

Interlude: Repose

Rosa woke up to the serene sight of sunlight streaming into her room through the window above her bed, a gentle chill permeating the linens and signaling her body to get up and about.

After blinking away the remnants of sleep—and doing a decent job, if she were to say so herself—she sat up and directed her attention outside. The snow-draped expanse of the Hartford estate lay beneath an almost crystalline blue sky, offering a stunning vista that practically screamed ‘good morning’.

Unfortunately, the sun’s position in the sky screamed ‘noon’.

Seems like she’d overslept.

A subtle smile graced Rosa’s lips. Lately, she had slept like a baby on more than one occasion.

Her smile waned as she realized she had missed joining Scarlett and the others for the first morning meal since their return to Freybrook. She had been looking forward to the chef’s mutton stew and walnut scones. They were to die for.

It was surprising that no one had come to fetch her. Was this some sort of divine punishment, perhaps? If so, it was most cruel, even for a divinity.

Shifting to the edge of the bed, her gaze momentarily dropped to the floorboards beneath her bare feet. For a fleeting moment, she half-expected some shadow to emerge from beneath the bed, clamoring for her ankles and muttering in a cacophony of tortured voices, but there was nothing of the sort.

She glanced at the room. It was tranquil. Calm. *Normal*.

Today promised to be a good day.

Her finger brushed against the strange violet gem pulsating steadily in the upper part of her chest, concealed beneath her nightshirt. While it still felt weird to have the ‘Heartstone’—as Scarlett called it—be a part of her, it had started to bring her an almost comforting sense of security. Even if she had the option to discard it now without any consequences, she wasn’t sure she would.

Standing up, she made her way to the wardrobe, extracting a velvet tunic with some light embroidery across the sleeves and a simple set of grey trousers which she casually tossed over her shoulder. She then moved over to the dressing table, where she deposited the clothes over the back of a chair and swiftly refreshed herself with a damp cloth before putting on her garments.

With her preparations complete, she scrutinized her reflection in the mirror above the dresser. Brown locks cascaded over her face, obscuring some of the faint freckles on her skin, so she picked up a comb to quickly restore some order to her rebellious hair.

After that, she smiled at her reflection, and it responded in kind. Just as a mirror was supposed to do. Nothing more.

Would she ever get tired of that?

With a light bounce in her step, Rosa retrieved the purple mantle Scarlett had given her—dubbed ‘Harmony’s Veil’ by the deceptively dramatic noblewoman—from a hook on the wall and gracefully draped it over her shoulders. It fit like a glove, seeming to encourage her to spark into song then and

there. While it *might* look a tad extravagant for casual mansion strolls, that was all the more a reason to flaunt its splendor.

Turning, she stepped towards the entrance, pausing before the door for a moment. Her gaze shifted to the two wooden instruments leaning against the wall beside it. One, weathered and unadorned, had been her only constant companion for years. The other, fresh and embellished with intricate carvings that lent an air of novelty. Each possessed its unique charm.

After a moment of contemplation, she picked up the new klert, placing it within the folds of her snazzy new mantle, where it promptly disappeared to Scarlett-knows-where.

Exiting her room and venturing into the hallway outside, Rosa wasted no time as she began making her way down it. Looking out through the windows to the courtyard, she spotted a group of men in warm clothing who seemed to be in the process of tearing up some of the stonework.

Right. She recalled Scarlett mentioning something a while back about courtyard renovations following everything that had happened to it. That one of those ‘things’ was a dragon was left unsaid.

That it was a dragon that had been killed by a ‘cat’ was left even more unsaid.

Rosa couldn’t help but chuckle at the absurdity of it all.

A sanguine echo of her own resounded in her mind. *Be careful not to let that smile of yours get to your head, Rosalina dearest, it warned. It would be a shame if this newfound peace of yours were to suddenly fail.*

The insidious commentary didn’t stop Rosa in her step as she continued down the hallway. “Don’t you worry about little old me,” she spoke in response, her smile turning a little sharper. “Since I know you love it so when I smile, I’ll make sure to do it lots and lots for you to see. Just stay tight and snug in that comfortable hoosegow Red’s set up for you, and you’ll be more than golden.”

Before Anguish could respond, she cut off the demon’s connection to the outside world with only a smirk and a slight mental exertion. It had become a satisfying routine, asserting her control over the Vile in that way.

She enjoyed that far too much. It had even gotten to the point where she sometimes *let* Anguish come out, only so that she could rub this new power of hers in the demon’s face.

Was it bad? Perhaps. It sounded maybe a *touch* hubristic, akin to the actions of the overconfident characters in the songs of her trade before they succumbed to the cunning wiles of some sinister demon.

She totally got where they were coming from now, though.

At this early stage, though, she could afford herself that luxury, right? Probably. Most likely. What was the worst that could happen? Other than another of her mistakes costing the lives of those around her, of course.

Her smile faded as she inadvertently brought her thoughts towards far too somber matters of the past.

Happy as she was with this new hierarchy between her and Anguish, the situation remained a bit of a mixed bag. In the end, she would have preferred if Anguish hadn’t lingered within her at all, or at the very least hadn’t remained conscious. But she couldn’t exactly complain about that. The blame for

that lay solely with herself, and she'd already come to terms with much more than that back in the citadel.

Her thoughts were interrupted as she heard voices around the corner ahead. A couple of seconds later, Allyssa and Shin emerged, in the middle of a conversation as they spotted her.

"Oh, Rosa, so it *was* you," Allyssa greeted with a smile.

Next to her, Shin nodded. "It's a bit late, but good morning."

"Why, to think I would stumble upon my most favored Shielders during my daily jaunt — what a blessed day indeed," Rosa responded. "Salutations, good mornings, and good days en masse to you as well."

Allyssa leaned to the side, peering past Rosa as though searching for someone, before redirecting her gaze to Rosa with a questioning look. "Who were you talking to earlier? I thought I heard your voice just now."

Almost by reflex, Rosa offered the girl a disarming smile in response. "Oh, you know, just the odd ghost or two. Every old mansion has to meet its quota, and I've noted this one does that several times over. The bright side is that you never get lonely."

Allyssa's skepticism at her response showed, and after a brief exchange of glances with Shin, she nodded. "Alright..."

A touch of awkwardness found its way into Rosa's smile as she realized what she'd done.

She studied the pair for a moment. They already knew, yet here she was, still coming up with excuses.

"Sorry," she said, shaking her head with a sigh. "Force of habit. The truth is, I was exchanging a few choice words with the passenger I've got tucked away up here." She tapped a finger to the side of her head.

"Oh." Allyssa blinked, sharing yet another look with Shin. "...Does it often talk with you?" she asked tentatively after a pause.

Seeing that, it was all but impossible for Rosa not to show a genuine smile.

She hadn't spoken much about Anguish and all that since leaving Crowcairn, and Scarlett likely hadn't filled in all the details for the others. They had to be curious—and probably worried—about some of it. Despite that, they didn't badger her about it.

They were good kids — probably both kind and a tad foolish. How could she not like them?

Rosa shrugged her shoulders to dispel Allyssa's concern. "I like to bully it on occasion, but that's all."

Allyssa frowned slightly, clearly perplexed. "Bully? Isn't it a...you know..." She glanced around cautiously before stopping mid-sentence.

"Yes, it is," Rosa replied with a sly smirk. "That's what makes it so fun."

The girl looked unsure how to respond to that.

"I think I get it," Shin chimed in.

Allyssa stared at him with wide eyes like he was a madman, and a peal of laughter escaped Rosa.

“So, I assume everybody’s already had their fill?” She said, wiping a non-existent tear from her eye. “Seems I missed out on our first little get-together after returning to Freybrook. How come no one bothered to come and wake me up?”

“Scarlett thought it was best to let you rest,” Allyssa explained, a hint of concern etched into her expression as she turned back to Rosa.

Rosa raised both eyebrows. “Oh, really? You sure it wasn’t an impostor then? It sounds uncharacteristically kind.”

Or devilish, depending on your respective.

“She also mentioned regretting not appreciating the peace and quiet we had while you were away in Bridgespell enough.”

Rosa snorted. “Okay, *that* does sound like her.”

“I, for one, missed you while you were gone, though,” Allyssa said.

“That’s because you don’t have a heart encased in ice and woven out of barbed thorns. You’re all sweetness like that.” Rosa spent another moment eyeing the two, casting a brief glance down the hallway the pair had emerged from. “So, where are you two lovebirds off to?”

The concern vanished from Allyssa’s face as Rosa was met instead by a small glare, but Shin answered her question with an unflappable expression. “We’re heading down to the cellar. I lost a bet with Allyssa, so she’s going to use me as her test subject for a new potion she learned about while we were in Bridgespell.”

“Wha—” Allyssa punched him on the arm. “You’re not my *test subject*. It won’t be dangerous. I just have a hard time stomaching the taste, so I need you to confirm the effects.”

“That’s what is colloquially referred to as a ‘test subject’,” Shin replied.

“Shut up, you.”

Shin gave her a long look. “I think it says something about your alchemy that you can’t stomach the taste of your own experiments while expecting others to do it for you.”

“Well, that’s all you’re good for,” Allyssa said with a huff, crossing her arms.

“Ah, young love~” Rosa mused while watching their interaction.

“Oi, stop that.” Allyssa shot her another glare, though there was *definitely* a noticeable flush to her cheeks.

Rosa grinned, shifting her focus to Shin. “My condolences, but your sacrifice is for a great cause. Maybe. Middling, at worst. Now, pray tell, what was this bet of yours about?”

Before he could answer, Allyssa had stepped forward and muffled his mouth with her hands.

“Don’t you dare!” she warned.

Sensing an air of intrigue develop, Rosa narrowed her eyes.

Shin gave her a weary look as Allyssa suddenly dragged him away, waving towards Rosa. “We’ll take our leave then. See you later. I think there should still be some leftover for you from earlier, so go check that out.”

Rosa waved them off with a playful salute, chuckling to herself. Her eyes followed them until they disappeared around another corner.

Seemed like she would have to do some digging later on. She couldn't have the young ones keeping secrets from her, could she? As their elder, it was only right that she ensured they weren't getting in over their heads or getting involved in some duplicitous scheme. Her motivations were nothing but pure.

Humming a little tune, she turned around and sauntered her way down the decidedly non-haunted hall, steering her nose towards the kitchens. Soon enough, she arrived at her destination, and true to Allyssa's words, a more than delectable meal *had* been left for Rosa. Ten minutes later, after having relished in the stew and currently savoring a tasty scone, she wandered around the mansion once more, exchanging pleasantries with the servants whom she had not seen for a couple of weeks, all the while contemplating where to venture next.

Scarlett hadn't mentioned anything about plans for the day, so Rosa assumed she was free to indulge in whatever whim struck her fancy. Typically, that meant playing around with her klert and mingling with the mansion's denizens. Using this day to engage in the same sounded perfectly delightful. Lately, she had discovered that even the most humdrum of activities carried an extra dose of enjoyment that they hadn't before, and she was more than excited to revel in that fact.

Before diving into any of that, however, perhaps she'd make a swift detour to Scarlett's lair. Just to confirm that there really wasn't anything that the curmudgeonly old noblewoman wanted from her.

In no time, she found herself facing the dark mahogany door guarding Scarlett's office. It looked utterly nondescript, normal, and yet special all the same.

She raised her hand to rap on the door.

"Who is it?" a dispassionate voice emanated from the other side.

"I'm hurt," Rosa replied. "Can't you recognize me by the distinct melody of my fingers against the wood?"

There was a brief pause before a response came. "You may enter."

Rosa pushed the door open, stepping into the most conventional she would ever lay eyes upon, lacking any haunting sights or blood-filled vistas. And at the far end, behind a desk strewn with documents, sat the most *unconventional* woman she would ever lay her eyes upon.

Scarlett looked up from her papers, a faint frown etching her face. "Did you require something, Miss Hale?"

Rosa smirked. "Nope, just checking in to see if you missed me."

The woman leveled a flat look at her that could impress even a stoical boulder. "Yes. Inconceivably so," she said in a monotone voice.

"Of course you did! I can barely endure not catching my own reflection every waking moment myself. I can scarcely imagine the struggle for everyone else." Rosa cleared her throat, taking a serious tone. "But have no fear, my dolourous Lady, for now I am here." She winked. "I'm sure my rhymes will add a splash of sunshine to your day."

Scarlett silently watched her for several seconds, then turned back to whatever she was working on. "I often question my sanity when I find myself entertaining your persiflage, Miss Hale. I am sure it is only a matter of time before I lose my mind if I have not already. Now, state your business."

"Oh, breaking out the big words, are we?" Rosa asked. "My 'persiflage' is honored."

"You are hardly one to speak," Scarlett replied without looking up. "'Dolourous'? Truly? If there is one mystery about you that I will never unravel, it is where you found the time to learn these words while living as a common minstrel on the road."

"You'd be surprised what you pick up when you hang around enough taverns, Red."

"I am sure. Now, you still have not answered my question. Was there something you wished to discuss with me?"

"Would you believe me if I told you I really just wanted to check if you missed me?" Rosa asked.

Scarlett paused, glancing up at her and studying her for a moment before returning her attention to her work. "If so, your concern was unnecessary."

Rosa allowed herself a short laugh as she strolled over towards the bookcases lining the walls, eyeing the titles with a touch of nostalgia. "Good to know. Ah, by the by, did you have any plans for us today, or am I a free woman?"

"I have other matters to attend to this afternoon and evening, so no, there is nothing of note," Scarlett's voice sounded out from behind the desk. "You are free to do whatever you may wish, as long as it does not involve anything that might provoke me to throw you out of a window. Tomorrow, however, we are likely heading to Freymeadow."

Rosa stopped, her finger poised on the spine of a book, and she turned to face Scarlett. "...Oh. Alright."

Returning to that place would feel...strange.

After a brief silence, she redirected her focus to the books, searching for something intriguing that she hadn't already read. Since she didn't have anything better to do, she might as well lose herself in some reading.

"Mind if I stay around for a while?" she asked Scarlett, glancing over at the woman.

Scarlett merely gestured with a hand, indicating it was fine. "Help yourself. It would not be the first time."

Rosa smiled as she found a book with a curious title and plucked it from the shelf, making her way to the cozy corner of the room where a chair and a small table stood. She draped her new mantle over the armrest, settled into the chair, and opened the book, ready to immerse herself in its contents.

Like that, the minutes ticked by in the office, with both Rosa and Scarlett focusing on their own pursuits. Occasionally, Rosa would glance up from her book at Scarlett, observing the noblewoman engrossed in her tasks. Scarlett rarely shed that serious expression of hers, no matter the circumstances.

At times, she wondered if the woman's most guarded secret wasn't that she actually suffered from a serious case of facial paralysis. It would explain why she never laughed at Rosa's jokes.

At one point when Rosa was studying her, Scarlett paused in her work and looked up at Rosa with a slightly raised brow. "I am starting to doubt if you are making any progress with that book, given how frequently your attention seems fixed on me rather than it."

"Can you blame me?" Rosa asked, feeling no shame at all about being caught. "You're simply too mysterious!"

"I can indeed blame you. In fact, that is precisely what I am doing at this very moment."

Rosa pouted. "You grouch."

"Perhaps," Scarlett conceded. Then, after studying her for a moment with a thoughtful expression, she continued. "Are you certain that there is nothing that you wish to discuss? To me, it would seem as if you expected more from this visit. If there is something on your mind, I can spare the time."

Rosa met the woman's eyes, her hand resting on the open page of her book as she lay it on her lap. "I can't speak but for you, but I'm satisfied as is. Sometimes, it's nice to have a moment where nothing much happens. There's nothing wrong with that."

"There are plenty of occasions where very little happens at this mansion," Scarlett pointed out.

Rosa clicked her tongue. "You know what I mean."

"I do not."

"Okay, then you *don't* know what I mean."

"...That is what I said, yes."

Rosa chuckled. "I'm glad we can agree, then."

And with that, she returned her attention to her book, reveling in being the last one to have had her say in their 'argument'.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Scarlett continuing to study her for several more seconds before finally turning back to her own work.

"I am glad to see that the day has finally come where you have the peace to smile while being honest with yourself, Rosa," the woman's voice echoed across the room.

The smile that had found its way back to Rosa's face broadened slightly at the edges.

So was she.