

159: The missus' return

Scarlett scowled as she used the Loci's senses to observe the woman who had teleported into her office.

What was Mistress doing here now?

The Loci was noticeably opposed to her presence, emanating antipathy and revulsion through their bond. Even if it couldn't have discrete thoughts, it wanted her gone.

"Is something wrong?" Dean Godwin asked, looking up at Scarlett from his seat.

She turned back to him. "...There appears to be an unexpected guest. Excuse me for a moment."

Just as she was about to leave the room to address the situation, she noticed Mistress tapping her staff on the floorboards of her office, creating a shimmering gate in the air there. Then an identical gate materialized where Scarlett and Godwin were, and the woman stepped through it the moment after.

Mistress met Scarlett's shocked look with a beguiling smile. "I see you've made some new additions to your house. It's been a while since I've felt this unwelcome."

As the previous times they'd met, the woman wore a gold-yellow robe with a crimson red inside, and a white marble mask covered the upper half of her face, embellished with golden inlays and scarlet rubies for eyes. Her pale, almost white skin contrasted with dark red lips that curled upward. "Oh? It seems like I'm interrupting something." She turned to Dean Godwin. "How rude of me."

Scarlett couldn't tear her eyes off her. Mistress hadn't contacted her since their encounter with the Cabal, so why would she suddenly appear now, when Godwin was here? What were the chances that this was just a coincidence?

She glanced at Godwin, unsure how he might react.

The wizard scrutinized Mistress closely before turning to Scarlett. "An acquaintance of yours, I presume?"

Scarlett nodded slowly. "One could say that. This is..."

"Mistress', if I am not mistaken," the Dean said.

"You certainly are not," the woman replied, moving over to the couch opposite him. She released the grey staff she had been holding, which remained standing on its own, and sat down without seeking permission.

Inside Scarlett's head, she could feel the Loci attempting everything it could to somehow force this foreign presence away from its domain, but its efforts didn't matter.

“I’m surprised to find an archmage of all people here,” Mistress remarked casually. “It seems clearing my schedule for this little trip was worthwhile more than I thought.” She turned her attention to Scarlett. “I have been *awfully* busy lately, particularly in trying to find that third old trinket you promised me. Your information wasn’t quite as helpful as I was led to believe.”

There was an undertone to her words that sent a shiver down Scarlett’s spine, but she fought against the unease as she settled back into her own seat. It seemed like the woman had no intention of leaving and had no qualms about bringing up these sensitive matters right in front of Warley Godwin.

Mistress chuckled lightly. “If I didn’t find you as intriguing as I do, I might have been tempted to decorticate your skin from your body out of sheer principle. While I will say that your information *did* give me plenty of opportunities to cause trouble for that decrepit gaggle of old bones who thinks himself a man, I could have done that, anyway. I believe this is the point where a normal person might ask for a refund.”

Scarlett met her gaze. “...I apologize if my information did not prove as useful to you as you had hoped, but I kept to my promise. I never guaranteed you would obtain all of them. However, you did obtain the second piece of the...trinket, did you not?”

The woman tilted her head to the side. “I suppose you’re right there. Technically, you *did* uphold your end of the bargain, though I have the sneaking suspicion you never intended for me to find more than I did.”

Mistress gave her a long, probing look, but Scarlett maintained a stoic expression. When dealing with Mistress, it was important to project self-assurance. She hated those who displayed hesitation.

Eventually, the woman shrugged her shoulders. “Oh, well. I did say I find you intriguing, so I suppose it doesn’t really matter in the end, does it? I am ever at the whimsy of my indulgent fancies.”

She looked over at Dean Godwin, who silently observed her with an inquisitive expression, then seemed to shift her gaze to the table between them where refreshments for only two had been prepared. Extending her hand into empty air, the woman’s fingers closed around a cup that appeared out of nowhere. She took a sip of whatever drink was in it and redirected her attention back to Scarlett. “Seeing as you’re still alive, it seems you made good use of what I gave you. I’d say I’m impressed, but I won’t. It would take a fool not to utilize it properly.”

Scarlett glanced over at Godwin. This meeting itself felt somewhat surreal. Suddenly, she had two of the empire’s most powerful mages in her home, both here to engage in secretive discussions. Neither seemed keen on leaving, as well.

At least Mistress wasn’t *outright* talking about the Seal of Thainnith or The Angler Man’s heart...

The woman in question took a couple more sips from her cup before she made it vanish. “Is there something on my face?” she asked with her attention on Godwin.

The man stroked his beard. "Have we met before?"

Mistress smirked. "Easy, tiger. I'm afraid our age gap is a bit too significant for my tastes. Or small, depending on how you see it."

Godwin raised both eyebrows. "I do not usually make it a habit to court ladies upon our first meetings."

"I have heard more than one rumor about your thrilling escapades that suggest otherwise."

"Is that so? I have also heard about you. However, I did not expect that my first time meeting you would be today."

"It is rather surprising, isn't it?" Mistress remarked. "That it would happen so suddenly in this charming little abode, of all places. It leaves me curious what other intriguing secrets and connections our gracious host has tucked away. I can barely contain my interest."

Both of them turned their gaze towards Scarlett, who was still trying to figure out the best way to handle this situation. Just as she was about to speak, a meow echoed through the room.

Everyone paused, directing their attention to the table where a black cat had appeared, perched on the edge and licking its paw.

Scarlett couldn't help but feel exasperated at the sight. Didn't she already have enough on her plate?

Both Mistress and Godwin stared at the cat, their thoughts hidden behind inscrutable expressions. Several seconds passed in silence.

Finally, Mistress grinned, running her tongue over her teeth. "It's not often I'm proven *this* right so quickly."

Empress shot the woman a sharp look, then meowed and returned to grooming herself.

"That is certainly an intriguing cat," Godwin commented, the interest clear in his voice. "I didn't even notice its entrance."

"That is about as much a cat as I am a paragon of temperance and modesty," Mistress said, earning another brief glare and low hiss from Empress. "Oh, hush now, whiskers. You know I'm right." The woman conjured a bowl out of thin air and floated it over to the table, placing it in front of the cat. The bowl filled with what appeared to be milk.

Empress gave Mistress a long look but eventually approached the bowl, as if deigning to overlook the minor offense.

Mistress turned back to Scarlett. "I've expressed a similar sentiment before, but you truly *are* more than that unassuming noble guise you present, aren't you?"

“...I am largely what I appear to be,” Scarlett replied. “I simply know how to leverage the knowledge and information at my disposal.”

“I’m sure you do.” Mistress leaned in, crossing one leg over the other as she rested her chin on her palm. Her voice carried an alluring undertone. “That’s why you’re currently my favorite.”

Scarlett wasn’t quite sure whether to take that as a good or bad thing, so after briefly glancing over at Godwin once more, she cleared her throat and decided to get to the point. “While I do not mean to be impolite, Mistress, is there a specific reason for your unexpected visit today? I was in the middle of discussing important matters with Dean Godwin here, and I do not recall receiving any prior notification of your arrival.”

Before their encounter with the Cabal where the woman had given her The Angler Man’s heart, Mistress had paid Scarlett a short visit in her office, where they talked over what they would do. That time, she had actually bothered sending a magical message beforehand. However, this visit was a lot more sudden.

“I know. It caught me by surprise as well,” Mistress said. She gestured towards Empress. “You have that one’s companion to thank for that.”

Scarlett’s eyes widened slightly. “The Gentleman instructed you to come here?”

At the mention of that name, Godwin turned his gaze towards Scarlett with keen interest.

“Oh, by the unwashed behinds of the Viles, no,” Mistress exclaimed. “I’d rather drink a barrel of bilewine than bother with anything that man has to say. There’s nothing quite as infuriating as those who can manipulate others to act according to their whims even without lifting a finger themselves.” The woman feigned a shudder. “Lately, there’s been a commotion across the realms, and even I can’t escape hearing a thing or two. His movements have all the wrong players acting in the wrong ways, and I’ve had to bend twice-over to prevent my own plans from getting entangled in that nonsense. It just so happened that I returned from a trip to Malevolence doing just that not a moment ago, and guess what I heard?”

Scarlett eyed her suspiciously. Malevolence was one of the six Blazes, and not a place you casually strolled into. Any news from there was bound to be concerning, no matter how you looked at it.

“I seem to be overhearing some rather significant revelations here, but this is something I am afraid I must inquire further about,” Godwin interjected. He focused on Mistress. “I take it from your words that you know a way to enter the Blazes?”

The woman met his gaze with a wry smirk. “Indeed I do. Unfortunately for you, I’m not sharing. The last thing this realm needs is another overeager archmage stumbling down there and forcing the rest of us to clean up the archdemon their soulless husk leaves behind.”

He chuckled. “That was not *quite* my intention. But I was under the impression that any interstitial spaces connecting directly to the Blazes, other than the Ever-reaching Grotto, were sealed off after the Veil of Convergence was established.”

“Oh, darling. The Veil is more of a *suggestion* to most non-mortals than a strict rule. There are no bolts of lightning from the skies to punish those who take a quick step across and back.”

“Are you suggesting you’re not a mortal?”

The woman’s smirk grew wider. “You tell me.”

Godwin studied her intently for a few moments, as if trying to determine the truthfulness of her words, and Mistress tilted her head to the side as if amused by him. The woman’s gaze seemed to flicker down to one of the man’s gloved hands.

“I thought I sensed traces of more than one little wolf nearby,” Mistress said. “Are you perhaps expecting that little trinket to work on me?”

The Dean appeared slightly taken aback by that, glancing down at his hand. “Hmm. I am uncertain. It would have been rather convenient if it did, wouldn’t it?”

Scarlett narrowed her eyes at him. While she would have understood the rationale behind it, she would have been annoyed if he had tried to make excuses about trying to use an artifact to determine whether Mistress was lying when he’d shown no remorse at using it against *her*.

“Then what do you think?” Mistress asked. “Does it work?”

The man studied her for another moment, then slowly shook his head. “I must admit that I cannot tell. I suppose the answer will depend on whether you have been lying since the moment you arrived.”

Beneath her mask, Mistress seemed quite satisfied by that answer as the smile played on her lips. “I always try to mix in a lie or two whenever I speak. Spice things up a bit.”

Scarlett turned to her, considering that statement. Was that actually true? While it *felt* like something Mistress would do, it also seemed highly impractical to consistently do that in practice. But the woman loved being enigmatic and misleading, so there might be a grain of truth in it.

“Where was I?” Mistress turned back to Scarlett. “Ah, yes. While I was busy not being horrifyingly mutilated and devoured by the odd demon or two that call that godforsaken place home, I stumbled upon something *terribly* interesting.”

Scarlett locked eyes with her, gazing into the clear rubies of the woman’s mask. “And what might that be?”

“Rumor has it that Anguish has found a potential incarnate here in the Material Realm, right under the noses of the others, and *they’re not too happy*.”

Scarlett’s blood ran cold. “...**What?**” She stared at the woman in disbelief. “Are you telling the truth?”

“As close to it as I can,” Mistress replied.

Scarlett took a moment to process this information.

The six Viles who reigned over the Blazes were technically demons themselves, which meant they had names that were tied to their very being and held power over them. They went to great lengths to keep their true names hidden, instead being referred to solely by the title of the Blaze they ruled. Anguish was one of those Viles, and it was the one Scarlett was most familiar with. After all, Rosa was currently being possessed by Anguish.

While Mistress had suggested that demons didn't have it that hard moving between the Blazes and the Material Realm, the truth was they *were* still pretty restricted in how they could interact with the Material Realm. These restrictions were even more pronounced for the Viles, who could only manifest themselves here during the most extreme of circumstances. That is if they didn't have an incarnate to serve as an anchor for them in this realm. People who were suitable for becoming incarnates were incredibly rare, though, and when they *did* appear, all the Viles would fight over them like rabid dogs.

Anguish had discovered Rosa relatively early, and had since taken great care to keep her existence hidden from the other Viles while steadily whittling down the bard's defenses and preparing her to become a suitable vessel. For Rosa, that was guaranteed to be an awful experience, but it was something Scarlett was familiar with and could anticipate. It had been mutually beneficial for both her and Anguish to keep Rosa's potential as an incarnate a secret.

But somehow that information had leaked, and now all the Blazes were aware. This meant Scarlett might not only have to face Anguish in the future, but all of the Viles. If that were the case, she couldn't rely solely on her game knowledge to get her out of the situation easily either. While she possessed some information about the other Viles, it was far from comprehensive compared to what she knew about Anguish.

A deep scowl formed on her face. How had this information spread? She was fairly certain she hadn't done anything to reveal Rosa's existence to any demon, and Anguish would have taken precautions as well. Was this really something caused by Scarlett's actions, or was it an inevitable development regardless of her choices? How *much* did the other Viles know? Were they aware of Rosa's identity, or only her existence? There were so many questions that she needed answered.

"My, you certainly appear quite concerned now," Mistress said, eyeing Scarlett from head to toe. "I wonder why that is?"

Scarlett regarded her seriously. "Speak. What is it that you want to say?"

The woman didn't let her sharp tone affect her. "I had thought I noticed something peculiar about that little companion of yours when I first met you, but I didn't imagine it was something *this* fascinating. I can't say I envy that girl. She is certainly in a bind now, and so are you, it appears."

"...What more do you know?"

Mistress' smile turned warmer, which filled Scarlett with a sense of disgust funneled to her from the Loci. "Don't you worry. Fortunately for you, mama Mistress is here to lend a hand."

Scarlett gave her a skeptical look. “Why?”

“Can’t a woman offer her help out of the goodness of her heart?”

She frowned. Just as she was about to respond, Mistress raised her hand to stop her.

“Ah, no, now that I hear it, I realize how absurd that sounds. ‘Goodness of her heart’? Dear me, sometimes I scare even myself with the nonsensical things I say.” The woman shook her head. “No, of course I’m not offering my assistance because I genuinely want to *help* you. That might lead people to think I’m a moral person or some such drivel, going around being nice because I *like* people. Which I don’t. Keep in mind that I’ve never *claimed* I liked you. I said you’re my favorite. A tepid dandelion atop a mountain of nebulous refuse, if you will.”

“...Then why?”

“Because I recognize an opportunity when I see one, darling. It has practically been written all over you since the moment I laid eyes on you.”

“What does that mean?” Scarlett paused, glancing at Godwin. Could it be possible that the woman could perceive the same thing he did? That Scarlett was ‘defying fate’?

“It means you carry yourself like a child that has an inflated sense of superiority because she knows where mommy dear keeps the cookie jar, and I am oh-so famished for an effortless treat,” Mistress said.

Scarlett couldn’t help but glare at her.

“Don’t give me that look. I’m not judging. If I had my way, half the world would be best left to the endless pits of Desolace while the other half wallowed in the depths of self-delusion. Not a minute passes where I don’t lament over the woeful fate of being surrounded by a sea of banality and mediocrity.”

“...Very well.” She didn’t think the woman was lying there. “How can you help, and what do you want in return?”

“First and foremost, you may find solace in knowing that none of the other Viles seem to know the identity of Anguish’s little incarnate-to-be yet. Otherwise, I doubt we’d be sitting here having this conversation.”

That brought some relief to Scarlett, at least. It also meant that she was unlikely to be the one who leaked Rosa’s existence.

“Another curious tidbit is that Malevolence herself is seizing this opportunity while Anguish is distracted to make moves against some of her territories.”

That might be considered good news. It wasn’t quite a silver lining, since the other Viles were still around, but it meant that Anguish wouldn’t be able to focus all her attention on Rosa in the near future. That suited Scarlett’s plans quite well.

“As for where you need my help,” Mistress continued, “well, you can say that demons happen to be an area of expertise for me. I’ve already taken the liberty to sow some confusion regarding the potential identity of this incarnate. No need to thank me.”

Scarlett looked at her. “You did?”

The woman shrugged. “It is an easy enough task for me. Leave some spectral residue here, create a disturbance there. Demons are crafty and unpredictable, but that only makes them all the more effortless to confuse. Not to mention amusing, if you discount the uproar that follows when they discover my involvement. Now, as for what I want in return...” Her smirk grew. “I’ll ponder that one for later. I’m sure when the time comes, you’ll eagerly fulfill whatever request I might have.”

That only made Scarlett more wary. “There are limits to what I can do.”

“All the more reason for me to wait with my request and see what those limits are, isn’t it? Until then, I’ll do what I can to help that ‘pet’ of yours, and if you desire, I can even recommend an exorcist or two for you to consider in the meantime. On the house.”

Mistress seemed to be giving her an expectant look under the mask.

It was entirely possible that she was lying about the ‘help’ she was offering, and Scarlett had no way to confirm it at the moment. She wouldn’t put it past her. However, if her earlier words about Rosa’s existence having been leaked were true, accepting this deal would give them more time. They might not afford to decline that.

That said, Scarlett disliked agreeing to something without knowing for sure she wasn’t being played...

Suddenly, Empress meowed and stood up, fixing a long, meaningful look at Scarlett. Uncertain of the cat’s intention, Scarlett remained silent, locking eyes with her.

“I think she’s telling you not to look a gift horse in the mouth,” Mistress said.

The cat shot another brief glare the woman’s way, but then returned her gaze to Scarlett, showing no clear signs of refuting Mistress’ words.

“Very well,” Scarlett finally replied, turning back to Mistress. “I will not be requiring your recommendations for an exorcist, however. I am already working on that aspect myself.”

“Of course you are.” The woman appeared satisfied. Then she turned to Dean Godwin. “Any thoughts after eavesdropping on our ladies’ talk, Warley?”

Godwin considered Mistress for a few seconds before extending his hands to the side. “I do not think it is entirely fair to label it as ‘eavesdropping’ when the Baroness and I were the ones who had our conversation intruded upon and interrupted. However, I will admit that I found what I heard rather captivating.” He looked at Scarlett. “Although, I suspect our host may not be as pleased about this as I am.”

Scarlett eyed him with a neutral expression. It was true that she would have preferred him not to be present for this, but she also knew that Mistress did this on purpose.

“I have faith that you know when it’s appropriate to remain silent,” Mistress said. “I would ask you to make a pact with Lady Hartford to ensure it, but I can’t really be bothered. We’ll simply have to rely on your sense of gentlemanly integrity, which I’m sure you possess in abundance. If that isn’t enough, we always have whiskers here.” She gestured towards Empress, who had calmly sat down on the table now and was attentively watching their conversation. The cat responded with a meow, turning its eyes towards Godwin.

That helped Scarlett relax a bit more, at least.

“I suppose I have little choice,” the man conceded, a faintly entertained smile on his face as he observed the cat.

Suddenly, Mistress rose from her seat, gripping her staff. “With that, I believe I have said everything I came here to say, and perhaps a bit more. It seems I am starting to overstay my welcome, so it’s best if I take my leave.” Her lips twisted into a grimace as she scrunched her nose under the mask. “It’s been a while since I last felt this close to the touch of an idol. I had forgotten how prudish their kind always are.”

Bidding her farewell, the woman conjured another shimmering display in the air beside her and stepped into the portal. As she vanished, the tension in the room dissipated, and the Loci relaxed at the back of Scarlett’s mind.

She exchanged a look with Godwin.

“That was quite an event, wasn’t it?” he asked. “Should we perhaps pick up where we left off?”