

## 65: Reunions

"My Lady," Garside's voice called out from the other side of her office door. "We have received a notice from the Shields Guild branch."

"Enter," Scarlett said calmly as she flipped a page in the book she was reading on old legends and fairytales here in the empire. A few days had passed since she started experimenting more with her magic, and things had been relatively calm as of late. But judging from what she'd read in the latest issue of the Emyreal Chronicle, things were a lot more hectic in the other areas of the empire, due to the attacks that had happened.

Garside opened the door and walked into the room. "It is from Miss Breeden," the old butler said, holding up a piece of paper. "It appears she has returned to Freybrook. Miss Astrey and Mister Thornthorn have expressed their desire to visit her, as it appears she will not stay for long."

Scarlett looked up from her book. So Kat *was* fine? She'd started growing a bit worried about the woman after not hearing from her after the attacks, so this was a welcome piece of news.

"Did they wish to leave at once?" she asked.

"It appears so, my Lady."

Scarlett looked at the silver clock piece that sat on the left side of her desk. It was noon, and she hadn't planned on clearing another dungeon today, so taking a trip into town would probably be fine.

She *was* starting to get a little nervous about what the Hallowed Cabal's next move towards her would be, so she had started being a bit more paranoid about leaving the mansion in general, but she hired Shielders for a reason.

"Inform them that we will leave in half an hour," she said.

"You are coming with, my Lady?" Garside asked, his thick mustache moving slightly as he spoke.

Scarlett nodded her head. "That is correct. I am curious as to how Miss Breeden has fared, and I have a promise to uphold."

She glanced at the [Bag of Juham] that lay on the other side of her desk. Although this was a bit earlier than expected, she could probably scrounge together something for now.



Soon enough, Scarlett sat in the carriage along with Allyssa and Shin, moving south from the northern district of Freybrook where the mansion was located and towards the heart of the city. They did not speak much on the way, but the streets outside were vibrant with life as usual. Before long, they arrived at their destination, the carriage stopping in front of the large stone building with an overhanging white birch roof that was the local Shields Guild branch.

Exiting the vehicle after the coachman opened the carriage door for her, Scarlett stepped onto the cobbled stone pavement and glanced around the surrounding square.

Allyssa was already on her way up the stairs to the building, with a slightly amused Shin close behind. Following, Scarlett passed under the sign with the Shields Guild's symbol on it and entered into the wide lobby inside. There were a few more people here now than the last time she had visited, with several of the spots around the tables in the lobby already filled. Most looked to customers of some kind, though, rather than Shielders.

Allyssa was heading straight towards the reception desk on one end of the lobby. Scarlett didn't begrudge the girl her eagerness but walked with a much more calm gait herself.

The receptionist was the same dark-haired woman Scarlett had met the first time she was here. The woman greeted Allyssa when she stopped in front of the desk. "Hello miss. Can I help you?"

"Yes, I'm a Shielder," Allyssa said, holding up her Shielder badge. "I heard Kat's back. Could we see her?"

The receptionist studied Allyssa for a second, her eyes also passing over to Shin as he walked up next to Allyssa. "Kat did say she might have guests from the capital. I'll bring you to her soon," she said, then her eyes reached Scarlett and a surprised look passed over her face for a brief moment. She looked between Scarlett and the other two somewhat hesitantly. "Baroness. Are you...also here to see Kat? Or can I help you with something else?"

"I came to meet with Miss Breedan," Scarlett answered.

"I-I see. Then I will bring you all to see her. She has been talking with the branch head for a while now, but I think they should be finished by now."

The receptionist leaned to the side to check that there were no other people in line behind them, then started leading them through the same side door and flight of stairs that Scarlett had traveled down last time, eventually guiding them into the waiting room she had been in before at the end of a hallway.

"I'll see if Kat is free, so please wait here until then," the receptionist said as she left the room.

Scarlett walked over and sat down in one of the armchairs next to the table that sat at the center of the room. Shin and Allyssa did the same, although the latter did seem to do it with some confusion.

"Why did she bring us here instead of to just meet with Kat immediately?"

"Probably because we have a noble with us," Shin said, looking around the room. "I'm assuming this is the reception room they have for the more important clients."

Allyssa blinked and turned to Scarlett. "Oh."

"Neither of you have been to this branch before, I presume?" Scarlett asked.

"No. I've only been to the branch in Elystead and Ambercrest," Allyssa said.

Shin nodded. "The same for me. Although I have also been in the Wildscar branch."

"I see. I suppose you two are still young, and have not had much opportunity to travel."

"We're not *that* young," Allyssa said with a small frown.

"You are yet to be eighteen, are you not?" Scarlett asked.

"Well, no."

"Then you are most definitely still young. I am close to ten years your senior, and I would still hesitate to describe myself as anything other than 'young'."

From what Scarlett had seen of the family tree, the real Scarlett was only about a year older than her.

"What?" Allyssa stared at her. "I thought you'd be older."

Scarlett arched an eyebrow. "And why is that?"

Allyssa grew a flushed face. "No, it's just that you..."

"You have a very mature air to you," Shin finished her sentence. "Compared to Rosa, for example, you act a lot older."

"Is that so?" Scarlett tapped her finger slowly against the armrest. "While I believe you are perhaps swayed too much by appearances and underestimate Rosalina, I do see your point."

Allyssa knitted her brows. "What do you—"

She was interrupted as the door to the room was knocked open the next second, and in walked a tall woman in simple clothes, with sun-bleached gold hair hanging in a braid above her shoulder.

"Kat!" Allyssa cried out and got up off her chair, then stilled as she stared at the older Shielder. "Wait, what happened to you?!"

Scarlett frowned as she saw that the lower half of Kat's right chin had a large burn, with cracked red skin running across it.

"Heya Ali. Shin." Kat smiled somewhat awkwardly at the two young Shielders. "And this?" she asked, pointing to her chin. "You could say I got in over my head, and unfortunately I didn't quite manage to get myself healed in time."

Allyssa ran up to Kat, a worried expression on her face as she looked over the older woman. Shin had also stood up to move closer. "Was this from all of those attacks that happened across the empire?" Allyssa asked.

"It was." Kat's countenance darkened somewhat. "We lost a lot of people then."

They all went quiet for a moment. But then Kat smiled again as she looked at her two juniors. "But we can't talk about that some other time. Right now, it feels good just seeing you two again. It's been so long." She grabbed both of them and pulled them into a large hug. "Two full-fledged Shielder, ready to make a name for yourselves. To think I'd see the day!"

Allyssa looked somewhat uneasy for a moment, but soon relaxed and returned the hug with a small smile. "It's good to see you too, Kat."

Kat's eyes turned to Shin. "I hope you've been keeping an eye on this one, so that she hasn't gotten into any trouble," she said with a grin.

Shin smiled as she somewhat awkwardly removed himself from the hug. "She's been relatively well-behaved lately."

"Hey!" Allyssa cried out as she also released herself from Kat, readjusting the goggles on her head that had fallen down somewhat.

Scarlett had stayed silent till now, content to let the three of them have their reunion. Now, however, Kat turned to look at her.

"I'm going to be honest. I didn't really expect you to be here as well," the woman said, crossing her arms. "Couldn't stop yourself from seeing your old friend, eh?"

Scarlett gave her a long look. "I would hardly describe us as 'old friends.'"

"Nah, maybe not." Kat let out a laugh, gesturing at Allyssa and Shin. "I hope these two have been useful to you?"

"They have," Scarlett said with a nod. "I am glad that you introduced them to me."

Kat shrugged. "Hey, you're the one paying them. It's good that they get some experience, and I imagined that working with you might be fun for them."

She looked at the two younger Shielders. "Did you visit any strange places?"

"Oh, yeah we did," Allyssa said. "The last week we've been going to these all of these hidden caves and places, and a couple of weeks ago we visited this magical forest full of bloodthirsty fairies. Oh, and back in Elystead I even met the princesses."

"Bloodthirsty fairies? And the *princesses*?" Kat glanced at Scarlett. "I thought *I* saw strange things."

"If you are envious I know of several other such places that you might enjoy," Scarlett said with a slight smile.

"Yeah, of course you do." Kat shook her head, then focused her attention on Allyssa and Shin. "I'd love to chat and catch up on how things are, but I have to talk with Scarlett about a few things first. The two of you could go and ask Kyla where the backroom is and you can stay there for the meanwhile. I'll come find you later."

"Talk to her about what?" Allyssa asked, looking between Kat and Scarlett.

Shin put his hand on Allyssa's shoulder as he looked at Kat. "We'll wait for you there then. Let's go, Allyssa." The two of them left the room, although Allyssa did it somewhat reluctantly.

Kat's eyes stayed on the door for a moment after they'd left, then she turned back to Scarlett. For some reason she suddenly looked a lot more tired as she walked over and sat down in the armchair opposite Scarlett's.

"How are you?" Scarlett asked.

"Alive," Kat answered, gently touching her hand against the side of her face. "That's about as much as I can ask for."

"...What happened?"

"A lot of things," Kat said, lowering her hand. "But first, I should probably thank you."

Scarlett leaned her head to the side. "Thank me?"

"Yes. I probably wouldn't be alive if it weren't for you." Kat looked her in the eyes. "I ran into that 'Vail' you mentioned."

Scarlett stilled. "...I see. I am glad that you are still alive."

Vail did not give most people the chance to escape, unless she thought there was a chance that they were strong enough.

"There are others that aren't," Kat said with a dark expression. "I was lucky."

"Where was this?" Scarlett asked. She didn't know for sure where Vail showed up this early in the game, but she had guessed that it would be Brinewick considering that was the most important location for this occurrence.

"I was sent to Brinewick, along with some other Shielders. We cooperated with several other organizations to evacuate and protect the place, but we were still overwhelmed."

Scarlett tapped her finger against the armrest. "...I was afraid that would be the case."

Although she had been expecting it, to a certain degree. She wasn't sure if her warning could have made too much of a difference no matter what she said.

"The Guild is on high alert right now, and we're working all over the empire to help those affected and find out what the Tribe of Sin is up to," Kat said. She turned quiet for a moment. "...And the Hallowed Cabal as well, I guess."

"Does that mean you will be occupied for the immediate future?" Scarlett asked.

Kat gave a short nod. "Probably, yeah. I can't really say. For now most of the high-ranked Shielders will probably be busy. I think only a few will remain at the branches in order to deal with the more important and dangerous requests."

"I see. That is a shame. I had hoped to commission your services once more."

Kat gave a small smile. "Well, I might be up for it later. Can't say I've ever seen any fairies before."

"That reminds me." Scarlett looked around the room. Right, she gave the [Bag of Juham] to Shin. "When you talk to Shin later, ask him to give you the items I spoke to him about. They are a reimbursement from my part."

Kat gave her a confused look. "Reimbursement?"

"It means compensation."

"Wha—" Kat began saying, then shook her head. "I know what *reimbursement* means. I just don't know what it's for."

"When we were originally assaulted by the Hallowed Cabal's assassins you lost your equipment along with the burned carriage. If I remember correctly, I promised to compensate you for it, in recognition of the aid you had lent me."

Kat scrunched her face together, placing her hand on her neck. "You said that?"

"Did I not?" Scarlett frowned. She had most definitely promised herself that she would do something like that, but she couldn't quite remember if she'd ever told Kat about it. She shook her head. "No matter. I will give it to you anyhow."

"You don't really owe me anything. I can't acce—"

"Do not attempt to decline it," Scarlett interrupted. "It is nothing especially noteworthy, nor anything I have need of, but it could prove useful to you in the future. Be a good Shielder and accept what I am deigning to bequeath you."

Kat raised both eyebrows in a small smirk. "Someone sure is pushy."

"I have already selected the items. There is not much point to me keeping them anymore. You may do with them as you wish."

They weren't particularly special items, really. Just what she had on hand. There was a pair of gloves that made terramancy slightly more efficient, a light set of—unfortunately slightly rusty—light armor that increased some of your resistances, and a ring that buffed restoration magic. For someone of Kat's strength, they were probably a bit underleveled, but it was better than nothing.

It'd be good if Kat didn't go and get herself killed somewhere, and Scarlett did feel somewhat indebted to the woman that had helped her when she first arrived in this world, so this was the least she could do for now.

"I guess I can't say no, then," Kat said with a smile, shrugging her shoulders. "It makes me a bit happy, actually. I sort of thought you would have forgotten about me as 'that one Shielder you hired once', so this is a bit unexpected."

"I believe I told you before that you are quite the memorable individual," Scarlett said.

That got a short chuckle out of Kat. "Oh, yeah. You did." She stayed quiet for a moment, then her expression turned serious again. "...There's one thing I've been meaning to ask you. If there's anything else you know about the Hallowed Cabal or the Tribe of Sin that might be important right now?"

Scarlett arched a brow at the woman.

"Not that you're forced to tell me or anything." Kat raised her hands in the air in front of her. "But...it sure would be helpful. And you always seem to know these kinds of things."

Scarlett stayed quiet for a moment longer, leaning back in her chair. There wasn't much point in sharing what would happen in Beld Thylelion, or over a year from now. The Guild would be aware of a lot by then anyway. Besides, it'd be odd if she started talking about things that were *that* far away. And for now, the Cabal would probably stay quiet for a bit.

"At present, there is not much that I know," she said slowly, keeping her eyes on Kat. "But if I do learn anything new, I will endeavor to inform you of it posthaste."

For a brief moment Kat looked disappointed, but then that grew into a relieved expression. "Thanks. Seriously. You don't know how much that means to me."

"It is the least I can do."

"It's not really that little." Kat shook her head. "But enough about that. I'm curious, what have you been up to since we last met? Mind sharing a little?"