

158: An archwizard's arrival

Later that afternoon, Scarlett sat in her office when her bond to the Loci suddenly alerted her to a new presence in front of the estate's gates. One moment there had been nothing there, and the next, an elderly gentleman had popped up.

She set aside the documents from this morning she had been reading and shifted her attention to the Loci's senses, 'seeing' in her mind's eye how the two guards at the gate jumped in surprise at the man who had teleported in front of them. Fortunately, they quickly recognized Warley Godwin's description and calmed down. Scarlett had warned them that something like this might happen today.

She observed for a while longer as one of the guards led the dean of the Elystead Tower inside the estate, then she rose from her chair and left the office behind.

Empress, once again, rested on the hallway windowsill facing the courtyard, seemingly enjoying herself as she relaxed.

Scarlett had actually been surprised that the cat had decided to stick around for so long today. Every other time Empress had appeared around the mansion, it had only been for a brief while. But now, the cat almost seemed to have made itself at home.

While having a powerful being nearby provided a sense of security in case something happened, it also made Scarlett somewhat uneasy. Considering Empress' connection to The Gentleman, she doubted the cat would do anything *too* drastic. However, Empress was still a large unknown to her. The game had always kept the cat's identity and purpose mostly a mystery, so she couldn't be certain whether Empress' presence here was beneficial, detrimental, or inconsequential.

Since The Gentleman often maintained neutrality, Scarlett doubted she could lean on Empress' presence too much. Both the cat and the man would probably be angry with her if she attempted that.

For now, she simply walked past the cast as she continued deeper into the mansion, leaving the east wing and heading towards the guest lounge, where she had instructed the staff to bring Dean Godwin once he arrived. She expected him to be held up a bit in the courtyard when he saw the dragon, but she wasn't in a rush.

The guest lounge was empty upon her arrival, save for some refreshments that had been prepared beforehand. She moved over to one of the armchairs situated at the center of the room and sat down. To pass the time, she brought out the book she had started reading earlier that day, *The Red Witch of Destruction: Catastrophe Incarnate*, and resumed reading, making some mental notes in the process.

After twenty or so minutes, there was a knock on the door as a servant opened it and led Warley Godwin inside. The woman glanced at Scarlett as if inquiring whether there was anything else to do, but Scarlett signaled with her hand that everything was fine. The servant then exited and closed the door.

“Welcome, Dean Godwin,” Scarlett said, gesturing towards a couch in front of her. “Have a seat.”

“I appreciate the warm welcome, Baroness,” the man replied with wry amusement as he crossed the room and took a seat. He was dressed in similar attire to what she had seen him wearing last time, with a billowing black cape that hung behind him, revealing a scarlet-red lining inside, and a suit that followed a similar color scheme. He gave her a curious look. “I must admit, when I initially proposed this visit to your home, I did not expect anything in particular. Yet instead, I was met with what might perhaps be the most unique residence I have ever borne eyes upon, even with all my travels.”

“May I take that as a compliment?” Scarlett asked, leaning forward as she closed her book and placed it on the table in front of her. The Dean’s eyes seemed to briefly linger on the book’s title before returning to her.

“I would say you have earned that distinction. This is the first example I have seen of someone keeping a recently deceased ashenwraith dragon in their courtyard.”

“You are familiar with its species?”

“Oh, indeed, I am.”

“I was under the impression that they were quite rare in these parts of the world.”

“That is one way to put it. They are believed to be nonexistent outside of Baajirr, after all.” Godwin watched her with an inquisitive expression. “I find myself unable to come up with reasonable interpretations to explain why there would be one in the home of an aristocrat from the Graenal Empire.”

Scarlett’s eyes roamed down to the man’s hands. They were covered by black gloves, so she couldn’t tell for sure if he had the ring that detected lies on or not. It was best to assume that he did.

“I can assure you that I was as surprised as you when I first witnessed it,” she said, picking up a cup of tea from the table and gesturing that the Dean was free to do the same with the cup that had been prepared in front of him. She took a sip to test the temperature, then used her pyrokinesis to lower it until it was only slightly warmer than lukewarm before drinking. She personally disliked drinks that were too hot—especially as it took so long for them to cool naturally—but guests might prefer it that way, so she usually refrained from requesting the servants to adjust it.

The archwizard raised an eyebrow at her action but remained silent as he waved his finger, causing his own cup to float gently through the air towards him without spilling. “If you’ll pardon my nosiness, is there a reason why there is a dead dragon in your home?”

Scarlett wasn’t sure if he always used his magic like that, or if he was just bragging, but she chose not to react to it. “I am sure there is, yes, although I will keep the details to myself for now. I had, however, been intending to discuss with you the handling of its body.”

The man sipped his tea, showing a slight nod of appreciation for the taste. Scarlett wasn't quite sure where they sourced the tea from, but the mansion's chef was apparently responsible for that, and the man was skilled in more areas than just the kitchen.

"I would certainly not decline such an opportunity," Godwin said, folding his hands as his cup floated back to the table. "Some of my subordinates would be thrilled to have access to a dragon not native to this continent. A member of the ashenwraith species alone is enough to inspire several dissertations, I suspect. However, I must warn you that there will be many questions regarding its origin and how it ended up here."

Scarlett waved her hand dismissively. "We can discuss the specifics later. At present, my priority is to ensure that I do not have a decaying cadaver in front of my home within a week. I was hoping that you could assist me with that."

The Dean chuckled. "Perhaps, yes." He turned his head and gazed out of the large windows in the room, which faced the back of the estate, offering a view of the corner of the hedge garden and the training grounds in the distance. "You know, the deceased dragon was not the only thing that caught my attention when I arrived, Baroness. Say, would you happen to have a protective spirit watching over this place?"

Scarlett looked at him intently as he turned back to her. "You could tell?" she asked.

He nodded. "It is rather evident if you are familiar with the signs. Although I'm not acquainted with the specifics of this particular spirit, I have encountered similar phenomena on a few occasions before. However, this is the first time I see it implemented inside someone's abode. It is a curious spectacle indeed. How did you achieve it?"

"I did not do much. The artifact responsible for it was of Abelard's creation. I merely removed it from his mansion and convinced it to serve me as its new master."

"Ah, I see. That does make sense, considering Abelard's expertise. It is a shame that a man as skilled as him would waste his talents the way he did." The Dean shook his head. "It would have been nice if you were more familiar with the artifact's workings, but I suppose there is little to be done about that. I find it somewhat humorous that Withersworth allowed you to take it without truly realizing what he was giving up, but that was his own oversight."

"I believe I did more than enough to compensate for it," Scarlett said.

"That you did." The man appeared thoughtful for a moment. "If you do not mind, would you allow me to examine it later?"

Scarlett eyed him cautiously. "That will depend. Is there a risk that you might damage or harm it in the process?"

"I would exercise utmost caution and diligence. I do not make it a habit of mishandling that which does not belong to me."

"In that case, I can grant you access to it on one condition."

He looked at her expectantly. "And what is that?"

“I would like your assistance in determining how I can further enhance its growth,” she said. “Abelard utilized a certain fountain or font of some kind in his mansion that I suspect acted as a source of power for it, but I do not know what I can do to replicate this here in my home.”

The corner of the man’s mouth rose in a slight smile. “Are you perhaps endeavoring to turn your home into an unassailable fortress?”

“I am simply striving to make the best use of the resources at my disposal.”

He chuckled once more, leaning back in his seat and crossing his arms. “If that is the case, it seems *fortuitous* that you have the remains of a recently deceased dragon available.”

Scarlett furrowed her brow. “What do you mean by that?”

Godwin studied her for a moment. “Dragons are among the most astonishing manifestations of natural magic and biological harmony. The materials that can be harvested from them are sought after in numerous professions for exactly this reason. Their scales are used in alchemy and crafting, their bones and horns in enchanting and runecrafting, and their blood possesses various magical qualities. Since time immemorial, dragons have been considered living treasures by most mortal civilizations, though few have been foolish or formidable enough to attempt to slay one on other than a few occasions.”

Scarlett nodded. She already knew as much. In fact, while she probably intended to turn over the dragon’s body to Elystead Tower—she would have to determine its exact worth later—she also planned to keep some materials for herself. Allyssa would probably be ecstatic at the chance to use some of it in her alchemy, and Scarlett could probably come up with a few uses herself.

“That being said,” the Dean continued. “There is one part of the dragon that is highly prized above all others.”

“Their heart,” Scarlett said. The dragon’s core was a valuable reagent in the game, although its worth varied depending on the strength of the dragon it was obtained from. Not that there were many dragons present in the game. There were a few named ones, and then players could encounter a dozen or so ‘weaker’, unnamed ones.

“Quite right. And tell me, what do you know about the dragon’s heart?” he asked.

She gave him a long look. “I am not particularly fond of quizzes or games, Dean. I would prefer if you got to the point.”

“Heh, excuse me. I am rather used to testing my disciples at every opportunity afforded me.” The man cleared his throat. “If I am to cut to the chase, a dragon’s heart is an incredible font of mana and vitality that grows as the dragon ages. This alone makes it highly desirable, for obvious reasons, but that is not all. You see, a dragon’s heart does not stop growing simply because the dragon itself has died. It continues to accumulate mana and power as long as it exists. You might not be aware, but the enchantments that protect Dawnlight Palace are powered by the heart of an elder tempestclaw dragon that was slain by the first emperor and his allies. It is one of three elder dragons confirmed to have been slain within the last four

centuries, and it is estimated that its heart may have reached the level of an ancient dragon by now.”

Scarlett’s eyes widened in slight surprise. That was actually new information to her.

“So, you are suggesting I use the heart of this dragon as a source of power?” she asked.

The man stroked his white, well-trimmed beard. “It would seem rather fitting, would it not?”

She nodded. That it would. It was almost as if Empress had been aware this was something Scarlett had needed.

A thought struck her.

If even an adolescent dragon’s heart was considered that valuable, and the heart of an elder dragon was enough to protect generations of emperor’s homes, then what could she do with something even better in her mansion? Elder dragons were incredibly rare existences, to the point where they were almost legends, but as Dean Godwin had mentioned, there *was* something above even that: ancient dragons. Ancient dragons were essentially natural disasters in their own right, and their numbers could probably be counted on one hand. So what would happen if she obtained the heart of an ancient dragon for this place?

It wasn’t entirely impossible. Ancient dragons were strong. Immensely so. There had also only been two of them present in the game. But, well... One of them was an entity that the empire was all too familiar with.

The ‘Dragon of Devastation’, as they had named it, was the dragon responsible for burning a large swath of the empire’s territory to cinders and creating the Blasted Lands. It was also the dragon that had caused Fynn to lose most of his tribe.

And that dragon was nearing the end of its life.

“I don’t think it would be too difficult for me to assist in setting that up,” Dean Godwin said, bringing Scarlett’s attention back to their conversation. “If that is what you wish.”

“That would be...appreciated.”

The man nodded, and his tea floated up to him once more with a wave of his hand. “Ah, but we have somewhat strayed from the primary purpose of this visit now, haven’t we? While your home is certainly fascinating, I did not come here simply to discuss that, though it was a pleasant surprise.”

Scarlett locked eyes with him. That was true. In their last meeting, she had agreed to talk more about her ‘visions of the future’. She had spent a lot of time these past few days preparing herself for this conversation.

“Then perhaps we should pick up where we left off,” the Dean said. “You told me that your foresight is not due to the interference of the gods—”

Suddenly, something screamed at the back of Scarlett's mind as if pressing itself against her very existence.

The Loci was crying out.

Like a roiling presence of black ichor, there was something that was fighting against the Loci, forcing itself through its will and making the Loci recoil intensely.

With a start, Scarlett rose from her seat as whatever defenses the Loci managed to bring up were breached, focusing her attention on its senses to determine what had happened.

There was someone in her office.

She paused when she recognized them.

It was Mistress.