

THE VAMPIRE & HER WITCH

Chapter 10 10: Nyrielle's Story

"Have you studied history?" Nyrielle asked, leaning back in her high backed chair and swirling a goblet of dark red wine in one hand.

"I have," Ashlynn said hesitantly. She'd spent much of her life in her family's libraries and she'd been taught by her tutors that a ruler must know the history of their people if she was to guide them to a better future.

At the time, she'd believed that learning history would help her to rule alongside her future husband, but reality disabused her of that notion. Owain had no interest in her help to rule, he preferred that she dedicated her time to raising children instead.

"But I think much of what I've been taught may be wrong, or at least incomplete," she said. "Your people are nothing like what's written in the history books."

"Tell me what you know of the early days of your homeland, when humans had just arrived here," Nyrielle prompted, ringing a bell and signaling to the servants that they could bring the next course. She'd eaten very little of her own meal but for her, the only purpose to eating was to enjoy the flavors and the ritual of sharing a meal with company.

Ashlynn collected her thoughts while the diminutive horned staff took away what little remained of her first course and replaced it with delicately arranged slices of tender venison covered by a rich and peppery sauce.

"The Kingdom of Gaal was founded almost two hundred and fifty years ago," she began after the servants withdrew, answering in the same tone as she would have used to answer a question posed by her tutors at home.

"But humans arrived nearly fifty years before that. They came from many different countries in the old world and when they arrived, they fought each other as much as they fought the, um, local clans," stumbling slightly as she worked to remove the word 'demon' from her vocabulary.

"It wasn't until King Baoithin the First received a holy mandate from the Church of the Holy Lord of Light that humans united together against the local clans," Ashlynn said. "The Church teaches that mankind must follow the path of the sun, beginning in the east and conquering to the western shores until all lands are ruled by the chosen people of the Holy Lord of Light."

"And do your history books tell you what happened to the humans who didn't want to be ruled by your king and the Church?" Nyrielle asked between bites of succulent meat. "Did they tell you what happened to the people who fought back against unification or the ones who refused to wage war on the local clans?"

"The history books mention a few examples," Ashlynn said. "They mention a witch who joined with the local clans, betraying her humanity to slaughter the king's armies. There are other tales of humans betraying their humanity, usurping the power of the Holy Lord of Light to bewitch their own kin."

"I imagine your history books tell you that those heretics were all defeated, captured and burned at the stake for their sins, don't they?"

"They do," Ashlynn acknowledged, a suspicion growing in her mind. "They didn't all die though, did they? Is that where you came from? Were you one of the humans that joined with the local clans?"

"Me? No," Nyrielle said, putting down her utensils and looking off into the distant past. "I was never human to begin with. My parents were. They fled from the Church and their 'holy flames' until they reached the Vale of Mists and found shelter here with my grandsire."

For a moment, she paused, her delicate fingers idly tracing the rim of her wine goblet. Her lips parted but no words came before she closed them again, sifting through memories of her earliest years before sipping her wine to chase away the bitter taste that accompanied the events of those years.

"My grandsire, Torbin, was the Eldritch Lord of the Vale of Mists at the time," she continued, returning to her meal and speaking between bites. "For all that he was a brute, he believed that humans would come here eventually to conquer his nation."

"He took my parents in and made them his progeny so that he could learn the ways of humanity from them and to prepare for the war to come. I was born not long after that."

"But war didn't come for a hundred years," Ashlynn said, caught up in the other woman's story. "Caun Lothian, the first Marquis of Lothian fought against the clans near the Vale of Mists. He died without breaching its defenses but his eldest son, Cellach, continued the war and established the March of Lothian's current borders."

When her father arranged her marriage to Owain Lothian, she'd read every available record and history book that covered the rise of the House of

Lothian. Their victories, their defeats, the knights who earned glory and titles in their fight against the local clans, she'd studied every bit of it in preparation for her marriage to the heir apparent.

"Caun Lothian died for his hubris, crushed by my grandsire's claws," Nyrielle said. "But Cellach learned from his father's mistakes. He promised to build the grandest temple to the Holy Lord of Light in all the frontier and to give the High Priest of the temple the same powers as a viscount within the March of Lothian if the Church would send him enough priests to defeat my grandsire."

"I married Owain in that temple," Ashlynn said softly. Half of the venison lay untouched on her plate as she became completely absorbed in Nyrielle's tale. The entire dining room felt distant as she imagined what things had been like so long ago and how different they were from what she'd been taught.

"It really is the grandest temple in the frontier," Ashlynn said. "It's even grander than the greatest temple in Blackwell County where I grew up. The spires are topped with gold and the stained glass windows are more than fifty feet tall. I didn't know it was built to garner support from the Church."

"I'm sure that Cellach is recorded in your history books as an extremely pious man," Nyrielle said. "His priests killed Torbin and Cellach himself captured my parents while they bought me the time to escape. He burned them at the

stake in front of his army, calling them heretics and traitors to the human race."

The words Nyrielle said were simple, but when Ashlynn looked at her she saw a heart wrenching anguish behind the other woman's eyes.

Ashlynn had just been torn away from her family and the hurt that came with that loss was greater than anything she'd ever felt, even knowing that they were still alive. But she was only twenty one years old. What must it have been like, she thought, for Nyrielle to lose the parents that she'd loved for more than a hundred years?

"The history books say that Cellach was murdered in his bed by the Eldritch Lady of the Vale," Ashlynn said softly. "They say that his chest was torn open, his heart crushed, and the whole of his body dismembered. It was your revenge against him for your parents, wasn't it?"

"It was," Nyrielle said, gazing into her empty goblet before refilling it from the crystal decanter on the table and taking a deep drink of the rich wine.

"But revenge is a never ending thing," she added, turning her midnight blue gaze on Ashlynn. "It isn't the Eldritch way to slaughter the innocent. Cellach's

sons were in their tender years, less than a decade old. I killed Cellach for my parents and I slaughtered his priests for my grandsire but I left the rest alive."

"I'm sure you know the rest of the story from there. Every decade or two, the current Marquis of Lothian raises an army to expand his lands and exterminate any of the Eldritch people his army can reach."

"Hundreds die on both sides before he retreats in glory with whatever victories he can claim," Nyrielle said. "Titles and lands are bestowed on new heroes to take the place of the nobles who die in his crusade and the cycle repeats itself a decade or two later."

"You asked what I get out of taking you in and making you my Seneschal," Nyrielle said, returning to the original topic.

"Your revenge on Owain is an opportunity for me. My grandsire took in my parents to better know his enemies before they arrived. That knowledge allowed him to defeat Caun Lothian in an overwhelming fashion."

"Now, however, my nation has been locked in a stalemate with the March of Lothian for generations of human rulers. The continual wars don't achieve real victories but they constantly bleed my people, preventing us from returning to the heights we reached in my grandsire's days."

"You, my darling," Nyrielle said, reaching out to rest a hand on Ashlynn's cheek. "Are the advantage I need to break the stalemate. Not only do you have tremendous potential as a Child of Earth, you've studied the March of Lothian better than most humans who live there."

"Do you understand now just one of the reasons why I would go so far to possess you?"