

212: Confessionals

Scarlett observed Raimond, considering him for a moment. “I will admit, I did not anticipate this conversation happening so soon, but very well. It would seem you are closer to having regained your usual spirit than during our last exchange,” she said. “Unless, of course, this is merely an act. It is often challenging to discern as much with you.”

Raimond chuckled lightly, placing the artifact that had been muffling the surrounding sound on the windowsill beside him. “To hear that from you, Baroness, feels almost like an indictment. I have had difficulty fathoming what goes through your mind since our first encounter.”

“I am pleased to hear that. It would not serve me well if everyone I encountered could so effortlessly see through me.”

“No doubt, that is understandable. This last day has peeled back enough of the layers hidden under that noble guise of yours to show that there remains much, much more concealed beneath it,” Raimond remarked. He scrutinized her for a few moments, the inscrutable smile lingering on his face, then he gestured casually with his hand in the air. “Ah, but you’ll have to excuse my haste. Who am I to speak of hiding under a guise? As it would seem you have been aware for some time, I am oft-guilty of the same charge.”

“I do believe our circumstances differ,” Scarlett replied, “but you will not find me faulting you for your act, at the very least.”

“How magnanimous of you, Baroness.”

“Rather, I do not waste my time on matters I find of little worth.”

“Then it would appear I can count myself fortunate that you’ve deemed it worthwhile to entertain my company on several occasions.” Raimond shook his head. “If only my peers and colleagues would share that sentiment, but alas.”

Scarlett studied the man’s exaggeratedly forlorn expression, but opted not to delve into that particular line of conversation. “You mentioned briefing your colleagues on recent events. With that, I presume you were referring to the Quorum. How much have you shared with them?” she asked.

“As much as I suspect you expected me to,” Raimond answered. “I had little room to maneuver in that aspect, unfortunately. Caught between the Scylla of one danger and the Charybdis of another, as they say.”

Scarlett’s mind caught on the man’s choice of words. That was some curious names she’d just heard. Were there monsters with those names in this world as well? She wasn’t familiar with them, but it wouldn’t be the first instance of a linguistic artifact from her world finding its way into this one.

“I conveyed about as much as I managed to glean on my own,” Raimond continued. “That included some observations related to the citadel and you and your companions — details

that couldn't be omitted. Ah, but regrettably, I forgot to inform them of your presence in Crowcairn or what I learned of Miss Hale's condition. There's always time for that in the future, however, if necessary."

"I would prefer if there were not," Scarlett said.

"I'll certainly take that into consideration." The man gave a noncommittal shrug. "This will indubitably be no shock to you, but your presence while one of the six Viles attempted to manifest within our realm wouldn't escape the Quorum's attention, or the attention of many others, I suspect. If you're seeking an excuse for your involvement, and a reason for Miss Hale being here, it is likely something you'll have to devise yourself."

"There is no need for concern. What you have done so far is sufficient. I have already considered how to handle the matter."

Scarlett could leverage her connection with Duke Valentino and Sir Home's men to explain most of it. As for Rosa, only a few people were even aware the bard was here. Some of the soldiers had seen her when she and Scarlett arrived at the camp, but it probably wouldn't be too hard to ensure minimal attention was placed on that.

She studied Raimond as he, in turn, considered her. Once again, she found herself contemplating the man's thoughts and motives, wondering if she was still over-analyzing things when deliberating whether he was hiding something.

"I must say, while I did anticipate your agreement to collaborate, Deacon Abram, it was still somewhat surprising when it came. Although I do not consider my actions in all of this unethical, I am aware that there are many who would. The risk you have taken is considerable, and we do not necessarily have much of a relationship between us to justify your faith in me. If I may ask, what led you to choose to assist me despite that?"

"Oh, the reasons are myriad, Baroness. Assuredly, unquestionably, there have been many moments this morning where I've pondered my own sanity, contemplating if it was truly in my best interest and my order's to believe in you as I have. As you say, undoubtedly, I've risked both my position and my favor in the eye of my god. Few, if any, other members of the Quorum would even consider such a prospect." The man paused, folding his hands in his lap as his tone turned more resolved. "However, ultimately, my reasoning itself can be reduced to a rather simple concept. I believe I've become familiar enough with you to know not to dismiss your warnings outright."

They locked eyes for a while.

"So, is that where you would like to begin, then?" Scarlett eventually asked.

"Indeed."

"Very well." Scarlett rested her hands on her legs, holding the man's gaze. "I believe the offer of information Fynn conveyed originally conveyed to you was two-pronged, yes?"

Raimond nodded. "It was, though I'll admit that the meaning of the second warning somewhat eluded me, even if I suspected there was great significance behind it."

“Only the first piece of information served as a warning. The second was more of a notice, if you will. I had thought you would recognize what it meant, but perhaps I was overestimating the knowledge at the Followers’ disposal.” Scarlett frowned for a moment before continuing. “No matter. Let us begin by discussing the first topic — let us discuss the traitors within the Quorum.”

Raimond’s expression soured ever so slightly as his brows furrowed.

“Am I correct in assuming that you already harbored your suspicions of a traitor within the Followers’ leadership?” Scarlett asked.

“...It is true that I and my fellow Deacon Solnate have had our misgivings lately, yes. But unless my grasp of our Imperial tongue is lacking, your warning used the word ‘traitors’, suggesting there is more than one malefactor.”

“That is correct.”

“And, pray tell, who are they?”

“Deacon Davenport and Deacon Townsend.”

Though the man tried to mask it, Scarlett noticed a brief look of surprise crossing Raimond’s face at her words. His serious expression returned quickly after, however.

“...Both of those men are esteemed members of not only the Quorum but also our order as a whole, having served diligently in their positions for longer than many others. Davenport has been a deacon for decades, and there are few in the current generation who have left such an imprint as he has. As for Deacon Townsend, he is perhaps one of our most devoted members, and the foremost expert on demons and how to combat them in the empire. I struggle to think of any action he has taken that has not contributed to ensuring the safety of the empire’s citizens. What traitorous plots are you suggesting that men of their standing might be involved in, Baroness?”

“I am not suggesting anything, Deacon. I am merely apprising you of what I know,” Scarlett said. “Deacon Davenport has been colluding with one of the Viles for some time, while Deacon Townsend has been cooperating with a foreign actor to amass much of the knowledge of demons he possesses, offering up valuable information and resources from the Followers in turn.”

Neither of the two deacons were major characters in the game, but there were questlines involving revealing their actions. The Vile that Deacon Davenport was entangled with was Malevolence, the only other Vile Scarlett had a decent amount of information on after Anguish. Although Malevolence didn’t play as central a role as Anguish did, as a Vile, Malevolence was no less loathsome. Deacon Davenport’s collaboration with the demon was far from justifiable.

In comparison, Deacon Townsend’s betrayal didn’t look as severe on the surface. As far as Scarlett was aware, he genuinely believed he was acting in the best interests of the Followers of Ittar and the empire, and he was *mostly* correct. The person he was working with also only counted as a ‘foreign actor’ by technicality.

It was Mistress, after all.

The woman wasn't inherently evil, nor were her plans. Given Scarlett herself was working with her, she couldn't exactly blame Deacon Townsend for doing the same. The difference was that Scarlett understood the consequences of Mistress's end goals, and he did not.

"...These are serious allegations," Raimond said.

"I would not be making them if I were not confident in their accuracy," she replied. "Furthermore, I believe we are well past the point where me accusing members of the Quorum can be considered my most egregious crime."

Raimond considered her for a while longer. "No, right you are, I suppose."

"So, did one of the two happen to be the person you and Deacon Solnate had misgivings about?" Scarlett asked.

"Yes, unfortunately," the man admitted with a sigh. "Certain actions on Deacon Davenport's part have been unusual, to say the least. When it first came to my attention, I delved into some of the other events he had been involved in the past, pre-dating my time as a deacon. There were several instances that stood out, including an event in Quickwallow where one of the previous Augur's revelations caused a rather unfortunate chain of events to unfold."

He fell silent for a moment. "Then there was an incident not long ago, whereupon intruders breached the very heart of the Sanctuary of Ittar. It remains an unsolved mystery how the perpetrators succeeded in doing so without facing any resistance. The Quorum chose not to disclose this event to the public, but I suspect you are aware of it, nonetheless. Am I correct in assuming so?"

"I have heard of it, yes. You believe a deacon was involved in that incident?" Scarlett asked.

All this time, one of her worries had been Raimond somehow knowing about her role in that, so it would be a relief if he suspected somebody else.

"It is certainly a possibility," Raimond replied. "Few are the people who could devise a way into the Sanctuary and bypass the Knights of the Eternal Oath that guards its halls." The man actually threw her a small smile, some of his earlier seriousness suddenly gone. "Well, perhaps you would be one of them, Baroness."

Scarlett maintained an unruffled expression. "I would ask that you keep the jests to yourself, Deacon."

While she was *pretty* sure he meant it as a joke, it didn't make her any less uneasy. Still, he had shown no sign of recognizing [Ittar's Genesis] in Crowcairn after the relic had been altered from Malachi's ritual, so it wasn't as if he should have any extra reason to suspect Scarlett at this point.

Actually, considering Malachi's connection to Mistress, who was working with Deacon Townsend, maybe Scarlett could spin some tale that those three were behind the Sanctuary

heist, if it ever came to that. However, she would first have to make sure she considered all the holes that might appear in that kind of lie.

Raimond cleared his throat. “Surely, I will endeavour my best. I will also, of course, make every effort to avail myself of whatever information you can provide about our two ‘estimable’ deacons. Dark clouds loom over the empire, and unscrupulous actors acting within the Followers could bring about tragedies unlike any other if left unaddressed. Naturally, this is all assuming your words are entirely accurate, Baroness. If I may ask, how did you come into possession of this information? Any evidence you might have would prove more than helpful.”

“I cannot divulge the how, nor can I offer you any evidence that would be useful to you in your current circumstances,” Scarlett said.

“Then, may I venture a speculative guess as to the how, at least?” The man eyed her thoughtfully for a few moments, one hand resting on his chin. “Hmm. As ever, anything that relates to you appears to be a most fine riddle indeed. In this case, I would say... Providence, perhaps?”

Scarlett raised a brow. “Providence?”

Raimond nodded. “The confidence with which you act, and the certainty in your own knowledge. It all brings to mind tales of the first Augur in the times of the Renaissance. Though the thought hadn’t even crossed my mind until just now, it felt wrong not to at least ask if the circumstances were similar. However unlikely a scenario it might be.”

He motioned with one arm towards Allyssa and Shin where they sat beside him. “In my conversations with your ever-charming group, they regaled me with tales of your deeds and the apparent prescience you so often display. To others, their laudable praises might seem like the excessive admiration of retainers for their—presumably generously compensating—lady, but my own experiences with you have taught me not to underestimate any claim I hear that relates to you. I am still somewhat interested in hearing more about that dragon story of yours.”

Shin seemed oblivious to Raimond’s gesture, the young man engrossed in the book he was reading, but Allyssa blinked and gave both Raimond and Scarlett curious looks, seemingly eager to ask them some questions once their discussion was finished.

Scarlett gave Raimond a long frown. “Let us say it was indeed providence. Which god would you suggest I am conferring with?”

The man’s brows furrowed, and he wore a ruminative expression as he crossed his arms in front of his chest. Eventually, he simply shrugged. “Perhaps the Mistress of the Perennial Scowl?”

She stared at him, then shook her head. “From your earlier demeanor, you had me convinced that you wished for a serious discussion, yet it appears as if you are having more and more difficulties keeping up that pretense.”

Raimond just offered another smile. “Pardon me immensely, Baroness. It is most challenging to dispense with one’s old habits, and I often find myself forgetting myself in your group’s company.”

“You mean to say that this is not how you act around other members of your order?”

“...Fair enough. Perhaps we should abandon this particular topic, posthaste, and return our attention to the previous question.”

As usual, Scarlett’s interactions with this man reminded her of dealing with Rosa at times. She was rather thankful that she didn’t often have to deal with both of them at the same time.

“As I already explained,” she said, “I will not be able to furnish you with an exact answer regarding how I obtained my information... However, I will confirm that, while some of it was gathered through mundane means and connections, there is also some that hails from sources that most ordinary people would not have access to. If its veracity is in question, I will simply provide you with the details necessary to confirm it for yourself.”

Raimond seemed to pause for a moment, a look of actual—if slight—surprise appearing on his face. Scarlett wasn’t sure whether he was taken aback by what she said or the fact that she admitted as much as she did, if only vaguely.

There was a brief silence before he spoke. “I understand that this is not something I can press you on, but there is one thing I would like to know, even had I no reason to expect an honest answer. These...enigmatic sources of yours, Baroness — might a humble priest ask whether he should consider them an ally of the empire and its citizens, or diametrically opposed?”

“Neither,” Scarlett replied. “If they were the latter, however, I would hardly be here engaging in this conversation with you, Deacon.”

The man nodded politely. “No, you would not, would you?” he murmured, falling silent once more as he seemed to consider things.

“Now, to return to the matter at hand,” Scarlett continued, her voice steady. “There were two pieces of information that I had to share with you, and the revelation of your fellow deacon’s treachery was only one of them. While it apparently proved to be a more compelling persuasion on its own than I had anticipated, I will not renege on my word. You shall receive exactly what I promised in return for your assistance.”

Raimond’s attention shifted back to her. “Ah, yes,” he said. “Regarding that other matter Fynn informed me. Tell me, Baroness, precisely what is this ‘Tribute of Dominion’?”

Scarlett considered him for a moment. “You truly do not recognize the term?”

“I do not.”

That surprised Scarlett, honestly. She had instructed Fynn to inform Raimond not only about the traitorous deacons, which she knew wasn’t something Raimond could ignore, but also about the impending return of the Tribute of Dominion.

She had assumed Raimond would know what that meant. The Tribute of Dominion was a legend, after all. An artifact coveted by all factions towards the mid-point of the game. It was also a necessary element of the Hallowed Cabal's plans for achieving their goals, so its return was a matter of great significance, considering the chaos it could unleash upon the empire and the continent.

Scarlett studied the man more closely, searching his expression for any hint of deception or feigned ignorance. "Deacon Abram," she began, "have you ever heard of Beld Thylelion?"

The Followers of Ittar's motivation in trying to enter Beld Thylelion in the game, the place where the Tribute of Dominion was located, was to thwart the Cabal's ambitions.

So why would Raimond be oblivious to what it was?

"I believe I have come across the term before," the man said. "Perhaps in some old Zuverian records. However, I must confess that I am far from an expert on the subject, and my knowledge of it is quite limited."

Scarlett frowned. When she had spoken with Dean Warley Godwin, he had been familiar with both Beld Thylelion and the Tribute of Dominion. Although, now that she thought back to it, the old wizard had never made it clear that he knew *what* the Tribute of Dominion was.

Did people in this world somehow possess less information about the Tribute than she was expecting? She doubted the Cabal held any misconceptions about it, though, since—

Her eyes widened slightly as a possibility occurred to her.

The Cabal had been around for a long time, and other than Scarlett herself, they were the only confirmed faction with the ability to transcend the boundaries set by the game's plot, defying the fate of this world. If so, it was conceivable that they had taken deliberate measures over the centuries to suppress any knowledge related to the Tribute of Dominion from spreading.

However, something was off with that. Despite confirming that the Cabal could challenge the fate of this world, most of Scarlett's information on them had proven accurate. If they'd had literal centuries at their disposal to change things, it was unlikely that her information would align with reality as well as it did. This implied that they *were* still slaves to fate, to a certain degree.

Perhaps they could only effect slight changes? She still remained in the dark about how their fate-altering abilities worked. She still didn't understand how it worked for *her*. Her talks with Crowley suggested that only some Cabal members could defy fate, but the mechanics remained unclear. She knew they derived the power from the being locked behind the Seal of Thainnith, but not much more. Did they perform some kind of ritual to get that ability? The Angler Man would likely possess the ability, at least, considering he was both their leader and the oldest member.

Regardless, it *did* seem like the Followers of Ittar had less information on Beld Thylelion and what was inside than they had in the game. Scarlett doubted they would not act once the ruins themselves opened, but if they were less aware of the stakes, it could pose a problem.

Or at least it might have if she hadn't been involved.

"I feel rather left out," Raimond's voice interrupted her thoughts. "Care to share what has you looking so focused?"

"...I was simply surprised by your apparent lack of knowledge," Scarlett said.

"You certainly don't mince words. Fortunately for you, I am already well-acquainted with disappointing people," Raimond replied.

"I am sure." Scarlett eyed the man for a moment. "As for the Tribute of Dominion, to put it simply, it is the 'artifact' which Beld Thylelion was built to house, and it was forged by the Zuverian divinarch known as Thainnith. Suffice to say, the potential stored within the Tribute of Dominion is near boundless, a beacon of power that has drawn the gaze of both the Hallowed Cabal, the Undead Council, and several other factions. Beld Thylelion's imminent awakening will ignite a fierce struggle among those who seek to claim its prize."

Raimond's expression hardened. "You say this ruin will open soon? When and where will this transpire?"

"The exact date is unknown, but I anticipate its emergence within the coming months, perhaps even weeks. As for its location, that question is best answered by the mage towers."

Scarlett would have to check with Adalicia Mendenhall to see if the towers would actually be able to locate it in time. The woman was an expert on Zuverian lore, so she should at least have heard about the Tribute of Dominion. But now Scarlett was slightly concerned that Adalicia wouldn't fully grasp the gravity and significance of finding Beld Thylelion in time for its opening.

"That is not much to work from if this is truly as important as you suggest, Baroness," Raimond said.

"No, but it should be enough."

While Scarlett herself knew where Beld Thylelion was, that wasn't information she wanted to disclose prematurely. Not before she had gotten what she needed from there.

"We can delve into further details related to this and the other topic soon," she continued, "but first, I would like to address another matter. Namely, the nature of our relationship from hereon."

Raimond responded with a wry smile. "A prudent matter to discuss, indeed. I must admit, I had entertained the possibility that you would merely impart this knowledge and then wash your hands of me as an annoying bother. While such a course would have undoubtedly simplified my life, I fear simply leaving things at that would constitute a dereliction of duty and a transgression that even I could not justify."

"My intentions are quite the opposite," Scarlett said. "I believe our continued collaborations would be mutually beneficial, both for myself, you, and the Followers in general."

Although she still had some lingering doubts, she felt relatively confident in trusting Raimond to work with her after their shared experiences. While she preferred collaborating with people like Beldon Tyndall, whose motives were relatively clear, there were plenty of things that Raimond's skillset and position could offer Scarlett.

Raimond met her gaze, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. "Why do I get the distinct impression that you possess ample experience in forging these types of clandestine covenants, Baroness?"

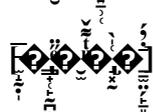
"I cannot account for your peculiar delusions," Scarlett said.

"Au contraire, my dear Baroness. I believe you are the sole authority on such matters. However, I have never been one to pry into a lady's secrets while they are aware that I am doing so, and as such, I cannot do much more but concede the point," Raimond said with one of his disarming smiles.

"Let us not deviate from the topic at hand, Deacon. As I have stated, I am willing to maintain a partnership between us that could serve both parties. Under the current circumstances, that would appear to be the best option for us. Do you concur?"

"It would be unwise of me to refuse at this point," Raimond said, and as he did, the air shifted between the two of them.

[Side-Quest completed: Underhand—]



[Side-Quest completed: Underhanded dealings with the honorable unscrupulous priest]
{Skill points awarded: 8}

Scarlett paused as the window of text appeared before her, glitching for a moment before settling into its usual form.

A faint, almost imperceptible smile played at the corner of her lips.

Finally.

She had been waiting for some sort of response from the system for a while now. It seemed that whatever had happened within that void had left a lingering impact on the system, but at least it was now providing her with some form of feedback.

"Oh, what is this I see? Have I finally managed to coax a smile from the Baroness's icy visage?"

Scarlett dismissed the windows and shifted her attention back to Raimond.

"During our journey to Crowcairn, Rosa informed me that she has succeeded with a similar feat on occasion, but I was unsure whether her words were those of a self-aggrandizing minstrel or the truth," the man said.

Scarlett composed her expression once more. “Miss Hale’s words should always be taken with several grains of salt, if not disregarded entirely. Ignore whatever you believe you just saw. Now, I have a further inquiry for you. What are your intentions from here on out? Both in regards to the Quorum and the events that transpired here near Crowcairn.” She gestured out the window, where Anguish’s citadel stood in the distance. “The Vile’s stronghold still remains, presumably as a result of the method which we dealt with and suppressed her power. I am sure this new addition to the land will raise numerous question around the empire.”

Raimond showed a smirk that rang warning bells in Scarlett’s mind. “It seems Rosa does indeed know you quite well, Baroness. She also shared with me your tendency to deflect when embarrassed or when you wish to maintain an air of mystery. Which can I assume is the case now?”

She shot him a glare, and she would have extended the same courtesy to Rosa had the bard not been slumbering soundly at the moment.

“Ahem.” Raimond cleared his throat with a slightly awkward expression. “Neither, I’ll take it.”

“If you would kindly address my question, *Deacon Abram*,” Scarlett said, her tone laced with a hint of impatience.

Why did it feel like everybody she knew *enjoyed* going around spreading tales about her? Rosa was by far the worst, but she wasn’t the only one.

“Certainly!” Raimond resumed, adopting a vigorous air for a moment, though it quickly grew less pronounced as he continued speaking. “Firstly, assuming once again that your assessment of the state of the Vile within Miss Hale is accurate, it’s likely that the Dawnbringers will be able to explore the citadel without much challenge. If I were to postulate, the Imperial Crown and the Quorum will probably reach an agreement regarding the handling of the matter beyond that point. It will presumably require some time, perhaps days or even weeks, considering its size, but as long as the citadel remains, the empire’s faction will likely remain unsettled until every demon within has been thoroughly vanquished. I also imagine that the Shields Guild, Ustrum Assembly, and other mage factions will wish to involve themselves, but matters pertaining to the threats from the Blazes and demons have always fallen under the purview of my order first and foremost in the empire.”

“I presume there will be individuals eager to interrogate me about our time within the citadel?” Scarlett asked.

“Most assuredly. Inquisitorial Auditors, to be precise. I would suggest that you cooperate with them, but that is ultimately your decision. Matters always become rather complicated once my order has to interfere with nobles.”

“I have no intention of attracting further suspicion than is necessary.”

Raimond nodded in his approval. “A wise approach. Now, as for how I will manage the remfainder of my estimable Quorum peers, I am afraid that I have yet to devise a suitable approach. Ittar knows why, but they were not particularly pleased with what I had to tell them before, and I anticipate the most arduous of times ahead, compared to which mayhap not

even the martyrdom of endless paperwork could compare. This is especially true as I will be also be devoting more time to investigating the actions of my fellows Davenport and Townsend where possible.” The man paused, briefly glancing over at Rosa. “There is also a conversation I would like to have with Rosa when the opportunity presents itself. There is much to be said between us.” He turned back to Scarlett. “But I suspect that will have to wait. Either until after you have returned to Bridgespell or the next time I find myself in Freybrook.”

“I do not envy your position,” Scarlett said.

“Were I not aware of your off-time confrontations with Viles, Baroness, I might have requested a role reversal between us.”

“And I would have declined such a request.”

“I see that any trace of compassion you possessed within your heart has now been depleted.”

Scarlett shook her head, sighing inwardly. This man’s ability to steer conversations off course was far too potent. “Anyhow, now let us proceed with the specifics. There are numerous details that require careful consideration from hereon.”