

220: Sibling reunions

Later in the evening, following Scarlett's meeting with The Gentleman and Empress—after which she had spent some time acquainting herself with the Loci's development—she was back in her office. The reports she had been interrupted from earlier now lay before her, with the finished ones placed to her left and the few remaining ones to her right.

As the clock was nearing ten, Scarlett was almost finished with her tasks for the day. Her typical routine often involved staying up later than this, and it had become a challenge for her to sleep before midnight, but recent events had taken their toll, leaving her body more tired than usual.

A knock echoed from the entrance, drawing Scarlett's attention away from the paperwork.

"Scarlett?" Evelyne's voice came from the other side. "Are you there?"

"I am," Scarlett answered, placing down the document in her hand. "You may enter."

The door opened, and Evelyne stepped inside. The younger Hartford sister was dressed in a rich burgundy velvet blouse with simple embroidery along the arms, her mostly auburn hair reaching just above her shoulders.

"Garside told me you were back, but I wasn't sure if you would still be up," Evelyne said, crossing the room.

"You will seldom find me asleep at this hour," Scarlett replied, studying the woman more closely. There were subtle shadows under Evelyne's eyes, a blend of tension and relief in her expression upon seeing Scarlett. It seemed she had headed here straight after returning from her business outside.

"Really?" Evelyne stopped in front of Scarlett's desk, pulling out the chair set for guests. "I didn't know that. Feels like I barely ever get any time to sleep nowadays, but I didn't realize the same went for you. Mind if I sit down?"

Scarlett gestured that it was fine, and Evelyne settled into the chair, leaning forward with her elbows on her lap, seeming to collect her thoughts.

"I suppose most of our interactions have been confined to the dining hall and the occasional discussion regarding fief matters," Scarlett mused. "Regardless, I presume you are here to discuss recent events?"

A solemn nod from Evelyne confirmed Scarlett's words. "I am, yes."

Scarlett considered her for a moment. "Given that you only returned just now, this could have waited until morning."

The younger woman grimaced. "Do you think I could sleep knowing you're back? Even when I've had the time, I've struggled to sleep these last days because of thoughts about this impending catastrophe or whatever you warned me about. My mind keeps concocting the wildest scenarios about the empire collapsing in on itself, and that mess over in Bridgespell didn't help on that front."

"I understand your concerns, but rest assured, there was no imminent danger." Scarlett glanced down at the reports on her desk. "With that said, it seems as if you have been rather occupied during my absence. Care to tell me more about it? I have been reading through the reports, but I would like to hear the overarching details from you, if possible."

She wasn't sure if Evelyne had composed these reports herself or had assistance, but to be frank, they were a bit overly detailed for her taste. More information could be helpful, but she wouldn't mind a broader perspective for these things.

Evelyne stared at Scarlett, a short, disbelieving laugh escaping her. "Is that really what we should be starting on?"

"I believe addressing the minor matters first will pave the way for more critical discussions," Scarlett said.

The woman fell silent briefly before sighing. "Fine. For now, I've delegated most of the fief's management to Kinsley while I've been dealing with everything else, so there's not much to report on that front. I have made some trips to the surrounding region and met with nobles to solidify my connections from the Tyndall Ball, but I doubt you care much about that. I also met with a few people that might be able to help us in the future and who were interested in you. Baron Tattersall in Dimwall and Lady Smythe from the Luicean Spice Guild were a couple of notable ones, if you remember them. Master Arthur Windermere as well."

Scarlett considered it for a moment. "I do recall meeting Master Windermere during the ball, and the name Tattersall seems familiar. However, Lady Smythe eludes my memory."

Though she had studied the empire's aristocracy enough to recognize most noble families, she remained far from an expert.

"Well, I'm the one handling negotiations with them, so it doesn't matter much. Lady Smythe was one of the individuals we aided during the Tribe attack at the ball, and her gratitude proved particularly helpful," Evelyne explained. "Beyond that, I've also been running all over the place, trying to spearhead those 'relief efforts' of ours. I hired more hands to help out with it all, but I severely underestimated the complexities of the logistics involved in something like this."

She shook her head with a tired expression. "If the empire's grain supply is affected, the amount we can source from Stagmond and the surrounding villages won't even make a dent in changing things, so I've had to explore other avenues of securing a substantial supply of foodstuff and other resources. Master Windermere and the Western Merchant's Alliance actually proved extremely helpful in getting into contact with some Voneian and Luicean merchants who were willing to make deals, though. We'll have to pay a premium because of how turbulent things have been lately, but it's better that it goes to us than outside the empire. You also said that costs were inconsequential here, so..."

Evelyne's expression held a hint of hesitation as she looked at Scarlett, who responded with a reassuring nod.

"There is no issue with spending the necessary funds. As long as we can afford it, you may spend as much as you need for this endeavour."

Scarlett had already set aside the money she needed for herself. She also didn't foresee any issues with accumulating more in the future, considering how many dungeons remained across the empire. Judging from the reports she had perused, Evelyne's efforts were already expected to surpass 500,000 solars, but that was well within the amount the ashenwraith dragon's corpse would provide.

Evelyne visibly relaxed upon hearing Scarlett's affirmation. "We can't exactly keep everything in the fief, so I've also rented facilities in the harbor to store the supplies. However, with the amounts we're talking, if we actually want to have an effect, that won't be sufficient. That's why I'm

considering reaching out to larger merchant groups in the city to borrow their facilities temporarily. Alternatively, we might be able to speak with Count Knottley to get access to additional storage for our efforts, but that would likely require you to convince him.”

Scarlett furrowed her brows. “That might prove...challenging.”

“I suspected as much, but it *could* save us a lot of money better spent on securing more resources,” Evelyne said.

After a moment of consideration, Scarlett nodded. “I will see what I can do.”

While Count Knottley wasn’t exactly her biggest fan, he was a pretty loyal subject of the empire. Maybe she could contact Livvi and enlist the woman’s help in persuading her father.

“Other than securing food and storage,” Evelyne continued, “the two most critical aspects that we need to address are manpower and distribution. Like I said, I’ve already started hiring people to help out where possible, but their experience is limited. Mostly, they’re just additional hands who couldn’t find any other work during the winter. I’m still looking into where I can find people with more experience, however. As for distribution, I don’t think the logistics of that will be quite as difficult on our end, given that we have access to both the Kilstone network and all the ships that pass by Freybrook. I have already initiated talks with some crews that were willing to collaborate on that front. The challenge lies in moving everything from other cities and to affected settlements, but I was hoping that the local lords and groups could manage that.”

Scarlett’s forehead knitted together in thought. “In some cases, that may be the case. However, I believe it will be crucial to have other alternatives for distributing help and supplies to regions by land when necessary.”

When the Cabal and Tribe commenced their full assault on the empire, there was no assurance that all nobles could effectively safeguard their lands and people. Some regions would face more danger than others, and the typical land transportation routes connecting to smaller settlements might prove unreliable.

Evelyne seemed to share Scarlett’s concern, her brow furrowing. “I was worried you were going to say that. It would require a considerable number of wagons and skilled personnel to carry out something like that on a large scale, though. Even if we’re just representing the stockpiles of the Freybrook region, I’m not certain we can manage that.”

“True,” Scarlett said. “In that case, perhaps it would be prudent to collaborate with the Shields Guild and Followers of Ittar. They possess both the manpower and expertise needed for such tasks, and would likely carry them out even without our involvement. If we leave that to them, we can focus on other areas.”

“I’ve actually already begun exploring that avenue,” Evelyne revealed. “Or, at least, started making inquiries. I spoke with my contact in the Guild to see what preparations they already had given their ongoing conflict with the Tribe. They’re stretched thin, though, so I’m uncertain if they’ll be able to fill that role as we would want. I visited the local temple to investigate matters there, but their information was limited.”

“If necessary, I have a connection to a member of the Quorum whom I can approach for further insights,” Scarlett said.

Evelyne’s eyes widened slightly, mild surprise showing on her face. “You do?”

"Yes."

"Since when?!"

"Recently."

"Thanks, that answers a lot." Evelyne let out another sigh. "Nevermind. That *would* be helpful, so please do that. I was also intending to look into if I can find some liaison with the imperial army to see if some collaboration can be set up with them or any of the knight orders. If I approach them under the guise of being worried because of current affairs, it won't even look too strange."

"That does sound like a wise decision. You may do so."

Evelyne's expression grew thoughtful, and Scarlett observed the woman as the room fell silent. Eventually, though, Evelyne noticed Scarlett's gaze and looked at her. "What?"

"Nothing," Scarlett said. "I was merely thinking."

"About?"

A faint frown creased Scarlett's brow. "You have been incredibly busy in recent works, tirelessly working with unwavering dedication to further this endeavour. It is...impressive, the strides that you are making."

Though the words felt wrong leaving Scarlett's mouth, she believed it was the right sentiment to express at this point.

Evelyne appeared momentarily flustered, blinking slowly at Scarlett. Then, a somewhat awkward expression appeared on the woman's face as she shifted slightly. "Well, I don't have much of a choice with a sister like you who places all the responsibility on me while running off to do *Ittar-knows-what* in another city."

Scarlett arched a brow at her in mild annoyance.

Realizing her words, Evelyne's expression turned slightly embarrassed. "Sorry, I didn't mean it like that... But it *is* true *that I have* been incredibly busy. It feels like I've spent less time out of the mansion than in it. I doubt that there are any people who bother paying attention to my movements, but there are definitely going to pop up some rumors eventually. Not much we can do about that since we're pressed for time."

"Rumors can be managed. Your work is important, so simply continue as you have without giving them undue concern."

Scarlett thought she saw another smile on the woman's lips, but it might have been a figment of her imagination, as a more serious expression returned to Evelyne's face.

"Now that I've told you what I've been up to, it's your turn." Evelyne locked eyes with Scarlett.

"What happened in *Bridgespell*?"

Scarlett held her gaze for a moment before responding. "A multitude of events transpired. For instance, as you are already aware, I engaged in some dealings with Duke Valentino."

"Yes, and I'm still not sure how that came about. What did he want with you? Was he interested in the artifacts you've been selling?"

“No. He was facing a particular problem within his domain that he believed someone with my experience could assist in resolving.”

“What problem?”

“A dragon.”

Evelyne fell silent. “...A dragon?”

“He believed it to be one, at least. Technically, it was not a true dragon, but I aided him in locating and neutralizing it nonetheless.”

Evelyne stared at Scarlett, then closed her eyes as if taking her breath before opening them again. “Okay, I think I’ve already used up all my surprise for the day. So, how did you help ‘neutralize’ this non-dragon? Did you find a cat to do this as well?”

“I did not.”

“No, I wasn’t seri—” Evelyne paused, then shook her head. “Whatever. Right now, I don’t even think I want to know. Let’s just continue. I assume this was before that colossal fortress materialized and sent half of the empire into a panic? Do you know what’s going on with that?”

Scarlett nodded. “I do.”

Evelyne scrutinized her with a long, searching look. “You were involved in that too, weren’t you?”

“I was, yes.”

“*Of course you were.* I’m not even sure why I entertained the hope that you weren’t. I just *knew* you had to be involved in that something that chaotic in some fashion.” The woman did sound a bit resigned, but Scarlett thought she was taking it rather well. “So, what exactly happened? Everyone I’ve spoken to seems to know about as much as the rest, and neither the Followers nor the Empyrean Chronicle have revealed more than the fortress being tied to some demonic ritual. They *say* it’s been dealt with already, but I’m not sure how much people believe that.”

“The exact sequence of events is...complex,” Scarlett said. “If I am being candid, I highly suspect that you would prefer to not know all the details in this case as well. However, I will tell you what I can if you are curious.”

Evelyne seemed to genuinely consider it for a moment, leaning back in her chair with arms crossed. “Just lay it on me before I regain enough sense to say ‘no’.”

“...Very well.” Scarlett tapped her index finger on the desk before her. “The fortress outside Bridgespell hailed from the Blazes, and it was the citadel of one of the six Viles. The dragon that I aided Duke Valentino in handling was, in fact, a powerful demon, connected to the appearance of that citadel. The structure’s presence in our realm signified a Vile attempting to manifest here, and my role played a part in preventing such a calamity from occurring. When it manifested, I collaborated with Father Abraham—if you remember him—to investigate the situation before devising a strategy to resolve matters without unleashing a horde of demons upon the empire’s citizens.”

From the expression on Evelyne’s face, Scarlett could tell that the woman was already regretting her decision. “...And with ‘resolve matters’, you mean...?”

“I confronted the Vile as it was manifesting and successfully halted the process,” Scarlett said.

“...You confronted a *Vile*?”

“I did, yes.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“When was the last time where you heard me jest?”

Evelyne went silent.

Scarlett waited as the seconds passed.

“Let me get this straight,” Evelyne spoke up again. “When you say ‘manifest’, you mean a *Vile* was *literally* crossing from the Blazes into our realm?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re saying that *you* put a stop to that?” she asked with disbelief in her voice.

“I did,” Scarlett answered. “Though I did receive some assistance from other groups, such as the Followers of Ittar.”

She didn’t have to mention that *she* was partly responsible for the citadel appearing as well.

Evelyne brought both hands up to her face, looking up at the ceiling and running her fingers through her hair as if trying to process it all. Eventually, she returned her focus to Scarlett. “So the situation *really* is resolved, then? That colossal fortress truly isn’t a threat?”

“It is a citadel, and yes. At the very least, it is not an immediate threat. I imagine entering it may still pose dangers for those unprepared, but the *Vile* inside has been dealt with. As far as I am aware, the Followers, crown officials, the mage towers, and several other factions are currently in the process of further investigating the citadel and its surroundings.”

She had considered mentioning the Tribe’s enclave in Crowcairn, but that wasn’t relevant for Evelyne to know, and Scarlett had promised Duke Valentino to keep quiet about that for now.

“Did you foresee this happening?” Evelyne asked. “Was it part of those future memories you have? Is that why you went to Bridgespell at this particular time?”

“...To some extent,” Scarlett replied.

“Which means?”

“There were unforeseen events that I had not predicted, and unexpected individuals were present. The manifestation also was not tied to a specific date, but that detail became irrelevant in the end.”

“But you did go to Bridgespell specifically to address this?”

“Essentially, yes.”

“...Alright.” Evelyne studied Scarlett for several seconds. “Thank you.”

Scarlett blinked. “What?”

“Thank you,” the woman repeated. “I’m sure there’s more to your involvement than you’re letting on, and I doubt dealing with a *Vile* could ever be so straightforward—I am definitely going to ask more about that later—but it sounds like you might have helped a lot of people. Given how no one

else seems to have heard of this, I assume most people aren't aware of that. That's why I'll at least be one of those who express their gratitude."

Scarlett stared at her. Receiving Evelyne's thanks for this was more than just unexpected. It wasn't even something she particularly wanted. It just felt *odd*. She wasn't sure if it was good or bad. The fact that she was partly responsible for Anguish's manifestation made it all the more weird.

...Yet simply ignoring the woman's gratitude felt even more off.

"Your thanks are unnecessary, but the gesture is appreciated," she eventually said, though her voice lacked much emotion. Evelyne seemed to sense it but didn't comment, simply moving on to the next topic.

"I'd like to hear more about the people involved and what consequences all of this might have for the empire, but I think I've heard enough for one night," Evelyne said, glancing towards the clock on Scarlett's desk. "I'm going to regret asking, but were there any other world-shattering events that happened while you were in Bridgespell?"

"Not world-shattering, no," Scarlett replied. "I did discover some additional locations of note which housed valuable artifacts that we will need to auction off when possible, though I believe I have already mentioned as much in my letters. The servants should have catalogued them for further assessment in the morning, so whenever you have the time, it would be good if you could have someone deal with that."

"Sure. That won't be a problem."

"Also..." Scarlett paused. She wasn't sure this was something she should share with the woman.

"What is it?" Evelyne asked.

Scarlett studied her for a moment. She was probably expected to keep this quiet, but it *could* prove beneficial for Evelyne to be aware of it in the future.

"When I first met with the duke, he held notable company," Scarlett said. "His Imperial Highness, the First Prince."

That seemed to catch Evelyne by surprise. "The duke invited you to a meeting with the *prince*?"

"He did."

"...Was this related to that citadel, or was this before that?"

"Before. They sought my help in locating the First Princess."

"What? Why?" Evelyne asked. "What happened to her?"

"She has gone missing," Scarlett answered.

"Seriously?"

"Yes."

Evelyne pressed a hand to her forehead. "Is it just impossible for you to *not* get entangled in ludicrous situations all the time now? Did you perform some kind of ritual that made the whole world revolve around you?"

"I do ask that question on occasion as well," Scarlett said.

The younger woman shook her head. "Why would they ask you for help if the princess has disappeared?"

"Because they apparently suspected that her disappearance was related to the Zuverian research she had been conducting. Since I have proven to be an expert on the subject, they thought to seek my advice."

A small scoff escaped Evelyne. "Expert? One year ago, you barely knew who the Zuver *were*."

"*Evelyne*." The word escaped Scarlett, a chill in her tone.

"...Sorry," Evelyne said.

Choosing not to dwell on the momentary irritation, Scarlett dropped it there. "I provided them with information that I believed could be of assistance, and from what the duke later told me, it seems as if did succeed in finding traces of the princess' whereabouts. I was not privy to the details, however."

Evelyne wore a slight frown. "Hopefully she's alright."

"I believe that she is."

The woman fixed her gaze on Scarlett. "...Do you know something?"

"Not as much as I would like. However, I have faith that the situation will find its resolution eventually."

"...Alright." Evelyne remained silent for a few seconds before rising from her seat. "Was there anything else you?"

"No, I think the rest can wait for now."

"Thank Ittar. I'm going to have enough trouble sleeping as it is." Evelyne moved towards the door, and Scarlett's attention returned to the documents on her desk, intending to finish them quickly before retiring to her quarters.

After a while had passed without the door opening, however, she looked up to find Evelyne standing at the entrance, back towards her.

Eventually, the woman turned back to face her.

"Was there something you forgot to say?" Scarlett asked.

Evelyne shifted on the spot, an almost palpable hesitation evident in her movements. "I, uh, know that it might not have sounded like it before, but I am *genuinely* amazed by all that you're doing, in a good way. Both your commitment to these relief efforts, what went down in Bridgespell, and everything else. It's...laudable." She turned around, as if embarrassed by her admission. With one hand on the door's handle, only her profile was visible to Scarlett. "One year ago, father would have been disappointed at the state of the barony and the things you were up to. But now? The things this *new* you are doing? I think he would have been proud."

With that, she left the office, leaving Scarlett staring at the closed door with a complex expression on her face. From out of nowhere, a swirl of conflicting emotions—anger, pride, and even tiny, imperceptible hints of *joy*—churned inside her.

She didn't know what to say to that.