

246: Inheritance

Scarlett's eyes quickly adapted to the gentle, otherworldly light that filled the chamber, some of which appeared to emanate from the numerous symbols adorning the walls, each pulsing in some strange rhythm. Tall structures, reminiscent of pods, occupied the room's corners, their surfaces intricately etched with ancient runes.

Scattered throughout the chamber were a range of peculiar arcane devices and instruments, their purposes and designs unfamiliar to Scarlett. At the chamber's center, a conspicuous orb floated by itself, its light casting dancing shadows on the stone floor beneath, where a constellation of star-like patterns seemed to converge towards it, the surrounding air buzzing with latent energy.

The atmosphere was charged with a palpable, unseen force, filling one with a sense of being watched.

"So," Rosa remarked with a touch of irony. "The hidden library *beneath* the library houses a secret forbidden section, which in turn conceals yet another hidden chamber. Am I the only one starting to question these Zuvers' architectural choices at this point?"

Glancing back at the woman, Scarlett noticed a hint of caution beneath her casual demeanor.

Returning her attention to the room, Scarlett paused briefly at the threshold before stepping in and looking around.

What was this place? Was it simply a chamber from the game that she had never found in her own playthroughs? Or was it unique to this world? Given some of her suspicions about the Orrery, she leaned towards the latter.

Her gaze fell on the pods at the edge of the chamber. There were five of them, all but one sealed. Their fronts were half-transparent, through which she could barely discern the outlines of various shapes, some distorted beyond any natural form.

She was hoping those wouldn't start moving.

Her focus lingered on the lone, unsealed pod, wondering what it was used for. Given its size, it looked suspiciously like it could have fit the custodian.

Turning, Scarlett noticed that the custodian had actually followed her into the chamber, though it wasn't doing anything but observing her.

Considering that it wasn't really a living being, she supposed it must have been created somewhere. It was possible it was here. Although from what she could tell, it wasn't aware of this place's existence, as evidenced by its earlier confusion when searching for texts related to Thainnith.

Redirecting her attention to the center of the chamber, she studied the orb there for a moment. Regardless of whether that was true or not, it was clear that this orb was the heart of this

chamber. Its appearance reminded her a bit of the Astral Soulstone, yet was distinctively unique.

At the back of her mind, that same urge from earlier told her to destroy it. This, in itself, told her a lot.

It also grew her annoyance even further.

Raising her left hand, Scarlett aimed the Orrery at the orb, observing a reaction akin to that with the sigil.

“What is that?” Rosa asked.

“I do not know.”

“...Like, are you saying ‘don’t know’ as in you’re keeping a secret, or you genuinely have no clue?”

Scarlett turned to face her. “I was genuinely not aware this chamber existed until now.”

“Oh...” Rosa’s expression turned more somber as she regarded the orb closely. “In that case... I think we should leave that thing be.”

Scarlett eyed her with a mix of surprise and curiosity. “And why is that?”

Rosa placed a hand over her heart, eyes suddenly deepening to a darker shade of violet. “It’s hard to explain, but there’s an unusual sensation coming from it. Everything in this room feels weird, but that orb... it’s on another level.”

Scarlett watched her quietly for a few seconds before responding. “Do you believe it poses a threat?”

“Not sure, but I’d rather you didn’t try interacting with it.”

Scarlett turned to Fynn. “Can you sense anything?”

He shook his head. “Not in here.”

Scarlett looked back at the room, focusing on the orb.

Ignoring the orb wasn’t an option, especially if the Anomalous One desired its destruction. There was also its apparent connection with the Orrery to consider.

“I can tell what you’re thinking,” Rosa said. “Or at least part of it. If you’re set on examining it, let me try. I’ve got the Heartstone, so I might be able to shield myself from any harm.”

“No,” Scarlett responded decisively. “It is best if neither of you gets involved.”

She wasn’t going to let her people take the risk this time. Besides, if the orb was related to both the Anomalous One and the Orrery, she needed to be the one to interact with it.

Letting her gaze wander across the rest of the chamber for a moment, she then began to approach the orb. Delving into this place's secrets could wait, but first, she wanted to uncover the nature of this orb.

As she drew closer, she examined the object more closely. From afar, it resembled more a floating sphere of energy, but on closer inspection, she realized that it was physical. Beneath the intense light around it, it seemed to be made of some kind of metal, adorned with complex lines and runes that almost seemed to shift.

Beyond the Anomalous One's urging to destroy it, the orb itself seemed to be calling to her in some way. Not in a deceptive, misleading way, as though trying to lure her, but instead as if sending an invitation.

"Scarlett..." Rosa's concerned voice called out from behind.

"Wait with whatever you have to say," Scarlett replied, her focus narrowing on the orb. There was no item description, which she had been hoping for, but despite what Rosa had said earlier, she didn't think it was dangerous.

Gently, she extended her finger, barely touching the orb's surface.

Instantly, darkness enveloped her. She blinked, finding herself in an endless void. It didn't feel like she'd been teleported somewhere, though. Was it some sort of mental or metaphysical shift, then?

Looking down, she noticed the Orrery's pointers were now both aligned, indicating directly ahead. After a moment's consideration, she decided to walk in that direction.

At first, it didn't feel like she was getting anywhere, simply moving through infinite nothingness with the passage of time uncertain. Gradually, though, the void transformed, revealing a path that solidified into a stone path under her feet. Along with that, the edges of the void grew brighter, until eventually, she was surrounded by the open expanse of a dusky sunset.

A platform appeared in the distance, hosting a single figure with their back turned towards her. As she neared, the figure remained indistinct, its form blurred as if refusing to come into focus even when she drew closer and stepped onto the platform. There, she stopped, studying the elusive silhouette of the figure, their garments seeming to fluctuate between states, though it was hard to tell.

In fact, the only thing she could say for certain about this figure was that they exuded an aura of formidable power, their presence dominating the surrounding space.

Slowly, the figure turned to face her. While their features remained hard to make out as well, she could see hints of greyish skin, with eyes that radiated a potent, silvery luminescence, settling upon her.

Words, initially emerging as unintelligible echoes, reached her as the figure spoke. These sounds gradually changed, sharpening into more familiar tones, until at last, they coalesced into perfect English.

“Welcome, inheritor, to this hidden sanctuary. I harbored concerns that this place would remain undiscovered, but I am relieved to see those fears were unfounded,” the figure stated in a slow, resonant voice, imbued with an ageless quality.

Scarlett paused. “...Who are you?”

“I am... Or rather, was, simply a man once. The one known as Thainnith.” The figure closed its eyes. “Now I am not even that. Now, I am likely dead. And your presence here indicates that my demise did not spark a miracle to fend off the threats to our world as I had hoped. For that, I am sorry.”

Scarlett stared at it. “Thainnith... Are you truly him?”

The figure opened his eyes again, nodding. “I am, though I have also been known by many other titles. The Veilweaver, the Ascendant, the Second Divinarch, Guardian of the Equilibrium, among others. But those are of little importance now. You are here now, which means you have found my hidden laboratory within the Veiled Library. For that, I must commend you.”

Scarlett remained silent for a bit, absorbing the gravity of his words. Despite most of his visage being obscured to her, his voice seemed to carry the weight of millennia, resonating with the wisdom and burdens of his past. It truly seemed like he was telling the truth.

But she hardly believed it. Meeting Thainnith was far beyond her expectations. His name popped up everywhere in the game, but as far as she was aware, the man himself never made an appearance. Encountering him like this was...

Well, she didn't quite know what it was.

“Your arrival here suggests the world teeters once more on the brink of chaos,” Thainnith said, his words sounding equally like a question and a statement.

After a brief hesitation, Scarlett responded, “That is correct, yes.”

“If you know who I am, you must have questions.”

“I do.”

Thainnith clasped his hands behind him, his gaze drifting toward the horizon.

“Understandable. Regrettably, I may not have all the answers you seek.”

Scarlett's expression tightened slightly. “Why is that?”

“Because I am no longer among the living,” he explained. “What stands before you is but a shadow of my former self, a reflection crafted at this place's inception. It lacks the full breadth of my knowledge and the capacity to address every conceivable inquiry you may present.”

“You appear to have no issue conversing with me at the moment,” Scarlett pointed out.

Was this thing perhaps similar to the infused Aurenthial Deacon Embertwood had left behind in the Sunfire Shrine?

“Any dialogue we may be engaging in is merely an illusion,” Thainnith said. He turned back to her, his glowing gaze, intense yet phantom, locking onto her. “I can interact to this extent because our exchange falls within an acceptable range of anticipated parameters. As a divinarch burdened with the fate of this realm, however, I couldn’t afford to anchor even a fragment of my essence here. Hence, not all your questions can be satisfactorily answered if they stray from my expectations.”

Scarlett’s brow furrowed in thought. Was he suggesting that Thainnith—the original Thainnith, that is—had literally pre-designed this echo of himself with a catalogue of anticipated queries and replies? The notion was baffling, if this was the result. It felt like talking with a real person. If it was true, though, how limited was his response range?

“...Earlier, you referred to the concealed chamber within the Veiled Library as your laboratory,” she said, choosing to begin somewhere. “What was its purpose?”

“Myriad,” Thainnith answered, his voice taking on a more solemn quality. “Myriad, always. Its original purpose, I cannot even recall anymore. It has been too long. The passage of time, the accumulation of years, and the pressing nature of my responsibilities and tasks have all but erased it. The same goes for the countless purposes it has no doubt had since then. However, now, as I fashioned this inheritance for someone such as you to find, it served a singular, paramount objective: to finalize the Tribute of Dominion.”

Surprise crossed Scarlett’s expression. “Is this where you created the Tribute of Dominion?”

“More accurately, it’s where I conducted my research,” the man said. “Though I am still engaged in that pursuit as of my latest memories, your presence suggests I ultimately succeeded long ago. For years—how many, I do not know—I dedicated my time here to that solitary endeavour, but it was only recently that I contemplated what would come after that success. The Tribute will not be this realm’s salvation. The threats against it will reappear, and once they do, I can no longer stop them. This epiphany led me to establish this space, to leave a legacy for those who might continue the fight, however meager it might be in relation to the task.”

“And you believe I could be one of those people?” Scarlett asked. “Is that why you called me ‘inheritor’?”

“Indeed.”

“How can you be so certain that I am the correct person?”

“The fabric of the future is woven with fibers of fate and conjecture, fixed in its course yet veiled to those not its architects. Though I wished that were not the case, I am far from such an architect, so certainty is oftentimes not something I can claim.” Thainnith shook his head. “Your arrival speaks for itself, since few others could find this place. It is both within and outside my expectations. I anticipated a pivotal figure uncovering this place eventually, someone unbound by the fate that has most of us a thrall. Yet I did not envision someone of your particular...format. My capabilities do not extend to fully understanding or predicting

what you are, which is surprising. Moreover, you bear the mark of having been touched by the Anomalous One, yet you do not appear to be here to destroy me.”

Scarlett’s brows rose. “You can discern the Anomalous One’s influence on me?”

Wasn’t that related to the system in some way? Could he still detect it, despite that?

“I can,” Thainnith replied.

“How?” Scarlett asked.

“I cannot say.”

She frowned. The lack of detail was...slightly frustrating. Did this mean he wouldn’t or *couldn’t* elaborate on the topic? Either way, there wasn’t much she could do about it.

For a few seconds, she simply regarded the enigmatic figure before her, considering his transient appearance.

“You claim to have created this sanctuary to leave a legacy for those like me,” she began. “What exactly did you intend for me to inherit?”

“My will, first and foremost. A heavy burden to bear, no doubt, but hopefully it can be lighter for you than it was for me.” Thainnith seemed to look past her for a moment, then continued. “At the point of my creation, my focus was aimed solely towards thwarting the Anomalous One and the threat it presented. No force in this world can definitively accomplish this, yet the Tribute of Dominion will do so anyhow. In my era, I have no doubt about this. Your presence here signals a pivotal moment in your era, where the realm faces similar dangers. This means that the location where I will safeguard the Tribute of Dominion will soon open.”

“You are referring to Beld Thylelion,” Scarlett said.

“That may be the name I bestowed upon it.”

“I am already aware of its unveiling. I have seen the future where it happened.”

Thainnith observed her in silence. “...I lack an appropriate response to that, regrettably. Know that the Tribute of Dominion cannot be hidden away forever, even if I wished for it. It is in its very nature to reveal itself, and when that happens, no matter what your affiliations in your era may be, inheritor, if you do not wish to see the Anomalous One be set free, you must secure the Tribute first.”

Scarlett held back a sigh. Was there no point in telling him about her knowledge of the future, then? Had she been too optimistic in thinking that he might know about that simply because he had created elements that might be beyond the game’s existing framework?

“...I understand. I will make it my mission to secure the Tribute first,” she said.

Not that she’d ever had any other plans.

Thainnith responded with a grave nod. "I wish I could offer you the Tribute's location, but its final resting place is unknown to me. However, I likely orchestrated a trail to find its sanctum. Should you seek guidance on where to begin the search, that much I can provide."

"That will not be necessary. I am already aware of Beld Thylelion's whereabouts."

"Then you have come here more prepared than I thought. Perhaps there's hope yet that this world may endure, even in my absence."

Scarlett observed him quietly, waiting to see if there was more he wanted to say. "...Is there nothing else you wished to impart?" she probed after a moment.

"The Tribute of Dominion's importance cannot be overstated," he replied.

"I agree, but surely there is more to this inheritance of yours than that?"

She basically knew all of that stuff from the game already.

Observing her intently, Thainnith seemed to ponder her question, though that felt unlikely if his responses were indeed predetermined. "You need not worry. There is indeed more to my legacy, but it cannot be transferred to you immediately."

"Why not?"

"It requires further preparation before it can be finalized. Simply be patient."

"...Very well."

"In the meantime, are there any further questions you have for me?" Thainnith asked.

Scarlett considered him for a bit. "Explain to me in further detail the nature of the Anomalous One."