

## 253: Sibling affections

With the wave of her hand, Scarlett ignited several candles around the room, casting light on the figure lying on the bed.

Evelyne peered up at Scarlett, slight surprise showing in her eyes. "...Scarlett?"

A scowl darkened Scarlett's face as she regarded the woman.

Evelyne's face was partially obscured by a thick bandage, extending over the upper part of her shoulder and left arm, which was set in a sling. The bandages also seemed to continue beneath the bedcovers, suggesting the injuries were even more severe than they looked. Her complexion was pale as well, her skin glistening with sweat.

The anger simmering inside Scarlett intensified as she watched the younger Hartford sister grimace, struggling to sit upright and lean against the headboard behind her.

"...Have you had yourself treated properly yet?" Scarlett's question came out harsher than she'd intended.

Prominent lines showed between Evelyne's eyebrows. "I, eh...yes, I think a healer looked at me earlier."

"You 'think'?"

"I wasn't fully conscious, but I'm fairly sure."

Scarlett's eyes drifted to a small table beside the bed, cluttered with rolled bandages and other medical tools. Were they talking about an actual magical healer or simply your conventional physician? Injuries like these usually required immediate attention for magic to work most effectively, and Scarlett wasn't sure how quickly Evelyne had been treated.

Perhaps Rosa could provide some help. The bard was a pretty capable healer. If not, Scarlett also had connections to Raimond, who might be one of the most powerful healers in the empire.

Returning her focus to Evelyne, Scarlett's glower eased into a frown as she scrutinized the woman.

"...Why did you allow yourself to reach this state?" she found herself asking.

The question seemed to momentarily stump Evelyne, who paused for a few seconds before looking away. "It's not like *I chose* to get hurt," she murmured faintly.

"What exactly happened?" Scarlett demanded.

"...I was caught by a monster. I'm not sure of its kind, but the Withersworths and I were trying to make it to safety when these portals suddenly unleashed several monsters on us. One of them, like a huge bear, targeted me specifically," Evelyne explained, her uninjured hand

clenching the sheets. “By that time I’d already killed one like it, so I didn’t have the mana to deal with another. Lord Withersworth and I managed to kill most of the other monsters, but that one... I didn’t know what to do, so I had the others escape while I distracted it.”

“You intended to *sacrifice* yourself?” Scarlett’s voice was sharp.

“I was trying to buy time,” Evelyne replied, gesturing weakly to her bandages. “Clearly, it wasn’t enough. I only injured the monster, and I might not have survived if some knights hadn’t shown up to help.”

Scarlett observed her quietly, arms crossed. “I warned you such dangers were brewing in the empire. Had you listened, you would not have placed yourself in such a perilous situation.”

She realized that her words were both harsh and unreasonable. Borderline hypocritical, even, considering she’d *known* Evelyne would be leaving Freybrook for Autumnwell and hadn’t given any objections.

But right now, nevermind acting *reasonable*, she could barely keep herself from going out to storm the Hallowed Cabal’s headquarters.

Evelyne turned to face her again, mouth open in slight disbelief. “...How could I have known it would happen now? Your ‘warning’ was as vague as they come. And what, was I supposed to seclude myself here in the mansion? Let’s not forget that I’m effectively managing the whole barony, as well as all these other projects you’ve assigned me. And if I hadn’t been there in Autumnwell, then Lord and Lady Withersworth might both have—”

The woman’s sentence was cut short by a sudden bout of coughing, her features contorting in pain.

“Do not strain yourself unnecessarily,” Scarlett said, her tone laced with annoyance that she was trying to rein back as she waited for the coughing to subside.

Her mood had been bad ever since she first received news of Evelyne’s condition, and it had only darkened upon seeing the woman in such a state. Maybe the worst part, though, was that she couldn’t even pinpoint the exact root of her frustrations.

Was it fear of losing her ‘sister’, or anger at the Cabal for harming her ‘family’? Or was there even a shred of familial affection in these emotions? What if it was more twisted than that? What if she was just upset because something of ‘hers’ had been damaged? Historically, she couldn’t think of a single point when she felt something that could clearly be defined as warmth towards Evelyne.

The visceral loathing and dislike that had surged through her upon first encountering Evelyne in this world hadn’t magically disappeared. Scarlett thought she had been managing it pretty well lately, and it *might* have lessened in intensity, but without a doubt, it still remained, and it made it almost impossible for her to decipher her current feelings.

When Evelyne’s coughing ceased, she looked up at Scarlett, hesitating as if she had more to say, but then averted her gaze, her eyes scanning the room absentmindedly. “...Just to

confirm,” she eventually began, “these attacks *were* the incoming disaster you were expecting, right?”

Scarlett nodded slowly. “They were.”

“And I assume the Tribe of Sin is behind this?”

“That is correct.”

A brief silence fell over the room as the woman seemed to mull over that. Scarlett’s own gaze began to wander, considering the space. It was her first time visiting Evelyne’s quarters, but there wasn’t much to see. The younger woman didn’t seem to be fond of decorating—

Her eyes stopped on a large portrait partially hidden behind a closet. It showed a family of three in a grand room: a man in his forties with short, dark-red hair and warm amber eyes, exuding a gentle aura, his hand resting on a young girl’s shoulder. Beside him, a woman appeared slightly younger, with soft features and long brown hair cascading past her shoulders. The girl in front of them, with shorter auburn hair and matching amber eyes, smiled broadly, a small beauty mark under her right lip.

As Scarlett’s focus moved from the girl to the woman, and then to the man, a tumult of discomfoting emotions roiled within her, her fists clenching unconsciously.

Seeming to notice Scarlett’s reaction, Evelyne spoke. “Ah, sorry, Scarlett. I know you don’t like having paintings of father or mother displayed in the mansion, but I thought—”

“Take it down,” Scarlett said, surprising even herself as she turned to face Evelyne.

Evelyn blinked. She looked at her for several seconds. “...No.”

A cold fury ignited in Scarlett’s eyes. She tried to keep it down, since she *knew*, logically, that her reaction was irrational, but controlling it proved difficult.

“That was not a suggestion,” she stated flatly.

Evelyne’s expression hardened as she met Scarlett’s icy stare. “I’m not taking it down.”

The tension in the room mounted as they eyed each other, the silence hanging between them. Finally, Scarlett was the one to look away, her gaze shifting to a window overlooking the estate’s eastern wall.

“...I have directed Garside to coordinate with Seneschal Kinsley, ensuring all the necessary preparations are underway for the relief initiatives,” she stated, her voice detached as she observed the snow-draped treetops outside. “He will oversee the operations while you are indisposed. I trust everything is set to proceed, despite the premature timing of these attacks?”

In her peripheral, Evelyne’s demeanour seemed to soften slightly, slumping back in the bed. “Yes, everything is mostly in place. Kinsley should know what to do for now. We’ll be needing either me or you to handle some of the more important parts eventually, though,

since we'll be relying on the cooperation of several nobles and other key figures. I'll focus on my recovery so I can get back to work."

"I have no expectations of you in your current condition," Scarlett said.

"...What's that supposed to mean?"

Scarlett turned back to her. That had come out worse than she'd meant it to, but she could hardly admit that. "It would be prudent to wait until you are not confined to a bed before resuming your duties."

"Then are you planning to handle these responsibilities yourself?" Evelyne asked.

Scarlett was silent for a moment before responding. "I will manage what I can."

Evelyne's skeptical look mirrored Scarlett's own doubts on the matter. She had very little true experience with the administrative side of running the barony and everything related to it, as well as the networking aspects that Evelyne had mostly been handling. She was also uncertain how she would even make the time.

"What about your commitments on the Rising Isle?" Evelyne continued. She paused briefly, seeming to think of something. "Actually, what happened to that? Did you come here straight from the Isle through the Kilnstone? When you left, it seemed important — I wasn't expecting you to be back so soon, even with what's happening."

"I did return immediately via Kilnstone, yes," Scarlett said. "And while matters on the Rising Isle are indeed vital for my goals, they will have to wait until we stabilize things here. That includes ensuring your recovery, so expect to have more people evaluating your condition. I will arrange for Miss Hale to visit after we conclude our talk."

"But I told you a healer had already looked at me."

"Miss Hale's ability is almost guaranteed to surpass theirs."

"Really?" Evelyne's eyebrows rose, apparently not familiar with that side of Rosa's capabilities. "...Well, alright."

The room fell silent once more, and Scarlett simply observed the other woman while doing what she could to not let her confused emotions control her. Evelyne, meanwhile, appeared lost in thought, staring at her hand while chewing lightly on her lip.

"What are you going to do from here?" Evelyne eventually asked, looking back up at Scarlett. "Now that the empire is under attack, I mean. What are your plans? What's going to happen?"

"It depends," Scarlett said.

"Depends on what?"

"On the extent of the tribe of Sin's actions."

Scarlett had issued some vague, general warnings and advice to individuals like Beldon and Godwin, both of whom were pretty influential, so that might help mitigate the threat in the long run. However, given that the Cabal could diverge from fate, it was also possible that things would turn out worse than she expected. It was hard to tell for sure.

“How far *can* the Tribe take things?” Evelyne asked.

“I do not know. They are and always have been a significant threat, and it is likely they will continue to launch attacks similar to yesterday’s.”

Their primary limitations were how often they could create so many portals and how quickly they could muster more monsters for those assaults, and those had been cyclical events in the game.

Evelyne’s brows pulled closer together. “What can we do against that?”

“Defend ourselves,” Scarlett said. “The empire is well-versed in conflicts with the Tribe by this point, so that should not be something new.”

“This time we’re not fighting just the Tribe, but hordes of monsters,” Evelyne replied. “I don’t even understand how they’ve managed to amass and control so many of them to begin with. It’s completely unprecedented.”

“Not completely, no. Eight years ago, the attack by the dragon of devastation resulting in what we now call the Blasted Lands was the same.”

Evelyne looked at her in slight disbelief, pushing some of her hair away from her right eye. “You’re saying the Tribe was behind that?”

Scarlett nodded. “They were.”

While technically it was the Hallowed Cabal, the distinction hardly mattered. Back then, the Cabal had also wielded the [Ring of Depravity], and the dragon of devastation’s attack against the empire was something of a trial run of the artifact. It had shown that the ring could influence even an ancient dragon, which was among the most powerful creatures alive, so controlling a horde of monsters was definitely within the realm of possibility. Though the actual mechanics were more complex, and had several caveats, the outcome still spoke for itself.

A look of concern crossed Evelyne’s face as she seemed to search Scarlett’s expression. “What should we do, then? You’ve... You’ve seen what happens, right, Scarlett? You must have some idea how to stop this.”

Scarlett frowned. “We have already had this conversation. There is no stopping this. I have made that clear.”

“But we need some kind of response—”

“—The relief effort initiatives *are* my response,” Scarlett interjected, cutting Evelyne off. “That is what we *can* do, and I only agreed to those to ease your acceptance of the reality.

The Tribe's ambitions extend far beyond mere skirmishes with the empire. My focus is on thwarting their broader objectives, not engaging in futile battles that are not my place to get involved with. Do not ask me to do more than I already am. I cannot achieve the impossible."

She was still grappling with what she should do about the Cabal and her feelings about Evelyne's injuries, but she didn't want to make any rash decisions that would hinder her future plans just because she got angry.

Even though that degree of restraint felt *really* challenging right now.

Evelyne seemed poised to argue with her on the matter, but stopped, looking down for a moment. "I didn't mean to ask for more than you can handle. It's just that, seeing the chaos in Autumnwell and imagining it elsewhere across the empire... How can I stand by and not do absolutely everything in my power to prevent it? I understand that you might not have cared before, but you've changed now, haven't you? You're not the same Scarlett I used to know. Surely, you must feel *something* about all the suffering that's happening."

Scarlett's controlled demeanour cracked, and she stared at Evelyne in a fierce glare. "You do *not* know me, Evelyne, nor have you ever done so, so do not presume that I share your sentimentalities simply because I have been more lenient recently. No matter how callous it pains me, the plight of faceless others has never moved me as it does you, and that will not change, regardless of whatever impact you believe my changes have brought. I suggest you temper your expectations of who I am as a person, or it will only lead us both to disappointment."

"I-I'm not trying to argue with you, Scarlett." Evelyne shook her head. "But you can't tell me that you *haven't* changed."

"Whether I have changed or not is irrelevant," Scarlett said. She wasn't sure why the woman's statement riled her up so, but it did. "What is pertinent are the unrealistic expectations you seem to impose upon me because of it."

"It's not as if I'm comparing you to a saint. I don't understand why you have to be so confrontational about everything."

"Because I find your presence more than simply displeasing, and it requires all of my current effort to even attempt treating you with the dignity and respect you seem to want from me."

The moment those words left Scarlett's mouth, she knew it was a bad idea. Evelyne froze, looking at her with widened eyes for several seconds. Finally, she spoke in a smaller voice. "What did I ever do for you to hate me so...?"

Scarlett was silent for a while, watching her. "...I do not know."

Flickers of hurt confusion crossed Evelyne's face.

Scarlett turned and began to walk towards the exit, deliberately avoiding looking at the closet beside the closet to not agitate herself even further. "This was not what I intended to discuss when I came here, so I will take my leave. I will disregard whatever was said here, and I

suggest you do the same.” She paused at the door for a moment, one hand on the handle. “...I will have Miss Hale visit you shortly. Do not be a fool and overexert yourself.”

With that, she left, stopping just outside in the hallway to shake her head at her own lapse in control. It almost felt like she had regressed to the times when she was newly arrived in this world and struggled to manage her reactions around Evelyne.

She didn't even think she had a legitimate reason to be angry this time. Much of what she'd said just now had neither come out the way she wanted or intended, but apologies weren't really an option for her. The best thing to do was probably to wait until these volatile emotions settled down before even attempting to interact more with Evelyne.

Hopefully, that wouldn't take too long. She seriously disliked being at the mercy of feelings and instincts she neither fully understood nor could control. She almost pitied the original for whatever past had caused her to end up this way.

Releasing a deep, pent-up breath, she resumed her walk down the hallway, heading towards her office. Some day, she needed to find out the background for this twisted 'sister' relationship, if only to give herself some peace of mind. For now, however, all she could do was cope.

Although she wouldn't say no to something to take out her anger on at the moment.