

200: Lead-ups

When Scarlett returned to the previous chamber, she found the whole group still waiting there for her, their expectant gazes landing on her as she arrived. That included Raimond, who bore no signs of injury.

“How’d it go?” Allyssa asked, her eyes scanning Scarlett’s appearance. “What was on the other side?”

“It went well,” Scarlett replied, directing her attention to the young Shielder. “As for what I encountered, there was nothing of particular note. The master of this place attempted to deceive me with tricks, but I dispelled and dealt with those promptly. Our path forward has been paved.”

Raimond regarded her closely. “Consider my curiosity thoroughly piqued. What manner of trickeries might we be talking about? Though perhaps of questionable judgement, it is rather intriguing to hear that you chose to confront a Vile’s machinations on your own and prevailed in such a short amount of time.”

Scarlett briefly locked eyes with him. “...She attempted to mislead me by employing your likeness to ambush me.”

The priest’s brow furrowed into a frown. “That is dastardly indeed. One can only imagine the inner turmoil anyone would endure when confronted by my own disarming visage in the form of an adversary.”

“There is no need for the concern, Father. I dispatched off the imitation swiftly, ensuring its demise.”

He blinked. “Surely you felt at least some hesitation.”

“None whatsoever.”

Raimond brought a hand up to his chest as if visibly wounded, while Allyssa wore a sympathetic expression beside him.

Scarlett then shifted her focus to the rest of the group. “This trap could have proven perilous had we confronted it as one unit, but since it has now been dealt with, we proceed unhindered. Follow me.”

With that, she turned around and stepped through the shrouded veil that covered the entrance, returning to the corridor from before once more. The mirror covering the right wall was still missing, revealing the duplicate corridor with the spiral staircase leading upwards. The others joined her soon enough, with Fynn taking the lead, and they started making their way towards the stairs.

As they advanced through the corridor, the knights maintained a watchful vigil of their surroundings warily, as though anticipating even graver threats than those they’d faced so far to appear simply because Scarlett had mentioned the trap here.

One of them, the same woman Scarlett had been riding behind on their journey to the citadel, pointed towards the end of the original corridor where, instead of a staircase, a curtain of darkness still obscured the way. “My Lady, where does that lead?”

“I do not know,” Scarlett said.

“You don’t?”

Scarlett glanced at the knight, and the woman seemed to realize herself. “Forgive me, I simply assumed...”

“That is quite all right.” She supposed it wasn’t strange for them to think she knew more than she did about this place, considering how she had been leading them up till now. If anything, that had probably been on the mind of everybody here for a while.

“I presume our destination lies with that staircase,” Raimond said. “Nonetheless, it might be prudent to investigate the alternate path. With preparation, I am certain we can contend with any deceptions our inhospitable host may have lying in wait, as you have already done, Baroness.”

Scarlett looked at him. “...I believe that is the opposite of ‘prudent’, Father. We already have a clear path before us.”

She didn’t know if another fight awaited them down the other route, and she didn’t want to bother finding out.

“Ah, but how can we be certain that is not yet another ploy to lull us into complacency? The staircase *is* suspiciously convenient, after all.”

The priest smiled as he spoke, as if his intentions were nothing but sincere, leaving Scarlett frustrated due to her inability to decipher his motives.

“Convenient, yes, but that does not preclude it being the correct route,” she replied. “As you yourself said, I believe we can contend with any deceptions that may await us if it is, in fact, the incorrect route.”

He almost certainly knew she wanted to climb the stairs because she was aware it was the right way, but he was pushing her like this to fish for information. At least she hoped that was the reason behind this. The alternative would be that he was actually toying with her and already knew everything, but that seemed increasingly unlikely as time passed.

Raimond raised both hands in a placating gesture. “I suppose you are right there. Consider me convinced.”

Scarlett eyed him for another moment, then turned her attention forward as their group reached the staircase and began their ascent, with Fynn and two of the knights leading the way.

While Raimond was clearly testing her, she could also appreciate that he wasn’t pushing her too hard. It was suspicious that Scarlett was here to begin with, even discounting her apparent

familiarity with the place, and she hoped his restraint in questioning her indicated good intentions.

The staircase was long, and the minutes stretched on as they climbed. By the time they reached the top, Scarlett's legs were protesting, and she called for a short break. Between the physical strain and all the mana she had expended as they cleared this place, she was starting to feel the onset of exhaustion. Without Rosa's stamina-boosting charms, she still noticed the limitations her own body placed on her, even with the buffs her own equipment afforded her.

Drinking a potion Allyssa had made for rejuvenating one's energy—it wasn't quite a stamina potion, but it was better than nothing—Scarlett soon ordered an end to their brief respite and they began moving again. The shortcut had placed them in another large chamber devoid of enemies, but since there weren't any windows, it was impossible to gauge how high up they currently were. Though she thought they were starting to get closer, Scarlett couldn't rely solely on her game knowledge to estimate how much farther they had to go. Their only option was to keep pushing on.

Continuing in the same manner as before, they navigated the chambers and hallways of Anguish's citadel, encountering more and more of the demons that made this place their temporary home. From basic mobs to mini-bosses like the guardian at the start, they gradually climbed the citadel, making use of the occasional shortcut that they could locate.

It was in a square room with nothing but a single threatening door at its center, adorned with two sizeable crimson gems and two paths leading to the right and left, that Scarlett instructed the group to pause once more. She examined the door for a few seconds, then gestured towards it.

“Fynn, see if you can open that.”

If she recalled correctly, that door would be locked, and the only way to unlock it was by destroying a set of relics at the end of the two paths. She had been uncertain if this feature would exist in this world's version of the citadel, but she had been hoping it would be. It was a time-old tradition in certain RPGs to lock important paths behind mechanisms like this one in dungeons, forcing the player to clear every route before progressing. While it was questionable game design in her opinion, this was one instance where she wasn't going to complain.

As for why this would translate to this world, she didn't even try bothering to find the answer. Most of the dungeons here were strange in one way or another if one thought about them for too long. Unlike the trap from earlier, this didn't feel like it could be blamed solely on Anguish's arrogance.

What mattered was that this provided her with an excuse to temporarily split the party.

Fynn stepped up to the door as she asked and tried to pull it open, but the door didn't budge. He continued for a few seconds before looking back at her and shaking his head.

Scarlett walked over to the rightmost path, which was an opening in the wall leading down a wide staircase into a dark corridor. From her vantage point, there were no visible demons, but she knew there would be more ahead. There always was.

She turned back to the rest of the group. “From here, we will be dividing into two groups,” she declared.

This announcement earned her a few puzzled looks.

She motioned towards the door. “To proceed, we will likely have to bypass that door. However, since it is locked, there should be a means of unlocking it available to us. That is how this place appears to be designed, and I do not think this instance will be different.”

Briefly, she wondered whether Anguish’s actual citadel in the Blazes was also laid out in this very game-like manner, or if an in-lore explanation for it could perhaps be that the Vile *wanted* someone to reach the top. Scarlett could conceive of a few reasons why that would be the case, but it still felt like a dubious explanation. If that were the case, the demon could just have created a single path that led all the way to the top.

That said, even if this layout was a relic from the game, there should still be some explanation for it, right?

Before she started going into a mental rabbit hole she’d already told herself to shelve for the time being, she returned her focus to the matter at hand.

Allyssa raised a hand in the air. “Not going to say you’re wrong about the door, but is it really necessary to split up for this?”

“Necessary? No. It would, however, be the most efficient way to proceed,” Scarlett said. “We are yet to know whether we are pressed on time or not, but as long as that remains an uncertainty, it is best to assume that we are. The breaks we have taken and the time we have spent to come this far may already be too much. Therefore, saving time where we can is wise.” She gestured towards Fynn. “That is why Fynn and I will explore one of these paths, while the rest of you explore the other.”

That statement prompted more than just puzzled looks as everyone stared at her.

“Just you and Fynn?” Allyssa asked.

“Yes.”

“...Even when there are like a dozen of us in total?”

“Yes.”

The girl looked like she wanted to say more, but refrained from doing so, probably because she knew Scarlett always had a reason for these things.

That did not, however, stop Raimond.

“I must admit to harboring some doubts about this proposal,” the man said, and the knights nodded in agreement. “While your abilities have certainly proved impressive, Baroness, and the same can be said for Fynn here, I think it would still prove a touch too uncertain for you

to go off on your own in a place such as this. If we truly are to divide ourselves as you suggest, we should consider a better distribution of our forces.”

“I disagree,” Scarlett replied, crossing her arms and aiming her gaze at the six knights lent to her by Sir Home. “I will be blunt. Fynn, on his own, can handle all of them without my support. With Mister Thornthorn’s and Miss Astrey’s help, they may stand a chance, and perhaps even hold the advantage, but Fynn is more than capable of acting independently when needed. If we are dividing our numbers, it would prove far too precarious to leave any of the knights by themselves. Therefore, the only viable option is for Fynn to serve as the sole vanguard in a group. As for why I should join him, I believe I have already demonstrated my ability to handle the weaker demons we encounter in this place on my own.”

Raimond frowned ever-so-slightly, but he didn’t actually challenge her words. Neither did any of the others. The knights had all witnessed Fynn’s strength, and it really wasn’t a lie that he could probably take on all of them by himself. Scarlett proposed this split because it suited her needs, but she also genuinely thought it happened to be the best way to do so. Raimond and Scarlett were the most effective damage dealers against these demons when they came in large numbers, so the two of them shouldn’t be in the same group, and considering that the knights would suffer worse injuries than Fynn, it made sense for Raimond to stay with them to provide healing.

“If I may ask, Baroness,” the priest eventually said, looking at Scarlett. “How much of your mana reserves remain?”

She met his gaze. Of course he *had* to ask that.

While her proposal might sound logical in theory, it didn’t take into account how much mana she had left.

[Mana: 1624/12063]

Even after having downed as many mana potions as she dared without suffering aftereffects, she was running low. Raimond, on the other hand, showed no sign of depleting his own reserves, even after healing the group and casting offensive spells against the demons for all this time. Scarlett didn’t know how much mana the man possessed, but it definitely wasn’t anything to scoff at.

Still, that didn’t matter much.

“I have more than enough for the time being,” she said.

As long as she was by herself, it didn’t matter how much mana she had left. That was what [Ittar’s Genesis] was for.

Raimond studied her for a few seconds, then nodded with a somewhat resigned expression. “I suppose you would know best. If you believe this is our best approach from here, then who am I to argue with you as a mere tagalong? However—” He raised a finger, lowered it, and pointed it in Allyssa’s direction. “I would still like to ask that you at the very least take Allyssa here with you. I will do my best to compensate for her absence in our group, and I believe having one more member with your group would give us all some peace of mind.”

Scarlett turned her gaze towards Allyssa and considered her for a moment. “Very well.”

The Shielder’s eyes widened at that, but Scarlett didn’t linger on the matter as she turned, taking the lead to begin immediately. “Our goal is to uncover a means through which to open this door or, if possible, find an alternate path forward. If you discover such a path or encounter a foe you cannot defeat on your own, return to this room and we will regroup here. Until then, I wish you luck.”

She didn’t look back as Fynn joined her, and they moved towards the path to the right. Allyssa soon caught up with a bewildered expression. Scarlett only glanced over her shoulder just before they lost sight of the room behind them to ensure that Raimond and the others went down the opposite path.

She had been worried about getting more resistance from Raimond, but it really did seem like he was being accommodating with her on these matters. While that was a good thing, it was also in itself kind of strange. What *was* his game here?

“I’m surprised you let me join you,” Allyssa commented next to her as they began descending the stairs into the dark corridor, hand crossbow in hand. “You had that determined look that you get when you’re planning to get something done on your own.”

Scarlett shifted her gaze to the girl. “...It appears you have come to understand me rather well.”

“It’s hard not to with how obvious you make it sometimes.”

“The circumstances do not always allow for subtlety.”

“Maybe not.” Allyssa shrugged. “I don’t understand the circumstances well enough to know if that’s true or false in this case.”

“Yet another unfortunate consequence of the very same circumstances.”

As they reached the bottom of the staircase, Scarlett signaled for both of the others to stop and conjured a couple of small flames to illuminate the path ahead. The corridor stretched for a few dozen meters before ending at a small door.

Allyssa held an expectant face, and Fynn turned back to look at Scarlett.

“From here on, you will continue on your own, Fynn.”

“W-Wait, what—?” Allyssa began, but the young man just nodded.

“You do not need to engage in combat with the foes that await you ahead. Simply reach the end of this path and destroy the relic that awaits there. Do it quickly and do not get yourself killed.”

“Alright,” Fynn responded. Then his white hair moved as a gust of wind surged up around him, and he disappeared down the corridor.

Allyssa remained beside Scarlett, staring at her.

Scarlett turned around and began climbing up the stairs.

“W-Wait, why are we just leaving Fynn on his own?” the girl’s voice called out behind her.

“Because he can accomplish this task independently,” Scarlett answered.

There would probably be a significant number of demons in his way, yes, but there was no requirement for him to bother fighting them. Even if they were too much for him to take on, she was confident that he could at least get past them if he didn’t have others to protect.

Returning to the room with the locked door, Scarlett positioned herself in front of it and waited, her eyes fixed on the gems set into its face. Allyssa soon joined her, still seemingly trying to decipher Scarlett’s plan.

As for Scarlett herself, she was preparing for what would come next. Although this door didn’t mark the end, it should be close enough that she could cover the remaining distance by herself if she generously made use of the mana inside [Ittar’s Genesis]. That meant that, soon, she would be able to reach Rosa and confront Anguish.

And that was precisely what she had been anticipating for some time now.