

106: That which lies buried

Leon glanced at Scarlett's back as the woman and her retainers walked down the cold stone hallways of the Withersworth mansion's underground cellars. She walked ahead as if she was the master of this place, despite its real master being right beside Leon.

"You appear well-informed of the layout of my home, Baroness," Lord Withersworth said as they passed by a set of doors with signs next to them. They looked like storage rooms, some of them marked for furniture and the like.

"I would say it is not as much me being well-informed as me ensuring I have suitable people by my side," Scarlett replied. She gestured towards the white-haired man called Fynn that was walking next to her. The odd young man had his gaze fixed forward. "He is accustomed to detecting that which does not belong."

The Lord didn't seem to object, though he did send a look towards the man and let out a short harrumph as Fynn turned a corner and started moving down another corridor. The Withersworth's cellar network was surprisingly extensive for something that was built in a large, populated city. It must have spanned beneath almost the entire estate, and maybe even a bit beyond. It all seemed quite old as well. Leon's family's home back in Steepmond had a much smaller cellar area, and he wasn't sure what all the space was for to begin with. One only needed so much storage.

As they moved around another corner further down the corridor, Leon turned his eyes towards the man next to him. "Lord Withersworth. What exactly is it we can expect at our destination? I would prefer to have as many details as possible about potential threats and the related circumstances, so that I can be suitably prepared."

The man's gaze moved between him and Scarlett walking at the front. "Has the Baroness not already told you what you need to know? She seems more than familiar with the specifics surrounding the situation, though I would very much like to know how."

Leon shook his head. "Unfortunately, she hasn't seen fit to share much with me yet."

He wasn't sure if it was out of some petty sense of revenge or if she just enjoyed keeping him in the dark. Whatever the reason, he would accept it for now if it helped convince the woman to put the whole betrothal mess to a rest. If she took things too far, though, and tried to use him in other ways... He wouldn't stay still.

Not that he had seen signs of that yet. From the looks of it, Scarlett legitimately needed his help with whatever it was that troubled the Withersworths. He'd wondered why at first, but the meeting with Lord and Lady Withersworth earlier had made things clear enough. She needed money, and she was willing to use a favor from him to get it.

Maybe she was also trying to create a connection with the Withersworths at the same time. While the couple had retired from most high society matters, they probably still held some influence. Lord Withersworth was the previous Lord Marshal, so it was possible Scarlett was trying to somehow use that to advance her house. It would take a lot more than that to do anything major, but it made sense considering her actions during the Elysian Proclamation.

Scarlett wasn't satisfied with being a 'mere' baroness.

Leon had no idea what *exactly* was going through her head, but she was without a doubt up to something, at the very least. Her movements these last few months had been odd, and it bothered him that he couldn't tell how much of it was from some calculations of hers and how much was just because of pure arrogance.

"I don't envy you," Lord Withersworth said in a lower voice, peering ahead at Scarlett. "That one is difficult to handle."

"You are not wrong." Leon glanced at him. "Although Lady Withersworth seemed like a headstrong woman, as well."

The man let out a huff. "I'm half-convinced that woman simply wants to drive me to a premature death so that she can berate me even more for not fulfilling my duties. She is a beast onto itself, that wife of mine. Although I suppose that is why I married her to begin with." His gaze turned cloudy for a moment, then he shook his head. "But that is not what you originally asked. You were wondering about the mansion, were you?"

"By mansion, I am assuming you're not talking about where we are right now?" Leon asked. "If that's where the problem in question is, then yes. Though it would also be good to know where we're going right now."

Lord Withersworth held up a hand to face, stroking the thin mustache above his lip. "I suppose there is no point in keeping mum if you are the one supposed to handle the matter in question. They are connected, in a way; the mansion and this place. However, I'm uncertain why the Baroness would want to visit this place in particular. My family has had dozens of priests and mages examine it over the generations, and none has succeeded in doing anything about it. They all agree that the cause is somewhere else, presumably inside the aforementioned mansion."

"What kind of place is it, exactly?" Leon asked.

"It used to be a storage room, like all the others you see down here. So that you are aware, you don't want to enter the ones without signs next to them. They are like that place, though not quite as forgiving." The man gestured to an old wooden door that they passed by, missing a sign describing its contents. "Roughly one hundred and fifty so years ago, the head of the house was a man known as Abelard Withersworth. Supposedly, he was a genius like no other when it came to the study of magical artisanship. It was never clear exactly what happened, but at some point, he went mad. Accounts say he started eating less, arguing with those close to him, and placing less of his attention on house matters and more on his magical artisanship. It became an obsession, one that he eventually took a step too far. In his insanity, he delved into topics that should never be touched by the hands of man. The results of his misdeeds still remain here and in the old mansion that used to be his home in my fief, and it has haunted this house ever since."

"What was it that he started delving into?"

"I cannot know for certain," Lord Withersworth said. "Much of the details surrounding the circumstances back then have unsurprisingly been lost since. I do not know if the things that

inhabit this place are a result of it, but one of the few things we know that he did was try to combine the teachings of necromancy with his own craft. In pursuit of what, exactly, is unclear.”

Leon frowned. Necromancy. It was a banned school of magic, entirely separate from the other schools commonly practiced in the empire. He *had* suspected necromancy would be involved, considering Scarlett had spoken of specters and revenants before. But naturally occurring ghosts and undead had also been a possibility.

“I find it difficult to believe something like this could have gone unnoticed by officials or members of the Followers of Ittar for so long,” he said.

Lord Withersworth’s expression turned darker. “To say it has gone unnoticed would be a lie. The Imperial Family were well aware of this when it originally happened, and I can only assume the same went for the Followers. After Abelard’s death, his name was removed from both the Followers register, the Imperial Register, and the Heraldic Houses Register. This could only be done by the grace of the Imperial Family, as they forgave our house for his actions after we helped ensure he paid for his crimes. Yet any ambitions we might ever have had to grow past a simple barony were crushed then and there. It is only through diligence and hard work that we have reached the state we are in today, where I could atone for some of the shame brought upon our house by my ancestor by serving His Majesty dutifully as a member of the Empire’s offices of state.”

Leon considered the man’s words. “If Abelard’s actions still have the consequences that you mentioned earlier, what do they look like today?”

“Hmm. Are you aware of what House Withersworth’s prime export is, Sir Leon?”

“It’s Wilerion Wine, isn’t it? I recall my father often having it during our family dinners.”

“That is correct.” Lord Withersworth nodded his head. “And do you know what the principal ingredient in Wilerion Wine is?”

“I do not.”

“It is Wilerion Grapes,” the man said. “Named, of course, after Wilerion Valley, situated east of Ruofield Ridge and south of the Dominating Mountains. They are quite sweet, as far as grapes go, and serve as a great and varied product for our territory. Grapes usually do not grow in the soil this far north, so the land of the Wilerion Valley is also really quite special. Unfortunately, however, it is also situated next to the forest where Abelard’s old home was made. As such, we have had to deal with the errant...outcast now and then.”

“Outcast?”

“Yes. The entire area surrounding the mansion is overflowing with some sort of nefarious aura, as well as various undead and other cursed inhabitants that boggles the common mind. What nefarious deeds Abelard must have performed to create such a place, I cannot even imagine. On occasion, these inhabitants also escape into the lands nearby and cause trouble. Attempts have been made to deal with the problem directly, but entering the mansion has proven to be impossible without the keys that Abelard himself had created.”

“It seems like you’ve done a decent enough job up till now, though,” Leon said. “As I understand it, the Withersworth house is one of the most prosperous baronies in the empire.”

“That is true.” Lord Withersworth’s eyes turned to another of the unmarked doors that they passed by. “We try to locate any escapees before they cause too much damage, and always endeavour to ensure suitable reparations are paid to those affected by such incidents. As you might have heard, however, during this last year things have taken a turn for the worse.”

“How so?”

“More and more of the mansion’s inhabitants have left its forests, mostly entering into our plantations and villages in Wilerion Valley. The majority appear to be ghosts of some kind, attacking people on sight and causing misgrowth in the areas where they linger. There have also been reports of sudden bouts of insanity among villagers; people attacking their friends and family without warning and acting out in delirious ways. Yet they remember none of it when, and if, they return to normal. The rates of these occurrences have increased at a frightening pace, especially these last few months. I fear for what it might mean for the future of my territory.”

“Do you know what type of ghosts these are?”

Lord Withersworth shook his head. “I am afraid I don’t. I have been in many talks with people that might help with the issue, but my expertise lies in other subjects. It has also proved difficult to properly deal with threats that can appear from almost anywhere, and that move in silent and erratic ways. The only permanent solution that has been proposed is dealing with whatever source is present in the mansion.”

Leon furrowed his brows. The ghosts mentioned could be of many different types. Most ghosts visible to the normal person were hostile to people and had an aura of decay that could affect local plant life. The bouts of insanity suggested the involvement of specters, at least, which fit with what Scarlett had said the day before.

If he had a choice on the matter, he would have postponed any further action until they could speak with someone more informed about the specifics of this threat. Maybe they would have the opportunity after they dealt with whatever was in this place and left for the mansion Lord Withersworth spoke of.

“The unmarked rooms here,” Leon said, turning to look at another old door close by. “They’re also home to these ghosts, then?”

If the Withersworths had large groups of undead or ghosts hiding in their cellars, it could be a threat to the entire city. The fact that something like that would be allowed by those aware of it sounded strange. Even if they couldn’t figure out how to deal with the issue, he would have expected barriers of some kind to be erected at the very least. But he couldn’t detect anything of the sort from these doors. There had been one at the entrance to the underground area, but would that be enough if something happened?

Lord Withersworth cleared his throat. “Not exactly, no. I’m uncertain exactly what they are, but the things that are left here are more...docile, so to speak.” He seemed to hesitate for a moment. “They are...dolls.”

Leon blinked. “Dolls?”

“Yes. *Dolls*.”

“You’ll have to elaborate.”

The man’s attention turned forward to where Scarlett stopped in front of a particular door. “I suppose it would be easier to show you,” he said. He then walked up to stand next to Scarlett. “So you have found your destination then, Baroness?”

Scarlett gave a short nod. “It would appear so.”

“I should warn you,” Lord Withersworth said. “Some of what you might see on the other side of this door is not for the faint of heart. You must also not touch anything in there, so there is nothing that you can bring with you outside. Do you still wish to enter?”

The woman turned her head towards the man, eyeing him closely for several seconds. “Your warning is appreciated, but that none of that will deter me.”

The older man met her gaze with a quiet stare. “Hmph. If you say so.”

Scarlett turned back to the door. “Fynn, if you would?”

The young man next to Scarlett put out a hand and pushed the door open. A surprised gasp left Allyssa—the blonde girl with protective goggles on her head—as their group walked inside.

What light was present came from a magical lamp held aloft by Shin, the other of the Shielders hired by Scarlett, and it illuminated lines of dusty old boxes spread out haphazardly around the large room. Dark tarps hung over and covered several other articles towards the back, with some furniture visible here and there as well. Nestled in-between these items and boxes, however, were the dolls Lord Withersworth had spoken about. There were dozens upon dozens of them, ranging in size from reaching up to a person’s shin to the waist. Their appearances differed wildly, some seeming to mimic humans with detailed dresses and hairstyles and disturbingly accurate faces, while others were unsettling in how *unlike* people they were, with stiff, emotionless marble faces that held strange smiles or lacked certain features. All the dolls either lay on the floor or leaned against the side of a box or similar, their unmoving faces turned towards the center of the room.

Leon’s hands went to the hilt of his sword that hung from his waist. Normally, he would not pause even at a sight like this. Dolls were inanimate. Even if they could look strange with their human-like appearances, they were nothing more but simple toys.

At first glance, these dolls appeared to be much like that, spread around the room like the decorations they were. Yet his instincts told him there was something different with these dolls. That their dull eyes weren’t *entirely* empty. Coupled with Lord Withersworth’s warnings, it was clear things weren’t what they seemed.

Another gasp left Allyssa's mouth, and the girl pointed to a section hiding between two boxes in the nearby corner. The magical lamp's light shifted to further light up the spot. A skeletal foot stuck out between the boxes.

"Is that a *body*?"

Leon's eyes narrowed. He searched across the rest of the room. Now that he was looking, he noticed even more examples of what might be more bodies, hiding in the dark of the dreary cellar room. He turned to Lord Withersworth. "What's the meaning of this?"

The man shot a look at the skeletal remains. "Those are the people who visited here before and made the mistake of touching any of the items here. The same fate would befall you if you did the same."

Leon pulled his sword out of the sheath, eyeing the nearby dolls as he stepped closer to the skeleton.

"Sir Leon," Scarlett's voice rang out across the room.

He stopped, turning to look at her.

"Surely you do not intend to touch that body, after the Lord's words just now?" she asked. "I will remind you that, while you may be strong enough to fight away any threat to your person, you are not the only one here."

"I wasn't going to touch it," he said. "I was just going to examine what the cause was."

"Is that much not already clear?" Scarlett sent him a questioning gaze, then gestured to the dolls around them. "I would hope you are not blind to the truth in front of you merely because it does not appear possible at first glance."

He looked at her for a moment, then stepped away from the remains and back to the others. He sheathed his sword again, though he kept his fingers around the handle.

Scarlett turned around and started walking down a thin aisle between the dolls and boxes that cut deeper into the room. The others followed. Leon moved near the back, with Lord Withersworth behind him. Behind Scarlett, her companions were careful not to accidentally touch anything as they moved, though the lady with the curly hair and klerl in her hand often stopped to examine some of the dolls.

"You know," the woman said as she bent over to inspect one that was leaning against the leg of a half-covered chair. "I've always wondered what sort of person gets so excited about dolls of all things. I imagined it'd be some old noble in a mansion somewhere with the money to buy an army of the things whenever he wished, but I never knew they would be so creepy. Just look at this little cookie." She stared into the doll's eyes. It had a white marble face with a small child's dress on. "You can tell that it's just *waiting* to jump at me and slit my youthful, dainty little throat to bits."

Leon reached out to grab the woman's hand as it moved towards the doll.

She looked up at him, her amethyst eyes holding a small smile. “Easy there, tall, lanky, and handsome. I know better than to touch it. I was just going to entertain it a bit.”

He released her hand with a scowl. What was this woman thinking? “How do you know that won’t have the same effect?”

She stood up, wiping away some dust from her legs. “I can just tell. Besides, the ol’ Baroness over there would have said if we had to be extra careful.”

Leon’s eyes went over to Scarlett. How did that make any sense? What had she done to earn that kind of trust? “Surely you don’t agree with this, Scarlett?”

“I trust the judgement of Miss Hale, if that is what you are asking.” Scarlett turned back to them for a moment, then looked at Rosa. “That being said, perhaps it is best if you do not attempt to purposefully antagonize everything that you see, Miss Hale.”

“It’s not antagonizing,” the woman replied. “I just felt bad for it a bit, that’s all. Felt that, considering my gruesome death was out of the picture, the least I could do was let it have some fun. But you’re the boss. From now on, I’ll aim to be nothing but heartlessness and coldness personified, just as you command!”

Scarlett seemed to dismiss the woman’s words and turned her attention forward again.

“I can’t believe we’re talking about dolls as if they’re cold-blooded murders,” Allyssa said, shaking her head. She stared at the doll in question as they continued moving. “...But if they’re all actually...you know...*alive*, and the ones that killed all these people, then they’re monsters, aren’t they? Why would you feel bad for it?”

Rosa shrugged her shoulders. “Even monsters can be sad. And I don’t think being a monster means you don’t deserve pity. Isn’t their very nature a tragedy?”

“But if they *kill* people, isn’t that just disrespectful to their victims?” Allyssa asked. She shivered. “And just *look* at how creepy they are. I don’t get how you can be so calm about it.”

“I guess I’ve seen worse,” the woman said.

Leon studied her for a few seconds. Perhaps he had misjudged her. The way she spoke didn’t sound like someone ignorant of the dangers around her. And her words about monsters... There was a truth to it that he couldn’t deny.

In his time as a knight, he had fought many threats against the empire and its citizens. Most were beasts and savage monsters that were openly hostile towards anything human. Things not much different from animals, moving out of instinct and lacking the intelligence to assess or understand their actions. There were also those that were intelligent but outright evil, like the few demonic presences Leon had encountered in his career. True monsters that only wished to watch suffering for all that they could.

However, there were also others. Monsters only by slim definition, who were more so forced by nature or circumstances to stand in opposition to humanity, but not necessarily as instinctual or basic as most animals were. Beings that, in any other situation, might even have

been considered harmless or able to exist with people. Beings with an intelligence or demeanor not necessarily at odds with what humans were.

The Ancient Dragon that ravaged the land southwest of here seven years ago was probably considered a monster by most. As were many of the other dragons that made their homes across the world. Yet, it most likely wasn't as simple as that.

Leon had helped drive away and severely injure an adolescent dragon the year before because it had injured many of the merchants and travelers on the roads near Chillburg. It had been called a monster by many of the residents, and their joy at seeing members of the Shields Guild work together with the Imperial Solar Knight had been a sight to behold. Yet dragons didn't act without reason.

The issue was only ever investigated more deeply into after the dragon had been driven away. Its territory had been encroached upon by a suit of mercenary poachers, who had erringly thought they could find the legendary dragon eggs in its nest. The people responsible had been charged with the damage and deaths caused by their actions, but by then, it was too late.

Both the dead people and the dragon could be said to be victims of the situation, but that didn't mean Leon would have acted any differently even had he known all the details at the beginning. The reality of the world was that some things would always be in opposition, and the only thing one could do was try to prioritize between them.

Eventually, they reached an open space, where the surrounding boxes and dolls were spread out around them in a half-circle. At the end of the space stood a large rectangular shape, taller and wider than Leon was, and hidden behind a dusty old black canvas. Scarlett gestured at it, and Fynn walked up to remove the sheet. Lord Withersworth's eyes widened and he let out a shout in protest as a cloud of dust flew away from the object.

Leon's gaze shifted around them, keeping a close eye on the dolls and other dark spaces in the room, yet there was no movement anywhere.

"W-What...?" Lord Withersworth's voice trailed off.

In front of Scarlett now stood a wooden door frame, unconnected to any wall. It had two keyholes above and beneath a smaller hole, where it looked like a door handle might have once gone.

Lord Withersworth frowned. "From what I have learned, that action of yours should have caused all of our death just now, Baroness."

"And yet it has not," Scarlett answered. "Ah, but do not mistake this for your knowledge being faulty. This is simply an exception to the rule." She held out a hand towards the man. "You brought the item I spoke of, did you not?"

He sent a confused look between the door and the dolls around them before finally shaking his head and pulling out something from inside his clothes. It was a round door knob, made of polished, clear bronze. "Ahem, yes, of course. I had always wondered what this was for, but I did not know its purpose was for something within this mansion."

He stepped forward and handed it over to Scarlett. She took it and placed it into the hole in the door. She then pulled out the two keys she had shown the Lord during their meeting earlier.

Lord Withersworth stared at the keys for a moment. “W-Wait just a moment, the keys as well? Dagnabbit all! Are you saying the keys are not for that accursed mansion, but for this door!? This is not at all what the accounts said!”

Scarlett put both keys into their respective holes, then turned them at the same time. A soft click sounded out from the door. “I do not see why they cannot be for both. It is common to have more than one way of exiting and entering one’s home, no?”

The door opened with a creak, revealing a curtain of pure blackness.

Leon narrowed his eyes. So it was a portal of some kind. He looked at Scarlett.

Not even Lord Withersworth seemed to be aware of its existence, so how did *she* know?

“This is where we will be parting ways, Lord Withersworth,” she said, looking at the older man. “Unless you wish to accompany us inside Abelard’s mansion?”

The man’s eyes widened somewhat. He looked between Scarlett and the dark curtain within the door, then understanding seemed to dawn on him. “I see. So that is how it is.” He let out a low chuckle as he shook his head. “No, I do not think I will be joining you, Baroness. I am far too old and inexperienced with these matters to be of much aid, and it appears you are more well-informed than me besides. I am afraid I would only hold you young folks back.”

“Very well,” Scarlett said. “Then I suggest you begin making your way back now, before you are left here by yourself.”

She turned to the others. “As for the rest of you, I hope you are prepared for what comes next.”