

## 77: Blood ties

“You’re back!”

“Bro!!!”

A group of children came bolting towards them, jumping at Fynn like a gaggle of monkeys. Scarlett watched him try to hold them back, placing Shin down at the entrance of the hallway. The first thing Fynn had done after they’d reached Dimfrost was guide them all to his old home in the village.

“Calm down. We have guests,” the young man said, picking up a boy—who couldn’t have been over eight—up around the neck. The boy himself just waved his arms around, pouting as he was placed down on the floor a short distance away.

“Who are they?” a girl who looked to be around ten asked, hanging hung off Fynn’s other elbow as she stared at Scarlett and the others who stood by the entrance. She sniffed the air, then grimaced. “They’re dirty.”

Scarlett’s eye twitched, but held herself back from saying anything.

They’d literally just climbed a mountain. Some sweat was to be expected. Still, the relative cold of the climb had stopped her from even sweating *that* much.

“They’re my companions. And she’s my employer.” Fynn gestured towards Scarlett. “You can’t say that she smells. It’s rude.”

The girl gave him a confused look. “What? Why?”

Fynn knitted his forehead, as if he actually had to think about it.

Scarlett decided to save him the trouble. “Will you introduce us to your siblings?”

“These are Velryrth, Themyar, Inayra, and Kelnorin.” He pointed to each of them in order. The first was a long-haired girl somewhere in her middle teens. Second was a boy, maybe a couple of years younger, sharing a lot of resemblance with Fynn. Third was the girl who’d spoken already, who had her hair cropped short above her ears. Lastly was the young boy Fynn had picked up, whose hair looked like it’d been through a storm, sticking in all directions. All the kids shared the same white hair and yellow eyes as Fynn, and were dressed in simple nightclothes.

Fynn pointed to Scarlett and the others. “She’s Baroness Hartford. Those two are Allyssa and Shin. The brown-haired one is Rosa, and the old—” He paused, peeking at Garside. “That one is a butler. He works for the Baroness.”

“The brown-haired one, eh?” Rosa mumbled from the side.

Scarlett herself was a bit surprised Fynn had referred to her noble title. Maybe he *could* learn these things after all.

“Hello,” Allyssa said in a cheery voice, waving to the kids, earning a couple of waves back.

“What’s a baroness?” the young boy—Kelnorin—asked, ignoring their greetings.

“It’s one of the empire’s rulers,” Inayra held her head high as she answered.

The young boy went wide-eyed, staring at Scarlett. “She’s their queen??”

She lowered her gaze to him. “I am not. The empire does not have a queen, nor would I have been one if we did.”

“I like your hair.”

Scarlett blinked. “I apprecia—”

“You smell weird though. It’s not good to lie.” The boy turned away from her and grabbed Fynn’s arm. “Come! I want to show you the statue I made.”

She stared at the boy, not quite sure what to say to that. Could it be that she *did* actually smell? But what about Fynn just saying it was rude to speak like that?

A dark-haired woman came walking out from a back room, rubbing her eyes as she exited into the hallway. There were traces of grey in her hair, and like the kids, she also wore nightclothes.

“Fyntrarth?” she asked, pausing as she looked at Fynn. “You’re back? Who are these people?”

“Franka! Bro has a queen!” Kelnorin yelled, trying to pull Fynn with him.

“She’s not a queen!” Inayra cried out.

The oldest of the siblings, Velryrth, put her arms around the young boy’s shoulders and pulled him back, holding the lump of energy in place as she looked towards the dark-haired woman. “Fyntrarth said they’re his companions. And his employer.”

“Employer?” The older lady’s eyes turned to them. “You mentioned it in your letter,” she muttered. Her eyes stopped on Scarlett, then widened. “A-Are you the Baroness? What are you doing here?”

“I am.” Scarlett nodded. “And Fynn had business to deal with in this area. I chose to accompany him and aid with those matters.”

Franka’s attention turned to Fynn. “I-I see. Then you’re not staying for long?”

“What? You’re leaving again?” the older of the brothers—Themyar—asked, staring at his brother.

Fynn glanced towards Scarlett.

She met his gaze. “We will only stay as long as required, in order to secure a means of return.”

Fynn nodded at the others. “What she said. They’ll be staying here tonight at least.” He stepped forward and lifted his youngest brother up with both arms. “You should be sleeping, though. The rest of you, too.”

“Kelnorin woke up when he smelled your scent,” Velryrth said with a smile. “We couldn’t calm him down.”

“Scent...?” Allyssa looked at the family of white-haired children. “Ehm, Fynn...are all of your siblings like you?”

Fynn looked back at Scarlett.

She arched an eyebrow at him. “I believe we are well past trying to conceal your origins.”

He turned back to Allyssa. “Yes. We are of the Grehaldrael.”

“Huh. I don’t recognize that name,” Allyssa mumbled.

“Nor do I,” Garside said.

Rosa grinned. “A secret tribe of wolves then, is it? How romantic.”

A surprised expression crossed Fynn’s face. “You know of us?”

“No.” Rosa pointed at herself. “But I do have these things called eyes.”

Fynn furrowed his brows. “What?”

“Let us save these conversations for another time,” Scarlett cut in before things derailed any further. “I would very much like to get some rest before the night has passed.”

Fynn, still holding his younger brother in the air, turned around. “Franka, can you help prepare a place for them to sleep?”

The woman still seemed a bit overwhelmed by the whole situation, but she seemed to regain some of her focus at Fynn’s words, fiercely nodding her head. “We don’t have anything fitting a noblewoman, but I’ll find the best that we have.”

She disappeared into one of the rooms. Fynn started pushing his siblings down the hallway, and the rest of them followed.



The next day, Scarlett was sitting on a wide plank porch at the back of the house, looking down at the book in her hands. She had tried to find a few books on linguistics, the history of how Modern Imperial developed, and how the language of the old Zuver tied into it, but the general knowledge on the subject appeared pretty scant from what she could tell. There might be more to find if you knew where to look, but unfortunately, she did not at the moment.

Instead, she had been reading up on the general history of the Zuver people—or at least what was known about them—and what some of the current theories about what led up to The Severance — the event that caused the annihilation of the Zuverian civilization. Because this was a fantasy world and there always had to have been some sort of major catastrophic event in the past.

While she knew a lot about the subject because of her game knowledge, she was lacking when it came to minor details and what the common sense was in this world. As she was dealing a lot with Zuverian artifacts and ruins, and would undoubtedly garner even more attention around it in the future, she'd thought it wise to educate herself more on what the people here knew on the subject.

This particular book also happened to have been written by the same author that Princess Regina had once mentioned to her when they spoke.

A loud cry rang out from in front of Scarlett, and she glanced up from the pages to see Fynn's youngest brother flying through the air. The young boy landed on the back of a 'statue' composed of a pile of stones, vaguely arranged in the shape of a wolf. A few meters away stood Fynn, hands raised in the air.

Scarlett could only shake her head at the sight. If there was anything she'd learned today, it was that Fynn's people were on another level when it came to some of their games.

Fynn's home was situated near one of the valley edges here in Dimfrost, and the porch faced the mostly empty area of land between the house and the rocky cliffside. This created a backyard of sorts, where Fynn had spent much of the morning with his siblings, romping about in and sharing stories of what he'd done out in the wide empire. At one point, Scarlett had overheard him sharing the fact that he'd had his first awakening and gone through with the trial, which had earned quite the intense reaction. She hadn't bothered to pay attention to the ensuing scrap after that, though.

Right now, Fynn was playing with the three youngest of his siblings. Rosa sat on the sidelines, chiming in with small tidbits of songs at appropriate times. The bard seemed to enjoy the exaggerated reactions from the youngest of the two siblings quite a lot.

The oldest of them—Velryrth—had been sitting at the edge of the house along with Allyssa, apparently quite fascinated by whatever they were speaking about.

Shin had woken up for a time, earlier in the morning, but he was still recuperating from the battle so he was resting back inside. Scarlett had been unaware of it, but according to Rosa, it usually took some time to recover from healing as intense as what Shin had been subjected to.

Garside was also missing. He had been out for a few hours now, busy at work as usual.

Fynn had informed them that there was usually a small ship that passed by the village with wares once a week or so, but according to Franka, it'd been here three days prior. The chances of it coming again anytime soon weren't high. Garside was currently going around the village, trying to arrange another way for them to get back.

It wasn't as if going north through the Blasted Lands was an alternative.

Scarlett had considered joining him on his mission, but there wouldn't have been much point in scaring all the remaining villagers in this isolated village with a sudden visit from a noblewoman.

It might have just been best to pay a few thousand extra solars to have those men that originally brought them here return with their ship. It was exorbitantly expensive, yes, but that was growing to be less and less of a problem for her. And she had to be back in Freybrook in a couple of days, when she was expecting Gaven Ripley to have returned.

She'd been so caught up in getting here and dealing with the current situation that she hadn't spent much time thinking about how to get back. They didn't even have a trip through the Kilnstone booked.

Well, sometimes even the simplest of things didn't become clear until in hindsight.

It'd definitely be annoying if they didn't make it back in time, but it wasn't life-threatening. Her plans regarding Gaven didn't have any strict deadline.

There was even a part of her that was *hoping* they wouldn't make it back in time, so that she wouldn't have to go through with her plans as soon.

Pushing those thoughts to the back of her mind for now, Scarlett returned her attention to the book in her hands. After some time, approaching footsteps prompted her to look up, and she saw Fynn sit down in a chair next to her. Rosa was entertaining the children by herself now.

"You appear unusually fatigued," she said, noting the drops of sweat on his forehead.

"Mm. It's because of the trial. Still haven't recovered completely."

"Is that so?" She studied him. "What was it you learned?"

He gave her a curious look. "You don't know?"

"I do not."

His eyes lingered on her. "I thought you would."

"I am not omniscient," she said. "Despite what some people might be saying."

"...I don't think I can tell you."

She closed the book in her hands. “That is understandable. But I presume what you received was worth the effort?”

“Yeah. The ancestors told me a lot. I’ll have to return later, though.”

Scarlett nodded her head. “That is within expectations. If you so wish, I will aid you then as well.”

Fynn eyed her for a while. He seemed to want to ask something. Eventually, though, he looked away.

Scarlett held back a smirk. He was curious, but still didn’t ask. Sometimes, he was surprisingly good at holding himself back.

“I had been meaning to bring it up,” she said. “There were several artifacts found after clearing the trial. I have several thoughts of what to do with them, but I was curious whether you held any interest in them first.”

“Artifacts?” he asked.

“Yes. Were you not aware of it?”

They *had* looted them while he was still in a trance.

“No. But I don’t really care. You can take them.”

Well, he might have cared if she told him what the artifacts were worth. But she reckoned it was okay, as long as she continued providing for him, and ensured he could continue to grow. Some might call it exploitation, but she was doing it for his own good. Honest.

Besides, she *had* risked a lot in this venture. This much seemed reasonable.

“Very well. I will ensure they are put to good use.”

They lapsed into silence. Fynn’s gaze was focused on his siblings.

“I wanted to thank you,” he said after a while. “I didn’t understand it before, but I wouldn’t have been able to beat the trial without you. I think I would’ve died.”

“There is no need for gratitude,” Scarlett said. “My intentions were far from altruistic. You are a valuable asset. It would be a waste to allow you to be squandered in such a manner.”

He tilted his head at her, wrinkling his forehead as if he was having a hard time judging the truthfulness of her words. Surprising, considering who he was. Eventually, he seemed to give up and returned his gaze to the open space in front of them. Rosa was now teaching Inayra how to play the klert.

“I don’t know what would happen to them if I were to die,” he said.

Scarlett kept her eyes on him. “You seem to care about them deeply.”

“Of course. They’re my siblings. Isn’t that natural?”

“...I suppose it is.”

Fynn looked at her. “Aren’t you the same?”

“The relationship between my sister and I is complicated,” she said.

“Is that why you yelled at each other in Elystead?”

“That was in due part of it, yes.”

“Why are you two like that? She’s your sister.”

Scarlett looked away, observing Fynn’s youngest sister turning the crank of Rosa’s instrument with a wide grin. “...You have never felt anger at your siblings? Frustration over them holding you back, restraining your freedom? Completely ignorant of the difficult position they put you in?”

“No,” Fynn answered without any hesitation.

Scarlett let out a low laugh. “I suppose you wouldn’t. That’s laudable in its own right.”

She paused, a strange feeling filling her, disappearing not long after.

“I will not claim to be a good sister, nor will I claim to have suffered through the same grief as you. But our circumstances do bear some resemblances,” she said. “When our parents passed away, I was barely an adult, with no other family to rely upon. However, I did strive to uphold my responsibilities as the elder sibling, despite the hardships it entailed.”

She ran her hand over the book in her hand, trailing her fingertips over the cover. “At first, I would like to think that I fulfilled my role well. I have never been an emotional person. I had no issue overlooking the grief I felt in order to care for my sister, whose entire world had fallen apart at a very vulnerable age. But as the responsibilities on me grew, so did the distance between us. Eventually, my sister grew more rebellious, and began associating herself with people I did not approve of, and she listened less to my words. As the stress mounted, I took it out on her at times. Not physically, but arguments were common, and I often wondered what it was all for. In my eyes, it seemed as if my sister had no appreciation for what I did for her, nor cared whether her actions helped or made it worse.”

A rueful smile grew on her face. “I am ashamed to say that not once did I try to see it from her point of view. If I had done so earlier, perhaps we could have talked about it. Come to understand each other. By the point I started having such thoughts, however, the time had long since passed for that to be an option.”

“...What happened?”

Scarlett turned to Fynn. “Not much. Things continued as they were for years, until she reached an age where she could take care of herself.”

He frowned. "And you regret it?"

She slowly shook her head. "Things are what they are. I regret the way I dealt with things, not realizing how many of my words and actions were smothering her. But I do not regret the woman she grew up to be. She was always more capable than I, and there are many things I am proud of as her elder sister."

Not that she'd often told her that. After her sister had left for college their relationship had improved a lot, but they still rarely spoke. Despite their rocky relationship, Scarlett still missed her. She hoped that whatever happened to herself back in her old world wasn't something horrible. It'd be awful if she put her sister through any more grief.

Perhaps the relationship between the original Scarlett and Evelyne had been similar. The original most definitely had a worse personality than herself, but their situation was at least similar, with the previous Lord Hartford having died when Scarlett was close to Fynn's age. In fact, wasn't it odd that their situations were so alike?

She frowned. Was that just another coincidence? Or was it another clue as to why she'd been put into Scarlett's body specifically?

"I don't really get it," Fynn said after a moment. "But I do think I understand. You want what's best for Miss Evelyne, don't you?"

Scarlett blinked. Both because he referred to Evelyne as 'miss', and because that wasn't who she'd really been talking about.

"...In a sense, perhaps," she said. "But it would be a lie to say that I would prioritize Evelyne's needs before mine under the current circumstances."

Fynn scowled. "Why?"

"There are many reasons. The simplest is that doing so could very well lead to both my own demise and the demise of an untold number of others."

She still didn't know what her purpose in this world was, but she did know that some force wanted her to be involved in its happenings. And not involving herself risked causing disaster, depending on how you interpreted the vague terms used in the main quest.

"I'll stop it then."

"...What?"

Fynn had a determined look on his face. "I'll stop whatever you're afraid of. I owe you a debt, so I'll help you."

Scarlett stared at him. If it weren't for the traits holding her back, she was pretty sure she would have broken into laughter right there and then.

He had no idea of what he was promising her, but he still resolved to do it. Words held a lot of meaning to his people too, so it wasn't as if this was something easy to back out of later.



She smiled. “Are you aware of the consequences your words might have?”

He shook his head. “No. But I’ll help you.”

Just how trusting could you be?

“What if that involves committing wicked acts?”

“I don’t think it will. You’re not bad.”

“Oh?” She raised an eyebrow. “You are not the first to say something of the sort to me. I presume you are unaware of my reputation amongst certain groups?”

“I don’t trust rumors.”

“What is said about me is not always completely unwarranted, however.” She tapped her finger against the book’s cover. “But I suppose it does not matter. Much of it is with regard to a person of the past. I am not bound by such things.” She fixed her eyes on his. “That is not to say I will not do what I believe necessary to achieve my goals.”

He held her gaze, staying silent.

Eventually, she tore her eyes away from his and opened her book again. “I hope you do not forget your words today. If there is one thing I have learned about myself during these last few months, it is that I am a greedy woman. It might be that I come to rely on you more than you expect.”

“Alright,” Fynn said. “If that’s what you need.”

She gently shook her head. Really, there should be a limit to how thoughtless one could be.

Still...maybe she should reward him some extra from now on. She needed him as strong as possible, and if that improved his impression of her in the process, then that was nice as well. And he had a family to take care of as well, after all.