

167: Putting some heart into it

“—my agents have increased their efforts concerning our operations in Ambercrest’s Silkspindle Ward,” Beldon’s voice resonated from the device on Scarlett’s desk. It was a small carving of a bluebird, standing on a circular base of pure marble that emitted a slight glow.

“That is all well and good, but I fail to see its relevance to me,” Scarlett replied coolly.

On the other end of the communication, she heard Beldon let out a small laugh. “Just thought you would like to know.”

She shook her head. He really didn’t need to update her on the progress of his investigation into Count Soames. She was purposefully avoiding involving herself in all that.

Deciding to change the subject, she spoke. “And what of the underground passages in Silverborough and Bridgespell that I informed you of?”

“My men have found an entrance to the ones in Silverborough and begun to map those out, but they are still searching for any such entrances in Bridgespell. If they truly do exist, I imagine they’ll be found within the week.”

Scarlett nodded. “I assume I do not need to instruct you on how to best utilize them once they are located. Simply remember that I have a claim on any significant artifacts that you find down there.”

After she had agreed to partner with Beldon and Mirage back in Windgrove, the man had provided her with this communication device to stay in contact when necessary. Although it could only be used a few times each week, it proved more convenient and efficient than constantly exchanging encrypted letters back and forth all the time.

While their partnership was still in its early stages, Scarlett had already started sharing information with Mirage that she thought could be useful to them and didn’t matter much to her. This included knowledge about some abandoned underground passages beneath large cities like Silverborough and Bridgespell, which a covert organization like Mirage could use in their operations.

These places weren’t really dungeons, so Scarlett wasn’t afraid of missing out on skill points by delegating their exploration to Mirage. However, since there could still be valuable items down there, she *had* made some demands in return for providing this information.

Additionally, these pathways could also serve as hiding places or shelters in the event of a catastrophic disaster in the future, which had been another reason she decided to share their existence. While she couldn’t directly reveal or prevent the Cabal’s upcoming attacks and other things that would happen, she could make some preparations like this here and there.

“Of course, I wouldn’t dare to forget that part of our agreement,” Beldon’s voice sang out from the bird statuette. “It pains me that you would even doubt my trustworthiness to the extent of confirming that.”

“Trust but verify is a saying that I feel holds relevance here,” Scarlett said. Her gaze shifted to a pile of papers beside the bird carving on her desk. They contained reports Beldon had provided her before her departure from Windgrove, detailing what he had gathered on her regarding her whole involvement with the Sanctuary of Ittar incident. She had intended to go through it to review exactly what had leaked and what hadn’t. “...Has there been any progress in the search for the woman I mentioned?”

There was a momentary pause on the other end. “No, there hasn’t been. I’ve had people searching for someone matching her description throughout the empire, but there have been no sightings of anyone fitting it for the past few months. I imagine you don’t need me to tell you where she was before that.”

Scarlett sighed. “No, you do not.”

So the Countess hadn’t been spotted at all since Scarlett picked her up in Bridgespell. That was not what she wanted to hear.

For weeks now, she had been trying to find traces of the woman, but still without any success. It was reaching a point where she was worried the Countess might have actually died, although that seemed unlikely considering who they were talking about.

But it was also unlikely that the Countess would be able to completely hide herself away like this if she was anywhere that had a decent amount of people. That ruled out any major cities and towns.

It was frustrating that Scarlett didn’t know where to go from here regarding that. All she could do was task Mirage with continuing the search and hope for a breakthrough. She had also attempted to use her connection with Godwin and Elystead Tower to have somebody from there divine the Countess’ location using one of the woman’s embroideries that had been left behind, but the deal had informed her it was hopeless.

All he’d needed was one look with a divination artifact he possessed to confirm that much. There seemed to be a barrier of some kind preventing any divination related to the Countess—not that divining was exact to begin with—and Scarlett suspected it was because of the woman’s connection to a goddess. Not only that, but then she’d also had to convince Godwin from asking more about the matter.

“I will immediately notify you if we find anything,” Beldon said. “As I am sure you would if you came across anything important for my operations, right?”

She could imagine the man waggling his eyebrows from wherever he was at the moment.

“Anything that will not cause significant repercussions, yes.”

“Ever the honest one, Baroness,” he replied readily. “Always makes it a pleasure speaking with you.”

“Was there anything else you wanted to discuss for now?” she asked.

“No, I believe that covers everything.” The man’s tone turned serious. “You’ll hear from me. Farewell.”

“Yes, farewell.” Scarlett touched the base of the communication device, causing the glow to fade. She then placed the device inside her [Pouch of Holding] on the edge of the desk before standing up.

She had been conversing with Beldon for the past half-hour, and before that, she had been reviewing even more of the paperwork Evelyne had passed on to her lately. Most of the day had been spent cooped up in the office, so some fresh air would be nice about now. While doing so, she could take the opportunity to check up on the progress with the Loci.

Leaving the room, she walked through the mansion hallways towards the back of the estate.

As promised, Godwin had spent the last couple of days analyzing and working on the Loci during her absence in Freymeadow, and he should still be at it. She anticipated him to leave in the afternoon, though.

Exiting the mansion, she was met by a gust of cold wind and surveyed the back of the estate. Snow had yet to start falling in the empire, but the trees beyond the walls stood mostly barren. Using her pyrokinesis to keep warm, she made her way towards the garden.

Its outer edges consisted of naked branches and muted colors, forming bare pathways that she passed through, but the closer she got to the heart of the garden, the more apparent the signs of vegetation became. Flowers soon started popping up around her, and the green returned to the hedges.

As the air grew warmer, and she neared the spot where the Loci was situated, she overheard a pair of voices carried by the breeze.

“—if I’m not mistaken, the scions of Grehalyr had not left your ancestral home for generations, so I am surprised by your knowledge on these topics,” a smooth, elderly voice said.

“The tribe never left, but there have always been wanderers,” Fynn replied. “My mother was one.”

“I see. And their knowledge was passed onto the younger generation through the ancient conjuring that connected your tribe. The Howling Echo, I believe it was called?”

Scarlett stopped just beyond the corner of one of the hedges to listen in on their conversation for a moment.

“You know about that?” Fynn asked.

There was a brief pause, as it sounded like Godwin was tinkering with something. “Ah, there we go. That should work. And yes, I am indeed familiar with it.”

“You’re right. The Howling Echo carries the voices of our ancestors.”

“It has always been one of the more intriguing phenomena that I have encountered, not to mention a remarkable and astoundingly profound achievement of proto-shamanistic magic. I would give my right hand and more to have even a glimpse into how it was accomplished.”

“It was a gift from Grehalyr, but we can only commune with the Echo when we are within her haunt.”

“Unless you have that ring on your finger, I presume.”

Fynn’s voice fell silent for a moment. “...You know about the mark of the gale as well?”

A quiet chuckle from Godwin reached Scarlett’s ears. “I used to have quite close ties with some of your elders, boy. I am acquainted with enough of your tribe’s legends to recognize what that ring signifies.”

“You’ve said that before, but I have never heard of you.”

“Hmm. How old are you now?”

“Nineteen, by the empire’s count.”

“Then you would have been five during my last visit to your tribe. I tend not to tarry in any one place for too long, so I doubt we would have had the opportunity to meet. And knowing your elders as well as I did, I would not expect them to have spoken much of me to the younglings.”

“Mm, that is true.”

Sensing the conversation was slowing down, Scarlett started moving again. Rounding the bush in front of her, she stepped into a larger open area that served as the center of the garden. Godwin was standing before the pedestal where the Loci was placed, leaning over it with an array of peculiar tools and crystals floating nearby. Fynn stood a couple of steps behind him, observing the man’s work.

The wizard paused his activities and turned his head to look towards Scarlett. “It seems we have a visitor.”

Fynn’s gaze also turned to her, though his expression remained neutral. He would have detected her approach long before she even left the mansion.

In contrast, Scarlett was actually slightly surprised to find the young man here, alongside Godwin. While she could usually have checked as much beforehand through the Loci’s senses, its accuracy was somewhat compromised while the Dean was working on it. She also tried to limit her use of it within the mansion unless necessary.

When she had an archwizard around temporarily, she also didn’t really have to worry about most intruders.

As she moved closer to the two, she turned her attention to the gemstone artifact that was the Loci. The emerald atop the pedestal emitted a more vibrant glow than before. Attached and

sculpted into the base of the pedestal was a translucent-like obsidian crystal with hints of what might have been a heart at its center. The heart pulsed with a dark aura, and the surface of the crystal was marred with veins of grey, swirling and shifting like ethereal wisps of smoke. Some of these veins intersected with lines etched into the stone pedestal, weaving their way to the top where the Loci had a circular rune around it.

“How is the work progressing?” she asked, turning to Godwin.

“Oh, quite splendidly, if I do say so myself.” The wizard gestured towards the Loci. “Working with the heart of an ashenwraith dragon has been a fascinating experience in its own right, and I am also grateful for the opportunity to further examine this ‘Loci’ of yours. It *is* rather unlike anything I have studied before, in certain aspects. My experiments suggest that it originally came from some variant of a harmonic prismite, which can rarely be found in the Wandering Realm. Despite their name, however, they are notoriously difficult to stabilize for use in any form of artifice, so I must once again commend Abelard’s skill in what he achieved here. If the man had not been so consumed by his own unpleasant pursuits, he could very well have been celebrated as one of the greatest artificers of his generation.”

Scarlett eyed the Loci and the ashenwraith heart that would soon power the artifact. She could already sense the difference this new addition had made. It felt as if a reservoir of energy and power was waiting on the other side of her bond with the Loci, eager to be used and integrated into the surroundings.

Although the Loci itself didn’t appear quite ready for that. From the impression it was giving her, it almost seemed to be in a sleep-like state of sorts.

She shifted her attention to Godwin. “The result does indeed look promising. Thank you once again for assisting me with this request. Now that you are nearly finished here, I assume you will be departing soon?”

The man nodded. “You are correct. I received a message this morning from my vice-dean and several department heads who had some complaints about my prolonged absence after the events in Windgrove. It makes one wonder what I have them for if they cannot handle matters themselves, but it is what it is, I suppose. Although I could spend days studying this intriguing creation and conversing with our young Grehaldrael here, I am afraid I have little choice in the matter this time.”

“Before, you told me they couldn’t force you to return, even if they all came here and tried to drag you back to Elystead,” Fynn said.

“Quite right.” A small grin appeared on the Dean’s face as he looked back at the young man. “Unfortunately, they resorted to far more dastardly methods this time. I have been informed that my ever-loyal disciple Mendenhall sought my daughter’s intervention, and I suspect I am about to be disowned if I don’t make haste.”

Scarlett blinked. “You have a daughter?”

She hadn’t been aware of that.

He turned to her. “That I do.”

The man always gave her the impression of someone who hadn't settled down in his younger years, let alone become a father.

"I see..." It *was* surprising, but it also wasn't her business to pry into his matters. "We will not keep you if you are indeed short on time. Feel free to take your leave whenever it suits you. If you can, however, I would ask that you convey my regards to Miss Mendenhall, and let her know that I hope we can collaborate on our next project sometime soon."

"I will pass that along," Godwin said, his tone turning a bit wry. "Is there something you wish to tell Vice-Dean Rowley as well, perhaps?"

Scarlett frowned, giving the man a brief glare. "You may inform him that, as a favor to an old acquaintance of my father, I will overlook our previous meeting. However, he should not expect me to extend him the same offer that I did at the time, even if we were to meet again."

The wizard chuckled. "I am once again left curious as to the precise words exchanged between the two of you on that occasion."

She stared at him. "You do not know?"

Godwin shook his head. "No, Rowley has been surprisingly tight-lipped about his meeting with you and what was discussed. Though he did not hold back his words otherwise."

Scarlett's forehead creased. So the vice-dean had actually been serious at the time when he'd told her he wouldn't share their conversation with anyone else? Even though it involved something as major as a primordial spell?

...Maybe she had been a bit harsh on the man, then. However, that didn't mean she would simply forgive him like that. She wasn't that magnanimous.

At least now she understood why the topic of primordial spells had never been brought up by Dean Godwin in any of their discussions. She had mentioned them once to Adalicia as well, but it didn't surprise her as much that the woman hadn't shared that information with anyone else yet.

Scarlett considered Godwin for a moment. For now, he was providing her with exactly as much help as she needed, so she might save the primordial card for some time in the future when she might need it.

"While I have been surprised several times during my brief stay here in Freybrook, I must admit that I have rather enjoyed it," Godwin said. "You have access to some very interesting retainers in your employ, Baroness, not to mention the resources at your disposal. I will make sure to visit again in the future, when given the opportunity. I am quite curious to see how the Lovi will develop from here. Oh, and convey my compliments to the chef. It's been some time since I've had such exquisite meals outside of a royal palace."

"I will do so, and you are welcome to visit again if you wish. I only ask that you inform me in advance of such visits, in case I am unavailable or occupied with sensitive matters."

"Of course, of course."

Scarlett observed him. There was a glint in the old man's eyes that Scarlett suspected meant he *wouldn't* be giving her any warnings in advance.

...He was a troubling fellow.

"It is a shame that I did not have more opportunities to meet that feline associate of yours," Godwin said, looking around the garden as if expecting a black-furred cat to come out at his words.

"I do not decide when and where Empress decides to appear, so I am afraid there is nothing I can do about that."

Since Scarlett's meeting with Mistress and Godwin a few days ago, Empress had been completely absent from the estate for some reason. She wasn't even sure if the cat *would* return again.

Godwin chuckled. "I would be more than surprised if you did." He shook his head. "I will finish matters up here before I take my leave, but I suspect that I will not have the time to go find you before I do. I will take into account what you have shared with me earlier, and contact you if I make any progress on researching that sight of yours that we discussed. You may, of course, feel free to reach out to me if you need help as well."

He gave her a gentlemanly smile, though Scarlett got the feeling that he wasn't saying that out of pure altruism. There were a lot of things that *he* wanted from her, so he would probably take any chance that he could to get her in his favor.

"The sentiment is appreciated," she said. "If I require your expertise and knowledge, I will contact you if it is a matter that I cannot resolve myself."

Even if she told him that, his current ability to help her was limited. Most of her current endeavours weren't things she could involve him with. Still, it would be good to maintain a connection with him.

Godwin nodded. "Good, good. If I may ask, what are your plans moving forward? I have heard that you are a rather busy woman, and I take it that the Loci is not your sole project at the moment."

"I will be traveling to Bridgespell soon," she replied. "There is something there that I have promised an acquaintance of mine to locate, and I intend to fulfill that promise. Miss Hale also has matters to attend to in the area, so this will present an excellent opportunity for her to do so."

"Is that so?" The man studied her for a moment, and he likely had a vague understanding of what she was talking about.

As a potential incarnate, the Vile inside of Rosa had to be dealt with before it was too late. Scarlett had assured Godwin that she had the situation under control, and she had no plans of becoming a liar in regard to that.

“In that case, I wish you the best of luck,” Godwin eventually said. “I suspect that you will need it.”

His words carried an underlying implication of what would happen if she failed. Although he was currently allowing matters to proceed as they were, if things spiraled out of control, he would probably disregard whatever consequences he might face and try to deal with Rosa himself.

Scarlett met his gaze. “Even without luck, I intend to navigate the situation to where I create my own.”

Regardless of the cost, she had already committed herself to this course of action. That wouldn’t change, even with an archwizard standing in her way.

Godwin eyed her for several seconds. “And I have the sneaking suspicion that you could.”