

## 118: Unwanted face offs

Scarlett frowned as she took Leon's appearance in. The bright golden light that had risen up to surround him wreathed like a beast facing a threat, and the man was staring at her with an intense expression.

"...I am afraid I do not know what you are referring to," she said in response to his previous question.

What had caused this sudden reaction of his? Neither she nor Evelyne had said anything in particular, and she hadn't heard anything from outside the room that could be the reason.

"Wait, what's happening? What is he talking about?" Evelyne asked.

Leon's eyes once again turned to a specific spot on the ceiling, the scowl on his face deepening. Was there something in another part of the mansion that he was suddenly sensing?

Without warning, he started moving towards the door.

"Wait for just a moment, Sir Leon," Scarlett called out, but he ignored her words.

She hurried to stand from her armchair as she followed him. "Sir Leon!"

What the hell was this man up to?

Evelyne accompanied her out of the parlor as Scarlett tried catching up to Leon, but the knight had already made it to the end of the hallway and soon disappeared around the corner.

Clenching her teeth in annoyance, Scarlett and Evelyne quickened their pace, passing by a confused servant girl as they attempted not to lose him. The man himself didn't seem to quite know where he was going, since they passed by several other servants who'd seen him and, when asked about his route, pointed in different directions in the mansion. Eventually, Scarlett spotted the back of his gold-black uniform once again as they entered the east wing.

"Leon! Stop right this moment!"

The man disappeared down another bend in the hallway once again. Scarlett's eyes widened as she rounded it and saw him turn to the left, where there was a set of stairs that led up to the other floors.

She realized where he was going.

A moment later, she spotted Fynn further down the hallway. The young man looked confused about the noise but was walking in their direction.

"Fynn," she called out. "Follow Sir Leon and ensure that he does not reach the top floor. Do not destroy anything!"

He took off immediately, without a word. Scarlett turned around to the confused Evelyne behind her. “You will stay here for now?”

“What—?” The woman gave her an incredulous look. “Why?”

“Because the identity of the person living on the top floor is something that I have vowed to keep secret. Do you remember?”

“Yes, but—”

“This is not up for discussion, Evelyne. You will remain here or return to your quarters. Is that understood?”

There was a hint of defiance in the younger woman’s eyes for a second, but then she lowered her gaze and nodded. “Yes.”

“Good.” Scarlett turned around and hurried down the hallway. “I will come and see you again after this has been resolved.”

She quickened her steps even more as she reached the stairs, annoyed at having to rush like this. She was wearing a dress instead of her usual exploration attire, which both hampered her movements and made this a lot more embarrassing. If she’d at least worn the [Garments of Form] underneath, she might have been able to make use of its teleportation ability.

Noises sounded out from the floors above, and when she reached the second highest one, she encountered a ruffled Fynn beating his fists against a barrier of light encircling him. Cracks formed with each blow, but it looked to be at least a short while longer before he was free.

She sent him a quick look of appreciation before continuing up the next set of stairs.

As she reached the highest floor—the floor where the Countess’ accommodations were—she saw Leon near the end of the hallway.

“Leon!” she yelled. “Stop right this moment!”

The man ignored her once again as he reached to open the door to the Countess’ room.

For a brief moment, Scarlett could see parts of the woman’s robed figure as the door opened, then a surprised scream exited the room. Leon had frozen in front of the entrance, and she hurried down the hallway to grab hold of his arm.

Then she stilled as well when she saw the inside of the room.

The curtains were pulled together, leaving the place shrouded in a dim light. Floating near the ceiling were over a dozen stars—each seemingly embroidered onto thin napkins—and at their center was a large moon, embroidered onto the face of a round pillow. It hovered gently in the air and a strange, glittery haze surrounded it, looking almost to support its flight.

It was as if they were staring up at a facsimile of the night sky.

“Ah, ah, ah, no-no-no.” The Countess, standing at the center of the room, body, and face, hidden by her robes, shied away from the entrance. The woman accidentally bumped into the side of the four-poster bed behind her and reached out to grab one of its pillars. The wood cracked in two inside her grasp, and the entire top part of the bed came crashing down. A moment later, the stars and moon floating near the ceiling also fell to the floor.

“Ah, ah, ah, no, I-I did not...no-no.” The anxiety in the woman’s voice was clear as she turned to stare at the ruined bed, as well as the embroidery pieces now spread around the room. She blinked several times, then turned to stare at Leon and Scarlett by the entrance again. Her words had turned into an incoherent rambling.

The golden light appeared around Leon once again—almost forming a protective armor around the man—as he stared back at the woman, his expression a mix of uncertainty and apprehension.

The Countess froze at the sight. Suddenly, a disorderly mass of silverly light spread out from the woman, like dozens of messy tendrils, engulfing half of the room and running towards Leon. In response, the knight raised his arms—Scarlett losing her grip on the one she’d been holding—and a golden shield took shape before him.

“STOP!!” Scarlett screamed.

The tendrils stopped a foot away from Leon. The Countess stood still like a statue, staring at the man as her mouth opened and closed.

“This is *my* home, Leon.” Scarlett didn’t even bother hiding the ice in her voice as she turned to glare at the man. “I will not allow you to assault *my* guests, no matter what wild misconception is running through your head, or whatever unfounded reasons you believe might have. Have you forgotten that it is your job as a knight to *protect* people? *Not* to scare unfamiliar women witless by acting like an impertinent brute.”

A brief look of recognition passed over the man’s face, as if he just now realized what he had been doing. Did the idiot just act out of instinct?

Whatever. It didn’t matter. She just had to get him out of here and away from the Countess.

Neither of the two had dispelled their magic—or auras, she supposed it would technically be in their case—so Scarlett turned to the Countess with the best impression of a calm expression that she could muster in this situation. “You may relax, my friend. No harm will befall you. You have my word.”

The woman didn’t seem to hear her words, continuing to stare at Leon. Scarlett turned to the knight instead. “**Lower your aura.**”

He gave her an uncertain look. The edges of the shield in front of him coiled and almost seethed at the silverly tendrils that were near it.

Eventually, though, he lowered his hands, and the light surrounding him dissipated.

The aura extending from the Countess also petered out, losing its cohesion as if its reason for existing had disappeared. The woman herself still didn't move, however, still frozen in the same state of alarm as before.

Leon leaned closer to Scarlett. "Who *is* that?" he asked, the wariness and suspicion clear in his voice.

"*You* will wait with your question," she snapped. She pointed back into the hallway. "Do not presume to act however you wish in my home. In case you are too blind to notice, you are not the one most agitated by the current circumstances."

He looked at the Countess for a moment, a conflicted expression on his face.

"*Leave*," Scarlett said. "I will speak with you after I have dealt with this situation."

It took a few more seconds, but eventually, he acquiesced and stepped away from the room's entrance, shooting Scarlett one last suspicious glance as he did. She immediately stepped inside and closed the door behind him, then turned back to the Countess.

"It is okay," she said in what she hoped was a soothing voice as she slowly started stepping over to the woman. "He will not prove a bother to you anymore."

The Countess' eyes shifted from the closed door to her, and she almost stumbled over the broken bed behind her as she tried moving back. "Ah, ah, they're here... They're here... They will take me...like my poor sister... No, no—they'll kill me... h-Help...the Baroness?"

"No one is here to take you," Scarlett said, stopping an arm's length from the woman. "That man was not one of those people. He was a Solar Knight and acted solely under a preconceived misconception. There is nothing to worry about."

The Countess almost curled into herself, casting her eyes to the ground. "T-They're here...here...here... My poor sister...why...They'll hurt me as well..."

Scarlett raised a hand, hesitating for a moment as she was about to place it on the woman's shoulder. Pushing through the aversion—and almost *revulsion*—from the action, she rested it on the woman and pulled out a handkerchief from the [Pouch of Holding] at her waist. "No one will come for you or hurt you, and you will meet your sister again. You have my word. I will speak with this man, so you do not have to concern yourself with this any further."

The Countess' shoulders trembled, but her rambling soon calmed down as she looked up at Scarlett and the handkerchief in her hand. After a moment, she hesitatingly reached out for the piece of cloth, seemingly uncertain what to do with it as she started dabbing it on her face. She stilled once more, however, as she looked back at the bed behind her.

"Be assured that I do not consider you to be at fault for the damages wrought just now," Scarlett hurried to say. "I will ensure that the man just now takes responsibility, so do not worry yourself over it."

The woman blinked several times, but thankfully, the words seemed to calm her down further.

Scarlett glanced over at all of the embroidered stars and the moon lying on the floor.

So this is what the Countess had been doing with her time? She was curious what the purpose was behind it, if there even was one. Maybe the woman was just doing whatever came to mind? The magic she'd been using to make them float didn't seem to have much more effect, but she assumed it was what had caused Leon's sudden reaction.

"These...decorations," she asked. "You made them?"

The Countess spun around, staring at all the items. "Ah, ah, ah, I-I'm sorry... Please...forgive me... Ugly...wasting your precious resources... Sorry...sorry..."

"That is not at all what I meant," Scarlett said. "I was simply surprised you had this sort of skill set. They are all quite masterfully crafted. I presume Molly provided you with the materials?"

The woman looked at her with surprise. "Ah, yes...yes... She was very kind... Helped a lot."

"That is good." Scarlett gave a nod. "If I may ask, is there a reason why you created these items in particular?"

The Countess shook her head. "...They are beautiful... Like in my dreams...and the Baroness..."

Scarlett raised a brow. "...I see. Thank you for the compliment. You may create as many as you wish while you stay in this mansion, so do not be afraid to ask Molly for more materials if needed."

The woman nodded along to Scarlett's words, though it wasn't completely certain whether she actually paid attention.

Sending one last look around the room, Scarlett looked to the door and back to the Countess. "I will have to deal with that knight now. Will you be fine by your lonesome for a while? I can have Molly sent up later to aid you in cleaning up."

The woman nodded her head even more, not exactly filling Scarlett with confidence about how much she was listening. But it was unlikely that the Countess would destroy anything more for the time being, and Scarlett didn't know what more she could do right now.

As soon as she was finished with Leon, she would have Molly sent up to get a better hold of the situation.

"Then I will return again later." With those words, she let go of the Countess' shoulder—the woman barely noticing—and made to leave the room. As she reached the door, she sent one last glance back at the woman before exiting into the hallway outside.

Leon met her eyes with a serious expression. "What in Ittar's name are you doing here, Scarlett?"

Scarlett stopped for a moment, the anger inside rising up once more.

“I could ask you the same, Sir Leon. For what reason did you think it acceptable to act out like this inside my home, and towards my guests?”

“I couldn’t just ignore whatever this is,” he replied. “Who was that? *What* was that?”

“*That* was a person, just like you and me. One whose life was just threatened by your ignorance. As for *who* she is, that is none of your concern.”

A flash of shame showed on the man’s face. Her words clearly struck a nerve. Despite that, he didn’t back down. “There was something *wrong* with that power of hers. It wasn’t necromancy, or any other dangerous force that I have encountered, but despite that, it clashed more with my aura than any of those.” He stared at her for several seconds. “What *is* it that you’re hiding?”

“That, as well, is none of your concern.” She met his eyes. “I will ask you this. What exactly about her power is it that was ‘wrong’, as you put it?”

His expression hardened. “...I’m not sure.”

She couldn’t help letting out a short scoff. “So you do you not even understand it, yet you insist that it is ‘wrong’. Do you not see the inanity in that? Since when has it been illegal to practice anything in the empire simply because it is not something that a Solar Knight likes?”

“It’s not about me not *liking* it. Whatever that was, in was in open opposition with my own aura. With the techniques and methods taught by the Imperial Solar Knight’s order, and with Ittar’s own power. If the Followers were the ones to notice this, they wouldn’t simply sit still.”

Scarlett frowned. She would have to be careful about not letting Raimond or anyone that might sense the Countess’ aura be around when the woman was using her powers, then.

“I fail to see your point,” she told Leon, shaking her head. “I would be more surprised if her power did *not* clash with what you are familiar with, but that has no bearing on the intrinsic ‘wrongness’ of it. Water clashes with fire, but that does not mean that either is inherently bad, nor that they cannot work together. I would say that my own magic is a prime example of this.”

Leon went quiet.

“Ittar may be the patron deity of our country, but as far as I am aware, the worshipping of other faiths is not prohibited, no matter if it might superficially appear to clash with what you ascribe to him. Your behaviour just now has severely agitated an innocent woman completely unfamiliar to you, and the only justification you have is flimsy at best, and you yourself have pointed out that her power is neither related to necromancy or any other force you know of, banned or otherwise.”

Scarlett stared at him for several seconds, studying his expression as he stayed quiet. Her words seemed to have legitimately troubled him a bit.

“This woman is a guest of mine,” she continued. “One which has helped me with several matters and whom I have promised to aid in return. I will not allow you to cause her to be any more uncomfortable, no matter what you might think of the power she wields.”

“I...” Leon looked unsure of how to respond, which, surprisingly enough, filled Scarlett with slight pleasure. She quickly pushed the feeling down for now. “You’re...right, Scarlett. I acted without thinking, and I’m sorry. I’m not even sure what came over me...” He sent her one last, earnest look. “...But I have to know what that was.”

“You do not. You are not entitled to that information, and I will most certainly not share it with you after the way you just acted.”

It was bad enough that he had *seen* the Countess. Scarlett might be able to salvage things if she made sure he didn’t speak of it to anyone, but even allowing him to know this much was risky. *Especially* if he decided to share it with any of the Followers of Ittar.

“You will not be allowed to meet with her again, if that is what you are hoping,” she said. “Even if you were to wish to ask for forgiveness for your behaviour. I will also ask that you show understanding for her situation and remain silent about her presence here. Do not speak of it to anyone.”

Leon’s expression changed into one filled with suspicion.

“There is nothing unlawful or illicit taking place here,” she added. “And she is of no threat to those that do not themselves threaten her first.”

The man cringed at that.

“But she has lived through very unfortunate circumstances not of her own making, and in order to stay safe, she has to remain hidden from a certain group of people that I cannot name. If you were to share your knowledge of her existence, no matter how safe you believe it might be, you may very well place her life in danger. As long as she is a guest in my home, I have a responsibility to ensure her safety. As such, I will not allow you to leave here without first having your word.”

His forehead creased together.

“Leon.” She met his gaze for several seconds. “Do I have your word?”

“I don’t even know what I would be swearing.”

“You would be swearing to keep the life of an innocent woman safe.”

“I can’t be certain about that.”

“Are you saying that your uncertainty is enough reason to endanger her life even further? Even when you were the one that forced your way through my home and nearly assaulted my guest?”

“I see what you’re trying to do, Scarlett.”

“I don't care if you see it or not. Do I have your oath?”

He went quiet again, the air between them heavy with her words. Finally, he let out a long sigh.

“...I promise not to speak of this with anyone. As long as doing so does not directly endanger the safety of someone's life or that of the empire.”

She clicked her tongue. That was close enough.

“Good. Now, if you do not mind, I will have to ask that you return to the parlor while I clean up the mess that you have caused. I will be sending you an invoice for the bed later.”