

## 142: Lights, camera, action

After being led to their quarters, Scarlett and Evelyne spent a few hours there, mostly just getting ready for the ball itself. The servant that had come with them helped with anything that they couldn't do themselves, and while they had been given separate accommodations, the rooms were close enough that the servant woman didn't have to run across half the building to move between them. There were also plenty of servants working under the Tyndall family present that took any requests proffered to them, though Scarlett personally didn't ask anything.

The dress that she had prepared and wore for today was made of a silk-like material of a rich burgundy color, embroidered with intricate gold thread and adorned with tiny rubies at its feet. The neckline was low but still tasteful, and the sleeves ended slightly above her wrists. In her opinion, it was all still a bit too much—especially the rubies—but she had to admit that it looked good.

And judging from what she'd seen during the Elysian Proclamation—and in her own wardrobe—this was far from the most opulent clothing that some of the nobles wore around here.

As for Evelyne, her attire was relatively simple in comparison. It consisted of a pair of fitted trousers made of black velvet and a flowing blouse that had billowing sleeves and a dark emerald green jacket over it. Flashy in its own way, but not to the same degree.

Scarlett had also noticed that the younger woman didn't seem to like wearing dresses or skirts much, even for events like this. A trend that didn't appear as uncommon in the empire as one might expect, with Scarlett having seen plenty of other high-born women dressing similarly. The first Imperial Princess was one example.

The sun had set a few hours earlier by the time both of them were finished with their preparations and they began making their way from their quarters. They weren't the only ones, either. As they exited into the courtyard in front of the building with their accommodations in it, they were met with the sight of several groups that were already climbing into their carriages and taking off towards the venue where the ball was being held.

Scarlett's and Evelyne's carriage stood parked at the edge of the courtyard, lit up by a pair of lanterns that hung from the side. Their coachman stood next to it, waiting patiently for them. He pulled the cabin door open as they approached, closing it behind them after they'd climbed inside. Then they were soon on their way as well, moving towards the castle in the distance.

"I can't get rid of this nervous feeling in my stomach," Evelyne said from her seat opposite Scarlett. "I thought it would be fine once we actually got here and things were getting started. That's usually how it is for me. But now, it's only gotten worse."

Scarlett turned to the woman. "This is far from the first time you attend. What is it that brings you to be more nervous tonight?"

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe it just finally sunk in exactly how many threats we have looming over us at the moment?” Evelyne shook her head lightly, then studied Scarlett quietly for a few seconds. “I wish I had even a tenth of that composure of yours. Not only are we already on shaky footing with most of the other nobles, but you’re also making an attendance against Duke Tyndall’s wish. And despite what I might have said before—I must have been crazy at the time—it actually *does* scare me that you’re essentially going against the Delmons completely by yourself in this whole betrothal matter. How is it possible that you’re still this calm?”

She brought a hand up to the bridge of her nose and sighed. “I’m not trying to start a fight, but the nerves *are* starting to get to me. I thought I was okay with it all, but now that we’re soon going to make a public appearance despite all of ...*that*—” She gestured with her hand. “I’m not as certain anymore.”

Scarlett considered her for a long moment, before eventually turning her head to look out the window.

“...I see.”

Outside, the lush gardens of Grovefort Castle were illuminated by hundreds of colorful lights that were spread out among the various footpaths.

“While your concern on the behalf of both of us is warranted, it is not needed,” she said. “Those matters are my responsibility, and I will deal with them as is appropriate in a way so that you do not have to worry. You only need to direct your attention to the affairs that you can influence, and trust in my capabilities regarding the rest.”

In truth, she wasn’t as sure about these things either. She had, however, built up a pretty decent foundation for herself now, both economically and politically. There were some points of weakness, but in general, if other nobles tried to cause her trouble, she could either push back against them, or simply ignore whatever they were trying and make up for whatever it cost her through other means. It wasn’t as if they could stop her from looting dungeons and growing stronger with the system.

“That...” Evelyne’s voice had turned smaller. Scarlett heard her shift in her seat. “It really shouldn’t, but that actually does relieve me a little. Just marginally.”

Scarlett nodded. That was better than nothing.

The carriage lulled into silence as they waited for the carriage to reach the castle. The impressive structure rose up ahead of them like a giant under the star-strewn night sky, coming alive with a mesmerizing display of light and colors. Its walls were adorned with flickering torches, casting a gentle glow over the numerous standards that hung over them. The castle’s towers and turrets were also decorated with shimmering strands of light that originated from unseen sources, sparkling like tiny marbles in the distance.

Above the main entrance, which was a pair of tall open gates with a long set of stairs leading up to it, was a large banner that fluttered in the breeze, bearing the deep green stag with golden eyes that served as the Tyndall family’s crest. Bright carpets of the same color had been rolled out through the doors and down the stairs, guiding guests inside.

With people arriving by the minute, the castle's main courtyard was filled with carriages and their horses, the animals' harnesses clattering softly in the night. Distant sounds of conversation and music drifted to Scarlett's ears from high above, where she could see lights in the higher levels of the castle that suggested it was there that the venue was.

Their carriage took a right and moved to the edge of the courtyard, stopping behind a line of other vehicles that held various house crests on them.

She and Evelyne climbed out of the carriage. The chilly nighttime air was uncomfortable when wearing a dress that exposed part of her neck and arms, so she used her pyrokinesis to warm up the air around her and Evelyne ever-so-slightly, careful not to let the magic out of her control. She was still having problems with that, but it had gotten a lot better after visiting Freymeadow and Arlene.

Evelyne gave her a surprised look at first, but then nodded in appreciation as the two of them started making their way towards the castle's entrance. Guards were standing at the feet of the stairs leading up to it, dressed in the dark green armor of the Windgrove duchy, but they didn't stop any of the guests from passing through. Presumably, they were only here to keep watch of things. Or maybe for show.

As the two of them walked up the stairs and through the large open doors that led into the castle, they entered a grand reception hall that made the foyer they had back in Freybrook pale in comparison. Scarlett didn't pay most of the fancy decorations much mind, though, as she and the other nearby guests followed the directions of some of the servants and began moving through the wide hallways winding through the castle.

It took them several minutes for them to get close enough to their destination that the sounds of music and revelry grew strong enough that one could make it out more clearly. She didn't quite understand why the castle had been built so that people had to walk this far to reach the venue, but no one seemed to complain. Perhaps it wasn't a big deal that they had to climb a few stairs.

Eventually, they entered a spherical chamber that opened up into a much larger space beyond. It looked like a ballroom, but much grander than any ballroom Scarlett had seen before. It was similar in size to Dawnlight Palace's throne room, with dozens of painted glass corridors running along its sides and connecting to several smaller rooms that all seemed to have their own decorative themes.

A thriving mass of people were already gathered, in the midst of conversations and enjoying the various foods and appetisers that were placed on tables throughout the space. The floors were polished to a high sheen, reflecting the dazzling array of colors from the ballgowns and clothes of the guests, and silver candelabras hanging from the ceiling cast a warm glow over people's faces.

If Scarlett were to guess, there were already a few hundred or so attendees present. The ball didn't start at a set time, and people were mostly free to arrive whenever they wanted to, but clearly those who arrived now were some of the latecomers.

As far as Scarlett was aware, though, they wouldn't have missed anything important, so she didn't think it mattered much. The ball would continue until late in the night.

From what she could see, most people paid little attention to new arrivals, and of those who did it wasn't much more than short glances in their direction. She *did* see maybe a couple of nearby faces that showed what might have been surprise at seeing her, but it was far from anything significant.

"What do you want to do now?" Evelyne asked as they had moved over to a section near the entrance that had fewer people in it. Both of them looked out across the ballroom. "Should we stay together at first?"

"That will not be necessary."

While staying with Evelyne might stave away some of the awkwardness Scarlett felt at formal events like this, it would also likely work to make her more stressed in general, having to keep her emotions in check around the woman.

"Will you be fine on your own?"

Scarlett had to hold herself back from clicking her tongue.

Case in point.

"I believe I will survive."

"That's not really what I'm worried about..." Evelyne sent a few looks at the people around them, then let out a small sigh. "We'll check in on each other later, then. All right? Try not to cause any major scenes, if possible."

"I will endeavor not to."

The woman gave her a look that was filled with doubt. There *might* have been a glimmer of worry in it as well, but it was hard to tell. Eventually, though, she relaxed her expression. "Don't forget that you promised to introduce me to some of your connections as well."

Scarlett crossed her arms. "I have not forgotten."

"Thank you. Then I will try to find you later, or you can try to find me. For now, there are a few people that I wanted to take the opportunity to meet with here, if possible." With that, Evelyne took, moving through the crowds of people.

Scarlett was left on her own, and she took a moment to scan the faces of everyone in her vicinity, searching for anyone that was familiar.

The truth was that she didn't *really* have a plan of what to do from here. There were no real rules for how one should act at these events—not committing any faux pas was more of a general rule of life in noble society in general—and she was far from the most experienced person when it came to being social at large gatherings. She might have some of the original's instincts, but that only got her so far. And if she were to completely trust in what those told her, she was more likely to get herself into trouble than anything else.

Her eyes stopped as she spotted Beldon Tyndall through some of the crowds. The man stood at the center of a small group of young nobles, occupied with conversation. The elaborate green jacket along with a white undercoat that he wore stuck out quite a bit, since almost no one else wore green tonight to respect the host's family. His dark hair was combed to the side as a dashing smile played across his face.

As he talked, his eyes seemed to meet Scarlett's and his smile grew a fraction. He looked away a moment after, however.

It might have been her imagination, but she felt like he had just been trying to tell her something with that look.

She watched him for a while longer, then she started to look around her for somewhere to move to. A passing servant held a tray with wine glasses on it, so she stepped over and picked one up as she walked over to another row of tables that held some refreshments. She'd had a light dinner, so it didn't hurt to eat something while she waited.

If it had been anyone but Beldon, she wouldn't have minded that look, but she had a decent enough grasp of his personality. She had the impression that he wanted to talk with her about something. The letters he had sent said as much as well, if not in such simple words. But she didn't have anything better to do for now anyway, so waiting it was.

Sipping on wine in her hand and occasionally tasting some sweets that tasted of almonds—molded to look like painted fruits—she observed the surrounding activities in silence. It felt awkward, simply standing by herself like this, but it wasn't too different from what had happened at the Elysian Proclamation. It was probably preferable to the alternative in her current situation, which would most likely include one party offending the other.

Those thoughts were interrupted after a while as a young man, maybe a couple of years younger than her, approached. He was dressed in a black coat that had silver embroidery across its sleeves and a pair of crisp white trousers, with his blond hair clipped short and a dapper smile on his face as he stopped in front of her.

“Fair night to you, my lady. I could not help but notice that you were standing here by your lonesome, and I thought it a sin to allow such a beautiful woman to stay neglected. May I perhaps offer you my companionship for a while?”

A frown wormed its way onto Scarlett's brow as she eyed the man. She doubted he was a noble. While not *all* nobles knew her name or appearance, she imagined that most of the ones that had attended the Elysian Proclamation would at the very least have an idea of who she was. Judging from the looks some of the people behind the man sent him, they knew who she was.

But it *had* also been a while since the Proclamation now. Maybe it was possible that some of the stigma around her had dissipated since then, and some among the nobility had let it go? It was hard to know, considering how disconnected she was from noble society at large.

Not that it mattered much right now. Nobleman or not, she didn't feel particularly inclined to interact with this man.

“My own company will suffice,” she said. “If I were looking for companionship, I would not be standing by myself.”

The smile on his face fell. “Ah, well, perhaps I could change your mind—”

“You cannot.” She gave him a cold look. “I mean no offence, but I think it best that you seek someone else out to offer your company to.”

The man let out an awkward cough. “Y-Yes, maybe I’ll do that. My apologies for disturbing you.”

He quickly spun around and left.

Scarlett only kept her eyes on his back for a second before turning away. She ignored the odd whisper she heard from those that were close enough to have bothered listening in. They were annoying, but she could handle this much.

Her right hand touched the fingers on her left, where she was wearing the [Charm of Expeditious Change] and one more ring. She couldn’t bring her [Pouch of Holding] to the ball, so instead she had opted to use the spatial ring she had originally procured for Gaven. It couldn’t hold much, but it was enough for one night.

Finally, after a few more minutes had passed, a familiar voice sounded out. “Baroness Hartford. It’s been some time.”

Several heads moved in her direction to look as Beldon Tyndall approached her. Now that Duke Tyndall’s son was involved, even more people seemed interested.

“Master Beldon.” She greeted him. “I see you have concluded your previous discussions.”

His lips curled up in a smile, and he still very much had that same playboy act he maintained in public. “When a lovely lady such as you arrives, a gentleman simply has no choice but to personally welcome her. Or am I wrong to think so? Anyhow, it delights me to see that you decided to accept my invitation after all, Baroness. I am sure your presence will only serve to make tonight’s festivities all the more fascinating and entertaining.”

A few hushed whispers rose from some of the people nearby, and Scarlett studied the man closely.

Their deal had never specified that he had to make it publically known that he was the one that invited her, nor did he have to hide that she was the one who requested the invitation. Did he have a special reason for doing this?

“...I am grateful for the sentiment,” she answered after a moment. “However exaggerated it may be.”

“Exaggerated?” Beldon stepped over to the table next to her and picked up a grape from a platter of sliced fruits that were arranged in a circle. “You wound me. The solidity of my words means more than anything else, so of course I am being completely forthright.”

She arched a brow at him. She found that very unlikely. But she could play along with his game. “You will have to excuse me. It appears I have been remiss with my comment in questioning your honesty.”

He waved his free hand in the air, picking up another grape and plopping it into his mouth. “Now you are making me feel guilty for coercing an apology from a respectable lady.”

She gave him a long look.

...Or maybe she didn't.

“My apologies,” she said, not really bothering to sound like she meant it this time.

He laughed. “It would seem I had almost forgotten the type of person you were. I suppose I should be the one apologising.”

“That will not be necessary.”

“No? Well, if you say so.” Beldon glanced around them and across the ballroom, then he shifted closer to her and spoke in a lower voice, though not quiet enough so that those closest to them couldn't hear. “The night is still young, and I will have to admit to some curiosity regarding what your plans are for it. Are you here simply to enjoy yourself, or should I perhaps expect a performance similar to that in the capital?”

He was giving her a look that told her he doubted she was here just to fraternize.

So he was wondering why she had tried so hard to get an invitation to the ball from him. It seemed he had expectations.

“I am afraid I will have to disappoint,” she said. “My only purpose is to partake in tonight's celebrations along with my sister, as well as the gathering tomorrow morning.”

“Your sister? Lady Evelyne, I presume?” His head moved as his eyes swept around the ballroom as if searching for the woman.

“Yes. She is currently engaged in locating some acquaintances of hers.”

“I see.” The man nodded to himself. “Then perhaps I will take the chance to seek her out later. I recall having met her once or twice before, but it was quite some time ago, and she must have grown a lot since then. It cannot hurt to make some reintroductions.”

“I am certain she would appreciate that,” Scarlett said.

A small cry reached them from further down the ballroom, where among a crowd of people, a girl with long dark hair called Beldon's name. The girl's appearance seemed to hold some similarities with the man, so Scarlett suspected they were related.

Beldon looked in that direction, then back at Scarlett. “It would seem I have to cut my greeting short. Apologies. There were some matters that I wanted to discuss with you, but I

think it would be best if they were left for another time. Perhaps you could spare me some time before the gathering tomorrow?”

What could he have to talk with her about that hadn't been brought up in their previous communications?

If she were to guess, it had something to do with Mirage, but that still left dozens of possibilities. She couldn't think of one that stuck out to her in particular.

“I will ensure that I make the time,” she said after considering it for a second.

He showed her a polished smile in response. “Marvelous. I will have someone inform you of the time and place later, and see you then.”

With a short farewell, he left and headed in the direction of the dark-haired girl that had called for him. Once he reached her, the two of them exchanged a few words and the girl looked towards Scarlett with a puzzled expression. Scarlett looked away.

She seemed to have amassed even more attention now than earlier, with more than a few people glancing over at her. Still, in the grand scheme of things, the majority of attendants focused on their own conversations rather than bothering with whatever she was up to.

As she was left alone once more, she returned to looking out over the ballroom, idly looking for any other people that she knew.

She still had to figure out what to do from here.