

140: Unravelling answers

Waiting in her office in the Freybrook mansion, Scarlett gazed at the large painting that hung on the desk behind her desk. ‘The Field of Broken Pacts’ was the title The Gentleman had called it by. It depicted a vast battlefield of some bygone era, painted in excruciatingly exact and lifelike detail by whoever the creator was. While enough time had passed where she had grown used to it, it still drew her attention whenever she entered the office.

It was an odd gift to have received, considering she didn’t know anything about its history or the battle it depicted, but she doubted it was completely pointless. The Gentleman didn’t do pointless things.

And presumably, the man would be visiting sometime soon again.

A knock sounded out from the entrance, and she announced that they could enter. Her connection with the Loci had already told her who it was. The sound of the door opening and closing was followed by steps moving over the wooden flooring.

“What are you doing?” Evelyne’s curious voice chimed out behind her.

Scarlett turned around, seeing the younger woman take a seat in the chair in front of her desk.

It had been over a week—almost two—since they last saw each other, with Scarlett having been gone for several days because of the Sanctuary heist and Evelyne being preoccupied with her own things. Not much had changed with the woman since then, except that her hair had grown slightly longer again, the tips now reaching the back of her shoulders. She was currently wearing a light, fitted doublet of a deep green velvet that had silver accents around the collar.

“Simply ruminating on some matters,” Scarlett answered, placing the thoughts related to the painting at the back of her mind. “Nothing that you need concern yourself with.”

“Alright. If you say so.” Evelyne seemed to eye the painting behind her, though. “Actually... I’ve been meaning to ask for a while now, but where did you get that? It looks like it was done by a master, but I don’t recognize it. I also haven’t seen anything suggesting its purchase in the accounts recently.”

“It was a gift.”

“A gift?”

Scarlett nodded “Yes.”

Evelyne gave it another look. “From who?”

“The Gentleman.”

“That doesn’t tell me much.”

“That is unfortunate, then. There is not much more to say.”

Evelyne knitted her brows. “What do you mean? How couldn’t there—”

Scarlett held her hand up, signalling for the woman to stop. “I ask that you do not press me today, Evelyne. There really is not any more to say. He is known only as The Gentleman. I am not being purposefully obtuse.”

The woman stared at her for a few seconds, then lowered her head as if accepting her words. Scarlett gave an appreciative nod in return. She usually did a good enough job of controlling her emotions in the younger woman’s presence, but considering how she had been lately, she didn’t want to push her self-control more than necessary.

“Leaving that aside,” she said, “I was not aware that you would be at the mansion today. Was there something you wished to see me regarding?”

“Lots of things, actually. So much that I’m not even sure we’ll be able to go through all of it right now. But, before that...” Evelyne moved in her seat, turning to point back at the door. “I saw this...black cat sitting on the windowsill outside for some reason. Is that yours? I didn’t think you liked cats.”

Scarlett frowned. This was the third time someone had told her they’d seen the cat—Empress—outside her office. First, it was Rosa. Then Marlon, the head servant, had mentioned it this morning as well. And now Evelyne.

At first, she had thought it meant The Gentleman would show up any second now, but a couple of days had passed since Rosa first saw it now. And the last time, Empress had already disappeared by the time Scarlett made it out. Even the Loci seemed incapable of detecting the cat’s presence, which was terrifying in and on its own. Scarlett *hoped* that was an exception, though she might have to ask Fynn to be a bit more on guard in the future, in case the Loci’s detection wasn’t as good as she thought.

Whatever Empress’ reasons for showing up here already were, the cat at least seemed to enjoy itself. Perhaps Scarlett should have the servants prepare plates of hot milk during all times of the day, just in case.

“What’s wrong?” Evelyne asked. The woman seemed to be studying her.

Scarlett cleared the frown from her face, waving her hand in the air. “I do not mind cats that much. Even if I did, I suspect I would not have much choice but to consider this one in particular the exception. If you see it again, I would recommend that you pay proper respect to the best of your ability.”

The woman raised both eyebrows, looking as if she was unsure if that was a joke or not. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Of course.”

“...Do I even want to *know* why?”

“If I am to be frank, I suspect that you do not.”

Evelyne stared at her for several seconds, then shook her head slowly. “I swear. Things just get stranger and stranger around you the more time passes. I’ve got enough on my mind right now, so I’ll take your word for it.”

“I will admit to some admiration at the stride you are taking it all with, however,” Scarlett said.

“I don’t feel like I have much choice.”

“No, I suppose you do not.”

“Leaving that behind.” Evelyne leaned forward in her seat, a slightly worried expression on her face. “I wanted to ask what’s been going on here in the mansion. When I arrived earlier, it felt like all the servants were walking around on eggshells for some reason. Did something happen?”

Scarlett had to stop herself from frowning again. “...I am to blame for that, unfortunately.”

She had gotten a little better control of her emotions since returning from Freymeadow, which in turn had made it easier to stop the people in the mansion from feeling it in the air through her connection with the Loci, but it seemed most of the staff were still somewhat wary.

Evelyne looked at her as if that was the answer she had been expecting, though Scarlett was grateful that it at least like appeared the woman was considering her own words. “What exactly...did you do?”

“...Some bad news related to an acquaintance of mine caused me to lose control of my temper temporarily. That, in turn, affected the rest of the estate due to my link with the Loci.”

Evelyne stared at her. “...Your *mood* affects the whole mansion?”

“Apparently, yes.”

“I thought you said this ‘Loci’ artifact was harmless,” Evelyne exclaimed, almost pushing herself forward onto the desk in the process. She immediately caught herself, however, leaning back in her chair with an awkward expression.

Scarlett eyed her for a moment before speaking. “Comparatively so, yes. There does indeed appear to be some side-effects that I did not predict, but they are negligible, and I am still learning how to handle the artifact.”

For the time being, she was still only using the Loci to keep watch over the estate. But when both the Loci and she had gotten more familiar with things, she was planning on experimenting more with exactly what it was capable of.

“I’m not sure if scaring all the servants to death should be considered a ‘side-effect’...”
Evelyne muttered.

“That is an exaggeration, and they will soon learn that there is no danger involved. I will, however, endeavour to avoid any such occurrences in the future to lessen the stress on the staff.”

The younger woman didn't entirely seem to trust her words, but there wasn't much Scarlett could do about that for now.

“...Can I ask what it was that made you mad?” Evelyne asked. “Other than just ‘bad news’ related to this acquaintance of yours.”

Scarlett paused, watching her for a few seconds. “Unfortunately, that is related to the guest who stayed here previously, and whose identity I could not reveal.”

“You've been using that excuse a lot lately.”

“It has been relevant on more than one occasion.”

The two of them looked each other in the eyes. Scarlett tapped her finger against the desk for a brief while, before eventually continuing.

“I cannot delve into the specifics, but that individual has gone...missing. While I was aiding them in locating one of their relatives, there was an attempt on their life. Since then, I have been considering how to find them and ensure their safety.”

Evelyne's eyes widened. “Someone tried to *kill* them?”

Scarlett nodded. “Yes.”

A troubled expression appeared on the woman's face. “What are you involved with here, Scarlett?”

“What I must involve myself with. I can assure you that it will not have a detrimental effect on the barony.”

“Can you be *sure* about that?”

“I can do my best to ensure it, at the very least.”

Evelyne had a doubtful look.

Scarlett shook her head. “The empire is entering a volatile period, Evelyne. Worse than it has perhaps ever been before. I know this better than anyone, though you may still have your doubts. I am doing what I can to ensure the safety of myself and those under me, which includes the barony as a whole.”

“Is that *really* your priority?”

“It is. If you do not believe me, you can ask Garside. He was with me when I was away this last time.”

They continued looking each other in the eyes. Eventually, Evelyne was the first one to turn away. "...Don't blame me if I do later."

"I will not."

Scarlett wasn't expecting Garside to say too much.

During her fight with Gaven, the old butler had seen the flames somehow and come running through the forest. She didn't even know how he did it, considering his age, but the man had arrived not long after she finished with Gaven. At the time, she hadn't been in the right state of mind to explain things clearly, but that hadn't stopped Garside from helping her clean up some of the mess and get out of there. If it weren't for him, she would probably almost have forgotten about picking up the [Memory of the Covenant] and the other items that Gaven had on him that had survived the flames. Unsurprisingly, the rogue had more in his spatial ring that Scarlett had asked him to take, though nothing she immediately had use for.

She had shared a bit more details with Garside after that, relating to what had happened and why, and he had agreed without hesitation to not tell it to another soul. Even if he cared about Evelyne and had often told her information about Scarlett before—which he had openly admitted to when asked—he was unlikely to share this. Besides, he knew just as well as Scarlett did what would happen if news of their involvement in the heist got out.

She cleared her throat. "I presume there was more you wished to speak about?"

Evelyne stared at her, blinking as if she had already completely forgotten about why she came here. "Right, I was going to talk to you about the Tyndall Ball. It's only four days away, and since both of us have been so busy this last week, I was uncertain about how much of the preparations you'd completed."

"You have already arranged for the passage to Windgrove and back, correct?"

"Yes, I have. We'll arrive in the late afternoon and attend the ball in the evening, then we'll take part in the gathering the morning after before returning here to Freybrook after that. We'll return around the same time that we left, as long as there aren't any complications."

"Good." Scarlett opened a drawer on her desk and pulled out a light-green letter that had fancy livery over it. At its center was a wax seal bearing the insignia of a stag. "My attendance should pose no issue. Beldon Tyndall sent this to me earlier this week."

Fully convincing the man to cooperate had meant giving him some information related to a couple of safe-houses belonging to one of Mirage's rivaling information guilds, but it wasn't anything she couldn't spare. It did mean she had fewer bargaining chips that were directly related to him and his guild in the future, though. She had also made several requests for help in finding the Countess lately, so if they continued doing business like this in the future, she might actually have to start acting as an actual client of Mirage and pay them normal commissions. It wasn't like she was lacking the money now, but it might be hard to convince them to do certain things using only money.

"It still surprises me you could convince him just like that," Evelyne said as she inspected the letter.

“We have an amicable business relationship.”

The woman gave her an interrogating look. “Is that all?”

Scarlett narrowed her eyes. “Yes. That is all.”

A flash of embarrassment passed over Evelyne’s face, and she changed the subject. “I was in contact with the tailor earlier and they said the dresses you ordered for the ball will be finished tomorrow. My own outfits were already complete, as well.”

“I will have Garside send someone to procure them in the morning, then.”

Scarlett had had a tailor pay a visit a while back to fit new dresses specifically for this ball. These probably weren’t as expensive as some of the other pieces Scarlett already owned and had seen in her wardrobe, but they *had* still cost a pretty penny. She wasn’t aiming at making a massive splash during the event, but she didn’t want to stand out because she was wearing something ‘cheap’ either.

“When we’re in Windgrove...” Evelyne spoke, but seemed to hesitate for a moment. “Actually, did Sir Leon say anything about if he was going to attend or not?”

“From what he told me, it appeared as if he was uncertain,” Scarlett said. “It would depend on whether the Imperial Solar Knights were preoccupied at the time or not.”

“Then, if he’s not there... How are you going to handle the Delmons?”

She looked at Evelyne. “Handle them?”

“I feel like there’s a good chance they might cause a scene if you met with them, considering our families’ current relationship.”

“They may say whatever they want. I see no need to heed their words or let it affect me.”

“But it *could* still affect our house, no matter what you feel. You seemed on better—if that’s the word—terms with Sir Leon, so I thought there was a chance he could help if something were to happen.”

Scarlett pressed her mouth together. Saying the two of them were on good terms wasn’t strictly true, but she supposed they weren’t on the *worst* terms anymore, either. Still...

“I am not sure it will matter for much longer,” she said. “I have been considering ending the betrothal and cutting any ties we have with them.”

Evelyne stared at her. “You were serious about that?”

“Of course. I had also promised Sir Leon that I would consider the matter. It is not as if we are currently relying on the Delmons in any of the affairs connected to the barony.”

From what Scarlett had heard, whatever business ties they did have with the Delmons had already been cut.

“No, it’s just that…” Evelyne studied her for another moment. “I thought there was a specific reason for that engagement that meant you didn’t want to end it.”

“There was, presumably.”

“What?”

Scarlett leaned down in her seat, reaching for another drawer on the desk and opening it. She pulled out a thin pile of papers, handing them over to Evelyne.

The younger woman’s brows creased as she received them. “What’s this?”

“The documents related to the agreement that was struck between me and Gerhard Delmon when we originally settled on the betrothal.”

Scarlett had found those papers during the week before the heist. They were inside a safe hidden in her bedroom, along with other objects that she suspected were connected to some of the original’s more illicit activities. At the time, she had been too busy with heist matters to pay these papers too much mind, but now that was over.

As Evelyne read through them, her eyes grew wider and wider. Eventually, she looked up at Scarlett in disbelief. “How did you get them to agree to this?”

“I cannot remember,” Scarlett answered.

Palming her forehead, Evelyne stared down at the papers. “But they essentially *promised* Sir Leon to you, along with far more collateral if they went back on their word than they should ever have had reason to. This is insane. I can’t imagine a marquise ever doing something like this for a mere barony. Some of these terms even make it sound as if they were getting ready to support you in…” she trailed off, glancing up at Scarlett again.

“Yes?”

“…Scarlett, were you aiming to advance your rank?”

“What makes you say that?”

“From what’s written here, the Delmons are basically promising to put everything they have into supporting and the barony after the engagement with Leon is finished. Not only that, but you were promised several *hundred* acres of land near the Voneinan border. That also *explicitly* state they will back you in the Chamber Court and the Imperial Chancellery if there were to occur any border disputes due to your new land in the future.”

Scarlett nodded her head. She had read through those documents more than once, and she could understand why Evelyne was reacting like this.

“Scarlett, this makes it look like you were conspiring with the Delmons to usurp the land of the minor nobles around Count Knottley’s domain. There are no reasons for why there would be any disputes. The land the Delmons are offering would already triple the size of our fief, but that still wasn’t enough?”

“It would appear not, judging from what those papers say. I do not recall making those particular agreements, but it does indeed seem like something I might have tempted to do.”

Not only would the original Scarlett have gained a lot of new land with this engagement—most of which would be in the southwestern part of the empire between the Delmon family’s domain and Count Knottley’s domain—but much of it held important strongholds and fortresses that bordered the Voneia Kingdom. The Delmon Marquisate was already one of the most strategically valuable pieces of land in the western empire, but if Scarlett married Leon and managed to take over a lot of the land that belonged to the minor nobles south of the Marquisate, the Delmons would be controlling almost the entire border by proxy. If a war was to break out with the kingdom sometime in the future, Scarlett would have much of the frontline in her domain. That conferred a lot of responsibility upon her, but also a lot of legitimacy. Such an important individual was unlikely to remain a simple baroness.

Not to mention how she would also be married to the vice-captain—possibly even the captain—of the strongest knight order in the empire.

In return for helping Scarlett achieve all of this, the Delmons would have a new powerful ally to the south, connected to them through marriage and owing them a huge debt. It would stack a lot of cards during future power plays in the empire.

She wasn’t sure who had been the one to first approach the other party—the original Scarlett, or the Delmons—but it all felt very noble-like, scheming and maneuvering politically for power like this. No real concern was paid to things like ‘feelings’ or the lives of those affected by this. The focus was only on the promised possibilities.

To be fair, border disputes within the empire were often minor and meant very little bloodshed. Any actual warring between nobles was considered an affront to the emperor’s majesty and was as good as illegal. A scheme like this wouldn’t *immediately* affect people that weren’t part of the local aristocracy — if you didn’t take into account that the original was likely not as experienced in governing border territories as the nobles whose lands she was gunning for. But she had read up enough on the legal workings and history of this nation to know that experience and capability weren’t always the most important things when it came to who got to govern what.

The specifics of how Scarlett and the Delmons had been planning on usurping other nobles’ lands were, of course, left unsaid, but there were only so many possibilities. Legal challenges concerning de jure land and legitimacy were unlikely to work, but nothing was stopping them from using political connections to underplay their targets’ authority and pressuring them to relinquish lands through threats and other means. People might frown on a marquis doing something like that to minor nobles, but it would be more accepted if Scarlett did it.

In front of her, Evelyne ran a hand through her hair as if processing all of these implications. “This explains why the Delmons were so desperate to end the betrothal after what happened at the Proclamation. It would be too risky to go through with it after you practically declared your intent in front of the emperor. Or at least it would look that way to them.”

“You know that was not my intent at the time,” Scarlett said.

“I do, yes.” Evelyne actually laughed. “Ittar’s light. The Delmons must have *panicked* when you said that out loud. To them, it would either look like you were being far too arrogant and hasty, or had just decided to betray them. But because they had already bet everything on this, it was too late for them to just back out without incurring unnecessary costs.”

“It is an amusing thought, is it not?”

“I don’t know why *you* find it funny. Even if you don’t remember it, this is still *your* plan that failed. The Delmons probably won’t ever want anything to do with us ever again, and you specifically have painted a large target on your back.” Evelyne paused, her hand going up to her head with a nonplussed expression. “I don’t understand how *I’m* so calm about either, honestly. Normally, this would be the kind of thing that set our house on its way to ruin.”

“I do not particularly fear the Delmons, and I do not think you have to either,” Scarlett said. “If they chose to act against us further than they already have, it will be due to nothing but petty vengeance. I am more inclined to believe they would wish for it all to be quietly swept under the rug. If they were to try anything, however, it is either fated to fail or will take far too long to have any real effect.”

The Delmons wouldn’t be able to kill her, and anything they tried within the legal framework of the empire would almost definitely be something that would take months or even years to fully carry out. Plenty of time for Scarlett to react, considering the time frame she was working on.

If anything was going to cause her downfall, it wouldn’t be the Delmons.

Evelyne eyed her for a moment. “That *really* shouldn’t reassure me, but it does.”

“That is good. It implies you are starting to trust me more than before.”

“Doesn’t *that* scare you?”

Scarlett cocked her head to the side. “Why should it?”

The woman stared at her, then shook her head. “Just... Never mind. Let’s go back to these papers. I still have over a dozen questions that it would be good if we could try to figure out the answers for.”

She leaned forward over the desk and the two of them delved further into the details together.