

## 98: Sisterly talk

Later, after Gaven and the Countess' visit, Scarlett was waiting in front of her desk in the office. A knock came from the door and Molly entered the room, performing a low curtsy.

"My Lady called?"

"Yes." Scarlett put aside an old ledger she'd been going through that detailed the room and chambers in the mansion. She had asked Marlon for it earlier since it bore accounts of what they were currently used for, and consequently, what they weren't used for. "There is something important I wish to discuss with you."

She fixed her eyes on the woman before her. "Know that this is a very sensitive matter. It is imperative that you do not speak of this to anyone else. That includes Garside, Marlon, or any of the other staff here in the mansion. Is that understood?"

The look on Molly's face grew uncertain, but she slowly nodded her head. "I understand, my Lady. I won't say a word of it to anyone."

Scarlett studied her for a few seconds. Her previous experiences with the servant were positive enough, so she didn't feel it likely that the woman would break her word. Just to be safe, though, she'd get Fynn's help later on to confirm the woman wasn't lying. She had done the same thing for all the staff after the Hallowed Cabal attacked the mansion, to ensure there were no spies or the like among them.

"For the time being, there will be a guest residing here in the east wing. Their circumstances, however, do not allow for much interaction with others. They are particularly sensitive to their environment, so during their stay I will have you aid them and ensure their needs are met with no further complications. You are being assigned this task because you have proved yourself both attentive and capable, and I do not wish to leave this individual's handling to someone unqualified."

Molly looked at her for a time, as if she was digesting the meaning behind those words.

"...Are they dangerous, my Lady?"

"As long as you do not agitate or excessively bother them, there should be no issue," Scarlett replied. "I will hand you a list of what to do and what to avoid in their presence. For the most of their stay, I believe they can be left to their own devices, so this should not occupy too much of your time. I will also ensure that you receive appropriate compensation if you were to shoulder this responsibility."

"That won't be necessary, my Lady, but thank you for the consideration." The woman performed another short curtsy. "I am your faithful servant, so it is only right that I carry out your commands. I will take care of this guest for as long as they remain here in the mansion."

"The compensation was up for discussion, but good. I will introduce you to the guest later today. Until then, you may return to your normal duties."

"As you wish," the woman said and left the room.

Scarlett looked back at the papers on her desk. She'd spent the last few hours trying to figure out exactly how to go about things after realizing she would have to take care of the Countess herself. One issue had been just finding suitable accommodations.

There was plenty of room in the mansion, but considering the Countess' unique situation, Scarlett didn't exactly want other people running into the woman. That meant the west wing—where most of the staff stayed—wasn't an option, nor was the central part of the mansion where the reception hall and most other public spaces were. Which left only the east wing.

There *was* less traffic here in this part of the mansion, but it wasn't as if she could keep the place empty all of the time. Fynn, for example, would definitely notice the Countess' presence. He probably already had the first time Gaven had arrived with the woman. Luckily, a few words would probably be enough for Fynn to leave her alone, so he in particular shouldn't be an issue. Other people still were, though.

Scarlett had narrowed down the feasible options to either the cellar, where there wasn't much happening to begin with, or an older guest chamber on the top floor. The Countess probably wouldn't complain about staying in the cellar—and it would definitely make it easier to keep her hidden—but it wasn't exactly the most humane of accommodations. Which meant Scarlett would need to have the guest chamber prepared as quickly as possible instead. Hopefully Molly could manage that on her own. Or perhaps Fynn could help.

What was most important, however, was that the woman would be able to take care of the Countess without any problems occurring. It'd be a pain if there was an incident where someone got injured or more of the mansion got destroyed.

Of course, if the woman's presence here wasn't going to cause other issues further down the line, there were also other things to take into consideration. The most important one, though, was simply keeping it as much of a secret as possible. Any other issues could hopefully be dealt with as they happened.

Returning to the other subject Scarlett was focusing on at the moment, she continued for a while until another knock suddenly sounded out from the other end of the office.

"Enter," she said as she looked up from a couple of legal papers she'd been taking notes from.

Evelyne stepped into the room, closing the door behind her.

"Oh?" Scarlett placed the papers on the side of her desk. "I thought you would not arrive until evening."

"I finished my business in the city earlier than expected," Evelyne said. She walked over and took a seat in front of Scarlett's desk.

"I see. Have you had the opportunity to inspect the accommodations I had prepared for you, then? I hope they are satisfactory."

“Well, they’re my old rooms, so I don’t know if it’s much to see. Things have changed, but it’s enough just being able to stay there for now.”

Evelyne trailed off, and Scarlett studied her for a moment. She felt like she’d grown out her hair lately. The light-brown locks, with shades of red to them, had previously reached the woman’s nape—and were only just about the right length to partially cover her right eye—but now they were starting to reach down towards her shoulders. Was she too busy to even have it cut at the moment? Things had been calmer around the barony lately, though, hadn’t they? Maybe she just wanted to grow it out?

“...Scarlett,” the woman began.

Scarlett was pulled out of her ruminations, waiting for Evelyne to continue. A hint of annoyance bubbled up seeing the woman hesitate with her words, but she forcefully pushed those feelings down. There wasn’t anything wrong with being uncertain about things now and then.

She shook her head as she tried to move her mind onto another track of thought. “Was there anything in particular you wanted to discuss with me?”

Evelyne eyed her for a few seconds longer, then nodded. “Yes, there are a couple of things.”

“Then please, elaborate.”

“First of all...” Evelyne leaned her arms on the desk in front of her. “Did you know Leon Delmon visited me while I was in the capital?”

Scarlett raised an eyebrow. “No, I did not. When exactly was this?”

“A few weeks back, not too long after you left.”

“What was this visit about?”

“I’m not sure. He said he wanted to meet you, but he didn’t stay long after I told him you had already left for Freybrook.”

Scarlett leaned back in her chair. “And was there a reason as to why you chose to not inform me of this over letter?”

“He didn’t leave any message to pass on,” Evelyne said. She met Scarlett’s eyes. “And I didn’t think we needed to damage our relationship with the Delmons more than we already have.”

“...You have grown quite bold, haven’t you? Declaring that in front of me.” Oddly enough, it only made Scarlett *slightly* more annoyed than she already was.

“Am I wrong?” Evelyne asked.

Scarlett rested an elbow on her armrest. “I do not know what further relationships there are to damage with them.”

The woman gave her a long look, then let out a sigh. “That’s true. You know they recently backed out of a business deal we had with them over in Steepmond regarding the transportation and exchange of the coming years’ harvests? I don’t think we’ll have much luck over there in the future, but Windgrove is too far away by carriage and we’ll never find a suitable partner that’s available here in Freybrook. We might have to start looking at some of the trade routes further inland if we want to make sure we’ve got somewhere to sell Stillshire’s and the other villages’ produce.”

“I suppose that is to be expected.” Scarlett nodded along. Stillshire was one of the villages that were part of the barony, that much she knew. What she didn’t know was how much this would affect their house. “Do you deem this to be an issue we need to prioritize?”

“No, I think we’ll be fine.” Evelyne brushed away some of the hair from her face, revealing part of her amber eyes. “Prices had already been declining on that front for a while, after Voneia started increasing tariffs across the border. We might even be able to find a better deal because of this. It’s just that it’ll take a lot of work, and the margins are already low on what the villages produce. But if we *don’t* do anything about it, our tenants won’t have anywhere to sell their harvest. Worst-case scenario, we would have to buy it off them directly. It probably wouldn’t affect us too much at first, considering the money we’re starting to make at the moment, but it would still be a waste. And definitely not sustainable in the long run.”

“That does sound bothersome,” Scarlett said. And she wasn’t just being phatic. That actually *did* sound annoying.

“It’s not like it’ll be you doing it,” Evelyne said, a hint of exasperation in her voice.

Scarlett let the remark go, giving a quick shrug of her shoulder. It was true enough. “Returning to the previous topic, did Leon not give any hint whatsoever as to what he wished to speak with me about?”

“No, not from what I can remember. But I think he might have plans to visit again.”

“Hmm. Then I suppose it has something to do with the annulment.”

Evelyne stared at her. “The what?”

Scarlett met her eyes. “The annulment of the engagement between Leon and me.”

The woman blinked. “Since when has this been a thing? Why didn’t you tell me about this?”

“I assumed you were aware. Were you not talking about the Delmons cutting their ties with us mere seconds ago?”

“I never heard about this, though! How am I supposed to, if you don’t tell me about it?” Evelyne shook her head. “I’m not saying I wasn’t expecting for the engagement to be annulled, but these are the sorts of things it would be good if I knew about... And why are you so calm about it? I thought you would be livid when this happened.”

“I do not see why I would care,” Scarlett said. “I am not losing much under the current circumstances. The Delmons would not be of much aid to my goals, and there have never been any strong feelings between Leon and me. In fact, them raising the matter first makes things easier for me.”

Now she wasn't the one who 'offending' the other family by pulling out of the engagement. Although, it would be a lie to say she didn't care *at all*. There *was* a speck of irritation at being shown this kind of disrespect by the Delmons. But she could ignore this level of pettiness, at the very least.

“Are you sure?” Evelyne asked.

It seemed her composure in this situation still surprised the woman.

“I would not say so if I was not.”

“...Alright.”

Scarlett eyed the woman for a moment. “What more was there you wished to discuss?”

“Oh, right.” Evelyne's expression turned more focused. “You know that the Tyndalls are holding their annual ball in Windgrove next month, don't you?”

“I was not aware, no.”

“Really? Then, you haven't received an invite?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

Evelyne leaned forward in her seat, hands clasped on the desk. “I was expecting that, in a way. Duke Tyndall might still feel offended by your actions during the Elysian Proclamation.”

Scarlett thought back to the man in question. If she remembered correctly, he had been just before her in pledging his fealty during the Proclamation. Having her follow him up *would* leave an impression.

“Did you receive an invitation?” she asked Evelyne.

The woman showed an awkward smile. “I did. Not sure why, even. It could be that they're trying to denigrate your name even further by showing that they're favoring your technical heir. Our poor relationship isn't exactly a secret.”

Scarlett frowned. “That seems like an excessive amount of effort for a duke against a mere baroness.”

“You used to do the same thing, didn't you? Spend weeks just deciding who and what people to invite when you held your banquets?”

She paused. “...Perhaps I did.”

“...You don’t remember?” Evelyne asked.

“No, my recollections on the topic are faint. It does indeed sound like something I would do, however.”

The woman gave her a long look, then shook her head. “Alright. Regardless, that’s not what I wanted to ask.”

“I suppose you are curious whether I would allow you to go or not?”

“Allow?” Evelyne shot her a look. “I don’t think you speak for whether I decide to go.”

Scarlett observed her for a few seconds. “...I misspoke. What I meant was if you were curious if I wished for you to go, or if it would conflict with any of my aims in some manner.”

The woman’s gaze calmed down, a hint of embarrassment showing on her face. “Yes...That’s what I wanted to ask. If you have those...revelations. Memories, or whatever... You should know if it’s worth for me to go or not, right?”

“That is not how it works. The knowledge I possess is far from detailed regarding matters like this, nor is it particularly reliable when it comes to events I have already affected with my previous actions. You would most likely be more suited to determine that in this situation. I have not kept myself informed of the current state of affairs in those circles due to other priorities.”

“Really...?” The younger woman seemed to think about it for a moment. “Then... It would definitely be bad for your image if I attended. It might affect your legitimacy in other people’s eyes, though I’m not sure how much you even care about that anymore. I can say that it would probably be better for the barony as a whole, at the very least. There are a lot of powerful people attending that I can try to foster connections with, and they might be more willing to work with me if they think I’m in a better standing than you.”

“There you have it,” Scarlett said. “If you believe it to be better for the barony if you go, then do so. I do not mind what others think of me, as long as it does not cause disproportionate harm to the affairs of me or those around me.”

Even if she *had* been invited, she didn’t feel especially inclined to go herself. Attending another large ball for the empire’s nobility just sounded like a pain. The last one had been far from an enjoyable experience, even discounting the fact that everybody had purposefully snubbed her all evening.

“Are you serious?” Evelyne asked.

“I am. Could it be that you do not wish to go as well?”

“No, it’s not that.” The woman shook her head. “It’s just that, if things continue like this, it might affect how people treat you more than you think in the future. I know you’ve been focusing on other things, but...even if the barony is fine, are you *really* okay with that?”

Scarlett studied her. “Do you think it would be better if I attended as well, then?”

Evelyne knitted her brows. “Well, yes, of course. That would be the best solution. It would show people that your situation isn’t as bad as it appears if you’re still getting invited to events like this one. But that’s not an option at the moment.”

Scarlett lowered her arm, tapping a finger against the armrest. Going *would* be a pain, but if it really strengthened her position, it might still be worth it. And with Evelyne’s help this time, she might manage to avoid offending people again. There was a month of preparation as well.

“...It is possible that I might be able to procure an invitation, if that is the case.”

“What?”

“I am acquainted with Beldon Tyndall, the second son of Duke Tyndall. Recently I exchanged letters with him and he has mentioned wishing to meet with me again more than once. If it would be beneficial for us, I could most likely convince him to arrange another invitation for me.”

Beldon didn’t strike her as the kind of man that feared his father’s ire, so persuading him shouldn’t be a problem. If he said no, she still had a few tidbits of information she could trade in for a favor.

Evelyne was giving her a disbelieving look. “You actually know Beldon Tyndall?”

She nodded. “I became familiar with him during our stay in Elystead.”

Evelyne seemed to consider her words for a moment. “Would he really be able to get you an invitation, though? If his father specifically chose not to invite you, it might be hard for him to do anything.”

“I do not believe that will pose an issue for Beldon.”

“...Alright. Then, sure. Do that.”

“Very well. I shall.” Scarlett lowered her gaze to the papers on the desk. “With that out of the way, was there anything else you wished to discuss?”

“No, that was it.”

She reached out to pick up a pile of documents that had been put on the edge of the desk. She held them out towards Evelyne. “These are the documents you left with me. I have read through them and there was nothing to call attention to. You may continue as you have with the fiefs’ management.”

The woman received the papers with an uncertain look. “You read through these in the past two days?”

“I did, yes.”

“Why?”

Scarlett tilted her head to the side. “Was that not your intention in handing them to me?”

“Well, yes, but...” Evelyne eyed her for a moment. “...Nevermind. I don’t know why I’m still surprised. As long as you don’t have any complaints, it’s fine.”

She placed the documents on her lap.

“Before you leave,” Scarlett said, “There was something I wanted to bring up with you. It might be pertinent, considering you will be staying here at the mansion for a period.”

“What is it?”

“It is nothing especially notable, but for the coming weeks, I will be hosting a guest on the upper floor here in the east wing. I merely wished to inform you of that, and make you aware that their presence is not to be disclosed to anyone, nor are they to be disturbed in any way.”

Evelyne narrowed her eyes. “Who is it?”

“I cannot say.”

“...Don’t tell me you’re up to the same kinds of things as with the Grey Dog Gang again.”

“I am not. However, the circumstances of this guest are rather unique, and I have to take this into consideration while allowing them to stay here.”

Evelyne gave her a long look. “You promised you would be honest about things like this to me.”

“That is true. But I am afraid this is an exception. It is a complicated matter and the details are not mine to share, nor does it pertain to our house or any of our affairs. You knowing of it would not make a difference.”

“...If you say so.” Evelyne seemed to let out a small sigh. “I’ll make sure to avoid that part of the mansion, then. Not that I usually move about there, anyway.”

“Thank you.” Scarlett gave a short nod.

Even telling Evelyne this much wasn’t necessary. But considering she had been pretty bad at sharing things with the woman lately, she thought it prudent to try and better herself on that front where she could. It’d be detrimental to their relationship if Evelyne accidentally found out about the Countess by herself and then proceeded to question Scarlett on the subject.

Of course, it was also for the sake of the Countess. Considering the woman’s state, Scarlett wanted to ensure there weren’t any unexpected events during her stay here, and Evelyne was the only person who wasn’t directly under Scarlett’s authority who ran a risk of running into her. Removing minor hazards like these was the last thing she could do for the Countess, given how much the woman would be helping.



Although...

Scarlett observed Evelyne for a moment. This reminded her of something she had been curious about.

“Perhaps...” she began, trying to think of how to put this. “No, rather... There is one more thing I wish to inquire about.”

“What’s that?” Evelyne asked.

“Say I were to grow less...stable,” Scarlett said. “If my mental faculties were to be...compromised, to a state where I would no longer be fit to remain as the head of the house... Moreso than I currently am.” The words left an unpleasant taste in her mouth. “What would you do then?”

Evelyne met her eyes. “...You mean what I would do with you?”

“Assuming you were placed at the head of the house instead and had to choose what to make of me, yes. What would be the common way of handling such a scenario?”

The woman frowned. “...It probably varies a lot. Some families would probably try to cover it up, sequestering away a family member like that in a residence somewhere. Others might try to take care of them...maybe find some way to help them... I’m not sure what I would do, though.”

“How would those that do not belong to noble families act?”

“I don’t know. I imagine most wouldn’t have the resources to take care of someone like that, so it’s likely the person in question would end up on the street.”

“Are there no facilities whose goal is caring for such individuals?”

Evelyne gave her an odd look. “Maybe? I suppose there might be wards that focus on taking care of manic patients at some of the Follower’s hospices.”

Scarlett furrowed her brow. “I see...”

That...wasn’t exactly an option when it come to the Countess. Not least because there weren’t many places that could keep the woman against her will. The Countess’ situation was also a complicated one, as well as a tragic one.

In the game, there was no ‘happy ending’ for her. There was a whole questline with her as the focus, and even though it wasn’t as if she died by the end of it, she wasn’t miraculously ‘cured’ either. Her mental state wasn’t the consequence of some curse or anything like that. Presumably, she had just ended up like that as a result of her experiences. Even Scarlett didn’t know all the details leading up to it. But, considering how much she would be using the woman—she didn’t quite want to call it exploitation—she’d at least been wanting to find a way to help her after their business with each other was finished.

But what was there to be done? She'd been hoping there might be some form of experts in this world that could help, or maybe mental hospitals that had experience with these kinds of things. Proper hospitals. Not just asylums where people were 'hidden away' from the world at large.

But it might be that that was too much to ask for in a world like this. It'd be sad if the common way of dealing with problems like these was pretending like they didn't exist, but that was much how things had used to be back in her world, too. It might be worth looking into those hospices, at least. Maybe there was something to be found there, despite how it seemed.

Still, the chances weren't exactly high. But Scarlett had no idea what else could be done. She had never *dealt* with this kind of problem, so figuring out a solution felt far outside of her capabilities.

Should she just give up on it, maybe? The Countess had been able to survive as she was until now. It wasn't as if she was likely to die, at the very least. Scarlett didn't have any real emotional attachments to the woman, either.

She pinched the bridge of her nose as she closed her eyes.

Whatever. It was annoying to think about. Maybe something would show up in the future. Or things would work themselves out and she wouldn't have to bother. It wasn't as if she could fix every problem in the world. She could choose for herself what to care and not care about.

She turned her attention back to Evelyne. The woman held her gaze down at her hands, a thoughtful expression.

Soon, she looked up and locked eyes with Scarlett. "...Does this have anything to do with those revelations you have?" she asked. "You told me they've been affecting your memory, but that it could have been worse than that. Like with the Augur. You said she's not entirely sane because of her connection with Ittar."

Scarlett blinked. "...It might be somewhat related, yes. But there is no need to worry about that happening to me. I was merely asking on a whim."

"I didn't say I was worried."

"Then there is even less cause for concern."

Evelyne stared at her for a long while. "...You're sure there's no risk of that happening to you?"

"I am certain."

"...Okay. I'll trust that you're not lying," the woman almost muttered.

Scarlett shifted her attention to the clock on the desk as she felt that the air around them turned slightly awkward. She hadn't been meaning to *actually* bring up concerns regarding

her mental health here. “If there is nothing more you wish to bring up, then I believe we are finished here.”

Evelyne clasped her hands around the documents on her lap, then gave a slow nod. “Yeah, you’re right. I’ll come over later and give you a report I wrote up of who I think will attend the ball this time. It might be good for you if you want to prepare.”

“That would be helpful,” Scarlett said as the woman stood to leave.

“I’ll see you later, then.” Evelyne gave her one last look before leaving the room.

“Goodbye.”

The door to the office closed.