

## 132: Just ruminations

As was becoming relatively common for Scarlett these days, she was currently sitting on the porch beside Arlene in Freymeadow, resting after another practice session.

She glanced over at the raven-haired woman who, as usual, had her attention focused on the book in her lap.

Over a week had passed in the outside world since Gaven returned with the [Memory of the Covenant], and it had probably been the calmest week yet that she had experienced since ending up in Scarlett's body. She'd used it to both get a lot of extra work done and to finish whatever preparations there were left. Any further dungeon excursions had been delayed for the time being, since she didn't want to leave the Freybrook area until all of this was over with.

To Arlene, it would seem like Scarlett and Rosa had arrived here in Freymeadow just two days back, but their current visit was actually the second one during this past week. The fact that the woman continued to deny Scarlett's request to be taken in as a disciple still hadn't changed, even with Scarlett's current progress in magic. Despite that, Arlene helped in her own strange—and somewhat infuriating—ways, so it wasn't too bad.

It irked Scarlett slightly to think about how much faster it would have gone if the woman was actually trying to teach her for real, though.

She turned her head to look out at Freymeadow's village square. Rosa was sitting with most of the village's kids on the wooden platform at the center of the square, playing on her klerk as a few of the children performed some odd dances that Scarlett could only assume the bard had taught them.

While Allyssa, Shin, and Fynn all appeared a little perplexed about this sudden lull in activities this last week, as with most things, Rosa had taken it in stride and seemed to make the most of it. Both when back in Freybrook and here in Freymeadow. Scarlett had heard the woman taken to holding minor concerts for the mansion staff in the evenings. They were quite well received if what Garside told her was true. Although, if what she'd heard about the content of some of those concerts was also true, then she might have to have a talk with Rosa about what were appropriate topics to cover...

She shook her head, letting her thoughts wander as she watched the children's joyful faces.

In a way, Scarlett wished that the time they could spend here in Freymeadow wasn't limited in the way it was. And it wasn't only because it would give her a lot more time to practice her magic.

This upcoming plan involving the Countess and Gaven was different from anything she had done before. Even from when she dealt with the Hallowed Cabal. This time, there were a lot more unknown factors at play, and she had to leave most of the actual work to other players.

It wasn't as if she *enjoyed* having to do everything herself. Having others do annoying work for her was at the top of the list of perks that came with being a baroness, in her opinion.

Cleaning, cooking, and all the other household chores that needed doing were a pain that she had gotten more than enough of back when she lived alone and with her younger sister. Being able to send Gaven out to do jobs for her was *nice*.

Despite that, it left a poor taste in her mouth this time. There was a part of her that screamed at leaving control of things in the hands of others.

It felt childish, letting things like that bother her when everything was her plan to begin with. She would like to say that it was solely another trait left behind by the original Scarlett. There definitely *was* some of that at play. But the truth was that she had always been like that. She would never have described herself as one, but back when the relationship between her and her younger sister had been at its worst, ‘control-freak’ was a term that her sister threw around almost daily. It had annoyed her to no end at the time, but it also wasn’t something she could completely deny.

There were a ton of things she had to take into consideration regarding the heist on the Sanctum of Ittar, and being concerned about this didn’t really help. There had been several times when she had just considered delaying or even giving up on the whole venture. But she couldn’t do that.

**[Main questline has begun: Rising action]**

**{Conflicts are brewing as powerful factions have started moving on the continent of Tanrelia. The Tribute of Dominion stands as the focal point of these clashing designs, resting in the heart of the ruins of Beld Thylelion}**

**[Objective: Enter the ruins of Beld Thylelion before all others]**

**[Reward: Additional Skills Menu privileges]**

**[Failure: Demise]**

The Sanctuary of Ittar held several items she could have use of, but there was one she needed above all else. It was one part of a set, and it was what would allow her to get inside Beld Thylelion to complete the main quest’s requirements. It was also the item that she had made a deal with the Gentleman regarding.

She genuinely couldn’t think of another way to complete the quest, so a lot was resting on her success in stealing this item from the Followers.

To be honest, she felt pretty certain that things would work out somehow. Even if things went against her expectations, both Gaven and the Countess were powerful in their own ways, and her plan relied on knowledge she had from ‘Chronicle of Realms’. Even taking all the changes between the game and this world that she knew about into account, this type of knowledge had stayed dependable throughout her stay here.

Her main worry wasn’t that Gaven and the Countess wouldn’t be able to complete the mission and get the item for her. Rather, it was what would happen after that. How she would deal with the Countess.

While she had planned out the actual heist in exceeding detail, she was still left mostly at a blank as to how to handle the woman. The Countess’ relation to the Augur was the entire reason Scarlett had made contact with her in the first place. She didn’t have any future plans for her after this. To make things worse, the Countess *was* a liability in more ways than one.

Simply letting her go wasn't an option for several reasons. The woman was strong, so keeping her in the mansion and having her help out at times might work, but the biggest hurdle still remained.

Scarlett had promised that she would help the Countess meet her sister, and the woman took that to mean that they would 'save' the Augur from the Followers. So how would she react when that didn't happen? And how would Scarlett calm her down if she threw a fit right after they escaped the Sanctuary?

Scarlett didn't have a suitable answer. The Countess was unpredictable, and there was no telling whether she would be in a state where she would listen. She was hoping that the goodwill she had built up with the woman would be enough to deal with the situation, but that wasn't a guarantee.

In the first place, was it even okay for her to manipulate the Countess like this? No matter how you looked at the situation, it was a pretty heartless thing to do. She was well aware of that, yet she had no plans to stop.

"I won't ask what's on your mind, if that's what you're waiting for."

Scarlett blinked, turning to her right where Arlene sat, still looking down at her book. It wasn't common for the wizard to initiate conversations like this.

"I was not," she said after a moment.

Arlene nodded. "Good."

"...Was there a reason you believed I was?"

The woman simply shrugged. "Who knows? I've only known you for a short time, but it looked like you were trying to tear a hole in those kids with your eyes. Either you dislike children more than most others, or you've got something bothering you."

Scarlett watched her for a while, then turned back to look at the village square. "Is that so..."

Perhaps she looked more contemplative than she thought. If it was to the level where Arlene could tell so easily—when the woman had first met her two days prior—then Rosa would almost definitely have noticed something was off as well. Despite that, the bard had said nothing, even when she was the type who wasn't afraid to pry and tease Scarlett for the smallest things.

"So you're not going to share?" Arlene asked.

Scarlett turned back to her. "I was under the impression you held no interest in what was on my mind."

"I said I wasn't going to ask about it," the woman said. "I do have an interest, infinitesimal though it may be."

Scarlett eyed her for a moment. She hadn't been meaning to ask anything, but...

“You appear the sort of person who has made many difficult decisions.”

Arlene paused. She stayed quiet for several seconds, as if considering what to say. Eventually, she looked up from her book. “...Yes. That’s true.”

“I imagine there are some of those which you regret.”

The woman met Scarlett’s eyes with a dangerous gaze. “I regret all of them.”

That...was not quite the reply Scarlett was expecting.

They looked at each other for a moment longer before Arlene turned to look at the village square.

“... When you made those decisions, were you aware that you might come to regret them?” Scarlett asked.

“Some, yes.”

“But you made them, anyway?”

“Yes.”

Scarlett examined the side of the woman’s face. “Why?”

Arlene maintained a neutral expression. “Because I thought they were necessary.”

“Were they ever?”

“...Sometimes.” A wistful tone entered the woman’s voice.

Scarlett glanced at the children dancing around Rosa. She knew some of Arlene’s history, but far from all of it. “Did knowing that lessen the regret you felt?” she asked.

“Not a bit.”

The two of them watched as Rosa taught a young girl how to play the klert, the bard wearing a smile on her face as the girl appeared overwhelmed by the instrument. Rosa was patient, though, pointing to the different parts and guiding her hands. Not that the girl would remember any of that in a few days.

“I suppose this is the point where I ask you if you are worried about a decision you have to make,” Arlene said.

“That was not the intent behind me bringing this up.” Scarlett shook her head. “As you said, it is simply something that has been on my mind. I do not expect you to take an interest in my worries.”

Arlene closed her book, letting out a small sigh. “My interest went about as far that you were bothered and I could tell it was affecting your magic. It felt like a waste, but I don’t

particularly care about more details than that. Now, it's too late, though. I guess this is my fault, in a way."

There was a moment of silence between them. The seconds passed as the faint sounds of Rosa's klert carried over the square.

"So, you've got a difficult choice in front of you that you have to make?" Arlene asked.

"I have already made it," Scarlett said, continuing to observe Rosa teach the girl how to play the instrument

"Then you're afraid that you might come to regret it?"

"...I am not."

From the corner of her eye, she saw the woman study her. "Then why are you worried?"

Scarlett kept her eyes on the young girl for a moment longer, then turned to Arlene. "There are many reasons, most of which I do not think I can share with you. But I suppose if I were to name one.... It is because I think I should I be."

The woman arched her brows. "And why is that?"

"Because that is what a normal person would be."

"And you're not normal?"

Scarlett's lips rose in a derisive smile. "I believe I am very far from 'normal'."

"And that's bad?"

Scarlett lightly shrugged her shoulders. "It is what it is." She pointed towards Rosa and the children. "I could never do what that woman does so effortlessly. I cannot immediately charm those around me or empathise with their plights, nor will I shed a tear when hearing about them. That said, I do not particularly lament this fact. It is something I have long since accepted as a part of who I am now. What I sometimes wonder, however, is whether it would have been better if I could."

"...Have you ever taken a life before?" Arlene suddenly asked.

Scarlett paused at the question, turning back to the woman. After a moment, she gave a slow nod. "I have, yes."

"More than once?"

"...Not by my own hands, no."

"I have. Many times," Arlene said. "It is not something easily forgotten."

Scarlett furrowed her brows. "I am not certain I can say the same."

In fact, it was almost the complete opposite. She had done an exceedingly good job of not thinking about the deaths she had caused up till now in this world.

“I got that feeling.” Arlene simply nodded along. “Some people are like that. Does that disturb you?”

“No, it does not.”

The woman seemed to scrutinize her. “Are you sure?”

“I am, yes.”

If anything, Scarlett was even thankful for the things she could witness in this world without barely feeling anything.

“But you *think* it should?” Arlene asked her.

“I think it would only be natural, yes.”

The woman eyed her for a moment longer. “I’m not sure I agree,” she said. “But let’s say that I do. What does ‘natural’ mean to you? What makes it something you have to conform to?”

“I suppose its definition is somewhat arbitrary. What is natural will differ between cultures, and there might be those cultures where empathy and compassion are not considered ‘good’.” Scarlett looked back towards Rosa. “I do not personally believe that there is a need for me to conform to all of society’s values, nor that I cannot afford to ignore them. It is a difficult matter to put into words, but this is not an issue of what I feel. Rather, as you said, it is simply a matter of what I have chosen to *think*.”

“Is it that you think you don’t fit in as you are now?” Arlene asked.

“Quite the opposite. I think I fit in too well,” Scarlett answered. “What I believe, however, is that if this world was a perfect place, I would not. Certain things might have been easier if it were so.”

The woman continued studying her, before eventually turning away. “Well, it’s certainly a unique way of seeing things. I’ll give you that. I’m not sure whether you say you’re extraordinarily self-aware or alarmingly naive. Perhaps it’s both.”

Scarlett stayed quiet in response. She wasn’t going to argue with those words. As a mix of herself and the original Scarlett’s personality, she wasn’t entirely sure of these things herself.

She turned to Rosa and the children, observing their merrymaking. Maybe it was pointless to even think about these things. It wouldn’t really change anything. Not how she felt or how she would act. If it did, well...perhaps that would be a welcome surprise of its own.