

209: Subterfuge

Scarlett couldn't speak for how the Followers of Ittar and their Quorum dealt with deacons who were derelict in their duties, but she did know that having Raimond's assistance helped her avoid a nasty confrontation. She hadn't been aware that the man was as skilled in illusion magic as he was, but it proved to be a good thing as he managed to conceal her and Rosa's appearance from the Dawnbringers. At the same time, he could make it appear as if they remained in their original position while rendering them invisible with another of his spells.

The Dawnbringers were too occupied with fighting the demons emerging from the rift to notice Scarlett and Rosa's escape. Supporting the unconscious Rosa, Scarlett had made her exit from the interstitial space originally created by the Sanctumbrum, which was growing more and more unstable by the minute. Despite Scarlett's worries, the process of exiting the space proved far less disturbing than entering it. There was no sign of the strange grey-and-white void, and Rosa's departure didn't trigger any special reactions.

There were still several matters that needed attention, but Scarlett's primary concern now was getting somewhere safe. Raimond would keep up the act for a bit longer before making it appear as though Scarlett and Rosa escaped as Malachi had, and he would also handle Fynn when the younger man arrived. Although unsure of the specifics surrounding that, Scarlett trusted Raimond could deliver on his promises.

As for if she trusted Raimond *himself*, the jury was still out on that. She always had a hard time deciphering what went through that man's head. At least it seemed he believed most of her story and saw a compelling enough reason to collaborate despite the risk it posed to him. Given what Scarlett had told Fynn to inform Raimond in order to gain the man's cooperation, that outcome wasn't *entirely* unexpected, but there had still been some uncertainty there. She knew Raimond was supposed to be a good person, but that could manifest in several ways. She hadn't been certain if he would approve of Rosa helping the villagers, considering what the Tribe of Sin thought about those who served Ittar.

There *was* still the possibility that Raimond was deceiving her in some fashion, but Scarlett doubted that. Although, just in case, she contemplated devising some measures to address such a situation in the future.

Right now, however, she was too exhausted and had other things to worry about. Concealed under a guise of invisibility, she and Rosa had appeared in an empty Crowcairn after exiting the interstitial space at its center. Scarlett relied on her enchanted glasses to see through the dead of night, plodding ahead. Though she couldn't see Rosa because of the invisibility, the bard's weight on her proved to be a challenge as she half-carried, half-dragged the woman over to the nearest house. Leaning Rosa against it for a moment, Scarlett retrieved one of the last revitalizing potions Allyssa had made and drank it.

The effect was minor, but at this point, everything helped.

In addition to everything else she needed to discuss with Rosa, she intended to ensure the bard paid her back for the inconvenience. Beyond the physical exertion of the act and the symptoms from Scarlett nearly having exhausted her mana, dragging Rosa just felt so

undignified. It was ridiculous that she actually let that bother her in a situation like this, but the original's personality traits still ran deep in certain ways.

While catching her breath, her gaze wandered over the village around her. In the dark, with its streets barren and the doors standing ajar, it looked more than simply deserted. It felt forsaken. She wasn't sure how long the villagers had been living here—years, decades, or maybe even generations—but the signs of habitation were still there. There were tracks in the dirt, tools leaning against the houses, baskets lying in front of doors, and various objects scattered about. In a window, a simple wooden doll depicting a horse caught Scarlett's attention, its eyes staring out the window.

Scarlett's gaze lingered on it for a moment.

Although she knew why the Tribe of Sin had their Enclaves spread out across the continent, she would never understand why some of their people would willingly be part of them. Living as an ordinary person in enemy territory, where getting caught could mean the death of themselves, their family, as well as the entire community, sounded insane. It *was* insane. While the empire might not be as ruthless as it had once been, it was the Tribe of Sin's mortal enemy. The Tribe and its members acknowledged this, yet several of its members still embraced the perilous prospect.

Scarlett wasn't sure whether to pity them or scoff at their dogmatism.

Her attention shifted to the seemingly empty ground next to her, where the invisible Rosa lay. She wondered how familiar the bard was with the beliefs of the people she had risked so much to save. As a citizen of the empire, the woman's understanding likely didn't extend much beyond viewing the Tribe as remorseless terrorists.

Although Scarlett supposed that if anyone would have a slightly more nuanced perspective, it would be Rosa.

Shaking her head, Scarlett leaned down to pick up the woman again and settled her over her shoulder. Dwelling on the matter served little purpose now. It was true that Scarlett had also had a certain distaste in her mouth ever since realizing the duke's men would assault the village, but the Tribe weren't any friends of hers. Much of their suffering resulted from their own actions. The members of an Enclave would understand the risks involved.

Lugging Rosa along with her, Scarlett moved towards the edge of the village. As they neared it, she paused for a moment, peering towards the horizon. There, standing as an imposing structure of black reaching towards the sky, was Anguish's citadel.

That was strange. She would have expected it to disappear by now. Even *if* Anguish wasn't entirely dealt with, the Vile should have lost even more of her Authority and power. Scarlett doubted Malachi would have left if Anguish's manifestation was still in process, so why was the citadel still here in the Material Realm?

At least its presence didn't feel as ominous as it had before. The dread gazing up it evoked had mostly dissipated.

What exactly this meant would have to be investigated further.

Continuing their journey and exiting Crowcairn, Scarlett soon spotted something else of note. To the west, where Duke Valentino's men had made their encampment, she saw figures approaching the village. Some might have been Sir Home's men, but the most notable ones were a group of mounted figures wearing golden armor. More Dawnbringers. By their side was a single figure who ran on foot, somehow keeping pace with the horses.

Fynn.

The group neared Crowcairn, heading towards an opening a couple of hundred meters away from Scarlett. Fynn, although he shouldn't be able to see Scarlett and Rosa, briefly stopped, turning in their direction. Scarlett's pulse quickened, but after a few seconds, he started running again to catch up with the Dawnbringers, entering the village.

Scarlett's gaze stayed on the spot where they had disappeared among the buildings. While not surprising that Fynn sensed them, it was unexpected that he would figure out that it was best to pretend like he didn't. Sometimes he could be more astute than one would give him credit for — a fact that Scarlett appreciated.

It was probably a good thing that he was accompanying the Dawnbringers, guiding them here on Raimond's behalf. Scarlett's presence during all of these events couldn't be kept under wraps, but if her retainers aided in addressing the apparent demon incursion, it would help strengthen her credibility.

Finally, she turned away from the village and started moving again, taking heavy breaths while supporting Rosa. The landscape surrounding Crowcairn consisted of a lot of smaller hills, with the village situated in a flatter area along a minor river to the south. Scarlett led them northwards, intending to distance themselves from Crowcairn before changing direction towards Sir Home's encampment.

After some time, she felt the woman leaning on her rouse.

"Wha...?" Rosa's voice sounded out close to her ear.

Scarlett paused, turning her head. Although she couldn't see Rosa, she could feel the bard's head pressed against her shoulder.

"Rosa?" she asked, bracing herself. Even assuming what Malachi did earlier had failed, now that they were outside the interstitial space connecting to the Blazes, Anguish should have even less control of Rosa. The Vile *shouldn't* be able to speak through her. However, if she could, Scarlett could still use Anguish's name to control the situation. It might not be as effective the second time, but it wouldn't do nothing.

"...Scarlett?" Rosa almost seemed to slur as she spoke, as if waking from a long sleep.

Scarlett relaxed slightly, her tensed shoulders easing. "Yes, I am here."

There was a moment of silence.

"...I'm not dreaming, am I?" Rosa eventually said.

Scarlett shook her head. "You are not."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

A hand touched her arm, moving up to her shoulder and poking softly at her chin as if the woman was verifying her words.

"...You are not dreaming, Rosa," Scarlett repeated, letting a hint of irritation bleed through her voice.

"Sorry," the bard replied in a quiet voice. "Not being able to see you threw me for a ride."

"Deacon Abram cast an invisibility spell on us."

"...Deacon who-now?"

"Father Abraham."

"That's not what you said."

"I will explain later," Scarlett said. "For now, we should continue on our way. Can you walk?"

"...I think so." The weight on Scarlett's shoulder lifted, and there were faint sounds of movement from the bard. Then, there was a faint yelp. "...Okay, I might be a teensy bit dizzy. Legs feel like they forgot they're supposed to have bones in them, as well."

Scarlett gave a small sigh. "Lean on me if necessary."

Even though she almost felt ready to collapse herself, at least her legs hadn't failed her yet.

A hand touched her shoulder as Rosa leaned on her for support, and after Scarlett had ensured that the woman wouldn't trip immediately after they started walking, they resumed their journey beneath the darkened sky. Although several thoughts were swirling in Scarlett's mind, and there were many things she wanted to say, she held back, allowing a long silence to descend between them.

"By the by," Rosa eventually said slowly, sounding like she was fighting against falling asleep. "Were you *carrying* me before?"

"No, I was not."

"...Sure felt like it. I certainly don't remember walking all the way out here myself."

"That is because I dragged you here," Scarlett stated bl. "As one would baggage, or a particularly recalcitrant child."

"That stings."

“Good.”

“This is why people call you heartless...” Rosa’s voice faintly lingered.

Scarlett shifted her head slightly, glancing towards the space where Rosa was.

She wasn’t sure *why* she was suddenly allowing the light bantering with the bard, as if avoiding what they should be discussing, but it didn’t feel quite right to press Rosa on it now. Still, they did have to figure out what the situation with Anguish looked like, but perhaps that could wait until they were somewhere safer. Rosa sounded exhausted enough as it was, which was understandable, given everything she had gone through in the last day.

Neither of them uttered a word for a while as they trudged onward, leaving Crowcairn’s immediate vicinity and gradually ascending a nearby hill. The frigid night air had begun to seep through Scarlett’s clothes, and she couldn’t spare the mana to heat herself up with pyrokinesis, so she had to endure the cold for now. Presumably, Rosa had it worse, with a gaping hole in her clothes where the Heartstone had been lodged.

“...She’s talking in my head right now.” The woman suddenly broke the silence. “Anguish, I mean.”

Scarlett arched a brow, stealing a glance in the bard’s direction. She hadn’t expected Rosa herself to be the one to bring the topic up. After considering the woman’s words, a frown etched itself on Scarlett’s face. If Anguish was still persisting in causing problems, then perhaps she had to invoke the Vile’s name to make her hurt a b—

“Don’t worry,” Rosa continued. “She can’t do anything right now.”

Scarlett paused. “...You mean to say you are in full control once more?”

Rosa released a wry chuckle. “Well, half-and-half. I think I can shut her up for a bit if I want to, but probably not forever. We’re kinda in a reversed position from how it was back in the citadel, when I was stuck on that throne. Pretty sure Malachi didn’t manage to snatch all of ol’ Anguish’s power, ‘Authority’, or whatever it called, but she did somehow block her from the Blaze where most of it is. Anguish’s body is still raring to go, but her head is stuck here with me, under lock and key.”

Scarlett’s brow furrowed even more. That explained why Malachi didn’t seem to have minded escaping into the rift. The woman knew this was her time to act, while Anguish was unable to exert her influence over her domain.

That *any* fragment of Anguish which was still powerful enough to talk remained in Rosa was perhaps not *ideal*, but... Maybe, just maybe, it wasn’t terrible either. It depended on how permanent of a thing this was and how much control Rosa had over the Vile. Scarlett also couldn’t deny that there was a part of her that felt a slight glee at the possibility of Anguish being confined within a mortal, bereft of power yet able to see and think. In a way, that was the cruelest fate that could befall a demon.

What would Anguish’s absence from her domain mean in the long run, though? Malachi probably lacked the power and Authority to *rule* the entirety of the Blaze of Anguish. The

other Viles had also been encroaching on Anguish's territory, and there was no way they hadn't noticed this whole manifestation ordeal. All six Blazes were no doubt in some state of uproar at the moment.

But it wasn't as if that was a bad thing. Scarlett preferred it that way. It meant there was less risk of the other Viles causing her any future headaches.

"...Got nothing to say to that?" Rosa asked beside her.

Scarlett returned her focus to the present, giving a slight nod. "I do, but my thoughts are rather mired at the moment. Much has happened."

"I get that."

For a moment, Scarlett stayed quiet, contemplating whether to probe for more. "...What is Anguish saying at the moment?" she eventually asked.

There were a few seconds of silence from Rosa before she answered. "Don't think you want to know."

"I see." Scarlett's mouth tightened. Anguish's absence from the Blazes wouldn't mean much if she could continue to torment Rosa like before. That didn't sound like it was the case, but she didn't know for sure. "Do you believe there is any risk of her resuming control anytime soon?"

"No, probably not. Not unless I let her. And before you say anything, I don't have any plans of doing that ever again. Besides, it's not like she would be able to do much now even if I did."

"Then that is good."

"...That's all you got to say?"

Scarlett kept her attention aimed ahead. "No, but I will leave it that for now," she said, ending the conversation there.

As long as it was safe for the time being, the rest could be dealt with later. First, they had to make it back to the camp, regroup with Allyssa and the others, and recover from all these events.

Scarlett likely wouldn't be able to avoid another encounter with Raimond as well, where she supposed she would learn the details of whatever fabricated excuse he'd conjured up to explain things to his fellows.

Beyond that, a real, actual conversation with Rosa about a lot of things was long overdue. If possible, Scarlett also wanted to confront Anguish and extract as much information from the Vile as she could.

Another thing Scarlett was waiting for was any sort of system notification signaling the end of this questline. If Rosa's words were to be believed, Anguish *was* pacified and wouldn't

resurface in any dangerous fashion for now. The absence of a notification appearing and saying something of the sort worried her, but she wasn't sure if that was necessarily a bad omen. She hadn't had much opportunity to check due to everything, but the system had seemed a bit off-kilter ever since she visited that void.

Her gaze dipped slightly as the system window appeared before her.

[Name: Scarlett Hartford]

[Skills:

[Greater Mana Control]

[Greater Pyromancy]

[Major Pyrokinesis]

[Greater Hydromancy]

[Superior Hydrokinesis]



[Traits

[Dignified August]

[Supercilious]

[Cavalier]

[Callous]

[Overbearing]

[Conceited]

[Third-rate Mana Veins]]

[Mana: 413/12063]

[Points: 36]

That strange new skill was still there, though its appearance had changed slightly. It seemed to do that every time she inspected it. She was still clueless about what it was, though. She simply knew that it was there and that it was *different* from the other skills. In a way, it felt like it was trying to communicate with her, though not in words. It was just a weird sensation that she couldn't quite describe. If her suspicions were correct, that wasn't the only thing it had done recently.

She couldn't help the frown on her face deepening as she scrutinized the new entry in her skill list. Eventually, she dismissed the system window.

It was another concern among many, adding to the ever-growing pile of mysteries this world had presented her with. This one was probably one of the most perplexing and nebulous ones yet, but at the same time, it also offered her some insights that not even nearly half a year of living here had given her. Perhaps if she could follow where that trail led in the future, it would let her learn more about the secrets of the system and this world, shedding some light on their origins.

That is, assuming it didn't bring about some far more ominous outcome before then. She'd be foolish not to be wary of what it signified.

Ultimately, however, the road ahead was unknown, but at least she knew that this meant *something*. And for now, that was enough to make her think.