

The Vampire 221

Chapter 221 221: Meeting the Mother of Thorns

The Briar changed around them as the boat took them deeper and deeper into its shadowed interior.

At some point, the clumps of dull, lifeless moss hanging from trees began to emit a pale, almost sickly green light. Likewise, the petals of flowers turned luminescent, appearing in the fog as clusters of pale pink, lavender, and red light that Jacques assiduously avoided.

The further they went, the darker the water beneath their flat-bottomed seemed to grow, changing from murky brown to an almost inky black that drank in the light from the glowing plants above and sound alike, turning even the sound of their passage into little more than a quiet ripple.

Now and then, something large would move beneath the surface, creating ripples that spread out until they vanished into the fog. Once, Ashlynn caught a glimpse of pale, scaled flesh and what might have been an eye larger than her fist watching them from the depths.

Each time such a creature approached, Jacques tapped his pole on the surface of the water, sending out a ripple of his thorny aura that drove the unseen beasts away. Even Talauia's excited chatter would pause briefly when these encounters occurred, her wings humming at a higher pitch and her eyes radiating a predatory menace until whatever beast approached them thought wiser of offering itself up as a meal and retreated.

"You should know, you should know," Talauia said as Ashlynn leaned out from the boat to catch a better look at the glowing flowers as they floated by. "The brighter the glow, the more concentrated the essence of the plant is. See over there, over there," she said, pointing at a towering sandbox tree that seemed to pulse with a bloody light between its prickly spines.

"That one's been feeding for years," the enthusiastic witch said. "Another decade or two and it will be ready for harvest."

"Feeding?" Heila asked, shivering as she looked at the tree. The bloody aura seeping from the strange tree reminded her of Sir Thane and Nyrielle's other progeny on the rare occasions they'd gone too long without feeding only this tree felt more... malevolent than any of Nyrielle's progeny ever had in her presence. "Trees don't 'feed' do they?"

"Maman," Jacques said as he pushed them along. "She knows the ways of things. To wake dem to deir true nature so dey can achieve deir true potential."

For a moment, Talauia almost scolded Jacques again. These weren't outsiders, there was no need to be so cryptic and mysterious around them. But they would arrive soon enough and Mother would explain the things they needed to know. Since that was the case, she held herself back to pointing out the things that were actively dangerous as opposed to simply interesting.

With a combination of Jacques and Talauia onboard, most creatures lurking beneath the cloudy surface of the water avoided them, instinctively moving out of their way as the pair of sharp and prickly auras approached. Only a rare few who were too large or too stupid to take the passive hint from the witches seriously needed specific targeting to discourage their presence.

To Heila, it was an almost unbearably uncomfortable ride. It took Ashlynn placing herself between Heila and the witches for her to feel like she could breathe normally without risking pricking herself on something unseen every time she moved.

"Almost there, almost there," Talauia soothed when she realized how uncomfortable Heila looked.

Even Ashlynn found herself needing to rely on the durability she'd gained from training with Thane to resist the aura of the Thistle Witch. Unlike Jacques's thorny aura that yielded and wrapped around her in a comforting way, every bit of energy flowing from Talauia was sharp, pointy, like countless needles facing outwards, leaving Ashlynn wondering how such a bright and bubbly personality managed to coexist with her own energy.

Finally, after a boat ride that seemed to stretch for hours even though it had been less than twenty minutes, the fog began to recede, revealing a village of wooden huts with thatched roofs built on stilt-like pillars that sank deep into the water below. Elevated walkways wound their way between the huts, none of them coming within one or two feet of the surface of the water.

"I'll take them to see Mother," Talauia said eagerly, her wings fluttering as she drifted onto one of the walkways before Jacques could even finish trying the boat in place next to the wooden ladder that extended down into the murky water.

"Little brother, little brother, you should take their things to Ashlynn's hut, next to mine," she added, pointing at a small, comfortable-looking hut. "Little Heila, I didn't prepare a place for you, but Little Brother will get one ready double quick, won't you little brother?"

"Sista, we should wait for maman to say dis little one can stay, no?" Jacques asked, clinging to the last of his pride over the issue of Heila's presence. If he'd known that Tala would instantly accept the diminutive horned woman, he wouldn't have put up so much of a fuss with Lady Nyrielle and Zedya. Now, she could at least leave him some face by asking for permission before sending him to prepare a hut, couldn't she?

"Oh, fine," Talauia huffed. "But at least carry their bags to Ashlynn's hut," she insisted once Ashlynn and Heila had arrived on the walkway. "Come with me, come with me," she said eagerly, beckoning for the two newcomers to join her as she fluttered next to the walkway.

The hut she led them to was far larger and grander than any of the others. It had been built under the boughs of an ancient cypress tree and seemed large enough to accommodate family gatherings of dozens of people. Other than the size, however, there was nothing 'luxurious' about the home of one of the most powerful witches on the continent.

Rather, the room that Ashlynn was led into was large and open with bundles of herbs, flowers, and an assortment of other things hanging from the ceiling. Whether that was so they were easily accessible or because they were still drying, Ashlynn didn't know, but the humble abode felt warm and comforting with only the faintest hint of sharpness in the air.

On one side of the room, a small brick hearth held a fire crackling under a stout iron cauldron, releasing an aroma that was rich, meaty and contained more individual scents mingling than Ashlynn could possibly identify. Elsewhere in the wide open area, several grass matts had been set into a comfortable arrangement around a low, wooden table set with a pitcher and several wooden cups.

It was the woman sitting at the table, however, that claimed most of Ashlynn's attention. She hadn't quite known what to expect when she came here. People alternately referred to the Mother of Thorns as wise, powerful, deadly... the words had combined to give her an impression of an older woman, perhaps white haired and matronly with a fierce look.

What greeted her instead was an enchanting beauty of a woman with long, silky black hair under her wide-brimmed hat. Her eyes were a touch large for her face, with deep red irises and what appeared to be two rows of four small pupils in each eye rather than a single larger pupil.

Her face was mature, but still smooth and free of wrinkles, and her movements as she poured beverages for her guests were precise and meticulous.

The dark, wide brimmed hat on her head matched with a figure hugging silk dress that stopped half way down her smooth, creamy thighs, and within the comfort of her own home, she seemed content to remain barefoot.

The most striking thing of all, however, were the four additional spider-like appendages that protruded from the back of her dress, resting lightly on the ground on sharp pointed tips. The shiny black carapace, to Ashlynn's eyes, resembled perfectly articulated armor, giving each of the slender limbs a sense of deadly weight and purpose.

"Welcome to the Briar and my humble abode, Miss Ashlynn," the dark-haired woman said, speaking in a tone that was rich with a welcoming, honeyed warmth. "Do come and set a spell with me, darlin', and your companion as well. Y'all must be positively exhausted after comin' so far, and we have ever so much to discuss," she said with a sweet, inviting smile.