

The Vampire 29

Chapter 29 29: A Powerful Gathering

That evening, for the first time since she began her magic lessons on the terrace with Nyrielle, Heila brought word that dinner would be in the formal dining room. Moreover, this time, several others would be in attendance.

Since Heila gave her the impression that things would be more formal, she submitted to the horned woman's suggestions and selected a midnight blue dress trimmed in black satin and lace along with sapphire jewelry.

Originally, she felt like the dress was too dark when she found it in her closets but now, it reminded her of Nyrielle's magic. Dark, flowing and a bit mysterious. She drew the line, however, at allowing Heila to style her hair.

The intricate updos that Heila arranged were stunning, to be sure, but they always left her with the feeling that a bird had made a nest of her hair. Besides, when she wore her hair down, Nyrielle was more likely to run her fingers through it.

When Ashlynn arrived at the formal dining room, she found that seven of the twelve places at the large cedar table had been set. Nyrielle had already arrived, and was accompanied by both Zedya and a vampire that she had yet to meet.

"My darling Ashlynn," Nyrielle said, beckoning for her to join them. When she did, Nyrielle disregarded all propriety, placing a hand on Ashlynn's cheek and drawing her into a deep, sensual kiss that sent shivers down her spine and left her breathless.

"Allow me to introduce you," Nyrielle said while Ashlynn recovered from the kiss. "This is Marcelle, one of our most important sources of information."

"My Lady," the gentleman said simply, offering a polite bow.

Despite the formality of the occasion that Ashlynn had been led to expect, Marcelle's attire could be mistaken for that of a moderately successful merchant. Loose black breeches tucked into short ankle boots and paired with a dark maroon tunic matched well with the loose curls of his short black hair and pale skin.

It wasn't until he stood up that Ashlynn realized how stunning his looks were. Where Thane's features possessed a rugged and handsome manliness, Marcelle's features were soft and delicate enough to be nearly feminine. Moreover, though she knew that he was of a similar age as her grandfather, if she hadn't known, she'd have taken him for a youth of sixteen or seventeen years old, younger even than her sister Jocelyn.

"Sir Marcell," Ashlynn greeted politely, doing her best to pretend that Nyrielle hadn't just kissed her in front of a man she'd just met. "I read your report. Thank you for everything you did to gather so much information, I know it can't have been easy."

"Ah, I'm too late to make introductions," Thane said, entering the room followed by two other men. "Ashlynn, watch yourself around Marcell. He's a rascal and a cad, and there isn't a game of chance that he can't cheat you at."

"And Marcell," Thane added. "Be good to Lady Ashlynn, I've taken her as my little sister which makes her your big sister from now on," he added with a wink at the other vampire.

"That... makes no sense," Marcell muttered.

"Ah, hem, boys?" Zedya interrupted, gesturing for people to take their seats now that everyone had arrived.

The two men who arrived with Thane had very little in common. Though Ashlynn had heard of both men, this was her first time meeting either of them.

The most striking of the two was a member of the Clan of the Great Claw called Bassinger. He was a towering individual with dark fur sprinkled liberally with gray who stood nearly eight feet tall. His dark tunic bore a gold badge in the shape of a sword and shield, and unlike the pot bellied Georg, his body seemed solid and muscular.

The other man, called Jakob, by contrast, was one of the shortest members of the Horned Clan that Ashlynn had ever seen. His hair had turned completely white and one of his horns had broken, missing the last third of its curl. He walked with a cane that was as gnarled as the man himself and his tunic bore a badge similar to the first man's, though in this case it was in the shape of a stone tower.

The badges marked the two men as among the most important of Nyrielle's direct servants. Bassinger held the office of 'Commander' and all soldiers within the Vale of Mists answered to him if Lady Nyrielle or her progeny weren't in command.

Jakob, on the other hand, was titled the 'Marshal of the Vale.' While he had fewer men under his command, he also had broad authority within the vale to maintain the peace. With only twenty thousand people in the vale, there weren't many constables or peace keepers, but some disputes between the people were inevitable, particularly when young ones decided to lock horns.

Seeing both men here along with three of Nyrielle's seven progeny made it immediately clear to Ashlynn how important this meeting was. Looking back at Marcelle, who seemed to be taking his ease in one of the high-backed chairs, Ashlynn couldn't help but wonder if his report contained more information than was in the written copy she'd been provided.

"Thank you, everyone, for coming on short notice," Nyrielle began. "Old goat, I know it's not easy for you to make the trip up to the castle, but I appreciate your council."

"Bah," Jakob snorted. "You're one to call me an 'old goat,' My Lady. But tell me young man," he said, turning to Marcell. "Is it really true that the humans have sent out one of their Inquisitors?"

At the mention of the inquisitor, a hush fell over the room as all eyes turned to Marcell. The young vampire frowned, sitting upright in his chair and reaching for a bottle of wine on the table, pouring himself a drink before he answered.

"I don't know," Marcell said reluctantly after a deep swallow of fragrant wine. "The acolyte who told me about it was young and junior, he hasn't met the person who arrived from the Holy City in person."

"Even if he's not an Inquisitor," the young vampire added. "He met directly with Loman Lothian when he arrived at the temple. He didn't meet with the High Priest or with Bors Lothian, he went to Loman."

"You think that Loman Lothian suspects his brother?" Zedya asked, running a delicate finger around the rim of her goblet. "Do you think he knows that Lady Ashlynn is a Child of the Earth?"

When Zedya spoke, Ashlynn struggled to suppress the icy grip of fear that wanted to close around her heart. Even if the Inquisitor knew about her, here in the Vale of Mists, there was little he could do. She might have lost her family, but she was much less vulnerable now than she'd been when she had to work so hard to conceal her secret.

"I don't know," Marcell said, putting his goblet down forcefully enough to spill a few drops on the table. "It could just be some kind of power play between the Church and the Lothian family. Maybe his target is his father Bors instead of Owain or our Seneschal."

"The only thing I know for sure is that an Inquisitor is almost always bad news," he said.

Hearing his words, Bassinger nodded, his bushy brows lowered in a scowl. "War," he said in a deep, rumbling voice. "Nearly every time an Inquisitor has arrived in Lothian, they've come to beat the drums of war."

"And if they know what Lady Ashlynn is," Zedya added, her bland face looking pensive. "If they deduce that she's here, then war will come for us sooner than later."