

178: A teacher's past

Scarlett and her party spent some time retracing their steps back to the main chamber where they had started their exploration. From there, they randomly chose one of the two remaining tunnels and began their journey down it.

Similar to the first path they had traveled through, they encountered several groups of concealed enemies—Auranthials, as Raimond called them—and while dealing with these foes did require some effort, it was far from the worst Scarlett and her party had dealt with before.

After a little over an hour had passed, they reached the end of the second path, entering another large chamber. Like in the previous one, a stone table stood at the far end of the chamber, with two small chests, a burning candle, and a weathered book on it. Above the table, another inscription was carved into the wall.

For my most austere disciple, I leave my regrets that I treated you with too little care as a master, although I suspect you never saw me as such anyway. Not until it was too late did I realize my negligence, and I am still plagued with doubts whether I could have prevented the events that unfolded. Though you might not care as your brother did, I am still sorry.

Scarlett read the text carefully as her group approached the other end of the room.

She couldn't recall much about these inscriptions from the game. It was possible they had said something completely different, or had simply had less text. To her, they had been set pieces for the dungeon more than anything else, only loosely connected to Arlene's backstory. However, since the woman had always been an enigmatic character with an uncertain identity, there had never been a large focus on these parts of her past.

However, now that Scarlett had come to know the person behind that character, she found herself increasingly curious about it all. Apart from the title Arlene had gone by in the past and some of the people the woman had known, this was the closest thing to information about her origins that Scarlett had encountered. Because while none of these inscriptions talked about Arlene herself, they were referring to her fellow disciples.

If Scarlett knew who they were, it would tell her more about Arlene as well.

"This old deacon certainly *sounds* like the remorseful type," Rosa said as the group stopped before the table. "Don't tell me he built this place *just* because he felt bad about disappointing his disciples."

"It would appear so." Raimond studied the text with a thoughtful expression. "I find it rather intriguing to see, actually. Perhaps knowing this will serve to provide more context to the other actions carried out by the venerable deacon towards the end of his life."

"Did he do something unusual?" Allyssa asked, leaning over to examine the dusty cover of the book on the table.

"I wouldn't know," Raimond replied. "I am far from an expert on the annals of the original deacons. The record keepers would be the ones to ask about that. But there were certain

questions left after his death that we still lack answers for today. Shedding more light on the happenings of the past can always be considered a constructive endeavour. Especially when it concerns influential figures who shaped the institutions of their time.”

Scarlett reached into her [Pouch of Holding] and pulled out a black handkerchief. Carefully, she dusted off the book’s cover, revealing a worn brown surface that lacked a title.

[Old Journal (Common)]

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

“Another keepsake of the disciple that the inscription is referring to, I imagine,” Raimond said.

Scarlett glanced at him.

He just wagged his eyebrows at her. “Don’t mind me. Pretend I’m not here.”

Her gaze lingered on him for a moment before returning to the book, which she carefully opened. The pages were yellow and weathered, but the neat handwriting on its pages was still legible.

It seemed to be a notebook covering several magic lessons, with organized contents and a few comments written on the side notes. From the writing style, Scarlett got the sense that the author had a rather uptight and arrogant personality. There were several criticisms, albeit subtle, about the disregard for propriety that a fellow disciple exhibited, with the author expressing dissatisfaction with the master—Deacon Emberwood—for allowing it to happen.

It didn’t surprise Scarlett for even a moment that the disciple in question was Arlene. The woman seemed to know proper decorum, but she only cared about it as far as she felt like it. Scarlett herself had several of her own grievances that she simply didn’t air.

Still, it was strange seeing Arlene being referred to in this context. Judging from these notes, this must have been written when Arlene was still young, before the woman became such an accomplished mage. Yet, even then, she showed incredible promise, as evident from the author’s annoyed words.

There were mentions of a third disciple—a Mitchel—but the author’s own name was never brought up. Nor were there any surnames, though Scarlett hadn’t expected any.

What she did know was that they were siblings, and that the owner of this journal was the oldest among them. Scarlett could vaguely recall Arlene mentioning an older sister at one point, and the woman had said that Scarlett reminded her of that sister.

After reading for a while, Scarlett put the journal away into her pouch, having gotten Raimond’s approval. Like the silver ring, she didn’t necessarily need it, but this at least had more of her interest.

Meanwhile, Raimond and the others had opened the two small chests on this table and examined whatever artifacts were inside. Scarlett didn't pay it too much attention, since she wouldn't be able to get her hands on them anyway.

When they were finished, the party turned back and started making their way to the main chamber. It took them around twenty minutes, and from there, they promptly started moving down the last remaining path.

Scarlett's expectations grew slightly as they progressed. This tunnel would be the one that led them to what she had come for.

She exercised extra caution not to waste more of her mana than necessary as they confronted the remaining Auranthial guardians blocking their path. During this dungeon run, she had used around 5000 mana simply countering their pyromancy spells. In the past, that would have left her almost completely drained, but after upgrading the [Depraved Solitude's Choker] she still had more than half of her mana left.

After replenishing her stores with some [Greater Mana Potions] Allyssa had made, she was up to full again after they dealt with the last group of enemies.

[Mana: 12039/12039]

Though consuming too many mana potions always felt a bit like mana exhaustion, this much was manageable.

Upon reaching the final chamber, they were greeted by a similar sight to the previous sections. A spacious but mostly empty stone chamber with a table at one end and an inscription carved into the wall.

To my closest disciple and dear friend, what words can be left to express myself? I have none. I cannot even reproach you for your actions, for I understand and sympathize with them. I only lament the circumstances that forced me to prioritize my duties before you. I am sorry. Your fate will never stop haunting me.

"Reading this, it kinda makes me feel bad for him and his disciples if they never saw this," Allyssa said. "Think there's any chance they might have seen it anyway?"

"I suspect not," Scarlett answered.

She knew for a fact that Arlene would never have had the chance to set foot in this place, at least.

Raimond shook his head slowly. "To be so close to a person and yet be separated by circumstance and misfortune is a cruel twist of fate."

"Do we know what this disciple did?" Shin asked, turning to the priest. "Even if the identities of the disciples are a mystery, the words inscribed here suggest that Deacon Emberwood may have taken action against this particular disciple while serving in his capacity as a deacon in some fashion. There would be records of that, wouldn't there be?"

“Perhaps,” Raimond mused, his gaze fixed on the writings on the wall. “With some sleuthing, I am certain we could uncover some answers. But whether they would be as conclusive as you expect, I am not so certain...”

The man turned his attention to Scarlett. “Would you like me to inquire into the matter? I could, once we’re done here. I am familiar with some individuals well-versed in the old scrolls and texts that record the era of the Renaissance and its following years. As these disciples of the venerable Deacon Emberwood seem relevant to the research that brought you here today, and which serendipitously allowed me to be here with you today as we explore this place, it would only be fitting that my order offer our assistance where we can.”

She eyed him for a moment. “That would be most welcome, yes.”

While she already had a decent idea of what would have occurred, it wouldn’t hurt to have their help in learning more about Arlene’s past. Her teacher wasn’t the most forthcoming person about these things herself.

“Very well then!” Raimond’s expression sparked with what had to be exaggerated determination. “I’ll see what can be done. You need only place your trust in me, and I shall take care of it.”

Returning her focus to the table before them, Scarlett spotted a short dagger lying among the other items. It sported a simple steel blade covered in rust, its hilt mostly decomposed and hardly recognizable.

[Old dagger (Common)]

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

Scarlett reached for her handkerchief once again and delicately wrapped the dagger before stowing it in her pouch. She glanced at Raimond, relieved that he still didn’t seem to object to her taking these items.

She had half-expected him to protest, considering who he was. But it appeared that even he didn’t see anything other than a rusty blade without any real significance. Most enchanted items and artifacts were more resilient to the passage of time, and those that were affected to this degree were likely already in that state before enchantment.

If he had realized what she had just taken, though, things probably wouldn’t have been so easy.

After Raimond had inspected the two chests present on the table as well, Scarlett turned her gaze back to the path they’d taken here. She’d gotten what Arlene wanted, but now came the real challenge.

“Shall we make our return?” she asked.

“I say let us.” Raimond clapped his hands to remove some dust that had stuck to them.

“Something tells me we aren’t finished here quite yet,” Rosa said as they started moving, thumbing the neck of her instrument. “I know how these things work by now. The moment we step out of this room, we’ll be accosted by a troupe of grumpy ghosts masquerading as skeletons with an obsession for raising some new dance partners.”

Raimond gave the woman a curious look. “A strange way of putting it. The more I hear from you, the more intrigued I am by what type of adventures you’ve been on. Perhaps I should hang up by priestly robes for a time and join the Baroness on some of her escapades.”

Rosa grinned. “Knew you would come around eventually.”

Scarlett simply shook her head. “Even for a traveling priest such as you, Father Abraham, I strongly suspect abandoning your duties is not so simple.”

Though she doubted he was serious, if he was, she had to make it clear it wasn’t on the agenda. The last thing she wanted was a priest of the Followers of Ittar tailing her constantly and seeing what she was up to. Especially if that priest was a deacon in disguise.

“Ah, right you are, unfortunately,” Raimond lamented, sounding genuinely disappointed. “I can already hear the complaints I’d receive from certain members of my peers. It is not guaranteed I would live to survive whatever sermons they would force upon me.”

Engaging in some light conversation on the way, the group made their way back to the main chamber, passing through the rooms where they had encountered this place’s guardians on the way. Red-gold robes lay strewn about the floor from the defeated Auranthials, some in better condition than others.

Finally, when they returned to the chamber where they’d started, Scarlett halted before they entered it, holding out an arm to signal the others to stop as well.

Rosa gave her a knowing look before peering into the chamber, as if half-expecting ghosts and skeletons to materialize at any moment. “Is it too late to say ‘I told you so’?”

Fynn frowned. “I can’t sense anything.”

“As far as I can tell, there is indeed nothing here,” Raimond said. The man eyed Scarlett.

“What can we expect?” Shin asked, his focus on her as he positioned himself in front of Allyssa and Rosa, shield at the ready.

“A trial of sorts, I suspect,” Scarlett replied. “From what I have read, the deacon did not leave this place to be forgotten entirely. Since we have not encountered it yet, there are few more alternatives.”

At her prompting, Fynn took the lead and stepped into the chamber.

Instantly, the atmosphere changed, and a towering, burly figure appeared in the air at the center of the room. It was hazy, donning red robes and a brilliant gold mask that almost seemed to emit a faint glow.

“My, oh my,” Raimond muttered to Scarlett’s left. “Deacon Emberwood in the flesh, it seems. Or, well, in spirit. In part, anyway.”

The guardian boss of this shrine, left behind by one of the original deacons, stretched out its arms, causing the space around it to shimmer as numerous Auranthials, similar to the ones they had previously encountered, manifested in the chamber. Their masks turned to face the party as one.

With a thought, Scarlett donned the [Tiara of Lost Benediction] and what remained of her equipment.

It was time to go all out.