

## 232: Leads and updates

A cavalcade of elemental forces unfolded before Scarlett as she channeled her mana into her magic. In front of her, fiery whirls of concentrated flames burst into existence, only to be quenched by cascading vortexes of water. These vortexes would envelop the flames, dousing them in a dramatic clash of opposing forces that resulted in towering columns of steam. Every other second, a new fire ignited, only to be extinguished moments later in a continuous cycle that would likely convince any spectators to stay away for fear of getting caught in it.

Sitting just beyond the range of the chaotic fray, Scarlett's brow was heavy with sweat from the intense focus required to suppress this onslaught.

"I'll be increasing the difficulty again," a voice announced from the side.

Suddenly, the emerging fires intensified, dwarfing the torrents of water forming in an attempt to contain them. The air filled with the hiss and roar of evaporating water as Scarlett's magic succumbed to the flames, and she was forced to yield under the staggering pressure. Overwhelmed, she sagged in her seat as the last of her hold waned, the remaining water currents before her that hadn't been swallowed by the flames dwindling away. The fires died down not long after.

"Huh. Seems you're not quite ready for this level," the voice remarked nonchalantly, only a hint of disappointment present in it.

Tiredly wiping her face with a handkerchief, Scarlett turned to face Arlene, who sat casually on the porch in front of her house in Freymeadow, glancing up from the book and at Scarlett. There was no sign of weariness at all on the woman from having conjured up that inferno just now.

"I was already straining to contain the flames before you chose to make it more challenging," Scarlett retorted with a mix of fatigue and exasperation. "Did you truly expect me to manage over double the intensity?"

"No, but it would have been a rather pleasant surprise, wouldn't it?" Arlene responded dryly, her eyes returning to her book. "Unfortunately, life's not always pleasant, it seems. We'll try again after you've rested."

Scarlett sighed, turning away to survey the quiet village square in front of her, disorderly as it was from the display just now. As always, Arlene didn't hold any punches in teaching her. While that was probably a good thing, she sometimes wished it didn't have to feel as frustrating as it did.

Leaning back in her chair, she brought a flask to quench her thirst, the water soothing her parched throat. Using her magic like this always made her thirsty, and that went double when enduring Freymeadow's broiling summer sun and Arlene's over-the-top magic.

Lately, the woman had been concentrating more on improving Scarlett's hydrokinesis, pitting the skill against her own fire in simulated 'combat' scenarios. It was most definitely a challenge on Scarlett's part, but she would also admit that it was a very valuable experience

in fighting against mages, even *when* Arlene's mastery overshadowed her by leagues and bounds.

Though if she were to believe Arlene's words, that gap was being bridged faster than Scarlett herself was even aware.

Her gaze drifted across the village, observing the simple houses surrounding the square and spotting some of the residents going about their lives. More often than not, they didn't bother questioning any of her activities here, choosing to focus on their own affairs instead.

Not that any of what they were working on would ever amount to anything. Scarlett didn't envy their ignorance of the truth of their existences, but she supposed that, considering their situation, there was an understated beauty to being unaware of the broader reality.

Being able to just forget and take things easy didn't sound all bad to her sometimes. Although she supposed she'd had it pretty calm lately.

In the outside world, a week had passed since Godwin's visit to the mansion in Freybrook. During that time, she hadn't done *too* much, mostly just practiced her magic and explored a couple of dungeons in nearby cities. The actual time that had passed for her was closer to two weeks because of her visits to Freymeadow, but that didn't alter her overall routine to a significant degree.

She cast a thoughtful glance in Arlene's direction, studying the woman.

This Arlene was different from the one whom she had previously given the [Eternal Flameweaver's Athame (Divine)]. That loop had already ended, begetting another after it and yet another after that.

Despite her initial concerns, the reset this time had done little to change their relationship. Where before she'd been the one to present the [Eternal Flameweaver's Athame] to Arlene; now, at each loop's start, the woman already had it in her possession, along with some new rationale to explain the anomaly, yet she still generously allowed Scarlett to use it during training sessions.

A fact Scarlett very much appreciated. It was what helped her persevere through the training, and why she only felt *half-dead* right now, despite it nearing afternoon and her having spent the entire afternoon rigorously practicing her pyrokinesis. Rosa had originally joined her for a while, but the bard left to run about with the village kids after having exhausted her mana.

Simply sitting still for a while, resting, Scarlett let her mind wander.

Frankly, the recent period of relative calm on her end felt somewhat off when one considered the current situation. The empire was embroiled in so many conflicts and mysteries at the moment—from the Hallowed Cabal and the Tribe of Sin's looming assaults to the turmoil wrought on the empire's faction by Anguish's citadel, as well as the first princess' disappearance and the existence of a potential player—so Scarlett's return to the mundane routine of dungeon delving and magic training *was* kind of weird.

But it wasn't as if it was unwelcome to have a temporary reprieve from most threats. After all, there were no Cabal agents bothering her about her encounter with Nol'viz, no inquisitions from the Followers besieging her home for colluding with demons, and no research-crazed mages intruding to get at all her secrets. It was just her dealing with her own stuff for the time being.

Still, she wouldn't say no to at least *some* action amidst all the calm. There were several ongoing investigations being conducted on her behalf at the moment, and she was simply awaiting outcomes that could allow her to get some things done. Unfortunately, she'd already done everything in her power in those processes, and the rest was up to fate.

Figuratively.

"That should be an adequate amount of rest, I believe," Arlene declared after a number of minutes had passed.

A reluctant scowl formed on Scarlett's face. She disagreed with that statement, but she had learned it was generally better to go with the flow.

Shelving any distractions for now, she refocused on the village square as new fires manifested before her. Back to the grind it was.



Scarlett was seated in the carriage along with Fynn and Rosa as it wound its way through the gates of the Freybrook estate, rolling along the snow-dusted gravel road towards the mansion.

The recent visits to Freymeadow had settled into a pattern of intense training and honing her magical skills, but not much of particular interest happened during them. She'd visited the sequestered village enough times that it had become part of the new normal. By this point, she didn't even always bring along Shin and Allyssa on these trips unless there was a specific reason for their presence.

Upon the carriage's arrival in front of the courtyard, Scarlett, along with Rosa and Fynn, disembarked from the vehicle. After they entered the mansion, Scarlett parted ways with her companions and headed to her office.

En route, she was intercepted by Garside, who informed her that Evelyne would be out for the evening to meet with Count Knottley, apparently to discuss some of the measures she was taking along with the relief efforts.

Hearing that surprised Scarlett slightly. Interactions with the Count were rare for both her and Evelyne, and he wasn't exactly her biggest fan. But she supposed the same didn't go for Evelyne, so perhaps he wouldn't mind meeting her now and then. If Evelyne thought a

meeting with the man would help what she was working on, Scarlett didn't see much reason to interfere.

Leaving that aside for now, she continued to her office, settling in behind her desk and retrieving several objects and books from her [Pouch of Holding].

She paused as she took out the small bluebird carving on a marble base that she used to communicate with Beldon Tyndall. A subtle flicker of white light on its base caught her attention.

It seemed like the man had something to tell her.

Extending her senses through the Loci, she made sure the vicinity around her office was clear before activating the artifact. She pressed a concealed switch on its bottom, which caused a gentle glow to radiate from the marble, accompanied by a soft static reminiscent of old phones. Soon, though, the noise transitioned to a clear, distinct voice.

"Who knows the paths unseen?" it demanded, with a straightforward tone.

"The paths unseen are known to the silent watchers," Scarlett replied.

A brief silence ensued before there was a click on the other end, and the light from the artifact faded.

Scarlett didn't mind as she reached for a book on her desk, choosing to browse through its pages while she waited. This wasn't the first time she'd had this exchange. The subterfuge felt a bit exaggerated for her tastes, but it was very much Beldon's style. In a way, it fit his role as the leader of a covert information organization.

Time passed, and about thirty minutes later, the artifact resumed its glow. Scarlett set aside her book, shifting her focus back to the carved bluebird.

"Baroness," came Beldon's voice from the object. "You'll have to forgive the delay. I was occupied with pressing matters, you see."

"There is no need for apologies, Tyndall," Scarlett said. "I have no expectations that you will always be at my beck and call. I am accustomed to waiting when necessary."

"Yes, I'm quite aware of your understanding nature. But it would be a poor showing of me if I didn't at least pretend to be sorry, don't you think?"

"...I suppose." She shook her head. "Moving on, I understand that you sought to speak with me. Have you progressed in the investigations I assigned?"

"In part," Beldon confirmed. "Though the reliability of the information is yet to be fully assessed, I thought it pertinent to bring it to your attention. You seemed rather invested in the outcome of this matter from the outset, after all. That said, even assuming the intelligence is accurate, my operatives have reached an impasse of sorts."

"An impasse?"

“An impasse. You see, while I’d like to say that there are no places on this continent beyond my people’s reach, reality proves otherwise. This particular investigation has presented a unique challenge, making it difficult to proceed with the request.”

“Do not dally. Say what you have to say.”

The man’s chuckle faintly transmitted through the artifact. “I am afraid that the leads we’ve pursued have taken us to a location beyond our capabilities to investigate any further, halting our progress.”

Scarlett frowned. “Which request does this concern?”

“It pertains to your request in determining the fate of that noble called Delmont.”

Scarlett’s expression darkened. “...So you are saying there is no way of proceeding further in the investigation?”

“Not on my end, regrettable as it is,” Beldon replied. “But that doesn’t mean all avenues are closed. In fact, this might be a situation where you can get involved directly and achieve much more than I could.”

Scarlett considered it for a moment. What places would Beldon have trouble finding any information in?

“Elaborate,” she said.

The man’s tone shifted to one of intrigue. “Tell me, Baroness. Have you ever ventured to the Rising Isle?”