

## Chapter 18 – The threat that is Dominion revealed

The elevator doors open on the 53rd floor with a soft chime.

Nothing is stirring.

Melissa Stepinski, Victor's assistant, has left for the day. The only light in the main reception area radiates from a backlit Dominion logo behind her desk—white text on dark glass, glowing softly in the dimness.

The space is immaculate. Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves line one wall, filled with leather-bound volumes—corporate law, economics, histories of industry titans—all perfectly aligned. A few understated awards sit on glass shelves: Business Leader of the Year, 1984. Chicago Economic Council, Distinguished Service. It's all very tasteful and controlled.

A pair of low, modern chairs flanks a sleek coffee table near the window. Beyond the glass, the city sprawls in grids of light—Chicago at night, alive and indifferent.

Down one hallway, doors lead to offices for senior leadership. All closed now. All dark. Marcus's is at the end on a corner of the building, though he's spent little time there of late, given the travel schedule he keeps.

He reflects on the inbox that has surely piled up while he was out today but then puts the idea behind him and turns left.

The door to the Furnace stands ajar. Light spills out—warm and golden, bleeding into the darkened reception area like a wound.

He walks in.

"Mr. Hale. Welcome home."

Victor Thorne stands with his back to the door, silhouetted against the floor-to-ceiling windows that dominate the far wall. Beyond the glass, Lake Michigan stretches dark and vast, the shoreline traced in light. The city spreads below—his city.

He's tall—six-two, lean but solid, the kind of frame that suggests he could hold his own in a fight if it came to that. Silver hair neatly combed back. Pale skin

that seems to catch and hold the ambient light. He's dressed in a charcoal suit, perfectly tailored, a burgundy tie knotted with military precision.

In one hand, he holds a glass of wine—something red, something expensive. He doesn't turn.

Though Marcus has experienced it hundreds of times over the years, Victor's ability to be completely aware of his surroundings without visual inspection never ceases to unsettle him.

"Thank you, sir. It's good to be back." Marcus crosses the room, his footsteps muffled by the thick carpet. He stops a few feet to Victor's left, close enough to be beside him, far enough to respect the implicit hierarchy. "I wish I came with better news."

He pauses, takes a breath. "I delivered your... requests... to Dr. Jeffries and his cabinet. They agreed to take them under advisement."

"But you don't think this will bear fruit?"

"No, sir, I don't." Marcus keeps his gaze forward, matching Victor's posture—two men looking out over the city like generals surveying a battlefield. "I got the impression they feel very much like they can recover from their recent setbacks and continue on their own path. I'm afraid they fail to appreciate all we bring to the table as allies in their endeavors." He pauses. "I found them a bit dismissive, if I'm honest, sir. I believe we may be reaching the point where their stubbornness needs to be addressed... again."

Victor continues looking out the window, watching the city lights pulse in ordered grids far below.

A minute passes.

Two.

"The day the shuttle broke apart," Victor says quietly, "the nation wept. Children saw it live on their classroom televisions. A biting wound to the American spirit." He tilts his head slightly. "Do you recall that wound, Marcus?"

Marcus inclines his head. "Unforgettable. One would think."

Victor's reflection smiles faintly in the glass. "Yes. One would think." He turns his head just enough to look at Marcus's reflection standing beside him. His eyes narrow with quiet satisfaction. "But these are men of folly, it seems. Slow to learn."

He takes a sip of wine, lets the silence stretch.

"Tragedy is an effective tutor. It reminds men of their limits. But in this case, it seems the lesson must be repeated until it is learned."

The implication hangs in the air—unspoken, unavoidable.

Marcus doesn't try to amplify or restrain it. He doesn't need to. This is the way of Dominion.

"I've begun working on an array of plans for your consideration, sir," Marcus says after a moment. "I should be able to have a full set of recommendations for your review within a few days."

"Excellent." Victor finally turns, gestures toward the long table that dominates the center of the room. "Let us turn our attention to brighter subjects, then. The uptick in Emergents being discovered continues."

Marcus follows and takes a seat across from Victor. The table is polished dark wood, gleaming under recessed lights. A single folder rests at Victor's place.

"On the way up, Elaine mentioned you had exciting news."

"Yes." Victor opens the folder, glances at the top page. "We've begun tracking a new emergent out in Buffalo Grove while you were away in DC. A young woman—Alison Becker, age seventeen. First discovered through the Emergent Stars group. Apparently, she confessed her powers to a school guidance counselor some of our staff have a working relationship with."

"Okay." Marcus senses there must be more. They're already tracking several dozen individuals throughout the country—and, to a lesser extent, across the planet. Several of those will end up being legitimate. Despite the number of false positives they have to sift through, the numbers of confirmed Emergents are steadily increasing. "And what is it that Alison Becker can purportedly do?"

Victor leans back in his chair, wine glass resting on the armrest. "She's a mind reader. If the reports are legitimate. A very good mind reader, at that. Or at least she's convinced the school counselor of it." He pauses. "And our friends at Emergent Stars have confirmed she's identified their surveillance twice already, despite their best efforts to remain undetected."

"Interesting." Marcus's mind races through the implications. Industrial espionage. Interrogation. Counterintelligence. Recruitment vetting. The applications are endless. "That's a compelling find, to be sure."

*And interesting that you did not inform me before my return,* his mind adds but censors from his words.

"With such a talent in our employ," Victor says, his tone measured but pleased, "many tasks would be a great deal easier. Imagine how much more efficiently we could handle the NASA project if we could turn all their minds into open books." He meets Marcus's eyes. "Such an assistant at your side would be invaluable in these negotiations."

"This is irrefutable," Marcus says smoothly, holding his expression steady.

But for the first time tonight, a slight unease works its way into the muscles between his shoulder blades. The Furnace is growing hotter.

*An assistant? Or my future replacement?*

Victor smiles softly to himself, as if he can sense the shift in Marcus's posture. Marcus is a loyal servant and a competent executive, but no one should ever feel comfortable.

Comfort is for the weak.

"And the plan for her interception?" Marcus continues, collecting personal intel as much as planning operational support.

"The team has intercepted communications about weekend plans," Victor says, glancing at the folder. "They intend to engage at a local mall. The exact playbook is still being worked out, but reports suggest money is getting tight in the family. I imagine they'll lead with a financial incentive—scholarship, stipend,

what have you—coupled with the promise of the support she needs. She's found telepathy to be... challenging to manage on her own, apparently."

"And the collateral?" Marcus asks. He's not sure why—he knows how it goes—but the process sometimes has to be respected.

"The family, school staff... that collateral?" Victor's tone is dismissive. "The home is fractured. By most accounts, strained. Ideally, everyone can be convinced that the best outcome for all is for us to take over guardianship." He swirls his wine. "Is that wishful thinking? Perhaps. But we can be relatively... persuasive at times. So, we'll see."

He sets the glass down, leans forward slightly.

"The school counselor is perhaps the most concerning of the group. She's experienced Alison firsthand, and she also has enough information about Emergent Stars to be annoying—if not dangerous. These self-righteous ingrates sometimes go off script."

Victor's expression hardens, just slightly.

"Do you recall back in '81—the counselor over in Gary?"

Marcus nods once. "Darnell Rhodes."

"Ah, yes. Darnell." Victor's voice takes on a lecturing quality, the tone of a man who's told this story before and savors certain details. "You know, Marcus, Dominion is extraordinarily generous with these people. We establish relationships with schools through organizations like Emergent Stars. We donate to their programs. We fund continuing education seminars. We treat them—these educators, these counselors—with respect. Professional courtesy. We ask for very little in return. Just an opportunity to improve the lives of struggling children. To help them reach their potential."

Marcus nods resolutely, affirming his boss's conviction.

Victor pauses, picks up his wine glass to study it, but doesn't drink.

"Darnell Rhodes was a guidance counselor at a middle school in Gary, Indiana. Fifteen years on the job. Solid reputation. Well-liked. He came to us, Marcus. One of his students—a boy, twelve years old, massive behavioral issues,

violent outbursts—turns out the kid had emerging abilities. Enhanced strength, near-impenetrable skin. The boy's home life was a disaster. Darnell knew the system couldn't help him."

Victor finally takes a sip, sets the glass down with precision.

Marcus waits patiently for the story to continue. He knows it will.

"So, he reached out to Emergent Stars. Asked for our help. We sent a team. We interviewed the boy. The boy wanted to join us. It was a match made in heaven. In fact, Bulwark—as we know him in the Choir—has been one of our star recruits since the minute he arrived. Exceptional discipline. Loyal. Decisive and effective."

Marcus listens, expression neutral. He's not sure his assessment of Bulwark's discipline would use the word exceptional, but the Choir—indeed the whole of the Aegis project is under his tutelage. Pointing out your shortcomings to the boss is only prudent when they are truly problematic. Marcus nods again in agreement. He knows where this is going.

"But these social workers..." Victor's voice drops, takes on an edge. "They imagine themselves as guardians. Protectors. They forget who the big fish is. They forget who owns the pond."

He stands, walks back to the window, hands clasped behind his back.

"Darnell had second thoughts. Started asking questions. Did some digging—superficial, amateurish, but persistent. He went to his principal. When that didn't work, he brought the police into our business." Victor's tone sharpens. "Our business. We own half the police in that county—more than half, if we're being honest."

He turns back toward Marcus, who hasn't stopped watching him throughout.

"What poetic justice that Bulwark himself eliminated the problem." Victor's smile is cold, surgical. "The whole family, actually. Darnell, his wife, their two daughters. Clean. Efficient. And Bulwark—he didn't hesitate. Not for a second. He really is an amazing specimen."

Marcus says nothing. This is not a conversation. This is a reminder.

"No, Marcus." Victor returns to his seat, folds his hands on the table. "It's not the family I'm watching closely. It's the counselor. For all their desire to help others, sometimes they just can't help themselves."

He picks up the folder, closes it with a soft thwap.

"They forget that when you fuck with someone else's escape hatch, you might be the one who ends up going down with the ship."

Victor's eyes meet Marcus's—pale, steady, utterly calm.

"Let's hope we've met a smarter person than Darnell Rhodes."

Marcus offers the smallest of shrugs. Measured and unmistakable. It is indifference. Not to what must be done. Only to the consequences for others.

Marcus takes a deep breath, releases it slowly through his nose. The air in the Furnace is always heavy—thick with implication, hard to move through the body.

Victor shifts, setting the Alison Becker file aside, his posture easing fractionally as he transitions back to operational thinking. The threat has been issued. The point has been made. He is pleased. Now, back to business.

"Either way," Victor says, reaching for his wine glass, "we should know a great deal more about how this will all unfold by Saturday evening. Should anything arise during your trip tomorrow, I will keep you informed. You'll want to get the Bastards' initiation and integration program lined up to expect this one." He takes a measured sip. "Ideally, we move fast with this one—assuming her psyche is in a place to handle it."

"Of course, sir. I look forward to integrating Alison into the program."

It's the right response. Marcus makes a religion of giving the right answers. But he can't help thinking that Victor might be counting chickens before they're hatched this time. Telepaths are notoriously difficult recruits—their powers make them resistant to the usual manipulations, alert to hidden motives, and psychologically very fragile. If Alison Becker is as good as the reports suggest, she's both in way over her head at the moment and will see through any sales pitch easily.

But Marcus doesn't say this. Victor doesn't tolerate doubt when he's decided something is inevitable.

Content with that answer, Victor checks the item off his mental list and moves to the next. "Any concerns about your Wichita trip?"

Marcus pauses, processing the array of known unknowns associated with extracting new Emergents on his own. It's not a small task—these operations require precision, leverage, and the ability to pivot when things go sideways. Which they often do.

"Concerns?" Marcus tilts his head slightly, considering. "No, I don't think so. The politician's boy seems a simple enough case. Parental ambition will grease the skids—make the transfer easy. Once on the inside, he might find the adjustment to our style a little..." He searches for the diplomatic word. "...challenging. But I have every confidence that Colonel Briggs and Dr. Stroud will handle that."

Colonel Briggs specializes in breaking down ego. Dr. Stroud specializes in rebuilding it into something useful. Between the two of them, they've turned dozens of entitled or unruly teenagers into disciplined operatives.

Marcus rubs his chin, considering how best to characterize the second recruit.

"As for Jaxon..." He allows himself a faint smile. "I suspect his bravado will be fairly easily cowed. He's enamored with the rockstar lifestyle—the attention, the excess, the lack of consequences. Tomorrow, that's exactly what he'll be sold. The lifestyle—as something that can be earned." Marcus's tone hardens slightly. "And he'll wilt at that. The idea of work, of discipline, of paying dues—it'll terrify him. Then I'll remind him of exactly how deep the hole is that he's already dug, and he will acquiesce."

Marcus takes a deep breath, allows a moment of silence to settle.

Perhaps because it's late. Perhaps to stave off the gnawing idea that there could ever be a replacement in the wings worthy of his role—an assistant at your side—Marcus allows himself a little more candor than is typical.

"Sometimes," he says quietly, "it would be nice to just tell these neophytes, 'Can we skip all the bullshit and go straight to the end result?'" He meets Victor's eyes. "Of course, that's not the way of things. So we go through the motions and form them like the clay they are."

Victor's expression doesn't change, but something flickers in his eyes—approval, perhaps. Or amusement.

"You are a skilled potter, Marcus." His voice is even, measured. "See that these two become fine vessels. I have big plans for each of them—if they can pass the crucible. Especially the politician's kid. What leverage he could provide down the road."

"I will oversee their development personally, sir."

"Good." Victor sets his wine glass down, the base meeting the table with a soft clink. "And is everything in order for our tour of the Aegis facilities tomorrow? I'm quite interested to see how the team is coming along."

The Aegis facilities. The bunker. Sub-level three beneath this very building, where the Choir and the Bastards train and are forged into Dominion's future. Marcus has spent years curating that program, selecting trainers, refining methodologies. It's his pride, his legacy.

Victor has given him unprecedented oversight in forming it. And now he wants to inspect it.

"It is," Marcus says smoothly. "The team has been preparing training demonstrations, and I'm told the newer recruits are quite excited to meet you."

*Excited. Terrified. Same thing, really.*

"Very well." Victor's tone carries flat satisfaction—a king preparing to review his troops. "I hope I don't disappoint."

A dark smile taints the corners of his mouth.

He stares deep into Marcus's eyes, unblinking, assessing. Marcus sits with impeccable posture, spine straight, shoulders back, hands folded in his lap. He remains calmly tranquil under the gaze. Unshaken. Unbowed.

Good, Victor thinks. Show no fear, Marcus. No hesitation. Be my weapon. For the time is short, and soon we will rise far beyond our current stature.

"It's time to wrap this up for the day." Victor rises to his feet in one fluid motion. Marcus follows suit immediately, a beat behind—close enough to be responsive, far enough to show deference. "It's late, and tomorrow is a big day."

Marcus runs his hand down his tie, checking its position—perfect, as always—and begins to push his chair in with precision.

"Plus," Victor adds, almost offhandedly, "you have Elaine waiting in your bed to get back to."

For the first time, Marcus's professional front cracks.

Just for a moment—a flicker of surprise, a tightness around his eyes, a fractional stiffening of his shoulders—but the shot gets through.

"Sir, I—" The words catch. What words are there? How long has Victor known? Has he always known? "I..."

Victor raises one hand, silencing Marcus's fumbling word search.

"It's not my concern, Marcus." His tone is perfectly neutral, almost kind. The words hang in the quiet room, suspended like smoke. "See to it that it never becomes my concern. Yes?"

The message is clear: I know everything. I allow what I allow. Do not make me regret my generosity.

"Certainly, sir. Of course." Composure floods back over Marcus like a mask snapping into place. His voice steadies, his posture resets. The crack seals itself.

"Good." Victor moves toward the window again, not bothering to look back. "We'll meet here at seven to go over the agenda for the morning one more time."

"Yes, sir."

Marcus gives a brief nod—sharp, efficient—and turns to leave the Furnace. Another visit survived.

There are no goodbyes. No "good nights." No "see you tomorrows."  
That is not the way.

