

185: The princess is always in another tower

Scarlett leaned back against the cabin wall, her eyes half-closed as the carriage rocked along. She tried to ignore the growing headache that had plagued her since morning. There had been a lot to think about, and her concerns were far too many for her tastes.

Allyssa's voice broke the silence from the opposite end of the cabin. "Is it really alright that we're coming along?"

Scarlett opened her eyes slightly, studying the girl. "You need not worry. This is merely another aspect of your duties while under my employ."

"I get that," Allyssa said. The young Shielder was leaning forward in her seat, peering out the window. "It just feels strange, being allowed to enter a place like this so casually. Don't they have to vet us or something? And it all happened so suddenly. I didn't even have time to prepare mentally."

Scarlett couldn't fault her there. She hadn't anticipated this course of events either. Her gaze traveled from Allyssa to outside, where their carriage approached a set of tall stone walls rising from the cobbled stone streets. Tall, crenelated towers rose beyond the walls, crowned with fluttering banners bearing the crest of a black and gold lion.

Passing through the gatehouse, they entered a spacious courtyard bustling with various activities.

Lordsfort Keep was in many ways the heart of Bridgespell, and even as the personal estate and home of a duke, it embodied many of the values present in the city. Even though it lacked the grandeur of the Tyndalls' Castle in Windgrove, and wasn't even close to being as large, it was filled to the brim with people moving about from left to right, from servants to traders and guardsmen the keep was a meeting place for several walks of life.

Smaller structures to the side likely hosted armories, servants' quarters, work offices, and more, while the main stronghold stood as the centerpiece overlooking it all. Its imposing facade featured stained glass windows of vibrant hues, filtering daylight into a tapestry of colors. It alone was easily double the size of the Hartford mansion in Freybrook.

"We've still got our job to do, so try to be less anxious," Shin said, placing a hand on Allyssa's shoulder and pulling her back into her seat as she took in their surroundings with wide eyes. "Maybe you should take a page out of Fynn's book."

He gestured towards the white-haired youth seated to Scarlett's left. Fynn wore a calm expression as he looked out of the window.

Allyssa shot Shin a small glare. "I'm sorry that I'm still not used to visiting *castles* regularly. I'm sure you have lots of experience visiting a duke's home." She crossed her arms as she leaned back in her seat with a huff. "And don't compare me to Fynn. That's just unfair. I doubt he even knows what *anxious* means."

Fynn turned to her. "Actually, I do."

“Yeah? And when was the last time you felt anxious?”

He fell silent, cocking his head as if considering it. “I don’t think I can say.”

Allyssa blinked, and both she and Shin glanced at Scarlett.

Scarlett suppressed a small sigh. She’d thought Fynn had improved a lot when it came to secrecy lately, but there were still areas he needed to work on.

“When was the last time that you *can* speak about?” Allyssa asked, returning her attention to Fynn.

Now it was his turn to look at Scarlett. “When I first met her.”

Allyssa nodded her head, her blonde locks swaying as she did. “Okay, yeah. I get that.”

Scarlett frowned slightly. Interacting with her wasn’t *that* stressful, was it? She thought she had gotten pretty relaxed in general, honestly. Relatively speaking.

A lot of that was probably because of Rosa, though. That woman’s presence didn’t brook any seriousness.

Scarlett tapped against the windowsill beside her as her thoughts inevitably returned to the bard and her current predicament. Her frown deepened.

This was exactly what she had been trying not to think too much about.

It irked her that Rosa had chosen to leave by herself. When she got back, Scarlett had some choice words to share with her on the subject. Until then, however, she couldn’t do anything other than hope for the best outcome.

That also irked her.

She had attempted to reach out to The Gentleman through Empress. He was about the only person she could get to help with the matter without her actually having to say anything revealing. He had also admitted to not having much skin in the game himself, so she had hoped there was something minor he could do in exchange for another favor or something.

But there had been nothing but radio silence since she asked the cat to convey her message yesterday. That could mean anything, which was the annoying part.

Her greatest concern lay in what could happen to Rosa in Crowcairn. It wasn’t the safest of places, for several reasons. Malachi was a dangerous individual in more ways than one, and cooperation wasn’t her strong suit. Also, there was the matter of what she would ask of Rosa once she found out the bard’s constitution.

There was also the matter of the village itself and its inhabitants. They could pose another threat to Rosa, depending on how things went.

If Scarlett could do anything about it all, she would. But she had already explored what avenues were available to her without breaking the pact with Anguish, and they were all pretty limiting. The primary and most efficient ones had plenty of caveats attached to them, and she suspected that Rosa would never accept them if she ever got word of it.

But even without taking into account that whole situation, Scarlett had her own separate affairs to deal with today. If she had time to worry about these things, then she also had time to think about whatever she was going to do now.

The carriage came to a halt at the courtyard's end. Scarlett exited alongside her entourage, and a neatly dressed male servant stood ready to receive them, bowing as they approached.

“Welcome, Baroness Hartford. The Duke is expecting you in the parlour.”

Scarlett acknowledged the man with a brief nod as they followed him into the main structure.

Initially, she'd held different plans for the day than visiting the Duke of Bridgespell. But this morning had brought a sudden invitation from Duke Valentino to their inn, requesting an urgent meeting. She didn't have any business on her end that she needed to do with the man, and she would have preferred to continue with her own matters for the day, but a duke's summons wasn't something you disregarded if you could afford not to.

That said, it was unusual for a duke to bother summoning a mere baroness. Especially when she didn't have any fiefs near his lands. It did leave her curious about the meeting's purpose, as the invitation was vague in its details.

She also found it slightly surprising that he was even aware of her presence in the city. The Kilnstone network was under the crown's jurisdiction, and information about individuals' whereabouts shouldn't be readily available even to a duke. She supposed places like the Golden Griffin Inn or the Golden Gavel might provide some information to a man of his standing, but it didn't clarify why he was interested in her in particular.

Sure, there were plenty of things that stood out about her, but which of them were relevant to him? She'd never spoken with the man, and she doubted the original Scarlett had much of a relationship with him, either.

Presumably, she would soon have the answer.

Navigating the castle's corridors while following the servant, Scarlett noted that there were an unusually high number of guards around, guarding the entrance and corridors that they passed by. Most bore Duke Valentino's colors, but some wore more neutral colors that didn't suggest their association.

Had there been some sort of attack, or were they expecting one? Perhaps there was some distinguished guest warranting the extra security, though the candidates of people fitting that description at a duke's residence were limited.

Eventually, they arrived at a single ornate door where the male servant stopped and faced Scarlett's party. “The Duke is awaiting you inside, Baroness. I will have to ask the remainder of your party to accompany me for the time being.”

Fynn and the others exchanged brief glances with Scarlett. Fynn in particular seemed to sense something on the other side of the door, but Scarlett signaled that it was fine. It was improbable that she'd face any sort of danger in this setting.

As her companions were led away, Scarlett stepped through the door.

The parlour was very much a sanctuary of comfort and elegance, with exquisite tapestries depicting pastoral scenes and intricate patterns woven in threads of gold and black adorning the walls. Sunlight streamed in through sizable glass windows, illuminating the room and drawing her focus to the center.

Seated in plush velvet armchairs were two individuals.

The first person was someone Scarlett had only seen a couple of times before, but whose presence she expected. Duke Ingomar Valentino was a somewhat portly but robustly built man in his late fifties, dressed in black attire trimmed with golden embellishments. His neck-length hair, streaked with white on the sides, framed his rumpled face along with a thin mustache, and his hand rested on the head of a cane leaning against his chair.

It was the other seated figure that caused Scarlett's eyes to widen slightly as she spotted them, and she almost instinctively lowered herself into a small curtsy. "May the brilliance of dawn greet the empire's burgeoning sun. Baroness Scarlett Hartford extends her greetings to the crown prince."

Occupying the chair opposite the Duke of Bridgespell was a young man with short, vibrant blond hair cascading to one side, dressed in a red-and-blue uniform accentuated by golden pauldrons and bracers. His head turned towards the entrance, and he regarded Scarlett with a casual expression.

Positioned behind the crown prince were two familiar individuals. Donned in resplendent gold-white armor with their helmets under their arms, Dame Iyana Webb and Dame Leandra Alston stood guard. The Second Sword of the Empire maintained an impassive face as her gaze briefly passed to Scarlett, while the Third Sword considered her with a strange look.

Scarlett suppressed some of the reverence and pride that surged within her upon encountering a member of the imperial family. While the intensity was milder than the first few times she'd experienced this same feeling, it was slightly annoying that it happened to begin with. That annoyance, in turn, made the Scarlett part of her annoyed, which was even more vexing, creating a loop of frustration.

This damn system really made her emotional state thoroughly more complicated than it had to be.

But that wasn't her most immediate concern right now. The question at hand was why she had been called to Duke Valentino's residence when the crown prince was present.

"Baroness Hartford." Duke Valentino's voice held a tone of authority as he gestured towards a third armchair positioned in front of the low mahogany table between him and the prince. "Take your seat."

Scarlett's gaze lingered momentarily on the prince before she offered a slight nod to the Duke, moving over to her seat to settle in. "This is a...surprise, Your Grace, Your Highness. When I received your invitation this morning, I had not anticipated to be in such illustrious company."

"The situation called for secrecy," the Duke said. "While I had intended to meet with you myself since learning of your presence in my city if I found the time, today was not originally the chosen day. Prince Garden and I, however, have been deliberating over some pressing matters, and we concluded that your expertise might be pertinent to our discussions. That is why I had you sent for."

"I see." Scarlett kept her eyes on him for a moment before shifting her attention to the crown prince and the Royal Guards flanking him. It seemed they weren't wasting any time getting to the point. "In what area is it that you require my expertise? If it is in service of the empire and the Imperial Family, I am, of course, committed to offering my assistance to the best of my capabilities."

Leaning back in his seat, arms crossed, the prince scrutinized her intently. Scarlett wasn't sure what was going through his mind. Despite the prominent role he held within the empire, he appeared so little in the game that she barely knew anything about his character.

"You've met with my sister before, haven't you, Baroness?" he asked.

"I presume you are referring to Princess Regina, Your Highness?" Scarlett briefly glanced over at Dame Leandra. Most of the woman's pale blond hair was tied up in a bun, and her sharp eyes met Scarlett's for a moment. Typically, Leandra would be escorting the first princess, so seeing her with the crown prince like this was strange when he already had Dame Iyana with him.

"Hilde seldom leaves Elystead, so yes, Regina. I have heard that you're experienced in matters related to Zuverian history and artifacts, and she has been obsessed with that stuff since she was young."

"I do recall the First Princess once inquiring with me about my knowledge on the subject, so that does not surprise me," Scarlett remarked, her gaze alternating between the duke and the prince. She wasn't sure she liked where this was going. "Could this matter, by any chance, be related to that?"

The duke fixed her with a long, serious look. "Whatever transpires within these walls must remain within them, understood? If this confidentiality is breached, do not assume you and your barony will escape unscathed, Baroness."

A subtle frown formed on Scarlett's brow. That boded even worse. "Rest assured, you have my word that I will not divulge what is spoken of here to anyone outside this room."

The man moved his thumb over the crown of his cane thoughtfully, eyeing her before offering a slight nod. "Very well," he said, shifting his attention to the crown prince. "Your Highness, if you will."

The prince spoke in a measured voice. "My sister has gone missing."

Scarlett stared at him.

She had been thinking that this all sounded too familiar to certain events she knew of.

“...If I may ask, what precisely do you mean by that?” she asked. “Has something happened to Her Highness?”

The prince shook his head. “No, not as far as I’m aware. Rather, she was the one who did something. She has escaped.”

Scarlett’s lips pressed into a thin line. It was exactly like she thought.

Did this line up with when the princess disappeared in the game? The timeline was a bit messed up because of her and the Cabal’s actions, leaving her uncertain if events were unfolding according to her knowledge. While she remembered that the princess could join the player’s party roughly around level 10-30, she wasn’t how long that time frame was in this world. It felt as though it should have passed by now.

“What compelled Her Highness to do so?” she asked seriously. “Did she depart on her lonesome?”

Scarlett had previously had some slight concerns that the princess might want to run away and join *her* party, simply because it was the closest things came to adhering to the game’s narrative. Obviously, that hadn’t happened. But the princess *had* still vanished.

The question now arose: did that mean the princess was always going to run away, no matter if she had someone to join in her travels, or was there *someone* she had run away with?

“My sister is one of the most dedicated and earnest people I know,” the crown prince said. “She approaches her responsibilities dutifully and boasts a deeper understanding of imperial administration than most ministers even. The exact reason behind her absconding is a mystery to everyone, my father and myself included. According to Dame Leandra, she has been increasingly preoccupied with her research on the Zuver lately and so we believe that holds some connection to it, but that’s all we know. Whether she did it alone or with someone else’s help remains uncertain. Dame Leandra was the last to speak with, so it would be better to ask her.”

Scarlett redirected her gaze towards the knight in question. “When did the princess disappear?”

“About three weeks ago,” Dame Leandra replied, her expression not revealing her thoughts. “We had just visited one of Her Highness’ acquaintances in Kilsfell when she disappeared during the night. She only left a note saying not to worry about where she might have gone.”

Scarlett arched a brow. That would have been right before the Tyndall ball.

Her eyes moved over to Dame Iyana, whose steadfast stare into the empty air and white plate armor almost made her look like a marble statue. If Scarlett’s recollection served her correctly, during the ball, the knight had mentioned that Dame Leandra had ‘prior commitments’. Presumably, this mess was what she had been referring to.

“Someone resembling Her Highness was sighted in Bridgespell last week,” Duke Valentino said. “Given her interest in Zuverian research, we suspect that she might have visited the city to pursue matters related to that. We do not know what specifically, however. This is why I sent for you, Baroness.”

“If so, would it have been better to confer with the mage towers or the Ustrum Assembly for counsel?” Scarlett asked. “They are some of the most knowledgeable entities on the Zuver in the empire.”

The man scoffed. “This is a matter that demands discretion. It cannot simply be disclosed to the Assembly and their ilk without regard. Furthermore, Baroness, your recent accomplishments have exceeded their combined discoveries related to the Zuver for the last two decades, have they not? It would seem you possess equal, if not superior, expertise, and since this concerns the Imperial Family, it is better left to those who have pledged their service.”

“The Duke apprised me of your recent achievements on the topic,” the prince added, studying Scarlett. “That is why I wanted to inquire whether you possessed any insights into my sister’s activities in Bridgespell or her potential destination.”

“...I see.” It seemed like the duke greatly overestimated Scarlett’s expertise on the Zuver and underestimated the mage towers’. “Regrettably, it is difficult to provide a definitive response based on the information available.”

What had happened and the princess’ intentions hinged largely on how her actions aligned with the game’s plot. There were plenty of implications involved here, but what exactly it all *meant* was something Scarlett herself dearly wanted the answer to.

If the princess had run away just like in the game... If she *wasn't* alone... What did that mean for Scarlett? Was it good? Bad? Both?

With her knowledge of the princess’ motivations, should she assist her so that she wasn’t caught, or should she aid the crown prince in his search? Or maybe not get involved at all?

“It’s enough if you say what you believe, or some possibilities,” the prince said. “My sister is in possession of an artifact that prevents even the most powerful of divinations at our disposal from discerning anything. At this point, we cannot afford to remain idle.”

Their gazes locked for a moment, and she could tell that he was at least slightly annoyed by the whole situation.

“...If so, there are certain locations that come to mind. While I have yet to ascertain their actual existence, my research suggests that there may be some undiscovered Zuverian ruins at a location east of Bridgespell. While I do not know how Her Highness would have learned of them, these ruins would undoubtedly be of interest to someone like her. However, if she was sighted in the city over a week ago, it is unlikely that she remains there.”

Those particular ruins were pretty low-level from what Scarlett remembered. Not to mention that they were probably a day or two of travel from Bridgespell, according to her estimations.

She hadn't deemed them worth trying to find, considering she didn't need anything from there and that there was always an uncertainty to even being able to locate the entrance.

"We'll explore the possibility, even if it's unlikely." The prince leaned forward in his seat. "If you were in her position, where else would you go? Are there other locations within the empire that would be of special relevance to her?"

Scarlett reflected on his question. He seemed to be overlooking the magnitude of what he was asking. He was essentially asking her to hand over highly valuable information, just like that. Perhaps he intended to compensate her for her aid in some way, but it was still a bit audacious of him. Even as the future ruler of the empire, he didn't actually have the right to demand whatever he wished from those under him. There were laws and conventions that governed the obligations between sovereign and subject.

Nonetheless, there was a certain level of compliance that was called for from a minor noble such as Scarlett in a situation like this. The prince's expectations weren't entirely unreasonable, especially considering the gravity of these circumstances. Still, it didn't leave her with the most favorable impression of him. She preferred his sister.

A fact that made it all the more annoying that she *wanted* to answer his question, just because of some idiosyncratic fixation the original Scarlett seemingly had for the imperial family.

"I would suggest that you begin by investigating other prominent ruins and sites associated with the Zuver," she said after a brief pause. "From my limited interactions with Her Highness, I have gathered that she is an inquisitive and astute individual. It would not surprise me if she chose to investigate established sites in pursuit of her own research on the Zuver, if that is indeed what she is doing. Unfortunately, that is the extent of what advice I can give."

For now, Scarlett wanted to stay as neutral as she could in this situation. It was unlikely that they would locate the princess using this approach at this point, so she didn't mind contributing this much. The princess might indeed have explored some already known ruins if she had the chance, but if she had already located the set east of Bridgespell, the young woman was already past that point in her research. It wouldn't surprise Scarlett if the princess would prove more efficient at finding new ruins than her in the future, even. In the game, one of the easiest ways of discovering new ruins was to have the princess in one's party.

The crown prince appeared somewhat dissatisfied with her response, but after exchanging a glance with the duke, he shook his head as if indicating that it would suffice for now. "I'll have someone compile a list of significant Zuverian sites to be investigated. As for the potential ruins you mentioned nearby, you can discuss that in more detail with Dame Leandra. She has assumed responsibility for tracking my sister's whereabouts and ensuring her safety. Whatever assistance you offer in this matter will be duly rewarded later." He stood from his seat, straightening his clothes. "I would stay longer, but I was only passing through Bridgespell and have other pressing affairs to tend to. Duke Valentino, I appreciate your contribution to this issue, and I shall convey your insights regarding the other matter to my father. Farewell."

With those words, the prince turned to leave. Dame Iyana immediately moved to trail behind him, though before her exit, she cast a final glance at Scarlett and nodded curtly. Scarlett

returned the nod, which earned her a slightly intrigued look from Dame Leandra, who stayed behind.

A moment of silence enveloped the room after the two's departure. Eventually, Duke Valentino leveraged his cane to rise from his armchair, wincing as he supported his weight with a noticeable limp. "I will return after tending to my own affairs, Baroness. The servants will bring any implements and maps that you require while you provide Dame Leandra with any information you have. After that, I have another matter I wish to discuss with you."

With that, the duke also exited the room, leaving Scarlett alone in the company of Dame Leandra. The knight gave her a long look before raising an amused eyebrow. "Well, Baroness. Let's get to it, then."