

# The Vampire 41

## Chapter 41 41: The Skills of a Lady

"It was fine at first," Samira said, heaving a deep sigh as she looked at the strange, dark-haired servant girl who had seen through her deception. At first, she was terrified that the other woman would expose her, or maybe try to blackmail her for favors.

The more the other woman spoke, however, the more she felt like she could trust her. Now that she'd decided to explain things, she felt like a weight was lifting off her heart since someone else would finally know what she'd been going through.

"I used to serve tea for her ladyship before she passed," Samira began. "So I knew the little things like how to hold the cups and where to set things out. I made a mistake right at the start though," she said with a heavy sigh. "I poured tea for the other ladies."

"One of the ladies acted nice," she continued, her face heating with a mixture of embarrassment and anger. "She said that I must have been used to having tea with the Duke's daughters and other high ladies if I reached out to pour."

"You're supposed to be the daughter of a count," Ashlynn pointed out. "And now the wife of the next Marquis. There are very few women senior enough to you to require you to pour during their gathering. You should have let one of the daughters of a baron pour, whichever one was younger or came from the smallest fief," Ashlynn explained. "They probably worked out who that was in advance."

"They had," Samira said. "A lady named Lottie. Everyone teased her about whether or not she dared to drink the tea I poured for her as if she thought she was better than me. But then the lady who acted nice, Evelynn, she asked me a question and things got even worse."

"She said that, since I took tea with so many high ladies, I must know about the latest trends, especially about the things from across the sea," Samira said. "So she asked me why merchants from across the sea were paying such a high price for turkey feathers to put in ladies' hats."

Inwardly, Ashlynn groaned, already having an idea where this was going. The fuss over feathered hats started two years ago in port cities like Blackwell. It seemed that it was finally making its way out to the frontier where there were more hunters and more wild birds to slaughter for their plumage.

"Let me guess," Ashlynn said. "You didn't know, so you made something up?"

"I just said that it's a pretty feather and people enjoy feasting on turkey so much, why not have a little something to have as a token to remember the feasts?" Samira said. "But they all laughed at that! It's just a feather, why is it such a big deal?"

"Because it's a turkey feather," Ashlynn said with a sigh. "There aren't any turkeys native to the old countries. That's a bird from this side of the sea. If you live in the old countries and you can put a turkey feather in your hat, it means you have the wealth to get something as delicate as a feather shipped all the way across the sea, just to wear it in your hat."

"But why turkeys?" Samira asked, now genuinely puzzled. "We have golden eagles here that have much prettier feathers than turkeys."

"Eagle feathers are reserved to royalty," Ashlynn said with a shake of her head. "The same is true of hawk and falcon feathers, and peacocks too. A noblewoman wearing one of those would be mocked for trying to raise above her station at best, beheaded at worst."

"Over a silly little feather in a hat?" Samira said, blinking her eyes in disbelief. "And they expected me to know all that?"

"Of course they do, you're supposed to be the daughter of Count Blackwell," Ashlynn said with a deep sigh. "Wait, don't tell me that you said you'd wear one of those hats, did you?" Ashlynn said, a feeling of foreboding settling over her.

"I said that I should have one of Owain's hunters find a grand turkey for me so I could have a new hat made," Samira said nodding. "And that I'd share the extra feathers with them."

"No wonder he was furious," Ashlynn said, imagining the look on Owain's face. He must have turned purple in rage, perhaps just as furious with Samira as he'd been with her when he discovered the witch's mark. Well, not that furious, she supposed. Samira was still alive. But his pride must have suffered greatly.

Only a young, unmarried woman would wear feathers in her hat. In Blackwell, her sister and her friends had taken to wearing hats with rock pheasant or grouse feathers, imported from across the sea in imitation of the trend from the old country.

The feathers, however, weren't just a sign that they had obtained something delicate from across the sea at great expense. They were taken from birds that were hunted as a way of declaring that they were available to be hunted by men bold enough to court them.

For Samira to say she wanted a turkey feather hat was as good as saying she wanted a man to come court her and steal her away from Owain! It was as good as advertising her intentions to have an affair.

"That's why he rushed me out here," Samira said, her eyes brimming with tears. "He said that, that I'm too stupid to pretend to be Ashlynn Blackwell," she sobbed. "He said that he can't risk anyone finding out that I'm pretending so I have to stay here without anyone who might catch on."

"That's why there aren't any servants here who are used to serving nobility," Ashlynn realized. "He's hoping that people won't notice your mistakes. But, why are you doing all this? Has he told you?"

"Marquis Bors Lothian told me," Samira said, blotting away her tears with a handkerchief. "He said that someone poisoned the real Ashlynn Blackwell and I have to pretend to be her while they hunt for the killers. He said that they might try again so they're going to tell everyone that I'm pregnant and that I've come out here for safety."

"So you're trying to help the Marquis to hunt the murderers," Ashlynn said, her heart sinking at how easily this poor girl had been misled. "Do you have family in Lothian? Did Marquis Bors make any promises about them?"

"He said that if I help them catch the murderers, then he would make me a Dame," she said, her face brightening. "And that I'd be granted lands that my family could retire to."

"But the real Ashlynn Blackwell is dead," Ashlynn said, finally feeling like she was getting somewhere with this conversation. "Once they catch the criminals, what will happen to you and this charade?"

"I don't know," the imposter said. "Owain doesn't tell me much, especially after I embarrassed him."

"You should ask him before he goes," Ashlynn suggested, hoping that the magic had made Samira pliable enough to take the suggestion without thinking about the consequences. "Do you like Owain?"

"He's handsome and strong," Samira said, her eyes growing bright. "And the way he makes me feel when we make love, it's like I've already reached the heavenly shores."

"When you... make love?" Ashlynn said, her heart going cold and plunging into the depths of her stomach. "He makes love to you?"

"Most nights," Samira said with a dreamy expression on her face. "Sometimes during the day. He calls me Ashlynn when he does," she added, placing a hand above her heart. "It's times like that when I feel like I'm really Lady Ashlynn, like I could live with him as his lady for... Lynnda?" Samira asked, pausing when she saw the color drain from Ashlynn's face.

"Is something wrong?" Samira asked. "You look unwell."

"I'm fine," Ashlynn said through gritted teeth. "You should enjoy the rest of your meal. Maybe ask Owain about your future when he comes back tonight," she added, standing quickly and heading to the door on unsteady feet. The heat from the room's fireplace suddenly felt unbearable and the crackling of the fire sounded as loud as her own heartbeat, leaving her lightheaded enough to nearly collide with the iron bound wooden door.

"I'll come back for your dishes in the morning," she said, unable to make herself offer a curtsy to continue the charade as she fled the room.

Behind her, a startled looking Samira returned to her meal, nibbling at another of the fruit tarts as she considered what her new friend had said.

Maybe she was right. Maybe she should ask Owain about the future. Maybe... Maybe there was a way that the charade didn't have to end, and she could go on living as the Lady Ashlynn Blackwell.

Right now, she was only pretending to be pregnant to give an excuse for why 'Ashlynn Blackwell' was staying in the summer villa but... what if she wasn't pretending? If she could give Owain an heir, she thought, tracing her fingers absentmindedly across her belly, then he'd have to keep her as his wife!