

The Vampire 39

Chapter 39 39: A Feast of Oddities

By the time the feast began, Ashlynn had accumulated several additional observations that didn't quite add up.

Not only was the fake Ashlynn traveling without any attending ladies, but the number of attendees for the feast was far lower than she expected. The grand banquet hall would need only a single table to accommodate Owain, the fake Ashlynn, a few knights, and the highest-ranking soldiers stationed within the villa.

Normally, the common captain or sergeant at arms would be lucky to have a seat at a lower table during the feast. Including them at Owain's tables felt almost like a desperate attempt to salvage pride and make up the numbers instead of leaving seats empty during the feast.

Even Otis seemed surprised at how few people would be attending given the instructions Sir Kaefin provided after his arrival. It wasn't until Ashlynn began preparing large pitchers of wine for the table, however, that she spotted the next oddity.

"No one has asked us to send wine to be blessed," she realized. In fact, when she thought about the people who arrived with Owain, she couldn't recall seeing a single priest, chaplain or templar among the entire party. It gave the strange impression that the Holy Lord of Light had withdrawn his protection from the villa.

"Is he hiding from the Inquisitor?" she wondered. "Or is he hiding the fake me from the Inquisitor?" It was the only thing she could think of that would explain why he hadn't even brought his personal priest along to tend to matters of faith at the villa.

As strange as it was, Ashlynn was grateful for the opportunity it offered her. Priests of the Church all received some training in combating the magic of the Eldritch peoples. In Blackwell County, it was seen mostly as a formality unless a person intended to become an Inquisitor or a Templar, but here in the Lothian March, Ashlynn imagined that every man of cloth had at least some ability to counter sorcery.

Since Owain hadn't brought any of his priests with him, it meant that Ashlynn didn't have to be as careful in her use of sorcery to gather information during her stay. When she realized that, she began to make several adjustments to her plan to make use of the things she'd learned from Nyrielle leading up to this mission.

Once the feast had begun, Ollie led Ashlynn up narrow winding stairs until they arrived on a balcony that ringed the great hall where the feast was held. The scent of roasted meats and fresh-baked bread wafted up from the tables below, making Ashlynn's stomach growl as if she needed a reminder that servants weren't allowed to eat until the feast had finished.

The narrow balcony held several ropes and chains that ran to winches on the wall for raising and lowering the many chandeliers in the hall or hanging the tapestries that covered the walls. A layer of dust and cobwebs covered everything that hadn't been touched to prepare for the feast, making it clear just how rarely people came onto the balcony.

While Ollie seemed comfortable ducking around the ropes and chains and other obstructions on the narrow balcony, Ashlynn moved with considerably more care as she worked her way toward the side of the room directly above the high table, her fingers tracing over oily chains and rough ropes for extra steadiness as she went.

The slowness, however, was mostly a pretense. Thane had forced her to navigate much more treacherous terrain at a run and in the dark during her training. What she really needed at the moment was the time to use one of the spells she'd learned from Nyrielle.

"Left ear, goblet, sound," she said softly, allowing a trace of power to envelop one ear and linking it to one of the goblets of wine on the table. She didn't dare to target Owain's goblet directly, but once her magic whispered across the cup in Sir Broll's hand, she was able to hear the conversation at the table as well as if she'd been sitting at the table herself.

"... toast to absent friends," Sir Broll was saying as he stood to hold up his goblet. Even without his armor, he was an imposingly large man with thick muscular arms and meaty hands that made the delicate goblet look like it could be crushed in his hands at any moment. "Sir Tommin, may you die a glorious death fighting the demon hordes!"

"None of that," the elder knight that Ashlynn didn't recognize said, reaching out to pull Broll back into his chair. The man's neatly tied-back silver hair and steel gray beard combined to give him an appearance that resembled Ashlynn's tutors more than a knight but the force with which he pulled Sir Broll back into his seat made it clear that he still retained much of his strength.

"Sir Tommin has taken a Templar's oath," the old knight said in a chastising tone that reminded Ashlynn even more of her tutors. "A man of great faith deserves our respect, no matter what age he was when he felt his calling."

"I don't think a calling had anything to do with it," Broll said darkly, taking a heavy swig of the dark red, slightly bitter wine. "But I don't wish him ill. Since he joined the Templars then it should be his greatest honor to die in battle fighting evil instead of collecting dust in a moldy castle."

"Brat, do you need this old man to show you what a dusty relic from the last war can still do?" the older knight said fiercely.

"Sir Cathal," Owain interjected before things could get out of control. "I'm sure Sir Broll didn't mean anything by it. No one has forgotten your service to my father in the last war and I'm grateful you could step in to fill the void left by Sir Tommin's departure."

"My Ashlynn is in delicate condition after all," he added, placing a hand over the imposter's belly. "Knowing that you'll be here to guard her and my heir growing in her belly is a relief to all of us, isn't it, my darling wife?" Owain said, giving the imposter a significant look.

"I feel very safe knowing you're here until my sister arrives," the imposter said lightly. "I know your lordship will keep me safe."

"You're too polite, my Lady," the old knight said, standing to bow. "I'm no lord, just a humble knight of the watchtower."

"My darling is kind to everyone," Owain said quickly, covering for the imposter's breach of etiquette.

No true noble lady would have referred to a knight beneath her station the way she had, but to servants, etiquette was much simpler. Any noble, from the most junior knight to the highest prince could be safely addressed as 'your lordship' and only the strictest of noblemen would fault them for failing to use an appropriate title.

"Still, the journey has been taxing on her," Owain said. "My darling wife, perhaps you should retire to our chambers and await me there."

"Of course, my lord," the imposter said, glancing wistfully at the table full of food before making a quick exit from the hall. Strangely, it seemed like she almost expected to be sent away, as though she'd only come to the feast to be seen but never planned to enjoy it.

Owain, however, remained in the hall, continuing to feast on venison and pork, drinking fine wine, and sharing boisterous jokes with Sir Kaefin and Sir Broll. Only the old knight frowned at the display of sending 'Lady Ashlynn' away, but he held his tongue, likely understanding that nothing good would come from questioning the relationship between a lord and his wife.

On the balcony, Ashlynn frowned at the callus display. Would Owain have treated her that way, just so he could drink and feast with his friends? Or was he doing it because the woman wasn't really her and he disliked maintaining the charade?

"Ollie," Ashlynn whispered to the red-headed youth. "I'm going to go back to the kitchens. Lady Ashlynn didn't eat much. I bet she wants someone to bring her a plate to eat in her room."

"Do you think so?" Ollie asked, straining to hear what was being said down below. "She looked like she was uncomfortable when she left. Maybe she's delicate and the carriage ride was too much for her."

"I don't think that's it," Ashlynn said, working her way back across the ropes and chains on the balcony. "I'll make her a plate. If I'm right, she'll be happy. If I'm wrong," she said, flashing Ollie a mischievous look. "I'll have an extra plate of food no one will notice missing."