

## 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. In fact, 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 were 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 other—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 was 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 fully 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.”