

180: For he who watches

Raimond's eyes scanned across the underground chamber as he and his quaint gathering of newfangled companions took a delectable minute or three to collect their breaths and bask in the glory of the splendid triumph they had all just achieved. He wore his most dazzling of smiles as his gaze briefly lingered on each member of the group.

The Shielder pair, consisting of Allyssa Astrey, with her spirited demeanor, and Shin Thornthon, poised and with an inquiring mind, boasted contrasting personalities that were a joy to watch in how well they harmonised. The bond between the two was undeniable as Allyssa fussed and scolded her companion for his carelessness while simultaneously assisting him in treating the minor scraps that remained after Raimond's healing magic had done its job.

The two Shielders exuded a youthful energy and vigor that Raimond was certain would propel them far in life, as long as they managed to avoid crossing paths with any vexed dragons or the like on the way. The Shields Guild was a beacon of good in the empire in many ways, but its members were not always known for their circumspection.

Beside them, the enigmatic white-haired fellow named Fynn sat on the stone floor, his eyes closed in a meditative trance. The youth's current disposition was a rather stark juxtaposition from the ferocity and intensity he had displayed earlier in combat. He gave Raimond the impression of a lurking predator, embodying both the natural innocence and ruthlessness of a wild beast.

Raimond had heard tales of the tribe that had made the Whitdown Mountains their home for generations, living alongside the empire in an impressive feat of relative harmony, but he had never thought he would get the opportunity to meet one of their members in the flesh. He considered himself exceptionally fortunate that he did.

Leaning against the wall next to Fynn was perhaps the most captivating of the bunch, if Raimond said so himself, and a woman much of the same cloth as him. Rosa drank water from a flask like a person parched for three days as she held the receptacle above her head, letting some of the liquid wash over her skin as she cleaned away the sweat and grime from their previous encounter.

Raimond found himself rather intrigued by the woman, and not just because of her delightful personality and the fact that she was a *wonderful* conversationalist. He was also intrigued by her rather curious blend of magic. Minstrels were common enough throughout the empire's cozy hamlets and bustling cities, but those practiced in the arts of bardic charms were rare north of the Luicean Isles. Among the ones he had met, while they had all been without a doubt pleasant encounters in their own right, Rosalina Hale seemed to have a special quality of her own.

Last, but certainly not least, Raimond's eyes settled on the proverbial heart of this group, the fervid-yet-winty Baroness Scarlett Hartford. The red-haired woman looked much as tired as the rest of her companions after dealing with the infused Auranthial left behind by the venerable Deacon Donovan Emberwood. Yet, that did not diminish the dignified aura she

exuded as she crossed her arms before her chest, casting a sharp and discerning gaze over her group.

Though Raimond still considered himself a fresh, young bachelor in the prime of his life—he was still a youthful thirty-three—he had lived long enough to encounter his notable share of impressive figures. While not all were as *uniquely* delightful and entertaining as the Baroness, individuals of her calibre were not as rare as one might expect.

Or perhaps they were, but it was the same type of rarity as a four-leaf clover in a large field. A pleasant surprise when found, but continue your foray for long enough and you were bound to discover more.

Even with that said, however, Raimond couldn't deny that there were qualities he had observed in the noblewoman that were singular to her. Like how each clover could have its own distinct pattern on its leaves, the Baroness held a captivating puzzle where that pattern took the shape of fiery hot flames amid a sleet of ice and snow, all centering around a tiny bud of what could perhaps signify a potential fifth leaf.

To one such as Raimond, who found nothing more beautiful and brilliant than the hidden potential within each person, what he had witnessed in the Baroness was an allure that set the very embers in his heart aflame with ardour.

During his first meeting with the woman at the Light Fest in Elystead, he had immediately noticed she was not your ordinary noble. Even his dear compatriot Livvi Knottley—whose intuition and acumen Raimond held in high regard—had been surprised by the woman at the time, despite ostensibly having known her since childhood.

The stories he had heard of the Baroness after that and her actions during the Providing Ceremony confirmed his initial thoughts, and further encounters with her only solidified his belief.

But it wasn't until today, after he had been given the almost serendipitous opportunity to accompany the Baroness and her group on this fascinating excursion, that he could get a clear picture of what type of person the woman truly was.

There were still many questions left unanswered and many mysteries that intrigued him, but he believed himself to now understand enough of her character, though the motivations behind some of her actions still eluded him.

The largest mystery of them all was perhaps the one she kept closest to her chest, and the one he was most interested in. Who, exactly, were all these recent exploits of hers *for*?

He was well-informed of the many curious trips and discoveries she had made of late, as were, he imagined, several other notable actors in the empire. That included some of her dealings with the mage towers, a major auction house in Elystead, and relations with the Withersworth family in Autumnwell.

It all painted the picture of a noblewoman who had somehow acquired valuable information in several noteworthy areas and was determined to leverage it swiftly and efficiently to increase her wealth and influence. While she did so in a fashion that was perhaps unorthodox

for a noble, it aligned quite with the nobility's general goal of personal and hierarchical advancement.

Yet, what Raimond saw was something more profound. He perceived not a noble lady simply aiming to increase her own power, but a woman preparing herself and caring little for what others made of her actions. Whether that determination was fueled by confidence or ignorance was difficult to tell, but he leaned towards the former. She possessed access to information and resources that astounded even him in some ways, and he had no doubt that she was keenly aware of the brewing storms beneath the empire's surface.

As such, the burning question that ignited Raimond's curiosity and concern the most was which side of the coming conflict she would align herself with.

Although he wanted to banish the notion, Raimond wasn't so naive as to entertain the idea that every noble possessed a heart of pure intentions and unwavering dedication to the empire, ready to relinquish both wealth and life to protect it. It was a lamentable fact, but reality painted a different picture. While certain nobles such as Duke Tyndall and Marchioness Thackeray were paragons in their own right in that regard, even their steadfast loyalty had its issues, and the empire bore a tapestry of historical and contemporary complexities that heralded perilous times ahead.

Finally, the Baroness turned her gaze towards him, and Raimond offered one of his most resplendent smiles. In return, she gave him a stout nod before diverting her attention to the rest of the chamber again, seemingly becoming lost in thought.

Indeed, he would have liked for his interactions with the Baroness today to have convinced him of her good-natured intentions for the empire at large, but he could not be fully convinced of that. For though he held a deep respect for the woman and how she treated her subordinates, and he recognized that many of the more unsavory rumors surrounding her character were either unfounded or no longer entirely accurate, he had also seen signs that indicated exactly what he had feared.

Scarlett Hartford was not a woman who flinched in the face of adversity, nor did she budge from her chosen path, even for those who might be called her allies. He saw no hesitation in doing what she saw as necessary from her, a quality that could be a double-edged sword.

The Baroness' motive for visiting this shrine today transcended the mere acquisition and trace of ancient relics, as she had done at many other historically significant locations. Nor did her presence center around research related to Deacon Emberwood and the three figures that had once been the man's disciples, as she claimed. Or, at least, not solely. Though Raimond's understanding of the true underlying purpose of today's expedition remained incomplete, he was certain the Baroness aspired for something more within these hallowed walls.

And she perceived the Followers as an impediment obstructing her path to achieve her goal.

He wondered what lengths she would have gone to get her way had he not been as obliging as he had been? Would she have been content with what she got, or would she have orchestrated an alternate strategy to ensure her success? The answer, once more, pivoted on the axis of her motivations.

It was not often Raimond placed himself in a quandary quite like this one. Had any of his peers been in his position, he imagined they would have assumed a much more assertive stance with the Baroness, aiming to ascertain her allegiances. And he suspected they might have come to regret it, eventually.

Once each member of the Baroness party had recuperated enough, the woman issued the command that they were leaving. Raimond had maintained his quiet while they waited to avoid being a nuisance, but he seized this opportunity to inquire about an event he had witnessed earlier that had him captivatively—and figuratively—charmed.

“Miss Hale, Baroness, if I may, I have a couple of queries that I would like to ask.”

Both women shifted their attention to him.

“I suspect I already know what they are related to,” the Baroness said.

“That would not surprise me in the least.” With a flourish of his arm, Raimond gestured towards the other end of the chamber. There, an intricate interplay of dark and pale splotches on the stone showed traces of the strange magic the duo had wielded to counter Deacon Emberwood’s infused Auranthial’s impressive spell earlier. “What manner of magic was it you displayed earlier? I don’t believe I have ever witnessed anything quite like it, though I am grateful for the privilege of now having done so. Among the myriad genres of magic and various disciplines I am familiar with, I’ve not encountered such an enchanting spectacle in many moons.”

He had already been aware that the Baroness mainly relied on her own unique strain of magic. Her masterful command over pyrokinesis and hydrokinesis was awe-inspiring, to say the least, and there were most certainly a plethora of mages who would eat their robes if they witnessed the ease with which she seemed to practice the skill. While she claimed not to know any spells beyond that, Raimond was uncertain how reliable that statement was. It strained credulity, from what he knew.

But even with her distinctive use of magic and enigmatic capabilities, Raimond grappled with how to classify what he had witnessed earlier. It bore similarities to certain spells and phenomena he knew of, yet he had observed none of the same techniques in use during the display.

“What you witnessed there was a fusion of my pyrokinesis and Miss Hale’s bardic charms,” the Baroness said. “As you saw, it boasts some interesting attributes.”

Rosa offered an extravagant bow, punctuated by the tipping of an imaginary hat. “I invariably aim to infuse a dash of ‘interesting’ into everything I touch, thank you very much. Naturally, this ethos extends even to my esteemed employer’s more *heated* enterprises.”

The Baroness gave the woman a flat look, but Raimond nodded. “I find myself increasingly afflicted with a tinge of envy for the exceptional individuals you surround yourself with, Baroness. It appears fate has bestowed upon you quite the blessing with the company you keep.”

That explanation aligned much with what he would have expected. While the carefree and often frivolous nature of bards tended to overshadow the significance of their charms as a discipline among mages and other magic practitioners, there were deeper reasons behind the general disregard for bardic charms in the empire. It was a well-known fact that charms and their intricacies defied most understandings, and while mages were inquisitive by nature, rarely did they choose to spend time on seemingly futile pursuits when there were other things to study.

Raimond considered himself slightly more open-minded than most mages in that regard, but even he had to concede that the essence of what he had witnessed earlier remained a mystery to him as well. While he had caught glimpses of the mana and composition of the Baroness' magic, discerning and comprehending the enigmatic echoes that the bard's charm produced proved a feat beyond his reach.

"When did you both have time to even practice and learn that thing?" Allyssa asked, joining their little group where they stood as Fynn and Shin exchanged a few words a short distance away. "I've never seen it before, but it was...breathtaking."

Rosa grinned and gave a playful shrug. "Oh, you know. We managed to sneak in some training here and there." The woman waggled her brows. "When you've a certain noblewoman looking over your shoulder all the time, it sometimes feels like one day stretches into three."

Allyssa paused, her eyes widening slightly as if finding some hidden meaning in those words, and Raimond observed the subtle exchange. It seemed like there were even more mysteries that the Baroness was hiding.

"If we have sated your curiosity, Father Abraham, shall we make our leave?" the Baroness asked, looking at Raimond.

He turned his attention to her and offered a warm smile. "Yes, let us, I say. I believe we have quite the thrilling tale to share with our resident shrine custodian and high priest upon our return."

With that, the group moved over to the wall where they could climb back to the undercroft located under the Sunfire Shrine. Raimond waited until last before he started his own climb, casting a final contemplative glance at the vestiges of the Auranthial left behind by Deacon Emberwood centuries prior.

It was an unfortunate fate indeed that the man had been driven to such depths of anguish that he deemed it necessary to infuse an Auranthial with his own essence. Raimond thought the fate of the existence the man had created needless in its cruelty, suffering through centuries of uneventful waiting in a place such as this, yet he couldn't help but admire the unyielding determination of the venerable deacon.

Scaling the passage above him, Raimond joined Baroness Hartford and the others in the undercroft, where an acolyte seemed to have been waiting for them. He instructed the acolyte to summon the shrine's custodian.

The man arrived soon enough, wearing a tired expression as he crossed the underground chamber. One might have thought he had been the one to just spend hours navigating through a centuries old tomb replete with perilous constructs devised by a powerful deacon, though Raimond refrained from judging.

He imagined there were few people who would greet the sudden arrival of an outsider, unearthing long-held secrets hidden beneath their noses for generations, with enthusiasm.

“What did you find?” Reverend Stanway asked, his attention focusing first on Raimond before turning to the Baroness. “Were there any complications?”

“Nothing that exceeded our capabilities,” the woman answered in her characteristically curt tone.

“We stumbled upon several Auranthials left behind by Deacon Emberwood, as well as three memorials dedicated to what appears to have been his personal secular disciples,” Raimond said. “Fortunately, there was little damage to anything of importance, providing ample opportunity to explore what remains at your leisure.”

He had to admit that he was impressed by the care the Baroness’ group had shown in preserving even some of the seemingly insignificant sections of stone walls. The majority of the damage their surroundings had suffered stemmed from the assault launched by the Auranthials, which likely would have been inevitable even with a more extensive clearing party.

Reverend Stanway adopted a contemplative frown. “His *secular* disciples, you say?”

“That I did.” Raimond nodded. “Most of the relics left behind by the deacon remain undisturbed. I suggest you have someone catalog them for now, awaiting the arrival of our the Congregation’s Curators to assess them and determine the appropriate course of action.” Raimond showed the gold mask he had retrieved from the infused Auranthial’s remains. “I shall be procuring this on behalf of the Congregation and ensure it is brought where it belongs for now.”

The man’s eyes widened in rapt astonishment as he gazed upon the mask. “I-I understand...”

“We will now be taking our leave,” the Baroness declared as she walked past the Reverend, who took a brief moment to tear his gaze from the mask and direct it towards the noblewoman, who seemed to have relegated his presence to the back of her mind.

Raimond’s eyes followed her. While the Baroness and the shrine custodian hadn’t had the most auspicious of first encounters, he knew countless nobles who would have reveled in the opportunity to flaunt their success in the man’s face in a situation like this. However, it came as no surprise that Baroness Hartford didn’t bother. She seemed the type who cared little unless you truly offended her, such as Count Soames once had.

He offered his fellow priest a congenial smile. “It appears that I am left with little choice but to join them in their departure. They serve as my transportation, you see.”

He proceeded to walk past the man as he followed in the wake of the Baroness and her entourage as they exited the undercroft and made their way through the Sunfire Shrine's corridors, emerging into the courtyard where the carriage they had arrived in still waited.

The return journey to Bridgespell was an uneventful one. Regrettably, Raimond found himself short one conversational partner as Rosa took the chance to nap throughout the entire ride. That said, it was a fascinating sight to see the winsome bard's head repeatedly droop onto the Baroness' shoulder, only to be steadfastly pushed away as the noblewoman shot her irked expressions.

In Rosa's absence, Raimond instead capitalized on this opportunity to further acquaint himself with the two young Shielders and the laconic Fynn.

Upon their arrival in Bridgespell, their first destination was the expansive temple of the Followers, nestled in the Emberwood Ward.

As the carriage pulled to a halt near the edge of the square leading to the temple, the Baroness sent a glacial glance at the slumbering bard beside her before turning to the Shielders sitting to Raimond's right. "Miss Astley, Mister Thornthon, the two of you can remain in the carriage along with Miss Hale, while Fynn and I go and meet with the high priest."

"Alright," Allyssa replied, and Shin nodded next to her.

With that, the Baroness climbed out of the carriage along with Fynn, and Raimond followed shortly behind.

As both of their gazes alighted upon him, he tidied up and smoothed out his pristine white robes with one hand, his other maintaining a secure hold on the strap of a knapsack that carried his personal effects.

He glanced at the Baroness' appearance, then back through the open door into the carriage and its current inhabitants. "If you pardon me saying so, but it seems Miss Hale might not be the only one in need of some rest. After the day's taxing ordeal, returning to your lodgings and indulging in some well-deserved respite could be a prudent course of action."

"*You* don't look that tired," Allyssa's voice floated from within the carriage as her form leaned forward to look at him. "Priests aren't entitled to breaks?"

"On the contrary, my friend. I am a staunch advocate of beauty sleep, else I would risk depriving people and myself of my lustrous presence." Raimond chuckled. "And I can assure you that I, too, am rather weary, though it may not be too outwardly apparent."

"I intend to rest once I conclude my talks with the high priest regarding today's expedition," the Baroness said. Raimond turned to look at her once more as the woman seemed to scrutinize him. "Will you be joining?"

He shook his head. "I might visit the man later, but first, I will have to report to my superiors. They are the stringent sort."

The woman's gaze stayed on him for a prolonged beat, and Raimond found himself rather amused trying to decipher her thoughts. For a fleeting instant, he even wondered if she knew who his supposed 'superiors' were. That was an unlikely scenario, but he almost found himself thinking that it could just be possible.

Though perhaps he was starting to get a bit too drawn in by the allure of the impenetrable face of unerringness and prescience that the Baroness cultivated through her actions and words. He felt it a tad unfair to suspect the woman solely because of that, even if there was the possibility.

"Very well." The Baroness eventually gave a curt nod in reply.

Raimond turned his attention back to those in the carriage cabin. "It has been a most enjoyable day, my transitory companions. Today has unfolded as a most gratifying interlude for myself, and I am certain that the horizon surely holds marvelous and splendid endeavours in store for both of you, Miss Astrey, Mister Thornton. I fervently hope circumstances align for us to rendezvous once more in the near future. Please, convey my most appreciative adieus to our slumbering Miss Hale as well, and express my gratitude for her delightful company."

"Will do," Shin said.

Allyssa let out a small chuckle. "I think she might not be thrilled to have slept through your goodbye, though."

"Ah, but what can one do to resist the siren call of repose when it beckons with gossamer threads of weariness and lethargy into the realm of dreams?" Raimond offered a subtle bow. "Although I would love to offer my goodbyes to a fellow connoisseur of life's finer pleasures, I would be even more remiss to wake her from her slumber. Yet, who knows? Mayhap fate will see fit to have our reunion be earlier than one might expect?"

"I believe that is enough for the goodbyes," the Baroness interjected. The woman's eyes passed over her retainers in the carriage. "We will return within the hour."

With those words, she turned and proceeded to head towards the temple alongside Fynn. Her demeanor showed very little sign of concern for the quizzical and scattered glances cast her way from the various bystanders in the square.

Offering one final smile towards Allyssa and Shin, Raimond executed a deft spin on his heel and hastened his stride to catch up with the noblewoman and her white-haired associate. As he closed the distance, the Baroness cast a sidelong glance in his direction as they reached the stairs leading to the temple's entrance.

"What will you be doing from hereon, Father Abraham?" she asked.

"Well, that is ever a question for me, Baroness. My superiors can be a fickle lot, so one never knows what expectations they might have and what they might ask next. Should there be nothing of specific import, I will be returning to my role as a traveling priest, bringing the light and teachings of Ittar to those weary souls in need of his grace."

“It appears your responsibilities within the Ecclesiastical Congregation of Sacraments are rather lax and undefined, Father. I was not even aware you were a member before today.”

“I confess, it is not often I am called upon for these types of ventures, and rarer still is the occasion when I am afforded the opportunity to do so alongside familiar companions.”

The Baroness briefly looked at Fynn, who was observing the passing priests and townsfolk, before returning her attention forward. “I see. And these superiors of yours. Are they the ones who oversee the Congregation’s matters?”

“In a manner, yes.” Raimond stepped to the side to assist an older lady who had been close to stumbling on one of the steps. The lady thanked him as he swiftly returned to the Baroness’ side. “The head of the Congregation is a stern woman who is perhaps best described as the embodiment of an arctic breeze surrounding the purest of hydrangeas. We share a unique rapport, you see. One built and cultivated on trust across years of shared toilings. There’s nothing quite like it.”

The Baroness leveled a long look at him. “...I am sure.”

They entered the temple, arriving inside the main vestibule. Raimond smiled at the woman and the young man. “This is where our paths will have to diverge, I’m afraid. As ever, a pleasure to have met you, Baroness. And you, my enigmatic comrade of newfound camaraderie, Fynn.”

Fynn simply nodded in return. “I don’t really understand what you’re saying, but okay? Bye.”

Raimond was shocked to see what *might* have been the tiniest hint of a smile creep onto the Baroness’ face as she looked at him. “While your enthusiasm teeters on the level of being daunting, the sentiment is mutual. Until next we meet, Father Abraham.”

Raimond found his spirits rather enlivened at that, and with a wink and the elegant brandishing of his hair as it flowed over his shoulders, he executed a graceful turn and began making his way towards one of the hallways linking to the left side of the chamber.

There was a satisfying sense of accomplishment that remained from the day’s proceedings, though he did lament the absence of a pretext to enjoy some more time with the Baroness and her group.

If only he wasn’t certain that a member of the Dawnbringers would be sent to retrieve him if he spent any more time dawdling, he might have dared to extend his little sojourn here in Bridgespell.

Navigating the temple’s corridors, Raimond passed the occasional priest or acolyte who offered him short greetings when they recognized the symbols emblazoned on his sleeves, suggesting his association with the Congregation. It had been some time since he last had the chance to wear these garments.

Eventually, he arrived at a secluded chamber nestled deep within the temple. His temporary quarters while here in Bridgespell — though it wasn’t looking as if he would be able to enjoy them for long.

Tossing his knapsack onto a modest bed tucked in the corner, he untied its top and extracted the gold mask, regarding it for a moment.

It had once been tradition among the deacons of the Quorum to inherit the veils of their predecessors. A blend of symbolism and practicality, perpetuating the lineage of the original ten deacons and the powerful relics in their possession. Over time, more and more of those veils had disappeared from the roster as deacons succumbed or went missing during times of tumult or upheaval. However, one veil's whereabouts had remained an enigma since its inception.

Now, they knew why. Deacon Emberwood had used his veil—the mask that marked his seat as a deacon—for infusement when forging that Auranthial. For the first time in over three centuries, it could now reclaim its place within the fold.

Raimond imagined it would have been a rather eventful and touching moment if it had been presented to the Quorum a couple of centuries prior when all the veils still remained. It lost some of its sentimental effect when there was only one else left.

Although he would likely still get some amusing reactions when he *did* present it to the others. It was a legendary artifact hailing back to the founding of their order, after all. Old Gresham, in particular, would probably be exuberant over his seat finally regaining one of its ancient regalia after all this time. Alas, the task of coaxing a smile from the man was an exercise in futility.

With a wistful sigh, Raimond put the mask aside, redirecting his attention to another item extracted from his knapsack. A diminutive golden sphere with a mesmerizing silver gem at its core. Bringing out a handkerchief, he wiped away some of the dust that had gotten on its surface—it was a priceless and irreplaceable relic only in possession of the Quorum's ten deacons, and he would rather not anyone find out he sometimes kept it in a mundane knapsack—before infusing it with his mana.

The gem inside turned a shade of black as it was cloaked in a dark fog, and Raimond positioned the sphere on a small table next to the bed as he pulled out a chair to sit.

A few moments passed before the air above the sphere flickered, and the translucent visage of the top half of a woman adorned in a gold mask materialized. Onyx tresses cascaded down from the side of the mask and ended in an elegant tail over her left shoulder and the red robes she was wearing.

“Deacon Abram.” The woman's voice was tinged with an austere note as her gaze seemed to penetrate Raimond even through her mask. “Did you have fun evading your responsibilities while you embarked on your little escapade?”

He met her with his most charming of smiles. “Marvelously so! It is a pity, my dear Ava, that you weren't present to partake in it as well. I dare say even you might have found it interesting. A future foray is in order, perhaps, where you can eschew your obligations and join me on a grand adventure reminiscent of the tales of old.”

“I don't have time for your antics, Abram,” she replied without a hint of emotion, though Raimond suspected there was a hint of a smile behind that veil of hers. Probably. The

'Steelgaze Deacon' Ava Solnate did not earn her nickname for nothing. "The others have lodged several complaints towards me for enabling your actions this time."

"For which you have my unending gratitude."

"Do not expect it to happen again."

"I wouldn't dare."

A moment of silence passed as neither of them said anything. Raimond yawned, stretching his limbs as he settled back in his chair. Why his body chose that any years after his twenties were the time to grace him with niggling discomforts, like lingering soreness and petty throbs after expending a more-than-noticeable amount of his mana, remained a mystery he had yet to solve.

"...So what did you find?" his charming colleague eventually asked after an ample span of quietude had passed. "What was so important that it warranted the involvement of a deacon of the Quorum in a mere baroness' exploits?"

Suppressing a burgeoning grin, Raimond cleared his throat. "I believe we are both aware that the 'mere baroness' you are referring to is a touch more than just that, though I suppose you can be forgiven for not having immersed yourself in the reports as thoroughly as yours truly."

"I am aware that she was the one to recently unearth one of the Chalice of Canon as well as several other notable artifacts and locations. That does not excuse your involvement today. I could have sent any of my operatives to address the situation."

Raimond raised a finger and shook it. "Ah, but that is where you are wrong, mademoiselle. It's about the *details*, my dear. And in that realm, I may, in fact, be considered somewhat of a virtuoso, as I'm sure you know. It's precisely why I supported High Priest Matthew's endorsement of the Baroness' request."

"So you claim."

He let out a low chuckle as he leaned to the side and picked up Deacon Emberwood's mask. "Behold, the fruits of my labor! Me and my compatriots expended sweat and spilled blood to acquire this prize, so I expect you to be suitably impressed."

The image of Deacon Solnate paused for a moment, her focus aimed at the artifact in his hands. "...Very well. It appears as if there were some merits to your words this time," she admitted, though Raimond felt a bit more enthusiasm was warranted.

"There were nine other relics left behind by the venerable Deacon as well. For now, they remain in the shrine, but I am sure you can send over a custodian to inspect them when you see fit."

"I'll have one sent over tomorrow."

"Efficient as always, I see."

“What more did you learn?” the woman asked.

Raimond knitted his brows in thought. “Hmm. That one is a bit harder to answer. There were a great deal of intriguing facets that I observed today, but I believe it can all be effectively encapsulated in a single sentence.”

Deacon Solnate seemed to wait for him to continue as several seconds passed, but finally, he heard what might have been a small sigh through the invaluable communication artifact that connected the deacons of the order. “...And what is that?”

“I’m glad you asked!” he exclaimed, taking on a serious expression as he shifted his posture and leaned forward in his seat. “My deduction is thus: I suspect we have greatly underestimated the importance Baroness Scarlett Hartford might play in the future conflicts that will come.”

“You base this on her achievements up till today, or your interactions with her during this excursion?”

“Both, but primarily the latter. She is a shrewd woman, but she is also not worried about displaying many of her capabilities. Though even saying that, I speculate that what I have witnessed till now was only the tip of the proverbial iceberg.”

“Then what do you suggest we do about her?” Deacon Solnate asked.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

Raimond shook his head. “For now, I think that is for the best. We are yet to know her allies or her motives, and until we do, it is wisest not to poke the hornet’s nest. It would truly be a tragedy if we were to provoke a potential ally before we know more about her.”

“The others are unlikely to accept that stance should they hear your earlier assessment.”

A renewed smile graced Raimond’s features. “How fortunate I am that I can trust you not to so callously share a man’s lone confessions, am I not?”

The conjured image of his colleague gave him a long look. “...Is there anything further you had to say at the moment?”

“Hmm. Have you heard tell of the empire’s new dragon slayer?”

“...What?”

Raimond chuckled. “No, I suppose you wouldn’t. I do not believe the rumors have spread quite that far yet.”

“Are you still referring to Baroness Hartford?” Deacon Solnate asked.

“I am indeed.”

“She slayed a dragon?”

“That is what some of the rumors say.”

“I am not asking for what the rumors say. I am asking for what you know, Raimond.”

“Ah. If so, then the answer is probably no.”

“Explain.”

Raimond brought a thoughtful hand to his chin. “For the time being, it appears to mostly be a rumor local to Freybrook, but some of our fellow members of the cloth from there informed me that news had spread of the corpse of a deceased dragon appearing at Baroness Hartford’s mansion. How it appeared there and how it died remains a mystery, but there were apparently several witnesses. I am sure I do not have to tell you how imaginative people can be.”

“Do we know what happened?”

“Some say that Warley Godwin was the one responsible, and when I inquired with the Baroness’ entourage, they confirmed as much.”

“Do you believe them?”

“I am not certain,” Raimond said. “From what I have seen, it wouldn’t be impossible for the Baroness to take down a younger dragon with her group, but I do not like their chances.”

There was a brief silence on the other end before Deacon Solnate nodded her head. “We’ll take this into consideration. Was that all you share?”

“I believe it was, yes.”

“Then I will end this here. The conclave with the Augur and the remaining deacons regarding the expanded defenses at the Sanctuary is starting soon. Do not expect me to provide excuses for your absence.” The woman moved as if to end their communication. “I expect a comprehensive report detailing today’s events to be delivered to me in paper by the end of the week.”

Raimond’s eyes widened. “Ah, wait, perhaps we can—”

The image dissolved as the obsidian gem inside the golden sphere cleared up and returned to its silver hue. Raimond sat there for a moment, realizing the looming threat that he had completely overlooked when he first cajoled Ava into allowing him to temporarily return to his previous station.

In the years ensuing his departure from the Ecclesiastical Congregation of Sacraments, he had never had to compile a report because of the relative freedom his authority afforded him, and as such, he had almost entirely forgotten one of his most feared existences.

He had forgotten the paperwork.