

THE VAMPIRE & HER WITCH

Chapter 12 12: Important Questions

When Georg had entered the dining room, the air was thick with tension between the two women and the bearish man had looked distinctly uncomfortable while he waited to see if they enjoyed his confection.

Seeing his discomfort, Ashlynn praised not only the delicate and refreshing tart but everything else she'd eaten that night as well. Still, it wasn't until Nyrielle smiled at the other woman's delight that Georg's shoulders slumped visibly in relief before he cleared away the dishes and made his exit.

Several minutes passed in silence after he left while the two women regarded each other across the dinner table. Nyrielle seemed to be in no hurry, content to give Ashlynn the time she needed to compose herself.

The distraction offered by dessert had helped Ashlynn gain some distance from the intense conversation with Nyrielle but now she'd come right back to where they left off. The ancient feeling vampire was right, there wasn't love between them. They barely knew each other and if Ashlynn was honest with herself, her heart still aches over what Owain had done to her.

It was too soon for love, from either of them. But could there be love? She didn't know. At the moment, all they shared in common was a hatred of the Lothians and a desire for revenge. It was enough to establish a partnership, perhaps even a friendship, but it was far too little to form the foundation of a lasting love.

"What did you mean when you said that your parents were human but you never were?" Ashlynn asked suddenly. As soon as she said it, she covered her mouth, realizing that the question was likely rude, but she hesitated to take it back. She really wanted to know how different they were, starting from the very beginning.

Nyrielle's lips twitched at the question. It wasn't the question she expected the younger woman to ask but she could tell that Ashlynn was trying to understand.

"It's a reasonable question," she reassured Ashlynn before the other woman could say anything further.

"Among all the Eldritch races, Vampires are unique. Anyone can become a vampire, even humans. As long as another vampire first drains them of all of

their blood and then grants them a drop or more of their own blood, the new vampire will perch forever on the line that divides life from death."

"But if it takes a vampire to make a vampire," Nyrielle said rhetorically. "Where did the first vampire come from to make all the progeny that followed? No one really knows where the first vampire came from, but sometimes, a person is born a vampire."

"So, even though you look human, you never really were," Ashlynn said. "The other night, you said that if you were a vampire like Thane, the only way you could save me is by making me a vampire," she said, struggling to recall the exact words Nyrielle had used. "But you're different because you were born a vampire?"

"Humans would call me a Vampire Queen or something similar. My grandsire used the term 'True Vampire.' All other vampires are progeny who can trace their lineage to the true vampire that started their line."

"There aren't many of us. I've only met three others like myself and all of our circumstances have been different. Some things we have in common, like the ability to form a bond with a chosen Seneschal, but much is unique to each of us."

"Do you, do you have to kill people by drinking their blood in order to live? Or is that just another lie invented by the Church?" Ashlynn asked, finally bringing up one of the questions that had haunted her from the morning when she first woke.

At first, she'd been inclined to dismiss it as utter fabrication, but hearing Nyrielle talk about draining a person of all their blood to make them into a vampire brought back her uncertainty.

Ashlynn firmly believed that many of the stories she read were fictions and exaggerations but at the same time, Nyrielle had admitted to the brutal way she'd murdered Cellach Lothian. Clearly, not everything in the books was untrue.

"The best lies contain a kernel of truth," Nyrielle said, smiling widely to display her fangs. "Vampires aren't truly alive and we must sustain ourselves on the blood of the living. We don't need to kill, however. As long as the blood is rich and strong, we can take so little from a person that they'll return to perfect health within a few days."

Hearing Nyrielle's words, Ashlynn's hands tightened under the table, clutching at her dress to prevent herself from shaking when she asked her next question.

"Will you, will you drink my blood?"

"Is that a request?" Nyrielle teased. "My darling Ashlynn, you have no idea how much I struggled when I washed your wounds. So much blood, so close to the surface of your skin," she said. When she spoke, her voice grew strained and her pupils flared wider as she recalled the scene and the smell of fresh blood that clung to Ashlynn's tantalizing figure that night.

"The taste of your blood when we swore our pact is like comparing Georg's tart to a common biscuit. Even now, you tempt me," she said, the sharp nails on her fingers digging into the arms of her chair.

Hunger and desire rose within her, taking a greater amount of will to subdue than usual. The blood of a Child of the Earth was just too potent and tempting, nearly overwhelming her restraint.

Ashlynn's pulse quickened, some part of her mind screaming at her to run from the predator sitting across the table from her. The faster her heart beat, the more she realized the echo of another heartbeat within her chest raced along with it. It was as though she could feel Nyrielle's hunger and desire responding to her own racing pulse.

"Calm yourself," Nyrielle said, pulling her eyes away from the pulsing arteries in Ashlynn's delicate neck which had become even more prominent and enticing when the young woman's heart raced with fear.

"I can't promise that I will never need to take your blood when you are unwilling but I do not wish to. One day, I hope you will indulge me, but I can tell it's too soon for that."

Again, Ashlynn grew quiet, staring at the paintings on the wall to avoid meeting Nyrielle's gaze. Whenever Nyrielle looked at her with that calm, placid expression, that otherworldly detachment bewildered and sometimes infuriated her. But now, seeing the naked hunger and desire on the vampire's face actually frightened her.

The tranquil landscapes in the paintings helped her to regain her composure. One of them even depicted a small village nestled between two hills. The painting was incredibly detailed, including several members of the Horned Clan, walking about the village or harvesting grapes from the terraces on the hillside.

These are the people she cares for, Ashlynn reminded herself. When she looked back at Nyrielle, the vampire's expression had returned to the calm

placid mask that she was quickly coming to hate. Underneath it, she'd seen care, concern, and compassion but she'd also seen the hunger of a predator.

It made it hard for her to know which face represented the other woman's innermost self. Was the kindness and compassion a thin veneer worn by a dangerous predator, or did the predator only emerge when provoked? More importantly, was the predator within Nyrielle a danger to her?

"Can you give me some time before we see each other again? Just a few days," she added quickly. "I don't know how to feel around you and it's hard to think when you're so close to me."

"Of course, as long as you follow one command from me, you can have as much time as you need."

"What is it you need me to do for you?"

"I had hoped to begin tutoring you tonight," Nyrielle said a touch sadly. Standing up she turned away from Ashlynn, hiding from the uncertainty and lingering fear she still saw on the other woman's face.

"There's so much for you to learn about your own power and about the powers you've gained from me. Lessons on sorcery and witchcraft can wait for a while, but lessons about the changes your body is going through can't."

"Healing is the least of what you've gained from me, my darling Ashlynn," Nyrielle said, placing her hand on the door to leave. "Now that you've healed, your senses will become sharper, your body stronger... It will be like all of the changes your body went through when you transformed from a girl to a woman, only more intense and more dangerous if you cannot adapt to the changes."

"I'll send Thane to tutor you in my absence. You can trust in him, he won't dream of touching someone I've claimed as my own. It may be painful at times," Nyrielle warned her. "But even if it hurts, these are lessons you'll have to learn, the sooner, the better."

"What is it that he'll be teaching me?" Ashlynn asked, unsettled by Nyrielle's warning.

"You'll see soon enough," Nyrielle said, stepping outside the dining room and quickly shutting the door behind her.

As much as she wanted to be open with Ashlynn, even she couldn't make herself say the words.

At the moment, she realized that she held far too much power over the young woman. Whenever her hunger flared or she said something that wasn't understood the way she meant it, Ashlynn grew more and more afraid of her.

The difference between them was too great and Ashlynn still hadn't recovered from the trauma of what Owain had done to her. As long as the young woman felt powerless and trapped by her circumstances, she could never truly open up and trust, much less return any affection she was given.

The only solution she could think of was to tip the scales forcefully.

Thane would have to teach Ashlynn how to fight a vampire.