

221: False appearances

“It’s been a while since this scene last graced these eyes of mine,” Rosa remarked beside Scarlett, the two of them gazing out over the expansive glade before them. A meandering river hugged its outskirts, vanishing into the forest to the north, while wooden-roofed dwellings stood encircled by a low stone wall nearby.

Under the ever-present summer sun, the glade radiated with warmth as a herd of sheep grazed in an enclosure adjacent to the village. Tiny figures bustled about, visible from Scarlett’s vantage point. Freymeadow was the same as always.

Rosa stretched out her arms next to Scarlett, a subtle grin playing on her face. “You know, I’ve been thinking about it, and I think a short dreamy outing to a place like this might be exactly what I need after everything that’s happened.”

Scarlett glanced at the woman, then returned her attention to Freymeadow in the distance. “Our time here will hardly be a leisurely escape. Do not forget that you must still acquaint yourself with your new abilities, and that the current loop concludes in two days.”

Rosa’s smile dimmed. “Yeah, I know...”

The two of them set out, following a simple dirt road towards Freymeadow. As they reached the village, they found its residents engaged in their daily routines, working outside their homes and moving about between the buildings. Scarlett and Rosa’s arrival did draw some attention, though no one seemed surprised.

Scarlett observed Rosa as they made their way through the village, noting that, instead of her usual buoyancy and waving to villagers, the bard wore a contemplative expression, studying the people. Perhaps her thoughts lingered on Crowcairn, and how its inhabitants were close to sharing the same fate as those here in Freymeadow. Despite any claims she might make of her not being kind, the woman clearly couldn’t easily dismiss that type of concern.

Eventually, they reached the open area that served as the village square, where a platform at its centre played home to a group of playing children. The kids looked excited upon spotting Rosa, and the woman *did* greet them with a wave and a smile, but she didn’t immediately approach them. Instead, she followed Scarlett towards the other end of the square, where Arlene sat on the porch of one of the larger houses.

The older woman, her raven-black hair with a streak of grey cascading over her shoulders, looked up from the book on her lap. “Oh? You’re back already?”

Scarlett nodded. “That we are.”

“I expected your absence to be longer this time,” Arlene said. “Or did I misunderstand that you had your sights set on Bridgespell? Did you abandon that venture of yours?”

“Not quite,” Scarlett replied. “I have already visited Bridgespell, in fact.”

Arlene raised a brow, her pale green eyes scrutinizing Scarlett. “After a mere day?”

“I work efficiently.”

Even though weeks had passed for Scarlett, for Arlene, it would have seemed as if they’d been here only yesterday.

The woman considered her for a moment longer, her eyes narrowed slightly, but she made no comment on the speed. “Judging by your confidence, I suppose you had some success in the request I gave you?”

“Indeed,” Scarlett confirmed. The quest she’d managed to corral out of Arlene before heading to Bridgespell had been the reason behind her visiting the Sunfire Shrine with Raimond. It hadn’t been her primary reason for going to the city, but it had been important nonetheless.

“Impressive.”

“Thank you.”

“I confess I am also somewhat surprised.” Arlene closed her book, focusing her full attention on Scarlett. “Donovan was not one to make things easy for others. I can imagine the barriers you had to overcome. He was always reluctant to let things go.”

“That’s an understatement if any,” Rosa said, stepping closer to the porch and leaning on the railing. “I’m not one to complain if the boss lady doesn’t, but it would have been helpful to know your friend was a deacon. He had some scary guardians protecting the place where we found that heirloom of yours.”

The older woman’s gaze shifted to the bard, sizing her up for a moment. “...Was he a deacon? Hmm... Perhaps that’s true. It had slipped my mind, but I am glad to see that it apparently did not impede your plans noticeably. Though, maybe I should refrain from asking exactly how you managed it so quickly.”

“That might be for the best,” Scarlett replied.

A small smile graced Arlene’s lips. “Indeed. Now, why don’t you show me what you found?”

Scarlett reached for the [Pouch of Holding] at her waist, extracting three items from it.

[Old Ring (Common)]

{A timeworn silver ring once belonging to a noble youth. Unremarkable in every other way}

[Old Journal (Common)]

{An old journal once belonging to a young noble lady, but long since abandoned by its owner}

[Old dagger (Common)]

{An old dagger once belonging to a young noble lady, a gift from her master. It appears utterly mundane}

These were the three items she had taken from the Sunfire Shrine with Raimond’s approval.

“Those are...” Arlene spoke in mild surprise.

“Your fellow disciples’ belongings, as I understand it,” Scarlett said, holding the [Old Journal] in one hand with the [Old Ring] atop it, with the [Old Dagger] in her other hand, delicately wrapped in a handkerchief.

The elderly Deacon Emberwood had preserved heirlooms belonging to his three disciples along with brief passages expressing his regrets in the shrine’s underground chamber. Arlene only needed one of them, but Scarlett felt it fitting to present them all since she could.

“Disciples, huh...” Allyssa’s gaze lingered on the heirlooms. “Seems like old Donovan did something unnecessary once more.” She turned her attention to Scarlett. “And it seems you learned some facts about my past.”

“The state in which the venerable deacon arranged the place where we found the heirlooms left little ambiguity on certain matters,” Scarlett said. “It was not my intent to pry.”

“Is that so?” Arlene gestured at the journal in Scarlett’s hand. “So you didn’t open that then, I assume?”

“...I may have done some slight prying.”

A short chuckle left the woman. “I suppose Liana wrote that? If so, I doubt it has anything good to say about me.”

“Liana? Was that your older sister’s name?” Scarlett asked.

Arlene gave her a slightly surprised look. “You didn’t know?”

“She did not write her name in the journal. I only learned that you were siblings, and that Deacon Emberwood was your master.”

Scarlett had finished reading through the journal before returning from Bridgespell, but since its focus was on magical theory and lessons, it lacked many personal details about the author.

“She was always an uncompromising one,” Arlene said, as though it didn’t matter much in the end. “So, did Donovan leave any parting words for me? Knowing my master, he had a penchant for conveying his thoughts in the most roundabout ways.”

Scarlett furrowed her brows. “There was an inscription expressing sympathy for your circumstances and apologizing for what happened to you, but I cannot recall the exact wording.”

Arlene’s expression softened slightly, her features taking on a more gentle demeanor. “...I knew he would regret it eventually. He’s fortunate he never allowed that sentimentality of his to cloud his judgement until after he made the difficult decisions.”

“If I may ask,” Scarlett began cautiously. “Exactly what caused the conflict between the two of you?”

In the game, she had never been particularly interested in the unexplored background behind this questline, but here, now, it was different. After all, Arlene was her teacher.

The woman responded with a rueful smile. “It’s a long and complicated story, and not one I care to delve into now. You’ll have to settle for knowing that I my actions clashed with his duties as a priest.”

Scarlett observed Arlene for a few seconds before nodding. “I see.”

She had a general idea of what had probably happened.

“So, was that all?” Arlene asked, her expression returning to a mostly neutral state.

“What do you mean?”

“Did the old man leave no other messages?”

“No, he did not,” Scarlett answered, then paused. “...Not directly, at least. However, there *was* something else. Deacon Emberwood left an infused Auranthial—if that is the correct terminology—to protect these heirlooms, and it seemed to...recognize me. I am uncertain if it truly did, but it said that it approved and requested that I return this to where it belonged.” She raised the [Old Dagger] in her hand into the air. “In addition, it wished to convey its final goodbyes and thanked me for concluding its story.”

Arlene seemed amused by that. “He better approve, or I would have some words to exchange with him in the afterlife. The goodbyes were unnecessary, of course, but he already knew that.” She motioned with her hand. “Hand those over, if you don’t mind.”

Stepping onto the porch, Scarlett walked over and first offered the [Old Journal] and [Old Ring] to Arlene. The woman held both for a moment, her expression unreadable as she studied them, before placing them on the stool that stood behind her. The stool also held the [Locked Jewellery Casket] which Arlene had been keeping since the first time Scarlett arrived here.

When Scarlett gave Arlene the [Old Dagger], a system message appeared before her.

[Side-Quest completed: The old teacher’s last wish and approval]
{Skill points awarded: 5}

Scarlett glanced at the quest-completion notification, surprised that had counted as a side-quest, but soon dismissed the message and refocused on Arlene, taking a couple of steps back.

Holding the dagger in both hands, Arlene unfolded the handkerchief around it, examining the item. She seemed neither surprised nor worried about the rusted blade and degraded hilt.

To all appearances, it looked like a completely ordinary—if old and ineffective—dagger. Even Raimond had seemingly judged it as such, and that man could be scarily perceptive.

Arlene looked up at Scarlett, a smile forming as she noticed that Scarlett had retreated a few steps. “No questions regarding what is that I asked you to risk your life for? Very well. I am afraid you will have to move back a bit further than that, though.”

Scarlett didn't argue, stepping off the porch to stand next to Rosa.

Arlene then seemed to focus all of her attention on the dagger in her hands, and Scarlett could feel how the temperature suddenly began to rise as the woman began to speak in a steady, deliberate tone.

*“By flame’s embrace, concealed and veiled,
A dagger mundane, in fire’s breath hailed.
In whispered words, the goddess’ plea,
Awaken now, reveal to me.”*

Dozens of fiery runes appeared in the air around her, shifting in form.

Rosa leaned closer to Scarlett. “Ehm, what is she doing?”

“Magic,” Scarlett said, not looking away.

“...Wow. And you call *me* difficult to work with.”

Before them, Arlene continued her chant.

*“Ignite the truth, dormant in disguise,
Unveil the power that within lies.
Goddess of fire, who lies in languor,
Let the blaze of revelation fall.*

*From embered depths, the secret springs,
In sacred chant, the power sings.
Once concealed, now blaze with might,
Reveal your purpose in fiery light.”*

As the enchanting words of the chant echoed in the air, with the runes burning hotter and hotter with each syllable, a transformation took hold of the old dagger. The rust melted away like shadows, and with it, the steel blade underneath was forged anew, starting to glow with an internal flame as veins of red-hot energy appeared across its surface, pulsing and melting the metal until it resembled molten lava frozen in time. The decomposed hilt, once frail and worn, also began reconstructing itself, as if the essence of fire breathed life back into it. Flames danced along its edges as sanguine scales like those of a dragon appeared, and intricate runes etched themselves along its base.

[Eternal Flameweaver’s Athame (Divine)]

{Forged in the crucible of ancient fires and blessed by the forgotten mother of fire, this fabled blade once channeled the essence of flames, granting its bearer an intimate connection to the elemental force of destruction. Hidden for generations, it waits to burn once more }

[Quest completed: A teacher's heirloom]

{Skill points awarded: 7}

Arlene held the dagger by its hilt(?), admiring it. "I never thought I would have the opportunity to hold this again in my life." Her voice seemed to hold a melancholic hint to it before she turned to Scarlett. "Well then, pupil of mine. Show me what you have learned while you have been gone. I am feeling particularly generous today."