

## The Vampire 42

### Chapter 42 42: Caught

By the time Ashlynn returned to the kitchen, she felt like her stomach had been hollowed out and her entire body had gone numb. Otis said something when she entered but Ashlynn didn't hear a word of it as she headed deeper into the kitchens.

The food had all been served and much of the excess had been taken to the soldiers and guardsmen that protected the villa. Since that was the case, Ashlynn grabbed one of the heavier cauldrons and a bucket of water to start scrubbing.

She wished she could scrub the words Samira had said from her ears but no matter what she did, they echoed in her mind again and again. Owain called the imposter 'Ashlynn' when he made love to her.

Hot tears fell from her eyes as she scrubbed as if she had to wring out the last of her feelings for Owain out of her flesh like water from a rag.

It had only been a little over a month since their wedding and already he was taking another woman to what should have been their bed. Worse, it was a woman who resembled her, who he dressed up in her clothes, gave her jewelry, and called her name when she did it.

Ashlynn's fist slammed into the cauldron and her body shook with silent cries. More than anything, she wished that she could take her sword and charge into the great hall to claim Owain's worthless life. But she couldn't. She had no sword, no armor, no Thane or Zedya to keep the other knights busy while she confronted Owain.

Even if she was willing to throw away her promise to Nyrielle and the greater mission in order to kill him, she still didn't have the strength to do it by herself. What little magic she'd learned so far wouldn't let her kill Owain and make it away safely and no matter how much she hated him, she wasn't willing to die to drag him down with her.

"Lynnda," Otis called out, interrupting her scrubbing. "Was Lady Ashlynn harsh wit ya? Did she hurt ya? Noble ladies can be like that, ya know. Even when yer just tryin' ta make things better fer 'em."

"It's fine," Ashlynn said, pulling her head and torso out of the giant cauldron and scrubbing the tears from her eyes. "She just said some hateful things to me. That's all."

"Ah, well, see, that's why ya shouldn't do things they don't ask ya fer," he said, scratching his head as he looked at the young woman's tear-stained face. "Look, I saved ya one of tha tarts," he said, holding out a small, misshapen tart that hadn't entirely baked properly. It never could have made it to the high table but the soldiers certainly wouldn't have rejected it.

"Cheer up," the cook said awkwardly. "Nobles ferget things quick enough. A few days and it'll be like it never happened."

"Thanks Mister Otis," Ashlynn said. "My hands are covered in soap and grease," she added, pointing at a nearby table. "But if you leave the tart there, I'll get it when I wash up."

"All right," the cook said. "So long as ya do."

For the rest of the evening, Ashlynn threw herself into the work of the kitchens, cleaning and scouring or banking the fires in the ovens so Otis could bake off a few loaves of bread before they cooled down for the night. Nothing in the kitchens was wasted, not even the leftover heat in the bricks.

"Hey Ollie," she said as the last of the work was finally finished. "Otis saved us a pair of tarts. I already had mine, yours is on the table."

"Lynnda," the gangly youth said with a frown. "Don't lie to me. I saw Mister Otis offer the tart to you for dealing with Lady Ashlynn. I won't take it from you."

"I can't eat it anyway," Ashlynn lied. "Women's troubles, my stomach isn't well. You take it."

"Well, if you're sure," Ollie said, hesitating as he drew near the cold and misshapen tart. When she waved him on, he eagerly snatched it from the table, wolfing it down in just a few bites. "Sho, sho good," he mumbled with cheeks as full as a chipmunk's. "So buttery, an sweet."

"Well, I'm glad you like it," Ashlynn said, chuckling at his comedic and exaggerated expression. "If it made you happy, it was worth getting scolded for."

"Did she really scold you fiercely?" Ollie asked. "I thought people said she was kind and rarely troubled servants."

"She just said some hateful things," Ashlynn said, forcing her feelings down to give Ollie a slight smile, as though it wasn't a big deal. "I just have to see her again in the morning, I promised I'd come back to clear away the plates for her."

"Do you want me to?" Ollie offered. It had only been a few days that they'd worked together but he was starting to like Lynnda and he felt like he owed her after taking the tart Otis set aside for her.

"No, go get some sleep," Ashlynn said, heading in the direction of her own bed. "I need to get some sleep too. Tomorrow is another day."

\*\*\*

The next morning, after rising early to feed the staff, Ashlynn told Otis about her promise to fetch dishes from Lady Ashlynn's chambers. Hoping to give herself a slightly better excuse for showing up so early, she fetched one of the loaves of bread Otis baked the night before along with a crock of butter, and headed upstairs to the room she'd fled the night before.

When she arrived, however, her sensitive ears perked up at the sounds of vigorous exertion and lewd moans from the far side of the door.

"Yes, Ashlynn, like that," Owain grunted. "Smother me in your bosom."

Ashlynn's face heated and she froze outside the door. Didn't Samira say that he made love to her at night? What was he doing starting his day with something so... so.... She didn't have words for it as she heard the sounds of flesh slapping followed by a sigh of release from her former husband.

"Husband," Samira said. "It's fine if you finish inside me. You don't need to pull out like this."

"Not a chance," Owain panted. "And don't call me husband. You're not really her, and I won't risk you bearing a child."

"Why not?" Samira pouted. "Don't I look enough like her? If you give me a child, a real child, not a pretend pregnancy, I'm sure it would look enough like her child that you could claim it as your heir. Wouldn't that be good?"

"No, it would be a disaster," Owain snorted. "Samira, don't mistake yourself because I give you affection. You should understand by now that you could never pretend to be her if we didn't hide you away in a place like this. Just play your role until the winter and then you won't have to pretend anymore."

"And then what?" Samira pressed, Lynnda's words still echoing in her ears to find out about her future once this was over. "What will you do with me once your father catches the people who murdered your Ashlynn?"

"That depends on you, doesn't it?" Owain said, almost playfully. "Jocelynn will be here soon. You should make good friends with her while she's here. When this is over and we let the public know about Ashlynn's death, after a suitable amount of time, I'll fall in love with Jocelynn who 'consoled me through my grief.'"

"We'll probably be married next year in the spring or summer," Owain continued. "If you've done well, and you've made good friends with her while she's here, my father will reward you with a minor title. After that, you can become one of Jocelynn's ladies in waiting."

"I see," Samira said, sounding dejected. "So, after this winter, you'll never touch me again because I won't be your Ashlynn anymore."

"Samira, you silly girl," Owain laughed. "Why would I want you to be Jocelynn's lady-in-waiting if not to keep you close to me? The future Marquis Lothian could never marry a former servant no matter how great her achievements, but that doesn't mean we can't be close in private. I've already taken your maidenhood, how could I let another man claim you?"

"That's why you must gain Jocelynn's favor when she comes here," he said sternly. "If you don't, then..."

"Well, well, well, what have we here?" A deep, rumbling voice said next to Ashlynn as she stood near the door to Owain's room. "Is a little servant eavesdropping where she shouldn't be?"

Horried that she'd become so distracted by events on the other side of the door that she hadn't noticed someone else approaching, Ashlynn spun, pressing her back against the wall and coming face to face with Owain's steward, Sir Kaefin.

"You know," the barrel-shaped man said, pressing his bulk up against Ashlynn and pinning her to the wall. "Doing that sort of thing, it carries a heavy punishment."

His meaty hand shot out, gripping Ashlynn's throat. "But I'm a merciful man," he whispered, his hot breath reeking of stale wine. "Perhaps we can come to an... arrangement. One that benefits us both."