

The Vampire 31

Chapter 31 31: Preparations

After fleshing out details for Ashlynn's proposed mission to spy on the summer villa, the group moved on to other topics once Georg's first course arrived.

It seemed like the cook understood that this would be a working meal. Rather than one of his usual menus of refined dishes, he sent several platters of cured meats, cheeses, dried fruits, and crusty bread that people could nibble on while remaining engaged in conversation.

"My Lady," Jakob asked, setting aside a plate of vegetables that seemed to have been prepared almost exclusively for him. "With an inquisitor in Lothian, should we begin calling the young ones to arms? We'll need time to form them into a proper army."

"If the Lothians are going to attack us this summer, then we should start calling up all of the able-bodied youths to train," Bassinger agreed. "There aren't many veterans of the last war that are still capable of fighting on the front lines but there are plenty to act as teachers."

"I don't think the Lothians will attack this summer," Ashlynn interjected. "Next summer at the earliest. Marquis Bors needs more time to build his forces."

"What makes you say that?" Thane asked. He happened to agree with her, but he wanted to give Ashlynn the chance to establish herself with the rest of this group.

"The Blackwells offer a considerable advantage to the Lothians," Ashlynn said. "But it isn't one that can be utilized quickly. The Blackwells don't have a large standing army. In fact, half of their soldiers serve

aboard ships that protect the coast and inspect ships coming to port. They couldn't be deployed this far inland even if they wanted to."

"What the Blackwells offer is a bridge to the old countries," she explained, tearing up a piece of bread and placing two pieces close together then dropping several others on the opposite side of her plate.

"Given time, the Blackwells can bring over shiploads of men eager to prove themselves against the 'demons' of the Frontier. Perhaps the reason the Inquisitor is in Lothian is to secure concessions from Marquis Bors about new territories in exchange for bringing over more of their miracle workers from the old countries," she added.

As she spoke, Ashlynn set several nuts next to the 'old countries' before gathering them up and sliding them across the table to 'Blackwell' and then to Lothian.

When she mentioned 'miracle workers', however, there was an audible hiss from several people in the room. The Church had its own titles for such individuals, 'Blessed One', 'Living Saint', and so on depending on the individual. All of them, however, were able to wield a form of magic that they claimed was granted by the Holy Lord of Light.

Whether it was true or not, Ashlyn increasingly believed that they were just sorcerers in the service of the Church, it was undeniable that their magic was particularly potent when used against the Eldritch peoples.

Nyrielle in particular adopted a grim expression at the news. It was these very 'Holy Men' who the Lothians had recruited to capture her parents and burn them at the stake. Their magic had also claimed the life of her grandsire. If the Lothians obtained their support again, she didn't dare imagine the nightmares that could unfold.

The news that the Blackwells would facilitate bringing over more of these 'miracle workers' was worse than being told the Lothians had doubled the size of their army.

"My marriage to Owain was the beginning of this," Ashlynn said bitterly. "A formal declaration of alliance with a goal to raise a greater army than has been assembled in generations."

"You're saying that we have time," Jakob said, stroking his white beard and thinking. "In that case, my Lady, perhaps this year we should do the opposite of preparing for war. We can draw down Bassinger's forces, send more men back to the farms to clear more land so we have greater strength going into next year."

"I think that's premature," Nyrielle said after thinking for a few moments. "I want two weeks' time to prepare for Ashlynn's mission. Once she returns, we should know more. We're making too many guesses right now."

"During those weeks, we need to make other preparations," she added. "After she returns, I intend to take Ashlynn to visit the Mother of Thorns."

Several gasps rippled around the table followed by a series of nods as people considered the implications of the move.

"I'll begin preparing your escort," Bassinger said. While agreements could be made with other Eldritch Lords, it was best to assume that no nation other than your own was truly safe.

"I'll prepare a tribute for Lord Ritchel and High Lady Erna," Nyrielle said with a heavy sigh. "Jakob, please send some of your men to the villages and ask for volunteers for me. I'm afraid that I'm going to drain myself substantially to prepare a gift that the High Lady will accept."

"What about the Mother of Thorns?" Zedy asked. "When you brought me to her, she charged a considerable sum to tutor me."

"My Ashlynn is different," Nyrielle said. "I brought you to her so that you could emulate witchcraft with sorcery. The price I paid was an apology for something she considered to be a mild desecration of her life's work. Ashlynn, on the other hand, is a Child of the Earth. The Mother of Thorns should be much happier to receive her."

As the conversation moved into the details of making a trip into the territories controlled by the Eldritch nations that no human had ever visited, Ashlynn found herself increasingly unable to offer anything to the discussion.

When it came to fighting the Lothians, she had a good deal of relevant information and experience, but in matters relating to the Eldritch peoples, she barely knew anything. If it had been just her and Nyrielle, or her and Thane, she would have asked several questions along the way. Now, however, she could only watch things unfold and file the information away for later.

"I expect that the Mother of Thorns may require Ashlynn to stay with her for a few weeks to months," Nyrielle said toward the end of the conversation. "If that's the case, I'll seek out my great grandsire and his progeny. They may be willing to cross the mountains to aid us."

"Either way, Ashlynn and I will return before the first frost," Nyrielle emphasized. "I won't have us trapped on the far side of the mountains through the winter. Now, time is limited. Everyone, you know what you should attend to, please see it done. Ashlynn, my darling, please stay."

Nyrielle waited until she and Ashlynn were alone in the room before reaching out to capture the young witch's hands, startling her out of whatever thoughts had consumed her while the others left.

"I had no time to ask before the others arrived, but, are you well?" Nyrielle asked.

"I am, why wouldn't I be?" Ashlyn said, puzzled by the question.

"You performed very well tonight," Nyrielle said, cupping Ashlyn's face with a cool hand. "But I'm worried about your eagerness to spy on the Summer Villa. If you run into Owain and his pretend wife, what will you do?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Ashlynn said, clenching a fist. "If the opportunity presents itself then I'll take it. I'm not as weak as I was before. I don't think Owain himself will show up, but if he does, then I'll claim his life!"

"My darling, my heart that beats next to mine, you can't," Nyrielle said. "Owain will have his day, but if you provoke the Lothians by murdering him at the Summer Villa, we'll be under attack before we're ready. More people will die," she said.

"You want me to wait until we're ready?" Ashlynn asked, trembling as she forced down the fire that ignited when she imagined killing Owain. "When will that be? This winter once we're back from across the mountains?"

"Perhaps," Nyrielle said. "I won't make a promise about when. The time will be ripe when it's ripe, and Owain will die by your hands, this I promise you," she said, drawing the trembling woman into a gentle embrace. "But we aren't ready yet, and you aren't either."

"If you can promise me that you will only act as a spy, then I will help you prepare to visit the Summer Villa," she said firmly. "But if you can't give me your word that you'll do no harm to Owain, even if you see him, then I cannot let you go."

"A wise ruler never forgets the whole of her nation," Ashlynn said softly, closing her eyes against the swirl of emotions in her chest.

"The information is too important," the young witch said after she'd regained her composure. "Even if I encounter Owain, I will let him live for now."