

## **Two Can Keep a Secret**

### **Part Three**

Giallo was leaning against a pillar in one of the smaller halls within the count's palace. He was posing as a low noble and was successfully avoiding discussion with most people. He looked around as he waited for his contact. There weren't too many other nobles in the area, but the count liked to flaunt his extravagance by keeping the wing open to the nobility.

"Well hello there. I do not believe I have seen you around court before," a sultry voice said from behind him.

Giallo shifted and saw a beautiful moon elf woman who wore a red and black dress that showed ample bust. The dress seemed to almost fade from the black at the skirt's hemline to the red of the chest. On the skirt were scarlet vines that snaked their way up to the woman's waist. The dress seemed more like daily wear without the hardened structure women would wear to support the skirt in a bell shape. Her dark purple skin crinkled around her eyes as she caught his gaze.

"I am not actually attending court today. I am simply meeting someone," he said.

"Oh? Not attending court? I dare say the count would not like that if he were aware," she said.

Giallo smirked. "I do not believe the count will even notice the absence of someone he does not deem important."

The woman chuckled softly into her hand. "I can agree with that. I am Lady Verene," she said.

He thought of the terran man he had extracted from the gang's hidden rooms and smiled. "I am Lord Soren," he said with a small bow.

Lady Verene curtsied slightly. "A pleasure, Lord Soren," she said as she reached out a hand.

Giallo gently grasped her hand and nodded his head. “The pleasure is all mine, Lady Verene.”

“Would you care to join me for a drink?”

Giallo glanced around the room and made a decision. “I would be delighted.”

The two made their way to one of the many small bars that adorned the count’s grand estate. Giallo sat next to the beautiful moon elf at the far end of the bar. He smirked as the woman brushed a strand of her dark blue hair out of her face. The raithe servant at the bar walked over and poured them two glasses of white sparkling wine, then handed them the glasses. Verene hummed appreciably as she took a small sip.

“I will say one thing. Count Kayser always serves the best wine,” she said.

Giallo chuckled. “That he does.”

“So, Lord Soren, where do you hail from?”

“I am from Moonlock originally, and yourself?” he asked.

“I am from Grimlea, actually,” she said.

That response made Giallo smile. “Grimlea? I especially enjoy the way the fountain at Virrel Hall gleams at midnight.”

Verene took a sip of her drink. “I would say that the third bell is the best time to view it. Fewer people, and you can really hear the roar of the water as it cascades into the fountain.”

Giallo nodded. The challenge phrase was correct, and he was now certain this was his contact. Virrel Hall was the local Academy in Grimlea, and the fountain there was a common topic people would discuss. Talking about seeing the fountain at the third bell was the code to discuss topics concerning Thirdghyll. Talking about the roar of the water meant that situation was not calm, and he would need to be wary.

“Should we leave, or can we discuss some here?” he asked.

The woman known as Verene glanced around. She leaned closer, whispering into his ear, keeping up the facade of a sultry woman seeking a rendezvous. “We should be safe for now. The

information you were given was correct. Kayser *has* been grabbing and torturing terrans. He seeks a way to use magic, despite what his terran baron has accused of the other terran noblewoman. He believes that terrans brought magic to our world and are the source of it. Thus far, he has been proven correct in his own mind. Terrans have the same orb in their chest as animals have been found to have. Some people when holding this orb can use weak magic. There is indeed one woman left, but I have not been able to locate her,” she said.

Giallo considered what the agent had told him. “How has the count kept this information from us?”

“I am unsure. However, the count has had several meetings with someone named Jorne. He is the only person I do not know that meets with him.”

Giallo froze. There had to be a mistake. Verene noticed his reaction. “You know this person, I presume? Is he known by the Academy?” she asked.

“He is. I will handle it,” Giallo said. If there was a traitor, it needed to be handled without hesitation. One did not betray the Academy.

Verene nodded. “Strange times. You’re the first I’ve met on a job other than my handler.”

He considered the woman. *Is she compromised as well? No... That thought leads to madness.* “Indeed. You should meet your handler. Explain everything we have discussed. Your handler will understand.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly, but Verene nodded. She likely realized circumstances had just drastically changed in priority. *One thing after another with this job.*

“Is Jorne here tonight?” he asked.

“...He is. Check the main hall,” she said after a moment’s thought.

He finished the rest of his wine in one gulp. “Then I must bid you a pleasant evening, Lady Verene. Giallo held his hand out and she slipped hers into his. He brought her hand up and kissed it gently. “It was a pleasure to make your acquaintance, My Lady.”

She nodded and pulled back her hand. “Likewise, My Lord. I wish you good fortunes.”

Giallo left the Academy's agent within Count Kayser's court behind and moved through the hall. He passed several guards, taking note of the increased presence the count had maintained since the event with Lady Sloane and the knights. He was curious as to why the count had yet to make a move. Perhaps the beast swarm held enough of the count's attention currently.

As he made his way into the main hall, he was announced by the attendant at the door. Luckily, his persona's low status barely received a glance from the crowd. Giallo looked around and noticed the hall was nearly filled and seemed as if court was about to start. He moved through the crowd toward the count then slipped to the side and settled in to wait.

From where he stood, he noticed the count speaking with several knights and members of his guard, one of which was older and adorned with more gold embellishments than the others. The moon elf was the commander of the city's guard and responsible for the defense of the city. The group spoke some more before reaching a pausing point for the count to begin his court.

As the initial ceremony was performed, Giallo looked around, trying to catch a sight of Jorne. Unfortunately, with the hall as crowded as it was, he was not able to search easily. The count was introduced and the old moon elf stepped forward from his Seat and addressed the hall. He began his speech with lies concerning the safety of the city. Count Kayser then spoke of duty and loyalty to the city, followed by demanding each noble present to provide men and arms to the city.

The response was as he expected; the crowd was loud and full of dissent. After the news of Valesbeck, no one wanted to give up any of their armed men or women. Especially the trained professionals. Giallo was prepared to lean back and weather the long debates and arguments that were sure to come when he saw movement across from him on the other side of the count's dais. Two men were making their way through the crowd to a door.

As he peered at the two moving, he managed to see the man in the rear turn his head. His eyes narrowed to slits as he recognized Jorne. A man who shouldn't be anywhere near the count's court.

Giallo moved through the crowd that was pushing forward toward the count. As he got near the front, he could barely move through the throng of nobles that were gathered in front of the count. He noticed one man with his hand on his sword, with a deft movement, he slightly

drew the man's blade and then shoved him forward toward the guards that were at the base of the dais.

"That man is drawing his blade!" Giallo yelled.

The guards instantly turned toward the man who had his hand on the hilt of a partially pulled sword. There were yells as the count's men drew their blades and pointed them at the man. Suddenly, several nobles from the crowd pulled their blades and started yelling back at the guards. There were several screams and Giallo used the distraction to finish weaving his way toward the door and took note of the guards that had moved toward the crowd.

He slipped into the door and walked down a narrow hall. There were no doors, however, there were tapestries hanging on the wall that depicted various moments of the count's life. *This guy is so full of himself.*

Giallo noticed two doors as he approached the end of the hall. The one at the end seemed like a standard door, however, the door on the left was steel and clearly reinforced. Glancing back down the hall to ensure he was still alone, he held his breath and pushed on the door. Relieved at the pleasant lack of creaking sounds, the door swung smoothly inward revealing a steep spiraling stone staircase.

*What is with people in this city and underground spaces?*

He crept down the stairs, drawing his dagger as he did so. A large open room awaited him at the base of the stairs with three doors as the exits, one directly ahead and one on either side of the room. Choosing at random, he moved to the central door. Straightening his coat, he opened the door and moved in as if he belonged.

He barely took a step into the room before he saw movement in the corner of his eye. Giallo quickly took a step to the side and raised his arm to hit the wrist of the sword-wielding hand swinging at him. He twisted around the wrist and grabbed ahold of the raithe man then yanked, causing the man to stumble forward off balance. Giallo stabbed twice, but the blade was blunted by a breastplate. The man grunted and jerked his wrist back, freeing himself. The raithe pushed on the puncture points and came away bright with blood.

"Nice to meet you," Giallo said.

The man just narrowed his eyes and took a step forward, thrusting his blade toward Giallo at the same time. Giallo used his dagger to parry the sword away from him then he surprised the man with how fast he darted toward him. He jabbed the man through the block he attempted with his opposite arm and caught him in the face. At the same time, he brought his dagger down on his sword arm, slashing at the tendon. The man screamed and dropped the blade.

Giallo was about to say something but then he heard a door opening. He quickly grabbed the man by the collar, brought his blade up, and ended the man's life with a single stab. He turned toward the noise as he felt the familiar rush fill him with more strength.

Jorne stood there, dagger in hand, and in a relaxed stance. The traitorous elf looked down at the dead raithe at Giallo's feet and scoffed. "Did you have to kill him? That will ruin my cover."

Giallo tilted his head. "Cover? Do you really intend to lie?"

Jorne took a couple of steps forward, the blade still out. "Lie? I have been following the lead since I started my mission. Ascertaining the connections between the count and the underworld of Thirdghyll."

"We know," Giallo said simply.

The traitor narrowed his eyes and took one more step forward. He paused, shrugging. "Can't fault a man for trying," he said then thrust forward with his dagger.

Giallo dodged to the side and slapped his arm away then kicked out. Jorne blocked the kick and stepped back. The two traded blows and blocked or parried each other's dagger thrusts.

He threw a jab at the man but had to pull short as Jorne tried to bring his dagger down on Giallo's wrist. He twisted and brought his dagger toward his gut which Jorne barely dodged. Every swing, kick, or thrust Giallo threw was blocked or diverted. His enhanced speed and strength were nullified by Jorne's better technique.

Jorne feigned a punch that Giallo went to block only to nearly miss sight of the dagger in his other hand lashing out at him. He grunted as his upper arm was slashed open in his attempt to dodge. He threw a hook directly into the former agent's side with such force that the man nearly lifted from the ground. Jorne swung wildly to create some distance and stepped back

toward the door behind him. He kicked out with his foot, causing the door to open and Giallo followed him through it.

Giallo swung with his dagger again but Jorne blocked him at the wrist with his blade hand then twisted and slammed his elbow into Giallo's arm, causing his dagger to fall. Jorne continued the spin and brought his dagger around, stabbing into Giallo's shoulder blade.

He grunted and started to fall forward but he twisted at the last second, causing Jorne to lose his grip on the dagger in Giallo's back. His fist connected with Jorne's chin and the man was sent crashing back against the wall.

Giallo used the moment's reprieve to yank the dagger from his back, letting it drop to the ground, his left arm falling uselessly at his side. He brought his right fist up and moved forward. Jorne just got to his hands and knees when Giallo kicked up with all of his dwindling strength, catching the man under his chin. The elf was lifted from the ground and rotated in the air, slamming onto his back knocking all of the air, and a few teeth from the man.

Jorne groaned, but Giallo didn't give him a chance to recover. He kneeled on top of the man and pummeled him over and over with his fist until the man stopped moving. Giallo stood up and walked toward his fallen dagger, picking it up from where it lay. He returned to the traitor and knelt next to him then swung downward with the dagger. Jorne's eyes shot open as he managed to catch Giallo's hand just in time to stop the blade from stabbing him. Giallo struggled against both hands pushing back against him, so he leaned over his blade and fell against his fist, putting all of his weight into the thrust. Jorne's eyes widened as he pushed back, but slowly the blade fell into his chest. Jorne looked into Giallo's eyes and started choking as he tried to say something.

Giallo looked back at the man. "Why'd you do it, Jorne?"

"C-Can you k-keep a secret, Giallo?" The man choked out, struggling with every word.

"Of course, I can," Giallo said.

"B-because... B-..." The pressure against his hand slackened and then fell away completely as the traitor gasped out his last breath, unable to finish what he was going to say. Giallo shook his head, wondering what was so important that would cause the man to betray the Order. *And now I'll never find out.*

As Giallo felt the telltale sign of a victory, he let himself roll over and collapse to the ground, breathing heavily. He stared at the ceiling, trying to catch his breath and keep his eyes open.

“Hey! Hey! Help me!” A voice called out.

Giallo turned his head and took stock of the room he was in. He was in another large room with four cells. The source of the voice was a woman that was the only occupant of those cells. He groaned as he rotated then with what took considerably more effort than it should have, he stood up.

“Are you okay? Can you get me out of here? The other guards will be back soon!” the woman said.

Giallo looked around, before taking a step toward the woman. “Who are you?”

“My name is Claire. Please, you need to get me out of here,” she said, choking up toward the end.

Giallo was about to take another step forward when he heard yelling in the distance. His eyes widened and he looked around the room again, there was another door to the left. “Where does that door lead?”

The woman sucked in some air. “I don’t know, but I know it’s another hallway. Quick, get me out. We can check together.”

Giallo looked around, quickly checking Jorne’s pockets. He couldn’t find any keys anywhere. He turned back toward the woman. “The keys aren’t here. I don’t have time to find them. I’m sorry. We will get you out of here. I promise.”

“No, no no no. Don’t leave me here with them,” she said and started sobbing, falling to her knees. “Please... Please take me. Get me out of here.”

Giallo knew he didn’t have time to help the woman, but still, his heart sank for her. “I need to get out of here or no one will know where to find you. I’m sorry.”

Giallo quickly turned and picked up Jorne’s dagger and stuffed it into one of the man’s pockets. He dragged the man through the door into the room where the first man lay and set the



two bodies up so it looked as if they had killed each other. Grabbing Jorne's knife, he placed it into the man's hand and closed his fingers around it, thankfully still able to do so. With one last glance to ensure everything looked believable, he quickly made his way back to the cell room.

Opening the other door in the room, he saw that it was indeed another hallway. One that would hopefully lead him toward another exit. Looking once more at the sobbing woman, he said, "I promise we will be back, Claire. The person to trust will say 'Giallo is the color of the sun.' Say it back to me."

The woman looked up, confusion evident on her face. "Giallo is the color of the sun?"

He nodded. "Good. Do not say that phrase otherwise. Stay resilient, Claire. It will happen quickly and soon."

The woman sniffled but nodded in return.

Giallo turned and rushed into the hallway.

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It was late and Giallo was sitting with his legs out straight on the ground in a barn. An animal doctor was busy kneeling behind him, patching up his shoulder. His handler stood in front of him. He had managed to make it out of the count's estate with no issues. Other than his injuries, that is.

"Giallo, Lady Verene managed to find more information about what Jorne had been doing. Evidently, he had been selling the Order's secrets to the count for almost a year. After the flash, and subsequently, when the count learned of the terrans, Kayser ordered him closer. This caused Jorne to get sloppier, which led to Verene finding out about him, even if she wasn't aware he was another agent," the man said.

Giallo nodded. "That makes sense. Has there been any indication that the count knows I was there?"

A shake of the head. “No. Verene passed along that the distraction in the hall worked and it is believed the guard and Jorne simply fought over something else, killing each other in the end over some disagreement.”

“Good. We need to get the terran woman out of there,” Giallo said.

“That isn’t going to be possible, Giallo. We are pulling out. We are leaving a team behind to deal with the count when the beasts hit the city, but then they will also evacuate. We do not have the bodies available to do so,” he said.

“We need to do something, Five,” Giallo said, calling the man by his codename.

“I am sorry, Giallo. It’s not possible. You get stitched up, then you will join the group leaving in a week, just before the swarm hits. You’ll be heading out the east gate, then north,” Five said.

The man looked down at Giallo, and when he didn’t respond, he said one last thing before leaving, “Do not be late.”

Giallo did not respond as Five walked out.

He winced as the raithe working on his shoulder pulled tightly, then wrapped some fabric over the wound. When he was done, he tapped Giallo’s other shoulder. “You’re all set. Take it easy on that shoulder and arm.”

Giallo stood up. “Thank you.”

He turned and walked out of the barn.

It was about time he met Lady Sloane.

He really needed a drink.