

Word's Edge

Lord Aldway Lydon studied the ruins of his hometown reproachfully. Caford had never exactly been a sight to behold even when it was inhabited, and it was even less so abandoned. Dismounting his horse and leaving her to graze, he entered the overgrown borough. Weeds had colonized the houses, and emerged through windows. The trails Aldway had run along as a child had retreated into the leaves and mulch until it showed no sign of ever being there. The quiet scenery was almost lulling, but the lord made sure to keep his guard up. He was a passive man who preferred not to get into fights—most found his harmlessly thin frame and gaunt face placating—but he was equally as cautious. There was something bizarre about the ruins, as if the rubble around him would get up and start walking around. It just didn't fit in. Everything felt just slightly... off. Aldway was a paranoid man who was the least bit surprised by his wariness. The lord could count off the people he trusted on one hand. They almost entirely consisted of his courtiers; his advisors Harper Wintly and Margaret Turner, as well as his assistant Farrell Rawe. His eldest joked he had made more of a family at court than he had at home, and Lydon was not one to object to that. He dedicated himself to work as the aged king's head counselor nigh religiously, at least until the old man had died. One couldn't accuse him of being secretive, though. To those he trusted, he told everything.

Finally, he reached a clearing in the center of the city—the grave of the town square—where a young man sat. He wore elegant clothing, the kind with far too many ruffles and folds to be practical. His chin was as pointed as a dagger, and his neat blond hair as sharp as needles. He turned to Aldway and smiled a hollow smile, the kind regurgitated from years of civility tutoring. The lord did not bother himself with such courtesies. “Ourson.” The lord said acidly.

“I would've thought that we'd be on a first-name-basis by now, Ald!” Lanist Ourson jested. Aldway eased himself to the cushioned ground, padded with damp leaves and desiccated nettles, and exhaled deeply.

“What do you want, Lanist?” Lydon had been shaken awake in the middle of the night by Harper Wintly, with news that Lanist Ourson was open to a peace talk at the ruins of the town of Caford. Aldway brought no soldiers to the meeting. Paranoid he was, but he still valued his honor.

“You *know* what I want,” Ourson responded finally. “I want you to surrender Ohtoan City to me.”

“And you know that I can't do that.” The older man shook his head. After the death of the old king of Ohtoan City, Lanist Ourson and Aldway Lydon had tumbled into a battle of succession. Lanist had been the King's lead knight, a polarizing, but nonetheless charismatic man who attracted supporters around him like crows to a carcass. The lord had little faith in Lanist's ability to lead, and opposed his claim to kingship more out of necessity than desire, being the ruler's counselor. The city had split into factions trying to choose a new king, and had danced upon the edge of civil war. Aldway continued to speak. “We can cease this pointless division. As the king's counselor, I have the better claim. Regardless, I doubt you could lead the city-state. Charisma and looks can only carry you so far before you get buried under controversy and politics.”

“I am not concerned with who has the better claim,” Ourson commented, almost offhandedly. “And as for politics, I’m conducting myself quite well.”

Lydon was taken aback. “You’re not concerned about who has the better claim?” he cried. “Have you no honor?” The young knight stood.

“I don’t bother myself with such follies as honor.” He said. Turning back to the lord, he smiled. “A foreign concept for you, I’m sure. I can read it off the aghast expression on your face.” He started to pace. Lord Aldway Lydon watched him with a rising feeling of resentment. “I’ve done my research on you, Ald,” started Lanist. “You aren’t born of nobles— you’re peasant-born.” Ald’s eyes narrowed.

“I am,” he admitted, “It isn’t much of a secret, although I must confess that the fact hasn’t exactly given me much leeway around the court. It was your grandfather that pulled me out of poverty, if I remember correctly.” The older man feigned pensiveness. In reality, he remembered it as clear as the waters that flowed through the Ohtoan River. He promised himself that no matter how old he got, he would always remember that, at least. Aldway was sixteen when Lord Amadeus Ourson took him under his wing. Amadeus was in his early forties when they met, but the wrinkles that tugged at his face suggested an age much greater. He was riding through the downtrodden town with his guard. Even then, Caford was starting to wither. He was there on some sort of mission or political campaign, Aldway couldn’t recall. Most of the settlement’s inhabitants watched, disgruntled. Only the young boy ran in front of the lord, attempting to bargain with him, begging that the borough be given help. Supplies, guards, anything. Impressed by Aldway’s bargaining skills, Amadeus convinced him to join one of the smaller councils that governed Ohtoan City. Aldway worked his way up the ranks, eventually becoming a lord himself. He was eternally grateful towards the Ourson house for that, although the lord’s affection soured as Lanist slowly shifted into the role of his political rival. It had never occurred to Aldway to return to his hometown. This had been the first time in decades. He knew not to get his hopes up, but the town was in an even sadder state than before.

“You have impressive dedication, I’ll give you that,” Lanist said, snapping the lord back to present. “But your— erm, *meager* upbringing starved you in more ways than one. You have been malnourished for connections. Connections are key.”

Lord Lydon rubbed his temples. He had started to notice how often he was getting headaches. The voice that rose from his mouth was tired, but firm.

“In the end, your disregard of who has the better claim doesn’t matter. It’s ultimately the nobles of the city that decide who rule, and I feel they might not share the same ideals as you when it comes to claims.” He stood up to join Lanist.

“You married into your power.” Continued the ambitious young knight, as if he hadn’t heard Aldway speak at all. “You have alliances for sure, but in the end blood runs thicker than water. When push comes to shove, what noble house will back you? You are not related to anyone of note, unless you count your grandfather... What was it again?” Lanist sneered. “Arrested for treason?”

Aldway inhaled sharply.

“Where did you find this information?” While on the outside, he kept a semblance of composure, his mind was scouring to find out how Lanist knew that his grandfather was a traitor. Aldway was hardly a child when the old man had been exposed for plotting against the late king. His mother had been run out of town just for being related to the traitor. Late that night, after word of

her father's arrest was exposed, she had pulled Aldway's stringy hair back, and kissed his forehead gently. Pulling back, she smiled softly and retreated from their old cabin to be swallowed by the darkness. He extended his hand as she pulled away, but she was out of reach. *It's alright*, the young boy assured himself as he was taken by sleep. *I'll see her in the morning.* Aldway had never seen her again. It had taken years for him to bury the fact that his forefather had been a traitor to the old king! Years of bribes and manipulation! If word got out about the old man, he would lose public and noble approval. *Lanist is no fool*, Aldway realized, *this is blackmail. Curse my fool of a grandfather!*

"Where I am finding this information is irrelevant," said Lanist, "The real thing you should be asking yourself is to what extent you will be condemned when word of your forefather escapes. Your mother was chased out of the city-state. You got lucky the city guards were too lazy to look for next of kin. Although with tensions so high, I doubt the public will be so merciful this time."

"What do you want, Ourson?" Aldway spat. "Steel? Money? Land?"

"I suppose it would be the most convenient for me if you surrendered the city to me, and your faction stepped down. The only casualty would be your pride. I would be lying, though, if I said I wasn't curious about what would happen if I spread the word of this."

"If you're so eager to see me dead, why won't you just kill me now? You are the better swordsman."

Lanist laughed cheerfully, but there was something more sinister behind it. "You think very little of my honor, Ald! Even I would refrain from something so shameful." He shook his head. "Killing my opponent during a peace meeting, I would lose all respect!" As his laughter died off, his face transformed into an indecipherable mask. Ald knew from years as the lord's counselor that letting a silence hang was a sure way to get people to share information, perhaps more than they should. Sure enough, after a moment of quiet, Lanist started speaking again.

"This was your hometown, wasn't it? Well, at least it was until all the trade routes were redirected to the center city, and this old place was left to wither."

"How did you know this was my hometown?" Aldway asked again, his voice taking an edge.

"The same way I knew that your grandfather was a traitor," Lanist's mask broke, and his face contorted into a sneer that spread from ear-to-ear. "Because your advisor is my nephew." Aldway stepped backwards. His world was spinning. His advisor, Harper Wintly, betrayed him?

"I was telling you Ald, connections are important, though you failed to listen. When you have noble blood, you tend to have connections in high places. If you're lucky, one of those connections might just be the advisor of the lord."

"You planted a spy!"

"You think so little of my honor, and yet you're surprised when I do the bare minimum to ensure my victory."

Aldway remembered when he had hired Harper. The Ohtan house requested he be taken on as an advisor, and the old lord was not one to reject a house that had done him such good. *Thinking back*, he noted, *they had made the request just before the death of the king. The only reason that the house would plant a spy at that time would be if they were planning for me to fight for the throne... But the only way they could've known that the throne would be open for the taking would be if-*

"You had the king murdered!" Aldway exclaimed, his mouth moving as fast as his mind.

“You catch on quick!” Lanist laughed, his head rolling back as he did so. “Although I wouldn’t say murder— such a gruesome word, don’t you think? It wasn’t difficult either, just a slip of belladonna in his drink... I knew once the old man was dead, you would step up to oppose me.”

Aldway felt blood drain away from his face, searching hopelessly for words.

“You— How dare you!” Aldway finally obtained his voice. “Once I spread word of this treason—”

“But you won’t.” Lanist interjected. His voice projected an icy resolve that sent chills through Aldway. “I have already sent a behorsed assistant to inform the nobles of your treacherous forefather, with documents to back up the claim. You hid them well, I’ll give you that, Ald. Regardless, a dead man can’t spread rumors.”

“If my fate was sealed even before I got here, then what was the point of any of this?” Aldway spread his arms wide, laughing at the direness of the situation.

“I thought I should get some practice at debating before I become king.” The knight’s words ran cold.

Calm yourself, Aldway! He scolded himself. *I’ve thought myself out of more desperate situations than this one! How can I beat Ourson?* Aldway’s stomach sank as he realized what he had to do. *The only way to beat Aldway... It is to shed my honor, and stoop to his level.* He started to smile with a new resolution. “I’m glad he was right.” The lord muttered to himself.

“What did you say?” Lanist asked apprehensively.

“I said,” Aldway raised his voice. “I’m glad he was right.”

“Who was right?”

Aldway felt himself smile. “Harper Wintly. It seems like your rat works both ways. He told me that you would send a rider to the nobles with information on my father. I informed the city guard that there would be an assassin riding under the Ourson family crest this afternoon, attempting to murder the nobles. If they listen to my instructions, the rider will be arrested on sight. With any luck, the murder will be pinned on you.”

“I- That’s impossible! I’m sure Wintly is loyal to me!” Lanist sputtered.

“If you say so. But don’t say I didn’t warn you when you get arrested.”

Fear danced across Lanist’s face for a moment, before getting quashed by fury. In a flash, he drew his gilded saber. Before Aldway could blink, it was poised at his neck, blazing in the sunlight. The old lord simply laughed. “Don’t think to fool me, child. Your threats are as empty as your heart. You wouldn’t kill an unarmed foe. What impression would that give to your soldiers?”

Lanist gawked.

“So you noticed.”

“I knew something was off from the moment I set foot in Caford. It might’ve been years, but it’s still my hometown.” Turning around, Aldway called out to the empty village. “You can come out now! There’s no point in hiding anymore.

The entire village shifted as soldiers emerged from false bushes and plaster rocks.

“I needed a fail-safe, in case you didn’t accept the pledge of peace.” Lanist admitted. Aldway remained silent as he studied the crest of Ourson emblazoned upon their cloaks. “Stop the rider,” Lanist spoke up, commanding his soldiers. “Shoot him down if you have to.” They moved silently but quickly, marching down the path. Dust was kicked up so thickly that, for a few heartbeats, neither politician could see each other. When it finally cleared, they stood alone.

Lanist smirked. “We’ve hidden our horses in a field near here. If they ride with haste, my soldiers will surely catch the rider.” As if on cue, the soldiers thundered back past the path on horseback, towards the heart of Ohtoan City. It was Aldway’s turn to smile.

“You played into my hand well. Better than I would’ve thought.”

Lanist’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

Aldway had to stop himself from laughing. “Harper never betrayed you. I had no idea you sent a rider to the nobles. You shot yourself in the foot.”

The knight stared for a few moments, then cursed silently under his breath.

“Still,” He argued “That isn’t detrimental to me. It just resets us back to ground zero, and I still have the leverage that your grandfather was a traitor.”

“So you think. But there are many-a-traveler from here to the city who would surely witness your soldiers apprehending one of your own. Using their evidence, I could easily weave the narrative that a rogue guard of yours attempted to tell the noble council of your assassination of the king before being stopped by more of your soldiers.”

Lanist stood, aghast and speechless. “I would wish you good luck, Ourson, but I doubt you deserve it. I’ll leave you with a piece of advice: A lord doesn’t meddle himself with such perilous affairs unless he is sure of victory.” Aldway Lydon left Lanist behind in the ruins as he went to search for his mare.

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