

## 91: A grisly meadow

Rosa stared up at the reddened sky. “What...?”

“You may still wait here, if you wish,” Scarlett said.

The woman looked at her, then shook her head. “No. I’m coming with you.”

“...Very well.”

They moved towards the path in the forest ahead of them, Scarlett creating a pair of small flames to lend them some light. Even with that, making their way through here at night turned out to be a lot harder than during the day, and the farther they got, the heavier the scent of charcoal in the air got. When they finally reached the other end of the forest, exiting out into the valley where Freymeadow was, a gasp left the bard beside her.

The entire village was on fire.

Smoke trailed up into the sky from the many houses that had already been turned into nothing but charred skeletons, flames licking at what remained of their structures. Even the stone wall surrounding the village had been toppled over and scorched beyond recognition, the nearby area a sleet of dead grass. The enclosure for the sheep had also burnt down, nothing left but a smoldering piece of rubble spread out over the field. The animals themselves were nowhere to be seen.

“W-What the Blazes happened here?” Rosa wore a horrified expression, then froze, before turning to Scarlett. “We have to get the others and help the villagers!”

Scarlett gave her a long look. “There are none to help.”

Rosa stared at her. “...You knew this was what was going to happen.”

Scarlett stayed quiet.

“All those people...!”

“Their fate had already been decided.” Scarlett turned her eyes towards the village, searching across the destroyed homes. “I warned you about joining me. There is nothing we can do.”

There was no movement, other than the lingering flames.

“I will only say it once more. You may stay here if you so wish.”

“...You’re going over there?” Rosa asked.

“I am.”

Things wouldn’t progress from here unless she did.

Silence followed from Rosa. Eventually, the bard stepped forward, raising her klerl. "...I said I'm coming with. And I am. Let's do this."

Scarlett glanced at the woman. Her expression was far off from her usual merry one, yet the sparkle of determination in her gaze spoke volumes.

They moved ahead, walking past the narrow river that ran around this area and stepping onto the dirt road that led to the village. The closer they got, the more the scent of burnt wood and smoke mixed with another putrid and tanned scent. When they reached the gates, it was almost thick to the level that one could taste it. Breathing in through the mouth just made it worse.

The first thing they saw as they walked into Freymeadow was a body. Lying on the ground outside one of the fallen buildings, it had been burnt to the point beyond recognition.

Scarlett stared at the sight.

Without question, it was horrible. Beyond horrible. It wasn't anything any person should ever have to see. It was no doubt something that would bring most people to have nightmares for maybe years on end.

Yet she felt nothing at all other than *revulsion* at the scene. Not abhorrence, horror, or frightfulness. Just revulsion at how it looked. And annoyance at the *stench*.

She wished she could at least say she felt horrified at her lack of reaction. But there wasn't even that. What she knew one should logically feel on an occasion like this didn't matter at all.

"Who... Who did this...?" Rosa's voice trailed off next to her.

Scarlett turned to her. There was a quiet rage behind the woman's eyes, mixed with the horror. Yet she was taking the sight far better than most people would.

Scarlett continued further down the street, deeper into the village. Rosa silently followed along.

They passed by more displays like the first, with scorched bodies lying on the dirt or stuck among the burning buildings. Some smaller than others.

Eventually, they reached the center of Freymeadow, where they were met with groups of them spread out across the village square, centered on the still-burning platform in the middle. There was a strange stand on it, of a deep black stone that was melting into the wood under it.

It was a chaotic sight, like one taken straight out of a nightmare.

And at the focus of all this was a lone figure, knelt on the ground next to the platform with their back turned towards them. Dark, raven-colored hair hung over them.

Arlene.

“There’s someone left!” Rosa uttered.

Scarlett held out her arm, stopping the bard from running off. The woman gave her a confused look, but Scarlett just continued walking ahead slowly.

They crossed the square, carefully striding past the corpses of those that had once lived here. Scarlett held her gaze forward, focusing on Arlene.

The raven-haired woman’s shoulders were moving. Like she was sobbing. She didn’t seem to notice them as they got closer. When she reached her, Scarlett stopped and walked in front of Arlene, who was staring down at the ground.

Rosa paused at the sight. “...What happened here?” she asked.

Arlene’s shoulders stopped moving, then she slowly looked up at them. Tears were streaming down her face.

“I-Is there anyone else left?” Rosa asked again.

The woman didn’t answer, her eyes moving towards Scarlett. It was a look like none she’d ever seen before. Like her entire existence was anguish.

Rosa kneeled on the ground next to her, placing her hand on the woman’s shoulder. “Please, if there’s someone... Anyone...”

Arlene stayed quiet, eyes locked on Scarlett.

Red embers bloomed into existence around them, floating gently through the air. A faint haze started spreading over the square. Rosa paused what she was doing, bewilderedly looking around. The haze quickly enveloped them, turning into a dense cloud as their surroundings suddenly morphed, like a giant brushstroke was drawn over the world, replacing it with a mishmash of colors and shapes.

Arlene was the last of the grisly scene that remained, her empty gaze staring at Scarlett as everything around them changed. Then she too gradually became a part of the kaleidoscope of colors that was closing in, leaving only Scarlett and Rosa.

Scarlett saw the bard’s confused expression, and her mouth forming words, but no sound reached her.

Things stayed like that for a while, then colors around them started becoming clearer, taking on brown, red, orange, and yellow hues as they transformed into trees and a forest. Some of the colors became people, and the faces of Shin, Allyssa, and Fynn slowly crystallized in front of them. Finally, as if the last jigsaw piece was locked into place, everything manifested as one, and they found themselves in the glade once more.

Allyssa gaped at them. “What... What just happened?”

Rosa stared at their surroundings, eyes wide open as her head spun around.

“We have returned,” Scarlett said.

“No, but... That wasn’t how it looked when you came back before,” Allyssa said, waving her hands around.

Shin had a frown on his face. “You just materialised from thin air.”

“We chose another means of exit this time. That is all.” Scarlett glanced at the shocked Rosa.

“What happened over there?” Allyssa asked.

“Nothing of note.”

Rosa paused at Scarlett’s words, turning around to meet Scarlett’s eyes. They looked at each other for a few seconds.

“...That was one strange exit,” the bard said after a while, letting out a small laugh as she looked at the others. “I’ll have a hard time topping that in the future.”

At times like these, it was good that the woman was a talented actor.

“I do not see a reason for why you would have to,” Scarlett said and turned to look at the center of the glade.

Her eyes widened slightly.

The portal was still there, faint ripples moving in the air like when they had first arrived. There was still at least one more use left

She turned to Rosa. “It appears things are not yet over. Will you accompany me once more?”

The woman blinked, then looked at the portal. “Again...?”

“Yes. The choice is up to you. Although I believe you may want to.”

“...Alright. Let’s go.”

“Wait, what about us?” Allyssa asked. “Should we just continue staying here, or can we actually come with this time?”

Scarlett looked at her. “It is as before. You will wait here, along with Fynn. Shin will also stay.”

The expression on the girl’s face indicated she wasn’t especially fond of that answer, but she didn’t say anything more. Nor did Shin or Fynn.

“Follow me,” Scarlett told Rosa, before once again stepping through the portal. Her surroundings warped as she exited into the other side of the clearing.

It was day once more, the sun hanging high in the clear blue sky as the bright green leaves on the trees wafted with the wind. The air was fresh, the smell from before completely gone.

Rosa appeared behind her a moment later. The woman looked around carefully. Scarlett let the woman take things in for a few seconds before she started moving towards the forest path ahead of them.

She could explain things to the bard, but it would be easier to just show her.

They traversed quietly through the forest until the trees thinned as they neared the clearing where Freymeadow was nestled. Scarlett could tell Rosa was preparing herself for the sight. But the woman's expression completely froze when they made it out into the bright clearing.

There stood Freymeadow, completely intact. The houses were as they were when they first arrived here, the wall and grass encircling the village untouched. Sheep were moving around in the enclosure next to the village, with a couple human figures walking amongst them.

"What..." Rosa trailed off, then looked at Scarlett. "How is this possible?"

"As I said, their fates have already been sealed. There is nothing any of us can do."

Scarlett started walking off towards the village. Rosa stayed where she was for a moment, before hurrying after. They passed by the river and stepped onto the nearby dirt road, continuing along it until they reached the village's gates. Inside, the heads of two middle-aged women sitting in front of one of the nearby buildings turned towards them. They were the same women they'd seen on the first day they arrived here in Freymeadow, and they held the same looks of curiosity mixed with wariness as they had then.

As Rosa gawked at the two, Scarlett continued deeper into the village. Every person she passed by gave her the same look. There was no recognition in their eyes.

Finally, she reached the village square, where the children who'd been playing there the first day were gathered next to the wooden platform at the center.

Rosa caught up once more, her gaze now lingering on the children instead as Scarlett began crossing towards the large building on the other end. Sitting on a chair on its porch, staring out at the square with a vacant gaze, was Arlene. Her current quiet image painted a stark difference compared to the tortured appearance Scarlett had observed just a short while earlier.

The woman's head turned as Scarlett stopped in front of the porch.

"Oh?" Arlene said, eyes locking on to her. "A visitor?"

Scarlett looked at the woman for a moment, then she spoke. "Pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Scarlett Hartford. I have come to be taken in under your tutelage."