

130: Preparations

Scarlett sat in her office, looking over an assortment of maps spread out across her desk. Roughly half were new ones recently purchased, and most of them were completely irrelevant to her current objective. She'd had them all gathered anyway, just in case anyway was curious about which area she was interested in. The extra caution probably wasn't even necessary, but it didn't hurt to err on the side of caution.

Gaven was slated to return with the [Memory of the Covenant] in the evening, and that meant she had to go over a lot of details related to her plans for the item. Not to mention what they would be doing regarding the Countess and her sister.

A knock sounded out from the door, and soon, Garside entered the room. The man was dressed in his usual black suit, neat and well-cared for, with his dark grey hair combed back. His left arm rested next to his side, and if Scarlett hadn't already been aware of his condition, she might have thought him to be perfectly recovered. There *might* have been a slight paleness to his face that hadn't been there before, but it wasn't overly noticeable.

The butler's injury had healed well these last few weeks, and even though he still couldn't use his arm, he had already returned to handling most of his duties. Scarlett would prefer not to have him take part in fights or anything of the sort for the time being, but she might need his help relatively soon, despite that.

"My lady." The man spoke in a straight voice as he bowed. "You expressed a desire to see me after I finished my dealings in the city for the day?"

She nodded her head. "That is correct. It heartens me to see that you are well enough to move around in this fashion again."

"This old man is thankful for your concern, my Lady, and for allowing my presumptuous request of re-donning my responsibilities." He glanced down at the desk filled with maps before her. "If I might ask, what is it you wished to see me regarding?"

She started gathering the maps up and placed them to the side. "As I am sure you must have noticed, there has been something different about the mansion lately, yes?"

"That has come to my attention, yes. Members of the staff have quietly been discussing it these past few days, but I do not believe anyone is yet certain of the details. I have instructed them not to pay it too much mind for the time being, and to refrain from venturing out into the garden at the back until further directions are given from you, my Lady."

Scarlett eyed him for a moment. She had stayed quiet about it for now while she was getting used to the Loci's new presence, but as usual, Garside was pretty sharp. She didn't actually mind if people went out and saw the Loci—they wouldn't be able to steal it—but it was nice to know that he was cautious.

"It appears you have already surmised much of what I wanted to tell you. The origin behind this unfamiliar phenomenon is indeed located in the garden behind the mansion." She tapped her finger against the wood of the desk before her. "I have already informed Evelyne of this,

and have promised to provide her a more detailed report in the future, but suffice it to say that I have adopted the use of a certain artifact to ensure the safety and management of this estate from now on. You can simply refer to it as the 'Loci'."

Garside stayed silent for a moment, a neutral expression on his face as he seemed to consider her words. "If I may be so bold, my Lady, are you certain this artifact will not pose a threat to the mansion or the people in it?"

She raised an eyebrow at the man. "I am, yes. Is there a reason you are asking me this question?"

"It is not within my right to decide; however, this mansion and the surrounding land have been passed down among the heads of the Hartford family for generations. The late Lord spent much of his time ensuring the same would stay true for when young Lady Evelyne and you took the helms of the barony, my Lady, and it would be a true tragedy if this artifact were to cause irreparable damage to the property due to a lack of discretion. If there is anything you wish for me to do in order to help prevent this, then you only have to give the command."

Leaning back in her seat, Scarlett considered his words. To be honest, she couldn't be one hundred percent sure that the Loci was harmless to its surroundings. She *felt* like it was, and it seemed like it had been in the game, so she was sort of just going from that. Even if it did somehow damage the grounds, she was willing to accept it. The mansion didn't hold as much meaning to her as it might to Garside and Evelyne.

That said, it would of course be best if she could avoid that in the first place.

"Your concern is always appreciated, Garside," she said after a while. "The Loci is an old artifact that bears ties to the Wandering Realm, and as such, I have formed a connection of sorts that will apprise me of the situation, if anything were to happen. I will take heed your words and take caution where needed, but rest assured that I currently see no reason for concern."

The man inclined his head. "If that is how it is, my Lady, then I trust in your judgement. If there is anything I can do related to my duties as a butler in this household that might aid you in how you wish to incorporate this 'Loci' to the estate, then simply say so. I will adjust my behavior and work accordingly, and assure the remainder of the staff is informed of the necessary details."

"For the time being, you do not have to change anything," she said. "I would, however, appreciate if you could assuage any worries the staff might have for the time being. You may also wish to speak with the gardener regarding the altercations to the hedge garden that I mentioned to him, and see if there is anything he requires in the near future."

"I will do so, my Lady."

She studied the man for a few seconds. "Garside?"

"Yes, my Lady?" The butler's mustache trembles slightly as he looked at her.

“Do you hold no interest in exactly what it is that this Loci might do?” she asked.

“To say I hold no interest would be a lie, my Lady. But it is not my place to decide what you choose to share with me, and the days of my youth where I could not control my own childish curiosity have long since passed.”

“Is that so? If you had asked, I do not believe I would have minded offering you an answer.”

“That is much appreciated, my Lady.”

Scarlett let out a small, barely noticeable chuckle. “Your humbleness continues to amaze, Garside. I would ask that you never change, but I imagine that I would come to regret that eventually.”

She shook her head. “For the time being, the Loci does not do much. It simply acts as a means for me to watch over the grounds and be informed if any intruders were to appear. I do not have an inclination to spy on those in my employ, but I imagine some concerns related to privacy could arise if this were to be known, so I would prefer if you kept this information to yourself for the time being.”

The butler nodded his head. “As you wish, my Lady.”

And of course, his answer was about as austere as always. He took his job seriously, this one.

Scarlett briefly let her attention wander to the active connection she had with the Loci, ready to be called upon at a moment’s notice. What she’d told Garside about it was the truth for now, at least. Even though the Loci had originally expanded to incorporate itself into the estate’s ground and create its domain pretty quickly, the actual process of familiarising itself with the surroundings was still far from complete from what she could tell.

Not only was the Loci’s ego still incredibly simple and primal in how it interacted with her—all of their communication happened through intent, and to even call it intent was a very large stretch—but it was still very limited in how much it could interact with things. It had grown to expand a bit beyond the estate’s stone walls, but it couldn’t do anything more than watch at the moment, and Scarlett knew it had the capacity for more than that. In the game it had afforded some slight buffs, for example, and she’d seen at least some of its effects back in Abelard’s Doll Mansion.

But being able to watch out for intruders was good enough for now. Her instincts told her that even powerful rogues and other sneaky types would have a hard time entering the Loci’s range unnoticed. Just to be safe, she was planning on testing it later with Gaven.

In front of her, Garside lightly cleared his throat. “Was that all you wished to speak with me about, my Lady?”

Turning back to him, Scarlett pushed any other thoughts to the back of her mind for the time being and put on a more serious expression. “No, there is one more matter.”

Garside seemed to notice the intent behind her words as the atmosphere turned heavier in the room.

“And what is that, my Lady?”

“I need you to both arrange passage and a temporary carriage for me and some associates to quietly travel to Silverborough,” she said.

“Silverborough?” the man asked.

“Yes, Silverborough.”

Their objective was the Sanctuary of Ittar. While the Followers of Ittar had their main temple in Elystead, the Sanctuary of Ittar was located on the eastern bank of Rellaria Lake, west of Silverborough. It was a sort of holy place for the Followers, but not the type that was a destination for pilgrims. It was where certain orders of the church were based, and it was also where the Augur usually stayed.

“There are some matters that I must attend to in the city’s vicinity,” she explained. “I will apprise you more of the specifics in the future, but for now, simply know that my visit to Silverborough is not to be made known to anybody. To the outside world, it must appear as if I am somewhere else.”

Considering where they were going, and what she was doing, doing this covertly was crucial. She trusted Garside enough to help with some of the preparations that were left, but she couldn’t bring any of the other members of her party, for several reasons. That included Fynn.

If the Hallowed Cabal tried anything when she was alone, it would certainly be a problem, but that was unlikely. Not only would the Countess be with her, in case of an emergency, but the Cabal knew the risks involved in going after her as well. There was also the fact that they wouldn’t even know she’d left for Silverborough if everything was kept quiet enough.

Garside had stayed silent for a while, one hand touching the end of his mustache as he seemed to ponder her order. “These matters you must attend to, my Lady. Are they dangerous?”

“In a way. However, they do not pose a threat to me directly.” At least not if things went decently.

“Is it truly necessary that you yourself expose yourself in this manner?”

“It is, yes. This is a necessary action that I must take if I want to ensure my own safety, and the safety of those I know. It would be irresponsible for me not to be involved personally.”

She would have *loved* if she could just have sent Gaven and the Countess on this job by themselves, but that was far too risky this time. And if they failed, it didn’t really matter much whether she was there or back in Freybrook. If anything, coming with would let her react quicker.

And in the end, this was all connected to how she was planning on completing the main quest that had been forced on her. She still wasn’t sure if failing it would affect other people or not, but it certainly would affect *her*.

“...Then I will look into the matter,” Garside eventually said.

Scarlett gave him a nod in appreciation. “Good.”

She’d had her suspicions that—considering how long Garside had worked for the original Scarlett—he would have at least some experience in clandestine things like this. Call it a hunch.

“But, my Lady?” the man asked.

“Yes?”

“Do be careful, I beg of you.”

“...I will.”

“That is all that I ask.” He inclined his head, then looked up at her again. “Then, was there something else you wished to bring to my attention, my Lady?”

“No, that was all,” she said.

“If so, I will take my leave. When I have made progress in the task you have assigned me, I will inform you of such.”

“I place my trust in you, Garside.”

“As always, you humble this old man.” The butler performed an elegant bow and then left the room.

Scarlett’s eyes stayed on the door for a while after he had exited.

It would probably take a while for him to finish those preparations. If she’d wanted to go as soon as possible, she could have asked him to do this earlier. But she’d both wanted for him to recover a bit longer and to get confirmation from Gaven first.

Since Garside had to make the preparations quietly, she was expecting things to take longer than they normally did when they had to visit other cities. The actual execution of their plans would probably have to wait two weeks or so, it seemed, but that much was acceptable. The actual opening of Beld Thylelion was still a few months away, so she still had some time before any other faction could get there.

Between now and when they actually left for Silverborough, she would have to spend a bit more time going over any details she might have missed with the plan. There should also be a couple of opportunities to visit Freymeadow for some extra training. And since she wasn’t planning on leaving for other parts of the empire to find dungeons for the time being, she would be spending a lot of time here in Freybrook doing things she hadn’t had too much time for.

Heck, this would probably be the closest thing to a vacation she'd had in a couple of years. One just had to ignore the fact that, at the end of this period, she would perform a heist against one of the most powerful factions in the entire empire.

She let out a sigh.

To think she had once considered herself an upstanding citizen.