

215: Girls talk

Scarlett found Rosa in the woman's quarters, sitting in the corner of the room next to a small table with her head lowered and arms leaned over the klert in her hands. Hushed, halcyon notes rang from the instrument in a glum melody, and Scarlett hesitated, observing the bard who was lost in her music, seemingly oblivious to her arrival.

*Through haunted walls where echoes weep,
A melody of secrets, the troubadour does keep~
A visage cloaked in heartache's guise,
Yet, a plea for joy in wanting cries~*

*Smile for me, 'neath the silver veil,
In the spectral dance, let joy prevail~
Ghosts of laughter, shadow's glee,
In the haunted night, smile for me~*

Rosa's voice, barely perceptible from where Scarlett was, whispered through the air, carrying poignant emotions that were clear to Scarlett even without the volume. And the lyrics... Scarlett faintly recognized them from the game, yet she felt some of the lines were different even though she couldn't speak for which ones.

She lingered near the doorway for a couple of minutes, listening to Rosa's song, until the melody finally faded, leaving the room in silence. Rosa's gaze remained fixed on the instrument in her lap and the empty floorboards for several seconds, however, and eventually, Scarlett decided to break the quietude.

Rosa's head lifted at the sound of Scarlett's footsteps, and a wry smile appeared on her face. "...Fancy meeting you here. Didn't think I'd catch you sneaking around during your downtime, but who can blame you?" The smile transformed into a smirk. "If you wanted a show, you could've just asked."

"And I would have if that is what I desired," Scarlett said, crossing the room and settling into a chair opposite the bard, placing the [Bag of Juham] on the table between them.

Rosa's eyes flickered briefly to the bag and then back to Scarlett. "So, how'd your little city excursion go? Heard you went to meet with some big-shot duke or other. Climbing up the social ladder, are we? Soon you'll be beguiling princes and princesses to do your bidding."

"I most assuredly would hope not." Scarlett shook her head. "And things proceeded smoothly. The duke expressed interest in further discussions before we depart for Freybrook, so I will likely meet with him again in the coming days."

"Yeah?" Rosa nodded along thoughtfully. "That's good, I bet," the woman said, her gaze shifting to the wall directly ahead of them, where a wooden wardrobe and a painting of a ship hung. She absentmindedly plucked at the string and keys of her klert, producing soft, contemplative notes.

Observing her from the side for a short while, Scarlett wondered about what was going through the bard's mind.

Eventually, she cleared her throat and shifted in her seat to reach towards the table. "There are a few reasons why I have joined you now, but before any of that, there are some articles that I have for you."

Rosa blinked, turning her head towards Scarlett. "For me?"

"Yes." Scarlett extended an arm and reached into the [Bag of Juham], extracting the first item inside. "If you recall, when we first arrived in Bridgespell, we visited several workshops to commission equipment for everyone. I have already distributed the others with items, leaving only yours remaining."

"Oh, right. I completely forgot about that, to tell you the truth," Rosa admitted. "You know, with everything that was going..."

The woman's words trailed off as she laid eyes on what Scarlett had pulled out.

Crafted from rich, polished wood and embellished with intricate detailing and imagery along the sides and bottom, it looked to be an instrument of sorts. It boasted several strings stretched across an exquisitely crafted bridge, with deliberately placed keys fashioned from bone-white marble adorning its face and a wheel of sorts set into the wood at the center. At the instrument's base, a single handle beckoned to be cranked.

[Melodyscript Klert (rare)]

{Born from the hands of an expert artisan working with a seasoned enchanter and made from the rare Lyradra Wood, this instrument seems imbued with a sense of life and artistry, eagerly waiting to express its unique sound}

"You once playfully suggested asking Dean Warley Godwin to enchant your instrument while he was staying at our mansion," Scarlett said, observing Rosa's reaction. "Obviously, the idea of requesting one of the most powerful mages in the empire to invest his time in such a mundane task is ludicrous. I am also convinced that whatever enchantment you *would* have asked for would have been meaningless at best. However, it did prompt me to consider if there might be more useful alternatives."

She gestured over the klert resting on the table. "That is why I commissioned this on your behalf. It was before we left for Bridgespell, so it is technically unrelated to the other items we commissioned, but I had inquired about notable artisans in the city who could craft a klert, as well as a mage who could enchant it. It did require me to use some connections, but I did find both. The body was fashioned by Sir Elowen Dalton, if you know of him, and it was later enchanted by a Master Docent Harding from Bridgespell Tower, recommended to me by Miss Mendenhall."

Rosa sat in silence, staring at the instrument.

Scarlett's brows furrowed slightly as she pondered Rosa's reaction. Did she perhaps not like it and was considering how to convey that? It might be understandable if the woman was

attached to her old instrument, but this enchanted one would objectively be superior during excursions. Rosa could always keep her old klert to use for other occasions if she wished to.

“Is there an issue with it?” Scarlett eventually asked after almost half a minute had passed.

Hopefully Rosa wasn't dissatisfied with the quality. Scarlett would have preferred an Epic-tier instrument for the bard, but getting something like that wasn't feasible at the moment. She lacked the materials, and creating a klert from scratch was a slow process. Unlike the workshops Scarlett had gone to for her other equipment, Sir Elowen had informed her that it was impossible for him to tailor a klert for Rosa specifically in under a month.

This one had apparently been fashioned from the body of a klert the artisan had lying around, and Scarlett supposed it was impressive that he had still managed to work with a mage to get it done in the time that he had. This was apparently the first time the man actually created an instrument to be enchanted. The enchantments themselves were somewhat limited due to the lower quality of the item itself, but this was still better than nothing.

Finally, Rosa turned to look at Scarlett, raising both eyebrows and pointing at herself. “What, you think this face of mine is one of *disappointment*?”

Scarlett eased slightly upon hearing that question. “It is challenging to discern such things with you,” she admitted.

The bard chuckled. She glanced down at the klert already in her lap, running her fingers over it before looking back up at the new one. “Mind if I try it out?” she asked, turning her violet eyes back towards Scarlett.

“It is yours,” Scarlett replied. “You hardly need my permission to use it.”

Smiling, Rosa leaned her old klert against the side of her chair and picked up the new instrument by its neck, holding it up and examining it from different angles. She then placed it on her lap and began experimenting with it, touching keys and strings, adjusting the tuning pegs at the head, and performing other small checks unfamiliar to Scarlett.

Eventually, the woman seemed satisfied and attempted cranking the handle at the bottom. A fleecy, dainty tune emanated from the instrument, resonating through the room, seemingly infusing the very air around them with a certain energy and vigour. Rosa began to sing in a low, casual voice.

*And oh she lived, that she did~
She bilked, she duped,
and she kept her way~
Tilde, never once did she keep her say~
She was a scamp, a cheat,
but she kept you astray~*

Scarlett listened to the song, recognizing it both from the game and their first encounter.

When Rosa was finished, she turned back to Scarlett with a composed expression. “This might be the best gift I've ever gotten. In my whole life. Period.”

“...Surely you are exaggerating.”

“No.”

Scarlett studied her, a moment of uncertainty passing as she wondered how to respond, then she shifted her attention back to the [Bag of Juham]. “If that is the case, then I am curious to hear your thoughts on these next items.” She pulled out two more objects from the bag.

[Harmony’s Veil (Epic)]

{A symbol of the harmony that a minstrel’s songs can bring, this veil’s purpose of protecting its wearer and spreading its melody far and wide will sing true }

The first was a flowing purple mantle, whose fabric almost seemed to dance and flicker in the ambient light. It was made from a mixture of the ashenwraith dragon’s hide and a particular kind of silk called amethystine silk, which Scarlett and the others had collected on one of their dungeon runs.

While it was a mantle, its size was enough to where it could fold over the front and protect the whole body if needed. A small spatial enchantment had also been integrated into it, allowing Rosa to stow away her kler inside whenever she wanted. *That* had been expensive, given how rare most spatial enchantments and the materials for it were, but the convenience it offered was undeniable.

The next item was a pair of leather boots.

[Harmony’s Echostriders (Rare)]

{Made from the finest silver silk, the luminescent threads within these boots sing the song of travels, aiding its wearer in their journeys }

Rosa stared at the two items as Scarlett placed them on the table. “What, I’m really getting these two as well?”

“You are, yes.”

Balancing her new kler on her lap, Rosa leaned over the table and began examining both the mantle and the boots. “If I didn’t know any better, I would have thought you were trying to win my heart with extravagant gifts. If only I hadn’t been there during that Tuesday store-run of yours to witness the nonchalance with which you spent enough solars to buy a castle. Nothing’s scarier than seeing nobles throw around money like it grows on trees.”

Scarlett chose to overlook the playful attack on her as she took the [Bag of Juham] and placed it on the floor. “This is not the first instance where I have supplied you with valuable equipment. You are a crucial member of my party, and thus, investing in anything that can potentially enhance your capabilities is a logical decision on my part. Strengthening one’s available assets is a natural course of action.”

“Now *that’s* the quintessential Scarlett response,” Rosa said.

“It is the truth.”

“Yeah, yeah.” The bard waved a hand dismissively as she continued examining the mantle and boots. She then looked up at Scarlett. “The klert I think I can figure out on my own, and I’m even looking forward to it. But what do these do?”

“They both feature basic enchantments for durability, with the mantle additionally possessing a warding enchantment to protect you when necessary. Furthermore, it should theoretically complement your charms slightly, and it includes a small dimensional fold for you to store your klert in. As for the boots, they will improve your stamina and agility while also theoretically enhancing your charms.”

Rosa whistled. “Now that *is* fancy. With everything else you’ve given me, I’m starting to feel like a walking treasure chest. It’s only a matter of time before a dragon comes swooping in to claim me as the crown jewel of its hoard. I should probably thank you, but I feel that won’t even get close to repaying you for any of this.”

“As I have already mentioned, you are a valuable asset to me. There is no need for thanks when my choices are driven by my own gain.”

“The klert was also only for your benefit then, I suppose?” Rosa asked, lightly tapping her hand on the instrument.

Scarlett’s eyes moved to it, remaining on it for a moment before she eventually gave a small nod. “Yes.”

Rosa flashed a knowing smile but offered no further response, concluding the topic there.

A brief silence followed, and Rosa returned to checking over the items on the table until Scarlett spoke once more.

“With that dealt with, perhaps it is time for us to have a conversation. We have not had much time or opportunity for a proper discussion since before you left for Crowcairn.”

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right,” Rosa answered casually as she continued inspecting the items, seeming to have found the spatial pouch inside the mantle. “Where do you want to start?”

Scarlett eyed her. “...How about we begin with how you are?”

The woman hesitated briefly, a flicker of surprise crossing her face. Her expression quickly returned to normal as she met Scarlett’s gaze. “Are you sure that’s where you want to start?”

“Yes.”

“Are you *sure*, sure?”

“I would not have asked if I were not.”

“Well, I was half-convinced the first thing that’d be on your mind once we get back here was to tear into me to the point where they’d need Fynn to sniff around half the city’s alleys to find what was left of my body.”

“...I would not have had you killed, Rosa, no matter what you may have done to anger me.”

“Really?” The woman wiped an imaginary sweat drop from her brow. “Whew, that’s a weight off my shoulders.”

“Allow me to reiterate my question, then,” Scarlett said. “How are you, Rosa?”

The bard squinted her eyes at her. “You’re *really* sure that’s where you want to start?”

A hint of annoyance entered Scarlett’s voice. “Do not start this again.”

“Sorry, sorry.” Rosa gave a light grin, then she leaned back in her chair and peered out across the room. “To actually answer your question, I’m fine. Much thanks to you, really.”

Scarlett arched a brow. “You are reverting to old habits, asserting that you are fine while wearing a smile that you have every right not to.”

Rosa’s smile cracked, then gradually faded away. “...Guess you’re right on that one as well.”

“I have been informed that I tend to be correct about a great deal of things,” Scarlett said.

“And humble too...” Rosa let out in a low mutter. A sigh then left the bard as she fiddled with her klert. “...You know, I used to go by this old adage. Not sure where I picked it up, but it always stuck with me. ‘Don’t tell your friends about your indigestion. ‘How are you’ is a greeting, not a question’.”

“That is an especially cynical view of relationships.”

“Not arguing with you on that, but it’s true, isn’t it?”

“In some cases, perhaps. But not ever have I posed that question to you without genuinely intending it.”

“I’ll be honest, I think that makes *you* weirder than it does me.” Rosa shook her head, a slight hint of amusement showing on her face, but it soon disappeared as her expression turned more serious. “...But I’m not lying to you this time. I really *am* fine. Mostly. Better than I have any right to be, at least. Better than I’ve been for years. That part isn’t a lie.”

“Yet you can still hear Anguish,” Scarlett pointed out.

“There is that,” the woman admitted. “Turns out she’s a pretty sore loser. I’ve spent the last day hearing her attempt about a hundred different ways to convince me to set her free and embrace the old homicide routine. I’ve considered shutting her up a dozen times by now, but there’s something soothing in listening to the thing that ruined your whole life desperately beg and plead for your attention, you know? Or, well, I say ‘desperately’, but it’s mostly just a bunch of her laughing at my ignorance, but I take what I can get. Don’t know what that says about *me*, but at this point, do I really care?”

A frown appeared on Scarlett’s brow. It was somewhat worrying that Anguish was still up to that kind of stuff, yet, simultaneously... she had to admit that she *also* found some

satisfaction in imagining the demon's futile attempts to sway Rosa, all the while Anguish was incapable of doing anything to stop the chaos that was no doubt currently spreading in her domain.

"She's also told me half a dozen or hundred tales about you that would make Drakon the Despoiler sound virtuous," Rosa continued, "but it's pretty clear most of it's made up."

Scarlett paused, looking at the woman.

The thought had crossed her mind that Anguish might tell Rosa things that Scarlett didn't necessarily want her to know.

Rosa met her gaze, the bard's clear violet eyes piercing into her.

"Most," Rosa said, "but I wager even a demon like her might have sprinkled some truth in there, even if by accident."

Scarlett stayed quiet for a few beats, studying the bard, before finally speaking. "...It should perhaps not come as a surprise that I have been harboring many secrets from you, although I hope you understand that I had good reason to do so. I cannot defend myself if I do not know what I am accused of, however, so if I may ask... What has she been telling you?"

"...First, I want to ask..." Rosa glanced down at her chest, where the [Astralbane's Nexus Heartstone] was hidden beneath the fabric of her blouse. "You've known about Anguish being inside me since before we met, right?"

"I have." Scarlett had no reason to deny it.

"So when you claimed you knew me when we first met in that inn, it wasn't that you had heard of *me* as a bard, but that you were aware of my whole 'incarnate' situation, even though I didn't even know about it?"

"...Yes."

A complex expression played across Rosa's face as she considered Scarlett. "Is it also true that you struck a deal with Anguish, agreeing not to interfere in each other's business?"

"Yes," Scarlett said, "However—"

"I know." Rosa raised a hand. "It's not like I'm blaming you for that. It's just that I finally have an explanation for why the visions disappeared around you. Besides." She offered a small smile and rapped her fist against her upper chest, emitting a subtle crystalline sound. "You clearly found ways around that pact of yours."

The smile faded, a solemn expression taking over Rosa's face as she turned her head, gaze drifting across the room. "...Course, then we had the *other* things Anguish told me. Even if all of it were to be lies or twisted versions of the truth, they led me to some realizations about our relationship that I'd been blind to. About how some of my assumptions were wrong. Looking back, it's clear that I was always dancing along to your tune far more than I was aware."

“Rosa, allow me to—”

“I’m still not blaming you, you know?” the woman said, though her attention wasn’t on Scarlett. “I’m the last person who has any right to do that, after everything you’ve done for me. It’s just that, realizing that there was so much that I missed in our interactions, so much context and meaning that I was completely oblivious to each time I talked with someone I *thought* I knew... It feels weird, you know? Sad, almost. Makes me wonder if I was the only one taking all those times seriously, at face value.”

A moment of silence followed as she paused, and Scarlett thought over her words. “...There was never a time where I did not take you seriously,” she eventually replied.

“Yeah?” The corner of Rosa’s lips lifted as she shot her a wry look. “You willing to stand by that claim?”

“Discounting all of the times that you were being a Rosa,” Scarlett added.

“It’s heartening I’ve made enough of an imprint for my name to have become a noun,” the bard laughed. She then turned her gaze away once more. “...Anguish tried to make you out as this master manipulator, but I didn’t *really* think you had been manipulating me all this time. She seems to think she’s got you pegged, but honestly, I don’t think she has any idea what you’re truly like. Even if you *had* been manipulating me like that, even if I had been nothing but a pawn in your games and everything had been a lie, I think I would have been fine with it. Though, once again, that probably speaks more about how much of a mess *I* am than you.”

“I do not believe you are not a mess, Rosa,” Scarlett said.

A mirthless chuckle left Rosa at that. “That’s mighty kind of you, Red, but this is one time where you’re *definitely* wrong. I’d wager a dragon’s bottom that you can’t find another pulchritudinous lass in the empire that’s as selfish as contradictory as this one.”

“...You expressed a similar sentiment in Crowcairn, but I struggle to understand the reasoning behind you labeling yourself as selfish. I have witnessed numerous instances where you prioritised the well-being of others above your own, to an extent where it is infuriating.”

There were several occasions when Scarlett had *wished* the woman wasn’t as kindhearted as she was.

Rosa shook her head. “If you knew anything about my past, you wouldn’t be saying that.”

“I *do* know your past,” Scarlett said.

The bard froze.

“My knowledge of you from before we met extended beyond knowing you were an incarnate, Rosa. While I will not claim to know everything about you, I am aware of much of what you have been through.”

Slowly, Rosa turned back to look at Scarlett, eyeing her. “...Then you should know that people have *died* because of me in the past. Because of this *thing* inside me. Because *I* didn’t

have enough sense to just go out into the forest and live in solitude with my own demons. Because I...I couldn't even envision a life where I was entirely by myself." There was a weighty earnestness behind her words now. "I have been *nothing* but selfish for most of my life, Scarlett. That's a fact."

Scarlett watched her quietly. "...I am aware. Yet, it is also a fact that I have seen you care for and heal children who cross your path, aid strangers who have nothing to offer you, and strive to distance yourself from me and the others to prevent us from getting hurt despite your unwillingness to do so. You chose to save an entire village belonging to the Tribe of Sin while placing your own life in peril."

"If anything, that *emphasizes* my problems," Rosa said. "Anyone can help out a kid or two if it doesn't cost them much, but that doesn't speak to whether they're genuinely good. You'd think that someone with an actual sense of decency wouldn't hesitate to push away her friends if it meant saving them from herself. Yet I did hesitate. So many times. And this was *before* I knew you could help me. What I should have done back then was leave after the first time I got paid, but I couldn't bring myself to do it."

A brief, self-derisive laugh left the woman, and her gaze fell down on the table for a moment, lingering on the mantle and boots resting on it. "Besides, weren't you of the opinion that me helping the villagers in Crowcairn was the *wrong* thing to do? I never disagreed with you about that. Like I've already told you, I didn't act as I did because of some kind of saint who can't see people die. People *have* already died because of me. I just... I wasn't sure I could live with myself if all my actions, the culmination of everything stupid and cowardly I'd done in my life, meant *me* getting away scot-free while an entire village of unrelated people and families died. Even *if* they were Tribe members."

Rosa shook her head. "Or maybe it was the opposite... Maybe I *did* think I could live with myself after that. I've never *wanted* to be that kind of person, but in a way, I've probably always been."

"...I was unaware those were your thoughts on the matter," Scarlett said.

This wasn't quite how Rosa had expressed herself in the game in any of the questlines Scarlett had played through, so it was somewhat unexpected. And surprisingly, Scarlett found herself actually sympathising with some of the woman's sentiments.

"Some of them were new to me as well." Rosa gave a weak shrug. "But when you put this thing in me..." She touched the Heartstone nestled in her chest. "When, for once, I had full control over both myself *and* the demon that had been tormenting me for so long, even if only temporary, it was the first time I actually felt that I had the chance to *change* who I was. Or to try to, at least. And so I took that chance. I took it, even if it meant betraying the expectations you had placed on me and potentially endangering half the continent by inviting a megalomaniac demon intent on laying waste to all of civilization into my body. Sure, *I* felt fairly certain I could have stopped Anguish at any moment by simply *stopping* myself, but it was still a risk no sane person would take. So how does that deserve me being called 'kind'?"

She looked at Scarlett for several heartbeats, the brief, tense atmosphere that had descended over the room soon fading as the bard seemed to realize herself. She shifted in her chair, returning to fiddling with the klert in her lap as Scarlett watched her.

“...Then do you regret it?” Scarlett asked after some time.

“No,” came Rosa’s reply, showing no hesitation. “Not even for a second. Even if I’d lost my life at the end of it all, I would have made the same choice again. Even knowing it would have made you waste all that effort you put into helping me. Like I said, I’m selfish like that.”

Scarlett’s eyes remained on the bard as she scrutinized her, listening to the occasional note that left the strings on the woman’s instrument. “...I am beginning to think that we are more alike than I had thought. However, there are still many ways that we are distinctly different.”

Rosa stopped playing with her klert, looking back at Scarlett with a slightly confused expression.

“Between the two of us, *I* am unequivocally the more selfish one,” Scarlett said. “Do not forget that I was the one who orchestrated everything that transpired within the citadel and with Anguish, including the sequence of events that ultimately led to Malachi exposing the Tribe’s enclave in Crowcairn to Duke Valentino’s men. You may lament the circumstances in your life that have made you question whether you are a good person, Rosa, but at the very least, it is apparent that you harbor a *desire* to be one. That much is better than many others may lay claim to.”

Rosa’s mouth tightened into a thin line. “Maybe, but you can’t deny the hypocrisy of me asking for that much at this point.”

“And what does it matter if it is hypocritical?” Scarlett asked. “Who is there to pass judgement but yourself? I will not fault you for your past, and the only one whose opinion should influence your actions is yourself. And you claim that you are a mess, yet I can guarantee you that my personality is far more disordered and flawed, and there is no reality where *I* am not a hypocrite. Yet I strive to not allow this to govern who I am.”

“Ehm, we’re not talking about who’s got the best social skills here, Red,” Rosa replied with a puzzled look.

Scarlett returned her a sharp glare. “That is not what I meant.”

She paused briefly, mustering her resolve.

“I will only be saying this once, so do not expect me to reiterate this ever again; however, I am *aware* that I can have a problematic personality. I am, as already stated, hypocritical, overbearing, conceited, callous, vain, petty, easily angered, and I struggle to maintain even the most basic and healthy of relationships. I harbor numerous quirks and prejudices that I suspect affect my judgement on matters far more than I realize, and it was only a few months back that I could not even hold a proper conversation with my younger sister without entertaining at least one thought related to strangling her with my own hands. And even as we converse now, discussing important topics that should deserve my full attention, there is still a part of me that is focused entirely on relishing in imagining Anguish pleading for mercy after you described her as desperate.”

Scarlett had to stop as she grimaced, both annoyed and proud of herself for managing to describe her in such a negative light. Discussing some of her more questionable qualities never was an *enjoyable* experience, but sometimes it was necessary.

Though a small scowl remained on her face, she returned her attention to Rosa. “Despite my best efforts, I still find it difficult to empathise with the plights and feelings of others to a degree that, in most cultures, would undoubtedly be considered abnormal. On every occasion that we have visited Freymeadow and witnessed the end that awaits it, you have showcased your genuine concern and dismay at the fate that befell the village and its residents, while my thoughts rarely extend beyond worries about the smell and keeping my clothes clean.”

Locking eyes with Rosa, Scarlett continued. “If we are discussing kindness, Rosa, then know that in the company you keep, you would be deemed a saint in comparison to me. While you may believe that what you have withheld from me could tarnish my perception of you, know that there are matters which I have hidden from you that, in the eyes of others, would cast me as nothing but a ruthless villainess. You can, at the very least, find solace in that you are *aware* of your personality and faults, and can work to correct them where possible.”

Rosa blinked, staring at her with half-widened eyes as if looking at some mythological beast. “...It, ehm... It certainly *seems* like you know yourself and your faults pretty well too.”

“It may seem that way, yes, but in reality, I question my identity on a daily basis. There have been many occasions where I have doubted whether it is even possible for me to change. Much can be concealed beneath a guise of conceitedness and indifference.”

Rosa’s stare remained on her for a while longer, until suddenly, the woman burst into laughter. Soon, she was doubled over the klert in her lap, gasping for breath, while Scarlett watched with a scowl.

“That was not a jest,” Scarlett said.

Rosa put up one hand in the air as if asking her to wait, still laughing. “Never thought you were,” she spoke between breaths. “It’s just that...I realized how absurd...this situation is!”

“And what, exactly, are you referring to by that?”

Almost a whole other minute passed as Scarlett watched Rosa try to respond, only to break into another bout of laughter. Finally, however, the woman seemed to have gotten enough of it out of her system so that she could turn her attention back to Scarlett, tears in the corners of her eyes.

“Sorry about that,” Rosa said, wiping her eyes. “I just started thinking — how did this conversation turn into *you*, of all people, trying to comfort *me* by explaining how much more horrible you are? And saying it’s okay to be a hypocrite? I can tell you’re a real aficionado when it comes to this whole ‘comforting people’ thing.”

Scarlett was about to give a rather sharp response, but then she stopped, her brows knitting together.

Actually, why *had* she veered off into this line of conversation? This wasn't at all where she had intended things to go. "...As always, you prove to be a poor influence on me, Miss Hale," she eventually said.

The amused and quizzical expression on Rosa's face disappeared. "Hey, hang on a minute now. Did I just get demoted from 'Rosa' to 'Miss Hale' simply because I laughed at you?"

"You have always been 'Miss Hale' to me," Scarlett replied with just a bit of ice in her voice. "I merely have slips in judgement on occasion that cause me to briefly forget this. Fortunately, I can always trust that you do something to remind me, *Miss Hale*."

Rosa frowned. "This is unfair."

"It is not."

"It's an abuse of authority."

"It is not, and even if it were, I believe I have already made it abundantly clear that I would not care."

"You really *are* a villainess."

"Yes."

The two of them looked at each other, then a wide smile appeared on Rosa's face. Even Scarlett allowed the corner of her mouth to rise ever-so-slightly.

"You're going to lay all the responsibility for sidetracking this serious talk of ours on me, aren't you?" Rosa said.

"That was not my intent," Scarlett replied. "But now that you have brought it up, it does carry a certain appeal."

"Suppose I deserve that much." The bard relaxed in her seat, gaze drifting upward to inspect the ceiling. "...I'm not really sure what to make of all this, though. Does this mean you forgive me for being an idiot?"

Scarlett's eyes lingered on her for a moment longer before she, too, looked away. "Are you referring to how you sabotaged my plans in the citadel?"

"Yeah, that."

"In part, I had already forgiven you for that during our conversation in Crowcairn."

"Buuuut..." Rosa's voice drawled beside her.

"But I am also a very petty person," Scarlett said.

"Yeah, thought so."

Scarlett studied the painting hanging off the opposite wall as her thoughts wandered slightly, and a mellow melody echoed out from her left.

“So,” Rosa spoke after a while as the woman played her tune. “Was it just me, or did you admit to having thoughts about murdering your sister earlier? Among a bunch of other things.”

A scowl returned to Scarlett’s face. “...I did, yes.”

“That *is* pretty messed up.”

“I am aware.”

“...Want to talk about it?”

“No.”

“Alright.”

There was another bout of silence between them as Scarlett listened to the woman play her music, contemplating things. Eventually, she turned to look at Rosa.

“And what of you?” she asked. “I do not expect you to become a new person in a day, but with much of the Anguish situation dealt with for the time being, do you believe yourself capable of being more honest with me from hereon?”

“Don’t know,” Rosa replied. “Probably. Think I would live to regret it if I didn’t.”

“Most likely, yes.”

“Then there you have it. Does that mean I can expect you to be more honest with me as well?”

At that, Scarlett didn’t immediately respond.

“...Yeah, almost suspected as much,” Rosa said.

Scarlett studied the woman’s expression as she played away on her kleret, neither showing disappointment nor joy on her face. “...I will endeavour to be more forthcoming on the topics where I can be. I can promise you that much. I hope that will be enough.”

The bard shrugged, smoothly cranking the wheel of her instrument while still seeming to eye the ceiling. “I don’t think I *can* ask for more. You’re the reason I’m still around, and the reason I don’t have to avoid looking into every shadow in fear that something inside will stare back at me. Have I *mentioned* how nice that is, by the way? I don’t think I have. Not really a word to describe how great that is. I suppose ‘sublime’ is as close as it gets. Having to occasionally listen to a demon at the back of my head trying to convince me to do an unspeakable thing or two and staying ignorant about whatever gods-defying secrets my boss has got tucked away in her closet doesn’t seem like such a bad deal in return.”

Scarlett wondered whether the woman was being entirely honest there.

Technically, Scarlett *could* probably share some more things with Rosa, but did she want that? Was there any point in doing so? Sure, she could reveal only some of the things she knew. Maybe let her in on some of the dealings she had across the empire with actors like Beldon Tyndall, Warley Godwin, and possibly even the Cabal.

Yet that would undoubtedly spawn even more questions for Rosa when she learned more of the details. Questions that Scarlett *didn't* feel ready to answer. Questions like where she *actually* got all of her information, or even questions surrounding who she *actually was*.

Telling Arlene was one thing, but Rosa as well...?

Did Scarlett's hesitance in doing so mean that she trusted Rosa less than Arlene? That shouldn't be true. But then, where did her hesitance come from?

She shook her head. That didn't matter. Those thoughts could be left for another time. For now, she needed to bring this conversation back towards one of the main issues she had wanted to address ever since leaving Crowcairn.

"Rosa," she said, bringing the bard's attention back to her. "Would it be possible for me to speak with Anguish?"