

228: Awkward company

Scarlett stared at Nol'viz. In return, Nol'viz stared back at her, the trio of eyes on her expressionless mask blinking in concert.

For several seconds, neither of them moved.

Scarlett was frantically trying to figure out the reason why one of the Hallowed Cabal's more formidable agents would be here right now. As far as she was aware, the Cabal shouldn't have any business here at present. Unless it somehow involved Ayrilazkreh, maybe? But they wouldn't have sent Nol'viz for that.

Were they here because of Scarlett, then? Had they decided to betray her after what happened in Crowcairn? Certainly, they would know she'd been there, but she hadn't violated any terms of their agreement. Without jumping to drastic conclusions, they had no grounds to hold her accountable.

Moreover, how would the Cabal even know to *expect* her presence here? They had never exhibited any signs of predicting the future before, making the likelihood of this being a mere coincidence higher.

But that didn't alleviate any of her unease about having a Cabal member in front of her.

Nol'viz's persistent, silent gaze bordered on disconcerting. The girl tilted her head slightly, as if finding this curious.

Scarlett's eyes briefly fell to the [Essence of Zenthias] in her left hand, her right gripping the blade against the heart-like object.

As long as she had The Angler Man's heart, she should be fine. Along with the teleportation feature of her [Garments of Form] and the means to disrupt Dean Godwin's spell and return home to Freybrook whenever she wanted, it wasn't as if she was completely defenseless.

Refocusing on Nol'viz, Scarlett adopted a look of authority. Yet, just as she was about to speak, Nol'viz interrupted with a question.

"Why are you here?" the robed girl asked, her voice a blend of echoes and raspy whispers emanating from beneath the mask.

Scarlett paused, taking a moment to consider before responding. It seemed like the Cabal agent was as surprised by Scarlett's presence as Scarlett was by hers.

"...The specifics of my presence here are irrelevant," she finally replied. "What brings the Hallowed Cabal here?"

Nol'viz slightly leaned her head to the other side. "They aren't here."

A small frown crossed Scarlett's brow. "Allow me to rephrase. Why are *you* here?"

The girl didn't answer.

After several seconds passed, Scarlett probed further. "To be clear, your purpose here does not concern me, correct?"

"No."

"Then you are not here to interfere in my matters?"

"No."

"Very well." Scarlett allowed herself to relax slightly, though she didn't let her guard down completely.

Taking a step back, she kept a watchful eye on Nol'viz as she turned to her left and began to walk away. Nol'viz didn't object. It didn't escape Scarlett's attention, however, that the girl soon started following her at a distance.

Navigating through the ruins, Scarlett had to be alert both for potential threats around her while staying mindful of her uninvited follower. Nol'viz showed no signs of halting her pursuit, so eventually, Scarlett stopped to once more face her.

"You must realize that the Cabal should know better than to intrude on my affairs," she said.

Nol'viz stopped, regarding her for a few seconds. "We are not the Cabal."

"But you are a member of it."

The girl didn't respond to that.

Scarlett's brows furrowed. Technically, as a member of the Cabal, any interference from Nol'viz could be construed as a breach of Scarlett's agreement with the Cabal as a whole, even if Nol'viz didn't appear to see it that way.

Should she try to dismiss her more forcefully? She didn't want to risk a fight with the girl, though. It was possible that Nol'viz wasn't here on the order of the Cabal, and if so, she might not restrain herself despite Scarlett possessing the [Essence of Zenthos]. The girl's priorities didn't entirely align with the rest of the Cabal.

Nol'viz simply continued silently observing her as Scarlett considered her options. Eventually, Scarlett shook her head and turned around, resuming her original purpose here.

If anything, this could be used as future leverage against the Cabal. As long as they didn't attack her, it didn't matter if they knew what she was up to here. She would have preferred if she didn't have to stay on her toes during her time here, but she felt relatively confident in being able to escape if necessary.

Pretending to ignore Nol'viz's proximity, Scarlett walked through the ruined Zuverian outpost, exploring the weathered labyrinth of stone. The remaining structures, gutted by time

and erosion, didn't look to have anything of note in them, but Scarlett still took the time to inspect most of them.

Eventually, she reached a semi-collapsed area near the outpost's edge, bordering the rocky shore providing a view of the surrounding waters and Darkshore in the distance. Stone arches marked the entrance to what might have once been a courtyard, dominated by a larger, tiered building at its center.

Scarlett considered it for a few seconds. This seemed to be the right place.

Crossing the courtyard, Scarlett made her way inside the building, entering into a tall hall filled with broken pillars and stone debris. Having to clamber over the rubble to get through—Scarlett felt more self-conscious than usual with Nol'viz still following her—she reached a raised platform at the hall's end, adorned with several podiums on it.

Scarlett paused, glancing back to see Nol'viz standing at the entrance, gaze unwavering.

What *was* the girl up to?

Nol'viz soon started moving, blending into the surrounding shadows and traveling through them across the hall, reforming at the base of the platform.

Keeping her eyes on Nol'viz for a few seconds, Scarlett eventually returned her attention to the podiums. Each had a ten-by-ten grid on it, each tile wearing arcane symbols that she was pretty sure weren't Zuverian script. They showed signs of significant wear, likely from years of scholars and other people having messed around while trying to figure them out.

Forehead creased in thought, Scarlett pondered the puzzle presented before her. Unlike previous such puzzles, she had no clue of the solution for this puzzle, and solving it by hand seemed a daunting task. There were five podiums, and the sheer number of combinations was probably in the tens of thousands.

Perhaps it had been easier in the game, but in this world, there would've been a reason no one had figured this out before.

Silent steps sounded out next to her as Nol'viz approached, and Scarlett cautiously stepped to the side. She eyed the girl for a few seconds.

"...If I recall correctly, the Cabal advised you to be wary of me."

Nol'viz nodded. "They said your words could be dangerous," she replied without a hint of deception.

"Then would it not be wise of you to heed their advice?"

"We are."

Scarlett met the trio of eyes on Nol'viz's mask as they blinked, weighing that reply. Eventually, she returned her focus to the five podiums and the puzzle. She tried rearranging

the tiles some, seeing if she couldn't stumble onto the right solution, but she had no such luck. Accepting the fact, she decided to simply try plan B.

Stepping off the platform, she found a suitable spot on a nearby piece of rubble.

"You might want to move," she warned Nol'viz.

After a moment of silently considering Scarlett, the girl complied, stepping off the platform as well.

Scarlett then summoned a veritable cascade of water that splashed over the platform. It spilled over the sides and pooled on the floor before vanishing as Scarlett manipulated the water, leaving only some traces of it behind.

She extended her senses, attempting to connect with her hydrokinesis skill and discern the path of the water that remained. For a brief moment, it was as though she could feel it seep into the smallest of crevices. The sensation was strange, and she wouldn't claim to entirely understand it, but after spending some time like that, she managed to find what she was looking for.

On one side of the platform, she detected the water seeping into a narrow gap where the platform met the floor.

Approaching that spot, she crouched to inspect the platform's edge. Perhaps the ages had worn down the structure, but she could see a small but noticeable seam.

Using her hydrokinesis, Scarlett formed a tiny heated jet of water, aiming it into the seam like a miniature saw. She then conjured a small, intensely compressed and focused flame. Despite its size, it demanded a decent amount of mana, but the rock at least began to melt under the concentrated heat.

She had previously tested her fire on rocks and knew it was hot enough to melt them, but the true temperature of her flames remained a mystery. At what point did rocks begin to melt? It was a question she wouldn't mind knowing the answer to, but she was unlikely to find it in this world.

Alternating between her hydrokinesis and pyrokinesis, she used her fire to soften up the stone and then quickly washed away the molten slag with the pressurized water as she created a thin hole. All the while, Nol'viz observed silently from the sidelines.

Eventually, Scarlett felt the water penetrate the stone into an open space.

Having accomplished her task, she stood, straightened her clothes, then activated her [Garments of Form] while focusing on the small cavity she'd created. Her previous experiments had confirmed that the teleportation feature wasn't limited by spatial constraints.

A cloud of mist enveloped her. Moments later, she found herself in darkness, almost stumbling on what felt like stairs beneath her feet. Catching herself on a nearby wall, she brought out her enchanted glasses to see through the dark, revealing a descending staircase.

She smiled. Things like this were one of the benefits that came with not being constrained by the game's system.

She began descending the stairs, only to stop as the stone around her trembled. Behind her, the staircase's entrance, previously concealed by a single slab of stone, started sliding open, revealing both the chamber she'd just left and Nol'viz standing at the mouth of the opening, peering down at her.

...The girl knew the puzzle's solution? Why would the Cabal have bothered teaching her that?

Nol'viz started walking down the steps towards Scarlett.

"Do you plan to shadow me across this entire island?" Scarlett asked, tone sharp.

"We are curious," Nol'viz's replied in her whispering voices. "Why are you here?"

"My purpose here is neither the Cabal's nor your concern."

Having said that, Scarlett continued down the stairs. Along the walls, small sconces held unlit, dark crystals, interspersed among carved Zuverian faces. At the base, the staircase opened into a spacious chamber.

In the chamber's center lay a massive steel construct, its dull grey body intersected by faded blue lines connected to veined pathways in the floor and walls. These pathways, in turn, connected to several shattered crystals around the room.

Scarlett raised an eyebrow at the sight. The chamber's guardian had been deactivated, it seemed, lending credence to the suspicions that had brought her here.

With no immediate threat to her safety, she confidently crossed the room. Nol'viz seemed to halt beside the dormant colossus, studying it curiously, while Scarlett continued towards the far end of the chamber, where a small stone altar stood atop an elevated platform.

Climbing up to the altar, Scarlett looked down at it.

It was empty.

She had expected as much. This altar once held the first piece of the Seal of Thainnith, which the Hallowed Cabal had in their possession at the start of the game. It was also the very same piece that Scarlett had assisted Mistress in stealing from the Cabal.

Turning her focus to the mural-adorned wall before the altar, Scarlett studied the Zuverian symbols and drawings etched into the stone. Her attention was drawn to a section depicting a group confronting a range of different entities in different scenes, varying from leviathan-like beasts to an amorphous blob blotting out the sky.

For some reason, it felt evident that they were all the same being. Merely gazing at it triggered an indistinct sensation at the back of her mind, as if calling to her.

Absorbed by that feeling, she nearly lost track of time. Snapping back to reality, she quickly turned her head to check on Nol'viz's position, finding the robed girl standing just a few steps behind her, her masked gaze fixed on Scarlett.

Nol'viz then shifted her attention to the murals, remaining silent.

Somewhat annoyed at her own carelessness, Scarlett stepped down from the altar before looking back at the wall. She still wasn't familiar enough with the Zuverian language to decipher the text herself, but she already had a general idea of what was said. The murals provided a general explanation of what the Seal of Thainnith was.

In the game, this place marked the player's introduction to the Seal of Thainnith questline, setting the stage for future events. With Scarlett's experiences in Crowcairn and what she had learned from Anguish, she had been curious if reality differed from the game in that regard. However, everything here seemed consistent with what she had been expecting.

Still, it couldn't hurt to be thorough.

Taking out a notebook from her [Pouch of Holding], she began transcribing the murals' contents onto the paper using pyrokinesis. That took her a dozen minutes or so, but once she finished, she sent one final look at the depiction of the confrontation with the strange entity.

Glancing to the side, she also summoned her status window.

[Name: Scarlett Hartford]

[Skills:

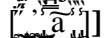
[Superior Mana Control]

[Superior Pyromancy]

[Major Pyrokinesis]

[Greater Hydromancy]

[Major Hydrokinesis]

[

[Traits:

[Dignified August]

[Supercilious]

[Cavalier]

[Callous]

[Overbearing]

[Conceited]

[Third-rate Mana Veins]]

[Mana: 9632/12145]

[Points: 2]

Her focus lingered on the glitched skill. She was pretty sure it was related to the Anomalous One that was trapped inside the Seal of Thainnith, and it was also probably the source of the inner pull that she felt while looking at the mural.

She was also pretty sure this wasn't the first time it had tried influencing her behaviour. Back in Crowcairn, when she had been close to facing off against Raimond, she had been convinced she could win no matter what happened. That conviction had only felt partially her

own. The other half, she suspected, had originated from this skill. Like it was promising her some unknown power.

She wasn't exactly keen on taking that offer when she didn't even understand the skill's purpose. Hopefully, the skill was limited in what it could do without her permission. Otherwise, she wasn't quite sure what she could do, considering the system itself was still largely a mystery to her.

Closing the status window for now, she glanced at Nol'viz, who appeared to have gotten stuck in front of the murals now as well.

Scarlett was still trying to piece together the reasons behind the girl's presence here. Since the Cabal would have retrieved the Seal a long time ago, the ruins here wouldn't hold much value to them. Other than that, there should only be one other place on this isle that might interest them, but she couldn't figure out how that connected to Nol'viz specifically being here.

With a shake of her head, Scarlett turned and headed towards a half-hidden exit on the side of the chamber.

Before she delved any deeper into that particular mystery, she wanted to confirm her other suspicions first. Potentially finding more information about the Anomalous One had been part of the reason for her visit here, but it wasn't her main objective.

She entered a corridor that was similar to the ones in the other Zuverian ruins she had explored during her time. Using her pyrokinesis to keep herself warm, she walked through the chilly stone passageways by herself. For the time being, it seemed Nol'viz had fallen behind, though she expected the girl would reappear soon enough.

Navigating through the corridor, Scarlett noted evidence of triggered or disabled traps on the way. Broken arrows and weapons were strewn about, some protruding from hidden compartments in the walls, while dried pools of acid and similar substances marked the floor on occasion. The scene was reminiscent of her own party's passage through similar ruins.

They also looked somewhat recent.

She wondered whether the Cabal was responsible for that. In the game, these traps remained intact until the player's arrival, even though the Cabal had supposedly visited this place first. In this world, maybe that was different.

Maybe.

As she continued, Scarlett eventually reached another chamber, this one markedly smaller than the previous one. It almost looked like it might have once served as someone's living quarters, or maybe workspace, with aged stone shelves and desks lining the walls, interspersed with odd metal apparatuses.

Scarlett couldn't help but notice the absence of any loot-worthy valuables on the shelves.

Her gaze was drawn to a peculiar structure in the chamber's corner. There, a circular platform of polished grey metal a few meters wide stood, surrounded by a metal frame. Most notably, however, was the fact that the frame twisted inward, its surface darkened and charred as if exposed to intense heat.

Scarlett paused upon seeing this.

It was just as she'd thought. Someone had been here. Recently. Someone who *wasn't* part of the Hallowed Cabal.

The question was who?