

THE VAMPIRE & HER WITCH

Chapter 11 11: Delicate Relationship

"Don't touch me," Ashlynn snapped, drawing back from the enchanting vampire's hand and staring at her in horror.

"Is that really what I am to you? An advantage in your war with the Lothian family?" Ashlynn said, her vision growing hazy as her eyes brimmed with tears. "It's fine if you want me to help you hurt them."

"I don't mind that you hate them as much as I do. It's better that way," Ashlynn continued, standing from her seat and dropping her napkin on the table so she could back away from Nyrielle.

"But don't touch me like you feel something for me if you don't. You don't have to lie to me to gain my help, you don't have to act like you cherish me or anything else," she cried, her voice becoming hoarse and strained the more she spoke.

Worse, the more distressed she was, the less emotion she could see on Nyrielle's face. The vampire's placid expression was no different than a mask, her midnight eyes staring at Ashlynn the way a bird watched people bustling below. The bird couldn't understand the people or why they went to and fro and in Nyrielle's eyes she saw no understanding of her own distress.

The romantic dinner and gentle words during the first course had lulled her into a pleasant dream of living the rest of her life with someone who cared for her, maybe more than Owain ever could. Now, however, the mask had slipped, revealing a cold, inhuman vampire beneath it. One who would use her as a tool to fight her enemies and then... then what?

If somehow they managed to defeat the Lothians, what use would Nyrielle have for her after that?

"I will serve you," Ashlynn said, turning away and walking toward the door. "I will do as you say and we will take our revenge together. Just don't act like I'm anything more than a tool to you when...."

Her voice broke off when a pair of arms wrapped around her from behind, pulling her back into a soft embrace before she could reach the door.

"Ashlynn," Nyrielle whispered in her ear. "Please don't misunderstand. I told you the truth you asked for but it isn't a complete truth. Come back, stay with me until dinner is finished, and let me tell you the rest."

"There's more?" Ashlynn said, not entirely sure she wanted to hear more. Nyrielle's lavender fragrance filled her nose and her embrace was soft and comforting even if she felt a little cold.

Part of her wanted to trust, to hear what else Nyrielle had to say but she was afraid the vampire would only make things worse.

"I won't compel you," Nyrielle said, relaxing her hold until it was so light that Ashlynn could easily slip away. "But I would like it if you would listen."

"I don't think I can eat any more of the venison," Ashlynn said, feeling almost petulant when she said it. It wasn't her dinner's fault but returning to it now felt like returning to the moment Nyrielle explained how useful she would be in fighting the Lothians.

"You don't have to," Nyrielle said softly, pulling on Ashlynn's hand and guiding her back to her seat before ringing a bell to summon a servant.

"Tell Georg that his venison was delightful and that I spoiled Ashlynn's portion with hurtful words," she told the diminutive horned man. "And ask him if he can send something sweet and comforting to help me apologize to Ashlynn."

"When you meet him, don't let Georg's fierce appearance fool you," Nyriall said as she helped Ashlynn back into her seat. "He's very anxious about disappointing me, especially when I have guests. I don't want him to think he failed you when I'm the one who ruined dinner."

"You care that much for the person who cooks for you?" Ashlynn said, surprised at how genuine the vampire sounded when she spoke. That she knew his name already said a great deal about her to Ashlynn.

She didn't think Owain or even her younger sister knew the staff of their manors well enough to name the person who cooked for them. Ashlynn herself only knew because she spent so much of her life caring for herself that she'd become acquainted with most of the household staff at home.

"I've known Georg since he was a cub the size of a house cat," Nyrielle said, pouring a fresh goblet of wine for Ashlynn before returning to her seat. "I knew his father just as long, and his father before him. Georg's family has served in our kitchens for five generations."

"You've met Heila. Her family is the same. She's one of six daughters and she has four brothers. The Horned Clan tend to have very large families but I know them all."

"How many people are here?" Ashlynn asked, still uncertain about how large the ancient castle was. The walk she'd taken from her bed chambers to this dining room hadn't been long but she'd passed several other large rooms on her way.

"Five hundred or so in the castle," Nyrielle explained. "More than twenty thousand in the nation, though I don't know all of my people by sight. I visit all of the villages in the vale at least once a year, but some people grow up so quickly that they've changed entirely in what feels like a blink."

Ashlynn tried to imagine what it would be like to rule over so many subjects and to come to know them all. Not just their names and faces, but to know their families like she knew Heila's or Georg's.

She wasn't just talking about twenty thousand people but several generations of twenty thousand. The more she thought about it, the more overwhelming it felt, to the point that she could barely believe it.

"So, am I like Georg to you? Or like Thane? How do I fit into your world?"

"You aren't like either of them," Nyrielle said, reaching out to take Ashlynn's hands in her own only to stop short and withdraw at the last moment. "At least, I hope you won't be like any of them."

"Ashlynn, we do not know each other well. I cannot claim to love you, and if I did you would be right to call me a liar. But it is no lie to say that I find you alluring," she said, looking directly into Ashlynn's emerald eyes.

"It also isn't a lie to say that I want to treat you with affection. People like Thane are my progeny, they can never truly stand beside me. Georg, for all that I treasure him and his family's loyalty, has served me his entire life."

"But you, Ashlynn, you are a Child of the Earth, one who will grow to be just as powerful as I am. Perhaps even more powerful. Between people of equal strength, there is an opportunity for affection to grow into love, if we let it."

"I won't deceive you, I desire your power to face my enemies and that isn't limited to just the Lothians. But I also desire your affection, and maybe one day your love," she finished softly.

"I don't know what to say to that," Ashlynn said. She'd thought that when Nyrielle touched her tenderly before they formed their pact that perhaps it had been love at first sight.

Her mind had been foggy and strained from fighting to stay alive. Balanced on the edge of death, her savior had glowed in her sight, radiant, beautiful, and tender after she'd been viciously wounded by the man she just married.

Now that the crisis had passed, she found her feelings tangled in Nyrielle's multiple motivations. What she heard in the vampire's voice felt genuine, almost lonely and she wondered if anyone had been able to give her affection in the hundred years since the death of her parents.

Once again, Ashlynn felt herself becoming overwhelmed when she tried to understand the perspective of such an ancient being.

A knock at the door interrupted further thoughts, followed by the entrance of a large pot-bellied bear of a man carrying a silver platter covered by a polished silver dome.

Ashlynn had tried to figure out what a person from the Clan of the Great Claw might look like, but when she saw the towering man enter she realized that she still hadn't adjusted her expectations enough.

While he wore a neatly fitted tunic and breeches that strained slightly over his large belly, his most striking features were his massive furry paws tipped by wickedly pointed claws and a visage that greatly resembled a brown bear.

"Georg," Nyrielle said warmly. "You didn't have to come in person."

"Nonsense," the bearish man said, quickly crossing the room with long strides to set the covered dish between the two women. "My Lady asked for my help to apologize, how can I not come in person?"

"Lady Ashlynn," he said, turning to face the startled young woman and bowing deeply. "Little Heila told me that you come from Blackwell County. I've never been able to try a Blackwell pear tart, but I've heard of them. I hope you enjoy the tart I've made with strawberries and hazelnut cream," he said, lifting the silver dome to reveal a pair of delicate refined tarts.

Ashlynn's gaze shifted from Georg to the desserts and back again, her brow furrowing slightly as she tried to reconcile the contrast between the bearish man and the delicate confections. His appearance had caught her so

completely off guard that it was hard to hold on to the tumultuous feelings that gripped her heart.

Part of her wanted to round on Nyrielle, to say that she wasn't a child to be bribed with sweets. Another part of her looked at Georg's anxious fidgeting and couldn't bring herself to make things difficult for him when he'd put in so much effort on her behalf.

And a third part, tiny, but growing, smelled the fresh crisp strawberries and wanted nothing more than to dive into the delicate treat and ignore her complicated feelings until she was done with the treat. After all, the pastry hadn't done anything to earn her ire.

"Georg," Ashlynn said, her voice still unsteady from her conversation with Nyrielle. "I don't think I've ever been served something so beautiful, even at my wedding."

Nyrielle smiled as she watched an almost childlike delight overcome her young Seneschal when she started to devour the luxurious hazelnut creme and fresh strawberries.

Desserts couldn't ease all the pains that came with their delicate, still-forming relationship, but it seemed like it had blunted the sharp edges, at least enough to give her more time to ease into things.

Maybe it had been a mistake to say as much as she had tonight but given time, she felt that she could make things right between them. And if there was one thing she had plenty of, it was time.