

THE VAMPIRE & HER WITCH

Chapter 9 9: Dining with a Vampire

Once Ashlynn had finished her breakfast, as much as she wanted to explore her new home, a full belly and a warm fire in the hearth combined with a soft and comfortable bed enticed her back to sleep.

"You should rest, my Lady," Heila said when Ashlynn looked torn about returning to bed immediately after her morning meal. "Lady Nyrielle will want to see you after sunset and you still need to rest to heal."

"You can ring the bell if you require me, otherwise, I'll come draw a bath for you before sunset so you're refreshed when you dine with her ladyship."

Hours later, Ashlynn was woken from a comforting, dreamless sleep by the sound of splashing water filling the large copper tub in her washroom.

"Do you need help washing, my Lady?" Heila asked when she entered the room.

"No," Ashlynn replied. "I'm accustomed to washing and dressing myself," she explained. The mark of the witch on her hip made it impossible for her to have servants attend to her at home. She'd thought it was normal at first until her younger sister grew older, retaining several servants to attend to her every need.

"I wonder if she'll miss me," she said as she stepped into the rose-scented water. "I wonder if Owain will even tell them what happened. I hope he doesn't retaliate against them."

She'd prepared herself to leave her family when she married Owain but there was a difference between moving away to live with her husband and coming back from the edge of death to serve a powerful vampire.

Tears dripped from her eyes into the warm water of the bath as thoughts of home and her family overwhelmed her. She was still here, alive and well, but it was impossible to reach out to her loved ones. If she wanted to, she could pen a letter to her family tonight but she could never have it delivered.

"I'll return one day," she promised herself before dunking her head beneath the water's surface and scrubbing away the tears. "Just not yet."

After washing, she dressed herself in a loose-fitting cream-colored dress with bell sleeves and pale green lace before following Heila to a windowless room located much deeper in the castle.

Two hearths burned in the opulent room and crystal chandeliers hung from the ceiling, lighting the room so brightly that you could forget how far the room was from outside light. A long table of polished cedar dominated the room with space for more than a dozen guests to dine, yet only two places had been set, one at the head of the table and one to the left of it.

Several paintings adorned the walls, showing scenes like an Ancient Oak glowing faintly against the night sky or a silvery waterfall spilling into a pool of water that reflected the moon. Each of the paintings seemed to show different parts of the Vale of Mists and all of them reflected the vale at night.

"Her ladyship will join you momentarily," Heila said, offering a brief curtsy before excusing herself from the room.

Ashlynn didn't wait long before the door opened again to reveal her savior and Mistress, the Eldritch Lady Nyrielle.

Seeing her again, Ashlynn's doubled heartbeat quickened, her senses drowning in the powerful aura that flowed from Nyrielle. The vampire had traded her black dress from the previous night for one of deep royal purple trimmed in spills of golden lace that matched the gold pendant dangling above her modest bust.

When Nyrielle entered the room, Ashlynn immediately felt unworthy, as though she stood before a queen or goddess. Quickly standing from her chair, she gave a deep curtsy, lowering her head and fixing her eyes on the hem of the powerful woman's dress.

"My Lady," she said, relying on the etiquette she'd been taught and saying nothing more until the enchanting woman gave her permission to speak.

"Ashlynn," Nyrielle said, placing a finger under Ashlynn's chin and gently lifting, drawing her gaze upward. "Before others, you should call me 'Mistress', but in private like this, please call me Nyrielle. There aren't many people who call me by name," she said wistfully. "I want you to be one of them."

"Nyrielle then," Ashlynn said as she stood. Meeting Nyrielle's midnight blue gaze, however, she found herself once again drowning in the other woman's eyes, her mind drifting and unable to find the next words she meant to say.

"Take a seat, join me," Nyrielle said, a playful smile forming on her lips. When she took her own seat, she pulled back on her aura as much as she could, dimming her presence until she could pass as a mortal, if beautiful noblewoman.

"In time, you should find my presence less overwhelming," she said, her dark eyes twinkling with mirth. "But I won't deny enjoying the way you looked at me when I entered the room. You're looking much better yourself," she said after giving Ashlynn an evaluating look. "I'm glad to see our bond has given you the strength you needed to heal."

"Thank you," Ashlynn said, slowly regaining her composure after Nyrielle withdrew her aura. "I owe you my life."

"We settled that when we formed our pact. I'm happy that you're grateful," Nyrielle said, ringing a bell to signal servants to bring in the first course of their meal. "Now that you've recovered and your life is no longer hanging by a thread, do you have any regrets?"

"About our pact? No, none at all," she said.

Before she could continue, the doors opened again and several servants, each dressed in dark purple livery and sporting curled horns similar to a ram's, entered carrying several aromatic dishes.

While her breakfast had been sumptuous with an extra portion of meat, the dishes set before them now were as elegant and refined as anything she'd eaten at the Marquis' manor.

Spring leek soup topped with fresh toast and melted cheese alongside a refreshing salad of spinach and ramps formed the first course, leaving Ashlynn's mouth watering in anticipation.

"Go ahead," Nyrielle said, laughing lightly as she began with her own soup. "When I told Georg about you this morning he promised to deliver his very best for our first dinner together."

"Is Georg another member of the Horned Clan?" Ashlynn asked, enjoying the crisp and refreshing salad before diving into the rich soup. "Are all of your servants members of the Horned Clan?"

"No, Georg is from the Clan of the Great Claw," Nyrielle said, pleased that Ashlynn was already adjusting to her new home and not referring to her

people as demons. "But before that, you looked like you had more to say when I asked if you had regrets."

"I, I regret that I can't return to my family. I never even said goodbye," she said, her eyes misting as she spoke. "When the ball ended, I told them that I'd see them off when they returned home but..."

"Would you like to visit them? It isn't impossible you know," Nyrielle said gently.

"Truly? But, if we do, if Owain told them what happened..."

"There's time," Nyrielle said, reaching out to take Ashlynn's hand in her own. "Not now. Long trips are best made in the fall and winter months when the nights are longer. You need to take some time as well."

In truth, a trip from the Vale of Mists to the coastal Blackwell County would be more than just long. It would take several days by carriage and they would have to move carefully to ensure that Nyrielle had a safe place to shelter during the day.

Moreover, she wouldn't be able to bring any of her Eldritch guards to protect her during the journey. To make the trip safely, she would need to rely on Ashlynn to protect her during the day while they traveled at night. For her new Seneschal, however, if the trip would put her heart at ease, Nyrielle was willing to take the risk.

"Right now, you've just begun to touch your magic," Nyrielle said gently. "And you're only drawing on the shallowest levels of our pact. It will take years to master your powers but by the end of summer you should be able to learn enough to make the trip to your homeland safely."

"And even if you haven't learned enough, I'll go with you," the vampire promised.

"I still don't understand," Ashlynn said, setting down a spoonful of the velvety leek soup before it reached her lips.

"Why do you do so much for me? Next to you, I feel like a stray cat, picked up by the roadside and taken to a nice home. I appreciate everything you're doing for me but I don't understand why. Please, tell me what it is you want from me that makes all of this worth it to you."

When she married Owain, she knew that it was a union born of politics. She'd worked to grow a love for Owain for two years, writing letters and attending balls together when they could make the travel arrangements work, but she never forgot that the marriage happened because her father and Bors Lothian wanted to form a binding alliance between their families.

She understood all of that, and she accepted it. Now that she had forged an even more intimate and binding relationship with Nyrielle, she struggled to understand the other end of the deal. She felt like she'd gained too much, a new life all together and one that was no less luxurious than the one she would have led as the Marquess of Lothian.

For this kind of relationship to be fair, Nyrielle must have stood to gain something valuable, she just didn't know what it was.

"You want to know what I stand to gain from you?" Nyrielle said, setting down her fork and leaving her salad half-finished. "Very well. If you think that you're ready, I'll tell you the truth."