

168: A very polite pull over

Scarlett and Fynn sat in a carriage as it traveled Freybrook's Northern District towards the heart of the city. She had some business with a local artisan related to the handling of some of the dragon materials to deal with, and she was also going to take the opportunity to check on the progress of the new carriages that she and Evelyne had ordered from one of the city's workshops.

Her gaze was placed out the window as naked trees and empty gardens passed by, along with the enclosed estates that were housed in this part of the city. She held an expressionless face as her thoughts focused on other matters.

Lately, she had been spending a lot of time trying to think up contingencies and formulating plans to counter any threats that might arise if the Viles were to find Rosa and take action against them. She also had to consider Anguish's looming presence within the bard, as well as the upcoming empire-wide assault that the Hallowed Cabal was planning.

Compared to all of that, Arlene's quest almost sounded like a cakewalk. It almost made her reconsider if it was even worth spending time on that when there were so many other things going on. It probably was. What she could get from that quest could be useful, and she was already going to Bridgespell anyway. Passage through the Kilnstone network had already been booked for the following day, so hopefully, she would be able to make progress on the Rosa situation, along with completing that quest.

After that, it might be worth considering—

Suddenly, the carriage slowed down and soon came to a halt.

With a frown, Scarlett turned her eyes to the front of the cabin. "Why are we stopping?" she asked loudly.

"Ehm, I'm sorry," the coachman's voice came from outside. "But there's..."

In the corner of her eye, Scarlett glimpsed a hint of movement through the window as the cabin door swung open. An average-looking man in a top hat and a long dark cape climbed in, head bent low to avoid the ceiling, followed by a black-furred cat that gracefully leaped onto the wooden floorboards.

The cat fixed its clear, amethyst eyes on Scarlett.

Scarlett stared at the two newcomers as the man leaned his ornate cane against the seat opposite her and sat down. He crossed one leg over the other, folded his hands, and looked at her with a polite smile.

"Greetings, Baroness. It has been some time," The Gentleman said.

A low growl emanated from Scarlett's left, and she only now remembered Fynn's presence. Turning to look at him, she found the white-haired young man glaring at The Gentleman as

both his hands were pressed onto his seat, as if poised to move in front of Scarlett at any moment. Maybe it was only because he had recognized Empress that he had yet to do so.

The cat in question nonchalantly jumped onto the seat beside Scarlett, settling down on the soft leather between her and Fynn as if it had been reserved specifically for her. Her tail swayed lazily in the air, brushing against Fynn's leg as he glanced down at the cat with an uncertain expression.

Regaining her composure, Scarlett raised her hand and gestured for him to relax. "There is no need for the hostility, Fynn. This is a business partner of mine," she said. Then she turned her attention to The Gentleman. "It has indeed been some time. This is quite the sudden and unexpected visit."

"I hope that is alright," the man replied. "I happened to have some matters to resolve along the same route as you and thought it a prime opportunity to feed two birds with one hand, so to speak."

"My Lady...?" the coachman's voice sounded out from outside.

The Gentleman reached up to his head and removed his top hat, placing it on the seat beside him and giving it two pats. "We should be able to continue now."

"The situation is under control. Please resume traveling towards our destination," Scarlett called out, and the carriage soon began rolling again. She then focused her attention on the man before her. "While I have been expecting your visit for some time now, I did not anticipate it to be at a time like this. In truth, I thought you would have shown yourself weeks ago."

"My apologies. I have been rather tied up with other responsibilities," the man explained. "I am sure you understand."

Scarlett nodded. "I do." She glanced down at the cat lying beside her. "...It appears the same has not been true for Empress, however."

The Gentleman's smile grew slightly as he gave a small laugh. "No, she can be rather impatient when it comes to some of the matters that I usually occupy my time with. On her behalf, I would like to express my gratitude for hosting her in your home on occasion."

The cat let out what might have been a peeved meow as she shot him a small glare, but the man was unfazed as he looked down at her. "Now, dear, it is only common courtesy to properly express one's gratitude after being extended such consideration, even if you consider the land as part of your domain. And lest I am misremembering, you only declared one particular windowsill as part of your territory, not the entire estate."

Empress fell silent at that, though the cat did send the man one final glare before turning her head away and resting her chin on the leather seat, seemingly choosing to pretend his existence was no longer her concern.

The Gentleman, in turn, only let out another light chuckle as he turned back to Scarlett. "I hope my dear companion hasn't proven too bothersome."

“There have been no issues whatsoever,” Scarlett said. “If anything, my people and I have been honored by her presence.”

Even if the cat *had* been a nuisance, it wasn’t as if she could come right out and say so.

“...We were somewhat taken aback when the remains of a dragon suddenly appeared in the courtyard, however, and I will admit to some uncertainty at first about how to handle the situation. But in the end, we managed to find a satisfactory solution.”

“Ah, yes.” The Gentleman placed one hand on the crown of his cane, shifting his gaze to the cat. “Empress tends to become possessive at times, which can make her somewhat unpredictable and overbearing in her reciprocations. Rest assured, it is unlikely to happen again. Isn’t that right, dear?” The last words were spoken in a slightly sharper tone.

Empress remained mostly unconcerned, tilting her head slightly to meet the man’s eyes.

“It is not that I am not grateful,” Scarlett said. “The dragon’s cadaver proved to be quite useful to me. But as I mentioned, it was all rather sudden and unexpected. It caught many members of my household off guard.”

“That may be true, but she is aware of what she can do and what she ought to avoid. I am afraid this incident falls into the latter category.” The Gentleman gently shook his head. “It has already happened, and I am not so boorish as to take away what has already been given. However, there are other considerations Empress needs to be cautious of, as she well knows. I expect you to be more mindful of this, dear, even if you find something that catches your interest for the time being.”

The cat gave him a long look before turning away again.

Silence lingered in the cabin for a moment, and Scarlett felt as if she was witnessing an awkward exchange between a married couple.

“Who are you?” Fynn suddenly asked, and she turned her head to look at him as he watched The Gentleman with suspicion.

The man met Fynn’s eyes with a calm gaze, his hand resting on the top of his cane as he studied the young man for a few seconds. “You certainly have the blood of Grehalyr running through you, my boy. One can tell.” Releasing his grip on the cane, he touched a hand to his clean-shaven chin. “Who am I, you ask? An excellent question. Usually, I would reply that you can refer to me as ‘The Gentleman’, but that wouldn’t really answer *your* question, would it?”

The Gentleman looked at Fynn for another moment, as if awaiting a response. When there was none, he turned away, his gaze seeming to focus on the empty air as he spoke again. “I suppose one could say I am a wanderer. A traveler and a spectator. If you’ll pardon the cliché, the world is a canvas, and I have made it my creed to not let it go unappreciated.” His eyes returned to Fynn. “Does that satisfy your curiosity?”

Fynn stared at him for a while before finally lowering his head in a nod. “It does.”

The Gentleman turned his attention back to Scarlett. “Now, perhaps we should proceed to the matters at hand. I believe you have something for me?”

“I do, yes.” She reached down to her [Pouch of Holding], which was wedged between her waist and the cabin wall to her right, and retrieved the item he was referring to.

[Sphere of Serendipity (1/2) (Unique)]

{ An item far out of the ordinary, it seems to call out for its twin, awaiting a reply }

In her hand was a gleaming gold-colored metal sphere, intricately carved with lines that wound and looped around its surface. Depictions of suns, moons, and other celestial bodies adorned its surface between those lines, with the odd Zuverian glyph present as well.

Scarlett handed the sphere to The Gentleman, who received it with one hand and briefly examined it. “Despite some of the rather unfortunate circumstances surrounding it, this is an exquisite display of craftsmanship and skill. It is a shame it was nearly forgotten until now.” He looked back at Scarlett. “You needn’t worry. I will ensure it reaches its intended destination, as agreed upon. Obtaining its twin, however, will be up to you.”

“I will manage,” Scarlett said.

The man nodded. “I have every confidence in your determination. Yet, such conviction can falter when faced with the realities of one’s situation and the actions one must take. But I suspect you do not need me to tell you that. I hope you succeed in your endeavours.”

He placed the artifact into the top hat next to him, and it seemed to vanish deep within the hat.

Scarlett considered him for a moment. She could understand his skepticism, but he also appeared genuine with his well-wishes, even though their official collaboration would soon come to an end. His role was solely to deliver the [Sphere of Serendipity] to Beld Thylelion, and from there, it was all on Scarlett. Sometime in the future, he would call in the favor she owed him, but aside from that, they would have no further business with each other.

“...If I may ask,” she began. “I am curious as to what you will be doing from now on. I have heard that your recent actions have caused a commotion among the Viles.”

The Gentleman waved his hand dismissively. “Ah, those fellows always know how to overreact. They know what I will and will not do, but they never quite seem able to accept it.” He released a short sigh, as if he was talking about a bunch of unruly hooligans.

Empress meowed harshly.

“Now, now, dear,” the man chided. “While that may be true, you should still mind your manners. Besides, I believe you are being rather unfair to me, don’t you think? It is not as if I am some sort of villain.”

Scarlett observed their brief interaction, unsure exactly of the context of their conversation.”What caused them to react this way?” she asked.

He returned his attention to her. “I imagine it was related to my revealing of the existence of a potential new incarnate,” he answered in a casual tone.

Scarlett froze.

She stared at him, processing the words she’d just heard.

...*The Gentleman* was the one who had disclosed Rosa’s existence to the Viles and the entirety of the Blazes?

The man watched her reaction with a calm expression, his mouth curving up in a light smile. “You needn’t worry too much,” he said. “Your friend is safe for now. I was careful about the information I shared, you see.”

Scarlett simply continued staring at him, torn between the urge to let her emotions get the better of her and confront the man about his motives and the knowledge that this was not someone she could pressure in any way.

Did this mean that The Gentleman was actively working against her, though? Had he been from the start? This was so far beyond her expectations that she didn’t even know what to think. She had believed that, at worst, he would be indifferent to her and her cause, but now he was willingly providing information about her people to her enemies?

The Gentleman remained silent in his seat, patiently watching her even as these thoughts raced through her mind.

“...*Why?*” she finally managed to press out.

“Hmm.” The man appeared to ponder her question for a moment. “I’ll be honest, I had hoped you would not ask that. Albeit unlikely, it would have made things rather easy for me, wouldn’t it? But I suppose you do deserve some sort of explanation.”

Scarlett stared into his relaxed eyes, hoping he wouldn’t say something that made her lose the grip she was trying to keep on her bottled anger and indignation.

He offered another small smile. “I am sure you are already aware, to some extent, that your presence has caused changes. You have caused waves that have altered and disrupted the natural order of events, and while I usually prefer to stay out of such matters, I had to step in and make certain adjustments.”

Scarlett’s eyes widened. He was telling her that she’d had too large of an effect on this world to the point where he himself had to counteract some of it?

“...*Why* was it necessary for you to intervene?” she asked.

He had always been a mysterious character in the game, but it didn’t fit with what she had thought of the man. Did he have some goal she was unaware of that directly opposed hers?

“That is a more complex question to answer,” The Gentleman said. “One might say that events were veering too far from their paths, so I nudged them to move in more *expected* directions. Still different from their initial course, but different in another way.”

Scarlett’s brows furrowed. Did this mean that he didn’t *want* things to deviate from their predetermined course, and would actively work against any such changes? Was it related to the game version of events, and the fate Godwin had spoken of? But if that were the case, he would want to stop both her and the Cabal from taking any action, and that didn’t fit with what he’d been doing up till now.

However, he *had* also just admitted to essentially selling her out to a bunch of demons.

As if sensing her thoughts, The Gentleman spoke again. “This must all be rather confusing for you, but as I mentioned earlier, there is no need to worry. I won’t interfere with your affairs, nor am I here to threaten you or anything of the sort. I do not personally mind any of what you are doing. It is simply that there is a balance to certain things. Although, truth be told, it’s not strictly my responsibility to maintain it. But sometimes, one has to step out of their comfort zone to do things they do not necessarily enjoy.”

Scarlett felt a slight sense of relief at hearing that, but his words didn’t entirely ease her concerns. While it was reassuring to learn that The Gentleman wasn’t outright her enemy, it still meant that he might act against her if he thought it necessary.

“What do you mean when you talk about a balance that needs to be maintained?” she asked. “What sort of balance is this? Is it somehow related to the fate of this world? Do you mean that fate cannot be altered too much?”

The man simply smiled at her. “I’ve recently heard some intriguing news from Empress. It would seem you have made some interesting deals in the wake of learning the Viles’ movements,” he said, as if he hadn’t heard what she said.

“Are you truly not going to answer my question?”

He gave her a long look. “I would like to think that I am being generous today.”

Scarlett locked eyes with him for several seconds before eventually sighing, the emotions inside churning at the top. She had no leverage to extract more answers from him, even though she was *sure* he had them. If anyone had knowledge of the workings of this world, it was him.

“To answer *your* question,” she said, “I did indeed come to an agreement with Mistress on how to handle the matter. “I should note that the woman did not seem especially fond of you.”

The Gentleman chuckled at that. “No, it would surprise me if she was. When wandering around for long enough, one tends to irritate a person or two. Nevertheless, you seem to have succeeded in persuading her despite my involvement.”

“I am not entirely sure I can describe it as ‘persuading’ on my part. I was more under the impression that Mistress did it as much on a whim as because she felt that she had something to gain from me.”

“I daresay that there are many people who would consider that much impressive enough.”

“Perhaps. But based on Mistress’ words at the time, I believe her visit and sudden desire to aid me were more influenced by your actions than either of us fully realized,” Scarlett said.

Now that she thought about it, even if The Gentleman had leaked Rosa’s existence as an incarnate, if he had also been the one that subtly caused Mistress to show up and promise to help Scarlett and Rosa from attracting the attention of any demons, that meant the man wasn’t even working against her as much as she had initially thought.

But he had still felt it necessary to permanently increase the risks with Rosa’s situation?

Scarlett couldn’t stop the frown from appearing on her brow. This was becoming increasingly convoluted. Exactly what *were* his motivations here? Judging from his earlier words, and what she knew of him from the game, he aimed to largely be a spectator. But did that mean letting things mostly run their course, or would he only watch from the sidelines if things went as he wanted?

Suddenly, Empress stretched her back and hopped down from her resting spot.

The Gentleman glanced out the window. They had exited the Northern District by now, and there were more buildings here, but the man’s gaze seemed to be fixed beyond those structures. “It appears this is where we part ways,” the man said, grasping his cane. He tapped the end of the cane against the floorboards once, producing a light thud, and the carriage started winding to a halt. Scarlett could hear the coachman’s surprised exclamations from outside as he struggled to regain control of the horses.

The Gentleman picked up his top hat and placed it back on his head, tipping it at Scarlett as he prepared to leave. “It has been a pleasure, Baroness. Young Grehaldrael.”

Empress let out a final meow as she brushed past Fynn and Scarlett’s legs, striding towards the cabin door.

“Wait,” Scarlett called just as the carriage came to a complete stop, and The Gentleman was about to open the door. He turned to look back at her.

“There was one question I wanted to ask you before you leave,” she said.

The man opened the door, and Empress slipped out, but he lingered for another moment. “Yes?”

“...It concerns Adtia’s avatar. A woman known as the Countess. I have been attempting to locate her for some time now, but I do not know where she is or even whether she is alive. Is there anything you can tell me about that?”

He arched a brow, considering her for a moment. “I am afraid not. The Lady of the Night and the Moon may have been forgotten by the people of today, and lives in the shadow of her brighter counterpart, but she remains a deity nonetheless. Her avatar will be hidden from all eyes that seek to discern her whereabouts. It is unlikely that the woman you are looking for is dead, but that is as much as I can tell you, I am afraid.”

Scarlett found his answer far less satisfying than she had hoped. “I see. I am grateful for your honesty, at the very least.”

“In that case, I bid you farewell. Until next we meet, Baroness.” With those words, the man stepped out of the carriage and closed the door behind him. Through the window, Scarlett watched as he walked up to what appeared like a completely ordinary storefront, passing an older couple on the street, and entered along with the black-furred cat.

“I’m sorry, my Lady! I can’t get the horses to move again,” the coachman called from the front. “I’ll see if—”

Suddenly, two horses neighed, and the carriage resumed its motion, accompanied by the coachman’s bewildered cry.

“Do not mind it,” Scarlett responded in a loud voice, her eyes lingering on the building where The Gentleman and Empress had disappeared. “Simply proceed to our original destination.”

“Ehm, as you wish, my Lady...”

A minute of silence passed as the vehicle soon returned to its normal travel, until Fynn finally was the one to speak.

“That man was strange,” he said.

Scarlett turned to him, studying his face for a moment. Fynn seemed to have taken the encounter in stride, at least, though she did see signs of confusion on his face. Much of what they had discussed probably went over his head.

“...Indeed he was,” she replied. “I suspect you have already surmised as much, but this meeting and conversation must remain a secret.”

Fynn nodded. “Mm. Sounded important. I won’t tell anyone.”

“Thank you.”

Scarlett turned her attention forward, leaning back in her seat as the carriage rocked forward. A multitude of thoughts raced through her mind, and she found it hard to focus on any specific one.

She would leave trying to sort through everything she’d learned and figuring out whether this encounter had been bad or good to another time. For now, she just wanted to relax and calm down.

That much she felt like she could indulge herself.