

## 99: Hospitality and scheming go hand in hand

Scarlett idly took in some of the wall decorations—paintings of landscapes, people, buildings—as she climbed the stairs to the top floor of the mansion’s east wing. This floor felt more like an attic than the rest did, with no windows and a lower ceiling, but it was far from ‘lacking’, if you asked her. Especially if you compared it to a normal person’s home in this world.

She made her way down the hallway, stopping to gently knock on the thick door at its end. There was no response. She waited for a bit before slowly reaching to open the door.

Inside was a bedchamber roughly the size of Scarlett’s office, with a large, canopied bed near the center and a table placed between the bed and a mostly empty bookcase. The robed figure of the Countess sat hunched over the table, back turned to the entrance.

Scarlett lightly cleared her throat.

The woman’s shoulders stirred.

“I hope I am not disturbing you,” Scarlett said, glancing around the room. It was surprisingly tidy. She had half been expecting to see broken furniture spread around the place. The smell also wasn’t that bad. Maybe Molly had done more than she needed to and helped the Countess in keeping things clean. The servant would only have had one day to prepare the room, so it was impressive that she had managed it.

At the table, the Countess slowly turned around to reveal her bandaged face hidden beneath her robe. A strange smile formed on the woman’s lips. “Ah, ah. Baroness. No need for apology, no need... Welcome.”e.”

Scarlett approached the woman. “At present, I am preoccupied with other matters, but I wished to pay a brief visit in order to ascertain how things are. Are the accommodations to your satisfaction? Do you lack anything?”

The Countess pulled her arms closer to her body, seemingly trying to cover whatever had been on the table that she’d been focusing on. Scarlett caught a glimpse of what looked like a decorated napkin of some kind right before it disappeared beneath the woman’s robes. Did she do embroidery? That was surprising. Perhaps Molly had given her the materials.

“Everything...” The Countess seemed to think for a moment. “Everything... Everything is good.”

“Excellent.” Scarlett nodded slowly, choosing not to pry into the question of what the woman had been doing. “Despite that, however, I wish to offer you my apologies. Having to conceal yourself in a room like this is not ideal, no matter the circumstances. I will endeavor to ensure that the secluded location is made up for, where possible.”

“There is no problem... No problem.” The Countess shook her head vigorously. “I am...grateful. So grateful... It is just...unfamiliar.” The woman grew quieter, mumbling to herself as she seemed to carry on the conversation by herself.

Scarlett watched as the Countess appeared to become lost in her own mind. She'd learned that there wasn't much to do in these situations. After a while, the woman's attention finally returned to Scarlett, a look of confusion on her face. Then a flash of recognition appeared in her eyes. "Ah, ah... Sister...where is my sister?"

Scarlett fought back the frown that almost wormed its way onto her brow. She really shouldn't have brought up the sister back then.

"Your sister is not here. But you will have the opportunity to meet her again eventually. This I promise."

"Right... Yes..." The woman nodded several times. "I-I am grateful... To the Baroness..."

"There is no need for that," Scarlett said, waving her hand. "Have you had the opportunity to grow more acquainted with the servant I tasked with helping you?"

It was best to change the topic before the woman lost herself again.

The Countess gave her a puzzled look. "...Servant?"

"Molly. The woman that has been visiting you lately. She has black hair."

A look of realization passed over the woman's face. "Ah... Yes...she brought me food... Very kind... Very kind."

"I am glad to hear that. If there is anything else that you feel you lack, you can simply request it from her and she will arrange whatever it may be."

"I understand...yes..."

Scarlett's eyes shifted to the Countess' hands which were wrapped in loose bandages. The woman was fiddling with the fabric of her robe, close to where she had hidden away what she'd been working on.

"...That was all I wanted," she said and began turning around. It might be best to leave her alone for now. "I will take my leave. If you wish to meet with me again later, you can tell Molly such whenever you have the need."

"Yes...yes..." The Countess' attention seemed to have dispersed somewhat again. Her head nodded absentmindedly, her gaze fixed on the wall in front of her.

Scarlett sent one last, long look at the woman, ensuring there was nothing strange, then left the room. Her visit really was just to make sure things were in order before she returned to the business at hand. While the woman's mental state hadn't exactly gotten better since their first meeting, the Countess appeared to be mostly harmless, for now at least. That was about as much as Scarlett could ask at the moment.

Returning to the stairs, she climbed two floors and moved down the hallways until she reached her office. There, she sat down at her desk and straightened herself, ready to get back to the work she'd abandoned before dinner and her quick visit to the Countess. There were

various documents and bulky, legal books spread out on the desk, along with several maps detailing the empire's different regions.

She pulled out her notes from the [Pouch of Holding] where she usually kept them safe.

Much of today and the previous day had been spent going over the current matter. Over and over again, she'd thought things through in her head, to make sure she wasn't missing something glaringly obvious. To *ensure* things would go exactly the way she wanted.

Tonight was when she was meeting the Hallowed Cabal again. Tonight was when she was supposed to provide them with the third piece of the Seal of Thainnith.

She put her hand into the pouch on the desk, pulling out the artifact in question.

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

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

If the Hallowed Cabal got their hands on this, things would change for the worse for everyone. The Cabal already had the first piece, and with the information she'd given them before, they had probably found the second piece as well. With the third piece, the empire would probably be the one most affected by the Cabal's following moves. But she held no illusions that she would get away unharmed. They had no real reason to leave her alone, even after getting the third piece, after all.

Besides the seal, she was also technically supposed to deliver the 'artifact' that let her resist The Angler Man's mental probing. When she'd originally made that promise, she had actually been planning on giving them an old diadem that existed in the game. She knew for a fact that it countered his abilities, so it would have been a decent enough excuse. The thing with that particular item, though, was that it was in a problematic spot. Even attempting to get it would cost her both a lot of time and resources.

Which is why she'd decided just not to bother. Her current plan didn't involve giving the Cabal anything at all to begin with. Everything she needed was already prepared. She had been in contact with the guest of honor for tonight's proceedings, scouted the meeting place, and gone through a list of the most likely Cabal members that might show up. Any surprises that could occur were within her expectations. Even if The Angler Man himself woke up from his slumber now, it should still be possible to keep things under control.

It might get a bit problematic if someone like Veil came with, yes, but that was unlikely. The woman would consider something like this a waste of time, and the Cabal didn't have any reason to force her to join.

No, Scarlett had thought through this a lot. She knew who she was dealing with. Things were in her favor.

She was actually starting to grow a bit excited.

At first, after the Hallowed Cabal originally attacked the mansion, anger had been the prime emotion she felt regarding things. It diminished somewhat over time, and she had channeled some of it into her efforts of coming up with her current plan of action, but it hadn't exactly

ever *passed*. Until now. Now, as she was getting closer and closer to actually carrying things out, the anger had almost been entirely replaced by a self-assuredness around the situation. It wasn't the normal haughtiness that came with the original Scarlett's personality, nor would she call it arrogance. But she also wouldn't go as far as to call it *deserved* quite yet, either.

What she was planning was pretty bold, after all. Not to mention incredibly risky.

To the Cabal, it probably looked like they were dealing with a minor, mostly harmless, but well-informed, factor. One which they clearly didn't see as an actual threat. And they were right. She was nowhere near being able to go against them or harm them by herself, nor were there many people who had the power—or inclination—to protect her from them to the degree that would be needed if she antagonised the Cabal. But she had the advantage, in that she knew a lot more about those she was dealing with than they did her. The current shot-callers in the Hallowed Cabal were exactly the kind of clever, calculating people her plan had a good chance of working against.

She wouldn't *have* to go against them, nor would she need the protection of someone powerful enough to keep the Cabal away. Because the Cabal would do that for her. As long as her plan worked out as intended—and she was feeling pretty certain about that part—then they wouldn't have much choice in the matter.

Of course, it would have been ideal if they had never turned their attention towards her to begin with. But now that they had, this was the best way she could think of to get them off her back permanently. Or at least semi-permanently.

After this, she would have a lot more freedom to focus on other things. Sure, she would have to be more careful about eyes on her than before, but that was a necessary sacrifice, considering things. She would just have to learn to cope with it. Fynn might have to work overtime from now on, as well. Thankfully, the young man wasn't one to complain about such things. Scarlett would make sure to pay him well.

He would be joining tonight's meeting. She'd already told him exactly what would be required of him, since he was the only one she was bringing along. Having any of the others come with would just cause trouble. Fynn, however, was a necessity.

Although, considering how his backstory tied into the Cabal in the game, bringing him along came with its own risk. But, for the time being, he didn't know all the details there. If a problem were to pop up, it wouldn't be this early. Scarlett would have to be a bit careful in the future, though. But for now, it would work fine. That was what mattered.

She stayed in her office for the remainder of the evening, reviewing things a few more times as she completed the last of the preparations. Finally, not long after the clock on her desk struck ten, a knock sounded out from the door.

Fynn stepped into the office.

It was time.