

The Vampire 36

Chapter 36 36: Preparing for Distinguished Guests

Ashlynn felt like she'd barely gotten to sleep when the sound of someone striking a metal cowbell rang through the servant's quarters, signaling a start to the day. The embers in the hearth had long burned out and the cold stone floor of the room made her grateful of the thick socks she kept, even though they were far too luxurious for most common servants. Once she slipped her house shoes on over them, no one would ever notice anyway.

"Lynnda, git out here," Otis called from outside the women's quarters. "Don't make e'ryone wait for ya."

"Commin," she called, dashing for the door while most of the serving women were still changing out of their night clothes.

Otis wasted few words on her, quickly putting her to work, clearing the previous night's ash from the kitchen hearth, and starting a new fire. From there, the two worked together with a gangly red-haired youth called Ollie to prepare a breakfast porridge for the staff while the rest of the household got to work.

From what little Ashlynn was able to learn while working in the kitchens, most of the staff had arrived more than a week prior to begin reopening the villa after a winter's disuse. Much of the cleaning was already complete and wagon loads of supplies had been arriving each day for the past three days.

"Lynnda," Otis called, waving her over from the large pot where she'd begun to soak several hunks of salt cured pork. None of the cuts in the barrel she'd been given were very good, in fact, half the barrel contained hog's heads, but Otis had been clear about the markings on the casks she was allowed to open and the others likely weren't any better.

"Yer mother musta been important, right? A chambermaid or sumpsuch?" Otis asked.

"She was a wetnurse, mister," Ashlynn said. "For Lord Owain," she added, providing an identity that would place her fictitious mother close enough to Marquis Bors to make an affair between the two likely.

"Figures," the cook snorted. "Lord Owain's Steward, Sir Kaefin, is arriving ta inspect tha place this afternoon. He's bringing a bunch more soldiers along wit all tha fine foods. We should make up somethin' a little nice for the Steward. Ya ever meet im? Know what he likes?"

Ashlynn had, in fact, briefly met Sir Kaefin on more than one occasion. While he'd inherited his title and never showed any inclination to go to war himself, his family connections allowed him to secure a place as the head of Owain's personal staff.

Ashlynn's impression of the man wasn't good. It wasn't just that he was a soft man who did little to live up to his title of knight. Whenever Ashlynn had been around him, she'd felt like his eyes roved over her body as much as she'd been told his hands did over the bodies of serving women. Just being around him made her distinctly uncomfortable.

Fortunately, however, if there was one thing he loved as much as he seemed to love beautiful women, it was luxurious food. When he visited Blackwell County with Owain, he boasted repeatedly about the wild game he hunted and the rich flavors of boar, venison and wild turkey that could be hunted in Lothian March.

"He likes things that are wild and gamey, mister," Ashlynn said after thinking for a moment. "He pays hunters for boar and venison. He also has a very large appetite," she added, though she was certain that Otis already knew that much about the man.

"We don't have any of either yet," Otis frowned. "He's probably bringin' hunters wit 'im to get ready fer Lord Owain an Lady Ashlynn's arrival t'morrow."

Ashlynn had to fight to keep the surprise off her face at the cook's casual announcement that not only Owain, but the woman who was masquerading as her, would be arriving the next day. Briefly, her hands balled up into fists before she forced herself to relax.

"Hey, Sir Kaefin didn'a put hands on ya did he?" Otis asked gently, misinterpreting her reaction. "Was that why ya got picked ta come out here? Is 'e tryin' ta keep tabs on ya? He already spoiled two girls last year," he said, shaking his head. "It won't do if he spoils ya too, there aren't enough of us ta pick up slack if ya fall pregnant."

"He didn't put his hands on me," Ashlynn quickly said, trying to emulate Nyrielle's impassive and expressionless face as much as she could. "I just thought, if we can't give him boar, we can stew the pork jowls with walnuts to make up the flavor a bit. Not enough to pass it off as boar but enough that he may like it."

"Oh, that's good thinking," Otis said, grinning widely. "Knew it was a good idea ta bring ya out here this time. Ya' know what his Lordship likes too?"

"I do, but, aren't you one of Lord Owain's cooks? Haven't you cooked for him before?" Ashlynn asked, puzzled by how uninformed the man seemed to be compared to what she would expect of a longtime retainer.

She didn't expect him to be as skilled as Georg, such a chef likely cooked for Owain's father, but certainly whoever Owain had sent out here would be better at serving him than this, wouldn't he?

"I wish. None of 'em will come out 'ere when Lord Owain isn't staying long. I'm jus' an army cook. We're just to care for Lady Ashlynn till 'er sister arrives with more folks from Blackwell. I imagine they're bringing all sorts of stuff from the sea fer her ladyship."

"Enough gossiping," the cook said with a frown. Normally he wouldn't be so forthcoming with anyone assigned to his kitchen but it wouldn't do to be too harsh on this Lynnda if it turned out that the Marquis kept tabs on her.

"Go start cracking nuts, imma have Ollie dig radishes and we'll see what we can pretty up fer Sir Kaefin ta night."

"Yes, mister," Ashlynn said, giving a quick curtsy like she'd seen Heila do countless times and turning away to search for the sacks of nuts she'd seen at the back of the larder.

"Why is Jocelynn coming out here?" she muttered as she began shelling nuts. Just weeks ago, the heavy burlap sack filled with nuts would have been more than she could lift, but now, as she sat down with a rough wooden mallet to begin cracking the tough shells, she found herself needing to focus to avoid crushing the nuts.

If it were Thane, she imagined, or even Marcell, she had no doubt that either vampire would have simply cracked the nuts in their bare hands without bothering with a mallet at all. Briefly, she tried doing so herself, squeezing the tough shell with her slender fingers until her knuckles turned white.

"And Owain isn't staying long? Just what is going on," she muttered, giving up on crushing the nuts bare-handed and retrieving the mallet to take out her frustration at the lack of answers on the helpless nuts.

There was a limit to what she could learn staying in the kitchens but already the news she'd received was explosive. Clearly, they were hiding away the fake Ashlynn Blackwell, but if her sister was coming out here then it was impossible that her family didn't know about her death.

There was no way they could hide things from Jocelynn once she arrived. While the Blackwell sisters had lived very different lives, they were hardly estranged. Jocelynn had even looked up to her older sister until the time she began to develop as a woman and spent more time socializing with the other young ladies of Blackwell County.

Even if this fake Ashlynn was a perfect lookalike, a single conversation would be enough to give away the ruse. Unless Owain planned to trap Jocelynn here, it didn't make sense that she'd be in the dark about the impostor.

Working in the kitchen to prepare for Sir Kaefin's arrival, Ashlynn's mind spun furiously as she revised what she thought she knew about matters between her family and Owain. Clearly, Owain hadn't kept them in the dark if Jocelynn was coming out here.

The only question was whether they only learned of his attempt to kill her after he did the deed, or if it had been one of her family members who told Owain about her mark of the witch in the first place.

She still wanted to believe that they'd only found out afterward and that it had been one of the family's retainers or servants who betrayed her. With her sister's impending arrival, however, it felt much less likely than before.

Unfortunately, she only had a few days before she needed to leave the summer villa. If she couldn't stay until her sister arrived, she could at least target Owain's other retainers. Sir Kaefin, as Owain's personal steward, likely knew several things that would be useful to the vale.

She'd rather target Owain's personal guards, Sir Tommin or Sir Broll, who had dumped her in a shallow grave in the Vale of Mists. She hadn't forgotten how roughly they'd treated her 'corpse' before throwing her in a freshly dug pit and burying her.

But, since Sir Kaefin was coming out alone first, perhaps that would offer her an even better opportunity.