

133: Expectations

Scarlett leisurely listened to the sounds of the winds and rustling leaves outside as her small carriage rocked along the narrow forest path. It was far from a comfortable ride. The seats were just solid wood; the air was stale, and the cabin was cramped. There weren't any windows, and the only light was the slimmers of moonlight that sneaked in through the cracks in the plank walls. It was far removed from what she had gotten used to up till now in this world, but that's what you get when you're trying to move inconspicuously. Spending money extravagantly on transport was the opposite of what you wanted.

They would get rid of this carriage away later anyhow, so it didn't matter too much. Though her body might object to that. Having spent the last two days traveling around in this thing—as well as sleeping in cheap inns with beds that only barely qualified as such—she was feeling a lot more sore than she thought she would. It was a minor annoyance in the grand scheme of things, but it didn't help to soothe her nerves much.

Today was the day. Tonight was when they carried out their heist on the Sanctuary of Ittar.

At first, she really didn't think this would be too different from when she had dealt with the Cabal. Both actions were a necessity, from her perspective, and both were a gamble in a way. But, unlike with the Cabal, she didn't feel as self-assured about everything this time. Apprehensions about what tonight would bring had filled her mind the entire day.

One major difference between now and then was that she had been more in control of the situation when dealing with the Cabal. This time, there were more unknowns and most of the work was left up to others. She liked to think that was the main reason she was more nervous this time, but it probably wasn't the only one. It wasn't something she liked to admit, but another important thing that differed was also that she didn't have a grudge against the Followers.

Her anger at how the Cabal had attacked her home and injured her people had served to motivate her a lot more than she had originally thought. Without that, this time, she found herself spending far too much time thinking about what could go wrong. Which there was a lot of.

She'd made preparations, of course. She felt decently secure in that she could deal with the worst-case scenarios. It would cost her, but it was manageable. If the Followers did find out about her involvement in this, for example, there were dozens of places across the empire where she could hide away and grow her power base in other ways. The Followers weren't evil, so it wasn't as if they would kill everyone connected to her or anything like that. And she had left a few letters and papers behind that might allow Evelyne and the Hartford barony to escape without too much harm if she were to be depicted as a criminal.

She'd had plenty of time to read through legal documents and the like to ensure that was possible, too. There were precedents where other noble houses had members commit heinous crimes and the house itself still survived, after all. Abelard was just one example.

All of that was far from preferable, however. She certainly didn't *want* to sacrifice herself in any way. But it also wasn't right to drag those serving her down along with her. She suspected perhaps Fynn would not give her much of a choice, but the rest should be fine.

For now, though, that was nothing but pure hypothetical. Unlikely to happen, hopefully. For the time being, all she could do was wait and see what the actual results would be.

The Countess and Gaven were currently carrying out the heist itself.

Scarlett had been traveling with the two of them in disguise for the last few days. They had originally left Freybrook inside a nondescript merchant carriage that Garside had arranged, traveling through the Kilnstone to Kilsfell, where they had stayed for a day before continuing to Silverborough. There, they had finished the last of the preparations and slowly started making their way westwards from the city, stopping at smaller towns and villages as they stayed under the radar.

Right now, they should be maybe a few kilometers or so away from the eastern bank of Rellaria Lake, the large lake at the heart of the empire. The Sanctuary of Ittar was relatively close by.

As for Gaven and the Countess, the two of them had left earlier in the day. Scarlett would be meeting Gaven after he had finished his task and escaped with the artifacts she wanted, and from there she would have to locate the Countess before they made their escape.

Considering the numbers the Followers of Ittar had, it *was* possible they might perform a wide search to locate Scarlett and the others, but even they would have trouble searching through the whole countryside for one or two perpetrators. Especially considering there was teleportation magic in this world. The divination magic the Followers might have access to was likely to be pretty limited. It was something mostly exclusive to the mage towers, and even then, it wasn't especially powerful.

To be honest, Scarlett suspected the Followers wouldn't even try contacting anyone else for help with this to begin with. She didn't think they would want to bring too much attention to an event like this. In the game, even after you did something similar to this, the news of it never got out as far as she was aware. It never got printed in the Emyreal Chronicle or anything like that. This made her think that the Followers probably suppressed it outside their ranks, which made a sort of sense. A religious organization like theirs wouldn't want to admit that one of their most holy places was breached, nor that one of their most sacred personages was vulnerable during the event.

All of that aside, she was getting tired of worrying about all of that now. To shift her thoughts a bit, she waved her hand in the air and summoned her status window.

[Name: Scarlett Hartford]

[Skills:

[Greater Mana Control]

[Greater Pyromancy]

[Superior Pyrokinesis]

[Greater Hydromancy]

[Superior Hydrokinesis]]

[Traits:

[Dignified August]

[Supercilious]

[Cavalier]

[Callous]

[Overbearing]

[Conceited]

[Third-rate Mana Veins]]

[Mana: 4998/4998]**[Points: 30]****[Skills Menu:****Upgrades**

[Superior Pyromancy] (25 points)

[Major Pyrokinesis] (50 points)

[Superior Hydromancy] (25 points)

[Major Hydrokinesis] (50 points)

[Superior Mana Control] (25 points)

New skills

[LOCKED]]

The past weeks of relative calm hadn't gotten her any extra skill points, since she had mostly stayed in Freybrook and Freymeadow. It had, however, given her plenty of time to further practice with her magic, as well as increase her mana stores a bit. She was also starting to get more used to what [Superior Hydrokinesis] was capable of. The skill wasn't quite combat-ready at her current level—at least not her pure-hydrokinesis-based attacks, like the water whips—but she could see herself reaching that point, eventually. When she did, there were a dozen other things she wanted to try as well.

She had been thinking about what to do with the skill points she'd saved up. She *could* just have used it to upgrade her Mana Control or something like that again. It would definitely help with her current efforts at familiarising herself with her magic and getting better at controlling her hydrokinesis. She had been vying between doing that or waiting until she had enough points to upgrade [Superior Pyrokinesis] to [Major Pyrokinesis].

Although she wouldn't quite say she had mastered [Superior Pyrokinesis] yet, she had gotten pretty decent with the skill. Waiting a bit longer to upgrade it probably wasn't a bad idea, so that she had as stable a base as possible when she actually did. She also wasn't in dire need of the immediate power boost, so it was tempting to focus on the 'auxiliary' skills for the moment.

That said, she wasn't entirely satisfied with her current progress. She wanted things to go faster. Now that they were going through with the heist on the Sanctuary, if they succeeded, she would get her hands on one piece of the puzzle that she needed to reach Beld Thylelion and complete the main quest. After that, she only needed to get the second piece, and that meant actually getting Arlene to accept her as a real disciple and learn from the woman until she was ready.

Upgrading her pyrokinesis was likely to be the quickest way to achieve that. Even if Scarlett rushed things, Arlene's guidance could probably make up for that. And since she had already

spent weeks not using the skill points she'd saved up, it would be a waste to use them on Mana Control.

She looked over the status window for a while longer, letting her eyes wander over the text on it as her thoughts strayed. Eventually, she dismissed the window and leaned back in her seat, the bare wood pressing against her back once again reminding her of how uncomfortable this mode of transportation was.

If she had anything to say about it, she would never do a trip like this again in the future. She had underestimated how large of a difference a decent carriage did.

Evelyne and she had actually been in several talks recently regarding what they would do with the large influx of money that the house was having at the moment. A decent amount had been put aside for Evelyne to use in matters related to the house and fief, but even with their most pessimistic estimates of how much they would make after having sold everything currently in their cache, there would still be plenty left. After all, with them currently in the progress of selling the loot from Autumnwell as well as from the latest Zuverian ruins, as well them soon receiving the money that the Withersworths had promised them—which they had recently gotten a letter informing them it was going to be closer to five hundred thousand solars instead of four—they were looking at well over one million solars filling their coffers soon.

They had already started getting ready to use some of it. Getting newer—and larger—carriages was one of the priorities, and they had been in contact with a manufacturer that would supply them with two. In addition, they were also looking into getting somebody to rebuild the mansion's courtyard, and Scarlett had tried finding someone that could help her construct a pavilion behind the mansion where the [Obedience's Solitude Loci] had its home.

For the time being, she'd just had a small stone column moved there for the Loci to rest on, but she was thinking about inquiring with one of the mage towers or another expert she could find if there were any other useful things she could do to possibly empower the artifact in some way.

Scarlett's shoulder struck the side of the cabin as the carriage jolted from hitting something on the path. She pressed a hand against the wall to avoid falling onto the floor, clenching her teeth as she waited for the vehicle's movements to calm down again.

Finally, after the carriage had traveled for a while longer, it pulled to a stop. Movements could be heard from outside, and soon, the cabin door opened.

"My Lady, we have arrived," Garside's voice sounded out.

She used her [Charm of Expeditious Change] to switch into a dark set of robes and pulled the hood up as she exited the vehicle.

"Thank you, Garside," she said, looking at the elderly butler standing on the muddy path next to the carriage. He was wearing a dark leather jacket that was tied loosely with a string at the top left side, as well as a brown cap that covered part of his thick grey hair.

The man had been the only one she trusted to join them on this job. Mostly because she had needed someone's help in arranging the trip, and involving some stranger just to drive the carriage was far from optimal. Garside also seemed surprisingly experienced with some of these things, so she suspected this was the first time he had done something along these lines.

"Find a suitable location to hide the carriage and wait here until I return," she told him. She then pulled out a map from her [Pouch of Holding], looking down to inspect it. The moon was out in full strength now, but its light didn't quite reach through the thick canopies looming over their current location. Thankfully, she was already wearing the enchanted glasses that allowed her to see in the dark.

"Are you certain of this, my Lady?" Garside asked from the side.

She looked up at him. "...I am. I will be fine, if that is your concern. Your presence is far more important here, for when we need to leave."

They were far enough away from the Sanctuary of Ittar that they wouldn't run into any Followers. And while she did trust Garside, she didn't want to involve him in this more than necessary. He didn't know exactly what they were here for, and she wanted to keep it that way if possible. It made it easier for both of them.

Although she wouldn't at all be surprised if he still figured at least part of it out. There was only so much she could do about that.

The butler gave a stoic nod. "Then I wish you good fortune, my Lady."

He walked over to the front of the carriage, taking the reins of the large draft horse that had been pulling the vehicle and caressing its mane.

Scarlett turned her attention back to the map in her hands. It took a bit of time to orient herself and figure out roughly where they were. They had gotten this map from one of the nearby villages, where one of the locals had spent time jotting down some of the trails in the area on top of a larger map of the region. She knew roughly where the meeting place was supposed to be, and Gaven had seemed certain he would be able to find it without difficulty as well.

After confirming the direction with a compass she brought out, she scanned the forest line in front of her. Eventually, she began making her way eastwards, locating a thin trail that led off from the forest path and seemed to fit with where she was on the map.

For quite some time, she made her way through the dark forest, keeping her eyes and ears peeled as she did. As things moved closer and closer to an outcome, her worries from before wormed their way to the surface. Even after meeting up with Gaven, the hard part would be locating the Countess. It would go faster with Gaven's help, but they would still have to hope the woman was in a cooperative mood.

Having Fynn's help here would have made things *a lot* easier, but involving him in this was far too risky. And it wasn't only because he was terrible at keeping secrets.

After maybe thirty or so minutes of walking, with her losing her way at least once or twice, Scarlett eventually reached a large clearing in the forest. The ground here was mostly made up of small rocks and soft dirt, and it looked like a shallow stream might have once flowed through the place.

She moved towards the center of the clearing, focusing on the other end of it, in the direction of where she expected Gaven to come from. Then, she waited. She didn't know for how long, and the disquiet in her gut only grew as time passed by, but eventually, she spotted movement in the forest line.

Sneaking out from the trees was a hooded figure in dark clothing, heading in her direction. As they neared her, they pulled down their hood to reveal Gaven's rugged appearance.

She relaxed slightly at the sight. Then she noticed there were dark red spots on his clothing, as well as a significant wound on his left shoulder.

"Figure meeting you out here in the wild," the man said with a tired smile.

Scarlett frowned.

"...Dispense with the frivolity," she said. Things clearly hadn't gone as smoothly as expected. "Were you successful in your task?"

Gaven shrugged, only showing a slight grimace because of his wound. "Ran into a hitch or two, but no plan ever goes as expected. I'll admit, despite things, this is probably one of the smoothest jobs I've been part of that hasn't been just me on my own. Though maybe that says more about the sort of people I tend to work with than anything else."

The man held up his left hand, where there was a small ring on one of his fingers. It glowed a pale blue as he touched it, and a metal plate appeared in his palm. Its center was made of a strange glass that had an array of colors moving within.

In preparation for this job, Scarlett had arranged a spatial ring for him to use. Spatial items in general were relatively hard to come by, and money wasn't the only thing that mattered if you wanted to get one on short notice. Fortunately, Gaven had a contact in Freybrook that helped them procure a small one. The price wasn't something Scarlett liked to think about.

The ring itself couldn't hold much—its storage capacity couldn't be compared with Scarlett's [Pouch of Holding]—but Scarlett only needed three items.

"You know, I had to fight pretty hard to stop myself from just nabbing this and running off on my own," Gaven said. "Don't ya think a bonus might be in order just from the sheer amount of loyalty shown here, eh? Even took a wound for the job as well."

She scowled at him.

He wasn't *completely* wrong. The value of what she had him retrieve exceeded what she had promised him. But if he did betray her, he would never get the information he wanted on where he could find the remaining pieces of the locket he always wore. It had been part of his background in the game, and she knew it wasn't something he could ignore that easily.

Besides, she was still paying him more than enough to live in luxury for quite some time, as long as he didn't go around trying to buy a mansion or something.

She looked to the object in Gaven's hand.

[Tablet of Sovegrephor (Legendary)]

{Within lies the unbridled power of change, harnessed and controlled}

These things were always useful to have. It wasn't anything she *needed*, but she had remembered it being here, so she had thought it good to get it when she had the chance.

She reached out to take the item, placing it into her pouch. Gaven's ring then lit up once more, and a crystal ball appeared in his hand. It seemed to hold a rainbow of colors at its bottom, swirling around like an ocean. Above, at the top of the sphere, was a deep orange nebula, filled with miniature stars.

[Ittar's Genesis (Divine)]

{“And Ittar proclaimed: ‘Thy light shall never falter, as long as this fire burns’” — Book of Canon: Cisirne 4:3 }

She stared at the item and the panorama of colors inside. It was beautiful. As she received it from Gaven, and her fingers touched the cool-yet-warm crystal surface, she could almost feel the storm of power churning within.

Pausing for a moment, she eventually pulled it away from the man and focused on it. Like any other artifact, the connection formed easily. It was supposedly a holy item, but it didn't seem to care much about the user.

She glanced to the side.

[Mana: 24998/24998]

Finally, she had an answer to one of her largest problems. If only this wasn't an item she couldn't show when around others.

“And for the last one.” Gaven performed an exaggerated flourish as he brought out the last item. The ring on his finger glowed once more, and another spherical object appeared in his palm. It was made out of a golden metal with lines drawn along its face. Patterned between those lines were suns, moons, stars, as well as several Zuverian symbols that Scarlett didn't know the meaning of.

[Sphere of Serendipity (1/2) (Unique)]

{An item far out of the ordinary, it seems to call out for its twin, awaiting a reply}

Scarlett moved the crystal ball to her left hand, picking the sphere up with her right and turning it around. [Ittar's Genesis] was important to her, yes, but this? This was *essential*.

It wouldn't work without its twin, but this was her key to completing the main quest.

“That’s all. With this, we’re done here, yeah? I’ve already taken care of that Countess lady, so you don’t have to worry about that whole mess either,” Gaven said.

Scarlett froze. At that moment, several lines of text appeared before her.

[Quest completed: Raid on the Sanctuary of Ittar]
{Skill points awarded: 10}

[Side-Quest completed: Wily machinations with the rogue]
{Skill points awarded: 6}

[Side-Quest completed: The Empyreal Princess and the Lunar Pauper]
{Skill points awarded: 6}

She didn’t pay any of the messages any mind, turning to look at the man. The uneasy feeling that she’d been feeling reared its head once again. She narrowed her eyes at him. “Repeat what you just said.”

He gave her a long, indecipherable look. “Like I said, I took care of that crazy woman. You didn’t need her anymore, did you? And she was likely to get us both offed, so I dealt with it.” He pointed up to the injury on his shoulder. “Didn’t go quite as planned, but I got the job done. That’s what matters.”

The blood in her veins ran cold as she stared at him. “...*What?*”