

## The Vampire 22

### Chapter 22 22: Witchcraft and Sorcery

"Do we really need to use such a large and formal dining room for the two of us?" Ashlynn asked when they returned to the ancient castle for dinner.

After the intense moment they shared in the forest, both women pulled back, perhaps realizing that they were approaching a point neither of them was ready to cross. While they didn't pull apart completely, the two women spent the remainder of their walk through the forest enjoying companionable quiet, holding each other's hands as they navigated the dark and winding trail.

"Where would you prefer to dine?" Nyrielle asked, taking her seat at the head of the table. "I don't think it would be kind to Georg if I tried to take a meal at the small table in his kitchen."

"I was actually thinking of the gardens in the east wing," Ashlynn said. "The days are growing warmer. The primroses should be blooming soon. Wouldn't it be nice to have a meal under the moonlight?"

"We can try if you like," Nyrielle said, smiling. As long as Ashlynn was willing to spend time with her, she was willing to do much more than moving dinner into the garden. "But the rainy season won't end for another three months. Do you mind if it rains on our meal?"

"My terrace then," Ashlynn countered, her face heating slightly. She still hadn't sorted out where Nyrielle fit into her notions of propriety and good manners. They weren't married but they were bound even more intimately than a married couple ever could be. Nyrielle wasn't a gentleman but she frequently treated Ashlynn like a lover.

An unmarried woman would never dream of doing something so forward as inviting a gentleman to take a moonlight dinner on her bedroom terrace. Inviting another lady wasn't scandalous but it was very intimate.

But could Ashlynn really consider herself an unmarried woman anymore? She still didn't know. Her relationship with Nyrielle didn't fit into any of the neat boxes she'd been taught growing up so she had to figure it out as she went.

"I'd like that," Nyrielle said, reaching out and giving Ashlynn's hand a gentle squeeze while servants brought in the first of the dishes Georg had prepared for them this evening.

Knowing that Nyrielle had visited one of the villages to feed, Georg had prepared a delicate salad of pickled vegetables and sweet beets that the vampire preferred in order to cleanse her palette from the metallic taste of her actual meal in the village.

"Since we'll be on your terrace," Nyrielle said between delicate bites. "I can begin your lessons in sorcery. It's important that you get some practice during the blossoming of our bond. I may not be able to help you learn witchcraft but it should at least give you a place to begin exploring the powers you were born with."

"What's the difference between sorcery and witchcraft?" Ashlyn asked, pushing the beets around her plate until they formed a small pile away from the rest of the tender pickled vegetables.

"Sorcery uses your own life's energy to affect the world around you," Nyrielle said. "You have to be careful not to overdraw yourself with sorcery or you can cause yourself significant harm. If you keep within your limits, however, it's no different from exerting your muscles. You'll grow tired, but you will not harm your life."

"Sorcery can be learned by anyone with a little bit of talent and study. That's why your church hates it so much," she added. "They're afraid of the common people coming to possess the power to create their own miracles."

"Witchcraft is the power you were born to and it's a rare gift," Nyrielle continued, setting down her utensils and ringing the bell for the next course when she realized how little Ashlynn was enjoying the first one.

Admittedly, the salad was an old recipe that she'd grown up with. It was one of the few things that Georg wasn't allowed to change no matter how much he felt like he could improve it. If Ashlynn didn't enjoy it, she'd just have to tell Georg to prepare something else instead, but she wasn't about to remove it from the menu.

"So, only people who possess the mark of the witch can learn witchcraft?" Ashlynn asked, sipping the cool, crisp white wine that Georg had sent along with the salad.

"Not exactly," Nyrielle corrected, pausing when Georg himself entered to present a delicate filet of trout in a rich, buttery herb sauce. "Something new?"

"Something Lady Ashlynn described from her home. I hope you enjoy it," he said, bowing deeply before retreating to a corner of the room, shifting nervously from foot to foot as he watched for their reactions.

"I miss the taste of the sea," Ashlynn said. "Growing up, it was normal to have fish in at least one course. Soup, stew, shrimp on salads or a bowl full of muscles, there was always something fresh from the sea."

Slowly, cutting a small piece of the flakey fish, Ashlynn took a delicate nibble, closing her eyes and savoring the buttery richness of the sauce along with the firm, succulent texture of the fish. It was different than what she had at home, Georg used different herbs in his butter sauce and the fish itself was different but it was delightful in its own ways and it felt like she'd grabbed hold of one of the things she thought she lost after leaving Blackwell county.

"Thank you, Georg," she said. "It's wonderful."

"I'll have a new soup for you to try tomorrow," the pot-bellied man added, a toothy grin blossoming on his face as he rubbed his paws together in excitement. He'd cooked for Nyrielle for most of his life. By this time, he knew her tastes well.

Cooking for Ashlynn, however, opened up so many opportunities for him to explore, and her own presence in the kitchens had turned into an unexpected delight. As to Nyrielle's impression of the new dish, he only needed a single glance at the gentle expression on her face when his Lady saw Ashlynn's delight to know that she would be happy with it as long as Ashlynn was.

"So, you were saying that the mark isn't necessary to learn witchcraft?" Ashlynn asked, returning to their previous conversation after Georg excused himself.

"The mark is a manifestation of your connection to the earth," Nyrielle said. "The stronger the connection, the more likely it is to manifest in a mark like yours. There are some people, commonly called 'hedge witches' and sometimes 'hearth witches' who have very minor talents in witchcraft."

"You, however, are a Child of the Earth. The power you can wield is many times greater than what those humble witches can. You see" she said, retrieving the bottle of wine. "Sorcery uses the energy of a person's own life. Like the little bit of wine in my goblet, you only have so much," she explained.

"But witchcraft can call upon the energy of all living things," she said, pouring more wine into her goblet, filling it until it began to overflow. "The limits are as vast as your reach and your ability to shape the energy that you can gather."

"The earth chose you," Nyrielle finished, setting down the bottle and looking deeply into Ashlynn's emerald eyes. "Some Earth Mothers claim that they are chosen to defend the earth. Some believe that you are like the fruit of a mythic tree, able to spread new seeds of life and magic wherever you go."

"When the snow in the passes finishes melting, I will take you across the mountains to meet with an Earth Mother," Nyrielle promised. "Until then, we can start with sorcery."

For perhaps the first time in her life since she learned about the mark of the witch, Ashlynn felt her heart quiver in excitement about her unique gift. Far from the unholy terror the Church spoke of, the way Nyrielle described it, witchcraft was as natural and wondrous as a flower blooming among the thorns.

She was certain there were dangers ahead. If there weren't, it didn't make sense for the Church to fear it so much. But, thinking of the Ancient Oak tree that helped to heal her the night she became Nyrielle's, Ashlynn felt that there was far more beauty and wonder ahead of her than danger.