

272: Some slight trespassing

Scarlett approached the armillary sphere, extending her hand towards it. With a purposeful touch, she activated the device. Rather than returning to Mistress' underground chamber, however, she allowed her consciousness to expand through the artifact. Her awareness spread outward from the Imperial Advisor's office, giving her a bird's-eye view of the corridors outside. The mental map continued to grow, encompassing neighboring chambers until Scarlett had a comprehensive view of much of Dawnlight Palace.

The bustling life of the palace unfolded in her mind's eye. Servants scurried through the corridors while Palace Guards stood at attention, their armor glinting in the warm light of various magical lamps and chandeliers. In the banquet hall and adjoining rooms, the nobles and dignitaries mingled, their voices inaudible but likely concerned both with tonight's politics and gossip alike. Scarlett observed the tapestry of activity for a moment, confirming she still had some time before the conclave reconvened. Satisfied, she shifted her focus to another section of the palace.

She knew roughly where to look, and after a brief search, she found something that seemed to match her goal. She performed a quick scan of the area, ensuring it was devoid of both guards and other prying eyes—which it thankfully was—then she activated the armillary sphere once more. In an instant, her surroundings shimmered and transformed.

She found herself in a spacious, dimly lit chamber. Numerous bookshelves lined the walls, their shelves filled to the brim with various works. A large, arched window dominated one wall, offering a breathtaking view of the night sky and the silvery white expanse of the frozen Rellaria Lake. Below the window stood an ornate canopy bed, its frame carved from a dark burnished wood. Plush quilts and silk pillows were piled high atop the mattress to form a tiny mound of luxurious comfort.

As her eyes adjusted to the low light, Scarlett surveyed the room carefully, triple-checking that she was indeed alone. The armillary sphere in Mistress' office was a Zuverian artifact, and courtesy of Thainnith's legacy, Scarlett knew it had more functions than simply connecting the woman's underground chamber to Dawnlight Palace.

For one, it possessed capabilities similar to the spell *Aetheric Repatriate* that Dean Godwin had once used to teleport Scarlett to the Zuverian ruins on the Resting Eye. Unlike Godwin's spell, which required a physical focus to trigger the transport back, Scarlett could feel a connection, a *tether*, still connecting her to the armillary sphere in Mistress' office. That should allow her to return when she was done here.

Having checked her surroundings, Scarlett first turned her attention to the room's many bookshelves. The sheer volume of texts suggested that the chamber's occupant was a voracious reader. It was almost a small library in its own right.

She walked up to the nearest shelf, squinting slightly as she examined the titles in the low lighting. The collection covered a vast array of topics, including military strategy, statecraft, economics, history, and more. From what she could tell, the texts were meticulously organised by subject and author, and Scarlett found several works on the Zuver that had their

own dedicated section. The latter appeared to range from modern imperial treatises to ancient tomes written in the Zuver script.

Scarlett didn't have the time to look through each and every single one, but she made mental notes of certain titles as she searched for anything that seemed to be of particular significance or out of place.

Eventually, her exploration led her to two large desks situated near the entrance. One held mostly writing implements and the like, while the other seemed to be more for study. Scarlett approached the second one, conjuring a small, dancing flame above her palm to give her more light. The desk's surface was covered in neatly arranged documents, open books, and what appeared to be partially translated Zuverian texts.

Scarlett imagined that the imperial family's own investigators had already combed through this room. However, they wouldn't have known exactly what to look for. While Scarlett herself wasn't necessarily sure she did either, her game knowledge did give her an advantage.

These were, after all, the private quarters of the first imperial princess — a place where the young woman would have conducted much of her research prior to her 'disappearance'.

There were still aspects of the first princess' vanishing that troubled Scarlett, questions that couldn't be answered solely by her game knowledge. Chief among these was, of course, the possibility that the princess was collaborating with another player-like entity, one that didn't quite align with the original game narrative. This suspicion had long been one Scarlett considered, but her only real proof was still her discoveries in the Zuverian ruins on the Resting Eye.

Her eyes darted over the material strewn across the desk, then carefully began shuffling through the piles in search of anything unusual. Of the Zuverian works, she recognised a few, and she also noted that several of the books had maps and observations on various regions of the empire that housed Zuverian ruins — both discovered and undiscovered. However, there wasn't anything specific that seemed to indicate the princess' planned destination or immediate intentions.

But that wasn't really what Scarlett was interested in anyway.

She turned her attention to the desk drawers, methodically opening each one and searching their interiors for something—anything—that might offer her more clues about this potential player that the princess might have gotten involved with.

As she slid open a third drawer, her hand froze above its contents.

A slight frown creased her brow.

Inside lay an emerald-green leather-bound book with gilded edges and flowing script, surrounded by stylised illustrations of castles, dragons, and heroes. Was it a compendium of folklore or fairy tales of some kind? It seemed completely at odds with the scholarly tomes and administrative documents that filled the rest of the room.

At first glance, it didn't seem like something of any particular importance.

Curious, Scarlett lifted the book from the drawer, her fingers tracing the embossed cover before carefully opening it to the first page. Then, she turned to the next, and the next after that, and slowly, her eyes widened as she took in the contents.

To the casual observer, the book might seem innocuous. The opening illustration depicted a wistful princess gazing up at a star-filled sky from her castle balcony, rendered in exquisite detail. Subsequent pages unfolded into a series of intricate vignettes, chronicling the princess' journey as she left her sheltered life to embark on a grand adventure. Alongside a small band of compatriots, she battled fearsome monsters and conquered daunting obstacles on what seemed to be a quest to save the world.

On the surface, it really wasn't anything more than a typical fairy tale — a fanciful story of heroism and adventure that could very well be common in this world. But as Scarlett studied the illustrations, a chill ran down her spine.

The cast of characters in them was *disturbingly* familiar.

A majestic white-furred wolf, its form wreathed in swirling wind and crackling energy. An eclectic bard with flowing locks, whose very shadow seemed to hint at hidden depths and terrors. A knightly figure clad in a cerulean cape, wielding a sword of shimmering blue light. A wizened sage with a gangly frame and knowing eyes. A diminutive character shrouded entirely in dark clothes and a concealing hood, showing only a pair of creeping, emerald eyes. And lastly, a nondescript hero whose appearance subtly shifted from scene to scene, valiantly leading the princess and the others through each trial.

Scarlett spent several minutes inspecting those images, uncertain whether to believe her own eyes. The first two characters were suspicious enough, but the rest were unmistakable. Despite their stylised and somewhat ambiguous likenesses, they perfectly matched the companions from the game she knew so well.

The wolf was undoubtedly Fynn, represented in an abstract, yet pointedly accurate way. The bard was Rosa, hinting both at the woman's own tormented past and Anguish's haunting presence. The cerulean-caped knight mirrored a loyal companion players could recruit later in the game, while the wizened 'sage' bore a striking resemblance to another potential ally. If you included the princess character, the book depicted all five of the possible 'good' companions from the game. The remaining two characters matched the descriptions of an extra companion and what was—presumably—the 'hero' and player character themselves.

This couldn't possibly be a coincidence.

The question was, why did the first imperial princess have this book in her room? More importantly, why did it exist at all? Who had created it, and for what purpose? The book seemed almost tailored specifically for the first princess, even going as far as to focus only on the possible 'good' companions. But to what end?

Mind racing with quandaries, Scarlett continued turning the pages, hoping to find some answers without success. None of the illustrations even depicted any specific situations or events that she recognised from the game; rather, they portrayed general scenes reminiscent of a children's picture book. She scoured the cover and every page for any mention of an author or artist, but even that was missing.

Had this book existed in the game as well? She doubted it had, or at the very least, the first princess hadn't possessed or been aware of it. If Scarlett had to guess, whoever had written it either drew inspiration from the 'fate' that guided this world or was intimately familiar with the game setting itself.

She couldn't decide which scenario was more plausible. From what she'd learned, reading and understanding fate was both incredibly rare and seldom precise. It seemed odd that someone with such abilities would go to the effort of creating a story like this based solely on those visions. Then again, the same could be said for anyone familiar with the game.

But even putting aside the book's origins, what did its presence in the first princess' quarters mean? Did this imply that the princess had somehow become aware that there existed a predestined path for this world? And that she herself might play a crucial role in that?

While the picture book alone didn't explicitly identify the princess character as the first princess, why would she possess it if she didn't somehow suspect its significance?

Scarlett didn't know what to make of it. In a way, this *did* make a certain kind of sense, if one could overlook the myriad questions raised by this book's mere existence. In the game, the first princess' motivation for abandoning her royal duties and joining the player's party was many-sided, yes, stemming as much from her stifled life as a dutiful princess as from her realisation that hidden threats were resurfacing that needed to be investigated. Despite this, her decision to leave her role had always seemed slightly odd to Scarlett. The princess was in a position to effect change by leveraging her authority, and she was respected by many in spite of her young age, making her choice to abandon it all seem somewhat impulsive and immature.

In the game, Scarlett had accepted it, even if she'd found it perplexing. The first princess she was familiar with was generally a logical person, even when emotional, but games were games. In this world, Scarlett initially didn't think it would be any different.

But after first hearing about the princess' disappearance, she *had* entertained the possibility that other factors were at play, even though she'd had no concrete ideas of what those might be. Perhaps this book in her hand was one of those missing pieces.

She continued studying its pages for a while, considering its implications. First of all, she needed to uncover where it came from. That might provide more answers about the princess' behaviour and, hopefully, shed some light on this potential other player and any other actors at play altering this world's narrative.

But how should she go about finding out more about this book? Depending on how rare it was, there might not even be any available information outside of the princess herself, but asking her wasn't exactly an option. Neither was asking any of the people from the palace who might have been close enough to the princess to know.

Maybe Beldon was her best bet. She wasn't sure if Mirage specialised in this type of research, but it would be the best way for her to investigate the matter discreetly. If she was lucky, this book was common enough that finding its source would be straightforward. Otherwise, she could always—

Scarlett tensed as she heard a soft rustle of fabric behind her. Spinning around, her gaze darted to the large bed at the far end of the room, dimly illuminated by the moonlight filtering through the adjacent window.

She narrowed her eyes. There was nothing there.

For a moment, she wondered if she'd imagined it, when suddenly, there was a subtle shift of movement. Amid the mound of luxurious quilts and plush pillows on the bed, a pair of sleepy eyes—framed by stray gold locks gleaming in the pale light—blinked owlshly in Scarlett's direction.

Scarlett stared, frozen in surprise. The urgent thought that she needed to leave *now* only registered after a long second had passed. But before she could move, the pillows stirred as the bed's occupant rose slightly. A slender hand emerged to rub at tired eyes while the covers slipped away, revealing a young girl in elegant nightclothes, her bright golden hair tumbling in disarray over her shoulders.

The girl's eyes, still clouded with sleep, focused on Scarlett. As comprehension slowly dawned in those eyes, Scarlett realised who this girl was.

She found herself face to face with none other than the *second* imperial princess.