

## The Vampire 187

### Chapter 187 187: A Thorny Protector

Following the toast, High Lady Erna led the small group of people away, much to the disappointment of those who were eager to strike up a conversation with Lady Nyrielle's Seneschal.

Beside the dancefloor, the woman who had thought to pull Ashlynn into her private group of wealthy spouses could only sigh at the misstep. Wearing masks could lower barriers and allow those of lower stations to build friendships with people they normally couldn't access. The key to climbing, however, was to realize when you were the one who was lower and make appropriate moves. In that regard, she'd failed miserably.

"You have created quite the stir with your arrival, Jacques," Erna said once they entered a smaller room outside of the main hall. Luxurious sofas offered plentiful seating and the table at the center of the room held several decanters of wine, water, and chilled fruit juice for people who would be talking long into the night.

"Don be putin' all the blame on me, cher," the Sandbox Witch said, taking an entire sofa to himself and sprawling in it. "I jus' came to dance a bit. Das hardly worth makin' such a fuss, non?"

"I don't believe that for a second, Jacques," Zedya said, her amethyst eyes flashing as she stood protectively behind the sofa that Ashlynn and Nyrielle occupied. Having spent time studying with the Mother of Thorns, she and Jacques could be considered old friends and she didn't approve of his demeanor this evening.

"If you just wanted to dance, you'd have reigned in your aura much more than you did tonight," the amethyst-eyed vampire pointed out. "You're doing it now, you could have done it then. You chose to isolate Lady Ashlynn when you approached her and you clearly didn't intend to dance with anyone else."

"Ah, ma belle cannot be deceived," Jacques said helplessly as he poured himself a large goblet of red wine with a heady fragrance. "Is true, I came for a reason after all. From now till we reach de Briar, I'm to be her protector. Maman's instructions ain't something for me to find trouble with."

"You think my Mistress isn't capable of protecting her Seneschal during the journey?" Zedya said, frowning deeply at the witch.

"Don't make me say the quiet part out loud, cher," Jacques said pointedly. "At the very least, I'm useful during the day, no? Jus think of me as something extra in the luggage, don't bother none 'bout this little ting."

"I'll have you say it," Nyrielle said, leaning forward to give the witch a pointed look. "Did the Mother of Thorns send you to protect my darling Ashlynn from me?"

Ashlynn turned to look at Nyrielle in surprise before returning her gaze to the reptilian man. No one had said much to her about the Mother of Thorns other than that she was the best person to teach Ashlynn how to use her powers and that explanations should be made by the woman herself rather than giving Ashlynn second-hand information.

Now it was the first time that anyone had suggested that the powerful witch would attempt to drive a wedge between her and Nyrielle. To say that he was protecting her from the woman to whom she had bound her life, who had rescued her from the brink of death more than once, it wasn't the sort of thing that could be tolerated by Ashlynn or any of her companions.

"Ah, if you know then you know. Maman is looking out for a sister," Jacques said simply. "Der's no denying da power of a witch's blood. I might be nottin' much to you, ma belle, and maman trusts Mademoiselle Zedya not to put her fangs where she shouldn't, but Ashlynn here, dat's somtin' different."

"As arrogant as they say," Nyrielle said with a shake of her head. "My darling has nothing to fear from me, and even if she did, someone like you could never defeat me." Perhaps Jacques could overpower Zedya, after all, the amethyst-eyed vampire's gifts weren't suited to direct confrontation.

In a stand-up fight, either Thane or Marcell would be the limit of the Sandbox Witch's strength. Against Nyrielle herself, he had no chance of victory and unless he was a fool, she was certain he recognized that.

"Ah, don' be so fierce," Jacques said, his tail shaking as though to brush aside the idea. "Der's victory to be had outside of overcoming you, non? Victory in spilling enough blood or stalling for a bit of time. I can't defeat you, ma belle, but does that mean I can't protect Ashlynn from you?"

"Enough," Erna said, raising a hand to stop the witch from saying more. "If you want to argue, do it when you've left High Fen City, or if you must, then settle things on the sands of the arena," she said, giving a warm smile to Nyrielle. "My arena is yours, just say the words any time you need to teach someone the limits of their arrogance."

"I'll take you up on that if I ever need to," Nyrielle said, giving her former pupil a grateful smile. The title of 'Mother of Thorns' wasn't an empty one and none of the witches in her coven were easy to deal with. As much as she wanted to put Jacques in his place, doing so before Ashlynn had a chance to learn from his mother would only make things more difficult for Ashlynn in the long run.

"I won't say anything else about the matter of you protecting my darling from me," Nyrielle said, retreating slightly in order to advance elsewhere. "But, from what you've said, it's a certain thing? My love bears the mark of the Mother of Trees?"

Ever since she encountered Ashlynn on that dark and rainy night, she'd believed this to be the case. The mark was too distinctive to be anything else, and yet, the possibility was always there that someone else in Ashlynn's life was the Mother of Trees and that Ashlynn had been marked as a member of that witch's coven at a very young age.

Until she had confirmation, she refused to speak too much to Ashlynn about what her mark truly represented. Besides, these few months of waiting until they could hear directly from the Mother of Thorns or her coven allowed Ashlynn to focus on mastering the powers she gained from Nyrielle. Anything more than Nyrielle had already shared with her about witchcraft would only have been a distraction.

"It is as you believed," Jacques said simply. "If the mark on her hip is as you've painted, den she's de next one to become de Mother of Trees."

"I'm not going to show you my mark," Ashlynn said sharply. "Things didn't end well for the last man who asked to see it. You strike me as much more of a gentleman than he did so..."

"Peace, cher," Jacques said, holding up his hands as if to protect himself. "Maman will look herself. I ain't here to run my tongue or put ma hands where they ain't welcome. I'm not even free to give you lessons on the road. Dis is why I jus' wanna dance a bit wit you," he said with a toothy grin. "We can just be friends, non? Ain't no need for trouble beyond dat till we get to de Briar."

"You mentioned the Briar before," Ashlynn said. "Just what kind of place is it?"

"It's the place where you and I will have to part ways, my love," Nyrielle said sadly, pulling Ashlynn closer to her. "An impassable swamp protected by a labyrinth of trees, vines, weeds and all manner of plants bearing the sharpest, most poisonous thorns in the world."

"Without a guide like Jacques," Zedya added. "Anyone who wanders into the Briar will die within a day. The labyrinth shifts and changes on its own. Even armed with a map it's impossible to reach the center of it if the Mother of Thorns doesn't want to allow you in."

"Impossible for most," Nyrielle said, giving Ashlynn a reassuring squeeze. "If you are ever in danger, nothing can stop me from coming to you."

On the opposite sofa, Jacques frowned at the True Vampire's words. She wasn't wrong, at least, not technically. She and others like her posed a greater threat to witches like the Mother of Thorns than any other member of the Eldritch people.

If Nyrielle was truly determined to make trouble for the Mother of Thorns, no one weaker than the witch herself could pose a threat to the vampire. If Nyrielle had only taken Ashlynn in as a powerful tool or a political token, breaking the bond between them might have been possible and many tragedies could be prevented.

But now, as Jacques gazed upon the apparent affection flowing between the two women, he realized that separating them would be all but impossible. In which case, everything that happened next would need to be handled very, very carefully.