

## 170: Precursors and preparations

As their carriage set into motion away from the Followers' temple, Rosa slumped back into her seat next to Scarlett.

"You know," the woman began, "with all this talk about 'research' and what-not that I keep hearing from you during these serious talks, it really makes one wonder when exactly you're *doing* all of it." She turned her head to look at Scarlett. "I always see you with your nose stuffed in papers in your office, but as far as I can tell, most of those have more numbers and figures in them rather than tales and texts from dead holy folk."

Scarlett arched an eyebrow at the bard. "That is because you do not pay enough attention."

While it was true that she had been reading more official documentation lately because she and Evelyne were preparing for the Cabal's upcoming attacks, that was far from what she spent most of her time on. A significant portion of her free time at the moment was dedicated to reading books to familiarise herself with this world, such as texts on old history, the Zuverian civilization, the empire's nobility, and the nation's governance and judicial systems.

And she *had*, in fact, spent these last few days performing actual research. It had more to do with planning this trip and studying maps of Bridgespell and its surrounding region, but it was research all the same.

That said, maybe it wasn't the best idea to have Rosa spending so much time in her office if she didn't want the woman to notice that *something* was off. The thought that Rosa would notice she never did a lot of research related to what she claimed had honestly never crossed her mind.

The bard shrugged her shoulders and turned away. "True enough. I can't make heads or tails of most of what you keep yourself busy with."

Scarlett didn't entirely buy that. Rosa was far from stupid, and she had proved to be shockingly perceptive numerous times, whether it be related to supernatural occurrences or more mundane matters.

As the carriage continued rocking forward, the others in the carriage soon fell into discussions about the upcoming days, while Scarlett shifted her attention to the passing city landscape outside.

The older buildings and narrow streets of the Emberwood Ward were eventually replaced by wider lanes and newer structures as they entered one of the adjoining districts. It still felt cramped compared to Freybrook, but that probably had more to do with the number of people who were moving around in the same area than the actual size of the streets around here.

From what she had learned in the previous days, Bridgespell's populace was concentrated around the heart of the city—and the four wards that made up its core—to a far greater degree than Freybrook was. But Freybrook was also a little bit of an outlier. Not every city could afford to dedicate an entire district the size of a small town solely to the residences and estates of nobles and wealthy individuals.

As their carriage soon entered one of Bridgespell's main thoroughfares, the traffic increased noticeably, but it also moved a lot more smoothly, which meant they made quick progress towards their next destination. Tobia, the coachman who often drove Scarlett around whenever she left Freybrook, skillfully navigated around the other vehicles. She had given him directions before they left, and the man had been in Bridgespell enough times to have a good grasp of how to move about in the city.

Eventually, after they had entered a district of the city where the lanes were lined by stalls and stores from left and right, the carriage came to a halt beside a large, sturdy three-story building flanked by two smaller wings, each with two floors. The foot traffic outside the building was moderate compared to some other nearby places, but there were several carriages parked in a long side-building that connected to one of the wings.

Exiting the vehicle with the others, Scarlett proceeded to the building's entrance. Inside, they entered a wide, polished stone-floored foyer bustling with various glass showcases and a wooden reception desk that took up much of the far wall. Scarlett crossed the room floor and approached a man in a neat suit seated behind the desk.

He greeted her with a polite smile. "Welcome to the Golden Gavel. How may I assist you?"

"I am Baroness Scarlett Hartford, here to transfer some artifacts and items according to an agreement between my barony and your auction house."

The man brought out some papers from under the desk and placed a wooden placard in front of him. "Please follow me. I'll guide you to our storage chambers, where a room should have been prepared for you."

He stepped out from behind the desk and led Scarlett and her party down a connecting corridor until they reached a set of doors that ran along the walls of the hallway. After a brief look through his papers, he pointed to a door with a particular sign beside it. "You can place the articles in there, my lady."

Scarlett gestured for Fynn to follow her, and they entered the room. It was empty save for a few chests and shelves lining the walls. She then had Fynn open the [Bag of Juham]—which she had specifically asked him to bring for this purpose—and the young man began emptying some of its contents into the room.

It almost exclusively comprised various types of Zuverian items—coins, light crystals, strange tools, vases, and other trinkets—that they had gathered during their exploration of the ruins with Adalicia. Most of the items related to magic from that place had already been sold to the mage towers, which left the items that held less practical value.

After about a minute of piling all the gold coins into one of the chests in the corner of the room—there had been *a lot* of coins in those ruins—Fynn finally finished up, and they left the room. The employee in the suit, along with the rest of Scarlett's party, waited patiently outside.

"Is everything settled?" he asked, glancing over at Fynn and the odd-looking bag the white-haired young man had strapped over his shoulder.

“We are,” Scarlett replied.

The man offered the same polite smile as before. “Marvelous. As I am sure you are aware, you need not worry about the safety of your items while they are in our care. Each room is enchanted with several safeguards to prevent unauthorized entry, and we will treat them with the utmost carefulness.”

“I am certain that you will.”

They walked back to the foyer, and the man provided information about how they dealt with articles that were auctioned off as well as the upcoming auction itself. While it was scheduled in four days, considering the nature and quantity of Scarlett’s items, it could take more than a month for all of them to be sold off. He emphasized that this was faster than any other auction house in the empire could likely do, though.

Scarlett simply nodded along with the man’s words. He probably wasn’t exaggerating that much. She had chosen this auction house specifically because they were said to be the most experienced in selling Zuverian relics. While she and Evelyne had usually used one of the larger houses in Elystead for most of her artifact sales, in this particular case, it was easier to work with these guys.

As they returned to the carriage, the group set off to their next destination. There were a couple of more steps left on her itinerary today.

After a short while, they stopped in front of a much smaller, single-story building with a sloping tiled roof. A wooden sign above the entrance depicted a needle and dress, and the large windows allowed a view of colorful bolts of fabric and various garments carefully displayed inside.

Bridgespell was home to some notable artisans in the empire, and Scarlett was taking this chance to visit a few of them and commission more gear for herself and her party.

Despite obtaining a sizeable amount of artifacts and equipment from her dungeon explorations over the months, most of them were low-level or unsuitable for her purposes. Of the higher-level items, she lacked enough to fully equip her party. While they managed with what they had, she was still making do with the [Garment of Form] as her main piece of armor after all.

Of course, if she continued clearing tougher and tougher dungeons like she was planning on doing, they would find more equipment. But it would take some time to collect what might be considered full sets, and that method wasn’t as flexible as having them custom-made, even though that was usually how you found the *best* items.

She had decided to work with the artisans here in Bridgespell to create some items from the materials she had available, including half-broken items like the [Scorched Robes of Sorcerous Synergy (Epic)] from the Zuverian ruins near Faybarrow and the dragon materials harvested from the ashenwraith dragon.

She had informed the artisans of her visit beforehand, and while some of them had been busy, they'd all been more than willing to work with her after hearing about the materials she was bringing.

Scarlett and her party made quick stops at four different workshops to discuss the requests, take measurements, and leave off the required components. After they finished up at the last of those workshops and returned to the carriage, the others were all looking at Scarlett with various expressions.

She met their gazes as the carriage rocked into motion. "Is there something you would like to say?"

"Those weren't your ordinary evening dresses you've ordered today," Rosa remarked.

Allyssa grimaced slightly. "No kidding. I got chills hearing the price of just *one* of those pieces."

Scarlett shrugged. It wasn't as if she didn't agree.

She wanted these items to be at least Epic-tier quality, which meant she had been quite particular in her requests. That led to some pretty substantial price tags, even with her contribution of materials. They were talking about a total cost in the six figures, and while Scarlett *had* the money, it still made her uncomfortable to spend so much on seemingly little.

This was one of the reasons she hadn't tried to commission a lot of items in the past.

But all the money she was raking in had to be used somewhere. The saying "Money not spent is money wasted" seemed particularly true in her case, considering the life-threatening situations she was facing in the future. Splurging on gear now and then would do her good if it helped lower the danger she and her party would encounter.

"Just another Tuesday for you then, I'd wager?" Rosa asked.

Scarlett looked out the window. The next stop wasn't far away. "Yes, this is indeed how I spend many of my weekdays, Miss Hale. Spending hundreds of thousands of solars commissioning equipment for strangers to wear simply for the enjoyment of it. Astute observation, as always."

"'Astute' is my middle name, right after Mendacious."

"Of course it is."

"Wait, so you are seriously having those made for us?" Allyssa asked. "I almost thought I was imagining it when that tailor started taking my measurements."

"It will be on loan, but yes," Scarlett replied.

She left the conversation at that, letting the others start up their own discussions while she paid attention to the surroundings outside.

At some point, she overheard Allyssa and Rosa getting into talks about the bard's previous jobs and her process for creating new songs and sounds. That conversation then shifted to how Rosa developed new charms that worked with her music, with the woman making a comment about the inordinate amount of sweat and blood shed because of a certain 'taskmaster' while coming up with her latest charm.

At the same time, Scarlett spotted a suitable place to stop on the side of the street. She called out to the coachman to halt, and all eyes turned to her as she leaned forward to open the cabin door.

"Miss Hale, this is where you will be getting off," she announced.

Rosa blinked, and the others looked surprised.

"Pardon?" the bard said.

Scarlett gestured toward the door. "I am asking you to exit the vehicle."

Allyssa looked between the two of them. "Wait... Are you kicking her out?"

Rosa's eyes widened a bit, but she attempted to cover up her surprise by clearing her throat and coughing into her head. "Of course, when I said 'taskmaster' earlier, I was referring to myself and my insatiable desire to improve and impress my dear employer. An employer that, I dare say, would *never* consider punishing me for something I may or may not have said by forcing me to walk alone through a large city with nothing but the klerd in my hand and the boots on my feet."

Scarlett studied the woman. Though it probably wasn't something to be proud of, she had to admit that it was *satisfying* seeing Rosa react like this. Sadly, she couldn't let it continue for too much longer.

"If this were a more just world, then perhaps that is what I would do. Unfortunately, that is not the reason behind this."

As she heard the bard mutter '*unfortunately?*' to herself, Scarlett reached into her [Pouch of Holding] and pulled out a list that she handed over to the woman.

Rosa received it with a slightly flabbergasted expression.

"That is a record of tasks that need to be performed and articles that need to be procured. I am assigning you the responsibility of ensuring that each item on that list is dealt with. I have other matters to attend to for the time being, but I trust that you can handle these without my supervision."

"Uh, okay..." Rosa turned the list in her hand and examined it. Allyssa and Shin leaned over from their seats to see it, while Fynn seemed perfectly content to stay where he sat and remain silent.

“These are your funds for the day.” Scarlett also reached into her pouch and pulled out a purse filled with coins that she had already prepared, handing it over to Rosa even as the woman kept reading over the paper in her hand.

“This is a pretty long list,” Allyssa observed. “I recognize a lot of the things you want her to get, but what are they for? It’s going to take a lot of time if she’s doing it on her own.”

Scarlett shifted her attention to the girl. “You are currently working on improving the efficacy of your greater healing potions, yes?”

Allyssa seemed slightly surprised by the sudden question, but nodded. “I am, yes.” Then she blinked, looking down at the list again. “Wait, is this for—?”

“In part, yes,” Scarlett said. “I intend to have you continue improving your skills while you are still acting as my retainer, and as such, this is the least I have to do.”

The young Shielder had been diligently working on alchemy over the past few weeks, where they’d had a lot of downtime at the mansion. With the ingredients and resources provided by Scarlett, Allyssa had made significant progress and was now able to create greater-grade potions at a satisfying frequency. Scarlett was hoping that soon she would be able to make superior-grade ones as well.

About half of the items on the list Rosa had been provided were ingredients and things that Allyssa could use in her profession. Bridgespell had a more active market for alchemy reagents due to housing one of the larger mage towers and one of the largest Shielder branches in the empire. It also had much easier access to a lot of the reagents because of its proximity to the Faywild Basin to the south.

This meant it was easier to acquire these things here in Bridgespell than in Freybrook. That’s not to say you *couldn’t* get them delivered to Freybrook, but this was cheaper. It also served as a decent excuse.

“Miss Astrey, Mister Thornthon,” Scarlett addressed Allyssa and Shin. “The two of you can join Miss Hale as well and assist her with this task, if you wish. When you are finished. I trust that you will be able to locate the Golden Griffin Inn by yourselves.”

“Oh.” Allyssa looked between the list and Rosa, who was holding it. “Okay, sure. I’m familiar with enough of them that it shouldn’t be a problem.”

Shin eyed Scarlett for a few seconds, though. “Will that be okay? It is part of our job to escort you, so I don’t know if both of us should leave.”

“Your concern is unnecessary,” Scarlett said confidently. “After I have dealt with my own affairs, I will immediately proceed to the inn from there. As long as I have Fynn alongside me, the likelihood that we will encounter trouble here in the city is slim.”

“...Alright,” the Shielder replied after a moment.

“Then we’ll head off,” Rosa said as she stepped out of the carriage along with the other two. She peeked her head back inside the cabin shortly after, though. “Wish us luck. And try not to have any too exciting adventures without me, pretty please?”

Scarlett just gave her an indifferent look. “I will endeavor my best to ensure we do not.”

“Great!” Rosa held up a thumb before closing the door.

Scarlett watched the trio through the window as they walked away and turned around on the streets, getting their bearings and examining the list she’d given them. After they turned a corner and disappeared from view, she heard Fynn’s voice beside her.

“You were lying to them.”

She kept her gaze out the window. “I was, yes.”

The carriage set into motion, beginning its journey towards their next stop. The Golden Griffin Inn.

She was hoping this would work out as she wanted.