

68: Foreboding winds

Scarlett walked through the mansion, absentmindedly taking in the various expensive decors spread throughout the hallways as she passed through them. A few days had passed since her meeting with Gaven, but not much of note had happened since. She was still in the process of clearing the surrounding area's dungeons—collecting skill points and valuable items—so she wasn't *expecting* much excitement for some time still, even though she was now hiring Gaven's services. Those particular plans of hers would take a while to get moving.

What she *had* done these past few days was communicate with Evelyne a lot, sending missives through a carrier service that made use of the empire's Kilnstones.

There were magical items and artifacts that allowed direct communication over long distances, the [Mirror of Communion] used by the Angler Man and the Hallowed Cabal was a prime example of this, but they were relatively rare—Scarlett wasn't even sure if there were any that weren't Zuver in origin—and it didn't seem like any network had been set up by any organization to be used en masse for such communication.

She knew for a fact that the Shields Guild had their own network set up for things like that, as did the Ustrum Assembly and some of the other influential groups across the empire, but the public didn't appear to have access to anything like it at least.

Not that it mattered much to Scarlett. The carrier services she'd been using to communicate with Evelyne were efficient enough for now. She had wondered on occasion if there wasn't a potential business opportunity in trying to set up a communication network for the public somehow, but there probably was a reason something like that didn't already exist. Most likely a mix of the rarity of the needed items and the complicated logistics of such a venture.

She would probably try and get her hands on some communication artifacts on her own in the future, for her own private needs, but she would probably keep using the carrier services as well. They had the added benefit of transporting goods in addition to messages; a feature she had used to send over much of the loot she had gathered during the last couple of weeks to Evelyne in the capital, where the younger Hartford sister was working on selling it all for as much as possible.

As Scarlett passed by a window giving a good view of the training grounds situated behind the mansion, and the hedge garden in front of it, she caught sight of Fynn running around between the target dummies.

For some reason, the young man had been completely engrossed in training the last few days, and Scarlett couldn't quite understand why. At first, she had thought it had something to do with the run-in with Gaven, and the somewhat unfair admonishment she had given Fynn at the time, but it didn't appear like that was the reason behind it. Instead, when Scarlett had talked to him about it—reminding him about trying not to openly leak secrets, and to be careful about destroying her property—she had gotten the impression that he was just intent on growing stronger as fast as possible right now.

The fact that he was able to use [Claws of Tempest] this early *had* surprised her. In the game, he didn't learn that until level 50, which should theoretically—or as theoretical as one could

be when trying to translate a game to the real world—still be quite some way off from where he was at the moment. But she supposed that this new mindset of his was part of the reason for that.

She was still trying to figure out what had prompted this premature development in him, though. It didn't feel like any of her actions up till now should have had much effect on his strength, but she wasn't sure what else it could be. One alternative was that there was some unknown factor that had changed without her being unaware. Or it could just be another of those things where it differed somewhat from what she knew in the game.

Whatever it was, she wasn't going to complain too much about it, considering that it meant she got a more powerful companion.

She was just hoping he wouldn't grow *too* fast.

Eventually, after having entered the first floor of the mansion's west wing where her destination was, Scarlett reached the far end of a corridor where there was a somewhat worn-out door whose frame showed signs of disrepair. As far as she knew, the west wing was where many of the mansion's staff lived. But there were parts of it that hadn't been shown enough care for quite some time.

Grabbing hold of the worn metal handle of the wooden door, Scarlett opened it to reveal a tight set of stone stairs that led down to a cellar area. The air had that chilly, slightly moist feel to it that was common to underground places like these, and the stone was cold to the touch as she traced her hand along the wall as not to lose her balance on her way down the steep decline.

The cellar itself wasn't too large, consisting mostly of a short hallway with a few doors on both sides leading to storage rooms of some kind. Scarlett walked over to the closest of the doors and opened it, revealing a simple stone room that looked like it was in the middle of being refurbished. Packs of crates lay strewn along the walls, with some of the open crates in one corner being filled with different kinds of stone and metal vessels, and two long tables stood at the center of the room with a range of odd tools and items on them.

Allyssa stood between the two tables, brown leather goggles pulled down in front of her eyes as the blonde girl turned to look towards the entrance. She was wearing a simple set of brown clothes with several spots on them.

Scarlett scrunched up her nose at the thick smell that wafted across her from whatever Allyssa's work here brought about. She turned her eyes toward a set of small windows situated at the top of the far wall, which lent a view outside at the western edge of the estate. The windows were open to let in some fresh air, but clearly it wasn't enough to combat the entirety of the smell.

"Oh, you were coming here?" Allyssa's muffled voice sounded out as she pulled down a piece of cloth that covered her mouth. "From what you said earlier I thought I was supposed to go and find you later."

Scarlett turned her attention to the young Shielder. She had told her this morning that they should talk a bit more about what Allyssa could do with her alchemy, now that the girl had

had time to get things set up and working here in Freybrook. Originally, Scarlett had intended to just discuss it in the office, but she'd found herself curious about how things looked here now that Allyssa was actually performing her craft and decided to just pay a visit herself.

Although she hadn't quite anticipated the smell to be this strong. She would need to change later if it stuck to her clothes.

"I had time to spare, so there is no need to fret," Scarlett said, studying an alignment of thin vials, containing several different-colored liquids, that stood in a row on one of the tables. Some of those looked similar to what she'd seen Allyssa use during their various excursions. "I heard from Garside that you have yet to use any of the alchemical materials and resources compiled and allocated to you by him, choosing to first exhaust your own supplies. Is that correct?"

"Ehm, yeah, that's true," Allyssa said, pushing up her goggles and rearranging the frayed locks of hair that were jumbled by the action. "You said that it was ok if I focused on refilling my own supply before I made anything else, so that's what I've been focusing on...But it didn't feel right to use what you've provided me with for that, and I still had some stuff left from Elystead, so I decided to use up that first."

"But does that not limit you in what you can make?" Scarlett asked, traipsing over to stand next to Allyssa and gently running her finger over the side of a triangular piece of metal on the table closest to them. The odd piece of equipment had three depressions on its face, with strange lines and symbols running between them. Scarlett recalled that this was an item you had used in the game when performing alchemy, though the true purpose of it evaded her. "My understanding is that Garside acquired a wide range of materials for someone of your craft. You are welcome to make full use of it, even when it is for your own use. You are currently under my employ, after all, and any additions to your capabilities in the field also benefit me."

Allyssa looked a bit shocked at those words, as if that hadn't even crossed her mind. Even though Scarlett felt like she had made it clear on more than one occasion that her intention was to fully support the young woman in her craft. The potential it signified held a lot of interest to her, after all.

Although, considering that the invoice for all the materials Garside had gathered totaled a few thousand solars, maybe Allyssa's reaction wasn't too surprising. While that was barely any money at all in the grand scheme of things—especially to nobles in the empire—that was a good sum of money to ordinary people. It was a decent amount to Scarlett at the moment too, as they were still in the process of selling most of the items and artifacts she had collected, but she had at least that amount of cash at hand.

"I'll...remember that in the future then," Allyssa said. "But for now I've already finished most of what I needed to do for myself. There are still some potions and elixirs that I haven't had the time or materials to create yet, like the Philter of Ire's Decay, but I should be fine for now. If there's anything special you wanted me to try and create, I could probably get started on it soon."

"That is, in fact, what I wished to speak with you about," Scarlett said. "However, I am not entirely certain what the limits of your capacities are, so I do not know exactly what I can request."

"Well." Allyssa wore a careful expression. "I don't really talk much with real alchemists outside of a couple of my mom's old friends, so I don't know how I would compare to others. But I think I would at least be considered on the same level as an Alchemist Adept in most towers? Maybe?"

Scarlett turned fully to the young woman. The alchemical ranking system wasn't something she was acquainted with. If it was anything like the system that mages used though, then an Adept was probably a step or two above a Novice, which in turn was a step above a complete beginner.

"I am unfamiliar with the practices of alchemists," Scarlett simply said. "So that does not tell me much. Would you be capable of creating healing potions, as an example?"

Allyssa wrinkled her face together as she considered it. "It depends on the level? I usually don't create any because the materials are so expensive, but I can make at least some minor ones. I *know* how to make ordinary ones, but I'm not completely sure I'd succeed with those so it could be a waste to even try."

Scarlett frowned at that. In the game, the prefixes for potions and the like went Lesser -> Minor -> None -> Greater -> Superior -> Major -> Argent. [Minor Healing Potions] and [Healing Potions] were a bit weaker than she would have wanted at this point, looking at it from a purely game perspective. [Greater Healing Potion] was more along the lines of her thoughts. And from what she had learned just one of those cost thousands of solar to buy—even if you didn't already have a bad relationship with one of the major suppliers—so she had been quite hopeful about Allyssa being able to make them for her at a much lower price.

That Allyssa could maybe only create [Healing Potions] at best right now was a bit of a shame. But who knows. Maybe ordinary healing potions were more effective than she thought. It wasn't as if she had actually tried any yet in this world. It was better than nothing.

And hopefully they would never even need them, considering that they had Rosa.

"It would be good if you could attempt to create some ordinary healing potions. As many as you can," Scarlett said. "In addition, I would like you to compile a list of the different concoctions you are currently capable of creating so that I can further decide what might prove to be useful."

Allyssa gave her a curious look. "Are *all* of these for your personal use?"

"They are, yes. Although if I were to sell any of your concoctions in the future I would ensure that you receive part of the profits as well."

"No, that's not really what I was aski—" Allyssa was interrupted as a strong gust of wind suddenly rushed in from the open windows at the end of the room and a pile of loose papers next to some old tomes on the table almost blew away.

"AGH, NONONO!" the young Shielder cried out as she whirled around to push the papers back down onto the table just as some of them were about to blow up into a tiny cauldron that had a thick brown solution in it. She let out another short cry as the wind increased in strength, some of the loose vials and other tools in the room starting to rattle against each other.

Scarlett narrowed her eyes at the window as the chilly breeze pushed against her skin, making the hairs on her arms stand up. It was growing stronger and stronger frighteningly fast.

As she walked forward to close the windows, the wind had almost grown to a level where she only barely managed to fight against it when she reached and forced the last window shut.

"What's happening?" Allyssa asked with a bewildered tone behind her. "Is there a storm outside? I didn't even think that was possible here in the southwest."

"It is not," Scarlett muttered as she looked out through the glass. All storms in this region were supposed to be drawn out south, into the Innisling Sea where the Forgotten Tower was, before they even started to form. So a storm around Freybrook was basically impossible, as far as she knew. That, coupled with the fact that it was still bright and sunny outside, lent to a storm *not* being the cause for all this wind.

The branches and leaves on the trees outside the estate's stone walls swayed heavily with the breeze, and small clouds of dust blew up along the gravel pathways inside the walls.

Whatever this was, it wasn't natural. And it looked to originate from somewhere behind the mansion.

"Come with me," she said, quickly turning around and beginning to walk towards the door, not leaving much room for Allyssa to say much more. Exiting into the enclosed cellar area, Scarlett hurriedly climbed up the tight stone staircase to the first floor of the west wing as she started moving through the hallways towards the center of the mansion. On the way, she passed by a few of the staff who were curiously looking outside at the strange phenomenon.

Now some of the smaller trees were even rocking back and forth like they were being pushed by grown men.

The two of them ran into Shin as they passed through the mansion's foyer — the young man apparently having had the gumption to receive his strange sword and the large rectangular shield from Temisbrook Glade that Scarlett had decided to lend him to deal with whatever was happening. He wordlessly stepped in beside them as they soon reached the back entrance to the mansion, and exited into the hedge garden there.

"What in Ittar's name is happening," Allyssa called out next to Scarlett as both of them were forced to press down their long hair as the winds violently pushed against them.

A growing premonition wormed its way into the forefront of Scarlett's mind as the three of them fought their way through the cyclone of current, beyond the garden, and in the direction of where all this seemed to emanate, soon coming into view of the training grounds.

Debris of wood and small stone had been spread around in an array of chaotic mayhem here. The wooden targets had been ripped apart at their limbs, and the shed that stood at the end of the grounds looked to have lost half of its roofing, with more planks threatening to tear off at any moment. At the heart of all this, sitting at the eye of the storm, was Fynn, hunched together like a blanching beast. Even from this distance, the vague viridescent glow around him was clear.

"Damn..." Scarlett swore at the sight, not even caring about the presence of the two Shielders beside her.

This wasn't good.

Fynn was experiencing his first awakening.