

The Vampire 219

Chapter 219 219: Descent Into Darkness

In the morning, a few hours after Nyrielle and everyone accompanying her had departed, Ashlynn sat with Heila and Jacques as they waited for the sun to break above the eastern mountains. A soft, rosy glow lit the sky, and the sounds of bright morning birdsong filled the air.

At this point, Ashlynn had long grown accustomed to being awake to watch the sun rise. Sometimes, Nyrielle would linger with her as the sky grew brighter, but she always vanished by the time the first sliver of golden light appeared above the horizon. This time, however, the vampire had warned her that it would be dangerous for her or Zedya to linger near this waterfall at dawn, particularly on the longest day of the year.

Already, the air felt charged with an even greater energy than Ashlynn had felt the night before. The world seemed to hold its breath, waiting for the sun to make its appearance. Finally, after sitting quietly facing the waterfall for close to half an hour, the first sliver of the sun's rays fell on the waterfall.

Instantly, the waterfall seemed to transform before their eyes. No longer were they watching thousands of gallons of water pouring over the towering cliff every second, instead, the White River had turned into a flowing river of liquid gold that spilled into the dark and foggy abyss below.

A moment later, a wave of energy rippled outward from the river of light. It felt warm, pure, like the sun had descended upon them to wrap them gently in a blanket of warmth that drove away the chill of the spray from the powerful waterfall.

"He shall touch all the lands with his Light," Ashlynn whispered. "Driving away the darkness, bearing warmth, comfort, and joy to all who bask in his glory."

"What was dat, cher?" Jacques asked. The more time he spent with Ashlynn, the more her command of the Eldritch language had improved. The instances where she said things in the human tongue and he needed to wait for Heila to translate had been decreasing by the day. This time, however, the way she spoke felt almost... reverent, which took him by surprise.

"It's nothing," Ashlynn said, collecting her rucksack and standing to leave. "I just said that the waterfall is beautiful.

Beside her, Heila gave her lady a concerned look. Faith wasn't something they spoke of often, but she knew that Ashlynn had been struggling ever since coming to the Vale of Mists. Her own faith declared her a heretic that must be killed but despite that, a lifetime of belief wasn't something that could be snuffed out like a candle.

When Ashlynn looked at the brilliant golden waterfall and felt the wave of energy it released, her first thought was that this was the most holy and wondrous light she'd ever encountered. For a moment, she wished she could bring other humans here, to see this place and understand that the things that felt sacred to them also felt sacred to the Eldritch. If they could understand, if they could share a place that felt so holy, wouldn't that be a foundation for changing the way humans and the Eldritch interacted?

The thought that followed made it hard to appreciate the beauty before her. As wondrous as the splendor of the glowing waterfall was, if she brought the Church here, they would immediately bring armies to keep the Eldritch away from the place. They would likely attempt to exterminate every Eldritch village within a hundred leagues of this place.

In the end, bringing humans to a place that nature had made so beautiful would drench it in so much blood that the waterfalls would flow red for generations. Everything beautiful and sacred about the place would be destroyed, leaving something behind that was zealously guarded by the very people who spoiled it.

It was a bitter thought to start the day with.

"We should go," Ashlynn said, turning away from the light that shined too bright in her eyes. "You said it's a long hike, didn't you Jacques?"

"Dis way, cher," he said, sensing the somber mood that had fallen over her and leading her toward the edge of the cliff.

There, leading down from the edge of the cliff, a narrow trail had been cut into the face of the cliff by generations of Eldritch people. Some were travelers looking for the most direct way down, but most were people who felt some mystical connection to the waters above, even if they lived in the communities below.

Stone posts lined the narrow trail with thick ropes running between them to provide hikers with a bit of additional security against the combination of wet, slick ground and frequent gusts that buffeted them as they made their descent.

The further down they went, and the more often the ancient, well-worn trail doubled back on itself in a seemingly endless series of switchbacks, the darker and colder the air became. The sound of rushing water tumbling over the edge of the cliff was replaced by a growing thunder of all of that water crashing down onto the large lake below.

As they walked, Ashlynn found herself grateful that she and Heila had abandoned their normal dresses for serviceable breeches with functional boots and heavy, long-sleeved tunics that helped keep the chill of the spray from the waterfall from soaking them to the skin. Descending from the top of the falls to the bottom took hours and by the time they arrived at the bottom, the roar of the water was so loud that they couldn't hear each other speak without shouting.

"Dis way," Jacques shouted, pointing at the fork in the trail that lead around behind the massive waterfall, taking them on a meandering course to the eastern side of the lake where a combination of thick fog and shadows cast by the cliffs cloaked the area in a perpetual twilight.

"Follow close now," Jacques said once they were far enough away from the roar of water to speak normally again. "Step where I step and don't wander away cher, no matter how much you feel a pull from the place."

The lake didn't have a true eastern 'shore.' Rather, it turned into a marshy area with standing water that could be anything from shallow enough to barely cover a person's boot tops to deep enough to swallow a man on horseback, with nothing visible on the surface to tell the difference. A small patch of higher 'dry' ground stretched away from the trail they'd been following, vanishing into the fog ahead.

"I understand," Ashlynn said, drawing a deep breath of warm, humid air before reaching out to take Heila's hand in hers. Up ahead, she got her first look at the Briar, and 'uninviting' could only be called an understatement.

Massive bald cypress trees loomed overhead, their branches draped with thick curtains of a dull gray, stringing moss that seemed to drink in what little light filtered through the canopy. Their twisted roots erupted from the sodden earth like gnarled fingers, creating natural platforms that rose above the murky water.

Between these ancient trunks, sandbox trees stretched their spike-covered trunks toward the hidden sky as though they intended to lay claim to what little available dry land could be found in the swampy Briar. Their bark bristled with conical thorns as long as a man's finger, while thick vines covered with inch-long hooked thorns wound between them like the strands of a child's game of cat's cradle.

Even the ground itself seemed hostile. Dotted all across the sodden earth, Ashlynn saw countless soft lavender thistle flowers perched above leaves edged with needle-sharp spines. Even the pale purple blossoms that formed into clusters on the hooked vines seemed to serve only to trap the unwary into snagging themselves on thin stems that were covered by tiny barbs the size of a single hair.

"The Mother of Thorns truly lives up to her name," Ashlynn said, looking from one deadly plant to the next.

"It's jus' like dis on de outside," Jacques said, leading them further into the Briar. Their footfalls had become completely silent on the soft earth and their voices were muffled by the thick fog and dense, jungle-like canopy above.

"Once we get a bit deeper," the witch said. "Den you'll see what da Briar is truly like."