

117: Home sweet home

After finishing matters with the Withersworths, Scarlett and the others stayed in Autumnwell for three more days, during which the old noble couple was generous enough to let them stay as guests in their home. What was probably most surprising was that Leon also chose to stay with them for that time, despite previously having said that he had other things to deal with before he was sent off on whatever assignment his order had gotten.

She suspected he wanted more opportunities to figure out what was up with her and why she—from his perspective—had changed so much. Or maybe he just enjoyed going around clearing old dungeons. Whatever his motives, Scarlett had little reason to deny him for the time being.

With his aid, in addition to Abelard's Doll Mansion, they had cleared two more dungeons in the area during these past days. She *had* been hoping they would have the time for more than that—there were at least four dungeons relatively close to the city which she had been aiming for—but the others had been harder to find than expected.

Considering the gains they got from just Abelard's Doll Mansion, though, she wasn't going to cry about it too much.

During their stay here in Autumnwell, Leon had also kept his promise to spar with both Fynn and Shin, which had caused a bit of fuzz among the group. Scarlett hadn't seen it herself, but from what she heard, both of the young men had managed to impress the knight after fighting him together. Although, of course, they hadn't actually beaten him. Neither was close to that level yet.

But it was good that they were developing and spending some of their free time on things like this, even if Scarlett didn't have much interest in the particulars of how those things went. At the moment, she was sitting in a small guest office in one of the Withersworth mansion's wings. The [Bag of Juham] and [Pouch of Holding] were placed to the side on the desk in front of her as she recorded their contents. For the last three days, she'd been going through all of the items whenever she had nothing else to do.

She could just leave it up to the servants when they returned to Freybrook, but it felt like a good idea to get a decent grasp over what they had actually gained from all of this.

That being said, there was a lot to go through. The [Bag of Juham] had an impressive amount of storage space in it, and they *had* ransacked a whole mansion. There were also a couple of crates they had bought here in Autumnwell for the extra loot taken from the last two dungeons. All of it would only barely fit in the carriage they had taken here.

Yet another reason why she had to get a larger carriage in the near future. With the money that was about to roll in, they could definitely afford it.

By now, she had gone through perhaps around seventy percent of all the items, but that was only a basic register of everything. Most of it was things she had no clue as to the worth, like old vases and jewellery of different kinds, so actually evaluating everything would have to wait till another day. The same went for many of the artifacts they had found. While she had

written down the name and description of each game item—as well as some personal notes regarding what effects she knew or suspected—she would leave the actual deciding of what to keep and sell until she had more detailed information.

Eventually, as the time was nearing noon, Scarlett put down her pen and lightly stretched her shoulders. She looked over everything one last time before returning it to its place and preparing herself. Their passage through the Kilnstone back to Freybrook was scheduled in two hours. She would have to call Fynn over to carry the crates back out to the carriage, then pay a last visit to Lady and Lord Withersworth, along with Leon, to say goodbye. After that, all of her business here in Autumnwell would be finished.

Now that they had a large influx of money coming in, and with the Hallowed Cabal issue already handled—especially if the [Obedience's Solitude Loci] could indeed help ensure no intruders made their way into her mansion—things were looking to be somewhat calm upon her return to Freybrook. No fires to put out, for the time being.

The thought of it made a small smile creep onto her face.



Leon gazed out the carriage window as it approached the large mansion in the distance. The vehicle rolled up to the low stone wall that surrounded the mansion—he could never understand why the Freybrook nobles had those things around their estates when they served no real purpose other than to deter onlookers, of which there were none—and was soon let through the iron gates by the two guards keeping watch.

His eyes passed over the two guardsmen as they rolled past them, noting the swords at their sides. He hadn't thought much of it before, but was there a reason Scarlett had her guards be armed with swords when there were barely any threats in this district of the city? Most nobles would satisfy with having footmen with cudgels, if even that.

Shaking his head at the thought, he leaned back in his seat as the carriage traveled up the gravel road towards the mansion's primary structure. There was no telling what went through Scarlett's mind. It could be that she genuinely feared some threat he wasn't aware of—he had noted that the 'restructuring' the mansion's courtyard was going through looked suspiciously like it might have covered over the scars of a battle of some kind—or was being overly paranoid. Another possibility was that she just wanted to scare other people away. Or maybe she was just concerned about her people's safety. There was no telling what the truth was.

If these past few days had taught Leon anything, it was that he didn't know this current Scarlett nearly as well as he thought he did.

The carriage soon reached the front of the mansion, stopping in front of the archway leading into the courtyard. Scarlett and the other members of her group exited the carriage, and Leon

followed shortly behind. A pair of servants had already hurried out to greet Scarlett upon her return, and Leon watched as the red-haired noblewoman started giving out orders for how all the resources that she had rounded up during their time in Autumnwell should be handled. After that, she and the others began moving towards the mansion itself.

Scarlett looked back at Leon after they had entered the foyer. “Now that we have returned, I will be meeting with my sister to apprise her of the happenings while I was gone. I suppose you will be leaving soon, now that matters have been concluded. Before that, do you care to join me and my sister for some refreshments?”

“There is still some time before I have to return to the capital, so sure.” Leon turned to look at the others, giving them all a nod. “It has been interesting meeting all of you. I never would have expected Scarlett to move around with company like this, but I have both been surprised and genuinely impressed with what all of you were capable of. I hope that we all get the opportunity to meet again sometime in the future.”

“It’s been an honor meeting you, Sir Leon,” Allyssa replied with a smile.

Shin nodded alongside her. “It has. And I am thankful for the pointers you gave me.”

“Yes, I liked fighting you as well,” Fynn said, almost casually. “Goodbye.”

Leon blinked as the strange young man observed him for a moment, then gave Scarlett a short look before turning and climbing up one of the set of stairs that were present in the lobby. Following his movements as he disappeared around a corner on the second floor, Leon heard small sighs leave some of the others.

Eventually, Rosa turned to Leon with a smirk. “If you ever feel like the life of a celebrated and respected knight doesn’t cut it for you anymore, I’m sure you can ask Scarlett and she’ll let you join our ragtag little band without question. You gave our makeup that good extra zest that can be hard to find.”

He glanced at Scarlett. “...I’ll keep that in mind.”

he doubted she felt the same.

“Then we will take our leave for now,” the woman in question said. “I will be gathering all of you later to go over this excursion’s performance, as well as arrange so that you may get used to some of the new equipment that I will provide. Until then, you may all do as you wish with the time.”

With that, Scarlett walked out of the foyer, evidently expecting Leon to follow her. He sent one last nod towards the others before he moved to catch up. Soon enough, they reached the same room that he had been led to the last time he visited, where Evelyne—Scarlett’s younger sister—was already waiting on one of the couches. A table filled with refreshments stood in front of her, with another couch on the opposite side.

The auburn-haired woman looked up at their entrance, a brief look of surprise visible as she saw him.

“Uh, Sir Leon? You’re still here?” Her gaze moved between him and Scarlett, seemingly trying to figure out what was happening.

Leon could understand her confusion. He had felt it several times lately.

He moved over to sit on the couch opposite Evelyne, and Scarlett sat down in an armchair to his right.

“I thought you would only be joining my sister for a day or so,” Evelyne said as they had gotten themselves settled in. She picked up a small confection. “Is there a reason why you’re still here?”

“I judged I could afford to stay with Scarlett and her group for a while longer,” he answered. “And considering the nature of what we encountered in Autumnwell, it seemed like a wise choice to do so.”

A mansion cursed by a long-since dead archmage wasn’t the kind of thing you overlooked. It also gave him a chance to see what Scarlett was up to. In the end, he thought it was the correct decision to make as well. After they exorcised the old mansion, they had moved on to exploring both an abandoned mining system filled with glass basilisks, and a hidden forest copse that had been home to an undead covenant of witches. It seriously put into question exactly how Scarlett learned of all these places, as well as her motivations in clearing them all out.

From what he could tell, the latter *seemed* to be simple greed. Scarlett had taken enough materials from these places to support a small, noble household — which he supposed was exactly what she intended to do.

“Doesn’t that conflict with your other responsibilities?” Evelyne asked.

He shook his head. “My other plans weren’t anything that couldn’t be delayed. And the order won’t be sent out on our assignment until tomorrow, so I still have some time over. I will be joining one of my comrades this evening as he travels back to Elystead.”

“Oh, well, that’s good to hear.” Evelyne studied Leon for another moment before glancing at Scarlett. “Actually, since you brought it up, what *exactly* did you encounter in Autumnwell? I was pretty shocked just to hear you would join my sister on her trip, but I didn’t know much more than that you’d help her with clearing some destitute place of pests of some kind?”

“We ended up visiting more than one location,” Scarlett said. “However, our primary objective was in what was once the residence of an old mage that dealt in artificing and necromancy. Sir Leon was greatly helpful in dealing with the threats that we faced there, as well as the other undertakings that we carried out after that.”

The woman’s hands moved down to her waist, where she pulled out a stack of papers from the small spatial bag she always seemed to be carrying. She handed the papers to her younger sister.

“This is an incomplete compendium of the items that I have procured during these past days, as well as a brief summary of each location they were found at, in case that will prove relevant.”

Evelyne eyed the papers for a moment before reaching out and accepting them. “You said necromancy was involved?” she asked as she started looking through the papers, though she quickly stopped, eyes widening. She hurriedly flipped through all of the sheets. “Wait, wait, hang on a second.” She turned her head up to look at Scarlett. “And you’re saying this is just *some* of what you’ve found?”

The woman gave a quick nod in response. “That is correct.”

Evelyne looked down at the papers again, flipping through all of them once more and reading whatever it was Scarlett had written. “...You can’t be serious. Judging from this, it almost looks like you looted someone’s mansion.”

“That is not too far from the truth,” Scarlett said.

The younger woman seemed to freeze at the words. She looked up to stare at her sister, then turned to Leon. “Tell me she’s lying.”

“She’s not,” he said, “but—”

“What?!”

The expression on Evelyne’s face made it seem like she was legitimately scared that Scarlett had robbed somebody’s mansion, which told Leon about as much as he need to know about the two sisters’ relationship. He’d thought it odd how cooperative the two of them had seemed just here, but clearly, not *everything* in the world surrounding Scarlett had turned upside down.

“Wait, wait, no.” Evelyne’s brows furrowed. “You’re an Imperial Knight, aren’t you? There’s no way you would have helped my sister loot a mansion.”

“You would expect me to, if not for his presence?” Scarlett asked.

Evelyne paused, furtively turning her eyes away from her sister. “I might have been thinking up some strange things lately and overreacted. Forget I said anything. Please.”

“It was an abandoned mansion,” Leon said. “One belonging to the Withersworth family. They had lost access to it generations ago due to the actions of one of their ancestors, and Scarlett convinced them to leave what was inside to her if she removed the cause of the curse that plagued the place.”

“I see. That makes sense.” Leon wasn’t sure, but he felt like he saw Evelyne let out a small sigh of relief at his words. She then sent a mild glare towards Scarlett. “You could have been more clear to start with.”

Scarlett silently met her sister's eyes for a few seconds, then gave a slow nod. "I suppose I could." Her tone didn't sound like she actually meant it, though the fact that she allowed a comment like that to slide at all was what surprised Leon.

He observed the two of them for a moment. Perhaps he'd been too hasty with his earlier judgement. He had never interacted much with Scarlett's younger sister, nor had he seen the two of them in the same location more than on a few occasions, but he did know that their relationship wasn't supposed to be close. And while there certainly was a distance between them here, the interaction just now was *not* something the Scarlett he knew would ever accept.

Or at least the Scarlett he *thought* he knew.

But just like everything else he'd seen lately had shown, Scarlett had clearly changed. Or he had never known her as well as he thought he had.

...That, or this was another of her ploys, and he was once more falling for her calculating schemes.

He shook his head. Even for Scarlett, that would be too much. All of her recent actions couldn't be part of one large scheme. They were all too sudden, disjointed, and *different* to be because of something like that.

He hoped.

"Do the two of you usually work together when it comes to matters like these?" he found himself asking. "I think it would surprise a lot of people to see this."

Scarlett turned to him, giving him the same sharp look that he'd grown used to. The one that made it seem like everything was a transaction to her.

"...Appearances can often be deceiving," she said. "Whatever people might believe, Evelyne and I remain members of the same house, in addition to being sisters. There are many topics where our interests align. It is only natural that we cooperate and share information when possible."

Leon noticed that Evelyne appeared to be slightly surprised at Scarlett's words, staring at her older sister.

"But that has no relevance to our current matters." Scarlett turned to Evelyne. "As Sir Leon mentioned, the mansion we provided help in clearing out belonged to the Withersworth family. It was with them that we resided during our stay in Autumnwell."

"Did you know them from before?" Evelyne asked.

"I did not," Scarlett answered. "I suppose you could say that I have succeeded in forging a connection with them through these events. At least with Lady Withersworth, it would appear. In addition to that, they have also agreed to provide payment for my assistance."

"Really?" Evelyne raised an eyebrow. "How much?"

“The exact figure has yet to be decided; however, I do not believe it will be any less than four hundred thousand solars.”

The woman stared at Scarlett. “...Four hundred *thousand*?”

“That is what I said, yes.”

Evelyne reached up a hand to pull her ear. “Could you repeat that one more time, please? I want to be sure that I didn’t hear it wrong.”

“Four hundred thousand Solars.”

She blinked several times. “...What the *Blazes* could get them to pay that much?! Was there some treasure or something in this mansion?”

“There was plenty of treasure, but none that they cared for,” Scarlett said. “They simply needed it dealt with. If you want further details, I can ensure that they are provided to you at a later time.”

Evelyne touched her forehead as if she was getting a headache. “That’s a massive amount of money to pay for something like this, though. And that, along with this...” She looked down at the papers in her hand. “If it continues like this, we’ll have more funds in a couple of months than our father ever had during his time.”

“That is a good thing, no?”

“It’s *insane* is what it is.” Evelyne shook her head. “Just a few months ago, we couldn’t even afford to buy a new carriage, and now we’re suddenly like this...?”

Leon glanced at Scarlett. This was the first actual confirmation he got that they had been having financial issues. She had been hiding it well up till recently. It seemed strange to him that she didn’t mind him hearing about it now, though. Something like that was exactly the kind of thing the old Scarlett would have liked to sweep under the rug so no one ever learned about it.

“I will introduce you to the Withersworths when the opportunity arises,” Scarlett said.

Evelyne gave a slow nod of appreciation to her sister. “That would be helpful, thank you. But I’m not sure when I would even have the time to go over to Autumnwell for anything like that.”

“They will be attending the Tyndal Ball, so then might be appropriate.”

“Really? Alright then.”

“So you’re actually attending the Tyndal Ball, Scarlett?” Leon cut in.

She turned to him. “I am, yes. Is it that surprising to you?”

“I wouldn’t even have thought you were invited. Even I know most people are currently trying to distance themselves from you for the time being. The amount of jabs I’ve had to ignore during the last month just for being your fiance numbers higher than I can count.”

“I have other ways of ensuring my attendance,” she said.

His forehead creased together as he thought over her words. If there was anyone he knew that might have connections like that, it wouldn’t surprise him if it was Scarlett. Perhaps she was close to one of Duke Tyndall’s daughters?

She gave him a curious look — or what counted as one for Scarlett, at least. “Will you be attending as well, Sir Leon?”

“We’ll see when the time comes,” he answered. “Things aren’t looking good in the empire at the moment, so there’s no guarantee that I won’t be busy when the ball is held.”

His mother would probably try every trick up her sleeve to get him to go, but he would prefer not to. And with the Tribe of Sin’s worrying movements around the empire, he doubted he would have the chance anyway. Not to mention that there were reports of those behind the Tribe finally rearing their heads again...

They would know more after this upcoming assignment was finished.

None of that was anything he could share with Scarlett or her sister anyhow. While he knew their father had fought against both the Tribe of Sin and the Undead Council back when they’d last made their moves, and that Scarlett was a surprisingly capable fighter with access to magic he hadn’t seen before, this wasn’t anything the two of them should get involved with.

“What I do know is that—” Leon interrupted himself as he sensed a strange presence appear from somewhere in the mansion.

Frowning, he turned his gaze towards the ceiling.

What in Ittar’s name was this...? It was unfamiliar, yet familiar at the same time. Like a cold blade held against his neck.

His eyes widened as it suddenly intensified. The hairs rose on his neck as all of his instincts screamed at him. Before he knew it, he was standing up, his aura having exploded forth to cover him in its golden light as if to protect him from threats.

Whatever this was, it was against anything that he knew. It was *dangerous*.

He turned to Evelyne and Scarlett, both of who were giving him confused looks. Ignoring that, he forced himself to unclench his teeth as he fixed his gaze on the only person who could be responsible for this. He had gotten too lax around her.

“What in *Ittar’s name* have you been hiding here, Scarlett?”