

273: This princess is in the right castle

“Regina...?” The soft, confused question left the young princess’ lips as she blinked sleepily in the gloomy light. The fog of slumber slowly lifted from her vacant face as she seemed to realise the figure before her wasn’t who she’d initially thought.

A stretched silence blanketed the room, and Scarlett found herself rooted to the spot, caught between conflicting instincts. Part of her urged to bow in reverence before a member of the imperial family, while another part screamed to activate the spell that had brought her here and flee immediately. She knew neither option was particularly viable, though. Escaping now would only ensure a witness to her actions without resolving the situation, and supplicating herself wasn’t much better.

What was the second princess even doing here, of all places? And buried beneath a *mountain of quilts and pillows*, no less. Had she been hiding on purpose?

Scarlett couldn’t avoid letting her eyes dart around the room, half-expecting a Royal Guard to materialise from the shadows. It seemed unlikely, though. Holdger ‘The Mammoth’ was the one who usually guarded the princess, and he was a man whose imposing stature lived up to his moniker. Scarlett would definitely have noticed him when she checked the area out earlier.

“Who are you?” the princess finally asked, her voice tinged with confusion. She shifted on the bed, pulling an embroidered pillow in front of her like a shield. Though not overtly cautious, her movements betrayed her attempt to make sense of the unexpected situation.

Scarlett studied the girl for a moment, considering her response, before letting out a short sigh. She allowed the small flame beside her that she’d used as a reading light to expand, bathing more of the room in its warm glow.

“Greetings to the second star of the Empire, Her Imperial Highness,” Scarlett said, dropping into a graceful curtsy. “I am Baroness Scarlett Hartford.”

The princess stared at her, silent and unblinking. “You’re that lady,” she finally replied, almost matter-of-factly.

Scarlett paused, slightly caught off guard by that. “‘That lady’?”

“You were in the garden that time,” the girl elaborated, her tone unchanged.

Scarlett eyed her for a couple more seconds. The princess was referring to their brief encounter during the Proclamation Ceremony nearly half a year ago, when Scarlett had stumbled upon Allyssa and her in one of Hamet Garden's secluded nooks.

She was honestly surprised that the princess remembered something like that.

"That is correct," Scarlett replied, inclining her head slightly. "I am honored that you remember me, Your Highness."

Another beat of silence passed as the princess observed her, then the girl's gaze swept the room. "...This is sister's room."

Scarlett's eyes narrowed marginally. She assumed the princess was asking about her presence here. If so, her composure was impressive. Most would be alarmed to wake and find a stranger rummaging through their sibling's chambers, but the princess' reaction was... Well, minimal.

Still, Scarlett knew she couldn't simply ignore the question. But what plausible explanation could she give that wouldn't lead to drastic consequences? While she could easily overpower the young girl, leaving no witnesses, the very thought was abhorrent. She needed another solution.

She regarded the princess thoughtfully, weighing her words.

"Your Highness, I presume you are aware of the first princess' disappearance?" she finally asked.

The girl met Scarlett's gaze before offering a wordless nod.

"I am here in connection with that matter," Scarlett continued. "His Highness the crown prince approached me some weeks ago, seeking my aid because of my expertise in the type of Zuverian research that the first princess has involved herself in. I have come here to further investigate that avenue."

It was the best excuse Scarlett could muster here on the spot, and it wasn't too far from the truth.

The second princess continued watching her silently for several long seconds, her face now an unreadable mask. Scarlett found it almost impossible to try to discern the thoughts swirling behind those eyes.

"Do you know where sister is?" the girl asked after an extended pause, as though fully accepting Scarlett's explanation.

“...I do not,” Scarlett replied.

The princess fell quiet again, her gaze dropping to the pillow in her arms. Her fingers traced the intricate embroidery as she spoke softly. “Why did she leave?”

Scarlett studied the young royal, struck by a sudden pang of familiarity. Despite their stark differences, the girl reminded her of her own sister at that age. She recalled having felt the same last time they met as well. Perhaps it was the air of concealed isolation that seemed to cling to them both, with a world that was too busy with its own complexities to care much about them.

“Regrettably, Your Highness, I cannot answer that either,” Scarlett said.

The reminder of her past left a bitter taste in Scarlett’s mouth, frankly.

Her attention fell to the emerald leather book in her hand, its cover adorned with fanciful script.

Even if she had an inkling of why the first princess had left, it wasn’t something she could or should share under the current circumstances.

The princess looked up at Scarlett again, her eyes searching. Scarlett wondered if the girl did actually suspect her motives or not. Anyone would find a stranger in their sister’s room suspicious, even more so within the palace walls, yet the second princess still showed little outward sign of distress.

“...You have a sister, don’t you?” the girl asked suddenly.

Scarlett’s eyes widened slightly. How did she know about that? While the Hartford family was well-known enough among the empire’s nobility for people to know about her, it wasn’t to the extent that everyone was familiar with its current members. Why would a princess bother learning about a minor house like theirs? Was it simply part of her education, perhaps? If so, the girl’s memory could be more impressive than Scarlett had thought.

“I do, Your Highness,” Scarlett responded. “She is of a similar age to the first princess.”

The second princess studied her for another moment. “Would you leave her?”

Scarlett paused, her fingers unconsciously tightening around the book in her hand. Why was she asking these questions of someone she’d barely met?

“...It would depend on the circumstances, Your Highness,” Scarlett replied carefully. “We cannot always control the hand that we are dealt. Sometimes, we are forced to

make choices that may hurt those close to us. Or at least, we believe we must.” She took a short breath before adding, “In my situation... I believe I would, yes.”

The admission seemed to hang heavy in the air, though Scarlett wasn't certain why. She did not think it was wrong. Hadn't she already left her sister from her own world behind, in a way? And she wouldn't be surprised if circumstances pushed her to do the same or worse with Evelyne.

“...You're very honest,” the second princess said, her voice barely above a whisper.

“I see no reason to be dishonest with you.”

“My sister would have lied.”

Scarlett raised an eyebrow. “...I see. However, I am not the first princess.”

The girl nodded slowly, her gaze dropping once more to the decorated pillow clutched in her arms. “Mmm.” A moment of silence passed, broken only by the soft rustle of silk as she shifted on the bed. “Mother made this for sister. Before I was born.”

Scarlett watched her, uncertain what to make of the comment. This conversation was taking very unexpected turns. “It seems Her Majesty was quite talented in needlework,” she observed, in lack of a better response. “I imagine it meant a great deal to the first princess.”

The girl nodded again, her small fingers tracing the embroidery of a flower. “Sister said mother loved us most. That's why she died. Because of me.” Her gaze lifted to meet Scarlett's, her young face remaining a strange mask of impassiveness that couldn't quite hide the sorrow in her eyes. “Is that normal?”

“I do not know the specifics of Her Majesty's situation, Your Highness,” Scarlett answered. “...However, I believe many mothers would give anything for their children. Love often drives people to great sacrifices.”

She thought back to what little she knew of the late empress. The woman had died a few years back due to some rare illness, if she recalled correctly. The first princess had mentioned it briefly in the game, but not at length.

“Would your mother do the same for you and your sister?” the second princess asked.

Scarlett stiffened, her lips pressing into a thin line.

“She would not,” the answer came almost unbidden. Despite knowing little about the original's mother, she felt instinctively that these words were true. As for her own

mother back in her world, it might have been different—it likely was—but she had long since stopped dwelling on such thoughts.

An uneasy silence fell over the room, accompanied by the soft crackle of the magical flame illuminating their faces. The princess watched Scarlett intently, and she found herself wondering why this had almost become an impromptu counseling session and if the girl wasn't playing her in some way.

Seeking to change the subject, Scarlett's gaze dropped to the book she held. She raised it for the princess to see more clearly. "Your Highness, if I may ask, are you familiar with this?"

The girl's eyes fixed on the book. "That is sister's."

"Do you know what it contains?" Scarlett pressed.

"Stories about heroes," the princess answered, a hint of warmth creeping into her voice. "Sister used to read it to me."

A slight furrow appeared on Scarlett's brow. "How long has Her Highness possessed this book? Do you recall where she might have acquired it?"

The girl tilted her head slightly, as though considering it. "For as long as I remember. I don't know where it's from."

If she couldn't remember how long the first princess had it, then it was likely more than five or so years at least. That suggested whoever created it wasn't a newly arrived player like Scarlett.

She leaned forward slightly. "Is there nothing else you can tell me about it? Even the smallest detail could be important. I believe this book may be connected to Her Highness' disappearance."

A barely perceptible frown crossed the young princess' face. She remained quiet for a long moment, then finally shook her head. "I don't know."

"I see. That is...regrettable," Scarlett said, keeping her tone measured despite her disappointment. Then was Beldon her best shot at learning more about it?

Alternatively, if she could study it further and figure out its purpose from its contents, that might give her an idea as well. But she was a bit at a loss as to where to begin.

The fact that the book seemed to depict scenes featuring the 'good' companions from the game couldn't be a coincidence. Was it meant to serve as some hint? A cryptic

directive to assemble them? Or maybe the book itself was some sort of vestige of a good playthrough of the game. Though that seemed unlikely, considering the game's party size constraints prevented you from having all of them at once.

Scarlett's mind worked through some of the different possibilities. For her, gathering all the good companions wasn't really feasible in the short term. There was a reason why Fynn and Rosa were the only ones she'd recruited thus far. The first princess had never been a good option, and locating and enlisting the knight companion would be challenging for Scarlett in this world. As for the sage, he could only be found all the way over in the Unresting Steppes, and his background potentially made him even more troublesome to deal with than Rosa with all her baggage.

"...Do you think my sister is safe?" the second princess' soft question brought Scarlett out of her thoughts.

"I am certain that she is," Scarlett replied. "While Her Highness' precise whereabouts remain unknown, my inquiries suggest she is not alone. Those in her company are likely to be quite capable."

If the woman was involved with another player-like character, she was likely advancing and growing stronger at an advanced rate. Of course, this world's divergence from the game's narrative introduced numerous variables, so the possibility of something unforeseen having befallen the princess couldn't be discounted, but Scarlett didn't see the point in sharing that with the young girl before her.

"...I am glad," the second princess murmured, her posture relaxing almost imperceptibly. Her gaze drifted to the flame illuminating the room, then back to Scarlett. "Were you here for tonight's conclave?"

"Indeed, Your Highness," Scarlett said. "The recent incursions have demanded much of my attention as of late. However, the conclave presented a valuable opportunity to further my investigations into Her Highness' situation, hence my presence here as well."

"If you find her...would you tell me?" the girl asked.

"If that is Your Highness' wish," Scarlett replied with a slight bow of her head. "In return, might I request a favor?"

The princess looked at her for a few heartbeats, then nodded silently.

Scarlett considered her words for a short while. "I would be most grateful if Your Highness could maintain discretion regarding my presence here tonight," she said at last. "While I am investigating the first princess' whereabouts at the crown prince's

behest, not all are privy to my involvement. In fact, rare few are, and there are those who might exploit knowledge of the princess' disappearance and my role for nefarious purposes. It also happens to be the case that some of the methods that I have employed in this matter are...not ones I can disclose lightly, even to those who would be considered an ally. This is why I have taken great care to avoid undue attention during my visit, and require your aid in ensuring that remains the case."

In the end, as long as the second princess remained quiet, her seeing Scarlett tonight wouldn't be an issue. The girl seemed to have plenty of things to think about herself, and Scarlett didn't think the imperial household was the closest of families, so perhaps it was possible to secure the princess' silence, even from the emperor and crown prince.

Still, if the girl did speak, it would prove incredibly troublesome. How would the princess' word measure against her own, she wondered? Without concrete evidence, was it possible that the princess' account would be dismissed as a child's imagination?

Honestly, maybe. But it would undoubtedly cast suspicion on Scarlett, nonetheless.

For a fleeting moment, the notion of simply eliminating all risks by dealing with the princess permanently while she could resurface in Scarlett's mind, but she swiftly suppressed it. She wasn't that much of a monster.

The second princess regarded Scarlett for a while after her request. Then, finally, she responded with a simple "Okay."

Scarlett had to admit that she didn't expect it to be that easy. She had thought it possible to convince her, but the girl's unhesitating agreement was surprising. Could she be dissembling out of fear, planning to report on Scarlett's presence as soon as she was gone?

She didn't get the sense that was the case. In both their current and previous interactions, the princess struck her as one who didn't hide her thoughts, even if she seemed the type to try and hold them back.

Scarlett studied the princess' face for a moment longer. "You have my gratitude, Your Highness." She glanced at the book in her hand, then back at the girl. "Might I retain possession of this book for the time being? You have my word that I will return it. Until then, it may prove invaluable in locating your sister."

"Mmm. It's fine," the girl said.

Scarlett carefully placed the book in her [Pouch of Holding], then looked out the window at the starlit sky where the moon hung high. "I believe the conclave will reconvene shortly. I must take my leave, Your Highness."

The young royal's eyes remained on Scarlett, a hint of curiosity in her otherwise impassive gaze. "Farewell," she murmured softly.

Scarlett reached out to the formless tether that connected her to the artifact in Mistress' office, but then hesitated. Her eyes lingered on the solitary figure of the princess, which looked small and somehow more fragile than even her age would suggest while sitting on her sister's bed.

"Your Highness," Scarlett began but held her tongue as the princess' head tilted slightly, her gaze seeming to carry a question along with quiet expectation. What was it about this girl that made her pause? "...No, forgive me. It would be presumptuous of me to offer counsel at this point in time. Know this, however: should my investigations yield any insights regarding your sister, I shall find a way to inform you. Until then, I hope you find strength in these trying times."

With a final, respectful nod, Scarlett strode towards the door, which she found was unlocked as she stepped through. As it closed behind her, she stood for a moment in the silent, empty hallway. She would like to think she could trust her intuition and this wouldn't be a problem, though there were still some lingering doubts.

Shaking her head, she pushed those thoughts aside and focused on the connection to the armillary sphere. In a whisper of arcane energies, she vanished from the palace corridors and returned to Mistress' office, where she prepared to rejoin the conclave and then put this night behind her.