

231: Hearty meals

When Scarlett returned to Freybrook, the courtyard was shrouded in darkness, save for the faint glow emanating from the windows overlooking it. The air here was starkly colder and more biting compared to the warmer temperature on the Rising Eye, and the sudden change between the two climates felt somewhat jarring.

Using her pyrokinesis to warm herself up, Scarlett allowed herself a brief moment to take in her snow-blanketed surroundings before she tapped into her bond with the [Obedience's Solitude Loci] to survey the estate in full. Through a cursory check, she could confirm that all appeared as she left it. Surprisingly, though, Dean Godwin was still present.

She'd thought he would have left by now, but it seemed not. Perhaps that was a good thing. This meant she could ask how things went with Rosa immediately. There was also another thing she'd wanted to double-check with him that she had been reminded of after her visit to the Zuverian outpost.

Right now, he and the others were gathered in the dining hall, Evelyne included. It seemed the youngest Hartford sister had made her return while Scarlett was out.

Crossing the courtyard, Scarlett entered the mansion's foyer, where she ran into a servant dusting the window sills clean. The girl halted in her work upon noticing Scarlett, bowing low in a respectful curtsy. "Welcome back, my Lady. I hope you have had a pleasant trip outside."

Scarlett acknowledged the greeting with a nod. "I have."

This girl was a newer hire, if she recalled correctly, and thus hadn't developed the same instinctive nervousness around Scarlett that was more common among some of the longer-serving staff here. Things had gotten better on that front, even with the more seasoned staff, but Scarlett still sometimes managed to unintentionally startle a servant or two when she moved around the mansion.

"Are Evelyne and the others in the dining hall?" she asked, even though she already knew the answer.

"Yes, my Lady," the servant replied. "I think they're currently dining with the Dean of Elystead Tower?"

"I see. Then I will have to see if they have made accommodations for me as well."

"I'm sure Master Garside has accounted for your return, my Lady."

"Knowing him, he likely has."

With that, Scarlett left the foyer and proceeded towards the dining hall, reaching out with the Loci's perception to check up on the ongoing discussions there. Evelyne appeared to be in deep conversation about the logistics of some of the fief's current business with Dean Godwin.

Approaching the dining hall, Scarlett overheard the younger woman's voice through the closed doors.

“—we've contracted several traders passing through Freybrook to supply their produce to us at slightly higher prices, and our barony is currently storing it in harbor warehouses,” Evelyne explained. “They're simple to keep dry for preservation, so we're expecting the produce to last for several months. However, I've been told that transporting it in bulk over long distances in cases like emergencies can prove a challenge. When I last spoke with a representative from the tower, they told me that you possess spells for both preservation and temporary spatial expansion, which I was thinking would be a much more economical solution than enchanting a fleet of wagons for the same effect. That's why I had been wondering whether it would be possible to reach some sort of agreement regarding these services?”

It seemed they were discussing Evelyne's efforts to organize and prepare the barony's relief operations.

“It is indeed within our capabilities to do something like that,” Dean Godwin responded. “Although I would not call them ‘services’, since this diverges quite a bit from Elystead Tower's usual ventures. We have also been increasingly busy lately, limiting the available personnel we have for any new projects such as this one. That said, I will speak with the department heads and inquire about the possibilities for the tower supporting the Hartford barony in this endeavour.”

“Really?” Evelyne was clearly surprised by that, but the excitement was clear in her voice. “That's incredibly thoughtful of you. I would appreciate any assistance you might be able to offer. I'm sure Scarlett would as well.

“That I would,” Scarlett said as she made her entrance.

The room's occupants turned their attention to her. On one side of the table standing at the center of the dining hall sat Allyssa, Shin, and Fynn, with various meals prepared on plates before them. Across the table were Evelyne, Dean Godwin, and Rosa, with Garside standing at the corner of the room, attentively monitoring the ongoings.

“Scarlett?” Evelyne looked at her, slight surprise showing on her face. “Did you catch our conversation just now?”

“The end part of it, yes,” Scarlett said, walking across the room towards the head of the table, where the seat reserved for her was.

Garside promptly moved from his position by the wall, carrying a set of plates with silver lids that he set before her.

“I took the liberty of preparing a meal for you as well, my Lady.”

“Thank you, Garside.”

The man unveiled the dishes as she took her seat, revealing a succulent roast pheasant accompanied by tender root vegetables glazed in honey.

Appreciating the sight for a moment, Scarlett then turned to Dean Godwin. "I am surprised to find you still here. Did you not have urgent matters that required your attention?"

"Indeed, I did," he replied. "But I later received a message that my people chose to proceed without my presence after I may have gotten a bit too absorbed in matters here. I expect that there will be some rather choice words waiting for me upon my return, and I am in no rush to confront those."

Scarlett gave him a long look. "...I do not envy those placed under your charge."

He waved a hand dismissively. "Oh, they'll manage. Rowley, in my stead, is perfectly capable of handling most of my responsibilities in my absence. Moreover, this stay has allowed me the pleasure of engaging in some rather pleasant discourse with another promising young mage," he said, acknowledging Evelyne with a gesture.

The woman blushed slightly under the praise. "You flatter me too much."

"Hardly. Though I did not know the man myself, I believe the late Lord Hartford would be immensely proud of the two daughters he left behind, both accomplished mages in their own right."

"I would prefer if you forwent the unnecessary praise," Scarlett said, her tone slightly brusque.

"Is that so? Do forgive me, then." Dean Godwin casually motioned his hand, and a beaker of gravy floated over to him, where it tilted over and delicately drizzled the brown sauce over his plate. "Anyhow, as you've gathered, Baroness, Lady Evelyne here has also been sharing some insights into the considerable effort she is currently expending in her current ventures," the man explained while Scarlett began her own meal. "It is not often that I involve myself with the dealings of the nobility, so I find it somewhat refreshing to hear about the challenges faced there. It is altogether quite different from many of my own experiences in the realm of magic."

Scarlett glanced over to her left at the dean, noting that he had already finished most of his meal and seemed to now be dining on not much more than just gravy. "Judging by the company you kept at the Tyndall Ball, I would have thought you possessed plentiful experience with such things. Do you not regularly mingle with high-ranking nobles like Lord Fitzroy and Lord Withersworth?"

The man laughed lightly. "Our conversations rarely delve into such productive topics. More often, they're filled with leisurely pastimes and trivial pursuits. If we were as engaged in substantial discussions as you seem to think, I doubt their spouses would find our gentlemanly gatherings as frustrating as they do."

Scarlett raised a brow. "Hmm. I do indeed recall Lady Withersworth expressing her... reservations about your influence on her husband."

"Ah, Lila can be one ruthless woman, that is for sure." He chuckled, though his expression briefly turned thoughtful, a slight creasing on his forehead. "It is to my own misfortune that

many of the formidable women in my life grow more like her with time. I often wonder how I would fare if she were to ever get her claws on my daughter.”

“Perhaps that would bring some tranquility to those around you,” Scarlett suggested. From what she knew of the man, she could understand Lady Withersworth’s complaints.

“Seems she has already influenced you, Baroness,” Godwin said. “It is often said that the social circles of the nobility are a battlefield on their own, and one well-suited to Lila’s talents. I wouldn’t dare to compete with her there, nor her new protégé.”

“Calling me a protégé might be overstating it,” Scarlett replied. “Although I will acknowledge that Lady Withersworth has given me helpful guidance before.”

“If she’s earned your recognition, then she must be quite the character,” Rosa joined in on the conversation.

“She certainly has a very strong personality,” Evelyne remarked. “My brief interactions with her at the ball were enough to confirm many of the stories I’d heard.”

Dean Godwin nodded thoughtfully. “There are likely many who would agree. And though I could hardly admit as much to his face, much the same can be said for her husband. If you’re considering expanding those efforts of yours, Lady Evelyne, perhaps you should consider securing their support. It could prove invaluable.”

Evelyne stared at him. “You think they would be willing to help?”

“Why not?” Godwin proposed. “Lord Withersworth’s extensive experience and connections far surpass mine in this regard, and there is no doubt in my mind that it could be of great benefit to someone of your talents. From what I have heard, they also owe a debt to your sister. Knowing him as I do, he is likely to seize any chance to repay it.”

Evelyne looked in Scarlett’s direction. “Do you think that’s an option? It *would* be advantageous to have a reputable house like the Withersworths on our side for this.”

“I see no reason why not,” Scarlett said. “You already have my full support to act as you see fit. If you believe securing the alliance will aid your efforts, I will not hinder it. Convincing them, however, is in your hands, though you may feel free to leverage my name if it helps.”

Evelyne nodded with determination. “Okay. I’ll come up with something.”

Scarlett delicately sliced through the roast on her plate. “I have faith that you will.”

Continuing the conversation, Godwin spoke. “Might I ask what your broader objective is here? To an outsider, it might appear as if you are bracing for a significant disaster of some kind.”

At that question, Evelyne glanced over at Scarlett, as if silently seeking guidance on how to respond. Scarlett, meanwhile, remained composed as she savored her meal. After a thoughtful pause, she addressed the wizard directly. “Are you perhaps insinuating something, Dean Godwin?”

He returned her gaze with a congenial smile, stroking his beard. “Merely an observation.”

“I see. Then let us leave it at that,” Scarlett said. “Considering the current challenges facing the empire, including attacks by the Tribe of Sin and now demonic incursions, it is only logical to prepare for any eventualities. Our barony, though small in territory and population, is fortunate in wealth. It is part of our duty to utilize that wealth where possible for the good of the empire.”

A knowing glint showed in the man’s eyes as he studied Scarlett with an appreciative look. “A commendable stance, Baroness. You’re a very generous woman.”

“At times, yes.”

The two of them regarded each other for a while as a short silence fell over the room.

As far as Scarlett was concerned, he could make whatever he wanted out of the barony’s actions. It was inevitable that it would catch the attention of some people, and Godwin was already aware of her foresight. If he took this as a sign to take some additional precautions against the Hallowed Cabal, then that would hardly hurt Scarlett.

“Ehm, by the way,” Allyssa’s voice sounded to break the silence. The young Shielder looked at Scarlett. “Where did you disappear to earlier? Shin and I didn’t even realize you were gone until we got here and you were missing.”

“I paid a visit to the Resting Eye,” Scarlett answered.

The clinking of utensils against plates momentarily filled the room, drawing Scarlett’s gaze to Evelyne, who looked back at her with a mixture of surprise, her fork momentarily suspended in the air.

“You went to Darkshore, Scarlett?” Evelyne asked, blinking.

“I did.”

“How? You didn’t arrange any transport through the Kilnstone.”

Scarlett nodded towards Godwin. “Do you not have one of the empire’s most esteemed wizards next to you? He was kind enough to assist me.”

Evelyne’s gaze shifted to Godwin, who confirmed with another nod. She then returned her attention to Scarlett, evidently awaiting more details.

“I was interested in inspecting the Zuverian outpost in the Resting Eye,” Scarlett said. “I had never visited it personally, and with the Dean’s presence, it seemed an opportune moment to circumvent the nuisances that come with traveling.”

“And you went alone?”

“It seemed the simplest approach.”

Evelyne's gaze lingered on her for a moment, then the younger woman just gave a slight shake of her head before refocusing on her meal.

From there, the conversation at the table gradually resumed, centering on lighter topics. Rosa, among other things, teased Shin about his role as Allyssa's guinea pig, earning her more than one cry of protest from their resident alchemist. Scarlett, having arrived later than the others, continued eating as Evelyne excused herself to look into how she could enlist the Withersworths' help, and Allyssa and Shin eventually retreated to further work on their alchemy efforts. That left Scarlett at the table with Godwin, Rosa, and Fynn.

She considered Fynn and Rosa in particular for a while, mulling over whether she should ask them to leave so she could have a private chat with Godwin. Ultimately, she chose not to. Their hearing what might be said wouldn't compromise her plans, and she had been intending to integrate Rosa more closely into her 'circle' now that Anguish was dealt with.

"Garside," she spoke up, addressing the butler at the edge of the room. "Could you give us a moment?"

"Of course, my Lady. I'll see if Lady Evelyne requires my assistance," Garside responded before exiting the dining hall.

Scarlett turned to face Rosa and Godwin. "I am eager to hear how things progressed in my absence. Dean, did we reach a satisfactory conclusion that aligns with both our ambitions?"

The man considered her question. "As satisfactory as one could hope for, given the complexities of the subject. While I cannot be entirely certain, it seems the Heartstone has indeed quelled the Vile presence within Miss Hale. The specifics of this suppression are largely a mystery, but it proved a very fascinating case study to examine the interplay between an Astral Soulstone and a demonic heart. I would welcome the opportunity to delve deeper into this phenomenon in the future, if that is a possibility."

"You would have to ask Miss Hale about that." Scarlett looked at the bard in question, inviting her input.

Rosa gave a light-hearted smile. "I'm open to whatever comes next. My head remaining on my shoulders and still breathing is a win in my book. Plus, I feel like I might have picked up a thing or two myself today."

"Very well. There is your answer, Dean," Scarlett said. "When you are available again in the future, you may feel free to visit given that I am present at the mansion and not occupied with other matters."

"Much appreciated, Baroness," Godwin replied.

"Will you ask for him to teleport you away again if he returns in the future?" Fynn suddenly asked.

Scarlett paused briefly, considering the white-haired youth's gaze before responding. "Most likely, yes. The circumstances will dictate, but I see no reason not to make use of his abilities when the opportunity presents itself."

Fynn's amber eyes lingered on her for several seconds. "And would you go by yourself then as well?"

"I cannot say. That will also be decided by the circumstances. However, I do not think I will. Today's journey, while seemingly carrying little risk, highlighted the necessity for vigilance in the future."

"Wait." That statement seemed to catch Rosa's attention. "Did something happen?"

Fynn's brow also furrowed into a frown as his gaze hardened. "Did someone attack you?"

Scarlett looked at the two for a moment, slightly taken aback by their reactions. Though perhaps she should have expected as much. Not that she could lie right now, with two people capable of seeing through deception in the room.

A small sigh left her. "Something did indeed happen, in a sense, although I was not attacked. I simply crossed paths with a member of the Hallowed Cabal known as Nol'viz. I believe you have met her briefly before, Fynn."

Fynn's expression darkened. "The masked girl?"

"Precisely."

"She was strange."

"Yes, she does leave that kind of impression."

It probably wouldn't be good if Scarlett pointed out that Fynn himself was hardly any better.

"Okay, wait, hold up for a second," Rosa interjected, a slightly concerned expression on her face as she looked between Scarlett and Fynn. "I feel like I'm out of the loop here. What's this all about?"

Scarlett looked at her. "The Hallowed Cabal. They are the group that attacked this mansion some time ago, if you recall."

Rosa's expression turned into one of confusion. "I thought that was the Tribe of Sin?"

"It was, in a sense. The Hallowed Cabal is the group behind many of the actions performed by the Tribe of Sin."

"...Alright, now I'm officially lost. I'll just sit back and be pretty, because apparently I have no idea what we're talking about now."

"I will fill you in on the details afterward," Scarlett said.

While Scarlett had disclosed the existence of the Hallowed Cabal to Fynn, it remained mostly a secret from the broader public, including Rosa.

“Just to check.” The woman gestured a thumb towards Godwin. “Was he privy to this before me? Not that I’m jealous or anything.”

The man in question remained expressionless as the conversation turned towards him.

“Yes,” Scarlett admitted. “But not through my disclosure. He already knew of their existence before we met, and he deduced my connection to them independently.”

“...Alright, if you say so.”

Seemingly judging that it was his time to speak, Godwin met Scarlett’s gaze. “So, you engaged with this Cabal member, I take it?”

“I did, yes. Confronting her was not an option, given my standing non-aggression pact with them. As you are already aware.”

The man’s face revealed no hint of his thoughts. “Their presence on the Resting Eye is odd. What could possibly draw them there? Did their reasons for being there perhaps align with yours?”

“Unfortunately, I am uncertain of their motives. As far as I could tell, however, their purpose there seemed unrelated to mine. You may attempt to investigate it yourself, but I suspect that you are unlikely to uncover anything of significance.”

Even if Nol’viz stayed around, the girl was skilled at hiding. It would probably take someone of Fynn’s calibre to have a chance of spotting her.

“I see...” Godwin’s brows creased in thought. “However, the Cabal’s actions are rarely without intent, and the Resting Eye’s proximity to several key settlements is troubling. It would be prudent for me to conduct my own inquiry, just to be certain.”

“While I am skeptical that you will find anything noteworthy, I would appreciate it if you could share any discoveries with me,” Scarlett said.

“I will do what I can.”

“That is enough.” Scarlett fell silent, observing the man for a few seconds before continuing. “Setting that issue aside, I have a question for you.”

“And what might that be?”

“Do you recall our discussion about the opening of Beld Thylelion and the Tribute of Dominion during your last visit?”

“I do.”

“Are you aware of *what* the Tribute of Dominion is?”

Godwin’s eyebrows rose slightly. “I am not, no. I have since looked deeper into the subject, but there is scant information available, and the legends offer no clear details.”

Scarlett frowned. That was a similar answer to what Raimond had given regarding the tribute. It truly appeared as if knowledge about it was even rarer here than it had been in the game. Was she correct in suspecting that the Cabal was responsible for this, then?

“From your expression, I presume that is not the answer you were looking for,” Godwin observed.

“Ultimately, it does not matter what answer I was expecting. What is important is that you continue your efforts to locate Beld Thylelion. I have already mentioned how crucial Adalicia Mendenhall’s research is in that regard, if you recall. How is that progressing?”

“While I am not privy to all the ongoing specifics, I understand that she’s fully committed to examining the Tabernacle on the Rising Isle and the one recently unearthed by you near Faybarrow. She seems to share your conviction that they hold further secrets, and I’ve had her usual responsibilities reassigned so that she can focus on this entirely.”

“Then it should only be a matter of time before she makes a breakthrough,” Scarlett said.

At least this development was somewhat reminiscent of what she remembered from the game. Maybe even events had been accelerated a bit by her interventions on this front.

Dean Godwin studied her for several seconds, and she suspected that he wanted to probe the extent of her knowledge on the matter. But he also seemed resigned not to overstep their boundaries. She wondered if that was out of respect or if he simply didn’t think he would be capable of extracting any more out of her.

Scarlett’s thoughts on the topic were interrupted by movement beside Godwin. She shifted her focus to Rosa, who had raised her hand into the air.

“I recognize that I’m the proverbial village hick in this conversation,” the bard said, scratching the side of her head with an air of self-deprecation. “But if we could perhaps circle back to square one... What exactly is ‘Beld Thylelion’?”