

270: Unexpected concerns

The Fire Emberling materialised between Scarlett and Mistress as the [Firefox Charm] activated. The fiery fox's luminous eyes aimed up at Scarlett, devoid of curiosity.

Mistress regarded the fox with a mixture of amusement and hunger, strangely enough. "My, my. Have you brought me a treat? It's been an age since I've sampled an Etherialias, and I must admit, I am feeling rather famished." Her masked visage turned to the [Sacred Flame] cradled in Scarlett's hand. Though her eyes were hidden, Scarlett sensed the woman's eyebrows rising in surprise. "And now *that*, that's a rare sight indeed. A primordial elemental essence. In what godforsaken realm did you unearth such a treasure?"

"The Emberling is not here to sate your appetite," Scarlett said, her voice firm. "As for this flame, it was quite the opposite. I discovered it in an ancient temple dedicated to the fire goddess after completing her trial."

Mistress clicked her tongue, a sound tinged with both envy and annoyance. "Typical. Those self-important gods always hoard the good stuff for themselves." She knelt, extending a hand towards the Emberling. A tiny flame appeared to dance above her palm, and the fox immediately turned away from Scarlett to hop towards it like a moth to a flame. Mistress casually stroked its fiery fur as if petting a common house cat. "What have you been feeding this little marvel? It's practically bursting with essence."

Scarlett watched on. She couldn't see any visible changes in the Emberling since its absorption of the elementals, but she was acutely aware of the vast gulf between her magical abilities and Mistress' expertise.

"It has taken in the essence of a lava hydra," Scarlett explained, crossing her arms. "And I have no intention of hunting down another simply to appease your appetite, so I would advise caution with those wandering hands of yours."

A sly smile curled on the woman's lips as she withdrew her hands, extinguishing her flame. The Emberling, suddenly bereft of a fire to focus on, stood aimlessly where it was.

"Such a pity," Mistress lamented. "All that delectable essence, and not a morsel for me." Her gaze sharpened as she stood and focused on Scarlett. "So, what brings you to seek old Mistress' arcane expertise, hmm?"

Scarlett met her gaze unflinchingly, staring into the scarlet ruby eyes of the woman's mask. "I want you to perform the Rite of the Primal Harmonisation."

Mistress went still, her body tensing as if struck. For several heartbeats, silence reigned in the underground chamber. Then, a shrill laugh erupted from her, echoing off the stone walls and sending a slight chill down Scarlett's spine. As the woman's laughter subsided, Mistress' demeanour shifted, her posture becoming almost predatory.

"Now that," she said, her voice low and dangerous, "is most intriguing. I can hazard a guess as to how you learned my identity and acquired those other tantalising tidbits of knowledge nestled in that pretty head of yours. But this...this leaves me truly perplexed." Her voice took

on a razor's edge. "Those meddlesome gods wouldn't waste their breath on such *esoteric* details, nor would they afford to, and you certainly didn't glean this from any of your Zuverian ruins."

The atmosphere in the chamber grew heavy, charged with an unseen energy that made the hairs on Scarlett's neck stand on end.

"Do enlighten me, Baroness," Mistress continued, her gaze boring into Scarlett. "Where did you hear of the Rite?"

Scarlett maintained her composure, arms still folded across her chest. "The threats are hardly necessary, Mistress," she said coolly.

"I beg to differ."

She remained silent for a moment, weighing her answer. It seemed like the woman was close to making assumptions, and they weren't ones that benefitted Scarlett. She wasn't exactly looking for a fight here, so it'd be best to de-escalate this before it went any further.

Releasing a light sigh, she responded. "If you must know, I learned of the Rite in the Veiled Library."

"The Veiled Library contains no entries on the Rite," Mistress stated flatly.

"And how can you be so certain of that?"

"I simply am."

The two of them regarded each other, the tension growing. Scarlett wondered if Mistress had any inkling about Thainnith's legacy, hidden away in the forbidden section. She doubted it. The question was how she might react upon learning about it.

"I did not say that I read it in the Veiled Library," Scarlett finally said. "Only that I learned it there."

With a small gesture, she dismissed the [Sacred Flame] from her hand. In its place, the [Orrery of Dissonant Convergence] materialised, its weight substantial and cool against her palm.

Mistress' attention immediately locked onto the strange metallic bracelet. For several seconds, she remained silent, her masked gaze fixed on the artifact. Scarlett studied both the woman and the Orrery's reaction with keen interest.

She had deliberately kept the artifact concealed during the night's proceedings, uncertain whether Mistress or someone else of her caliber might recognise it and react unpredictably. Now, however, she needed to convince the woman. It was clear that Mistress had no trouble discerning the Orrery's presence, suggesting her existence already diverged significantly from fate. The Orrery's short pointer, wobbling around a sixth of the face's circumference, seemed to confirm this.

This was the most intense reaction Scarlett had witnessed from the artifact, save for her own. She had to admit, it surprised her. While she had altered some of Mistress' destined events by working with her, the woman had largely acted in line with Scarlett's expectations in this world. According to the Orrery, though, there might be more to Mistress than she had initially believed.

"Who crafted that?" Mistress finally asked, the earlier threatening atmosphere mostly dissipated. Her ruby gaze returned to Scarlett's face, then she raised a hand, as if to stop herself. "No, don't answer that. I'd recognize a divinarch's handiwork from leagues away. Tell me instead what it is."

Scarlett arched an eyebrow. "You do not know?"

"I may appear to be an all-knowing, self-sufficient savant," Mistress said, her tone tinged with dry humor, "but even I have limits to my knowledge. You could count the number of mages in existence capable of discerning the purpose of Thainnith's creations at a glance on two fingers, and one of those was the man himself. I'm not so blustering as to believe any of my names is the other."

Scarlett considered her words before dismissing the Orrery once more. "It is a device for measuring the divergence of fate. Thainnith created it to discern the influence of the Anomalous One."

"Is that so?" A thoughtful expression seemed to flicker across Mistress' masked features.

"I will not be handing it over, if that is what you are considering," Scarlett said.

The woman waved her hand dismissively. "Oh, petal, it's adorable that you think you'd have any choice in the matter if I truly desired it." Her contemplative gaze stayed on Scarlett, and several seconds passed as she seemed to reassess her. "I believe I am starting to piece things together now, but humor me — where did you find that fascinating trinket?"

"In the Astral Sanctum," Scarlett answered.

"Truly? How curious... And I presume you brought it to the Veiled Library afterward?"

"I did, yes."

"And there, did you encounter Thainnith himself?"

Scarlett's eyes widened slightly. "...I did. A fragment of him, to be precise. But how did you know that?"

She'd been interested in inquiring about it with Mistress if possible, which was also part of why she revealed the Orrery, but she hadn't expected the woman to deduce so much on her own. If that was indeed what she'd done.

"Let's call it Auntie Mistress' special intuition." An enigmatic smile played at the corner of the woman's mouth.

Suddenly, she stepped closer to Scarlett, her white marble mask stopping just a hand's width from her face. The ruby eyes of her mask seemed to peer deep into Scarlett's own.

"That cruel man," Mistress declared after a moment, an oddly amused lilt to her voice. "And people call me heartless. They're right, of course, but that's hardly comparable."

Scarlett retreated a step, a scowl forming on her brow. "What do you mean by that?" she asked.

"Am I wrong in assuming that pretty head of yours now carries more than it did during our last encounter?" Mistress replied, tapping her own temple. "That it's been indelibly stuffed with knowledge of a rather...*dated* variety?"

"...So you are already aware of Thainnith's legacy, then," Scarlett said carefully.

Mistress tilted her head slightly. "His legacy? I'd hardly call whatever he may have left you a legacy, but I suppose it's more useful than a chocolate teapot. I'm more surprised that he bothered leaving anything behind for us mere mortals and mortal-adjacents."

"It is what taught me of the existence of the Rite of the Primal Harmonisation."

"I'm sure it did, as well as a wealth of other delectable crumbs of knowledge. Such a repository would be a treasure trove of cosmic proportions to any scholar or mage alive today." She paused, studying Scarlett intently for a few beats. "If it didn't leave their brains a quivering mass of cerebral jelly, of course."

Scarlett stared at her. "What do you mean?"

"What truly astounds me is how you're still standing, frankly," Mistress continued, her tone a mix of curiosity and something darker. "Humans are ever-so-fragile, and their minds even more so. Little more than walking sacks of meat waiting to decay and topple over, really. I've yet to meet any that don't crumble after a few casual pods at their intellectual goo grotto, much less could survive having an entire library of knowledge crammed in there, regardless of its size. How many do you think survive the whispers of Zenthias' dreams, hmm?"

A trace of unease wormed its way into Scarlett's heart. "...What are you saying?"

"Hmm? Haven't I made it clear enough already?" Mistress asked. "Well, alright. I'll spell it out more clearly, just this once. You, Baroness, should be dead. Pushing up daisies. Deader than last week's catch. Wearing the silver shroud."

"...Because of the legacy?" Scarlett asked.

"No, because of the price of tea in Baajirr."

Scarlett studied the lifeless mask on Mistress' face, searching for any hint of deception. The woman seemed utterly serious, but Scarlett found it hard to believe. When Thainnith's fragment had infused her with this legacy, he hadn't mentioned any danger, and he would have had no reason to lie. He must have known that Scarlett could handle it, right?

She *was* more inclined to trust the knowledge of the greatest mage to have ever lived over almost anything else, even if it came from Mistress.

That said, Mistress wouldn't say this without reason. Scarlett wasn't an expert on magic of the mind or whatever method had been used to create the legacy, nor did the legacy itself contain much legible information on the process. She couldn't confirm whether the woman's claim about forcing information into people's minds was as risky as she implied. The closest equivalent she knew were Augurs, who received visions directly from the gods, and the victims of The Angler Man's mental attacks.

Now that she thought about it, both *were* clear examples of something that infamously had drastic effects on a person's sanity.

"I do wonder what's so special about you," Mistress mused, her voice cutting through Scarlett's thoughts. "Tell me, have you experienced any peculiar symptoms since 'acquiring' that legacy of yours? Strange headaches? Nosebleed? Sudden urges to recite the entire history of the Luicean Isles while juggling flaming kittens?"

Scarlett frowned, her brow furrowing. "...Headaches are more common, yes." She already knew that was a side-effect of overusing the legacy, but from what she'd been able to tell, it wasn't dangerous. "Do you believe the legacy poses a danger to me?" she asked Mistress.

The woman shrugged lightly, her golden robes shimmering in the dim light. "Blazes be feytouched if I know. Like I said, I would have expected you to be dead already. What's keeping you alive is a mystery, and while I do love myself a good enigma, this is one that I think I'll keep my hands off of."

"Why?" Scarlett pressed.

"Oh, there are numerous reasons, first and foremost because I'm not your nursemaid," Mistress replied, her voice now laced with leisure. "I don't have much to gain, and I know when to keep my curiosity in check. And if Thainnith was the one who crammed that thing into your head... Well, let's say that there are few people I've ever bothered doing anything as troublesome as harbor any sort of respect for, but he is one of them."

Scarlett watched the woman intently, unsure what to make of this unexpected information. If anyone could provide answers about the potential risks associated with the legacy—aside from Thainnith himself—it would likely be Mistress. But if she was unwilling to get involved, that complicated things.

There was also the possibility that the woman was simply wrong. Mistress didn't have all the information, after all. Her ignorance of the system and its effects on Scarlett could be the missing link explaining why Scarlett was mostly fine, assuming the legacy was truly as dangerous as Mistress thought. But then again, Thainnith shouldn't have known about that either.

So, what did this mean? Did Scarlett have to worry? Thainnith's legacy had already proven useful to her in various ways, and it held a whole lot more promise in the future. Yet, she was reluctant to risk her life unnecessarily. Not that she knew what she could do about it at this point.

Mistress regarded her for a moment longer before turning and striding to the center of the room. She retrieved the upright staff standing there and rapped its end against the floor three times. A section of the wall at the end of the chamber began to rumble open, and with a snap of her fingers, a trail of tiny flames materialised in the air towards the opening. The listless Emberling immediately bounded after them.

She looked back at Scarlett, her mask gleaming as it caught the flickering light. “I suppose I’ve instilled enough existential dread in you for one day. You were asking me to help you perform the Rite of Primal Harmonisation, weren’t you?” She waved one hand towards the shimmering arch-like construct that she’d conjured out of ethereal lightning earlier. “While that does precious little on its own, I suppose there’s not much else for me to do. Come. Let’s get this over with.”

Scarlett remained silent for a few seconds, then squared her shoulders as she forced herself to shelve her concerns for the moment. If answers weren’t forthcoming, so be it. She’d figure something out. Right now, she still had another goal to pursue.

Her gaze moved past Mistress towards the newly revealed chamber. It was cluttered with an array of imposing stone and metal equipment, looking like a strange kind of forge. Information bubbled up from the legacy, telling her that what she needed for the Rite was indeed here.

She fixed Mistress with a suspicious look. “Am I to take it that you agree to help me with the Rite, then?”

The woman cocked her head. “Is that skepticism I detect in your voice? This is what you are here for, no?”

“True. But I did not expect you to agree so readily.”

In fact, Scarlett had come prepared to bargain.

Mistress released a dismissive chuckle. “Bagh. What’s a few ancient, secret, reality-bending rites between fellow schemers and power-seekers?”

Scarlett narrowed her eyes. “Presumably very expensive.”

“Inordinately so,” the woman confirmed.

“I see. Then name your price.”

Mistress’ inscrutable gaze remained fixed on her, fingers drumming on the core. Eventually, she exhaled softly. “Just this once, there will be no price. I may be a self-serving manipulator, but even I have a modicum of decency. Deep, deep down. While I may not understand Thainnith’s reason for hampering with that ‘legacy’, he would have chosen you for a reason. I’d scarcely call myself an ardent enthusiast of his, but suffice to say that I owe certain...debts to his efforts. Consider this my repayment of those.”

“...That is surprisingly charitable of you, Mistress,” Scarlett said, unable to keep the surprise from her voice.

Mistress let out a long-winded sigh. “Don’t remind me. I’ll be scrubbing the stench of altruism off for weeks.” She feigned a dramatic shudder. “Now, chop chop, little baroness. Time waits for no mage, not even me.”

Scarlett followed the woman into the new chamber, where the Emberling already stood transfixed, its fiery form flickering as it gazed up at a flame dancing before a towering forge of shimmering, pale grey. The structure seemed to breathe, its iridescent metal surface rippling like liquid starlight.

Mistress approached the forge, her staff stopping in the air obediently beside her. With a graceful gesture, she touched a pulsing crystal embedded in the forge’s side. The device roared to life, its depths igniting with dark colors that cast their glow through the chamber.

“If you intend to take up Thainnith’s mantle,” the woman said suddenly, her back still turned, golden robes fluttering with her movements, “you’d do well to choose your allies with utmost care. One never knows when today’s drinking companion could become tomorrow’s assassin.”

Scarlett studied her back intently, weighing her words. “..I believe I do, in fact.”

Mistress paused for a moment, glancing back at Scarlett over her shoulder, then smiled. “Hmm. I suppose you do.” She returned her attention to the forge, raising one hand in a casual gesture. At the end of the chamber, a series of ornate, rune-covered chests sprung open. An array of gleaming ingots — some transparent as diamond, others dark as the void between stars — rose into the air and streamed towards the forge in a coordinated dance.

“Now then,” Mistress purred, a note of excitement creeping into her voice. “Stand back and observe, little baroness. I’m about to remind this world why they call me Mistress.”