

175: Heated shrine visits

The carriage traveled through Bridgespell's gates and continued down the well-worn cobble road as they left the city behind, journeying into the surrounding countryside. Scarlett looked out the window at the wide fields that stretched towards the horizon west, where fences and smaller dirt lanes separated the different lots.

She imagined they hummed with life and farmers during the warmer seasons of the year when it was harvest season, but now the vegetation was thin, and the activity almost nonexistent on them.

"Thus, I bid adieu to Bridgespell on the very day I set foot on her captivating streets," Raimond mused from his seat on the opposite end of the cabin, his eyes fixed on the city slowly receding from view. "Delightful city, really, but I'm grateful my travels do not bring me here too often. One can't help but feel suffocated amidst the teeming crowds and constant flurry of motion."

Allyssa chuckled, glancing over at the priest. "That's almost exactly what Rosa said when we first got here."

The man looked between the girl and Rosa, wriggling his eyebrows. "Well, it appears that the adage 'great minds think alike' holds true."

"Hear that?" Rosa said, nudging Scarlett playfully in the side with her elbow. "A priest has declared my mind 'great'. It's official now, sanctified by the big fellow up high. Bet you feel pretty lucky to have snagged me as your personal minstrel now, don't you?"

Scarlett turned her head to briefly look at the woman before returning her gaze to the passing scenery. "Indeed, is there anyone as fortunate as I?" she replied in a deadpan voice.

Following their meeting with Raimond at the Followers of Ittar's temple, they had set out for the Sunfire Shrine after some brief introductions between the man and the rest of the party. Raimond didn't have any carriage of his own, so of course, he had joined them in hers. A fact that Rosa probably enjoyed the most, judging from how the two appeared to vibe with each other.

"There almost definitely is not," the bard's voice sounded out from behind her.

"Wasn't that sarcasm?" Fynn asked.

"Almost definitely not," Rosa replied. Scarlett heard the woman shuffle in her seat, and, glancing over at them, she saw that Rosa had covered Fynn's mouth with her hand. "Don't you dare say that was a lie."

Fynn wordlessly looked at her for several seconds until Rosa finally lowered her hand. "I wasn't going to," he finally said.

Rosa seemed to narrow her eyes, then turned her gaze to Allyssa and Shin, who sat opposite her. “Which one of you taught our sweet, innocent boy to lie without even an ounce of shame?”

Allyssa held up both hands in the air. “I’m innocent. I mean, I’ve *tried*, but that’s like trying to teach a fish to dance.”

Shin just shook his head, seemingly opting to remain silent.

Rosa’s stare moved to Raimond. The priest placed a hand over his heart at the unspoken accusation. “It would be rather impressive if I had managed such a feat in the short time I’ve known him, wouldn’t it? But I am afraid not. Still, I’m flattered to be part of your suspicions.”

“That only leaves one possibility.” The bard turned to Scarlett with a dramatic, horrified expression, leaning over to cup Fynn’s chin. “What have you done to corrupt this innocent boy? Is there no end to your vileness?”

Scarlett gave her a long look. “Have you considered that he might not be lying?”

Rosa shook her head, her voice filled with conviction. “Impossible! Fynn doesn’t know how *not* to point out even my teeniest of white lies. It’s like a compulsion, I’m sure of it.”

Scarlett glanced at Fynn, who looked wore a slightly confused expression. Rosa would know that Fynn *often* overlooked her lies—probably far more often than even Scarlett was aware—but the woman was ‘magnanimous’ enough to pretend that wasn’t so.

If anything, Scarlett was impressed that Fynn actually knew when it was appropriate to point out Rosa’s lies and when it wasn’t. It was in stark contrast to the image most probably had of his personality.

But calling attention to this fact wasn’t something Scarlett felt like doing at the moment. She suspected that Rosa needed this playful banter as much as anything else.

“It is curious that you would accuse me of corrupting him,” she said. “I seem to recall you preaching that ‘white lies’ are a necessary evil on more than one occasion. One would think that to be a more likely reason for any changes in his behavior.”

“Don’t try to trick me with your ‘logic’ and ‘reason’. I know you’ve been having secret rendezvous with Fynn, where you’ve been coaching him in the art of deception!”

Scarlett paused. That was...actually not too far from the truth. She *had* told him to be more cautious about sharing certain information, but that was unrelated.

Rosa blinked, staring at her. “Wait, really? I was just pulling your leg, but it seems I hit the mark.”

Scarlett released a small sigh. “I have advised Fynn to be more prudent with his words and considerate of others’ thoughts. It does not relate to this situation, so let us not blow it out of proportion.”

“Oh?” The bard finally let go of Fynn’s chin, leaning closer to him. “So, what secrets have our dear Baroness been whispering in your ear lately?”

The white-haired young man just shook his head. “I can’t say.”

Rosa gasped. “She really *has* corrupted you. Quick, Father Abraham, can’t you purify him with your priestly invocations?!”

Raimond chuckled. “I am afraid that is not quite how it works, Miss Hale. While there are certain members of the clergy that have techniques for coaxing the truth out of people, I am not practiced in such arts. And, of course, even if I were, I would never dream of using them on someone so evidently pure-hearted as this young man.” He went quiet for a moment, touching a hand to his chin in thought. “Have you tried bribery, perhaps? Bridgespell boasts some prominent patisseries that are—to use a touch of hyperbole—truly divine.”

Rosa nodded thoughtfully. “Hmm, that might work.”

Scarlett turned to Raimond. “Father Abraham, I would appreciate it if you did not aid her in prying into my personal matters.”

Wasn’t he supposed to be a holy man? Why was bribery the first thing that came to mind for him?

He showed an apologetic smile. “Pardon me, Baroness. As a wandering priest, it has become somewhat of an ingrained habit to offer advice when I interact with people.”

“I suppose you are not the main issue here,” she said, turning her attention back to Rosa.

The woman blinked. “I feel like I should be offended here, but for some reason, all I feel is pride.”

Scarlett could feel the exasperation build up, and she decided that the best way to proceed was simply to disengage. As she turned away to gaze out the window again, she let the others hold their own discussions while she thought about their upcoming dungeon run. She didn’t have the clearest recollection of this place, but it wasn’t a particularly complex dungeon.

The Sunfire Shrine was located roughly an hour out of the city by carriage. As the journey progressed, the conversations continued among the rest of the group. Much of it was between Rosa and Raimond, engaging in what was perhaps best described as light-hearted banter as they shared their various experiences across the empire. Meanwhile, Allyssa appeared quite intrigued by Raimond’s stories and some of the sights he had seen as a wandering priest.

Scarlett only listened in occasionally, like at one point when Raimond inquired into what was apparently the spreading rumors that Scarlett was now a dragon slayer. A ridiculous prospect, honestly, but for once, she wasn’t surprised by an exaggerated rumor about her. It was only a matter of time before it got out that a dead dragon had been found inside her mansion.

At least Raimond seemed wise enough to believe the others when they told her Scarlett *hadn’t* been the one to kill it, and that its presence was related to the dean of Elystead Tower. It was

the best explanation Scarlett could come up with that would make sense to people, and she'd checked in with Godwin that it was okay for her to say that.

By the time they reached their destination, the city and its surroundings had long since disappeared from view.

Nestled amidst several of these hills, the Sunfire shrine was a relatively humble set of structures with an unassuming stone exterior and simple pillars that blended in well with the natural surroundings at this time of year. A short, weathered cobble wall enclosed the shrine, and adorning the walls near the entrance were delicate carvings depicting the sun alongside imagery of flames reaching towards the sky.

As they approached the gates, no one was there to greet them. Their coachman had to stop the carriage and open the old metal gates himself to let them through. Inside, a peaceful courtyard stretched out before them, flanked by a few smaller buildings, likely living quarters and the like. At the heart of the compound stood the Sunfire Shrine itself.

Just after their carriage had stopped, and Scarlett had climbed out of the vehicle along with the others, an acolyte emerged from the shrine. Clad in the red robes and white mask common among the Followers, the figure hurried toward them.

The acolyte stopped before them and bowed with both palms pressed together. "Excuse our delay; we did not know when to expect you. May Ittar's light grace and welcome you all to the Sunfire Shrine, dear guests."

"There is no need for the formality, brother," Raimond said with a smile, brushing his long hair back over his shoulder as he gazed over at the shrine. "I don't believe either Baroness Hartford or myself would demand such reverence from those who dutifully devote themselves to their paths of reflection and self-improvement done here. We are the ones intruding, so please, don't worry about it."

Scarlett nodded. "Indeed. The formality is unnecessary. If you could lead us to Shrine Custodian Stanway, we will proceed from there."

"Of course, if you will follow me." The Acolyte turned and gestured for them to follow him.

They walked up to the shrine and entered through a pair of large bronze doors, stepping into a spacious chamber with a modest altar at one end. Upon the altar stood a statue of the enigmatic Ittar holding a flickering flame. A few short pews lined the area towards the statue, but there were also worn mats on the ground directly in front of it that appeared to be in more frequent use. Several acolytes were currently sitting on them, each wearing masks and deep in silent prayer.

The relative simplicity of this shrine was in stark contrast with the grandiosity of some of the Followers' other places of worship, which Scarlett found somewhat curious. From what she knew, the Sunfire Shrine was one of the few places in the empire where clergy members of the Followers of Ittar practiced a mix of pyromancy and lumomancy spells, which was an unusual combination in the church.

One might expect a group worshipping a sun god to emphasize fire more, but that wasn't the case here. Maybe a reason for that was because there had already been a fire goddess who was worshipped in these parts before Ittar, and the Followers had gradually pushed that away instead of assimilating it. The House of Fire had once been dedicated to that goddess, but while the name remained, it had now been repurposed with most ties to that fire goddess forgotten or left ignored.

As Scarlett and her party followed the acolyte through the main chamber and into the connecting corridors, she noted how Raimond was paying close attention as they moved, even as a smile never left his face.

Considering how high his actual position among the Followers was, she wouldn't be surprised if he was assessing the shrine's state and ensuring everything was in order.

Eventually, the acolyte led them to what seemed like a small training chamber. The floor tiles bore the marks of generations' use and abuse, with irregularities and signs of damage scattered across the surface.

In the center of the room stood an older, slightly burly man in red-and-white robes, closely overseeing two younger men in grey robes. The latter two appeared to be practicing some sort of spell cords of fire and pure light hung in the air before them, coiling around each other in patterns that made Scarlett think of candy canes.

None of the three wore masks, and their clothes were much simpler than the acolyte who had been guiding them, but that wasn't surprising considering they were training with fire magic.

Scarlett observed the spells the two men were performing with interest as she and the others approached the trio. She didn't recognize what spell it was, nor could she see any obvious combat application in it, so she wondered whether it was perhaps some kind of practice composite spell.

The older man, presumably Shrine Custodian Stanway, turned to face them.

"Father Beaman. Are these the guests we were expecting?" he asked, his eyes scanning Scarlett and her companions with a slow gaze.

The masked acolyte nodded. "They are, Custodian. This is Baroness Hartford and..." The man hesitated, then turned to Raimond as if only now realizing he had never gotten his name.

Raimond offered a warm smile. "Reverend Ray Abraham. I was sent here on behalf of the Ecclesiastical Congregation of Sacraments."

The Custodian's expression held a slight frown as he eyed Raimond, but he soon returned his attention to the two young men practicing their magic. "Stop here for now. We will continue later."

"Yes, Custodian," both men responded as they dismissed their spells.

Curious, Scarlett studied both of them for a moment. "If I might ask, which spell was it that you were practicing just now?"

Custodian Stanway turned his gaze towards her. “That was the Gleaming Scepter. It is a rudimentary invocation taught to all acolytes here, preparing them for more complex and powerful invocations in the future.”

“Such as?”

“The end goal with this particular invocation is Luminous Inferno, but few ever reach that level.”

“I see.” Scarlett’s eyes stayed on the two men for another moment. She did recognize that spell, at least.

Although the Followers of Ittar referred to them as invocations rather than spells—and their magic often differed slightly from that of mages—they were, in essence, still spells. Arlene had even held a short lecture on it to Scarlett during one of her visits to Freymeadow.

Luminous Inferno had been one of the most powerful pyromancy-lumomancy composite spells in the game, boasting a higher damage output than almost any other if you excluded primordial ones.

“You are a mage, I suppose?” Stanway asked in a somewhat dry tone.

“In a manner,” Scarlett replied. “While most mages might dispute the matter, and I would be inclined to agree with them, there is no doubt that I am proficient in certain types of magic. Pyromancy in particular. Hence, my interest in the display just now.”

“Hmm. That does not surprise me.” With a wave, he signaled to the two young men he’d been instructing, along with the acolyte, to leave the room. Then, gesturing for Scarlett and the others to follow, he led them towards one of the adjoining corridors, “I have been made aware of your purpose here, as well as your identities. Particularly yours, Reverend Abraham.”

Stanway shot a look at Raimond, implying he wasn’t particularly thrilled about having him present, before shifting his focus back to Scarlett.

“I will tell you that I have presided over this shrine for three decades, overseeing the training of numerous acolytes and priests within these walls. While I don’t intend to insinuate that your claims of a concealed section left behind by the venerable Deacon Emberwood are inconceivable, I am intimately familiar with these halls. I find it difficult to believe there is much here for you to uncover.”

“I understand your skepticism,” Scarlett said. “However, with all due respect, I think you are wrong in this scenario.”

“Hmph. And why is that? What texts or evidence have you unearthed that makes you think you can challenge the knowledge amassed by generations of custodians who have safeguarded this shrine since its inception?”

“While I am not willing to share the precise source of my information for the time being, I can assure you of its reliability. I anticipate that you will soon witness its validity firsthand.”

The shrine custodian's eyes narrowed at her as she avoided answering. He glanced at Raimond, as if questioning whether the man would let the matter rest there. However, Raimond displayed no intention of intervening. Eventually, Stanway just let out a faint scoff as they reached an aged wooden door at the end of a hallway. He grasped the handle and applied force, swinging the door open to unveil a dim stairway descending down.

Now Raimond cleared his throat, raising his hands. "If you'll allow me." He clapped twice, and the entire stairway was illuminated by some unseen source.

That was certainly more practical than Scarlett's typical approach to lighting spaces up. Maybe she should look into getting some sort of artifact or item that did something similar. Adalicia might have one that she could buy, considering the wizard was also partially specialized in lumomancy.

Stanway sent another look Raimond's way, then gestured down the stairway. "Then let us continue."