holding his arms out wide as though he was helpless. "Ashlynn is a Child of de Earth, she can enter. No one else can."

"I think there's been a misunderstanding," Zedya said, her amethyst eyes flashing as she stepped forward gracefully over the rocky soil. "Lady Ashlynn uses human titles. You may not understand what she did when she made little Heila her lady-in-waiting. Lady Heila isn't just another servant," the vampire said smoothly as she strode forward with Heila at her side.

"Lady Ashlynn intends for Lady Heila to be the first member of her coven," Zedya said, surprising both Ashlynn and Heila with her declaration. "As such, she'll soon be a witch herself, won't she?"

"Dis... since when was dis de way tings were going to be?" Jacques asked, looking from Zedya's gleaming amethyst eyes to Ashlynn and back again. His eyes skipped directly over Heila, at the moment, the servant didn't present any kind of threat, but seeing the way Zedya looked at him with eyes that seemed to glow in the darkness of the moonless night, he suddenly wondered if she was trying to deceive him.

Heila, on the other hand, stared at Zedya in wide-eyed amazement. Her? Become a witch? As far as she knew, it wasn't even possible. Lady Ashlynn was the one who was special, having been born with the mark of the witch. This was Ashlynn's destiny. What did powerful witchcraft have to do with someone as common and ordinary as her?

As soon as she had that thought, however, she recalled Zedya's words only a few minutes ago. That there was an opportunity for her in the Briar as long as she stayed close to Lady Ashlynn. Is this what she meant? If it was, then that meant... that meant that she could one day stand as an equal to Madame Zedya, Sir Thane, and Nyrielle's other progeny. More importantly, she could gain the power to be truly useful to the woman who had already transformed her life beyond measure.

"Everyone," Nyrielle said, her velvety voice rolling across the camp like a blanket of smooth velvet, suppressing both the growing feel of hypnotic power that gathered in Zedya's eyes and Jacques's prickly aura that grew sharper by the moment.

"This is at least partially my fault," the vampire sighed. "But Jacques, you own your share of this too. We've both held back from teaching Ashlynn about the traditions of witches until your mother could guide her, but you should have explained at least this much to her when you saw how closely Heila tends to Ashlynn."

"I know when to step back and when to step forward, ma Belle," the Sandbox witch said, struggling against the chill, oppressive aura that radiated from Nyrielle. He had no desire to fight her, but when she suppressed him, he felt like the points of his thorns had been wrapped in soft cotton. It wasn't only oppressive, it was humiliating, as if he had to be wrapped up in a blanket like a child to stop him from hurting himself.

"Maman is sure to teach Ashlynn how to form her coven," Jacques said. "She can't become de Mother of Trees wit' out one. But dis is a ting for de end of her trainin', not its beginning."

"Excuse me," Ashlynn interrupted. "Please, I feel like I'm the only one who doesn't understand," she said, her eyes flashing briefly as she glared at both Jacques and Zedya before turning her gaze to Nyrielle. "What exactly is a coven, and how could Heila become a witch? I thought a person had to be born with the mark of the witch in order to learn witchcraft."

"Just like a True Vampire is born to be a vampire, a Child of the Earth is born to be a witch," Nyrielle said, wrapping an arm protectively around Ashlynn as she explained. "And, just like a vampire is able to create progeny, a witch is able to induct others into their coven, bestowing on them a mark of the witch of their own and granting them access to a portion of the Earth Mother's domain."

"Der's more to it den dat," Jacques said somewhat reluctantly. There was something deeply offensive about having a vampire compare the way he had become a witch to the way vampires created their progeny. On the surface, they might be similar, but the rituals and processes were very different things.

"Though dat's de essence of it, I suppose," he admitted reluctantly moments before his thorny aura flared, pressing back against the chill deathly aura emanated by the two vampires.

"Mademoiselle Zedya," he said, his voice hardening. "You shouldn't be lyin' about tings like dis. It could get dis little one hurt, non?"