

The Vampire 30

Chapter 30 30: Forming Plans

"I've made arrangements," Nyrielle said, instantly drawing the attention of everyone around the table. "They shouldn't discover my darling's presence as long as she's safe within the Vale."

"What kind of arrangements did you make?" Ashlynn asked.

"Just a little trick, a diversion to keep their attention in their own borders," Nyrielle said cryptically, her face an impassive mask. "Marcell," she said, turning to the young vampire before Ashlynn could ask more questions about her diversion.

"Your report mentioned that they were sending supplies to the summer villa. Do you think that Owain is planning to hide from the Inquisitor by going there with the woman he's dressed up as my Ashlynn?"

"It's not impossible," Marcell mused. "If Owain Lothian knew that an inquisitor was coming, he might have made moves to see himself out of the city until things blow over. It would help to keep from exposing their fake Lady Blackwell as well."

"The young lord is playing with fire if he moves to the Summer Villa now," Bassinger said. "It's still in the one hour zone for another two weeks."

"One hour zone?" Ashlynn asked, unfamiliar with the term.

"Apologies, my lady," the Commander said, gesturing to a servant and whispering brief instructions.

"I'll have maps here in a few moments," he said, turning back to Ashlynn. "After so many years fighting each other, the Lothians are well aware of how far from the vale Lady Nyrielle's progeny can move in a single night and still return to safety before dawn," he explained.

"The Lothians call it the 'Summer Villa' because, during the summer, it's impossible for any of my progeny to attack their villa and make it home safely," Nyrielle added. "It's located in the foothills of the mountains, private and beautiful, but it's only safe for the Lothians to occupy during the months when daylight is shortest."

"We track the amount of time that Lady Nyrielle's progeny would have available to fight at any given time of year," Bassinger explained, taking a map from the servant and unrolling it on the table.

"Right now, days are getting shorter. In two weeks, there won't be much safe time at the Summer Villa at all. In a month, just going there and coming immediately back would be the limit."

As Ashlynn looked at the map, she marveled at the work that Nyrielle's people must have put into it. Not only was the map more detailed than any map of the area she'd ever seen but the concentric rings marking different dates of the year and travel times were impressive.

When she'd read the history of the battles between the Lothians and the forces of the Vale of Mists, they often mentioned the powerful lieutenants of the Demon Lady of the Vale. While they were never mentioned by name, there were several mentions of singular 'demons' who had once been human that showed up in the night and decimated any force that wasn't prepared to resist them.

The Lothians might not understand things as well as Nyrielle's own people did, but the dance had clearly gone on long enough for both parties to learn the steps well. No wonder Nyrielle desired Ashlynn's help to break the status quo.

"It doesn't make sense for Owain to go to the Summer Villa just to avoid the Inquisitor," Ashlynn said, looking at the map. "If he really wanted to hide from the Inquisitor, he'd go to Blackwell County."

"Why would he do that?" Zedya asked. "Most people don't know of your 'death', but he certainly does. How could he go to your home to avoid the inquisition?"

"Marcell's notes mentioned that he saw my family off alone," Ashlynn said, gaining confidence in her reasoning. "Whether they know the truth or not, the effect is the same. He's maintaining the appearance that I'm still alive and with him. As long as the Lothians intend to keep selling the lie, then there's little reason for him to abandon his plans."

"You know what young lord Owain was planning before your wedding?" Jakob asked. "And it has something to do with Blackwell County?"

"Originally, Owain and I were supposed to spend a month touring the March of Lothian," Ashlynn said, gesturing to the map. "After that, we would visit Blackwell County so that Owain could meet with several of the merchant families there."

"The Marquis of Lothian wants the support of the coastal merchants to strengthen his army," Ashlynn explained. "With support from my family, he can make his case directly to the merchant families."

"Bors Lothian wouldn't give up on his ambitions. Ashlynn is correct," Nyrielle said with a smile. "Whatever is happening at the Summer Villa, it likely isn't an attempt to conceal Owain from the Inquisitor."

"That leaves us right back where we started," Thane said. "We don't know if it's truly an Inquisitor in Lothian, and if it is, we don't know their purpose. We also don't know what they're preparing at the Summer Villa and whether or not it's related."

"What if we could find out?" Ashlynn asked. "Since the Summer Villa is still within the one hour zone, couldn't we spy on things there?"

"You still haven't adapted to nightlife, my sweet," Nyrielle said gently, placing her hand on Ashlynn's. "That one hour is in the dead of night. Even if Marcell could slip undetected into the Villa, most people would be asleep. There's little he could learn."

"I know," Ashlynn agreed. "But what if I went?"

"What?" Thane blurted out. "Ashlynn, you're the person we can least afford to expose to the Lothians. How could we send you there?"

"It's not as bad as you think," Ashlynn said quickly, reaching into a pouch at her waist and pulling out a page of notes. "I have a plan, or the beginnings of one, if you'll listen," she said, turning to Nyrielle for permission to continue.

"I'll indulge you, my sweet, but I won't agree unless you convince me," Nyrielle said, offering a fleeting smile. It seemed like Ashlynn was no longer content to act passively in the face of events. Or perhaps

she never had been and she was simply too overwhelmed by the many changes in her life to show her real strengths.

"I understand," Ashlynn said, grateful to be given the opportunity. Thus far, she'd felt like nothing but a burden, learning and training but doing little to contribute. Now, she finally felt like she had something to offer. More than that, it would let her learn more about what was happening in the world she hadn't entirely left behind.

"If they're sending supplies to the villa, then there are several servants coming and going," Ashlynn said. "I can join them to spend a few days in the villa, learning what's happening from the inside. I just need a little bit of help."

"You need one of us to carry you there," Thane said. "But Ashlynn, we have time enough to deliver you, but we wouldn't be able to protect you while you're there. You'd be on your own."

"Not entirely," Ashlynn said, turning her attention to Commander Bassinger. "Commander, do you think you could hide a few of your men in the forest nearby? Not enough to attack the villa, but enough to help me escape if things go badly."

"It's risky," the Commander said, scratching the fur along his chin. "The humans have placed a bounty on our heads. Any Eldritch head is worth ten silver pennies, and enough of them can earn a commoner a knighthood."

"It's not impossible to camp in the woods for a few days," he added. "But any hunter that stumbles across us is powerfully motivated to attack. An arrow that could kill a boar or stag can just as easily kill one of us."

"How many days do you think you could wait safely in the woods for me?"

"None," Bassinger said flatly before his face split with a wide grin. "But we could handle the risk for three days. Four at most. After that, they'll notice that anyone we have to kill to stop from reporting our presence has gone missing."

"Sorry if I'm asking something obvious," Marcell interjected. "But, Lady Ashlynn, can you really pose as a servant? I don't mean any disrespect, but servants are highly skilled at what they do. I've never met a nobleman who can do what their servants do for them."

"My darling is different," Nyrielle said. "I sent her to Thane so he could teach her to fight. She insisted on going to the kitchens to study with Georg. It seems your willfulness is coming in handy, my dear."

"I wouldn't have thought of this if it wasn't for Georg's lessons," Ashlynn admitted. "But, with a little bit more practice, I'm sure I could pass for a kitchen hand. Does that mean you're willing to let me try?"

"Your plan needs some refinement," the vampire said, her lips parting in a smile that revealed her fangs. "But it has enough potential that we should give it a try."