

## 174: Priestly reunions

The first four days of their stay in Bridgespell went by in a flash. Scarlett and her party spent much of the time scouring the surrounding countryside for the dungeons she knew were in the region. Bridgespell was a place you returned to multiple times in the game, and it boasted a fair number of points of interest nearby. She could offhandedly think of at least a dozen she had cleared in the game, but unfortunately, most proved harder to find than she had hoped.

For now, they had managed to locate four dungeons. Clearing those had been swift, at least, so she had amassed a decent amount of loot and skill points.

**[Points: 15]**

**[Skills Menu:**

**Upgrades**

[Superior Pyromancy] (25 points)

[Argent Pyrokinesis] (100 points) (LOCKED)

[Superior Hydromancy] (25 points)

[Major Hydrokinesis] (50 points)

[Superior Mana Control] (25 points)

**New skills**

[LOCKED]]

It marked the first time in several weeks that Scarlett had earned any new skill points, and it felt good to make progress on that front again. Although she couldn't afford to upgrade any of her skills yet—the cheapest ones were superior hydromancy, pyromancy, and mana control, each requiring 25 points—she expected to collect at least ten more points while in Bridgespell. That would provide her with enough to upgrade one of those skills if she wanted to.

She was considering going for [Superior Mana Control], as it would be valuable in her training with Arlene. But she also wanted to upgrade her hydrokinesis to [Major Hydrokinesis], which cost 50 points.

Deciding her priorities there would have to wait until later, though. She might opt to first improve her proficiency with hydrokinesis as a skill before upgrading it further. But for the time being, at least, she had other things to deal with.

Currently sitting in the carriage with the rest of her party, they were making their way through the bustling streets of Bridgespell towards the Emberwood Ward, where the Followers of Ittar's temple was. This morning, they received a message from the high priest regarding the Sunfire Shrine matter she had gone to them about.

Rosa was sitting to her left, talking and being casual with the others as she usually did. There were no signs of the vulnerable woman Scarlett had seen a mere four days prior, nor the troubles she was no doubt thinking about. Scarlett was still waiting for Rosa to talk to her about leaving for Crowcairn, but it had yet to happen.

It made her slightly worried that the bard would end up ignoring the matter entirely, but for now, she chose to trust her.

It would be hard to get anywhere if Rosa wasn't determined herself, after all.

It took them roughly half an hour to travel through the busy city from their inn to the temple, but eventually, they arrived at the same square they had been before, facing the grand temple built of pale stone and marble that belonged to the Followers.

An acolyte in red robes and a featureless white mask greeted them as they climbed up the stairs to its entrance, performing a brief bow with hands pressed together. "The high priest has been expecting you," a man's voice echoed from behind the mask. "If you will follow me."

With that, the person turned around and led Scarlett and her party past a congregation of believers and clergy members gathered around the central statue of Ittar in the main chamber of the temple as they began navigating the structure's corridors. Eventually, they reached the door leading to the high priest's office.

The acolyte looked at Scarlett. "The high priest is waiting for you inside, Baroness."

Scarlett nodded at the man as he opened the door for her, and she motioned for the rest of her party to wait outside while she and Rosa entered.

Inside, the high priest sat behind his desk at the far end of the room, clad in the same elaborate vestments as last time, with his priest's mask resting on a nearby shelf. He looked up from some papers at Scarlett and Rosa as they walked through the door.

"Baroness, may Ittar's light grace you. Welcome back," the man greeted them, gesturing towards a pair of chairs in front of him. "Your patience in this matter has been greatly appreciated, not to mention your initiative and devotion in bringing this to us. I hope you have had a pleasant stay here in Bridgespell these past few days."

"I have," Scarlett replied as she and Rosa took their seats. "There has been much to keep me occupied, but it has been fruitful."

"I can understand that you are a busy woman, Baroness. "The high priest placed his hands on the desk and folded them. "In these worrying times, there is much that needs to be done, but not enough time for it all, even for those who follow in Ittar's light. We can only work together where we can and ensure that we try our best to support each other as children of man, wherever possible."

"Not sure everyone got the word on that one," Rosa said.

The high priest turned to her, and his mouth curved in a slight smile. "Miss Hale, was it? No, unfortunately you are right." He gently shook his head. "There are far too many in this empire who do not care for their fellows if they do not personally stand to gain from it. Unsavory as it may be, it is an immorality inherent in our very nature as a society. Ittar speaks of how to combat such immorality, but not everyone is open to his teachings. While I have nothing but respect for the principles of other followings, such as the Pantheon's order or the Harmonious

Way, I fear that the forces conspiring in these lands now belong to more malevolent groups. And in the end, it is the common man who bears the consequences of their actions.”

The man looked back at Scarlett. “But that is not what we are here to discuss. I was the one to call you here today, Baroness, so I will not waste any of your time. Let us proceed immediately to the matter at hand.”

She gave him a short nod to signal him to continue. She was hoping this was good news.

“As I mentioned when we last spoke, Baroness, the reclamation and restitution of relics and sacred artifacts fall under the purview of the Ecclesiastical Congregation of Sacraments. I have no say to oppose their authority in that, even concerning matters within my diocese. That is why I could not immediately give a response to your request to inspect the Sunfire Shrine last time, even if I wanted to.”

“Of course. That is more than understandable,” Scarlett said. “I am aware that the Followers of Ittar carry many responsibilities in the empire, and a clear delineation of jurisdictions is necessary to maintain order within your ranks.”

The high priest smiled. “I am glad you see it that way.” He cleared his throat. “Anyhow, taking into account your request, I communicated what you told me to the Congregation and used my position as a high priest to promptly entreat the Quorum to make a decision on the matter. Normally, such a request would never even be considered, but in light of your feat during the Providing Ceremony and what I have later been told are numerous recent experiences and accomplishments in discovering other artifacts and notable locations, the Quorum agreed to discuss it after certain deacons expressed interest.”

Scarlett raised an eyebrow. She knew the Followers had been keeping an eye on her, but she wasn’t certain to what extent. They seemed to be aware that she had been exploring a lot of ruins and the like lately, at least. She wondered which members of the Quorum had spoken up on her behalf, though. She could guess one of them.

“They reached a decision yesterday,” the high priest continued. “In it, it was agreed upon that you would be allowed to investigate the shrine, under the premise that no unnecessary damage be done to the shrine or its surroundings and that any relics or artifacts found will be handed over to the Ecclesiastical Congregation of Sacraments.”

“I would expect no less. My primary interest lies in learning about the history of that shrine and discerning Deacon Emberwood’s motivations behind building it.”

She did need at least one item from there to complete Arlene’s request, but it wasn’t something the Followers themselves would have any use for at first glance. She could probably convince them to part with it if she offered enough in return.

“I believe I might have already said this, but your devotion and passion are indeed admirable, Baroness,” the high priest said. “However, there was one more condition before you could be allowed entry into the shrine.”

“And what is that?”

“We want members of the clergy to accompany you on this undertaking.”

Scarlett nodded at that. She hadn't expected anything less.

While the Followers of Ittar *was* a religious organization, they themselves never acted on faith when it came to worldly matters, especially not when the Quorum was involved in the decision. She had anticipated them to send their own people with her from the beginning. If they hadn't, she could have taken much more of the loot inside the shrine for herself.

“Of course, we understand that having inexperienced individuals accompanying you might burden you in your efforts, as could bringing too many people, so the Congregation promised to send only one of their members who they said would be more than enough to offer you the support needed.”

Only one person?

She supposed that was actually better for her than having a bunch of priests watching her every move. While he said ‘support’, their main purpose would undoubtedly be to supervise her.

“He traveled with haste here to Bridgespell after the decision was made and arrived this morning. I sent for him as soon as I heard you had arrived, so he should be here any moment now.”

Scarlett was curious who this person was. The Followers of Ittar had a few notable names among their numbers who could go head-to-head with even some of the Cabal's members. This person probably wouldn't be anyone she was familiar with, though. While she had *heard* of the Ecclesiastical Congregation of Sacraments in the game, she wasn't sure who their members were.

“I believe his name was Ray Abraham,” the high priest said.

She paused, staring at him for a moment. “Did you say Ray—?”

“Did someone call my name?” a colorful voice rang out from behind as she heard the door open.

Scarlett turned her head to see a blond man with hair flowing down over his shoulders, dressed in an immaculate set of white robes with blue-red lining, cross the room. His teeth showed a brilliant smile as he met her gaze. “If it isn't Baroness Hartford, my dear old acquaintance! When I first heard about this little assignment, I wondered if I hadn't misheard your name, for there to be such a stroke of fate. I'm glad to see I wasn't mistaken. A delight, as always, to see you.”

Scarlett fixed her eyes on the man.

Raimond Abram was exactly as she remembered him.

“No flowery compliments for me, then?” Rosa asked beside her, having turned around in her chair to lean an arm against the arm seat. “I'm hurt.”

The man's smile widened as he looked at the bard. "Why, there most certainly is, Miss Hale. Long have the days been since I last saw you, and though it was but a brief meeting, I can still recall the delightful conversation we had at the time like it was yesterday. I am surely blessed by Ittar to have the chance to meet both of you fair women again today."

"You are already familiar with each other?" The high priest sounded slightly surprised from where the man sat behind his desk.

Scarlett's eyes stayed on Raimond for a moment longer before she turned back to the high priest. "We are, yes. We share a close acquaintance and have met on a few occasions before. I was not, however, aware that Father Abraham was a member of the Ecclesiastical Congregation of Sacraments."

While Raimond often traveled around in his guise as 'Ray Abraham', the man *was* still a deacon and part of one of the Followers' highest decision-making organs. She wouldn't have expected him to take on a relatively minor task like this. If anything, he was overqualified.

"You wound me, Baroness," Raimond said, stopping to stand next to a bookshelf in line with the high priest's desk. "Are we still but mere acquaintances? By now, I would hope that we have developed a certain rapport between us, no? Perhaps even a budding friendship, if you will?"

"Ah, I'm afraid she doesn't do friendships," Rosa cut in. "At best, she allows you to stand around her now and then while she offers you the occasional scowl. I like to think it's her way of showing affection."

Raimond chuckled. "Well, I suppose I could live with that as well. There is a certain allure behind having a woman such as the Baroness glowering at you."

Scarlett glanced between the two of them. "...Good to see that both of you are bonding, at least."

The high priest cleared his throat. "Ahem, this might make matters even easier. Reverend Abraham here has been granted the authority by the Congregation to investigate the Sunfire Shrine alongside you, Baroness. Reverend Stanway, the Shrine Custodian, will assist you with any requests you might have when you arrive. You can leave whenever it suits you."

"I am grateful for your help and cooperation in this, Your Excellency, and for granting me this opportunity," Scarlett said.

The man simply smiled. "During my time in this seat, this is the first chance we have had to discover more about the history related to the original deacons from the Renaissance and founding of the empire, and to possibly retrieve priceless relics. I am quite excited at the prospect myself, and with Reverend Abraham's assistance, I am confident everything will go smoothly. I wish you all the best. May Ittar's light guide your way."

"May it indeed," Raimond agreed with a nod.

Scarlett glanced at the man. She wondered how this was going to go.