

103: Joyride

A long silence reigned over the carriage cabin as the vehicle set off from the mansion, venturing out into the wide and mostly open spaces of Freybrook's northern district. Scarlett's gaze was focused on the small forests that separated many of the estates in this district, mindlessly observing the passing trees. It was ridiculous how large the northern district was, really. The nearest home to the Hartford mansion was a few hundred meters away, so it would be a stretch to even call them a neighbor.

After they had been traveling for a while, Rosa's voice finally rang out from the seat next to Scarlett. "So, the two of you are acquaintances, I take it? How acquainted are we talking, exactly?"

Scarlett turned to look at the woman, who, in turn, was looking at the seat opposite them where Leon was sitting. The dark-haired man wore the same uniform as yesterday, and he seemed to hesitate before answering. "We're...betroted."

Silence fell upon the cabin again.

Allyssa turned to stare at Scarlett from where she sat to Leon's left. "You had a fiance?!"

Rosa also looked at her, an impish grin on the bard's face. "Oh? I didn't know the usually cold Baroness had a special someone. Here I thought that prickly exterior of yours would have strangled the very notion of romance in its cradle before it even had the chance to rear its head in your presence."

Scarlett gave her a pointed look, but Rosa's smile didn't disappear. Across from them, Leon frowned at the interaction, but remained quiet. Scarlett shook her head and returned her attention out the window. Rosa had without a doubt already realized that Leon's and her relationship wasn't like that.

"The air is stifling with this many people here," she said after a moment, just as silence was about to descend over the carriage once more. "I find it difficult to think that you did not have your own means of travel, Sir Leon."

When she'd asked him to join them on their trip to Autumnwell, she hadn't been expecting him to *literally* join like this. He was the son of a marquis, as well as the vice-captain of the Imperial Solar Knights. One would expect him to have his own transport. A horse, at the very least.

"You were the one that asked for my help, Scarlett. If you're regretting it, I can step off right here."

"That is not what I am saying. I merely find the reasoning behind you having to travel with us puzzling. Did you not arrive in a carriage at the mansion' earlier?"

"That belongs to the family of a comrade of mine," Leon said. "He's the son of Baron Acton. I can't use it for a personal trip to Autumnwell."

“I see.”

She decided to let things be at that. It wasn't as if it mattered much. They would have to get a larger carriage in the future, though, in case there were more situations like this. Six people barely fit in their cabin. Allyssa and Shin were packed together next to Leon's tall frame in their row, and it didn't look especially comfortable. Scarlett herself also wasn't overly fond of having to press into Rosa, even if she didn't mind the woman herself.

Their ride continued southwards, deeper into the city. The morning sun was rising on the horizon by the time they left the northern district and entered the more trafficked streets of Freybrook. They'd left early in the morning because Scarlett knew it might take some time to finish the preparations in Autumnwell, and she wanted them to reach their final destination before it turned dark. With the end of October approaching, evening had started setting a lot earlier in the day, even though they were in one of the more southern parts of the empire.

She had said her goodbyes to Garside and Evelyne the day before, as well as informed the Countess of her trip so that the woman would be aware of the situation. She'd also spoken a bit with Evelyne regarding the details of the original's engagement with Leon, but unfortunately, the younger woman hadn't seemed to know much more than Scarlett herself on the matter.

She would have to spend some time looking through records when she came back to the mansion. If the original really had some sort of contract with the Delmons, then there had to be documentation of it in some form. Hopefully, it wasn't in a place where it couldn't be found.

“It feels a bit surreal, sitting next to you like this, Sir Leon,” Allyssa said as their carriage entered the heart of the city.

Scarlett shifted her eyes to the girl as Leon turned to her with a small smile. He seemed to appreciate someone finally starting up a conversation.

“I suppose you've heard of me?” he asked.

“Of course I have. Who hasn't?”

“I think most people, actually.”

The girl looked at him with both eyebrows raised. “You're famous in the Shields Guild, though.”

“You're a Shielder, then? From the Elystead Branch, I presume? I've heard they've been spreading some rather exaggerated stories about me ever since the order cooperated with them to drive away that adolescent dragon last year.” He eyed her for a moment. “Earlier, you said your name was Allyssa Astrey, yes?”

“That's right.”

“Then, are you related to Arnaud Astrey, by any chance?”

An awkward smile grew on Allyssa's face. "Yes. He's my dad."

"Really?" Leon nodded along slowly. "I've heard a lot of good things about him. He's an impressive man, if even a fraction is true."

Next to him, the young Shielder fidgeted with a lock of blonde hair while looking down at the floorboards. "People often say that, yeah. But to me, he's just 'dad'." She paused, then looked back up at Leon. "Ehm, not to say I don't appreciate it. I'm genuinely glad that someone like you would think that about him, really."

"Is he that special?" Fynn suddenly asked. The young man was studying Leon closely.

"Do you mean Arnaud Astrey?" The knight asked.

Fynn shook his head. "No. You."

Allyssa sent him a look that said a lot about what she thought of Fynn's rudeness, though she didn't seem annoyed. "I told you yesterday, didn't I? He's the vice-captain of the Imperial Solar Knights. They're the strongest knights in the empire, so yes. He *is* someone special."

"I'm not *that* special," Leon cut in. "My purpose is simply to serve the Imperial Family and the citizens of the Empire. There are many others like me that deserve much more respect, and not only among the Solar Knights. The five Swords of the Royal Guard are especially impressive individuals."

Scarlett studied the man. It seemed like he was both humble *and* polite, as long as he wasn't interacting with her. She'd say his humbleness might go a bit too far, though. While she wasn't sure what level he could be considered this early in the game's timeline, he *would* still be one of the strongest knights in the empire in the not-too-far-away future. A few members of the Royal Guard were probably the only ones that were on a similar level, if you were talking pure knights. Carnwedain and one of the other companions were the only other two exceptions.

"The Imperial Order of the Solar Knights only accepts fifty of the most talent swordsmen in the empire. Every single one of their members is generally considered to be at least equivalent to an A-ranked Shielder," Shin spoke up next to Allyssa. "Being one of the youngest vice-captains in the order's history is something most would consider enough to be called 'special'."

Leon's attention shifted to study the young man for a moment, eyes seemingly lingering on the scar across Shin's right eye. "You were Shin Thornthon, correct?" He gestured with his head towards the back of the carriage. "I apologize for changing the subject, but I noticed your sword before we got in. Was that a pran?"

"It was."

"Are you from the Steppes?"

"My parents were," Shin said. "They moved to Wildscar when I was still young, so I've spent most of my life in the empire."

Leon gave a short nod at that. "I've always found the Kereq's weapons intriguing. It would be interesting to see it used."

"I wouldn't mind showing you in a sparring session later if we have the time."

The man glanced at Scarlett. She met his eyes briefly. "...If we find the time, then."

Scarlett looked to Allyssa, who had leaned over to Shin. The girl stared intensely at the side of the young man's face, though Shin himself seemed to ignore her.

"...You must be thrilled now, am I right now?" she said. "Don't try to hide it. You weren't even sneaky there. I know getting the chance to spar with the vice-captain of the Solar Knights is sending you over the moon."

"It's a good opportunity," Shin answered remotely. "Any swordsman that wants to improve their skills would take it."

"Suuuure."

"Can I fight you as well, then?" Fynn asked from his seat opposite them, staring at Leon.

Scarlett turned to look at the white-haired young man. Why was it starting to feel like her retainers were about to start a fight club with her temporary fiance?

Allyssa seemed similarly surprised by Fynn's question, gaping at him before shaking her head. "Boys..." she muttered.

"I don't think you should be the one saying that," Shin said.

"I'm not the one asking to fight a solar knight the first time I meet him."

"But you did tell him straight to his face how amazing it was to meet him."

Allyssa scrunched her eyes up at Shin. "Quiet, you. It's rare to meet famous people."

"Isn't your dad strong as well?" Fynn asked, a confused look on his face.

"No, well, that's different. And there's also a difference between strong and famous. Not that my dad isn't strong, but that's not the point."

Fynn knitted his forehead as he seemed to consider her words. He pointed at Leon. "Then, is he more important than that princess you met before?"

Allyssa blinked. "No, that's not at all what I meant. There's a difference between *imperial* important and *other* important, you know?"

Leon gave her a curious look. "You met one of the princesses?"

She looked back at him. "Ah, y-yeah, that was..."

“If I’m not mistaken, weren’t there *two* princesses?” Rosa smiled at Allyssa. “Like something out of a fairy tale.”

The girl’s face grew redder. “You’re making it sound much more impressive than it was. And I didn’t even know she was a princess at first. Besides, it’s unlikely they would even remember me.”

“When was this?” Leon asked.

“Ehm, it was when I joined Scarlett during the Providing Ceremony. We were in Hamet Garden, and I ran into Princess Hilde in one of the enclosed patios. The first princess arrived not long after that as well. I’m not sure what I would have done if Scarlett wasn’t there.” Allyssa paused, then shook her head. “Ah, but what am I saying? You must have met the princesses plenty of times, so this wouldn’t be anything special to you.”

“I have met both of them on several occasions, that’s true. But there’s nothing with you sharing your encounter, as well,” Leon said. His expression turned into a slight frown as he looked at Scarlett, though. “... You didn’t say anything to the princesses, did you?”

She gave him a long look in return. “Are you perhaps suggesting I should have disregarded the Imperial Family and ignored them? If so, I am sorry to inform you that I did no such thing.”

“You know what I mean. You didn’t try any of your schemes with the princesses, did you?”

“I have no such ‘schemes’ to attempt, nor would I ever act to disparage the imperial family, even if I had.”

Leon let out a small scoff. “You sat that after what you did during the Elysian Proclamation?”

“Did His Majesty himself not acknowledge my vow that day?” Scarlett asked. “As a knight acting in the faithful service of His Majesty and the Imperial Family, I would expect that to be enough for you.”

“...It’s hard to forget all of your history, Scarlett. As a knight, it is also my duty to ensure there are no threats or nuisances bothering the princesses.”

“Our meeting with them was pure happenstance, in case you are thinking I somehow precipitated the event.”

He eyed her for a while. “If you say so.”

The others in the carriage were looking on silently during their conversation, and an awkward atmosphere fell over the cabin now.

“So, can I fight you or not?” Fynn asked.

Scarlett glanced at the young man, having to fight down a small smile. Sometimes, his overly sincere nature wasn’t so bad after all.

“If we have the time, I don’t mind sparring with you as well,” Leon said. “Are you a Shielder as well? I never knew Scarlett to keep too many people around her.”

Fynn shook his head. “I’m her enforcer,” he said.

Scarlett stilled, and Leon’s expression grew darker. Next to Scarlett, Rosa was trying to hide a laugh as she coughed into her hand.

“*Miss Hale.*” Scarlett glared at the bard.

“Eh, Fynn.” Allyssa looked at the young man. “Who told you that you were an enforcer?”

He pointed to Rosa next to him. “She did.”

The woman in question held up her hand to her chest in an affronted manner. “Wha—me?! I would never lead a young, innocent lamb like our sweet Fynn astray. Ahem.” She cleared her throat. “I might have told him, at one point or another, that he seemed particularly talented at helping our dear employer out with her problems, and it’s possible that the word ‘enforce’ *might* have been brought up somewhere around there, but that’s just pure coincidence, I tell you.”

“That’s not what you sai—”

Rosa covered Fynn’s mouth. “Look at him. Now he’s all confused.” She shook her head. “Poor boy.”

Fynn furrowed his brows, staring down at the hand covering his mouth.

“Miss Hale,” Scarlett said.

Rosa let her arm down and turned to Scarlett. “Yes, dear employer? What can I do for you? Would you like me to play a song?”

“I hope you are not going around, causing unwelcome rumors to spread about me.”

“Oh, no. Definitely not.” The woman shook her head fervently. “Only the good kind, I assure you.”

“...I am uncertain whether I should be relieved or even more troubled.”

Rosa smiled. “I find that the best balance is always a smidge of both.”

Scarlett studied the woman for a moment, then turned back to the carriage window with a small sigh. “Sir Leon, I expect you to be discerning enough to surmise which words to believe and which not to. It would be a shame if this was to cause any unfortunate misunderstandings, yes?”

“...Sure, Scarlett.”

“Good.” She nodded her head, eyeing some of the people moving about on the streets outside. She was starting to suspect this might be a longer ride than first expected.