

271: Crowning achievements

Scarlett retreated cautiously to the chamber's entrance as Mistress got to work in front of the imposing forge. Thanks to Thainnith's legacy, Scarlett recognised it as an Empyrean Crucible — a near-priceless relic from the days of the Zuverian and far beyond the capabilities of any ordinary craftsman. She watched in slight fascination as Mistress began feeding the array of exotic and rare metals and materials into the Crucible's gaping maw. With each addition, various sections of the forge pulsed with vibrant, otherworldly hues.

The woman really wasn't sparing any expenses.

Under her expert guidance, intricate rune patterns materialised across the Crucible's gleaming surface. Scarlett studied them closely. More than half of the runes, she realised, seemed dedicated solely to containing the forge's immense energies.

And despite that, the chamber's temperature was starting to rise rapidly. Even with her resistances, Scarlett could feel the oppressive heat building around her.

"Be a dear and hand me that primordial elemental essence now, would you?" Mistress called over her shoulder, her fingers dancing across the Crucible's controls.

Scarlett produced the [Sacred Flame (Legendary)], its white-hot core taking on an ethereal shimmer in the forge's arcane glow. The near-divine artifact lifted from her palm of its own accord, gliding across the room to hover at Mistress' left side. On the floor, the Emberling's fiery gaze tracked the [Sacred Flame]'s movement with unwavering focus.

Mistress' hands moved in a blur, manipulating the beating crystal embedded in the forge while simultaneously grasping her staff. The gem atop the weapon flared with an azure light, and a stream of ochre-red dust rose from a nearby rune-covered chest. It swirled through the air before settling on the floor around the still Emberling, forming an intricate pattern around it.

"Back in the day, this is where you'd have some cleric of whichever deity you're choosing to bother channel the binding through the essence," Mistress remarked casually as the [Sacred Flame]'s fire intensified. "But we'll dispense with that formality. It was always more pageantry than necessity."

The Crucible's interior had become a maelstrom of swirling energies, the various ingredients melding and transmuting within. Mistress tapped her staff against the stone floor, and the [Sacred Flame] surged forward, plunging into the vortex.

In an instant, the forge's inner fire flared to blinding intensity before being entirely consumed. The [Sacred Flame] expanded explosively, filling the Crucible with its radiance. Flashes of color danced with brilliance, growing more frequent as the chamber's temperature skyrocketed. The very air seemed to vibrate as the contained power strained against its bonds. Scarlett was forced to channel her pyrokinesis just to withstand it all, while Mistress stood unflinching before the inferno.

“Now it’s your turn,” the woman said. The rune encircling the Emberling ignited, and the fox-like being’s form grew sharper, more defined. It rose into the air, entirely unperturbed and attention fixed solely on the roaring conflagration that it was slowly being pulled towards.

Scarlett watched in silence as Mistress’ magic guided the pseudo-spirit into the Crucible. The Emberling vanished into the all-consuming fire of the [Sacred Flame], disappearing like a moth into a bonfire. There was no immediate reaction, but she knew the process wasn’t over yet.

With a touch to the Crucible’s surface, Mistress caused a gleaming barrier to slide down, sealing the forge’s opening and obscuring its inner fire from view. The oppressive heat, however, remained.

The woman turned to face Scarlett, her marble mask and ruby eyes shimmering in the chamber’s light. “Do you have a suitable anchor?”

Scarlett raised an eyebrow at her.

“Don’t tell me you expect me to provide that as well?” Mistress asked, a hint of exasperation coloring her voice.

After a moment’s hesitation, Scarlett reached into her [Pouch of Holding] and withdrew the [Tiara of Lost Benediction]. While she would have preferred to keep her only other Legendary-tier item in reserve, she couldn’t deny that this seemed an appropriate use for the artifact.

Mistress extended her hand, and the tiara lifted from Scarlett’s grasp, floating gracefully through the air. The masked woman plucked it deftly from its trajectory, examining it with a critical eye.

“I suppose this will suffice,” she muttered, turning back to the Crucible. She approached a section where the runes were conspicuously absent, replaced by an intricate array of glinting crystals. With a touch, a portion of the metal morphed, creating a perfect recess for the tiara. As the artifact settled into place, the opening sealed seamlessly.

Mistress released her staff, then began gingerly regulating the crystals, which flared to life in a dazzling display of chromatic colors. Even Scarlett, who was terrible at sensing mana, felt the overwhelming surge of power emanating from the woman as the forge thrummed with newfound energy.

As minutes ticked by, the chamber’s temperature continued to climb, reaching heights that forced Scarlett to retreat out of the room to avoid depleting what remained of her mana supply. From the relative safety of the first chamber, she observed Mistress performing the Rite of the Primal Harmonisation.

In truth, it hardly looked much like a ‘rite’ from here. Still, Scarlett understood some of the theoretical underpinnings involved. The process included binding the essence of a spirit or something similar—such as the Emberling—to a primordial essence, stabilising its existence which was usually only partially present in the Material Realm. But the process itself

occurred within the Empyrean Crucible, so it was hard to see exactly what Mistress was doing.

After a surprisingly short number of minutes, several of the runes etched into the forge's surface began to flicker and fade, signaling that the rite was nearing its end. Scarlett watched as Mistress manipulated the Crucible's crystalline controls and opened the main compartment. The interior, now mostly empty, still flickered with residual energy from the intense magical blaze that had taken place.

Mistress reached into the forge's depths, withdrawing a single object. It resembled a circlet, though its surface was entirely encrusted with a char-like, obsidian substance.

Steeling herself, Scarlett re-entered the sweltering chamber, channeling just enough of her pyrokinesis to keep the oppressive heat at bay as she approached.

Mistress turned, proffering the blackened item. "There you have it. One Rite of the Primal Harmonisation performed. You better be grateful."

Scarlett paused, eyeing the soot-covered artifact with a slight aversion.

Noticing her hesitation, Mistress glanced down at the circlet and clicked her tongue. With a casual snap of her fingers, the blackened crust crumbled away like ash in the wind, revealing the true form beneath.

It was a slender band of pale white metal, just large enough to fit on the head but deceptively simple in appearance.

"There. Happy?" the woman asked, extending it once more.

[Crown of Flame's Benediction (Unique)]

{Born through ancient forgotten rites, this crown harbors the unified essence of sacred and elemental flames, its true power waiting to be discovered}

Scarlett studied the artifact closely. She had honestly hoped for a Divine-tier item, but she knew that Unique-tier artifacts could rival their divine counterparts at times. Given the extraordinary materials and process used in its creation, she had no doubt this circlet outclassed anything she had at the moment, including her sacrificed [Tiara of Lost Benediction].

It also boasted a far less ostentatious—and *embarrassing*—appearance.

As she reached out to accept the circlet, Scarlett was surprised by its cool touch, defying the intense heat still permeating the chamber.

Carefully, she extended her senses towards the newly-forged artifact, attempting to establish a connection. The process felt surprisingly intuitive, reminiscent of her experiences with the [Tiara of Lost Benediction], but also different.

Her brow furrowed in light concentration as she started to probe the circlet's capabilities. At first, faint red runes ignited along its circumference, and her eyebrows rose as a small wave

of mental clarity washed over her, dispelling some of the fatigue and lingering headache that had plagued her throughout the evening.

It seemed that the circlet had retained—possibly even enhanced—the stat boost provided by the [Tiara of Lost Benediction]. That was a pleasant surprise.

Focusing her will further, Scarlett watched as the runes blazed brighter. In response, the Emberling materialised between her and Mistress, its fiery form unchanged from before.

“Ah, what a pity. All that delectable essence, gone to waste,” Mistress lamented, traces of genuine disappointment in her voice.

Scarlett paid her no mind, focusing intently on the artifact. She could tell there was more to it. Maybe part of that intuition came from the legacy, but she was pretty confident she knew how to draw the circlet’s potential out.

Extending her free hand, she conjured a single flame above her palm. The Emberling’s gaze immediately fixed upon it. Concentrating on the circlet, Scarlett pushed further. The runes along its surface burned brighter as the flame in her hand intensified. Suddenly, tiny, ethereal fires erupted around the circlet, wreathing it in a mesmerising dance of mystical flames.

While the circlet’s fire didn’t harm Scarlett directly, the sudden surge of power caught her off guard. The other flame above her palm flared unexpectedly, singeing her skin before she could dispel it.

She blinked, examining her hand with surprise. Given her high fire resistance, that was unexpected.

Her eyes narrowed. She was pretty sure there were still more surprises in store.

Following her instincts, Scarlett conjured several smaller flames in the air around her, then held out the circlet. It almost looked to call to her as it seemed to activate, and she watched as the ethereal fires licking its frame grew in power. The surrounding flames were drawn towards the artifact, absorbed into its cold metal. Tiny traces of warm, invigorating energy suffused Scarlett’s being, and she observed with fascination as the singed skin on her hand began to heal, returning to its unmarred form.

But that wasn’t all. She clenched her fist, sensing a subtle increase in strength unlike anything she’d experienced before. Was this some form of fire-fueled body enhancement magic?

That was...interesting, to say the least. She knew skills from the game that utilised pure mana for similar effects, but fire as a source? That was a first.

A faint smile played across her lips as she flexed her hand, testing the power. Could this be applied defensively as well? Where were its limits? While she doubted it could put her at the same level as individuals like Fynn or Leon, it could potentially address her relatively weak physique. That had always been an annoying vulnerability that she’d had to deal with.

When she had more mana and time to spare, she would need to experiment with this.

Returning her attention to the circlet, Scarlett wondered if that was all. From what she could tell, there was *still* more that the artifact could do, as if asking to borrow her energy. Narrowing her focus, she drew upon its power once more. The flames embracing the artifact expanded dramatically and coiled around the metal until essentially the entire circlet had been transformed into a crown of pure, radiant fire resting on her palm.

Scarlett's eyes widened as she felt it suddenly begin to drain her mana at an alarming rate. Realising the danger, she hurriedly removed it using her [Charms of Expeditious Change] and canceled the effect before it could deplete her entirely. As her perception returned to normal, she found herself slightly winded, staring at the now-empty space in her hand.

"One should always exercise caution when experimenting with unfamiliar artifacts," Mistress said, amusement coloring her voice. "Especially ones this potent." She tapped a finger against her marble mask. "This mask and my staff were also forged through the Rite, and even I faced some initial challenges mastering both." She tilted her head slightly. "Well, that's not entirely true. But I imagine it would have been quite difficult had I been at your level."

Scarlett eyed the woman's mask, then glanced at the staff standing on its own. She hadn't been aware those were products of the Rite. If she recalled correctly, the staff at least was considered Divine-tier in the game. She wondered what made her circlet different? Was it weaker, or was it arbitrary somehow? She supposed it depended on whatever mechanism the system used to classify these things.

She turned her attention back to Mistress. "Then did you—" she began, but her question was cut short by a thunderous sound echoing from behind her.

An expectant smile curved Mistress' lips. "Well, well. It seems my other guests have finally arrived. A bit tardy, though."

Without warning, Scarlett sensed a concentrated surge of sinister energy hurtling towards them from behind. Mistress raised a hand, conjuring a shimmering barrier of light around them just as a writhing mass of dark-green energy, laced with ominous crimson streaks, slammed into it. The impact shook the chamber, gouging deep furrows in the stone floor.

"Always the same dramatic entrance," Mistress chided, her tone dripping with sarcasm. "One would think she'd tire of it eventually. This place doesn't just repair itself."

Scarlett turned to see a small group of figures had appeared in the previous chamber, emerging from the arch-like gateway Mistress had established earlier. One figure stood out immediately — draped in dark robes with wild, unkempt silver hair and a pair of eerily intense green eyes that seemed to pierce the very soul.

Malachi.

The woman was accompanied by an assortment of demons, the atmosphere thick with a noxious miasma that appeared to corrode the very air itself.

Malachi lowered a hand still swirling with corrupted, dark energy as she strode across the room, her face contorted with barely contained rage. She halted at the threshold of Scarlett and Mistress' chamber, her gaze fixing upon Scarlett.

“You,” she spoke bluntly.

“It has been some time, Malachi,” Scarlett replied coolly, her brow furrowing. “I cannot say that I appreciate being attacked the moment we meet.”

The half-demon clicked her tongue, the sound carrying an unsettling weight that threatened to send a chill down one’s spine. Though not particularly adept at these things, Scarlett could tell Malachi had become more powerful since their last encounter. The stolen Authority from Anguish had clearly taken root.

“I was unaware you would be here,” Malachi said, gesturing towards Mistress with undisguised annoyance. “She was my target.”

“Oh my. Someone’s in a foul mood,” Mistress remarked airily, earning a withering glare from Malachi.

Scarlett glanced back at the masked woman. It seemed Mistress had exaggerated when claiming Malachi had moved past their grievances. Hardly surprising, if this was how Mistress acted.

“I presume you were the one who summoned Malachi here?” Scarlett asked.

She’d been wondering about the purpose of that mysterious device earlier. She wouldn’t have thought Mistress had somehow modified it to allow a Vile—or at least a pseudo-Vile—to pop up so easily.

Mistress nodded, her tickled gaze shifting from Malachi to Scarlett. “Indeed, I was. And that, petal, means it’s time for you to make your exit. Now, shoo.” She made a dismissive gesture with her hand.

“...What?”

“What games are you playing now, Mistress?” Malachi demanded, her voice laced with irritation.

“Oh, dozens, as always,” the masked woman replied flippantly. “But none that particularly involve both of you at the same time. Not anymore.” She continued waving Scarlett away as if shooing an insect.

Scarlett remained where she was, staring at Mistress. Eventually, the woman ceased her gesturing and let out an exaggerated sigh. “Ugh, *fine*. I’ll use words instead.” She shook her head, pointing at both Scarlett and Malachi. “I had intended for the three of us to have a little chat, a girl’s talk, if you will, but I really can’t be bothered anymore. I’ve done far too many charitable deeds lately, and I have to draw the line somewhere, don’t I? You can thank old Thainnith for this, Baroness dearie, but if you want to parley with our little quasi-Vile here, you’ll have to perform a blasphemous summoning ritual on your own time. So, now, shoo, shoo.”

Scarlett’s frown deepened, her eyes narrowing.

“Come now, don’t give me that look,” Mistress said. “I just helped you fashion an artifact that would have half the empire’s nobility salivating with envy and the other half unable to even comprehend its value. What more could you possibly ask of me?”

An irritated hiss escaped Malachi’s lips, the demons behind her bristling menacingly. “What’s the point of this charade, Mistress?”

“I’ll get to that, once our esteemed friend here has taken her leave,” the woman replied, fixing Scarlett with a patient yet unsettling smile. “Feel free to depart the same way you arrived. I’m sure you won’t have any trouble figuring out how. Rest assured, I’ll wrap things up here before the conclave resumes.”

Scarlett’s gaze moved between Mistress and Malachi, studying the latter for a moment. What did Mistress have to discuss with her that she’d initially wanted Scarlett privy to? There were plenty of possibilities, but she didn’t like not knowing for certain.

She was also frustrated at missing the chance for a proper talk with Malachi. She’d been wanting to speak with the new Vile for some time now.

“Clock’s ticking,” Mistress added. “Dawdle too long, and I really will translocate you out of here myself. I can’t guarantee you won’t find yourself in a rather...compromising situation if that happens.”

Scarlett shot her one last annoyed glance before moving towards the chamber’s entrance. Malachi watched her approach.

“I believe it would be beneficial if we spoke, when circumstances allow,” Scarlett told her.

The woman’s green eyes tracked her. “...We’ll see. If I deem you correct, I’ll contact you myself,” she replied.

Scarlett walked past Malachi and her assembled demons, pointedly ignoring their hungry gazes that seemed to hunger for a taste of her flesh. She made her way to the far end of the underground chamber where the armillary sphere artifact she’d used to get here stood.

Casting one final glance back, she saw Mistress offering a casual wave. Scarlett then reached out to activate the sphere, drawing upon the knowledge imparted by Thainnith’s legacy to operate its complex mechanism. She focused on Mistress’ office in Dawnlight Palace, the empty room materialising in her mind’s eye.

If the imperial family knew the woman had installed something like this in the palace, they’d probably be apoplectic. It represented a massive security breach, but Scarlett supposed it didn’t matter much when Mistress was the one with access to it.

Her surroundings shimmered and shifted, and she found herself standing in the office of ‘Evelia Blackwood, Imperial Advisor’. She was about to turn and leave when she paused, glancing back at the armillary sphere.

...Actually, there should still be some time left until the conclave started, right? Wasn’t this an opportunity? It wasn’t often she found herself within the imperial palace, and there was

something she'd been deeply curious about investigating. It would have been impractical, if not impossible, to attempt on her own, but this artifact presented her with options she usually didn't have access to.

Besides, Mistress *had* said she could depart the way she arrived, but she never said anything about the destination.