

269: Behind the mask

Leaving the gallery, Scarlett wove her way through the bustling crowd as she exited the Emperor's Forum. The weight of numerous gazes pressed upon her, much more noticeable than what she'd enjoyed during the banquet. Not surprising, considering her recent role as a brief centerpiece of attention during the proceedings.

After a while, the throng of people began to disperse around her, with most returning to the banquet hall for the break while others drifted into ornate lounges that dotted the palace's spacious corridors. Palace attendants stood at attention here and there, ready to cater to the guests' whims. Scarlett, however, had other plans at the moment. She veered down a less-traveled hallway, her steps echoing softly as she made her way to the ladies' room.

The restrooms in Dawnlight Palace were a marvel of opulence, their walls adorned with intricate gold filigree and wide mirrors polished to a fine sheen. Individual rooms, presumably fit for royalty and their esteemed guests, offered privacy to those seeking it, but Scarlett didn't linger to admire the decor. She bided her time near the entrance as a couple of other ladies walked past, sending her perplexed glances while conversing under their breaths.

When there were finally no eyes upon her, Scarlett activated her [Charm of Expeditious Change], her attire shifting and a hood appearing to cover her face.

Cautiously, she peered back into the corridor outside, her gaze landing on a servant passage she'd noted earlier. A lone guard stood sentry, his posture rigid and alert.

Using the ability of her [Garments of Form], a swirl of mist enveloped Scarlett, and she materialised inside the passage. Moving slowly and quietly, she moved forward, her senses heightened as she listened for any approaching footsteps. Considering they were further from the banquet hall, though, there would likely be fewer attendants around here.

Her recollection of the palace layout was hazy at best, not to mention mostly based on an outdated game map, but she had a general sense of her bearings. The unadorned servant passages proved more navigable than the main corridors, and she ascended several floors as she searched for her destination.

As long as she avoided the imperial quarters and certain other heavily guarded areas, she should be fine. Worst-case scenario, she could probably manage to explain herself out of any unexpected encounters, but it would be a bother.

After some educated guesswork and careful exploration, Scarlett eventually found herself in a hallway that seemed more familiar than the others. She stayed close to a wall as two servants bustled past, their arms laden with polished silver trays. Once they were out of sight, she continued her search.

Rounding a corner, she spotted a door at the hallway's end, flanked by two palace guards. Scarlett's brow creased in slight surprise.

She hadn't expected it to be guarded. That complicated matters somewhat.

After a moment's deliberation, she decided a direct approach was the best option. Especially considering who she was meeting.

With a thought, her clothes shimmered back into the elegant gown she had been wearing before. She walked down the hallway with purposeful steps, maintaining the air of someone who belonged. The guards' eyes tracked her movement, hands resting lightly on their weapons but making no overtly threatening gestures.

As she reached the door, Scarlett briefly considered trying a polite smile, but quickly abandoned that idea. "Is this room's occupant currently inside?" she asked.

One guard eyed her closely. "No, they're not. Your Ladyship, may I ask what business brings you here?"

"I believe she's here to meet with me," a melodious voice interjected from behind. Scarlett turned to see a woman approaching, her raven hair cascading over a resplendent violet gown that shimmered like dragon scales in the torchlight. An enigmatic smile played on her lips as she strode forward, an elaborate silver staff clasped in one hand.

Scarlett's eyes narrowed. She hadn't even noticed the woman's approach.

"Lady Blackwood!" Both guards snapped to attention.

Evelia Blackwood, the Imperial Advisor, stopped beside Scarlett, the woman's gaze sweeping over her with undisguised mirth. "My, what an intriguing visitor I have this time. To think you'd trouble yourself to come all this way." Her lips widened in amusement. "A simple letter would have sufficed, you know."

With a graceful flick of her wrist, the door before them swung open. Evelia stepped inside, leaving Scarlett to cast a final glance at the guards before following. The door closed behind them with a soft, gentle click.

It was a spacious and elegant office, dominated by a massive desk at one end and flanked by towering bookshelves laden with tomes. A single glass door led to a balcony, offering a broad view of the night sky reflected in the frozen waters of Rellaria Lake.

"I believe this is our first face-to-face meeting," Blackwood remarked casually, her back to Scarlett as she crossed the room. She released her grip on the silver staff, which remained upright on its own. "I'm curious what could have brought Baroness Hartford to my door."

Scarlett's eyes followed the woman as she paused by an ornate cabinet, lifting a delicate porcelain cup to her lips.

"You may dispense with the charade," Scarlett said coolly. "I am not here to speak with Evelia Blackwood."

The woman's head turned, eyebrows rising as she locked gazes with Scarlett for a long moment. Then, a lilting laugh escaped her as she set down her cup. "Alright, have it your way."

A shimmering aura enveloped her form, melting away the illusion to reveal a tall, lithe figure clad in golden yellow robes with stark red lining. The upper half of her face was obscured by a white marble mask, its edges traced with golden inlays and its eye sockets filled with gleaming scarlet rubies. The visible skin beneath was unnaturally pale, practically white, and a knowing smirk played across its features.

“Come here often, hmm?” Mistress almost purred, regarding Scarlett. “It’s been quite some time since we last met, hasn’t it? You’ve certainly been keeping yourself busy. I’ve been following your escapades closely, particularly what happened in Crowcairn. Riveting stuff, that.”

“I am not here for idle chatter, Mistress,” Scarlett replied curtly, striding across the room towards a granite stand in the corner. Atop it sat an object resembling a bronze armillary sphere, its intricate rings gleaming in the dim light.

“I’m sure you aren’t, darling.”

The woman watched with unconcealed interest as Scarlett approached the device. With practiced movements, Scarlett’s fingers touched different spots on the sphere’s poles and rings, and suddenly, it blazed to life. The office around them seemed to blur and twist, colors bleeding together before resolving into a vast, underground stone chamber.

The new space was a veritable wonderland of arcane artifacts and paraphernalia, looking every bit the secret laboratory of a master mage. Scarlett’s eyes moved from one magical contraption to the other, Thainnith’s legacy whispering some of their purposes into her mind.

“Now *that’s* curious,” Mistress remarked, her tone a mixture of amusement and fascination. “Unless I’ve let something slip during some drunken revelry I can’t recall, that device is supposed to be a closely guarded secret. One that fewer than a handful of people would even have any idea exists, let alone activate. And you, Baroness, are most certainly not on that very short list.”

Scarlett turned to face Mistress, her expression unreadable. “Are you truly surprised?”

“I am, actually.” The masked woman studied Scarlett for a long moment, then snapped her fingers. Her silver staff—which hadn’t joined them to this underground chamber—materialised in her hand, its form shifting. The metal darkened to a deep gray, its head transforming into an intricate arrangement of curled bronze, crowned by a small, pulsing azure gem. “And that’s me being honest, as utterly repugnant as the notion may be.”

With graceful steps, Mistress approached the center of the chamber, where a complex array of runes and sigils was carved into the stone floor. She placed her staff at the heart of it, leaving it standing upright as she returned her attention to Scarlett. “So, what’s given me the honor of your seeking me out tonight? I’d ask how you knew of my little alter-ego, but that’s hardly a tenth as surprising as what you did, frankly.”

Scarlett’s gaze drifted to the runic array, studying it briefly. She wasn’t entirely certain, but it seemed like some form of sophisticated arcane infrastructure, perhaps designed to channel and distribute mana throughout the place. The faintly glowing sigils pulsed with an otherworldly rhythm, and the staff practically resonated with energy. She then returned her

attention to the woman, assessing her. “To begin with, there is something I would like to know.”

“I imagine so. And I’m the unfortunate soul who has to enlighten you, I take it?” Mistress asked in a dry tone.

“If you would be so kind.”

“Only if you swear not to breathe a word of it to anyone. I can’t very well have my reputation sullied by people thinking I’m developing a conscience or any such nonsense.”

“You have my word.”

“Then, by all means, proceed.”

“The proposal to establish the magical barrier preventing the Cabal’s teleportation across the empire,” Scarlett began. “Was that your design?”

The visible portion of the woman’s lips curved into a more pronounced smirk. “What makes you think that? Is it simply because I vouched for its effectiveness? I was far from the only mage to do so, even if I was by far the most competent one.”

“That is not my only reason for suspicion,” Scarlett said.

Mistress hadn’t invested years crafting her ‘Imperial Advisor’ persona without good reason. While perhaps not as malevolent and straight-out dangerous as the Hallowed Cabal, Mistress was still pursuing the Seals of Thainnith for her own purposes without consideration from others. Her role as an advisor to the emperor was simply part of achieving that goal.

“Will the magical barrier suggested by Lord Withersworth and the others truly function as they claimed?” Scarlett asked, keeping a neutral tone.

Mistress tilted her head, the rubies in her mask glinting. “Is my word, along with that of several other esteemed mages, not enough to convince you?”

“It is your word that makes me skeptical.”

It would have been easier if Scarlett had heard about this in the game, but she hadn’t. Perhaps if she could examine whatever ‘blueprint’ existed for the proposed barrier’s array, she might confirm at least part of it with the aid of Thainnith’s legacy.

A low chuckle escaped Mistress. “I’ll try not to feel offended by that, but there’s little reason for deception here. Blocking the Cabal and their ‘vaunted’ teleportation trick is, in fact, remarkably straightforward. It always has been, even for the empire’s...” she paused, as if searching for the right word, “shall we say, *less gifted* mages. Dawnlight Palace has long employed such defences. The real challenge lies in applying the same principles on a grander scale, and the Kilnstone affords a rather convenient solution to that.”

“I see... Then suppose that I accept your word.” Scarlett’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Were you the architect of this proposal or not?”

Even if Mistress wasn't outright lying, it was entirely possible she had manipulated Lord Withersworth and the others into presenting the motion during the conclave.

"No," the woman answered casually. "And before you ask, no, I don't know who was. Judging by the array's configuration I was presented, I'd have wagered on our common acquaintance, Warley Godwin, but I find that unlikely."

"Even if you did not set these events into motion, you no doubt must have seen it as an opportunity, no?" Scarlett asked.

A beat of silence followed, Mistress' smile taking on a dangerous edge. "This is why you're my favorite, Baroness. While other troglodytes stumble about in blissful ignorance, you always manage to pierce the veil. But knowledge, darling, can be a double-edged sword. Not to mention awfully inconvenient."

"I will take that as a confirmation," Scarlett replied, maintaining an impassive expression in the face of the unspoken threat.

A palpable tension hung between them for several heartbeats before dissipating as Mistress gave a light shrug and turned away. "Of course. The opportunity practically presented itself on a silver platter, and I've always had a weakness for low-hanging fruit."

The woman strolled over to a large pillar near one of the chamber's walls, where a set of intricate metallic frames was set up. Scarlett recognised those as a Zuverian artifact meant for establishing communication networks, though it seemed to have been altered from what she knew to expect.

"Naturally, the final decision rests with our illustrious emperor," Mistress continued as she started making subtle adjustments to the device, her tone dripping with sarcasm. "That man is perpetually mired in *caution*, as if the sycophants surrounding him weren't protection enough. How much simpler it would be if he'd just follow my every command like a good little sovereign."

"His Majesty is not your personal puppet," Scarlett said sharply.

Mistress paused, turning back with an amused quirk of her lips. "Well, that's a surprise. You're quite the loyal subject, aren't you? Or partially, at least. I'm not quite sure a truly loyal subject would go about summoning Viles and striking deals with the Hallowed Cabal."

Scarlett's features hardened. "...I believe neither of us can speak much of loyalty."

"No, perhaps not." The woman returned her attention to the artifact.

Scarlett observed her for a few moments longer before speaking. "I will not interfere with your plans for the barrier, but you would do well not to compromise with its primary purpose."

She found herself conflicted on the topic. Part of her was tempted to help overturn the proposal, but she also recognised that it could bring about a lot of good. The inability to use

the Kilnstones and the unpredictability it would create would be inconvenient, but it could be a worthwhile trade-off if it allowed the empire a chance to stabilise and recover.

Mistress waved a dismissive hand. “Don’t fret your pretty little head about that. Though I can scarcely fault you for your concern. After all, you stand to gain more from this barrier’s establishment than most.”

Scarlett’s brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“You don’t think those pylons Withersworth droned on about will materialise out of thin air, do you?” Mistress finished whatever adjustment she’d done to the metallic frames, stepping back as arcs of dark, ethereal lightning suddenly started dancing between them, forming a shimmering arch-like construct in front of them. “These pylons will require vast amounts of mana and rare materials to function. Their locations must be chosen with utmost care. In most cities, only the mage towers are even close to qualifying, but Freybrook just so happens to have another perfect site.”

Realisation dawned on Scarlett. “You are referring to my mansion.”

“What else?” Mistress said. “That quaint little Icon-infused detritus of yours is almost tailor-made for this purpose. Using it instead of Brook Tower for the pylon could save the empire tens of millions in solars and magical materials, not to mention manpower. No doubt you’ll be ‘generously encouraged’ to offer your home for the illustrious safety of this *glorious* empire, and you’ll barely have to lift a finger. The countless defences that’ll be used to fortify your estate to safeguard the pylon could be considered an added boon. How fortuitous, wouldn’t you say?”

Scarlett mulled over this information. Would they really try to use her mansion as one of the pylons for the barrier? The prospect was both intriguing *and* concerning. Sure, if she was rewarded for it, that might be a good thing. But what if it limited her freedom or made her a target? What were the benefits and the risks? Did she even have a real choice if it concerned the empire’s safety and that much money?

She’d need to look into that further later on.

Suddenly, Mistress snapped her fingers once more, and the shimmering arch construct expanded, now towering at nearly twice her height. Scarlett’s brow arched in light perplexion. What was the woman up to?

“If you’re interested, I could whisper a word or two in the emperor’s ear to secure you certain...other benefits.” She fixed Scarlett with a calculating look. “Lucky for you, Auntie Mistress has been viewing you in a rather favorable light ever since learning what you did with that squalid excuse for a Vile.” Her mouth curled into an almost predatory grin. “I do wish I could have witnessed it firsthand, but alas, fate is a fickle mistress.”

“Indeed,” Scarlett said, though her eyes were now on the shimmering gateway—if that was what it was—studying it cautiously. “...What is that?” she eventually asked.

Whatever Mistress had done with the device, it clearly wasn’t performing its original purpose.

“You can consider it a wake-up call, if you will,” the woman answered. “Or bait. Nothing to worry about, though you’re certainly welcome to if you’d like. We’ll have to wait and see if something bites.”

“I see...” Scarlett remained silent for a moment, continuing to examine it, before refocusing on Mistress. “As for whispering my name to the emperor, I believe I would prefer if you did not.” She’d rather *not* get involved with Mistress’ other persona more than necessary. “That said, I am surprised that you would even make the offer. It was my understanding that my actions in Crowcairn directly interfered with your plans for Anguish.”

Mistress shook her head. “Hardly. That was, at most, an amusing side project. It would have been entertaining to see her reduced to a gibbering wreck devoid of any Authority, but I’m a pragmatic pessimist at heart. Or what remains of it, I’m sure. I barely expected much to come of it, so this outcome is satisfactory enough.”

“A side project? I do not believe that was the impression Malachi had of your involvement.”

“Should I be held responsible for whatever fanciful notions those around me conjure up? I’m inclined to say no.” The woman cocked her head slightly. “Though I will say that Malachi seemed to disagree at first.”

“You have been in contact with her since then?” Scarlett asked.

She’d heard nothing at all from Malachi or the Blazes in general since Crowcairn, but Mistress did have ways of interacting with both that she didn’t.

“On occasion,” Mistress replied. “It does well to maintain connections with the new ruler of one of the six Blazes, fledgling and quasi-Vile though they may be.”

“I would not have thought Malachi would forgive you.”

“Forgive me? Oh, far from it.” The woman laughed. “It took more than a few tries simply to get her to stop trying to reduce my existence to leftover effluvia at the mere sight of me, but I am nothing if not resilient.”

Scarlett folded her arms. “Resilient, perhaps, but not a dependable ally. How did you convince her?”

“Malachi and I were never allies to begin with,” Mistress said in an indifferent voice. “Occasional collaborators, at best. I gave the woman what she desired, and whatever might have transpired because of this if it weren’t for your involvement wasn’t much of my concern. She’s no fool, so she saw that as well eventually.”

“You are as callous as always.”

“You know me so well. But, that’s beside the point. While I’d love to engage in witty repartee all night, time does happen to be of the essence. So, let’s get to the heart of the matter. I’ve sated your curiosity about the barrier and our dear Vile friend, so what’s the real reason for your visit?”

Scarlett eyed her, then let her arms fall as she activated her [Charm of Expedient Exchange] to bring out her [Pouch of Holding]. From it, she produced the [Firefox Charm] and [Sacred Flame]. “I require your expertise.”