

## The Vampire 224

### Chapter 224 224: A Simple Life

Once they left Amahle's home, Ashlynn got a better look at what she had originally taken to be a village. Now that she looked around more, however, perhaps it would be better to call it an estate?

Tala led her and Heila to a simple, small hut with a thatched roof. The entire estate was arranged in a rough circle that linked several of the taller trees to free-standing supports, keeping everything two to four feet above the water's surface.

Nearby, there were a few areas of dry land where Ashlynn spotted meticulously tended gardens, some with fruit and vegetables, others that grew stranger plants and flowers that she'd never seen before.

"I'm here, I'm here, right next door to you," Talauia said brightly, pointing at the hut a few feet away from Ashlynn's. "Jacques is on the far side of the ring," she said, pointing across the way. "The two to the left of mine belong to Saini the Rose Witch and Mamao the Blackberry Witch, but both of them are away at the moment."

"Heila, we still have a few others that are available to long-term guests, we'll have everything cleaned up for you by tomorrow, I promise," she said.

"It's fine," Heila said quickly. "I can stay with Ashlynn, you don't need to make anything special for me. Just a place to rest my head at night is good enough."

"No, no, that won't do, won't do," the Thistle Witch insisted. "You two both need to study and practice. Why do you think we all have our own space that's at least a little bit apart from each other?" Talauia asked, pointing to the gap between the small huts.

"It's too easy to disturb someone else when you're practicing and I just know that Heila is going to be an amazing witch," she said, her wings humming in excitement as she fluttered over to the horned woman. "You looked so brave when you stood up in there, I just know you'll make it through, no worries, no worries at all."

"Is the ritual to join a coven really that dangerous?" Ashlynn asked. Nyrielle had told her that it wasn't a simple thing for a vampire to turn someone into one of their progeny. It required draining a person nearly to death before they were given a bit of blood from the vampire who made them. It was possible that a person could fail to hang on through the process and they would die in the attempt.

"Um, a little bit, just a little bit," the witch said, unconsciously placing a hand on her chest. "But you won't fail, I know you won't. Here, come inside, let me show you your new home," she said, taking both Ashlynn and Heila's hands and pulling them forward before they could ask any more about the ritual to join a coven. Mother would tell them what they needed to know and she knew it wasn't her place to intrude.

The hut itself was simple and divided by walls into three sections. First and largest was a sleeping area that also held a small hearth, several lanterns, and surprisingly, a large, wide hammock that stretched in front of a long window covered by a finely woven mesh net.

"You can pull the curtains closed if you ever feel shy," Talauia said, though her tone seemed to imply that she didn't understand why anyone would ever need to. "As long as one of us is home, the mosquitos and gnats will leave you alone, but if we're away, the mesh should keep them out."

Through another doorway, a screened balcony extended out over the murky water, offering an unobstructed view of the Briar. As threatening as the Briar had looked from the outside when they were making their way to Amahle's estate, now that they were here, Ashlynn had to admit that there was a quiet beauty to the stately trees stretching their boughs through the fog, reaching toward the witch's home and swaying in the gentle breeze as if waving hello.

A smaller hammock had been strung up in one corner of the balcony, creating what looked like a perfect nook for reading or quiet contemplation. Looking out in the direction the hammock faced, the newcomers found that it overlooked one of the many small gardens planted around the estate, this one filled with flowers that glowed a faint lavender and pink in the thinning midday fog.

"The view is beautiful," Heila said softly, her eyes drawn to the smaller hammock. "My Lady, if you'd prefer me to stay close, that little hammock would be more than sufficient for me. I wouldn't take up much space at all."

"Absolutely not, absolutely not," Talauia interrupted before Ashlynn could respond. Her wings hummed with agitation as she fluttered between them. "No, no, this is Ashlynn's space for when she needs to be alone with her thoughts or practicing her craft. Everyone needs that, especially when learning witchcraft. You'll have your own place to think and grow too, I promise."

"You can stay here with me tonight while they prepare your space," Ashlynn said, reaching out to ruffle Heila's soft, curly hair. "It'll be good to have you close while we're settling in, but Talauia's right. You're going to be a witch soon," she said as she knelt down next to Heila.

"I know," Heila said, shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot. "But, I've never been alone like this. At home, no one has a room to themselves, we all have too many siblings for that. And in the castle, I slept with the other servants. Lately, I sleep near your chambers so I'm always there if you need me. This," she said, tugging at the small hammock. "It's beautiful, but if I have to move into one of my own, it feels too lonely."

"Oh, Heila," Ashlynn said, wrapping her arms around her diminutive friend and pulling her close. "I won't be far, I promise. And if you ever want to, you can come join me for a night. That shouldn't be a problem, should it?" she asked, turning to look at Talauia.

"It's not a problem, not a problem," the witch said quickly. "But it won't be long until you'll likely want a bit of space from each other. It's summer now so it will keep getting hotter during the day. Too many bodies, too close together won't feel so nice. Was it hot where you grew up?"

"Even when summer was at its hottest," Ashlynn laughed. "We always had a cold breeze off the sea. I've heard that there are places where summer becomes as blistering as an oven and people are baked to brick if they stay outside too long. Is it like that here?"

"Not quite, not quite," the witch said. "More like being inside of the stew pot. Everything is damp and hot. In a few days, I'll take you to one of the villages nearby so you can buy clothes that won't drive you mad. In those boots, your feet can't breathe and the wool is too heavy too."

"I'm sorry, my Lady," Heila said, looking embarrassed. "If I'd spoken to Jacques before we left, I could have packed more appropriately."

"Not your fault," Ashlynn reprimanded her lightly, setting her rucksack down next to a chest in the room. "The way he dresses, I don't think he even notices the heat here."

"It's not fair, not fair at all," Talauia huffed in agreement. "Oh, come here, over here," she said, fluttering through one of the room's two doorways. "This is your space to work. I set it up myself!"

Inside, Ashlynn felt like she'd walked into a version of her greenhouse back in Blackwell County. There were over a dozen clay pots sitting next to a large wooden bucket of soil. Rows of neatly labeled seeds had been set out, waiting for someone to decide which things needed to be planted.

Along the window, several long planter boxes had been mounted, each one filled with young herbs, giving the entire room a fresh scent that mixed rosemary, thyme, lemongrass and countless other scents.

Along with the pots and gardening implements, an array of other tools had been carefully laid out on a workbench. Mortar and pestle, scales with precise weights for measuring, knives and chisels suitable for carving and sheers for pruning. Most importantly, however, she found a small collection of heavy, leather-bound books that looked freshly made.

"Are these," Ashlynn asked, her fingers trembling as she reached out to touch the books.

"I did it, I did it," the Thistle Witch said proudly. "I started copying them out for you when we received Lady Nyrielle's letter. Mother has a much larger collection, but these are the essentials she wanted to be prepared for you. You can take them with you when you go."

"This is a bit too much," Ashlynn said, looking from the books to the bright-eyed witch. "All this, just because I'm a child of the earth?"

"Nope, nope, that's not it," Talauia said as she hovered over to Ashlynn, wrapping her arms around her and flashing a grin full of needle-sharp teeth. "All this, because you're going to be part of our family."

"Mother will tell you, she'll tell you, but I'll say it now," the witch said, her tone becoming serious. "This is a home for you. It will always be a home for you. You can always come home here and we will always welcome you. The Briar is away from outsiders. If you need to run, if you need to hide, if you just need peace, if..." her voice trailed off and her eyes grew misty as ghosts and memories danced through her multifaceted eyes.

"If one day, the whole world hates you... If you're ever being hunted or you feel like there's no place in the world for you... then you can always come here, and here will always be home for you."