

266: Ugh, politics

Deacon Solnate excused herself from Scarlett's side and strode towards the large table at the center of the Forum, taking her seat among the assembled figures. Meanwhile, Scarlett's gaze wandered to the raised galleries lining the edges of the vast chamber, spotting Lady Withersworth and making her way towards her.

As she walked, she studied the central table and its occupants more closely. Lord Withersworth and Deacon Solnate were far from the only prominent individuals there. The large circular table hosted an array of powerful nobles, high-ranking officials, and other figures holding important positions within the empire's factions. From her understanding, they would be responsible for much of the discussion and debate tonight.

A fact she certainly didn't mind if it meant less for her to do here. From what she'd heard, the conclave could drag on for many hours, a prospect she did not relish. She wanted nothing but to return to the warmth of the mansion and sleep right now.

At least she could comfort herself with only being an observer for the proceedings. It was unlikely she would be called upon to speak at length, and there weren't any matters she particularly wanted to bring up at an event like this.

Upon reaching the galleries, she ascended to the level where Lady Withersworth sat and threaded her way past other guests until she reached the woman, who had reserved a seat to her right. Lady Valentino occupied the chair on Lady Withersworth's left.

"Welcome back, my dear," Lady Withersworth greeted with a warm, maternal smile, patting the open seat beside her. Once Scarlett settled in, the woman leaned in conspiratorially. "So, did that deacon have anything intriguing to tell you?" she asked in a hushed, playful tone that didn't quite match her age.

"She was curious about some of my recent collaborations with her fellow clergy," Scarlett replied in a measured voice. "I have assisted the Followers in reclaiming several valuable relics of late, and that had apparently piqued the interest of certain members of the Quorum."

That was actually pretty close to the truth.

A light chuckle escaped Lady Withersworth as she sat back. "Others will no doubt have noticed your arrival alongside a deacon. I wonder what kinds of rumors that will fuel."

Scarlett stifled a tired sigh. While she did expect that, she hoped Deacon Solnate was telling the truth when she claimed most of the Quorum was too preoccupied to dwell on her existence much.

Well, even if that wasn't the case, there was no use fretting over it at this precise moment. Scarlett redirected her attention to scrutinise the figures seated around the large central table.

"Were you aware that your husband would already be present?" she asked, her gaze falling on Lord Withersworth's disgruntled expression as he occupied one of the high-backed velvet chairs. Even from this distance, he looked tired.

“No, but it’s not entirely unexpected,” Lady Withersworth replied, raising a finger to indicate some of the individuals near her husband. “Those to his right are High Treasurer Fitzroy and Chancellor of Trade Hayhurst. And the man to his left is the former Imperial Steward, Sebastiano Langdon, accompanied by Count Stansfield. No doubt they and many others have been working behind the scenes extensively with my husband these past two weeks.”

Scarlett studied their faces thoughtfully. Working on what, she wondered?

She was far from an expert, but she knew the empire’s politics could range from byzantine to relatively straightforward depending on the times. Historically, permanent factions were rare, with more fluid, temporary coalitions often forming around shared interests or objectives.

From her research and discussions with Beldon, most of the nobles Lady Withersworth identified tended to remain neutral arbiters, which in the empire essentially meant you were a loyalist faithful to the crown and establishment. While not an organised faction per se, the loyalist mindset pervaded much of the aristocracy here to varying degrees, and the imperial nobility overall demonstrated a pretty strong sense of patriotism.

Scarlett supposed that included her as well, in a way.

She did spot some influential figures around the central table who she knew were part of more defined factions, such as Count Hayden of Kilsfell and Duchess Swail of Silverborough. Both were key members of the growing coalition aiming to capitalise upon the recent attacks as a catalyst to push for swift, dramatic changes across the empire and the rights granted to certain nobles.

Her sight drifted past the central table to the far end of the spacious chamber, where an ornate grand staircase led up to a pair of large, opulent doors adorned with vivid crimson tapestries and gilded accents. At the foot of those stairs, a solitary figure in black-and-gold plate armor stood rigidly at guard, his steady gaze fixed forward.

Leon.

He looked unchanged from their last encounter, but she wondered how he had been doing lately. Not that she cared *too* much for the man’s well-being, but he had no doubt seen considerable fighting these last few months, the last two weeks in particular. She was just curious if that had tempered his skills any further. In the game, his growth rate had been pretty fast.

...Was it heartless of her to focus solely on pragmatic considerations like that? She didn’t think it was too bad herself. If anything, it was a necessary byproduct of her circumstances.

That said, it was probably best not to let others hear her say anything of the like. She and Leon *were* still technically betrothed, after all, even if they had been in talks to annul that.

Somehow, Leon seemed to sense her scrutinising gaze, his eyes flicking up to meet hers across the chamber. They held that shared glance for a moment before he refocused on his duty, and not long after, the reverberating blare of a trumpet abruptly echoed through the hall.

A tall man dressed in rich, imperial garbs that Scarlett recognised as the royal herald stood atop the stairs, grasping an ornate staff while a liveried servant holding a ceremonial trumpet waited beside him. The herald slammed his staff against the floor with an echoing boom.

“His Majesty, Gartelnas Articius Verddun Teronia!” he proclaimed in a rich, commanding tone. “Ittar’s chosen light makes his entrance!”

All eyes turned towards the large doors as they swung open with a resonant creak, the murmurs of the assembled nobles and dignitaries hushing in anticipation as a small group of people exited.

Leading the procession were two members of the Royal Guard, resplendent in their elegant white armor inlaid with gold, their dragon-crested helms glinting under the light. Next was the emperor himself, clad in intricate gold and crimson robes that trailed behind his regal, measured steps. A neatly trimmed beard framed his features, while wavy blond locks topped his head beneath an ornate golden crown inlaid with three large gemstones.

The crown prince followed closely, accompanied by the Imperial Advisor, with one final Royal Guard bringing up the rear.

Scarlett felt the familiar flutter of awe and reverence at the imperial family’s presence, her pulse quickening slightly as she tracked the emperor’s progress down the stairs. Eventually, though, she tore her gaze from him to briefly regard the two figures trailing behind.

The crown prince cut an odd figure compared to his stately father, dressed in a uniform blending red and blue with golden pauldrons and bracers. But Scarlett’s attention quickly passed over him to the woman beside the prince — Evelia Blackwood, the ‘Imperial Advisor’, resplendent in a form-fitting violet gown textured like dragon scales, clutching a long silver staff in one hand with her raven tresses cascading in luxurious waves down her back.

Even amongst royalty and the emperor himself, the advisor’s presence commanded notice. Scarlett might have imagined it at this distance, but she thought she saw the woman’s eyes flick briefly in her direction, accompanied by the faintest of smiles.

The emperor reached the raised dais at the head of the central table and took his place upon his throne beneath the watchful gazes of the entire chamber. The crown prince claimed a seat to his right, while the Imperial Advisor settled at his left, the three Royal Guards arraying themselves in vigilant formation behind them.

The royal herald once again slammed his staff against the floor with another resounding boom. “His Majesty, Emperor Gartelnas, graces us with his presence to convene this most critical conclave. By his command, let all matters of urgency and state be brought forth, as we strive together to safeguard our empire and restore prosperity to our lands.”

A heavy silence descended over the hushed chamber as the emperor surveyed those assembled before him with an inscrutable expression. Finally, he addressed the gathered nobles and officials in a calm yet resolute voice.

“Esteemed nobles, honored dignitaries, and loyal servants of the Graenal Empire, I welcome you all here.” His commanding words resonated through the chamber.

“Tonight, we gather under the shadow of great adversity, as our beloved homeland is under relentless attack and many of our cities lie in states of ruin unseen for generations. Our people suffer shortages of food and essential supplies, and the very fabric of our realm is strained.” He paused briefly to let those words sink in before continuing. “However, it is in times of trial that the true spirit of our empire shines brightest, as demonstrated by our ancestors countless times before. Let us approach these discussions with the same courage and clarity they once did, ensuring our decisions today reflect the strength of our unity and our commitment to defending our realm. For the future of this land, the welfare of our people, and the honour of our forebears, let the deliberations begin. May the light of dawn guide our path.”

The emperor raised his left hand.

The Imperial Advisor, Evelia Blackwood, nodded her head, and a crystal atop her silver staff lit up. Above the central table’s map of the empire, various lights and markers appeared. Some regions, like the eastern provinces, were highlighted more than others, while the Freybrook area remained relatively empty.

“Your Imperial Majesty, esteemed lords, and honored guests. I will now present you a general overview of the situation facing our empire.”

The woman went on to provide an abridged report on the repeated incursions suffered from the Tribe of Sin starting roughly six months ago, which had drained resources and caused damage in key regions, but were mostly contained through the cooperation of the empire’s forces and independent actors like the Shields Guild.

She also mentioned the manifestation of Anguish’s citadel near Bridgespell a month ago, which was ‘resolved by Duke Valentino’s local forces’ along with the timely intervention of the Dawnbringers.

Finally, she went into detail about the monster attacks that began two weeks ago, causing widespread destruction and devastation across the empire and in select cities, further straining defences and resources in dealing with the repeated monster incursions since then. The Tribe of Sin was believed to be responsible, though their forces’ presence had notably diminished since then.

After her account, there was some light murmuring and discussions among the people present. While the information itself shouldn’t be much of a surprise to those here, the woman’s magic helped provide a clear overview of their current circumstances and the affected locations on the map.

“Thank you, Lady Blackwood,” the emperor said after a while, motioning towards a large-framed man seated further down the table. “Now that we are all apprised of the overall conditions, I would like my officials to update us on the details of our situation. Lord Graeme, if you would start.”

The man, the Imperial General, lowered his head in acknowledgment. “Certainly, Your Majesty.” He straightened, a steadfast expression on his face. “Two weeks ago, our forces were caught off guard by the massive wave of simultaneous monster attacks that struck all major cities. But despite the initial shock, many local leaders and garrisons reacted swiftly, regrouping to mount commendable defences that were instrumental in preventing even greater losses.

“Since then, we have reorganised our forces, concentrating them on critical strategic locations while dispersing smaller units to counteract the repeated monster incursions that have begun to affect smaller settlements. However, our army is currently spread thin, as we must continuously deploy troops across the empire to combat increasingly unpredictable attacks. We have fortified the perimeters around the cities that faced the most destruction, while working in extensive collaboration with the Shields Guild and the knight orders to patrol vulnerable regions.

“There is a concern that our current approach leaves our border defences near Wildscar understaffed, especially near Wildscar and the Everdust Barrier, where reports suggest that the Undead Council and other threats from the Unresting Steppes have begun showing concerning movements.”

Scarlett observed impassively as the general droned on, delving deeper into the shortages the imperial forces were facing and the estimated threats. When he finished, the Chancellor of Trade was up, reporting on the current state of the empire’s supply routes and warehouses, the measures underway to secure and restore crippled routes, and the plans for food and supply distribution. A succession of similar reports from other imperial offices followed before prominent nobles and dignitaries were called upon to provide firsthand accounts from their domains and relevant areas.

Those summoned included figures seated at the central table, like Duke Valentino and Deacon Solnate, but some were also beckoned down from the galleries to share information. One such person was Count Knottley, whom Scarlett had spotted briefly during the banquet but hadn’t spoken to herself. After a litany of speakers had given their accounts, the royal herald’s booming voice announced the floor open for all those present to express themselves freely.

Instantly, a susurrus of murmurs rippled through the vast chamber. As a few individuals stood to speak, their voices were amplified by whatever magic had carried the emperor and other people’s voices earlier.

“Your Imperial Majesty, esteemed peers,” a count called out from the galleries. “While I applaud the swift actions thus far, it should be clear to all that our current measures remain insufficient to secure our lands against these relentless threats.” He paused, eyes sweeping the assembly. “I believe we can no longer afford a solely reactive stance. The imperial forces and knight orders, valorous though their efforts may be, have proven unable to respond with the swiftness and effectiveness required to handle the localised perils each province faces, as already detailed by the Imperial General and others. This is not a question of loyalty or courage, but one of practicality and logistical reality.”

Scarlett folded her arms as she leaned back in her seat. She’d expected someone to bring something like this up eventually.

“The Imperial Security Edict may have allowed us to alleviate some of these pressures, but tales of beleaguered lords left defenceless during the past fortnight are widespread,” the man continued. “As such, I propose that each lord of their respective territory, for the duration of this crisis, be granted greater autonomy in establishing and drafting forces from the common folk, as well as procuring the other necessary resources required to effectively protect their lands. The safety and stability of our empire must be our foremost priority.”

A swell of mutterings greeted his proposal, though Scarlett doubted many were surprised. The empire’s military was highly centralised under the emperor, and it was basically only high nobles who could maintain large private forces in order to protect the major cities, and even those ultimately answered to the imperial family. Officially, most nobles relied solely on small, elite personal retinues rarely exceeding a hundred for conflicts, otherwise requiring aid from knight orders or groups like the Shields Guild. Drafting commoners into levies was a wartime privilege, and those levies themselves also fell under the imperial army’s authority.

It didn’t exactly come as a shock that some nobles would take any opportunity they could to chip away at that power structure.

“Are you mad?” a man across the galleries had risen, his voice also carrying through the vaulted chamber. “This is not the time to be looking at laws and needless bureaucratic wrangling! And there are reasons you cannot simply commandeer whoever and whatever you wish in your lands to feed your own greed!” He seemed to glare down the count who had spoken. “There are those who tried in the past, and they were no better than thieves!”

Even from this distance, Scarlett could tell that the count’s face flushed. “You would call me a thief?” he spat. “Hah, how naïve of the current circumstances you must be. Have you witnessed the devastation around Ambercrest these last two weeks? In the city and its surrounding fiefs, nearly a quarter of the peasantry has already fled in fear or to find food for their starving children, leaving the lords bereft of both the people and resources to properly protect those who remain. An issue easily prevented if they could impose curfews, draft laborers to fortify and muster defences, and not solely rely on the overtaxed imperial forces and other actors to maintain order! To brand a lord safeguarding his people through any means in this crisis a *thief* is ludicrous!”

The debate quickly escalated, with more standing to voice their stance. Scarlett wasn’t sure who was moderating and controlling the magic that amplified people’s voices, but they seemed intent on ensuring each side roughly had equal time.

Mostly, the discussion remained focused on the nobles’ inability to defend their lands against these monster incursions, and how the current framework actively prevented them from mobilising their populations against the threats. Opponents warned how such ‘freedoms’ often came at the cost of the very people many nobles claimed to protect, and that already established organisations—some of whose members were speaking—existed to combat threats like these. Even if they were spread thin presently, inexperienced nobles mobilising common folk would hardly make up for that. Instead, they should collaborate to better establish logistics for transferring resources from those settlements that had them to those in need while ensuring those with the ability to protect received full support.

Scarlett saw some validity in both arguments, though she cared little either way. The empire’s inner politics didn’t matter much to her, and she had no plans on conscripting the few souls

who lived in her territory anyhow, nor had she much to gain by doing so. Besides, this debate was still mostly posturing from what she could tell, with the leaders on both sides not having raised their voices.

Eventually, after several heated rounds of arguing to which the emperor and those at the central table merely listened, an unfamiliar, well-dressed noble rose in the galleries and was soon given the floor.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen,” he said, as if placating the masses. “It’s all well and good that we discuss how to properly distribute and allocate resources and treat those in our lands, but it feels as if we are overlooking one of the most glaring issues these past weeks have revealed. It is almost as if you are too afraid to broach it. I am not, however, nor do I believe I am the only one to have considered the eerie accuracy with which some of the attacks recently have been carried out, *and* how certain figures have acted.”

He went quiet for a moment, as if allowing for a dramatic pause while adjusting his silk cravat. Scarlett wasn’t sure how effective it was. The man felt a bit too much like a rat to her, if not in appearance.

“I speak, of course, of the rumors that have been prevalent among many circles lately. Of the likelihood that there are individuals within this empire, perhaps even this very room, who have collaborated with or indirectly benefited from the Tribe of Sin’s and these monsters’ savage attacks in ways befitting no loyal subject of the empire.”

A sudden silence fell over the chamber, with only some hushed whispers audible near Scarlett.

“Oh, Baron Ogden, you gullible fool,” Lady Withersworth spoke quietly beside her. “You always allow yourself to be used too easily.”

Soon, as if unleashing a floodgate, several impassioned cries erupted around the Forum. People yelled and gesticulated, some appearing genuinely enraged that this ‘Baron Ogden’ dared make such a brazen public claim based on unsubstantiated rumors. Most had probably heard some variety of them at this point, but the imperial nobility was very particular about never appearing disloyal in public spaces.

Baron Ogden himself seemed unprepared for the intensity of the response aimed at him, awkwardly standing in place for a bit. Still, there were those who defended his words, shouting that there was nothing wrong about exposing those who would betray the empire.

Unlike before, no single voice was chosen to speak above the rest, leading the chamber to be flooded by a swelling cacophony of cries. Scarlett rubbed her throbbing temple, wondering why the man two seats down couldn’t shut up about his Bridgespell mansion’s damage being sabotage.

She didn’t care, and she’d torch whoever did.

Finally, to her relief, the emperor raised a hand, and the air above the center table burst with faint lights and sonorous chimes that immediately quieted the crowd. Beside him, the Imperial Advisor Blackwood lowered her glowing staff.

“Calm, everyone,” the emperor’s steady voice rang out. “We are here to promote discussion, not fight each other.”

Silence reigned for a brief while until, eventually, one of the central table’s occupants rose. All eyes were drawn to the severe-looking man, who had a neatly-trimmed beard and a hawkish gaze.

That was Hanwyn Roscoe, the Duke of Darkshore.

“First off,” the man began, his voice projecting clearly. “I would like to commend Baron Ogden for the bravery of his statement, even if his words may have been somewhat excessive and misguided. But it’s clear that they came from a place of good intent, and as shown by the heated discussion that followed, his concern is one shared by many here tonight. And while I wish I could say it is unfounded, can we claim that with certainty? We need only look to Ambercrest and Count Soames’ recently unveiled crimes to see that we cannot.”

“Count Soames was revealed to have been collaborating with demonic cults making offerings to the Viles, Duke Roscoe, but not the Tribe of Sin,” another man at the table, the Imperial Chamberlain of Justice, interjected. “The man may be a loathsome sinner and a betrayer to all of man, but that is a separate matter.”

“But we cannot know that, can we?” The duke spread his hands. “The Tribe is savage and cruel in their depravities. Like the cowards they are, it would not surprise me if they made pacts with demons in their efforts to overthrow us. Did you not find it convenient that one of the Vile’s own citadels appeared so close to when these latest attacks began? It is almost as if planned.”

Scarlett frowned as whispers moved through the chamber, many seeming to agree with the man.

“Dear, I believe you should prepare yourself,” Lady Withersworth said quietly beside her.

Scarlett shot her a questioning look.

“I agree,” another voice spoke up, and Scarlett’s attention snapped back to the center of the chamber, where Count Hayden had now stood up. “The Citadel incident’s timing is suspicious. That it was allowed to occur at all could almost be considered treason. I have also recently learned a fact related to it that sows further doubt surrounding its circumstances.” His gaze swept over the galleries. “The Citadel’s appearance occurred right next to a village called Crowcairn, which was revealed to have been a hidden Tribe Enclave.”

Shocked gasps erupted from many of those assembled, and Scarlett’s frown deepened.

Count Hayden turned towards Duke Valentino, seated not far away from him. “Tonight, many have praised Duke Valentino’s efforts in resolving the situation when the Citadel manifested. But I fear this achievement is tarnished by learning he was aware of this Enclave’s presence and purposefully attempted to suppress that information. I do not wish to make baseless accusations, but that is certainly suspicious, is it not? Perhaps we should hear more from the person involved himself?”

Duke Valentino met the man's gaze with a dark scowl. Before he could respond, however, another noble spoke up — a minor baroness that Scarlett recognised as being under Marquis Delmon, Leon's father.

“That is not all,” the woman said, for some reason being given the word. “I have also heard Duke Valentino was not the only noble present tonight involved in those happenings, and thus, likely not the only one aware of the Tribe's Enclave. It also appears Baroness Scarlett Hartford was engaged in what happened there.”

Some eyes turned towards Scarlett, others showing confusion about why a mere baroness just got dragged into this play.

Scarlett herself couldn't help but mirror Duke Valentino's dark expression.

Someone had just ruined her evening, and she wasn't about to let that go lightly.