

63: Returning

"Now that the Light Fest has ended, I will soon be returning to Freybrook," Scarlett said, looking across the table to where Allyssa, Shin, Fynn, and Rosa sat. They were still in the dining hall, but Evelyne had recently left because she had wanted to check deeper into which places had been attacked by the Tribe of Sin.

The news reported by the Empyrean Chronicle had probably spread to most people around the mansion by now, but Scarlett had long since been expecting it so that wasn't her main focus right now. The trip back to Freybrook through one of the capital's Kilstones had already been booked for tomorrow, and considering how busy those usually were—especially at the end of a festival, and under the current circumstances here in the empire—there probably weren't many chances to reschedule the trip.

because of this, she'd wanted to talk with those in her party before they left.

"My original offer to you two," she said, looking specifically at Rosa and Fynn. "Was made under the assumption that you would continue to be under my employ even after I had returned to Freybrook. As such, if you are satisfied with the current state of affairs, I will have you accompany me tomorrow. You will be allocated lodging and treated as guests in the Freybrook mansion, and there will be ample opportunity for your current pay and benefits to increase further depending on the development from there."

"Where is Freybrook?" Fynn asked, earning a couple of odd looks from the others.

"In the southwestern part of the empire, south of the Whitdown Mountains."

"All right. Sure," he said.

"I take that to mean you wish to continue to be in my service?" Scarlett asked.

"Yes."

"Good. And you?" She turned to Rosa, who just gave her a smile.

"Who would say no to that? I haven't lived this luxuriously for *years*. And all I have to do is play a little tune now and then? Count this girl in."

Scarlett nodded, then looked at Allyssa and Shin. "And what of you? While I am aware that you are based in Elystead, the same offer applies. I believe it was also Kat's original intention that you would continue the contract. That is also why I proposed an arrangement regarding your alchemy, Allyssa. Were you two to terminate the contract, however, I would have to find new Shielders to hire once I return."

The two young Shielders looked at each other.

"I don't think either of us would mind going to Freybrook, but things might have changed now that the Tribe of Sin has returned," Allyssa said. "We don't know if the Guild's going to need our help dealing with things."

Right...Scarlett hadn't considered that. Kat had been called away because of what was happening, after all.

Although judging from what she knew from the game, the Shields Guild probably wouldn't call too many of the lower-ranked members. But she couldn't know that for sure.

"And we're also pretty sure that Kat and some other people we know were involved in what happened, so we're worried about them."

"That is understandable," Scarlett said.

She was also interested in learning how Kat was doing. The woman was relatively strong, but both the Tribe of Sin and the Hallowed Cabal had plenty of members stronger than her. And Scarlett didn't know exactly where Kat herself had gone this time.

"However, I would imagine that the Shields Guild will not be the only ones engaged in dealing with the ramifications of these events, nor that they will entirely arrest their usual state of affairs. If they have need of you, I am certain they will inform you of such. In addition, Kat herself is based in Freybrook, so you would in all likelihood have the opportunity to ensure her well-being when she returns there."

"Would you allow us to visit the Guild branch later today just to confirm the situation?" Shin asked. "We would have to check in with them no matter what, but if we're going to Freybrook we also have to say our goodbyes and pack things. Allyssa would also need to bring alchemy equipment along, and a place to practice it when we're there."

Allyssa turned at him. "Are you making plans for me now?"

He just shrugged. "I think you should accept her proposal if you can."

The girl smacked his shoulder with a somewhat peeved expression, but it didn't look like she was actually annoyed.

Scarlett studied them for a moment. "I believe we will be able to find a suitable solution for her. If she requires a space to carry out her work we have an abundant number of rooms she can appropriate as she wishes. We will assist her where needed."

"Wait...really?" Allyssa looked at her.

"Yes."

The young Shielder looked surprised by that. "Huh. Maybe I should just quit as a Shielder and go work for you instead."

"Then do it," Shin said, earning another smack from Allyssa.

"I wasn't being serious you goof. Besides, you wouldn't make it for a week without me."

"If you say so." Shin shook his head lightly, then turned to Scarlett. "We'll go and see how things are at the Guild, then we'll give you our response," he said.

Scarlett simply gave a nod in reply. "Very well."



"What are you going to do after returning to Freybrook?" Evelyne asked Scarlett later that day, as the two of them sat in Evelyne's office.

Scarlett took a sip out of the cup of tea she had prepared for this conversation — a way for her to distract herself somewhat from the emotions that rose up from talking to the younger woman. "My first priority will be locating the places of interest I am aware of near Freybrook. The more artifacts and other such items I can gather, the more we can bolster our current position."

"Are any of those Zuverian ruins?"

"Unfortunately not. I believe there will still be some time before I explore the next Zuverian ruin."

"Hmm, all right. But you're certain there will be valuable artifacts at least?"

"I am."

"Good. Then I'll look into securing a deal with one of the auction houses here. It would probably be best if you could give me one or two of the artifacts you've already found, so that I've got something to show for our words."

Scarlett paused. "You are staying in the capital?"

Evelyne gave a short nod. "Yes. I still have a lot of things that I need to take care of here. I probably won't return to Freybrook for at least a few weeks."

"...I see," Scarlett murmured. "I suppose that is understandable. Then I will present you some of the artifacts from my latest excursion. When you return I hope that you visit the mansion and inform me as such."

"I will," Evelyne said.

"And if you so wish, you may stay there when you feel necessary. I will not stand in your way."

Evelyne grew a strange look on her face. "You mean live in the mansion?"

"I mean stay. For how long you wish to do so will be your own decision."

Evelyne stared at Scarlett.

"I do not mean to say that we must fraternize with each other beyond when necessary," Scarlett clarified. "However, if it would work to facilitate for you in your efforts, I see no need to bar your access to the estate."

Evelyne stayed quiet for several seconds, before eventually giving a slow nod. "If you say so."

"In addition, as you will continue to reside here for the immediate future, I will present you notes pertaining to more locations home to defunct establishments that could prove fruitful looking further into," Scarlett continued.

She had used the day before the Providing Ceremony to, in part, go into town and look up a few more of the places she'd had vague recollections of from the game and rank up her hydrokinesis skill and get used to it somewhat. In addition, she had also received a pair of glasses with some sort of dark-vision enchantment from the shop she'd made a deal with earlier.

Evelyne raised a brow. "You mean like those three you told me about earlier?"

"Yes, exactly."

"Were those also things you knew of because of your new...knowledge?"

"It was," Scarlett said. "All those locations were home to businesses that faired well in the future, as far as I can surmise. As for why they did so, I am unfortunately unaware. But as I have previously mentioned, I believe it worth inquiring further into."

Evelyne shook her head slowly, but if Scarlett were to guess she probably didn't think her words were completely bogus anymore.

"I'll look into it."

"Ensure that you do so," Scarlett said, taking another sip from her cup. "Have you found anything regarding the first three locales?"

"I've only had time to investigate one of them, mostly because I didn't think there would be much point to it," Evelyne admitted. "It was the silversmith. It seems like most of the equipment and previous paperwork are still there, according to the current owner. I sent a few messages to them, and apparently they inherited it from their grandfather but didn't have the money to keep it running. They seemed excited at what I guess they thought was interest from my end, and tried to pretty unobtrusively convince me to invest so that they could get the place up and running again."

Scarlett nodded along as she listened on. So that was how things were in this world. "I believe it would be good to do so."

Evelyne still looked a bit doubtful. "We don't actually know if it's worth it. And at the moment we're still short on the money we'd need."

"Consider it an experiment. If the venture appears promising, we know that there is potential in investing in the other locales as well. And money will not be an issue for much longer, so simply allocate some funds that we can spare this once. If you wish, you can also use the money from what I sold earlier this week."

It was still unclear whether the fact that those businesses always succeeded in the game without any real input from the player actually translated into this world in any way whatsoever, but it was worth trying to find out.

"...All right. I'll see what I can do."

"Good." Scarlett placed her cup down on a small table to the side of the chair she sat in. "Incidentally, I presume you recall Miss Livvi?"

"Livvi? Of course I do. What about her?"

"I came across her yesterday, and she wished for me to send you her regards. She also said she would pay a visit to the estate in Freybrook sometime in the future."

"And you accepted it?"

"I saw no reason not to."

Scarlett hadn't really considered it to be an option at the time, to be honest.

"You haven't met her for years, so why now?" Evelyne asked.

"Why not?" Scarlett said. "I will admit, my memories of her are somewhat vague. I can barely remember which house she belongs to, but perhaps interacting with her further will help with that."

Evelyne narrowed her eyes. "You know she's Count Knottley's daughter, right?"

Scarlett raised her eyebrows. "...I see. That does sound familiar."

So Livvi was that guy's daughter. That made some sense."

"How could you forget something like that," Evelyne said with a sigh.

"I am unable to control what I do and do not remember in my current state, unfortunately. However, considering the advantages that come with it, I would say that neither of us has much to complain of on the matter."

Evelyne just quietly shook her head, and Scarlett decided to change the subject.

"There was something else which I had intended to ask before. What are our current relations with the Elystead Tower?"

"The Elystead Tower?" Evelyne furrowed her forehead. "They're one of the towers we made a deal with regarding what was found in the ruins. But that's all."

"I see," Scarlett said, tapping her finger against the armrest next to her. "They have not said anything, or sent us any particular complains lately?"

Evelyne frowned with confusion. "No, not that I'm aware. Why would they?"

Scarlett went quiet for a moment. "...One could say that their vice-dean and I fell into a dispute, of sorts, and he saw fit to ban me from interacting further with the tower. I feared that would also encompass our house, but it appears they did not take it that far."

Evelyne's eyes widened. "He *banned* you? What did you do?!"

Scarlett shot her a cold stare. "I did nothing. It certainly wasn't egregious enough to warrant such a response, at the very least. Rowley simply chose to do so of his own volition, for some arbitrary and illogical reasons that I have yet to learn."

She saw the disbelieving look in Evelyne's eyes.

"I am saying this, *aware* of how I usually act," Scarlett added. "It truly was due to no fault of mine in this particular instance."

Well, she *did* ask for help in finding The Gentleman, which Rowley clearly hadn't liked. But you didn't freaking *blacklist* someone without explanation just because you hear a name you're not fond of.

Beldon had had a much more reasonable reaction. Say what you want about that guy, but at least he had *some* manners.

Evelyne stayed quiet for a while before speaking again. "Then, are you asking me to stop making deals with the Elysian Tower?"

Scarlett gave her a bewildered look. "Why would I ask that? If they are not raising any undue concerns, and we stand to gain from it, I see no reason to discontinue our relationship with them. I simply wished to inform you of this so that you are aware."

Evelyne looked surprised at that.

"What?" Scarlett asked. "Have I not promised to be forthgoing regarding issues such as these? I will admit that I forgot to inform you up till now, but I did not intend on concealing it from you."

Evelyne shook her head. "No, I'm just not used to it."

"Then I hope that you grow to be soon," Scarlett said. "In addition, I wanted to ask that you contact a certain member of the Elysian Tower. Her name is Adalicia Mendenhall. She should currently be on an excursion to the Rising Isle, but when she returns I would like it if you could arrange a meeting between me and her. I believe she is likely to accept, but if she does not, you may feel free to inform her that I have valuable information regarding the Zuver that she would be interested in."

While Scarlett didn't need the tower's help finding The Gentleman anymore—*and* she was banned from interacting with them—it would still be good to establish a relationship with some of their higher officials. Adalicia also held some leverage within the Ustrum Assembly, which could be useful in the future.

"Adalicia Mendenhall?" Evelyne hummed. "Sure. I'll send the message."

"I appreciate your support," Scarlett said, though the words did leave a bad taste in her mouth. She then stood up from her chair. "That is all I have to say for now. If there any further details you wish to go over we can do so before I leave tomorrow."

After exchanging brief goodbyes, she left the room and started walking down the mansion's halls. She had a few more minor things she wanted to take care of by herself while she was still here, but soon she'd be leaving Elystead.

And then, it was back to Freybrook.