

## 107: A dance at the mansion

Leon found himself in what looked to have once been a large ballroom, with old yet burnished decorations running along the walls and silver chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. Chairs and long tables lined the edges of the room and an old piano stood in the corner, its fallboard and lid propped up as if waiting to be used. There was almost no dust to be seen, and the room had an air of *expectation* to it that belied the apparent dereliction. It was as if the emptiness was only temporary, and a suite of guests would stream in through the wide entrance at the end of the room and a quartet would start playing any second now.

It was strange how there were no visible lights in the place, yet it was still bright enough for him to make out details. He had encountered similar phenomena previously, but they weren't common.

Behind him, Scarlett appeared, stepping through the black curtain that was the entrance of the door that led them here. Its wooden frame, standing on its own at the center of the room, was a strange sight. Scarlett's retainers soon exited the door as well, and the woman quickly moved past Leon.

His eyes followed her as she pulled out a strange knife from the pouch at her waist and raised her other hand.

"What are you doin—" he began.

A large sphere of fire suddenly formed above one of the chandeliers further down the room, enveloping its crown completely. A shrieking wail sounded out. Leon pulled at his sword as a transparent shape in a flowing blue dress flitted down to escape the flames. A face twisted in rage turned towards Scarlett. Several smaller spheres appeared to swarm around the sudden ghost figure, reflecting the light of the fires in a strange way.

Leon frowned. Was that water? What spell was that?

The fires exploded in bursts of steam that tore through the ghost's dress. More shrieking filled the room as each attack removed more of its body. It began flying straight towards Scarlett when, suddenly, a wall of fire bore into existence ahead of it. It let out one last wail as what remained of its form was quickly reduced to nothingness by the flames. The fire died out soon after and Scarlett lowered her hand.

Leon relaxed the grip on his sword and turned his attention to Scarlett. "What was that?"

She looked back at him. "I believe that was a Malignant Apparition," she answered coolly. "I have read that they are quite common in places such as this. One would have thought you would notice it before I."

"I meant whatever spells those were. Since when could you do that?"

As far as he knew, despite coming from a famed family of magic casters, Scarlett could barely be called a mage. The display he just saw shouldn't have been possible for someone

like her. His eyes shifted to the knife in her hand. It had a bronze cavalier hilt and a short iron blade that had rusted over in most parts.

Was that some sort of artifact? Now that he thought about it, Scarlett seemed to wear several items that looked like they could be enchanted in some way. The most obvious were the two rings on her fingers and the necklace around her neck. The necklace, at least, was an odd choice of attire to wear to a place like this if it wasn't an artifact or enchanted in some way.

"It has been some time since I learned those 'spells', as you called them," Scarlett said. She seemed to notice his gaze on the dagger in her hand, though she simply returned it to the pouch hanging from her waist. "But if you must know, those were applications of pyrokinesis and hydrokinesis, not spells. It has its limits, but it is quite effective against opponents of this sort."

She turned away from him and walked deeper into the ballroom. "That should be all for this chamber," she said loudly for them all to hear. "If you would all gather around me. We will soon continue to the other sections."

The members of Scarlett's little group passed Leon by. The curly-haired woman, Rosa, gave him a small smile as she went by. "You're not going to get far here if you get stumped by even the smaller things."

He watched the woman as she and the others walked up and gathered around Scarlett like this was something they were used to. Was she talking about what Scarlett just did? Was there more? The last couple of days with Scarlett had been filled with more questions he lacked answers for than he cared to admit, but this was perhaps the farthest from the truth he thought he had known. Scarlett wasn't a *fighter*. Yet the ease with which she moved here showed at least some familiarity in the area.

The woman's attention turned to Leon. They were waiting for him. He walked up to where they were, stopping behind Allyssa and Rosa and looking over their shoulders. He kept a close eye on Scarlett.

The woman herself didn't look out of place here at all. Just like in Lord Withersworth's cellar, she acted like she had complete control of the situation, even if they were in a place that could be filled with even more ghosts, undead, and Ittar knows what else. It was an environment far removed from anything Leon had ever associated with Scarlett. How much of her composure was an act?

"As you may all be aware," she said and turned her gaze to the group as a whole. "We are currently in a separate location from the Withersworth's home in Autumnwell. This is an old mansion in the northern ends of the Withersworth Barony. Once, it belonged to an artificer and wizard named Abelard, but that has long since changed. As you might have surmised from the cellar we were in before and the apparition I just dealt with, Abelard was a man that dabbled in some rather strange and dangerous topics."

Rosa raised a hand. "This Abelard fellow wouldn't have happened to be a dragon of any kind, would he?"

Scarlett gave her a long look. "No, he was not."

The blonde-haired girl next to Rosa leaned close to the woman. “What did I say?” she whispered.

Scarlett continued. “Our primary aim while here will be to remove the root of the issue that is haunting this place and its surrounding area, as agreed upon with Lord Withersworth. Beyond that, however, the usual priorities for these excursions apply. Lord Withersworth has agreed to relinquish any artifacts or other valuables to me, so if you find anything that you believe to be valuable and safe to bring with, you may do so.”

Leon glanced over the others in Scarlett’s group, all of which nodded along at her words. He wasn’t sure what these ‘usual priorities’ were, but they all seemed to know what to do. How many times had they done this with her before?

“This estate houses many secrets as well dangers, so take caution as you proceed. For our first objective, we will divide into two groups. Fynn and Mister Thornthon will move with me while Miss Hale and Miss Astrey will join Sir Leon for this.”

“We’re splitting up?” Allyssa asked. “We’ve never done that before.”

“It has never been necessary before,” Scarlett said. “If we are to proceed with things in an orderly and productive manner, however, it is the best course of action under the current circumstances. From what I have gathered, amongst the many inhabitants of this place, there are two that could be considered the mansion’s ‘custodians’, for lack of a better description. Locating and dealing with them is a prerequisite before we begin addressing any of the other objectives. They also have to be dealt with in a relatively close time-frame of each other, which is why we are taking this particular approach.”

Leon crossed his arms. How would she know that? From what Lord Withersworth had said, this mansion was supposed to have been closed to all outsiders for over a century. Yet Scarlett was speaking like she already knew everything there was to know about this place. Whatever source of information she had couldn’t be *that* accurate, could it? If priests and mages had already tried looking into the matter before with little success, it probably meant that any sort of divination magics didn’t work.

“How do we find these ‘custodians’?” Shin asked. The scarred young man looked ready to start moving with his sword and shield in hand.

“One of them should be present somewhere in the east wing, where we currently are,” Scarlett answered. “The other will be wandering around in the west wing, which is where the group that is coming with me will go. As for how we will be locating them, that will be left up to all of you. Their appearance should be conspicuous enough. I also believe that Fynn and Sir Leon will be able to help in that regard.”

People’s eyes turned to the two of them.

“You’re expecting me to find this ‘custodian’ then?” Leon asked.

“I will admit that my hopes on the subject have diminished somewhat, seeing as you did not immediately detect the Malignant Apparition in this room earlier,” Scarlett said. “But you are

a Solar Knight, no? Sensing the presences of the dead and similar beings should be something you are accustomed to.”

He drew his mouth together. “It’s not our expertise, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“It may not be, but you are still capable of it to a certain degree. Is that not so?” Scarlett gestured to the others. “That is more than can be said for the rest of us, barring Fynn. However, even if you are unable to detect it by yourself, I do not believe that will hamper your chances significantly. The three of you will simply have to pay more attention.”

“Did you just choose these groups out of who you thought had the best chance of finding these custodian fellows then?” Rosa asked.

Scarlett shook her head. “It was also based on what I deemed to be the safest compositions available to us. Sir Leon is more than capable of acting as a front for the two of you by himself, and I can provide sufficient support to Mister Thornthon and Fynn. It should allow both groups to move about relatively unchallenged in these parts of the mansion. We have also brought a suitable amount of mana and healing potions, should they be required.”

“No, I was just curious,” Rosa said. The woman fiddled with the neck of her instrument. “Sounds good, though. I’m sure you and your noggin have spent a good amount of time thinking all this through, so no complaints from me.”

“Isn’t it a bit dangerous, though?” Allyssa asked, looking around the ballroom. “Splitting up like that, I mean. We’ll have Sir Leon with us, but you guys...”

“There is nothing that poses an unsurmountable threat to us in this part of the mansion,” Scarlett said. “You have the Philters of Dawnlight that I asked you to create, do you not?”

“Ehm, yeah.” Allyssa walked over to Fynn, who had a green satchel hanging over his shoulders. The young Shielder pulled at the satchel to reveal the odd face sewn onto its front and put a hand inside Leon had assumed it was a bag of holding of some kind, and the fact that the girl pulled out a number of large bottles with a pale yellow liquid in them proved as much.

“Here they are. I also have the Brews of Fireworks.” Allyssa pointed to another line of vials hanging off the bandolier on her chest.

“Good,” Scarlett said. “There are several variants of specters in this place, so all of you should drink imbibe these before we leave. Otherwise, you may risk falling under their possession.”

Allyssa handed the bottles out to everyone. Leon took his and downed it quickly, grimacing at the taste. It was impressive that the girl was an alchemist at such a young age, but it was clear she hadn’t quite learned how to make her concoctions not taste like dirt yet. That was common among alchemists still focusing on the efficacy of their potions. Still, what mattered in the end was the effect.

Not that he was at much risk of getting possessed by a specter of any kind, but it wouldn't do for a knight to get complacent. Before an assignment, members of their order always took as many precautions as possible to be prepared for as much as they could.

"Aren't you taking them as well, Scarlett?" Allyssa asked as she handed out the last bottle. Scarlett had just placed hers into her pouch instead of drinking it.

"I have no need for it," the woman replied. "Perhaps I should have informed you of as much earlier, considering the price for the materials. For now, I will keep it and see if it can be sold at a later time."

Leon blinked at the statement. Exactly how desperate for money was Scarlett at the moment? And where did that self-confidence come from? The woman had never been averse to throwing money around before. If anything, he thought she would be the first to make use of philters like these.

"Any further questions?" she asked, looking between the group.

Leon raised a hand. "What sort of threats can we expect from now on? If we're talking specifics."

Whatever was up with Scarlett would have to wait, he supposed. It was best if he got as good a handle on the situation as he could now. If anything went sideways, it would be up to him to get everybody out of here safely, no matter what Scarlett might have to say about it.

"As I mentioned, there will be several variants of ghost and specters here." She gestured to the chandelier where the ghost had been hiding before. "The Malignant Apparition just now was such an example. Unfortunately, it was also one of the few which I knew the specific type of. I can tell you that you can expect to see more of the dolls that were in Lord Withersworth's cellar, and do not expect them to be as docile now that we are in their domain. In addition, there may also be undead of sorts, such as skeletons and its kin. As far as I am aware, however, we are unlikely to encounter those as long as we do not exit the mansion grounds."

"...Alright. Then, these 'custodians' you mentioned," he said. "What do they look like? We're going to need more to get off of than what you've said so far."

"I was about to bring that up." Scarlett looked around the room, her eyes stopping on a large painting hanging off one of the walls. "How convenient." She pointed at it.

Leon examined the painting. Its canvas had faded to nothing more than a bleak, grey surface ages ago, so there wasn't much to see. Scarlett walked closer, however, and the rest of them followed.

"What do you see?" she asked, pausing in front of it.

"There is nothi—" He stopped as he came up next to her. Suddenly, there was a pale sheen surrounding the painting. He looked closer, then closed his eyes. When he opened them again, there was a drawing of a ballroom in the painting, with masses of people dancing around on the floor.

“Oh, wow,” Rosa muttered. “That’s...macabre.”

“What?” Allyssa peered at the image, stepping a bit closer. “What is?”

Leon narrowed his eyes. After a while, he saw what the woman meant.

The people in the painting weren’t people. Or rather, not *real* people. Some of their limbs were in odd or unnatural positions, and there was a strangeness to how they were all arranged. And after looking very closely, one could see that there were strings attached to them. Every single figure in the painting had a thin line drawn from their bodies that led up to somewhere in the ceiling, where some unseen hand was ostensibly directing their movements.

Had this been here since before the mansion was abandoned? It would be a strange piece to have in a ballroom unless you were trying to make a message of some kind.

A strange growl left Fynn’s throat as he glared at the painting.

Leon was uncertain what triggered the young man’s reaction, but his attention was brought back to the painting when all the dolls suddenly *moved*. Dozens of lifeless eyes turned to stare at them.

“Wait.” Allyssa stepped back. “Are they looking at *us*?”

In turn, Shin stepped closer to the painting. The girl’s hand shot out to grab his shoulder. “Don’t move *closer* when you hear that, stupid!”

He turned to look back at her. “Calm down. I’m not going to touch it. Besides, it’s still a painting.”

“Since when can paintings do *that*!?”

“Since now, it seems.”

“Pay attention,” Scarlett’s voice brought everyone’s attention back to the image drawn upon the canvas.

The dolls had moved again, a step towards all of them. It was as if they wanted to escape out of the frame, clambering to freedom. One second when you looked at them they would be in one position, then you blinked and they were in the next. Yet... Their movements were so awkward. Their limbs got caught in one another and they stumbled over their own legs. As they clambered forward many of them fell over each other, and soon all the dolls were just lying in piles along the floor.

That was when another figure entered the frame. A transparent man, with an almost palpable gloom hanging around him. He was dressed in an antique black suit, with an arrangement of iron chains hanging around his arms. He floated over to the dolls, stopping momentarily at each one to cut its string and pull it free from the piles, before lobbing it over his shoulder where it disappeared into nothingness. It looked like he was cleaning up just another mess.

“That,” Scarlett said. “Is your first target.”