

## 102: Dealing with a knight

Scarlett moved through the mansion's hallways in the direction of the guest parlor.

Of all people, she hadn't been expecting Leon to suddenly show up like this. It'd been almost two months since they last met, so she thought he wouldn't bother with her anymore now that talks of the annulment were in progress. That's the impression she'd gotten through interacting with him, at least. It was clear he wasn't a fan of the original Scarlett.

Not to mention how he hadn't even cared about sending word before his visit. Wasn't that common practice around here, most of the time?

Maybe it wasn't. There were a lot of people that visited her unannounced, actually.

She took a moment to smooth her clothes as she arrived before the parlor, then opened the doors. Entering the room, she saw Leon sitting on one of the couches situated at the center. The dark-haired man was dressed in the same black uniform she had seen him wear during the wedding back in Ambercrest, with gold trimmings running along the chest and collar. Or it could just have been a similar uniform. This one did look a bit more casual, missing the medals and a couple of other minor details.

"Scarlett," he said, turning his head towards her.

"Sir Leon." She walked over to take a seat opposite him. "I was not expecting you to pay me a visit. To what do I owe the pleasure? Does the vice-captain of an imperial knight order not have more important matters to tend to in the capital?"

The man examined her for a couple of seconds. "We'll be moving out on an important mission soon. It's expected to take some time, so the captain recommended we take care of any business we have left before then."

"I see. And I presume this 'business' involves me or my household," Scarlett said. "Was there a reason you refrained from informing me of your visit beforehand, however?"

She noticed a small wince on his part. "...I only have a few days, and there was a fellow member of the order who already had passage here to Freybrook. I didn't have the time to wait just to send you a letter in advance."

"Is that so?" She eyed him for a moment. "And what, exactly, is it that you are here for? Could it be related to the reason behind your visit to my mansion in Elystead last month? My sister informed me she met with you at the time."

"You know why I'm here."

"I can surmise that it is related to the voiding of our betrothal, but I will not claim to know the specifics. Is that truly something that warrants inconveniencing yourself merely to come here?"

“You...” Leon narrowed his eyes, then closed them and sighed. “What is it you want, Scarlett?”

She cocked her head to the side. “There are a great number of things that I wish for, although I do not think that is what you are asking. You will have to be more specific.”

“You can quit acting ignorant. I don’t feel like playing your mind games.” He pressed a hand against his forehead. “You’re already aware my family wants to end the engagement, but that they’ll never be the ones to initiate it. That doesn’t mean they won’t try to make things harder for you in other ways, however. We both know this betrothal isn’t going anywhere now, and I don’t want to be caught in the barrage between you and my family, so that’s why I’m here. I’m just going to ask: what do you want from me to end things cleanly?”

Scarlett stared at him.

She’d been under the belief that his family was already in the process of getting the engagement annulled. They hadn’t said so outright in the letter they sent previously, but it seemed like the reasonable conclusion. She had just been waiting for more news on that front, honestly.

From the sounds of it, though, it seemed like ending the engagement required her agreement as well? Or perhaps being the party that initiated the annulment was frowned upon in this case, for some reason? Could the original have made some sort of contract with the Delmons that they didn’t want to break?

Whatever the case was, it didn’t seem Evelyne was aware of it, judging from their earlier talks. She would have to speak with the woman about it later just to make sure, though.

“To clarify,” she said. “You have come here hoping to convince me to be the one to break the engagement, rather than your family?”

She assumed that, if she *didn’t* break it, there was a good chance the Delmons would continue to be on her back about it. Like how Evelyne had told her they stopped their business with their barony over in Steepmond and blocked their other routes in the city.

“Yes.” Leon nodded.

Scarlett scowled. “I would have expected more from the family of a marquis. If they are displeased with the current arrangement, then they should move to resolve it themselves. I did not expect for them to hide away from the situation in this manner.”

Whatever deal they had with the original, they still were a freaking marquise. It was definitely within their power to have the engagement annulled, even if there were some consequences. And considering they had agreed to things to begin with, one would think they should be ready to deal with those consequences.

“They don’t know I’m here,” Leon said. He didn’t look perturbed at all at how she spoke of his family.

“I would argue that makes it worse.”

He just shook his head. “So, what do you want, Scarlett? As I said, I don’t care about the politicking between you and my family. I’ve earned enough as a member of the Solar Knights to pay you, if that’s what you want. If it’s something else, then tell me what and I’ll consider it. I won’t allow anything illegal or that might hurt the citizens of the empire, though.”

She schooled her expression, putting the matter of what she was starting to suspect was a family of assholes—Leon excluded, for now—at the back of her mind. “I am not certain what I would want from you. It is not a topic I have paid much thought to.”

“I’m not convinced this wasn’t part of your plan from the beginning,” Leon said with a disbelieving expression. “Regardless, neither you nor I stand to gain anything from this engagement anymore. There’s no point in having it continue.”

Scarlett tapped her finger against the armrest next to her as she thought over his words. She was very curious about exactly what the original had done in the past to make this guy so paranoid around her.

“That may be,” she said after a while. “However, I will still have to give the matter more thought. It is not something one decides on the spur of the moment, after all.” She turned her eyes towards the room’s exit. “I will also have to confer with my sister. For now, I ask that you return at a later date.”

“...I won’t be staying in Freybrook for long. I can return tomorrow, at the latest.”

“I am afraid I will not be available tomorrow. I will be leaving early in the morning for other affairs.”

Leon’s forehead creased. “When are you free, then?”

“Perhaps in a few days. Although that will depend.”

Well, she already knew when she would return, but what her schedule would look like from there wasn’t set in stone. And she didn’t exactly feel pressured to deal with this immediately. Not before she knew the specifics of the situation, and what the arrangement with the Delmons actually was.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“Autumnwell.”

“What are you doing in Autumnwell?”

Scarlett fixed her gaze on him. “We may currently be in an engagement,” she said, “but do not presume that to mean I hold the obligation to share all of my affairs with. My business in Autumnwell is mine alone.”

The city was where the next dungeon she wanted to clear was. Abelard’s Doll Mansion.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t guaranteed that she would be clearing the place. Neither Kat nor Adalicia were available at the moment, and Garside was still recovering. Bringing the

Countess wasn't exactly an option, either, so clearing the whole dungeon would probably be too difficult with Scarlett's current party.

Still, she didn't want to delay doing it too much. That's why she had booked passage to Autumnwell anyway, just in case any of the people that could help were to become available. If she didn't find anyone—as was appearing to be the case—she was planning on visiting the Shields Guild there to see if there were any strong Shielders free that she could hire for the time being. If there wasn't, she'd been thinking of just spending the time clearing some of the other dungeons in the area and returning at a later date.

Leon glared at her. "Then why—" He paused, then he shook his head with another long sigh. "...Sure. Have it your way, Scarlett. I grew tired of all this political maneuvering years ago. Just tell me if it's money or something else that you want."

She frowned. Hadn't she *just* told him she would have to think about it? Did he believe she was being purposefully circumlocutory? She understood he didn't have much time, but she wasn't going to rush things just because of that, no matter how much he annoyed her about it. He would just have to deal with it. He was strong enough to—

She paused, an idea coming to her.

...Actually, if he was going to hound her like this, then who was she to turn away his efforts? He was one of the strongest knights in the empire, after all. Her ties to the man weren't going to exist for much longer, so why not make good use of him while she could?

She studied him closely for a moment. He seemed to be waiting for her reply.

"You are curious what it is you can do to convince me, yes? While I cannot give a full answer yet, there is something you could provide aid with that might affect my view on the matter somewhat." The tips of her mouth rose in a small smile. "It is something that the skill set of a Solar Knight would be especially suitable for."

Leon eyed her. "And what's that?"

"Before that, I would have to ask whether it is possible for you to delay your other plans and join me in Autumnwell for one or two days."

"Join you?" He gave her a wary look. "...Depends on what it is."

"I will interpret that as a yes, then. If so, I can inform you that I am traveling to Autumnwell in order to help fulfill the request of an acquaintance in the region. The request itself involves the exorcising of a certain estate, and it is a task where I believe your aid would help to greatly expedite matters."

"Exorcising?"

"That is what I said, yes."

"...You're talking about removing ghosts or undead from a location?"

“Mostly revenants, to be precise. As well as some specter variants, though I do not expect those to pose much danger to me.”

Leon furrowed his brow. “Since when have you known anything about things like that? Or cared, for that matter.”

“Since it became relevant for me to do so.” Scarlett placed her hands on her lap as she met his eyes. “So, what is your answer? Will you lend your aid with this?”

He seemed to consider it for a moment. “You said you’re leaving tomorrow?”

“That is correct.”

“And you’ll agree to ending the engagement yourself?”

“I did not say it would be enough to make me agree to that, no. However, I will take it into consideration when deliberating the matter.”

“That doesn’t mean anything.”

“On the contrary, it holds quite a lot of meaning,” she said. “I do not take my word lightly when I see fit to give it. I would recommend you seize this opportunity while it is still available to you. Know that the only thing you will save me is time, which I now have plenty of. For someone of your ability, I believe this is a rather generous offer.”

He observed her for a few seconds, seemingly mulling her words over. “Tell me more precisely what’s involved with this job.”

Scarlett smiled. This would make things easier.