

## The Vampire 246

### Chapter 246 246: Feeding the Soul

"No! Nyrielle!" Ashlynn screamed, her eyes finally opening as she tore her way free of the darkness of the vision. In her mind's eye, however, she was watching Nyrielle turn her back on her, flying away into battle and leaving her to die on the wall. In the vision, Nyrielle's face had once again become an impassive mask and though she called Ashlynn her darling, there was no warmth in her voice when she did.

Ashlynn's scream echoed across the small island, startling a flock of birds from their roosts in the Ancient Willow's branches. Her emerald eyes flew open but it took several moments before she could focus on the world around her. Her mind was caught somewhere between the cold stone battlements of her vision and the humid reality of the Briar, and for a few terrifying moments, she wasn't sure which was reality and which was a dream.

"Easy, cher," Jacques' deep, rumbling voice said, pulling her more firmly into the present where she started to notice the world around her. "Breathe deep, dere's nottin' here to harm you now."

Jacques' calm collected voice helped her to calm her racing heart while the visions faded from her minds like dreams in the early hours after dawn. She didn't know how long she had been trapped in the visions, but it had at least been long enough for the early morning sunlight to be replaced with a foggy evening gloom. Crickets chirped in the distance, and a crackling campfire cast a soft, golden glow over the small island.

It wasn't until Jacques spoke that Ashlynn realized she'd been struggling against the spider-silk restraints that held her lashed to the tree. The double ended thorn in her shoulder, while it didn't hurt, had moved enough with her struggles to reopen the wound and spill fresh blood down her back.

"Here," Jacques said, standing up from the campfire and closing the distance between them to hold up a water flask. "It's sweet tea, not water," he said, giving her a warning and waiting for a nod from Ashlynn before placing the spout of the waterskin in her mouth and giving it a gentle squeeze.

The tea was cool but not cold, but even then it felt heavenly as the smooth liquid poured down Ashlynn's parched throat like honey, soothing an ache she didn't realize she had. She originally intended to stop at a few sips but she quickly found herself taking gulp after gulp of the sweet tea until she'd drained nearly a quarter of the waterskin.

"Thank you," she said in a voice that had regained a bit of its usual strength. "I needed that."

"Ain't notin' to pay any mind to," Jacques said, turning away from her and returning to the campfire. "Maman, she said dat de Ancient Willow will sustain you, but dat you might still want a meal. Do you?"

"If you have a bit of bread, or sausage or something I can eat easily," Ashlynn said, gesturing helplessly with her bound hands. "I can't manage much."

"No, dat won't do," Jacques said. Rooting around in his large leather pack, he first placed a giant looking pot on the campfire before scooping a thick, white paste out of a large jar and emptying it into the pot.

"You just rest a spell, cher" the reptilian witch said lightly. "I'll make up someting' special for you."

From her position tied to the Ancient Willow, it was hard to see everything Jacques was doing, though she heard him splash into the water more than once, along with the sound of a knife biting deeply into a wooden chopping board. Just how many cooking tools had the Sandbox Witch brought with him to this island?

"You don't have to talk none if you'd rather be silent, cher," Jacques said as he rummaged through his pack for a few small wooden bowls and ingredients to fill them with. He'd left the eggs in the boat, too afraid they'd be crushed in his pack to risk them, but everything else seemed to have made the short trip to this island in the Briar just fine.

"When Maman gave me my seed, taken from de Bloody Sandbox Tree, de one we saw on de way in," he continued. "De visions were sometin' cruel and fierce. Dis Willow, she look sweet and gentle, but de tings you seein', dey can't be easy. So, if it helps, Jacques here has an ear for you."

"You saw visions too?" Ashlynn said, blinking at the reptilian witch in surprise. "What, what was it like for you? I, I want to understand what it will be like for Heila when it's her turn."

"You don't have to act brave for me, cher," Jacques said as he worked in his makeshift camp kitchen. The lard in the pot had melted and was giving off a rich savory aroma that said it was ready to use just about the time he'd finished the rest of his preparations.

"You behave now," he commanded the pot before dropping in several morsels of carefully prepared food. "I won't have no brush fires tonight," he told the pot before turning his attention back to Ashlynn.

"De visions, dey reminded me of my worst days and my weakest moments," he said, listening to the sound of crackling and popping from the pot. "I had to face dem over and over again. De day my village burned. De time I ran in fear and left my sista behind... dey reminded me of everyting' I wanted to forget."

"Amahle said the Ancient Willow would test me," Ashlynn said. "How do I pass this kind of test?"

"I don't know," Jacques said. Carefully, he reached into the pot of splattering lard, retrieving the hot, crisp morsels with his bare hands and sharp claws, as though he wasn't bothered by the boiling hot oil at all. Perhaps, with his thick, scaly skin, he wasn't.

"Dese tests, dey come straight from de heart. De Earth, she shares her power wit' us, but she judges us extra harsh when a new witch is born," he said, dropping the hot, steaming food into a bowl and walking over to Ashlynn.

"What is that?" Ashlynn asked, looking at the misshapen golden-brown lumps in the bowl. They smelled heavenly and her mouth watered with eagerness but she struggled to place the aroma beyond the lard that had been used to cook it.

"Little Heila, she said dat you missed de sea and all de fish in it," Jacques said, holding up one of the deep fried morsels to cool in the night air before offering it to Ashlynn to take a bite. "Dis is food to comfort de soul," he said.

"It's no ocean fish but it's delicate and flakey. A fish stew is too hard to eat when you're all tied up like dat, so I thought, cher might like a bit of fried fish. Crispy outside, flaky inside, and maybe jus' de flavor you've been missing all de way out here, so far from de sea."

"Jacques..." Ashlynn said, suddenly at a loss for words.

"I can't help you wit' de visions," Jacques said, shrugging his shoulders helplessly. "But I can keep you company when you come up for a bit of a breather. And maybe, jus' dis will help give you a bit of strength for de fight."

"Thank you," Ashlynn said, leaning forward to take a bite of the fried fish. When she did, she found it exactly as he'd described. Hot and crispy on the outside with a breading that had a firm texture like rustic bread before it melted away to reveal the tender, juicy white fish within.

Juices dribbled down her chin as she ate, but at the moment, Ashlynn didn't care. Each bite was a little treasure. It might not have been as artfully prepared or presented as any of Georg's refined dishes, but as she ate one piece after another, directly out of Jacque's outstretched hands, she felt every bit as much care and affection in the dish as anything the bearish chef in the Vale of Mists had ever given her.

"You look tired, cher," Jacques said, noticing Ashlynn's head hanging low and her eyes beginning to droop after she finished the last of her meal. "De visions, dey sure to come back. You go on and face dem now," he said. "When you need me, I be right here waitin' so don't worry none and focus on doin' what you need to do. For Heila."

"Mmm," Ashlynn said, as she felt the Ancient Willow pulling her back into the inky darkness. "For Heila," she repeated. Heila was counting on her to do this right. Now that she understood at least a little better what the test would be like, she was ready to face whatever the tree had in store for her.