

254: Elderly offers

Scarlett sifted through a stack of documents cluttering the desk in her office. Their contents and purposes varied greatly, including things like manifests and bills of lading for shipments of goods and agricultural produce, as well as official charters and writs issued by the relevant authorities. There were also invoices and correspondences from entities such as Elystead Tower and the Followers of Ittar, coupled with several preliminary reports from the numerous temporary clerks Evelyne had employed to help with her increased workload.

The sheer volume of paperwork was honestly daunting. Scarlett wasn't the biggest fan of bureaucratic chores like these, and most of the content before her lay far outside her expertise, but despite that, she'd been diligently reviewing every document while Evelyne was unavailable.

That said, most of the actual work would still be handled by other people as well as the barony's seneschal, but Scarlett still felt she needed a more comprehensive overview of current operations than she'd gotten from simply reading through Evelyne's usual reports.

It had been two days since the attacks on the empire, and only one day since Scarlett's return to the Freybrook mansion. In that time, the barony had gotten started on carrying out several of their relief measures. For now, this mainly included establishing communication channels with the Followers and Kilnstone officials with whom they would be working to facilitate the distribution of emergency supplies, as well as coordinating the use of chartered ships to transport resources that couldn't be moved via Kilnstone.

Across the empire, the needs currently varied significantly from one settlement to another. Some cities that had been hit by the attacks had ample food supplies but suffered significant losses in infrastructure and available workforce, while others faced severe shortages of water and basic sustenance and required urgent deliveries from external sources. Their efforts were currently focusing on the latter since those issues were more time-sensitive, but initiatives to provide medical support and other critical aid were also underway.

In her work, Evelyne had explored various options for delivering aid and the woman hadn't spared much on expenses, so at the moment the barony on its own probably had enough basic supplies to sustain a medium-sized town for a few weeks. Although this was modest on an empire-wide scale, they had secured ongoing contracts to ensure a steady influx of supplies, and under the current circumstances, every last drop mattered.

Fortunately for Scarlett, they'd yet to run into any major issues that demanded her direct intervention. Admittedly, though, things were still in the early phases. She knew that Evelyne anticipated that some suppliers, both domestic and foreign, would challenge their standing agreements in light of the drastically changed climate, so it was only a matter of time until those people came crying. Their contracts should be pretty air-tight, however, so outside of any imperial decrees to start seizing grain and the like, they should be secure.

Personally, Scarlett was more concerned about the people who might ask questions about her timely preparedness for an emergency like this, but she'd handle those as they came.

In addition to deepening her understanding of the relief operations and everything surrounding them, Scarlett had also been in contact with Beldon Tyndall both yesterday and this morning, receiving updates about the situation throughout the empire.

So far, no members of the Cabal or Tribe had been spotted in any of the attacks, meaning there was still a lot of confusion among the general populace about what was going on. The monster assaults had people in a panic, and while the authorities had managed to stabilise the situation temporarily, the damage had been significant in the cities. Ambercrest and Wildscar had been hit particularly hard — the former due to the precarious political situation after Count Soames was detained and placed under investigation earlier in the week, and the latter because it had been forced to deal with three adult dragons along with the other monsters.

In comparison, Freybrook and Elystead were the only cities that fared relatively well. Freybrook's defenders had repelled some bigger monsters, but overall, things had been calmer here than in the rest of the empire. As for Elystead, it both had natural defences that deterred monsters and was a hub for some of the empire's most powerful factions.

Most of these developments had been in line with Scarlett's expectations, which was a relief. She had feared that, because this event diverged from fate and occurred several months earlier than in the game, the Cabal would launch an all-out assault immediately, but thankfully, that hadn't been the case.

However, this didn't mean that they were content with a single large-scale attack and had given up. They would have known this wasn't enough to bring the empire to its knees. Beldon had informed Scarlett that there had already been reports of more portals appearing sporadically across the country over the last couple of days, unleashing monsters closer to smaller, more vulnerable settlements. This had prompted a lot of people to flee to the cities, exacerbating the already tense resource shortages that were building up.

Groups like the Shields Guild and various knight orders were now redirecting their efforts towards combating these waves of monsters, but they'd already been stretched thin dealing with the increased frequency of normal Tribe attacks in recent months and were struggling to reorganise against this new threat.

To begin with, the Cabal and Tribe held a significant tactical advantage since they had the ability to strike almost anywhere via their portals. Although the empire had some defences against such tactics, they'd never had to deal with them on this magnitude before.

Amid these difficulties, though, there were still some silver linings. For instance, Beldon and Mirage had leveraged the information Scarlett provided to better respond to the original monster attacks when they occurred. Unsurprisingly, the man had managed to suss out from their previous conversations that something big was brewing, and he'd made plenty of preparations.

Among other things, Mirage had disseminated details about safe locations within underground passages beneath certain cities to local leaders, and was also supplying crucial intelligence to organisations like the Shields Guild. Beldon wasn't exactly a saint, but like Scarlett, the man recognized the importance of maintaining the empire's stability against the Cabal's onslaught.

Though she didn't have any illusions that he hadn't secured some benefits for himself in the process.

In other areas, it seemed like there was still confusion among the mage towers over exactly how the Tribe of Sin had managed to disable the entire Kilnstone network during their attacks, and the imperial nobility's circles were buzzing with discussions on how they should address the current crisis. According to Beldon, there had already been a good number of petitions submitted to the crown just in the last day alone.

One notable faction was apparently advocating for the declaration of what was basically martial law along with the imposition of emergency drafts and taxes to bolster the empire's defences. This approach might not sound entirely unreasonable on the surface, but from what Beldon had told Scarlett, there were plenty of nobles who were pushing for measures that would disproportionately impact certain regions and groups within the empire in order to weaken their rivals and avoid responsibility themselves.

The Hartford barony, with its relatively small population and relatively stable finances, probably wouldn't be affected much by these measures anyhow, but she could see how this could cause discord among the empire's elite.

For now, the emperor had only issued an Imperial Security Edict — which was essentially a milder form of martial law that granted special privileges to military officials and knight orders, as well as affording high nobles more autonomy in managing security within their domains. Beyond this, the future actions of the crown remained unclear.

Rumors and suspicions of foul play and espionage within the nobility had also circulated, seemingly fueled by the precision of some of the Tribe's attacks. The crown had yet to address any of that publicly, but accusations were already being whispered among the aristocracy.

Beldon had cautioned Scarlett that the Freybrook area and nobles like herself might come under scrutiny due to this, though he didn't seem to think it was a big threat. From what Scarlett gathered, he thought that her relief initiatives were a strategic move to preempt such suspicions and ensure, at least, that public opinion remained in her favor.

It hadn't been, of course, but she could see how those efforts might paint her in that light. Especially considering how she had been described in similar ways before, such as when she originally dealt with the Grey Dog Gang operating out of Freybrook. The thought didn't appeal to her that much, though. She found the prospect of people she didn't know viewing her as some kind of saint mildly irritating.

As for any potential suspicion that might fall upon her, she could only say that it was justified. She *had* made a pact with the Cabal, after all. However, she felt pretty secure in that there wasn't much evidence that people could use against her. And given the enormity of this crisis, she doubted much attention would be directed towards a relatively minor noble like her, despite her infamous reputation.

Having finished reviewing another document, Scarlett returned it to the desk and was about to reach for the next when a knock at the door interrupted her. Soon, Garside stepped into the room.

“My Lady,” the elderly butler began. “I have come to inform you that Lady Withersworth has requested a meeting with you at your convenience.”

Scarlett looked at him in mild surprise. “Lady Withersworth?” She paused, her gaze shifting over the papers strewn across her desk. “...Very well. Bring her to the parlor. I will meet with her shortly once I have finished here.”

“As you wish, My Lady,” Garside replied, bowing respectfully before departing.

Returning to her work, Scarlett quickly read through a few more papers and affixed her seal to a couple of them, then rose and left her office. She made her way through the mansion’s east wing to the parlor, where she found Lady Withersworth seated on a couch. The walls were adorned with landscape paintings and large windows that offered views of the hedge garden housing the Loci. A low rosewood table stood at the room’s center, with vases holding flowers on it.

Lady Withersworth, her grey hair neatly gathered into a bun, was sipping a steaming cup of tea as she gazed out the window with a composed expression, a dignified demeanour air hanging above her. Her head turned as Scarlett entered, smiling warmly.

“Baroness Hartford, it’s wonderful to see you again.”

“The sentiment is mutual, Lady Withersworth,” Scarlett replied, crossing the room and settling into a couch opposite the woman. She noticed another cup on the table, likely prepared in advance by Garside. “I trust that you have found your stay comfortable, despite the surrounding circumstances?”

“The formality really isn’t necessary, dear. But I suppose there truly isn’t much point in saying that to you, or asking that you simply call me ‘Lila’.” The woman shook her head lightly. “And yes, it has been more than comfortable, thank you very much. This is a beautiful home you have here. I can tell that a lot of history is housed within these walls.”

“Indeed, this estate has been in my family for many generations,” Scarlett said.

“I am aware.” Lady Withersworth’s gaze moved down to her tea. “It’s well-maintained, much like our estate in Autumnwell used to be. And there is something quite unique about this place.” She paused to sip her tea before adding, “My husband mentioned that Warley, the knave, had told him about a rather curious garden you have here. I presume it’s the one out there, hmm? Supposedly it blooms throughout the year, unaffected by the seasons.”

Scarlett glanced out the window at the garden. From here, the snow-covered hedges at its border blocked one from seeing the flourishing vegetation at its heart. “That is true, yes.”

“How delightful that must be. I would love to see it during my stay if possible,” Lady Withersworth said.

“That should not be an issue. Feel free to do so at your leisure.”

The woman smiled appreciatively as she continued sipping her tea. “How sweet of you, dear.”

Scarlett returned her focus to her, observing her quietly.

“Is there something on your mind, dear?” Lady Withersworth asked after a few seconds, catching Scarlett’s gaze.

“No, I was simply surprised,” Scarlett replied. “You seem to be in good condition, in spite of what happened.”

She’d heard that the woman’s injuries were mostly treatable, but recovery could still be slow given her age. Moreover, with her home in Autumnwell half-destroyed and her husband staying in the city to deal with things there, she had been effectively stranded in Freybrook by herself, with only a couple of servants joining her.

Lady Withersworth’s smile waned ever-so-slightly as she set her teacup down. Suddenly, her previously relaxed features seemed to bear the weight of many years, a light sigh leaving her. “Truthfully, I am exhausted. Every waking moment is filled with concern for my husband, our children, and everyone else impacted by these tumultuous events. But as you know, dear, women like us cannot always afford to let concerns like those show.”

Scarlett nodded in understanding, picking up her own cup of tea. “That is a sentiment that I can understand,” she said, tasting the tea and finding it perfectly brewed to her preference. Had Garside even bothered adjusting its temperature with pyrokinesis? After a few more sips, she set the cup down and turned her attention back to Lady Withersworth. “Now, if I may ask, what is it that you wanted to talk to me about?”

The old woman’s smile reappeared, seeming to mask her earlier weariness. “Why, I wanted to express my gratitude, of course. For your hospitality in generously allowing me to stay here, among other things.”

“I hardly did much. If you wish to thank someone, you should extend your gratitude to Evelyne.”

The woman waved her hand. “Oh, I already have, both on my own behalf and on behalf of my husband, as well as everyone that brave girl helped at our estate. However, I believe you also deserve our acknowledgment. You can call me old-fashioned and superstitious, but I feel that fate and fortune play a role in everything, and it is partly thanks to you that we are alive to tell our story.”

Scarlett shifted slightly in her seat, leaning her hand on the couch’s armrest. Was it ironic that Lady Withersworth should bring up fate in front of her, of all people? Considering Scarlett’s own manipulations might have inadvertently affected or even escalated the Cabal’s choice to attack when they did, it was entirely possible that she was part of the *cause* that they nearly died.

Pushing aside those thoughts, Scarlett cleared her throat. “Speaking of your husband, what are his plans following the attacks?”

“His immediate concern is likely to visit our lands and ensure their safety, but we didn’t have much time to discuss specifics before I left yesterday,” the woman said, shaking her head. “Knowing that dogged nature of his, I suspect he’ll be reaching out to his old acquaintances

and getting involved in the capital's response to this crisis. Many will surely welcome his involvement, but the incessant fool won't have any hairs left on his head by the time his overworking leaves me a widow."

"That seems rather extreme. Even in his previous duties as Lord Marshal, they should not have involved managing such emergencies, should they?"

"I'm afraid you might be underestimating the stubbornness of my husband, dear. He has a habit of involving himself in matters well beyond his remit, and there are many, even among high nobles, who would not ignore his counsel if he chose to intervene. It is quite likely that he will sway some opinions on the current political disputes."

Scarlett wasn't expecting that response. Although she was aware that the Withersworths were pretty well-connected, she hadn't realized they had *that* kind of pull. They were just a barony like hers, after all.

"What about you, dear?" Lady Withersworth asked.

"What do you mean?" Scarlett replied.

"When your sister stayed with us in Autumnwell, I took the chance to properly get to know her and hear more about those projects she was working on," the older woman said, a twinkle of intrigue in her eyes. "It appears the Hartford barony has been more foresightful than most others, dedicating significant resources to prepare for a disaster like the ones we are facing. While it's commendable that you're using the means available to you to aid others, I'm curious if there is perhaps some particular objective that you have in mind?"

Scarlett met her gaze, pausing before responding. "No, there is not. At the very least not tied to the relief initiatives managed by Evelyne. For now, we will simply be collaborating with groups such as the Followers to provide our aid where necessary, and we will expand those efforts where possible. However, we do not have any grand ambitions. The impact a small barony like ours can make is inherently limited, even though we have invested substantially in this endeavour."

A contemplative expression appeared on Lady Withersworth's face. "I had planned to introduce your sister to some individuals who could have supported this project, but that was before the attacks. Unfortunately, with everyone's current focus being on this crisis, I believe it will be much more difficult to achieve the same result now."

"That is understandable. Nonetheless, we appreciate the intention," Scarlett said. "We will proceed with the resources and opportunities available to us, though I do not expect our reach to extend much further than that."

This was mostly Evelyne's project, anyway. Scarlett wasn't sure how to expand it beyond its current scope.

The other woman's gaze lingered thoughtfully, an almost smile playing on her lips. "Then what do you say about me perhaps assisting you, dear?"

Scarlett blinked. "...Pardon?"

“Believe it or not, I doubt even I could convince that doting husband of mine to let me return to Autumnwell until I’ve fully recovered, which leaves me with little else to do but fret endlessly.” Lady Withersworth lifted her teacup again. “That simply won’t do, especially not with the empire seemingly up in flames, from demonic castles one week to monster hordes the next. I need a worthwhile diversion, and this project of yours seems like an excellent opportunity.”

She tapped her finger against her cup, now giving Scarlett an almost conspiratorial look. “And avoid sharing this with my husband, but truthfully, I had started to find my current lifestyle somewhat drab, and I sometimes find myself missing the thrilling days of noble intrigue from my younger days, tiring as they were. While this isn’t exactly in the same realm, I believe this endeavour might still provide a withering woman like myself ample opportunity to leverage some of my old connections.”

Scarlett hesitated, uncertain how to respond. “And what would you expect in return for offering such assistance?” she eventually asked.

At that, Lady Withersworth gave a light scoff, as if offended. “Dear, by now I hope you know me well enough to understand that I am not some old miser. I have ample reasons to help without needing compensation. Furthermore, it’s the duty of the older generation to share our wisdom with today’s youth for the benefit of all, and it would hardly benefit my dignity if I started making demands of the family who has saved mine on no less than three occasions. I must admit, I would be rather disappointed if you were to decline my offer.”

Scarlett considered the woman for a moment.

It was true that having her support *could* be incredibly beneficial, but it was unusual for nobles to offer such direct help without any existing familial ties or formal alliances. The idea of accepting such an unconventional proposal actually made her slightly uncomfortable. But she also recognized that she shouldn’t let her emotions cloud her judgement in these matters. She’d allowed them to do enough of that yesterday with Evelyne.

“Very well,” she eventually conceded. “We would deeply appreciate any help you can provide.” She frowned slightly, considering the best way this could be approached. “However, you will need a thorough briefing on our current efforts to be effective. I am not best suited to provide that. Evelyne would be far more ideal for that task, but she should not be involving herself in these affairs until she has fully recovered.”

She’d heard from Garside that just their short meeting the day before had taken a lot out of Evelyne, and she’d slept most of the day after it.

Would it be enough to just show Lady Withersworth all the documentation and then have the seneschal provide her with any additional details?

Lady Withersworth studied Scarlett, her finger tracing the rim of her teacup. “Although I fear it’s not my place to say this, dear, I can’t help but notice that there seems to be some tension between you and your sister.”

Scarlett paused. “...perhaps I should not be surprised that this fact did not escape you.”

The woman chuckled softly. “One does not reach my age without learning to read people, although discerning the dynamic between you two hardly required such skills. I won’t claim to understand the history between you two, but from what your sister shared with me, it’s clear she holds a great deal of respect for you. Judging by your words, it sounds as though the feeling is at least partly mutual.”

A small scowl found its way onto Scarlett’s brow at the mere notion that she *respected* Evelyne, but she managed to suppress the brewing emotions inside. It was true, at least in part. She did hold Evelyne’s abilities and dedication in high regard, even though the more irrational parts of her protested.

“Our relationship is...complex,” she admitted. “But I strive to ensure this does not impact our duties or the affairs of the barony.”

“That in itself is commendable, dear,” Lady Withersworth said. “Sibling rivalries are not uncommon, and I have personally seen far too many nobles let such conflicts lead to decisions so foolish that it boggles the mind. I do hope that nothing of the sort ever befalls any of you. Perhaps it’s too intrusive, and if so you can feel free to say no, but may I ask what caused this rift between you?”

Scarlett’s expression tightened slightly at the question, but she valued the older woman’s opinion too much to say anything that might offend her. She stayed silent for a while before finally responding. “By now, it is mostly forgotten history.”

Literally.

Feeling the shift of the conversation, Scarlett began to rise from her seat. “I must attend to other matters now, but I will ensure that all relevant documents are prepared for you to review, and I will arrange for our seneschal to provide you a detailed briefing. We can discuss further details afterward. Also, while you are here, do take care not to overexert yourself. If you are looking for a peaceful spot, the garden is ideal for relaxation as well. Garside will be happy to show you the way whenever you wish.”

Lady Withersworth watched her prepare to leave, not offering any objections while extending her farewells for the moment.

Once Scarlett was out of the room, she immediately headed back towards her office, intending to occupy her thoughts with work before she went out to the training grounds later for practice. It did feel ever-so-slightly like she’d escaped there, but that was probably for the best.