

151: New partnerships

Early the next morning, Scarlett was led through a series of long corridors by a young woman dressed in plain attendant's clothing. She felt like she recognized the servant from her visit to Beldon's house in the capital a few months ago, although she wasn't entirely certain.

Following the chaos of the previous night, she would almost have expected the Tyndall estate to be bustling with activity today as well. However, to her surprise, things appeared strangely calm from what she had seen. Having left her quarters earlier than most due to her scheduled meeting with Beldon, she hadn't encountered many other guests, but those she had seen seemed largely unaffected by the events of the previous day.

Considering that the majority of the remaining guests were nobles, she supposed that their pride and need to uphold their image might have played a role in their composed demeanors. Nonetheless, it caught her a bit off guard how casually everyone was behaving. While there were more guards present in general, and certain areas of the castle were closed off, one could almost forget that the place had been attacked the night before.

Say what you will about nobles, but she couldn't help but respect their ability to shrug off things like this when they needed to.

"The young master is inside," the woman in front of her said, coming to a halt in front of an oak door. "He has not had much time to rest since yesterday, so please be considerate."

Scarlett observed her for a moment before shifting her gaze to the door. "I will keep that in mind."

She hadn't slept at all during the night, so it wasn't as if she was brimming with energy either. However, she could manage getting through the day until they were back in Freybrook, at least.

The servant woman nodded, lowering her head as she opened the door. Scarlett entered, spotting Beldon seated on a couch at the center of the room. He was still clad in the same clothes she had seen him wearing the previous day, though his jacket hung on a rack near the entrance, and he currently sat in only his white undercoat, holding a stack of papers in his hands. His dark hair was combed to the side, looking slightly more disheveled than before, but overall, he didn't look too worse for wear.

As the door closed behind Scarlett, the man looked up at her with a small smile and gestured to a couch opposite him. "Baroness, welcome. Please have a seat." Leaning forward, he placed the papers on a table in front of him. "It is unfortunate that our second meaningful meeting had to take place under these circumstances, but I appreciate your presence and willingness to meet. There are some matters that I wanted to discuss with you."

"No need for gratitude," she replied, walking over to take a seat. "I also have some matters I wish to discuss with you."

She briefly glanced at the papers on the table. Even though they were upside down, she could tell that they contained a list of names and descriptions, some of which she recognized. It seemed like the man was in charge of damage control.

“I am glad to hear that. Contrary to what people might think, I don’t often receive personal visits from such lovely ladies.”

She looked back at Beldon, studying him intently. “You are doing what you did last time as well. There is no need to maintain this facade in front of me. I believe we will both have an easier time if we can converse candidly today.”

His smile grew, accompanied by a low chuckle. “No, I suppose you’re right. We don’t have all morning.” There was a shift in the man’s demeanor, a mixture of relaxation and seriousness. “It *is* a shame we couldn’t have this conversation at another time, untainted by last night’s mess. Originally, my intention for wanting to meet with you had no relation to the Tribe of Sin’s attack. But now, it’s difficult not to bring it up.”

Scarlett noted that he didn’t suggest meeting again *after* the gathering that was later in the morning, as if he already knew she would be leaving for Freybrook immediately after that.

“First and foremost, I want to thank you on behalf of my father and my family for the assistance you provided yesterday in repelling the Tribe’s attack,” he said.

She raised an eyebrow at him. He looked completely sincere.

“...I was not aware that you witnessed my actions yesterday.”

“I didn’t see most of them. I only personally witnessed some of what you did towards the end. But I must admit, I had underestimated your capabilities prior to that. From what I heard, you were responsible for saving an entire room of people during the attack.”

She frowned. “‘Save’ is somewhat excessive of a description.”

Beldon tilted his head. “Based on what I’ve heard, I am inclined to agree. It certainly doesn’t compare to the performances of Iyana Webb or any of the Thackerays. The Second Sword, if the accounts are to be believed, single-handedly dealt with over fifty Tribe members. However, people have a tendency to talk about the things that surprise them the most, and the individuals you aided were rather talkative. Although, I imagine that after the events of last night, the entire empire will be abuzz with conversation for quite some time.”

“I do not pay too much attention to what others say of me, whether it is positive or negative,” Scarlett said.

“I can believe that. A little bird told me about your encounter with Count Soames. I admit, I’m curious about what you know that caused him to cease bothering you.”

She held back a sigh. There the man went with his ‘little birds’ and all that. Had anyone ever told him it got a bit excessive?

As for the Count...

She glanced down at the bare skin on her left hand. Even the thought of saying something that might implicate him to Beldon strained the pact she'd made. She could sense that much. Even if she wanted to say something, she couldn't.

But Rosa's passenger had managed to skirt around those restrictions, so who was to say she couldn't?

She studied Beldon. "I do not necessarily think that my dealings with the Count are any of your concern."

"Fortunately for me, I make it my business to be informed of that which is not of my concern," the man replied.

"Of that, I am well aware." Scarlett tapped her finger against the armrest of her couch as she considered him. "But *I* cannot disclose anything to you."

He met her gaze. "Baroness. If I didn't know any better, I would think that you are trying to tell me something right now."

"I am sure I do not know what you mean. Did I not just now state that I cannot reveal anything? Nor do I have any intention to do so."

Beldon scrutinized her for a moment. "That is funny. I had assumed you possessed information that Count Soames wouldn't want publicised. Something that *I* was unaware of. It sparked my competitive spirit."

"If you wish to compete with me, do so on your own time. Do not expect me to provide you with all the answers," she said.

The man placed a hand into his leg pocket and pulled out a gold coin with a flourish, rolling it over his fingers. "I suppose that *would* make things more boring. Perhaps I'll pay closer attention to the Count in the future."

"I advise against that."

He stopped the coin between his index and thumb. "And why is that?"

Scarlett glanced at her hand again. The crest had yet to appear. She wasn't exactly sure how this pact worked—if it relied on intent or some other mechanism—but clearly, this conversation didn't violate it yet. While she *knew* that her words might have the opposite effect, she *was* also trying to steer Beldon away from the subject. She just happened to be familiar enough with the man's personality to know that it wouldn't work, especially now that he had caught on to something.

She looked back up at him. "I cannot stop you if you wish to do so, but I fail to see what you stand to gain from it."

"The Count is an influential man. There is always much to be gained from powerful individuals."

“Is that so?” Scarlett didn’t say more, and Beldon continued observing her.

“Powerful people like him always have enemies as well,” the man said. “I’m sure there are those who would love damaging information to emerge about him.”

“I am certain that there are,” Scarlett replied. “I am not one of them, however. Do not expect any favors from me if you act impulsively.”

“I barely know the meaning of the word.”

“I somehow doubt that.”

Beldon started rolling the coin over his knuckles again, a pensive expression on his face.

Scarlett watched him. Maybe she had been too insistent on dissuading him there?

Finally, the man flipped the coin up and caught it. It seemed he had reached a conclusion. “Come to think of it, I’ve always found it peculiar that some of my men tend to mysteriously vanish when they get too close to investigating a certain noble’s connections to a particular group operating in the Silkspindle Ward in Ambercrest.”

Her eyes widened slightly. So he already had some inkling that the Count was involved in something? He just hadn’t been able to gather concrete details?

“You wouldn’t happen to know something about that?” the man asked.

At that moment, Scarlett felt a slight sting in her left hand. The crest itself didn’t show itself, but it was warning her. This was the information she was most bound not to share.

She shook her head. “I see no reason why I would. I have very little business or involvements in Ambercrest currently.”

She wished she could provide him with a subtle hint of some kind, but it was far too risky. The best she could do was hope that this slight push would be enough for him to do the rest himself.

Beldon studied her for a moment longer, the small smile from earlier returning. “Well, if you say so, I have no reason to doubt you. After all, what reason would you have to lie to me?”

“I do not sense complete honesty in your words,” she said.

“And are you being completely honest?” he countered.

“Of course. I have not uttered a single falsehood throughout this conversation.”

The man nodded. “That is certainly good to know. I apologize if I may have offended you in some way.”

Scarlett waved her hand dismissively. “I am not so easily offended.”

“Good, good. It would be a shame if that had driven you away, considering there’s something else I wanted to discuss with you.”

She paused, eyeing him. Was this the original reason for him wanting to meet with her?

“You are a well-informed individual, Baroness,” the man said. “I am sure I do not have to tell you the value of accurate information about the occurrences across the empire, especially in times like these when the future is uncertain.”

“What is it that you want to have said with this?”

“You yourself mentioned that you are not easily offended, so I hope you won’t mind when I say that I’ve been keeping a close eye on you since our first meeting.”

“I would have expected no less. Did you discover anything of interest?”

“Quite a lot,” he said. “although I suspect most of it barely even scratches the surface. I am particularly curious about how you succeeded in helping the Withersworths, where generations of mages and priests have failed before you.”

“It was not as challenging as it might sound,” Scarlett replied.

“I am sure it wasn’t. But that only piques my curiosity even further.” Beldon snapped his fingers. The door immediately opened, and the servant from before entered, stopping behind the couch where Beldon sat. The man leaned forward, picking up the papers he had been examining earlier—still focused on Scarlett—and held them up over his shoulder. “Mireya, please have these delivered to my father.”

The young woman took the papers with a neutral expression. “Yes, young master.”

“And do you have the documents I asked you to prepare?” he asked.

She pulled out another stack of papers, holding them over his shoulder. Beldon took them without looking and extended them over the table.

Scarlett eyed the papers for a moment before accepting them. The servant woman left the room as she began to read through the contents. It took her a few minutes, and when she finished, she placed the documents on the table and refocused her attention on Beldon. “So, this is what you wished to discuss.”

The papers contained reports detailing her movements over the past few months. While they were far from complete, with lots of information lacking on her specific dungeon visits and the like, it was not the gaps that stood out the most. Rather, it was the focus of the reports and what they implied. In particular, there were accounts concerning her activities and preparations that she had hoped would never come to light.

It appeared Beldon had caught on to her involvement in the heist at the Sanctuary of Ittar.

“You seem remarkably calm about all of this,” the man said.

“Is there a reason I should not be?” she asked.

The truth was that she *wasn't* calm about this, but her concern was easy enough to hide. When she had made the decision to proceed with the heist, she had been prepared for the possibility that someone might uncover her secret, and Beldon had been at the top of her list of likely suspects.

“Most people would say yes, but that’s what I appreciate about you, Baroness. It makes our conversation much easier.” Beldon leaned back in his seat, examining her. “So, you won’t deny your involvement in what happened at the Sanctuary?”

“Is there any point in doing so? The evidence you have is far from enough to take any action at the moment, and you will not be able to share this conversation with anyone.”

He shrugged. “No, I simply thought it refreshing to receive such a straightforward response.”

“So, why did you show me this?” Scarlett asked, gesturing towards the papers on the table. “I have higher expectations than you attempting to pressure me with it.”

“I’m flattered that you think so highly of me. And you’re right, of course. While there’s a lot I would like to gain from you, all of it is information I suspect I couldn’t force out of you, even if I threatened to expose this to the Followers. The reason I showed you this is much simpler.” Beldon looked at her for a moment. “I am impressed.”

“...You are impressed?” She crossed her arms.

“Yes. I had already assumed you were more than what you appeared to be. I just didn’t know to what extent. But successfully infiltrating the Sanctuary of Ittar and stealing several holy relics...” He smiled. “It’s clear that I severely underestimated your capabilities.”

“I am glad to hear that you think so.”

“Would it be too much to ask *why* you did it?”

She stayed quiet for a moment as she looked at him. “...They possessed an artifact that I needed.”

“For what purpose?”

“To achieve my goals. To survive. Does the specific reason matter? It is not something I will allow you to involve yourself with, if that is what you hope.”

Beldon rubbed his chin. “I would not say I want to *involve* myself, necessarily. But this is a once-in-a-generation occurrence, you see. I find it difficult to be so close to the one response for it *without* knowing the details.”

“I trust that you will survive,” Scarlett said.

“Most likely. But that will not stop me from trying. Anyway...” He focused his gaze on her. “Let me get to the point. We have had some mutually beneficial exchanges in the past, and

our relationship has been amicable enough, wouldn't you agree? But I believe there's more we can offer each other."

She studied him. "You are suggesting we deepen our collaboration?"

"Yes."

"In what manner?"

Beldon once more twirled the gold coin in his fingers, giving her a thoughtful look. "I'm not asking you to reveal your sources of information if that's a concern for you. However, I can imagine several situations where your movements and actions as a baroness are restricted, like with the Sanctuary, and my associates and I could prove helpful in bypassing those limitations. I already did you some favors related to that matter, just so that you know. Likewise, you have demonstrated your ability to acquire valuable information that even my Mirage doesn't have access to, so we would love to work more closely with you."

Scarlett furrowed her brows as she contemplated his proposal.

"Of course, if you agree to this, you wouldn't have to concern yourself with any commission rates when you need something from us in the future," he added.

"That was not a worry of mine to begin with," she replied absentmindedly.

Cooperating with an organization like Mirage did sound like a favorable deal, honestly. It would provide her with a lot of resources whenever she needed it. The problem was the cost on her part. In return for their collaborations, she would likely have to be more generous with the information she possessed from the game, but determining what was worth sharing posed a challenge. Most details related to dungeons were things she wanted to keep to herself to acquire the skill points from clearing those locations. Sharing some of her other knowledge could have unpredictable consequences as well if she divulged it to Mirage.

But it *was* a very tempting offer. As long as she satisfied Beldon with the information she shared, he wouldn't know how much she was holding back. However, there was one potential issue that needed addressing.

"What would you say if I told you that I will only agree to this if you do not interfere with the Hallowed Cabal?" she said.

The man stared at her. "Pardon?"

"You heard me."

If she became more deeply involved with Mirage, it was only a matter of time before the Hallowed Cabal learned about it in some way or other. While Mirage wasn't directly opposed to the Cabal, they clashed at times, and it would be problematic for her if that caused any backlash to her because of her involvement with them.

A harder expression formed in Beldon's eyes. "...I would have to ask why you're making such a request."

“I will tell you if you agree to it,” she said. “If it helps you decide, I can assure you that I possess information that would aid you in evading and staying ahead of the Cabal in the future. However, you cannot directly interfere with their operations.”

He eyed her quietly for a prolonged moment, twirling the coin in his fingers. Eventually, he placed it on the table and folded his hands. “I can make a compromise. We have no reason to target the Cabal ourselves, but some of our clientele often seek information related to them. In the past, we have tried have avoiding their agents more, but that usually only results in greater costs for us. If you genuinely can assist us on that front, though, I can agree to being more passive in our dealings with them, while still offering what information we might stumble upon.”

“...That is acceptable,” she said.

“Then may I ask why you made that request?”

“Because I have a prior agreement of non-interference with the Hallowed Cabal. Our conflicts escalated to a point where they threatened to cause irreparable devastation to both parties. So, we agreed to a cease-fire to avoid such an event.”

Beldon blinked. Then an amused look entered his eyes. “I am starting to think I made a very wise choice in approaching you, Baroness.”

“It is good that you realize as much.”

“Then, should we discuss details?”