

223: Teacher's tasks

Scarlett felt more than tired as she sat on her chair, perched on the porch in the heart of Freymeadow, gazing out at the simple square before them. Beside her, Arlene was engrossed in her book, while Rosa, seated on the porch railing with her back turned towards them, played away on her klert.

After a while, Arlene looked up from her book, glancing at the reddening sky as the sun began to dip below the horizon. "It's getting late."

Scarlett eyed the woman for a moment, then nodded, understanding the unspoken suggestion.

"Miss Hale. If you would," she said.

Rosa's music continued without interruption, and Scarlett, feeling a wellspring of energy surge inside her, rose somewhat unsteadily from her seat. Stepping off the porch, she watched as Rosa leaped down beside her, then turned to face Arlene.

"Then we will be taking our leave for now."

"Until next time," the older woman said.

"Until then," Scarlett replied, though her gaze lingered for a few seconds.

"Do you have something to say?" Arlene asked.

"...I believe you promised me a reward for retrieving your heirloom. Beyond your teachings."

Tomorrow marked the end of this current loop, which meant Arlene would forget the promise by their next encounter. Scarlett had been waiting for the woman to broach the subject herself, but it hadn't happened.

"You certainly seem fixated on that reward," Arlene observed.

"Promises are meant to be kept, are they not?"

Arlene considered her silently for a while. "...Wait here," she said, standing up and placing her book on the chair. Then she entered the building behind her, which surprised Scarlett.

She'd never seen the woman actually go inside.

"Huh."

Scarlett looked at Rosa, who appeared equally astonished.

"What do you think she's getting you?" the bard asked. She waggled her brows. "Something to help her dearest pupil? Perhaps a guide on how to avoid making enemies of everyone you meet?"

"I hardly make that many enemies," Scarlett said.

"That's only because you throw endless money and invaluable information at everybody until they're forced to pretend you didn't just kick their cats. I should know, considering I've experienced it."

Scarlett just shook her head. "I believe I have an idea of what she is retrieving."

"Of course you do." Rosa sighed theatrically. "Doesn't it get tiring always knowing everything? You're sucking the excitement out of everything!"

“There is already more than enough ‘excitement’ in my life as is. I would gladly reduce it,” Scarlett replied.

“A real grouch, you.”

“I am not preventing you from enjoying that ‘excitement’ yourself, so cease with the complaining.”

“Never,” Rosa declared. “I’ll keep this up till my deathbed and beyond.”

Scarlett gave her a long look. “Unfortunately, I believe you.”

Instead of getting pulled into some other tangent with the offbeat bard, she directed her attention to the house in front of them and waited. Soon, Arlene returned, walking across the porch to stop in front of Scarlett.

“Give me your hand,” the woman instructed.

Scarlett complied, and Arlene placed an ornate key in her hand, crafted from polished brass with a light silver finish.

Frowning, Scarlett inspected it. What was this for—?

[Jewellery Casket Key]

{A key seemingly intended to open a jewellery casket}

Her eyes widened.

“If I recall correctly, you wanted what was inside that casket, didn’t you?” Arlene asked.

Scarlett looked up at her, then to the short stool by the building. A red-tinted wooden casket with gold latticework rested on it.

[Locked Jewellery Casket]

{A woman’s jewellery casket. There appears to be no way of opening it}

“...Are you allowing me to open it?” Scarlett asked after a brief moment of processing the situation.

What she needed indeed lay within that casket.

A faint smile appeared on Arlene’s face, and the woman shook her head. “No. I am giving you the key, but I am not saying that I will let you use it.”

Scarlett couldn’t fully suppress the scowl forming on her brow. Then what was the point of receiving the key? As long as Arlene insisted on blocking her, the key was basically useless. She doubted she could trick the woman in any way.

“I will grant you permission to use it eventually,” Arlene said. “Just not at this moment.” She studied Scarlett for a few seconds, her gaze contemplative. “You have not quite yet reached that point.”

“...But I will, eventually?” Scarlett asked.

If she could get her hands on the artifacts inside that casket, she would finally be able to enter Beld Thylelion. It’s what all of her visits in Freymeadow and her deal with The Gentleman had been building up to.

She had just never been expecting Arlene to *willingly* grant her access to it. The woman's statements in earlier loops had implied that such an outcome wasn't even in the books.

"I will permit you to use that key if you fulfill one more request for me," Arlene said.

Scarlett adopted a confident expression. "Very well. Whatever it is, I will strive to carry it out with the same haste as your previous request."

There were a couple more quests in the game that Arlene would give, aside from the one in Bridgespell, but none were particularly challenging. If completing them was all it took to reach Beld Thylelion, it would be easy.

"It is similar to that request," Arlene explained. "I want you to find another old keepsake of mine. A necklace."

Scarlett paused, frowning slightly. She studied the woman. "...A necklace?"

"That is what I said, yes."

"Are you certain that is what you want me to assist you with?"

A brief, amused chuckle escaped Arlene. "I am quite certain, yes."

Scarlett's frown deepened.

That wasn't a quest from the game. She had never even heard of Arlene having any necklace keepsake, let alone had any idea how to locate something like it. How was she supposed to fulfill the request? Why would Arlene suddenly make this particular demand? Had Scarlett's actions truly altered things to that extent? If it was so crucial to Arlene, though, shouldn't it have been present in the game?

"...Is there no alternative task I can undertake for you?" she asked.

Arlene seemed to consider it for a while before responding. "Do you lack confidence in your ability to carry out this request of mine? That is surprising, considering how effortlessly you retrieved my dagger."

Scarlett remained silent for a few moments.

That was a no, then.

"...I will inquire into the matter and see what I can uncover," she eventually said. No matter how difficult, she couldn't exactly decline this opportunity. "Is there any additional information you can provide that might aid my investigation? While knowing that I am searching for a necklace is helpful, the task becomes challenging with only that."

"Oh, I'm sure. Regrettably, the necklace itself is not especially remarkable. It is made of silver and has a sapphire pendant, but it is nothing you would not be able to find in a market if you looked around for long enough."

"...Then what do you expect me to do?" Scarlett asked.

"Find it, hopefully," Arlene replied. "You have proven capable of exceeding my expectations in that regard quite a lot already. I can tell you that the last person who had the necklace in their possession was another of my master's disciples and my younger brother, Delmont."

"Delmont...? And which house does he belong to?"

Arlene merely smiled at Scarlett. "You're assuming he is a noble."

"From what I gathered from your sister's journal, he is. The same would apply to you as well, would it not?"

"Once, perhaps. But in my case, that is no longer true. And in Delmont's case... I'm not so certain. Regardless, you will have to manage without knowing our house. Even as my pupil, I do wish for my name to inadvertently leave this place and cause more issues than necessary."

"It will be more than challenging to locate this necklace without even knowing the name of its last possessor," Scarlett pointed out.

"True," Arlene admitted. "Unfortunately, I cannot tell you where to find Delmont, since I don't know myself. Perhaps you could begin your search with the Brook Tower. He was once a member of it when he was younger. He also spent some time with Ustrum and that old man's new 'assembly', but I can't vouch for what you'll find there. Those two never got along."

"Are you referring to the Ustrum Assembly?"

"I doubt there are other assemblies with the same name. "

"I see..."

That could actually help Scarlett in finding out more about this matter. The Ustrum Assembly was established when the empire was still relatively young, and Ustrum himself had been a legendary archmage during his time. If Arlene's brother had been someone who knew the mage personally, there was a decent chance there existed records within either the Assembly or Brook Tower that had information about him.

Scarlett wasn't sure exactly how that would lead her to this necklace, but she wouldn't get anywhere if she didn't first find out what happened to Delmont.

"Then I will endeavor to locate your necklace as swiftly as possible," Scarlett said.

Searching for something like this without being able to rely on her game knowledge was unfamiliar territory for her. Contacting Beldon Tyndall and leveraging his information network would likely be her first step in this venture, and she knew that Adalicia Mendenhall also had connections within the Ustrum Assembly. She also recalled that Lady Withersworth's daughter was a relatively high official on the Assembly, so perhaps that was a potential avenue of approach as well.

That said, she suspected it would still pose a challenge considering how much time had passed since Arlene's era. Three centuries was more than enough time for most traces to have gone cold.

The loop here in Freymeadow also posed another complication. Scarlett *hoped* she could keep the key since it was given to her as a reward, but even if she did, Arlene wouldn't remember giving it to her in future loops. Maybe if Scarlett presented the key alongside the necklace would prompt the woman to come up with her own explanation that rationalized it within the context of the loop.

That was a possibility, given how Arlene acted similarly whenever Scarlett displayed the pyrokinesis technique which convinced her to teach her. Though far from a guarantee, it was at least a strategy worth attempting.

"Then, if that was all, we shall take our leave now," Scarlett declared.

“Wait,” Arlene said. The woman reached into her robe. “I am not so stingy a teacher as to offer you nothing but an ineffective piece of metal for your efforts.” She took out a charm shaped in the form of a fox’s head, extending it towards Scarlett. “It may not be much, but perhaps you will find some use for it. It serves little purpose gathering dust with me, at the very least.”

[Foxfire Charm (Unique)]

{This mystical amulet harbors within the elusive essence of a fiery spirit, its warmth radiating and aglow with a special flame}

Scarlett regarded the charm, slightly surprised. *This* was what she had been expecting when Arlene promised her a reward.

She reached out to accept the item, examining it in her hand before stowing it in her [Pouch of Holding].

“Thank you,” she said, meeting Arlene’s gaze.

The woman nodded. “Now, it *is* getting late. I suppose I can expect to see you tomorrow as well?”

“You will. Until then, goodbye for now.” With that, Scarlett and Rosa bid their farewells, turning to make their departure from Freymeadow. Several thoughts ran through Scarlett’s mind as she moved, but primarily, she was thinking about all the letters she would have to pen when she returned to the mansion.