

484: The tag-along

Leon watched the doors close behind the crown prince, then turned back towards Scarlett, the second princess, and the enormous knight standing behind her.

"I'm not finished with you, Scarlett," he said.

The woman raised an eyebrow. "That sounds rather ominous."

"You know what I mean."

"I do, yes. Do not worry. As you can see, I am being rather amicable."

Leon frowned.

That was true, annoyingly enough. Scarlett had actually revealed much more than he'd expected her to without being forced into it.

But there was still plenty she wasn't sharing. Of that, he had no doubt.

"I am certain there is much information that we can still exchange," Scarlett continued. "And it appears we will have ample opportunity to do so. His Highness seems likely to have need of my assistance in the coming days."

"Yes..."

Leon glanced towards the doors.

He still would have preferred if the prince had ordered Scarlett to remain in the palace. Letting her leave didn't sit well with him. But it wasn't Leon's decision to make.

He headed for the exit, only to slow as he reached the doors. His hand came to rest against one of them.

After a brief hesitation, he looked back at Scarlett.

"Do you...need help getting out?" he asked.

Scarlett's eyes narrowed slightly, as if the question annoyed her.

"You could barely stand earlier," he pointed out.

The irritation in her expression faded somewhat. Her attention shifted to the second princess.

"I suspect we can manage," she said. "However, if you could see that Evelyn and Lady Withersworth are sent home, I would appreciate it."

“To my knowledge, Lady Withersworth has already left. Most of the younger guests and elderly nobles were escorted out once things settled down. The city was mostly untouched outside the harbour districts, so it was considered safer than keeping everyone here.”

“I see. Then if you could simply help Evelyne, please.”

“...Sure.”

“Thank you.”

Leon gave her a final look, then pushed open the door and stepped out into the corridor.



The doors closed behind Leon.

Scarlett remained in her seat for a while, watching the chamber entrance as silence settled over the office.

She was feeling...

Well, she was feeling a lot of things, really.

But tired, above all.

So much had accumulated.

She drew in a long breath.

The emperor was gone. Possibly dead, depending on how one interpreted what ‘gone’ meant in a situation involving Eidolon and Memory. The palace was apparently a mess, and who knew how the imperial politics would look in the coming days. Scarlett had burnt out most of her mana channels casting a primordial spell on a scale far beyond what she should have been capable of, and then survived a head-on encounter with Vail in which the woman had stabbed her through the stomach to literally take her name.

And that barely scratched the surface of everything that had happened.

Really, it was a miracle she was even lucid at this point.

She was supposed to have had a meeting with Raimond and Deacon Solnate regarding the gala, but she assumed that whole arrangement was thoroughly abandoned by now. She would find a way to contact them later. Yamina should also be fine on her own for the time being, and although Evelyne hadn't looked to be in good shape, Scarlett trusted the younger woman could at least make it back to the mansion without her assistance.

There were probably a great many things Scarlett could be doing right now, but she really, really, *really* wanted to sleep somewhere that was her own.

Being unconscious for however long—or short—she had been simply hadn't done it for her.

Scarlett shifted her attention to Holdger, who stood near the doors, his presence filling the space in a way that made the office feel smaller than it was. The second princess remained a few steps in front of him, turned partly back towards Scarlett. She hadn't moved since her brother left.

Scarlett studied the girl for a few seconds before offering a mild smile.

"One would scarcely suspect it from your demeanour, but you have something of a troublesome streak, do you not, Your Highness?"

The girl blinked once, turning fully towards her.

"I should warn you," Scarlett continued, "that I already have more than enough stragglers finding their way into my homes. You should not assume that this arrangement will become a lasting one."

The princess reached up, one hand loosely taking hold of the braid of bright golden hair hanging over her shoulder, rubbing her thumb absently along it.

Scarlett's smile faded.

"...Are you alright?" she asked.

The girl had just learned that her father might be gone, whether she believed it or not. And the whole affair with the empress—or not-empress, as the case most likely was—could hardly be easy on someone that young. It had to be confusing. Especially when the princess' life must already have been confusing enough, living with abilities she seemingly didn't even understand herself.

The princess watched her for some time, then lowered her gaze.

"Mm."

It wasn't much of an answer. But Scarlett supposed it was better than nothing. She chose not to press further for now. Whatever the truth of the girl's feelings was, Scarlett wasn't in any condition to coax it cleanly from her here.

The princess' gaze shifted towards the door.

"Can we leave?" she asked.

“Yes. Let us.”

Scarlett placed a hand on the chair’s arm and pushed herself upright, only for her legs to immediately betray her and nearly fold beneath her. She caught herself against the chair before she could collapse back into it, gripping the arm hard enough for her knuckles to pale.

Damn it.

...She honestly hated feeling this weak, even if she knew it was temporary.

At least this time it hadn’t been in front of both Leon and the crown prince. Keeping herself awake through all of that hadn’t been easy. Her mind was still clear enough when she forced it to be, but the moment she allowed her attention to loosen, fatigue seemed to rush in and occupy everything.

Hopefully she only had to last a little longer.

“Are you all right?”

The princess’ quiet question caught Scarlett by surprise.

She looked at the girl.

Suddenly, she felt a little ridiculous for caring about appearances at all right now. Which was surprising in itself. Since when had she become fine with making a fool of herself in front of royalty, regardless of their age?

A light chuckle escaped her.

“I will be, Your Highness.”

She waited until she felt reasonably confident in her legs before straightening again. This time she didn’t stumble. At least some small measure of strength had returned to her limbs, though she still took a couple of careful steps to test them before moving away from the chair.

She then picked up the emperor’s book, running her fingers briefly across its cover before slipping it into her [Pouch of Holding].

She would need to do something about that when she could.

If the book really provided Eidolon with some means of observing its surroundings, carrying it around without precautions didn’t seem particularly wise. But she didn’t want to dispose of it either. It might prove to be her best means of learning more about Eidolon, especially since it seemed possible that the book communicated with different parts of the entity.

Yamina might have ideas for how to isolate it. Even if conventional magic proved ineffective, they did have access to the heart of Ol—

Scarlett paused as her mind reached for a name that was no longer there.

That was...still very uncomfortable.

She shook her head.

Regardless, with the heart of the Dragon of Devastation containing Anomalous power, she figured they could probably devise something.

But that was for later. For now, she would hide the book somewhere secure and return to the problem when she was in a better state to actually deal with it.

She crossed the office towards the princess and Holdger, stopping in front of the latter and craning her head back to look at him.

Holdger's helmet dipped to meet her gaze.

"You truly are rather large, Sir Holdger."

The mammoth of a man answered with a solemn nod.

"I saw someone almost as large," the princess said.

Scarlett glanced sideways at her.

"Did you, now, Your Highness?"

"Mm."

"I see."

"Also..."

Scarlett waited, but the girl fell silent.

"Also...?" she asked.

The princess' fingers shifted against the braid over her shoulder.

"...You can call me Hilde."

A faint crease formed between Scarlett's brows. "I do not believe I should."

"There is only us."

"I am aware. However, this is a matter of propriety."

The princess regarded her in silence with that taciturn, almost inscrutable expression of hers. Several seconds passed.

"This is an order," she said.

Scarlett's eyes widened a fraction.

For a moment, she simply stared at the girl. Then she inclined her head.

"...Very well. But only when we are alone. Is that understood?"

The girl nodded.

"Good. Then, Hilde..."

Scarlett composed herself, setting aside the peculiar weight the name seemed to pick up now that she had permission to use it, and stepped up to the doors.

"How does this ability of yours work? Can you always decide where a door will lead?"

Hilde joined her, with Holdger looming a step behind them.

"Maybe?"

"Can you choose somewhere you have never visited?"

The girl shook her head.

Scarlett considered her options. She doubted Hilde had ever visited the Hartford mansion, which removed the most convenient destination. There were a number of places in central Elystead that a princess could reasonably have been taken to before, though none that Scarlett particularly wanted to suddenly emerge in right now.

One alternative did come to mind, however. It should be pretty quiet at this hour, not disastrously far from the mansion, and Scarlett knew for certain that Hilde could go there.

"Have you visited Hamet Garden?" she asked.

Hilde studied her briefly, then nodded.

"Good. Could you try bringing us there?"

The girl hesitated before stepping up to the doors. She wrapped both hands around the handles and pulled. The doors opened soundlessly. Beyond them wasn't the corridor outside the emperor's office. Instead, a gravel path stretched between walls of dark, carefully clipped hedges. Neat beds of flowers lay set into a garden, their petals washed nearly silver beneath the cold light of the moon.

Scarlett stared through the opening.

That was...extraordinarily convenient.

Especially if the Empyrean Barrier truly was currently preventing most other forms of spatial travel around Elystead.

How did Hilde's ability even work?

Scarlett hadn't sensed any mana gathering. Nor any other form of power, for that matter.

Seeing this almost made her reconsider whether letting the princess stay with her had to be a temporary arrangement.

But no.

She really did already have enough stragglers finding their way into her life without adding an imperial princess to the list. There were half a dozen reasons why that wasn't worth it.

The three of them crossed the threshold. Holdger passed through last, and the doors swung shut behind him. When Scarlett glanced back, she didn't see any doors. Only another stretch of gravel disappearing between two high walls of hedge.

Oh?

So the ability didn't even require a corresponding doorway at the destination.

That was even more convenient.

They set off towards the nearest exit. From what Scarlett could recall, Hamet Garden's hedge maze covered a sizeable portion of the grounds and probably wasn't the easiest place to navigate in the dead of night. But Holdger was tall enough to see over the hedges, while Hilde seemed surprisingly familiar with the maze's twists and turns, so they made good enough progress that it wasn't long before the paths opened up and they emerged into the rest of the garden.

Unfortunately, Scarlett's body eventually decided to betray her again.

She managed well enough at first, but then the weakness in her legs returned, followed by an unpleasant lightness in her head whenever she moved too quickly. Her pace steadily worsened until even Hilde, who hadn't appeared particularly concerned with how slowly they were travelling, started watching her more closely.

At one point, the princess suggested that Holdger could carry her.

Scarlett declined.

They continued walking, and several minutes later, Scarlett had reached the point where she needed to pay conscious attention to every step just to keep her gait even. Hilde made the suggestion again, but Scarlett still refused.

As much as she'd realised she didn't care quite as much about appearances in front of the girl as she might have expected, she had her limits.

Hilde tried convincing her by mentioning that Holdger often carried her. Scarlett pointed out that the girl was considerably smaller than her, then continued walking until her knees nearly buckled beneath her.

At that point, she didn't have much of a choice.

She could be stubborn, but it wasn't worth faceplanting for.

When she eventually relented, Holdger stepped forward. Scarlett wasn't entirely sure what she had expected—simply leaning on him wouldn't have helped much—but she'd hoped that it would retain at least a vague approximation of dignity. Instead, one enormous arm moved behind her back while the other slipped beneath her knees, and a second later, she found herself lifted entirely off the ground in a *princess carry*.

Scarlett went stiff at first.

Holdger didn't seem to notice her reaction. He simply adjusted his hold until she was secure, then continued moving.

Scarlett, meanwhile, was surprised by just how mortified the Amy part of her felt about the situation. She hadn't expected being carried like this by a relative stranger to bother her quite so much, but apparently it did. Strangely enough, leaning further into the Scarlett part of herself actually made the embarrassment easier to endure.

That said, she chose to remain very still for the rest of the journey.

They reached one of Hamet Garden's side entrances without any real incident, where the two guards stationed there reacted about as well as could be expected when a veritable giant appeared in the middle of the night with an exhausted baroness in his arms and the second princess walking beside him.

There were, understandably, questions, but most of them disappeared once the guards recognised Holdger's armour.

Scarlett instructed one of the men to find them a carriage or wagon. The guard hesitated only briefly before hurrying off, apparently deciding that whatever explanations might normally be required could be dealt with by someone of considerably higher rank.

Scarlett doubted their appearance here would remain a secret. By morning, there would probably be a report somewhere detailing how the missing princess had unexpectedly appeared at Hamet Garden. But considering the crown prince himself had allowed Hilde to leave with her, Scarlett wasn't particularly concerned about whatever questions that might raise.

Eventually, the guard returned with a carriage and a profoundly confused coachman who looked as though he had been hauled directly out of bed and given only the vaguest explanation of why. Scarlett and Hilde climbed inside while Holdger took his place outside.

Scarlett gave the coachman the address of her Elystead mansion, and soon the carriage lurched into motion.

Scarlett observed the girl seated opposite her as they rattled through the streets.

Hilde met her gaze.

"Do you have friends?" Scarlett found herself asking.

"Mm," the girl replied. "Holdger."

"Only him?"

Hilde was silent.

"I see."

Scarlett considered that for a few moments before leaning her head back against the seat and turning her gaze to the window.

"Then perhaps we will see what can be done about that."

Maybe.

She'd think about it when she wasn't dead tired.