

The Long Game

"It is time."

Dr. Armstrong took a sip from her cabernet and watched for Mercy Black's reaction.

It was a thin, wicked smile.

"You agree?"

"I agree that you shouldn't have given them the car," said Black, the Morley welded to her right hand dripping ash. "I agree that Stonecastle is royally fucking up their operation as a result. And I agree that *someone* needs to step in."

"That someone is you."

"I agree."

Armstrong nodded, the fat dossier on the table thick with glossy evidence of a multi-day orgy of violent action: a bomb in Chicago, gun battles elsewhere in Illinois and Iowa, a trail of corpses clogging up morgues across two states. "They say she's working with a team this time. Mercenaries, from I don't know where, at least one trigger man and an intelligence agent. She's completely out of control, and the Church is openly considering disavowing her actions."

"Sounds like someone I know."

Armstrong rolled her eyes. "Tactless kills drawing the attention of local authorities. She's become arrogant, drawing all manner of pursuit. The Church must be really desperate to bury the evidence against their involvement in the Fortean debacle if they're tacitly condoning this."

"And you want that evidence."

"I want the Church to respect our influence."

"You want ammunition for blackmail."

"Po-tay-toe, po-tah-to."

Black took a drag on her Morley, the smile still glued to her face.

"I'll need discretion to decide--"

"You'll need discretion," stated Armstrong, "Discretion to extract evidence without drawing that same attention. Let Stonecastle burn but don't get singed."

"And Starry Wisdom?"

"Let the cult and the Church duel each other."

"That cult needs to be checked worse than Stonecastle. I'll put her in her place but I can't say that I won't set a few of them on fire if the opportunity arises."

Armstrong frowned. "I know you don't like cult, but they are pawns."

"Left unchecked pawns can be promoted, Gabby."

"That is up to others, in other games that you will not play. Do you agree?"

There was a grimace lurking somewhere under Black's smile.

"I'll get you your evidence."

Black left then, in a twist of smoke and malice.

From the shadows: "Watch that one, Head Mistress."

"Oh, you think I sit here ignorant of her sentiments?" Armstrong replied, ripples in her wine. "Mercy is capable, and one day she may very well sit here in my stead. Before then you might do well to reconsider our reticence to cut roots instead of leaves and branches."

"In its own twisted way Starry Wisdom serves our purposes as well."

Armstrong snorted and gulped down her drink.

"For a time. For a time."