

The Vampire 40

Chapter 40 40: A Woman Named Samira

In the kitchen, Ashlynn quickly assembled a plate that included everything from minced onion pie to smoked venison sausage and a handful of small jammy tarts, ducking out with only the briefest explanation to Otis before he could scold her. As she left, she heard the head cook rounding on Ollie for an explanation.

"Sorry Ollie," she said under her breath as she made her way up the stairs of the villa to the east tower where the fake Ashlynn should be staying with Owain. Hopefully Zedya's implication that she was Marquis Bors' illegitimate daughter would prevent Otis from getting too upset at her and taking it out on the gangly kitchen boy for peeping at the feast when they should have been working.

While she walked, Ashlynn drew a tiny amount of magical energy and laid a simple spell over the food. With luck, it would encourage the imposter to be more forthcoming in answering questions, as though the person she was speaking to was a trusted confidant rather than a complete stranger.

When she reached the door to Owain's chambers, Ashlynn paused, her ears perking up at the sound of faint sobbing coming from the room.

"Owain, you really don't know how to be good to a woman, do you?"

Balancing the plate on one hand, Ashlynn gave only the most perfunctory of knocks before opening the door and walking in without giving a chance for the imposter to tell her no or send her away.

"Excuse me, your ladyship," Ashlynn said, bringing the plate over to the bedside table next to the teary eyed woman. Today, her imposter was wearing a dark blue dress with silver embroidery across the bodice and a matching necklace set with local pearls from Blackwell Bay.

For a moment, Ashlynn froze as a burning sensation surged from her stomach up her throat, hot words ready to form on her lips. The necklace was a memento from her grandmother and she only ever wore it on somber occasions, yet it hung on the imposter's neck like a simple decoration as if to mock the meaning of everything she once treasured.

"Since your ladyship didn't get to eat much," Ashlynn said, busying herself with the plate and cutting a sausage into several pieces to hide her misty eyes from the woman on the bed. "I thought you might want a plate to eat in private."

"You can leave it," the woman said, blotting at her eyes and staring out the window at the darkening sky. "I don't have much of an appetite."

"Please, your ladyship," Ashlynn said, gesturing at the plate. "You're carrying his lordship's child. You shouldn't be skipping a meal. At least take a few bites for me," she pleaded, turning her misty eyes on the other woman. "I can't take another beating, your ladyship. A few bites and I can tell Mister Otis that you didn't go hungry tonight."

"A few bites then," the imposter said, taking the tip of her knife and spearing a slice of sausage. "Bad enough that I'm suffering here, you shouldn't take a beating for me," she said, biting into the succulent venison and savoring the rich herbs and spices in the sausage.

"Thank you, your ladyship," Ashlynn said. "If you're suffering, maybe a bit of something sweet would be nice. They're no Blackwell pears but the tarts should be lovely," she suggested smoothly.

"You've had Blackwell pears?" the woman said in surprise. "Tell me, what are they like?"

"I imagine you've had many more of them than I have," Ashlynn said, a faint smile forming on her lips as she saw her magic taking hold of the young woman. "So soft and delicate when they're ripe that you almost don't need to chew them, and sweeter than honey all by themselves."

"But, if you were really Ashlynn Blackwell, you'd know that, wouldn't you?" Ashlynn said, stepping close to the other woman. As soon as she said it, Ashlynn wished she could take the words back. She hadn't planned to confront the other woman with the truth because she knew it could blow up in her face.

But, seeing the fake 'Ashlynn' sitting there, wearing one of her dresses and her grandmother's pearls, she couldn't help herself. It hurt too much and she was already at her limits to just hold back from shoving the other woman down and ripping her grandmother's necklace off of her.

"What, wait! That's not what I meant," the woman stammered, scooting back on the large feather bed. "I just wanted to know what you thought of them and how you managed to get one so far from home! I am Ashlynn Blackwell and I'll have you beaten for saying otherwise!"

"No, you won't," Ashlynn said firmly, taking a seat on the bed close enough to the other woman that she sat on her skirts, pinning her in place on the bed. "You know what it's like to be beaten for saying the wrong thing, don't you? Would you really turn in another serving girl to suffer that kind of beating?"

"You, just who are you?" the fake Ashlynn said, her dull green eyes wide and darting from Ashlynn to the door and back again. "You can't just come in here and make things up and..."

"Hush, 'your ladyship," Ashlynn said, placing a finger over the other woman's lips. "You don't want to raise a panic that someone walking by might hear, do you? You can call me Lynnda and I might be the only friend you have here."

It took considerable effort to calm herself down and put on a friendly mask toward the imposter. Ashlynn had to remind herself again and again that she'd promised Nyrielle she could do this, that she could get information that would be worthwhile and that she could rise above her immediate vengeance to help the vale.

When she thought of Nyrielle and the look of hurt or disappointment that she would see from the vampire, or worse, the expressionless mask that told her nothing at all, she found the strength to slow her racing heart. She didn't have to act for long, she reminded herself. Just long enough to learn as much as she could from this woman.

"What kind of friend could you be, making up things about me? You should go now and I'll pretend this didn't happen," the woman said, her voice growing high pitched and almost petulant as she tried to push Ashlynn away.

Ashlynn, however, was far from the weak woman she appeared to be and despite the shove, she didn't budge from her place on the bed.

"I've told you my name," Ashlynn said. "Now you tell me yours. Your real name," she emphasized. "We both know that you're not really Ashlynn Blackwell or you wouldn't be sitting alone in this room while Lord Owain entertains his knights."

"Fine," the woman said, her face scrunching up in a pout. "I'm Samira. But you mustn't tell anyone," she emphasized. "I'll be worse than beaten if anyone finds out."

"Oh, I won't tell," Ashlynn said, picking up the jar of wine she'd brought with the plate. "I came because you're troubled and you look like you've been left all alone here. So tell me, why are you alone in your room while the man you're pretending to be married to is feasting?"

"It's because I've embarrassed him again," Samira said, taking a long drink of the heady wine. As she did, a warmth spread from her belly to the rest of her body, heating her face more than the little bit of alcohol could account for. "Can I really trust you, Lynnda?"

"Of course you can," Ashlynn said, wrapping an arm around the other woman's shoulders. "Tell me what's been happening. How did you embarrass Owain?"

It was hardly the information she most wanted to hear from the young woman, but as long as she could get her talking, she felt reasonably certain that she could steer the conversation to more useful things. She just needed to get Samira to start and let the magic pull her along.

"It happened a few days ago," Samira said, drinking more of the enchanted wine. "Lord Owain brought me to meet with several women from the countryside. He said I should be friendly with them and just talk about silly women's things, nothing important."

"Were you looking for someone to act as a lady in waiting for you when you came out here?" Ashlynn guessed. It seemed like Owain wasn't as careless as she'd thought, he'd made some kind of an effort to find a companion for Samira.

"That was the idea," she said, taking one of the tarts and starting to nibble on it. "I didn't mean to make a fool of him," she pouted. "Those women, they're just too... too... wicked! I would never cuckold Owain, and I would certainly never announce that I was going to in front of him and all the other ladies," she protested.

"Tell me what happened," Ashlynn said, biting her lip to stifle a laugh at the image Samira conjured. As much as she hated seeing this woman impersonate her, hearing how badly she'd made a fool of Owain at least took an edge off her resentment.

"It's okay," Ashlynn said gently. "Owain will be feasting for hours, you just let it all out and let your friend Lynnda soothe your worries," she said gently. "What led to people thinking that you were going to cuckold him?"