

224: Back-office dealings

“—your investigations should primarily be concentrated on Brook Tower and Ustrum’s acquaintances, likely around 800 A.R. The exact time period, however, is somewhat uncertain,” Scarlett spoke aloud, sitting alone in her office.

Before her, on her desk, stood a small bluebird carving perched on a circular marble base that emitted a faint glow.

“Gathering reliable information stretching that far back might prove difficult, depending on the circumstances,” Beldon’s voice responded from the bird sculpture.

“I understand, but I request your best efforts within your current capacities nonetheless.”

“Certainly, I will do what I can. That said, most of my people are currently engaged in other matters, especially after the recent turmoil in Bridgespell has been dominating the conversations of half the important figures in the empire. It’s quite coincidental that such an event unfolded during your own visit to the city, isn’t it, Baroness? I have even heard tell of rumors that suggest your involvement in the citadel incident, alongside the Followers of Ittar and Duke Valentino’s men. Such talk piques a man’s curiosity about the true happenings over there.”

“I advise against prying too deeply into that, Tyndall.”

“How you tantalize me, Baroness. You should know that your warnings only make me even *more* intrigued about what I’m missing out on,” the man replied, his voice tinged with an almost palpable sigh. “Nevertheless, I shall heed your wishes for now. Regarding your inquiry, I will have my available people investigate this Delmon character. It’s hardly an uncommon name, but if he was indeed a noble of that era, as you suggest, identifying a list of potential matches should not be too difficult.”

“For now, that is a satisfactory starting point,” Scarlett said.

Her progress in completing Arlene’s latest quest hinged on finding out what had happened to the woman’s brother. Locating Arlene’s necklace came after that.

“I assume you’re not inclined to divulge the reason for this sudden interest in a long-gone noble?” Beldon asked.

“I do not particularly mind, actually. It is simply that the matter is of little consequence to you. I am seeking an heirloom that I believe will help me in gaining access to a certain set of ruins, and Delmont was the last confirmed person to be in possession of the heirloom.”

A soft chuckle emerged from the communication artifact on the desk. “That is hardly a satisfying answer, but perhaps I am to blame for hoping for more. As ever, you are nothing if not a masterful tease, my lady.”

Scarlett lightly tapped her finger on the desk. “Spare me the compliments. Simply ensure that you fulfill this request. That is my primary concern.”

“And fulfill it I shall. Have I ever let you down?”

“Not to date, no. But our partnership remains in its infancy. I am not so naive as to believe you are infallible.”

“Ah, you wound my pride too? Such blunt honesty is what I admire about you, but it does possess the charm of a thorny rose.” There was a brief pause from Beldon. “On a different note, have you kept abreast of recent developments in Ambercrest, Baroness?”

Scarlett raised an eyebrow. “I presume you are referring to the affairs involving Count Soames?”

“Hmm, yes, precisely so. His name has surfaced in connection with recent events there. But, of course, it is nothing but rumors for the time being, so who knows what can be trusted? Ah, but I forget that you have previously claimed to hold no interest in that matter. My apologies for bringing it up.”

Right, every time Beldon had brought up Count Soames before, Scarlett had feigned indifference due to her pact of non-interference with Anguish. Beldon would still think she was keeping up that act. But Scarlett wasn't bound by any pact now, and while Anguish wasn't a direct threat any longer, Scarlett could see an opportunity to leverage the Vile's noble pawn for her own purposes.

“The situation has evolved,” she began. “I had intended to forget the matter where Count Soames showed disrespect towards me and my house at your estate's ball, but I have since changed my mind. Any news you have of him would be more than welcome.”

“Oh? Truly?” Beldon sounded genuinely surprised, followed by a moment of silence. “...Funny how that works. It would appear that those rumors I spoke of were just now confirmed, so allow me to fill you in. Count Soames has been associating with some dubious characters in Ambercrest's Silkspindle Ward. My agents have been monitoring these individuals, and while their true affiliations have long remained nothing but conjecture, the current conclusion seems to suggest that they are of the *demonic* variety. While that is none of *my* concern, for some inexplicable reason, some bird seems to have spread news of these activities to certain members of the Followers and the crown. I suspect Count Soames will soon find himself under close scrutiny from various inquisitive officials.”

“But that bird had no connection to you whatsoever, of course,” Scarlett remarked.

“Well, I may have played a minor role,” Beldon's amused reply came. “It is looking as if Ambercrest might find itself under new leadership in the near future, and I suspect the question of succession will be a nasty and complicated one. The perfect environment for someone like me to add a few extra cards to my deck.”

“I expected nothing less of you.”

“What can I say? It would be foolish of me not to utilize the intelligence I have gathered after putting so much effort into this affair, no? Count Soames has made multiple enemies within the empire, you included, it would seem, so who am I to deny them their retribution? My

investigations have also made me aware of several high-profile figures who've maintained unusually close ties with him, ties that are suspect given his more...questionable activities.”

“It sounds as if you have secured some rather valuable assets for your organization’s future use.”

Based on her knowledge from the game, Scarlett knew that Count Soames’ crimes included aiding in abducting and sacrificing citizens in demonic rituals in a ploy to be given power through Anguish, who in turn used him as a tool in her plans in the Material Realm. Any other nobles and officials connected to the count likely didn’t know the full extent of his deeds, but were entangled with him through Anguish’s influence.

“Not just I, but *we*,” Beldon corrected. “Some of the count’s associates are more influential than you might imagine, Baroness, making them valuable assets in our upcoming endeavours.”

Scarlett looked at the communication artifact on the desk in surprise. “...You are willing to share their identities and this information with me?”

While she might have indirectly suggested that Beldon investigate Count Soames in the first place, she hadn’t ever done anything to help the man’s operation in Ambercrest. Any information he had uncovered was his own doing. Scarlett expected having to bargain with the man to get anything from this.

“But of course. I wouldn’t withhold valuable information from a partner for my sole benefit,” Beldon said.

Scarlett couldn’t help but scoff lightly. “We both know that is not entirely accurate.”

“True, I suppose,” the man conceded, and she could picture the smirk on his face. “But I see no need to monopolize what can be gained from the impending chaos in Ambercrest. I happen to value our partnership highly, Baroness. If you wish, you can consider this a gift of sorts. A token of my commitment to our future collaboration.”

Scarlett stayed quiet for several seconds, processing his words. She hadn’t realized he was this devoted to their partnership.

“Very well,” she eventually said. “Send me a list of these individuals, along with what information you have available on them. I will assess the true worth of this ‘gift’ of yours.”

While she didn’t have an immediate use for it, possessing blackmail material on influential figures in the empire would prove beneficial in the future. She already had some possibilities in mind, depending on the people involved.

“Consider it done,” Beldon replied.

“Good. Now—” Scarlett began to speak but paused in the middle of her sentence, her attention drawn by a sensation from the [Obedience’s Solitude Loci].

“...Yes?” Beldon’s voice sounded out from the artifact after a while. “I believe you were just about to say something, Baroness.”

Scarlett refocused on the conversation at hand. “...Disregard that. It is nothing pertinent to our current discussion. Just a minor distraction.” From what she could tell, it was a matter that could wait before she had to deal with it. “Let us proceed on to the next topic. Have you found the information I have continued to provide you beneficial in your operations?”

“Hmm.” Beldon sounded tempted to press further, but after a moment, he seemed to decide it was better not to. “Indeed, we’ve made more than excellent use of your intel. My people have already charted most of the underground networks beneath Silverborough, Bridgespell, and now even Elystead, and we have been far more successful in avoiding and neutralizing threats to our agents from both other groups and the Cabal than we have been in years. Per your recommendations, we have also been making headway in empire-wide preparations for the conflict with the Tribe and Cabal to escalate, though even I question if some of those preparations are not somewhat excessive.”

“You are more than welcome to ignore my recommendations if you wish,” Scarlett said.

“Hah, I would think not, no. I believe Count Soames is about to experience the consequences of underestimating you, Baroness, and I do not wish to make the same mistake as him.”

“I am not involved in his coming downfall, however.”

“If you say so.” Beldon cleared his throat. “To continue where I left off, following the leads you gave us, we have also identified several noteworthy locations all across the empire. Although most are unexplored per your instructions, it would be a waste to neglect them entirely.”

Scarlett had supplied Beldon’s organization with diverse amounts of information over the last month, ranging from details on competitors and corrupt nobles to old ruins and dungeons from the game. The latter were mostly the type of places Scarlett wasn’t sure she could find the location off herself, and where it was easier to make use of Beldon’s extensive network instead. As long as none of his people entered those dungeons, she could go in and clear them for the skill points when she found the time.

Retrieving her journal from her [Pouch of Holding], Scarlett jotted down some notes with her pyrokinesis. “I will take care of it. Simply forward their precise locations to me when you can.”

She wasn’t sure when she’d had the time to explore all of these sites, but having them pinpointed in advance was better than nothing. “Was there anything else you wished to discuss for the time being?”

“Actually, there was one matter,” Beldon said.

“And what is that?” Scarlett asked, closing her journal down and returning it to the pouch.

“I do not have full confirmation yet, and have sent my agents to verify it further, but we might have located traces of the woman you asked me to find. This ‘Countess’.”

Scarlett paused, shifting her focus to the carved bird. Finally. “When was this? Where?”

“Our sources reported a sighting in Farmire, a couple of weeks back,” Beldon explained. “A woman fitting her description was seen. We can’t confirm if it was indeed her, and she’s likely moved on from the city since then, but it’s the first trace we have found so far.”

“It is better than nothing,” Scarlett said, brows furrowing. This was the first tangible evidence of the Countess still being alive since receiving only a vague confirmation about it from The Gentleman. “Was she alone?”

“That I do not know. A local stall owner noticed a hooded woman examining his goods, worried she was attempting to steal his goods. However, she vanished before he could confront her. From that description alone, it would seem she is no ordinary individual.”

Scarlett frowned. It felt strange that the Countess would have been able to stay concealed this well on her own, especially if the woman was moving around populated areas like that. Was she receiving assistance? If so, from whom? And what were their motives?

“Keep me informed of any developments, no matter how minor,” she instructed Beldon. “I want it all relayed to me.”

“As you wish, oh esteemed partner of mine,” Beldon replied, with a hint of exaggerated flourish.

“I am starting to think your flattery is less about genuine esteem and more a habitual part of that charade you always maintain, Tyndall,” Scarlett said. “We both know that your true interest lies in the information I provide, and not in me personally.”

Beldon’s response came with a touch of irony. “And aren’t your motivations the same in regards to me?”

“I never claimed otherwise,” Scarlett replied, shaking her head slightly. “If there is nothing more, I must attend to other matters. We will continue our discussion another time.”

“By all means.” A more serious tone entered the man’s voice. “Until then, Baroness. Farewell.”

“Farewell.”

Scarlett extended a hand and touched the base of the artifact, causing its glow to dim. She stored it in her [Pouch of Holding], then stood and left her office, heading towards the central wing. There, she exited out the back of the mansion, employing her pyrokinesis to shield herself against the gently falling snow.

Making her way towards the hedge garden, she navigated through its winding paths until she reached its heart, where eternal summer seemed to reign.

There, standing at the center beside the pedestal holding the Loci, was an older gentleman with flowing silvery-grey hair and a well-groomed beard, draped in a black cape lined with scarlet-red silk.

Warley Godwin, the dean of Elystead Tower.

Scarlett had sensed his arrival during her conversation with Beldon. Initially, the Loci had resisted the old wizard's teleportation attempt, but Scarlett had allowed his entry to avoid complications. She wasn't sure if the Loci could contend with an archmage, anyway.

As she approached, Godwin turned around, his expression solemn and severe. "Baroness Hartford. Forgive my intrusion, but we have an urgent matter to discuss."

Scarlett observed him silently for a moment before nodding, gesturing towards a nearby bench. She had been expecting this. "Take a seat, Dean. I believe I already have an inkling of why you are here."