

The Vampire 220

Chapter 220 220: The Thistle Witch

After an hour of navigating the treacherous footing and narrow paths through the fog and prickly vegetation, Ashlynn's shoulders burned and her feet felt like they'd been cramping constantly from the tension of maintaining her footing.

Heila had fared even worse and Ashlynn didn't hesitate to relieve her lady-in-waiting of the heavy rucksack she carried, shouldering both of her packs herself instead. While Ashlynn benefited from the vampire-like strength and endurance conferred by her bond with Nyrielle, Heila had no such power to rely on. It was already impressive that she'd managed the hike down from the top of the cliff with so little complaint.

Jacques seemed to move effortlessly through the Briar, his prickly aura blending in naturally with the plentiful sandbox trees that served as his namesake. Seeing them up close, Ashlynn finally understood why she felt such sturdiness from him underlying the prickly exterior. The thorns, some as large as her thumb, looked terrifyingly large up close but seen against the giant of the tree trunk itself, they seemed almost undersized.

"Dey's poisonous too," Jacques warned when Ashlynn paused to take a look at the prickly spikes covering the thick bark of a tree. "As much as you're carrying, you shouldn't get so close you could tip over and hurt yourself, non?"

"You could help," Ashlynn said, gesturing to the second rucksack on her back.

"Nah, cher, you wanted to bring ma petite into da Briar as part of your coven," he said, shaking his head. "Don't go thinking dat's an easy ting."

Behind Ashlynn, Heila looked down in embarrassment. In the mountains of the High Pass, her cloven feet had moved swiftly and surely over the rough, rocky terrain. Now, however, mud sucked at her feet and she had to work twice as hard to pick her way carefully from one exposed root to the next if she didn't want to risk becoming mired in the soft soil.

Ashlynn never once chastised her though, she just silently took up Heila's burdens and helped her along when she needed an extra hand. Finally, at a point when Ashlynn was beginning to worry about her diminutive friend and if she should call for a rest, things changed.

Up ahead, the fog began to clear, revealing the warm glow of a lantern hanging from a pole at one end of a wide, flat-bottomed boat. Sitting within the boat, Ashlynn got her first look at one of the other witches of the Briar, a woman with skin almost as fair as Nyrielle's and features so delicate they seemed almost fragile.

Long, pointed ears swept back from her face, framing pale green hair that shimmered like long grass covered in dew. Her eyes seemed large for her face and her purple irises appeared multifaceted, catching the lantern light like polished jewels.

When she smiled, her teeth were as sharp as Jacques' but far more delicate, like she could strip the flesh from the bones of anything she devoured rather than crunching through bone the way they'd seen Jacques consume his meals during the journey.

"Welcome home, little brother," the woman said in a voice that was bright and musical as she hopped smoothly from the boat to the sodden soil. Her dark green petal dress fluttered with her movement, revealing legs as slender as a dancer's.

Behind her, two pairs of iridescent wings caught the lantern light, their iridescent surfaces webbed with delicate veins that shimmered under the soft lantern light. As she hovered, the wings moved so quickly they became nearly invisible, leaving only a soft humming sound and ripples in the mist around her.

Like Jacques, she wore a wide-brimmed conical hat, though in her case, the hat band seemed to have sprouted a collection of brilliant pink and pale lavender thistle blossoms. When she moved, her head would tilt at sharp, precise angles, tracking every movement with a predatory awareness of her surroundings.

"It's good to be back, sista Tala," Jacques said, reaching out with his scaly hands to capture the slender woman and lift her high in the air, spinning around once before returning her to the ground. "Let me make da introductions," he said with a large, toothy grin.

"Dis is my older sister, Talauia, called the Thistle Witch," he said proudly. "She's the oldest member of maman's coven. And dis," he said, turning in the direction of Ashlynn and Heila.

"So this her, this is the next mother of trees," the Thistle Witch said, fluttering ahead to land in front of Heila. "You've struggled to get here but it's okay now," she said with a wide smile that revealed teeth every bit as pointed as Jacques. "This big sister will take care of you from here, so you can send your vampire servant home now."

"Um..." Heila said, not certain how to respond to the mistake.

"Sista Tala," Jacques said, looking embarrassed. "Dat's Heila, she's Ashlynn's 'patient lady,'" he explained. "De one wit the rucksacks is Ashlynn, de future Mother of Trees."

"Eh? How is that, how is that?" Talauia said, fluttering back on her gossamer wings and looking flustered. "Isn't that aura of death on her a little too strong? How can she be a witch? And why is she carrying everything if she's the one coming to see Mother? Little brother, are you being mean to her?" she asked, her tone rising in pitch and growing sharper.

"Please, it's fine," Ashlynn said, setting down the rucksacks and offering a slight curtsy to the witch who hovered a foot above the ground. "I'm a child of the earth, but I also have a blood pact with Lady Nyrielle as her Seneschal. That may be what you're noticing from me."

"Then who is this, who is this?" Talauia said, fluttering back over to Heila. "What's a 'patient lady' and why is she here struggling so hard? Little brother, did you take a fancy to her? But this isn't how you treat a lady you took a liking to."

"I'm here to learn," Heila said, forcing herself to stand up as straight as she could in the face of the winged witch. "If the Mother of Thorns will accept me, I'm going to join Lady Ashlynn's coven."

"Oh! So that's how it is, that's how it is," Talauia said excitedly. "Little brother, you didn't send word that she was coming," she scolded, rounding on the powerful reptilian witch. "I didn't even make a place for her to stay, it's embarrassing and it's your fault."

"But sista," Jacques said, looking puzzled. "Maman said only Ashlynn was to come, dat she can't bring none of her friends or servants from da Vale of de Mists. Dis little one is her lady servant, so..."

"But she's going to join Ashlynn's coven," Talauia interrupted. "This is good, this is good. This is not a bad thing. Look at them, looking so nervous. What did you tell them that you shouldn't? This won't do, it won't do at all. Help them with their things, let your older sister make it all right now."

"Don't you mind him, now," the flighty witch said, turning back to a stunned-looking Ashlynn and Heila. The entire trip, they'd seen Jacques as something of a prickly boulder, stubborn and difficult to budge, but as soon as this 'older sister' of his showed up, he became as meek as a kitten.

"I think there has been plenty of room for misunderstandings all around," Ashlynn said, extending a hand to Talauia. "I'm glad to meet you, and so is Heila."

"So, it really won't be a problem for me to be here?" Heila asked as they moved to enter the flat-bottomed boat.

"Problem? Not a problem, not a problem at all," Talauia said with a wide smile. "This way, Ashlynn can awaken as the Mother of Trees even sooner. It's the opposite of a problem. Mother will be very excited to meet you both. And little brother," she said, rounding on the witch who had just finished loading the boat. "I'm sure he'll find a way to make it up to you if he was mean on the way."

"Sista," Jacques said helplessly, his shoulders slumping when his actions drew light laughter from all three women. Outside, he was the powerful and fearsome Sandbox Witch. Now that he was home again, it seemed like everyone would be stepping on his tail again.

"It'll be fine, it'll be fine," Talauia promised, passing the pole to guide the boat over to the browbeaten-looking Jacques. "You brought them both here, all safe and sound. Mother will be very happy. She's been waiting for this one for a very long time," she said, flashing Ashlynn a smile that was so eager it bordered on... hungry.