

The Vampire 222

Chapter 222 222: A Warm Welcome

"I do hope you don't mind somethin' simple to drink, darlin'," the Mother of Thorns said, gesturing for Ashlynn and Heila to join her. "We don't keep much wine here in the Briar, though if you're ever in need, there are far more interestin' ways to cloud your mind, if that's what you're after, and I always have a few such things on hand. I had Tala fix up some fresh lemonade, but if you'd prefer, there's sweet tea chillin' as well."

For a moment, the relaxed, casual greeting from such a powerful host completely froze Ashlynn in her tracks. What was the etiquette for this? Bow? Introductions? Should she take her boots off like the woman before her? She didn't know. Her etiquette lessons at home covered meeting powerful figures in the Church but she didn't think that they applied to witches.

"We'll be happy with anything you offer," Ashlynn said, giving a slight bow and taking a seat across the table from the woman in black. A moment later, Heila joined her though they were both puzzled by the pale yellow beverage in the cups before them.

After spending time among the Frost Walkers and the multitude of clans in High Fen City, Ashlynn had adjusted her expectations about what sorts of things might be included as 'food' but she couldn't for the life of her think of anything that was so... yellow.

The aroma, however, was crisp and refreshing and when she finally took a sip she found it to be a surprisingly pleasant combination of sweet and tart that both satisfied her thirst and cooled her body.

"Thank you," she said, only realizing when she spoke that she'd consumed almost everything in her cup.

"Y'all just relax a bit, you must be hungry too after all that walkin'. Tala, sugar, be a doll and fetch us a few bowls of gumbo from the pot. I started it at dawn, it should be plenty well done by now."

"Yes, Mother," Talauia said, bounding to a nearby cupboard to retrieve several bowls and utensils. "I'll get it, I'll get it, and do you want some too?"

"Serve enough for everyone, sugar," the Mother of Thorns said sweetly. "Your little brother should be joining us soon too, so don't leave him out. Now, Miss Ashlynn, who is this enchanting belle with you? I seem to recall telling your Lady Nyrielle that you were the only one permitted to enter this time, even Miss Zedya was to be excluded."

"This is my lady-in-waiting, Heila," Ashlynn said. "If you'll permit it, I intend to take her into my coven and would like her to learn alongside me. Jacques warned us that you may not agree and I'll admit that I know nothing about what it means to take her into my coven. I hope you'll forgive the impertinence of bringing her in anyway," she said, bowing from her seat.

"I know I'm unworthy," Heila said, darting to her feet in order to give a proper bow. "My Lady has been very kind to me, giving me many opportunities..."

"And you've proven yourself, several times over," Ashlynn interrupted. "Not many people would jump in a freezing lake to save someone who wasn't their family or lover, yet you didn't hesitate to come to my rescue. I thought we were done with you saying that you were unworthy," she added, raising an eyebrow at her blushing friend.

"Now, now, Miss Ashlynn, Miss Heila, let's not stand so much on ceremony," the older woman said, one of her black spider legs tapping on the wooden floor in gentle reproach. "Why, it may be true you didn't know better about bringing her here, but that don't make it wrong to bring her here to find out. It

would've been a far greater tragedy to leave the poor thing behind. Then poor Jacques would have been forced to hike all the way back to her, just to fetch her back here."

"Maman," Jacques protested from the doorway. "I gone through all dat effort to explain your rules to dem, and now it don't matter none?"

"The rules still matter, mind you," she said, pouring another round of drinks for her parched guests. "But mercy, I never dreamed she'd have chosen someone for her coven when she only just embraced her destiny these few months past. She's movin' faster than anyone expected, so my instructions weren't quite what they should've been. Don't you go blamin' yourself for that, sugar," she said, tapping the grass mat next to her on the floor and gesturing for him to take a seat.

"Now, I trust y'all won't hold Jacques' behavior against him," the woman added. "He can be mighty direct at times, but I do say, if you're looking to keep someone safe, there ain't nobody better."

"If Mother wanted someone dead, she'd have sent me," Talauia said, setting several bowls of a hearty stew on the table before taking a seat herself on the other side of the Mother of Thorns.

"No boasting," the older woman admonished, lifting one of her spider-like legs to tap the Thistle Witch admonishingly on the head. "Don't be shy now, dig in. There's a bit of everything in the gumbo, boar sausage, catfish, kingsnake, carrots, onions, okra and the like. Just what the body needs after all that trudging to get here."

"Hehe," Ashlynn laughed, hiding a smile behind her hand as she watched the witch gather her 'children.' "I'm sorry. I think I finally understand," she said, her shoulders finally losing their tension. "This whole time, when I heard people use the title 'Mother' for you, I've treated it the same way the human Church uses certain titles," she explained.

"In the Church, a Mother Superior would be a noblewoman who gave up her worldly station in order to take over a convent, a place of worship for women," Ashlynn explained. "There are also priests who are addressed as 'Father' because they represent the Holy Lord of Light, the Father of All Families. I've thought that it was a term of high status and deep respect."

"I didn't realize," she said with a smile. "That it can be all of those things, and still be a term of endearment for a group of people that act like a family with each other."

"A coven is family, Miss Ashlynn," the dark-haired woman said warmly. "It's the kind of family you get to build for yourself. Well," she added after a moment, "you don't get to choose everyone in your family."

"You, precious, weren't family I chose, but just like birth sisters, you were born to be my baby sister. So, seein' as we're family, if it's agreeable to you, I'll just call you Ashlynn, and you can call me Amahle. Or Big Sister Amahle if you prefer, since you're bein' ever so proper," she said with a pleasant and disarming smile.

"I'd like that," Ashlynn said with a smile of her own. "I'd like that a lot."

"Well now, that's all settled," Amahle said, taking a delicate sip of her lemonade and looking at Heila. "Auntie is just fine from you, you hear?"

"A-auntie?" Heila said, struggling with the almost instant offer of such a casual form of address. It had been hard enough to address Lady Ashlynn by title and she would never in her wildest dreams imagine leaving a title off Lady Nyrielle's name, but this powerful witch wanted to be called 'auntie'?

"Can I, can I call you Aunt Amahle instead?" Heila asked with a tremble in her voice. It was still very familial but at least it felt like it had an appropriate level of familial respect for someone of Amahle's status.

"Aunt Amahle if you must," the witch said with a sigh. "But I would really prefer 'auntie.' Out there in the world, everybody's fussin' and feudin' for power. They're all caught up in their orders and hierarchies, killin' each other to be king of some pile of dirt built on a mountain of bones."

"But in here," the witch said, giving Ashlynn a pointed look, "we remember what's truly important. People come and go. Don't matter one bit who lives on what mound of earth or how they stack their stones to make their homes. They only matter to us when they get too big for their britches and need remindin' that we all have the same Mother and she sleeps beneath our feet."

"I've heard a little bit of that from Mistress Nyrielle," Ashlynn said hesitantly. Nyrielle had warned her that witches had their own view of things but this much should be reasonable to share, right? "She said that Vampires exist to serve life by spreading death, but that witches exist to serve nature."

"Now look at that," Amahle said with a shake of her head. "There they go, tryin' to put in some kind of hierarchy where there ain't need for one. As if 'life' is some kind of master you can bow down to, shake hands with, and collect your wages from. It's no such thing. And nature sure ain't some master to crack a whip over your head or scold you when you've gone astray."

"Don't worry none darlin', it ain't your fault that you don't know better," she said gently, reaching across the table to set a hand gently on Ashlynn's. "But seein' as you don't know, why don't I start from the very beginnin' and we can make sure we start on the right foot together. We don't have but a few months to help you along, and my stars, you've got ever so much to learn."