

The Vampire 28

Chapter 28 28: The Value of a Spy

In the two weeks she'd spent in the Vale of Mists so far, Ashlynn had heard mention of Marcell several times. According to Thane, the vampire progeny that had trained as a spy and assassin was the youngest of Nyrielle's progeny, if someone the age of her grandfather could be considered 'young.'

Thankfully, Marcell was young enough that his writing lacked the archaic spelling that plagued anything Nyrielle wrote, even if his tight, cramped handwriting came with challenges of his own. Clearly, he was accustomed to writing on small slips of paper to be sent by carrier pigeon. When she read the words of the report, his concise writing only added to the feeling.

For several minutes, the only sounds in the room were the crackling of the hearth and the rustling of pages as Ashlynn sat with the heavy parchment of Marcell's report. Her eyes scanned from the top of the first page to the bottom and moved to the next before returning to the first page of the report and reading again, tracing her finger along the tightly spaced words as though afraid she'd missed one.

Marcell clearly understood that reliability was important. Each snippet of information held a notation; 'widely known', 'two independent sources', 'unreliable rumor, but widespread.' The picture he wove in those two pages spoke of countless conversations with everyone from castle servants to disgruntled pensioners and even a temple acolyte.

Sadly, as much as she wished for news of her family, the report contained only a single line that Owain had seen them off alone with speculation from servants that she must have had an 'intense' wedding night.

The first time she read the line, she nearly crumpled the report. Her hands tightened on the pages, creasing them sharply before she forced herself to relax. Marcell only reported what he heard and it wasn't like servants had never gossiped about her before.

Still, the implication that she had 'enjoyed herself' with Owain too thoroughly to see her family off added to the pile of smoldering embers burning in a corner of her heart. Even after she was dead, it seemed, Owain would still find ways to wound her.

When she finally finished, Ashlynn sank deeply into thought, completely forgetting Heila's presence until the diminutive woman prompted her with a question.

"Should I bring tea and breakfast?" Heila asked hesitantly. "Will you be staying up?"

"I, I don't know," Ashlynn said after a moment. "Could you answer a few questions for me Heila? You can join me up here," she added, patting the fluffy down bed. "There's plenty of room."

Though she looked uncomfortable at being so informal, as one of Ashlynn's few daytime companions, she'd come to realize that Lady Nyrielle's Seneschal wasn't accustomed to having a personal servant and often forgot about the differences in their status. Since that was the case, she'd given up on teaching Ashlynn the ways of the castle and acquiesced to her requests, even when they weren't strictly proper.

"I'm not entirely surprised that Owain is concealing news of my death," Ashlynn began. "From Marcelle's report, many people have reported seeing 'me' visiting the library or touring one of the gardens with Owain."

Even though she'd firmly carved any affection she once held for Owain out of her heart, the news that someone was dressing up as her, wearing her old clothing and acting like his affectionate wife in public still felt like salt grinding into wounds that had only just begun to heal.

"Most of these reports come from servants or people who are distant from the Lothians themselves," Ashlynn said. "Do you know if Marcell has been able to enter the Lothian Manor directly?"

"It's impossible, my Lady," Heila said, shaking her horned head. "The Manor is as old as Lothian. After Lady Nyrielle killed one of their lords to avenge her parents, they say that priests of the human god consecrated the entire manor. Now, neither Lady Nyrielle nor any of her chosen ones can enter there."

"I see," Ashlynn said, returning to the pages. "No wonder there's so little news to confirm this other bit. If Marcell can't enter the Lothian Manor, there's no way he can enter the Temple."

The second piece of news was little more than a rumor. While Marcell had noted that many people observed a dignitary arriving from the Holy City, no one seemed to know who he was or why he had come to visit the March of Lothian.

Only a single temple acolyte, who spoke out of turn after being given a copious amount of wine in a tavern, mentioned that the dignitary represented the Holy Inquisition.

Given the mark that had been part of her since birth, Ashlynn had always been wary of inquisitors, even when they presented a kind and affable exterior. She'd heard plenty of stories from her father about commoners and noblemen alike who had fallen into the grasp of the inquisition only to emerge as battered and broken men if they emerged at all.

"So why are the Lothians pretending that I'm still alive?" she wondered aloud. "Are they buying time for the inquisitor to arrive before announcing what happened, or is it completely unrelated?"

"I don't know my Lady," Heila said. "The temple is all but impossible to spy on. Even people who have been mesmerized by Madame Zedya are unable to cross the threshold. The temple is too strongly protected against us."

"What about the Summer Villa?" Ashlynn asked, looking at the last note in the report. "Marcell mentioned that the Lothians have been sending enough supplies there for an extended stay but the family hasn't stayed there often since the death of the late Marquess. Could Marcell sneak in there?"

"I don't know, my Lady," Heila said. "I don't know if anyone has ever needed to. Would you like me to find out?"

"No," Ashlynn said, folding up the pages and setting them aside. "I imagine that I'll be able to speak with Marcell directly this evening. He must have arrived very close to dawn if Mistress Nyrielle didn't summon me. Any more questions will just have to wait until dark."

"I see," the horned woman said, hopping off the bed. "Then, would you like a light breakfast before you turn in?"

"Only if you join me Heila," Ashlynn said with a smile. "Didn't you mention that one of the young men working in the barracks was trying to catch your eye? How well informed are you about our military forces?."

"As well as anyone in the castle, my Lady," Heila said, her face heating at the mention of the young man trying to catch her eye. Rayk wasn't even a proper soldier even though he worked closely with the people who were. He worked for the quartermaster, tending to the equipment and supplies of Nyrielle's army.

"What is it you wish to know?" Heila asked, hoping to deflect attention away from her love life.

"Lots of things," Ashlynn said, getting out of bed and moving to the small writing desk in her room. "How many soldiers we have, how far away we can send them on raids, that kind of thing."

"My lady?" Heila asked, her mouth opening wide in shock.

"Something is happening at the Summer Villa," Ashlynn said. "It's a much easier place to attack than the Lothian Manor. I think," she said, beginning to sketch out her thoughts. "Maybe we should go and take a look."