

169: Holy endeavours

Scarlett peered out of the carriage window at the stone buildings outside as they traveled down Bridgespell's cobbled streets, watching some of the stalls and open shops that they passed by. Although it was one of the larger cities in the empire, Bridgespell's Kilnstone district was mostly a mix of narrow streets and alleyways unless one followed the main thoroughfare, which they had left not long after arriving in the city.

That wasn't to say that the traffic was any less along their current route. It was just more cramped. People moved out of the way as carriages moved past, and the crowds fluttered about between the buildings like ants.

"Ah, this brings back memories," Rosa hummed to Scarlett's left, where the bard leaned forward in her seat, chin resting on her palm, gazing past Scarlett through the window. "There's no place quite like Bridgespell if you want to experience what it's like to be a sardine packed into a barrel."

"You've been here before?" Allyssa asked from her seat opposite the woman.

"Of course." Rosa looked at the girl, who gave the bard an amused look.

"Is there anywhere around the Empire you *haven't* been?"

Rosa furrowed her brows at that, tapping a finger against her cheek. "I suppose I haven't been to the Rising Isle yet. Or the Forgotten Tower, for that matter. They're close enough to the empire in my book that I can't *not* visit them, eventually." She shot a smile in Scarlett's direction. "If I stick close to this one for long enough, I'm sure it's only a matter of time before I get the chance as well. I've already been able to check off visiting the top of one of the highest mountains on the continent thanks to her."

"*No one* has ever been to the Forgotten Tower," Allyssa said. "And the Rising Isle only allows mages there, don't they?"

"The Rising Isle doesn't have any policy against non-mages visiting the island." Shin looked up from a book that he was reading. "They haven't for a long time. I would imagine that there are at least some living there who aren't mages as well. And they've had several collaborations with the empire over the last five decades where people from here have been allowed to visit."

"Ok, well, yes, sure. If that's the case, I'll admit it that I wouldn't be surprised if Scarlett somehow ended up taking us there at some point." Allyssa shook her head. "But my imagination draws the limit at the Forgotten Tower. That's a bit unrealistic, don't you think?"

"Hmm, I don't know~" Rosa looked at Scarlett with a smirk. "Is it?"

Scarlett eyed the bard for a moment, before looking back out the window. "I do not think you are quite ready for that yet."

She could imagine the smile on Rosa's face growing at that, even as Allyssa let out a noise of bewilderment.

"W-Wait, you can't say that. Then I might actually believe you're serious," the young Shielder said. "You *are* joking, right?"

Scarlett shifted her eyes to look at the girl. "Of course," she answered after a brief pause.

Allyssa blinked. "Nonono. Now you're saying it like *that*. Like you do when you know something we don't. But you *have* to be joking, don't you?" She turned to look at Fynn. "She's not telling the truth, right? Please tell me she isn't."

The young man glanced at Scarlett, then looked back at Allyssa. "I've been told not to share those things anymore."

Rosa chuckled, while Allyssa didn't appear to know what to do with that. As the girl turned to Shin and started trying to get him to convince her that Scarlett had to be joking, Rosa leaned closer to Scarlett.

"Just for reference, are you actually serious?" the bard whispered, a glint of interest showing in her eyes.

Scarlett met her gaze for a second, then simply shrugged her shoulders. "Who knows?"

With that, she turned around and started looking out the window again. Rosa wasn't the only one that could have some fun at others' expense.

The carriage continued through the city, and eventually, they arrived in what appeared to be an older section of it. The buildings and streets here showed clear signs of age, at least in their style, but they still looked well-preserved. Some of the buildings here were also larger, and it was clear great care was placed into maintaining the beauty of this place. If Scarlett remembered correctly, this was called the Emberwood Ward. Before their trip to Bridgespell, she had spent a good amount of time researching the city's layout and its different wards since it would be relevant for her visit this time.

"What will we be doing here?" Shin asked after a while, having put aside his book as he examined the sights outside. "You said that we'll be exploring a couple of caves and ruins here in Bridgespell, as well as an old Follower shrine, but I assumed all of that was outside the city. Is there a reason why we're visiting this section of it first? Is this where will be staying?"

"It is not, no," Scarlett answered. "For the duration of our stay here in Bridgespell, we will be lodging in the Golden Griffin Inn, which is located in the Upper Ward. Before we arrive there, however, there are some other matters that need to be dealt with. Our first order of business is to visit the Followers of Ittar's main temple in the city."

"You planning on picking up the red cloth?" Rosa asked, jokingly nudging an elbow towards Scarlett's side, though the woman didn't actually seem to touch her.

“I am not. However, I am now considering inquiring whether they have need for an obstreperous bard.”

Rosa blinked, then laughed a long, melodious laugh. “That doesn’t actually sound that bad. I’d prefer a less poss and obnoxious-sounding description, but who knows? Maybe I’d fit right in with the priests and their gaggle of knee-benders. I *have* been called divine on more than one occasion.” She patted a hand on the neck of her klert instrument that was leaning against the seat between her legs. “And they’ve asked, you know? Had a priest that followed me around from village to village for a while giving the whole spiel and trying to convince me to join up. But then I’d have to deprive the world of my ravishing visage.” The woman gave a fake shudder with a horrified expression. “That would just be too cruel.”

Just as she said that, the carriage came to a halt at the end of a long rectangular square that had dozens of vehicles and people moving back and forth across it. The two wings of a large temple, cut out of pale stone and white marble, extended along both sides of the square and covered about half of it. The temple featured tall pillars that ran along the wings next to walkway balconies, with gold filigree covering the base of the pillars.

At the other end of the square, a set of stairs, flanked on each side by statues that had their arms raised to the sky, led up to the temple’s entrance. The entrance consisted of a wide archway surrounded by even more pillars and the large head of a man, lacking any identifiable characteristics, carved into the stone above it.

While most of the people moving about in this area appeared to be ordinary citizens, there were quite a few individuals dressed in thick red robes adorned with gold embellishments and wearing decorated white masks that covered their faces. Some also wore more intricate masks, consisting of two squares interposed over each other at orthogonal angles, along with two thin pieces of cloth hanging down in front of them. The clothing that was common among priests of Ittar.

Scarlett stepped out of the carriage along with the others and wasted no time in starting to make her way towards the temple’s entrance. She passed by both clergy members of the Followers of Ittar and civilians as she reached the stairs and began climbing them. When she reached the entrance and stepped inside the temple, she was greeted by a spacious vestibule with a wide glass pane ceiling, allowing the sunlight to stream in. Gleaming marble floors stretched out before her, reflecting the golden rays of the sunlight, while a delicate fragrance permeated the air from thuribles hanging on the walls with incense burning in them.

Several archways connected to the room, and there was a tall statue of Ittar at the center. Some individuals were kneeling before the statue, engaged in prayer, while a couple of clergy members moved among them, bestowing what might have been blessings.

Scarlett spotted one priest who sat on a stool near the entrance, seemingly keeping watch of the room under their white mask. She assumed they were a woman, and probably an acolyte judging from the mask.

The clergy member turned her head towards Scarlett as she approached, briefly glancing over at the group of four that followed behind her. “Welcome, child of the sun, to the sacred embrace of Ittar’s dwelling. May the blessings of his radiant light shine upon you. Is there something I can help you with?”

“There is,” Scarlett replied. “I am Baroness Scarlett Hartford, and I wish to meet with either the high priest or ritual master of this temple, if any of them are available.”

The acolyte seemed to hesitate for a moment. “...The ritual master is currently presiding over a sermon, so I am afraid she is unavailable. I can see if the high priest is occupied at the moment, if you would be so kind as to wait here.”

“Please, go ahead,” Scarlett said.

The masked woman turned around to leave, and Scarlett prepared that it might take a while. While it wasn’t exactly an apt comparison, getting the boss on the line in customer service was never a simple thing.

“Why do those people always wear masks?” Fynn asked after a minute had passed, his gaze fixed on the priests that were walking around the room.

“So that people can’t see the funny faces they’re making,” Rosa answered. “That’s how they convince people to join.”

“I have a sneaking suspicion that isn’t as appealing a perk as you think it is...” Allyssa remarked, eyeing the bard. Then she turned to Fynn. “I think it’s fair to ignore her on this one. The masks are symbolic.”

The young man looked at her. “Symbolic of what?”

The Shielder waved her hand, gesturing around the room. “It’s supposed to symbolize the connection between Ittar and us humans. The masks serve as the representation of him and his radiant nature, you know? You can’t actually look at the sun without hurting your eyes, so it’s kinda the same idea. Stops you from seeing their faces.”

“It’s also to show humility and equality,” Shin added from the side. He was squinting because of the brightness in the room, the scar over his left eye knitting together. “By covering their faces, the Followers emphasize that they’re only conduits for Ittar’s teachings and that anyone can stand among their numbers.”

Fynn furrowed his brow. “Can they?”

“To a large extent, yes. The Followers accept anyone into their ranks, and I’m not aware of any particular biases on that end.” Shin shrugged his shoulders. “Although I’ve heard that many of their members hail from those who receive their help. So people from hospices, orphanages, and other institutions run by them.”

“Yeah, they can be a bit pushy,” Rosa said, eyeing some of the devouts who were praying in front of the large statue of Ittar, her face unusually somber. “They like talking about all the fancy benefits you get from joining them and the community they have. Personally, I never thought I could make it with that many people around me all the time. Can’t say I’ve ever felt especially close to the big sun guy either.”

Allyssa gave the woman a surprised look. “Wait, you’re saying the Followers *actually* tried recruiting you specifically before? I thought you were joking.”

Rosa turned to the girl with an affronted expression. “Me? Joke? Never. A jest or two, though...”

Allyssa just shook her head with a slight chuckle.

“Anyhow,” Rosa continued, “I was telling the truth about that, yes. It was ages ago, though. Back when I was still running around with a gap in my teeth and a hole in my pocket. Stayed at one of their homes for about a month, caught the eye of a particularly wholesome fellow, but I wasn’t too open to other people at the time.” The woman grimaced. “Ended up running off after I accidentally made the local overseer dance a step or two too many near a pair of stairs. Not my proudest moment. Old man wound up breaking both ankles. I patched them up before I left, though.”

“But does that mean you were—”

Before Allyssa could finish that question, the acolyte from before returned and spoke to Scarlett. “The high priest has set aside some time to receive you. If you follow me, I will guide you to his office.”

“Seems like time’s up,” Rosa said, the smile back on her face. She looked towards Scarlett. “What say you about taking the lead, my Lady?”

Scarlett simply began walking after the acolyte without any response, following the person through the main vestibule and down a long stone hallway. After taking a few turns, and passing through an area or two where sermons and the like seemed to be carried out on occasion, they finally stopped outside of a simple birch door adorned with some basic religious imagery.

The acolyte turned to look at them. “The high priest is inside. The room is not overly spacious, so I ask that only two of you enter.”

Scarlett gestured for Rosa to follow and for the rest to stay outside. The bard showed a look of surprise, as if she genuinely didn’t expect to be picked, but followed her in without question.

Passing through the door, Scarlett and Rosa entered a small office. It was a surprisingly cozy space, cut out of grey stone with simple decor, mostly limited to plain bookshelves along the walls and some religious paintings hanging above them. Sitting behind a desk at the opposite end of the room was a man in his late fifties, with streaks of white in his brown hair. He appeared to be studying the two of them with a pair of half-wrinkled, sky-blue eyes.

He wore the same elaborate set of robes and vestments as most full priests among the Followers did, though the design was slightly different, with more white to it, and his helmet lay on a shelf to the side.

“Ittar’s grace be upon you, Baroness. Welcome,” the man said with a nod. “I am High Priest Matthias, the priest presiding over the official matters at this temple and this diocese.”

“Thank you for the warm reception, Your Excellency,” Scarlett replied. “As you know, I am Baroness Scarlett Hartford. This is my retainer, Miss Rosalina Hale.”

The high priest gave a nod in greeting to Rosa as well, then signaled towards three empty chairs that were piled on top of each other next to the entrance. “Feel free to take a seat. I have been preoccupied with secular matters for most of the day, and I was not expecting a visit from someone of your standing. You will have to excuse the somewhat lacking accommodations.”

“I do not mind,” Scarlett said. Rosa moved before she could and grabbed two chairs, carrying them across the room to place them before the desk. Giving the bard a slightly surprised look, she moved over to sit down in one of the chairs.

The high priest observed them as they sat, leaning two hands on the desk and clasping them together. “May I ask what business a baroness has that she wants to discuss with me today? I usually do not engage myself with matters of the nobility, but I happen to recall your name as one of the ones recorded in the Hall of Providers this year. For finding and returning one of the Chalices of Canon, no less. It caused a notable stir of discussion among my fellow clergymen at the time, so hearing your name in the context did leave me curious.”

“So you were already aware of my contribution during the Providing Ceremony. Good.” Scarlett folded her hands on her lap. “I am currently investigating some other findings that I recently uncovered, which are of a similar nature to those that led to me locating the Chalice of Cannon. I have reason to believe that these findings point me to here, in the Bridgespell region. That is why I have sought you out.”

The man’s brow rose slightly. “First the Chalice of Cannon, and now another similar undertaking only months after? Can I take it you hold an interest in unearthing sacred relics, then? Your devotion is admirable if you are taking it out of your own free time to explore the subject. What is it you wanted to ask of me, specifically?”

“Am I correct in that there is an old shrine to the west of Bridgespell where young acolytes are trained, and which was built slightly over three centuries ago?” Scarlett asked.

“I believe you are referring to the Sunfire Shrine.”

“I would like to gain access to it.”

The high priest knitted his forehead. “I presume you are implying that there are undiscovered relics within the shrine.”

Scarlett nodded. “That is what my findings suggest.”

“Can I ask what the nature of these ‘findings’ is?”

“You can, but unfortunately I cannot tell you. For the time being, the exact character of my research must stay confidential. That said, I am, of course, willing to share the fruits of my research with you, as I have done before.”

Considering that her research basically amounted to what she remembered from the game and what Arlene had told her, there really wasn’t much to share.

The man regarded her silently for a moment. "I hope you do not take offense at my saying so, Baroness, but it's likely that your research no longer holds any worth on this particular occasion. As you yourself mentioned, the Sunfire Shrine has been used by our clergy members for centuries, and it was built by one of the original deacons. If there was anything to find there, it has already been found. If you were to share what you believe might be there, I could have one of our acolytes peer through our records to confirm it. I cannot promise any more than that, however."

Scarlett studied the high priest for a few seconds, feeling a twinge of annoyance at the need to actually try to convince this guy. In the game, you would first do a bit of sleuthing after getting Arlene's quest to even figure out that the Sunfire Shrine existed, and while doing so, you would run into an item that you could show to the Followers to convince them to give you access. But getting that item would just be a waste of time for her, which is why she went straight here.

Another option was to simply sneak into the shrine and not bother getting permission. That was pretty easy in the game, but it was a lot riskier in this world. Especially considering that no one in Scarlett's party was experienced in stealth.

So she would just have to make things up and splice in a bit of truth.

"I am convinced that you will not have found this," she said. "In my research, I came across mentions that seem to trace back to when the shrine was first constructed. Although I cannot be certain if they were authored by the man himself, they directly referenced Deacon Donovan Emberwood and how he established the shrine to honor a close disciple of his, entombing a powerful relic in a concealed section within the shrine."

She hadn't remembered the name of the specific deacon from the game itself, so she'd had to find some old scriptures mentioning the original deacons and figure things out from there.

The high priest gave her a serious look. "Are you certain?"

"I am."

"And what relic did these texts refer to?"

"Its name was not mentioned, nor its purpose."

There were a few items there that could probably be nice to have, honestly. She couldn't quite remember the effect of the last item found there, but it would have been an epic-tier item at the very least. Keeping that for herself *would* have been nice, but she needed something to convince the Followers to let her inside, and since it had been left by one of their original deacons, they would essentially consider it a sacred relic.

As long as she got her hands on what was *actually* waiting for her in that place, she would be more satisfied.

The high priest wore a thoughtful expression on his face as he brought a hand to his chin, remaining quiet for some time. "I will say that this is the first time I have ever heard of anything of this nature related to that shrine, but I am not so well-versed in its history. If what

you say is true, however, we would of course be interested in further investigating this matter.”

“If you would allow me to do so, I am more than willing to lend my aid in that endeavour,” Scarlett said. “It would be greatly helpful for my continued research. I also possess the knowledge and expertise to open the concealed section of the shrine without damaging the structure.”

The man pursed his lips, appearing to consider her proposal. “I am afraid something like this is not entirely within my authority to decide on my own. Not only is there the Shrine Custodian’s opinion to bear in mind, matters related to sacred relics and texts are handled by the Ecclesiastical Congregation of Sacraments, who are under the purview of the Quorum. I would have to present it to them before I can give you an answer on how we can proceed.”

“That is understandable. My retainers and I will be staying in the city for some time, so we can wait until a decision has been reached.”

She planned to clear as many dungeons in the area as she could while she was here, so waiting for a few days wasn’t an issue. In the worst-case scenario, she *could* always try sneaking in. Though she hadn’t used it since the incident with Gaven and the Sanctuary of Ittar, she still had the [Memory of the Covenant], which would allow at least one person in her party to hide their real appearance.

“I appreciate your understanding, Baroness, and this opportunity you might have provided us. I will ensure this matter is brought to the attention of the right people as soon as possible and then give you a response at the nearest opportunity.”

“Very well. I will be waiting. You can find me at the Golden Griffin Inn if needed.”

“Was there anything else you wished to discuss, Baroness?”

Scarlett shook her head. “No, that was all. We will take our leave, so as not to disturb you in your affairs any further.”

“Then the child from before will lead you back,” the high priest said. “May Ittar’s light guide your path.”

With that, both Scarlett and Rosa left the man’s office and returned to where the others were waiting outside. There, the acolyte led them back to the temple’s entrance, where they returned to the carriage that was waiting for them.