

## 277: Heated recaps

Scarlett's remaining time in Elystead passed in a relatively leisurely fashion, punctuated by only a few notable events. She accompanied Lady Withersworth on several trips, visiting the older noblewoman's acquaintances and her daughter at the Ustrum Assembly to strike some new connections for Scarlett. Beyond these outings, Scarlett busied herself with minor affairs until it was time to return home.

The journey back to Freybrook proper was quick and uneventful. Kilnstone travel had been reserved for the nobles and dignitaries who had attended the conclave, both to and from the capital, making it easy to arrange the trip.

As their carriage rolled through the estate gates of the Hartford mansion, Scarlett gazed out the window, observing the winter-bound landscape. Little had changed in Freybrook during their brief absence.

At the back of her mind, the Loci stirred, its nascent awareness seeming to welcome her return. Scarlett took a moment to borrow its senses, surveying the ground to ensure all was well before gently pushing the Loci's presence back into her subconscious.

After disembarking and entering the mansion's foyer, Scarlett bid her temporary farewells to her companions and made her way up the grand staircase. Her footsteps echoed in the empty hallways as she walked in the direction of Evelyne's quarters. Though things remained somewhat awkward between them, someone had to update Evelyne about the conclave's proceedings, and she supposed it was easier if she was that someone.

Pausing briefly before the oak door to the woman's room, Scarlett took a steadying breath, preparing herself. Then, with a soft knock, she pushed it open.

Like last time, the room was shrouded in dim light, heavy curtains drawn tightly across the windows. The pungent smell of disinfectant had faded, replaced by the subtle aroma of herbal remedies. As Scarlett's eyes adjusted to the gloom, she pointedly ignored the painting in the corner that seemed to demand her attention and kindled fires within. Instead, she focused on the bed, where Evelyne's figure lay motionless beneath the covers.

Bandages still partially obscured the woman's face, extending down over her left shoulder. Although Scarlett had been informed that the injuries were healing, the sight still fueled the anger inside.

Evelyne appeared to be asleep, but as Scarlett approached, she stirred. Her eyes flickered open, unfocused at first, before finally settling on Scarlett.

"...Scarlett?" she mumbled, her voice thick with sleep.

"Yes, it is me," Scarlett replied, keeping her tone neutral.

Evelyne blinked several times, seeming to process Scarlett's presence. Suddenly, her eyes widened in recognition. With a light grimace, she pushed herself up, leaning against the headboard. "What are you doing here?" she asked slowly. "I thought you left for Elystead?"

"I did, and I have now returned," Scarlett stated matter-of-factly, not really sure of the best way of circumventing the awkwardness that her visit carried with it. This was their first real conversation since Scarlett's return from the Rising Isle, and what had been said then had mostly been left unaddressed.

Scarlett also wasn't planning to address it today.

Surprise flickered across Evelyne's features. "Oh. I didn't realise that much time had passed..." Her gaze drifted downward, briefly examining the blankets covering her legs.

Another wave of anger surged within Scarlett at seeing the languid state Evelyne was in, directed both at the Hallowed Cabal for injuring the woman and, paradoxically, at Evelyne herself for allowing it to happen. Scarlett fought to quell those unreasonable emotions before speaking. "The conclave has concluded. I thought you might want to know the results of the proceedings."

Evelyne's expression as she looked up at her again carried both slight shock and something akin to gratitude. "You came here yourself to tell me that?"

"Yes."

"I... I appreciate that," Evelyne said, her voice softening. "Please, go on."

Scarlett nodded. "I will share the details I remember. The conclave covered numerous topics, from resource allocation to the distribution of manpower..."

She went on to provide Evelyne with a general overview of the less notable discussions that had taken place, including the various reports and minor agreements between lords and factions that had been made. Though Scarlett hadn't been able to keep track of it all during the actual proceedings, Lady Withersworth had later reviewed the details with her to ensure she was well-informed.

Despite seeming tired from recently having woken up, Evelyne listened attentively, occasionally interjecting with a question or two. Scarlett answered as best she could, though she suspected her responses weren't as thorough as Evelyne might have preferred. Still, keeping the woman updated would be good for when she eventually recovered enough to resume her duties in the barony.

After outlining the less pressing matters, Scarlett paused, her expression growing more serious. "While these topics hold some relevance to our barony, I believe it all pales in comparison to what I am about to share. In fact, this may have been the true purpose behind the conclave."

"What is it?" Evelyne asked, reaching for a glass of water on the nightstand beside her bed.

"The loyalists proposed a project called the 'Empyrean Barrier'," Scarlett explained. "It involves constructing a network of arrays across all imperial lands to prevent certain forms of advanced translocation magic, like that used by the Kilnstones and the Tribe of Sin. This would be invaluable in preventing the current monste attacks, but the costs are projected to be astronomical, and all are expected to contribute. It was, without exaggeration, the most contentious topic of the conclave, but His Majesty pushed it through nonetheless."

Evelyne's eyes widened again. "Seriously? The emperor went that far? I... I wouldn't have expected that, at least."

"Few did, I suspect," Scarlett said. As far as she knew, this was the first time this emperor had done something so controversial.

Evelyne studied Scarlett for a moment. "What do you think of this?"

Scarlett was quiet for a brief while, considering her response. "...I do not have a strong opinion on the matter." It was both a convenience and an inconvenience for her. "For the empire, I believe this is

one of the best courses of action that can be taken at the moment. It may also prove to be a surprising boon for our barony, depending on certain factors.”

“What do you mean?” Evelyne asked, leaning forward.

“The Empyrean Barrier will require several pylons to be constructed around imperial Kilnstones, which will act as anchors for the Barrier’s array,” Scarlett explained. “These pylons require both a substantial supply of mana and numerous near-priceless components, meaning much of the cost lies in them. Locations that can reduce those costs by even small margins will be prioritised. I have been informed by a reliable source that our estate will likely become a candidate for Freybrook’s pylon, which may mean several notable benefits for us due to the costs it could save the empire.”

A slight frown creased Evelyne’s brow. “Is that because of that Loci thing you have in the back garden?”

Scarlett nodded. “Exactly.”

“Can it handle becoming one of these...pylons? If this Empyrean Barrier is as extensive an array as you say, that’s going to require some serious power.”

“I believe it can,” Scarlett said.

Mistress probably wouldn’t have mentioned it if it couldn’t.

“Then...” Evelyne paused briefly. “...Are you okay with that? What does that mean will happen to this place? Will we be able to stay?”

Scarlett’s mouth thinned. “...I do not know. However, I am not certain we will have a choice.”

Nothing had been decided yet, so all of this was just hypothetical for the time being. It wasn’t even clear that the empire was aware Scarlett had something like the Loci, though it would likely come to some people’s attention once they started surveying Freybrook for suitable locations. When that time came, they would have to see what actually came with it all.

Though Scarlett wasn’t sure she would be willing to give up the mansion entirely, if that was what it came to.

“I guess you’re right,” Evelyne muttered, her shoulders sagging slightly. After a moment of silence, she spoke again. “Was there anything else that came up during the conclave, or was this all?”

Scarlett’s gaze lingered on the younger woman, taking in her bandaged form and the pallor that had settled into her complexion after days of bed rest. Should she share the part where she and Duke Valentino were brought up for questioning in front of the entire assembled conclave?

“There is nothing else of significance,” she finally said.

Frankly, it was probably easier to keep quiet about that particular incident for the time being. That was part of why she’d chosen to be the one to talk to Evelyne as well. The matter didn’t matter much now anyway, and she doubted Evelyne would approve of her plans to teach certain meddlesome nobles a slight lesson.

“Alright,” Evelyne replied, more of her exhaustion seeping into her voice. She leaned back against the headboard again, her eyes drifting closed. At least from her end, the earlier tension and awkwardness between them seemed to have dissipated somewhat. “I guess just this much is already enough to process. Beyond just the Tribe and Cabal’s attacks, it makes one wonder where the empire

will be in one year. At least I'll have plenty to think about while I'm stuck here. It feels like I'm sleeping most of the time, but when I'm not, being cooped up all the time gets to you."

"That is only to be expected," Scarlett said. She studied Evelyne for a moment longer, then turned towards the door. "I have said all I came to say. I will take my leave."

"...Wait," Evelyne called out quietly.

Scarlett turned back to see the woman had opened her eyes again and was now sitting up straighter in the bed, a hesitant expression on her face. "Scarlett...about last time..."

"You do not have to force yourself to bring that up," Scarlett interrupted.

"But I want to," Evelyne insisted.

Scarlett met her eyes with a stern look. "I do not."

Evelyne fell silent, watching her intently. "...Why?" she finally asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Scarlett remained motionless, her posture rigid as they regarded each other. The silence stretched between them again, almost heavy. "There are many reasons," she eventually answered, controlling her voice carefully. "But primarily, it is because there is much I do not know."

The original's past remained a mostly empty picture to her.

Confusion showed on Evelyne's face. "What do you mean?"

Scarlett held her gaze for a little longer, then extended her hand. With a subtle gesture, she activated the [Charm of Expedient Change], summoning a gold garnet ring onto her finger. The deep red stone on its face seemed to pulse with a faint, inner light. "Do you recognise this?" she asked, tone neutral.

### **[Hartford Garnet Ring (Unique)]**

{Blessed by an unknown power, this ring has been passed down through generations of the Hartford family, often worn by its head. There appears to be a slumbering flame burning within}

Even after more than a week, she had made no progress in figuring out how to use it.

Evelyne's lips parted slightly as she stared at the ring. "That's..." Her eyes flickered back to Scarlett. "I thought you'd thrown that away?"

"I had not," Scarlett replied. "It was left behind in a certain locked room within the library."

"Left behind?" Evelyne's brow furrowed. "Why are you saying that as if you don't know—" She paused, realisation dawning on her face as she studied Scarlett. "...Did you forget about *this* as well?"

Scarlett remained silent, irritation flaring at having to make even this much clear.

Evelyne watched her for a long moment, as if waiting for an answer that wouldn't come. Eventually, she let out a weary sigh, lifting her uninjured arm to point at the ring. "Do you know how to activate it?"

Scarlett frowned. What kind of question was that? She was fairly certain the original Scarlett *hadn't* known how to activate the ring, and Evelyne would likely have been aware of that fact if she thought Scarlett had thrown it away. So why even bother asking?

She knew Evelyne wasn't as culpable as the original in the current state of their relationship, but she also knew that Evelyne had believed the previous lord—their father—considered her more worthy. That likely meant *she'd* been entrusted with the ring's secrets.

Was she proud of that fact?

Whatever. It didn't matter. Scarlett hadn't brought out the ring for this purpose, anyway. It was to highlight another point, but now that didn't feel necessary anymore.

"I have no need of it," she said bluntly, turning to leave once more.

"Wha—" Evelyne's shocked voice sounded out. "Scarlett, wait!"

Scarlett continued walking until she reached the exit. There, she stopped, looking back at the woman.

Evelyne didn't speak immediately, uncertainty written on her features after Scarlett's reaction.

"What?" Scarlett asked, her tone cool and detached.

Evelyne chewed her lower lip, her fingers worrying the edge of the blanket.

"I am not giving it to you," Scarlett stated directly.

Evelyne tensed momentarily, then shook her head. "I wasn't even going to ask for it."

Scarlett's eyes narrowed, a hint of steel glinting in her gaze. "Then what is it?"

Evelyne better not ask what she thought she was about to ask.

There was a brief period of stillness before the woman spoke. "...Do you want me to teach you how to use it?"

"No." Scarlett's answer was immediate and final, leaving Evelyne staring at her in surprise. "I wish to make this clear. I do not want your help, Evelyne, for much the same reason these visits are difficult for me. That you still do not understand this demonstrates that you have yet to grasp both who I was and who I am now. I have no intention of bridging that gap any further than I already have."

She took a breath, gathering her thoughts.

The original Scarlett was a villainess. Unreasonable, conceited, callous, with a moral compass that pointed firmly towards self-interest. Her good qualities were few and far between. While Scarlett had no wish to embody those traits or excuse the woman's actions, she couldn't deny the complicated legacy she'd inherited.

This body, this life, even these tumultuous emotions — all belonged to Scarlett Hartford first. And while her respect for her predecessor was very limited, there were aspects of the woman's personality that Scarlett found herself drawn to, almost compelled to honour.

The [Hartford Garnet Ring] had laid heavy in her thoughts ever since she discovered it. A symbol of the Hartford family's head, yet one the original Scarlett had chosen to lock away.

As she'd delved deeper into trying to figure out its secrets, Scarlett had become more and more aware of the strange disconnect it presented — not just from the ring itself, but from the very name of Hartford. To the woman who came before, it had been more than a symbol of the head, carrying all these other heavy connotations.

The mere suggestion that Evelyne would be the one to unveil its secrets felt like more than a betrayal. It was an affront to the very essence of what the original considered it meant to be a Hartford.

Scarlett didn't blame Evelyne for not understanding this about her sister. It was admirable that the woman was making these attempts to connect and reconcile. But the hard truth was that they'd never truly been close. Even after Scarlett's arrival in this world, their relationship had never evolved beyond that of cordial business partners. Shared meals and discussions of baronial matters did little to bridge the chasm between them.

Scarlett hadn't realised until recently that she likely wouldn't be able to fix that while such large parts of *Scarlett's* past in this world remained blank.

For once, she also wasn't going to chalk all of her feelings up to some remnant of the original's personality or a quirk of the system that had brought her here. For once, there had come a topic where she just genuinely didn't want to fight against her predecessor's instincts.

Unlike their last encounter, where hurt and confusion had painted Evelyne's face after Scarlett's outburst, now the woman simply looked lost, as if struggling to process the logic in what Scarlett had told her.

Scarlett moved towards the door, her hand resting on the ornate handle. "Do not take this as a failure on your part," she said, her voice low and deliberate. "...And while my words from last time may have been harsh, I suggest you do not let them weigh too heavily on you. They were hardly spoken by a person worthy of listening to on matters like these. I am simply reminding you that there is a distance between us that casual conversation cannot overcome. That is all."

With a soft click, Scarlett opened the door and stepped into the hallway, leaving Evelyne alone in her room once more.