

125: New sights and introductions

Scarlett sat opposite Evelyne in the younger woman's carriage as they traveled from Count Knottley's estate back towards the Hartford mansion.

"...That went better than I thought it would," Evelyne said after a while.

Scarlett looked away from the window and to her, giving a small nod before looking outside again. "I suppose you are correct."

It wasn't as bad as she'd feared, at least.

Although, if you asked her, the entire dinner had been somewhat awkward. Livvi had been the one that kept most of the conversation going, and on more than one occasion, Scarlett had been unsure of what a proper response should be. Often, she had just leaned back on polite formalities in lack of anything better to say.

Despite that, Livvi had kept a smile going almost the whole evening, and Scarlett had to admit that the diminutive woman's cheerfulness helped to diminish some of the discomfort surrounding the whole situation.

Perhaps that feeling was another remnant left behind by the original Scarlett, in some way. She'd noticed something similar the previous times she had interacted with Livvi. It was a bit like how things were with Garside.

Scarlett continued to vacantly observe the dark streets pass by outside as their carriage made its way into Freybrook's northern district, her thoughts focused on the evening's proceedings.

Eventually, she turned back to Evelyne. "I had been meaning to inquire with you about how the matter of arranging passage to Faybarrow has gone. Did the merchant you were acquainted with agree to the arrangement?"

The younger woman looked up from a thin stack of documents in her hands. "Oh, right. Yes, I spoke with him this morning. The next time he was slated to visit Faybarrow was tomorrow evening, and he was supposed to return three days after that. He agreed to give the spot to you if you needed it, though we'll have to compensate him for his losses."

"That does not pose an issue. We are likely to gain far more from this venture than he could make in such a short period anyhow."

Evelyne seemed to consider her for a few seconds. "You're really expecting to find another set of Zuverian ruins, then?"

Scarlett nodded. "I am, yes. I trust that you have been in talks with the relevant members of Elystead Tower and the other mage organizations that might have an interest in buying what we recover this time?"

"Some of them, yes. Although I think the person I talked to from the Elystead Tower was the only one who truly believed me when I said we'd be uncovering another set this soon. But

they're also the only ones that know we're working together with one of their members of this, so..."

"That is quite all right. The thoughts of the other organizations will change after they see the fruits of this next excursion."

"Are you sure you'll be ready before tomorrow evening, though?" Evelyne asked. "That Mendenhall woman never said a specific time she would be here, did she?"

"She did not, no." Scarlett shook her head. "But I sent her a message informing her that we were pressed for time. We will simply have to hope that she arrives on schedule."

Evelyne shrugged her shoulders. "If you say."

She then went back to reading her documents.

Scarlett returned her attention outside, where the moon was rising higher into the night sky.

As they came closer to the mansion, the connection to the [Obedience's Solitude Loci] that lingered at the back of her mind become slightly more active. She turned her head, gazing in the direction of the origin of that connection.

Not much had happened after establishing the connection earlier in the day. Or perhaps covenant would be a better description. The Loci originated in the Wandering Realm, after all, where spirits and other beings that could strike covenants made their home. What she had forged with the Loci probably wasn't too different from that.

She could feel that the Loci was still familiarising itself with the estate, as well as assimilating itself into the surroundings. That's why she had made no attempts at testing things out yet. She wasn't sure how long it would take, but for the time being, she would just have to wait.

The carriage passed through the estate's gates and up the graveled road towards the mansion.

"Ehm... Scarlett?"

She turned to look at Evelyne, who had looked up from her documents once more, her brows furrowed.

"Yes?"

"I wanted to ask..." The younger woman looked outside. "I felt this when I picked you up as well, but there's something different about the mansion today. I can't quite put my finger on what, exactly, but I can tell it's there. Is this because of something you have done?"

Scarlett eyed her for a moment.

"You have astute senses," she said after a while. "Yes, it is true that I have done something. It is related to the new custodian that I mentioned to you earlier today."

“The reason you were talking to the gardener?”

“Exactly.” Scarlett nodded her head.

“Who is this new custodian?” Evelyne asked.

Scarlett pressed her lips together. She wasn’t quite sure how to describe this part. “I suppose that it would be easier to show you,” she said.

“Show me?”

“Yes. It is a rather unique situation, after all.”

Evelyne gave her a long look. “...I knew it was a good idea to stay quiet before.”



“...What is this?” Evelyne asked in front of Scarlett as the two of them looked down at the Loci that was lying on the ground in the hedge garden behind the mansion.

“It is as I said. That is the new custodian that I told you about.”

The younger woman turned to look at her. “That’s a rock.”

“Technically, it is an emerald.”

“A very valuable *rock*.”

“True, it is quite valuable.”

The two of them looked at each other for a few seconds.

Eventually, Evelyne sighed. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

Scarlett nodded her head. “Indeed I am.”

“I can’t believe this is the kind of thing that’s becoming normal for me,” Evelyne mumbled as the younger woman turned back to the Loci. “So, is it an artifact of some kind, then?”

“It is. You can refer to it simply as the ‘Loci’,” Scarlett said. “It has an ego of its own, even though it is not particularly developed.”

“You mean it can hear us?”

“In theory, it is able to hear anything that occurs within the boundaries of its domain, which coincides with the borders of the estate. Whether it can understand any of what it hears, however, is another matter.”

Evelyne’s eyes widened at that. “Wait, everything?” She looked back at Scarlett. “So it even knows when we’re...” she trailed off, an uncomfortable expression on her face.

Scarlett frowned. Okay, she hadn’t even thought of that, and she would have preferred if it stayed that way. From her connection to it, she suspected that the Loci probably didn’t even understand how humans worked. But, still...

Could she perhaps exclude the restroom and some of the other locations from the Loci’s domain, just to be sure?

She cleared her throat. “...I will look into what can be done on the subject. But I recommend you do not pay it too much thought.”

Evelyne knitted her forehead together. “How am I supposed to do that now that I know? What even is the point of this?”

“It is to keep the people here at the estate safe, and to ensure intruders do not make their way in.”

“This ‘Loci’ can do that?”

“It can, yes.”

“And you’re sure it’s not dangerous?”

Scarlett looked at the Loci, which was practically glowing to her other senses. “I am certain, yes.”

“...I’d prefer it if it wasn’t here at all, to be honest,” Evelyne said.

“An understandable sentiment. However, I ask that you trust in me when I say that it was a necessary addition to the estate under the current circumstances.”

Evelyne glanced at her. “Is it to stop anything like what happened to the courtyard from occurring again?”

Scarlett met her gaze. “Yes.”

The younger woman closed her eyes for a moment, then looked back at the Loci. “...Alright. I think I understand. But do you think you could at least give me a report or something about exactly what it does and who it affects? I’d like to know what it is that we’re adding to the mansion in a situation like this.”

“I am currently familiarising myself with the details myself,” Scarlett said. “But I will endeavor to provide you with details as soon as I am able.”

“Thank you.”

“It is of no matter.”

“Oh, you should probably tell Garside about this as well, by the way. If this thing is going to act like some sort of custodian, then it would be good if he knew.”

“I will do so.”

“Yes, well... Good.” Evelyne let out a shiver. She wasn’t wearing much more than her jacket at the moment, and it was late at night now. “I think I’m going to go in now. I’ll be leaving again in the morning, but I’ll check in with you first before I do.”

“Very well.” Scarlett greeted the younger woman a short goodbye as she left, then returned her attention to the Loci. It almost seemed to pulsate slightly as she observed it.

Well, it was certainly an interesting artifact, at least. She was curious about how it would develop in the future.



The following day, Scarlett was waiting in front of the mansion as evening approached once more. She’d spent most of the day going through her office and parts of the library for documents related to her betrothal with Leon, but had yet to find anything. There had to be *something* though, so she would continue with it later when she had time. There wasn’t really a need to rush it too much.

She crossed her arms as she looked to the estate gates, where a smaller cart had pulled up and was moving up towards the mansion. Eventually, it stopped close to Scarlett. A younger man in simple clothes and a brown cap glanced at her and the large structure behind her somewhat nervously as he climbed down from the cart and walked to the back, where Adalicia stepped off.

The wizard was dressed in a thick blue robe that suited the cooling weather, with a thick tome fastened to her waist. Next to her, the young man started offloading a set of four wide suitcases from the cart.

“Miss Adalicia.” Scarlett walked over and greeted the woman before gesturing to a carriage nearby. “I am afraid we have little time left for receptions. We will soon have to be off. Our passage through the Kilnstone is scheduled in less than an hour.”

A brief look of surprise crossed the older woman’s face, but she gave a short nod. “I apologize for the late appearance, then. I presume we’re leaving for the place you spoke of in the letters? My assumption had actually been that would not be for another day or two.”

“Unfortunately, this was the best I could arrange on such short measure,” Scarlett replied, as the two of them walked over to the carriage. “I see that you have brought several belongings this time.”

She gestured for two servants that were standing to the side to help carry Adalicia’s luggage over and place it in the trunk at the back of the carriage.

“It’s equipment related to what we discussed last time. It’s not often one has the opportunity to explore what might be a set of undiscovered Zuverian ruins, untouched since The Severance.”

They climbed inside the vehicle, where the rest of the party was waiting.

“These are my retainers,” Scarlett said. “Miss Hale is experienced with healing and other supportive magic, and Fynn is quite proficient at protecting us from most that seek us harm. The other two are Mister Thornthorn and Miss Astrey, members of the Shields Guild currently working under my employ to aid with excursions such as these.”

“Pleasure to meet you all.” Adalicia smiled as she sat down next to Rosa. “I am Adalicia Mendenhall, a member of Elystead Tower.”

“I mentioned this before, but she will be joining us this time,” Scarlett explained as she took a seat beside the woman. “She has experience in analyzing Zuver technology and their methods, so I am sure her assistance will prove beneficial for us in the coming days.”

The members of her party all greeted Adalicia, and the woman’s attention seemed to pause on Shin for a moment. “Forgive me for asking, but you wouldn’t have any relations to the Kereq tribe?” she asked.

His eyes widened slightly at the question. “My parents were part of it, but I mostly grew up in Wildscar,” he answered. He examined her. Both of their skin tones were slightly more tanned than what was most common here in the empire. “Do you have any ties to them as well?”

“Oh, only barely. My grandmother hailed from the Steppes, and I spent some time hearing stories from her when I was young. But it is rare that I meet people with similar connections.”

“Mm. Same goes for me,” Shin said.

As her party started getting more familiar with the wizard, Scarlett glanced out the window as the carriage eventually started moving. They were cutting things a bit close time-wise, but it seemed like they would make it.

It felt somewhat odd, leaving on another trip this soon after returning from Autumnwell. But at the same time, it didn’t.

Most of her time in this world had been spent moving back and forth between different places like this in some fashion, so it wasn’t as if she hadn’t grown used to it. The ruin they would be visiting this time also wasn’t as dangerous as Abelard’s Doll Mansion had been. And they had the support of a grand wizard. She was expecting things to be relatively calm these coming days.

Adalicia didn't appear to have any issue blending in with Scarlett's party as they traveled through Freybrook, and not too much later, they reached the square that housed the city's Kilnstone.

There, they had to wait in line for around forty minutes—which was apparently a comparatively short waiting time for normal people, Adalicia told Scarlett—before it was their turn. The coachman handled the talks with the Kilnstone officials, and soon they were let through when it was their turn. Scarlett was accustomed enough to traveling through Kilnstone now that the teleportation itself barely raised an eye, and then they found themselves at their destination.

Like Freybrook, Faybarrow was located in the southern parts of the empire, housing a large harbor that opened into the Innisling Sea. The city itself was a lot smaller than Freybrook when it came to the area, but the population density seemed to be a lot higher as they saw masses of people walking about the streets even as it was quickly becoming darker.

“We will be spending the night at an inn,” Scarlett told the others as the carriage slowly made its way through the packed lanes leading away from Faybarrow's Kilnstone. “Expect to rise early tomorrow morning. Most likely, most of the day will go to between our destination and locating the specific coordinates for the ruins, so be prepared. I hope all of you took my warnings into consideration and brought something to entertain yourselves.”

“Which inn are we staying at?” Rosa asked.

“I believe it was called the White Armadillo.”

Evelyne had informed her it was one of the better inns in the city. At least of the ones you could get a room in without reserving weeks in advance.

Rosa let out a low whistle. “That's where a lot of fancy people stay.”

Scarlett looked at her. “You know of it?”

“I played there once?”

“Truly?” She studied the woman. “That was not within my expectations.”

“Oi.” Rosa leaned forward in her seat and looked past Adalicia at her. “I can be sophisticated when I need to.”

“I have witnessed this ‘sophistication’ of yours,” Scarlett said. “I believe we have very different definitions of the word.”

Rosa shook her head exaggeratedly. “Oh, woe is me. Not even my dear employer—whomst with I have braved innumerable treacherous situations—has confidence in my ability to baroquely articulate myself in front of others.”

Scarlett raised a brow. “‘Baroquely’?”

The bard nodded confidently. “Baroquely.”

“You sound like one of those street performers who hold doll shows in Elystead,” Allyssa said with a grin.

“Why, you!” Rosa turned to stare at the girl. “You dare compare my oratory talents to the verbosity and crudeness of those commonplace performers?” She wiped away an imaginary tear. “Truly, all appreciation for pure art has perished.”

Scarlett stared at her. “Are you finished?”

Rosa cocked her head to the side, then nodded her head. “I think so, yes. Though I could probably push a few more out if you want me to.”

Scarlett raised her hand. “No, that will be quite all right.”

Adalicia seemed to have watched this interaction with slight amusement, and finally spoke. “I have been to that inn as well, actually. It *is* rather pleasant.”

“Is that so? Then I suppose I will have to take your word for it,” Scarlett said.

“Oi,” Rosa cried out.

Scarlett simply looked out the window again as the carriage continued traveling through the city, pushing down the small smile that had threatened to form on her face. It had been some time since she had genuinely teased someone and enjoyed it. Perhaps Rosa was rubbing off on her.