

88: The quaint meadow

Scarlett pushed aside a branch with annoyance at the same time as she sidestepped a root jutting out from the ground, avoiding the soggy pool of mud next to it. She hated wet forests.

It just had to rain the night before they were supposed to venture out into the woods like this.

They'd only been at this for about an hour, and she was already getting seriously tired of it. But there were no roads or paths around these parts, so the carriage had to be left almost immediately, and when everything you had to go off of was an old, yellowed map older than most of the trees around them, the conditions weren't exactly optimal for finding your way.

Thankfully, they had Fynn with them. He could scout ahead much faster than the rest. Ten minutes earlier he'd said he found a place that fit Scarlett's descriptions, and they were following him in that direction now, so she was really hoping this wouldn't have to go on for much further.

As they proceeded through the damp underbrush, eventually, the trees opened up into a small clearing. The bed of the clearing was covered with the fallen leaves of the nearby trees, bearing shades of orange, red, and yellow. Strong winds were probably the reason so many leaves had gathered here, considering most of the trees themselves still kept much of their foliage. They were a few weeks into October now, and it seemed like these were prime times for some leaf peeping, the fall colors making a strong appearance here in the southwestern parts of the empire.

"Is this the place?" Fynn asked as Scarlett approached him, where he stood near the center of the clearing.

She glanced around as she took the area in. It didn't look like anything special, so it was hard to be certain.

"I believe it may be," she said.

But there was only one way to find out.

She put her hand into the [Bag of Holding] at her waist, pulling out the [Forgotten Hairpin] she had received from The Gentleman. The red rubies affixed to its head reflected the weak sunlight peeking through today's cloudy sky.

"What exactly are we expecting to find here?" Allyssa asked, the young Shielder exiting out of the forest a short distance behind Scarlett. Rosa followed not long after, ducking under a twig hanging down from a nearby oak. "Don't tell me... Is it another hidden fairy place?"

"It is not." Scarlett looked to the side, where Shin also appeared from out of the thicket. With everyone gathered, she then turned her eyes back to the hairpin and held it up in the air.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then, a weak light stirred inside the hairpin's rubies, and the air in front of Scarlett rippled with faint waves. It looked almost like the refraction above a campfire.

She smiled. This was indeed the right place.

“Hmm... I give it a six.” Rosa had walked up next to Scarlett, one hand cradling her elbow now as she caressed her chin with the other. “The fairy entrance was much more dramatic.”

“Is this another example of a portal that will transport us to another realm?” Shin asked, walking up and examining the odd phenomenon in the air.

“Not exactly,” Scarlett answered. She eyed the strange ‘gate’ for a moment, then looked over the others. “I believe some of us should stay here this time.”

All of their eyes turned to her.

“...Is that really a good idea?” Allyssa asked.

“In truth, there is no need for anyone other than I entering,” Scarlett said. “There is nothing that poses a threat on the other side.”

Even if there was danger there, it wasn’t something any of them could handle. Even if they all worked together.

“Are you sure?” Shin asked.

“Yes.”

She saw Fynn study her closely. She was uncertain whether he would consider that a lie.

“...Then I’ll stay,” he said.

Scarlett looked at him with surprise. He was volunteering?

“I’ll keep watch if there’s anything suspicious around here when you get back,” he continued.

“I’ll stay behind with him then,” Allyssa said after a moment.

Scarlett turned to the girl. She as well? That made things a lot easier. She would actually have preferred if none of the others came with to this place, but Allyssa was the one those concerns held the strongest for.

She glanced over at the remaining two. Shin and Rosa looked determined enough, so she supposed she could bring them along for now. She might need Rosa’s help for a while, at least. And while she was relatively certain it was safe, it might be best not to completely abandon the others here before their worries had been assuaged.

“You two will stay here for now, then,” she told Allyssa and Fynn. “It is unlikely that we will be gone for long, but do not fret if we are.”

They nodded their heads at her words.

She then turned back to the strange space at the center of the clearing.

“Let us proceed,” she said and stepped through. Her surroundings warped, like a ripple spreading across a canvas, and a moment later she exited into the same clearing. But now, she was surrounded by green.

Strong sunlight shone down from a blue sky with no hints of clouds on it, and the trees around her were covered with verdant leaves that danced with the wind. The soft, pleasant smell of fresh grass reached her nose from the bed that surrounded her.

Rosa and Shin appeared beside her soon after, both of them stopping and turning around as they took it all in.

“Is this...?”

“We’re still in the same place,” Shin said.

Scarlett put away the [Forgotten Hairpin]. “That is correct.”

“...But it’s summer,” Rosa pointed out.

“Astute observation, Miss Hale.”

The bard shot her a boorish look.

Scarlett pointed towards the edge of the clearing in front of them. There was a path there now, leading further into the forest. It was slightly overgrown and didn’t seem to see much traffic, but it was better than the dense undergrowth that had been there before.

“Shall we continue?” she asked.

“Whatever the lady says.” Rosa moved to the side, gesturing for her to walk ahead with an exaggerated flourish.

Scarlett decided to ignore it as she strode past, towards the path. Perhaps calling it a trail was more accurate, as they could barely walk side-by-side on it, and the footing was pretty uneven, but at least she didn’t have to bother about tripping on a branch or stepping in a pool of water now.

As they followed the path deeper into the forest, the trail widened slightly and the surrounding trees grew less dense. Eventually, they spotted signs of another opening ahead of them, and Scarlett could faintly hear running water. Soon, they exited into a large glade with a thin river running around its edges. The river passed by near them, disappearing into the forest further north. Close to there, at the other end of the glade, was a small village, with simple wooden buildings and a low stone wall surrounding it. A small herd of sheep moved around in an enclosure outside the village, with a couple of human figures walking among the animals.

“How quaint,” Rosa said, looking out over the village and its surroundings.

Shin seemed to be puzzled by the sight. “Where are we?”

“This is the village of Freymeadow,” Scarlett said.

“Why is it hidden away like this?”

She eyed him for a few seconds.

“...Perhaps you will learn later on.”

Preferably not, if she had anything to say about it.

She didn't wait for him to ask any further questions as she began walking towards the village itself. A simple dirt road began near the river and continued towards the settlement, and following that road, it only took them a short few minutes to reach the place. The path followed along the stone walls until it reached a small opening that could only generously be called a gate.

As they entered Freymeadow, the heads of two middle-aged women sitting outside a small house, with large baskets filled with wool next to them and wooden tools on their laps that looked a bit like large brushes. Scarlett felt like she recognized the tools, though she couldn't remember their names. Both women gave them surprised looks, mixed with curiosity and wariness.

Scarlett continued down the dirt road into the village. On the way, they passed by even more people, each giving them similar looks. As if they weren't used to outsiders.

There was nothing that stood out as odd about the people here, though. Their clothes were simple, and so were most of the activities they were doing, but they looked just like any of the other people Scarlett had seen in this world. If she were to compare this place with Whistlecreek or Dimfrost, there really wasn't anything special to point out.

Soon they reached a small open area that had a raised wooden platform at its center, perhaps used for larger gatherings and celebrations. The area looked much like your ordinary village square. A group of kids stood near the platform, playing some sort of game with sticks and stones on the ground.

Scarlett's eyes turned toward the edge of the square, where one of the larger wooden homes had a small porch that looked out over the space. A woman was sitting on a chair there.

She had straight, raven-black hair that reached down and rested on her shoulders, with a streak of white running through it just above the left temple. As she neared, Scarlett could see that the woman's eyes were a pale green, with hints of wrinkles and dark skin, and two beauty marks beneath the right eye. She had an almost vacant gaze as she watched over the square, seemingly observing the playing children. Her clothes were a dark set of loose robes, with simple decorations around the edges.

Scarlett stopped in front of the porch, and the woman's head turned to them.

“Oh? Visitors?”

“Pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Scarlett Hartford.”

The woman's eyebrow rose. "Scarlett Hartford?" She studied her for a few seconds. "That's a new name."

"These are my companions, Rosalina Hale and Shin Thornthon." Scarlett gestured towards the two. "We hail from Freybrook, and have come here to meet with you."

"Is that so?" The woman's eyes lingered on her for a moment longer, then passed over to Rosa and Shin. Finally, she turned her attention back to the square. "I'll have to disappoint then, I'm afraid. I'm not much to meet."

"I beg to differ," Scarlett said.

She looked behind the woman, where there was a red-tinted wooden casket with gold latticework standing on a wooden stool.

[Locked Jewell Casket]

{A woman's locket jewelry casket. There appears to be no way of opening it}

Eyeing the object for a short while, she eventually looked back at the woman. "I wish to be taken in under your tutelage."

She stilled, slowly turning to her. "What?"

"I wish to be taught under your guidance."

The woman stared at her. It was as if she was trying to peer through her words, to see if there was a meaning behind them. "You're here to learn from me?"

"That is correct," Scarlett said.

The woman stayed quiet for a second. Then she pointed to the empty air beside Scarlett. "Show what you can do."

Scarlett looked at the space. "You wish for me to showcase my abilities?"

"What else is there to do? Now, hurry up."

She glanced back at Shin and Rosa, signaling for them to step back. Then she raised both arms, holding her hands up in the air.

Taking a deep breath, she summoned all her focus. A giant sphere of fire blazed into existence a dozen meters away, blasting her with its heat. It had a diameter of over two meters and was of the highest intensity she could muster, gorging through her mana stores even with her recent skill upgrades. Still, she kept it up for almost twenty seconds before she dismissed it, drops of sweat forming on her temple.

[Mana: 1435/4575]

Loud cries sounded out from the children near the center of the square, who were staring over at her with wide eyes. Scarlett ignored them, turning back to the raven-haired woman.

“Does that satisfy you?”

She seemed thoughtful for a brief period, then shook her head. “I’m sorry, but the answer is no.”

Scarlett held back from showing her disappointment. She had really been hoping it’d be that easy.

“Then is there something I can do to convince you?” she asked.

“I’m afraid I’m not that generous.”

“I am not asking for your generosity. Only that you teach me, in exchange for whatever it is you may want.”

“And I’m saying no. You don’t have what it takes.”

She studied her expression. The woman didn’t look like she was going to be convinced.

“...Very well,” Scarlett eventually said. She reached up to her neck, pulling off her [Depraved Solitude’s Choker] and holding it out towards Rosa. “Take this and refill it.”

[Mana: 495/1575]

Rosa blinked a few times, before slowly accepting the necklace and putting her hand over the violet crystal that hung from its thin black band. A pale light appeared over its surface as the bard started filling it with her own mana.

This was why Scarlett needed Rosa to join. Otherwise, she’d be stuck with just relying on her own mana right now.

She used to do this when she trained with Garside as well, though only on days that she had nothing else to do afterward. While she could technically keep having the necklace’s mana recharged in order to stock up her mana, it was unfortunately impossible to only use the mana from the artifact. At least from the experiments she’d run. Using this method more than once wasn’t much different from mana exhaustion. Still, it was useful at points. Especially when she had lots of time to spare.

She waited quietly for the few minutes it took for Rosa to do her work, then gladly received the now full necklace. Stepping up onto the porch, she picked up an empty wooden chair and walked back to where she’d been, placing the chair on the ground in front of the porch.

She took a seat.

The woman looked down at her. “What are you doing?”

Scarlett met her eyes. “You said I am not fit to be under your tutelage, yes?”

She snapped her fingers as two small spheres of fire water appeared in the air before her, spinning around each other in a cyclical formation.

“Then I have no other alternative than to continue practicing, do I not?”