

129: Sisterhood

Back in the Freybrook mansion, Scarlett finished dressing herself in her room and walked over to the nightstand next to her bed to pick up her [Pouch of Holding].

She and the others had returned from Faybarrow about an hour ago after having spent the last few days in the city. The days after clearing the Zuverian ruins had been relatively uneventful, with them only finding two smaller dungeons in the nearby area, neither of which had particularly good loot. The mansion staff were currently cataloging and storing what they did find, in addition to what they had recovered from the ruins. For the time being, it would be stored in the cellar.

Things going missing wasn't a particular worry of hers. From her time grilling all the servants with Fynn after the Cabal's assault, she knew they were relatively trustworthy people. And with her new connection to the Loci that now made this place its domain, she would know if there were any intruders on the estate.

For now, most of the matters related to the Zuverian ruins would be left on the back burner. They had said their goodbyes to Adalicia just after they returned to the mansion earlier, and they would wait to announce the find publically until after the woman had finished going over some of the specifics related to the ruins. Evelyne would probably start getting into contact with Elystead Tower and the other mage factions before that, though. As for when they would be visiting another Zuverian ruin...

Well, that would probably also have to wait for a while. Adalicia was a busy woman, after all, and Scarlett would have her plate filled with other things soon. She was expecting Gaven to return to Freybrook tomorrow from the job she gave him. With him, he would hopefully bring the [Memory of the Covenant], which would finally let her make use of the [Gem of Athanasia] she had picked up in Abelard's Doll Mansion.

That, in turn, meant she would soon have everything she needed to execute one of the most important parts of her plan for completing the main quest and reaching Beld Thylelion before any other faction.

She reached a hand down to her pouch and pulled out the [Cube of Instant Katabasis] she had found in the Zuverian ruins. The small grey cube felt cold to the touch in her palm.

Before doing anything else, she first had to have a talk with the Countess.

Placing the cube back into the pouch, she left her room and began climbing the stairs to the highest floor in the east wing. There, she stopped for a moment before the door to the Countess' room.

She had already thought over how this conversation would go several times in her head, but she still reviewed it one last time, just to be safe. This was an important conversation, on several levels.

Finally, she opened the door.

It was dark inside, with the curtains pulled over the windows and the candles unlit. Floating near the ceiling was an ocean of stars, each embroidered onto a napkin, with a full moon at the center. The light emanating from the 'moon' and the surrounding 'stars' wrapped the room in a calm glow. The Countess was sitting at the table in the room's corner, working on even more of her embroidery pieces.

For a few seconds, Scarlett simply took in the sight of the room and the woman engrossed in her work. She had given the Countess the okay to do things like this, since it seemed to calm the woman. The only thing they had to be careful about was to ensure it didn't happen when there were any guests present that could detect it. Not that they were too common.

Turning her away from the ceiling, she also glanced at the new bed that had replaced the old canopy one that the Countess had accidentally broken. This one was far simpler, so it wouldn't matter as much if it broke. Not that she cared that much about the last one. She'd sent an invoice for the cost to Leon's abode in the capital, and being the upright knight that he was, she didn't doubt that he would pay. Though she was curious about the reaction his staff might have if they were to see the invoice.

She started walking across the room. "Countess," she said, not too loudly, but just enough to catch the woman's attention as she leaned over the table.

The Countess' head rose instantly, and she turned around to look at Scarlett, pulling her robes closer to hide her appearance. "Ah-ah, the Baroness is here... H-Hello... I'm sorry, welcome..."

"There is nothing to apologize for." Scarlett waved away the woman's concerns. She stopped next to her, looking over her shoulder at the new star that was being embroidered onto another napkin. Then she gestured towards an empty chair on the opposite side of the table. "Would it be okay for me to take a seat?"

The Countess' eyes widened under her hood, and she nodded her head several times. "O-Of course, yes, yes."

Scarlett moved over and pulled out the chair before sitting down. She rested her hands on the table.

The Countess started fidgeting with the fabric of her robes, turning her gaze downwards.

"...Most of the necessary preparations are now complete," Scarlett said. "Ridley will be returning tomorrow evening, and we will then be able to proceed with our plans."

In front of her, the robed woman simply continued nodding along. "Plans...yes."

Scarlett's eyes stayed on her for a while.

This particular part hadn't gone well when she'd brought it up previously, but now they had reached a point where she couldn't avoid bringing the topic up.

"...You still wish to meet your sister, do you not?"

The Countess' head jerked up, and she stared at Scarlett. "M-My...sister...?"

The two of them looked at each other as she seemed to process her words. Finally, the woman started nodding her head again, more and more fervently.

"Y-Yes...! My sister, she is...she is..."

"Do you want to meet her?"

"Yes...yes.... I want to see her... I-I want to meet with sister...save her..."

The woman trailed off, her words turning into quiet mumblings that eventually turned into whispers. Scarlett let her return to her senses, then spoke again. "Are you aware of where your sister currently is?"

The Countess pulled down on her robes. "T-They took her...those evil people..."

Scarlett observed her. "...You are referring to the Followers of Ittar."

A flash of anger crossed the woman's face at the name, and Scarlett froze as thin tendrils of silvery light exploded out from beneath the Countess, covering almost half the room in the blink of an eye. A dangerous air hung between them.

Scarlett eyed the tendrils warily. She had [Sidhe's Flowing Garbs] activated and wore the [Prayer of Salvation] on her wrist, just in case. She was also ready to use her [Charm of Expeditious Change] if anything happened. Thankfully, the tendrils soon started trailing back towards the Countess.

Still, Scarlett waited a while before continuing. "Do you know who your sister is to them?"

"My sister...my sister...my sister..."

The woman's words once again threatened to devolve into unintelligible mumbling.

"Countess." Scarlett spoke in a serious tone, bringing the woman's attention back to her. "...Have you heard of the Augur?"

The Countess blinked, a brief look of recognition entering her eyes. "Ah, ah, ah. M-My sister... That is what... What they called her... Augur...*Augur*..."

"You are correct. She is considered one of the most sacrosanct personages in the whole empire, and getting close to her would prove impossible for most any person but the Emperor. However—" Scarlett met the Countess' eyes. "As was my promise, I will help you meet your sister. I will help you meet with the Augur."

"Ah, yes, you will... You promised, yes..." An unsettling smile formed on the woman's face. "Yes, the Baroness is kind, after all... Yes, surely...I will meet her... T-Thank you...thank you..."

“It will not be easy,” Scarlett said. “Your sister is one of the Followers' most important assets, and the protections around her are impenetrable to most mundane advances. There are, however, flaws within them which we can make use of, and this is why we have spent so much time on these preparations. There is something that the Followers of Ittar have that I need, and beyond seeing your sister, I will also require your aid in procuring this.”

“Yes, yes, I will help.” The Countess leaned closer over the table and closer to her. “Yes...anything... I will help...with anything...”

Scarlett pushed down the instinct to move away from the woman, as well as the feelings of distaste that roiled up. “Are you certain?”

“Yes, yes.” The Countess fervently nodded.

Scarlett eyed her for a moment.

She knew the woman wasn't considering the implication behind her words right now. She wasn't considering what the consequences of meeting with her sister were, or even that the meeting itself might not go well. What she saw was something she thought she wanted, and she would agree to anything to get it.

And Scarlett was making use of that fact.

She didn't want to think too much about what that said about her.

“As I mentioned, Ridley will soon be returning with the Memory of the Covenant in hand. It is an artifact with which you will be able to meet your sister.” She brought down a hand to her pouch of holding and pulled out the [Cube of Instant Katabasis], placing it on the table between them. “The two of you will be carrying out this task together, like previous times. Your sister is currently in the Sanctuary of Ittar, and Ridley will aid you in locating and reaching her there, where you will then be afforded the chance to speak with her. The Followers of Ittar will most likely not be aware of your presence at first, but we cannot be certain of that. Making your escape will prove difficult if something happens, and Ridley cannot help you with this, so I have expended the effort of procuring this item for you.”

She pushed the cube towards the Countess. “It is an ancient Zuverian artifact. Once activated, it will teleport you to a random location in the nearby region. I wish for you to use this device in order to escape safely, and then seek me out.”

Gaven's specialty was evasion, so he would be able to escape by himself as long as he didn't have to take the Countess along. This teleportation cube was the best option she could come up with for the time being that solved that problem. Scarlett had tested the day before to ensure it worked as she thought. It had taken her a while to trek back to the others after that.

Unfortunately, it only teleported one person. This meant that the Countess couldn't bring her sister along to 'save' her, but that had never been the intention to begin with. Nor had it ever been a possibility. There were a plethora of reasons why they couldn't just kidnap the Augur — one of the most important persons in one of the most powerful factions in the empire.

But the Countess probably wouldn't accept that even if she told her as much.

The woman reached out a half-covered hand towards the cube, tentatively picking it up and examining it.

“Ensure that you do not lose it,” Scarlett said. “Understood?”

“Y-Yes... T-Thank you... Thank you... I will...treasure it.”

Well, treasuring it wasn't exactly necessary. But as long as she didn't lose it, it was fine.

“Good.” Scarlett gave a brief nod. “I have placed my trust in you regarding this matter, so I am certain that things will go well.”

She was hoping things would turn out well, at least. But it was difficult not to worry.

The Countess stared at her with a stirred expression before turning back to the cube in her hand and hurriedly stowing it away inside her robes. “I-I will not...disappoint...the Baroness,” she mumbled.

Scarlett paused.

“...There is no need to worry about disappointing me. Simply act as you normally would, and endeavor to cooperate with Ridley when required during this coming task. If you do so, I will be more than satisfied.”

“Yes...yes...” The words left the woman quietly as her attention seemed to turn down to her lap.

Scarlett observed her for a while longer, then eventually rose from her seat. “I will come and visit you again later. Until then, feel free to continue as you were.” She looked around the room, eyes stopping at the embroidered night sky that hung just beneath the ceiling. “It is quite impressive. What you have fashioned here.”

The Countess looked up again, a smile reappearing on her face. It was perhaps the most normal smile yet that Scarlett had seen from her. “Thank you...”

“...Then I will take my leave.”

Scarlett said her goodbyes and turned around, crossing the room and exiting into the hallway outside. After the door closed, she stopped and looked back at it.

...Things were starting to fall into place. It was only a matter of time now before the reason she contacted the Countess in the first place was gone. After that... She would have to figure out what to do from there then.

For now, all she had to do was wait. Wait for the meeting of two sisters. One, the representative of Ittar, the sun god. The other, the unknowing avatar of Adtia, the forgotten goddess of the night and lady of the moon.

It probably wouldn't be the happiest of reunions.