

86: Noble decisions

Scarlett sat in the east wing guest parlor, sipping a warm cup of tea as she waited.

It was nearing late afternoon, and she had already spent much of the morning training, dealing with some paperwork and reports sent over by Evelyne, and reviewing her current strategies after what she had learned from Mirage.

She had sent a letter to Beldon Tyndall the day before, asking about as much information on her different 'associates' as she could get, and a reply had arrived this morning. The letter itself had been filled with some vague pleasantries and Beldon wishing her well, saying he hoped they would have the chance to meet again in the future. This had confused her at first, and she was embarrassed to admit it had taken her a while to realize there was a hidden message. Some of the words had hinted at her using magic to heat the letter up, after which the actual contents had revealed themselves on the paper.

And what she had learned left an unpleasant taste in her mouth. In full, the letter had described some of the known dealings of Vern Cheek, Bodil Pudges, and The Blue Skulls, who were all supposedly tied to the original Scarlett. And while none of what she learned was quite as bad as the child trafficking the Grey Dog Gang had been involved with, it was still far from good. The cleanest was probably Bodil Pudges, and even he was running several illegal gambling dens and similar in the capital.

Things were a bit vaguer regarding the Blue Skulls. They were a gang that was said to raid certain ships moving outside the empire's borders, mostly to the west and south, but there wasn't much more information than that, other than that they were wanted for several charges over in Voneia. Why Mirage thought Scarlett was related to them wasn't entirely clear either.

As for Vern Cheek, he appeared to act as a loan shark of sorts in Kilsfell and was linked to several deaths in the region. From what Scarlett gathered, Mirage seemed to suspect the original of having cooperated with him to get rid of certain individuals and moving money around in what essentially boiled down to some kind of money laundering.

She had received more info than that, for example who Vern Cheek was sometimes believed to work with and some of his subordinates' names, but suffice it to say, none of these were groups you wanted deep ties to.

A knock sounded out from the door.

She looked up as it opened, revealing Gaven in the same blond disguise as last time. Hiding in the hallway behind him was a slightly hunched figure covered by dark brown robes. There was no servant with them. Scarlett had arranged it so that a guard would lead Gaven to the wing's side entrance, where he'd find his own way here. No other people should be present in this part of the mansion at the moment.

Gaven entered the room. The robed figure followed soon after, their head moving fretfully back and forth as if they were watching every corner.

“Welcome,” Scarlett said to the two. “I am glad no issues appear to have risen, despite the demand for subterfuge.”

Gaven pulled off his disguise, revealing his thick dark-brown hair and well-kept beard. “No difficulties is one way of putting it,” he said with a small scoff. “But we’re here at least.”

Scarlett ignored his complaint as she studied the other individual. “I take it you are the Countess?”

The person froze, slowly turning to look at Scarlett. Beneath the hood was a dirty face with loose bandages covering parts of it. Grimy, soot-colored locks with hints of gold hung down messily over a pair of bright blue eyes that had an almost crazed look to them.

A sense of revulsion filled Scarlett as the person stared right at her, and she fought to maintain a neutral expression.

The woman blinked. “Ah, ah.” She performed a clumsy curtsy that made Scarlett’s hair stand on end. “Good morning Baroness. I-I’m so...thankful. I-It’s an...honor to meet you.”

“...The sentiment is mutual,” Scarlett said.

The feeling she got from this woman wasn’t quite on the same level of disgust as Evelyne, but it was still difficult to control her speech.

She pointed towards the leather couch opposite her. “Take a seat.”

The Countess walked over, stopping to stare at the piece of furniture, furtively glancing around the room before eventually sitting down awkwardly and turning her head down. Scarlett scrunched her nose up as the smell reached her, a mix of wet alley and stale food. Gaven circled the couch to sit down on the other end, his eyes meeting hers.

She could tell his annoyance at the situation.

“Do you want tea?” she asked, turning back to the Countess. “Or something to eat?”

The woman stilled, looking up at her. “...Tea?”

Scarlett gestured towards two silver trays with lids on the table between them.

After a moment, Gaven leaned over and pulled off the lids, revealing plates filled with steaming soup, bread, and cups with tea in them.

The Countess’ eyes widened, and she looked at Scarlett with a shocked face. “I-Is...it ok?”

Scarlett nodded. “Feel free.”

“So...kind,” the Countess mumbled. Two half-bandaged hands appeared from beneath the robes and snatched up a piece of white bread. The woman immediately began scarfing it down.

Scarlett lost all appetite as she saw the woman's filthy fingers grasping the bread, with half-broken nails that looked to have been chewed down but were still too long. Within seconds, the bread was gone, and the Countess started licking the crumbs from her fingers.

"...You may take as much as you wish," Scarlett said. "There is no need to fret."

The woman gaped at her. "Y-You're truly kind... Thank you for your...generosity."

She picked up another piece.

Scarlett looked away as the woman started gorging on the bread, turning her attention to Gaven. "It appears you have accomplished the task I assigned you, Ridley. Well done."

"Yeah, well, you were right. Turned out to be surprisingly simple." The man shrugged his shoulders. "Ain't been *easy*, though. Just glad that it's over now."

"As agreed upon, you will be rewarded for your labor," Scarlett said. "Can I also assume you are willing to continue your work for me?"

He let out a short laugh. "Lady, I'd be willing to kill for what you're paying, as long as it doesn't get *me* killed."

Scarlett scowled at him.

He raised his arms. "Sorry, sorry. *My Lady*."

"Good." Scarlett nodded her head. "There is still much for you to do, after all."

She turned back to the Countess, who was now in the process of devouring the fourth piece of bread. "If you are starved, you can also try the soup. I believe it will be more appetizing than simple bread. You may use the cutlery on the tray."

Gold and silver spoons were lying next to the plates.

The woman looked at them uncertainly, but soon picked up one of the plates, as well as an engraved silver spoon that she held gingerly in her hand.

"Perhaps I should introduce myself more formally," Scarlett continued. "I am Baroness Scarlett Hartford, the owner of this estate and Lady of Stagmond Keep. As Ridley here might have informed you, I heard of the plight wrought upon you and could not sit idly still while such injustices were allowed to stand. That is why I have invited you to my home, because I wished to meet with you, and aid you in seeking retribution for these wrongs."

"Ah..." Small tears formed at the edge of the Countess' eyes. "You're right...you're right," she said in a frenzied tone. "I've fallen to this state. They took all from me... They took it all. They'll pay. I want them to pay..." Her eyes stared out at Scarlett from beneath the hood. "...You'll really help me? Thank you! Thank you...so much! I can tell...you're a true noble... You won't allow them to do this... Thank you."

The woman's words continued, quickly trailing off into an unintelligible ramble as she looked down at the table and the soup before her.

Scarlett noticed Gaven roll his eyes. It appeared he'd already grown used to this during the short time he'd spent with the woman. He held up a hand and pulled at his ear like he was waiting for it to end.

A loud crash suddenly rang out as the table split in two and caved in on itself.

The Countess leaned over where her soup had been, a half-broken and bent spoon in her hand as she looked down at the chaos. "Ah, ah, n-no. no."

She threw herself down on her knees, right on top of the ruined table and shattered plates, crawling in front of Scarlett. "Ple-Please forgive me! I di-didn't want to—please, please, I'm sorry. I'll replace—I'll replace it!"

"Stop," Scarlett commanded, before the woman could clamber over the entire table. "There is no need for you to beg forgiveness. It is evident you did not intend to destroy the table, and I do not intend to hold it against you. Do not lower yourself so."

The Countess froze, looking up at her with a beholden expression. "Ah... You're truly...a kind woman. A...saint. Thank you. So generous...thank you... I will repay you."

The look in the hysterical woman's eyes told Scarlett those words were filled with nothing but honesty. Like a child who trusted everything the adults said unequivocally. She looked away, instead focusing on the damage to the room. It didn't look too bad, thankfully. There was a tear on the bottom of the couch where a piece of the table had flown, and clear indentations on the floorboards, but the table had taken the brunt of the harm.

"Ju-Just wait," the Countess continued. "I will definitely repay your kindness... I look like this now, but...I am actually a countess." She nodded her head slowly. "Once I return to my land...once I regain everything...I will definitely repay you."

"There is no need for repayment," Scarlett said. "My aim is to aid you, but there are also certain matters where I might require your aid as well. Some of these are related to your restitution, and are worth well more than this table."

"...R-Really?" The Countess asked.

"Yes." Scarlett nodded. "Now, raise yourself from the ground. That is no way for a noblewoman to carry herself."

The Countess gaped at her for a moment longer. Then she put her palms down on the broken table, ignoring the splinters and plate shards, and pushed herself up. Glancing around fitfully for another second, she then touched the bandages on her hand and sat down on the couch.

After the woman seemed to have settled herself, Scarlett turned to Gaven.

"Ridley. Do you recall the key you brought me previously?"

The man's eyes narrowed at her. "Yeah..."

"I wish for you to procure the other one."

"...There's one more?"

"There is."

"...Is it in a similar place to the last one?"

"The locations are similar in nature, yes."

The uneager expression on his face spoke volumes.

"I can assure you that your reward will be more than satisfactory this time as well," Scarlett said, then turned back to the Countess. "This is also part of why I wanted you to come here, Countess. Would you be willing to accompany him on this assignment? Your help would be greatly appreciated, and I believe it would be vital in securing other matters required for restoring your title."

Gaven wouldn't be able to clear Abelard's Doll Pavilion by himself, but with the Countess helping him, it shouldn't be an issue.

"You want...my...help?"

A strange smile grew on the woman's face. "Ah, ah, I'll help. Of course...I'll help the Baroness. Yes...I am a countess, so of course I'll help..."

She trailed off into an incoherent ramble once more.

"Thank you," Scarlett said, waiting for the woman to calm down again. "I must warn you, however, that this location has some discomfiting elements. It is best that you be careful when there. I am certain Ridley here will be able to provide any other guidance when necessary."

"Ah, thank you, thank you. So kind." The Countess fervently began nodding her head, some of the bandages on her face swaying with the movement.

Scarlett's eyes passed to the woman's clothes. While her robes appeared new, the lower half was now covered with soup and crumbs from crawling over the table earlier. And the woman herself looked like she'd just been picked up out of a dark alleyway somewhere.

Maybe they should get her cleaned up, and get rid of or replace some of the bandages.

"If you wish, you may remove your robes," Scarlett told the woman. "They are no longer necessary."

The Countess froze, an agitated glint appearing in her eyes. "No...No...Nononono." She pulled the robe closer around her, hiding her hands and much of her face. "...Hideous... Scars. It's hideous... I can't..."

Scarlett frowned. The woman had always worn the same garbs in the game as well, but so did most of the characters. It was a game, after all. She hadn't known there was another reason behind it.

Just from looking at her, however, the Countess didn't look 'hideous'. Her appearance was certainly filthy, to the level where it made Scarlett's skin crawl, but she didn't look much older than Scarlett herself, and the parts beneath the bandage that were visible looked normal. But the bandages were also haphazardly applied, so there was no telling which parts they were actually trying to cover.

"...Very well. I will not force you if you do not wish to," Scarlett said after a moment. "But there is no need for you to remain in such an unwashed state. I have taken the liberty of having a warm bath drawn in one of the connecting rooms, so that you may at the very least clean yourself and take some time to relax."

The Countess stared at her. "A...bath?"

"Yes." Scarlett gestured towards a door at the corner of the room. "It is through there. Everything has already been prepared, so there is no need to worry. You can take as much time as you need."

The woman sat still in her seat for several seconds, then glanced towards the door.

"If you do not wish to take it right now, I can ensure another is prepared later."

"Ah, ah. No." The Countess shook her head. Her hands emerged from her robes, and she clamped them over her lap. "...A bath," she mumbled and stood. "I'll...become clean..."

It was as if the woman had completely forgotten their existence now, drifting past Gaven and across the room towards the door. Without another word, she soon disappeared into the next room.

"Blasted crazy woman..." Gaven muttered after a while.

Scarlett turned to him. "...Watch your words."

"What? She's *insane*. Don't act like you weren't put off by her either."

She met his eyes but didn't respond.

It wasn't as if he was wrong. Even discounting the original's traits.

It was the first time she'd ever interacted with a person like that. In either world. Even knowing exactly what she needed to say to convince the Countess, there was still a certain sense of unease you got from interacting with the woman, feeling like you couldn't be sure what she'd do next.

Or whether it was okay to get irritated at a person who clearly wasn't entirely...'there'.

She looked towards the door the Countess had left through.

“...I am expecting you to cooperate with her regularly from now on, so I would recommend you refrain from using such language. It serves no one.”

“You’re really expecting me to work *with* her?”

“I do, yes.”

“Why is that necessary? I’ll just do it by myself, like last time.”

“You would fail. Her aiding you will make matters easier for all parts.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes. This is what I am paying you for, so I expect you can tolerate some inconveniences, at least.”

And the Countess was needed for a lot more than just muscle.

Scarlett leaned back on the couch, resting her arm against the armrest. “In addition, there is one more task that I have for you.”

“Does this one also include ‘the Countess’?”

She tapped her finger against the soft leather. “...No. This will be carried out by you alone, and no other person should learn of it.” She looked straight at him. “Have you heard the name Vern Cheek?”

Gaven shook his head. “Can’t say that I have.”

“He is a moneylender, among other things, residing in Kilsfell. And it appears he does not realize his own limitations.”

She paused for a moment.

Was this really ok? It wasn’t too late to turn back. She could try to find another way. Or just let things play out and go into hiding.

She didn’t *need* her position as a baroness.

And with her knowledge, she’d probably be able to find a few safe spots.

Saying she didn’t have much choice would be nothing but an overindulgent lie.

And what scared her wasn’t that she was going to have regrets, but that she wouldn’t have any.

...No. She had already decided how she would progress with things. It didn’t matter how she felt about it. She would go through with it and not look back. That was what she was going to promise herself.

She looked at Gaven for a moment, then she spoke.

“I want you to deal with him.”