

The Duke of Cyan stared dumbly at the dagger piercing his heart. Like many of history's best diviners, he never saw his death coming.

The Archduke of Teal watched the events re-unfolding once more, then sealed the captured image into crystals to send out. Glancing back a few minutes into the past was no simple feat, even for him, but they needed to know what had happened.

And the answer was simple: The worst.

"The Rot has the body and Soul," Intercalate turned to his apprentice. "Spread the message to my peers as soon as possible. And tell them I suggest we sound the second Beacons. Today if possible."

The War was clearly about to escalate.

The Duke of Green was obliterated, her body reduced down to individual cells, which were thereafter scorched to ash by the impact's after-blow. A very precise ambush, attempting to kill her in a single blow. The mana had built up so unbelievably fast that she had failed to react. Even with her guard down, that was ludicrous. Not to mention the planning needed... The enemy did miss a drop of blood though.

The Duke of Greed was whole again the next instant, rushing towards the traitors. Whatever weapon they had just used though was clearly singular though - smuggling it in under her nose must have been difficult enough. They were just a group of scribes, not one above Conception, which was probably why she had let her guard down. A moronic mistake that would not be repeated.

Keeping her second Truth, **MOLTBIRTH**, secret for years had probably saved her. The assassination had been *disturbingly* close to succeeding. The following 'fight' was not, if it could even be called that. The gaggle of traitors were reduced to a pile of comatose blobs of flesh before even realizing what had happened. Hopefully the inquisition would be able to figure out what in the world that weapon had been as there was not even a hunk of broken metal left of it. With a bit of luck, it required exceedingly rare materials or something along those lines, because she didn't fancy meeting 50 of those on the field.

"Dear!" a shrill voice sounded from the entrance to the garden. Instantly recognizable as the Duke's second favorite consort. Always pretending to be the damsel, even when rushing towards danger.

"Already dealt with," she replied. Shame about the office, though. It was more pieces than room after the attack. And the Duke did *not* envy whoever would be charged with restoring the destroyed documents scattered around.

"What?" or perhaps not. Her lover's look of confusion was quickly mixing with redoubling worry as the cute little thing took in the state of the room.

"Assassination attempt. I will need Frowny to have a look. Or whichever subordinate he left with us. What emergency do *you* have?"

“The Duke of Cyan is dead and taken.”

“Ah. Fuck.”

The Duke of Purple grit his teeth, his hand smashing into the empty spot where his expensive desk used to be. *Fucking vultures*. Even during a Lich war, they were pecking at his heels. As of just a few hours ago, he was no longer patron to the Berkley mega foundry. His grandfather, the previous Duke, had laid the cornerstone in his youth. Through the incredible effort of several centuries it had grown into one of the biggest workshops in the entire Duchy. In his younger days, Pavos himself had been deployed to manage it, making the connection quite personal.

And it had been stolen from him. The week prior it had been two crystal refineries. Just another chunk of meat bitten off of his bleeding legacy. Almost three millennia of political dominion his ancestors had secured, and he was hemorrhaging that legacy like it was swill beer. Day by day, his family's estates shrunk. As they had for many decades at that point. Slipping by as he powerlessly stared.

Worst of all, it was Pavos' fault. Every single coin lost was on his head. The ruinous damage to House Steelmason wholly caused by the man's failures. He had tried. He really had, and was making attempts still. It was just that he simply did not have the predisposition to accomplish that

Pavos Steelmason was the only Duke of the last millennium who did not wield a Truth. At least when discounting those who had been deposed within a month.

There were those in the Duchy of Purple who did. By all means, they should have long usurped his seat. It had been claimed by him on a promise of potential when Pavos had been advancing through Domains well ahead of the curve. By the time he had ambitiously reached for it in the wake of his grandfather's demise, the young him had truly believed that Truth was just months away at most. Then it never came. Not for years and decades.

By the end of the first he should have been challenged and gracefully left the seat. The challengers would have had to fight each other for the position, of course, leaving them too busy to attack the weakened House Steelmason. It would not have been glorious, but hardly the first time that a great House took a back seat for a few generations until they replenished their well of talent enough to retake their rightful position. Pavos would have made a worthwhile custodian in the meantime.

Except then rose the fucking Soulcatcher. A mirror of everything Pavos should have had, but never could. A nobody from the middle of an unimportant nowhere who somehow claimed a Name with no support from any major faction, fiercely rejecting any attempts at recruitment throughout his entire rise. But that achievement made him the undisputable strongest mage in the Duchy, by law the only claimant to the title of Duke.

Yet the man had only snorted to the messengers Pavos had sent to summon him. Not a trace of care for the most honored of all titles. And after that moment, his rivals were no longer *obligated* to compete over the seat. Besides just breaking tradition, chasing the Dukeship suddenly became too risky. What was the point of winning authority that could be easily stripped away by a single madman's whim.

So instead, they decided to cut up House Steelmason into bite sized meals, stealing generations of accumulated riches with every breath Pavos took. Even the War had not stopped their predations, merely slowed them down. Rival Houses, happy to share such a lavish meal. Perhaps only further escalation could stay their hands...

And as if with perfect timing, a message fell to the floor below where his desk used to be with a characteristic *thump* - the letter-pipe system was perhaps archaic, but very much to the Duke's preferences. Leaning down and noting the 'emergency' markings, he did not hesitate to read. Then a smile almost broke over his lips. Pavos was basically getting exactly what he had just hoped for. His mood was improved for all of two minutes before he realized that the others had not even conferred with him before deciding that the second Beacons were to be sounded in just a scarce few hours.

The Duke of White was having one of those 'rough' conversations. As the self-identified patron saint of compromises and forced choices, it was always unnerving to speak with someone who simply did not need to play his games. A creature truly immune to any scheme he would ever dare conduct. One such being was the Archduke in Red.

"I estimate they will reach out to the Purple failure soon, if they haven't already slipped past our measures," he reiterated. "I give it even odds he will actually betray us. You know that I am right. The Rot had clearly let him live through the last several Wars just to abuse the moron as the weak point he is at a critical juncture. And we cannot afford the situation to deteriorate any further."

"I agree," the old terror nodded through the mirror's surface. "But my answer remains the same as when first given. If you wish, seek an alternative solution. I know you can be creative when you want to, lad."

And that was that. Afterward, they exchanged empty pleasantries and goodbyes before the Archduke quickly broke the connection. The Duke of White had deliberately chosen the time right after stirring the Beacons to make the call. He had clearly been too hopeful.

"Damn geezer," said the Soul mage, who himself was nearing 300.

He knew that there was no changing Conflagration's mind once committed, but he had hoped that the escalation of a Lich war was good enough of an impetus to finally let him remove one of their biggest weaknesses. But alas, that man stuck to his choices, arbitrary as they often seemed. It was hardly the first time that the Archduke had acted as such, simply the most egregious in memory.

There was also no telling if the Archduke would actually enforce what he preached. Sometimes he didn't even bother with a slap on the wrist to those who openly defied his choices. Other times he personally went to burn down entire estates with the owner still in them over seemingly mild offenses. So the Duke of White stepped over to his desk and got to rearranging his plans. It would take more manpower than he would have liked, but there *was* something else he could do without breaking the letter of the instructions. *Alternative solution* it is.

The Archduke of Red owned a very special set of dice. Five total - six sides each - though he only ever used three. Currently, he was staring at the faces, two ones and a two, adding up to just four. Unfortunate. He shook his head, and stamped *denied* onto the file. It had been a decent plan in his opinion, hence why the threshold had only been five. Still, that was what the dice had decided.

He took another proposal from the eternal pile, quickly reading through it. Though it went into further detail, the summary was simple: Scale back the Federation wide attempts to suppress its history and the real length. The Archduke didn't really need more than that, already well aware of the lukewarm returns of that century long campaign. He didn't even remember the original logic behind it anymore, just that it had needed a full 18 and had then miraculously passed. Finally repealing it would need just four, he decided.

The three dice left his hand, then ceased to exist. Completely detached from reality in a way few things could ever possibly become. He could technically still see them in the air, but even his prodigal mind could not calculate their trajectories. Had he tried, his magic would have failed to change how they fell. Which was the point. An Edict of Severance decreed upon them - truly severing the dice from any interference or prediction. A gift from an ancient friend who had been dead longer than some of the Federation's oldest mages have lived.

Eight, good enough. Quickly stamping *approved* onto the file, the Archduke moved it onto the smaller pile. The next proposal asked to re-open the investigation into Steelmire. Eighteen, and probably shouldn't have even made it to his desk. It was not up to the Duchy of Red to stick their nose into the secrets of his peers - especially not those they would kill a whole city for. Once again, he took up the dice and tossed them across his desk.

Most people could not comprehend why such a mundane object would warrant the danger of Proclaiming an Edict. Dukes of Cyan tended to be the sorest over it, as he always made it a point to challenge any new one to a game of dice, leaving them sputtering when they failed to cheat. Actually, many of the other Dukes had a similar initial reaction, though with a lower frequency. The brats. Only about one in twenty understood on their first meeting. And almost all of those had been Inquisitors claiming the Dukeship of White.

12, *denied*. It was simply a problem of memory. The Archduke of Red was old. He had forgotten many things. The faces of his ever-shifting court. The follies of youth, adulthood, and even centuries. The smiles of his first dozen wives before he had finally decided the heartbreak was not worth the brief happiness. The voices of almost any friend he had ever made. Even his own birth name, discarded and eventually fully lost.

The Rot never, ever forgot.

Any decision he could conceivably make, they would predict. With a perfect understanding of his personality they had long refined, the Undead would know what choice would be made before even he did. Then they would know exactly how he could try to mitigate them, counter-predict his counter-prediction in a way that only a thinktank of ten thousand dedicated analytical Souls with perfect recall of every action he had ever taken could.

Therefore, the Archduke of Red made no choices. He nudged the odds based on logic, uplifted and mentored promising leaders, filtered out some blatantly disastrous mishaps... but the real choices belonged to the dice. The very same set that no Lich could ever predict nor rig. That

was his personal answer to the Forever War. He got back to processing the files, reading some with intend interest while barely skimming others.

“Lord Conflagration,” a weak voice eventually sounded from the couch on the other side of the study. It was rather large, as he had specifically had it put there to allow him to work while waiting for people to wake from unconsciousness. One of the *unusual* amenities he had arranged. The situation came up surprisingly often.

“How are you feeling?” he looked over at his latest project. He could have easily kept working throughout a conversation, but it tended to disturb the young and weak. And the other person in the room was always particularly twitchy.

Outwardly young and androgynous, the surface revealed only a fraction of the truth. The being in his office was far from human. But then, so was anyone powerful enough to matter. This one simply needed the time to grow. In the past 30 years, they have made progress comparable to most first grade prodigies, despite needing to split their attention manyfold. Just the sheer potential made the Archduke almost salivate.

Six affinities. What unimaginable breakthroughs could such a mage make? It has been too long since the Federation had last expanded upon the very fundamentals of magic. And this wanderer had both the mind and potential that could lead to them. If the dice hadn’t rolled the *four* total needed to keep the strange wanderer, he might have tried to find a workaround himself!

“I apologize for my weakness.”

“No, the fault is more mine than yours,” he shook his head. “Your protectors had underestimated how intensely the second Beacons would affect you, despite their explicit instructions otherwise. A reprimand will be issued. You may inquire through your usual contacts if you wish to learn more.”

“Lord... may I ask why you had me brought here?”

“I was already going to summon you, so this was merely convenient. I was made aware that some time ago, two Domain wielding demons spontaneously appeared in the Duchy of Black, hunting a suspiciously weak person over very vague reason.”

“When?” the poor thing immediately grew deathly pale. The spark of panic was almost tangible.

“Many months ago. It has only reached my ear now because one of those demons had been recruited to fight in the war, making me curious as to why.”

“Does that mean someone else made it?” excitement immediately replaced the fear.

“Supposedly dead, killed in the attack on Abonisle. Those demons seemed rather convinced by the finality from the letter I received.”

“Oh.”

“But it brings up questions. Should the existence of others like you be revealed to the ducal houses? If so, to what degree? Should the Federation move subtly, or try to openly compete in snatching up more beings like you? After all, with the Void’s haphazard dilation, more ‘fresh’ escapees could be appearing for centuries to come. Should the Federation enforce

benevolence, or merely aim to surpass the extraordinarily low bar of your previous captors and then leave the details to the whims of the finder?"

"I... don't know," was the response after a few stunned moments.

"You have a week to compile and submit a proposal then. Dismissed."

Ezax von Blackburg was only one fifth of the way through his daily five-minute break when a new annoyance made itself known. A crow that was blatantly something else was flying towards the open air parlor. It was acting so blatantly that Ezax decided to not immediately consign it to nothingness. He might have done that had stealth been attempted. That poorly construed assassination attempt recently aimed at Avys already had him in poor mood.

Crow. Maybe messenger, he sent over their link instead. It is strange beneath the surface, I cannot quite place it.

Now, if that isn't curious. I might even know who that is.

"Avys, pleasure as always," the bird landed on the nearest railing, then greeted with a raspy voice. The beast's vocal cords clearly good enough to replicate human speech, but not without an echo of that biology being apparent. "And Ezax, of course. This would be the first time I dared approach your presence."

"What are you?" Ezax inclined his head, already tracking the source. He had started doing so as soon as the bird had first entered his sight. Because what he beheld was curious.

The crow's origin was obscured by a recursive loop of sorts. Rather than trying to hide whatever links it held towards its controller, it sprung thousands upon thousands of them traveling in every direction behind the bird, any he followed eventually looping around back into the mess. If it were an emergency, the Duke could likely untangle the mess in a second, but well over 99% of his attention span was constantly divided to observe the Lich War unfolding. Thus it would probably take the small fraction remaining in his body several minutes.

Which was still impressive feat by the intruder. Ezax was an extraordinarily difficult man to hide from once he had caught a glimpse. In the whole Federation there were only a few dozen places that could fully divert his gaze - such as Abonisle's Dredge or White's Ivory Bastion. It was SECRETS that did it, a Domain wielded at almost its full potential. Another curiosity. Even the most experienced and talented mages rarely utilized more than a third of that potential.

"Old Crow, I presume?" Avys seemed almost curious. And surprisingly not putting up any pretense for once. "You may remember I have mentioned him before, Ezax."

"You know I cannot remember every person you keep track of," he played along, the act familiar. In all honesty, he had mostly just memorized how to react to Avys' prompts and rarely needed to divert when she wanted a specific impression to be passed along.

"One of the main 'Fowls' of the criminal 'Guild' as they call themselves. Possibly the founder of the whole institution, according to some annoyingly unreliable rumors."

"Yes, him, I recall now," Ezax frowned. "You said you suspected Honing, I think."

"It seems to be the only conclusion."

"That monstrosity has very little to do with the refinement of flesh, if it ever had any in the first place."

Not honing, yet not a mage either. Perhaps god, but there was no telltale stream of divinity from worshipers either, so that option was out. There were also more Domains than just the one beneath the surface, but twisted to a ridiculous degree, to the point Ezax was struggling to name them even with his sight. Like they were divergent from the human comprehension of how a Domain should be held and used.

The only other time he had seen such aberration was Calm, and that man had a real claim to the title of a 'least sane person capable of functioning' in the entire Realm. That implied a thought structure of this Old Crow was not only fundamentally alien, but then also intentionally further twisted by another Domain. That was at least five total by Ezax's count. Secrets, Theft, Hunger, Distortion, and *more* Secrets - Not the exact names of them, but somewhere along those lines.

"Now, now, I am just as human as you, Ezax," the crow seemingly guffawed with a few raspy croaks.

"So, barely?"

"And doing an excellent job pretending otherwise!"

"Fascinating. And surprisingly revealing," Avys commented, always digging for more while Ezax gradually transferred what he was gleaning through their link. Which would probably take over a minute. Setting a pace that wouldn't mentally overwhelm Avys was always tricky.

"I will cut to the chase before the great Duke somehow finds his way even around my arduous defenses. I have found the facility beneath Abonisle."

"I don't believe there is such a thing?" Avys perfectly played out feigned confusion without missing half a heartbeat. Ezax relied heavily on his poker face training to not allow a surprised twitch.

"Activate them, Avys," the crow told her, ignoring any denial. "The situation is worse than you think."

"What would make you say that?"

"Three hours ago, every single deity and half decent artifact in the Duchy of Yellow almost simultaneously died."

"And you would know this how?" Avys fished again.

"We both know that such undertaking requires *deep* infiltration," the crow spoke over her. "I don't know if it's down to the marrow or just regional, but that's likely where most of the hordes are hiding. When they try to cross the border, give them a surprise even the Rot will not see coming."

"I will take your words under advisement," Avys allowed.

“Good. And good luck to us all. My options for dealing with the Rot are limited, but I too will contribute where I can.”

Then the crow obliterated itself. It was downright fascinating to Ezax’s eyes. The creature, through some advanced mental gymnastics, designated its own existence as a Secret, the immediately stole itself, using that Hunger adjacent Domain to simultaneously feast on what it stole. Except that rather than digesting that power, it instead let the sustenance turn into a secret again. Which fed into the digestion again in a loop. A rapid but not lossless one.

All of that naturally happened within a split second, leaving Avys to yelp as the bird detonated into a cloud of gore. Ezax also finally realized the trick with the thousand decoy connections. The truth was that there had never been a real one among them. The crow had somehow contained a fully independent and functional Soul splinter. One that could wield the Domains, yet was clearly easy enough to make that sacrificing it was an option. The Duke of White would probably wipe out a whole city state to learn how to do that.

“What do you think?” he turned to his dear wife. His break was chronologically almost over, but then he was keeping up with that pretense mostly for her benefit. True rest was simply not an option during a Lich War.

“He would not have shown himself to you unless he believed the threat urgent,” Avys bit her lip, intentionally allowing the tick to show with just the two of them present. “And revealing he *knows* about that project? Sheer desperation at a glance. I will have to seriously consider taking him at his word - because I know he is not a fool. So he is already aware we will want him dead for knowing.”

“Ask Johnson if everything is actually prepared then,” Ezax nodded. “Wherever the treachery lies, we need to be ready.”

Illius von Brightbeak enjoyed a few moments of serenity in a field of complete sensory deprivation. Getting that enchantment installed had basically become a habit, no matter where his office ended up being. Just the blessed bliss of *silence*...

Which was unfortunately never going to last. While the spell did a wonderful job isolating physician sensations, it did far worse with mana. And with an unstable Truth mage seated just on the other side of the room and starting to spiral, he did not have the option of willful ignorance.

“Mother, calm,” he commanded and it immediately worked. To an extent.

He had five to ten minutes before the next episode started. Sadly, she was already so resistant to most sedatives and he could not let her get used to the last few that still had a real effect on her ever degrading self-control. There would still be times when he needed the Duchess calm enough to function for at least a few hours. The silver lining was that she no longer talked - though Illius nonetheless had to suffer through the constant interruptions from his mother.

The Duchess regent. Not Duke, obviously. There was technically not one at the moment. She had *a* Truth, but that was not always enough to earn that title. The only reason she had even been able to maintain the polite lie of authority was because everyone of any importance in the

Federation knew that removing her meant that she would perish. Well, she do that would anyway, but a lot slower than if she had been actually deposed.

A domain leaving someone was not a pleasant way to go. But a Truth breaking within a living being? That meant the kind of agony that the cruelest of torturers could not even dream of. A carnival of pain so notoriously brutal that it made her former friends decide that literally turning the poor widow into a living bomb with a rather loose trigger was a far kinder plan than leaving her to break in that manner.

Everyone recalled that the last real Duke of Yellow had died during the previous Lich War - valiantly leading the charge against the Archlich. What fewer knew is his once wife's one and only Truth. **LOYALBORN**. An almost traditional culmination. Any young noble could take their pick from a selection of prodigious orphans, already trained and educated in what honor serving would be - more than one in some cases!

Well, to not lie about a system just because Illius hated it - a low bar anyhow - it technically did produce a high degree of average happiness among those picked. Those who made it to the 'education' phase of the program were always carefully picked to be already inclined towards it. Illius' mother had been one such. And she *had* been happy. A Truth is never attained from a lie.

Then her beloved husband was killed and suddenly all that Loyalty that had defined her entire existence for well over a century had nowhere to go. Obviously, she had quickly begun to crack. The other Truth mages in Yellow were already gathering for the goodbyes and subsequent mercy killing when a last ray of hope appeared: The pregnancy she had been striving towards for decades.

So, rather than let the Duchess come undone or kill her right then, there had been a compromise struck. While Illius was the heir apparent on paper and in public rhetoric, it was basically nothing more than a trick to make a dying delusional woman live just long enough to serve one last purpose. Then she could go down in history as a martyr rather than a shattered fool. Then the moment his mother perished, the real powers behind the Duchy of Yellow would suddenly remember all the many indiscretion Illius had committed with no prior repercussions.

Had he behaved like a model prodigy, they would have likely even let the Brightbeak boy have a shot at the Dukeship in a century or two. The Duchy of yellow was known to be less cutthroat among their Houses. But holding himself back for so long was simply impossible. Instead, it would be the noose for the poor Illius. Maybe severing Light through the neck, that was more traditional. Not that the heir apparent cared. The status quo had given him incredible leeway to act in the moment while the ancient idiots just tallied his wrongdoing on the sidelines. As if patient justice was anything more than pointless revenge.

"Soon, mother, soon," he calmed the woman down once more, then reactivated the deprivation magic before his senses could become too incessant again. His plans were already laid.

The Duke of Brown watched the currents of the Realm unravel from within her hiding place, remotely puppeteering what appeared to be her physical body. Just as she had been for the last 130 years since becoming the Duke. Because just as the Undead learned and misdirected, so did she.

Even the Archdukes did not know of her simple scheme. Any discrepancy of that remote control that might have given rise to suspicion would have been smoothed over by the half dozen Lich Wars fought. Over half her life spent to set up a trap. Her teacher would have been proud.

Because one day, that moment of surprise would matter. By the Duke's estimate, it may very well come soon.