

## 93: Cryptic crypts

“That’s one large statue~” Rosa hummed as their group crested the last ridge, treading along the craggy path that trailed the hillside.

Before them stood a tall rock statue, at least thirty meters in height, holding up a giant shield before it. The head had broken off, and there were several large nicks and gashes in the bare stone that made its age apparent, but it was an impressive sight nonetheless. Scarlett doubted this place saw much traffic, considering how out of the way it was, but it was at least notable enough to be marked as a minor landmark on a map.

She scanned across the surrounding landscape. It was nothing but rolling hills as far as the eye could see—not that it was particularly far, with these slopes—covered with clusters of rock and yellowing grass. Even with the statue being as tall as it was, trying to locate it would have taken a while if you had to search through the entire region. She was lucky they found as good a map as they did. Following its directions, they’d been able to cover at least three-quarters of the way on the carriage, and had only spent about two hours on foot. And with the stamina boost given by the [Mark of the Staunch], a trek like that wasn’t an issue for Scarlett anymore.

As they made their way to the foot of the statue, which sported several haphazardly spread stones that had probably been part of the statue itself once, the others in the group stopped as they started looking around.

“What now?” Allyssa asked.

Scarlett looked at the girl. Right. None of them had actually been with the last time she found a Zuverian ruin, if you discounted the Zuverian outpost near Fynn’s old home. They wouldn’t know what to expect.

She threw one last look around. Not that she was expecting to spot anything. She would be far from the first to notice if anyone had been following them. But she’d already had Fynn check if there were any others nearby, and she was confident enough in his abilities. Whatever tail the Cabal were bound to have placed on her didn’t appear to be around at the moment. It might have helped that she’d traveled through the Kilnstone from Freybrook so suddenly, and then immediately made her way out of Darkshore to find this place. It wasn’t as if they were a spy organization.

And well, even if someone was nearby, they probably wouldn’t stay an issue for long.

She walked closer to the statue, standing directly in front of and beneath the large stone shield it was holding. The shield had several circular designs etched into its face, arranged in a rupee-like shape, with lines interconnecting them. It didn’t look like much more than embellishment on the stone.

Let’s see if she could remember this right or not.

She raised her hand and conjured five small Aqua Mines in front of the circles, detonating them in a set order. Then she waited a few seconds.

Nothing happened.

So that wasn't right. She pulled up her notebook from her [Pouch of Holding] and struck out the first of the sketches she'd made. Then she moved on to the next one.

She repeated the process, conjuring more Aqua Mines and detonating them in another order.

Once more, nothing happened.

"You having fun?" Rosa's voice rang out from behind her.

Scarlett looked back at the woman for a moment, then turned back to the statue. "I do not know how long this will take. Do not disturb me."

She glanced down at her notebook and the third sketch she'd made. Worst-case scenario, it would take a few thousand tries to figure out the right order for this. She couldn't remember much of high school maths, but with eight different 'buttons' and a five-step sequence, there were a lot of potential combinations.

She'd *thought* she remembered the right one, or at least something close to it, but she wasn't completely certain.

Continuing onto the next sketch, she struck them out one after one as she moved down the list of alternatives that had aligned closest with her memories. Eventually, after trying out about a dozen of them, she put her notebook back into the pouch with a frown.

There was one other alternative now, but it was far less satisfying.

She pulled out the book she had bought from the shopkeeper here in Darkshore earlier. *Tales and Accords of Darkshore — The Old Ways*. A gathering of old tales from the region. She had been quite surprised to see it at the store, considering it was a book in the game. One of many minor lore records that could be found here and there, which served both to further flesh out the world the game took place in and sometimes to reward those players devoted enough read through them.

She flipped through the pages until she found the one that was relevant to her.

*The Warden of the Vale and his sentinels*, read the text at the top. Beneath was a short story of a great warrior who was once said to watch over the region around Darkshore, along with five of his sentinels, and how they had beaten back a vast army of giants from the northeast at one time. Along with the story were a few simple illustrations, where each sentinel had a sign tied to them.

Scarlett had no idea if the story actually held much truth to it. It was an old folk tale, after all. But there was, without doubt, one part that wasn't taken out of thin air.

She raised her hand once more, conjuring another set of five Aqua Mines, each in front of the symbols on the statue's shield which resembled those in the book. Then she detonated them, in the order in which the sentinels had been introduced in the story.

A loud grinding sounded out. She took a quick step back as the shield suddenly slammed into the ground, sending pockets of dirt and grass into the air.

Allyssa coughed to Scarlett's side, spitting out some dirt that seemed to have gotten into her mouth. Shin stood next to her, dusting away some more from her cape.

"What was *that*?"

"I'd call that *flair*." Rosa smiled as she stepped out from behind Fynn, whose white hair had gotten covered in a large patch of soil. "These symbols... Zuverian, right?"

"That is correct," Scarlett said with a frown as she patted away some of the dirt that had gotten on her. She hadn't been expecting that.

"And I thought those old coots didn't have it in them." The bard walked up and trailed her hands over the shield cutting into the ground. She turned back to Scarlett, pointing back with her thumb. "All that's missing is him bursting into dance now."

"I doubt the Zuver would have added such a feature," Scarlett said. She paused as she saw Fynn raise his right hand with the [Mark of the Gale on it], the ring lighting up a light green as the wind around him rose. His hair rippled as the dirt blew away, and Scarlett blinked as happened to her.

That was convenient.

"Thank you, Fynn," she said, before walking up next to Rosa to study the shield.

It really wasn't as satisfying to solve puzzles like these when you could just check what the right answer was. Still, she wasn't about to waste several hours just because of her stubbornness. Finding this book could be considered a stroke of luck, and it meant they had so much more time to spend on other things.

She walked around to the other side of the shield. There, carved into its inside, was a rectangular gateway with a deep black surface that seemed to absorb all the surrounding light. It looked much like a Kilnstone as it was preparing to teleport people.

She pointed at the gate as the others joined her. "There is our entrance."

Allyssa eyed it. "A bit elaborate, isn't it?"

"Not if it's not supposed to be found," Shin said. "I imagine this place was hidden for a reason."

"Astute observation, Mister Thornthon." Scarlett watched as Fynn was the first to walk up to the gate.

The young man glanced back at her, and she gave him a nod. He placed his hand against the black surface, and then disappeared.

Waiting a few seconds, Scarlett then followed. As she touched the gate, her surroundings warped. A moment later, she found herself at the top of a stone staircase. Small sconces with dark green crystals hung from the walls, illuminating the space with a dim light.

Fynn stood a few steps down from her. As they waited, the rest of the party soon joined them.

“So this is a Zuverian ruin...?” Allyssa mumbled not long after she arrived, looking around.

Shin had stepped closer to examine one of the Zuver faces that were carved into the stone walls.

“While one could call this a ruin, it is in actuality a crypt,” Scarlett said, walking down the stairs. Well, technically, the last ruin she’d visited had been a crypt as well. But this one had it in the name.

“What’s the difference?” Shin asked.

“I suppose it would be the location. We are currently underground.”

She didn’t have to go far before she reached the bottom of the stairs, where it opened up into a wide chamber. She held up an arm to prevent the others from entering.

At the center of the chamber was a hulking construct of a dull grey steel, with faintly luminescent blue lines running along it like veins, leading down into the floor. Its limbs were an interconnected set of large, bulky blocks, with what were its fists resting on the ground and the protruding knob that passed as its head turned downwards.

Scarlett’s eyes passed over the chamber, following the blue lines that ran from the construct all the way to the walls, connecting to four different crystals at each end of the room. She raised her hand and quickly conjured four Aqua Mines next to each one. Cracks formed in the crystals after she detonated the mines, and the blue light running to the construct at the center of the room immediately faded.

It seemed that worked as well. She couldn’t for the life of her figure out why such an obvious flaw in design would exist outside of a game, but she was glad it did. Saved them a lot of trouble.

“Ehm, did you just turn thing off?” Allyssa asked.

“It would appear so, yes.” Scarlett looked at Fynn. “Would you care to confirm?”

He stepped forward without hesitation, walking up to the unmoving mountain of steel. It didn’t move an inch, even when Fynn touched its arms.

Satisfied with that much, Scarlett walked out into the chamber as well and went past the construct. At the other end of the room was an elevated platform with a small altar on it. Resting on top of the altar was a small object the size of a hand, shaped like a rounded triangle. It had several intricate lines and symbols across its face, and looked like it might have fit together with two other pieces.

**[Seal of Thainnith (1/3) (Unique)]**  
**{A third of a whole. A seal upon that which covered}**

Scarlett paused. That was an...odd description. She wasn't sure what it meant with "covered" in this context. But being confused by the system wasn't exactly something new.

She looked to the wall behind the altar, which was absolutely lined with the same kind of symbols, a large section of the wall's center also being covered by what looked like a basic geographical map of the empire and its surrounding regions. There were several locations marked on the map.

Eyeing it for another moment, she then turned her attention back to the item on the altar. She didn't really care about what the map was saying. That was for megalomaniacs and crazies.

She picked up the seal, placing it inside her pouch of holding.

**[Quest completed: Assemble the Seal of Thainnith (1/3)]**  
**{Skill points awarded: 4}**

Oh? She got points for getting just one piece of the seal? That was nice.

She turned back to the others. "We are done here."

They gave her surprised looks.

"That's all?" Rosa asked.

"It is, yes." Scarlett walked down from the altar.

"I was expecting a bit more after that opening."

"The purpose of this place did not extend further than safekeeping. It does not need to have more than this."

The look on Rosa's face seemed a bit disappointed, but it wasn't as if there was much to do about that.

Scarlett crossed the room, ready to leave, but stopped as she passed the magical construct at the center of the room. She eyed it for a short while.

Certain mages and wizards would no doubt go crazy over the possibility of getting their hands on something like this. Unfortunately, she couldn't exactly bring it with her. And revealing this place to outsiders might not be the best idea. While it wasn't a certainty, it was possible that it'd provoke the Hallowed Cabal, so it was best to let it be.

She glanced around the room and at the sconces that were spread around the walls. Well, the same couldn't be said for all those.

"On second thought, before we leave, I want you all to collect those crystals and place them inside the storage bag."

If she wasn't misremembering, those sold for a pretty penny.

Only after having ensured all the lights were gathered—which included the magical crystals that had powered the construct—did Scarlett leave with the others.

Exiting through the same gateway they had entered through, all of them stepped out beneath the large stone statue.

**[Quest completed: Cleared the Crypt of Osen Allnar]**  
**{Skill points awarded: 5}**

“Oh?” a refined, mature voice called out from nearby. “Not quite who I was expecting. How disappointing.”

They all spun around.

A short distance away stood a woman with a tall, lithe figure, covered by a gold-red robe. Its hood wrapped around her head, with the upper half of her face hidden by a white marble mask that had thick golden inlays that traced along the edges and the front, with deep scarlet rubies obscuring the eyes. Her skin beneath the mask was pale, almost white, and a small smile played across her deep-red lips.

Fynn took a step forward, letting out a low growl as he lowered into a fighting stance.

“Now, now,” the woman said. In her right hand she held a long grey staff, its head a winding arrangement of curled bronze with a small azure gem in its crown. “Down boy.”

As she said the words, the gem lit up a light blue. Fynn froze, his teeth bared, as he was locked into place.

“Those Grehaldraels really are all the same, aren't they?” The woman shook her head. “All that thin air must be doing something to their heads.”

Allyssa stared at Fynn's unmoving figure. “What...!?”

Shin pulled out his sword and stepped up next to Fynn, holding his shield up to cover the rest of them.

The robed woman gave him an amused look. “Oh, look. Next is the Kereq. I'm sure that'll go much better than for your little friend.”

The crystal on her staff lit up once more. A moment later, a pale white sheen enveloped Shin's shield and the young man was pulled to the ground like a stone.

“Shin!” Allyssa exclaimed. Scarlett held the girl back with a hand on her shoulder.

Kneeling on the ground, Shin tried—and failed—to pry his hands loose from the shield.

“Anyone else feel like testing their brilliant ideas?” the woman asked. “I'm more than happy to oblige, really. Perhaps I'll even throw in a surprise or two this time.”

Both Rosa's and Allyssa's eyes seemed locked on the women, but neither spoke up.

"No? Shame. I was starting to hope it might have been worth getting out of bed this morning."

The woman turned her attention towards Scarlett. "Now, *who* might you be?"

She had an almost alluring undertone to her voice, as she appeared to look over Scarlett. "I was expecting someone a bit... *More*. Not a..." she trailed off. "Well, maybe I'll keep that to myself. I have a modicum of decency, at least. I'm sure."

Scarlett held her expression neutral.

Look at this woman, acting like she had no idea who she was. Or like this would have been the first time she'd seen her. But that's about what one could expect.

"I am Baroness Scarlett Hartford." She gestured to the others. "And these are my retainers."

"A noble, hmm? Wasn't expecting one of those around these parts. Especially not meddling with my plans."

Scarlett pulled out the Seal of Thainnith from her pouch. "I presume you are referring to me acquiring this?"

"Yes, yes. That." The woman waved her hand. "Not that there's much other left in that dreary old cellar, other than that sorry excuse for a guardian and its afterlife tagalongs."

Afterlife...?

Oh, right. There had been ghosts present when you fought that boss in the game.

She had completely forgotten about that part.

"Now, be a good little noble and hand me that seal so I can erase your memories and return it to where it belongs." The woman held out her hand. "I'll promise I won't jumble things about *too* much. Or well, I'll try at least."

...Scarlett wasn't sure if the woman was serious or not.

"I have another proposal," she said, returning the seal to the pouch.

"I'm sure you have. And I happen to have a craving for poached dragon egg with a side of grask. Unfortunately there's not a lot of that flying around."

"I believe this is something you will welcome," Scarlett said.

The robed woman studied her for a few seconds. "Why, aren't you a confident? Usually I love myself a woman with a bit of aplomb, and I'm sure it'd be terribly fun, but I'm far too stingy for charity. Now, I'd prefer it if you didn't make me do *all* the work."

“You have the Essence of Zenthias, do you not?”

The woman paused. A smirk grew across her lips. “I take it back. Maybe I can afford a *smidge* of generosity, just this once. Consider yourself honored.”

Scarlett glanced at Fynn and Shin. “Before we continue, is it necessary to continue treating my retainers in this manner?”

“They’re spry young men. I’m sure they’ll be fine. Don’t go changing subjects and leave a girl hanging. You’ve got at least a finger’s worth of my curiosity raised, you know.” The woman eyed her for a moment. “You’re not one of that old miscreant’s people, are you? I wouldn’t take a Grehaldrael to join. And I’d be even more disappointing now if you were.”

Scarlett shook her head. “I am no one’s person.”

“Mmm, yes. It’s dreadfully drab, isn’t it?” The woman gestured at Scarlett with her hand. “Now, out with it. Tell me whatever trifling tactic you’ve got cooked up for yourself here. Don’t worry, I’m sure it won’t be *that* much more banal and crude than what I am used to hearing.”

Scarlett stared at her with a cold look. In the game, this woman had been an entertaining character, but she wasn’t *quite* as charming when you were at the receiving end of her personality.

“It is simple,” she said after a while. “You will hand me the Essence of Zenthias, and in return, I will give you the seal.”

“Ah, I spoke too soon.” The woman’s tone turned flat. “And here I was, going around catching *expectations*. One would think I’d know better at my age.” She raised her staff. “Now, be a dear and hand me that dimensional bag of yours. I won’t pry too much. A lady’s privy to her secrets.”

“I believe you misunderstand.” Scarlett looked into the rubies that hid the woman’s eyes. “I did not say I would give you a piece of the Seal of Thainnith. I said I would give you *the* seal.”

The staff paused, held still above the ground. “...Now, didn’t your mother teach you not to make promises you can’t keep?”

“True. Perhaps I should clarify.” Scarlett pulled out the seal once again, holding it aloft. “In truth, this is the only piece I can give you. But what I am offering is not the seal itself, but rather the location of another piece, and the opportunity of retrieving the third. This should not differ much from your own plans, no?”

The woman slowly lowered her staff. “You sure do seem to know a lot, don’t you?”

“I make it a priority to be informed before I undertake any significant pursuits.”

“Oh, I’m sure you do. And I do so love working with competent people.” The woman stayed quiet for a while. The crystal on her staff lit up as Fynn was suddenly released from his stasis.



He stilled for a moment, then growled at the woman.

“Say, poodle-boy, what do you say of this master of yours words?”

Fynn blinked, gawking at her.

“Well?” She placed a hand against her hip. “I don’t have all day. Some of us have matters to tend to. Or at least *pretend* to tend to.”

He glanced at Scarlett, who gave him a nod.

“...She’s telling the truth,” he said.

“Is that so?” The masked woman seemed to return her attention to Scarlett. “Hmm. Well, I suppose that’ll do for now. Luckily for you, I’ve always had a penchant for striking deals that should probably be better left alone.”

“So you will hand me the Essence?” Scarlett asked.

“Not like I have much more use for that rotten thing anymore. But that will have to wait a while.” The woman seemed to grimace under her mask. “If I knew I’d need it, I wouldn’t have thrown it into *that* place.”

Scarlett wasn’t sure where “that place” was, but she suspected she didn’t want to know. “After you have retrieved it, I will fulfill my end of the bargain. Until then, I presume you will not oppose me keeping the seal?”

The smile returned to the woman’s face. “You’re certainly trying to pique my interest, aren’t you? I’m dying to pick your brain.”

She turned quiet, looking to the side for a moment. “That will have to wait until another time, unfortunately.” She turned back to Scarlett. “The henhouse is calling.”

She tapped her staff on the ground, and a shimmering gate appeared in the air beside her. She threw one last glance at Scarlett and the others. “Until next time.”

She had stepped through the portal and it disappeared along with her. The next moment, Shin fell onto his back as his shield clattered to the ground.

The others stared at the space where the woman had been.

“...Who was that?” Allyssa eventually asked.

Scarlett returned the seal to the pouch. “My contingency.”