

58: New faces

Scarlett was in the mansion's foyer along with the others, getting herself ready to leave. Today was the end of the Light Fest, and when the Providing Ceremony was held.

Soon, Evelyne came walking down the stairs, stopping in front of Scarlett as she sent an evaluating look at the others behind her. "You're bringing all of them with you?"

Scarlett looked back at them as well. "That was my intent, yes. Is there an issue with that?"

Evelyne gave her a skeptical look. "I don't think that's a good idea. People generally don't bring a large entourage today. Considering what happened during the Elysian Proclamation, I think bringing all of them would just cause even more rumors right now."

Scarlett's eyes passed over her retinue, one by one. They all wore what she presumed was their fine wear, after she had told them it was fine. Rosa, especially, looked ready to enjoy herself, dressed in a flowing purple dress with the end of her long, wavy hair tied into a braid that hung over her right shoulder. Her hurdy-gurdy-esque instrument was in her leaning over her other shoulder.

Shin and Allyssa also wore decently fine clothing.

Fynn was the only one that wasn't there. He'd returned from the job Scarlett sent him on a few hours earlier, and he didn't seem to have any real interest in today's events, so she had let him rest for the day. He had also looked more beat up than she had expected, so that was probably for the best. Of course, she'd also had Rosa use some of her healing magic on him too.

"I suppose we can leave them in the common section." It was highly unlikely that she would need much defending today. "But I believe one of you should remain with me, nonetheless."

"I can do that," Allyssa volunteered, glancing at Shin and Rosa. "You two can enjoy yourselves, and I'll stay with her for the day."

Shin raised a brow at her. "You sure?"

"Yeah, it'll be fine. You can go and buy some boring books or something from the stalls. Maybe go and pay Maggie and the others a visit."

He looked at her for a second, then nodded his head. "If you say so."

Looking at the exchange between the two, Rosa turned to Scarlett with a smile. "I certainly won't complain. I've been itching to find a nice crowd the last couple days. The tail end of the Light Fest is a prime opportunity to let loose and give my admirers a nice little spectacle."

"Then it is decided," Scarlett said, turning to Evelyne. "Was there anything more you wished to say before we make our leave?"

The younger woman appeared to hesitate for a second, before leaning forward as she spoke in a lower voice. "You remember everything we talked about, right?"

Scarlett gave a sure nod. "I do."

"...And you're not going to do anything random, are you?" Evelyne looked her in the eyes. "There's nothing you haven't told me about for today?"

Scarlett met her gaze. "I will not. And no, there is not. We both agreed on what the correct course of action is today, and I will act in accordance with that."

Evelyne's eyes lingered on her for a moment, then she lowered them. "Yes. You're right."

The both of them had spent quite some time the day before, going through the details of the Providing Ceremony and what it entailed, making sure that Scarlett was filled in on what she was unsure of or didn't know about. They had also settled on what Scarlett should try to achieve today, and which people she should try to avoid speaking to right now.

It was somewhat unfortunate that Scarlett, as the head of the house, had to handle most of the more important matters solely by virtue of her position. Otherwise, Evelyne herself could probably have done more to directly help.

Although, that might not have been possible anyway. Evelyne apparently had a figurative mountain of work that had to be completed at the moment—some of which had been delayed because of the last couple of days' events—so she didn't actually have the time to join today's Providing Ceremony.

Which meant it was all up to Scarlett.

Evelyne took a step back, looking over Scarlett and her group one last time. "Then I hope everything goes well."

"It will," Scarlett said with a confidence she wasn't entirely certain about. She then turned around, pulling off the [Pouch of Holding] she had at her side and holding it out to Allyssa. "You will be carrying this. Ensure that nothing happens to it."

She had removed some of the more important things from it, but today's offering was still there.

The young Shielder received the pouch with only a slightly confused expression, then their group left the mansion.

As they walked down the stone path to the gates of the mansion where the carriage awaited, Rosa shot Scarlett a curious look. "What was that I heard about the Elysian Proclamation? Did something interesting happen? I don't want to brag, but I've been to a fancy occasion or two, but never something *quite* like that."

Scarlett glanced at the woman, then continued walking. "There was nothing of real note," she said, a bit more curtly than she intended.

"Is that so?" the bard hummed. "Shame. Sounds like a waste of a venue."

"You're talking like it's a *concert*," Allyssa said. "It's the *Elysian Proclamation*. All of the nobles and the imperial family is there."

Rosa looked at the younger woman with a grin. "Why couldn't it be a concert? I reckon I could get a few oh-so noble backsides moving with excitement if I wanted."

She waved her hand in Scarlett's direction. "Ah, of course, you're free to dance along too if you want."

Scarlett shook her head as she stepped towards the carriage. "Perhaps it is best if you save your breath for your upcoming performance."

Rosa smiled. "It's fine. I never get out of breath," she said as they all climbed into the vehicle.



"Have you considered my proposal?" Scarlett asked as the view of the busy streets of the Petal District passed by outside the carriage window.

"Ah, you mean that about the alchemy?" Allyssa turned to look at her with a look of slight surprise.

Scarlett nodded.

The two of them were the only ones left in the carriage. They had left Shin and Rosa in another part of the district, where the majority of people celebrating today were. The section Scarlett and Allyssa were in right now was mostly where the more well-off gathered for the event. There were among other things, a lot more gardens and expensive-looking buildings in this part.

"I have," Allyssa said after a while. "And it's not like I have anything *against* the idea, but..." she trailed off.

Scarlett had mentioned it to her a few times during the last few days, but they hadn't reached an agreement regarding it yet.

"You are hesitant to accept?"

Allyssa shrugged her shoulders. "I haven't done anything like that before. I don't know if I could."

"You would not be expected to bear the cost of materials, and you would be amply remunerated. I also do not expect you to do more than you are capable of, so there would be

no cause to fret over such things. It would also allow you many opportunities to work with rare ingredients in the future."

"That does sound nice," Allyssa said. "But...would you give me some more time to think about it?"

"Of course," Scarlett said, turning her attention back outside. "Take however much time you require."

Eventually, their carriage reached an open area where there was a lot of traffic passing through. The carriage stopped at the side of the road, where Scarlett and Allyssa exited the vehicle. The coachman then drove off after a brief exchange. He would return here later in the day to pick them up again.

Scarlett looked around. This area of the Petal District was like a large square, which seemed to have been repurposed almost as some kind of staging area for carriages and wagons for today. A pair of carts not too far from them were off-loading crates that were filled with different sorts of decorations for the festival.

Six streets connected to the square, but three of them were closed off from vehicles at the moment. Large goalposts of wood had been set up at the entrances of the streets, bedecked in gold coloring and papers suns that hung down from strings. It was similar to what had been present around much of the city during the whole week, though there did seem to be even more of the decorations present today. More like them hung from almost every single building continuing down those streets. Among the people walking there, Scarlett also spotted several priests from the Followers of Ittar, with their iconic helmets and robes.

"Come," she told Allyssa, beginning to move towards the middle of the roads. Evelyne had told her that the Providing Ceremony itself was held at an even larger square that was an intersection between the different district sections, but the event was still some time away so they had another destination at the moment.

Soon they were walking down the middle street, keeping to the side of the road where there was less traffic. There was still a decent number of people here, despite this being where primarily the more wealthy gathered. Scarlett mostly kept her eyes on the passing houses and some of the smaller gardens around here as they moved.

"This doesn't really feel all that different from how the celebrations are in the common section," Allyssa said, looking at two kids who were buying some kind of fruit sweets from a stand along with their mother. "Although it *is* nice actually being able to move without walking into people."

"I imagine it would."

"Where are we heading right now?" the Shielder asked.

"To Hamet Garden," Scarlett answered.

Apparently, that was a common place for some of the more connected and influential people to gather today.

"Oh, I've been there a couple of times before. It's not usually open to the public though."

"Is that so," Scarlett hummed, putting that piece of information to the side in her head. "Did you perhaps visit it with your father?"

"No." Allyssa shook her head, a melancholic look on her face. "It was with my mother, actually. She used to love gardens, so we often visited the Petal District."

"I believe you told me she was the one who taught you alchemy, if I recall correctly."

"Yes, but I was still pretty young back then. I don't actually remember too much of what she taught me, or my visits with her."

"Then this would be an opportunity for you to explore it once more, would it not?"

Allyssa smiled awkwardly. "I've still got to perform my job as a member of the Shields Guild."

Scarlett shook her head. "While I did ask you to accompany me, there will not be much for you to do today. It would be enough if you merely remain in the vicinity, so if you wish, you may explore some by yourself later. I have business that I need to attend to, that I suspect would only be uncomfortable for you."

"Uncomfortable?"

"Yes, in consideration of the fact that even I do not enjoy the thought of doing it."

Allyssa went quiet for a moment. "I don't know if anyone has told you this before...but you're pretty nice, aren't you?"

Scarlett looked at her with slight surprise, before turning her head away and looking forward. "...No, that is not a descriptor people commonly ascribe to me. And for good reason, I would argue."

She had done her fair share of selfish and stupid things. Just because she tried to be nice sometimes didn't mean she would call herself a nice *person*.

"I merely endeavor to consider the circumstances of others on occasion, when it does not require any particular sacrifice on my part," she said. "That, in itself, does not constitute me as 'nice', if I am to share my opinion on the matter."

"But isn't that what being nice is?" Allyssa asked.

"No. That is simply common decency."

She heard the Shielder let out a small laugh beside her at that, as they lapsed into silence and continued down the busy street.

Scarlett knew roughly where to, and soon enough they reached a sectioned-off area surrounded by thick hedges that blocked the view inside. The only thing that could be seen

from the outside was the top of a large stone manor that appeared to be situated at the far end of this area.

This was the Hamet Garden.

The entrance near them had two guards next to it, but they seemed to let most people pass without issue, even though they did keep a watchful eye on those that entered. Scarlett and Allyssa walked through without any fuss and were met with an impressive sight.

The garden was sectioned into several different parts, each large enough that it could be considered a garden of its own, and having different kinds of flowers and architectural arrangements. All of the paths were also neatly organized into nice rows and patterns, with several beautiful fountains and statues spread out around the sections as well.

While Rosalind's Garden in Dawnlight Palace was incredibly impressive in its own way, this place was both larger and felt more like a real garden; the kind one might have expected to see near late medieval or renaissance palaces back in Scarlett's world.

Where they had entered they were given a decent view of the whole place, but soon they started walking down a short set of stairs and onto a gravel path that led towards the center of the garden, where there was a large fountain with a lot of people gathered near it. According to Evelyne, that was where most of the important people usually gathered at this time.

Scarlett glanced to the side, noticing that Allyssa seemed completely immersed in taking in the sights around them, appearing especially intrigued by some of the more exotic examples of flora that they passed by.

"You may leave and explore on your own now, if you so wish," Scarlett said.

Allyssa seemed to be pulled out of her stupor, turning to Scarlett with a slightly flustered face. Then she looked around, as if considering it. "I might do that then," she said, turning to look forward towards the fountain at the center of the garden. "Is that where you're going to be?"

"Indeed," Scarlett answered. "I will remain there for some time, so there is no need to stress."

"Ah, then I'll...be off?" Allyssa said slowly. Scarlett gave her a nod in confirmation, and she soon veered off on one of the smaller paths that led to another part of the garden.

Continuing forward by herself, Scarlett soon reached the fountain. There were dozens of different groups gathered here, all dressed a bit fancier than your usual commoner. They didn't all look like nobles, though. At least if she were to judge from what she had seen during the Elysian Proclamation.

There were small tables that had been set up to the sides, with appetizers and drinks on them, but Scarlett mostly ignored those as she scanned across the groups of people. Evelyne had given her the names of several people whom she should try striking up some conversations with during the day, but as Scarlett only had descriptions to go off for it was going to be a bit tiresome identifying people. She knew that most of them were merchants, though, with a few mages and other individuals lumped in as well. Evelyne had recommended avoiding most nobles for the time being.

Her head stopped as her eyes landed on a particular figure. A man wearing a set of red robes with light gold emblazoning on the sleeves, similar to what some of the lower priests in the Followers of Ittar wore. Unlike most of the Followers' priests though, he wasn't wearing a mask. He had handsome features and bright blond hair that was tied back in a ponytail, a smile on his face as she spoke with a small group of people beside him.

Although this wasn't the graphics in a game anymore, Scarlett had no difficulty recognizing the man as Raimond Abram. A member of the Followers of Ittar and—if Scarlett's memory didn't fail her—one of the deacons that were part of the Quorum that made many of the church's decisions.

She started walking in his direction. She would have to interact with him at some point eventually, so now was as good a time as any to introduce herself. It would also be good to make sure he knew her name, *before* she presented her offering later in the day.

As she got closer, one of the people that Raimond was talking to suddenly turned to look at her with a shocked expression.

"Scarlett?" the woman exclaimed, causing the others in the group to turn around as well.

Scarlett stared at her. She was short, had long brown hair, and wore glasses.

"Ah, I'm sorry Ray. I didn't mean to interrupt you. I was just surprised," the woman said, looking at Raimond.

"There's no issue at all, Miss Livvi." Raimond smiled back at her. "Why don't you introduce this fine lady? Is she perhaps a friend of yours?" he asked, looking at Scarlett.

"Ah, yes she is. We have known each other since we were young," the woman—Livvi, apparently—said. Her eyes turned to Scarlett. "But I wasn't expecting you to be here today."

"...Nor I you," Scarlett said slowly. She had no idea who this woman was supposed to be, but she had yet to meet many people that referred to her with her first name like this.

"I just arrived here in Elystead yesterday," Livvi said. "I've been busy with Guild matters for some time, but father had been pestering me about making at least one appearance."

Her eyes then widened, and she looked at the others. "Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot to introduce her. This is Scarlett Hartford, Baroness of Stagmond."

"And this is Monika Melton, daughter of the head of the Whiteley Trade Guild." She looked back at Scarlett and gestured to a woman with short black hair in a blue dress. She then gestured towards a man in a green overcoat with light brown hair. "He is Derik Thorp. My colleague from the Shields Guild." Lastly, she pointed at Raimond. "And this is Ray Abraham."

"Greetings, Baroness."

"Nice to meet you."

The man and woman gave short greetings. Raimond—or 'Ray'—however, lowered his body in a graceful bow. "I see that Miss Livvi's friend are just as fair as she is. It is a delight to become acquainted with you, Baroness. Yours is a name I have heard before."

Scarlett studied the man closely. "I believe I recall having heard your name at some point as well."

He gave her a bashful smile. "While it would gladden my heart to hear from the lips of a fine lady such as you, I'm afraid my name is not that noteworthy. You are probably thinking of someone else."

"Is that so?" Scarlett said, crossing her arms over her chest. "Perhaps I was mistaken then."

Raimond had been like that in the game as well. Often going around under an alias and pretending like he wasn't anybody special.

"I wouldn't think you would attend the Providing Ceremony, Scarlett," Livvi suddenly said.

Scarlett turned to look at the woman. Surprisingly, being referred to by her first didn't really cause any annoyance on her part. Even though she had allowed it from Kat and the others, it had always irked the Scarlett part of her at least a little bit. Was there something special about this lady?

"I suppose one could say that recent events called for it," Scarlett said after a moment. "And an occasion such as this does not occur often. I believed it to be a good opportunity to present a certain item of value that I recently came upon. One that the Followers will greatly appreciate."

She saw Livvi's eyes narrow ever-so-slightly at her words, as if the woman wasn't entirely sure how to interpret them. Scarlett ignored it, instead turning to Raimond. "You were a priest, were you not? Are you perhaps involved in today's ceremony?"

He let out a low chuckle as he gently shook his head. "I'm afraid not. Were it so, I would likely not have been here right now. Important rituals such as these are usually left to more experienced members of the clergy."

"If so, what is it that you customarily do?"

"Oh, I do all kinds of things," he answered with a dashing smile. "But nothing terribly impressive. In the end, I'm just a humble servant of Ittar."

"I see. How very pious of you," Scarlett said. Not that it was much of an answer.

"If you wish to know more about the duties of a traveling priest such as I, then I'm sure we can discuss it at some other time and I can go further in-depth."

"Yes, perhaps if you were ever to visit Freybrook you could visit my residence. I will ensure that you are suitably welcomed."

"Ah, nothing would gladden me more," Raimond said with another bow.

"I will leave you to your previous conversation once more," Scarlett said as she looked around and spotted a person that seemed to fit one of the descriptions Evelyne had given her. "It was a pleasure exchanging greetings with all of you, but I have prior matters to deal with at present."

Although it was sudden, the others gave her short farewells as she walked away from their group. She then schooled her expression and tried to enter her best impression of business mode.

She had a lot of boring conversations to get through.