

108: Hallway crawling

Leon walked down the dark hallways of the mansion, with Allyssa and Rosa following. He kept a close watch on their surroundings, eyeing the different corridors and doors that they passed by which led deeper into the mansion. Occasionally, he glanced back at the other two to make sure they were still there.

Both the two women had turned a lot quieter since they separated from Scarlett and the other group. Most of Allyssa's attention seemed to be focused on what was around them, a pair of brown leather goggles pulled down over her eyes as she held a strange hand crossbow made of metal and decals running up its side. From his experience, it wasn't uncommon for Shielders to be laxer than most others in dangerous environments, which had both its good and bad sides. She seemed to know there was a time and a place for things like that, though.

The same couldn't be said for the woman next to Allyssa. Or at least, that's what he had thought. From what he'd seen of Rosa up till now, Leon would have expected her to make jokes and other strange statements as they went on, and she had to a certain degree, but—though he wasn't entirely sure—it felt like something in her demeanor had changed since they split with Scarlett. And unlike Allyssa, she seemed to consciously *avoid* paying attention to their current surroundings.

Leon paused in his movement and turned his head as he sensed a presence. A low whisper sounded out from a nearby wall, next to a derelict chiffoinier where an empty painting hung above it. His eyes narrowed.

A ghostly hand exited the frame, followed by a woman's face, partly hidden by rippling black hair. It tried to crawl out of the painting with two slender arms, but Leon didn't let it. He gathered his aura and struck with his sword the moment enough of its body was visible, cleaving the woman in two. A wail left her throat as the ghost was torn apart by the brilliant glow of the sword's edge and dissipated into nothing.

He turned to look at the nearby paintings covering the walls of the hallway. It was impossible to tell which ones were hiding something inside them, and for some reason, he usually couldn't detect anything until whatever was present inside tried to exit. It didn't help that all the paintings were supernatural in some way and appeared empty until one got closer.

"That one looked almost normal compared to the last one," Allyssa said from behind him. He looked back at her. The girl was giving another painting a wide berth, crossbow raised in one hand and the other clasping the bandolier hanging across her chest. She glanced at him. "Are all ghosts always this varied?"

"It depends," he answered. "Some ghosts are the product of real events. Echoes of the creatures and people who were once alive, you could say. Others are just a natural consequence of places like these, where the boundaries between life and death are thinner. The latter can take the shape of almost anything you can imagine, while the former usually looks more 'normal', as long as the original cause wasn't something overly terrible."

"So the ghost we ran into before was an example of the latter?"

“...It could have been, yes.”

The one before this had appeared as a person with sewing marks all across their body as if their limbs had been reattached posthumously. It could definitely have been a natural result of a convergence of negative energies in the area, but he doubted it. Echoes of people were almost always a result of something that had happened in real life.

He began moving down the hallway again, returning his focus to the surroundings. They'd been roaming around this part of the mansion for almost an hour now, and they still hadn't found any signs of the custodian Scarlett wanted them to locate. These hallways were also strange in that they never seemed to end, yet at the same time, they'd passed by several stairs and other corridors that clearly seemed to lead to other sections and wings of the mansion. More than should have been possible, at least, no matter how large of a mansion this was. At first, he thought the cause was some sort of spatial magic, but he was growing more and more skeptical about that.

Whatever the underlying reason, it proved annoying enough. Scarlett had told them not to deal with the custodian within the first hour and a half or so if they found it, so that she and her group could make it to the west wing. But with how large this place was, and how few traces they'd found this far, he was starting to doubt whether they would even find their target to begin with.

A while passed as they moved through the mansion before Allyssa eventually spoke again. “What do you think happened here for this place to become like this?”

Leon glanced back at her. “I heard about this place first earlier today, so I don't think I know much more than you.”

“Scarlett didn't tell you anything?”

“No, she didn't.”

Allyssa blinked at him. “Oh.”

“I'm not sure what kind of relationship you think I have with her, but our previous interactions should have made it clear that us being betrothed isn't because of any fondness on our parts.”

“No, well... I could tell that much, I guess. I just thought that...” the girl's words trailed off, and she shook her head. “Well, whatever. It doesn't matter.”

He eyed her for a few seconds before returning his focus forward. “I could tell earlier that all of you were used to working with Scarlett in this. Does she usually ignore telling you what's going on like this?”

“I wouldn't she ignores it,” Allyssa's voice came from behind me. “It's just that... I think she only tells us what she thinks is necessary? Usually that's more along the lines of what kind of monsters we can expect or where traps and such might be. Sometimes she even skips those, if she's confident that we can deal with things as they are.”

Leon listened to her words. To him, that sounded like a terrible way of leading. If he were to command his knights while only sharing the most basic of intel for their assignments, how could he expect them to react properly if uncertain situations arose? How could he even expect them to trust him if they knew he was hiding things related to their missions? Honestly, he doubted any Solar Knight would accept it to begin with.

But maybe that wasn't the same. The Imperial Solar Knights were some of the most elite and disciplined knights in the empire. Each and every one could be trusted to keep what they learned secret no matter the circumstances, and he didn't have to worry about them not properly understanding the information given to them. Of course, they were also a prideful bunch. He'd learned that lesson the hard way when he originally became a member. But like many things in life, he'd only started to appreciate that fact after spending some time with them.

In comparison, Scarlett was relying on Shielders and people she was paying to work for her. For as long as he'd known her, the woman had never placed all of her trust in another person. Not to his knowledge, at least. Being paranoid about other people's motivations was probably par for the course for someone like her. In her mind, it probably made perfect sense to only share what was absolutely necessary. And there was probably some truth to that, in some way.

Nevertheless, he doubted it was the best way of going about things.

Suddenly, he stopped. There was only one set of steps behind him now. He spun around. Allyssa met him with a confused look before the girl herself looked to the side and back. Rosa had frozen on the spot a dozen steps back, affixed in front of one of the paintings.

Bulwark of the Egis.

A pool of light spread out from Leon's sword and formed a shimmering barrier around Allyssa and him. Then he moved, shooting up the hallway with his eyes locked onto Rosa and the frame before her. It took him two seconds to reach the woman and pull her back, placing himself between her and the painting. He readied himself to deal with whatever might come out.

...Nothing came.

As Leon blinked, the empty canvas changed into that of an abandoned village landscape, with dilapidated dirt trails running through it. But there was nothing in particular that stood out about the picture, nor did he feel that anything was off.

Behind him, Rosa seemed to rouse from whatever daze had afflicted her. He looked back at her with one eye staying on the painting. "Are you okay?"

She stared at him for a second before sending a glance at the painting. She shook her head. "Y-Yeah, I'm fine. Perfectly fine, thank you. Must have been something...strange with that painting." A small smile formed on her face. "Funny, I thought those potion thingies we drank would stop mental thingies like this, but guess it got through anyway. Thankfully, we've got a tall and dependable knight right her ready to save damsels like me when we need it, right?"

She reached up a hand to adjust some of her hair, then looked down the hallway where Allyssa was surrounded by the barrier of light. “Think you might have scared the youngling, though.”

“I didn’t have time to explain things.” Leon examined Rosa for a few seconds, then finally placed his full attention on the painting. There still weren’t any signs of a specter or anything of the sort hiding in it. He also couldn’t detect any sort of bewitchment coming from it. It was just the image of the abandoned village. But the look he’d seen on Rosa’s face, for just a brief moment... That wasn’t the look of someone seeing a simple village.

He would have to be more alert from now on.

The two of them returned to Allyssa, who had seemed ready to escape the barrier of light and provide aid at any moment if needed.

“Are you okay, Rosa?” the Shielder asked as the barrier fell around her.

“Just dandy,” the woman replied. “Might have to take things a bit more carefully from now on, though.”

She held up the instrument in her hands and a few notes rang out. Leon felt a strange clarity enter his mind as a sense of cool calmness fell over him.

“Haven’t used this one much lately, but it always gives me the urge for a good, nice coffee.”

Allyssa grimaced at that, for some reason.

“Just make sure not to lose any arms, legs, or other precariously attached limbs,” Rosa continued. “This one is a pain to maintain, and it’d be even more of a pain if I would have to do that while reattaching any errant body parts.”

Leon frowned. He’d assumed the woman knew bardic charms from the klert she was carrying around. That alone was unusual enough in the empire, but this effect was surprisingly powerful from someone outside of the Velvet Dancers of the Luicean Isles.

“Can you really reattach arms and legs?” Allyssa asked.

Rosa cocked her head to the side. “Who knows? I’ve never tried it.” She pointed to a thin silver bracelet around her wrist. “With this, it might actually be possible. Maybe. Possibly. It’d be a pain to find out today, though, I can tell you that much.”

She shot the two of them a grin, then signaled down the hallway. “Well, we can’t be loitering around here forever, can we? I’m sure we have several closets full of ghosts and bed-monsters just waiting to meet us.”

Leon kept his gaze on her for a moment longer before finally turning around and resuming his position at the front of the group. Now, though, he kept even closer watch, both behind and ahead.

They walked in silence for a while until finally a subdued rustling of metal sounded out around a corner in front of them. All of them stopped.

“That sounded like chains, didn’t it?” Allyssa whispered from behind. “Is that him?”

Leon looked back to make sure both of them were ready, then he gestured for them to follow him. Soon, they rounded the corner at the end of the hallway and found another corridor to their right that ended in a door with a painting hanging on either side of it. There were no signs of what had made the noise.

Looking back from where they’d come, he found that the hallway they’d been going down now looked slightly different; new furniture and paintings were lining the walls, and the carpet on the floor had gone from an intense vermillion with gold trimmings to a dark green, lacking any decorations whatsoever.

“Should we try the door?” Allyssa asked.

Leon turned back to examine the door in question. Most rooms they’d tried up till now had either been locked or empty, but this was the first time they might have heard a sound from one.

“Stay behind me,” he said in a low voice, then moved up to the end of the hallway. His eyes were locked onto the empty frames next to the door, which soon changed to display a pair of dark, empty forests where the night sky showed through the dense canopies.

Even after waiting for several seconds, there was no sign of anything trying to leave them. Waiting for a while longer to be safe, he then stepped closer to the door and tried the handle. It crept open without noise.

He glanced back at the others, who gave him short nods. He opened the door fully, revealing a pitch-black room. It didn’t share the same magical illumination effect to it that much of the rest of the mansion seemed to have. A touch came from his arm as Allyssa stepped up beside him and pulled out a thin vial from beneath her cloak, gesturing to cover their eyes.

He readied his sword as he raised a hand to shield his eyes. The Shielder threw the vial. A moment later, an explosion of light spread from the room where it landed. Leon stepped in front of Allyssa as the light quickly subsided to a manageable level, a thin pool of illuminating liquid having gathered on the floor at the center of the room.

A gasp sounded out behind him as they took in the lit-up space.

It looked like a playroom, with miniature rocking horses and several other toys spread about. Wide, dull windows faced a gloomy forest that could only barely be seen between sets of heavy black curtains. The darkness from outside almost seemed to want to sneak into the room, not shying away from the light inside.

There was a group of six dolls leaning against the walls around them. Yet, these weren’t the same dolls they’d seen in Lord Withersworth’s cellar. These were at least as large as a child, with the matching clothes and looks as well. Their pale marble faces with mouths and eyes

painted onto them gazed out into the space in front of them, and in their hands, they held large scissors that were the length of a short sword.

Silence fell around them as Leon observed the dolls. None of them seemed to have reacted to either the light or the noise.

“That looks expensive,” Rosa said from behind. A hand was rested on Leon’s shoulder as the woman looked over him and pointed towards the other end of the room. There, lying on a carved wooden chest, was a long, curved blade with a silver sheen to it. Hints of red also ran along the metal of the blade, and at the base, there was a large hole. It looked like it could have been a part of a massive scissor at some point, the kind the dolls were holding, though what it was doing here was unclear.

“We’re not here for artifacts,” he whispered, looking back at Rosa.

“Not sure Scarlett would agree.”

He held back a groan. Right, she had said they should get ‘valuable’ things when they could.

Scarlett and her greed...

He turned back to the room. “Stay back,” he said as he took one step inside.

Immediately, all the dolls’ heads spun to him.

“*Is it time?*” A symphony of hair-raising giggles filled the room. “*It’s time to cut~*”

Before he could blink, all of the dolls were standing up. They were *fast*.

Divided Blade’s Quintessence.

Within a moment, he’d focused his aura in his sword and stepped out of the room. He shut the door as he prepared his counterattack. Barely a second later, a cacophony of slashing noises tore through the air as the wooden door shook before him. Rosa and Allyssa moved back even further, the Shielder raising her crossbow and the bard her instrument. Leon waited for a few seconds longer as the sounds of the door being broken down continued.

Suddenly, the noises stopped. A moment passed, and the rattling of chains rang out from the other side of the door.

He hurried to open the door again and was once more met by a pitch-black room.

Waiting for a few seconds, sword at the ready for any potential attack, there was nothing coming at him. He looked back at Allyssa, who pulled out another vial and walked up. He covered his eyes once more as light filled the space, then scanned the room. The dolls were back in their original positions, but there was no sign of the origin of the chain noise.

He let out a sigh. Playing it safe here clearly wouldn’t work. Seems like he would have to do it the hard way.

Bulwark of the Egis.

A barrier of light formed around the three of them.

“Let’s try this again,” he muttered to himself. He looked back at the other two. “Stay back for now. I’ll deal with this.”

He stepped inside the room and closed the door behind him. All the dolls turned to look at him.

“*Is it time?*” Giggles filled the room as they stood up. “*It’s time to cut~*”

Light rose from Leon’s sword as he raised it.



Allyssa glanced at Sir Leon’s back as he walked down the eerie, dimly lit hallway in front of her.

It still felt weird, being around and talking so casually with a person she’d only heard of in tales before. Leon Delmon seemed to be exactly like the rumors described him, but at the same time, he wasn’t. Allyssa couldn’t count the number of times she’d heard Maggie at the Guild Branch talk about how he had fought a dragon along with the others, as well as several other things. In many ways, she’d expected those impressions to have been exaggerated. But surprisingly, he still lived up to those expectations, with his tall and handsome appearance, the friendly way he acted with you, and the way he seemed both able and wanting to protect those around him.

At the same time, though, he was also a person. This much had been made exceedingly clear to Allyssa. Not even in her wildest dreams had she been expecting that she would one day get to see the Solar Knight’s Vice-Captain *squabble* with Scarlett, of all people. And more than once in the span of just a few hours, as well. Never had she been expecting *Scarlett* to squabble with anyone, for that matter. From what she’d learned of the woman, Scarlett didn’t as much as argue as much as just roll over everybody around her until she got what she wanted. A fact that was about as impressive as it was somewhat worrying.

The way Allyssa had understood it, the woman just didn’t know any other way of going about things. It was almost cute, in an awkward way. Probably not for the people at the receiving end of the noblewoman’s actions, though. That said, Scarlett usually seemed to have good reasons for what she did, so Allyssa didn’t want to seem like the type to complain about a lot of things. She wanted to continue working for the woman for as long as she could. And not only because of all the opportunities it gave her to improve her alchemy.

When it came to Scarlett's relationship with Sir Leon, however, it was clear it wasn't simple. At the moment, Allyssa was strangely thankful for that because it made it easier to meet the knight. She imagined this was similar to how many saw her father at first, before witnessing how he acted around her. People were always at least slightly different from the stories.

Not that she was *glad* that Scarlett and Sir Leon seemed to dislike each other. Things like that were never good. Especially if you were supposed to get married. But she also knew nobles were weird like that. She was curious about exactly what might have happened for their relationship to get to where it currently was, but it wasn't like it was her affairs to pry into. She wasn't like Rosa, who could say the most daring of things right to people's faces. Or Fynn, who could seemingly fail to pick up on the most basic of social cues. Or Shin, who spent all day with his nose in his books and didn't seem to care a bit about what everybody else thought about him.

In fact, was she the only *normal* person in this group? The thought had never struck her before, but now that it had... What in Ittar's name had Kat actually gotten her into? She was so going to give that woman an earful the next time they met.

Allyssa's eyes shifted to her left, where Rosa was. The usually cheery woman had been quieter than normal ever since they left the others. Right now she was looking around as if she was prepared for something to pop out of the walls any second now. Which, fair, was actually a possibility. But Rosa often struck Allyssa as the sort of person who didn't fear anything at all, so this level of focus felt a bit out of character.

Maybe it was because Rosa was scared of falling under the same kind of spell that she had earlier, back when Sir Leon helped her. Allyssa wasn't sure what had actually happened back then, but this considering where they were, anything was possible. This creepy mansion had all kinds of strange things about it.

A shiver went down her back as her thoughts returned to some of the things they'd encountered up till now. The ghosts were bad enough, but the dolls were the worst if you asked her. She was almost glad that Sir Leon took care of those last ones by himself, even if it did make her feel a bit useless.

Unfortunately, they hadn't found any traces of that custodian person Scarlett wanted them to find after that. He didn't return even after they exited the room, it seemed. The strange blade that had been there was the only thing they got out of it.

Allyssa was currently carrying it, wrapped in one of the curtains that had been in the room. None in their group had a spatial bag, so there weren't many other alternatives. For some reason, Scarlet always wanted Fynn to carry the larger bag that they'd originally found in the fairy realm, and the woman never separated from her own spatial pouch.

Allyssa paused in her thoughts as her eyes fell on the door of a room that seemed different from the others. It had an odd feeling to it that she found it hard to describe. She looked at the others. Neither of them appeared to have noticed anything in particular.

"Wait," she called out. Both Sir Leon and Rosa stopped to look back at her. She pointed to the door. "I think there's something behind this door. It's special."

“Special?” Sir Leon’s forehead creased. He eyed the door for a moment. “I can’t sense anything.”

“Neither can I,” Rosa said.

“...Really?” Allyssa looked back at the door. Wasn’t it obviously different from the others?

“Want to look inside?” Rosa asked, that small grin that the woman usually wore having returned to her face.

“It might be another trap.” Sir Leon stepped to it before they could. “I’ll check first.”

He tried to open it, but the door didn’t budge.

“You’re doing it wrong.” Allyssa moved up beside him and reached for the handle. He caught her hand before she could touch it.

She blinked, then looked down at her hand.

...What did she just try?

Her eyes turned to Sir Leon. The taller man was looking down at her with a serious expression.

“I think we should leave this room alone,” he said.

“No, but...” Allyssa looked back at the room.

“It’s clearly affecting you in some way. Remember what happened with Miss Rosa earlier.”

“I get that, but...” Allyssa's gaze was fixed on the door’s handle, a twisting set of bronze lines in the shape of a wing.

She could *tell* that there was something off about this feeling, but at the same time, she didn’t think it was bad. Not necessarily. It was just something...familiar? No, not familiar. But not something *new*.

“I think we should still try it,” she said.

Sir Leon watched her for a moment longer before turning to look at Rosa. “Can you try that charm you used earlier?”

“It’s called a melody, but sure. Can do.” The bard placed both hands on her instrument. “I’ve been using it quite a bit now, though, so don’t go expecting too much of me if something happens later.”

A short tune sounded out from the klert as she played it. A sense of clarity filled Allyssa, along with the same cool calmness that she had gotten used to from the previous times Rosa used the same magic. Still, it didn’t affect the feeling the door gave off to her.

Sir Leon looked back at her. “Is there any difference?”

She shook her head. “I still think we should try it. I can tell that there’s something different about this one. Something I should see.”

He gave her a long look, then finally nodded her head. “Alright. But I’ll be going first. You’ll stay close to me unless I say otherwise, as well.”

“Yes, of course.” Allyssa reached out for the door handle again. For some reason, she knew exactly what to do. She began by pulling it outwards. At the same time, she placed her other hand on the door and pushed inwards. Then she pulled the handle downwards. Something clicked, and the door swung open.