

THE VAMPIRE & HER WITCH

Chapter 7 7: A New Day

Dawn had nearly broken by the time Nyrielle tucked the exhausted witch into bed, leaving her in the care of her loyal retainers before retreating deep within the ancient castle to rest for the day. That evening, she returned to Ashlynn's bedside but found the young woman still fast asleep.

Many of her minor injuries had healed, revealing a face that was elegant with a delicate nose and jawline and lips that were pert without being overly full. Her breathing was slow and steady even if it was still shallow and her pulse had become strong and even.

"Alert me if she wakes," Nyrielle commanded one of the servants, turning to leave the room. "Tend to her needs if she has any while I'm away."

Still, by dawn, Ashlynn showed no signs of waking, sleeping deeply and comfortably while her wounds healed.

"You better not be a morning person," Nyrielle whispered as she stroked the young woman's hair. Sunrise is time for bed," she said before retreating to her own bed chambers for the day.

Hours later, when the sun rose well above the tops of the hills bathing the misty valley in a diffuse silvery light, Ashlynn's emerald eyes fluttered open, taking in the place she'd woken.

The bed she'd slept in was soft and luxurious, roomy enough for two or even three people to share without bumping into each other in the night. Posts at each corner of the bed held up soft lavender curtains that had been pulled back to allow her to see the rest of the room.

Along one wall, two large windows filled with the largest panes of clear glass that Ashlynn had ever seen flanked a door set with more glass that opened onto a terrace. The wall opposite the bed held a large fireplace and two soft-looking sofas that faced each other across a polished wooden table.

There were three other doors in the room, two of which stood open to reveal a luxurious bath and a wardrobe large enough to hold an entire season's worth of clothing. Because of her secret, Ashlynn had attended very few balls or banquets, but she imagined that the wardrobe was large enough to fit every gown her sister had worn for a year with room to spare.

Throwing back the soft blankets that covered her, Ashlynn found that she'd been changed into a soft peach-colored dressing gown. She also discovered that while her body ached in a number of places and drawing a deep breath still produced a twinge of sharp pain in her ribs, the bruises and scrapes had almost completely faded from her skin.

Underneath all of that, she felt something strange in her chest, pulsing in time with her heartbeat. It was almost like an echo or like there were two hearts beating within her chest. When she felt her pulse at her neck, however, everything felt normal.

"I wonder where," she began, thinking about where Nyrielle might be only to realize that she knew. She was certain that Nyrielle was somewhere hidden from the light, perhaps in a room underground or deeper in the building in a room without windows. But when she closed her eyes and thought about the second heartbeat in her chest, she felt like she could point toward the place where Nyrielle was.

She could be wrong, she might just be imagining it, but answers would have to wait until the evening when she could see the vampire again. Until then, she firmly pushed down any thoughts of the mystical bond she now shared with the Eldritch Lady and focused on more immediate concerns.

Before Ashlynn could ring the bell on the bedside table, she heard a sharp knock on the room's third door followed by a high-pitched woman's voice.

"My Lady, may I enter? Lady Nyrielle asked me to tend to your needs," the voice called.

After she gave permission, Ashlynn's eyes opened wide and she quickly covered her mouth before she said anything untoward.

When Nyrielle had taken her, she'd met two other vampires, both of whom appeared to be human before they became vampires. The person who entered the room was short, barely four feet in height, but their stature was the least shocking thing about their appearance.

Two curved horns emerged from the woman's hair, sweeping backward like the horns of an ewe. Further, though she wore loose skirts below her fitted bodice, the feet that peeked out from her skirts as she walked were cloven hooves.

"Is something wrong, My Lady?" the woman asked when she saw the other woman's reaction. She'd been told, of course, that the young woman

recovering from her injuries had become Lady Nyrielle's Seneschal and that she was a Child of the Earth, but she couldn't figure out why the young woman looked so startled to see her.

"I'm sorry," Ashlynn said, struggling to quiet her racing heart and reminding herself that this was the place Nyrielle had brought her and there shouldn't be any danger here. "Aside from Lady Nyrielle, I'd only met Thane and Zedya. I hadn't thought that there would be other demons in her household who weren't vampires," she explained.

When she spoke, the diminutive woman wrinkled her nose and pursed her lips with a pained expression.

"My Lady," she said stiffly. "I apologize for my rudeness, but please do not refer to us as demons. That's a word humans use for us, not one we use for ourselves."

"I'm sorry," Ashlynn said. Nyrielle had said something similar but she thought it was about her title when she said that she was an Eldritch Lady and not a Demon Lady. She didn't realize that 'demon' wasn't an appropriate term at all. "Then, what should I call you?"

"My name is Heila," the horned woman said politely. "I'm a member of the Horned Clan."

"Heila, thank you for correcting me," Ashlynn said, her ears burning in embarrassment. "I grew up among humans," she said, realizing that after accepting the blood pact, she likely couldn't count herself as such anymore. "I'll probably make several mistakes in the days to come. Please forgive my ignorance and correct me when I'm wrong."

A smile blossomed on Heila's face as she realized she likely wouldn't be punished for correcting the new Seneschal. She'd been prepared to accept any punishment when she objected to being called a demon but it seemed like this new member of their household wouldn't be as vindictive as other Eldritch Lords were known to be.

"My Lady," Heila said. "You must be famished. May I fetch you a meal?"

"Please," Ashlynn said, only now realizing how hungry she was. "I'll wash up while you do."

It wasn't until after she'd finished washing and exploring the wardrobes where she found a few elegant skirts, loose breeches, and bell-sleeved blouses that

Ashlynn realized she might have made a horrible mistake when she asked for a meal.

In the books the Church provided about demons, it mentioned that they were primitive, frequently feasting on raw flesh including the entrails of their defeated opponents. Others were said to subsist on insects or bitter fruits.

Seeing Heila's refined manners and the elegant room she'd woken in, Ashlynn was quickly coming to realize that the things she'd learned growing up were likely riddled with falsehoods but she still had no idea what the people here actually ate.

Heila called herself a member of the Horned Clan and her horns resembled those of a bighorn sheep. Did that mean she ate grass and leaves like a sheep or did she eat other things? She didn't know and hadn't asked.

When the diminutive woman returned, however, the only thing that surprised Ashlynn about the food was the size of the portions. Thick-cut bacon was piled high next to an equally tall stack of fluffy pancakes along with soft poached eggs served on toast with ham.

"Isn't this a bit too much?" Ashlynn said even as she began nibbling on the savory, smokey bacon.

"Lady Nyrielle left instructions that you were to be given large portions of meat to help rebuild your body," Heila explained, suppressing the urge to giggle as she watched Ashlynn eat. Even though their new Seneschal protested the portions, she hadn't stopped eating since she sat down with her meal.

While she ate, Ashlynn resolved to forget everything she thought she knew about the people who had been on this continent long before humans arrived. The first human settlers had only reached the eastern shores three hundred years ago and for much of that time, they had been united by the Church in a series of crusades to 'cleanse the lands' and claim them for 'righteous men.'

Now, however, it seemed that nothing was as she'd been taught and she would have to be ready to learn again from the beginning if she was going to live her new life among Nyrielle's people.