

162: A familiar meadow

“You ever wonder who thought it was a good idea to build a village and hide it away out in the sticks like this?” Rosa asked from where she was walking beside Scarlett as they trekked through the slightly overgrown forest path before them.

“No, I do not,” Scarlett replied, reaching out to push away a branch that was blocking her way.

“Well, okay, silly question. I forgot you make it a habit to smother any signs of creative and inspired imagination the second it’s about to rear its head, so you don’t have to be afraid of having fun now and then.” Rosa shook her head exaggeratedly. “Let me rephrase that: don’t you think it would’ve been much easier if they *hadn’t* built the village in the most isolated spot in the entire empire?”

“This is far from the most isolated spot in the empire.”

“You sure? Because it sure feels like it every time we have to come here. Tell me one other place where you have to go through a mystical tear in space that only opens up when you show it a fancy hairpin. A barrette doesn’t count.” Despite her complaints, Rosa wore a smile as she continued along the bumpy forest trail.

“Frey Meadow was not originally located within this space, Miss Hale.”

“Excuses! I was not originally this fair and charming—I know it might be hard to believe, however when I was first born I couldn’t even sing a simple ditty—but you don’t find me holding that against myself.”

Scarlett gave her a look. “No, instead you do not appear able to do anything but exaggeratedly *boast* about yourself.”

The woman waved her hand dismissively. “Poppycock. Only about one tenth of what I say is bombastic in any way. I’ve counted.”

Scarlett simply chose not to deign that with a response as she turned her attention head. The bard was as talkative as ever today.

Her mind wandered back to what Fynn had told her the day before. Since then, she hadn’t been able to stop thinking about Rosa’s situation. And at times like this, it was difficult to discern anything from the woman herself. It wasn’t like Scarlett could just ask, so she was left trying to figure things out herself.

It didn’t help that there was also the threat of the other Viles looming over them at the moment, now that they were aware of the existence of a potential incarnate. Even with Mistress promising to help out on that front, Scarlett couldn’t help but worry about what might happen if Mistress was lying or failed to keep the demons away.

Scarlett had started taking some precautions in case such a scenario happened, but there was no simple solution that she could simply rush for. For the time being, she had to rely on Fynn

and the Loci to detect any potential demons that might be around, but that would only get them so far. If they did run into a demon and it recognized what Rosa was, it would be difficult to stop the woman's identity from spreading. Without knowing its name, permanently killing even an ordinary demon was hard. Most of the time, they were just banished back to one of the Blazes.

"By the way, how long is that ancient wizard fellow going to stay at the mansion?" Rosa asked after a while.

Scarlett glanced at her. "By 'ancient wizard', are you perhaps referring to Dean Warley Godwin?"

"No, I meant the other ancient wizard who's been running around the mansion the last few days. The one with the old scraggly beard and pointy hat that he keeps pulling rabbits out of." Rosa pointed over Scarlett's shoulder. "Look, he's behind you right now."

Scarlett didn't bother turning around, simply giving Rosa a skeptical look. "The *Dean* will most likely leave tomorrow. He is still examining the Loci, as well as preparing some of the materials harvested from the dragon. Once the preparations for those matters are complete, he will have no more reason to stay."

After getting some time to inspect the Loci yesterday, Godwin had requested to stay a bit longer to continue the work with the artifact. Since Scarlett was receiving his help in improving the Loci and had nothing to hide in the mansion at the moment, she saw no reason to decline. As such, he had still been around at the mansion this morning, and Scarlett had invited him to dine with the rest of them in the morning.

The wizard had been rather surprised to see Fynn there, since he apparently believed all members of the Grehaldrael tribe had died. It had been somewhat amusing to see the man attempt to question Fynn, only to receive the usual overly blunt replies, although the wizard himself didn't appear too surprised and seemed to have anticipated that to some degree.

"You think I could ask him to magic up my klert so that it changes between different hues of brown whenever I play a note before he leaves?" Rosa asked. "I've been thinking that it might be fun to test that with an audience and see if they think they've gone looney or not."

"I believe you certainly *could*," Scarlett said. "Whether he will do it is a different matter. First of all, I do not know if he is capable of enchanting items to that effect. Secondly, even if he can, he is a very busy man. Do not forget that he is one of the most experienced and skilled mages in the empire, Miss Hale. I imagine that it is not on his list of priorities to help you mentally torment your crowds."

While she *said* that, Rosa had a knack for making people like her when she wanted to. In a certain sense, Godwin had a pretty laid-back personality, and Rosa had seemed to hit it off well during their first interactions this morning. If Rosa asked, it wasn't outside the realm of possibility that the man might actually consider doing something like that.

"No worries." Rosa tapped a finger to her forehead. "I haven't forgotten anything. This ol' noggin has the memory of an owl."

“That does not reassure me much.”

The woman grinned. “It wasn’t meant to.”

Scarlett paused for a moment, studying that grin. It looked so genuine, but how much of it was forced?

“...How have you been lately? Are you straining yourself?”

Rosa blinked and stopped walking, her grin fading. Scarlett stopped beside her, observing her expression. After a few seconds, Rosa let out a soft chuckle as her eyes shifted away from Scarlett’s and turned downwards. “...I don’t know how I’m supposed to answer that now.”

Scarlett kept her gaze on the woman for a while longer before turning around and resuming her walk. “Then you do not have to.”

Her words were followed by silence behind her until eventually she heard the rustling of boots against dirt as the bard started catching up again.

They continued their journey through the forest without speaking, and eventually, the trees around them gradually lessened as they emerged into a large glade with a narrow river encircling its outskirts. At the opposite end of the glade stood Freymeadow, a cluster of houses with simple wooden roofs, surrounded by a low stone wall. A small herd of sheep roamed within an enclosure next to the village.

It was a familiar sight to both of them by now.

“You mentioned a ‘surprise’ that you were preparing for me when we next visited Freymeadow,” Scarlett said, just as Rosa moved up and stopped beside her. “Did that lead anywhere, or should I pretend as if it never happened?”

The woman raised a hand to her chin, taking in the view. “Hmm~ Who knows? Guess we’ll have to wait and see.”

Scarlett looked at her. “Is there still a need for evasiveness?”

“It’ll do you good to be on the receiving end of it for a little longer, I’d say. Have faith in me. This is *definitely* for your own good.” Rosa dropped her hand as she donned a somewhat awkward expression. “I also genuinely don’t actually know if it will work. We *will* have to see.”

“Then I am looking forward to finding out,” Scarlett said. “I would be quite disappointed if this amounted to nothing after all this talk.”

The bard turned to her with widened eyes.

The corner of Scarlett’s mouth curved up slightly. “No pressure.”

With that, she left Rosa behind and started moving towards the village. There was a dirt road that began near the river and continued in Freymeadow’s direction, so she followed it towards

the settlement. As it reached the village, the road ran alongside the stone wall for a short distance before ending in an opening that could loosely be called a gate.

Two middle-aged women sitting in front of a nearby house looked up from their work as Scarlett and Rosa entered Freymeadow, and Scarlett spared them a glance. Both had baskets filled with wool beside them and tools resembling large brushes on their laps. These women were always here at the start of these loops.

Rosa smiled and waved at them as usual, receiving surprised looks in return.

Continuing further into the village, Scarlett and Rosa attracted even more attention from the villagers who were seeing them for the first time. Things were always the same on the first day of these loops, with the villagers displaying a mixture of wariness and curiosity at this new arrival.

Just like these villagers, this Arlene wouldn't have any memories of Scarlett or their previous conversations.

Somehow, that was both a relief and a disappointment to her.

Soon, they reached the large village square with the raised wooden platform at its center. Some of the village children were gathered near the platform, playing with sticks and stones as their eyes turned in their direction. Rosa greeted them with another cheerful wave.

Scarlett focused on the house at the other end of the square, walking over towards it. There, Arlene was sitting on her porch, observing the children with a distant gaze. With long raven hair that had a streak of white in it, the woman wore a familiar somber expression, with traces of wrinkles and darker skin under her eyes.

Arlene turned to look at Scarlett and Rosa when they stopped in front of the porch.

“Oh? Visitors?” The woman spoke the same words she always did at their first meeting.

Scarlett had grown accustomed to it, but for some reason, it didn't feel quite right this time. She could still see the other woman before her — the one who had listened to her confession with a calm demeanor and showed understanding of her situation.

“Pleasure to make your acquaintance,” Scarlett said, echoing the same greeting she always did. “I am Scarlett Hartford.”

Arlene raised an eyebrow. “Scarlett Hartford?” The woman studied her for a moment. “That's a new name.”

“This is my retainer, Rosalina Hale.” Scarlett gestured towards Rosa, who had moved closer to the porch's railing and leaned against it. “We have come from Freybrook to meet with you.”

“Hmm, is that so?” Arlene's gaze lingered on Scarlett for a second longer before shifting to Rosa. After seemingly seeing what she'd searched for, she looked back at the village square. “I'll have to disappoint, unfortunately. I'm not much to meet.”

“I disagree,” Scarlett said, fixing her eyes on the woman. “I wish to be taken under your tutelage.”

The woman paused, turning back to Scarlett. “What?”

“I wish to be taught by you.”

Arlene narrowed her eyes and then pointed at the empty space beside Scarlett. “Show me what you can do.”

Scarlett looked to where she pointed. “Is there something specific you wish for me to demonstrate?”

“Magic would be preferable, but if you’re here to learn my baking secrets, a sponge cake works as well.”

Scarlett took a deep breath, then raised one hand in the air and conjured a wheel of fire. Several dozens of flames moved and revolved like a tiny whirlpool at its center.

Arlene watched the display quietly for a long while, her brows furrowed in thought.

It took a decent bit of focus on Scarlett’s end to maintain the magic and have it be as perfect as she could—in any other case, this would have been overkill—but a hint of worry still crept its way into her mind. What if this wouldn’t be enough? What if the previous Arlene had lied to her?

Finally, the woman broke the silence. “That’s enough.”

Scarlett dismissed her flames.

“I’ll teach you,” Arlene said.

Scarlett tried not to show the surprise and relief on her face. “...May I ask *why* this was enough?”

Compared to some of the things she’d shown in previous loops, this current demonstration felt a lot less impressive in terms of scale and power. While it might have been slightly more complex, she honestly thought that her Aqua Mines had greater nuance and usability. If she’d spent an equal amount of focus and mana on a single Mine, it would probably be powerful enough to completely destroy an ordinary person.

“Would you prefer I don’t teach you?” Arlene asked.

“No,” Scarlett hurried to say. “I only asked out of mere curiosity.”

The woman seemed to consider her for another few seconds. “...It looked promising,” she eventually replied. “That’s all.”

She then turned to look at Rosa. “Are you also here to be taught?”

The bard smiled and shook her head. “No, don’t mind me. Just a tag-along so that Red here doesn’t get lonely.” She pointed a thumb in Scarlett’s direction.

Scarlett shot her a sharp look at the new moniker but quickly averted her eyes when she noticed the small smirk on Rosa’s face. It was best to ignore the woman and not give her any more amusement in moments like these.

“I’m also here so that she has someone to leech life-force out of whenever she runs out,” Rosa added.

Arlene turned back to Scarlett with suspicion in her eyes.

Scarlett couldn’t suppress her sigh. “She is referring to mana, and I do not ‘leech’ it from her. I have an artifact that stores mana, and Miss Hale assists me in refilling it when necessary.”

If Arlene was actually going to teach her, Scarlett might not even need Rosa’s help for replenishing her mana anymore. An experienced master mage would almost definitely possess more mana than Rosa did. Additionally, Scarlett had access to [Ittar’s Genesis]. While she didn’t think using the item within the village was an option, it might be worthwhile to venture outside of the village at times in order to practice with it.

“If you aren’t going to participate, I suggest you move back,” Arlene told Rosa. Taking the hint, the bard immediately started backing away.

Then, for the first time since Scarlett’s initial visit to Freymeadow, Arlene rose from her chair. Four flames materialized in the air before her, transforming into arrow shapes that pointed in Scarlett’s direction.

Scarlett took a step back, eyeing the flames. “What are you doing?”

“Exactly what you asked me to,” Arlene replied. With a flick of the woman’s hand, two of the arrows shot off towards Scarlett. “Teaching you.”