

100: Old grudges

Scarlett walked through the dark forests outside Freybrook, along with Fynn. The moon lent little light that penetrated through the dense canopy above, but with her enchanted glasses on, she could see the opening among the trees ahead of them clearly.

“Are they still maintaining their distance?” she asked Fynn in a lowered voice.

The young man looked around for a moment, then nodded his head. “They are. There are more in front of us, as well.”

“I trust that you have not forgotten what to do.”

“I haven’t.”

He had a determined expression on his face.

Scarlett returned her attention forward. Soon, they entered a small glade. Arranged in a half-circle on the end opposite them were dozens of Cabal Adepts, each of the black-robed figures standing completely still. Their ornate, gold masks were aimed at her and Fynn, and at their center stood two other figures.

One was short, like a child, and concealed by a crimson robe that revealed only a white mask. Pale, blonde hair stuck out from the under a hood, running down and covering the sides of the mask. The mask itself only held three large eyes, each a bright lavender. The third eye, sitting vertically on the forehead, blinked as it appeared to take Scarlett and Fynn in.

Next to this figure stood a veritable giant, standing well over all others in the glade and looking much like a knight of old — if that knight was cursed and lived in an old abandoned swamp. Their frayed black vestments reached down towards the ground like wrangled threads and their head was entirely hidden by a cylindrical black helm that lacked slits. In their hands, they were grasping the handle of a tall sword whose tip rested on the ground.

Scarlett’s eyes were locked on the figure for a few seconds. She knew he would be big, but it was a different thing seeing it in real life like this. They weren’t even close yet, and it already felt like he was looming over her with his stature. The only person she knew that was of a similar size was Holdger ‘The Mammoth’ of the Royal Guard, and even that was uncertain.

To add to this knight’s imposing presence, there was also a large crow standing on his shoulder. The bird looked almost like a statue, staring straight at Scarlett with an unnatural fixation from across the glade. If she hadn’t known better, she would almost have thought it was taxidermied with how still it was.

She removed her glasses as she and Fynn continued forward. Placing them inside her [Pouch of Holding], she raised her hand and snapped her fingers. A huge sphere of fire appeared above them all, bathing the space in its warm light.

None of the Cabal members showed any reaction at the display, at least not physically. She could practically feel the tension in the air as dozens of eyes followed their movements.

Beside her, Fynn was practically oozing with alertness in return, though he wasn't making any overtly threatening actions.

Scarlett stopped a few meters away from the two figures at the center of the Cabal Adepts, examining the two a bit closer. These were Nol'viz and Carnwedain. Both important members of the Hallowed Cabal, though not shot-callers per se.

"How many are there?" she asked out loud.

"Thirty-six," Fynn answered.

She looked around. There was about half that number in the glade. "I see. Shall we begin?"

In front of them, the hooded figure—Nol'viz—tilted her head curiously at Fynn, while the dark knight next to her removed a hand from his sword's handle. The wind stirred behind Scarlett as Fynn stepped forward, glaring at the two. He didn't seem to mind the fact that the knight stood several heads above his height.

Carnwedain showed no signs of noticing Fynn's action, simply pulling out from beneath his frayed clothing. A reflective piece of grey metal appeared in his hand, the [Mirror of Communion] taking on a darker hue as a fog grew across its surface.

"Do you have it?" a sharp voice sounded out from the mirror a moment later. The same voice that had spoken with Scarlett the last time, when the Cabal attacked her mansion.

"A pleasure hearing from you, as well," she answered.

"Do you have the last piece?"

Wow. They sure were eager to get down to business.

"From your reply, I presume you have already located the second piece of the seal. Just as I promised you would if you heeded my words."

"Bring it out."

"It would do you well to entertain some patience," she said, eyeing the two in front of her. "Before we proceed to the matter of the seal, I think it would be prudent to first revisit what our original deal was. It would not do for one party to have forgotten the details regarding how to uphold their end, no?"

Carnwedain showed no reaction to her words, standing like a statue with one hand around the handle of his sword and the other holding the [Mirror of Communion]. The crow on his shoulders was similarly stationary, though its head was now cocked to the side as it stared at Scarlett.

Nol'viz was still studying Fynn, now with an almost transfixed gaze. Up close like this, it was even more clear that the eyes on her mask weren't just decorations. Tiny black pupils—surrounded by unnaturally large and almost transparent irises—moved in unison as they roamed over the young man.

It seemed like neither of the two Cabal members cared much about interfering with the negotiation itself, at least. And if any of the Adepts were to try something, Fynn could hold them off for at least a moment, which would be enough.

“...What is it you want to confirm?” the voice on the other end of the mirror asked.

Scarlett returned her attention to the artifact. “I believe your promise was that your organization would leave me and my people alone, in exchange for the two pieces of the seal that I would assist you in procuring.”

“That was not all.”

“Ah, yes. There was also the artifact I spoke of. The artifact which protected me from the mental prying of your other affiliate.” Scarlett nodded along. “In exchange for the seals and that item, you agreed to leave me be. These were the terms of our agreement, were they not?”

“Yes.”

“Then, before I hand you the last piece of the seal and that item, I have simply one question. I wish to know what is stopping you from reneging on your word after our business has been concluded.”

“...We will keep our word. Stop wasting time. Give us the seal.”

“You say as much, but what would happen if you were to break your word?” she asked.

“Know that I am only asking so that I can have a sense of reassurance for me and my people, not because I doubt your trustworthiness.”

The voice turned silent. It stretched out over several seconds as both ends stared each other down.

“Carnwedain, Nol’viz,” the voice finally said, its tone implying it had already grown tired of this. “Check if she has the seal on her.”

A growl escaped Fynn as he moved in front of Scarlett with hands raised. The large knight in front of them lifted his sword from the ground with his one free hand. At the same time, something moved under Nol’viz’s robes.

“That will not be necessary,” Scarlett declared and held up a hand. She moved her other hand towards her waist. “I will hand over the seal, exactly as promised.”

“Halt,” the voice commanded.

Both Carnwedain and Nol’viz stopped, almost immediately returning to their original positions.

“I had wanted to see what reactions that might engender, though I suppose there was nothing in particular I wanted to gauge,” Scarlett said as she brought a hand into the pouch of holding. “Call it a whim, if you will. I already knew the answer, after all.”

She pulled out the seal.

[Seal of Thainnith (1/3) (Unique)]

{A third of a whole. A seal upon that which covered}

“With that in mind, I find it fortunate that I do not actually have to acquiesce to your demands.” She showed a small smile. “Is that not—”

“Take the seal,” the voice said immediately.

“—so, Mistress?” Scarlett finished.

“You *are* a dramatic one, aren’t you?” a soft laugh sounded out as an ethereal, yet strangely mature, voice seeped into the glade. Both Carnwedain and Nol’viz froze in place just as they were about to move, as did all the Adepts around them.

The air shimmered next to Scarlett as a gate formed in the empty space. A moment later, a woman in gold-red robes garbs out, the upper half of her face hidden by a decorated marble mask. She looked out over the Cabal members, the azure gem at the top of her staff glowing a light blue. Her gaze then turned to Scarlett, the tips of her mouth rising in a smile. “I can’t say I don’t enjoy it, though.”

“...Theilenna.” The voice on the other end of the [Mirror of Communion] spoke slowly.

The masked woman turned to the artifact, which was still held in the hand of the large knight. “Vior, is that you? I see you’re still the same bore, slaving away for that decrepit old reprobate. One would think you’d grow tired of it eventually.” She shook her head. “And haven’t I told you? I go by Mistress now. Do try to remember it. We wouldn’t want something awful to happen because you can’t adjust to a name change or two, would we, dear? I’ve only had so many.”

Her words were met by silence.

The woman, Mistress—the game had really had a thing for its descriptive sobriquets—tapped her staff on the ground and the light from the gem on top faded. At the same time, all of the Cabal members seemed to be released from whatever spell had been holding them. The Adepts all raised their khopeshs, while Nol’viz and Carnwedain had their attention fixed on the woman. Yet, no one moved.

She let out a small laugh, turning her head as she appeared to consider them all. “If I’m not mistaken, it looks like you were in the middle of something. I *do* hope I’m not disturbing.” Her tone took on an excessively friendly tone. “It would be a shame if I were to be a nuisance—” The woman stopped in the middle of her sentence, letting out a short cough.

“Ahem, one moment please.” Another couple of coughs followed before she wiped her mouth with her sleeve. “*Haaah*. No, enough of that.” Her voice turned derisive. “Any more and I might develop a rash. Shows me to try and add a little spice to things.”

Her focus shifted towards the seal in Scarlett’s hand before turning back to the [Mirror of Communion]. “Well, I detest speaking with that miscreant’s lackeys about as much as you do

me, so I won't draw this out longer than necessary. Yes, it's me. Yes, I'm actually here. Yes, I'm taking the seal. No, I don't care what godforsaken, anathematized pit you're threatening to throw me into because of it. Yes, more than I can count. And no, it wasn't me, though I'm sure I wish it was."

Finishing, the woman took a deep breath. "There. I just had that whole conversation for the both of us. Aren't I nice?"

"...You will regret this, Baroness," the voice from the mirror said.

"Perhaps. We will see." Scarlett looked to Mistress. "Did you bring what we agreed to?"

"Why, of course. Although I almost wish I hadn't." The woman's mouth contorted. "Viles know why I thought it a good idea to leave it in that place."

Scarlett reached down to her waist and pulled out a thin pile of furred papers from her pouch, holding them out towards the woman. "What I promised is in there."

These were a gathering of maps and notes she had prepared in the previous days. They detailed the location of the first piece of the Seal of Thainnith—currently in the possession of the Hallowed Cabal—along with places where the second piece could be.

She was pretty sure of the first piece's location because there was a questline to steal it in the game, but the second piece would only just now have been found by the Cabal. She couldn't be certain they would have moved it to the same place. They probably wouldn't, so she had tried recalling the general locations of other relevant Cabal bases instead. From there, Mistress would most likely be able to pinpoint the exact position herself.

To be honest, though, Scarlett wasn't exactly hoping for the woman to find the second piece, nor did she think the odds were that high either. She'd decided to give Mistress what information she had, yes, but that was only because the woman wasn't the kind of person one doublecrossed. Scarlett wouldn't actually *benefit* from Mistress getting all three pieces, though. It just wasn't *as* bad as if the Cabal got them.

Of course, she also used this as a chance to have the woman sow some chaos among the Cabal ranks. There were only a couple of members in the Cabal that could stand up to Mistress, after all.

As the woman received the papers she didn't even bother looking them over as they disappeared into thin air. She then reached out and grabbed the empty space in front of her, and her fingers grasped hold of something that hadn't been there the moment before. It looked reminiscent of a heart, but with the lower half being made of some red-wine-colored bone material that had a slight sheen to it. At the top were several thick blood vessels that bore a sickly, sallow color.

[Essence of Zenthas]

{The still heart of one who abandoned impermanence, grasping for truth}

From the corner of her eyes, Scarlett noticed several of the Adepts flinch at the sight.

“I’ll be kind and fill you in on what’s happening, Vior,” Mistress said out loud, shaking the object in her hand. “See, I’ve finally found something useful to do with that rotten coot’s heart. Namely, trading it for that nice seal of yours.”

“...You dare—”

“Oh, I *do*.” Mistress smiled. “You should take notes, darling. This is how you get things done. It’s all about give and take. You just have to make sure you’re giving less than you take.”

She held out the heart towards Scarlett, who looked back at Fynn and gave him a nod. The young man walked up. Just as he was about to take the heart, however, Mistress pulled her hand back and raised a finger. “Ah-ah-ah. Don’t go expecting much if this little trade of yours turns out to not live up to my expectations.”

“There will be no such problem,” Scarlett said. “As long as you are capable enough to make use of what I have disclosed to you.”

She was giving away exactly what she had promised.

The masked looked at her with a smirk. “Well, then we won’t have an issue, will we?” She handed the heart over to Fynn, who stepped back behind Scarlett.

He knew what to do from here.

“I think that’s it for me, then,” Mistress announced. “I’ve got things to do and people to bother. After that, maybe I’ll relax; treat myself to some wine as I think of that codger’s face when he hears of this. I’d say I’ve earned it.”

The woman tapped her staff on the ground. Another shimmering gate appeared in front of her. She turned to look at Scarlett. “Best of luck dealing with these eyesores. It’ll be fun seeing if you’re still alive for our next meeting. I hope you have something interesting prepared for me then as well. I’d say you owe me, but why state the obvious?”

With that, she stepped through the gate and disappeared without another word.

“Fynn,” Scarlett said. The wind flared behind her with the command.

If any of the others moved even a single step towards them, he was to move to stab straight through the heart. No hesitation. Something that wouldn’t completely destroy it. For something like that, Fynn was the prime candidate. Not even these powerful people would be able to stop him in time.

Scarlett turned her eyes to the tall figure of Carnwedain. The [Mirror of Communion] was still in his hand.

“It appears as if your subordinates have correctly understood the situation at hand,” she said. “But for the sake of clarity, I shall elucidate. The article currently in my retainer’s hands is the Essence of Zenthias, which had previously been in the possession of the woman known as

Mistress. If any of your men were to act out of line, my retainer will destroy the Essence instantly, with no consideration for his or my own fate.”

What Fynn was holding was the heart of The Angler Man. If it was damaged, so would The Angler Man.

Mistress had kept this in her possession for a long time in order to keep the Hallowed Cabal from annoying her too much. But they had always been locked in an odd stalemate where neither party could truly deal with the other for various reasons. Now, though, Mistress didn't have any real need for the Essence anymore, and she was more than willing to trade it off. Which is why Scarlett had decided to act on the opportunity this afforded.

Like the Cabal, Mistress also wanted the Seal of Thainnith. Both parties were in a race to get it before the other. But the Cabal didn't know that the Mistress had been aware of where the third piece was. In the game, if you picked up the third piece of the seal while playing as a member of the Cabal, the woman would use that piece to track you down after a while and try to find the other piece that was in the Cabal's possession.

All Scarlett had to do was offer Mistress what she had originally been aiming for, just making things easier. And in exchange, she got a powerful bargaining chip against the Hallowed Cabal.

A long silence had followed Scarlett's previous words, but eventually, the voice from the mirror spoke. "...Don't act unless on my command.”

The Cabal Adepts all lowered their weapons.

Scarlett smiled. "I believe it is time for the actual negotiations to begin. You all acted quite conceited during our previous talks. Do not think I have forgotten about it.”

"...What is it you want?" the voice asked.

"Hmm." Scarlett hummed, eyeing all of the Cabal members for a moment. She was feeling a bit *too* much satisfaction from this situation. She wasn't sure if she'd ever felt this self-assured before. It was, without a doubt, not at a healthy level, considering the circumstances.

There was an inherent risk behind this plan of hers. While it was true that she now had in her possession one of the Hallowed Cabal's largest weaknesses, they still had the power to obliterate her and everything connected to her without any real opposition. So, with both parties able to so easily hurt the other, but neither willing to receive that damage, it made it hard to know exactly where the line would be drawn.

How far could she push them before she crossed it? Because when she did, it wouldn't matter if she had the Essence of Zenthias. She would be crushed all the same. But the same went for the Hallowed Cabal. If they went too far, The Angler Man would die, which would cause irreparable damage to their organization and cause.

Scarlett's greatest advantage in this situation was that she was a mostly unknown factor. The Cabal didn't know how far she was willing to go, while she at least had a rough sense of their side.

“My wish in itself is quite simple,” she said. “However, I will not say the same for its implementation. We will strike a deal, but unlike before, it will be a true contract. One in which, among other things, you will agree to not disturb me in any way, and I will agree to not destroy the Essence of Zenthias. This time, however, I suggest that you do not attempt to fool me with those empty ‘promises’ of yours. I am not, not have I ever been, that naïve.”

“...Alright.” The voice did not sound happy. “You will be left alone.”

She shook her head. “Do you think that will suffice? It appears you fail to completely comprehend the current circumstances. This is not a matter where such vague terms will be enough.” She pulled out an additional pile of papers that she had prepared from her pouch. “I said it will be a contract. That includes all that such a recourse entails.”

The contracts in her hand had been fashioned after the legal documents of this world. Although the Hallowed Cabal wasn’t a group that would recognize the authority of any judicial organs in the empire, these documents and the way they were structured still served as a good framework for Scarlett to build upon. After all, she was now essentially in a state of mutually assured destruction with the Cabal. What’s worse, she was a mere individual, and they were a large and powerful organization. What she stood to lose, were relations to break down, was literally everything.

Of course, there was also the fact that she wasn’t *actually* willing to give her life just to off The Angler Man.

She would be damned if she didn’t make the terms *extremely* clear now, when she had the upper hand and the Cabal was still unsure about her. If the terms were too vague and the Cabal did something she didn’t like in the future, she wouldn’t be able to say much in complaint. Her only option for retaliation was killing The Angler Man, after all. And considering she wanted to live, that wasn’t a real option.

No, it was best to tie the Cabal’s hands and feet as early as possible. They would regret the day they messed with Amy Bernal, Scarlett Hartford, or whatever one would call her.

She pulled out the first of the documents. “Then, let us begin with the terms and conditions concerning any activities conducted by the Hallowed Cabal or any of its affiliates that pertain to or affect the Hartford barony.”