

150: Untenable associations

Scarlett and Evelyne were among the last ones to leave the ballroom once things had calmed down following the Tribe of Sin's attack. Evelyne had insisted on helping those who had been injured and restoring order, and only when a large group of guards and healers arrived did she feel comfortable leaving. Scarlett, on the other hand, didn't particularly mind either way. She continued to ponder the events of the night, trying to make sense of it all.

Together, they navigated the chaotic halls—the entire castle was a hub of activity right now—until they reached the exit and stepped into the wide courtyard outside where they had initially arrived. Most of the other carriages had already departed, but several remained, likely belonging to those who weren't in any condition to leave yet.

They found their carriage, with the anxious coachman already waiting, and boarded it. Soon, they were on their way back to their temporary guest quarters.

Scarlett looked down at her clothes. She was still dressed in her 'adventure' attire. There had been little point in changing back to her ball gown. Not only in case something happened again, but also because that mess earlier had made her work up a sweat. Hopefully she might be able to clean herself off later.

"...I still can't believe what happened." Evelyne broke the silence after a minute. "I've never encountered the Tribe of Sin before, but I never thought they would do something so... I don't know. I just didn't think they would do something like *this*."

"It is not that surprising, if you ask me," Scarlett replied. "Attacking an event with so many powerful people that might oppose them present might be an odd choice, but it aligns with their objectives, does it not?"

"Maybe you're right..." Evelyne stared down at her legs, seemingly still processing what had occurred. There was a tired look on her face, and she seemed liable to fall asleep any second now. After a while, she glanced up at Scarlett and observed her for a moment. "...You handled yourself well during the attack. Astonishingly well."

"I have had ample opportunity to gain experience in recent months," Scarlett said, pausing to study Evelyne. "...You also handled the situation admirably," she added.

The woman's eyes widened slightly, and she turned to gaze out the window. "Thank you..."

Another minute passed before Evelyne spoke again. "Did you expect any of this happening?"

Scarlett. "What makes you ask that?"

"You appear so composed and rational about it all."

"I believe you are well aware that I have never been one to easily display my state of mind."

"I know, but..." Evelyne turned to face Scarlett. "Still... It feels like you might have known. Wasn't this something you saw in those visions of yours?"

Scarlett arched a brow. “Memories, not visions. And no, it was not. If it were, I would not have attended tonight.”

“You wouldn’t have tried to prevent it?”

“And how would I have accomplished that? Should I have informed the Tyndalls that I, a minor baroness in disfavor with the Duke, am aware of an impending attack by the Tribe of Sin? Should I have publicly proclaimed knowledge of the Tribe’s plans? Such actions would only bring unwanted attention and trouble to our house, and I suspect you understand that.”

Technically, she couldn’t have warned anyone due to her deal with the Cabal either.

“Yes, but...” Evelyne’s face showed conflict. “People were *injured*.” She spoke softly. “I’m not sure if anyone died, but I saw people who almost lost their arms...”

Scarlett sighed. “It is a moot point, regardless. I had no idea this would happen.”

She was just relieved that the Tribe’s objective hadn’t been her. That would have placed both her and them in a difficult situation.

“...What are we going to do now?” Evelyne asked.

“I still plan on attending tomorrow’s gathering, unless it gets canceled,” Scarlett replied.

“Are you serious?”

“Yes. You do not have to accompany me if you do not want to, however.”

“No, I’ll come.”

She thought it unlikely that the Tribe would attempt another attack so soon, and security would undoubtedly be much tighter this time. It might also be good to show that something like this wouldn’t scare Scarlett. Besides, they wouldn’t be able to return to Freybrook before afternoon anyway, so it was better to utilize their time efficiently, even if she wouldn’t particularly enjoy it.

She also had that meeting with Beldon in the morning.

The carriage came to a halt, and Scarlett looked out the window, realizing they had arrived in front of their accommodations. The courtyard was filled with guards and people that were bustling about, some preparing to leave. It seemed like less than half of the guests would stay until tomorrow. Most of these individuals didn’t appear to be nobles, though, which meant they wouldn’t be attending the noble gathering anyway. Given the circumstances, now was as good a time to depart as any for them.

As Scarlett and Evelyne reached the entrance of the building, a servant inquired about their well-being before allowing them inside, accompanied by a pair of armed escorts. They passed by several more guards patrolling the hallways, some of whom looked like they had been abruptly roused from their sleep. The Tyndalls must have rushed to muster all this manpower this quickly.

Outside their respective rooms, Scarlett and Evelyne bid each other farewell. Evelyne looked more exhausted than anyone else at this point. Scarlett entered her own quarters, a spacious room dimly lit by a single lamp near the window. Making her way to the table where her [Pouch of Holding] rested, she heard a sound behind her.

She spun around, the [Tiara of Lost Benediction] materializing on her forehead along with the enchanted glasses as she prepared to defend herself. The darkness in the room dissipated before her enhanced vision, except for a vacant space in the corner where a shadow took shape, coiling together as it grew more distinct by the second.

Her breath caught in her throat.

She immediately brought out the [Essence of Zenthos] and her [Fireguard Knife], positioning the dagger's edge against The Angler Man's heart.

The shadow took the form of a short figure, almost childlike, concealed by a crimson robe and white mask peering out from under a hood. Pale blonde hair peeked out from the sides of the mask, and three large lavender eyes were the only visible features on it. The third eye sat vertically on the forehead, and each had unnaturally enlarged, semi-transparent irises with tiny black dots for pupils.

Nol'viz. A member of the Hallowed Cabal.

Silence enveloped the room as the girl tilted her head, observing Scarlett with all three pupils moving in unison.

Scarlett was on the verge of summoning the guards outside, but it was unlikely that they could do anything. She also didn't know Nol'viz's purpose here. If the Cabal had concluded that they had nothing left to lose and decided to take the risk, Nol'viz was the ideal candidate to eliminate her discreetly.

Instead of attacking, the girl retrieved a [Mirror of Communion] from within her robes. The reflective grey metal of the artifact darkened as a fog enveloped its surface.

For a brief moment, Scarlett worried that she would hear the voice of The Angler Man resounding in her head. However, she relaxed when a familiar sharp voice spoke.

"Is she there?" it asked.

Even if The Angler Man had woken up, it was part of her agreement with the Cabal that she would never have to make direct contact with him.

Before Nol'viz could respond, Scarlett interjected. "I am here, yes. And I will say that I do not appreciate being approached in such a clandestine manner."

"It was necessary," the voice curtly replied, displaying indifference to Scarlett's opinion. "Does she have the heart?"

A few seconds of silence followed before Nol’viz replied, her voice resembling a chorus of echoes and whispers rasping from beneath the mask, as if she was imitating people’s speech and not entirely accustomed to it yet.

“Yes.”

“I assume you are not foolish enough to attempt anything that would violate our agreement,” Scarlett said.

“We will uphold our end as long as you fulfill your part,” the voice stated. The words hung in the air for a moment before they adopted an accusatory tone. “You attacked several of our people.”

“I had little choice. Surely you did not overlook the possibility of my presence tonight.”

“We were under no obligation to inform you of our plans.”

“And I had no obligation to refrain from protecting myself or those around me. If I had not acted as I did, my actions would have aroused suspicion. I operated well within the boundaries of our agreement. If anything, you were the ones who ran dangerously close to breaching it.”

The voice remained silent, which Scarlett interpreted as it not challenging her statement.

“Why have you contacted me in this manner?” she asked, eyeing Nol’viz. “Are you here simply to ensure that I do not harm your precious heart?”

“We have already achieved our goal tonight. We hold no grudge against you unless you give us reason to.”

“I am not the one that is likely to break the contract.”

“...I advise you to remember those words. Soon, we will take action against the empire.”

Scarlett paused. Was he trying to *warn* her?

“And what exactly do you mean by that?”

“The empire will soon realize their mistake in opposing us. Freybrook will be spared for a time. Do not act rashly.”

She stared at the [Mirror of Communion], the meaning behind his words dawning on her.

They had gotten their hands on the [Ring of Depravity].

Was *that* what tonight’s attack had been about?

She hadn’t been aware that the Tyndalls possessed it at this time. It didn’t become relevant until later in the game’s storyline. Beldon Tyndall *had* been the one to have it initially—

before losing it to the Cabal—but she had just assumed he had acquired it through his connection in Mirage.

What had moved things up so that it happened this early? Had her own actions played a role? She had undoubtedly influenced certain aspects of this world, but she didn't feel like she could have accelerated an entire storyline by several months, even considering the pressure she was placing on the Cabal. There was a reason they couldn't do it this fast in the game, after all.

So, were there other factors at play? It wasn't the first time she had noticed differences in how certain storylines unfolded, even without her direct involvement. While dungeons and artifacts remained mostly consistent, the actions of individuals and groups in this world seemed the most unpredictable. What Godwin had told her about the Cabal might also tie into that.

She gritted her teeth.

Regardless of the reasons, what mattered was the current situation. If the Cabal had the [Ring of Depravity], it meant that one of the threats to the empire from the game was drawing near.

The fact that the Cabal had essentially given her a warning about it perplexed her, though.

It had to be because they wanted to prevent anything from happening to her that might lead her to kill The Angler Man. They seemed confident that even with her foreknowledge, she would be unable to stop their plans. They were probably right as well. There were a few things she could *maybe* do, but the risks involved were just as likely to get her killed as anyone else.

This development would make moving around the empire more challenging in the future. She really would have preferred if events unfolded as they did in the game. But she supposed she should consider it a blessing that the Cabal apparently intended to avoid targeting Freybrook initially. It was a stroke of luck, if anything.

“I will take this into consideration,” she finally responded.

“See that you do,” the voice replied. It fell silent for a moment before speaking again. “Your home. Our agents have reported abnormal activity in it.”

“I would have expected them to have gathered more than that,” she remarked, “but I suppose they are not as skilled as I had thought. I presume you have not been so foolish as to send someone *into* my home?”

“I have already told you that we will uphold our end of the agreement.”

“That would undoubtedly be in your best interest.”

She actually believed him. The Loci had never detected any unauthorized individuals entering the estate. It *had*, however, picked up on the presence of some of the Cabal's agents nearby. Its range extended beyond the walls, after all.

“Do not presume to threaten us, Baroness,” the voice spoke harshly. She didn’t think there was much weight behind the words, though, considering she had done exactly that during their previous encounter. “We are finished here.”

The fog covering the surface of the [Mirror of Communion] dissipated, leaving Scarlett alone in the room with Nol’viz. The masked girl observed her silently, three eyes blinking in concert. Scarlett wondered what thoughts were going through Nol’viz’s mind.

While the Hallowed Cabal had plenty of members with diverse and peculiar backgrounds, Nol’viz stood out as perhaps the most unusual.

“Are you satisfied with your current circumstances?” Scarlett found herself asking.

Nol’viz continued to gaze at her without responding for several seconds. Then, finally, the same echoing whispers as before reverberated through the room. “We were instructed to be wary of your words.”

Scarlett stared at her, and a small smile involuntarily appeared on her face. The Cabal seemed to be more concerned about her and what she knew than they let on. Perhaps it was to be expected, considering she had effectively unleashed Mistress—one of their oldest enemies—upon them and was holding their leader’s life hostage.

But the thought amused her nonetheless.

“That was probably a wise decision on their part,” she said.

Nol’viz tilted her head to the side, watching Scarlett for a while longer before turning around. The shadows around her coalesced, and she vanished from sight.

Scarlett was left completely alone, contemplating the encounter that had just taken place. The Cabal was cautious around her, but their influence still could not be underestimated.

She found herself glancing up into the air, almost expecting a quest completion message to appear, but it never did. That made her frown. Was it perhaps because she hadn’t actively been the cause of anything that happened tonight? Her previous interactions with the Cabal had counted as quests, so it wasn’t something off with them in particular.

She wanted a manual for this damn thing.

Eventually, she returned the [Essence of Zenthias] and her [Fireguard Knife] to the spatial ring on her finger. She walked over to a table in the corner of the, took a seat on a chair that provided a clear view of the room, and retrieved a book from her [Pouch of Holding].

It seemed that she wouldn’t be getting any sleep until she returned to Freybrook.