

56: There's always a secret organization or two

"My Lady, we've arrived," the coachman's voice rang out from the front of the carriage.

"Welcome, Baroness," another voice said from outside the window.

Looking out, Scarlett saw a man in black servant's clothing standing before a wide iron gate. On the other side of the gate was a garden with a large mansion overlooking it. The building wasn't quite as large as the Hartford mansion back in Freybrook, but it wasn't too far off. It was most certainly bigger than the mansion they had here in the capital, that was for sure.

"The young master is waiting in his study," the man said as the coachman walked over and opened the carriage door for Scarlett. She wordlessly exited, turning back to see Fynn and Shin follow her out of the vehicle.

Allyssa and Rosa had stayed in The Coins district, rather than accompanying them here to the Eastgate district where most of the nobles had their mansions. Technically it was so that Allyssa could buy materials for her alchemy—because of all the traffic they'd had less time for that before—but Scarlett had also felt she could let them enjoy the festival a bit too.

Turning to the servant, she saw him give both Fynn and Shin a mildly surprised look. The man's attention returned to her as she spoke. "Lead the way."

He gave a slight bow. "Of course. Follow me."

He signaled to a guard in a dark green gambeson with black rims who walked forward to open the gates. The servant then led them through the garden and into the mansion itself, where they halted in the middle of a large, decorated lobby that had four large chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. Curving along the walls up to the second floor were two pairs of white marble stairs, with a black banner, hung off the far wall, that had the image of a dark green stag with golden eyes on it.

It was the same insignia she'd seen in Freybrook a few weeks back, when she had originally traveled to Ambercrest. Although she hadn't quite been able to place it at the time, she now recognized it as the family crest of the Tyndall ducal family.

Another servant, a younger woman with short brown hair, stepped over to their group as the male servant turned to Scarlett. "Young Mireya here will guide you to the second master. Your companions may wait in the parlor. We will prepare some refreshments for them."

Scarlett glanced back at Fynn and Shin.

Yeah, that would probably be for the best. Some of the things she was about to discuss were best left secret. Even though Fynn's ability to tell lies from the truth was useful, she didn't really need it here.

Shin was giving her an asking look, so she gave a low nod. "I do not believe this will take long. Wait for me until then."

Fynn's attention seemed to be focused on a painting that depicted some large beast or other, but Shin at least nodded his head in understanding. "All right."

Scarlett turned to the female servant, who gave a short curtsy. "Please follow me, my Lady."

The young woman then walked off, guiding Scarlett up one of the long stairs to the second floor where they continued to walk through a series of corridors until they eventually reached a dark oak door at the end of one of the hallways.

"The young master is waiting inside," the woman said, opening the door.

Inside was a dimly lit room filled with bookshelves. A black wooden desk stood at one end with a stone fireplace not far from it, and near the center of the room was a low table with two green couches on both sides. On one of the couches sat a man with a pair of glasses, reading a book he held in his right hand. He had dark hair that was combed to the sides so as not to fall in front of his eyes and that reached down to the nape of his neck, and wore a set of deep green pants along with a white shirt.

Walking into the room, Scarlett noticed a green jacket and black undercoat hanging leisurely over the side of a chair next to the desk at the other end of the room.

She wasn't an expert on these things, but she suspected this wasn't how you commonly greeted other nobles.

The man's head turned to her. "Ah, Baroness," he said, leaning forward over the table in front of him and placing the book down on it along with the glasses he'd used. "Or maybe I should refer to you as 'your grace?'"

Scarlett eyed him. "Baroness will suffice."

She had learned enough to know that the title of 'grace' was only appropriate for dukes, people in higher stations, and certain members of the imperial family.

He made no sign of caring much about her reaction, simply gesturing toward the couch opposite him. "Take a seat. I've been curious all day about what this proposal you have for me might be."

Scarlett moved to sit on the couch, leaning her right arm against the armrest as she took the man in.

This was Beldon Tyndall, the younger son of the current duke of Windgrove. If she were to guess, he was probably a couple years older than her—somewhere in his late twenties—and had somewhat of that stereotypical 'handsome noble' look to him. From just seeing him like this, a slight smile on his face as he looked at her, she might have assumed him to be your typical playboy-type of guy.

But she knew there was a lot more to him.

"Well?" he asked, somewhat nonchalantly. "What is it that brings a beautiful lady like you here to see me?"

Scarlett looked around the room, wondering momentarily if there were any kinds of recording devices here.

They were a thing, she knew that much. She just didn't know how common they were. The ones she'd seen in the game had been of Zuverian make, so they were probably a relatively rare element in this world. Although if anyone were to have one, it would probably be this guy.

"It is a delicate matter," she said after a moment, her eyes stopping on Beldon. "I hope I can trust that you will not allow it to leave these walls."

Well, she said that, but it wasn't as if it really mattered that much if he recorded what she was about to say. It wasn't something he could go around spreading. She was mostly just curious, if anything.

Beldon let out a short laugh. "When you put it like that it makes me fear it's something that would put me in danger of having Sir Leon's envy directed at me."

Scarlett frowned. Did he have to bring that guy up right now?

Beldon eyed her for a second with a small smile. "Ah, but maybe that's not something that I have to fear anymore."

Ugh. And of course he had to prod at her like this.

Was this a rumor that was already spreading, or was it just this guy being ahead of the curve?

Whatever. It didn't matter.

"I do not believe Sir Leon is one to easily show jealousy over such trifling matters."

Beldon raised an eyebrow. "Even when his fiance visits another man's house during the Light Fest like this?"

"Even then, yes. And what I do on my own time does not concern him."

She didn't know if there was some cultural significance to visiting a person like this during the Light Fest, but even if there was it really didn't matter. It seemed like the engagement was going to get annulled anyways.

"Anyhow, that is inconsequential to our current discussion. I am not here to deliberate such topics."

"Is that right?" Beldon leaned further back on his couch. "Do tell."

Scarlett looked at him for a few seconds. "I wish to commission the services of Mirage."

The smile on his face froze for a brief—almost imperceptible—moment. Then he let out a long laugh. "Hah...I didn't know the Baroness was one for jokes. It's different from what I've heard of you."

She stared at him. "It was not a jest."

His laughter died down and he ran a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry, but I find that hard to believe. Who in their right mind would set up a meeting with me, of all people, and ask about Mirage? If you wanted an excuse to see me that badly, you could have just said so," he said, throwing her another smile.

Scarlett ignored it. She wasn't exactly expecting him to admit it that easily. Mirage *was* technically a criminal organization, after all. But they were also one of the best information gatherers in the empire, and one of the few factions in the capital that she felt could help her with this matter without causing too much of a ruckus.

That wasn't to say she *wasn't* hesitant about getting involved with them. She would have vastly preferred not to. But in the end, she'd judged the pros and cons, and felt like this was her best option for now. Especially after her first choice had gone as poorly as it did.

Beldon eyed her quietly for a moment, then suddenly leaned forward and picked up a small silver bell that stood on the table. Almost immediately after ringing it, the door to the study opened and the female servant from before entered the room.

"Yes, young master?"

"Would you get us some refreshments?" he asked the servant. "Something that fits our guest here?"

The woman curtsied. "Of course," she said, and left the room.

Beldon then turned back to Scarlett, his previous playboy smile having returned. "I hope you don't mind."

"There is no need to maintain this charade," Scarlett said.

"...Pardon? I don't quite get what you mean."

She arched a brow. "I believe you do. I am well aware of your true vocation."

He stared at her for a good duration with a slightly amused expression on his face. "Is that so?" he asked.

"It is," she said.

"I see..."

His expression turned completely flat, the look in his eyes losing all signs of mirth. "It seems the Baroness' confidence is getting a bit too large for its boots," he said as his whole air changed.

Although she had been expecting it, the sudden change still took Scarlett a bit off guard.

"I'm curious what little bird you've been listening to, that put these ideas into your mind."

She studied him for a moment. "Where I learned it no longer matters. There is no risk that it will spread further than me, if that is your concern."

"You say that," he said slowly. Scarlett now noticed that he was rolling a gold coin between his finger, though she had no idea when he'd taken it out. "But I've always been a person who likes to confirm these kinds of things myself. It wouldn't do if any false rumors started spreading about me, would it?"

"That would indeed be regretful."

The both of them looked at each other.

A knock sounded out from the door. Scarlett turned to look as the servant from earlier entered, holding a silver plate with two cups and small confections on it. There was also a thin, brown leather book on it.

That was fast.

The woman walked up and put the plate down on the table between them, placing one of the cups in front of Scarlett. It appeared to be a tea of some kind, giving off a pleasant citrus fragrance. Not her favorite, but she wasn't going to complain.

The servant woman placed the other cup in front of Beldon and handed him the book, before wordlessly picking up the plate and leaving the room.

Beldon made his coin vanish with a small flourish and opened the book.

"Scarlett Hartford," he said, looking down at its pages. "Vern Cheek. Bodil Pudges. The Blue Skulls. Grey Dog Gang. Although maybe I should strike that last one now."

Scarlett knitted her forehead. She knew one of those names, but what were the others.

"You've always been an ambitious one, haven't you? But I never took you for someone to cross that line." He looked up at her. "You've been quite active lately. Ousting your former associates. Exploring Zuverian ruins. Selling artifacts. Causing murmurs at the Elysian Proclamation."

She glanced down at the book in his hands. Was that about her, then?

"It appears you are well informed of my movements," she said.

There was a lot more that he had missed, but he wasn't sure if that was simply him hiding his full knowledge or if that was just the full extent of it. If she were to guess it was probably closer to the latter, but she didn't actually know how organizations like this worked.

It did feel somewhat unreasonable for them to keep full tabs on every single noble at all times, at least.

"I hear a thing or two from birds, here and there."

She stared at him, almost feeling the need to roll her eyes. "I was unaware you were such an accomplished ornithologist," she said sardonically.

"I could say the same of you."

The room fell quiet as their eyes met.

Scarlett broke the silence as she leaned closer to the table and picked up the cup of steaming tea near her. "If you are quite finished attempting to intimidate me by spouting what I already know, shall we continue onto business?"

She blew lightly on the tea, focusing for a second as she used her pyrokinesis to lower its temperature. She had always hated waiting for drinks to cool down in these situations. It might be superficial, but this was probably one of the nicest things about this world. This, and the food back at the Freybrook mansion.

Of course, magic in general was cool too.

"And by business, you mean this 'commission' you spoke of?" Beldon asked.

Scarlett inclined her head as she took a sip from the tea. For a brief moment she had thought about whether it was poisoned or not, but that would literally be one of the poorest disguised murders in history, so she doubted it. It even turned out to be better than she expected. "Indeed. It is something that I believe your association is well equipped to handle."

"And who is this commission for?"

She paused, glancing up at him. "I am the one who is requesting it, if that is what you mean."

"That *is* what I'm asking, yes. And I'm sure you understand when I tell you that I don't trust your answer."

"And why is that?"

"I wonder," he said, studying her for a while. "...Every fish has their own pond that they belong in. It is often ill-advised leaving it."

Scarlett felt her blood rise, though she wasn't sure if it was because he kept using unnecessary metaphors all the time or because he likened her to a fish. "I ask that you refrain from comparing me with such animals."

"Would a frog in a well work better for you?" he asked, his expressionless face contrasting with his jesting words.

She stared at him. "It would not."

He put the leather-bound book in his hands to the side on the couch as he shrugged. "Simply trying to help. But if you don't care, so be it. Let me hear what this 'commission' is about."

Scarlett took another sip of her tea. "To be precise, there are two commissions. However, none of them portends any true danger as long as one abstains from acting foolishly." She put the cup down on the table and placed her hands on her lap, focusing her gaze on Beldon. "I require your aid in locating two individuals. For one of them, I need your aid in arranging a meeting. For the other one, you simply have to pass on a short message."

He stared at her. "That's all?"

"That is all."

He seemed to consider her for a moment, then nodded. "Who are these individuals?"

"The first one is named Gaven Ridley. He was previously a member of the Vanguard, but now takes on various jobs in the underworld across the empire."

Gaven had been another of the possible companions in the game, although he was for either an evil or a neutral run. While Scarlett was hesitant about trying to add him to her party, there were several other uses she had planned for him if they were to collaborate. That was why, when she'd decided that she was going to make contact with Beldon and commission the services of Mirage, she'd also chosen to use this opportunity to find where Gaven.

"I don't recognize the name. But if he was part of the Vanguard I don't think it'll be too hard to find information about him."

Scarlett gave a slight nod. "That is what I would have expected."

"And the other person?"

She paused. This was the one she had been the most nervous about.

"Have you heard of The Gentleman?"

Beldon's eyes widened by just a little, and a small smile even grew on his lips. "That's not a name you hear often. And certainly not one I would have expected to hear now of all times."

Scarlett let out an inner sigh of relief at the fact that he didn't seem to panic at the mention of the name. From what she knew, it was highly unlikely that Beldon Tyndall would have any relationship with The Gentleman. At most, she assumed he'd heard of him. But she had still been afraid that this would be a repeat of last time's events.

Beldon brought his right hand up to his chin, stroking it slowly as he studied her. "What dealings do you have with him that requires our help?"

"That is of no concern to you. You simply have to complete the task."

"I think it might be some of my concern, actually, considering *we're* the ones who would be looking for him."

"I imagine that much should be possible with your resources," she said. "As I said, all that I demand is that you pass on a message. You do not have to meet him or anything of the sort. Merely ensure that he hears it."

"And what would that message be?"

"That Scarlett Hartford wishes to meet with him."

Beldon looked at her. "Nothing more?"

"That is enough."

She was pretty sure that would be enough to get him to find her. She didn't want to press for anything more than that at this point.

Beldon looked thoughtful. "While it certainly sounds interesting," he eventually said. "I'm afraid I'll have to decline."

Scarlett frowned. "I have not yet told you of the compensation."

"And what, pray tell, were you planning to reimburse us with?"

"The location of Alton Carlyle."

Beldon froze, and Scarlett's lips curled up a little at the sight.

She'd done these questlines in the game in her second playthrough. She knew what Mirage wanted. Honestly, they were probably one of the cheapest available options for her when it came to making deals, with all the information she had. The downside, of course, was the fact that they were technically a criminal organization. There were some risks to getting involved with them. And it would definitely put her on their map.

"...And how exactly do you know that name?" Beldon asked, a hint of a distrust clear in his voice.

"Perhaps I will share that sometime in the future, were we to establish a constructive relationship," Scarlett said calmly. "For now, I believe you should focus on whether you judge that being suspicious of my sources is more important than apprehending him."

Alton Carlyle was a minor character without any importance at all to her. He was literally just a one-time target in one of the Mirage questlines. She wasn't even sure if he had any lines. But Mirage wanted him because he was a traitor, so this was a decent deal for both of them.

Beldon stared at her quietly for several seconds, then he nodded slowly. "Very well. You have a deal."