

The Vampire 218

Chapter 218 218: Coven (Part Two)

"You shouldn't be lyin' about tings like dis. It could get dis little one hurt, non?"

As soon as Jacques said the words, Captain Lennart and everyone under his command tensed. Heila had become something of an idol to the small troop of soldiers after stories of her jumping into the freezing lake to help rescue Lady Ashlynn spread and none of them would tolerate seeing their idol threatened so blatantly.

"I'm not lying," Zedya said, stepping forward before any of Lennart's men could take matters into their own hands. She was sure the gesture was appreciated, but with Mistress Nyrielle here, there was no reason to resort to force when words would suffice and she had long become a master in the use of words as weapons and tools.

"Lady Ashlynn cares deeply for Lady Heila," Zedya said as she drew everyone's attention to her. "She's commissioned a blade for Heila made from the horn of a Frost Walker and I've been tutoring her in sorcery ever since we left the High Pass."

"Lady Ashlynn," Zedya said, turning to face Ashlynn and dropping into a deep curtsy. "If I'm wrong in my assessment, you may punish me as you see fit. But, in my view, you have been preparing little Heila for this position for some time now. The only difference is, you didn't know that it existed to offer it to her. I also believe that you will take Ollie into your coven when you return to the Vale of Mists."

"Or, am I mistaken?" the vampire servant asked, raising an eyebrow as she stood up from her curtsy.

"I don't know anything about what it means to make someone a member of my coven," Ashlynn said, this time turning her gaze to Heila. "But if it's anything like becoming one of Mistress Nyrielle's progeny, it's a life altering decision that I can't make for someone else."

"Heila," Ashlynn said, kneeling down so she could meet the diminutive woman's gaze directly. "You don't have to do anything you don't want to. I don't understand this well enough to ask you to join my coven when I'm not sure what's involved."

"I do want you by my side," she said, her eyes growing misty at the thought of being forced to separate from both her lover and her closest friend. "But I won't force this on you when neither of us knows what's involved."

With all the attention gathered on her, the moment should have felt heavy and oppressive, but to Heila, it was anything but. Lady Nyrielle had placed her faith in her to watch over Ashlynn and care for her in Nyrielle's absence. That alone left Heila feeling light headed and giddy.

Jacques might have popped that bubble when he insisted she couldn't accompany Lady Ashlynn into the Briar, but it didn't change the fact that Lady Nyrielle had praised her, and as Ashlynn's insistence mounted with even Madame Zedya stepping in to speak in her favor... what could Heila feel at this moment other than more love and respect than she'd received from anyone other than her own parents.

"Ashlynn, no, Lady Ashlynn," Heila said formally. The moment felt too important to speak casually as a friend, even though she had been working hard to be more relaxed with Ashlynn. "I intend to serve you for the rest of my life. As your lady-in-waiting or anything else you need me to be. If you ask me to join your coven, I won't refuse."

"I refuse," Jacques said, shattering the tender moment. His action earned an immediate glare from Zedya but he pressed on nonetheless. "You cannot make dis promise, ma petite," the witch insisted as he knelt down to be closer to eye level with the horned woman. He still loomed over her even then, but the simple act of lowering himself went a long way to easing the tensions around the camp.

"It ain't a simple ting you're saying. But," he said, quickly holding up his hands. "I can see your intention clear as day. So, I know when to step back. I'll bring you into da Briar. You can speak to maman 'bout dis. If she says you can stay and learn, den you can stay and learn."

"But if maman says no," Jacques said, his thorny aura growing sharper. "Den you have to leave da Briar and wait for Ashlynn in one of de villages near da Briar. Dat's as close as you can be and you'll be all by your lonesome till Ashlynn can come fetch you back to her side. Or, you can go on wit ma Belle Nyrielle when she leaves and you won't be so lonely like you would if maman says no."

"Then I'll go with Lady Ashlynn," Heila said resolutely. "If the Mother of Thorns sends me away, I can only submit, but... I won't go away without even trying."

"So be it den," Jacques said, withdrawing his prickly aura entirely. At this point, he felt utterly helpless in front of these women.

Briefly, he glared at Zedya for her part in this. The time she'd spent among them, learning to enhance her sorcery with the power of thorns, she'd learned several other things about witches and she knew more than most outsiders did. If she hadn't suggested that Heila would join Ashlynn's coven, he could have resolved this much more simply and in a way that didn't risk provoking his mother's wrath.

Now that even Lady Nyrielle had aligned herself against him, there was nothing else he could do. The instant she brought her power to bear to suppress him, he lost his ability to insist that Ashlynn came

alone. All he could do was try to find a middle ground and warn them that just because everyone here thought things should work a certain way didn't mean that the Mother of Thorns would agree.

"It would be good if maman said yes," Jacques said after a long pause. His lips pulled back and he flashed a wide, toothy grin at the horned woman that he hoped felt more welcoming than threatening. He didn't oppose her because he wanted to or because he resented her being close to Ashlynn, he opposed her because those were maman's rules and he was bound to follow them. And if Heila entered the Briar, she would be bound to follow them too.

"But you have to convince her of dat yourself," he said, washing his hands of responsibility for what happened next and leaving it to Ashlynn and Heila to convince the Mother of Thorns that Heila should be allowed to stay and learn alongside Ashlynn. Whether she would agree or not, even he didn't know.