

201: Intermissions

The minutes ticked away as Scarlett and Allyssa stood before the sealed door, its frame mostly a dark pitch black with two crimson gems embedded in its face. They were still awaiting their companions to finish their tasks, though over twenty minutes had already gone by.

It seemed that the distance they had to cover was a lot longer here than Scarlett had been anticipating.

Still, she trusted that they would be successful.

Eventually, the right gem finally burst into life as a vivid blaze lit up inside it.

“Oh?” Allyssa’s voice sounded out beside her. “Does that mean Fynn’s finished his part?”

“That it does,” Scarlett said, her gaze shifting to the other gem. “Now, all that remains is for Father Abraham and the others to conclude things on their end, and then we can proceed.”

She’d been expecting Fynn to finish first, but she didn’t know how far behind Raimond’s group would be. It depended on how successful Fynn had been in bypassing the enemies along his path.

“So we really aren’t waiting for them?” Allyssa asked.

“We are not.”

The point behind this was to create a window of opportunity for Scarlett to act independently of Raimond and the knights. Even then, she didn’t know how much time they’d buy.

“I’d already figured as much, but...” Allyssa began to murmur. Scarlett turned her attention to the Shielder, who was fidgeting with the goggles on her forehead as she looked at the door. She then turned to Scarlett. “...Can I ask why?”

Scarlett met her eyes. “Because I am concerned that they will prove a hindrance.”

“Even Shin?”

“No, he is an exception, but it proved logistically sound to have him remain and continue assisting them.”

“But you don’t mind me staying here with you?”

Scarlett weighed the blonde girl’s inquiring gaze for a moment, then shifted her attention back to the sealed door. “...Initially, I had intended to proceed alone for what to come next. In truth, that is still what I would have preferred. It is my genuine belief that would simplify matters for both of us. However...your presence will not necessarily be a detriment, unlike Father Abraham’s. The words you spoke to me during our journey here also came to mind, where you expressed a desire to aid in resolving this situation and demonstrated your trust in

me and my abilities. As such, it felt only right that I provide you with that same trust in return.”

A brief silence followed before Allyssa responded. “It’s probably not the right moment to say this, but it feels *so* weird hearing that from you. I don’t know why, and it’s definitely silly and not at all what I want, but I’ve still got this image of you dying before being honest like that. Aren’t you supposed to be aloof, like, all the time?”

Scarlett’s mouth tightened into a line as she gave her a look. “...You have spent far too much time around Miss Hale.”

“Yeah, probably.” The young Shielder chuckled. “...So, what’s the plan from here? After that door opens up.”

“If all goes well, we will ascend to the top of this citadel and resolve this entire situation before the others reach us.”

It would be fine if Fynn caught up, but they wouldn’t be waiting for him. He should already be on his way back, but that would likely take about as long as it took for him to unseal his end of the door.

“And at the top, what’s waiting for us is...?” Allyssa asked, looking expectant.

At this point, any pretense about Scarlett now knowing what was going on here had clearly been abandoned.

“Rosa,” Scarlett answered.

Allyssa blinked, staring at her. “...*Rosa?*”

“Yes.”

“...Why would she be here?”

Scarlett crossed her arms, regarding the girl for a short while. “I suppose I did make a promise to provide you with more details on the situation.”

She fell silent for a moment, shifting her gaze to the door blocking their path. It felt like Rosa should be the one to share this information, but there wasn’t much choice given the circumstances.

“The master of this place is the Vile known as Anguish,” she began in a serious voice. “I am uncertain precisely how much you know about the six Blazes and the entities who rule them, but Anguish is a demon who thrives on the suffering and misery of others. She has long sought to gain a stronger foothold in our realm, as have all the Viles. What has always prevented them from doing so is an interspatial barrier known as the ‘Veil of Convergence’. It is not, however, absolute, and there are ways through which a Vile can still influence the Material Realm. The primary method is through an ‘incarnate’.”

“An incarnate?”

“It is an exceedingly rare phenomenon where a person has the unfortunate fate of being born with a connection to the Blazes. This connection is one that circumvents even the Veil itself, leaving the individual vulnerable to the beings who call those infernal realms their home. Through an incarnate, a Vile can channel their authority and embody themselves here, wreaking havoc and suffusing themselves in our realm’s energies. This citadel that we are in is the manifestation of that process, with Anguish bringing part of her Blaze along with her.”

“Wait, wait, wait, hold on,” Allyssa interrupted, and Scarlett fixed her gaze on her. “You’re not trying to tell me what I think you are, are you?”

“And what do you think I am attempting to tell you?”

“That Rosa is somehow this ‘incarnate’ thing.”

“Then you are correct. That is precisely what I am asserting.”

Allyssa simply looked at her for several seconds.

“Rosa has been caught within the clutches of Anguish for a long time,” Scarlett continued. “It has always been her wish to hide her condition from others, and I suspect we cannot even begin to fathom some of the suffering she has endured, but until now, she has been unable to break free from her role as a potential incarnate. My purpose here, however, is to aid her in doing exactly that.”

Allyssa’s brows furrowed, and her eyes seemed to move around the room before landing on the door. “...And the only thing standing in your way is a Vile.”

“That, and a horde of demons, I suspect,” Scarlett noted.

“Do people ever tell you that you're insane?”

“I believe Miss Breeden may have insinuated as much on occasion.”

“Kat herself is also crazy, so I can’t blame you if you ignored her...” Allyssa paused again, turning back to Scarlett with narrowed eyes. “...I just had the craziest of thoughts, but I really have to check. It can’t be that...*you* were somehow involved in making all of this—” The girl gestured around them with her arms. “—happen, right?”

Scarlett considered her. “And what makes you ask that?”

“It’s hard not to be paranoid when things *always* seem to unfold according to your plans. Add to that the fact that you know basically everything and anything about most things to a level where I consistently find myself wondering if I’m working for the Augur in disguise or the continent’s largest secret crime boss, and yeah...” Allyssa herself seemed a bit uncertain of what she was saying, a serious expression on her face but a more casual tone to her words. “Sure, I’ve had this feeling that Rosa was hiding things from the rest of us for a while, and that, no matter what we did, she wouldn’t let us get involved or help with whatever it was. But if it’s *you*, I can see her going along with whatever you say, and if all of this was a way of getting Anguish out of her... Well, you get where I’m going. Are you involved in this whole ‘incarnate’ situation?”

Scarlett studied her for a few seconds. It seemed it was obvious even to Allyssa that, despite Rosa's typical flippant demeanor around Scarlett, the bard listened to most things she told her. That in itself shouldn't be surprising, but it made Scarlett once again think about what Anguish had said about Scarlett manipulating Rosa.

She shook her head to clear her mind of those concerns. This still wasn't the time to bother with any of that. She refocused her attention on Allyssa.

"To answer your question, I can say that I am not responsible for this 'incarnate situation'," she said.

Upon hearing that, Allyssa seemed visibly relieved. "Oh, thank Ittar—"

"However, I did become involved to ensure that it occurred now, rather than at its originally intended time."

The girl stared at her. "...I was mostly joking earlier, but you really *are* insane."

"Given that you have been kept mostly ignorant concerning the full scope of the underlying circumstances, I will not fault you for that remark," Scarlett said. "While the finer details will need to wait for another time, I can oblige you somewhat and reveal that, no matter what role I may have played in the events that brought this situation about, Anguish would have eventually attempted to manifest in this realm through her connection to Rosa. I simply guaranteed that it began at a time where Anguish was less prepared to do so. There were only two other alternatives, neither of which was ideal."

"What were they?" Allyssa asked.

"The first was to allow Anguish complete dominion over Rosa without any interference, meaning that when she incarnated, she would possess far more power to the extent that it would be uncertain whether anyone on this continent could thwart her. The second option was simply to ensure there was no vessel for her to incarnate in."

"Wait, you mean—"

Scarlett nodded. "Killing Rosa, yes."

Allyssa fell silent, and Scarlett watched her for a moment. Although she had indeed promised that she would reveal more about the situation when she could, she was still surprised that she was doing it. It was as if she wanted to hear Allyssa's perspective on these matters.

She chose to continue. "The most prudent course of action would have arguably been the latter. Gambling with the lives of countless thousands merely to preserve the life of a single bard is an audacious and irresponsible decision, regardless of the motivation behind it."

Allyssa held a complex expression. "That's not..."

"If Rosa herself had been aware of the stakes, she would likely have concurred. In fact, she has expressed similar sentiments to me before, suggesting that I finish her off if she ever posed a threat to those around," Scarlett said. "Yet I opted not to do so, nor did I ever reveal

to her the extent of the danger she might pose were things to go awry. Why do you believe that is? Do you believe it was out of sentimentality?"

Allyssa met her eyes, and it took a while for her to respond. "If I were in your shoes, it probably would have been," she answered in an unexpectedly measured tone.

"But we are rather different, are we not?"

The girl nodded.

"And it may not surprise you to know that I was aware of all this even before we first met Rosa," Scarlett added.

"Frankly, that's about what I have come to expect."

A faint smile tugged at the corner of Scarlett's lips. "Then why do you think I did all of this? Why do you think I acted as I have?"

Allyssa simply gazed at her for several seconds before running a hand through her hair and turning around. "You know, the first thing Kat ever told us about you before we met was that you were a noble who did whatever she wants. Wanna guess what the second thing she told us was?"

"Do tell."

"That you were arrogant."

Scarlett frowned.

"And the third thing she said was that you didn't know how to be wrong."

"I am beginning to think that Miss Breeden and I will need to have a conversation the next time we meet."

"Well, it's not like she was entirely wrong, just that it had a different shade of truth than she probably meant it." Allyssa twirled a strand of her hair around her finger, now staring at the last unlit gem on the unsealed door. "But I bet that's the answer, anyway. You do as you please, stand as a better definition for 'arrogant' than any dusty dictionary Shin might be able to cough up from his boring collection, and have a knack for dodging being 'wrong' in about any situation. In other words..." She turned back to Scarlett. "You chose to help Rosa because you never saw it as a gamble. You were sure you could do it."

Now, the smile found its way to Scarlett's lips. "You are correct."

"Are you going to fire me if I call you insane once more?"

"No, I will permit it this one last time." Scarlett also looked to the door, eyeing the last gem, waiting for it to light up. "The prospect of finally confronting Anguish after having to endure her as a thorn in my side for this long has me feeling rather generous."

“Being able to save Rosa doesn’t factor into that equation?”

“Perhaps that plays its part as well.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re feeling good about things,” Allyssa said, sounding almost a bit pouty. “I am literally reconsidering about every choice I’ve ever made in life and am questioning my own sanity. Shin’s also going to freak when he hears about this.”

Scarlett glanced at her. “While I will allow you to share your newfound knowledge with him, you understand that I will have to insist that you otherwise keep it a secret.”

The young Shielder actually pouted a bit. “It’s not like you didn’t already know I’d keep quiet from the moment you started sharing all this with me…” she muttered.

Scarlett let out a soft chuckle. Though she wasn’t sure how anxious she’d really been before this, she at least found that any anxiety that might have been there had mostly faded by now. It was replaced by nothing but the typical confidence that she had grown so used to during her time as Scarlett Hartford.

As they waited for the door to unlock, more minutes slipped by before, eventually, something happened. Crimson light flickered to life inside the gem, and the door began to move of its own accord, sliding open.

Scarlett reached for her belt, withdrawing a rectangular kerchief along with [Ittar’s Genesis] from her [Pouch of Holding]. She kept the divine artifact’s appearance hidden beneath the fabric, clasping the crystal ball’s warm surface in her left hand. It was probably for the best if Allyssa remained unaware of its existence, and the girl likely couldn’t sense its presence as Raimond and others might.

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“I suggest you prepare yourself,” Scarlett said. “From this point onward, we will not have much time for rest.”

Allyssa adjusted her bandolier across her chest, lowered her goggles, and readied her hand crossbow with a determined expression.

This would be the final stretch.