

The Vampire 35

Chapter 35 35: Infiltrating the Summer Villa

The night was cold and crisp and Thane's body lacked the warmth to ward off the chill Ashlynn felt as they raced through the night to the distant Lothian villa. Hours passed in near complete silence as neither of Nyrielle's progeny spoke for the duration of the trip, leaving Ashlynn alone with her thoughts.

From what she had read when preparing to marry Owain, she knew that the Summer Villa had been a treasure of the Lothian family for generations. While they referred to it as a villa, the combination of outer and inner walls gave the luxurious manor several attributes of a country fortress and a number of storied battles had even been fought at the villa.

Because of Nyrielle and her progeny, the Lothians had never been willing to engage in protracted sieges that lasted through the dark winter months. Doing so only invited disaster when the most powerful of Nyrielle's forces were the least restrained. Instead, wars between humans and the Eldritch nations tended to be brief but intense affairs fought in the late spring to early fall.

During that time, the Lothian family made it a habit to send vulnerable young heirs or cousins of the main line of the family to the Summer Villa. It was located far enough from any of the major battlefields to become a place of safety, and at the same time, it prevented the Church from offering to fulfill the same role.

While young Lothian heirs would have been incredibly secure within the walls of the temple in Lothian City, they would also become hostages that the Church could use to pressure the Marquis. Bors Lothian, like his father and grandfather before him, had no intention of giving the Church any more influence in the march than they already had and so the tradition of sending the family to the Summer Villa in the late spring persisted to this day.

When Ashlynn arrived at the villa, it loomed large against the stars of the clear night sky, occupying the top of a hill with a commanding view of both the lowlands and the distant forests of the foothills. Walls nearly thirty feet high stood like silent sentinels in the dark, wrapping themselves around the grand manor like a scarf of stone draped over the uneven hilltop.

What surprised Ashlynn was that the villa was already more active than she would have expected so early in the season. Torches burned at both gatehouses filling the air with the faint smell of woodsmoke and light shone from the windows of several rooms in the manor even at this late hour.

"Is this going to be a problem?" Ashlynn asked when they paused outside the outer gates.

"It won't," Zedya said with a smile. "Excuse me, gentleman," the vampire called, stepping out of the shadows in full display of the guards atop the wall. "My Mistress craves a moment of your attention."

When Zedya spoke, her amethyst eyes glowed like sparkling jewels in the night, drawing the attention of the men on the wall with an irresistible pull. As soon as she had drawn their attention, Thane made his own move, easily scaling the wall in a few steps to arrive before the entranced men.

"Open the side gate," Thane commanded, his voice rich and sonorous, landing on the ears of the guardsmen like it was a command from the Holy Lord of Light himself.

"Yes, Lord," one of the guardsmen said, moving awkwardly, as if in a daze while he made his way into the gatehouse to open the small door that would only allow a single person at a time to pass through.

"My Lady," Zedya said, gesturing for Ashlynn to proceed her into the gate. "I'll be right behind you as soon as these men have forgotten seeing us."

Time was limited, so Ashlynn said nothing as she entered the villa, but inwardly part of her shivered at the efficiency with which the pair of vampires gained access to the Lothian fortress. Thane had been given the Voice of Command while Nyrielle had gifted Zedya with Mesmerizing Eyes.

This was her first time seeing Zedya's gift in action and the results were impressive. Combined with Thane, however, it was a little bit terrifying. "No wonder the Lothians have never broken the vale..."

Seeing the vale for herself, she'd been surprised by how few people there were to fight off the combined armies of the Lothians and all of their vassals. Even with the advantage held by defenders, they should have been overrun generations ago.

Now, walking effortlessly into a Lothian fortress because of just two people, she realized why numbers couldn't tell the whole story. Nyrielle's forces were much more capable than those raised by the Lothians and she had no doubt that the appearance of any of her progeny could tip a pitched battle in the Vale's favor.

Perhaps the only thing that allowed the Lothians to resist an attack on their own home ground was the considerable presence maintained by the Church in Lothian City and throughout the march. If these guards had been Templars instead of ordinary soldiers, Ashlynn doubted their entrance would have been so easy.

"The servant's quarters are this way," Thane said once they'd reached the manor itself.

Fully staffed, the manor could easily accommodate fifty servants or more. At the moment, however, fewer than twenty men and women occupied the two common rooms provided to household staff.

The beds were simple with mattresses stuffed with hay and each servant had a single wooden box to hold their spare change of clothing and any personal effects they owned. While the men and women slept separately, Zedya quickly woke all of the servants and brought them under her spell, gathering them in the women's chambers.

"Remember everyone," Zedya told her enthralled audience. "This woman is called Lynnda and she arrived at the same time as all of you. She's been here as long as you have," she repeated, ensuring that the people under her sway wouldn't find anything unusual about Ashlynn's sudden appearance.

"Which one among you is in charge of the kitchens," Thane asked one of the numbly standing servants. Turning to the man the servant pointed out, he spoke again, using the richness of his Voice of Command. "Tell me your name."

"Otis, Lord," a balding man with a thin mustache said, looking straight ahead with glazed eyes while under Zedya's spell.

"Otis," Zedya whispered, coming closer to the man. "I've heard a rumor. You've heard the same rumor. Lynnda is Marquis Bors' illegitimate daughter."

"Be good to Lynnda," Thane commanded. "She will assist you in the kitchens but do not abuse her."

"Why would you tell him that?" Ashlynn asked sharply. They'd told her that Zedya would mesmerize the servants to accept her presence, but no one had mentioned this to her. If they hadn't told her about this during their planning, what other arrangements had they made without informing her?

"So that they don't dare to touch you," Zedya said, stepping close to Ashlynn. "My Lady, please don't be displeased. I know that you wish to prove yourself without more of our meddling help."

"If you know," Ashlynn said, raising a brow. "Then why do it?"

"Because you mean too much to Mistress Nyrielle," the vampire said. "She didn't command this, but you Thane, and I, we've both seen what's happening. Mistress is happier now than she has been in a very long time. Perhaps happier than she's been since before she took Thane and I in."

"I won't let anyone bully my little sister," Thane added, stepping up to give Ashlynn a parting hug. "And I won't spoil Mistress Nyrielle's happiness by risking you. Learn what you can, but remember that your life belongs to our Mistress and is more important than any information you can gather here."

"Alright," Ashlynn said, returning Thane's hug before stepping back. "You two should go. You don't have much time to make it back before daylight."

Lying down on one of the available beds, Ashlynn closed her eyes while Zedya led the glassy-eyed servants back to their own beds. In the morning, no one but her would remember the strange visitors who had come in the night and left like the wind.

It wasn't until almost an hour later that Ashlynn was able to join the servants in sleep. The hay of the bed poked at her and the coarse blanket scratched at her skin and the smell of so many unwashed bodies in a single room was far from pleasant but she knew that if she didn't get at least some rest before the sun rose, she would regret it.

Once morning came, she would be all alone among the humans of the Lothian villa... and her real work would begin.