

198: Into the depths

Scarlett's gaze remained fixed on the Raimond ahead of them as the knight in front of her directed their horse towards the smiling priest. He was waving cheerfully, looking as if there was nothing strange about the scene of a deacon of the Quorum just standing by his lonesome in front of the entrance to what was basically the bastion of one of the most powerful demons in existence.

What on earth *was* Raimond doing here?

She was certain he hadn't been part of this questline in the game. None of the Followers had been involved, at least not during the events themselves. So what was it that had brought him here now, of all times?

"Is that...Father Abraham?" Allyssa asked from her position on a horse behind one of the other knights, leaning over the man's back to get a better look at Raimond.

"Contain your excitement, for it is indeed I, Ray Abraham!" the priest shouted enthusiastically in response, even though he was probably too far away to have heard Allyssa's question. "Welcome and salutations, my erstwhile shrine-venturing companions!"

Their group approached the man, where he stood a short distance away from the citadel's gate. There, the surroundings had begun to take on a pale, crimson hue, and everybody's gazes turned to the structure itself, wearing wary expressions. The gate easily stretched thirty meters high, and from the outside, its gaping maw ceded way for a veil of thick darkness that seemed to beckon trespassers to enter.

As Scarlett turned her focus back to Raimond, his eyes were scanning over her and the others. "Baroness Hartford, Allyssa, Shin, and Fynn. Allow me to convey my immense delight at encountering all of you once more, although the circumstances themselves are far from preferable. It seems fate is rather insistent on orchestrating our rendezvous."

"...That does indeed appear to be true," Scarlett replied, scrutinizing him closely as the knight who she'd been riding behind helped her dismount her horse. The woman gave Raimond a brief, slightly surprised look, evidently taken aback by the sight of a priest of Ittar here. While Raimond's white robes deviated from the typical attire of the Followers, the intricate patterns on his sleeves hinted at his affiliation.

How could he be *here*, precisely as they arrived? How long had he been waiting? Why outside of Anguish's citadel?

There were several questions running through her mind, but perhaps the most pressing of them all was this: how much did he *know*?

The man's smile only seemed to widen as he observed her expression. "I will pose you the same question I suspect you want to ask me, Baroness. What has brought you and your retinue to this place?" He gestured dramatically towards the towering citadel, which loomed above them like a malignant sentinel of terror.

Scarlett remained silent for a moment, considering him. "...I was working alongside Duke Valentino on an investigation of a nearby village when this structure materialized out of thin air. Given the circumstances, it was judged that we could not simply ignore its presence. Thus, I was chosen to assess the situation." She motioned towards the six knights who accompanied her, all of which had dismounted now. "These are members of the Sable Knight order, under the command of Sir Franke Home."

"A pleasure to make all of your acquaintances. I am Ray Abraham, a humble priest in the service of Ittar," Raimond nodded in greeting to the knights. Then he aimed his attention towards Scarlett once more. "Coincidentally, I was also in the midst of conducting an inquiry on the behalf of my superiors in a neighboring village when, as you see, events took an abrupt and slightly unforeseen turn. The fearsome aura of this fortress was unmistakable even from leagues away, and like you, I couldn't simply turn a blind eye."

Scarlett hid the surprise she felt at hearing him say that. If he was investigating a nearby village, there was only one realistic candidate.

"Perchance, was this settlement you were investigating Crowcairn?" she asked.

"That it was," Raimond replied. "I assume the same holds true for your and the duke's circumstances?"

"It does."

She couldn't recall any mentions of the Followers investigating Crowcairn in the game prior to this questline. Clearly, this was another instance of the events in this world deviating from her expectations.

She fixed her gaze on the horizon, where only the top of the grey barrier surrounding the Crowcairn was visible. "I imagine it must have been shocking for you when that barrier was erected. You were indeed fortunate not to be trapped inside with its inhabitants."

Raimond chuckled. "Indubitably. Ittar knows what onerous challenges and arduous demands such circumstances would have imposed on me had I been ensnared within that thing."

Scarlett returned her attention to him, studying him briefly. She had a nagging feeling that there was a hidden meaning behind those words, though she couldn't quite decipher it.

Raimond, in turn, observed her for a moment before his gaze moved over her companions as if searching for something. "It wasn't an exaggeration when I mentioned that I feel this encounter is a fateful one. The fact that a mere two days have elapsed since our last meeting is truly unexpected. Even more so after the fortunate occurrence of having Rosa as my travel companion when I initially journeyed to Crowcairn for my investigations. I suppose you gave her temporary leave from her duties in your employ?"

Scarlett frowned as the other members of her party displayed varying degrees of surprise at the man's statement.

"Rosa's there?" Allyssa asked, turning in the direction of Crowcairn with a concerned expression.

Raimond shook his head. "It appears she had a prior engagement with a certain acquaintance in the area to attend to, which is what led her here. However, I am fairly confident that she is not currently within Crowcairn itself." As he spoke, his eyes shifted towards Scarlett.

She met his gaze.

He knew. Or at the very least, he suspected that Rosa might somehow be involved in all of this.

"What could Rosa possibly be doing that brought her all the way out here?" Allyssa wondered aloud. "She never told us who the person she was going to meet was, but I don't think it was a family member."

Fynn briefly glanced at Scarlett, clearly wondering as well, but he remained silent.

"No matter the answer to that question, I don't think that should be our immediate concern," Shin said. The group's attention returned to Anguish's citadel.

Scarlett, though, kept her focus on Raimond. "If I may ask, Father Abraham, what was your intention in coming here?" She scanned their surroundings. "...And did you come alone?"

No one else was in sight, and there was no sign of any form of transport that he could have used to travel all the way from Crowcairn here. Surely he couldn't have run, could he? Unless he knew beforehand where the citadel would appear, which was unlikely, it felt odd that he would have arrived here before her.

The priest offered her a wry smile. "Ah, yes, about that. Although I am certain there are plenty of brethren in my order who would have been more than elated at the opportunity to accompany me on this endeavour, ultimately, it was a task I was assigned to undertake on my own. As for my intentions... While I do like to pride myself on being a man of both action and great foresight, if I am to be frank, I hadn't quite planned that far ahead yet. Perhaps I held the hope that, once I arrived, the right path would reveal itself." He wriggled his brows at her. "And it appears that it has. Ittar must be smiling down on me today."

"If you did not have the assistance of others, how did you arrive here so swiftly?"

"That, my dear noble friend, is a trade secret."

Scarlett fought to suppress the growing frown. She found none of these answers reassuring. There was an unsettling uncertainty in not knowing his motives and the real reason for his being here. What if he knew *everything*, and this was just him toying with her? However unlikely that felt, the Followers *did* have access to the Augur, and while Scarlett had assumed the seer was limited in what she could see, there was the possibility that they knew far more than Scarlett anticipated. It *had* been suspicious that Raimond had been the one to join her in clearing the Sunfire Shrine. And now, here he was again.

"Now," the man in question said. "I believe a more pertinent question in this situation might pertain to what *your* intentions are from here, Baroness. We are dealing with what appears to be an incursion into our realm from the very Blazes themselves, and judging from your

arrival and your group's attire, it would seem you are prepared to investigate more than just its exterior. Am I incorrect in assuming you are planning to enter inside?"

"You are not," Scarlett replied.

One of the knights turned to her with slightly widened eyes. "We're entering that thing?" Then, realizing himself, he cleared his throat awkwardly. "What I meant to say, my Lady, is that we don't know what might be awaiting us inside. Assessing the threat level of this thing is important, but entering is risky. There is no guarantee we'll be able to leave..."

"Even so, we are going in," Scarlett stated firmly. "As Father Abraham and I have both noted, the existence of this place cannot be ignored. While Captain Home might have called for reinforcements from Bridgespell, we do not yet know the purpose of this structure or whether we have time to wait for help in case it threatens the surrounding region."

Although with Raimond's presence here, she did have to consider the possibility that the Followers already had more people prepared to deal with the situation, including the Dawnbringers. If that were the case, the situation could be more precarious than she thought.

For one thing, she wasn't sure if the Dawnbringers could resolve this situation without access to her knowledge. While they boasted some of the most powerful members of the Followers of Ittar among their numbers, this wasn't solely a matter of strength. Moreover, their involvement might spell doom for Rosa.

That wasn't something Scarlett could accept.

As she considered Raimond, the man once again offered her that enigmatic smile of his, a fact that only further served to vex her because she didn't know what that smile *meant* in this context. Was he an adversary, an ally, or something in between?

"If you're preparing to delve into the depths of this place, then I would be more than willing to offer my assistance, Baroness," he said.

"That would indeed be appreciated," she replied, even if those words contradicted her thoughts. Under the circumstances, she had no valid reason to decline his offer that would be accepted.

At least might prove helpful in navigating their way through the citadel now that they couldn't rely on Rosa's charms for healing. They still had a decent supply of Allyssa's healing potions, but magic was the superior alternative.

"Mister Thornthon, Fynn, the two of you will take the lead," Scarlett continued, pointing towards the entrance ahead. She then addressed the knights, "As for you, those who do not feel confident entering may remain here. Otherwise, I ask that you cooperate with my people to protect those in the rear."

A couple of the knights appeared less than enthusiastic about the prospect, but none voiced any objections as they began to advance towards the entrance.

Scarlett and the others followed, and as they crossed the threshold of the dark veil concealing the citadel's interior, they found themselves in a wide foyer — or at least what might have been supposed to be one. It was more like the place had been designed according to what most foyers in mansions or palaces could look like, but somewhere along the way, the concept had twisted into madness.

The walls were constructed from a disconcerting blend of blood-red and pitch-black stone, their colors intermingling in erratic patterns. Human faces seemed to emerge from the stone, trapped in expressions of eternal agony, as if forever captured in the throes of their final moments. Chandeliers, fashioned from bones and magma, hung from the ceiling, dripping molten rock onto a floor covered in countless markings and claw-like indentations.

The oppressive atmosphere that had enveloped the citadel's exterior now weighed even heavier inside. While Scarlett still had no trouble bearing it, she imagined that most ordinary citizens would crumble under this intense pressure.

“By Ittar...” one of the knights gasped, and Scarlett noticed Allyssa and some of the others grimacing at the unsettling sight.

They would have to get used to it quickly, though.

Shin and Fynn took the lead into the room, followed by the knights, while Scarlett, Allyssa, and Raimond stayed near the back. As they ventured further in, the knights sending wary looks at the walls and their surroundings, Fynn was the first to halt. Translucent claws formed above his knuckles, and a slight wind surged up as the young man assumed a combat stance.

Moments later, a piercing howl reverberated through the foyer, and something began to materialize at its center. Its form was a grotesque amalgamation of nightmares, a spectral head suspended in the air, its translucent skin revealing veins pulsating with a perverse energy. Its eyes burned with malice, and its gaping maw harbored jagged onyx teeth. Sinister, smoky tendrils drifted from it, leaving a trail of dread in their wake.

A [Whispering Specter], if Scarlett's memory served her right. She could feel its unearthly wails and incantations probing at her very soul, a profound sense of revulsion washing over her.

Allyssa brought one hand to her mouth, and one of the knights averted his gaze momentarily.

“Well,” Raimond remarked beside Scarlett. “That's certainly a...unique gatekeeper.”

Scarlett looked to him. “One that you might be particularly well-equipped to handle.”

“I feel the urge to ask whether that was meant in offense or not, but I will choose to believe the latter. I suppose it's not an entirely incorrect statement, either. Though for some reason, it almost makes me lament the commonly hallowed fact that lumomancy is the natural bane of the Blazes' denizens.” He glanced back at her. “From what I have seen, however, I am not the sole person in possession of means suitable for the situation.”

She arched a brow. He really was more perceptive when it came to magic than one might expect from a priest. It seemed he had discerned the nature of her magic and was aware that

what she was using was true pyrokinesis. While it might not be on par with lumomancy in that regard, she had learned from Arlene that it was better than ordinary pyrokinesis against demons. Considering how effective it had proved against ghosts and similar creatures, perhaps that wasn't too much of a surprise.

The [Whispering Specter] emitted another piercing howl as Fynn was the first to engage it, lunging forward and marking the start of the battle.

Scarlett found herself both pleasantly surprised and somewhat disappointed by the outcome.

The Specter was undeniably formidable, more so than she had hoped. Its numerous tendrils, escaping from its mouth, had the power to send two knights flying across the room, leaving behind smoldering marks on their armor and skins that threatened to corrode everything they touched. Without Raimond's swift reactions, those knights might have died on the spot.

The fact that the first foe they encountered—even if it was essentially a mini-boss—posed such a threat suggested that Anguish and her demons weren't as weakened as Scarlett had wanted. They might be weaker than in the game, but not to the extent that this would be a walk in the park.

What turned out to be a pleasant surprise, however, was that she had apparently underestimated her own party's ability to handle such a threat. From their previous encounters, she thought she had a pretty decent grasp of everybody's capabilities. Still, now that they had additional support drawing the enemy's attention and protecting the rear, both Shin and Fynn could concentrate more on the fight. Fynn, in particular, showcased his ridiculous strength as he tore off the Specter's tendrils and repeatedly pushed the demon back.

Moreover, when facing a single opponent like this, primarily a melee combatant as well, Allyssa and Scarlett were given free reins to time their attacks for maximum efficiency and damage. With Raimond assisting them, providing healing and occasionally casting offensive lumomancy spells that seared the demon, their combined efforts proved a significant danger to the Specter.

All in all, the demon lay battered and defeated on the floor within a few minutes, fading away into nothingness as its essence returned to the Blaze of Anguish, where its true body resided.

Scarlett glanced at her mana.

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From the start, this had been a question of endurance. She possessed the firepower, but did she have enough mana to make it to the top? Initially, her plan had been to rely on the supply that [Ittar's Genesis] afforded if necessary. The divine tier artifact would have been incredibly useful in that regard, but with Raimond and the knights' presence, that option became more complex. While she could potentially conceal it under a cloth or similar if she was surrounded by ordinary people, knights and a priest of Ittar would undoubtedly sense its aura.

However, Raimond's presence offered its own advantages, so perhaps she wouldn't deplete her mana reserves if they continued like this. Since she didn't know how big this place was compared to the game, and how many foes they would face in comparison, it was hard to gauge the situation.

Passing by the knights, who still appeared somewhat shaken from the previous battle, Scarlett made her way to the far end of the foyer. There, a pair of massive stone doors, adorned with disturbing images carved into them, led to the next chamber. Fynn joined her, and as she waited for the rest of the group to collect themselves and catch up, she signaled for Fynn to open the doors.

The white-haired young man complied, pressing his shoulder against the heavy stone and pushing. It took a few moments, even for him, but eventually, the doors creaked open. When Scarlett caught sight of what lay beyond, however, her expression darkened.

Before them stretched a long hallway, teeming with dozens upon dozens of smaller demons. It seemed as if her dreams of conserving mana were in shambles.

She did *not* look forward to how this would smell.