

147: Balcony escapades

There was such a thing as too much socializing in one night.

Whatever the original Scarlett's feelings might have been on the matter, she currently felt this statement couldn't be more true. She had already been in not the best moods when she first arrived, so the constant activities, conversations, and people giving her odds looks here and there tested her patience. While she would admit that not all of it was as bad as she had feared, the further into the night things got, the more exhausted she felt herself getting.

After that whole run-in with Count Soames, she had spent a good deal of time talking with Evelyne, Livvi, and Raimond, until the latter two eventually left for their own things. That's when the floodgates had opened, so to speak.

She wasn't sure if it was because of what happened with the Count or something else, but after that, she and Evelyne had been approached over and over again by strangers who wanted to talk and introduce themselves to her. Mostly it had just been lower nobles—the last-born children or relatives of barons and the like—with a few merchants and other people in the mix, but none were people she knew. Probably not any she *wanted* to know either, judging by how clingy some of them had been. It was at times like these that the original's general rudeness and indifference to others was a blessing that let her blow them off pretty quickly.

But it was still annoying.

She had tried bringing Evelyne along to find and introduce her to the Withersworths, but it had taken almost an hour of moving around and dealing with such occurrences before they actually found the elderly couple and their family. By this time, Scarlett felt like she might actually light the next person who approached her on fire and so she had left Evelyne with the two and excused herself to get some air.

After asking some of the servants for directions, she had gone back to the ballroom and crossed it, entering one of the dozen glass corridors that connected to it and led to the side rooms beyond where she passed through another couple of corridors and chambers—each decorated in different ways and with small bands playing in them—before eventually reaching a hallway that led out onto a balcony a quiet respite from the happenings inside. It was large enough to host a decent amount of people on its own, but there weren't many guests out here at the moment. Most probably wouldn't want to waste a minute of tonight not forging connections or enjoying themselves.

A crisp breeze blew through the open space as she exited out onto the balcony, carrying the fragrance of plants and flowers with it. It wasn't as cold as she would have expected, though. There was presumably some kind of enchantment at work here.

She walked over to the stone railing at the opposite corner which overlooked the tranquil waters of Stockder Lake. The moon wasn't out in full, so it was somewhat dark, but it was still a pretty sight. As she stopped to lean on the railing, she observed the soft glow of the lanterns that illuminated it from beneath, casting delicate shadows over what she now

realized were illustrations carved into the stone. The Tyndalls really didn't spare any money when it came to decorating their home.

While it *was* a bit excessive, she also had to admit that it was pretty impressive as well. This balcony, especially—hanging off the top of one of the castle's spires—was more relaxing than she would have thought. She idly wondered whether it would be worth trying to create a similar nook in the Freybrook mansion that she could visit sometimes.

It probably wasn't necessary. She wasn't lacking for spaces where she could be by herself if she really wanted to, and the gardens around the mansion were beautiful enough on their own. Besides, she didn't doubt for a second that investing in something like this was a whole lot more expensive than it was worth. Repairing the courtyard was one thing, as was the hedge garden where the Loci was, but there were limits. Even if she had the money.

Maybe she was just letting the atmosphere get to her.

She stood there, simply looking out into the night sky for a while.

"Taking a break from the incessant solicitations?" a cool voice rang out behind her.

She turned around, finding a tall woman in a black-and-silver tunic with dark hair pulled into a braid walking up to the balcony edge a couple of meters away from her. A pair of piercing blue eyes examined her for a moment as the woman leaned onto the railing.

Scarlett furrowed her brow as she studied the woman. She looked familiar, maybe, but she wasn't quite sure from where.

"Did I interrupt something?" The way the woman spoke actually reminded Scarlett of herself, though there appeared to be even less emotion in her voice. Like she didn't care much about anything at all.

"...In a manner of speaking, yes," Scarlett answered. "I was enjoying the privacy that this place provided, though I suppose you are under no obligation to take that into account."

The woman regarded her for a moment, then shifted her eyes to look out over the lake. "If that is what you think."

And with that, silence descended between them. Scarlett waited, expecting her to continue, but she didn't.

Just as Scarlett thought that was everything she had to say and looked away, the woman spoke again.

"There are few spots where one can find peace and quiet tonight, but most others do not care about that. I was considering whether it would be worth fighting you for this one, but I realized you might not survive the fall."

Scarlett stared at her, taking a second to peer over the balcony edge. While they weren't near the top of the castle, they were still several stories up.

The woman looked back at her and seemed to notice her expression. “That was a joke.”

Scarlett gave her a dubious look. It certainly didn’t sound like one.

The woman scrutinized her with her gaze, as if she was considering whether it was worth trying to convince her, then seemed to give up as she simply turned away again.

Scarlett remained quiet as she deliberated if it was best to leave now or stay and pretend the woman wasn’t there.

“I fail to understand how others do not tire of constantly being approached by strangers with unreasonable expectations,” the woman suddenly said. “It is a wonder there aren’t more dismembered hands at events like these. It has been so long since I attended outside of my duties that I forgot how tedious it is.”

Scarlett glanced at her. It did not sound like the woman was actually expecting a response. It was more like she was talking into empty air.

“...Perhaps it is a good thing weapons were not allowed in tonight,” she found herself saying despite that.

It wasn’t like she couldn’t *understand* the sentiment—heck, she kind of agreed with it—but it probably wasn’t the sort of thing one usually said to random people.

“That would not stop most people I know,” the woman replied.

Scarlett gave her a curious look. “And who might those people be?”

There had to be a reason why she felt like she recognized this woman. She doubted it was someone that the original knew. From the way she acted, it didn’t seem like they were acquainted.

The woman stayed quiet for a bit while it seemed as if she was thinking about how the answer to that question. “Swordsmen, I suppose,” she eventually answered. “Knights, at the very least. Not sure if the Mammoth can be considered a swordsman, but that has never mattered much to him. He is as strong as some dragons.”

Hearing that, Scarlett finally realized where she recognized this woman from. She had glimpsed her face during the Elysian Ball when the woman had accompanied the prince as his escort. This was Iyana ‘The Frigid’ Webb, the Second Sword of the Royal Guard. The ‘Mammoth’ had to be referring to Holdger, the Fifth Sword, and the giant knight who Scarlett had seen following the second princess around.

“As one would expect from one of His Majesty’s Swords,” she said after a moment.

Iyana glanced at her, only nodding slightly before returning her gaze to the distance. “I witnessed your clash with Count Soames earlier. That type is always a hassle to endure.”

“Indeed, they are.”

“You handled it better than I would have expected.”

“Thank you.”

“What was it that you said that made him scared of you?”

Scarlett raised a brow. “I do not believe he was necessarily scared.”

“He was,” the woman said.

“I see... Well, I am afraid the details of what I said are not something I can share.”

The knight didn't seem to mind that answer. “I would also stay silent if I publically threatened a count like that.”

Scarlett eyed her. The woman was honest, at least, though she didn't seem to care much for filtering her thoughts. That was refreshing after some of the previous interactions Scarlett had during the night, but it could probably also get tiring.

She returned her attention to the view, observing some of the stars visible in the sky above.

“You are different from what I imagined,” Iyana said after a while.

“People often tell me that.”

“They tell me the same thing.”

Scarlett studied her for a moment. The woman looked about as indifferent and aloof as they came, and from what little Scarlett knew about her, that much seemed to fit. The woman wasn't called ‘The Frigid’ for nothing.

“I will not be offended if you say that you do not believe me,” the knight said.

“It is not that I do not believe you. Rather, I simply find it surprising to hear.” Scarlett thought back to the earlier ‘joke’. “...On reflection, perhaps it is to be expected.”

“I have been told that humor does not fit me,” Iyana said. “I am apparently ‘as emotive as a golem and more likely to judge a knock-knock joke as secret code for conspiring against His Majesty than break a laugh’, so I would be careful what you say while around me.”

A short laugh escaped Scarlett at that. “I have been told much the same thing in this case as well.”

“Was the person who told you that also an old man with what cannot be described as anything other than a mania for woodworking and a questionable sense of humor?”

She blinked. “...No. Although her humor is dubious, what is most questionable is her judgement if you ask me.”

The woman shrugged. “I would prefer that over the Captain.”

Scarlett gave her a long look. She didn't expect the captain of the Royal Guard to be that kind of person. Not that she knew him especially well. Most of the Royal Guard members weren't explored that much in the game, to be honest. There weren't any quest-lined to become a member of the guard, like there was to become a Solar Knight, so they only appeared occasionally. The one that had the most appearances was Leandra 'The Swift', the Third Sword, but that was mostly in relation to quests that involved the first princess.

Iyana seemed to consider her for a moment, as if she only just now realized something. "You were the one that caused a stir during the Proclamation, were you not?"

"...I would have thought you would have already known that, since it appeared you were already familiar enough with me to have expectations of what I would be like."

"I do not pay much attention to most things nobles do," the woman said. "You are Sir Leon's fiancée, however. There have been mentions of you among the knights. I overheard some of what they said."

"I presume much of was not the most flattering?"

"Does it matter? It is not as if you have to pay it any mind."

"That is true enough." Scarlett cocked her head to the side. "Are you well acquainted with Sir Leon, by any chance? If so, are you aware of whether he is here tonight or not?"

She had looked, but she hadn't spotted the man yet. None of the Delmons had approached her tonight, either.

"I have sparred with him, but I would not say we are close," Iyana said. "As for if he's here, I would assume not."

"Preoccupied with knight matters?"

The woman nodded. "The Solar Knights are more busy than any other order at the moment."

"Is there a reason you are here tonight, then? As far as I am aware, no members of the Imperial Family are present, and judging from yours words, it does not seem as if you enjoy these types of events."

"Sir Swale wanted at least one member of the guard here, and I was the most suitable. Dame Leandra was busy."

That made sense. Scarlett couldn't imagine Holdger taking part in these kinds of events unless he was accompanying the youngest princess. As for the last member of the Royal Guard, she didn't know too much about him.

"Then—"

Both of them paused as a loud crash rang out from behind them, originating from inside. It was soon followed by someone's scream, though it sounded distant, as if smothered by the air before it reached them.

Scarlett scowled. What was happening now?