

## The Vampire 26

### Chapter 26 26: Hidden Movements

After the demonstration, Ashlynn slumped against Nyrielle, her entire body feeling drained and cold in the early spring air. The green light she'd added to the polished crystal faded, leaving only Nyrielle's pale blue light to illuminate the terrace.

"That," she breathed. "That was amazing."

"That was a beginning," Nyrielle promised, gently scooping Ashlynn up in her arms and carrying the young woman back into her bed chamber. "You should rest now," she said after gently setting the young witch down atop the soft feather-filled mattress.

"Stay with me? Just until I sleep," Ashlynn pleaded, hanging onto Nyrielle's hand. The moment on the terrace had been so intense that she wanted to cling to it just a little bit longer. To feel Nyrielle's soft touch a little longer, or even just linger in the other woman's presence.

"I'll help you sleep," Nyrielle said, gently helping the young woman out of her blouse and skirt until nothing remained but her soft shift. Pulling a heavy blanket up and tucking Ashlynn in, she added a thin trace of power to her voice and whispered "Sleep."

Within a few heartbeats, Ashlynn's emerald eyes drifted closed and her chest rose and fell with the steady rhythm of deep sleep.

"I wish I could stay," Nyrielle whispered, gently stroking Ashlynn's hair. "But tonight, there are things that need to be done."

Sweeping out of Ashlynn's room, the vampire raced through the night, leaving the Vale of Mists far behind and venturing into the lands ruled by the Lothians.

Each year, more humans came to the marches along the frontier, drawn by the offers of various marquises. A wealthy man who established and defended a village in the frontier could be elevated to the rank of knight, and granted lands and the rights to rule over them.

Other members of the nobility, particularly second and third sons who were unlikely to inherit, also flocked to the frontier in the hopes of establishing a cadet branch of their family and a title of their own.

For the past several nights since Ashlynn's arrival, Nyrielle had prowled through those frontier villages, quiet as a breeze whispering through the eaves. This night was no different, though the power she gained from Nyrielle's blood allowed her to move even faster and penetrate deeper into Lothian territory than she'd otherwise have dared to.

When she started this quest, her motives had been pure and pragmatic. It wasn't hard to foresee certain troubles and eliminating them before they could become tragedies was better than leaving matters to fate.

Now, however, after what she'd shared with Ashlynn tonight, her mission became much more urgent and even more personal.

Finally, in the third village of the night, she found what she'd been searching for.

Standing outside the window of a small crafter's house on the edges of a village, she blended a trace of energy with her voice and spoke to the young woman sleeping quietly in bed.

"Come outside," she commanded, firmly enough to wake the other woman and quietly enough that others in the village couldn't hear. "I'm waiting for you," she added. "Hurry."

A few moments later, a young woman with ashen blond hair and a slender build walked out of the home she shared with her family, scrubbing sleep from her eyes and standing in the doorway wearing nothing but her shift.

"Who is it? Why are you waiting for me?" she mumbled. "I told Sir Liam, I'm not some cheap thing he can summon whenever he wishes. If he truly wants to be with me, he should come himself..."

"Hush now," Nyrielle commanded, her eyes glowing with power and slowly turning dark as she studied the other woman. "You're taller than my Ashlynn," she murmured. "But not by much. Show me your hands."

Under the pale moonlight, the vampire inspected the young woman's slender hands, smiling when she found few calluses or signs of manual labor. The sign that hung on the home bore the symbol of a needle and thread used to advertise the services of seamstresses and embroiderers.

In the hundreds of years that she'd been alive, Nyrielle had encountered countless people who resembled others, even when there was no blood relationship between them. While Ashlynn's blonde hair was uncommon in the frontier, this was actually the third woman that Nyrielle had found who both closely matched Ashlynn's build and features.

The first, however, had been the daughter of a tanner. Her limbs had been so darkly stained with dye over the years that no one would ever mistake her for a nobleman's daughter. Likewise, the second had worked in the kitchens of a local baron and her body bore countless scars from the embers of a hearth.

This woman, however, had lived a gentle life by the standards of the common folk. Dressed in fine silks and seen from a distance, people might easily mistake her for Ashlynn. The resemblance, at least, was close enough for her purposes.

"Sleep," she commanded, scooping up the young woman in her arms and vanishing into the night.

An hour later, after returning to the forest of the Vale of Mists, Nyrielle set the young woman down and shook her awake.

"What? Where am I? You, who??" The woman asked rapidly, her head turning from side to side as she took in her surroundings and the strange woman in the forest with her. Her bare feet scrambled against the soft soil of the forest as she scrambled backward, pressing herself against the rough bark of a nearby tree as she struggled to her feet.

"Did Liam send you?" the young woman asked, realizing something must be horribly wrong. "He, he's trying to get rid of me, isn't he? Or is it his father? I swear, I'll never tell anyone..."

"Do not speak," Nyrielle commanded, instantly silencing the other woman whose eyes grew wide with fear as she began to rapidly back away from Nyrielle.

Twigs snapped as the young woman fled, sounding unnaturally loud in the still and quiet night. Her heart thudded loudly in her chest, urging her to turn and run but she dared not take her eyes off the strange woman who seemed to drift silently through the forest, never letting her out of sight.

"This will be over soon," Nyrielle said, appearing before the other woman in a flash, her fist striking out and knocking her to the ground. "But it will hurt before it's over," she added, her voice cold and face expressionless.

"If you have resentment in your heart, direct it at Owain Lothian," Nyrielle said, striking out again. In her mind, she recalled every wound on Ashlynn's body when she'd first found her stumbling through the dark and rain. Again and again, she struck out, inflicting the same wounds on the young woman that Owain had inflicted on Ashlynn until the young woman lay in a crumpled heap on the ground, barely clinging to life.

Slowly, the woman turned her head, peering at Nyrielle with swollen eyes that seemed to shout the question "Why?"

It made no sense to her. What did the Marquis's son have to do with her? Unless Liam's father wanted her out of the way to arrange matters between Liam and someone Owain Lothian favored? She just couldn't understand. Was what she and Liam had done really so wrong to deserve this?

Nyrielle, however, provided no answers, lashing out with a brutal kick that shattered ribs and pierced the young woman's heart.

"It isn't just," she said, scooping up the young woman's body and discarding her shift in the woods. "But one day, someone may come searching for my Ashlynn in the grave they dumped her in. It would spoil far too much if they found it empty."

"If you raise again to haunt someone, then you can haunt Owain Lothian," she said as she placed a hand over the young woman's body. "Without him, there would be no need for you to have died in such a painful way."

Slowly, dark red energy began to spill from Nyrielle's fingers, pouring into the young woman's flesh. After a few moments, a birthmark began to form on the woman's hip. She didn't do anything to replicate the scars on Ashlynn's hip from the misguided attempts to remove the mark of the witch, but when she was done, a remarkably similar mark adorned the unnamed woman's flesh.

Hopefully, Ashlynn would never come to know what she had done. Even she found it distasteful when the young woman had done nothing to deserve her fate. But when had the Eldritch people ever done anything to deserve what humans did to them?

"Ashlynn doesn't see the world that way," Nyrielle said. "At least, not yet. Maybe one day she'll understand," she whispered, carrying the young woman's body into the night.

Maybe, if the day ever came when Ashlynn did find out, she could find a way to forgive her for doing this to keep her safe from the people who would hunt her if they found an empty grave.