

The Vampire 225

Chapter 225 225: Family Dinner

Eventually, Ashlynn and Heila had settled in for much needed rest before freshening up and joining Amahle and her coven for dinner.

"Dis is ma specialty," Jacques said proudly when Ashlynn and Heila entered. "Catfish courtbouillon over white rice. She is simple, rich, and done ready to melt on your tongue," he said as he brought a large iron pan from the hearth over to the table and began to serve the delicate, flaky fish in a deep, rich red sauce.

"Try this, try this," Talauia added eagerly, dishing up portions of a bright green salad filled with wild lettuces, crisp, fresh cucumbers, finely diced peppers, and an odd creamy white dressing. "It's a soursop salad, sweet, sour, and a little spicy too."

"You'll have to wait for mine till the end," Amahle said, taking her place at the table with a warm smile. "The first blackberries have just come in and I couldn't resist a cobbler."

"Everyone cooks?" Ashlynn asked, mildly surprised as she looked around the table. The portions everyone dished up were generous and Talauia seemed exceptionally excited about Jacques's catfish dish, taking an extra fillet for herself before she'd even begun to eat.

"Dat's de way of it at home, cher," Jacques said with a wide, toothy smile. "Don't worry none, dis nephew can teach you a few tings right quick. Have you cooking up a storm in no time."

"Hehe," Heila giggled while sorting through her salad, piling up the spicy peppers on one side of her plate. "My lady is a very good cook," she said proudly. "She used her blossoming period to train her senses in Georg's kitchens. She even pretended to be a kitchen girl just to spy on the Lothian's summer villa."

"Mercy me," Amahle beamed. "You do have a number of surprises about you, don't you, darlin'?"

"Maybe a few," Ashlynn said, her face red with embarrassment. "Jacques, did you pick this dish because you heard I miss fish from the sea?"

"Pure coincidence, cher," he said, acting like he was surprised by the news. "Dis truly is my best dish. I thought it would be best to welcome you home. And to make amends," he added, turning to face Heila. "I didn't mean to make tings so hard on you, ma petite."

"It's fine," Heila said after taking a large gulp of chilled, sweet tea. She'd removed the peppers from the salad but she hadn't realized how spicy Jacques's red sauce would be. She thought it would be mild, maybe even herby like the red sauces she'd seen from Georg's cooking, but this was something with a peppery kick that snuck up on her after the third bite. Was he trying to apologize or trying to set her tongue on fire!

"We just have different ways of doing things," Heila said, trying to be magnanimous about it all. Now that the Mother of Thorns had accepted her presence here, there was much less to be anxious about and she wasn't inclined to hold a grudge against Jacques when she had so many other worries looming on the horizon.

Dinner that evening was boisterous, with eagerly shared food, cool drinks that helped to hold off the late evening heat, and pleasant conversations about things that didn't matter much.

Heila told stories about her siblings and Ashlynn answered a number of questions about her gardens in Blackwell County, Talauia produced one embarrassing anecdote after another about the fearsome Sandbox Witch who could only threaten to withhold additional portions of fish if she kept teasing him.

And over all of it, Amahle smiled, nudging the conversation in one direction or another, like a puppeteer tugging on strings to ensure that the mood remained light. When Ashlynn and Heila arrived, they were both travel-worn and guarded. Both clung to familiar formalities, whether it was Heila's manners as a servant or Ashlynn's courtly etiquette, as shields to conceal or at least blunt how much of their genuine emotion they revealed.

To Amahle, such surface-level subterfuge was pointless. No detail was too small for her crimson eyes with their rows of pupils to track and detect. Her coven had long since given up any attempts to hide what they felt, though in Jacques's case, he didn't express it very well either.

Now, with food before them and comfortable conversations, the Mother of Thorns used every moment of their shared meal to build comfort. Thorns were for keeping outsiders away and to give a safe space for all of the people and creatures that hid behind the thorns. People like Talauia who had nowhere else to go after running across half the continent to escape the people who felt she'd wronged them.

When Amahle looked at Ashlynn, she saw some of the same ghosts in her eyes that she saw in Talauia's all those years ago. She knew, because Nyrielle had hidden nothing in her letters, that Ashlynn's awakening of power had been anything but gentle and that a thirst for vengeance simmered beneath the surface of her polite laughs and gentle manners.

More than that, deep losses haunted her like gaping wounds that were still far too fresh. Every time the conversation turned to family, there would be a slight catch in Ashlynn's voice when she mentioned her parents or her sister. It was clear that she had been torn away from them and the closeness of Amahle's family couldn't help but remind her of the birth family she was separated from.

"All right, I see that hungry look in little Heila's eyes," the powerful witch said, using her spider-like legs to gracefully lift herself up to her feet before she strode across the room to fetch a hot bubbling blackberry cobbler from the hearth.

The aroma of sweet, fresh-picked berries and buttery pastry filled the air as Amahle carried the cast iron dish to the table. Dark purple juice bubbled up through cracks in the rustic golden-brown crust, along with hints of warm spices grown in the witch's personal garden.

"Poor thing," Amahle said as she dished out the sweet and tart dessert. "I'll make the main dish tomorrow. Something that's not so spicy. No one goes to bed hungry, you hear?"

"It's all right," Heila said, fidgeting with her hands under the table. In her mind, she kept overlapping the Mother of Thorns with Lady Nyrielle, but when she tried to imagine Lady Nyrielle baking a cobbler and personally serving her an extra large portion or promising to cook something more suited to her tastes for dinner tomorrow.... It was just too difficult to reconcile with what she knew of the powerful witch's status.

"I'm small so I don't need much," Heila said, even as her mouth watered at the tantalizing scent of the piping hot dessert. "But why is it only me that can't eat spicy things? Lady Ashlynn, did you eat spicy food in Blackwell County?"

"No, not at all," Ashlynn said. "At least, I didn't before Owain. He used to challenge the knights who traveled with him to see who could eat the spiciest dish or the most peppers or... whatever. It was stupid, men thumping each other on the back and shouting like eating a bigger pepper proved which one would be braver in battle."

"I've seen the type," Amahle laughed. "But how did a delicate rose like you wind up embroiled in such foolhardiness?"

"The second time that Owain visited Blackwell County while he was courting me, I wanted to know what it was all about," Ashlynn said, shaking her head at her own foolishness. "He laughed, but he gave me a tiny pepper that I thought wouldn't be very bad... I only learned afterward that it was one of the hottest ones the traders brought to port!"

"So, I promised myself I wouldn't be humiliated like that again," Ashlynn said. "I asked Jacey to talk to the wayfinders and the carters to get me as many different kinds of hot pepper as they had. I didn't realize there were so many different kinds and colors, but I spent months trying them all, and bit by bit, I got used to it. It was silly, but the next time it was my turn to visit Lothian March and I brought a whole bushel of different kinds of peppers with me as a gift for Owain's cook."

"What happened, what happened?" Talauia asked excitedly, her wings quivering behind her.

"It was horrible," Ashlynn said, shaking her head. "After I ate a half dish filled with roasted peppers, Owain gave me this look," she said, lowering her brows in mock concern as she imitated his reprimanding tone. "You know, these things are best used to put hair on a man's chest, and I adore yours too much to see it spoiled. You shouldn't eat these things," she quoted.

"Dat beast! He says dis in public? Wit his knights and other folk present?" Jacques said, looking both aghast and like he wanted to find Owain to have a few impolite words with. Perhaps words that would be punctuated by a scaly fist.

"He did," Ashlynn said. "I... I should have realized the kind of man he was long ago. It was just..."

"Darlin', you've got no need to justify what happened with him, then or any other time," Amahle said, placing a protective hand on her 'little sister's' shoulder. "Some people will only respect power, and before you accepted using yours, you didn't have the power to stand up for yourself the way you could now, much less the way you'll be able to in the future."

"Before you leave, no man will push you around the way that Owain did," the powerful witch said firmly. "You have my promise on that, darlin'. Tonight, you just get some good rest. Tomorrow, we'll get to work so no one, not ex-husband, human lord, holy priest, or possessive vampire, can tell you what to do."