

265: Old and new connections

The other guests began drifting towards the exits under the guidance of attendants as Scarlett navigated her way over to Trista. The woman's glare held on her briefly before Trista turned away, seemingly dismissing Scarlett to refocus on her duties.

That *did* Scarlett somewhat, though she imagined the woman had her reasons for disliking her. Unfortunately for Trista, Scarlett lacked both the tact and generosity to let that deter her.

"Dame Trista," she greeted as she halted in front of the knight.

Trista's attention slowly returned to Scarlett, her stern countenance transforming into a scowl. "What do you want, Scarlett?"

A vein began to pulse on Scarlett's temple. On second thought, maybe this *was* a bad idea after all. Standing before the woman like this reminded her that Trista was one of the few people whom the original harbored enough dislike for that it even carried over to her.

Allowing herself just a moment to compose herself, Scarlett masked her own scowl. "I simply wished to greet you and ask some questions. It has been some time since we last spoke, after all."

Technically, she'd never actually spoken with the woman herself.

"I know. I was counting myself lucky for that — until now," Trista spoke with a distant tone. "I'm on duty, Scarlett, so I'm going to have to ask that you don't disturb me."

"This will not take long." Scarlett surveyed their surroundings, noting a few other Solar Knights casting glances their way, along with curious gazes from nearby guests. She then returned her focus to Trista. "I did not expect to see the Solar Knights present for tonight's proceedings. Is Sir Leon here as well?"

Trista's eyes narrowed slightly, a trace of threat lingering in her voice. "I'm sorry, but I see no reason why I should disclose that to you. I have no interest in complicating matters for my friend, and I think the vice-captain has enough on his plate already."

"...Your response is understandable given the nature of our past...encounters, let us call them. But I believe you are the only one who is still caught up in the past. My relationship with Sir Leon is not as strained as it once was, in case you were not aware."

"I've heard as much. Frankly, I've heard more about you in the last six months than I ever cared to. It's as though you've become a completely different person." The woman's accusatory tone suggested she herself found that hard to believe.

For a moment, Scarlett locked eyes with her, tempted to retort in a manner that was almost definitely wholly unwise in the current setting. Instead, she exhaled softly.

Despite her *emotional* aversion to the knight, she didn't hold any personal animosity towards Trista. Perhaps she could afford to be somewhat tolerant, just for today.

“My priorities have...shifted,” she said with a slight shake of her head. “But that is hardly relevant now. I simply wish to know if Sir Leon is present tonight and his whereabouts, if so. As I am sure you are aware, he has been occupied as of late, making it difficult for me to find an opportunity to discuss certain matters with him.”

Trista remained silent for a few seconds, studying Scarlett, then let out a short sigh. She returned her gaze straight ahead, watching over the banquet hall and its guests. “He’s here. Half of the order was summoned for tonight, and the vice-captain is in charge of overseeing things in the Emperor’s Forum.”

“I see.”

That was where the conclave and relevant discussions would be held. If Leon was in charge of security there, it likely meant Scarlett wouldn’t have a chance to speak with him during the evening. But if he remained in the capital another day or so, maybe the opportunity would present itself.

Scarlett’s gaze drifted down to Trista’s black-and-gold armor and the sword at her hip, briefly glancing over at the other Solar Knights as well. “Do you anticipate any disturbances tonight?” she asked.

Neither she nor Beldon had any intelligence regarding a specific threat to tonight’s proceedings. The Cabal was always a threat, sure, but she was curious if the Solar Knights possessed any additional information.

Trista’s expression tightened, and she responded curtly. “It’s just a precaution due to the current circumstances.”

Scarlett regarded her thoughtfully. Was that truly the case? Still, everything she knew spoke for the palace not being a place that was easy to attack, and Beldon was probably one of the most well-informed people in the empire...

“...Very well. Then I will not trouble you further,” she said, turning to leave. A thought struck her, and she hesitated for a moment, glancing back at Trista. “On another matter...”

The knight looked at her. “Yes?”

Scarlett paused. “...No, I suppose it is inconsequential at this point. Farewell for now.”

She had briefly considered apologising for crashing Trista’s wedding, but the words didn’t feel right on her tongue. Besides, it wasn’t as if she had caused that much of a mess at the time.

As she strolled away, Scarlett observed the clusters of guests making their way towards the exits at the center of the hall, which presumably led to the Emperor’s Forum. Amidst them, she spotted Lady Withersworth, still accompanied by Duke Valentino and his entourage, slowly edging towards one of the exits. The older lady seemed to notice her as well, and their eyes met just as someone called out to Scarlett.

“Baroness Hartford,” an austere voice spoke from behind her.

Halting, Scarlett turned to identify the speaker. There, a woman adorned with a gold mask stood, onyx hair cascading in a sleek tail down her shoulders, dressed in ornate gold-embroidered red robes.

Deacon Solnate.

Scarlett considered the woman, her gaze flitting to the two priests behind the deacon, clad in the customary red robes as well as white masks consisting of intersecting squares and draped cloths.

“This is unexpected,” she said. “Greetings, Deacon. Is there something you wish to discuss with me?”

“There is,” the woman replied tersely. “Perhaps you could spare me a moment as we move to the Forum?”

Scarlett’s eyes moved back to the deacon and lingered on her for a beat longer, then she turned back towards Lady Withersworth, gesturing for the older woman to proceed without her. Lady Withersworth seemed to catch on, offering a smile in return before departing with the duke and the others.

Turning back to the deacon, Scarlett motioned towards the exit closest to them. “Shall we?”

Deacon Solnate’s gaze swept over the bustling guests still leaving the chamber, swarming into the connecting corridors. “If you don’t mind, let’s wait until the crowd thins out.” With a gesture of her gloved hands, the two priests behind her took their leave.

Scarlett watched them blend into the departing throng before refocusing on the deacon.

What was this about? She hadn’t expected the deacon seeking her out tonight. Could it be related to Raimond?

A few minutes passed in silence until the bulk of the guests had vacated the hall, leaving only a few stragglers and still-vigilant Solar Knights. To most, such silence would be uncomfortable, but the woman didn’t appear to have any such qualms. That was a relief.

“Should we start moving?” Deacon Solnate finally asked.

Scarlett cast a final glance around the now quieter hall, noting that Trista was among the remaining figures. The knight seemed to shoot the occasional look in her direction but appeared mostly focused on her duties.

“Yes, let us,” Scarlett replied, and they started walking towards the exit. “Now, what is this about? This is the first time I have conversed directly with a deacon of the Followers of Ittar, and I must admit I am curious as to why you would approach me.”

“I have been interested in speaking with you for a while, Baroness Hartford,” the woman said. “But don’t worry. I understand this is not the most suitable place for an extended discussion, so I will keep things brief.”

She brought one hand to a pendant hanging from her neck, a diminutive silver piece housing a polished black gem. As she touched it, the gem emitted a soft glow, muffling the distant sounds of the guests further ahead.

“If you were concerned about our conversation being overheard, that won’t be an issue.”

Scarlett studied the pendant with interest. Presumably, it was an artifact of some sort. Raimond had used something similar before, though his had blocked out all surrounding noise. This artifact seemed more subtle.

It reminded her that she still needed to get something like it. It was on the list of things she had demanded from the Rising Isle’s council in exchange for her help, among other things.

Returning her attention to Deacon Solnate and the woman’s golden mask, Scarlett briefly pondered what lay behind it.

“So, what did you wish to discuss?” she asked.

“Deacon Abram wasn’t wrong about you being direct,” the deacon noted.

“...Deacon Abram?”

“Father Abraham, though I suspect you already know his true identity. If his reports are to be believed, you’re likely privy to a great deal of information that should be beyond your reach. He has a flair for exaggerating things, though, so sometimes it can be difficult to discern what to trust.”

Scarlett’s eyes narrowed. “His reports?”

What kind of reports were they talking about here, exactly?

Deacon Solnate maintained a detached air as they exited the banquet hall, stepping into a lavishly decorated corridor. The hallway was adorned with opulent tapestries and intricately carved marble columns, with chandeliers casting a warm, golden light over the floor.

“It shouldn’t surprise you that the Followers have been closely monitoring your actions these past months. Presenting one of the Chalice of Canon during the Providing Ceremony, uncovering ancient Zuverian ruins, locating one of the original deacon’s veils, and your involvement in the Citadel incident — all these events have caught our attention, and Deacon Abram was responsible for investigating these matters.”

Scarlett scrutinised the woman carefully, though the mask made it impossible to read her expression.

“I did have my suspicions,” she admitted.

“Deacon Abram had a lot to say about you,” Deacon Solnate continued in a measured tone.

“That does not surprise me,” Scarlett said, wondering where this was going.

“Do you know what he said when he first reported about you?”

“I am not sure I want to know.”

“He described you in one sentence: It was his genuine belief that we had greatly underestimated the importance you might play in the conflicts to come.” The deacon fell silent, her gaze seeming to momentarily drift to a tapestry depicting a hero clad in golden white with the sun at their back fighting against a dragon. “Despite his...tendencies, I do not know Deacon Abram to make such statements lightly. Initially, I had my reservations, but based on what I have seen since then, I’m inclined to believe his assessment might be accurate.”

A small furrow appeared on Scarlett’s brow. While this was not an unexpected evaluation considering everything she’d been involved in up till now, she’d hoped Raimond would divert the Quorum’s attention from her. This was the opposite of that.

“I am the only one who received this report,” Deacon Solnate added, as if reading Scarlett’s thoughts. The woman finally turned to face her directly. “Although you remain a notable figure to them, my fellow deacons are preoccupied with their own concerns and aren’t focusing on you as much as they could. In fact, Deacon Abram’s testimony regarding the events that transpired during the Vile’s attempted manifestation likely has only a few of them even considering you at all.”

Scarlett allowed her frown to fade as she met the woman’s masked gaze. “I see. While the affairs of the Quorum are hardly mine to comment on, it does concern me slightly that they would have reason to regard me at all. Nonetheless, I am intrigued that you chose to share this with me. I presume there is a reason for that.”

Deacon Solnate studied her with a penetrating look for several seconds. “...I want to know the nature of your partnership with Deacon Abram.”

Scarlett raised an eyebrow, the corner of her mouth turning up in a slight smile. She looked ahead as they continued down the corridor, passing a Palace Guard standing watch. “What makes you so certain we are in a partnership? While we did collaborate during the Citadel incident and in exploring the Sunfire Shrine before that, those were temporary arrangements, nothing out of the ordinary considering the circumstances.”

“The other deacons did not receive Deacon Abram’s original assessment of you, so perhaps they would have believed that statement. During the hearings, they only saw Deacon Abram defending his actions, claiming most of the responsibility for the outcome in Crowcairn rested on his shoulders, including the mistakes. According to him, your role was minor, but considering what he had previously told me, I find that hard to accept.”

“And that is reason enough to suspect a partnership between us?” Scarlett asked.

“There is always a reason for Deacon Abram’s actions, no matter how convoluted they may appear,” the woman replied. “In this case, despite being somewhat restricted in his role following the inquiry, Raimond has been urging me to allocate resources to various investigations with little clear purpose.”

“And I suppose you believe there is a connection between these ‘investigations’ and my association with him?”

“Is there one?”

Scarlett did not answer at first, considering her response closely.

“...Perhaps there is,” she eventually said. “Are these investigations perchance related to certain members of the Quorum and their *unsanctioned* activities?”

“...So you are involved,” the deacon stated.

“I have made no such admission.”

“You didn’t need to. Deacon Abram has been unwavering in his convictions lately. I know he needed to have a source that he trusted, and you were the most likely option.” A hint of exasperated frustration seemed to sneak into the woman’s voice. “Despite leaving the bulk of the work to me, he refused to share this with me.”

Scarlett was actually slightly surprised that Raimond had kept this information, even from Deacon Solnate. She knew he trusted the woman more than anyone else among the Followers, so she’d expected him to involve her in some fashion. Was he trying to maintain Scarlett’s trust?

Maybe it was a good thing that the deacon had approached her tonight, if only to make things easier for everyone involved.

“If that is the case, then there is little point in continuing to feign ignorance,” she said. “You are correct in that Deacon Abram and I are currently collaborating, and I did provide him with information about members of the Quorum who have been engaging in activities they should not.”

“I have been investigating these issues for years without much success. Where did you get your information, and how can you be certain that it’s true?” Deacon Solnate asked.

“That is not something I can disclose, but its accuracy is something that your own inquiries will no doubt confirm. If you can persuade Deacon Abram, perhaps he will divulge more.”

Scarlett honestly wouldn’t mind it too much if Deacon Solnate knew a bit more about her partnership with Raimond. The woman’s position as a deacon appeared more stable than his, so her support could probably be more helpful.

That said, Scarlett wasn’t that familiar with Solnate, so she wasn’t sure how much it was safe to reveal. It seemed wiser to leave such matters to Raimond, who could better filter details according to his own judgement.

“I will see what he has to say, then,” the woman replied. “On that note, you wouldn’t happen to be aware of his current whereabouts?”

Scarlett turned to the woman with mild surprise. “Were you not aware that he is currently staying at my estate here in Elystead?”

Though she couldn’t see the deacon’s face, the air around her almost seemed to freeze. “Is that so? Then, Baroness, would you mind if I paid your estate a visit?”

“...You are welcome to do so, if you wish.”

Scarlett mentally apologised to Raimond for apparently having sold him out just now. It seemed she had just inadvertently complicated his stay.

Their conversation dwindled down as they reached the end of the corridor, stepping into an expansive, magnificently adorned chamber within the palace. The room’s domed ceiling was an artistic marvel, painted with colorful scenes and mythological figures, while colossal crystal chandeliers hung from above, casting a radiant glow throughout the space.

The walls of the Emperor’s Forum were draped with ornate banners representing various noble houses and legends, their vivid colors and emblems symbolising the empire’s storied legacy. Towering marble pillars, streaked with veins of gold and silver, stood proudly between tall, arched windows that framed a view of the starlit sky.

At the heart of the Forum was a massive circular table with a detailed map of the empire, surrounded by high-backed, velvet-upholstered chairs. Beyond this central area, tiered galleries with rows of plush seats ascended towards the back and sides of the chamber, already bustling with guests engaged in hushed conversations.

The emperor’s throne, carved from a piece of white jade and embellished with gold filigree depicting the sun’s rays, stood on a raised platform at the head of the table. Currently, it was empty, but Scarlett recognised several prominent figures already seated around the table, including Duke Valentino, Lord Withersworth, and other individuals she had been introduced to briefly through Lady Withersworth.

“We’ll need to continue our conversation later,” Deacon Solnate said, her tone turning businesslike.

Scarlett gave a curt nod. The time had come to participate in the conclave.