

## Two Can Keep a Secret

### Part One

If one of them was dead, they wouldn't know quite yet. They didn't speak to other agents when on a job unless ordered or absolutely necessary, that only brought undue attention to the organization. The man in the yellow hat sat back in his seat as he contemplated the circumstances that led him to this point.

The Westaren Order of Secrets was an open... secret amongst individuals in the know. Typically, these individuals were important within their respective areas of influence, whether that be a nation or an organization. They knew *of* the Order of Secrets, but what they were unaware of was all Order *did*. Oh, they had suspicions, everyone did. You didn't get far within the field if you weren't paranoid and Westaren had honed paranoia into a weapon. In fact, that was the very reason the Order of Secrets had set up its headquarters within Ghyll in the first place.

Ghyll was a hotbed of political issues. The one place the crown had ordered its agents, spies, and assassins to work against its own people. The city was a cesspool, and it was filled to the battlements with cockroaches—and not the insect kind. An infestation of ideas and corruption. No matter how many times the city had been cleansed of its filth, it came back. It was telling that the people had even made a game of it. They focused on the 'Big Ones', the events that nearly wiped the city from the map. What they ignored, but loved in private, were the occasions the cleanses stayed localized. A business here, a gang there, or an entire noble line over yonder; all was fair game to the depraved enjoyment of its masochistic citizens.

The man had recently taken on a new name after a positively delightful conversation with a terran named Giacomo. Each member of the Order maintained a different *face* when on assignment. His current face's name was Giallo, which was the name of the color of the hat he wore in Giacomo's native tongue. He liked the sound of it, for it sounded almost like the word for darkness. As a moon elf, the word suited him just fine.

The city was on the verge of open unrest, and that was something the crown simply could not abide. It required the Order to take an even more proactive stance since the Flash. A new

people had magically appeared all over the place and as the *Hand of the Crown* for Thirdghyll, it was his duty to sort it out. That goal was becoming increasingly more difficult to obtain without... drastic measures. His next meeting would likely determine the extent of the plague he would need to excise from the kingdom.

He looked up as a group of raithe and moon elves walked into the tavern he sat in. He was still missing a man, and he would find him. Jorne was a common name within the kingdom and the name for the current *face* of his misplaced asset. He was supposed to be checking the link between the gang that owned the tavern Giallo currently sat in and Count Kayser, Thirdghyll's governing noble.

The group of thugs that had entered the tavern consisted of four raithe and three moon elves. He had learned that despite employing any race, Mr. Rowe would only fill his closest people with the two races that preferred the night. Giallo himself didn't discriminate like many of the others—the nobles tended to do within the kingdom. As the eight moved past him, he slowly stood up, grabbed his drink, and followed behind them.

He paused as they moved to a door inside of an open room at the rear of the tavern, two of the raithe turned and stood at either side of the door. Giallo took a big swig of the watered-down ale and stumbled toward the two men.

“Oi! Is the piss pot back there? I feel like this piss I'm drinkin' is 'bout to come out, friend.” He said as he walked into the room.

The man on the left lifted a hand. “Woah. This area's off-limits. The outhouse is... outside. Get out of here, you drunk.”

Giallo slurred his words slightly. “Aw com' on, friend! I's jus' gots ta drain the... the slitherin' drakyyk.”

The man on the right made a disgusted face and moved forward to shove him. Just as Giallo was grabbed, he stabbed the man into his armpit with the dagger he kept hidden under his long sleeves. The man stumbled forward with a grunt. “Oh! Sorry, friend. Here, lets me help you,” he said.

He grabbed the man and pulled him close and turned him, as he did, he stabbed at the base of his neck from behind and shoved him forward into the other man. Two steps, and he

stabbed the stumbling man trying to catch his compatriot three times before he could do more than grunt.

He moved the men to either side of the door and quietly checked the door. Feeling that it was barred, he banged on it and moved to the side. He pulled out a longer dagger from under his coat and waited.

The door was unlatched and swung open. A telv he hadn't seen earlier swung it open. "What? The boss said not to let anyone disturb—Ungh!" The man collapsed into a fit of coughs that were ended quickly by the second blade.

Moving into the hallway, his eyes narrowed as he instantly noticed the stairs. *Those weren't supposed to be here.*

Giallo slowly and quietly moved down the stairwell that spiraled down easily two levels equivalent in depth before opening up into a warehouse-like area held up by pillars and filled with wooden boxes and crates.

He heard some talking and listened in as he stealthily moved closer to the sound of people.

"That's the third terran this week we haven't been able to get before the count has," the first voice said.

A deeper, more suave voice spoke up. "None of you has figured out what the count wants with the terrans?"

"No boss. It's like they disappear once taken," a third voice said.

There were some muffled curses before the man that seemed to be the boss spoke again. "Do we have *anything*?"

"No, boss."

A door opened from the far side, luckily not from the entrance he had come in. Giallo peeked in and watched a raithe rush in.

"Boss!"

The group turned toward the lone man that was in obvious pain. “What the hell happened to you, Sten?”

“The noble you sent us to get. S—She used magic! And she killed Delon and Troy!”

“What?! I told you to just get her, not fight her. What happened?”

The raithe launched into an explanation of his failure to kidnap the terran noble. The more he spoke, the more Giallo was impressed.

“She then created some blue magic and when it hit Troy, it blew a hole in his chest. Just a bit after that, her knights arrived and they let me go.”

Giallo’s brows raised at that. It was the second noble the city had seen and something he would need to look into once he completed the discussion here. The Order had some reports on her, but he hadn’t been the one assigned to her observation.

The Flash had been causing him all sorts of headaches. One benefit it had brought, though, was the physical changes. He barely felt it after resolving his first dispute. However, now... now he had dispatched enough that he could *feel* the improvements. Something had happened during the flash, and it seemed to bring physical enhancements the more... active one was.

It was something the Order was actively investigating. Another was the various small phenomena that seemed to be popping up around the kingdom and nearby Sovereign Cities. They had reports of the terran noble’s alchemy testing, but if what this man said was true, she wasn’t doing alchemy at all. It was a level of magic that hadn’t been seen yet. He sighed quietly. His priorities just shifted. A terran performing magic took priority over anything going on with Mr. Rowe’s gang. His timeline had to move up, and he needed to ensure they did not try to interfere with the noble again.

Giallo moved along the crates and turned a corner toward the edge of the room, one row over was one of the two raithe in the room. He snuck up behind him, reached around to cover his mouth, and jerked his head back. The man’s hands instantly went up to Giallo’s hand, but the spy brought his dagger up and stabbed him in the base of his skull. Giallo carefully moved the man to the shadows off to the side to conceal his body and continued forward.

He found the other raithe in the back corner moving some crates around. He was making so much noise and so oblivious to his surroundings that he didn't notice even Giallo approaching him well within his peripheral vision. A grab and five quick stabs were all it took to finish the man, then another small rush of *something* filled him as every kill before had. Giallo had come to associate the feeling with not only getting stronger but confirming the death of his target. It was something that even happened when he didn't have sight of the person, which made the feeling highly beneficial. With that, he moved toward the group, still talking in the center.

He reached inside his coat and brought out four throwing knives, then stepped out from behind another crate. He threw two blades and the two moon elves speaking with Mr. Rowe dropped. The gang boss turned and his eyes widened in surprise. "Who are you? Don't you know who I am?"

Giallo smirked. "Of course, I know who you are, Mr. Rowe. However, your men have caused the Academy's timeline to be moved up. It is quite unfortunate. Yet, needs must and all that."

"T-The Academy? What does the Academy want with me?" Mr. Rowe asked hesitantly while stepping backward. The gang boss quickly looked around, his eyes landing on the last moon elf subordinate, who marched forward with his sword drawn.

Giallo shrugged and two throwing knives flew through the air toward the oncoming man. The elf managed to dodge one, but the other caught him in the right shoulder. With a grunt, the man yanked out the blade and let it fall to the ground before switching his sword to his other hand. Giallo stepped forward and easily dodged a wild offhanded swing from the man then caught his wrist and ended any resistance with a well-placed thrust of his dagger.

"Now, where were we, Mr. Rowe?" He looked between the two remaining men, gaze settling on the man who failed to abduct the terran. "And you. Please do not try to run. We need to talk once I am finished with your employer."

The raithe nodded quickly. "Y-yes, sir. P-please don't kill me," he stammered.

Giallo shrugged again. "We'll see where this discussion leads. Mr. Rowe, you have unfortunately stumbled into an area that is outside your purview. This little shadow war between the count, you, and the Guilds is at an end. I suppose it is fitting that your faction is the first to fall." He stepped toward the crime boss.

“Wait. Wait just a minute,” Mr. Rowe said.

“Do you have any terrans here?” Giallo asked.

“Y-yes! There’s one. He’s been staying here. I’m keeping him safe from Kayser.”

“That’s all I needed to know,” he said as readied his dagger.

Mr. Rowe started to pull a sword, which he really should have long before then, but never entirely drew it before he fell. He clutched at his neck as blood pooled around him. The light in his eyes dimmed until he left for Relena’s judgment. Giallo bent over and wiped his blade off on the man’s tunic. Standing, he turned to the raithe who had nothing but fear in his eyes.

“Now, tell me everything about your interaction with the terran,” Giallo demanded.

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Giallo left a few minutes later through the back door, wiping the fresh blood on his blade off with a rag he had picked up. Walking down yet another hallway with doors on either side, he quietly looked in each, seeing small rooms with beds and chairs inside. He was opening the door when he heard a voice call out.

“Oh! Just a moment! I didn’t hear you knock,” the voice said.

The door pulled away from Giallo and an older man with rounded ears came into view. The man was wearing an odd assortment of clothing that didn’t remind Giallo of any style from anywhere he knew of. He wore a grey vest that covered a white shirt that was rolled up to his mid-forearm and well-made grey pants. He wore a pair of bifocals that dwarves and jewelers liked to wear. His grey hair flowed to just above his shoulders and was tucked behind his ears.

“I am sorry to disturb you, Mr...”

“Ah, this is like that... My name is Soren, and whom do I have the pleasure of meeting?”

“You may call me Giallo,” he said.

The terran tilted his head. "You do not seem to be one of my current host's men."

Giallo shook his head. "I am not. He was a criminal. I am an agent of the crown."

"Mr. Rowe warned me about the noble in charge of this city. Do I have a choice?"

"I do not answer to Count Kayser. You will be safe with my people," Giallo said reassuringly.

A slow nod was his only response.

"Perhaps you could tell me where you come from?"

The man's head jerked slightly. "I am from the North American Federation of Terra."

"I haven't heard of that nation yet. Have you met other terrans since you arrived?"

Soren sighed and tapped a finger against his leg. "I have met a few, and I am still processing the ramifications of those conversations."

While he didn't truly know what the man was going through, he could only imagine the difficulty of processing the situation of being in another world. Then find others of your people, only to realize they aren't from the same world as you. It shook the Academy and even the crown itself from the Eona-shattering revelations that there could be other *versions* of everything they knew. A huge religious revival was underway. More and more of the masses were flocking to the temples and praying to the gods, as surely the Flash was a sign of them. Giallo himself felt the pull to attend the Temple of Tenera with each terran he met.

He needed to get Soren to the Academy and debrief him. The North American Federation of Terra was the fifth origin point yet, and another from Terra in contrast to those from Earth, or even some other location, like the one tall, thin woman from a place called the Martian Republic. She was currently being tended to by the priests of Eona because of something the woman and another terran had called gravity adaptation syndrome.

"I will not say that I understand what you have gone through, but I do appreciate the gravity of the situation."

Soren nodded. "Thank you."

“Now, let us leave this place. We have people that can properly assist you,” Giallo said then smiled. “After, maybe you can tell me about your home.”

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Giallo was wearing a different outfit as he sat in the inn that the terran noble and the knights following her stayed at. He was currently drinking a glass of water and eating a small dish of mixed vegetables and bread. The woman was currently sitting at a table not far from him and staring down at a notebook. He wasn't sure what was in that notebook, but he had caught sight of her occasionally scribbling furiously into it.

“Are you ready for your second course?” a raithe woman asked.

Giallo glanced down at his plate before looking back at the woman. “I will be soon. Would you allow me a bit of time before you start it? In the meantime, could you bring me an ale?”

The raithe smiled. “Of course. Coming right up.”

A short while later, Giallo was slowly drinking an ale waiting on his second course when a telv woman arrived and sat down with the terran. The redhead telv was the medic for the knight order according to notes he had on the group. He listened in as they spoke.

“Sloane! How are you doing? Still working on your designs, I see,” the telv said.

“I'm good, Maud. Just trying to finish up the runes and design for the Banking Guild's runecard terminal. The card is nearly done, so I want to have the terminal completed soon. That way I can work on other things while we are on our way to Marketbol.”

Giallo caught sight of the telv, Maud, leaning closer. He could barely make out what the woman said if he strained himself. “What is your opinion of the Blade and the Guildmaster's niece working for you?”

That was surprising to Giallo. The terran had only just met with the Banking Guild's head yesterday. To come out of that meeting with not only a deal to meet with presumably the Guild's



leadership in Marketbol, but to have a Blade and the Guild's own niece join her House? That was a development the Academy needed to know.

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Giallo walked out of the cafe after meeting with his handler. The two had spoken of much, including the ball Giallo and several other agents had just left. Ramifications of which would be widespread. The initial opinion was that the Order would need to know more. What was surprising to Giallo was the length the Guildmaster went to ensure the count did not apprehend the terran woman. It was something else to check into.

He also passed on information about Lord Andrei Vasile to his handler. The Order would task other agents with ascertaining the reason for the noble's interest in Lady Sloane. He was a known philanderer, yet the length he went to for the terran was beyond his norm. Either something about her enticed him more than usual, or he had ulterior motives. Both reasons were of interest to the Order.

For now, he would return to the Academy and figure out the next move. They needed to prepare to leave the city.

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Giallo sat at the inn again. He'd become a regular over the past two weeks. Choosing to maintain his cover by eating and drinking in the tavern part of the inn, even when the knights and terran weren't around. The Order's interest in the terran had increased dramatically after her actions in the count's ball. She'd shown the ability to use magic, along with one of the knights. The two of them showed extensive control that was greater than any the Academy had seen thus far. The count's interest was starting to make sense. It was a lead that would need to be checked further.

Sloane and the sun elf, Ernard, entered and sat at a table and started discussing other projects the terran was working on. He missed some of the specifics, but he heard something about a bird. *I wonder what she's working on next.* The Academy was quite interested in her grenades and her deal with the Guilds.

He listened in as the two spoke of more things before moving to inconsequential topics. Sloane spoke of doing more work in her room and wanting to work out some math.

Giallo finished his second course and was about to get up and leave when Ernard said something that made him pause.

"I will be back later. Deryk is already trying to find a contact to meet with the Order," he said.

That in itself wasn't really news to Giallo. The two knights had been searching for a way to meet with the order for several weeks. However, Giallo did believe it was about time to force a meeting. The horde would meet the forces the count had sent out in the next day or so. Within a week, the Academy was going to leave the city. A small force like those sent out by the count would barely cause a delay, but it did mean that the beasts would arrive later than initially estimated. Experts suspected they had about a week and a half before the swarm arrived. *As if experts for such a thing existed...*

"You still think they can help us?" Lady Sloane asked.

The knight replied and slid his chair back, so Giallo stood up and walked toward the exit, not wanting to leave after the man. He made it outside in the crisp Autumn air and moved to the side, blending himself in with the crowds moving around the cobbled streets. A few minutes later, the knight emerged from the inn, looked left then right before making toward a small pedestrian alley across the street. Giallo counted to five then made after the man.

Giallo followed the man for another fifteen minutes as they wound their way through the alleys and streets. The man obviously had a clear destination, and Giallo knew that the orkun knight would be there waiting. The knight stopped at a stone arch across the street in between the row of businesses and looked around. Giallo moved into a doorway as the man stopped to prevent himself from being seen. He waited a moment before walking out as if he were leaving the building, trying to catch sight of the sun elf as he turned left, away from where the arch was.

When he didn't see the sun elf, he made his way across the street and peered into the large public gardens that were beyond the archway. It took him a moment, but then he noticed the sun elf moving through the hedges.

Endeavoring to remain unseen, Giallo moved quietly through the garden after the sun elf. He paused when he heard Ernald speaking quietly.

"Deryk, have you found anything?"

A gruff voice answered him. "No. It's as if they are purposely avoiding us. There is no way they are not aware of our attempts to contact them at this point," the orkun said.

*He has no idea how true that is. Or perhaps he does. There is something about him...*

"That is unfortunate. We promised Sloane this would be the best option. We do not have much longer with her," Ernald said.

A grunt came in reply. "We have months left with her, Ernald. We have to travel all the way to Marketbol and then go back to Swanbrook. Cristole has shown that the plans can change. I know your feelings on the matter. Maud has let her feelings known as well. Ser Gisele is understandably hesitant to tie our order down to Sloane. We have to part ways, but we have pledged to do all we can to assist her in finding her daughter."

Giallo tilted his head in thought. That explained why they wanted to meet with the Order. Of course, the Academy would have information concerning terrans within the kingdom. A plan was forming in Giallo's mind, one that would require him to meet back with the Academy. He could easily obtain the information the woman desired. He knew from listening and from other agents' notes that the terran's daughter was nine years old, somewhat tall for her age, and had brown curly hair just like her mother, but lighter. That would be enough for him to know if any terran matching that description or even similar was discovered. He just hoped that the girl wasn't one of the bodies they had found, dead from various sources.

Ernald continued. "How do you think we will meet with the Order?" He asked.

"I do not believe we will meet them. I half expect them to pop up behind us and introduce themselves," Deryk said.

Giallo nearly snorted as he tried to stop himself from laughing. There couldn't be a better queue for him to show himself if he planned it. He stepped out from the hedges and approached the two. The orkun instantly jerked around, two long, double-sided daggers appearing in his hands. Ernald's eyes went wide, but he quickly raised his hands, ready for a fight.

"Sers. No need for hostilities. I do believe Deryk just requested my presence," Giallo said. He was confident in his abilities, but that orkun would be a very tough fight. The scholar would be easier, but having to fight both at the same time would require him to go on the defensive almost immediately.

Ernald looked at Deryk with a confused expression, but the orkun simply put away his daggers. "I should have spoken to the wind and requested a meeting sooner if that was all it required."

Giallo huffed a laugh and smirked at the orkun. He could appreciate the humor of the situation. "Now, I believe it's beyond the time we've met. Shall we?"

The three spoke at length about what they wished to know. As expected, information regarding the daughter was first and foremost among their request. What was not expected was knowledge he was sure the Academy didn't have.

"How sure are you of the count's actions with the terrans?" Giallo asked.

The two men glanced at each other, then Ernald responded. "Our source has their reasons for obtaining this information. I am sure it is true. The Order of Secrets has no knowledge of this?"

Giallo tilted his head, deciding how to respond. "Since the Flash, the Academy has had to gather information from a multitude of sources all over the region. Our sight has not always caught everything, but once something has our *focus*, there is nothing that we cannot find out. The terrans are under that focus, if the count is doing something that you are aware of, the Academy would *appreciate* any further insight you could provide."

Ernald nodded. "We can understand that. We are aware of several terrans the count captured, tortured, and then killed. He apparently has one remaining terran he is holding. While we cannot prove it, we believe the terran noble he has on his court is being utilized to trap any terran they find. Especially any with... abilities."

“Any information you can provide on the terran he has, we want,” Deryk said.

Giallo noticed Ernald’s glance at Deryk. Obviously, that was something they had not discussed beforehand, but fit within what the Academy knew of how the group operated.

“I will need to confirm what you have told me, but I do believe we can come to an arrangement. In the meantime, I will need to meet with your Lady Sloane,” Giallo said.

Ernald’s eyes narrowed. “Why do—”

“That is fine. I will inform her,” Deryk said, cutting off his fellow knight, which garnered him a glare.

“Deryk—”

The look the orkun gave the sun elf cut off anything the man had hoped to say. Giallo just smirked.

“Good. I look forward to meeting the Lady. Until next time, sers,” Giallo said.

He left the two knights standing there, both still on edge. He hadn’t lied. Giallo did look forward to meeting the woman herself. However, first, he needed to look into the count and the information obtained that he expected was from the Blade attached to House Reinhart.

*This woman may not have the largest connections of the terrans the Academy knew of, but she’s certainly doing well for herself after such a short time period.*

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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, tapestries were 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.

\* \* \*

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 raiithe 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.