

251: Mixed news

Scarlett sat alone in her provided quarters on the Rising Isle, poring over a weathered old Zuverian tome. It was something she'd used on occasion to practice reading the old script, but now was the first time she could truly comprehend its contents. Mostly, though, she was reading to distract herself, albeit the effort was only marginally successful as her thoughts kept returning to the unfolding events in the empire.

Almost the whole day had passed without any updates from Gaspar, leaving Allyssa and the others deeply concerned about the ongoing attacks. Scarlett herself didn't feel worry per se, but she couldn't shake a nagging sense of unease. There was also the fact that she simply disliked the feeling of not being in control, even if she had been anticipating the Cabal's assault for some time.

It probably didn't help that she'd been coping with a persistent headache all day, caused by having Thainnith's legacy jammed into her head. She had tried resting at noon, but it had only helped so much.

She absentmindedly thumbed through the tome in her hands, letting the meanings of the once-foreign symbols seep into her understanding.

Suddenly, a brief flash of light filled the center of the room, and a figure in emerald robes with purple hair materialized, holding a circular disc artifact.

"Oh, excellent. I found the right place," the woman remarked, surveying the room before her gaze settled on Scarlett. "Determining your precise location can be unexpectedly challenging."

"Greetings, Miss Ward," Scarlett said. "I was not expecting you to pay me another visit so soon."

"But here I am," Yamina replied, her eyes flicking down to the tome she'd been reading. "I see you're reading Zuverian. I was pondering whether you were fluent or not."

"I am." Scarlett placed the tome into her [Pouch of Holding]. "What brings you here, Miss Ward? Given the current situation in the empire, I assumed you would be otherwise engaged."

The woman nodded. "Everyone at the Mistral Observatory currently has their hands full assessing the circumstances on the continent. However, I managed to carve out a momentary respite for myself and decided to visit you one last time, as I suspect I may not have another opportunity after today."

Scarlett considered her for a bit. "...Indeed, I will be returning to Freybrook as soon as possible, so it is unlikely we can meet again in the coming days. That said, I still have unfinished business here on the Isle, so I will be coming back as soon as circumstances allow."

She still hadn't found the answers she needed related to Arlene's quest, after all, not to mention all of her dealings with the council here.

"That is understandable," Yamina said.

"I would hope so. Now, returning to my previous question, what exactly brings you here?"

The wizard fell silent, studying Scarlett for a moment before adjusting her glasses. "It seems we haven't yet had a chance to have a decent discussion, just the two of us."

"Given that we only introduced ourselves properly yesterday, that is not surprising. We are barely acquaintances."

"I have many acquaintances, but I cannot say I've gone as far as to collaborate with any of them to gain entry into one of the Rising Isle's most restricted areas."

"Accomplices, then," Scarlett said.

"I think I prefer 'partners'," Yamina replied.

Scarlett arched a brow. "I do not think I would categorize our relationship quite so warmly yet."

"Oh? Not even after I jeopardized my position to help you enter the Veiled Library? You're rather unsentimental and callous, aren't you?"

"What risks you took or did not take seems to be a matter of concern for you, rather than for me."

That comment actually earned a slight laugh from Yamina, who shook her head lightly. "Hardly. I'm not so careless that it would be a real issue." Her demeanour then shifted to a more serious tone as she crossed the room and sat down at the table beside Scarlett.

Scarlett observed her closely. "So, what is it that you wanted to discuss?" she eventually asked.

"That artifact you handled earlier today," the woman started, locking eyes with Scarlett. "What was it?"

"...I am not sure what you are referring to."

Yamina glanced towards Scarlett's wrist, where the Orrery was now conspicuously absent. "It seemed to be an artifact that alerted you. Coincidentally, only shortly afterward, an almost unprecedentedly large attack was launched against the empire. Personally, I had no forewarning at all of such an event, despite my proficiency in predicting significant events."

"Is that so?"

"It is."

“Then would you claim you can read fate?” Scarlett asked.

Yamina paused, her eyes narrowing slightly behind her glasses.

“Dean Godwin once mentioned he possesses such an ability,” Scarlett added. “Since you are familiar with him, it struck me as a possibility that the same applied to you.”

After a moment, Yamina responded, “What Warley can do isn’t exactly ‘reading’ fate. Rather, he can sense when others deviate from it. Although I suspected that you were already aware of as much.”

The two of them regarded each other quietly.

“What do you know?” Scarlett finally asked.

Yamina had been paying special attention to her since their arrival on the Isle. Scarlett had speculated several times over about the possible reasons, but she hadn’t yet found one that quite explained everything.

The woman waited with her answer, wearing a thoughtful expression, as though carefully considering her next words.

“My curiosity about you was initially sparked by your association with Warley, and by that point, your findings related to the Zuver had already garnered significant attention here on the Isle,” she said. “It’s hardly surprising, then, that I employed more magical means to learn more about you, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I had somewhat expected that, yes. I assume what you found was of particular interest?”

“Quite the opposite, actually. There was surprisingly little to discern about you. I am not certain how familiar you are with divination magic as a school, but it is far from a precise art, unreliable in many cases. However, seasoned practitioners can glean useful insights if they know what to look for. It’s not exactly reading fate, but sometimes it does allow us to catch glimpses, especially if the subject is closely linked to it.” A flicker of intensity passed through the woman’s eyes as she looked at Scarlett. “What was curious about you, Baroness, is that despite me casting numerous divination spells before and after your arrival, the results were very mundane. If my divinations are to be believed, there is nothing that distinguishes you from how you appear, except perhaps the company you keep.”

Scarlett found that interesting. Was this how she was perceived by divination in this world, then? Not as a conspicuous anomaly or an unperceivable black hole, but plain and unnoticeable? Did that mean someone would have to be looking into her specifically to even have a chance at finding something was off?

“Under normal circumstances, I might have left my investigations there,” Yamina continued. “But I felt compelled to meet you in person to confirm my findings.”

“That is why you approached us at the Arcanum Spire,” Scarlett noted.

The woman nodded. “Precisely, and that is where you truly caught my attention, Baroness. Because contrary to what any divinations might say about you, you are far from ordinary in presence.”

“How so?”

“For one, you do not carry yourself as others do, though I suppose that may stem from being an imperial noble. But more notably, the lingering tenor surrounding you indicated that you were anything but simple.”

Scarlett frowned slightly. “Tenor?”

“Yes.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Are you not familiar with the term?”

“Not in this context, no.”

Yamina touched her chin thoughtfully. “‘Tenor’ in this case refers to ‘arcane tenor’, a term used by mages to describe the residual mix of mana and other energies that cling to individuals and objects after interacting with different magics. You could say it’s an imprint left by you on the world.”

“I have never heard of this before.”

“Very few can perceive it, so it’s rarely significant.” The wizard tapped her gold-rimmed glasses. “In fact, these glasses carry enchantments so incomparably complex that they are likely more valuable than most of the fortunes that nobles in the empire possess. However, even they cannot accurately capture the subtle nuances of an individual’s tenor. It’s entirely possible that it’s impossible to do so fully.”

“I...see.” Scarlett’s frown softened. “And what have your glasses revealed about this ‘tenor’ surrounding me?”

“Oh, many intriguing little details. They always do. Mages often overlook how much can be inferred from just the traces of what they interact with. In your case, what stood out were signs of your exposure to at least one highly powerful mana source, or repeated interactions with an *incredibly* potent artifact. Possibly both. There were also traces of magic use that would be considered especially unusual for a mage of your supposed level.”

“I assume you are referring to my ability to use both true pyrokinesis and hydrokinesis?”

“That’s correct.” Yamina tilted her head thoughtfully. “Simply put, after meeting you in person, it was clear you were far, far from an ordinary individual. Yet, all divinations pointed to the contrary, a paradox that I found particularly intriguing.”

“...What are you implying?” Scarlett asked.

“I’m not entirely sure yet,” Yamina confessed, her gaze intense. “But I sense that some of our objectives might overlap, more than just our mutual interest in the secrets of the Veiled Library.”

Scarlett eyed her cautiously. “I believe you may be right. However, do not expect that to mean I will reveal my own secrets freely.”

She was still somewhat uncertain what it meant that Yamina deviated slightly from fate, and it was better to be safe than sorry in that regard. She also saw no reason to be overly forthcoming, unlike with Godwin, where her options had been limited.

“Of course,” Yamina said. “I was not expecting to simply be given the answers to your particular mystery.”

“Good.”

Scarlett did realize this also meant she couldn’t expect the woman to unveil her own secrets that were perplexing her, but she’d simply have to accept that.

Yamina’s attention turned away as she pulled out a small crystal ring from her robes, which emitted a slow, pulsing blue light. “Unfortunately, that’s all the time I have for now.” She stood, walking to the center of the room and turning back to Scarlett. “I hope we will have more chances to meet in the future, then. Do look for me when you next visit the Isle.”

“I will,” Scarlett said.

The wizard paused as if about to activate the teleportation artifact that had brought her here, looking at Scarlett for a couple of seconds. “You might be interested to hear that there was one detail from divinations that differed from the rest, though I can’t claim to understand its significance.”

“And what is that?”

Yamina offered a mysterious smile. “When you return, you might want to visit the Hall of Echoes.”

With that, she activated her artifact and vanished in a flash of light.

Scarlett stared at the spot where Yamina had disappeared, left wondering at her final remark. She had already planned to visit the Hall of Echoes eventually, but as far as she was aware, there wasn’t anything there that she *needed*.

Shaking her head, she put the question aside for the time being and pulled out her earlier tome to read it. The hours passed as evening approached, until eventually, she was interrupted by a slight vibration from the table beside her.

Looking over, she saw the communication artifact she’d used to talk with Gaspar in the morning was blinking. Putting down the tome, she activated the artifact.

Gaspar’s weary voice came through. “Baroness, there are matters we should discuss.”