

The Vampire 238

Chapter 238 238: Preparing for War

That night, Thane summoned a small group of people to a late dinner in Nyrielle's formal dining room. It was a meeting he could just as easily have held in his office in the tower, but at the moment, part of him craved the steady reminders of Nyrielle's presence that this room offered.

Whether it was the soft lavender wall hangings in her mother's favorite shade or the exquisitely detailed landscape paintings created by Nyrielle's own hand, it was impossible to sit in the formal dining room deep underground without feeling like you were in the presence of the Eldritch Lady of the Vale, even if she wasn't here.

The high-backed seat at the head of the table stood empty, which was normal for an occasion where Nyrielle wasn't present. What had changed, however, was that Thane no longer occupied the seat reserved for Nyrielle's second. That seat now belonged to Ashlynn, and even in her absence, Thane refused to intrude.

"Thank you, Georg," the former knight said with a warm smile as the portly chef entered with a tray of crisp, fresh salads that combined summer greens with winter nuts and fresh, crumbly cheese. "I know you're staying up late to cook for us tonight."

"If I wasn't cooking for you, Sir Thane, who would I be cooking for?" Georg said with a smile as he set a small portion in front of the acting ruler of the Vale of Mists. Another small portion was quickly set before Marcell who sprawled comfortably in a seat across from Thane.

Neither vampire relished in food the way Nyrielle did and if Thane was honest, he struggled to keep up the habit of eating when there weren't others around. Marcell was decades younger and still retained more of his humanity, especially since his work kept him in contact with humans as he gathered

information from across Lothian March. Thane, on the other hand, felt time like a millstone, slowly wearing away at the things that had defined his life when he still lived.

"You can come cook for me any time," Marshal Jakob said, his usually gruff voice rippling with mirth. "Elise would welcome a night off."

"Lies," Commander Bassinger said, happily accepting the large bowl of salad that Georg placed in front of him. "Your wife gave up on you being home in time for dinner years ago. Last I heard, she was still rotating between your children's homes so she could help feed your flock of grandchildren."

"Grandchildren, is it?" Thane said, raising a brow as he nibbled on the crisp, slightly bitter greens. "I thought your youngest was still at home. Has she moved out already?"

"Last fall," the Marshal said, tugging on his scraggly gray beard as he remembered his wife pleading with his latest son-in-law to move in with them instead of finding their own place in the castle town.

Now, the once boisterous house had become truly empty and quiet, not that he had much time to spend there. With life as it was, he could hardly blame Elise for spending so much time visiting their children and grandchildren.

"I see," Thane said, giving the old goat a regretful look. "I'm sorry to be keeping you away from them tonight, but some things can't wait."

"I know, I know," Jakob said. "A few more years and I'll retire to keep my Elise company, but the Lothians don't seem to want me to end my tenure with a war. What do you need from me, Sir Thane? It can't be good if you couldn't wait for Lady Nyrielle to return."

"Marcell?" Thane said, turning to face the youngest of Nyrielle's progeny. "What's the news?"

"It's nothing we didn't expect," the dark-haired vampire said, setting aside the empty bowl that had once contained a salad. Georg's food was always a treat after spending any amount of time in human settlements and for a moment, he considered asking for more, but knowing Georg, the main course would be even more delightful and so he made himself hold back.

"The biggest complication is that Owain is using the Holy Festival of Light to show off the trophies he collected in his massacre," the spymaster explained. "By itself, that wouldn't be a problem, but something odd is happening between Owain Lothian and Liam Dunn."

"I thought they all but hated each other," Commander Bassinger said in a deep, rumbling voice. "Weren't the Dunn's chafing at the bit to become lords in their own right? Their territory is on the farthest edge of Lothian lands. With a bit more strength, couldn't they form their own domain?"

"Humans don't work that way," Thane said with a shake of his head. "If the Lothians were High Lords in the Eldritch way, then sure, Baron Dunn could break away to become an Eldritch Lord with a smaller territory. They have the strength to rule it, or close enough to it."

"In human lands, that would be considered a rebellion," Marcell explained. "The Dunns can advance, effectively becoming High Lords once the Lothians are promoted to Great Lords," he said, using Eldritch terms as an example even though the parallels between ranks weren't quite the same. "But you're not wrong, the tension between the families has been significant for years."

"Owain and Liam, however, seem like they've become recent friends," Marcell continued. "Evidently, Liam was supposed to join Owain for his bloody rampage, but he was delayed over some other business at home. Now, they're using Owain's recent 'victory' to drum up support for a campaign led by Liam this summer."

"So much for a quiet summer spent on training and preparations," Bassinger said with a disgusted snort. "How many men do you think this Liam will raise against us?"

"More importantly," Thane interjected. "Where does the Church stand on this hunt? Owain was terrifying this time because he brought an Inquisitor and Templars. Will Liam have the same report?"

"I don't know," Marcell said with a defeated sigh. "This time of year, I can't risk visiting Lothian City. If I get caught, there's not enough time between sunset and sunrise to flee. I'm relying on the few spies I've placed in Lothian City and elsewhere to pass along information and I've never gained a permanent spy in the Church."

"I don't think Liam Dunn will be able to raise enough men to assault the Vale though," Marcell added. "I think it's the outlying villages that he's going to go after. Even if he could raise enough men to make trouble for us, he's moving in concert with Owain and we know that Owain is planning his Holy War for next year. Do any of you think that Owain Lothian would tolerate Liam Dunn kicking off the war early after everything Lady Ashlynn has told us about him?"

"Owain is a rabid beast, but a cunning one," Jakob said, offering his opinion. "He beat his own wife half to death for threatening his ambitions. I can't imagine he'd be kinder to a rival lord. Your men may still get the year to spend training yet, Bassinger."

"Yes and no," Thane said, retrieving a map of the Vale of Mists and pinning the corners in place with salt and pepper shakers. "Marshal, I have two problems I'd like to have you help solve for me. First, it's been

too long since we clearcut the forest near the walls. Some of the trees growing there are within fifty feet of the walls and they're almost twenty years old, dating to Bors Lothian's last campaign."

"I see where you're going," the Marshal said, nodding at the map. "You need clear lines of sight for archers on the walls, and we need lumber to build a village for the refugees, right? Will you let me press able-bodied refugees in the camp into work teams to do the logging?"

"You can't press them," Thane said, tapping his finger on the wooden table as he thought through the Marshal's suggestion. "But if Ollie can build some enthusiasm for this village, I'm certain you won't lack for volunteers. Use your own men for brush clearing and the refugees for logging. If they feel like the work they're doing supports their new village, you'll have fewer complaints than if you tell them we need them to strengthen the walls."

"You think they'll flee if they're asked to help with our defenses?" Bassinger said in a dark, disapproving tone. "Are we about to see another wave of cowards flee through the High Pass?"

"I didn't say that," Thane said smoothly. "But that's why I need your help with something else. Too many of your men have never fought against humans. They're well trained and have served for years, but they've served in peacetime."

"I want you to form a few small teams to visit the villages closest to the Dunn Barony," Thane said, a predatory smile forming on his lips that revealed a hint of fangs. "Some have been abandoned, others have sent only their elderly and their children. Aim for the ones that haven't been abandoned entirely."

"Sir Thane," Bassinger said, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. "I want to make sure I understand our mission. Do you want us to defend these villages?"

"If they can be defended, then that's good," Thane said, his amber gaze growing sharp. "The important thing is to bring back word of a victory to reassure the refugees that the forces of the Vale of Mists can keep them safe. The second thing is to give our soldiers some real experience fighting humans. Saving villages comes a distant third. If the villagers need to flee, so be it. We'll take them in."

"But Commander Bassinger," Thane said. "Come next year, we'll need as many soldiers as possible, and the more of them who can be considered veterans, the better. Right now, that's your first priority. As much as it may hurt to abandon a village, I'd rather see another dozen villages burn than lose a dozen men fighting to save them."

"I understand," the bearish man said, giving a formal salute from his chair. It didn't sit well with him to do a half-hearted job of defending the outlying villages. If they were going to protect people, they should protect them to the end. But... Sir Thane was looking to the future, and the commander could hardly fault him for that.

If the Vale of Mists fell because Bassinger squandered his men defending villages that hadn't even placed themselves under the rule of Lady Nyrielle... it was as good as signing his own death warrant.