

## The Vampire 34

### Chapter 34 34: First Parting

Two weeks after the dinner with Nyrielle's council, Ashlynn sat alone in one of the castle gardens, waiting for the sun to set. Her hair had been freshly dyed black and her clothes were simple, roughly made items taken from one of the human villages closest to the vale.

For the past two weeks, Ashlynn had immersed herself in preparation for her mission to infiltrate the summer villa. Most of her waking daylight hours were spent in Georg's kitchen, working alongside the bear of a man in everything from the preparation of elegant dishes to the cleaning of pots and pans.

At the same time, her nights were consumed with lessons from Nyrielle and Thane. The lessons she received in sorcery included some of the magic that Marcell used in his work as a spy while Thane ran her ragged, practicing to escape from pursuit should things go wrong.

Both Nyrielle and Thane would have been happier if she'd had an additional week or two to prepare but when Marcell returned with word of several servants being transferred to the villa, they realized that their window of opportunity might be closing. Now, as Ashlynn sat in the garden, awaiting the setting of the sun, she hoped that the preparation had been enough.

Today was a rare day in the Vale. Several days of rain had cleared away the mists leaving the air cool and crisp when the clouds finally drifted away. In the past month, there had only been a handful of days like today where Ashlynn could actually see the sun, even when it was directly overhead.

The constant fog and the shift in her schedule to being awake until dawn made her time in the vale seem like a surreal dream. A dream that, now that she was preparing to return to human lands, she didn't want to wake up from.

"The primroses are in bloom," Ashlynn said when a breeze stirred and Nyrielle appeared beside her in the final moments of fading daylight.

"You like them?" Nyrielle asked, a hand reaching out to take one of Ashlynn's hands in her own.

"I don't know that I like them," Ashlynn said, keeping her eyes on the delicate flowers and refusing to meet Nyrielle's inquiring gaze. "I admire them though. They're always the first to bloom like they have to come out and show the rest of the garden that it's okay to open up."

"They're not the prettiest flower, but they're the first look at beauty in the garden, here or at home. In a little bit, the more stunning flowers will open up and the primroses won't be noticed, but for a little while, they're the only ones in the garden and they can bask in all of our attention."

"You're far too beautiful to compare yourself to a primrose," Nyrielle breathed, reaching out and gently turning Ashlynn's face to face her. "Even with your hair dyed black and the rough clothing, you're still my orchid in the night. You just needed the right environment to blossom."

"I never said I was a primrose," Ashlynn said, her face heating. "Only that I admired them. They have the courage to be alone. I need a bit of that right now," she whispered, leaning into Nyrielle's touch.

"You know that you don't have to do this," the vampire reminded her. "As valuable as it may be, as much as you may learn, we have survived many years without being able to place a spy like you among the humans. We can find other ways."

"No," Ashlynn said firmly. "I need to do this for myself as well as for you. If I don't..."

Her voice trailed off with the things she couldn't bring herself to say. After a month in the Vale of Mists, living among the Eldritch, she felt like she was losing touch with what it meant to be human. The only people she'd encountered in the vale who had once been human were Nyrielle's progeny and they were each otherworldly in their own ways.

She wasn't sure if she could still think of herself as human, not after everything she'd learned about her own powers.

Her blood bond with Nyrielle was still growing stronger, and the power she gained from it had yet to reach its limits. Already, she possessed the same physical strength as her father's knights, and even in the rough terrain of the vale, she could match the speed of any member of the Horned Clan when she raced through the forest.

She wasn't like Thane and Nyrielle, with power that transcended human limits, not yet at least, but she had moved far beyond what anyone would expect from a delicate noblewoman.

That distinction made this moment even more important to her. She wanted to step back into the human world at least one more time while she could still feel like a part of it. Before her growing power could twist her perception of the humans she'd once been.

"I'll be waiting for your return," Nyrielle said softly, drawing Ashlynn into a warm embrace. Nyrielle had fed frequently these past two weeks, though she hadn't fed on Ashlynn since the first time. Whatever sorcery she was working on to prepare her tributes to the other Eldritch lords demanded not only much of her time but drained her significantly in the process.

"Leaving is harder than I thought," Ashlynn said softly, her arms wrapping around Nyrielle and holding her tightly. For a moment, all she wanted to do was listen to the sound of Nyrielle's heart beating, letting it soothe her in a way the echo she carried in her own chest never could.

"Do you want me to carry you to the villa tonight instead of Thane?"

"No," Ashlynn said, shaking her head slightly against Nyrielle's chest. "You have work to do, and so do I," she said, pulling back. "Thane and Zedya can take care of delivering me."

"Such a willful Seneschal I've gained," Nyrielle said, leaning in close and taking Ashlynn's soft lips in her own.

At first, the kiss was gentle and innocent, but the longer it lasted, the deeper it grew as if their lips and tongues clung to each other in an embrace all of their own. A slight prick from Nyrielle's fangs spilled a few drops of sharp, metallic blood from Ashlynn's lower lip, sending a shiver down the younger woman's spine and stirring a heat within her body.

The kiss lasted until the last light of the sunset faded from the sky as neither woman was willing to step back from the moment. Only the arrival of Nyrielle's progeny held Ashlynn back from going further and wrapping herself around Nyrielle to cling to her Mistress with her entire body.

While Nyrielle might not care for the thoughts of others when displaying her affection for Ashlynn, the young witch was still enough of a noblewoman to shrink away from being so bold in full view of others.

"Thane," Nyrielle said when she finally pulled back from the kiss. "You have the final decision when you arrive. If you assess it too dangerous, you bring my darling home, no matter what she says, you understand?"

Despite the determination she could feel radiating from Ashlynn and Thane's positive assessment of her skills and preparations, Nyrielle still couldn't entirely put her heart at ease with Ashlynn's departure.

The presence of an Inquisitor conjured too many painful memories of loved one's lost to be cavalier about the threat posed by one of the Church's highly-trained zealots. If Thane detected even a hint of such a person, she expected him to sweep Ashlynn off her feet and bring her home whether the young witch was willing or not.

"Your will, Mistress," Thane replied with a slight bow. "If I see any sign that the Inquisitor is there or that there's extraordinary danger, I'll bring her directly back."

Ashlynn looked like she wanted to protest, but she held her tongue. That the villa was being prepared for use by the Inquisitor was one of the many speculations that had formed while she prepared for her mission and one that could prove the most dangerous for the vale.

If the Inquisitor was present, she felt that it was even more important to gain information but she understood that the man presented not only the greatest danger to Nyrielle's progeny but to herself as well. Since that was the case, she accepted Nyrielle's arrangements, even if she felt like she could avoid being discovered.

"I'll return soon," she promised, stepping away from Nyrielle to join Thane and Zedya.

"I know," the vampire said, smiling slightly with a mixture of pride at Ashlynn's growth and sadness at her departure. "I'll be waiting. Now go, the night is short and growing shorter."

A moment later Thane scooped Ashlynn up into his powerful arms, whisking her away into the darkness of the night.