

141: Expensive sights

The noises of silverware on porcelain echoed out across the dining hall as Scarlett and the other members of her household dined together. This included Evelyne, with Garside standing silently to the side next to one of the walls, a calm expression on the man's face.

The different people at the dining table occupied themselves with discussions as Scarlett satisfied herself with eating her food and listening in on the others now and then. Evelyne and Rosa were talking about the fashion of certain nobles for some reason, while Allyssa and Shin were arguing lightly about a topic Scarlett hadn't really caught. Fynn, meanwhile, was wolfing down his own food without paying much attention to much else.

It had become a pretty similar sight whenever all of them were gathered like this.

A part of Rosa's and Evelyne's discussion caught Scarlett's attention.

"You know, I bet one hundred solars that Scarlett will cause a ruckus of some kind during this ball of yours," the bard said, hiding part of her mouth with her hand as she leaned closer to Evelyne. Her words were still perfectly audible across the table, though, and the woman almost certainly intended that.

Evelyne glanced at Scarlett for a moment before turning back to Rosa. "I don't think anything can beat what she did at the Elysian Proclamation, honestly."

"Oh?" Curious interest entered Rosa's voice, and she had the expression of someone who had just found a morsel that might lead her to a bigger fish. "And *what* did she do there, if I might ask?"

Evelyne gave her a surprised look. "You haven't heard?"

"No, but now I'm *dying* to."

"You are not, Miss Hale." Scarlett decided this is where she should cut in. "And take my word when I say that it is not something you need to know, either. It is for the greater good of all those around you that you never do."

She had intentionally never mentioned it to the bard because she knew what the woman could do with that information.

"You *have* to know that's just going to make me even more curious." Rosa gave her a hurt look, as if Scarlett had just told her that her pay was getting docked. "Do you want for me to not be able to sleep at night?"

"I believe you will survive, Miss Hale. If not, then do provide me a warning in advance so that I may begin searching for a replacement in time."

To the side, a soft snicker left Allyssa, and even Evelyne had a small smile on her face. Scarlett hid her relief about how everybody seemed to be behaving relatively normal today, not trying to act extra cautious around her, as some of them had these last few days.

She had been trying to rein in her emotions lately so that they weren't worn on her sleeve, and none of it should be bleeding through from the Loci either. It was good to see that her attempts had some effect.

Even if it also meant that she had to deal with some annoyances at the dining table.

The previous conversations were picked up once again, but after a while, Allyssa shifted her attention to Scarlett. "When are you two leaving for that ball?"

"In the afternoon. The event itself does not start until evening, but it is common for guests to arrive early as they are led to their quarters. Is that not correct, Evelyne?"

Evelyne nodded. "That's right. The duchy has always provided all the guests with their own private chambers for the ball. They can rival some of what we have here at the mansion, but the service afforded is said to eclipse anything else other than that experienced by guests at Dawnlight Palace. That isn't even to mention the connections that can be made there. Nobles aren't the only ones to get invited, so it's an event that a lot of merchants and influential people spend minor fortunes simply for the chance to attend."

Both of Allyssa's eyebrows rose at that statement. "Now I wish *I* could go. Sounds like an experience."

"I don't really get what's so special about it," Fynn grunted in the seat next to her as he tore into a thick piece of meat on his platter that had been specifically prepared for him.

"Fynn, I genuinely don't mean anything bad with this, but you're not the type of person these kinds of things are meant for. I'm pretty sure you would have more interests in common with a dragon than most other people."

A small frown appeared on his forehead. "Dragons like the taste of people," he said. "I don't."

"Is that *really* the only difference that comes to mind first for you?"

The white-haired young man just shrugged his shoulders as he continued eating.

Allyssa shook her head as if it didn't surprise her before returning her focus to the rest of them. "Anyway, it would be nice to get a chance to see something like this ball with my own eyes at least once in the future. Do people from the Guild get invited as well?"

"They do," Evelyne answered. "In fact, if my memory serves me right, I think your father might even have attended once. I can't quite recall when it was, but I remember my own father pointing him out to me at the time."

"Really? He never told me that. Though he rarely ever talks about work around me, so that much is normal." Allyssa sighed.

"It's because you never listened when he did, so he stopped doing it," Shin told her.

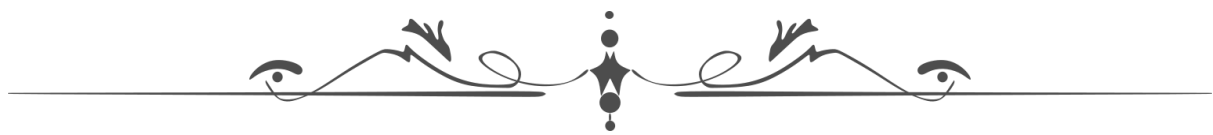
"What?" She spun to stare at him. "That's not true!"

“He told me so himself.”

A peeved expression formed on her face. “*Dad...*”

Evelyne watched with was looked like slight amusement, while Rosa made a cheerful comment about how he at least seemed to care enough about Allyssa to *not* bore her with ‘uninteresting work tales’, though the girl herself didn’t seem to quite agree.

Like that, the mealtime continued in relative peace for a while longer.



Later that afternoon, Scarlett and Evelyne were sitting in the same carriage just as it was about to leave the mansion. The sounds of the servants loading their luggage into the trunk pierced the wooden walls as they waited for the last preparations to finish.

“Are you ready for tonight?” Evelyne asked her.

Scarlett’s attention had been focused out the window, gazing at the front of the mansion and the empty courtyard that was sequestered between its two wings. “I am as ready as I will be,” she answered absently.

From the corner of her eye, she could see the younger woman studying her.

“I suppose that’s as much as we can ask for,” Evelyne said. “We’ll just have to hope this won’t be a repeat of what happened at the Elysian Proclamation, won’t we?” There was a hint of humor in her tone.

Scarlett shifted her gaze to her, eyeing the woman for a moment. This was perhaps the first time she had heard Evelyne try anything even resembling a joke around her.

It seemed Evelyne herself was equally surprised by the fact, judging from how the woman turned away with a stiff face and not saying anything else.

Scarlett watched her for a few seconds before returning her attention outside.

She didn’t find the comment particularly funny—it was an awkward and somewhat annoying joke, if anything—but the intellectual part of her thought it a welcome change from how they usually were around each other.

The two of them sat in quiet for a while longer as they waited, with audible conversations from the servants being heard outside. Not long after, the coachman called out that they were ready and the carriage started moving. As it turned around, Scarlett saw Garside stand by the side of the gravel road along with Marlon, the head servant, Kinsley, the family’s seneschal

who often worked with Evelyne, and a couple other members of the staff as they all bid her and Evelyne goodbye.

She raised her hand in a short greeting in return as they passed them by.

Soon, they were outside the estate's gates. Her connection with the Loci gradually faded to the back of her mind as they got further away. She had traveled through Freybrook by carriage enough times now that she was used to this part, so she let her mind wander as they moved past the small forest and large buildings of Freybrook's northern district and into the heart of the city. From there, they continued towards where the Kilnstone was located.

As usual, the large square housing the ancient artifact was packed with various people and vehicles by the time they arrived. The traffic might even have been denser than usual. Not that it mattered much, since their carriage simply rolled past most others towards the line reserved for nobles waiting for their turn through the Kilnstone.

It didn't take long for them to reach the front of the line, where they were then ushered onto the platform that held the open marble structure that was the centerpiece of the square. Through its curled pillars, a floating obelisk was visible. After checking with the driver, the Kilnstone officials let them in with no hassle, and their carriage rolled up next to the Kilnstone.

"When was the last time the two of us traveled somewhere like this?" Evelyne suddenly asked.

"Does our trip to Count Knottley's home or the Dawnlight Palace during the Elysian Proclamation not count?" Scarlett asked.

"No, I meant longer trips. Not just across a city."

"If so, I do not know."

"Neither do I."

She considered the younger woman for a few seconds. "Does that bother you?"

Evelyne shook her head. "No. It just makes what we're doing right now feel strange, that's all. I think even father would have been surprised to see us like this."

"...Perhaps he would have."

Scarlett wouldn't know.

Outside, the Kilnstone's reflective grey surface seemed to suck in the light around them and their surroundings turned completely black for the blink of an eye. The next moment, the world regained color as they appeared at their destination, surrounded by new people and carriages in a marble structure similar to the one they had just been in.

After another pair of black-dressed officials stepped up to speak with the coachman, their carriage rolled out onto another square, giving them a better view of Windgrove.

The city was the second largest in the empire, and the Kilnstone was located high enough to give them a decent outlook of the region. Immediately surrounding the square they were in were numerous brick and stone buildings, with carts and carriages winding through the streets in front of them that connected to the various parts of the city. Many of the carriages that passed by nearby bore the symbols of noble houses. Scarlett and Evelyne were far from the only people visiting because of the Tyndall Ball.

Their carriage soon joined a trail of others down one of the larger thoroughfares that led deeper into Windgrove. As they traveled down the streets, Scarlett took in the passing sights. The city's architecture was a blend of pointed stone arches, wooden storefronts, and a surprising amount of miniature parks that had children running around and housed small stalls where merchants hawked their wares.

It was a city brimming with life. It was easy to see why Windgrove was sometimes known as the "Emerald of the North".

Sometimes visible in the distance, whenever they crested a smaller hill or there was a lack of buildings in the way, a large lake stretched out like a shimmering mirror that reflected the bright blue sky above. Several small vessels floated about in its waters, though there appeared to be no real harbor. Overlooking the lake was a grand castle made of a deep grey stone. It had tall walls and imposing towers that reached up high, each topped with deep green flags that fluttered in the wind.

"Last time both of us were here together like this was before father died," Evelyne said as she looked out the window, watching the activity filling the streets. "I can't remember if my mom came with at the time as well, or if it was just the three of us." There was a melancholic look on her face as she turned to Scarlett. "I think that might actually have been one of the last times all of us attended something together that wasn't in the capital."

"You would know better than me."

Scarlett didn't even know what the original's father looked like. For some reason, there weren't any paintings of him in the mansion. At least not any that she'd seen. She had considered using the [Memory of the Covenant] to borrow his appearance and see it for herself, but she'd never done so. It felt like that would only rile up the emotions that the original had left behind.

"Maybe you're right." Evelyne spoke in a lower voice. "You always seemed so distant at those times, so perhaps they weren't as important moments to you as they were to us. They're not things you remember that well, right?"

"I do not, no."

The woman turned quiet, looking at Scarlett for a moment longer before returning her attention outside.

"...I will not forget this moment as easily," Scarlett said.

Evelyne's head spun and her eyes widened as she stared at her, but Scarlett left it at that and looked out the window again.

It seemed like Evelyne wanted to say something after that, but in the end she didn't, and they traveled in silence from there as the carriage continued through the crowded streets of Windgrove towards the castle that looked over the city. The closer they got to it, the larger and more expensive-looking the buildings around them became. Eventually, they reached a long street that was packed with other carriages, each lined up behind another all the way up to a pair of enormous steel gates at the end of the street, flanked by tall stone walls that blocked the view beyond. The carriages at the front were slowly being inspected by guards before being let through.

Here, Scarlett's status as a baroness wasn't anything special. They could do nothing else but wait.

It took them roughly forty minutes to reach the front of the line, but eventually, their carriage rolled up to the gates and stopped next to a bulky man in dark green armor with black inlays running along the side. He stepped up to them, peering through the carriage window.

"Greetings, my Lady. Welcome to Windgrove and Grovelfort Castle." He spoke in a loud voice.

Evelyne leaned over and pulled the glass latch open. "Thank you. I'm Evelyne Hartford, from the Hartford barony."

The guard briefly lowered his head before looking up at her again. "We'll be performing a quick inspection of your carriage, if that is all right with you, before letting you through the gates."

"That's fine. Feel free."

The man threw one glance at Scarlett through the window before signaling for another guard to join him as they inspected the carriage. Scarlett wasn't quite sure what the purpose of the inspection was, since they only checked the outside of the vehicle and didn't bother with the cabin. Scarlett had her [Pouch of Holding] lying next to her, so if she wanted, she could have brought in any number of dangerous items without their knowing. Maybe they only cared about stopping particularly suspicious-looking people from entering? Or they had other ways to check for danger? She doubted they would let weapons be brought inside during the ball itself, at least.

They didn't have to wait too long before the guard gave them the okay and waved them along. Then they were through the gates and into the castle grounds.

And that was certainly a sight one didn't see often.

Scarlett had always felt that the Freybrook mansion was impressive, and it was clear a lot of money went into building and maintaining it throughout the years. This place, though, was far beyond that.

Several hundred meters away, almost as far as the eye could see here, was the towering structure of the main castle that was visible in most parts of the city. The distance between them and the castle, however, had dozens of manicured terraces and carefully tended gardens that were bursting with life. Extravagant statues ran along the cobbled roads, each made of a

different material. Bronze knights, marble dragons, and even crystal stags. Everywhere you looked, there was evidence of meticulous attention and skilled craftsmanship.

Not only that, but the area was also dotted with outbuildings, some as large or larger than the Hartford mansion, as well as a large stable with a glass greenhouse near it. Scarlett imagined one could easily employ an entire village with just the number of people it would take to care of this place. It was ridiculous how it differed in scale compared to her mansion. It wasn't quite at the level of Dawnlight Palace in the capital, but certainly not for a lack of trying.

Instead of traveling straight ahead towards the castle, their carriage took a right turn, passing through an extensive rose garden with neat rows of vibrant pink-and-red flowerbeds that somehow defied the chilly late-autumn weather. Beyond it was a wide structure that already had dozens of carriages parked in front of it, with more stopping every minute. Groups of people were exiting and moving towards the building's entrance.

Soon their carriage pulled to a halt as well, and Scarlett stepped into the courtyard outside, with Evelyne following soon after. Their luggage and carriage would be handled by the coachman and the other servant that had come with them, with the help of the people working here at the castle, so they didn't have to bother about that for now.

The two of them started walking over to the large set of stairs that served as the entrance, where two well-dressed servants in dark green stood with long lists in their hands. Guests were gathered in front of the two, approaching in small groups as they were gradually let inside.

Once more, Scarlett had to resign herself to waiting in line. It was annoying, and far too many fibers of her being screamed that she should get to go past all the people here, but she controlled herself. While no one seemed to be wearing their event attire yet, almost everybody was as well-dressed as Evelyne at the moment, and she recognized several crests that belonged to noble houses. It seemed like a couple of them might have recognized her as well, giving her curious looks, but she ignored it all for the time being.

Finally, when it was her and Evelyne's turn, they walked up to the servant nearest them. It was an older gentleman, with slicked-back white hair and wearing a long, dark-green overcoat. He looked up from his list as they approached.

"Welcome to Grovelfort Castle, my ladies. If you are here for the accommodations prepared for you, may I please have your names?" he asked.

"Barones Scarlett Hartford."

"Evelyne Hartford."

The man seemed to pause for but a moment, giving Scarlett a probing look. Behind her, she heard a few whispers at her name. It seemed she was still a bit of a topic in these contexts. The fact that a simple servant would know her name was a bit surprising, however. Although considering his duties and the way he was dressed, it made sense for them to place someone knowledgeable about potential guests to greet them.

The man let out a small cough as he held out a hand. "If I may see your invitations."

It didn't seem like he was actually expecting Scarlett to have one, so the brief look of surprise in his eyes when she pulled it out gratified her.

Even more whispers sounded out from behind as the man received both hers and Evelyne's invitations, checking that both were authentic. Then he started leafing through the papers in his other hand, the process taking a short while before he finally seemed to find something that made his eyes widen slightly.

It seemed as if he hadn't actually expected her name to be on the guest list. Did he perhaps think she had forged an invitation?

To the man's credit, he handled it with prompt and returned their invitations to them with a small bow. "There are attendees inside that will lead you to your rooms. The Duke hopes that you will enjoy the event."

Now there were actual conversations happening behind them, and next to Scarlett, Evelyne appeared a little uncomfortable with the attention. Scarlett noted that most of the noise was made by the same people, though, and she glanced back to briefly catch their faces. It wouldn't hurt to keep her eye out for them in the future.

After that, she and Evelyne walked up the stairs to find their temporary quarters.