

97: Noble visits

Scarlett spent two more days in Freymeadow being instructed by Arlene about the difference between normal pyrokinesis and true pyrokinesis. Those days had been used refining what the woman had told her, trying to gauge the difference between the two ‘skills’.

Unfortunately, beyond explaining that there *was* a difference, and showcasing a couple of examples, Arlene hadn’t actually deigned to provide much further explanation, so Scarlett was still in the process of actually trying to figure out how to implement the new knowledge with her magic.

Right now, however, they had returned to Freybrook, and she had other matters to prepare for. Evelyne had left shortly after she and Livvi visited a few days earlier, and the woman had left some documents regarding the fiefs for her to go over. Scarlett didn’t really know much about noble duties, tax laws, fief management, or even the land that belonged to the Hartford family, so much of the contents went over her head. It seemed Evelyne had suspected as much, though, since there had been written outlines summarizing much of the material, which was helpful.

As far as Scarlett understood things, the majority of the Hartford family’s revenues and assets didn’t actually originate from their fief. They had an old keep—Stagmond Keep—to the northwest of Freybrook, which had a small number of staff ensuring its upkeep, but it didn’t appear to serve any real purpose other than being the family’s ancestral home. In the region near Stagmond Keep, there were a few villages that belonged to the barony, but none of them seemed to have any major exports. Their populations didn’t even surpass a few hundred. All in all, the Hartford barony probably didn’t encompass more than a thousand people, which was nothing when compared to just some of the towns that bordered it, not to mention Freybrook itself.

Despite that, the Hartford family had been a relatively prestigious house throughout the empire’s history. They owned several mansions, had several notable mages in their family tree, and were even at the level where the emperor himself would acknowledge them. It was somewhat of a conundrum to Scarlett how the family was as prestigious as it was, considering its ‘humble’ origins. She’d learned enough about the empire’s aristocracy to know that there were a dozen other baronies of similar size just around the Freybrook area.

Unfortunately, there wasn’t exactly an encyclopedia for these kinds of things. Not to her knowledge, at least. There were probably family chronicles and the like detailing most, if not all, of the empire’s noble houses, but she doubted any of them had a simple answer written in plain text. From what she could gather, though, it was a mixture of the Hartford mage-producing endeavours and them just making good business decisions.

Or at least it had been before the original Scarlett became the head. She was neither a skilled mage nor a talented businesswoman, if any of what she knew was true. Noble politics seemed about the only thing the original had been truly skilled at—maybe—but that was so far out of Scarlett’s area of expertise that she still couldn’t be entirely sure. All she had to go off of was other people’s reactions to her actions.

She wasn’t sure whether things started getting worse for the Hartfords before or after the original became the baroness, but she doubted the woman’s actions had helped the situation

any, at least. Over the last few weeks, she'd gone through past financial accounts on more than one occasion and seen some of the costs the original Scarlett had racked up. Even for minor things, like clothes and jewellery, the numbers had astonished her. We were talking figures in the six digits. Probably enough to buy an entire neighborhood in this world.

Still, all of that was in the past. Things were on the upswing in those regards now. The money Evelyne had been bringing in from selling all the loot was slowly mounting up. Scarlett had also made sure to sell some of the more expensive jewellery pieces she found, as well. Even with the expected costs for repairing the mansion—when that time came—she wasn't expecting any actual issues on the financial front, as long as they weren't pressed for time.

Although that was assuming no other sudden costs popped up out of nowhere. Their current expenditures ranged everywhere from salaries for the employees spread out across their different homes and fiefs, to costs for the new orphanage that was now up and running or the business investments Evelyne was in charge of, as well as a few miscellaneous costs here and there that included a few different stipends and the like that the family had been financing since previous generations.

Honestly, all this management and economy stuff was a bit much for Scarlett. Even with her already delegating the majority of the work to Evelyne and others, she didn't *enjoy* having to look over what still ended up at her desk. In fact, it annoyed her even having to bother with most of it. Sometimes she felt like she would die of boredom from some of the documents. But she also didn't feel comfortable just ignoring all of it.

...Actually, that was a lie. She was pretty sure she *could* ignore all of it without feeling an ounce of regret. In general, she'd always felt a sense of ambivalence to most matters that didn't directly affect her. That went doubly now that her personality had been affected so by the original Scarlett's. There were a lot of things she just didn't care enough about.

But she felt like she should. Or rather, she *thought* that she should. Which was all the reason she needed to force herself to do it anyway.

Besides, she was in a position of power now, even if she hadn't asked for it. That meant that it was only right she performed some minor sacrifices herself where she could—like spending time reading through boring documents—in order to ensure that those under her had it good. Or at least decent.

She didn't feel that empathy was a necessity when it came to taking other people's circumstances into consideration.

When she finished going through the last of the documents Evelyne had left, she placed them on the side of her desk for now. She was planning on returning them to Evelyne in the evening. The younger Hartford sister had informed her she'd be staying at the mansion for a few days, apparently still concerned about Garside's condition, even though the butler had been recovering without issue lately. There were even signs that the butler's injured arm might heal to the point where he could use it again, despite what the physician had said about its prospects.

Scarlett stood from her chair.

But all that was for a later occasion. Right now, she had other things to deal with. It should be about time. This morning she had received a message from Gaven Ridley that he was back. He and the Countess should be here shortly.



Scarlett was waiting inside the east wing's parlor when a knock sounded out from the door. It opened a moment later.

Gaven entered, wearing the same disguise as usual. He was followed by the robed figure of the Countess. The woman's head nervously moved back and forth, taking the room in as if this wasn't the second time she came here.

"Welcome," Scarlett said, gesturing to the seat across from her. "Take a seat."

The table that had been destroyed last time had been replaced, this time by a thick stone countertop Scarlett had brought up from the cellar. It wasn't as ostentatious as the rest of the room, but she thought it might be best not to risk losing another piece of furniture quite so soon.

"I trust that things have gone well?" she asked.

Gaven sat down on the couch as he removed his disguise.

"There were some minor complications," he said, glancing at the Countess as the hooded woman carefully moved to sit next to him. "But we got the job done."

He put a hand inside his vest, pulling out a black key. It was almost a carbon copy of the key the man had retrieved from Abelard's Doll Orchard. A sapphire-encrusted shaft that bent in on itself like a question mark, with a comb-like end.

[Abelard's Doll Mansion Key (1/2) (Unique)]

{Half of a pair of keys leading to Abelard the Doll Maker's Home}

Scarlett reached and received the key, placing it inside the pouch of holding that lay next to her. This made two in her possession. With this, she had exactly what she needed in order to enter Abelard's Doll Mansion. Now she just needed to wait until the right opportunity.

"Well done." She looked up at the Gaven. "...And the second task? Did you carry it out as well?"

A smirk appeared on his face. "There's nothing to worry about on that front. I did exactly as you instructed. Everything, including potential loose ends, was taken care of."

“I see...” Scarlett gave a slow nod as she let the meaning of his words actually sink in.

How messed up was it she that felt *relieved* at them? Hearing that, what was essentially a hit ordered by *her*, had been successful? No matter if the targets had been bastards or not, it was, objectively, pretty terrible.

She closed her eyes.

...Whatever. What point was there in overthinking the matter? This was another world. She was essentially another person. This wasn't the first death she'd been involved in here. Despite the cliché of the situation, she wasn't going to cling to all of her old morals. As long as she wasn't crossing any lines she didn't want to cross, she would continue as she was.

She had never been a saint, anyway.

“I will ensure that you are properly compensated for your services.” She opened her eyes and looked at Gaven, then turned her attention to the Countess. The bandaged woman had been sitting quietly in her seat, a distant expression on her face. “It is a pleasure to see you once more, Countess. I hope things have been well since our last meeting?”

The woman blinked. “Ah, ah. Y-Yes. Yes... Thank you...thank you. I have been well.”

“I am glad. I feared Abelard's Doll Pavilion would prove an unpleasant experience for you, but it appears there was no need for concern.”

She fervently shook her head. “No need. No need. I... Did as Mister Ripley said... There were no problems.”

A snort left Gaven beside her. “Yeah, tell that to what remains of that place's roof.”

The woman stilled. Her wrapped hands clasped tighter around the robe's fabric across her lap.

“As long as you fulfilled the goal, nothing else matters,” Scarlett said. “You have done well, Countess. Thank you for your assistance with this task.”

The woman looked up at her with wide eyes. An unsettling smile grew across her face. “So kind... Yes. Yes. You're welcome. Yes.”

“...Let us proceed on to other matters.” Scarlett shifted her eyes away from the woman. Even if the Countess' appearance was in a better 'state' than last time, it still raised the hairs on her neck. She was pretty sure the woman hadn't bathed since then, as well. The smell told her as much. It was a good thing she was paying Gaven as much as she was. Otherwise, she wasn't sure he would accept working with someone like that.

“Don't tell me,” the man in question said as Scarlett looked at him. “There are more of those creepy pavilions or whatever that we need to rob, isn't there?”

“No, there is not,” she said.

She would have preferred sending Gaven to the next place in that questline if that was an option. But he wouldn't be able to clear Abelard's Doll Mansion by himself with just the Countess helping him. It required more than two people to get through that place. Or at least more than one-and-a-half self-sufficient people she had here. Besides, there was another thing that she needed him to get done in the meantime. Abelard's Doll Mansion would be left to herself and her group to deal with. There were at least two important items that she needed there. It was her second priority at the moment, right after dealing with the Hallowed Cabal.

The only problem right now was that she wasn't certain her current party could clear the place either, with Garside being out of the picture. They would either have to wait until he fully recovered, or find someone else to help. Maybe if Kat was available sometime soon? Or perhaps they could hire another powerful Shielder? Convincing Adalicia to join was also an option if the wizard returned from the Rising Isle soon. Scarlett wasn't sure when that would be, however.

"Your next task involves procuring an old artifact that will be of vital importance to our plans. Regrettably, it is currently in the possession of another, one who neither realizes its worth nor its potential. It will be up to you to ensure that it finds a new, more suitable owner."

The man smirked. "Yeah, I bet. What's the item?"

"It is a small dagger, known as the Memory of the Covenant," Scarlett said.

He stared at her for several seconds. "...You're pulling my finger."

"It would appear you know of it. That is good. I can assure you, however, that this is not something said in jest."

"I've heard a couple of things about it, yeah..." Gaven scratched his beard. "But those are just old superstitions among senile swindlers. Guys more likely to pluck out a gold tooth from their mam's mouth than spout an honest word from their own."

"The artifact's existence is no superstition," Scarlett said. She crossed her arms. "Although I will admit that the dagger does not hold much value on its own and, as such, may seem useless. However, I know how to bring out its full potential. As I said, we will also have need of it in our plans, so it is fortunate that you are an individual that is well suited for these sorts of tasks."

Gaven eyed her for a moment, as if he was trying to really make sure he wasn't the butt of some joke right now. "...Alright. Sure. Sounds interesting. If it can really do what those old tales say, I wouldn't mind getting the chance to try my hands at it."

"You seem convinced that I would allow you the opportunity. Remember, you are procuring this for *my* use. Not yours."

"Lady, I've dealt with enough idiots in my time to know when I'm talking to the opposite. You wouldn't give someone like me the job of getting this thing if you weren't intending for me to use it as well." He let out a chuckle. "Though if you *would*, I suppose I should tell you that you'd do best to rethink who you do business with in the future."

“...No. You are correct. It is indeed my intention to have you make use of this artifact. But ultimately, even that will still be on my behalf, so I recommend that you do not grow any absurd ideas.”

“What can I say?” Gaven brushed away some imaginary dirt from his arm. “I’ve got a talent for telling this kind of thing.”

“I am sure that you do.” Scarlett shook her head at the man’s theatrics. “Returning back to the job in question, know that, this time, carrying it out surreptitiously is of vital import. You are not to be caught, nor are you to interact with the current holders of the artifact or their staff in any way.”

The people currently in possession of the [Memory of the Covenant] were just some old, rich, noble couple. They had done nothing wrong, and as far as Scarlett could remember, they’d actually been pretty decent people in the few dialogues they had in the game. While she would technically be stealing from them, there was no point in causing unnecessary harm in the process.

“Got it.” Gaven nodded his head, then sent a look towards the Countess. “Something like this, though... I’d have to do it by myself.”

Scarlett furrowed her brow. “Are you certain?”

“Yeah. I can’t be busy being a nanny while doing a job like this.”

The Countess gave him a confused look. “...Nanny...?” she mumbled.

Scarlett glared at him. “Ridley.”

He held up both hands. “Sorry, sorry. A chaperone, then. Better? You know what I’m getting at.”

Scarlett’s eyes shifted to the Countess. It was true that it might be difficult to bring the woman along if she wouldn’t be of any help to the mission itself. But what would they do with her in the meantime? She wasn’t exactly the sort of person Scarlett felt comfortable leaving on her lonesome until they needed her again. That’s one of the reasons why she’d wanted to team her up with Gaven like this to begin with.

“How long do you believe this task would take?”

“Depends.” Gaven leaned forward. “You sure you want it done all sneaky-like?”

“Yes.”

“Alright. Then where is it right now?”

“In Fayrun,” Scarlett said. “The current holder is a baron by the name of Branson. He lives in a mansion in the city. The artifact should be kept in their gallery.”

Gaven seemed to think about it for a moment, scratching at his beard again. He held up two fingers. "Give me two weeks."

"Two weeks?" she asked.

That was more than she had expected.

"Getting inside a noble's mansion without causing a ruckus is far harder than just robbing some old, abandoned ruin for a key or whatever. You're not expecting this to be a cakewalk, are you?"

"You did not appear to have much issue infiltrating mine."

He grinned. "Yeah, but that didn't exactly end well, did it?"

"I doubt they will have the same level of detection available as I have," she said.

"Still." The man shrugged his shoulders. "There's a lot to prepare if it's in Fayrun. I didn't go prancing into this place without a plan, you know."

Scarlett considered him for a moment. "I have already arranged passage to the city. You will arrive as early as tomorrow morning, so that will not be an issue."

"Took that much for granted." Gaven held up his fingers again. "Still the same deal. Two weeks, to be on the safe side. And you wanna be on the safe side for something like this."

"...Very well," she said. She turned to look at the Countess sitting next to him.

What was she supposed to do with this woman for that long a period?

"D-Dagger..." the woman suddenly muttered. Her eyes focused on Scarlett. "What...what is the dagger...for?"

"It will serve to help you in the future," Scarlett said.

"M-Me...?"

"Yes."

An odd expression grew on the woman's face, a thin smile on her lips as she stared down at the table.

"Until then, would you agree to staying at this mansion as my guest?"

The Countess stilled. She blinked, looking up at her again. "Me... Stay here?"

"That is what I asked, yes."

"I-Is...that alright?"

“Of course.” Scarlett nodded. “You are an associate of mine. I see no reason as to why you should not be allowed to reside here.”

A snort left Gaven.

Scarlett shot him a look. She didn’t especially like solving things like this either, but he could at least try to keep up appearances a bit.

“T-Thank you... Thank you.” The Countess lowered her head again, and again, repeating the same phrase. After doing that for several seconds, though, she suddenly stopped. She slowly glanced up at Scarlett, words coming out in a whisper. “...h-help me...?”

“Excuse me?”

The woman froze, bandaged hands clasped tightly together. “Dagger... You said...dagger...the dagger will help me... How?”

Scarlett stared at her for a moment, unsure exactly what to answer. She hadn’t been expecting the woman to actually ask any questions about what they would be doing, considering how she had been acting up till now.

“...You have a sister, do you not?”

The Countess’ eyes widened, and a frenzied look entered them.

“S-Sister?” She gawked wordlessly at Scarlett for a while, pulling at her robes. Her eyes started shifting around the room as if she was looking for something. “T-That’s right... M-My sister... My sister... My poor sister... T-They took her... My sister...sister...”

Scarlett scowled as the woman’s words continued. She hadn’t thought bringing the subject up would lead to this kind of reaction. As the Countess’ ramblings turned more and more incoherent, the woman’s eyes locked onto Scarlett once more.

“M-My sister! They...they took her...! They killed her—no, they took my sweet sister! They came...into our home... They took her...from my grasp...they want to use her...injure her...those evil people... They killed everyone... N-No, they took everyone...? Everyone gone? They have to pay! Yes... The Baroness is kind...! Make them pay...! P-Please...m-my sister...”

Scarlett schooled her expression as much as she could as she listened to the woman’s ravings. In the Countess’ mind, what did those events look like? How had things become so twisted that the woman herself didn’t even seem sure of what happened?

It might have been better if Scarlett hadn’t brought up the sister at all yet.

“...That is right,” she told the woman, mustering the closest thing she could to a soothing voice. “The depraved people who took your sister will see justice. I will ensure that you get to meet her again. This I swear upon my name.”

The Countess stopped in the middle of her rambling. She stared at Scarlett. The crazed look in the woman's eyes was still there, but it looked like her words had some effect. The woman lowered her head, her raving turning into a quiet mumble that was barely discernable from a whisper.

Scarlett turned to Gaven. "...Then it would seem the Countess will be staying here, for now. I am expecting you to return in two weeks, with the Memory of the Covenant in your possession."

The man shot her a smile as he leaned back in his seat. "Have I failed you yet?"

"No, you have not. And I would like for it to continue that way in the future."

"Sure. 'Course it will." He glanced at the mumbling woman beside him. "I might have gotten the easy job, though. Having been on that end for the last week or so, I can't say I envy your side of things."

"*Ridley.*"

"Just saying. Sounds hard. Nothing more to it."

Scarlett shook her head. "Let us proceed on to the specifics, so that you know what will be required of you."

For now, she would leave the Countess alone. She would figure out how to deal with all of that later.