

## The Vampire 37

### Chapter 37 37: Different Traps

Unfortunately, when Sir Kaefin arrived, Otis ordered Ashlynn and Ollie to remain in the kitchens while most of the staff assembled in the courtyard to receive the Steward.

It seemed like Zedya's enchantment was doing its work and Otis didn't dare to expose someone as fetching as Ashlynn to the Steward's lustful gaze.

For Ashlynn, it was a mixed blessing. She'd hoped to use delivering Kaefin's special meal as an excuse to get close to the man. While she lacked Zedya or Thane's abilities to place him in an unbreakable trance, she'd learned enough sorcery to encourage someone to speak more than they should. She was confident that, given the opportunity, she could pry a few secrets from his lips.

On the other hand, Otis' orders meant that she didn't need to risk being alone with a man who was known to have spoiled several serving women. Just the thought of his meaty paws on her sent shivers down her spine and made her glad for the ability to avoid him until she could approach him in a way that didn't put her at risk.

The relief, however, was short-lived when one of the hunters accompanying Sir Kaefin dropped off the freshly gutted carcass of a young buck.

"Tomorrow, when young lord Owain arrives, we'll feast on venison," the knight announced proudly, as though he had been the one to hunt the deer instead of the hunters he hired. He also completely ignored the pained look on the cook's face when he announced that they would need to prepare a feast in a single day.

"Make sure everything is ready for a feast that begins two bells before sundown," the knight said, poking Otis in the chest with a thick finger for emphasis.

As a result, Ashlynn found herself in a cold room with Ollie, up to their elbows in fresh meat as they struggled to prepare everything from cuts for roasting to fresh venison sausage. The experience was made even worse by the enhanced senses Ashlynn had carefully developed over the past month.

The smell wasn't the worst part of things, the cool room at least muted the worst of the smells from the butchering. Rather, it was her sense of touch that was torturous as her hands became slick with a layer of animal fat that melted under her own body heat while she squeezed minced meat into sausage casings.

"Say, you ever get a chance to eat any of the things the lords eat?" Ollie asked while carefully separating meat from the bones that would go into a stock pot. "Not sneaking any but, you know, do their lordships ever share a bit with you?"

"Why would the lords share food with me?" Ashlynn asked, wishing she had some of Nyrielle's lavender soap to wash up after she was done with her current chore.

"Well, um, I mean, you're really pretty," the gangly youth said awkwardly. "Don't the lords favor pretty women?"

"Ollie," Ashlynn said, giving him a look as cold and flat as Nyrielle's. "Take a look at my hands," she said, holding up her delicate hands that were covered in fat, bits of meat, herbs, and spices. "If I came up to you and shoved my hands into your breaches for a bit of a feel and then ran my hands through your hair, would you feel favored?"

"What? Ew, no," he said, shuddering at the idea. "Why would you do that?"

"That's what it's like to be 'favored' by someone you don't want touching you," Ashlynn said, thinking of a few lords who had overly 'praised' her at banquets she couldn't escape attending after her coming-of-age celebration.

In a way, betrothal to Owain had been a blessing all its own when she became 'off limits' to men almost twice her age who thought she might make a worthy bride. Jocelynn, she knew, had suffered even more than she had. As the eldest daughter of a count, Ashlynn had always been marked for marriage to a person of significant status. Outside of peers of a similar or greater rank, few people would make a move on her.

Jocelynn, however, was often targeted by people hoping to marry up or by people who felt like she was a prize that could be won through acts of exaggerated loyalty. A few of the barons who were her father's vassals had even suggested that marriage to the younger Blackwell daughter would be a fitting reward for generations of dutiful service, even if the lord in question had never personally done anything praiseworthy.

When she thought of how her sister must be facing pressure after her 'death' Ashlynn began to wonder if Jocelynn's upcoming visit to the Lothian summer villa was voluntary or if she was being compelled in some way. The thought just made her current circumstances worse, stuck in the larder where she couldn't learn anything about her sister's visit.

"So, no food then?" Ollie said weakly.

"No," Ashlynn sighed. "No food. But you know, the stuff they serve the lords isn't that different from the things soldiers get to eat. If you want to eat well, why not serve in the Marquis' guard? You're tall and strong, I'm sure they'd take you."

"I wish," the young man said wistfully. "The only way I'll get in the army is if there's a war. Without a war on, the only ones who get to join the guard are the sons of pensioners from the last war. My da was a stablehand and my ma works in the laundry. The kitchens are already a step up in life for me."

"Couldn't you strike out on your own if you wanted to?" Ashlynn asked, finally finishing with the sausage stuffing and looking around for a way to wash up before moving on to the next task. "You're handy with the knife, why not be a butcher in town instead of working in the castle?"

"I'd never make it," Ollie said, his shoulders slumped. "At least working for their lordships I get a place to sleep and food to eat, even if it's not great. And I get a silver penny every month. I hear that penny would only let me rent a room in a common house in the city for a month, it wouldn't even feed me. I'd have to save every penny for years to strike out on my own."

"Oh, I see," Ashlynn said, frowning at the young man. "What about the smaller towns? Doesn't a silver penny buy more in the towns managed by the barons?"

"Sure, but aren't the barons always under attack by demons?" Ollie said. "I heard that there are demons ten feet tall, covered in fur that can tear a man in two with their claws."

Ashlynn had to fight from laughing at the image of Georg tearing a person in two with his claws. The poor man didn't even do his own slaughtering, he had to have one of his assistants in the kitchen snap the necks of chickens and pluck them so it no longer resembled a living bird when he began cutting it up for dinner.

Still, she had to admit that men like Commander Bassinger were far more deadly and the Vale of Mists didn't lack for hearty soldiers who could tear through even the bravest knights.

"So I suppose we're both stuck where we are," Ashlynn said with more feeling than she intended. Growing up, she'd been trapped by her mark, then trapped by her betrothal. Now, while she felt freer than ever, she was still bound to Nyrielle.

Her new prison might be a gilded cage with hands tied by velvet ropes but if she ever decided to run away from it all, she had as much chance at succeeding as Ollie did of striking out on his own.

"It's not all bad," Ollie said, trying to cheer her up when he felt the mood grow heavy. "This is your first time at the summer villa, right? I've come out here every year since I was ten. Tomorrow, at the feast, I can show you one of my favorite spots."

"You think we'll get to rest during the feast?" Ashlynn said. "Look at the mess we're already making. We'll be cleaning for days."

"That's just it though, it'll be a whole day to clean up. Mister Otis won't mind if we slip off for a bit to watch the feast. We can listen to the music and there might even be pretty ladies that, um, never mind," he said, realizing that Ashlynn might not be as excited as he was at the idea of peeping on the noblewomen dancing as he was.

"If you're sure we won't get caught," Ashlynn said, flinging a bit of gristle at the gangly youth. "Then I suppose I can go watch with you. But you have to promise me that we won't get caught by the people at the feast," she insisted.

With her hair dyed black and not so much as a trace of makeup or jewelry, she was fairly confident that Owain wouldn't recognize her. Even if he saw her, knowing that Ashlynn Blackwell was 'dead' should result in him taking her for having nothing more than a chance resemblance.

Still, going to the feast where not only Owain but his personal guards would be present as well struck her as risky. If she was recognized one-on-one by someone like Sir Kaefin, she felt like she had a chance to manage things, but everyone would be present at the feast.

"I promise," Ollie said with a wide grin on his face. "There's no way they'll see us from my spot."

"If you're sure then," Ashlynn said, choosing to put her faith in his promise. Going to the feast was a risk, but she couldn't deny that it also presented an opportunity to listen in on whatever conversations Owain had with his noble guests. For that alone, she hoped it would be worth the risk.