

59: The two princesses

After having excused herself from Raimond Abram and the others, Scarlett had mingled with several of the other groups here. None of the conversations she got into were particularly interesting—mostly just basic introductions and her inquiring about and mentioning some potential business ventures Evelyne had asked her to speak about—and she only stayed with one group just long enough that it wouldn't seem completely rude to leave, but she had still probably been at it for well over an hour before determining that it was enough, right about when some of the people had started leaving the garden.

It was a bit earlier than she had originally expected—she was pretty sure there was a decent amount of time left until the ceremony itself—and Allyssa hadn't returned yet, but that didn't matter much. If she were to guess the young Shielder would probably come looking for her soon enough, but, as there was enough time, Scarlett didn't mind exploring the garden some more to find the girl herself.

Her eyes passed over the remaining crowds as she double-checked Allyssa wasn't nearby and had just gotten pulled into a conversation somehow. Although there were a lot fewer nobles here than for the Elysian Proclamation, there were still several faces she recognized from there. She wasn't here anymore, but earlier Scarlett had also seen princess Regina moving around for a time. She was the only member of the imperial family that Scarlett had spotted though, and the young princess had only interacted with some of the upper-crust nobles that had hung out at the other edge of the fountain.

Not finding any traces of Allyssa, Scarlett was just about to step onto a smaller gravel path that led away from the center area when she heard a voice calling out to her.

"Scarlett."

She turned around to see the woman with glasses from earlier—Livvi—walking up to her with hurried steps.

"Yes. Was there something you wanted?"

Livvi stopped in front of Scarlett, seemingly taking a second to regain her breath. "What's with you today?" she asked with a slight frown. Then she shook her head. "No, never mind. I just wanted to ask if everything was okay."

Scarlett gave the woman a long look. "Okay?"

"Yes," Livvi said with a sure nod. "I've been busy for some time now, so I don't know the latest of what has been transpiring here in the capital, but I have the feeling that *something* happened. And yesterday when I spoke with my father he seemed annoyed at you for some reason. More than usual, that is. What did you do?"

Scarlett arched an eyebrow. That might have meant more if she knew who this woman's father was.

"There was an incident during the Proclamation ceremony," she said. "I believe some may have taken offense to a few of the words I spoke. It is nothing I am not taking measures to deal with."

"Words?" Livvi furrowed her forehead in what looked like minor confusion, but soon relaxed. "As long as everything is all right. How is Evelyne?"

This woman knew Evelyne closely as well? Was it because she and the original had apparently been 'friends' since young?

"...She is quite busy at present. I believe the last few days has worn her down somewhat, but I am certain she will recover. In general, she appears to be largely fine."

Livvi grew a surprised expression. "R-Really? I wouldn't have thought you to—" she paused in the middle of her sentence, turning her eyes downward. "Never mind. Send her my regards, if you could. I hope she manages to get some rest if she needs it."

They lapsed into silence.

"Was there anything else?" Scarlett asked after a while.

"Ah, no. That was all," Livvi said and looked up. "I had been planning on paying a short visit now that you're here in the capital, but if you're that busy perhaps now isn't a good time."

"No, now would probably not be a suitable time."

"Perhaps I'll visit next time I am back in Freybrook, then. But I won't keep you any longer. It was nice seeing you again, after so long."

"...Yes. You as well," Scarlett said as Livvi turned around and left. Scarlett kept her eyes on the woman's back as she walked off.

She was surprisingly...pleasant, for someone who was supposedly a friend of the original.

It might have been a bit prejudiced of her, but Scarlett had assumed that all of the original's friends were the kind of one-dimensional stuck-up aristocrats that were commonly depicted as villains in stories.

Although, considering the original's personality, it was entirely possible that Livvi and her's 'friendship' was one-sided. Or that Livvi just said they were friends to fit the situation.

Watching the woman for a moment longer, Scarlett eventually turned around and started walking away herself. She could ask Evelyne more about who Livvi was when she got back.

She followed the gravel path into another section, one that looked a lot like a hedge maze. This was the part of the garden where one had the least visibility into from the center, so she figured there was a decent chance Allyssa was here considering she hadn't seen her in any of the other sections.

The hedges themselves were too tall to see above them, but as she walked closer she realized they weren't actually arranged in a maze pattern. Instead, there were several long paths winding straight through the 'maze', with small mini-gardens here and there, half closed-off by the surrounding shrubbery. Scarlett spent about ten minutes strolling around there, then she heard a familiar voice from close by.

Continuing down a corner and one of the paths, Scarlett stopped to peek through an opening to her right, into a small space with a circular bed of flowers at its center. Two figures sat hunched over before the flowers, with their backs turned towards her.

The smaller of the two figures sat to the left and looked to be a young girl wearing a white dress and what looked almost like a bleached coif over her head. Part of the girl's bright golden hair hung over her shoulder in a long braid, however, and Scarlett felt that the girl seemed familiar.

"—used to mitigate the symptoms from certain poisonous berries. And this one is called Aecolla," the other figure's voice rang out, whom Scarlett easily recognized as Allyssa. The young Shielder pointed to a flower with yellow, diamond-shaped leaves. "Its stems are good for creating some solvents. It's pretty rare though, so you don't see it blooming like this often."

The young girl slowly nodded her head at the words, pointing to another flower. This one looked a lot like a forget-me-not, if you had increased its size by five times and added thorns on its stalks."

"That's a Dawn Swinie. They only grow where there's a lot of sunlight, and they're great for relieving pain. Just touching the thin bristles on the back of the leaves numbs you a bit."

As Scarlett took a few steps closer, Allyssa suddenly turned her head around towards her. "Oh, Sca-I mean...Baroness." She stood up, dusting off her legs with her hands. "Sorry. Did I take too long?"

Scarlett's eyes turned to the girl next to Allyssa. "No, it is quite all right. There is still ample time," she said, then froze for a brief moment when the girl also turned around.

Scarlett immediately went down into a small curtsy when she recognized her. "Greetings to the second star of the Empire, Her Imperial Highness," she said firmly. "I am Baroness Scarlett Hartford."

The girl looked on with an expressionless face, even as Scarlett saw Allyssa's eyes widen in panic.

"H-Highness?!"

Had Allyssa been accompanying one of the empire's princesses all this time, without even realizing it? And why was the youngest princess even by herself in a place like this?

The princess grabbed the hem of her dress, returning the curtsy, but without saying anything.

Scarlett threw a short look towards Allyssa. "I apologize on the behalf of my retainer. It appears she was unaware of the identity of Your Highness. While she had an amiable disposition, I hope she has not caused you any offense?"

The princess glanced at the shocked Allyssa for a second, then shook her head.

"No."

"I am glad," Scarlett said, then silence fell around them. Allyssa looked unsure what to say, and the princess didn't show much reaction either.

Scarlett's eyes rested on the young girl.

...For some reason, the princess reminded her of her own sister at that age. Back from her world. Despite the two of them not bearing any direct similarities, as far as she could tell.

"May I ask what Your Highness is doing here by yourself?" Scarlett eventually asked, wanting to break the awkward silence. She wasn't really certain about what to do in this whole situation either. Should she just excuse herself and Allyssa?

The princess stared at her. "I'm not alone," she said.

Scarlett looked between Allyssa and the princess. That wasn't exactly what she had meant with 'alone'.

"...Ger," the princess mumbled.

Scarlett held her breath as a new figure rose up above the hedge to her left, towering over even the bush that was two heads taller than Scarlett. The figure wore a white helmet with gold inlays and a miniature figure of a dragon on top of it, with the handle of a sword showing behind the shoulder.

The knight—Holdger 'The Mammoth'—stayed completely silent, simply standing there.

"...I see," she said slowly as she stared at the giant of a man. She had *not* been expecting one of the Royal Guard to be hiding there. "It appears I was mistaken. Then are you perhaps partaking in the Providing Ceremony as well, Your Highness?"

The princess nodded. "Yes."

Scarlett's gaze lingered on Holdger for a moment longer, before shifting to the flowerbed behind Allyssa and the princess. "I was intending to begin relocating to the site and meant to find Miss Astrey before that. I will admit that I was surprised to discover you here as well, Your Highness. Are you perhaps fond of flowers?"

The princess turned back to look at the flowerbed, then shook her head. "No."

"There is nothing wrong with having interests. Especially burgeoning ones," Scarlett said, studying the young girl. If she were to guess, the princess was probably around ten or eleven years old. Her own sister had been pretty...*outspoken*, in general, at that age—especially

towards her—but it wasn't too unusual for kids that age to be uncomfortable around adults they didn't know. It wouldn't surprise her if that went double among some nobles.

"Although if you simply wished to eschew the gatherings, I can understand that as well," she added.

The princess was quiet for a short while, then looked towards Allyssa. "...It was interesting hearing her talk."

Scarlett raised an eyebrow. "Is that so. I am sure that gladdens her to hear."

Allyssa grew a flustered expression. "Ah, yes. Well, ehm...thank you, Your Highness."

A moment later, Scarlett heard steps on gravel approaching from behind. Turning around, she saw Princess Regina appear at the entrance, wearing a set of black and gold clothing with burgundy pants.

"So it was true that you were here, Hilde," Regina said as she entered the enclosed space. Her escort, Leandra 'The Swift', stopped next to the entrance with a neutral expression on her face.

"And we meet again, Baroness," Regina said as she looked at Scarlett, who responded with a curtsy.

"Greetings to the star of the Empire, her Imperial Highness."

The princess nodded in return. "I would not have expected to find you here with my sister, Baroness."

"I happened upon Her Highness in search of my retainer," Scarlett said, gesturing to Allyssa. The young Shielder looked a little overwhelmed now that there were two princesses here.

Regina walked over to the second princess, stopping next to her. She glanced down at the flowers. "Have you been enjoying the flowers, Hilde?"

The younger princess suddenly showed a small smile, shaking her head. "No, I was simply exploring. I didn't want to get in your way when you were talking to the others."

Scarlett blinked at the stark difference between the young girl now, and just a minute earlier.

"Next time, inform me if you're leaving. It worries me when you suddenly disappear," Regina said.

"Okay, sister," the second princess said with a nod.

The first princess looked at her younger sister for a second. "And if you want to explore, we can always visit again later. We still have duties to uphold."

The smile on the second princess' face stilled for a brief moment, but it soon returned. "I'm sorry, sister. It was my fault. I won't do it next time."

"I'm not berating you, Hilde. Just reminding you that father has expectations of us today." Regina went quiet, looking back at the flowers. "...If you wish, we can visit mother together again later today, after the ceremony has finished."

Scarlett watched on silently as the two sisters interacted, not feeling like she really belonged. There was a clear distance between these two, one that was quite familiar to her.

"No, it's fine," the second princess said.

"...Very well." Regina turned back to Scarlett. "We will be leaving now, although I presume we will be seeing each other again during the ceremony."

"That we will, Your Highness," Scarlett said.

Regina looked at Allyssa as well, and gave her a slight nod before she started walking. The second princess curtsied at Scarlett once again, and at Allyssa. "Farewell Baroness, and...Miss Astrey," she said, then started following her sister. As she passed her by, Scarlett spoke.

"Your Highness," she said gently, not quite sure why she was bothering involving herself with others' matters. The young girl stopped momentarily. "I do not know if someone else has ever told you this, and I do not know if I am overstepping my bounds, but sometimes it is okay to complain. One does not always have to be satisfied."

The young princess stared at her with an undecipherable look, and Regina also looked pretty surprised. But soon enough they started moving again, with the two Royal Guards disappearing along with them, leaving Scarlett and Allyssa by themselves.

"...We just met the *princesses*," Allyssa muttered to herself after a while.

"Not a common occurrence, no," Scarlett said.

"Are you kidding me?!"

Scarlett turned to her, eyebrow raised.

Allyssa grimaced. "S-Sorry. It's just...I never thought I'd meet *them*, of all people."

"Understandable. I suppose I might have reacted in a similar manner, had I realized I had unwittingly been speaking with a princess. It must have been quite an experience."

"That's one to describe it. Not even in my wildest dreams did I think I would meet the second princess like that." Allyssa's eyes turned to the entrance where the others had left. She was silent for a moment. "But...Don't you think she looked a bit sad?"

"...It is not our place to speculate on matters of the imperial family," Scarlett said slowly.

And maybe she could just ignore the fact that her last words to them had basically been just that.