

104: Provoking accommodations

The city of Autumnwell was situated at the end of one of the distributaries that fed into the main body of the Three Streams River, northwest of Elystead and east of Windgrove. The settlement was nestled in a natural canyon, surrounded on both sides by low, verdant cliffs covered in fields and small forests. A large fort overlooked the city from atop a tall hill to the north, acting as a natural barrier of sorts. This meant that, unlike many of the empire's other cities, Autumnwell wasn't enclosed by walls built by previous generations to shield them from the dangers outside.

As for the city itself, there remained plenty of room in the canyon for it to expand. The ground held a gentle incline from the harbor to the south towards the hill to the north, with lots of open space surrounding the inhabited sections filled with smaller pastures and woodlands.

Scarlett and the others were afforded a magnificent view of it all as the buildings sprawled out before them and their carriage left the harbor area where the Kilnstone was, traveling towards the heart of the city. Most of the structures here were made of brick, with additions of wood here and there, though some of the homes closer to the edge of the city had more simple wattle and daub structures.

"Where are we heading now?" Leon asked after they veered off one of the more well-traveled thoroughfares onto a long road that carried off eastwards.

Scarlett turned her attention from the window she'd been looking out of, watching the man for a second. "First, we will be visiting members of the local nobility."

"The acquaintances you spoke of yesterday?"

She nodded. "That is correct."

"Who are they?"

"Are you familiar with the Withersworths?"

His eyebrows rose. "Lord Withersworth was the previous Lord Marshal, if I'm not mistaken. I've also heard tell that Lady Withersworth was rather influential among the nobles of the capital."

"Lord Withersworth holds a barony northwest of Autumnwell, which just so happens to be where our final destination is. Before journeying there, however, we will have to speak with him regarding the matters related to this venture."

"They retired from high society years ago, didn't they?" Leon eyed her closely. "How do you know them?"

"I suppose that, technically, I do not." Scarlett returned her gaze back out the window. "But that is hardly relevant for today's proceedings."

“What?”

She stayed silent after that, and after realizing the conversation wouldn't be going much further than that, Leon also remained quiet. It wasn't long before another discussion was sparked among the others inhabitants of the carriage cabin, however, which the knight occasionally chimed in on.

As they entered the more affluent parts of the city, their transport making its way towards a large mansion with a modest garden surrounding it, Scarlett began preparing herself mentally. Her eyes passed over the others, listening in on their conversation that had somehow turned into a bet on what they would be doing for this excursion.

“It's a dragon, I'm telling you,” Rosa announced, a confident look on the woman's face. “We have three fair maidens and a knight, so it's a must by this point.”

Opposite her, Allyssa sent an uncertain glance at Leon. “I don't think we're going to fight a dragon...”

“We would not be able to survive against anything but the youngest of dragons,” Shin said, only momentarily looking up from a book he had been reading for much of the trip. “And I have heard nothing of a dragon being sighted anywhere in the empire for over a year.”

“Of course you haven't. If you were a giant, fire-breathing lizard living for millennia, would *you* like it if a rabble of puny humans came around to your lair and poked their little spears into your belly just because you kidnapped a maiden or two?” Rosa held up a finger to her lips. “They do it on the hush-hush, clearly.”

“I don't think those tales about them kidnapping maidens are true,” Allyssa said.

Rosa gave a sage-like nod. “That's what they want you to think.”

“Dragons do whatever they want, whenever they want,” Fynn declared from the side.

Allyssa gave him a long look, as if trying to determine whether his words were supporting Rosa's claims or refuting them. Eventually, the girl shook her head. “Whatever. I'm telling you, it's not dragons. I've been preparing a bunch of Philters of Dawnlight and Brews of Fireworks lately. It has to be undead of some kind.”

“Hmm.” Rosa knitted her forehead. “I see... Undead dragons. Does that mean they prefer undead maidens, as well? A unique choice, for sure, but who am I to knock on people's tastes...”

Leon seemed to be watching this with a look of consternation, seemingly unsure of what to say of the conversation.

Shaking her head at it all, Scarlett turned her eyes back to the gate in front of the estate that they were approaching. She hadn't told the others where they were going this time because she hadn't been certain they *would* be going until the day before. Still, she'd had Allyssa prepare some of the relevant concoctions, in addition to more health and mana potions than she usually had the young Shielder make.

A footman at the front of the estate's gates walked up to their carriage before it stopped. He wore a simple brown uniform, the emblem of a white pine emblazoned on the chest, and glanced briefly at the coachman before shifting his eyes towards Scarlett through the window. "May I ask who you are, my Lady?"

"I am Baroness Scarlett Hartford, Lady of Stagmond Keep."

The man's forehead creased at that. "Do you have business here?"

"I am here to meet with Lord Withersworth."

He studied her for a moment, looking back towards the mansion behind him. "Sorry to say, but I don't think he's available right now."

Scarlett frowned. She'd been unsure whether or not they would be expected, but she had sent a message about her potential visit beforehand. There hadn't been a reply, which she supposed was an answer in and of itself.

Eyeing him for a while longer, she then turned to Leon, sitting opposite her. "Inform your masters that Vice-Captain Leon Delmon of the Imperial Solar Knights is here to pay a visit as well."

The footman's eyes widened. Even if he wouldn't necessarily recognize Leon's name, the order of the Solar Knights was famous enough. The man appeared to hesitate for another moment, however, glancing at the side of Leon's face through the window before eventually clearing his throat. "Please wait here for a bit, my Lady. I'll go and see if the Lord and Lady are free."

He walked back to the gate, opening a small side door next to it before disappearing over to the mansion beyond.

"You're using me to get inside?" Leon asked, a furrow on his brow.

"Is there a reason I should not? You are here alongside with me, and I presume you will be joining in on my meeting with Lord Withersworth or his wife."

He narrowed his eyes at her, but stayed quiet. Soon, the footman returned and opened the large metal gates for them. "The head butler will receive you in the foyer, my Lady. You can park the carriage in the courtyard."

They rode past the gates and into the estate, stopping at the side of a small, circular courtyard surrounded by low hedges. Scarlett exited onto the gravel footpath leading up to the mansion along with the others and started walking up to the doors. An older woman in servants' clothing stood there to open them for her. Inside, a gentleman in a neat brown uniform with wavy, flaxen-blond hair and a thick, well-trimmed mustache greeted them.

"Baroness Hartford, I presume?" The man said in a dapper manner, sending a watchful look across Scarlett and her company. "My word, there are quite a lot of you. The mansion will be practically overrun with visitors at this rate."

She studied him for a moment. This guy... She definitely remembered him from the game.

“Yes, I am Baroness Hartford. These are my retainers, and this is my fiance, Sir Leon Delmon, Vice-Captain of the Imperial Solar Knights. We have come to meet with your Lord and Lady.”

The butler’s gaze stayed on Leon for a few seconds, seemingly examining the knight’s black-and-gold uniform. “Yes... I heard as much. I do apologise if I came across as impertinent just now, and I hope you’ll forgive my unabating boldness, but I assume the Baroness has arrived without arranging a meeting with milord or milady in advance? I certainly do not recall seeing any correspondence confirming any conclave of the sorts lately, and I dare say there isn’t much in this household that goes past me.”

“Is that so?” Scarlett showed a cold smile. “No, I suppose there was no such arrangement, that is true. But if you are indeed informed of what communications pass through this household, you should be aware that I have sent several letters in the past week trying to arrange exactly that. Unless those letters were ignored, for some reason.”

The butler paused. His eyes met hers for a moment before shifting away. “Hmm, yes, perhaps... After further reflection, there might indeed have been something of the sort arriving at the estate these last few days. However, it was ever so unfortunate that neither milord nor milady had the time to reciprocate your requests. I, the dutiful and steadfast butler that I am, chose to delay the response until a later juncture more favorable for all parties. I was certain that an educated and respectable such as the Baroness would understand this particular quandary of mine, but as you appear to have found yourself here in this mansion in spite of that, I can only surmise that there has been some confusion on the end of the Hartford household.”

“There was nothing of the sort,” Scarlett said. “I simply judged that Lord Withersworth and his wife appeared uninformed of the offer I had prepared for them, and the benefits they stood to receive from associating with me on this occasion. As such, I decided it would be best for both parties if I expedited matters by visiting in person.”

The man clasped both hands behind his back. “You have my unending gratitude for so generously taking milord’s and milady’s interest into consideration; however, I’m afraid I can’t accommodate you with the opportunity to have a word with either of them at this precise moment. Being perversicacious on the matter will not help whatsoever, my Lady. Milord is currently in his study dealing with affairs of vital importance, and milady left early in the morning in pursuit of business and has yet to return.”

“That will not be an issue.” Scarlett looked back at the others. “We will wait here until either of them is available.”

“Pardon, my Lady?”

“We are not lacking in time, so if waiting is all that we must do, then we will do so.” She turned back to the butler and gestured towards Leon. “While Sir Leon may be my betrothed, I would not have brought along an imperial knight today if my business with Lord Withersworth did not warrant it. We will wait for as long as it takes.”

The butler looked at Leon, a somewhat miffed expression on his face. "...Of course, you're all to right, my Lady. I'm ashamed not to have taken this into consideration. Having heard this, I wouldn't dare question the rationale behind your unheralded visit. I will...*inquire* into when milord is next available. In the meantime, would you like me to guide you to the drawing room? I'm sure that a party as well-travelled as yours appear to be would have no problem drifting in that general direction by yourselves should you deem it fit to do so, but I would be remiss not to offer the hospitality one such as yourself deserves."

"That will do perfectly." Scarlett stepped in line behind the man as he began leading them down one of the decorated hallways in the foyer.

"What affairs did you say Lord Withersworth was currently preoccupied with?" she asked after a while.

"I did not say, my Lady," he replied. "I gather that it pertains to a certain plot of land that has proved rather troublesome for milord's domain and the denizens within it lately, and I am sure he is working endlessly to ensure everyone's peace of mind on the matter. A most noble task, if I do say so myself."

"Troublesome in what manner?"

"For that, you would have to speak with the Lord himself. I am not privy to the specifics of milord's ventures, and on the remote possibility that I were, it would, of course, not be something that I could share so freely with outsiders, even if they were to be what I'm sure are *eminently* esteemed members of our empire's vaunted nobility."

The butler looked back at her, and Scarlett could swear he was waiting for a reaction on her end. His mustache moved in ever-so-slight disappointment as she kept her composure, and he turned his attention forward again. "Unless I'm quite mistaken, in which case I apologize profusely, as a noble lady you would be far more well-equipped to gauge the type of complications that are wont to occur when managing one's people and lands than a far-removed house butler. Otherwise, that would be a truly tragic affair. Truly."

Scarlett held back an annoyed sigh. "Yes, that would be tragic, would it not? Fortunately, that is not the case. I have a fair notion of what it is that might be troubling Lord Withersworth."

There was no point in getting into an argument with the butler here just because he was an asshole. She expected him to be when she chose to go here. Though she *did* wonder why anyone would ever hire this guy. It just felt like asking for trouble when you were dealing with a class of people as conservative and self-important as nobles.

"I'm sure that you do, my Lady," the man said. When they neared the end of a hallway, he looked back at her again. "I will have to inform milord about your visit. What do you want me to state as the reason for your stay?"

"I suspect it is related to the very problems you spoke of earlier," she answered. "But as not to cause confusion, you may inform the lord that I am here regarding what Abelard Withersworth left behind."

The butler gestured his hand towards one of the doors. "I am sure milord will be overjoyed at the news," he said in a dry tone as he opened the door for her.

They were led into a wide room with two leather couches placed in front of an adorned fireplace. The pelt of some unknown beast covered the floor between the couches. Lining the walls were several bookcases, and hanging low from the center of the room was a bronze chandelier with faint, magical candles on it that lit up the room. It all had a very rustic feel to it.

"Feel free to do whatever you may so wish while you wait here," the butler said. "I only ask that you avoid frolicking, excessive revelry, inappropriate dalliances, or other behavior deemed uncouth by civilized people." He paused to look at the klert that Rosa had brought along with her. "Also, no music."

He performed a curt bow before leaving the room and closing the door behind him.

"No inappropriate dalliances...?" Allyssa muttered, staring back at the door.

"It comes from a place of jealousy, I'm sure," Rosa said, shaking her head forlornly. "It must be hard, living life when while using words like 'pervicacious' so naturally."

"What does that even mean?"

"Who knows?" Rosa smiled. "I'm not stubborn enough to try and find out."

The bard traipsed over to one of the couches and sat down with a low thud. She immediately placed her instrument on her lap and started cranking the wheel at its bottom. A soft tune filled the room, one that fit well with the atmosphere. It almost felt like they were in a cabin out in the woods. All that was missing was the live fire.

Scarlett walked over to sit down next to Rosa. She looked up as Leon sat down on the couch opposite her, giving her an intense look.

"Is there something you wish to say?" she asked.

"Other than how you breached a dozen protocols just now and practically forced your way into a lord's home by using my name?" He stared at her. "What in Ittar's name are you up to, Scarlett?"

"Wait, how was Scarlett the one breaching protocol?" Allyssa asked, sitting down on the same couch as Leon. Behind her, Shin had started looking through one of the bookshelves, and Fynn was walking around the room doing who-knows-what as he stared at the walls. "Wasn't the butler the rude one?"

"That's true," Leon said. "But there are certain customs to uphold among nobility. Scarlett showing up without an invitation in a context like this would be considered unacceptable by most in high society."

"He is not wrong." Scarlett nodded her head. "Just like when a certain person did so at my home, it is generally not considered proper to arrive unannounced."

Even though people kept doing it all the time at her place. Although she supposed people like Livvi and Adalicia had decent enough reasons for their visits, and some of the others weren't strictly 'upstanding' citizens of the empire to begin with.

Leon frowned at her. "There's a difference between the two situations, and you know it. We're already familiar with each other, for one, and only you are the head of a house. But a Baroness visiting another Baron like this is an entirely different thing. Frankly, I never thought I would see you of all people do something like this."

"Then you may consider yourself fortunate," she said. "You have witnessed something you previously thought inconceivable."

"I'm not sure it's something I *wanted* to see. If people start talking about this, it'll be my name that is dragged through the mud along with yours again."

"That would be regrettable, I suppose." Scarlett brought out a book from her [Pouch of Holding], opening it up as she leaned back on the couch. "We are fortunate that you have no interest in any of that 'politicking' then, yes?"

A short snicker left Rosa next to her. The bard paused her music for a moment, looking up from her instrument and at Leon. "Oh, don't mind little old me, Mister Knight Sir. Not very often you get to witness a lover's spat quite like this one first hand, that's all. They're usually not this interesting."

Leon's expression darkened somewhat. "This isn't a lover's spat."

Rosa held up a hand in a gratifying gesture. "Oh, I'm sure it isn't."

"She is sure," Fynn said from where he now stood, at the center of the room, staring down at the floor for some reason.

Scarlett looked up at the young man.

"Fynn," Rosa called out. "What have we said about white lies?"

"That they're for people's own good," he answered casually, kneeling down to run a hand over the floorboards. "But you were lying back then, so I wasn't sure if I could trust it."

"Is there something that has caught your attention?" Scarlett asked as she watched his strange actions.

He looked up at her. "There's something weird about this place. Especially down there."

She looked down at the floor where he was pointing. "As perceptive as ever, it would seem. You do not have to concern yourself with that for now, however. We will discuss exactly what it pertains to later."

The young man sent one last look downwards, then shrugged and stood to sit down along with the rest. Rosa and Allyssa sent curious glances Scarlett's way after the brief exchange,

but both appeared patient enough not to ask more at the moment. Leon, however, held a confused expression.

“What is he talking about?” he asked.

Scarlett observed the man silently for a good while, then turned her attention back to the book in her hands. “I wonder. I suppose we will have to wait and see.”