

218: Home once more

The final days in Bridgespell swiftly slipped by for Scarlett and her party. They were comfortable enough in the accommodations provided by the Golden Griffin Inn, so Scarlett had politely declined Duke Valentino's offer to stay at his estate. Nevertheless, she had taken him up on his proposal to meet up again, discussing the recent events in Crowcairn and some other matters related to the nobility. She'd even had dinner with the duke and his wife.

Though not exactly *enjoyable* experiences, she had to acknowledge that they could be valuable, if only for the future leverage it gave her to have a connection with the Duke of Bridgespell. Even if the man himself didn't appear to be her biggest fan.

In the days leading up to their return to Freybrook, Scarlett had considered using some of the time to explore more of the nearby dungeons. Ultimately, though, she decided against it. She had already explored the most accessible ones, and her party deserved more than a single day of rest, considering everything that had happened.

She had anticipated Raimond possibly visiting them at some point and updating her on how things were going on the Followers' end, but that hadn't happened. Presumably, he was too preoccupied with his duties to find the time, which was understandable. From what Scarlett had heard from the duke, the investigation into the citadel was still ongoing, and no official statement had been released to the empire at large beyond some vague assurances.

As the final day in Bridgespell arrived, Scarlett and the others finished their preparations early in the morning and left the inn, boarding their carriage bound for the city's Kilnstone.

When they arrived in Freybrook, the sun had just started stretching its golden light across the city, peeking up above the horizon in the clear sky. In stark contrast to the swarming chaos of activity that was Bridgespell at all times of the day, Freybrook's streets were a lot less packed, inviting a sense of calm as their carriage started traveling through the city.

To Scarlett's surprise, a delicate layer of snow had fallen upon the city while they were gone, adding a touch to the otherwise familiar scene.

Rosa, peering out the carriage window at the wintry tableau and the people walking about on the streets, sighed dramatically. "Ah, good ol' Freybrook. It's been ages, but it's still as thrillingly dull as ever. I love it."

"It's only been two weeks," Fynn said, a subtle frown showing on his brow.

"Exactly." Rosa nodded sagely. "Ages."

Allyssa's lips parted in a light laugh as she shook her head, the girl's gaze fixed on the cityscape outside. "I agree that it certainly *feels* like more than two weeks have passed. So much happened. I'm still having trouble processing it all."

"That might have more to do with your poor perception of time," Shin remarked beside her, though his comment was promptly ignored by its intended target.

“So, boss.” Rosa turned her attention to Scarlett. “What do you have planned for us from here? What devious schemes to rattle our minds and blow away our common sense can we expect?”

Scarlett spared a brief glance at the bard before shifting her own attention outside. “It will depend,” she answered.

The threat that Hallowed Cabal’s assault against the empire posed still loomed like a dark cloud on the horizon. At this point, it was probably only a few weeks away. She needed to continue preparing for that while also looking into some other relevant matters.

“For the time being, our activities will mostly be centered around the mansion. Although there might be the occasional excursion to other cities, they will be brief, allowing ample time for each of you to pursue whatever personal matters you may wish. For example, I presume that Miss Astrey will be spending this time to further delve deeper into your alchemical pursuits.”

Fynn would likely continue communing with his ancestors to get access to the next level of The Howling Gale’s Haunt, while Rosa needed to acclimatise herself further with the Heartstone and the powers it brought.

As for Scarlett, her focus would be on refining her own magic, among other things.

The conversation ended there, with the others engaging in some small talk as the carriage rolled through Freybrook’s streets, heading towards the city’s northern district where the Hartford mansion stood. The closer they got to the estate itself, the more prominent a certain presence at the back of Scarlett’s mind became, as if making its existence known.

The [Obedience’s Solitude Loci] recognized her return.

Scarlett couldn’t tell for sure, but she felt like its presence had grown a bit more pronounced during her absence. As they approached the gates, passing through the boundary of the Loci’s domain which stretched beyond the estate’s walls, she only grew more convinced of this.

She would have to visit it in order to assess its progress later.

The two guardsmen stationed at the entrance were clad in thick gambesons to ward off the chill, greeting Scarlett’s carriage with brisk salutes before moving to open the gates. She caught snippets of conversation between the coachman and the guards as the carriage passed through, following the snow-covered path leading to the mansion.

After the vehicle came to a stop and Scarlett’s party had disembarked, she spotted Garside and three other servants emerging from the mansion, crossing the courtyard to welcome them.

“My Lady,” Garside greeted her, the old butler’s mustache shifting as he spoke. He and the other servants bowed and curtsied. “Welcome back to Freybrook. It warms me greatly to see you and your companions in good health.”

“Thank you, Garside,” Scarlett replied, considering him for a moment. “Did anything noteworthy happen while I was away?”

“Not anything that demands your immediate attention, my Lady. A report detailing the minor details awaits on your desk for you to peruse at your leisure.”

“Good.” Scarlett gave a satisfied nod. It would have been just her luck if the whole place had burned down while she was gone. “Is there anything else?”

Garside seemed to hesitate for a moment, his brows furrowing as a thoughtful expression appeared on his weathered face. “Not here in Freybrook, no. However... The staff heard the news regarding what occurred in Bridgespell, and there were those who expressed their concern for yours and the others’ safety while you were there, my Lady. Lady Evelyne, in particular, was anxious upon receiving the news. Especially when she learned that you were in talks with Duke Valentino.”

Scarlett could understand Evelyne’s worry. She didn’t exactly have the best track record when it came to interacting with high nobles. Count Knottley, Marquis Delmon, Duke Tyndall, and now Duke Valentino could maybe also be added to that list. She seemed to have a knack for getting on their nerves.

At least her relations with Count Knottley and Duke Valentino could *technically* be considered cordial.

“The concern is appreciated, but unnecessary,” she told Garside. “While the events in Bridgespell are troubling in their implications, I am more than capable of handling myself, and I was an honored guest at the duke’s estate. As for Evelyne, where is she currently?”

“Lady Evelyne is on business in the city and won’t return until evening.”

Then it seemed as if Scarlett would have to wait to catch up with the woman until later. There was a fair deal to discuss. Scarlett was still a bit uncertain about exactly how much she should share, considering that oversharing about what had gone on in Bridgespell would almost definitely cause unneeded grief and anxiety for Evelyne.

Garside quickly briefed Scarlett on some of the things the staff had been up to during her absence as they crossed the courtyard—which had been thoroughly cleaned up after the dragon incident—and entered the mansion.

From there, Scarlett instructed her party that they were free to do as they wished for the rest of the day, and the group dispersed to deal with their own things. Scarlett lingered in the foyer for a while longer, continuing her conversation with Garside and briefly informing him of some of the things they had been up to in Bridgespell which she hadn’t mentioned in any of the missives she’d sent back. She didn’t tell him anything about the Anguish business, though.

Garside also told her about how he had been in contact with a mason who had looked into reconstructing the back garden where the Loci was. The mason had apparently already drawn up several plans for the project and was now only waiting for Scarlett’s confirmation before starting any of the work.

She would need to schedule a meeting with the mason when she had the time. He must have been rather surprised when he first saw that the hedge garden was still blooming in the middle of December.

Concluding her talks with Garside, Scarlett proceeded to navigate her way towards the east wing. Ascending the stairs to the second floor, where her office was located, she couldn't shake a strange sense of nostalgia as she walked through the carpeted halls adorned with paintings and other decorations. Returning home after a long trip *always* felt oddly strange, no matter the time or place.

Upon reaching her office, she paused for a moment to study the aged mahogany door leading inside.

Only now did she realize that she had started thinking of this place as *home*.

While the Scarlett part of her had probably always considered it as such, mentally, this place had only functioned as her temporary dwelling. A base of operations as she acclimated to this world. A pragmatic necessity rather than a genuine home.

So when did the shift in perception happen for that part of her as well?

She wasn't sure. It didn't seem like a sudden transition, at the very least. She had been in this world for almost half a year now, and a lot of things had changed during that time. Beyond the sudden forced transformation of her personality when she first arrived here, most changes had been gradual.

Still, it was a curious realization to make only now, after all this time.

It made her wonder what her broader feelings about being here, in this world, were.

She reached out and turned the handle of the door in front of her, stepping into the office. The room appeared exactly as she just left it before leaving for Bridgespell, with two bookshelves adorning each wall and a large painting depicting an ancient battlefield hanging behind the desk at the far end.

Scarlett's eyes lingered on the artwork for a moment before she crossed the room, circling the desk and settling into the chair in front of it. Her gaze moved to the documents stacked in the desk's corner, prepared by Evelyne for Scarlett to review upon her return. The younger woman was always diligent in her work to manage the barony and support Scarlett in her current endeavours.

That was funny, given the nature of their relationship. Even if they didn't constantly argue and snap at each other whenever they had a conversation anymore, their dynamic remained far from the typical 'sibling' bond.

She wondered what the original Scarlett might have thought if she witnessed the current state of her life. Despite sharing many traits and emotions with the original, Scarlett still found the woman herself to be a bit of a riddle.

A riddle she wasn't sure she would ever completely solve.

Pushing those thoughts aside for now, she reached for the first set of papers prepared by Evelyne, intending to quickly go through it all before dealing with other matters. Her hand stopped only a moment later, however, as her eyes met a pair of brilliant amethyst orbs, gazing at her inquisitively.

“...Greetings, Empress,” Scarlett eventually said.

The black-furred cat that had suddenly appeared on the desk—or had she always been there?—inclined her head in a small nod, as if deigning to accept the greeting. Empress then shifted her attention away from Scarlett, leisurely licking her paw.

Scarlett quietly regarded the cat for several seconds.

Was this just another of Empress’ impromptu visits, or did it carry a specific purpose?

“...If I may ask, is there something The Gentleman wants to tell me?”

Empress glanced up at her, considering her, before turning around. In one graceful movement, the cat leaped down onto the floorboards and strode up towards the door, which opened of its own accord.

Scarlett’s gaze trailed the cat as she exited the room, pausing to look back at Scarlett, as if expecting her to follow.

Suppressing a sigh, Scarlett rose from her seat. It seemed that she would have to postpone the paperwork until later.