

284: Echoing warnings

Scarlett arched an eyebrow as she took in Yamina's strange form, a shimmering blue projection that seemed to flicker slightly at the edges. "That is quite an unusual appearance, Miss Ward," she remarked. "If memory serves, you were considerably less...ethereal the last time we met."

A tickled smile played across the wizard's translucent lips as she inclined her head. "Don't mind me. This is merely the effect of an artifact I discovered in the Forgotten Tower. It's an avatar shaped by mana, allowing me to project my consciousness across vast distances. I'm currently on the mainland, and this artifact is one of the few things capable of bypassing the Rising Isle's wards undetected. From what I've gleaned in my studies, it seems the artifact's creator had a hand in designing the wards as well." She paused, her spectral form shifting slightly. "The Council would likely be livid if they knew of its existence, so I use it sparingly. I'd appreciate your discretion on the matter."

Scarlett chuckled lightly. "Your secret is safe with me. But I am curious — is there a reason you are not currently on the Rising Isle? Where exactly on the mainland are you?"

"I'm afraid I can't share too many details at present," Yamina replied, gliding over to take a seat opposite Scarlett. Her form seemed almost weightless as if hovering just above the chair, creating an odd effect. "You might say I'm pursuing a personal endeavour."

"Might it be related to what you sought in the Veiled Library?" Scarlett asked, studying the woman as she rested one arm on the table.

Yamina cocked her head, her expression not revealing much. "Who can say?"

Scarlett continued observing her for a moment longer, considering some of the possibilities. The wizard had been looking into the Tribute of Dominion in the Veiled Library, which was likely to involve Beld Thylelion in some capacity. If that were the case, she'd probably be collaborating with the mage towers and Dean Godwin. Yet Scarlett hadn't heard anything of the sort from Adalicia, and it didn't seem like something Yamina would have to keep under wraps.

"...I suppose we all have our secrets," Scarlett finally said, tapping her finger lightly on the tabletop. "That said, something you mentioned earlier piqued my interest. You said this artifact that allowed you to project yourself was found in the Forgotten Tower? I have long

wondered how you managed to access such an allegedly impenetrable place. If you are willing to share that tale, I might have some valuable information to offer in exchange.”

A gentle laugh escaped Yamina’s lips. “While your proposal *is* tempting, regrettably, that story will have to wait for another time. This avatar form isn’t sustainable indefinitely, so we should probably get down to business.”

Scarlett couldn’t hide a flicker of disappointment, but she nodded in acknowledgment. “Very well. What did you wish to discuss with me?”

She had received a message from the wizard earlier this evening, after concluding her meeting with Gaspar, and all Yamina had said was that she wanted to talk. Scarlett *thought* that meant in person, but apparently not.

Yamina’s gaze fixed on Scarlett, her current appearance adding an eerie reflection to her glasses. “I asked Magister Penney to relay my message as soon as I heard of your arrival. I assume you’ve already spoken with Grand Wizard Hartford about the situation in the Hall of Echoes?”

“I have,” Scarlett confirmed. “We met but a few hours ago.”

“And I presume that, as with the Astral Sanctum and the Veiled Library, you possess certain ‘forgotten knowledge’ about the Hall that justifies the Council requesting your presence?” Yamina pressed, her form shimmering briefly as she leaned forward. “I seem to recall you suggesting something of the sort on your initial visit.”

“That is correct,” Scarlett replied. “Or, at the very least, I have reason to believe so. I cannot guarantee anything until I visit the Hall myself.”

“Hmm.” Yamina observed her for a long moment, then adjusted her spectral glasses with a blue-tinted hand. “Well, it’s as I suspected then. I had a feeling you would return to the Isle soon enough, but I only received the news from Hugbert earlier today. Now, as for why I wanted to meet you in person—figuratively speaking—do you recall that I suggested you visit the Hall of Echoes specifically when we last spoke?”

Scarlett nodded. “I do, yes. Is it in some way related to what is happening now?”

If the woman somehow managed to predict this, an event that—as far as Scarlett was aware—was outside of the game’s narrative, then it was truly impressive.

“It might be,” Yamina replied. “Though I didn’t quite expect it to unfold in this manner.”

“How did you anticipate it unfolding?” Scarlett asked.

“Not in any one particular way, frankly,” Yamina said with a ghostly shrug. “As I’ve mentioned before, divination is a capricious school of magic. It’s rarely, if ever, precise enough to where you should actually bother with things like *expectations*. Vague notions and impressions are often the limit of what one can glean. However, if what I’ve heard about what’s currently occurring in the Hall of Echoes is true, the situation is far more unusual than even those impressions led me to believe.”

A slight frown creased Scarlett’s brow. “Do you know what is happening there, then?”

Gaspar had explained the overall situation to her, but it hadn’t made much sense to her. What he’d described was entirely different from what she had experienced or knew to expect from the game, to the point where it was honestly worrying.

“I’m afraid I’m likely more in the dark than you are, Baroness,” Yamina said with a tinge of what might have been frustration. “The Council hasn’t seen fit to share much with me due to my current departure, and I can’t perform any inquiries outside the Isle. All I know is that my original divinations suggested some sort of connection between you and the Hall of Echoes, seemingly stemming from our visit to the Veiled Library. I will say, however, that as I have been trying to analyse the threads of those divinations further, I’ve noticed they have become increasingly difficult to interpret. The results appear almost inconsistent in a highly irregular manner, even for ones related to you.”

Scarlett’s eyes widened in slight surprise. Did that mean her meeting with Thainnith had somehow triggered whatever was happening in the Hall of Echoes? And if Yamina’s divinations were becoming more unreliable, did that suggest that something was interfering with fate *beyond* Scarlett’s own existence?

“I wanted to warn you,” Yamina continued, her gaze locking with Scarlett’s, an intense seriousness now in her eyes. “I can’t even begin to predict what might happen there, but I suspect that whatever your original plans for the Hall of Echoes were, they won’t play out as smoothly as you might have hoped. I have no concrete evidence for this suspicion, and neither my divinations nor my instincts are in agreement on it, which is precisely why I’m concerned. Something strange is occurring in the Hall, and I only wish I had the opportunity to investigate it myself.”

Scarlett remained silent, contemplating the warning. After a while, she reached into her [Pouch of Holding] and withdrew the [Orrery of Dissonant Convergence]. Yamina did not

seem to fully recognise what she was doing, her eyes narrowing with curiosity as she watched Scarlett handle it.

Turning the intricate metal bracelet over in her hands, Scarlett inspected the small, spherical mechanism set in a copper frame on its face. The Orrery remained inert, showing no particular reaction to the surrounding environment beyond what she would have expected. However, if the disturbances in the Hall of Echoes were somehow linked to her visit to the Veiled Library, and they had started somewhere around the same time as well, it would coincide suspiciously well with when the Orrery first reacted to a major divergence in fate.

Could it be that the Hallowed Cabal's assault on the empire wasn't the *only* incident that happened at that point? Was their sudden attack somehow intertwined with this anomaly here on the Isle? If so, how did Scarlett meeting with Thainnith's remnant and receiving his inheritance factor into that?

She would have to bring the Orrery to the Hall of Echoes herself, to gauge its reaction firsthand. Then she would at least have some idea of the magnitude of this divergence. If events *did* differ as significantly from what she knew, she would need to approach this situation with more caution than initially planned.

"I appreciate your effort in offering this warning," Scarlett said, tearing her gaze from the Orrery to meet Yamina's eyes once more. "I will give your words careful consideration as I decide how to proceed."

Yamina's brow furrowed slightly. "But you still intend to go there?" she asked.

"Of course," Scarlett replied without hesitation.

Not only could she expect a more substantial reward from the Council for her efforts, but more crucially, she needed to get to the bottom of whatever was happening here on the Rising Isle. Was this apparent discrepancy a consequence of her own influence, the machinations of the Hallowed Cabal, perhaps the involvement of an unknown player, or something else entirely?

And while the Hall of Echoes she was familiar with from the game didn't house anything she desperately needed, every dungeon on the Isle thus far has revealed unexpected surprises. It wasn't beyond the realm of possibility that she'd stumble upon something of interest here as well. Moreover, while she was waiting for Gaspar to report back to her on the Arlene situation, this seemed like a good use of her time.

Yamina studied her for several long seconds, the woman's gaze eventually falling back to Scarlett's hands. Recognition flickered across her features as she seemed to finally identify the Orrery's presence. "...Is that the artifact from last time?" she asked deliberately.

"It is," Scarlett answered candidly, slipping the Orrery back into her [Pouch of Holding]. She met the wizard's eyes once more, her expression neutral. "Was there anything else you wished to tell me?"

Yamina continued to scrutinise her, then slowly shook her head. "I simply wanted to convey my warning, that's all." She glanced down at her own hand, as if checking something invisible to Scarlett. "I don't have much time left, besides." The woman rose from her seat, giving Scarlett one last meaningful look. "I'll take my leave now. I hope you find success in your endeavours within the Hall."

Scarlett gestured with her hand. "And I wish you the same in whatever pursuits currently occupy your attention."

"If fate smiles upon us, perhaps we'll have the opportunity to meet again soon, Baroness," Yamina said with a final smile. "Farewell." With those parting words, her form began to glimmer and fade. The air around her rippled like a heat haze, and within moments, she had vanished entirely, leaving Scarlett alone in the suddenly silent room.

Scarlett remained still for a time following the woman's departure, her finger continuously tapping a rhythm against the table as she considered the implications of this new information. She had intended for this visit to the Rising Isle to be relatively straightforward, but it seemed 'fate' had other plans. She would need to put her mind to it if she wanted to unravel what tied all of this together, it seemed.

And it would all begin tomorrow, with her first foray into the Hall of Echoes.