

157: What the cat dragged in

“Can someone *please* tell me what I am looking at?” Evelyne’s resigned voice echoed across the mansion’s courtyard.

“A dragon,” Fynn casually answered.

“And why is that? No, *how?*” The woman turned to Scarlett with a helpless expression.

Scarlett stood before the monstrous carcass of the dragon, inspecting it closely. Almost every member of the household was present. Allyssa and Shin gazed wide-eyed at the beast close to her, while Rosa seemed endlessly amused by the sight. Garside was conversing with the guards near the opening to the courtyard about what had happened, while the rest of the staff gathered at the edges, their faces filled with perplexity, awe, and slight fear.

Witnessing a dead dragon was an exceedingly rare event. The fact that one lay in her *courtyard* was still something Scarlett was processing.

“I’m with her,” Allyssa said. Like the others, she seemed to be struggling to accept the reality before her. “How is this even possible? How is there an actual *dragon* in front of us?”

The group’s eyes turned to Scarlett.

She looked at them. “...I do not know what answer to give you. Do you perhaps expect me to have been the one who slew it?”

Dragons were formidable creatures, even in the game. This one appeared relatively young—despite its already impressive size that probably surpassed most whales—so it was likely an adolescent dragon, placing it on the weaker side as far as dragons came. Even so, it would have lived for at least nearly a century. Scarlett doubted her chances against it alone. Even a group of level 60s could struggle to deal with an adolescent dragon. With the support of her entire party, and if she could go all out by using the extra mana from [Ittar’s Genesis], they might have a chance. Maybe. She wasn’t sure.

At the very least it would be comparable to the last boss in Abelard’s Doll Mansion, where she’d had Leon to help last time.

But that didn’t matter now. This dragon had been killed by something else. Judging from its injuries, it hadn’t stood a chance against its opponent.

She glanced up at the window that led to the hallway outside her office, where traces of black fur could be seen through the glass.

“You *sure* you didn’t do it?” Rosa asked, a small smile playing on her lips. “Maybe you mistook it for a bird and accidentally knocked it down with one of your little flame-water thingies.”

Scarlett gave her a long look. “Yes, that does indeed sound very plausible,” she replied in a flat tone.

The bard shrugged. “It’s slightly more likely than a dead dragon randomly falling from the sky and landing here.”

“They’re *both* absurd scenarios.” Evelyne wore a complex expression as she glanced between Scarlett and the dragon. The woman really seemed to have a hard time figuring out how she should react to the situation.

A moment later, Garside concluded his conversation with the two guards and approached them. The guards themselves resumed staring at the dead dragon like everyone else, disbelief evident in their eyes.

“My Lady,” the butler said, offering a short bow. “None of the staff members I spoke to seem to know what happened. One of the guards reported passing by the courtyard twenty minutes ago, and there were no signs of the body then. The people who spotted it first claimed it simply appeared when they weren’t looking. No one heard any sound indicating its arrival.”

Scarlett shifted her attention back to the dragon, studying it. The surrounding stone didn’t look damaged, so it was unlikely it had fallen. Especially not if there wasn’t any sound. It couldn’t have been dragged here either. Some type of teleportation magic had to have been involved. The Loci hadn’t detected anything either, but that aligned with Scarlett’s previous experiences with Empress. The cat clearly abided by rules of her own.

The puzzling aspect was *why* Empress had suddenly brought a dead dragon to Scarlett’s home like this.

“Did no one see anything suspicious at all?” Evelyne asked, turning to Garside.

The man shook his head. “I am afraid not, lady Evelyne. This servant apologizes for the staff’s lack of vigilance.”

“It is all right, Garside,” Scarlett reassured him. “I do not expect any of you to know what happened.”

“Yours word humble me, my Lady, but our negligence is still unforgivable.”

“It is not. It is unreasonable to expect anyone to have discerned more in this situation.”

Evelyne looked at her. “So, you *do* have an idea about why there is a dead dragon in our home.”

Scarlett pressed her lips together. “...I believe it might have been a gift.”

The younger woman blinked, and bewilderment spread across the faces of the others.

“...A *gift*?”

Scarlett nodded. “Most likely.”

Evelyne brought a hand up to her head in incredulity, running it through her neck-length hair.

Fynn approached the dragon's body, kneeling next to it as he examined one of its damaged and torn wings. "This is an ashenwraith dragon," he declared, poking it. "They live in the mountains surrounding the Ashen Plains."

"The Ashen Plains?" Allyssa gave him a puzzled look.

Next to her, Shin knitted his brows. "It's a region on Baajirr, famous for the dangerous monsters that inhabit it."

"Gee, thanks. That doesn't tell me anything."

The young Shielder gave his companion a look as if he wasn't surprised by her lack of knowledge. "Baajirr is the continent west of Zovivios. It's said to be mostly desert, so not many people live there."

Allyssa's eyes widened. "It's from *that* far away? Then how did it end up here? Are there more of them here in the empire?"

Fynn shook his head and looked back at them. "They don't leave their home in the Ashen Plains."

"Then how do you know about them?" the girl asked. "You speak as if you've encountered them."

"I was taught about them by the ancestors."

"...Right."

Fynn directed his gaze towards Scarlett. "Whatever did this toyed with the dragon. It likely targeted the wing first to force it to the ground before attacking the neck." He pointed at the deep gash across the dragon's neck, from which thick black-and-red blood was flowing out. The stone beneath showed signs of dissolving where it was touched by the liquid. "Dragons are not easily killed, even with injuries like this. It would have taken several hours for it to die."

Evelyne shivered. "And you're saying *this* was a gift, Scarlett?"

"That is what I suspect, yes," Scarlett replied.

"From who? How? *Why?*"

Once more, she glanced up at the window where Empress was. She was hesitant about how much she should reveal.

Evelyne fixed her with an intense gaze. "Scarlett, there is a freaking dragon in our courtyard. A *Dragon*."

"Note the capital D," Rosa chimed in.

“Yes, I mean, no—” Evelyne shook her head and turned to the bard. “Could you maybe take this a little more seriously? What if a herd of dragons suddenly descends on us for revenge or something?”

“I would if I could, but like you said, there’s ‘a freaking dragon’ in front of me. It’s hard *not* to see it all as one big joke.” Rosa smiled. “I would recommend trying to find the humor in it. Makes it a whole lot easier to look at things from the bright side.”

“And dragons don’t live in herds,” Fynn added.

Evelyne stared at the two for a few seconds, then looked back at the dragon. Finally, her expression relaxed a little as she turned back to Scarlett. “Could you please explain why I shouldn’t be freaking out about this? Please?”

Scarlett met her eyes. “...As I said, it is most likely a gift, so there is no reason to be overly concerned. As for the how and why, unfortunately, I do not know. I...suspect the reason might be because of the milk.”

Evelyne gave her a dumbfounded look. A second passed, and Rosa burst into laughter that echoed over the courtyard. Several of the staff sent her befuddled looks.

“...The *milk*?” Evelyne asked.

“I *knew* there was something special about that cat,” Rosa cried, wiping away a fake tear.

Allyssa looked back and forth between them. “Cat? What cat?”

Evelyne’s expression froze, and she stared at Scarlett. “Wait, is she talking about that cat I saw outside your office? The one that...” She blinked. “...You told me to show the proper respect.”

“Her name is Empress,” Scarlett said. “Or at least that is what she goes by. Her actual name and title are longer, but I am afraid that I cannot remember it fully.”

She’d only heard it once, and about half the places and terms in it had been new to her.

“Wait, wait, wait just one minute.” Allyssa waved her hands as she gestured to the injuries on the dragon. “You’re telling me a cat did *this*?”

Fynn frowned. “Cats are small. It would have to be larger to do this.”

“Nonono, that’s not the issue here.” Allyssa shook her head. “We’re talking about a *cat*. It doesn’t matter how large it is, cats don’t kill dragons. Cats barely kill *mice*.”

“A really large cat could kill a dragon,” Fynn pointed out.

“Then it’s not a cat anymore! Then it’s a lion or... I don’t know! Something else!”

“The definition of the animal aside, I do find it difficult to accept that a normal cat would be responsible for this,” Shin said. “I assume there is more to it than that.”

Evelyne, still seemingly processing the earlier information, suddenly jumped in the air and let out a yelp, grabbing everybody's attention. At her feet, a black-furred cat had appeared and brushed against her legs before striding up to watch the dead dragon.

The group froze, their eyes locked on the cat.

Scarlett cleared her throat. "I presume there is a reason why you brought this to my courtyard, Empress," she said, and the cat turned to look at her with a pair of clear amethyst eyes. "The gesture is...appreciated. However, I must admit that I do not know what to do with it."

Empress tilted her head, observing Scarlett curiously. Then the cat simply lifted a paw and started licking it, while casting a gaze over the others in the group, pausing momentarily on Rosa and Fynn.

Fynn was the first to speak.

"That's not a cat," he said.

Empress paused, her ears twitching as her eyes narrowed at him.

"Um, Fynn... I think you should be really careful with what you say right now," Allyssa warned. "That is clearly a...cat."

The young man furrowed his brows. "Cats smell. This one doesn't."

Empress lowered her palm, gazing at him for a moment longer. Then she walked up to him, tail standing up in the air, and stopped before his legs, looking up at him.

Scarlett watched, uncertain of what would happen, though she felt it unlikely that the cat would get violent.

Fynn's nose twitched as he sniffed, and his frown deepened even further.

"I see. I'm sorry," he said.

With that, Empress seemed satisfied and moved in between his legs, continuing away from them and towards a group of servants who had been looking on with confused expressions. One of them, a young blonde woman named Nichol, leaned down and began petting the cat as she approached, and Empress appeared to preen under the touch. If Scarlett recalled correctly, Nichol had been the one to have fed the cat milk when she was away in Windgrove.

"Okay, I feel so lost," Allyssa said after a while.

"So do I..." Evelyne muttered.

Allyssa turned to Fynn. "What did you mean by 'I see'?"

The young man didn't reveal much with his expression. "I was wrong. She does smell like a cat."

“You’re telling us you just happened to make a mistake?”

“Yes.”

Allyssa pointed over at Empress. “So that’s just a normal cat?”

Fynn looked at her like she had just said something absurd. “No. Clearly not.”

The young Shielder gave him an indignant look. “What? That’s what I—!” She paused, then sighed. “Ugh, never mind.”

“One would have thought you’d learned by now,” Shin commented from the side.

“Quiet, you,” Allyssa retorted.

Evelyne turned to Scarlett. “We’ll need to talk more about this in the future.”

Scarlett nodded. “That is understandable.”

The younger woman then focused her attention on the towering dragon carcass in front of them. “For now, though... What should we do about this?”

“That is what I have been considering for the last few minutes,” Scarlett said.

What did people do with dragon corpses here in the empire? Even if you discounted the usual items that they dropped in the game, the materials one could get from this huge dragon had to be valuable. But she doubted there was a specialized agency specifically for dragon harvesting. In the past, when she had gathered resources from monsters, she had mainly sold them to alchemy and reagent shops here in Freybrook. The rarer materials were either auctioned off or sold to the mage towers through Evelyne’s growing connections.

“Do you believe the Brook Tower would be equipped to handle this if we contacted them?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe?” Evelyne eyed the massive creature, scrunching her nose. “It would probably take them days, though. What if it starts rotting before then? It’s already causing damage to the stone.”

“It takes decades for a dragon to fully decompose,” Fynn said.

“Okay, but how long does it take before it starts to smell?”

The young man tilted his head. “...I’m not sure? I think it already does.”

Scarlett took a sniff of the air, but she couldn’t tell anything too much yet. There might have been traces of ash in the scent—which fit with the name—but it wasn’t even close to what she would have expected a beast of this size to smell. That said, her sense of smell wasn’t as acute as Fynn’s.

“Well, regardless, I would prefer *not* to have a dead dragon lying in our courtyard for a week. It’s giving me the creeps just looking at it. Feels like it might start moving any second,” Evelyne said.

Fynn raised his eyebrows. “It’s dead, though.”

“Yeah, no, I agree with her,” Allyssa chimed in. “It feels *weird*.”

Garside looked at Scarlett. “Should I contact Brook Tower to inquire about the matter, my Lady?”

Scarlett pondered for a moment, then shook her head. “Delay doing so for the time being. I have a guest visiting later today who might be able to assist us with this issue.”

Evelyne turned to her with slight surprise. “Really? Who is it?”

“Dean Warley Godwin of the Elystead Tower.”

The woman’s eyes widened. “He’s coming *here*?”

“He is, yes. I received a message from him yesterday confirming the visit. I expect him to arrive in the afternoon. There is no way to hide this from him in that amount of time, so I may as well bring it up.”

Evelyne’s expression turned more serious. “...You met him during the ball, right?”

Scarlett nodded. “I did.”

“You told me that he seemed interested in doing business with us, but I thought you were referring to the Elystead Tower in general. I didn’t expect him to come here in person.”

“He is apparently quite an eccentric individual. But considering this.” Scarlett gestured at the dragon. “I believe he has good reason to take an interest in our house.”

Their eyes turned back to where Empress was now getting the attention of a group of servants at the edge of the courtyard, reveling in the affection as hands stroked her fur.

“Well, I can’t blame him,” Rosa commented.

Evelyne grimaced. “No, neither can I...”