

267: Legacy

The assembled gathering's attention was split between Scarlett and the people at the central table, while hushed whispers rippled through the crowds. Scarlett shot a withering glare at the baroness who'd brazenly called her out, though the woman pretended to be oblivious.

Presumably, Marquis Delmon had set her up for this. The thought that the man still had it out for Scarlett wasn't a surprise, but this was stupid. Unless he foolishly expected her to literally be arrested on the spot due to whatever trumped-up allegations they had, an outcome that seemed very unlikely, this *would* backfire on him.

If anything, Scarlett would make sure of that.

"Perhaps we should allow these two to explain their actions to those assembled here?" Count Hayden's voice rang out, his gaze sweeping the chamber. "Don't you all agree?"

A smattering of voices murmured their assent while most remained silent, eyes turning towards Duke Valentino.

"Your Majesty, would you permit us to inquire further with these two nobles?" Count Hayden addressed the emperor.

The emperor leaned forward, elbow on the armrest of his throne, quietly appraising the count for a pensive moment before giving a slight nod. "Duke Valentino, Baroness Hartford. You may take the floor to present your perspectives."

A hush fell over the chamber. Duke Valentino rose stiffly from his seat, limping with the aid of his cane towards a small raised platform at the head of the table, opposite the throne. Expectant eyes then turned to Scarlett as she stood as well.

She threw a glance to her left, where Duchess Valentino and Lady Withersworth sat. The duchess looked worried, but Lady Withersworth emanated her usual unruffled calm, offering Scarlett an enigmatic smile. "I'm sure you can acquit yourself admirably, dear. Don't fret. I've made note of those who spoke out."

A glint of something dangerous lurked behind that smile, a fact Scarlett felt appreciative of. With a curt nod, she turned and descended to the main floor, keenly aware of the weight of countless stares following her moves. Rather than make her worry, though, they just served to further stoke the flames inside.

Soon, she joined Duke Valentino on the platform before the central table. They exchanged brief looks, but neither said anything to the other.

Scarlett did feel, though, that if he'd wanted to keep the existence of the Tribe's Enclave under wraps for now, he should have done a better job of not getting her pulled into this mess.

Opposite them, the emperor's watchful gaze remained fixed on them, prompting her to instinctively incline her head slightly in deference.

“Now, while it is not my place to dictate proceedings,” Count Hayden began, “perhaps we should begin with—”

“Enough of these games, Rawling,” Duke Valentino cut him off, his annoyed tone reverberating through the chamber. “Get to the point.”

Scarlett noticed a faint glow emanating from the duke’s cane. Was it enchanted? That looked like a handy feature.

Count Hayden frowned lightly before clearing his throat. “I suspect many here are curious why the duke would attempt to conceal the existence of a Tribe Enclave. Should we start there?”

Duke Valentino glared at the man for a moment, muttering a curse under his breath about fools that only Scarlett likely heard.

“The answer is simple,” he said at last. “I did not divulge it because I refused to allow rash simpletons, like certain people in this chamber, to start persecuting our settlements indiscriminately. Our empire has endured enough misguided persecutions in the past without repeating those blunders now.”

“With the Tribe of Sin in our midst, is this not the opportune time to root out any agents or sympathisers within our borders?”

“It is not the time to allow those unqualified to undertake such actions.”

“That is not your place to decide,” Duke Roscoe, who’d started all this, said.

Duke Valentino’s nostrils flared, a vein pulsing at his temple. “It most certainly is my place when the Enclave was discovered within *my* lands,” he almost growled. “I will not have ignorant rabble harassing my people based on unfounded suspicions after a Vile nearly decimated their homes and livelihoods. Those who needed to know about the Enclave’s existence were informed, as you are already *well aware*.”

There were some quiet discussions and debates around the table and galleries following his words, but Scarlett kept her focus on the emperor and the officials seated closest to him. It was true that they should have all known about the Enclave’s existence, so it was hardly as if Duke Valentino had kept it a real secret. Most people in this chamber likely understood that aspect, even if they had just learned the information themselves. It should be clear to just about anyone that this was more of a political maneuver targeting Duke Valentino, though Scarlett wasn’t sure exactly why they singled him out.

Still, the emperor had decided to allow this impromptu questioning despite likely understanding the underlying motives. Did he also have it out for the duke? From what Scarlett knew, Duke Valentino was one of the more loyalist dukes in the empire, so that seemed unlikely. But she also doubted the emperor would actually suspect him of colluding with the Tribe.

“What you say certainly makes sense,” Count Hayden conceded, and Scarlett shifted her gaze towards him. “But it also makes for an awfully convenient excuse, does it not? The fact

remains that the only Tribe Enclave that has surfaced for decades appeared in your lands, duke, *as well* as a Vile's citadel. This either suggests that you have been involved in illicit activities you should not have, or that you have been grossly negligent in your duties as a lord."

Duke Valentino's expression darkened further, his lips curling into a light snarl as his hand clenched into a white-knuckled fist on his cane.

"That is a rather bleak perspective, wouldn't you say, Count Hayden?" an older gentleman in stately clothes at the central table spoke up. Stockwell Bentley, the count of Farmire, stroked his neatly cut beard. "One could just as easily view Duke Valentino as a hero who, when faced with events so precarious they would have paralysed many a noble, took decisive action that averted catastrophe and spared the empire untold destruction. All while exposing a Tribe Enclave with minimal loss of life, I might add. To me, that sounds like a very admirable achievement."

Count Hayden sent the man a dismissive look, then turned back to Duke Valentino. "Under normal circumstances, perhaps I would have agreed. But we must view this from the lens of our current crisis, Count Bentley, and in that context, there is no doubt that these events reflect poorly on the duke. Had the Followers of Ittar and the Dawnbringers not intervened, we might now be contending with not just monster incursions, but demonic ones as well."

A few shouts of agreement erupted from the galleries. Scarlett scanned the areas where the cries originated, wondering whether those were people who genuinely agreed or if those were pre-arranged plants by the duke's detractors. This whole affair seemed pretty organised to her, from the suspicious speaking right allocations to their decision to drag her into this farce.

The more she thought about, the more it annoyed her.

"Perhaps we should allow Baroness Hartford to explain her involvement as well?" another voice rang out — Duchess Swail, Scarlett noted as she turned her attention back to the central table. The woman in her late thirties had a cascade of blonde curls spilling over her shoulders and scrutinised Scarlett closely.

As far as Scarlett was aware, the two of them had never interacted, but she got the sense that the duchess didn't particularly like her.

The feeling was mutual.

"Yes, let us afford Baroness Hartford the opportunity to present her reasons for cooperating with Duke Valentino in these matters," Count Hayden said. "I suspect I am not the only one who has heard the Baroness' name bandied about more than once lately, but few likely anticipated her being so deeply enmeshed in these troubling affairs."

"Enough with the meaningless insinuations," Duke Valentino interjected, his tone clipped.

"Insinuations? That is not at all what I am doing here." Count Hayden shook his head. "Like Baroness Upton put forth, I too have heard from credible sources that Baroness Hartford was involved in both the events surrounding the Citadel's appearance and the Tribe Enclave.

Reportedly, she acted as *your* agent in those matters, duke. In addition, she rather coincidentally visited Bridgespell and yourself just prior to it all unfolding.”

Scarlett studied the man closely. He spoke as if revealing some grand secret, but much of that would already be common knowledge to anyone who bothered looking. Sure, she had asked the duke and Raimond to help ensure details didn’t spread too widely, but a cursory investigation would still reveal her name. Count Hayden wasn’t so much presenting damning evidence as engaging in a public smear campaign against her and the duke’s reputations.

In the process, he *had* inadvertently stumbled onto some truths about the Citadel’s appearance, but Scarlett doubted even the man himself actually believed them.

“Now, if that was the extent of it, maybe it would not warrant mention,” he continued. “But after deeper scrutiny, I’ve noticed a series of other suspicious coincidences centering around the Baroness. For those unaware, she has rather conveniently located several ancient Zuverian sites lately that eluded even the Ustrum Assembly and mage towers, despite ostensibly having no prior expertise in that field. Moreover, her barony’s activities over the past few months have been...curious, to say the least. Apparently, they have included stockpiling prodigious quantities of grain, produce, and other vital supplies — almost as if anticipating our current dilemma. Not only that, but while the rest of the empire suffered untold damages from monster attacks, it appears none of the Baroness’ lands or properties have been impacted whatsoever.”

Scarlett didn’t allow her expression to betray her thoughts as the man spoke, though she likely wasn’t gracing him with the most pleasant of looks to begin with. She’d expected someone to eventually connect those particular dots, so this didn’t come as a surprise at least.

Glancing at Duke Valentino, she wanted to see if the man had any response on his end, but for some reason, he’d suddenly gone stoically quiet. While his anger was still palpable, Scarlett somehow got the sense that he wasn’t actually too worried about the attacks leveled against him.

Well, if he wasn’t speaking up, she supposed it was her turn. Returning her attention to Count Hayden, she considered him for a moment.

“Is that all?” she eventually asked, though her voice only carried to those nearest at the table.

The man paused. “What was that? It seems the Baroness has something to say.”

“I said, is that all?” Scarlett reiterated coldly, and this time her voice projected through the entire chamber.

Count Hayden cocked an eyebrow, seemingly faintly amused by her reaction. “I believe so. For now, at least. I will say, however, that for a mere baroness, you certainly have a checkered past. But what explanation can you offer for all this?”

Scarlett regarded him in silence for a moment longer, then clicked her tongue in patent irritation, the sound echoing around the hushed Forum. “You disrupted my evening for only this paltry showing?”

A few surprised murmurs could be heard, though Scarlett ignored them, keeping her eyes locked on Count Hayden. She was fairly certain he didn't actually know the full scope of her role in what happened with the Citadel, but if she were to guess, he likely assumed it was minor. Still, his accusations wouldn't be based on nothing either, and any detailed information could only have come from Duke Valentino's people or the Followers of Ittar. It wouldn't surprise her if the count and his cohorts had some connection to one of the deacons.

"There was nothing untoward or irregular about my involvement in the events that transpired near Bridgespell last month," she declared evenly. "My presence there was indeed a coincidence, but a fortunate one, as I happen to have prior experience dealing with demons and the like. That is why I offered my assistance to the duke in investigating what appeared to be an assassination attempt against him, involving a demonic presence, and it was in the course of this investigation that we uncovered the circumstances surrounding the Citadel and the Tribe's Enclave."

Count Hayden shot her an annoyed look, likely not appreciating her tone.

"As for the nature of my actual involvement," she continued, "it is nothing as nefarious as you seem desperate to suggest. The Citadel's appearance caught us by surprise, but once it manifested, the duke's forces and I, along with members of the Followers of Ittar—who apparently foresaw the Citadel's emergence, if you were unaware—investigated directly by entering the structure itself. There, we learned that the source was a demonic practitioner named Malachi, and after confronting her, we succeeded in halting the ritual she was performing to summon the Vile. As for the Tribe Enclave, it seemed connected through dealings with this Malachi, but they fled during the course of events."

Her explanation shouldn't differ too substantially from Raimond's report to the Quorum, if somewhat abridged and omitting the events in Crowcairn afterward. But she wasn't officially part of those happenings anyway.

Still, she would have preferred avoiding explaining this altogether in front of a sizable portion of the empire's nobility and dignitaries. It was the wrong kind of attention she wanted.

A weighty silence followed her account, and Count Hayden raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Hmph. From your tale, Baroness Hartford, it would almost seem you are attempting to use this opportunity to claim credit for preventing the Vile's manifestation for yourself. That rings rather distasteful when, by all reports, the Dawnbringers played a far more pivotal role."

"While the Dawnbringers were indeed vital in combating the demons that attempted to breach our realm from the Blazes, they did not arrive until after the Vile's summoning had already been halted," Scarlett said. "As for my role in this, I never claimed that it was major. I merely offered my assistance where possible."

"But you expect us to simply accept your version of events and motivations at face value?" Count Hayden challenged. "Even crediting you with this supposed demonic expertise seems far-fetched and uncertain, I hope you understand. I well remember your conduct during the Elysian Proclamation, and more than one noble I have spoken to has mentioned your propensity for grossly overstating your abilities." His eyes turned to Duke Valentino. "Is this

the sort of individual you ally yourself with, Ingomar? Charlatans who inflate their own accomplishments for status?”

“If you refuse to believe her words, perhaps mine will suffice?”

The count paused as another voice rang out, the chamber’s attention turning to a robed, gold-masked figure at the central table — Deacon Solnate. The woman’s gaze found the count.

“...Deacon Solnate, are you vouching for the veracity of Baroness Hartford’s claims?” Count Hayden asked tightly.

The deacon inclined her head. “I have personally spoken with my people present during the described events, and they have corroborated her account.”

“That may be so, but it does not eliminate the possibility of her deeper involvement. Nor does it mean she is not greatly exaggerating the importance of her role.”

“But it is true that she possesses extensive knowledge of how to effectively combat demons,” Deacon Solnate said in a steely tone. “According to my subordinate, there are precious few in this empire who can match her expertise in such matters. Where she acquired that aptitude is another matter, but not the one at hand from how I take it.” She raised a gloved hand. “If you find her presence in Bridgespell strange, I can inform you that the Baroness was working with the city’s high priest to inquire into the history of one of our shrines. She has previously assisted us in recovering lost relics, so her particular expertise was called upon once more for this task.”

The man stared at her for several tense seconds, clearly not having anticipated one of the Followers’ highest-ranking members to so unambiguously speak up in Scarlett’s defence. Truth be told, Scarlett hadn’t expected it either. Even if Deacon Solnate verified her account based on what she’d heard from Raimond’s report, Count Hayden could still have pressed the issue besides that, since he was just aiming to raise suspicions.

But this was unmistakably a deacon covering for her. Deacon Solnate had even gone as far as to bend the truth in order to make it seem like Scarlett had originally been to Bridgespell on the Followers’ request.

The corner of Scarlett’s lips curled into a cold smile. Maybe she owed the woman a favor later. This presented an opportune moment to turn the tables.

“I believe the count mentioned how suspiciously convenient it was that my barony escaped damage while the rest of the empire suffered, as well as our ‘curious activities’ these past months,” she said, her voice carrying a razor’s edge. “If we are to scrutinise all of those who emerged relatively unscathed, perhaps we should interrogate every noble in Freybrook and Elystead as well? As for my barony’s recent activities, their reason should be self-evident to anyone with a modicum of sense. The escalation of conflict with the Tribe was clear after their attack on Windgrove during Duke Tyndall’s ball. I merely prepared for the inevitable. What I find truly curious is that you neglected to discuss where all those supplies my barony procured have gone.”

“Ah yes, those support programs you’ve supposedly established,” Count Hayden replied, his eyes narrowing. “A laudable endeavour, to be sure, if only their timing wasn’t so suspect.”

“It would appear we have quite different interpretations of the term ‘suspect’. To me, that word better applies to more...insidious activities.” She met his gaze with a contemptuous sneer. “For instance, attempting to establish a monopoly on goods essential to the empire’s welfare.”

She saw the man’s eyes widen suddenly.

It seemed her arrow had found its mark. Having a partnership with the empire’s foremost information broker certainly had its benefits. Beldon had provided her with numerous useful tidbits about some of the empire’s various influential actors lately, including some choice information about Count Hayden.

The man’s territory held some of the most productive salt mines in the empire. Over the past years, he had been involved in various schemes to induce more of a monopoly on the resource so that he could better control its price. This included investing in salt mines in other regions and negotiating exclusive contracts through intermediaries, as well as buying up and stockpiling large quantities of salt to create artificial scarcity. While not *strictly* illegal under imperial trade law, such practices with an essential good could bring you significant trouble, especially during wartime when salt became crucial for tasks like cheaply preserving food without magical enchantments.

Count Hayden remained silent in response to her statement, surprising some of his allies around the central table. Scarlett couldn’t help but scoff at the man’s sudden indecision. He hadn’t hesitated to be the one to publicly bear his fangs at her, but merely hinting at his own shady activities rattled him this much? Though she supposed he’d had little reason to expect her, of all people, to have ammunition to fire back. She wasn’t exactly a big player in the game of political intrigue.

“...From the sound of things, it seems, Count Hayden might have been somewhat overzealous in his assertions, but we shouldn’t lose sight of the matter at hand,” Duchess Swail interjected in the man’s stead.

Scarlett turned her eyes to the woman. While she didn’t have anything specific on her at the moment, she could probably dig something up, given time.

“Come now, Duchess,” Count Bentley spoke up before Scarlett could respond. “I think it’s been made abundantly clear that the purpose of this ‘hearing’ regarding Baroness Hartford and Duke Valentino’s actions has become aimless. Whatever suspicions you may still harbor about the Baroness, they are clearly not the sort to be addressed at this conclave.”

“I concur,” the Imperial Chamberlain of Justice added. “Baroness Hartford in particular has displayed both remarkable foresight and generosity far transcending her rank to alleviate the hardships of citizens these past two weeks. If what we’ve heard about her role in halting the manifestation of a Vile is true as well, it doesn’t sit well with me to continue treating her in this adversarial manner.”

“That may be so, but should we not address any lingering doubts, considering the severity that a noble collaborating directly or indirectly with the Tribe of Sin represents?” Duchess Swail countered.

There were some sounds of agreement from the galleries, though surprisingly, these were met by equally vocal disagreements from other sections. Scarlett turned her head to observe the galleries as arguments seemed to spark up among them, curiously trying to identify some of the faces who appeared to be on her side. She’d planned to offer a few more points in her defence, but perhaps that was no longer necessary.

As before, the arguments grew in scale until much of the audience was suddenly engaged in debate. Somewhat unexpectedly, the scales seemed to be tipping decidedly in Scarlett and the duke’s favor. Perhaps Deacon Solnate’s testimony and Scarlett’s recent portrayal in the *Empyrean Chronicle* helped sway the opinion. Although she suspected Lady Withersworth’s influence also played a part, with Duke Valentino likely having his own base of supporters as well.

Scarlett glanced briefly at the duke. Though he still looked visibly angered by the proceedings, his expression had calmed to a stoic resolve as he waited out the storm of voices filling the chamber.

Duchess Swail and Duke Roscoe, along with a few other nobles, tried speaking up to regain control of the narrative, but it was clear they’d lost most of the momentum they had previously held. As for Count Hayden, he seemed to be grinding his teeth while watching Scarlett closely, perhaps weighing whether he could afford to press on or cut his losses.

If she were him, she wouldn’t expect any quarter either way.

Eventually, after having silently observed the proceedings from the side all this time, the emperor raised his hand. Imperial Advisor Blackwood cast another spell to quiet the Forum.

“Since it appears we can no longer reach a consensus on how to proceed with this matter, we will conclude it here,” the emperor declared in a voice that brooked no argument. “Though some may still have questions for Duke Valentino and Baroness Hartford, those can be addressed later. The duke and baroness may return to their seats.”

Those who’d been arguing against Scarlett and the duke at the table frowned, but soon seemed to accept that they wouldn’t gain any further ground. Duke Valentino gripped his cane and gave Scarlett a nod of acknowledgment before returning to his own seat.

Scarlett cast one final, pointed look towards Count Hayden and Duchess Swail, as well as towards the galleries where a certain baroness sat, before turning and making her way back to Lady Withersworth. As she walked, her mind started going over potential responses on her part.

She would see with Beldon what more dirt she could unearth on those who’d tried to corner her here. Perhaps she’d also leverage some of the information she had on Count Soames’ associates to pressure them into lending their aid. There were several angles worth exploring.

It was a shame that she couldn’t just burn her obstacles to the ground in this setting.