

124: Fancy dinners

Evelyne looked from the papers in her hand as their carriage pulled to a stop. She looked out the window at the courtyard outside, situated on top of the hill that overlooked the central part of Freybrook. It had been a while since she last visited this place.

Scarlett rose without a word in front of her and exited the cabin. Her sister had been as taciturn as always for most of the while, not speaking to her unless she had reason to.

Evelyne didn't mind it too much now. It felt different from the silence filled with judgement that had often been there before. At times, it even felt like Scarlett *didn't* hate her very existence, though she was hard to tell. She had no idea what Scarlett thought of her nowadays.

Following her sister out of the carriage, she stepped foot on the paved ground outside and looked around. The Count's butler walked over to greet them.

The man bowed. "Baroness Hartford, Lady Evelyne. Count Guifford Knottley welcomes both of you to his home."

The way he addressed Evelyne made a warm feeling rise up, even as she instinctually glanced at Scarlett's face for any sign of anger. There was none, of course. Because Scarlett truly *had* changed.

"Come with me and I will lead you to the dining hall where the Count and his family are waiting."

The butler turned around and started walking towards a building that towered over the courtyard. The Knottley house's estate was actually smaller than the Hartford estate here in the city, but it was also older. It had been built at a time when the Freybrook region still saw a lot of strife. Originally, it had been a fortress, much like the ancestral Stagmond Keep belonging to Evelyne's and Scarlett's house, and it had simply been expanded upon since then.

As they entered and began moving through the hallways of the manor, Evelyne sneaked a few looks at her sister's figure from the side.

Scarlett appeared as collected and aloof as ever, wearing a fine alabaster dress that revealed her arms and shoulders. Oddly enough, she was barely wearing any jewellery, though. Just one ring on her left hand, as well as a relatively plain gold necklace. Most of the other jewellery Evelyne had seen her sister wear almost constantly for the last few months—which she'd been assuming were enchanted in some way—were missing. Scarlett had even worn some of those during the Elysian Proclamation, so it surprised her that *this* occasion was when she finally took them off.

Was it because they were meeting old friends of their family? That didn't *feel* like something Scarlett would do. If there was one thing she *did* know about her sister right now, it was the fact that Scarlett hadn't been excited at all about this dinner.

Which was insane, in and on its own. Her sister practically *breathed* noble gatherings, no matter the size. But now the woman's priorities had shifted a lot.

When Evelyne had arrived at the mansion earlier to pick her up, Scarlett had actually been in the middle of a conversation with the *gardener*, of all people. The poor old man had looked positively petrified, and when Evelyne asked what Scarlett was doing, her sister had said she was preparing a home for a new custodian.

Evelyne had really wanted to ask what *that* meant as well, but she didn't feel like having another stupefying revelation or other right before they were having dinner together with the Count, so she'd stayed quiet for the time being. But as usual, she wasn't entirely sure what was going through her sister's mind. She doubted it was something trivial, at the very least. There had been something different about the mansion that she couldn't quite place.

The butler continued leading them through the manor, and after a few minutes, they reached a door at the end of a corridor. He opened it to reveal the dining hall beyond. Sitting at the head of the table at the center of the room was Count Guifford Knottley. The stocky, bald man was looking in their direction, his chin resting on his knuckles.

To his right was Livvi, and to his left sat Garrin Knottley, the Count's eldest son and heir.

Evelyne followed Scarlett into the dining hall, glancing around as a small bit of nostalgia bubbled up. She had often been here with her father and mother in the past, when they were still alive.

"Welcome, Lady Evelyne," the Count's voice rumbled across the room as he gave a nod in their direction. He seemed to consider Scarlett for a moment. "Baroness Hartford."

"We greet the Count," Scarlett replied, performing a *very* small curtsy.

Evelyne did the same, though slightly deeper.

Led by the butler, the two of them then crossed the room towards a pair of chairs opposite the Count. The dining table was shaped like a square, and it wasn't too large.

"I'm glad both of you could make it," Livvi said with a smile.

Evelyne looked over at the woman. To her, Livvi had always felt like a kind, older sister, even though she had often been around her sister. It felt strange seeing her like this, considering Evelyne probably stood almost a head over her now. It was also a bit of a comical sight, with Livvi almost looking like a child next to her large father.

"We had no reason not to," Scarlett answered, taking her seat with more grace than the action called for.

"Hello, Scarlett. Evelyne. It's been a while," another voice said.

Evelyne sat down as well and looked up at Garrin Knottley. The man was the opposite of his sister, with a tall frame and deep brown hair.

Evelyne showed a polite smile. “Garrin.”

As for Scarlett, she seemed to observe him for a while before giving him a brief nod. “Lord Garrin.”

The man’s awkward smile shrunk ever-so-slightly at the formal way of address, but Evelyne wasn’t sure what he was expecting. She doubted he would be foolish enough to *still* hold feelings for her sister. Any remaining embers of affection were likely to have been quashed ages ago when Scarlett’s indifference made it clear that the son and heir of a powerful noble apparently wasn’t enough for whatever ambitions she had.

Maybe he thought their history would at least mean enough not to be addressed with titles?

Evelyne eyed her sister for another moment.

To be honest, she wasn’t even sure Scarlett had remembered who he was. The more she interacted with her, the more she noticed the different changes. Some were big, while others were much more subtle. One that she hadn’t actually been sure of at that the start, even after Scarlett had told her about it, was that whole spiel about Scarlett’s memories being incomplete. But in the last month, she had been convinced of the truth of that statement.

Scarlett hadn’t even been certain about who *Livvi* was. And as far as Evelyne was aware, Livvi had been the closest Scarlett had ever had to a real friend. At least until recently.

From what she could tell, there seemed to be a pattern to what sort of things Scarlett remembered best. Essentially, the more useful to were to her, the higher the likelihood that she wouldn’t have forgotten about you. Her sister didn’t seem to have any issue remembering those that served her or had political importance to her, but others weren’t quite as lucky.

Even if they had grown up along with Scarlett as Livvi did.

Evelyne was brought out of her thoughts as the Count cleared his throat. She turned to look at him as the man had his hands clasped together in front of him. “Johan. Have the food brought in.”

“As you command, my Lord.” The middle-aged butler bowed before exiting out a large door at the back of the room. A few moments later, he returned, followed by three servants who were carrying trays. They placed the trays on the table before Evelyne and the others and quickly left the room.

“Dig in as you wish,” the Count said. He picked up a knife and fork and cut into a thick piece of meat.

Evelyne relaxed slightly, seeing that. It seemed as if he’d decided to forego most of the ceremony today.

“So, Scarlett, Evelyne. How are things?” Livvi asked after everybody had started eating. The woman pushed up her glasses as she leaned forward and picked up a piece of bread, dipping it into a soup beside her. “From the way I understood it last we spoke, both of you have your plates full at the moment. I was actually a bit surprised you accepted my invitation for this.”

“Things are well,” Scarlett replied, with little emotion.

Evelyne waited for her sister to continue, but that was all Scarlett said. She held back a small sigh.

“Much the same for me as well,” she said after a moment of silence. “While Scarlett has been busy forging some connection over in Autumnwell and handling her other responsibilities as the head, I’ve been dealing with some of our businesses that have showed promising growth.”

She hadn’t reported it to Scarlett yet since she only got confirmation the day before, but she’d been in contact with an influential merchant in Elystead who had ties to the Followers of Ittar. The man had shown interest in working with Scarlett and the barony after the Providing Ceremony. He had been incredibly helpful to Evelyne in getting in touch with the right people related to their interests in the capital. Most weren’t nobles, but that didn’t matter as long as they were willing to do business.

Of the ventures that Scarlett had wanted Evelyne to pursue in Elystead, the silversmith was also looking promising. They had hired personnel and finished all the other preparations, so things had been up and running for a few weeks now. It was too early to tell how profitable it would be in the long run, but it had at least exceeded her—admittedly conservative—expectations at this point.

Since more and more funds were currently making their way into the baronies’ coffers from Scarlett’s other exploits, and because Evelyne had been lucky in finding the right suppliers, she had already inquired into investing in the other locales that her sister had told her about.

Normally, it would have been considered reckless to spend money on uncertain undertakings like these when you’d barely paid off your preexisting debts and with other future costs looming over you, but Scarlett had been right that the prices *were* surprisingly low for these businesses, so it would be a waste to let this opportunity go just like that. Evelyne had also gotten one of the larger auction houses in the capital to act as a guarantor in exchange for a promise to continue bringing artifacts to them for the near future, which she’d been intending to do anyway, so she wasn’t too worried on that front.

They already had a stockpile of artifacts and other items that Scarlett had gathered, which they hadn’t had the time to sell yet. And that was without counting the veritable mountain of stuff that her sister had brought back from Autumnwell.

It *was* a lot of work for Evelyne, having to manage all of this on top of other fief matters. She had also been dealing with trying to get Scarlett’s ‘Scarlett Cross’ orphanage to get officially recognized, which was a more complicated procedure than she had originally expected.

And that was not to mention all the time she had been spending moving around the Freybrook region and trying to forge connections that could help their barony in the future. Something that was a lot harder than certain people made it seem.

Sometimes, she wished she knew how her sister—despite that personality of hers—did it.

All that said, Evelyne didn’t actually *mind* the extra work. Or rather, even though it was tiring, it was worth it in the end. She hadn’t felt this fulfilled in years, if ever.

“I’m glad that things are going well for both of you,” Livvi said, pulling Evelyne out of her own mind.

Glancing at her sister, Evelyne eased her leg to nudge Scarlett’s.

A small frown formed on the woman’s face as she looked at her, and Evelyne tried to point towards Livvi with her eyes. After a moment, Scarlett seemed to recognize her meaning.

Her sister turned back to the table and reached out for a glass of wine, lifting it up and taking a sip.

“And how of you, Livvi?” her sister eventually asked, as if the awkward silence didn’t affect her at all. “How have things been faring for you lately? Have you been occupied with Shields Guild matter here in Freybrook, or have you had time for other endeavors?”

Livvi smiled. “I have actually been taking it slow these past few weeks. Paid a few visits to the local branch to contact some of my colleagues and offer my aid where I could, but besides that, I’ve mostly been advising my father and brother on some affairs related to the county and met with some old acquaintances. I am planning on returning to my usual work with the Guild again soon, but father has been oh-so cross every time I’ve brought it up.”

“Hmph.” Count Knottley let out a scoff, even as his attention was focused on the food before him. “Your talents are wasted behind their desks. There are much more important things you could be doing with that mind of yours.”

“*Father.*” Livvi spoke to him in a chiding voice. “What I do with them *is* important. Especially so with what’s currently going on. We are helping a lot of people.”

“You could do the same and more in any of the administrative positions under His Majesty and the Great Offices. I don’t doubt for a second that you would surpass some of the fools there in less than a decade, and you would almost certainly be awarded an honorary title even before that.”

Livvi just lightly shook her head. “You know that’s not what I want. Besides, we haven’t met with Scarlett and Evelyne together like this in years, so let’s not bring this up now.”

“You were the one who brought it up this time,” the Count rumbled. He turned his head, his eyes landing on Scarlett for a brief moment before shifting to Evelyne. “You have matured quite a bit in the last few years, Evelyne. I am sure Castor and Leondra would have been proud seeing you like you are today. I heard you won a tourney bout over in Grimford a while back as well, so it seems you are on good way to honoring your father’s legacy.”

She blinked, staring at the man. She’d taken part in the contest she spoke about over a year ago; more on a whim—because she happened to be passing by the small town—than anything else. She also hadn’t had a proper opportunity to practice or display her skills since then. But he had somehow heard about it?

The Count turned back to her sister with a gruff face. “...And I suppose you are well on your way to honoring his legacy as well, Baroness. You’re the first one since he died that has managed to almost single-handedly give me ulcers just from thinking of you.”

““Father!””

Both his children cried out at the same time.

“What?” The man looked between the two of them. “You asked me to be on my best behaviour, didn't you? I think that is about the best compliment I could give under the circumstances. And I doubt the Baroness requires the two of you to pamper her if she has skin thick enough to anger over half of the empire's nobles in one night without care.”

Both of the Knottley children held awkward expressions as they turned to their guests.

“I'm sorry, both of you,” Livvi said. “You know how father can be.”

Evelyne sent a worried glance at her sister but was relieved to find that Scarlett didn't look offended by his words.

“There is nothing to apologize for.” Her sister held up a hand. “In fact, I believe it is I that should apologize to the Count if my actions during our last dealings caused you undue stress. I trust you understand that was not my intent. At the time, it was simply the most appropriate approach to suitable deal with the situation.”

“‘Undue stress’, you say.” The Count let out another scoff. “Oh, you're your mother's daughter, all right. But there's no point in beating one's breast over what's already done. By this point, I'm only hoping you didn't inherit all of your father's penchant for trouble and cause a block to burn down in my city sometime soon.”

Evelyne looked with slight surprise as she noticed the smile on Scarlett's face stiffen somewhat.

“Of course, I would do no such thing,” her sister said after a moment. “If such an occurrence were to happen, I would endeavour to fight it myself if necessary.”

The Count's bushy brows furrowed together as he eyed her. Eventually, he waved his hand in the air and turned away. “You've always taken my words too literally, ever since young. I hope you will leave things like that to the city guards and those more experienced were something to actually happen.”

Evelyne silently nodded along. So did she.

“The dealings you mentioned just now, Scarlett.” Livvi spoke up as her father quieted down. “Was that the things that the Emyreal Chronicle wrote about a few months back? Related to that organized gang of criminals?”

Scarlett inclined her head. “It was, yes.”

Livvi glanced at the Count. “My father refused to talk about it when asked.”

“Because it is nothing worth talking about,” the man grumbled.

“Father,” Garrin said. “You should know that will only make her think there is *more* to talk about.”

“Hmph.” The Count shot a look at his daughter. “Well, then. Go ahead and ask the Baroness if you don’t think the words of your own father are worth listening to.”

Livvi hid a small smile behind her hand. “I think I will.”

She turned to Scarlett. “Would you mind telling me about it?”

“It might disappoint you to hear that I happen to share the Count’s opinion that there is not much to share on the topic,” Scarlett said. “The Grey Dog Gang had been operating out of Freybrook for several years and proved unassailable to most efforts of rooting them out attempted by the guard. In addition, they also had powerful backers. So, when an opportunity presented itself for me to involve myself and assist in the matter, I contacted the Count and we devised a strategy of removing them for good. As soon as I ascertained the identity of their leader and the location of one of their transactions, I acted with the support of the Shields Guild to detain them and gather the necessary evidence on those sponsoring them.”

Evelyne kept a neutral expression as she listened to her sister.

Originally, she had been convinced Scarlett had been lying when she said her involvement with the Grey Dog Gang was a ruse in order to catch them. But now...

She glanced at Count Knottley, who wasn’t saying a word in objection.

...*Was* it possible that Scarlett had actually been telling the truth? Evelyne had been pretty sure that it wasn’t the only illegal dealing that Scarlett had been involved with, but it *was* the only one she’d had any evidence for.

Could it actually be that she had been acting under a misconception all along?

It annoyed her that she both wanted that to be true and false at the same time. But as it was, she had no way of finding out which was which. Her sister would never tell her if it *was* a lie, and if it was, the Count clearly had some reason to go along with it, anyway.

“My significance in the actual raid on the Grey Dog Gang’s base of operations was, however, severely exaggerated in the article authored by the Emyreal Chronicle,” Scarlett added. She shot a look at Count Knottley. “I presume I have the Count to thank for that.”

The man had his arms crossed over his chest. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“...Of course. I must have been mistaken.”

“I find it impressive nonetheless,” Livvi said. “I actually spoke with those at the Guild branch about it. While they couldn’t go into detail, they mentioned that the B-ranked Shielder you had been working with had nothing but good things to say about you. They said it was the same Shielder that worked with you to uncover those Zuverian ruins as well, right?”

Scarlett nodded. “That is correct.”

“How has that been going? When you and Ray spoke about it, I got the impression that you were doing even more research into the Zuver.”

Evelyne relaxed somewhat as the conversation shifted towards more light-hearted matters. This wasn't as bad as she had feared. Hopefully, the rest of the evening would continue like this as well.