

160: Future talks

Scarlett eyed Godwin for a few seconds before speaking. “I hope you will excuse the sudden interruption. Mistress’ appearance was not within my expectations.”

The archwizard smirked subtly. “I could tell as much.” He glanced at Empress, who was still sitting on the table, calmly observing them while grooming herself, and then at the spot where Mistress had disappeared moments before. “Before coming here, I did not expect for you to have so many...interesting associates.”

Scarlett sighed. “To be frank, neither did I.” This entire day had been a bit more chaotic than she could have thought. “Can I trust you to keep what you have heard here today strictly between us?”

Godwin nodded sincerely. “I am a man of my word, and I intend to keep it that way.” He gestured towards Empress as he continued, “Besides, I suspect it is in my own best interest to do so.”

The cat briefly met his gaze before returning to licking her paw.

Godwin’s attention returned to Scarlett, a new intensity behind it. “However, my promise relates specifically to what I just heard. It does not extend to the matters I originally came here to discuss. I hope you understand.”

Scarlett met his eyes before eventually nodding in return.

“Noted,” she said, careful not to sound too guarded. She wasn’t confident she could extract another oath from him, so she would simply have to rely on what she had and whatever else she could get from here on. It was also important to remain cautious about his lie-detecting artifact. “Let us proceed then.”

“Since I will not be divulging your secrets, I will take the liberty to be more open about my thoughts. I am curious about your conversation with ‘Mistress’ just now,” the man said. “Although I am far from an expert on demonology or matters related to the Viles, I *have* heard of incarnates before. Based on your earlier words, it would appear you have one somewhere within your household.”

An incarnate was to the Viles what an avatar was to the gods, though in some ways it was also the opposite.

The Countess was an example of an avatar, serving as a mortal vessel for Adtia—the forgotten goddess of the night and lady of the moon—to channel her power into the Material Realm and directly influence it. Some avatars were unaware of their true nature, like the Countess, but it was usually pretty obvious to those who knew what they were looking for. As far as Scarlett knew, the connection between an avatar and their deity wasn’t supposed to be harmful, although the same couldn’t always be said for roles such as augurs.

Incarnates, on the other hand, weren’t vessels that the Viles could channel their power *through*, but rather receptacles *for* their power. A fully realized incarnate was more akin to an

empty doll for the Viles to use. It was the most direct and easiest way for them to influence the Material Realm, which was why all of them would show interest whenever a potential incarnate appeared. That was also why, to the rest of the world, someone like Rosa was just a walking time bomb unless handled correctly.

“That is indeed true,” Scarlett eventually responded. “However, this matter does not directly concern you, Dean. I would prefer if you did not involve yourself with it.”

Godwin raised an eyebrow. “It appears both you and this incarnate companion of yours are at risk of being targeted by those beings that call the Blazes their home,” he said. “While I have heard rumors of Mistress and her abilities, I am uncertain to the extent to which they are true and how much she can help you. Should things go awry, though, it seems to me as if this has the potential to trigger another Desolation Calamity. It is said it was also caused by the birth of an incarnate in the Material Realm. That is something deserving of my attention, don’t you agree?”

Scarlett gave him a measured look. “The Viles will not lay their hands on this incarnate. I will ensure that the situation remains under control.” If Mistress could keep any demons off their trail for a while, that should be possible. Godwin would hopefully be able to tell the veracity of her statement.

The man studied her for a moment. “You certainly appear confident in the accuracy of your word, at least.” He fell silent, and the atmosphere seemed to grow heavier around him. “But in a situation like this, the most prudent solution would be to ensure that the Viles simply cannot reach the incarnate to begin with.”

Scarlett froze, her blood rushing as anger flared up inside. She narrowed her eyes at him. “It does not matter who you are,” she pressed out, her voice dripping with cold fury. “I will not allow you or anyone else to harm my people.”

Godwin met her intense look with a cool expression.

“Is that so?” he asked, observing her. Then, finally, he nodded slowly, a glimmer of approval flickering in his eyes. “Very well,” he said, voice steady. “That is as acceptable an answer as any, considering the circumstances. Your loyalty and drive to protect those under you is commendable, at the very least, and I respect that much. It seems as if I may have misjudged your personality somewhat before today, but it is good to gain a better understanding of your motivations.”

Scarlett’s tension eased slightly, and some of the anger dissipated as she realized the man might not have entirely meant his words.

“I will not interfere with your current matters concerning this incarnate companion of yours,” the man continued. “However, I will investigate further into the matter when the opportunity arises. I hope you will not resent my intervention if I judge that the situation has devolved too far.”

She pressed her lips together, then begrudgingly nodded her head. There wasn’t much more she could ask for. He was already showing her a lot of respect by leaving it at that for now.

Godwin cleared his throat. “Well, now that that’s settled, perhaps we should return to what I originally intended to discuss before we were graced with the presence of our unexpected guests?” The silver-grey-haired man leaned forward slightly, a classy smile appearing on his face. “I recall that when we last spoke, you agreed to enlighten me further about this ‘future sight’ of yours.”

Scarlett took a deep breath, composing herself after the sudden burst of emotion she’d experienced moments ago, and preparing herself for what was coming. She had anticipated this for the last few days.

In front of her, Godwin reached into the depths of his black cape and produced two items that he held out. One was a small, intricately crafted amulet made of shimmering silver that seemed to possess an ethereal quality when caught in the light, almost as if the metal was alive. The other was a polished obsidian mirror framed with gold runes.

Scarlett frowned, and noticing that, the man spoke. “This first item is an ancient Zuverian artifact that I once *borrowed* from the Hallowed Cabal after a run-in with them in the past. Its exact purpose and function have always eluded me, but it is somehow linked to the defiance of fate that I have observed in some of their members. It played a role in my own development of perceiving this phenomenon.”

He gestured toward the second item. “And *this* is a tool that I created myself over the past two days with the assistance of an acquaintance of mine. It combines certain divination and analytical enchantments to determine likelihoods and probabilities. It is the closest approximation I could create within such a limited timeframe to replicate what you claim to possess, though even with more time I hesitate to say I could create something much better.”

As Scarlett inspected the items, the first one prompted a description from the system to manifest.

[Whispering Amulet of Thainnith (Unique)]

{An ancient power resonates within, whispering words of a realm untouched and sealed. When that which covered trembles, these whispers relate its stirring with watchful eyes}

She stared at the text.

This was connected to the Seals of Thainnith.

It was a good thing that Mistress had already left.

“Do you perhaps recognize what this is?” Godwin asked, drawing her attention back to the old man. He regarded her with a curious expression.

She hadn’t thought she showed any reaction on her face, but now that he’d asked, she had no choice but to respond truthfully. “I do recognize it, to a certain extent. At the very least, I have an idea of what it is.”

A deeper interest seemed to spark within the man’s eyes. “And what might that be?”

Scarlett glanced at the item description. “Since you seem familiar with the Hallowed Cabal, I presume you are aware of what it is they want?”

He nodded. “I am more familiar with their doctrines than most.”

“In that case,” she said, “are you acquainted with the name Thainnith?”

Godwin paused, a flicker of surprise crossing his face. “Thainnith... I believe that was the name of one of the legendary divinarchs the ancient Zuver were said to have among their numbers,” he mused.

During the time of the Zuverian civilization, powerful magic casters had been far more prevalent than they are today, and magic had supposedly permeated their society to a much greater degree than among today’s civilizations. But even the Zuver had limitations they couldn’t surpass, even among their most formidable mages. The diviniarches, however, transcended those limitations. They were a group of half-deity Zuver who held partial rule among their people, and they could even rival actual gods in some aspects. The last of the diviniarches died during the Severance, the ‘cataclysm’ that left almost all of Zuverian civilization in ruins, and Thainnith was one of them.

“In that case, do you know of the Seal of Thainnith?” Scarlett asked.

Godwin considered her for a moment, as if contemplating the reason behind her question. “I have heard mention of the Seal of Thainnith in legends and ancient records, but information on the matter is scarce. From what I have gathered, it was supposedly a seal created sometime during the Severance to bind something of great power. I am also aware that the Cabal has some connection to whatever was sealed away.”

Scarlett nodded in confirmation, pointing towards the amulet in his hand. “I believe that artifact’s purpose is to observe that seal.”

At least if she interpreted the item description correctly. It could also be an artifact that was supposed to communicate with what was inside the seal, but she didn’t feel like that fit.

Before her, the archwizard blinked, lowering his gaze to examine the amulet more closely. “Truly?” he murmured, glancing up at her again as if trying to gauge the authenticity of her words. He then returned his attention to the artifact.

Scarlett, too, took another moment to study it. If this item was indeed connected to the ‘defiance of fate’ that Godwin mentioned, then maybe what was imprisoned by the Seal of Thainnith was the source of that ‘defiance’? The fact that the wizard observed a similar phenomenon among some of the Cabal’s members might be because of their connection to that.

She had thought that she knew everything there was to know about the seal before, but even she had been puzzled when she originally encountered the first piece, and the system referred to the sealed entity as ‘that which cowered’. Perhaps that was the first sign of a discrepancy between the seal in this version and what she knew from the game.

“This is certainly intriguing,” Godwin commented. He looked up at her. “What makes you believe this is the purpose of the artifact?”

“It is through the same means that I have been granted glimpses of the future. However, it is not entirely predictable or accurate, and I often find myself surprised by its workings. I was not aware of the existence of this artifact before today, for example, but now that I have seen it, I have a notion of what it does.”

Godwin furrowed his brow in thought. “And how does it manifest for you?” he asked. “Do you experience vision, or does the information appear to you in some other way? Does it feel as if it is channeled into your mind?”

“It is difficult to explain,” she admitted. “One could say that it simply...pops up before me when I need it. It is as if the knowledge has been waiting for me to discover and access it, but the information itself rests within the item and not myself.”

“*Pops up*, you say?” A chuckle left the man as he repeated the words, stroking his beard deliberately. Eventually, he refocused his attention on her. “My apologies. It seems we have veered off course once again. To steer us back to the matter at hand, I intended to inquire whether I could use these to examine you?”

He extended the two items toward her.

Scarlett eyed both items warily. She wasn't entirely comfortable accepting that request. She had no idea if the system was detectable by the magic of this world, and if it was, how it might appear. But she would prefer not to find out.

Not to mention that it was technically a lie that she could see the future. She had managed to convince Godwin of it by being careful with her words, but if he examined her, who's to say he couldn't see through her deception?

Unfortunately, she wasn't in a situation where she could outright refuse his request either. She was being agreeable with Godwin because she *wanted* his goodwill. She wanted to maintain a cooperative relationship with him and prevent him from having a reason to do anything that screwed her over.

Reluctantly, she nodded. “You have my permission.”

She hoped that whatever the system actually was, it wouldn't cause problems for her here. Maybe she could even learn something new.

Both of the items floated out of Godwin's hands as if guided by an unseen force, gliding through the air until they stopped beside Scarlett. There, they began rotating around her head. The air itself seemed to shimmer, and a series of intricate runes materialized as the wizard performed his magic, emitting a soft glow that bathed the room in a strange light. Godwin produced an array of white crystals from his cape, adding them to the dance of objects swirling around Scarlett.

Godwin's expression grew focused as he proceeded with whatever spell this was, and Scarlett could only sit in silence, waiting for the outcome. As the minutes ticked by, she occasionally

stole glances at Empress, who had blended in seamlessly with the surroundings for a while and was now observing them with keen curiosity.

Eventually, after ten or so minutes, the magic subsided. The runes dissipated, and the crystals and artifacts returned to Godwin as he concluded his spell. He remained quiet for a short while, holding both artifacts in his gloved hands as he examined the crystals hovering before his eyes, seemingly processing whatever information he had gleaned. Finally, he looked back at Scarlett.

“Did you gain any insights?” she asked, careful not to betray any worry.

“That is a difficult question to answer,” he replied, still appearing somewhat lost in thought. “At the very least, I can say that the source of your ‘fate defiance’ appears different from that of this amulet.” He raised the [Whispering Amulet of Thainnith] into the air. “However, I couldn’t discern the exact nature of this distinction. Perhaps one might say that this artifact, along with those of the Cabal exhibiting the same trait, moves against the current of fate and opposes it, whereas your defiance seems to cause the movement of fate to shift *around* you instead...” His forehead creased. “Or maybe it is the exact opposite of that. What I could grasp of what I saw is rudimentary at best, so I am afraid there is much guesswork involved in my interpretation. What I *can* say is that it is a truly fascinating phenomenon.”

Scarlett pondered his words. They seemed to align with her perspective of having first known this as a game and now living in a game-like world where certain things moved in a predetermined manner.

Godwin continued. “The results pertaining to this ‘future sight’ of yours were equally perplexing. Throughout my life, I have had the privilege of meeting two generations of Augurs, as well as numerous individuals from other continents who possess some ability to divine the future. In those cases where I was permitted to examine their abilities, all of them exhibited clear signs of being connected to the workings of fate in a manner visible to even someone like me.

“This connection is particularly noticeable in those who gained their abilities from deities or powerful beings channeling the tellings of fate to them. However, even the most formidable shamanistic diviners that I have encountered—whose exact methods I was not privy to but far surpass our relatively rudimentary understanding of divination magic here in the empire—display similar traits. Yet you, baroness, show no signs of such a connection. Instead, I detected something else. It was not a link to fate as a whole, but rather something more defined. An ineffable existence of some kind.”

A pensive expression had settled on the man’s face as he seemed to consider exactly what that might imply. “I cannot determine precisely what it was—I cannot do anything other than posit mere hunches—but I intuitively want to liken it to *condensed* fate. The existence shared certain aspects with fate as I know it, although I could not even begin to comprehend its true significance. It could be something akin to fate in a bottle, a predestined path separate from the fate of this world, or perhaps a collection of all the fates you have already altered through your actions while aware of fate yourself. Though it is rather infuriating to admit, I truly do not know.”

Scarlett stayed silent, mulling over his statements. It was reassuring that he couldn't tell too much, at least, particularly concerning the system. Yet his description left her somewhat confused as to what he might be referring to exactly. Was it merely how the system appeared to his spell, or was it actually something different? Similar to what he'd said, could it somehow be related to the fate of this world that she was familiar with from the game?

Godwin sighed. "I will have to dedicate further time to analyze this. There is much to unravel, and I believe the data from this experiment may prove valuable in the future." With a flick of his hand, the crystals before him moved into his cape and disappeared. He stowed away the two artifacts as well.

"So, does this mean your examination is complete?" Scarlett asked.

The man looked at her. "For now, yes. I have gleaned as much as I can from this session, but as mentioned, there is still much to comprehend. Rest assured, I will delve deeper into this matter and share any further insights I uncover, as is only appropriate." Before Scarlett could reply, the man continued. "With that said, I am still rather curious about the contents of your visions."

She paused, considering him for a moment. "Are you asking me to divulge everything I have seen?"

Godwin raised his hands while shaking his head, sporting a small smile. "No, no, I am not quite that greedy. However, one cannot fault an old man for wondering if there is something relevant or useful to him." He wiggled an eyebrow.

Scarlett studied him as she took a short while to mull it over.

She had already proven to be an individual who could be of use to the man. She possessed valuable resources he might desire, such as the dragon corpse and items from Abelard's mansion, as well as knowledge of the future. Not to mention that she *was* still a baroness, with no clear crimes that she had committed for which he had evidence.

Previously, she had refrained from pushing back too much against Godwin because she felt she lacked the leverage to safely negotiate with such a powerful figure. But now she had established herself. She could afford to be more assertive.

"I must stress once again that the knowledge I possess is often unreliable and incomplete," she said. "What it centers around is largely out of my control. This is especially true when it concerns matters involving the Cabal, for obvious reasons. There is not much that I *can* share with you. Not that would be genuinely useful to you and that I am willing to disclose, at the very least."

She locked eyes with the wizard. "I also want to emphasize the sensitivity of some of this information. While I have been accommodating thus far, that is solely because I value maintaining a positive relationship between us. However, it should be clear that you are *not* entitled to more than what I have already offered."

Empress let out a short meow, sounding almost amused by that.

Godwin observed Scarlett for several seconds. “No, I suppose I am not,” he eventually replied.

“...That being said,” she continued, taking another moment to choose her words. “There is one piece of information that I believe might be relevant for you to know. It is related to a particular set of Zuverian ruins known as Beld Thylelion.”

She saw a hint of recognition in the archwizard’s eyes.

“Based on what I have seen, Beld Thylelion is likely to open in the near future,” she said. “And it will contain something coveted by both the Cabal and several other factions. The competition to obtain it will be fierce. Adalicia Mendenhall’s research into the Tabernacle on the Rising Isle will be crucial for the mage towers to locate the ruin as quickly as possible so that you can make the proper preparations. If you do not wish to give up the prizes inside to other groups, I suggest you focus on that.”

Scarlett didn’t actually want anyone to reach Beld Thylelion before her, but if someone *did*, it would be best if it wasn’t the Cabal. By sharing this information with Godwin, she could steer him in the right direction while maintaining the appearance of assisting him more than she actually was. It would also better prepare the Cabal’s opponents without her direct involvement. And even with this hint, Beld Thylelion wouldn’t open until it was time. By that point, where the mage towers could enter it, she planned to have already plundered it long before.

Godwin seemed to consider what she’d told him. “I have heard mentions of Beld Thylelion, although its exact meaning appears mostly lost to history,” he said. “I do know that it is said to house what legends refer to as the ‘Tribute of Dominion’. In my experience, such legends do not arise without reason, so I must thank you for sharing this. Is there anything else you are willing to share with me?”

“This is already plenty,” she replied. “What lies within those ruins is worth far more than anything else I could offer you.”

That *was* actually true, if you considered the fact that the Tribute of Dominion was irreplaceable and one of the key elements in the game’s storyline. While the Cabal needed the pieces of the Seal of Thainnith to release what was imprisoned in it and initiate their true plans, the Tribute of Dominion was akin to the interface and power source necessary to execute those plans in reality.

A low chuckle escaped Godwin. “Well, Baroness, you certainly possess some confidence. But very well. I won’t press the matter further for today. For now, perhaps we can discuss something of a more casual nature? For example, the ownership of some of those artifacts you retrieved from Abelard’s mansion.”

Scarlett looked at the man for a short while, then gave a low nod. *Finally* something she could talk about without having to worry that a slip of the tongue would set loose an archmage on her tail.