

137: Baring oneself

“You are not the real Scarlett Hartford?” Arlene gave her a long, inquisitive look. “That is an odd thing to say, if you ask me. What does that mean?”

“...It is exactly as I said. I am not the real Scarlett.”

The two of them observed each other in silence for several seconds. A strange sensation wound itself up Scarlett’s spine, like a faint tingle. She wasn’t sure if it was because of worry, uneasiness, or simply nerves. She never thought she would actually tell anyone about her identity in this world.

“If I recall correctly,” Arlene said, “you introduced yourself as Scarlett Hartford only a couple of days ago. Was that a lie, then?”

Scarlett placed her hands in her lap, her jaw set as she shifted her gaze away from the woman and onto the buildings on the opposite side of the village square. “...To a certain extent, yes. The truth is that I share the appearance of the woman known as Scarlett Hartford. Not only her appearance, but her life, traits, and emotions all remain within me to some degree or other. To most, I may very well be considered Scarlett; however, in truth, I am but a stranger to this body, as well as its prisoner.”

From the corner of her eye, she could see Arlene studying her closely. “So that is what you mean when you say you are not the real Scarlett Hartford.”

Scarlett lowered her head. “Yes.”

She wasn’t sure how something like this would sound to the woman. Was it perhaps something inconceivable to her, even in this world of swords and magic? Or was it something she had encountered before? Actually, what if Arlene thought she was possessed and tried to ‘exorcise’ her?

“Alright.” The woman’s casual voice sounded out next to her. “I’ll believe you.”

Scarlett turned to stare at her, her eyes widened slightly.

Arlene shrugged her shoulders as if Scarlett hadn’t just shared with her an enormous secret. “I am not entirely certain how something like the possession of someone else’s entire being—body, emotions, and traits included—would work, but I am not a spiritualist. Not planning on becoming one, either. I will do you the favor of not assuming you’re a demon or a specter, though you can skip the gratitude.”

Scarlett continued staring at her for a moment longer.

The woman closed the book placed on her lap. Several seconds passed as she leaned back in her chair, giving Scarlett an expectant look. “So? You’re not leaving it at that, are you? Tell me: who are you, really?”

Scarlett gathered herself from the surprise, shaking her head free from any further doubts. Arlene was being candid with her, and so she would be in return.

“My true name is Amy. Amy Bernal.”

The words felt strange as they left her. This was the first time she had ever said her name out loud since coming to this world. Even just the number of times she had *thought* of her real name since then was frighteningly low. It almost sounded foreign to her now, saying it in Scarlett’s detached voice. Like a distant memory of a life once lived, although only a few months had passed in reality.

“Amy Bernal, huh?” Arlene spoke the name as if tasting it. “Pleasure to make a proper acquaintance with you, Amy.”

Scarlett blinked. Being addressed like that felt even stranger. Not only the fact that the woman used her real name, but the *way* she used it. It was so different from how their usual greeting went, where the woman barely showed her any interest.

“With that out of the way, I’ll ask you the same question as before, but this time to the actual you.” Arlene looked her in the eyes. “What kind of person are *you*, Amy?”

There was a sincerity behind the woman’s eyes that Scarlett hadn’t encountered before, and she almost found herself looking away again, unsure how to respond. “...Unfortunately, I do not think I can provide you with an answer to the question this time, either.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I do not know how *much* of Amy Bernal I am at this point.”

This wasn’t a topic she knew how to talk about properly. Even her own thoughts on the subject were scattered, at best, and she did not enjoy spending too much time thinking about it. The answer also didn’t matter to how she continued in this world.

Arlene didn’t say anything for a few seconds, and Scarlett suspected she was waiting for her to continue. Either that, or she was giving her space. Whatever it was, Scarlett had to take a moment to collect herself and the swirling emotions she felt inside. Most of it was the anger she had felt almost constantly since her fight with Gaven, but it was a lot more confused now. Less directed.

Finally, she opened her mouth to speak again. “I killed a man recently.”

Her words were met by a brief lap of silence, followed shortly after by Arlene’s sober tone. “I see. Was this related to that difficult decision you had made before? The one we talked about last time?”

“In part, yes.” Scarlett traced a finger over the hem of the breeches she was wearing. They reached down to cover her ankles, but were made of a light wool that helped at least a little bit against the stifling summer air here in Freymeadow.

It was funny that Arlene would ask that. From the woman's perspective, that conversation would have been only yesterday. Most people might not assume that Scarlett would have gone and killed a man in that brief amount of time, or that she would go through such a sudden change.

"...I had two subordinates," she continued. "One was a man who aided me in tasks that I could not afford others to know about. An unscrupulous rogue whose morals were questionable at best, and who I only saw as a tool for furthering my goals. The other was a woman who had experienced much grief and pain through her life, yet had been gifted by fate with a power far above many others. Or perhaps some would call it a curse. She was an unfortunate soul with an unstable mind and strength she could not entirely control. Like with the rogue, I also used her to achieve what I wanted. I will not deny this fact, and I am well aware of its implications. I felt it was necessary at the time that I approached them, and I still believe so even now. However, due to my negligence, that woman almost died at the hands of the rogue."

She clenched her fist. The anger inside took shape again as she thought about it. "In his mind, it was a pragmatic act intended to remove unnecessary risks. Our original purpose for the woman was finished, and so he saw no point in having her stay alive. As such, he acted in the belief that I would approve. I sometimes tell myself that I do what I do for the better of all. If that was genuinely the truth, then perhaps I *would* have approved. I do think myself capable of that type of callousness."

She turned to Arlene with a grim face. "Instead, when I learned of this, I burned him. I burned him and everything around us in a fit of rage from which there was no escape. Even as he begged for his life, even as I gained a semblance of lucidity that I have only experienced a couple of times since entering this body, I did not hesitate to reduce him to nothing but ashes before my very eyes. And I do not feel regret or sadness. The only thing that persisted was the anger, and it will not go away."

Arlene looked at her with an indecipherable expression. "...Is this what you mean when you say you don't know how much of you is Amy Bernal?"

Scarlett gave a slow nod. "Not many are capable of speaking about killing a man without mercy or remorse in this manner."

"But you think Scarlett Hartford was?"

"Yes."

"Then, is it that you think her personality has affected yours to the point where you're not Amy Bernal anymore?"

"I do not think that." Scarlett shook her head. "I know it for a fact. What I am uncertain about is *how much* of my change is due to the original Scarlett, and how much is simply due to my current circumstances. Would the old me have been capable of the same thing in this situation if I was unaffected by Scarlett's personality?"

Arlene studied her. "Is it such a fine line where you cannot tell?"

“...Once again, I do not know.” Scarlett sighed. “The original Scarlett was a vile woman. She was arrogant, ruthless, conceited, indifferent, and considered most anyone beneath her as little more than useful dirt. She did not shrink from dealing with syndicates that committed murder or trafficked innocent children if she believed she stood to gain, and she was an ambitious woman. In the time since I have occupied her life, I have learned that she was inordinately capable in many ways, yet she was also held back by her own talents and the position she was born into. Her fate was that of a stereotypical villainess, with her demise already predestined.”

“It does not sound as if she will be missed,” Arlene said.

“One would think so. Despite all of that, however, Scarlett was a woman who held surprisingly strong emotional attachments to those close to her, twisted though they were. She cared for her butler in a way I suspect she was not even aware of herself, and even though her own sister disgusted her, I do not believe she would ever have allowed anyone but herself to interfere with their relationship. The same complexity appears to hold true for her ties to her parents and the one person who might have been called her friend, though I do not understand the circumstances behind that completely.”

Scarlett looked down at her hands. They were not much larger than her old hands had been, but they were thinner and the skin was smoother. “In comparison, Amy Bernal was a very ordinary woman. People often called her kind and considerate, and she spent years of her life caring for her younger sister when their parents died. She had never purposefully hurt another, and while she did not necessarily believe herself to be ‘kind’, she did consider herself a decent person. She was happy with the life she led and the relationships she had, and most of her regrets were not things she would have changed even if she had the choice.”

She stayed quiet for a short while, trying to order the subject in her mind. It was hard to distill all her thoughts on the matter into words that truly conveyed her feelings and didn’t sound misleading.

“...Despite all of this, I cannot recall ever feeling as strongly about those around me as Scarlett did. I cared about my parents, and I still care about my sister. I miss them, and I wish I could see them again, yet I did not cry when our parents died, nor during any of the difficult times that followed. I am not certain I have ever cried for someone else. Compared to Scarlett, who felt strongly about those close to her, my emotions feel much more distant. It is a somewhat disturbing thought, if one knows the type of person Scarlett was.”

She looked up at Arlene. “But that is not the main issue at hand. I do not mean to make it appear as if this is a realization to me, or that I *fear* what type of person I was. I have always been aware that I did not get as emotionally attached as others, but it has never affected my life severely. In almost all other ways, I would consider myself a more sympathetic, moral, and emotionally mature person than Scarlett. Of this, I have no doubt. It is simply that now, when I share the personality of a woman as callous as Scarlett Hartford, I wonder what parts of the current me are simply remnants left behind of her, and what is solely me. Her potent feelings about those around her only serves as a marked contrast between us. An area where I know her personality has overruled mine.”

After a moment, she shook her head again in irritation and looked away from the woman. “You will have to excuse me. It is difficult to communicate it all properly.”

“You seem to be worrying about it quite a bit, at the very least. Can I take it that you would *prefer* if yours and Scarlett’s personalities were separate?”

She scowled. “That one is difficult to answer. It is not certain that I would have gotten to where I am had I been unaffected by Scarlett’s traits, so if I were to be pragmatic, the answer might be no. Yet I do not enjoy the uncertainty of it all either, and I loathe not being in control of my emotions. In the end, however, these are mostly nothing more but my disorganized ruminations on the matter. Most of my actual feelings on it are numb, in a way. Sterile and removed from myself. Instead, I am forced to suffer through the ones that affected Scarlett the most. In large part, that is anger.”

She paused as she noticed several motes of flames had started on the floorboards of the porch, licking at the wood. Closing her eyes for a moment, she recentered herself and smothered the rebellious magic. Thankfully, they hadn’t spread.

“I suppose the worst part is not being able to tell what the true reason for the anger is...” she almost muttered to herself. It would be nice if she could say for certainty whether she was enraged because of what happened to the Countess, and not simply because Gaven had acted against what she wanted.

Next to her, Arlene leaned back in her hair and looked out at the village square. “It sounds like a difficult dilemma. I do hope you believe me when I tell you that I wished I had something to say that could help, but I don’t. I’ve been responsible for enough mistakes in my life that one could consider me an expert in what *not* to do, but unless the subject is related to magic, I often find myself hopeless when trying to discern what the right thing to do is.”

“That said—” The woman turned back to her. “I will say this: The world isn’t a fair place, neither in its workings nor in its reality, but it *can* be made fairer, if only ever so slightly. And what defines you in this world isn’t your feelings about things, but your actions. This can both be a curse and a blessing, depending on the where and how, but anything else is a privilege. I imagine you might share this sentiment, considering your circumstances and what you’ve told me.”

Scarlett looked at her for a while, then nodded. “I often choose to put more focus on my actions than my motivations, but as you said, this works both ways. And unfortunately, it does not make the reality of my current situation any less vexing.”

“It doesn’t, no,” Arlene said in a solemn tone. “If it’s any consolation, I think the day *will* come where someone brings tears to your eyes and you can be sure it’s Amy Bernal’s, and not Scarlett Hartford’s.”

Despite it all, Scarlett almost found herself chuckling at that. “That is perhaps the strangest consolation I have heard. But I suppose I should thank you.” She stayed quiet for a brief moment. “Both for that, and for indulging me.”

She didn’t understand why, but she actually felt better now. If only slightly. The anger and all the other emotions hadn’t suddenly just disappeared with these last few sentences, but something *did* feel different after talking about all this. She felt slightly more calm and relaxed. This was the first time she had ever opened up like this, both in this world and back

in her own. She had not thought of herself as the kind of person who would gain anything from it.

The two of them entered a period of silence where they simply sat there for a few minutes, looking out at Freymeadow's building spread out before them. After a while, however, Arlene was the one to break it.

"I've been pretty generous here, I would say, with not asking *how* you got yourself into this situation. How 'Amy Bernal' became 'Scarlett Hartford'."

Scarlett glanced at her. "Do you truly wish to know?"

The woman's pale green eyes turned to hers. "Now that I've heard this much, I don't have much choice, do I?"

Scarlett hesitated for a moment.

She had been vague about everything but her own identity for a reason. Could she actually speak about more than that? *Should* she speak about more?

"It will be difficult to believe," she said. "An uncomfortable truth to accept."

Arlene seemed to consider her for a few seconds, her expression unreadable as she did. Then she turned away again. "Then maybe it's best if I don't hear it."

Scarlett blinked a few times before slowly nodding her head. She honestly hadn't expected that answer, but it was probably for the best. Arlene had questioned nothing she said so far, but there was no telling what she might do if Scarlett said more. After all, no one would—

"What are you waiting for?" the woman said. "Go on."

Scarlett stared at her, and Arlene looked back at her with a small smile.

"Didn't I tell you before? I always make choices that I regret."