

# 101: Morning afters

**[Quest completed: Conclude negotiations with the Hallowed Cabal]**

**{Skill points awarded: 5}**

**[Quest completed: Broker a truce with the Hallowed Cabal]**

**{Skill points awarded: 8}**

Scarlett eyed the quest completion messages. The words floated in the air next to her as she walked through the darkened forest.

She glanced at Fynn, who was moving beside her. The young man had been on constant guard of their surroundings ever since they left the mansion, but now, after the negotiations, he was clasping the [Essence of Zenthias] in his hands as well, ready to act any second.

“Are there any eyes on us?” she asked him.

He shook his head. “No.”

That was good. That meant the Cabal was actually keeping to their word. Not that she was expecting them not to. In the current situation, it wouldn't be wise of them to act that bold.

A period of silence followed as the two of them continued making their way back towards Freybrook, where a carriage would be waiting for them near the gates. She was looking forward to getting some proper rest when they returned. Even if the [Mark of the Staunch] afforded her a boost in stamina, it did little for mental exhaustion. She had spent the majority of the past two days focused on and preparing for this meeting. Things had gone according to her expectations, but the effort still took its toll.

As they neared the forest border further ahead, Scarlett shifted her attention back to Fynn.

“Remember,” she said. “You are not to speak of this with any of the others. Is that understood?”

He turned to her, then gave a nod. “Yes.”

“Good.”

His gaze stayed on her for a moment longer. “...Why does it have to be a secret, though?”

Scarlett looked ahead. “Why, you ask?”

Shin and Allyssa couldn't know because they were Shielders, that much was obvious. Nothing good could come out of the Shields Guild knowing she had dealings with the Cabal, no matter how innocuous.

It was better to leave Rosa in the dark when it came to this kind of thing, as well. Everything the woman learned would also be leaked to the being possessing her. And while Scarlett

wasn't exactly scared about letting it know *some* of her plans, matters related to the Cabal were best kept secret.

"Simply be aware that telling them could pose a danger, both to me and them," she said. "It is not within anyone's interest that tonight's dealings are shared with anyone not directly involved."

"If you say so." Fynn seemed to think for a bit. "But who were those people? They were the ones who attacked us before at the mansion. Then, they looked down on you. Now they listened to you."

"They are an organization known as the Hallowed Cabal. They are also immensely powerful, which is why they did not believe it necessary for them to show me any true respect during our first encounter. As you might have ascertained, however, the object in your hands is something that they deeply value. So this time, they had little choice but to heed my words."

The young man scowled, looking down at the strange, half-petrified heart he was holding. "I don't understand why they care. It doesn't feel special. What is it?"

"Precisely what it appears to be," Scarlett answered. "A heart."

"But half of it is hardened... And it's missing its owner."

"You, of all people, should be aware that there are more than simply physical connections that matter in this world."

Fynn glanced up at her, then eyed the heart. "What would happen if I actually crushed it?"

"It would mostly likely injure the owner quite severely."

To be exact, it would kill him. But while she couldn't exactly lie to Fynn, it also might not be wise to outright share all the details in this particular situation. While he wasn't aware of his grudge against the Cabal yet, it was better to play it a little safe.

"And the owner is part of that group?" Fynn asked.

"Yes, he is."

"And he's bad."

"Quite."

"Okay." The young man nodded his head as if he understood, although his brows soon creased once again. "How is he alive without his heart, though?"

"I am afraid I do not have an adequate answer for that," Scarlett said. "It is not something I entirely understand myself."

Magic nonsense. That was all she could say.

“With this, though, you forced those Cabal people to agree to that contract thing,” Fynn said.

She nodded. “That is correct.”

“Why?”

“Because if I had not, they would have continued to persecute the life of myself and those around me.”

“But was a contract necessary? Couldn’t you just have told them what to do directly? Instead, now you agreed to some of their demands as well.”

Scarlett shook her head. “Let us say that I did as you say, attempting to enforce my will upon them with no concessions. What do you think would happen if one of their number were to break their word and act against me in that situation?”

“That would force you to break this heart, wouldn’t it? And they don’t want that, so they wouldn’t do something like that?”

“They do not want that, no. But that is not a guarantee that nothing will happen. And if I were to indeed break the heart, I would not live for much longer. This leaves us in a precarious situation where both parties stand to lose from provoking the other. As such, it is imperative that the balance is always maintained. One minor transgression from either side could incite a chain of events that leads to one side being forced to act or otherwise jeopardize their own position. This, in turn, would force the other side to retaliate, and we will be left with both parties having caused irreparable damage to the other.”

Scarlett examined Fynn for a few seconds. “Do you understand what I am trying to say?”

He stayed quiet for a moment, a serious expression on his face. “...Maybe.”

“Had I not set forward clear and understandable terms as to what both parties are allowed to do, it would have given the Cabal more freedom to interpret or bend the words of the agreement to their benefit after having gained a better understanding of me and my limitations. And I am in a position where I lack the power to properly respond to any of their actions without endangering myself. With this contract, any such action from their end now carries considerably more risk, since it would be a direct breach of the agreement.”

“...So because they’re much stronger, you wanted to tie both them and yourself down under as many promises as possible.” Fynn glanced back to where they came from, deeper into the forest. “And you wanted to do it before they have time to find out how far they could push you?”

“That is an apt way of describing it, yes. Although I would not say that I am as burdened by this agreement as they are. As an individual, I simultaneously have the most to lose, as well as the least, if one side were to break their word. Because of this, and the relative insignificance a single person plays to a group as large as theirs, the terms of the contract benefit me far more than it benefits them.”

One of the head clauses that Scarlett had pushed through, for example, had been that the Hallowed Cabal was not to interfere with any of her matters. Of course, in return, she wouldn't interfere directly with their affairs either. But a subclause of that had been that it didn't count 'retroactively', so to speak. That is, if the Cabal were to interfere in something she was *planning* to do before she did it, then it was fine. This was to prevent either side from accidentally breaking the agreement. But the Cabal stood to lose a lot more on an organizational level if she were to impede their major projects in ways that the clause allowed for.

And unlike them, she already *knew* a lot of their plans, which gave her a lot more freedom. This meant that, according to their contract, she could snatch things from right under their noses and they couldn't do anything but accept it. Or breaching the agreement, of course. But it would have to take something pretty serious for them to go that far, with the life of The Angler Man on the line. He was vital both to their organization *and* their goals, after all.

In general, the Cabal hadn't had much leeway in these negotiations. She'd had the lead on all of this, and because of the circumstances, the Cabal didn't have the opportunity to postpone discussions. And most of her terms had been things that, at face value, seemed reasonable when it came to maintaining a sense of non-interfering neutrality between two parties. They'd almost definitely been aware of which terms favored her, though. But she'd allowed them some renegotiation on certain parts. It was important that she didn't tempt them *too* much to act out against her. Upholding their agreement with her had to seem like the less risky alternative.

But in the end, they would only push things so far when such an integral part of their organization was at stake. Especially when they didn't know enough about their enemy.

So even though she had in some regards tied her own hands with this contract, she was *very* satisfied with how it had all turned out. She'd even managed to potentially solve some of the problems she'd been worrying about a lot for in the future. The major one had been what she would do if she succeeded with the main quest and reached Beld Thylelion before the Cabal and they found out about it. With this contract, they technically couldn't do anything in response. There *was* some uncertainty in that particular regard, considering how important the Tribute of Dominion resting in that place was, but it was definitely better than what she had before.

The only actual threat at the moment was if the Cabal were to somehow try to get back the heart from her. She didn't *think* they would, considering the risk involved, and had showcased part of Fynn's perception abilities to drive that part home. If they were to send an assassin to her home or anything like that, they would have to succeed in taking the heart from Fynn without even giving him the chance of reacting. Even for the most powerful of the Cabal members, doing something like that would be hard. It was much more likely they'd fail or get detected long before they even got the chance to try.

To be safe, she and the others would probably have to keep their eyes open from now on. Other than that, though, things were definitely looking up.



Scarlett sat in the dining hall for supper the next day. After returning from the negotiations at the dead of night, she'd spent much of the morning and earlier parts of the day sleeping in, at Fynn's prompting. The young man in question had decided not to rest at all, instead standing watch outside her room until she woke up. She had wanted to tell him it wasn't necessary, but that wasn't entirely true. She also knew he could go several days without sleep if he needed to, so in the end, she'd allow it until they established some other means of maintaining their guard. There were already some plans she had made in that regard, related to the next dungeon she was hoping for them to visit.

For now, though, Fynn was choosing to stay close to her, to the best of his ability. Currently, he was seated to her right, his attention fixed on the food in front of him. Shin, Allyssa, Rosa, and Evelyne were also present in the hall. It was rare that all of them were gathered in one place like this. The last time had been the morning before they left Elystead, when the news of the Tribe of Sin's attacks across the empire first broke.

At the moment, Evelyne was in a conversation about famous alchemists with Allyssa. Sitting opposite them at the table, Rosa and Shin were discussing the local history of the Freybrook area, of all things. Scarlett was content just listening in on some of their discussions as she concentrated on her meal. Today, it was steamed mussels with grilled sausage. Apparently, mussels were starting to get into season, and the chef here at the mansion had done a sublime job as usual. She hadn't even known mussels could taste this good.

She would have to send the man her regards again. Something she felt she'd done more than a few times, really, ever since arriving at this place.

"Scarlett."

She was brought out of her thoughts by Evelyne's voice. The woman seemed to have finished her conversation and was now looking at her.

"Yes?"

"I had been meaning to ask... I heard you left with one of the carriages tonight. What was that about?"

Scarlett paused, a frown appearing on her brow. It seems like either the coachman or one of the guards had a loose tongue. She had specifically told them to keep things quiet...

Well, that would have to be dealt with later. Figuring out who was responsible wouldn't be hard, with Fynn's help.

"...There was a matter that I had to tend to, along with Fynn," she said. "It was not something that could be performed within the city walls, however, which is why we made use of the carriage."

“What ‘matter’ was this?”

“The specifics of it do not concern you. Simply know that we needed a suitable location to assess some of Fynn’s capabilities.”

“Capabilities, eh?” Rosa asked. The carefree woman smiled at Fynn. “That sure sounds on the up-and-up. What sort of things did you have our youngling pup get up to? Are travelers going to run into what remains of the local critter wildlife for the coming months, perhaps?”

The white-haired young man looked up as everybody’s questioning gazes turned to him. He adopted what was probably supposed to be an aloof expression and shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t remember.”

Scarlett groaned inwardly.

...At least he tried.

“Haven’t we already seen enough of Fynn’s weirdness?” Allyssa asked. “We don’t mind it, so wouldn’t it have been best to bring us along as well? What if something had happened?”

Next to her, Evelyne furrowed her brows. “There were people after you, Scarlett, weren’t there? Leaving the city like that in the middle of the night with only one person accompanying you was an enormous risk.”

Scarlett shook her head. “There was no such threat this time. I took the proper precautions. And while I am loath to withhold information from all of you, I also have an obligation to Fynn as his employer to protect his secrets.”

Everybody turned to look at him again. The young man in question now wore an impartial expression as he was busy trying to pull out the meat from one mussel with his fork.

“...I feel like I am lacking a lot of information about this retainer of yours, Scarlett,” Evelyne said. She turned back to her own plate. “But alright. I’ll let it be.”

The others also seemed to leave it at that, as a momentary silence descended upon the dining hall for a short while before the previous conversations picked up again. Scarlett remained outside the discussions, continuing her own meal.

‘Pushing’ the blame onto Fynn might not be the best of excuses, but it was effective enough. People usually accepted her keeping things hidden if she claimed it was someone else’s secret, funnily enough. There was also no point in claiming anything that would force Fynn himself to try lying for real.

It wasn’t exactly optimal that she had to lie to Evelyne and the others like this, though. Especially considering she’d decided to try to be a bit more open with Evelyne in general recently. But there was an exception to everything, and having dealings with the Hallowed Cabal *was* likely to be a crime against the empire. That was definitely the sort of thing that was best kept secret from the woman. For both of their sakes.

The supper continued like that for a while longer, until one of the female servants entered the dining hall. A short, blonde woman, who Scarlett recognized as one of the younger servants among the staff.

The woman performed a small curtsy. "My Lady. There is a visitor."

"A visitor?" Scarlett asked. "Who?"

"He introduced himself as Leon Delmon."

She blinked. Leon? He was here? In Freybrook? She turned to Evelyne, sharing a look with the woman. "Were you aware he would come?"

Evelyne shook her head. "No. He mentioned nothing of the sort when I last met him."

Scarlett frowned. Then why was he here? Was it still about the whole engagement thing? That shouldn't require him to visit Freybrook personally like this, though, right? He was the vice-captain of the Solar Knights. It wasn't as if he could just leave the capital whenever he wanted.

"Who's that?" Fynn asked, looking up from his food.

"He is an acquaintance of mine," Scarlett said. "One which I did not expect would visit personally."

"...Nichol." Allyssa turned to the young servant standing at the room's entrance. "Did you say his name was Leon *Delmon*?"

The woman lowered her head. "That's right, Miss Astrey."

"You know him?" Fynn asked.

Allyssa shook her head. "I've only heard of him."

Scarlett put down her cutlery on the table and picked up a white napkin to clean her mouth. "Have him brought over to the guest parlor. I will be there shortly."

"Yes, my Lady." The servant woman performed another curtsy and left the hall.

Scarlett pushed her seat back as she stood.

"You're meeting with him right away?" Evelyne asked.

"I am, yes." It was best to get this over with quickly. "Do you wish to join?"

The younger woman shook her head. "I don't think that's a good idea. I barely know him, anyway."

"Very well. I will share what he had to say later."

“Alright. I appreciate it.”

With that, Scarlett left the dining hall behind.