

## 128: Late-night talks

**[Quest completed: Cleared Zuverian Ruins]**  
**{Skill points awarded: 5}**

Scarlett squeezed out of the narrow slit in the cave wall, exiting into the natural quarry where they had originally started. It was a lot darker than when they had entered, and there was a quiet air to the forest surrounding the quarry. She looked around for a moment, bringing out her enchanted glasses to see better, and noting that they were at the top of the quarry.

They had cleared the entirety of the Zuverian ruins to end up at the actual entrance, which had spared them the effort of having to swim back out. She was thankful for that much.

The other members of her group climbed out of the opening behind her, and soon, all of them were gathered outside. Adalicia was last, and Scarlett eyed her for a few seconds.

The wizard didn't seem quite as used to all this exploring and moving around as the rest of them. Moving through the dungeon had taken its toll on her. It also hadn't helped that Adalicia had moved back and forth all the time, inspecting almost every single part of the ruins and taking extensive notes for later perusal.

That wasn't to say the rest of them had been idle. In addition to dealing with all the enemies and traps that were spread about the place, they'd been spending a lot of time gathering most anything they could. At the rate Scarlett's party was getting used to this kind of thing, they could probably have become professional tomb raiders by now.

Like in Abelard's Doll Mansion, they *had* eventually reached the limit of what could be placed in the [Bag of Juham] and the [Pouch of Holding], but fortunately that was only towards the end, so they hadn't sacrificed too much. The only things they didn't bring with them were minor baubles that Adalicia had said weren't too valuable and the things that were too large or literally nailed down, like the Tabernacle.

Whatever was left would be left to the mage towers, when Scarlett eventually shared the location of this place with them. In this case, it would probably only be Elystead Tower, since there wasn't too much left. Though they would most likely be selling some of the loot they brought back to the other towers as well.

But for now, they were done here. There wasn't much more to see, and it had already turned dark, so next, they would be returning to Faybarrow.



Later that night, Scarlett was sitting in a small private lounge inside the inn they were staying at in Faybarrow. In her hands was a thin pile of documents given to her by Evelyne that she'd delayed going through up till now. It wasn't anything too important—just another report on current business dealings and other fief affairs she wasn't too familiar with—but it was something to while away her time with, at least.

Recently, she'd gotten into the habit of going to sleep a lot later than usual.

She wasn't entirely sure why. Maybe it was just because of how busy she had been lately, or maybe she accidentally reversed her sleep-wake cycle at some point these past few months. Another possibility was that it was simply due to stress, but she didn't *feel* too stressed. Simply...bogged down, at times.

Anyhow, the reason wasn't too important to her. She honestly didn't mind it too much. There was a relaxing quality to staying up and working late, even if you weren't working on anything special. It just made her feel more productive, and that relaxed her.

Although she really shouldn't stay up too long this night. They had two more days here in Faybarrow where they had nothing in particular that needed doing, so she was planning on having them wake up early once more so that they could go out and try to find another set of dungeons if possible. She wasn't too familiar with this area in particular, nor could she think of any items she *needed* from around here—most dungeons here didn't go past the level 40 range—but it never hurt to collect extra loot and skill points when she could.

Adalicia might want to stay here in the city and go over what she had found in the Zuverian ruins, though. The woman wasn't technically part of Scarlett's party like the others were, so there was no point in forcing her to join them on excursions that weren't part of their agreement.

Enjoying a cup of tea that she kept warm with her pyrokinesis, Scarlett continued reading through the documents by herself for a while longer. It had probably passed midnight by the time she heard the sound of footsteps on wood in the hall outside. Looking up, she spotted Rosa's distinct curls as the woman peeked around the corner into the lounge.

"Miss Hale," she said, eyeing the bard's rundown appearance. The woman was wearing a light grey shirt and a ruffled pair of pants that looked like they might have been put on without thought. Had she gone to sleep and woken up again? "I thought you would be in bed by now."

The woman had been using a lot of her magic today, mostly to provide the rest of them with energy as they trekked back from the ruins, so it was reasonable for her to be tired. The [Mark of the Staunch] meant that Scarlett made do well enough, but the same didn't go for Adalicia and Rosa herself.

The woman showed a weak smile as she stepped into the lounge. "I was. Didn't go too well, though, so I thought I'd wander around a bit and clear my mind."

"Is that so? I have heard reports from Marlon that you do the same in the mansion at times."

An awkward grin formed on Rosa's face as she scratched the back of her head. "Didn't think anyone had noticed that. It's an old habit of mine. I get antsy easily when I stay in one place for too long."

"Are you not satisfied with how things currently are? With working for me?" Scarlett asked.

"Oh, I'm about as satisfied as I can get. You couldn't force me to give this gig up even if you dragged me away screaming and fighting. Old habits just die hard and all that, you know?"

She studied the woman for a while. She doubted that was all there was to it, but as usual, Rosa was very tightlipped when it came to speaking about what troubled her. And with the deal Scarlett had made with the being possessing the woman, it was risky for her to pry too deep.

"...Do you wish to take a seat?" She gestured at the round table next to her, which had three empty chairs beside it.

For just a brief moment, Scarlett could have sworn she spotted a look of relief pass over Rosa's face.

"Don't mind if I do." The look was gone as quickly as it appeared, and the bard casually walked over to sit down opposite her.

Both of them went silent as Scarlett returned her attention to the documents in her hands.

This scene wasn't too uncommon nowadays, with Rosa often visiting her office and reading a book or other as Scarlett worked. This time, though, it felt slightly more awkward than normal, and she found her thoughts traveling back to the quiet Rosa and whatever bothered her several times.

Maybe it was because they weren't in the mansion that she had a hard time concentrating like this. Shutting the bard's antics out was usually one of her most practiced habits.

Eventually, she placed the papers down on the table and turned to Rosa.

"...I had been meaning to ask. Did you find the items I gave you useful?"

The woman blinked, clearly not having expected Scarlett to initiate a conversation. She nodded. "Sure do. Feels strange casually going around wearing stuff that's probably worth more than what I could have hoped to earn even over a decade of tavern-hopping, though."

In addition to the [Prayer of Devotion (Epic)] that Scarlett had given Rosa a while back, she had also given her the [Death's Shadow (Epic)] from Abelard's Doll Mansion as well as an [Earring of the Split Mind (Epic)] that they had looted from one of the other dungeons near Autumnwell.

The first of the two gave immunity to a certain amount of dark damage—which Scarlett hoped could prove useful to Rosa sometime in the future—and the other was a red jade earring that made it easier to concentrate on several things at the same time. Scarlett had

considered keeping herself, but with all the other items she had taken for herself lately, she decided that Rosa could make better use of it.

Thanks to that, the bard could now maintain up to four different buffs and effects at the same time for short periods, which was incredibly helpful to the rest of the party.

“I understand your sentiment,” Scarlett said. “It was the same for me. But you will grow accustomed to it, eventually.”

Rosa gave her a dubious look. “Lady ‘I-wear-a-different-thousand-solar-dress-every-day’ feels uncomfortable wearing expensive jewellery? To think, even nobles share the woes of us common folk.”

Scarlett frowned. It wasn’t her fault she had so many dresses. What was she supposed to do? Jewellery she could sell, but dresses? It wasn’t like there were any second-hand shops for aristocratic clothing in this world.

...Or maybe there was?

Well, whatever. They weren’t desperate for money anymore, so it wasn’t as if she was going to sell the dresses now. She might even buy new ones if she felt like it. Maybe.

Probably not.

Although, she *should* get one for the Tyndall Ball next month, shouldn’t she? That was the kind of thing where you’d be looked down upon if you wore something old, right?

She would have to double-check with Evelyne.

And she also had to send another letter to Beldon Tyndall.

He had replied to her request of getting an invitation to the ball, saying that arranging that could prove slightly difficult even for him, but he would consider it since he ‘really wanted to meet her again’.

Knowing how that man worked, she’d interpreted that as him saying she would have to give him something he wanted if she wanted an invitation, so she had been considering what piece of information she should share that both wasn’t *too* important but still was something that Mirage wanted.

There were a couple of minor tidbits of quest-related info that might fit the bill, so she would look into it further when she got back to Freybrook.

“...There is something I’ve wanted to ask,” Rosa said.

Scarlett returned her attention to the woman as she was about to continue, but then another set of footsteps sounded out from the hallway.

Rosa paused as she looked towards the open entrance to the lounge.

“It appears as if you are not the only one that has an interest in walking around at night,” Scarlett said.

They’d reserved this entire section of the inn for themselves, so the only ones that would be moving around here would be members of their group.

“Damnation.” Rosa pouted. “And here I thought I was unique.”

Scarlett simply shook her head at the bard’s act, and soon Adalicia appeared around the corner.

“I thought I heard voices,” the wizard said, observing the two of them. “So it was you. Baroness, Miss Hale. I hope the night greets you well?”

“As well as one might expect,” Scarlett replied, giving a nod in greeting.

“Same, but opposite,” Rosa said.

Adalicia offered a small—and perhaps slightly confused—smile in return. She was dressed in long white dress-like robes that reached the floor, and had her long hair hanging freely behind her. Standing there, with that gentle expression on her face, Scarlett felt that the woman exuded a very motherly nature. “I hope I’m not interrupting anything.”

“Even if you were, I would not mind,” Scarlett said. “While Miss Hale can offer surprisingly profound snippets of wisdom at times, most of what leaves her mouth is best left ignored, lest you find yourself tearing out your own hair in exasperation.”

A theatrical gasp left Rosa as she raised a hand to her mouth. “To think you consider me wise. I ahve never felt so complimented in my life.”

Scarlett gestured to the bard. “Like so.”

Adalicia gave the both of them an amused look. “You two certainly have a unique relationship.”

“I believe ‘unique’ is one way of describing it, yes.”

“‘Astounding’ is another,” Rosa said. “As is ‘enviable’, ‘eye-popping’, and ‘passionate’.”

“Of which ‘astounding’ I believe is the only one which holds a sliver of truth to it,” Scarlett added.

Adalicia chuckled. “I rather do think I’m interrupting something.”

Scarlett let out a small sigh. “Forgive me. You are not. Was there something you wanted? As with Miss Hale, I would have expected you to be asleep at this time.”

“Oh, no. I don’t think I’m getting any sleep done tonight.” The wizard shook her head gently. “I’ve been poring over the notes I have from the ruins since we got back, trying to decipher and compare what we found with what I have on record. I want to at least determine what the

purpose of these particular ruins were before I return to Elystead. If my suspicions are right, I won't have much time to do it there."

Scarlett arched a curious brow. "And why is that, if I might ask?"

Adalicia showed a slightly tired smile. "I won't bother you with too many of the details, but we recently finally received word that the Dean will be returning after Ittar-knows how long of being unreachable. Knowing how these things have gone in the past, I will have my hands full with that for at least a few weeks."

The woman's tone was that of someone annoyed at an itinerant uncle for forgetting to show up at the least family gathering.

"I'm not sure if you are aware, but the Elystead Tower has also been working together with the Ustrum Assembly, the Shields Guild, and several of the knight orders to deal with what's happening with the Tribe of Sin lately," she continued. "Matters like those aren't technically part of my responsibility as an official of the Tower, but it does help in making things more busy in general around the place."

"I did hear of that," Scarlett said. "It is unfortunate that it has resulted in causing you more stress."

"It is what it is." Adalicia pointed to one of the empty chairs between Scarlett and Rosa. "I had been meaning to take a short break. May I take a seat?"

Scarlett glanced at Rosa. The bard had clearly been meaning to bring something up before Adalicia got here...

Rosa just smiled. "You won't find me protesting."

Eyeing her for a moment longer, Scarlett eventually turned back to Adalicia and signaled towards the chair. "Feel free."

The woman walked over and sat down. "Today has been quite hectic, hasn't it? It's not often I have the opportunity to leave the tower and move about like this, but all of you seem rather used to it. It's at times like these I realize I'm not as young as I used to be."

"Really? I wouldn't have pegged you past twenty," Rosa said.

Adalicia let out a small laugh. "There's no need for flattery. I don't have any grey hairs yet, but it's been a few years since I was in my apprenticeship. You two would do well to heed my warning to take care of yourselves now while you still can. I used to think the obstinate old men at the tower exaggerated with their complaints of their 'elderly woes', but you'll be surprised at how early your body starts to complain after one too many nights spent leaning across a desk, straining your eyes at dusty old texts."

"Is that so?" An amused tone had found its way into Rosa's voice as she turned to look at Scarlett.

Scarlett met her look. "Is there something you wish to say, Miss Hale?"

“Nope, nope.” The woman turned away. “Just reminded me of someone I used to know. Old Baroness Sharlet Dartford. You’d find her huddled inside her poky little office six days out of five, doing who-knows-what with what-knows-who until her pupils fell out. But you’re nothing like her. Nuh-uh.”

Scarlett narrowed her eyes. She wasn’t ‘huddled’ inside her office all the time. In fact, she actively avoided it when she could. Didn’t she? She hated paperwork and things like that just as much as other people. Probably more. The only reason she still did some of it was that she knew there was *a lot* she wasn’t doing.

“Yes, well, perhaps you should ask this ‘Baroness Dartford’ if she would not be willing to employ your services instead,” she said. “I am sure that she will be enthusiastic over the opportunity to procure such a competent, not to mention soon-to-be-unwaged, persona.”

Rosa turned back to her, fluttering her eyebrows. “Have I ever said how lucky I am to have such a charming, magnificent employer? With red hair that flows like a river of molten gold, framing a face that could launch a thousand ships and a gaze as piercing as the sun, I dare say your voice could command the very stars in the sky. If there ever was a vision of power and beauty, of a queen among mortals, then I am sure it must be my dear employer.”

Scarlett *really* felt like sighing. “...That is quite enough of the adulation.”

“Are you sure?” The grin on the bard’s face was *far* too large. “I’ve got a whole notebook filled out with these, if you want to hear more. Of course, even serenades pale in comparison to reality.”

Scarlett opened her mouth, then paused, squinting her eyes at the woman. “Is that true?”

Rosa shrugged. “I was bored one afternoon.”

“...I am sure your reason for this was entirely due to pure admiration, and not some debased predilection for causing me discomfort, yes?”

The woman nodded. “Surely.”

Scarlett brought a hand to her forehead as she closed her eyes. “Were it not so late, I would have had half a mind to command you to fetch it only so that I could ensure its incineration right here and now.”

Rosa’s eyes widened. “You would burn the work I poured so much passion and effort into?”

“Without hesitation.”

The woman grinned once again. “As ruthless as ever.”

The conversation entered into a brief lull, and silence fell over the three of them. As no one spoke, Scarlett leaned back in her seat, her thoughts drifting off to where they would go tomorrow. Adalicia and Rosa similarly seemed to occupy themselves with thoughts of their own. This time, it wasn’t an awkward silence, and they sat like that for a while.

Eventually, Adalicia turned to look at Rosa. “Miss Hale. There was something that caught my interest earlier today, and I had been intending to ask you about it. Feel free to not answer if it isn’t something you wish to share.”

Rosa looked back at the woman with a laid-back smile. “Shoot.”

“It was related to the style of magic that you practice. It is a variety of bardic charms, isn’t it? I have read of them before, but this is the first time I have ever encountered someone making use of them. I’ve heard it is a very difficult magic to grasp.”

Scarlett’s ears perked up. The matter of Rosa’s magic was something she was curious about as well. She hadn’t even heard the term bardic charms before, so this was news to her.

Rosa touched a hand to her chin. “I don’t know about it being difficult, but it can certainly be a bit tricky to get a hang of at first. If I’d brought my klert with me, I could have showed you right now, but it’s back in my room right now.”

“That is quite alright.” Adalicia held up a hand. “I know myself well enough to know it would be a poor idea to start delving into another interesting topic like this when I’m already in the middle of another project. Perhaps if we are given another chance in the future, I would appreciate it.”

“I’ve never said no to someone wanting to hear my music,” Rosa replied. “Whenever you have the time, just say the word. Unless we’re in the middle of being eaten by a giant gator or something like that. There aren’t many music-afficionados among that kind of monster, I’ve learned. She can attest to that much.” The bard gestured to Scarlett, who let out a scoff.

“Do not remind me.”

That had been a relatively low-level dungeon near the Freybrook area, so things had gone alright, but things definitely got a whole lot messier than they had to. She was still half-convinced Rosa had done what she did for a laugh, but the woman rarely messed around too much during their excursions, so she couldn’t be sure. Not that it had stopped her from giving her a verbal thrashing at the time.

“No, I can imagine.” Adalicia let out a small laugh. “If I may ask, how did you first learn your magic?”

“Well, I’d like to say I just had the gift for it. Picked up an instrument one day and — *wham!*” Rosa clapped her hands. “Suddenly you’ve got flowers flying around your head and people regrowing teeth to your right and left as they dance the Changle as Ittar and his buds look on from above.”

“But I suppose that wasn’t how it went?” Adalicia asked.

“No, unfortunately the gods must have been out the day I picked up my first instrument. Instead, I had to make do with an unimpressed raggle of cats and a tone-deaf old josser who thought I was his grandniece for the day. I think he might have actually been deaf as well.”

“Then, did someone teach you?”



“Not all of it, no.” Rosa shook her head. “I met an old lady who taught me a trick or two at first, but that’s about it. The rest I had to figure out by myself.”

The wizard grew a thoughtful expression. “Do you know if this lady was a mage of some kind? Or from the Luicean Isles?”

“I know about as much about her as about that old josser I mentioned, and that was the last day I saw him.”

“So you weren’t her disciple, then?”

Rosa snorted. “I’m sure she was hoping that, at first. Changed her mind real quick, though.”

“Why is that?” Adalicia asked.

The bard went silent, as if she just realized she’d shared more than she had intended. Her eyes went to Scarlett for a moment, before returning to Adalicia. “Can’t really say. People have the tendency to not stay in my life for long. She was just another example of that.”

Scarlett studied her as she spoke, and next to her, Adalicia knitted her brows.

“That sounds like a difficult way to live,” the woman said.

Rosa simply shrugged her shoulders. “Like you said earlier, it is what it is. When you make your coin minstreling away like me, it’s only natural that you travel around a lot, so it doesn’t matter much.”

“And that is the sole reason behind your travels?” Scarlett asked.

Rosa paused, turning to Scarlett. After a couple of seconds, she smiled. “What other reason would there be?”

Their eyes met.

“...Indeed. What reason would there be?” Scarlett repeated her words.

They looked at each other for a moment longer before Scarlett eventually turned away. There were a lot of things she wanted to ask Rosa, but she wasn’t sure when she could. Or should.

Soon enough, Rosa steered the discussion onto another subject, and the night continued as the three of them conversed in the inn’s lounge.