

## 145: Elderly insight

Scarlett froze.

How did he know of her ties to the Cabal?

“...I am not certain what you mean by that,” she said.

Dean Godwin studied her closely. He reached into a side pocket on his jacket and pulled out a silver ring that he placed on one of his gloved hands with a casual movement. “Pardon my rudeness, Baroness, but I believe that is a lie.”

She glanced over at Lady Withersworth and the others who were in the middle of their own conversation, none of the sound reaching her.

“I thought this would be a discussion best kept between us,” Godwin said. He stood half a head taller than Scarlett, and there was a weight to his words that hadn’t been there earlier. “Now, if you would not mind answering my question... What is your connection to the Hallowed Cabal?”

His presence felt both overbearing and completely relaxed at once, but that wasn’t anything she couldn’t deal with. Still, this was comparable to the pressure when she had been standing in front of the emperor. If she were to guess, there was some magic involved with that. When the man looked at her, it was as if he was observing something more than simply her physical presence.

She cleared her throat. “I have never heard of this ‘Hallowed Cabal’.”

While she didn’t know what he knew or how he’d learned it, admitting anything here was a bad idea. But so was angering an archwizard, so she would have to figure out some other way to handle this situation.

A few seconds passed as the older man eyed her quietly.

“Very well,” he eventually said.

With one wave of his hand, their surroundings changed and the two of them were standing in a vast void of white light.

Scarlett blinked at the sight.

She was relatively certain they wouldn’t have teleported anywhere—that would be far too conspicuous—so this was probably an illusion of some kind. That meant it was likely a lumomancy or umbramancy spell, or a mix of both. Considering spells that affected the mind didn’t seem to affect her much—which umbramancy often focused on—that left lumomancy as the primary candidate.

She turned her attention to Godwin. He wasn't a lumomancy mage, though. His expertise was in aeromancy and terramancy, as far as she was aware. Did this mean he was just that skilled of a mage that he could do this despite that, or did he use some sort of artifact?

The corners of the man's mouth curved up in a small smile as he observed her reaction. Then he looked to the side. In the white space that stretched out forever before them, a single symbol appeared. Like grey rock carved into the empty air, it formed a character that felt slightly familiar to Scarlett.

Was it ancient Zuverian, maybe?

"Truth. That's what it says," Godwin said, gesturing at it. "Have you ever seen this symbol before?"

Scarlett continued examining it, trying to recall if there was anything special about this character that she knew from the game, but she drew a blank. And while she had learned a bit of Zuverian in her studies, it was far from enough to be of much use yet.

"I believe you have," the man said. "I would prefer if you were honest with me now, while I am asking nicely."

She turned to him. "I have no recollection of seeing this character in particular. If I have, it held no special meaning to me."

He arched an eyebrow. "There is no use lying to me."

"I am not lying."

He studied her for a few seconds more.

"Dean Godwin." She motioned at the space they were in. "Before we continue with this conversation, could you explain exactly why you saw fit to bring me here and interrogate me in this manner?"

The man brought up a hand to his chin, ponderously stroking his beard as he considered her. "You have placed me in quite the conundrum now, Baroness, and are making me question my own judgement. If you are indeed ignorant of what this character signifies, then I may very well have made a rather embarrassing mistake." His black cape billowed as he turned to the side, peering into the distance. "Perhaps so much so that I have to erase your memory simply to ensure news of it does not spread."

For the briefest of moments, Scarlett felt a shiver run down her spine. Mistress had once said something similar, so she didn't doubt that it was possible.

He turned back to her, a hint of mirth in his eyes now. "Unfortunately, that is not something I am capable of, so your memory will have to remain as it is. I would be grateful if this stayed between us, however."

The tense atmosphere that hung between them disappeared for a second—

“Of course, that is assuming what I saw is wrong.”

Then returned with full force.

Scarlett didn't let her wariness show as she looked at the man. “And what, exactly, is it that you think you saw?”

His eyes met hers.

“Hmm. Before that—” He moved his hand and the Zuverian character disappeared, replaced by a red rabbit that was the same shade as the inside of the man's cape. “What color is this little fellow?”

“...Red,” she answered.

“Maroon, technically. But close enough, I suppose.” This time, the man only jiggled his index finger and the red rabbit was replaced by a blue badger-like creature. “Now tell me that this walladger is red as well.”

Scarlett frowned, turning back to him.

“Indulge me, if you would,” he said. “Although I am in no rush.”

She eyed him for a few extra moments. If she just drew things out for long enough, Lady Withersworth or one of the others would likely notice something was up eventually. The question was if they would do something then. Or if they even *could*.

If they did, would it be worth trying to avoid answering the man's questions here? There was clearly something he wanted to know from her, but he didn't seem entirely sure of it himself. Continuing to play his game for now was probably still for the best.

She raised a hand and pointed at the 'walladger'. “That is red.”

Godwin studied her closely for a few seconds before nodding his head. “You are a skilled liar, but a liar nonetheless.” He let out a low chuckle. “This certainly puts me in an uncomfortable spot.”

That might have been the wrong decision. Scarlett stepped back, readying herself to use the [Charm of Expeditious Change] at a moment's notice as the temperature slowly began to increase around her. Small flames popped into existence around her feet.

The man blinked, staring at her. He coughed into his fist. “It seems as if my words might have caused a misunderstanding. I suggest you relax your magic, else you wish to accidentally light some oblivious guest's clothes on fire.”

With a small wave of his hand, a gentle wind swept past Scarlett's legs, and the fires died out.

“When I say that you are a liar, I meant that you failed to convince me that blue is red,” he said. “I apologize for the confusion. As for why this puts me in an uncomfortable spot, you

see, it is because this means that you truly don't recognize that character I showed you earlier, and I may have acted a little impulsively."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "I presume you will explain what you mean by that?"

A small smirk appeared on his face as he locked his hands behind him and gazed into the empty space beside them. "I will not waste too much of your time going over irrelevant details, but suffice it to say that over my somewhat long life, I have traveled a lot and seen many wonders. Books could be written about the adventures I've led. And they have, though I am loath to brag."

He didn't look at all reluctant to mention that.

Clearing his throat, he then held up his left hand and raised the finger featuring the ring he'd put on earlier.

Scarlett inspected it closer. Generally, she couldn't get the system to prompt descriptions of items that other people were carrying, but sometimes it worked if the person was purposefully showing it to her.

Her eyes widened as the message actually popped up.

**[Mark of the Keen (Epic)]**

{The threads of speech form an interwoven web upon which falsities hide. The gift of unraveling this weave lies in the blood of Grehalyr — lent in part to this ring }

"There was a tribe known as the Grehaldrael that once lived in the mountain range south of us," Godwin said. "You likely have not heard of them, but they were an interesting group that I met when I was younger. Quite unique, that lot. In several ways. One notable trait of theirs was that they had the uncanny ability to always know when someone lied."

Scarlett had already understood what he was getting at the moment she saw the description.

He looked back at her. "This was a gift I received from them. While it is somewhat limited in its ability, it has a similar effect. I will tell you, it gets tiring rather quickly to always know when others are lying, but it can always be useful at events such as these, where dishonesties are a currency of their own."

He *knew* she had been lying about not knowing about the Hallowed Cabal, then. If he truly wanted to, it would be hard for her to keep something from him completely.

"There are several things I am curious about regarding you, Baroness," the man continued. "I would say suspicious, but I am already questioning my judgement and it would be embarrassing if I jumped to any further hasty conclusions, so I will leave it at 'curious' for now." He considered her for a few breaths. "To get things back on track, however, I will unfortunately have to ask this question again. And I do hope you are forthright with me this time. What is your connection to the Hallowed Cabal?"

She thought over it for a few seconds before answering. "They are an adversary of mine. I have had several altercations with the Cabal in the past."

“In the past, you say? And what is your relationship with them at present, if I may ask?”

She shot him a look. The man wouldn't let her wriggle out of this.

“I am still at odds with them,” she said.

“Yet you no longer have altercations with them?”

“...We have reached an arrangement, of sorts.”

“An arrangement with the Hallowed Cabal?” The man's gaze turned sharper. “I presume you're aware that the Cabal is an enemy of both the empire and all of its citizens? What is the nature of this arrangement, that a noble of the empire would have dealings with a group of that sort?”

Scarlett creased her forehead. “The empire could not protect me nor my people from the Cabal. In order to safeguard myself and those that serve under me, the Cabal and I have agreed not to interfere or threaten each other out of turn. I am in no way supporting them or acting against the empire, so I see no reason as to why I should not prioritize the safety of my people.”

That seemed to surprise the man a little. “Pardon my saying so, but I find it difficult to believe that the Cabal would agree to such an arrangement with a mere baroness. I am uncertain if you are aware, but there are members of that group that even I would not want to face.” He furrowed his brows. “But you do appear to be telling the truth.”

“I have told you as much as you are owed under these circumstances, Dean Godwin,” she said. “The exact means by which I convinced the Hallowed Cabal, however, is not something I am willing to share with you. It has the potential to jeopardise the safety of far too many people.”

If he knew she had The Angler Man's heart in her possession, then there was no telling what he would do. It was entirely within his power to take it from her and use it to kill The Angler Man, which would effectively doom her and those close to her to be hunted down by the rest of the Cabal. And while killing the Cabal's leader could technically prevent some of the disasters that would occur in the future, it could also possibly bring about others in their place. Even if she somehow could protect herself and everybody around her—including those living peacefully in her lands—it was far too risky a move.

“Hmm.” Godwin started massaging his beard. “While I fail to think of anything that might cause you to say that, I will not press the topic. However, there is still one question that remains unanswered, though I am starting to suspect you yourself do not know the reason behind it.”

Once again, he observed her not as if he was looking *at* her, but rather *through* her.

Scarlett steadied herself.

“Are you aware that you are going against fate?” he asked.

She paused. "...Pardon?"

The look in his eyes was as if he was watching some strange specimen whose existence he couldn't quite explain. "Do you perhaps know what the dogma of the Hallowed Cabal is? Do you know what the truth they seek is?"

She frowned. She was familiar with all of that from her playthroughs in the game, yes, but what did he mean about her fighting against fate? That could be interpreted in a number of ways that might fit her situation, but she felt it was strange he was even talking about fate to begin with.

He continued speaking as if he had guessed her thoughts. "Fate is not truly a thing that can be predicted. It is most likely not even a thing that any one person can truly comprehend. Even catching a glimpse of it is beyond perhaps everyone but the gods, and I strongly suspect that even they are mostly blind to it. I have lived for quite some years now, traveling across countless lands in my time, yet I would never dare claim such an ability myself. As an accomplished archwizard, though, what I *have* learned to see—however modestly—is when other fight against that fate. But there is only one group of people in which I have observed that phenomenon. Certain members of the Hallowed Cabal, involved enough in their search for their 'truth' that they go against even the currents that steer the path of this world."

Scarlett stared at him.

This was news to her.

She knew why the Hallowed Cabal had been created, and why they were fighting the empire. She knew why they were fighting against the very gods themselves, and the current order of the world. But she knew nothing about this fight against 'fate'. Was that something specific to this world? Did it have something to do with the fact that some things were predetermined to happen as they did in the game? Or was this something else?

She could at least understand why Godwin thought she was going against fate, if this was true. There were over a dozen explanations that she could think of from the top of her head, but all of them boiled down to her presence here as Amy Bernal in Scarlett's body. But now the Cabal was tied into this as well? And that was why he thought she was connected to them?

Was he the only one that could see this, or were there others like him? Had any of the people she'd met before now seen this as well, yet chosen not to mention it? Godwin was one of the most powerful mages in the empire, yes, but there were many people that were on a similar level as him. Arlene and Mistress were just two examples.

"It seems my words have made you start to consider," the man said. "Do you perhaps know what it is that is so special about you?"

She stayed quiet for a while as she gathered her thoughts. "...There are too many possibilities for me to disclose them all."

Godwin blinked. Then he laughed.

“Adalicia mentioned that you were an interesting lass. Withersworth did as well, though he wasn’t quite as generous with his words. I will admit that I was disappointed at first meeting you and seeing you might be associated with the Cabal, but I do believe I understand what they meant now. I also think I understand why Rowley was so reticent when your name was brought up.”

Scarlett’s mouth twitched as she recalled her meeting with the vice-dean of Elystead Tower.

“Could you perhaps indulge me and mention only one or two?” Godwin asked.

Scarlett pressed her lips together. “...I have seen glimpses of what might happen in the future. I did not like what I saw, so I endeavoured to change it.”

The man stilled, an intense interest now having entered his eyes. “The *future*, you say?”

“Yes. Or perhaps a possible future, were things to play out without interference.”

If the Cabal were ‘going against fate’ as well, then she wasn’t sure how many of the predictions surrounding them were accurate. They still *seemed* to be, from what she’d seen, but it was hard to know for sure.

“And how did you achieve that? Did you perform some ritual, or was it due to the influence of Ittar or one of the other gods?”

“Before I answer any of that, I would like to know more about this ability of yours that allows you to see that I am fighting against fate,” Scarlett said. “Is it something all archmages can do?”

“Archwizard,” the man pointed out. “Though I will admit the difference does not matter much in this context. And no, I would imagine I am the only mage in the empire capable of it. But one never knows what secrets others hide.”

“So it is not due to a spell?”

A wry smile appeared on his face. “If there were a spell that could see the strands of fate, then it would be a powerful spell indeed. They are the underlying gears that rule this world, beyond even the workings of magic and the gods. That is exactly why your claim of seeing glimpses of the future is so intriguing.”

“I would appreciate if you did not share this information with anyone else.”

“I believe I may be able to comply with that request, though I hope you understand why I cannot simply overlook something of this magnitude myself. No self-respecting wizard could.”

She eyed him. “...What is it that you want?”

Godwin crossed his arms as he held a thoughtful expression. “First, I want to confirm that this foresight of yours is not due to any of the gods.”

She sighed. “Not as far as I am aware.”

“Hmm.” He tapped a finger against his arm, then paused as he turned his head and looked out into empty space. “It would seem as if we are out of time.”

Scarlett looked where he was looking, but couldn’t see anything but the white void.

The man turned back to her. “Perhaps this is for the better. This is not the best venue for something of this nature. Would you perhaps agree to arranging a meeting in the future? I would very much like to know more and investigate further into this phenomenon. Of course, in return, you may ask questions of me as the dean of Elystead Tower and whatever else you might need.”

She wanted to say no, but that felt like it would be a bad idea at this point, so instead she gave a nod. “Very well.”

He smiled. “I am glad that we have that resolved.”

He clapped his hands and suddenly the world returned around them, along with all the noise.

Scarlett looked to Lady Withersworth and the others, who were still occupied with their own discussion like nothing strange had happened at all. How had all of that looked to them?

Dean Godwin gave her a wink before he seamlessly entered their conversation, causing a burst of laughter from the group of gentlemen and Lady Withersworth to shake her head.

Scarlett looked on for a while, uncertain how to feel about what had just happened. It wasn’t necessarily bad, considering how things had gone and the archwizard’s personality, but she didn’t like being pushed into a corner with her options like this. She would have to see how she dealt with this in the future, and if she could squeeze some benefits from this.

Lady Withersworth looked in her direction, and the woman seemed to consider her for a bit, glancing at Godwin. Deciding not to make her worry, Scarlett soon joined the conversations as well—to the degree which she could, at least—and left any further thoughts about everything else at the back of her mind for now.

First, she had to get through this night. Then she could bother with other things.