

## 229: Playing apprehensions

Scarlett's attention was locked on the mangled device before her, eyeing the damage that had been done to it. She'd had her suspicions, but seeing tangible proof was a different thing entirely.

To anyone else, this sight by itself wouldn't carry much meaning. Even if they recognized it as odd that this artifact was in such a sad state, they wouldn't have any insight into its implications.

Scarlett did, though.

Deliberately, she walked across the chamber, stopping before the round platform nestled in the room's corner. Her focus shifted from the contorted and charred remains of the device's frame to its base. The platform, split into several parts by deep cracks, bore remnants of what might have been runes, now scorched beyond recognition.

This device was yet another Zuverian teleportation artifact, similar to the Kilnstones. Unlike the Kilnstones, however, this artifact formed a one-way link to another set of hidden ruins near Kilsfell. In the game, the player could only use it once, and it would break after they did.

Just like this one had.

Scarlett wasn't exactly sure *why* it broke. She vaguely recalled something about age having gotten to it, but the details escaped her. What mattered was that, in the game, this device served as the typical method for the player to reach the ruins she was currently in, meaning it would likely have still been functional just a few months ago, when the game's timeline originally began.

Combining this fact with the activated traps she encountered on her way to this chamber, she felt pretty confident in her assumption that someone had used this thing recently.

The number of possible suspects Scarlett knew of wasn't exactly long. In fact, other than the Hallowed Cabal itself—which she thought unlikely—she could only think of three possibilities.

One scenario was that this world's timeline had diverged enough from the game that someone Scarlett was unfamiliar with had discovered the ruins outside Kilsfell and used the teleportation artifact located there. Since she knew the Cabal themselves could defy fate at least slightly, the events she knew to expect weren't completely set in stone. However, she had yet to encounter a situation where a detail like *this* had changed.

Another, more plausible scenario involved Princess Regina. Scarlett knew the princess was already going around the empire, researching Zuverian ruins similar to this one. In the game, having the princess in the party was even one of the easiest ways to find this place. Scarlett had even suspected that the princess might discover this site ever since learning that the woman had disappeared.

But there was still a third possibility. One that could very well go hand-in-hand with the second.

A ‘player’ might have been here.

Scarlett’s expression turned into a deep frown as she considered it.

Since her arrival in this world, she had entertained the possibility of not being the only outsider. The existence of a ‘player’ character, filling the same role as the game’s protagonist, seemed to fit inside the framework of this world. Whether they’d be aware of the overarching meta-narrative, as Scarlett was, remained uncertain, though.

Until recently, she hadn’t encountered any substantial evidence that such a person existed. She’d even grown relatively confident they *didn’t*. If they did, she would have expected to see some signs of their presence, since she was based in Freybrook, which served as a low-level area in the game. If the player followed a similar progress route to the game, that would have put them squarely in her sights. *She* had been a low-level boss originally, after all.

Sure, she’d altered events to the point where it was unlikely that the ‘confront Baroness Scarlett Hartford’ questline would ever occur as it did in the game, but she should still have seen *something*. She had even used Beldon’s information network to investigate if there were any promising new Shielder or similar characters running around, but none of the reports had indicated anything that pointed to the existence of a player character.

That changed with the news of the first princess’ disappearance, though.

While it was entirely possible that the princess had independently decided to run off in this world, Scarlett couldn’t ignore that the event paralleled the game’s storyline, where the princess would join the player’s party.

Scarlett had mixed feelings about the possibility of such a player. On one hand, it might be nice to interact with someone from her own world. On the other, a player character—regardless of whether they were aware of the game aspects of this world—introduced unpredictable variables that Scarlett couldn’t necessarily manage.

The player didn’t have any defined allegiances. If they possessed the same type of knowledge and system that she did, there was no telling what sort of threat they could pose. Any actions on their part could limit Scarlett’s own influence on future events.

If a player did exist, Scarlett preferred if she could make them her ally, but she also had to accept the fact that they could be a potential enemy. And there was no telling what effect their presence might already have had on the timeline of this world.

What bothered her the most was that she had so little information about this potential player. In contrast, if they possessed the same game knowledge as her, there was a decent likelihood that they would know about her, given all the waves she’d made across the empire.

A chilling sensation traveled up Scarlett’s spine and she whirled around, finding Nol’viz’s robed figure standing at the chamber’s entrance, her masked face studying her intently. Soon,

though, Nol'viz's gaze drifted to the disfigured device behind Scarlett, head tilting inquisitively.

The girl's silence was laden with unspoken questions.

Scarlett chose not to respond, instead walking back across the chamber and moving past Nol'viz towards the main chamber.

The purpose behind her visit to this place was to confirm her suspicions, and she'd done just that. While the significance of what she learned was still unclear, it would force her to ponder several new scenarios that she hadn't previously given much consideration.

The faint sound of footsteps trailed behind her as she navigated the corridor, but she pushed that to the corner of her mind as her thoughts focused on the ramifications of this potential discovery.

Once she reached the main chamber where the Seal of Thainnith had once been located, she ascended the stairs back to the surface. From there, she removed her enchanted glasses and clambered her way over the broken rubble to the courtyard outside.

"We are curious," Nol'viz's echoing voices reached her as the girl moved up beside her. "What did you learn there?"

Scarlett turned to face her, observing the girl silently for a moment.

Even if the Cabal heard of her visit here, it was very unlikely that they'd be able to make much sense of it. Nonetheless, she wasn't going to share more than she needed to.

"No matter your persistence in asking me such questions, my response remains unchanged," she stated in an emotionless tone, shifting her focus to the volcano taking up much of the nearby horizon.

There was a brief silence in return as Nol'viz seemed to digest that answer.

"...Are you afraid?"

Scarlett's head snapped back to the girl, her eyes meeting the impassive mask. The strands of blonde hair framing the mask under Nol'viz's red hood fluttered in the breeze as they regarded each other.

There was something unnerving in Nol'viz's stare, beyond her trio of blinking eyes.

Scarlett's gaze sharpened. "I am not."

Nol'viz tilted her head. "Excited?"

"...No. I suggest you abandon your attempts at interpreting my emotions. Such efforts will prove futile to you."

The girl was similar to Fynn, in a way. They both had a certain sensitivity to the emotional states of others. Likewise, both struggled to accurately decipher those emotions.

Nol'viz was probably worse on that front.

After a short pause, Scarlett decided to ask her own question. "And what of you? While I do not expect you to disclose your reasons for being here, it seems unlikely you would accompany me if you harbored suspicions about my intentions."

If the girl really thought Scarlett was up to something that could affect her agreement with the Cabal, openly following her around would have been the worst thing she could do.

"We do not understand your question."

"...Never mind, then. I will refrain from commenting on you or your affiliation with the Cabal," Scarlett said with a slight shake of her head. "Regardless, I still have further investigation to conduct. If you are going to shadow me, then assist by leading me to Ayrlazkreh's lair."

This seemed to catch Nol'viz's attention, as the girl's dark pupils narrowed slightly.

Scarlett, raising an eyebrow, continued. "If you intend to refuse, I advise you to reconsider. I may not have been here before, so I may face some difficulties locating it myself, but I would do so eventually. Your guidance would simply expedite the process for both of us."

Nol'viz considered her for a moment, then turned and started walking. Taking that as a yes, Scarlett followed, maintaining a short distance between them.

This confirmed another suspicion for Scarlett, at least. That Nol'viz was aware of Ayrlazkreh's lair's location implied the girl's presence here might be related to it in some manner. That narrowed down the potential reasons she was here.

Together, the two of them made their way through the desolate ruins of the Zuverian outpost, soon leaving it completely and moving in the direction of the looming volcano at the heart of this isle. After about twenty minutes, they arrived at a natural ravine at the volcano's base, formed by rocky outcroppings. Nol'viz showcased no hesitation as she began entering the ravine through a slender gap near the edge.

The temperature rose as they delved deeper into the ravine, the stone on the sides drawing closer and narrowed as they did. Scarlett made liberal use of her pyrokinesis to maintain a bearable temperature around her, while Nol'viz remained silent, seemingly indifferent to the heat.

Eventually, they reached a section where the ravine ceased to be, opening into a dark, expansive chamber where the air itself was stifling. With her enchanted glasses once more donned, Scarlett surveyed the place.

At first glance, it looked to be no more than an ordinary cavern, though there was no obvious source of the intense heat. But considering the proximity to an active volcano, that much was to be expected.

Scarlett walked past a stationary Nol'viz, approaching the cavern's end, where a massive section of the rock wall seemed slightly out of place compared to its surroundings. Nearing it, she was suddenly enveloped by a pervasive pressure, pausing in her steps as the rock in front of her began emitting a deep red glow.

A warning.

Cautiously stepping back, her gaze remained on the glowing wall as she acclimated to the pressure.

At least this matched her recollections from the game. If she couldn't proceed further than this, then it was likely the same applied to the Cabal.

She glanced back at Nol'viz, who remained near the cavern's entrance. "I must ask, though I suspect I will not get an answer — has the Cabal attempted to overreach their boundaries in this place?"

Unsurprisingly, the girl offered no response.

Suppressing the urge to shake her head, Scarlett returned her attention to the glowing wall.

She had been somewhat worried that, since the Hallowed Cabal had showcased the ability to slightly alter the game's narrative, they might have found a way to exploit the being residing here. Their assault against the empire was approaching, and it wasn't beyond the Cabal to utilize everything at their disposal, no matter the consequences. The devastation wrought in the Blasted Lands was a grim reminder of that.

And there was no doubt that the being that lived here was capable of achieving something on the same scale. This was the entrance to the lair of none other than Aylazkreh, after all. An ancient dragon rivaled by few other creatures in this world.

The incident that destroyed most of Fynn's tribe and scorched a significant swath of the empire's land seven years ago was the work of Olgolzkreh, another ancient dragon who dwelled in the Whitdown Mountains. Between the two, Aylazkreh was definitely the more dangerous now, particularly if the Cabal manipulated it for their own ends.

However, from what Scarlett could see here, it seemed unlikely that the Cabal could do that. That meant Aylazkreh didn't pose an immediate threat, which was a small solace in her calculations.

Nevertheless, Aylazkreh's presence here on the Resting Eye *would* eventually spell trouble. The volcano didn't erupt without reason in the game.

But there was still time until then. Lots of things could be done to mitigate such a disaster, even if it couldn't be prevented entirely. For now, Scarlett was content in simply knowing that the timeline didn't appear to have been accelerated in that regard.

Contemplating the gently glowing rock for a short while longer, Scarlett eventually decided to leave.

As she turned towards the exit, the pressure looming over her surged. What had initially felt like the subtle weight of a dormant colossus now transformed into a focused, overwhelming presence. A tyrannical force, brooking no resistance, pressing against Scarlett, as if asserting its dominion over her.

Her breath momentarily seized as every fiber of her being wanted to scream at the sheer impudence of this pressure, and a voice resonated within her mind.

*“You... Mortal one who treads on the border of my domain... **Halt.**”*

Without even realizing it, Scarlett had stopped to acquiesce with its command, but the action caused an instinctual scowl to appear on her brow.

*“...Excuse me?”* the words escaped her lips.