

177: The common delve

Scarlett and her companions ventured down the path she had chosen at random, gradually delving deeper into the stone tunnel. It was an odd experience since they didn't seem to be making any progress if you looked ahead into the seemingly endless opening that stretched on before them, but a glance backward revealed that they were moving away from the central chamber.

Magic did strange things sometimes.

Scarlett was most amazed by the existence of this place. She couldn't help but wonder how the deacon who made it managed to keep its existence a secret. Excavating it the traditional way would have taken ages and an army of laborers.

She supposed magic was the answer to that as well, but that still raised questions. As far as she was aware, there weren't actually any construction mages or similar professions. It felt like there should be, but maybe the spells required for such a task were too advanced. They would have to be manifest spells, at the very least.

Perhaps some of the mage towers had divisions focusing on that, though. She imagined that there was a decent demand from groups like the imperial army.

It might be worth looking into in the future, even if she didn't personally have any need for it.

"This place is starting to give me the same vibes as that haunted mansion did," Allyssa said as they continued through the never-ending passage. "All that's missing is a ghost or a creepy doll leaping out at us from the walls."

"Sounds like you have had some rather interesting experiences before," Raimond commented as he walked close to the front of the group, beside Fynn. The blond-haired priest turned back to look at Allyssa. "Let's hope that we don't encounter any errant spirits of the dead today, shall we? We are in a place of faith and spirituality, after all."

"But it sure would add some excitement to things," Rosa chimed in.

The man laughed. "I suppose it would."

"What *can* we expect here, if not ghosts and the like?" Allyssa asked.

"It's hard to say," Raimond replied thoughtfully. "One can never be too sure with these old shrines and ossuaries left behind by those who pioneered our order. You wouldn't believe some of the things that the Ecclesiastical Congregation of Sacraments has encountered throughout its existence."

Scarlett eyed the man. So was he part of that congregation, or was it just a temporary cover? She wasn't familiar enough with the inner workings of the Followers of Ittar to know whether a deacon could also be a member of its various branches, or if the Quorum was always a separate entity from everything else. Maybe he had simply been a member of the congregation before becoming a deacon.

It took her a moment to realize that the rest of the group's attention was now focused on her, as if waiting for her to answer the question.

"I am afraid that this is an occasion where I do not know much more than Father Abraham," she said. "We will simply have to wait and see. As such, I would recommend that you be prepared for anything."

Although she had a rough idea of what to expect here, she didn't want to stand out *too* much with her information while Raimond was present. Besides, with their current party, their opponents here wouldn't be the type where it was super important to know about them beforehand.

She sensed that Rosa and the others didn't quite believe her supposed 'ignorance', judging from the looks they gave her, but no one said anything.

They continued walking for a while longer, and eventually, even though the passage seemed to continue forward, they suddenly stepped into a wide chamber. It appeared to have nothing in it other than another endless path that continued at the other end.

Fynn frowned, his nose scrunching up. "We're not alone."

"I'm inclined to agree," Raimond said. The priest stepped forward, and with a gesture of his hand, a dozen tall, lanky figures materialized throughout the room as if a curtain had been lifted. Each figure wore gold-red robes reminiscent of the ones worn by the Followers' priests, their heads entirely covered by smooth blank helmets of gold.

Initially, they seemed almost like statues, standing completely motionless, but as Fynn stepped deeper into the room with a low growl, the figures all sprang to life.

Their arms moved in strange, deliberate patterns, and the left half of them conjured rings of fire that morphed into tiny globes, while the ones to the right surrounded themselves with nimbuses of pure light that seemed to spin at high speeds.

Fynn had already crossed most of the space between them, with Shin following a bit farther behind, shield raised.

Their group had grown experienced in working together, and Allyssa had already started pulling vials from her bandolier while Rosa moved a step forward as the bard began playing her klert to buff the rest of them.

Since this wasn't the main fight in this dungeon, Scarlett intended to hold back a bit with her mana unless absolutely necessary. Instead, she set her attention on the fire-wielding enemies.

She had learned in her training with Arlene that manipulating other pyromancers' magic was less mana-intensive than conjuring her own flames. While it could be challenging—nearly impossible against the woman herself—Arlene claimed that Scarlett had a knack for it.

The half-dozen priest-like enemies unleashed their attacks towards Shin and Fynn, but the moment their spells left their owners' vicinity, Scarlett mentally seized control of them.

About a third of the red-hot fire globules fizzled into nothingness, while another third lost their shape as they veered off their path and spun towards their own casters. Only a few attacks managed to reach Fynn and Shin, but those were shrugged off by the two.

A moment later, the white-haired youth at the front of the pair slammed into two opponents at once and pushed them back.

Raimond also lent his aid, creating shimmering discs of golden brilliance that blocked the beams of light shooting out from the light-wielding priests like tiny fireworks. Occasionally, golden rays extended from a radiant circle beneath his feet and crawled across the floor to heal Shin and Fynn whenever the two sustained injuries.

Continuing like this, with Scarlett keeping the attacks of one half of the priests in check and Raimond the other, the party managed to defeat the opponents within a few minutes. When defeated, the priests' bodies slumped to the ground like a bundle of cloth that had lost its cohesion. Surrounded by the piles of discarded garments, Shin and Fynn almost looked like they were at the center of what remained after a wild shopping spree.

Allyssa wiped a bead of sweat from her forehead as she approached them. "What *are* these?" she asked, kneeling down next to one of the red-gold robes on the floor, pulling at it carefully.

Raimond dusted off some non-existent dust from his own white robes as he walked over. "Auranthials, sometimes called the Followers' 'Radiant Guardians'. They are a type of construct that was not uncommonly used by my order during the early days of the empire and the Renaissance. You could think of them as a type of golem, if you wish." He stopped next to Allyssa, looking down at the one beside her. "The method for creating them is a closely kept secret, and whispered to be inordinately expensive, so they are a rare sight today."

The girl looked between the defeated 'Auranthial' and Raimond, a slight furrow on her brow. "The way they moved felt weird. It was *almost* as if they were alive, but not."

"They are imitations of life, animated by the techniques and power of Ittar. Rest assured that they aren't actually living beings." The priest's gaze wandered around the room with a slightly wistful expression. "There are ways to make them a bit...*more*, but they are still not truly alive."

"What does 'more' mean?" Shin asked. The young man swiped off some black scorch marks from his shield as he moved closer to the two.

Raimond looked at him for a few seconds, then gave a slight smile as he shifted his gaze to the passage continuing onward at the other end of the chamber. "Shall we proceed as we were, perhaps? I suspect this isn't the only surprise the venerable departed deacon has left for us in this place."

Both Shin and Allyssa exchanged curious glances, but neither pressed the question any further. To Scarlett, it didn't matter much anyway. She did, however, eye some of the defeated Auranthials and wonder if they could have been worth something, but considering the nature of this excursion, she wouldn't be able to take them along.

Soon they were off again, continuing deeper into the dungeon. As they progressed, they ran into a few more sets of concealed Auranthials, varying in numbers. Each encounter took a few minutes, but with Raimond here and Scarlett being able to counter many of their opponents' attacks, they didn't have to worry much about getting hurt for the time being.

In fact, she felt that this was excellent training for her pyrokinesis overall. She recognized the spells the Auranthials used, mostly [Ignis Barrage], [Emberstrike], and [Blazing Salvo]. While they were fairly powerful spells, some of which she had seen Kat use on occasion, that didn't stop her from being able to interfere with their structure.

There were limits to how far she could manipulate the spells—she couldn't take complete control of them and could only redirect them at best if she tried that—but it was still pretty effective. She also realized that this was probably the closest she would ever come to casting real spells herself.

There was still a question of exactly how effective this was against other pyromancy mages other than these Auranthials. They weren't really alive, and she imagined that someone like Kat or Evelyne—mages who she considered herself roughly at an equal level to now when it came to her pyrokinesis, discounting any extra buffs—would be much harder to contend with.

Maybe she should spar with Evelyne next time she returned to Freybrook. It could prove to be a valuable experience for both of them.

After continuing down the same passage and engaging in occasional battles for a bit over an hour—this was one dungeon that definitely took longer in this world than in the game, she noted—the party arrived in a larger chamber that seemed to mark the end of this section. Neither Fynn nor Raimond could detect any enemies, and there wasn't any path that continued forward from here.

On the far wall of the chamber, there was a stone table with a burning candle, two small chests, and an old silver ring lying in a bowl on it. Above those, a single line of text was carved into the wall.

Scarlett and the others approached.

For my most steadfast disciple, I leave my repentance towards you and your kin. Even with my lacking guidance, your accomplishments made me proud, yet I am burdened with the knowledge that I could not uphold my promise to you. For this, I am sorry.

“I guess the deacon who made this place wrote that, then? What does it mean?” Allyssa asked.

“Sounds like the fellow was sorry for whatever he did to this disciple of his,” Rosa said, looking to Raimond. “Or failed to do. Strange, though. I wasn't under the impression that priests took disciples. Not in the traditional way, at least. Aren't your lot all about that community and teaching the masses?”

The man's face took on a contemplative expression as he considered the ancient text. “Normally, that's the case, yes. But I have heard that Deacon Emberwood was somewhat

unorthodox in that aspect. Supposedly, he had mage disciples even while holding his seat as a deacon, and it appears as if he held them rather dear to his heart.”

As he glanced over at Scarlett, their eyes locked. Did he have something he wanted to say to her?

They held the gaze for a moment, but eventually, the priest shifted his attention to the small chests resting on the table. They were made of polished limestone and bore gilded edges. With measured steps, Raimond approached and gently attempted to open the first chest. It wasn't locked, so the lid slid open easily.

Inside was a medallion of deep ocher hue, boasting a single, radiant gem at its center.

[Companion's Medallion (Epic)]

{ Warm to the touch, this pendant evokes the spectral presence of a once-cherished companion, awaiting the command of its master }

Raimond studied the medallion for a few seconds before closing the chest. He then proceeded to open the other chest, revealing a short bronze rod with a brazier at the top and a spike at its bottom.

[Traveler's Respite (Epic)]

{ A magical flame resides within this rod, prepared to be called upon and envelop its surroundings with its comforting warmth }

Scarlett wouldn't deny that she was tempted by the items and their descriptions. But these weren't her primary objectives, and the Followers wouldn't freely give them to her.

Raimond soon closed that chest as well with a short nod. “The Congregation and record keepers will be quite interested in these, I'm sure. Although, truth be told, they are usually fascinated by anything that happens to be older than a forgotten piece of toast, so perhaps that might not be saying much.”

“I was under the impression that you were also a member of the Ecclesiastical Congregation of Sacraments,” Scarlett said.

He turned to her, a small smile dancing on his lips. “Technically, yes, but I like to consider myself a slightly more free soul. The world is a canvas, and I am its unerring brush. Its every movement speaks a language of its own, and I am here to partake in it.”

“A man after my own heart,” Rosa chimed in with a playful tone. “Maybe you should've tried the bard life like me. I heard you play the flute, yeah? We could have dazzled the crowds around the empire as a musical duo.”

A melancholy expression crossed Raimond's face as he gazed into the non-existing distance. “Ah, wouldn't that have been a splendid prospect? And why limit ourselves to the empire when an entire continent could have been our stage?”

Rosa let out a mirthful laugh as she shook her head. “Didn't wanna dampen your spirits with thoughts of lost opportunities.”

“Indeed, pondering what might have been can make one quite forlorn. Nevertheless, it is my calling to wander these lands as a humble priest and offer Ittar’s guidance to those weary souls in need.” The man winked at Rosa. “But who knows? Fate’s whims may yet lead us to bedazzle audiences in the future.”

“True that. You never know,” the bard replied with a grin.

Scarlett eyed the two of them for a moment, then she stepped up beside Raimond in front of the table and gestured towards the final item resting there — the old ring.

[Old Ring (Common)]

{ A timeworn silver ring once belonging to a noble youth. Unremarkable in every other way }

She was a bit surprised that the ring warranted an item description, honestly. It was basically useless. But maybe it was for later consistency.

“I realize it might be brazen of me to ask,” she began, “but do you believe it would be possible for me to take this ring?” She looked at Raimond. “As I am sure you can tell, it is not an artifact nor enchanted in any way. I suspect that it belonged to the deacon’s disciple, and if so, it could hold relevance for my own research. I would be greatly appreciative for the chance to further investigate its origins.”

“Hmm.” Raimond appeared to ponder her request for a moment, a perceptive glint appearing in his eyes. “I will almost certainly receive some not-so-savory comments about it later, but considering the circumstances and what you have afforded my order in revealing this place, I see no reason to decline your request. Truth be told, I don’t believe the Followers have any right to meddle in the venerable Deacon Emberwood’s secular affairs to begin with, and the fact that he concealed this place from his fellow clergy members speaks volumes. Perhaps allowing you to be here and take this ring aligns better with the man’s original wish than if I and the Followers were to keep it.”

With that, the priest reached down and picked up the ring, offering it to Scarlett.

“Thank you,” she said, accepting the ring and briefly inspecting it before safely stowing it away in her [Pouch of Holding].

In all honesty, she had little interest in the ring or its backstory. It held almost no value to her, and the game had never focused on its significance either. It was just a minor detail part of the set dressing for this side-quest that you did for Arlene. That said, Scarlett *did* need to get her hand on one of the later keepsakes from this place, so setting a precedent was good.

She was surprised by Raimon’s casual willingness to give it to her, but she wasn’t about to complain. She had been prepared to put in much more effort to convince whoever the Followers sent with her at this point, but he made it easy for her.

“But will you not be taking those items?” she asked, gesturing at the two small chests.

Raimond shook his head. “It is enough that I determine what they are, for now. We will have people return at a later time to further examine them.”

“I see.” Scarlett turned her attention back to the passage they had come from. “Then I believe we are finished here. Shall we return and explore the other paths that remain?”