

105: Noble negotiations

Scarlett and the others were still waiting in the drawing room when the butler returned. The man stopped at the room's entrance.

"Baroness Hartford," he said in a mild tone. "Milord still finds himself preoccupied with the duties of his office, but... It would appear milady has returned from her previous ventures and has expressed an interest in meeting with the guests that saw fit to visit her abode."

Scarlett put down the book she had been reading and looked up at Leon. "Shall we?" she said, rising from the couch.

He stood up as well.

Grabbing her [Pouch of Holding] from her waist, she pushed it into the surprised man's hands before turning to the others. "I think it best if the rest of you remain here for now. We will return when we are finished with the negotiations."

"Sounds good to me," Rosa said. The woman patted the instrument on her lap. "I'm sure we'll live for at least a bit more. What's the worst that can happen?"

The butler at the door cleared his throat. "I hope the Miss has not forgotten my earlier words regarding music, and the prohibition of said act. While it is all well and good for those of the common masses to have something to distract them when they squander away their time in their backstreet tavern and the likes, this is a distinguished and respectable household belonging to esteemed members of the city's nobility. We cannot allow just any minstrel from the street to ply their 'trade' here, so to speak. Oh, of course, I did not mean to imply *you* to be one such minstrel. As an associate of Baroness Hartford, I'm sure that you're a well-experienced lyricist who only employs the most poignant of balladry, but understand that we can only be so careful."

"But of course," Rosa replied in a wholly serious tone. The fact that the woman had been playing away on her klert up till a minute earlier when Fynn noted the approaching butler wasn't visible on her expression at all. "What sort of butler would you be if you did not work to ensure that none but the most fantabalous of serenades reach your noble masters' ears? A humble bard such as I could only dream of performing in a room as exquisite as this. A drawing room, no less." She shook her head dramatically. "Perhaps, one day. For now, I will have to satisfy with merely having had the exhilarating opportunity of having witnessed this place."

"Yes... *Quite.*" The butler looked back at Scarlett. "Come with me, my Lady. Sir Leon."

Scarlett followed him out of the room, along with Leon. Neither of them spoke as they walked down the mansion's carpeted hallways until reaching a door at the end of one of the outer wings. The butler turned back to them. "Milady is waiting inside the parlor."

He opened the door, gesturing for them to enter. Scarlett walked through first.

The parlor was furnished in a similar style to the drawing room, with premium leather couches and animal pelts spread on the floor. Next to one of the walls was a lit fireplace, with two windows on either side overlooking a small garden. A long oak table stood at the center of the room, with an older lady in a dark dress sitting next to it with a steaming cup of tea in her hands. Her greying hair was arranged in a neat bun at the back, and her eyes held a cool bearing as she looked over Scarlett and Leon.

“Good afternoon, Lady Withersworth. I am Baroness Scarlett Hartford.”

“A pleasure meeting you, Baroness,” the woman said. Her focus turned towards Leon. “And I presume you are Sir Leon Delmon?”

He stepped up next to Scarlett and gave a polite nod. “That’s right. I’ve heard a lot about you, my Lady.”

“Only goods things, I hope.” Lady Withersworth showed a gentle smile and gestured towards one of the couches. “Please, have a seat. Make yourselves at home.”

They walked over to sit down opposite her. Scarlett picked up a cup that had been prepared, while Leon left his alone.

Lady Withersworth looked at the butler at the door. “Henley, will you be a dear and close the door?”

“Of course, milady.” He stepped out and pulled the door shut behind him.

“That man is such a rascalion, yet that is what I like about him. I’ll have to speak with him later. I’m afraid I’m becoming more and more like my husband the older I get.” The old woman shook her head for a brief moment, then turned her attention back to Scarlett and Leon. “Now, it’s been a while since my husband and I retired from the capital and all of its doings, but that doesn’t mean I am entirely ignorant of the latest gossip. To think I would have the young new Vice-Captain of the Solar Knights and his notorious fiancée visit personally.”

Scarlett raised a brow. “Notorious?”

The woman smirked. “Dear, one doesn’t cause a ruckus at the Elysian Proclamation in front of all the nobles in the empire without ruffling a few feathers. If anything, I find it impressive that notorious is the worst word I have to describe you with.”

“...I suppose you are correct,” Scarlett said. She didn’t really have any reliable way of knowing what others said about her. Fortunately, it didn’t matter *that* much, as long as things didn’t go too far.

“Baroness Hartford’s reputation notwithstanding, I have been Vice-Captain for over two years now, my Lady,” Leon said from beside her. “I am unsure whether ‘new’ is an apt way of describing me.”

Scarlett turned to look at him. The man sure knew how to change his tune in front of other nobles, it seemed. Wasn’t he the one that said he didn’t like things like that?

“The previous Vice-Captain served for more than ten years if I’m not mistaken,” Lady Withersworth glanced up at him from her tea. “I was acquainted with her personally, in fact. I think that in honor of her service, the least you can do is accept an inconvenient descriptor or two, don’t you think?”

The polite smile on Leon’s face grew a bit stiffer. “...Of course. I did not mean to make light of Dame Rosanna’s achievements.”

“I’m sure you didn’t,” the woman replied.

Scarlett was uncertain whether Leon noticed the small smile on the woman’s face behind her cup.

“So, what was it you two wanted to discuss with my husband?” Lady Withersworth expression turned more serious, and her focus shifted to Scarlett as she seemed to study her.

“I brought the matter up to your butler, but I am here regarding that which Abelard Withersworth left behind,” Scarlett said.

“He did tell me that, yes. But I am afraid you will have to be a bit more specific as to what exactly you mean by that. Abelard Withersworth was the head of this house generations ago. Knowing everything that he left behind would prove a formidable task.”

She raised her cup to take a sip of the tea. It was lavender, and the taste suggested it had been steeped for almost the perfect amount of time. It was slightly too hot for her taste, though, so she used her pyrokinesis to lower the temperature to a more comfortable level. “From what I have heard, your husband’s family has been enduring adversities caused by his old estate for a long time. It is something that every head of the Withersworth house has had to deal with in their fief for generations, including your husband. I am also aware that conditions that worsened considerably lately in the regions nearest the mansion, and that Lord Withersworth is in the process of locating measures of mitigating these issues.”

Lady Withersworth’s countenance had darkened slightly at her words, but the woman nodded her head slowly. “It would seem my husband’s efforts at stopping news from spreading haven’t gone quite as well as he hoped. Yes, what you say is true.”

“I am here to provide you with aid on the matter,” Scarlett said.

“And how, exactly, would you do that?”

“By removing the root of the issue that is located within the mansion.”

Lady Withersworth gave her a doubting look.

Scarlett gestured towards Leon. “It is not for nothing that I have brought a Solar Knight with me. I can assure you that it is well within my power to handle this task.”

The woman sent Leon an estimating look. “Does this mean that the Imperial Solar Knights are endorsing this endeavour?”

He shook his head. “No, I’m doing this as a favor to the Baroness. I’m not entirely sure what sort of threats we would be facing, but you have my word that I will give my all into taking care of them.”

She studied him for a few seconds more, then turned her eyes back to Scarlett. “The reputation ascribed to members of the Solar Knights is not something I can argue, so who am I to say anything regarding the qualifications of their current Vice-Captain? Unfortunately, however, this is not an issue that can be solved through pure strength. Otherwise it would have been dealt with ages ago.”

“I am aware,” Scarlett said. She placed her teacup on the table and reached for the pouch of holding Leon had next to him. She brought out two items and placed them on the table.

[Abelard’s Doll Mansion Key (1/2) (Unique)]

{Half of a pair of keys leading to Abelard the Doll Maker’s home}

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Lady Withersworth stared at the two keys. She leaned forward, picking one of them up to inspect it closely. After a while, she returned it to the table.

“Henley,” she called out.

The door to the room opened and the butler stepped inside. “Yes, milady?”

“Fetch my husband right this moment.”

The man’s brows furrowed, his mustache wobbling as he seemed to process her words. “But, milady, milord is still in the middle of his work. I’m sure that whatever business Baroness Hartford is here for can wait until a more opportune time.”

“I’m sure she can,” the woman said. “But this is something *I* am asking you to do. This is not something I can verify myself, so that husband of mine will have to get his head out of that stuffy study of his and do it himself. Now, go.” She waved her hand at him.

The butler sent an uncertain look towards Scarlett and Leon before turning around and exiting the room.

Lady Withersworth turned back to them. “If you do not mind me asking, Baroness, where exactly did you find these?”

“That is not something I am at liberty to share,” Scarlett said. “What matters is that I am currently in possession of them, and that I intend to use them in the aid of your house, no?”

The woman gave her a long look, then showed a small smile. “I suppose you’re right. And judging from that perplexed look of his, there also doesn’t appear to be any point in inquiring with your companion for more information.”

Scarlett glanced at Leon, who was looking at the keys with a focused expression, as if he was trying to decipher exactly what they were. "I only had need of him for his strength, so it was unnecessary sharing any other details with him," she said.

The man paused and turned to her.

"Hmm..." Lady Withersworth observed the two of them for a few seconds. "Yes, I know what you mean. Sometimes it's best to leave the men ignorant, isn't it? Leaves less of a mess to clean up and makes things easier for everyone involved."

Leon's frown was met by another smile from the woman.

They waited for a while longer until the door to the room opened again and an older man in a black suit, with thinning silvery hair and a thin mustache, entered. He only looked over at Scarlett and Leon for a second before turning to Lady Withersworth. "What was this about something urgent, woman? I was in the middle of something important, dagnabbit!"

"You're always 'in the middle of something important', you daft old man. Do you think I would have called you if this wasn't more important? Can't you see what this is?" The woman clicked her tongue and motioned at the table. She gave him a disapproving look. "Where are your glasses? You didn't leave them behind, did you? Is that memory of yours already starting to go?"

Lord Withersworth's gaze went to the keys lying on the table. He paused, his eyes narrowing as he took a step closer. "If I needed my glasses you should have said so," he muttered as he stopped in front of the table and picked up the closest of the keys. Holding it in front of his face, he squinted as he scrutinized the object. "Ittar's light..."

"You will have to excuse my fool of a husband," Lady Withersworth said, looking at Scarlett and Leon. "Ever since he retired from his office he's grown more and more lax in his hospitality. A fact I'm saddened to say he appears to relish in."

"Why don't you wait until I'm in the grave before you start besmirching my name in front of me," her husband said, finally placing the key back on the table. His attention turned to Scarlett and Leon, a frown forming on his face. "Baroness Hartford and Sir Leon, was it? You brought these items?"

Scarlett nodded. "That is correct."

"Where did you find them?"

"I have already discussed this with her, dear."

"Does that mean I can't discuss it with her again? The girl still has a mouth, doesn't she?"

"The 'girl' is perfectly able to speak on her own behalf, yes." Scarlett looked up at the older man. "If you wish for me to repeat myself I can tell you that the location from which I procured these items is not something that I can share. That will not change, no matter what opinion you might have on the matter."

“See?” Lady Withersworth said. “Now calm down and listen to what she has to say. She claims to be here to deal with the wretched curse of a mansion your ancestor left us.”

“Deal with it?” Lord Withersworth looked between his wife and Scarlett. “You mean she’s here to help us?”

“I am, yes,” Scarlett said. “To be more precise, I am here to discuss the terms of my assistance.”

The man’s gaze immediately turned more calculative, and he eyed her for a moment. “What is it you ask?”

She leaned forward to pick the two keys up and returned them to the pouch of holding. “First and foremost, I ask that you renounce all claims to any items or artifacts found within the mansion and relinquish the rights to me.”

“That’s not a problem,” he said. “I have no idea what would be in there to begin with. I just want to be rid of the place.”

“I am glad there is no contention there. The second term is related to monetary recompense. In dealing with this matter, I am placing that of my own safety and of my people at risk, and as such, it would only be expected proper compensation is paid.”

The older man narrowed his eyes at her. “If I had the keys I could pay to have it dealt with myself.”

“I have no doubt that you could; however, I have no intention of parting way with them, considering the effort that went into procuring the items.”

“Hmph.” The man rubbed his mustache between two fingers. “Putting it straight and getting to the point, I see. Fitting for a Hartford.”

“You are familiar with my family?”

“I am familiar with all the houses of the empire,” he answered with a huff. “I served His Majesty and the Imperial Court as Lord Marshal for over two decades.”

Scarlett arched an eyebrow. While she had been reading up a lot on the nobility and hierarchal structure of the empire, she wasn’t too familiar with all the different offices of state yet. She knew that the Lord Marshal was a chivalric title and an office that oversaw the tasks and duties related to the Heraldic Council. But other than that the Heraldic Council held jurisdiction over heraldic matters and the granting of coats of arms, she wasn’t too sure about what they actually *did*.

“I see...” She nodded her head slowly, not wanting to sound disinterested in what clearly was something he held great pride in. “Returning to the matter at hand, however, what say you of the proposal?”

“Are the Hartfords in such dire straits that they need to deal with the minor plights of others to make do?” Lord Withersworth asked.

“Not as of now, no. But I would be remiss if I did not take advantage of the opportunities presented before me.”

“Hmph.” He crossed his arms. “How much are you asking for?”

“What value would you personally accredit to the issue?”

The man went quiet for a moment, looking to his wife. The woman seemed to be leaving the discussion to her husband, drinking from her teacup with a refined expression. He turned back to Scarlett. “We can do forty—”

“Ahem.” Porcelain clinked against wood as Lady Withersworth put her cup down on the table. She looked at Scarlett with a smile. “We wouldn’t want to cause offense by extending an offer that doesn’t accurately represent our vested interest in the matter. Would it be okay if we gave you an offer after we have looked over the specifics and determined the effects it would have on our fief?”

Scarlett met the woman’s eyes for a moment, then gave a short nod. “That is acceptable, yes. However, I will be proceeding with the task immediately, so your decision will have to be reached after I am finished.”

Getting paid for this wasn’t her priority, so it didn’t really matter to her whether they paid her now or later. And as a noble house with an image to maintain, she doubted they would outright try to scam her just because she dealt with the job before agreeing to a number.

Besides, to her, it sounded like Lady Withersworth had just stopped her husband from proposing an offer the woman thought was too small. Scarlett was all for giving them more time if it meant she might get more out of it.

“You will be doing it immediately?” Lord Withersworth creased his forehead.

“Correct.” Scarlett turned her gaze to him. “In fact, that brings us on to the third condition. I will be requiring access to your basement.”