

## 149: Puzzling conundrums

Beldon Tyndall was a man who more often than not found himself being right.

Most of the time, that was something he took great pleasure in. But there were times when he would have preferred the alternative.

He surveyed the scene before him with a serious face. The ballroom that had been a hub of conversations and merrymaking not even an hour ago was now filled with wounded nobles and other influential guests. The scent of burnt wood and singed fabric hung heavily in the air, mingling with the faint aroma of spilt wine and shattered pride. Walls adorned with beautiful frescoes and delicate reliefs that had been commissioned by dukes generations back bore the marks of the Tribe of Sin's onslaught. Vibrant paintings were slashed, and the once-polished dance floor was littered with shards of glass, splintered furniture, and scorch marks.

Wounded nobles and other influential guests were spread around the space. Some only looked slightly ruffled while others lay on the floor with blood-soaked clothing as their companions treated them.

Beldon walked across the room, taking note of all the injured. He saw the fear in the eyes of some of those around him — those who hadn't had the strength to fight back but had been unable to escape when the Tribe first began the attack. A group of elderly and young were still huddled in one of the corners, gathering themselves together as the group of knights that had protected them rested on the ground with bated breaths.

It was a scene of destruction and chaos that he would have preferred never to have seen inside his own home.

Perhaps it could be considered a saving grace that the majority of the casualties appeared to be on the Tribe's side, and most of the non-combatants had escaped serious harm. The duchy would save no expense in treating those here, so he suspected there wouldn't be many who would leave Windgrove with much more than a scar. Healers were probably already being roused all over the city to rush over and provide their aid.

Considering what they'd likely lost tonight, however, he wasn't sure how much of a comfort that was.

As he walked, he spotted his father towards the room's center, stepping up on what remained of the stage here.

Santos Tyndall had the same stern expression on his face as always, yet ash and blood on his clothes revealed exactly how exposed he had been during the attack. As did the cold fury behind the man's eyes.

"Esteemed guests." His deep voice carried across the whole ballroom, likely reaching even most of the connecting side chambers. "I stand before you now with a heavy heart, dismayed by the senseless attack that was carried out against us all. Some of you may remember when our empire did battle against and pushed them back over a decade ago, but for those of you

unaware, this vile act was carried out by none other than the contemptible and eternal enemy of the Empire: the Tribe of Sin.”

Some small voices of shock rose around the room, but most who were left likely already knew this.

“We do not know the entire reasoning behind their actions,” the Duke continued, “but one thing is clear and has not changed since the inception of our empire. They are still nothing more but cowards who seek to instill fear and panic among their enemies. But I will tell you this: we will not be cowed by their dastardly deeds. As we did back then, we will stand tall, with our heads held high, and we will not bend to their will. We will not allow their despicable acts to disrupt the peace and prosperity that we and our predecessors have worked for generations to achieve.”

He peered out over the people, like a dragon inspecting his domain. “To those of you who have received injuries, know that I stand with you in this time of need. Our duchy does not abandon those who tread upon our lands as honored guests. We will do everything in our power to support you and your close ones. And to the Tribe of Sin, I say this: You may have struck us tonight, but know that you have gained nothing. Like our forefathers before us, we will come back stronger than before, and as citizens of the empire, we will show you the consequences of your acts this night.”

There were many less-than-pleasant things one could say about Beldon’s father, but the man had always had a way with how he spoke. There was a weight to them that was difficult to ignore. Despite the circumstances, many of those who appeared tired or shaken from the attack actually appeared to have been roused by his words.

“Tonight I pledge to you all, esteemed guests, that Windgrove and its allies will stand at the forefront of the effort to bring these criminals to justice. We will not rest until justice is delivered on behalf of those here tonight, and for this slight against the empire and His Majesty. Heed my words. May we continue to stand united even against adversity.”

There were a few applauses, and some—mostly nobles—seemed to echo his sentiment. Despite his disheveled appearance, Duke Santos Tyndall truly looked like a man who had not allowed this incident to affect him. But Beldon knew his father well, and it did not escape his attention that the duke hid both hands behind his back during the whole speech.

It had been a lie that they didn’t know why the Tribe of Sin attacked. His father knew exactly what the Tribe’s goal had been.

And presumably, they got it.

Although it was pure speculation, he imagined that if the Duke were to show his left hand right now, the guests would see that he was missing a finger. Including the ring that had been on it.

Beldon had warned his father against keeping the artifact on him like that. He had warned his father against keeping it here in the duchy, inside their lands. It was an unnecessary risk. But his father was a stubborn man, and there were few people that he completely trusted. Beldon himself was barely among that group, and the Duke would hand over such a vital item to the

Ustrum Assembly or any of the mage towers. The Shields Guild was not much better, in his opinion. Little more than a principled mercenary group. Not loyal to the empire itself.

Santos Tyndall saw it as part of *his* duty to protect the ring himself. And he'd held no doubt that he could.

Beldon let out a snort as he shook his head.

Tonight showed how correct his father had been in that belief. The Tribe of Sin—or perhaps he should say the Hallowed Cabal—had succeeded in the end. They had all been caught by surprise.

That *irked* him.

He had expected an attack from the Cabal eventually, but he had to admit that he had never expected it tonight, of all times. Not when several of the empire's strongest individuals were gathered in one location like this. There were small nations that could be toppled by the right selection of only a handful of them. Beldon couldn't even begin to count the numerous other occasions that would have been more fitting for an ambush. Yet instead they had mustered exactly enough of a force to carry out tonight's attack, losing dozens upon dozens of people, simply to get at this father.

If he was not already aware of how terrifyingly capable the Cabal could be, he would have thought them fools for wantonly wasting their resources. Instead, he found himself trying to decipher their reasoning.

The most likely explanation was that they wanted to send a message. Both to their duchy and to the empire as a whole. But there were many other ways of doing that without taking the risk they did today.

What made them choose tonight in particular? Was there something that pushed them to act?

He recalled reports he'd read regarding the Solar Knights' joint effort against several of the Tribe's and the Cabal's known bases across the empire. Warley Godwin and Rosanna Adlam had both shared more intel than any other which had been an important part in organising the efforts. The Cabal always seemed to have endless resources, but that was sure to have been a large blow, regardless.

Rosanna was well known for her hate towards the Tribe, and the S-ranked Shielder was often considered one of the foremost experts on battling them. The Dean of Elystead Tower's involvement had been slightly more surprising, however. There were still questions regarding how he had found information on the Cabal's movements. Especially when Beldon had read reports that the man had been in Visian and some of the other kingdoms west of Voneia in recent months.

Personally, he suspected the involvement of Imperial Advisor Blackwood in some way. The Dean's movements were always difficult to keep track of, but recent events suggested the two had met on at least one occasion.

Whatever the actual cause behind the Cabal's actions, Beldon doubted it was simple. He knew there were more actors involved in these conflicts than met the eye. Actors who did not always want to make their existences known.

No matter the truth, he knew one thing. The Cabal had expended more than just manpower in their attack tonight. He didn't know the exact method they'd used to teleport so many people here in such a short amount of time—the Hallowed Cabal had access to knowledge and magic that no one else had, and that he intensely desired—but it had to have cost them. The protective enchantments around the castle were eased to not disturb the guests—perhaps a contributory factor to why tonight, in particular, was chosen—but even an archmage would still have needed time to break through it. Not to mention an immense amount of mana. The Cabal really wanted what they came here for.

The question was what would happen now that they got it.

Much to his chagrin, Beldon didn't know much more than his father about the true purpose of the ring. The Duke had never shared where he found the artifact, but they were both aware that it was connected to the Cabal in some way and to the Dragon Rampage that happened seven years ago. His father seemed to think it was also tied to the attacks the Tribe of Sin performed when they first showed themselves a few months earlier. Those less knowledgeable about the Cabal and the Tribe were under the impression that those attacks were simply attacks of terror, but such things were always secondary for the Cabal. Surveys of the locations where the attacks had occurred showed that the Tribe had been looking for something under them. Most likely they had found it as well.

Beldon wasn't quite as convinced about the connection between that and this ring, however. He suspected there had been a different purpose behind those attacks, though he disliked not knowing for certain. But the unfortunate truth was that even an organization like Mirage had trouble keeping tabs on the Cabal.

The same did not go in reverse.

The Cabal had an uncanny ability to get whatever information they wanted out of the agents they caught. This had been especially annoying during this last year when their activities had taken a rise and the Cabal had taken up the habit of kidnapping his people at every opportunity to milk them for information. It had forced him to take some major precautions, and even then he couldn't completely avoid the issue.

It was unlikely that they would ever be able to figure out what the ring that had been taken tonight did on their own now. But he had the unnerving feeling that they would soon experience the repercussions.

“Beldon.”

He paused and looked up as his brother approached. He swept a glance over the man's appearance. Gideon had been more involved in the fighting than he had, with blood stains showing on his legs and one of the sleeves having a large gash over it.

“Father asked me to oversee the preparations in case the Tribe of Sin returns,” the man said. “He wants you to work with our people and record anyone that is missing, injured, or dead, while he deals with the rest of the aftermath.”

“I have already started,” Beldon said, not bothering to point out that meant their father would first have to go and get his hand healed. There were only a few healers in Windgrove that could completely regrow limbs, and that was only if one acted fast enough.

His brother showed a brief look of surprise, but soon nodded and turned around as he started ordering some of the nearby guardsmen that were milling to follow him.

Beldon returned his attention to the rest of the ballroom, taking in the faces of those he saw and what their current conditions were. He casually stopped a passing servant who was carrying several containers of water with a tired expression, telling them to send a message to Mireya and fetch some paper.

His father would likely want an exhaustive list before the night was over, but it was unlikely all the guests would quietly stay on the ground until then. Some of the more daring ones would definitely take this opportunity to attempt reproaching their family and their inability to prevent this attack, demanding remunerations for damages and injuries that were not guaranteed to actually exist. It was best to work preemptively in such a situation, and Mireya would know what to do.

His eyes continued passing over the guests, stopping on some of the more notable faces here.

Alcot Thackeray of the Vanguard's stood at the center of a group of people, the bear-like man towering over them as his exposed chest was bloody and burnt from the high-ranking Tribe member he had fought. As was expected, considering the man's reputation, most of his focus during the assault had been on ensuring the brunt of attacks was focused on him.

Not far away was the Elystead Tower dean himself, discussing something with Rodmun Ainsworth, the only other archmage present tonight. Both appeared mostly uninjured, but Beldon had seen the powerful foes they'd faced during the battle. Every single person here was lucky that both sides had held back to a certain degree.

Count Knottley stood with his family, a grim expression on his face. Next to him was a large axe on the ground as his petite daughter helped clean blood from what looked like a broken nose.

The eldest of the Delmon sons sat on what remained of a chair as a pair of servants attended to and cleaned what looked like a serious injury to his right arm, a dour look on his face.

Valdemar Hayden was lying unconscious on a table, though he didn't seem to have any visible wounds on his body. Beldon would have to inquire for more details about that later.

Marchioness Thackeray walked over to her cousin with assertive, her usually well-kept grey-white hair ruffled and hanging behind her freely. Other than that, she looked perfectly fine.

Shepard Yardley, the captain of the Amber Knights, was surrounded by several of his men as they were helping to clean up the mayhem around them, and some appeared to be in the process of searching through the other chambers.

Iyana Webb entered the ballroom eventually as well, with what was perhaps the most expressive face Beldon had seen on the swordswoman as she soon sought out some of the other knights. He hadn't seen her during the battle itself, so presumably she had been caught up somewhere else.

Curiously, he also spotted a yellow-haired priest in a bright red overcoat moving about between people, using bright gold magic to heal those who needed it. Beldon had to go through the list of what priests might have deigned to attend tonight in his head before he recognised the man.

A small smile found its way onto his lips.

It seemed that even despite the havoc that was going on inside the Followers' circles, the Quorum didn't try to keep a tighter leash on their youngest member.

In between checking over the faces of notable attendees, he also noted the condition of the other people he recognized and passed by, intending to write it all down later.

Finally, his eyes stopped on a pair of sisters. One had neck-length, auburn-colored hair and looked as if she was ready to fall asleep any minute now, while the other had long, dark-red hair and was talking to an older lady with a cool expression on her face. Beldon noted that the clothes Baroness Scarlett Hartford wore were an entirely different set from what he'd seen her wear earlier tonight. She'd had time to change during all the chaos? No, that was more likely the effect of one of those artifacts she seemed to have a near-endless supply of.

He observed her for a moment longer.

Scarlett Hartford was another conundrum he was still trying to figure out.

Up until a few months ago, the mapping of her actions was straightforward and somewhat predictable. Nothing he hadn't already seen from a dozen other nobles, if perhaps a tad more daring. But that had changed, and he wasn't sure what was the cause of it.

Yet.

At first, he had thought there was someone else behind the noblewoman. A high noble who used her as a front for their own dealings. The Delmons had been the prime candidate. Count Knottley had also been a possibility, but it was unlikely considering the man's personality.

Further interactions had made Beldon doubt that assumption, though. Both because her relationship with most powerful nobles seemed tenable at best, and because he simply got the feeling that it was not like that. The woman did not strike him as someone who would bend her knee to most others. If she was working with someone, it wasn't as a subordinate.

Of course, it was possible all that was an act as well. He didn't doubt that she was a capable actor.

What intrigued him the most, however, wasn't the apparent changes surrounding the woman these last few months or the waves she was making in certain circles across the empire with her recent actions. It was the *knowledge* she seemed to be in possession of. Not only had she provided him with exactly the type of information he wanted—suggesting she was very familiar with Mirage and its workings—but she also appeared to be deeply knowledgeable about the locations of ancient artifacts, ruins, and even holy relics. His informants within the Shields Guild had reported that the Guild leadership was keeping their eyes on her as well, and the same went for the Followers and some of the mage factions.

It also hadn't escaped Beldon's attention that the Withersworth barony had had an influx of activity this last month, only shortly after Baroness Hartford had been reported to stay at their Autumnwell estate for a few days. Further inquiries by his agents had suggested that the curse on their domain had been dealt with.

It did not take a genius to make the connection.

And if he was correct in the Baroness' involvement, that would conveniently place the Withersworths in her debt. This had only been further confirmed by the fact that the old couple had accepted the invitation to tonight's ball despite not having attended for several years now. And that Lady Withersworth was speaking with the woman right now.

It seemed as if Baroness Hartford was gathering allies. None that were too influential yet, but the Withersworths had many connections. Neither Lord nor Lady Withersworth was to be underestimated, even after having left most of high society behind.

What exactly the Baroness was trying to do with all of this, however, was still a mystery.

That wasn't all, either. Beldon had caught sight of her during the fighting earlier, as well. Her magic mastery had been a surprise. It did not fit with what he'd learned of her as a supposedly inept mage, but he supposed that was simply more proof suggesting she was not as simple as she seemed. By now, he was certain that the noble lady most thought they knew was part of an act of some kind, at the very least.

He seemed to share several similarities with the woman, now that he thought about it.

Hopefully, he would still be able to meet with her in the morning. It might be difficult to find the time after the attack, and his father would no doubt *not* cancel the gathering that was happening tomorrow, but he did not think the Baroness would leave before that. If she did, it would be troublesome for him to pay a visit to Freybrook later simply to meet with her.

"Brother," a voice reached him from the side. He stopped in his ruminations to turn and looked at his approaching sister.

"Mariele. I see you still haven't left." He glanced over her appearance. The dark-haired young woman was uninjured, having been protected by several guards during the earlier chaos. "Correct me if I'm mistaken, but Gideon must have told you to go to your quarters and rest, no? Your presence here leads me to believe you have chosen *not* to adhere to that demand."

"I already sent Anne away, but the danger is over. I'm helping with the efforts right now."

“Ah, what a kind sister I have. To think she prioritises the wellness of those around her over avoiding being confined to the castle for a week for opposing an order.”

“It’s better than doing nothing,” she said. She stopped next to him and looked around. “What are you doing?”

“Oh, nothing much. Simply waiting for my dear subordinates and some writing implements to arrive so that I can get to work.”

Mariele’s head turned in the direction Beldon had been looking earlier, her eyes stopping on the two Hartford sisters for a moment. “That’s the woman you spoke with earlier tonight, isn’t it? Baroness Hartford?”

“I am flattered that you remember even my briefest of dalliances so well, dear sister.”

She frowned. “What’s your relationship with her?”

Beldon smiled. “Mere acquaintances, I assure you. I fear I might lose a limb or two if I were to ever try for something more. Her fiance also happens to be the current vice-captain of the Imperial Solar Knights.”

“I am familiar with Sir Leon. He is not the type to do something like that out of envy.”

“I wasn’t suggesting he was.”

His sister looked at him for a bit, then spun around. “I am going to try to gather up the healers when they arrive and help with organizing that. I was going to ask if I could have Mireya or someone else help, but I suspect that you will have her be busy. Don’t get yourself killed by forgetting to rest for even one second.”

Beldon watched her leave with the small smile still on his lips, then it faded when she was gone. He threw one last glance towards the Hartfords before returning to his current task. There was a lot that called for his consideration right now, but everything had its time. As for the Baroness, it could wait until next they met.