

84: A Gentleman's visit

"The Field of Broken Pacts," The Gentleman said, regarding the large painting hanging in front of him. "That is its name. A battle that ended the life of countless thousands, and decided the face of those that remained. It is said that even the very skies tore open that day; it was a time when the hubris of man brought the gods low, yet when the character of man shone brightest all the same."

Scarlett looked past him, studying the unfamiliar painting. It depicted a vast field filled with armies, tiny figures in armors atop a large canvas of interconnected movement, all pressing forward toward the basin of a deep valley.

"I make it a habit to always bring a gift when a guest in another's home." The Gentleman turned to her. He had a surprisingly common appearance, with short black hair and dull brown eyes, and looked much like your average middle-aged man. Exactly *how* your average middle-aged man looked, Scarlett wasn't quite sure, but she knew he fit the description nonetheless. "I hope it pleases you."

Scarlett shot one last look at the painting. "...I was not expecting such a present. It appears masterfully made."

The Gentleman smiled and leaned his cane against the desk. "The artist was famed for putting in all his effort when he worked, and breathing life into his creations. It was quite a sight to behold." He sat down on his side of the desk and gestured towards the seat across from him.

Scarlett watched him wordlessly for a moment, then walked over and sat down in the chair. Despite this being her office, this arrangement somehow felt natural.

"I am often referred to as The Gentleman," the man said. "But you already knew that. Nevertheless, an introduction is always in order."

Scarlett placed her hands on the table and met his eyes. "I am Baroness Scarlett Hartford. I have heard much about you."

"I am sure you have." The Gentleman gave a gentle nod. "I hope you do not mind the sudden visit. I happened to be in the vicinity, and there was no set date on the invite."

"I do not mind, no. Though I will admit that I did not expect you to visit so soon."

"It is not often that someone extends an invitation to me these days," he said. "I felt I had to repay the courtesy."

The black-furred cat on the desk next to them let out a long meow.

"Oh my, you're right." The Gentleman looked down at the cat, then up at Scarlett. "You will have to excuse my rudeness. I almost forgot to introduce my companion here. This is Her Royal Highness Tazu'Ivhra D'lhemra Azidazcha Ma'hri Khinzanda, Sovereign of the Endless Jungles of Najjera, the Realm of Ji'Var, the Eternal Dominion of Za'gh, the Sands of Baajirr, and all the sunbathed lands between."

The cat meowed again.

“Ah, and it appears she has approved of the window ledge outside. She will extend you the honor of having it added to her domain for all hours of the day it’s graced by the sun.”

Scarlett stared down at the cat as it seemed to straighten its back, preening with pridefulness. “...How very magnanimous of you, Your Highness. It is a pleasure making your acquaintance.”

The cat meowed once more.

“You can call her Empress.”

“...I see. Thank you, Empress, for this honor.”

Empress gave her a long look, then laid down on the desk and began licking its paw.

“Now then,” The Gentleman said, and Scarlett looked up to him. “With the introductions concluded, shall we continue onto other matters?”

“Very well.”

“You were the one to invite me, so I can only assume you had something in particular you wished to discuss. The fellows who contacted me were rather suspicious, but I am not one to judge others’ practices.”

“I hope they did not affront. I had no other methods of approaching you.” Scarlett eyed the man for a moment. “...I did confer with the Vice-dean of Elystead Tower, in the hopes that they could afford me their aid on the subject, but mentioning your name only seemed to aggravate the man, and they refused my request.”

“Oh, you tried asking them first?” The Gentleman’s brows rose as he showed a small smile. “No, I suppose the idea wouldn’t entuse them much.”

“May I ask why that is?” Scarlett asked. “If you do not mind.”

He brought his hand up to his chin, eyes drifting over the room. “It was some years ago now, when certain members of that tower held an interest in some matters related to me. Unfortunately, they were not entirely familiar with the meaning of courtesy at the time, and their interest grew to be somewhat of an annoyance to me. If I do not recall incorrectly, I ended up giving them a rather brusque admonishment, and I do believe Rowley was among their numbers. I imagine the situation would have to be rather dire for them to try and contact me again.”

“I...see.”

So that was the reason behind Rowley’s reaction? She hadn’t heard of anything like it in the game, but that didn’t mean much. And the questline for contacting The Gentleman had been a pretty unique situation, so it wasn’t completely unreasonable that Rowley would have felt

forced to act despite previous experiences. Still, even though she didn't know the specifics of what a 'brusque admonishment' was, she felt like Rowley's actions had been an overreaction.

Empress let out a loud meow, and The Gentleman's brow creased as he looked down at the cat. "Mind your manners, Empress. We're guests here." He turned to Scarlett. "You will have to excuse her words. She hasn't had her milk this morning."

Scarlett eyed the dark-furred cat. Empress looked back at her with those large purple eyes. After a moment, Scarlett looked back at The Gentleman. "Would you open the second drawer on your left?"

The Gentleman arched an eyebrow at her, then opened the drawer and pulled out the gold bell inside it. Scarlett held out her hand, and he gave it to her. She rang it, and the sound echoed out over the room. She then waited quietly for a while, The Gentleman's and Empress' gaze fixed on her curiously.

Eventually, the office door opened up and Molly stepped inside. "You called for me, my Lad—"

The woman stopped, eyes wide open as she stared at them. Scarlett looked back at her. "You knew the Kindle spell, did you not?"

Molly blinked a few times, then her focus turned to Scarlett. "Y-Yes, my Lady."

"Good. Then bring a bowl of the finest milk we have from the kitchen. Ensure that it is of a suitable temperature as well, and make haste."

The servant gave her a confused look, glancing at the cat on the table. "...As you wish, my Lady," she eventually said and left the office.

Scarlett turned back to Empress and The Gentleman. The cat was giving her what seemed like a look of acknowledgment.

"How hospitable of you," The Gentleman said.

"You are my guests. It is only right that I take your wants and needs into consideration," Scarlett said. "Is there perhaps any refreshments you want as well?"

He held up his left hand. "I am quite alright, thank you."

Scarlett gave a low nod. "Then let us continue on. There are two topics I wished to discuss."

"Ah, yes. Let us hear it. Empress over here believed you were going to demand my backing in some temerarious pursuit or other, though I myself found that somewhat unlikely."

Empress let out a harsh meow and stared back at The Gentleman.

"I only say it as it is, my dear. There is nothing wrong with changing one's opinion after meeting a person."

The cat turned away from him with what Scarlett could have sworn was an indignant expression.

Scarlett watched the two for a moment, then cleared her throat. "I presume you are aware that Beld Thylelion will open soon?"

"I am," The Gentleman replied shortly. There was no look of surprise, or anything like that, at the fact that Scarlett knew of it. "There are bound to be many who are interested in what is hidden there. I presume the same goes for you. But it would be hard for you to accomplish much there, with the other players that will be involved."

"That is true," Scarlett admitted.

"Were you hoping I would help you gain an edge over the others when it opens?" He spoke in exactly the same cordial tone as before, but somehow it caused the hairs on Scarlett's neck to rise.

"...Yes, but not in the manner which you might think." Scarlett was in no position to make major demands of him. He would never help her with something like beating the others to begin with, even if he could. "What I want your help with is something much simpler. I only want you to deliver a single article of mine, that is all. There would be no need for you to personally involve yourself in anything further than that."

He seemed to consider her, his hand touching the head of the cane resting against the desk next to him. "Whether or not that is simple depends on the article, does it not? I'm interested in what it is. May I see it?"

"Unfortunately, I do not have it at the moment," she said. "When I acquire it, I will provide the item to you immediately."

The Gentleman slowly nodded along. "Understandable. Though I will refrain from promising anything until I have seen it with my own eyes, what is it you would offer me for this trade?"

"That will depend." Scarlett met his gaze. "What is it you wish for in return in order to agree to this arrangement?"

Even with all of her game knowledge, she had no idea what she could use to convince him. This was the first time she'd been in a situation like this in this world. But none of the information she had would work as payment for him, as far as she knew, and there were no items she had that would interest him. This was one of the major holes in her plan, and she was solely relying on the possibility that there would be something he wanted despite that. The deal with the Hallowed Cabal had been a gamble as well, but there she had at least been aware of all the cards in the opponent's deck. Here, it wasn't much different from going in blind.

The Gentleman looked her over for several seconds. Finally, he reached up and took off his top hat, placing it on the desk in front of him. "A favor," he said.

"A...favor?" Scarlett asked.

“As you said, the request itself is relatively simple. A favor will be enough for payment, if I judge the request acceptable. Sometime in the future, I might ask you to repay this favor, and if so, I would like for you to uphold your end.” He smiled. “There is no need to worry. I doubt I will ask for anything unreasonable, if that is what you’re thinking.”

Scarlett studied him for a moment. Truth was, she had little choice in the matter. Not knowing exactly what his request would be made her a bit disconcerted, but it wasn’t as if she was making a pact with a demon again. And she had to get his help here, no matter what.

“I believe this is a satisfactory arrangement,” she said. “If a favor is required for your aid in this matter, then I will swear to carry out my word.”

A knock sounded out at the door as Molly returned, pushing in a serving cart with a single bowl on it. The woman quietly moved up next to Scarlett, stopping for a moment before placing the bowl on the desk in front of Empress, a befuddled look on her face. The cat gave the bowl of milk one look and let out a long meow at Molly, then moved over to it and happily started licking.

The servant stared on until Scarlett waved her away. Empress let out another meow after Molly had left the room.

“Oh? Is it that good?” The Gentleman asked, looking down at his feline companion. “Then perhaps I should leave you here, so that you can keep enjoying their milk.”

Empress hissed back at him, before returning to its milk.

The Gentleman chuckled, turning his attention back to Scarlett. “If we have reached an accord, shall we move on? I believe you said there were two points to discuss, yes?”

“That is correct.” Scarlett folded her hands. “I will be blunt. I wish to enter Freymeadow.”

“Ah.” He studied her. “Now I see.”

Freymeadow was a small village related to a certain questline in the game, and it wasn’t actually too far away from Freybrook. But entering it was a completely different matter. There was a set way of doing it, requiring a specific item that could only be found in a side-room in a dungeon that was locked behind several other questlines, but reaching that point would take a long time even with Scarlett’s knowledge. Those questlines were also a tad too high-level for Scarlett and her party. With Garside’s help, they might have been able to clear some of them, but it would still take far too long. That’s why she’d thought of just seeing if she couldn’t sideline all of that and just ask The Gentleman for help. If there was anyone who could help in this situation, it was him.

The man in question tapped his finger against the top of his hat. “I suspect I know what it is you want me to deliver. It will not be an issue.”

“Truly?” Scarlett asked.

“Indeed.” He smiled. “That is quite clever of you, Baroness. It will most likely work, as well. Although I cannot say I envy the path you will have to take.”

His eyes seemed to pass over Scarlett as he gazed at the wall behind her with a thoughtful expression. Then he let out a short laugh. “How serendipitous. It makes one wonder...” he trailed off, smile still on his face, and caressed Empress’ back with his hand. “Dear, could you go and fetch it for us?”

The cat turned away from its meal to shoot him a dirty look.

“Now, now. Don’t be like that,” he chided his companion. “The milk will still be here when you return. And I’m sure the Baroness here won’t mind heating it up again if it were to turn cold.”

Empress meowed.

“That’s no way for a lady to speak. Especially when our host has been so gracious.”

The cat glanced at Scarlett, then back at The Gentleman. After a moment, it strode over to the edge of the desk and leaped down onto the floorboards in a single, graceful motion. Scarlett watched on as Empress crossed the room towards the door, which silently opened itself before the cat, and disappeared out into the hallway.

“She can be quite a feisty one,” The Gentleman’s voice sounded out behind her.

Scarlett turned back to him. “It would appear so.”

A silence fell upon the room as the two of them looked each other over.

Scarlett’s mouth felt dry for some reason. “Would a favor suffice as payment for this as well?” she asked.

The Gentleman gently shook his head. “There is no need for any reimbursement this time.”

She blinked. “Are you certain?”

What, so she was getting this for free?

“I believe in fair deals,” he said. “And it would be unfair for me to demand payment for this. I am only assuring that an item is returned to its rightful owner. That is hardly deserving of compensation, wouldn’t you say?”

Scarlett couldn’t help the frown that grew on her face. “I am afraid I do not quite understand.”

The Gentleman massaged his chin. “No, I suppose you would not. Let us put it like this instead.” He held up his finger. “When your business in Freymeadow is concluded, give the item to the person you meet at the end there. That will work, as well. You could even consider this the payment, if you so wish.”

“And that would suffice?”

“That would be more than enough.”

“Very well,” Scarlett said. That much shouldn’t be too hard.

“I am glad we could reach an accord.” The Gentleman nodded. “I am curious to see where you will bring things in the future. I’m sure there will be lots of interesting events unfolding circling you.”

Scarlett stilled. “...You appear to know a lot about me.”

“Quite the opposite, in fact. I know frighteningly little about you. But that alone tells me much.”

She stared at him. What did he discern from that? Might he actually have information about her situation?

“Perhaps, do you—”

“Well, let us not dwell on those matters,” he stopped her before she could continue. “I could not help but notice the mess outside.” He gestured with his hand towards the right wall, though there was no window to the courtyard. “Are you perhaps renovating?”

Scarlett paused as she reined back the annoyance that rose at his interruption. She wasn’t going to tell The Gentleman, of all people, off. He had been completely aware he was interrupting her. If he wouldn’t tell her more, there was nothing she could do about it. “We had an unfortunate encounter with some contentious individuals last night. The situation was resolved. Regrettably, not all damage to the estate could be prevented.”

“That is a shame,” The Gentleman said, looking around the office. “This is a beautiful home you have here.”

“Thank you.”

“I can tell it has seen many owners throughout its life. I am sure you won’t be the last.”

“One can only hope.”

The Gentleman let out a calm chuckle. “Yes, hope is always good to have.”

Scarlett observed him for a moment, then started as Empress suddenly jumped up on the desk beside her, the cat now holding something in its mouth. Scarlett hadn’t even heard the door open.

“Thank you dear,” The Gentleman said to his companion as Empress placed down an item on the desk and went back to the bowl of milk.

Scarlett looked down at the object. It was an old hairpin made of silver, with several rubies affixed to its head, where the metal had been twisted in the shape of a leaf. There appeared to have once been letters carved onto its side, but those had long since faded away. Even the silver itself clearly hadn’t escaped the passage of time, marred on several spots by a dark, orangy tin.

[Forgotten Hairpin (Unique)]

{This hairpin once belonged to a noble young lady, both long since buried by the sands of time}

Scarlett carefully picked it up, examining the hairpin in her hand. In the game you found a bracelet. But considering The Gentleman was the one who gave it to her, this would most likely work just as well. It did make her wonder where Empress had gone to get this, though. She didn't know the limits of the strange cat, but even The Gentleman would probably have had to spend a bit more than that if it was the bracelet he'd gone for instead.

The Gentleman put his hand into his black suit jacket, pulling out a gray pocket watch. "I think that is about all the time I have for today," he said and picked up his top hat, placing it on his head. He shot Scarlett a smile. "It has been quite a pleasure meeting you, Baroness. I'll make sure to visit and pick up that item of yours when I have time, so don't worry about contacting me."

"Very well. It has been a pleasure meeting you as well," Scarlett said.

As The Gentleman stood from his chair, Empress turned back to him and let out a short meow.

"Now, now, dear. Let's not bother the Baroness any further. I'm sure we can find something for you later."

The cat's response was an annoyed flick of the head as it walked up to the edge of the desk and leaped down on the floorboards.

"Thank you, dear." The Gentleman looked back at Scarlett, tipping his hat. "Till next time, my lady."

"Farewell," she said.

With that, The Gentleman picked up his cane and rounded the desk, moving towards the room's exit along with Empress. Scarlett remained in her seat as the door opened and closed behind her, staring at the large painting that now hung across the back wall of her office.

Unlike a lot of other things she had encountered lately, that had gone surprisingly well.