

Scarlett sat on a couch in the east wing's parlor with the Countess sitting opposite her. The robed woman was nervously fidgeting with the fabric of her clothes, head turned downwards as they waited in silence. Scarlett didn't particularly mind the quiet, since there weren't too many conversations to be had with the woman, anyway. And she doubted the Countess cared much about the awkwardness of the scene or things like that.

She turned her attention to the door as her connection with the Loci told her of the presence outside, and soon a knock sounded out. A moment later, a disguised Gaven entered the room. He smiled as he removed his cap, revealing his thick hair. "Evening, ladies. Been a while."

"Ridley." Scarlett gave a curt greeting, gesturing to the couch in front of her. "Take a seat."

The man moved over to sit beside the Countess. The woman flinched as he did, then slowly turned to look up at him.

"...Greetings..." she almost whispered.

Scarlett blinked, and Gaven gave her an amused look.

"Finally feel like saying hello to me, eh? Suppose I must be growing on ya? Well, can't say I blame you," he said.

The Countess didn't quite seem to follow his words, just staring at him for a while before turning back down to look at her hands.

"Oof. You sure know how to wound a man."

"Ridley." Scarlett gave him a sharp look, and the man disarmingly raised his arms in the air.

"Right, right, forgot. Supposed to play nice, aren't I? I'll be on my best behaviour, don't you worry."

She eyed him for a moment, trying to discern his honesty.

As always, dealing with Gaven's personality was irksome to her. But there wasn't much to do about it since she had decided to work with him. Considering he was one of the companions you could have on the evil route in the game, he was still relatively congenial. There was one that tried to kill every noble they saw.

"Were you successful in carrying out the task assigned to you?" she asked him.

He smiled at her. "I'm here, aren't I?"

"I will interpret that as a yes."

"Good on ya." The man raked a hand through his hair as he leaned back on the couch. "The job this time was a pain, though. I'll tell you that much. Had to spend four nights in a row in the cold just staking the place out. 'Course, still things went off without a hitch. That old noble couple is probably still sitting in their little mansion thinking the artifact's in its case."

Hearing that, Scarlett nodded. She was relieved he hadn't gotten caught and that no one had to get injured. She doubted she would have felt guilty if someone had, but that didn't mean she actually wanted it to happen.

"Show it to me." She signaled for him to put the item on the stone countertop between them.

Gaven placed a hand inside his clothes and brought out a dagger that was as long as Scarlett's forearm. It had a red, leather-bound hilt with two silver protrusions at the bottom, and its blade had several markings and symbols etched onto it. At the top of the hilt, centered on the cross-guard, was an empty slot where it looked like something might have once been affixed.

[Blade of the Covenant (Unique)]

{A blade once forged as a conduit for a nameless power. It currently has no use}

"So, is this what you were looking for?" the man asked as he placed it on the table.

"Indeed, it is." Scarlett observed the dagger closely. "This is the Memory of the Covenant."

"You sure?" Gaven touched the dagger's hilt with his finger. "Because to me, it just looks like any other fancy exhibit knife. Unwieldy and unbalanced, if you ask me. From the tales I've heard of the 'Memory', I'd expected a lot more. Even tried this thing out a couple times, and it didn't do much special."

Scarlett frowned at his mention of 'trying it out'. She wasn't sure exactly what he'd tried, and she wasn't sure she wanted to know.

"I will remind you of what I told you last time," she said, leaning forward to pick the item up. "On its own, this dagger does not hold much value. It is not complete. But I know how to bring out its potential."

She reached into the [Pouch of Holding] that was lying next to her on the couch, bringing out a violet gem from it.

[Gem of Athanasia (Unique)]

{The impermanence of death lies in the connections that bind us, embodied in this gem}

The artifact glittered as it reflected the room's light, and Scarlett turned it in her hand for a moment.

A whistle left Gaven. "I bet *that's* something that would catch people's eyes."

Scarlett ignored him as she brought out another item and placed it on the countertop in front of her. A silver scale.

[Scale of Reconciliation (Epic)]

{That which was once one may now be two, but there is always place for reunification}

She placed the gem on one of the scales and the dagger on the other. For just a brief moment, a dark color washed over the gem's surface, and then a flash of light enveloped the scale.

When it faded, only the dagger and scale remained, with the [Gem of Athanasia] now slotted into the dagger's guard.

[Side-quest completed: Assembled the [Memory of the Covenant]]

{Skill points awarded: 7}

[Memory of the Covenant (Unique)]

{A remnant of a covenant once formed, remembering the connections that bind}

Scarlett examined the finished item. In the game, the [Scale of Reconciliation] was just a convenience item that you could use to repair without having to go to blacksmiths and the like all the time, though it usually came at a slightly higher cost. It could also be used on quest items like this, which saved her the trouble of having to find someone else to do it for her.

She turned her eyes up to see Gaven and the Countess looking at her and the dagger. Remaining quiet, she held out her left hand above the table and brought the dagger's blade closer to it.

Gaven raised both eyebrows. "Not that I'm one to question your actions, mind, but what are you doing now?"

"Verifying the dagger's functionality," she answered and cut a small nick on her palm. A thin trail of blood stuck to the dagger's blade, soon disappearing into it. A strange chill wound from the hand she was holding the dagger with and throughout her body.

Closing her eyes, she focused on that sensation, trying to follow it towards its source. It seemed to lead her into the dagger, where it split into dozens of paths. Those paths then split even further, and soon there were hundreds, maybe thousands, of paths all going in different directions. Keeping track of them all was almost impossible, and most felt so distant that she couldn't even try to reach them.

She focused on those closest to her. There was a familiarity to them that she couldn't quite place. She grabbed hold of the one that shone brighter than all the others.

A startled cry sprang out in front of her. Scarlett opened her eyes to see the Countess having crawled back on the couch, staring at her with a bewildered look. Beside the woman, Gaven was eyeing Scarlett with interest.

"That's a cute one. Who's that?" the man asked.

Scarlett creased her brows. Shifting the [Memory of the Covenant] to her left hand—holding it with her fingers as to avoid the wound on her palm—she reached up to feel at her hair with the other hand. It only barely reached the nape of her neck, and instead of the distinct, dark-red hair that she had grown used to, it was more akin to a light brown, with only a slight shade of red.

A wave of disgust and anger roiled up from inside, and she fought to maintain her neutral expression as she tried pushing away the locks that covered her right eye. She didn't need a mirror to know whose appearance she was currently wearing.

Despite her efforts, she failed to get control over the errant tufts of hair and eventually gave up. Instead, she narrowed her eyes at Gaven. “I suggest you be more careful with your remarks, Ridley, and with who you call ‘cute’.” Her words came out in the usual steely tone that was normal for her, but her voice was a lot softer and smoother than before. The dagger didn’t only mimic appearances.

She turned to look at the Countess, who was still staring at her. “I apologize for the surprise. As you can see, this is an artifact that allows one to borrow the appearance of others. Specifically, of those whom you share a blood tie with. This appearance that you see before you now is that of my sister.”

“That’s how it works?” Gaven knitted his forehead. “Not as useful as the stories I’ve heard, then.”

“It does indeed limit its usefulness to a certain degree,” Scarlett said. “However, it is still an incredibly valuable and versatile artifact. It is also exactly what we require to succeed in our upcoming task.”

She focused on the dagger once more, and her appearance returned to her own.

In theory, this artifact should work even for taking on the appearance of people she’d never met herself. She could, for example, see what the original Scarlett’s parents looked like, or her grandparents, or her grand-grandparents. She didn’t know *where* the limit was, or how closely related you had to be, but that it even worked to begin with was crazy.

In the game, you mainly used it to sneak around easier, changing your appearance randomly now and then whenever necessary. It had a cooldown, preventing you from abusing it too much, but it was still very useful. The context in which you acquired the [Memory of the Covenant] was in relation to a certain quest-line when playing as a member of the Hallowed Cabal. At the end of that quest-line, you kidnapped a distant relative to the imperial family and used them in order to sneak into the capital and murder the emperor.

The fact that she now had this knife meant the Cabal’s plan for assassinating him would have to change. She didn’t doubt that they could still *do* it, but at least they wouldn’t have as easy of a time now. Unfortunately, this also meant she couldn’t quite as accurately predict how they would act in relation to all of that, but it was a necessary sacrifice.

“So, what’s this upcoming job, then?” Gaven asked.

She turned her attention back to him. “We will be infiltrating the Sanctuary of Ittar.”

The man’s relaxed posture immediately vanished, and he gave her a long look. “Lady, are you crazy?”

She scowled at him. “I am quite sane.”

He leaned forward on the couch, continuing to stare at her. “...You’re serious?”

“I do not jest in matters like these.”

“Viles be damned,” Gaven muttered under his breath. “Hey, I know you nobles like vying for more power and all that, but why in the six Blazes would you want to do something like that? You’ve got the looks, the money, and a pretty decent roof over your head here, don’t ya? I don’t see no reason why you’d want to go and throw all that away like that.”

The Countess whispered something next to him.

He turned to her. “What was that?”

The woman was once again staring down at her own lap, not facing him. “...My sister... The Baroness...is kind... She will help me...meet my sister...”

Gaven looked at her for a moment, then glanced at Scarlett. “That true? We meeting her sister?”

She met his eyes, then gave a slow nod. “In part, yes.”

The man seemed to understand that wasn’t the main reason, but he returned her nod. “Who’s this sister, then? Someone the Followers got locked up down in a dungeon or something? If they’re keeping her in the Sanctuary of Ittar, she’s gotta be someone special.”

“You may know her as the Augur,” Scarlett said.

The man froze. “...Okay, this time you’ve got to be pulling my leg, right?”

“I am not.”

He turned back to look at the Countess, a dubious expression on her face as he eyed her.

“...I’ll be honest, you could have told me that this lady here was actually some duke’s forgotten daughter or something and I might have thought ‘yeah, sure, makes sense’, but I was not expecting *this*.”

“It is the truth,” Scarlett said. “And that is all that matters. That, and that we will require your assistance in carrying out this task.”

Gaven seemed to consider her for a couple of seconds. He reached up a hand and scratched his beard, eventually letting out a sigh. “You know, it might sound like a fib, coming from me, but I really respect ya, you now? You know your stuff, you give good paydays, and your jobs are straightforward, so I haven’t really complained even when the work has been a pain. But, this? This might be too much, even for me. I like a challenge, but no type of thrill is worth it if I ain’t staying alive to enjoy it.”

She tapped a finger against the leather armrest beside her. “You will be paid fifty thousand solars if you succeed.”

The man’s eyes widened, and he seemed to mouth the figure.

“The carrying out of this venture brings with it a significant risk to me as well,” she continued. “I would not be assigning it to you were I not certain that it was possible.”

He didn't seem wholly convinced. "That's tempting, for sure, but I think I'll still have to say no. Money's another thing I can't enjoy if I'm lying in a ditch somewhere."

Scarlett studied him for a moment. She could offer him even more. She could afford it. But even though she offered him a good deal of money, it probably still wouldn't even be near enough. There were items worth a lot more in the Sanctuary of Ittar. If she wanted him to carry out this task and not just betray her in the process, she would have to offer something else. Thankfully, there was something she had saved for now.

"If you accept my proposal, I can also give you information related to where you can find the missing pieces of that locket you carry in your pocket," she said.

Gaven's expression changed, and he narrowed his eyes at her. "...How do you know about that?"

"Does it matter? You have two pieces of four, yes? I know where the other two are, and I will share this information with you in exchange for aiding with this task, in addition to the aforementioned payment."

The man rubbed his chin as he seemed to consider her words. "Suppose, hypothetically, that I agreed to this job," he intoned. "How would we go about doing this?"

"The general plan is simple." Scarlett held up the [Memory of the Covenant] in her hand. "This item is at the core. While the Sanctuary of Ittar might be considered impregnable by some, that is far from the truth. There are, in fact, several secret entrances that would allow you and the Countess to enter the grounds without being noticed. There are also sections on the Sanctuary where none but a few may enter, and where you will not run a high risk of encountering anyone that might question your presence. From there, the Countess will use the Memory of the Covenant's power to mimic the appearance of the Augur until you reach her chambers, where there are a few artifacts that I require."

Gaven frowned. "That's all?"

"Yes, it is. I do not believe it will be as easy in practice, and there is still the matter of leaving after having accomplished your goals, but I trust in your ability to deal with whatever other unexpected circumstances that might unfold."

The man smirked. "I appreciate the trust, but I'm not sure I share your confidence in this. The Sanctuary is supposed to be the heart of the Followers organization, isn't it? I don't mean to be crass, but even if we manage to sneak in and copy the looks of her sister here, the moment we run into some and have to start talking, we're screwed."

"The entrance you will be entering through will deposit you in an area that connects to the tower where the Augur's chamber is. As I said, it is unlikely you will encounter anyone that will question your presence."

"Isn't the Augur supposed to be protected by the Knights of the Eternal Oath? I've heard they might even beat out the Solar Knights, and even with the Countess here joining, we won't be able to fight our way through that whole place."

“Any Knights of the Eternal Oath that you might run into will not act against you as long as the Countess holds the appearance of the Augur,” Scarlett said.

“You sound awfully sure of that.”

“Because I am.”

She had already done this in the game, so she knew roughly how it worked.

Gaven appeared to think over her words for a while. “You know... Being known as the guy who infiltrated the Followers base doesn’t sound too bad.”

“I am sure you understand that information of our involvement in this must never spread,” she said.

He shrugged. “Course. Still, people in my trade have our ways of doing these things.”#

She eyed him for a moment. “Then does this mean you are willing to accept the job?”

The man smiled. “Let’s go over the details.”



“I knew you were a scary woman, but I think I underestimated you,” Gaven said with a smirk on his face.

They were still in the parlor, having spent the last hour or so going over the specifics of Scarlett’s plans. The Countess had started looking uncomfortable after a while, so Scarlett had Molly bring the woman up to her room earlier.

Gaven looked at her with a curious gaze. “You really had all of this schemed out from the start, didn’t ya? Ever since before that first meeting of ours.”

“That much is only natural when dealing with a matter of this level.”

It wasn’t *entirely* true that she had it planned out since the start. When she originally asked Beldon Tyndall to contact Gaven, this particular heist wasn’t part of her intentions, though she had considered it. It was when the main quest asking her to reach Beld Thylelion popped up that she made the decision.

“I’ll admit, if things go as you say, then this might actually work,” the man said. “But we still haven’t talked about the most important part, you know? After me and the Countess have done what we’re supposed to, what then? How are you expecting us to get out?”

Scarlett pulled out a map of the central parts of the empire and placed it between them. She pointed to where the Sanctuary was on the map. “I will be waiting at a predetermined meeting location with a carriage that will take us to a safe location where the Followers will be unable to find us. It is only a matter of you making your way there. There is a balcony in the Augur’s chamber. While it is high up, knowing your capabilities, I do not believe you will have any difficulty in making your escape through there. This is your area of expertise, no?”

He eyed her for a moment. “Yeah, like I said. Scary... I bet even if I asked, you wouldn’t tell me how you knew about the locket, yeah?”

“I would not, no.”

He shrugged his shoulders as he leaned back on the couch. “Next thing I know, you’re telling me the color of my underwear as well.”

Scarlett scrunched her nose at that. Did the man have no sense of propriety? “Keep such thoughts to yourself from now on. I have no wish to hear it. And I believe we have already established that I am well aware of your abilities, else I would not have sought you out.”

“Yeah, yeah, if you say so.” He crossed his arms. “But then we’ve got a way out for me, at least. What about that helper of mine? You planning on leaving ol’ crazy there?”

“...I have warned you to behave around her, Ridley.”

“She’s not here now, is she? And I’ll bet I’ll have to be the one to get her out of there, so it’s a valid question.”

“...You will not have to concern yourself with her escape this time,” Scarlett said.

The man paused, an interested glint appearing in his eyes. “Really?”

She nodded. “I have already made the necessary preparations. She is under the belief that you are primarily there to save her sister, so there might be some complications were she to realize the futility in those aspirations. She will pose a risk to the security of my operations, but I will deal with the ramifications after this is over. You will only have to focus on your own safety.”

“You’re saying you won’t have any further need for her after we’re done here?” he asked.

“...Essentially.”

It sounded heartless, but it was the truth. She *could* try to have the Countess continue helping her in the future even after this, but it was doubtful whether that would work. When the Countess tried to use the [Cube of Instant Katabasis] to leave the Sanctuary, she would be brought to a random location without bringing her sister along. Not only would finding the woman after that be difficult, but it was also completely uncertain what state of mind she would be in at the time.

Frankly, Scarlett wasn’t even certain how this part would go. She was hoping the Countess would at least remember to follow some of the instructions she’d given her, which would

make her easier to locate. From there, she could just pray that the Countess could be calmed down enough so that they could leave the area before anything happened. Everything else could be left for later, when they were in a safe place.

“You sure are a cold woman,” Gaven said.

“Pardon?” She looked at him.

He smiled. “Hey, I’m not judging. You’re the boss, and it’s not like I don’t agree. But, I can’t avoid feeling just a tiny bit of pity for the lady, you know? She worships the ground you walk on, and this is what she gets.” He shrugged. “Well, not that it matters much to me. I’ll do the job I’m paid for, as long as you’re also willing to part with what you know about the locket.”

“You speak as if I am betraying her.”

“If it makes you feel better, we can pretend you aren’t.”

Scarlett stared at him for several seconds. “...I am well aware of what it is that I am doing. It is what must be done. Any errant thoughts of regret or guilt can be left for a more suitable occasion.”

If she actually felt any.

“So, what do we do about the Augur?” Gaven asked. “If she’s not coming with us, isn’t it better if we also take care of her before leaving? It might be a bit blasphemous, but it’d be problematic if she stays alive and knows who we are, right? She might use some of that god-given magic or whatever of her and track us down.”

“No matter what happens, you are not to harm the Augur in any way.” The Augur had to be alive in the future. “Even if she were to see your face, which I expect that she will not, it is unlikely that she will discern our involvement in this. The limitations on what she can and cannot see are many.”

The Augur figuring them out *was* a fear that Scarlett had, but it had never been a thing in the game at least. She felt reasonably sure that would translate to this world. The woman wasn’t omniscient. She had no choice in the knowledge that was given to her, nor was she always the best at interpreting it. There was a high likelihood that she wouldn’t be able to figure out that Scarlett was the one behind this.

There was still the possibility of it happening, sure. In that sense, though, this entire plan was one large gamble. If the Followers *did* figure out Scarlett was involved, it would spell tons of trouble. But she still had to go through with this. In the worst-case scenario, she was prepared to go into hiding if needed.

She would just have to hope that it never came to that.