

## 202: Expectations

Shadows seemed to dance over the walls as the door opened before Scarlett and Allyssa, the air suddenly thickening with slight tension as they revealed what lay beyond. A dark set of stairs led to a long corridor with a high ceiling. At the top of the stairs loomed a macabre tapestry of demons.

As one, dozens of eyes pivoted to glare in Scarlett's direction. Some of the demons appeared as little more than grotesque amalgamations of charred flesh and jagged obsidian armor, their eyes glowing like smoldering coal. Others scuttled next to the walls like impish little minions. Molten hulks, towering three times Scarlett's size, turned slowly like grim sentinels, while spectral tormentors of shifting shadows began to emit eerie, unsettling flicking noises. All in all, it was a menacing assembly of foes, enough to make probably even some of the most seasoned adventurers' hair stand on end. Against most, their varied statures and capabilities demanded flexibility in one's approach and signified a threat that wasn't to be underestimated.

Scarlett found that they all burned the same beneath her flames, though.

By the time she'd counted their adversaries, the [Tiara of Lost Benediction] and Scarlett's other gear had already appeared on her. A cacophony of screams reverberated from the throng before them, and as the swiftest and nimblest of the demons began rushing down the stairs, a swarm of Aqua Mines and fire arrows materialized in the air to face their advance head-on.

The weaker demons found themselves vulnerable enough to either stumble down the stairs from these attacks or collapse where they were, trampled upon by their larger kin. As for the shadowy demons, they too clung to the walls and moved like wraiths, but were met by barriers of fire that pierced their forms and halted their advance. By Scarlett's side, Allyssa fired her crossbow and tossed out a flask that shattered against the floor at the base of the stairs, releasing a layer of grey muck that had proven efficient at slowing these demons before.

It also made excellent kindling.

Scarlett nodded slightly, seeing that, appreciative of the help. With her magic, she deftly forced the demons at the front back, corralling them with their slower and bulkier counterparts. A few errant demons managed to move past her fiery barricades, demanding her full attention for a brief moment as she pushed them back, but for the most part, the horde moved as she directed. The door was not large enough for all of them to pass through, and the stairs tapered off towards the base. Among humans, demons were notorious for their cunning and deceptiveness, but that was mostly because those who often made it to the Material Realm had those qualities. These could better be described as the trash that Anguish kept around to throw into the proverbial meat grinder.

And that was a role Scarlett didn't mind filling.

Once the majority of the demons had reached the end of the stairs, they were amassed as a tight mob pushing ahead with snarls and growls, slowed by the remains of their fallen or

wounded comrades and Allyssa's concoction. That was when Scarlett shifted from her usual strategy of summoning lots and lots of minor attacks to control her enemies and wear down their defenses and instead focused on a more decisive approach that was better at dealing with the tougher demons.

Her forehead knitted together in concentration.

Like a blazing torrent of destruction, the opening before burst into light with searing red flames that seemed to consume the very air itself for a brief moment. The heat didn't bother Scarlett too much since she had a bit of fire resistance from her items, but she imagined Allyssa would feel uncomfortable. The smell was also far from pleasant.

Even through the inferno, the demons' cries reached them. Scarlett spotted a few shapes attempting to push through the roaring wall of fire, but a handful of larger fire arrows took shape above her head and shot forward, driving them back into the brilliant maelstrom. She maintained this approach for a while—demons really were resilient—but eventually, she let her flames subside, revealing a grisly pile of charred and smoldering demon corpses at the foot of the stairs. Some still clung to life, even though their lower halves had been scorched to nearly nothing, and Scarlett made sure to finish them off quickly.

As the remaining flames died down and the pungent odor *really* hit them, Scarlett cast a glance at her mana with a scowl.

**[Mana: 16468/32063]**

That consumed a good portion of it, but she still had a substantial amount left, and [Ittar's Genesis] had a decent recharge rate.

She turned to Allyssa, finding the girl staring at her in amazement.

Scarlett arched a brow. "Is there something you have to say?"

Allyssa's gaze shifted to the mass of still-warm corpses. "Have you been *holding back* until now?"

Scarlett allowed a small smile to grace her lips. She had been frugal with her mana today, so she had mostly stuck to her typical approach with only a few sporadic incinerations of demons here and there. "In a sense, I suppose. Though this should not be a surprise to you. You have witnessed what I am capable of before, no?"

"Yes, but I thought you were running low on mana. And I wasn't aware your flames were *this* effective. You literally turned them all into ashes in less than a minute."

Well, they weren't *actually* all ashes. There was a good deal of scorched limbs and torsos remaining, making for a disgusting sight on its own.

Allyssa narrowed her eyes. "Some of them were practically made of stone and were on fire themselves already. How does that even work?"

Scarlett offered a slight shrug. "Sometimes I deem it best not to ask."

Her fire seemed to outstrip theirs. She could also see all their vulnerabilities through the effect of her [Charms of Apperception], so all she had to do was poke at them for long enough, and then her true pyrokinesis did the rest. It worked wonders on anything that relied more on their sheer mass and numbers than their wits. Send any real boss up against her though, like Deacon Emberwood's remnant, and they were considerably more resistant to her attacks. Not to mention that they actually knew how to fight back at a range.

She also didn't doubt that Raimond could accomplish this much against this level of enemies. Strength lay in their numbers. As for the true threat of this dungeon, it lay in what was supposed to be the last boss.

"What's that?" Allyssa asked, pointing at the covered [Ittar's Genesis].

Scarlett glanced down at it, then back at the girl. "An artifact that I do not often get the opportunity to utilize," she replied before turning her attention forward, walking towards the door.

She paused for a moment in front of the charred demon remains, scrunching her nose at both the sight and the smell. After using her pyrokinesis to smother the last of the flames and mentally preparing herself, she stepped forward. The sensation of walking over the corpses was far from pleasant, and once she reached the stairs, she immediately summoned some water to cleanse the ash and filth off her feet, extending the same courtesy to Allyssa once the girl caught up with her wearing a grimace.

They then began ascending the stairs, ready to confront what awaited them.

From there, their journey through the citadel was not much different from how it had been when they were in one large group. They maneuvered through halls and chambers of varying size and fiendishness, housing different-sized groups of demons in them. While some demon breeds had acute senses, that wasn't true for all of them. Moving on their own, Scarlett and Allyssa had a much easier time avoiding fights where they could. Scarlett made sure they didn't fight against anything too bothersome, and when combat was inevitable, she acted swiftly and decisively to minimize the risk of injury. Like that, it was only a matter of time before they closed in on their goal.

Roughly an hour later, they arrived at a vast hallway leading to a solitary door made entirely of pitch-black darkness, appearing as though it was a void into nothingness. By that point, Scarlett anticipated that Raimond's group would have returned to where she left them and was moving to find them, while Fynn probably wasn't far behind her and Allyssa. In fact, she had almost expected the young man to have already caught up to them, but there was no telling if something had delayed his progress.

Regardless of the situation, Scarlett had no intention of waiting any longer.

Allyssa and she crossed the hallway in silence, their footsteps echoing against the walls in a haunting manner. These latter sections had been conspicuously empty of demons, but that didn't surprise Scarlett, nor did she complain at being able to conserve her mana.

**[Mana: 9341/32063]**

She had used up most of what she'd had left getting to this point, but [Ittar's Genesis] was recharging rapidly. Its rate seemed to be even faster than what she had previously noted for the artifact, which made her wonder if it had an easier time because of the abundant energy in their surroundings, even if it was demonic in nature. It made a certain kind of sense that a holy relic would have some purification aspect to it.

"Is that where Rosa is?" Allyssa asked as they halted in front of the imposing door of darkness. At this distance, it was clear that it was made of stone, but it still felt like staring into emptiness itself.

Scarlett nodded briefly, contemplating the door and what lay beyond. "Yes."

As often happened when she stood before the culmination of one of her grander plans, a sense of excitement welled up within her, mingling with her other thoughts and emotions. She felt anger and irritation towards Anguish and the demon's manipulative role in everything that had happened until now, apprehension about what might unfold and the elements outside her control, and an unshakable self-assuredness that she was wholly uncertain if it was entirely suitable for the circumstances.

Allyssa seemed to take a deep breath, leveling her expression. "And there's really a *Vile* inside as well?"

"Yes, although Anguish is currently weakened and trapped within a human vessel. She has not fully incarnated into Rosa yet, so she should be bound and mostly incapable of acting directly against us."

"Is Rosa responsible for that?"

"No, Malachi is."

"Malachi?" A tinge of surprise entered Allyssa's voice. "Wait, who's that? Are there more people involved in this?"

Scarlett gave her a short look. "There is, yes. As for who Malachi is, that is a somewhat complex matter that I deemed best to set aside for now." She moved her focus ahead. "It should suffice for you to understand that she is neither our enemy nor our ally, but she could very well become either."

"Right, great... And we're *really* going to handle this alone? I realize it might be a bit late to ask that now, and I've kinda just been riding along until now because of what I am starting to think is my own lunacy, but I wouldn't mind one last confirmation that you've got all of this under control."

Scarlett remained silent for a few seconds. "...It will likely be fine, but I will not lie. Some of the confidence you have seen may be more attributed to my own arrogance than anything else. However, even with that said, you can trust me to manage the situation. I will inform you if there is any action required on your part."

If they were lucky, they wouldn't even have to fight the boss. If they were unlucky, things would get a bit more complicated.

“Now, let us not waste any more time.” Scarlett extended her arm, preparing to place her palm on the dark surface before her when the door began to move on its own accord. It opened slowly, like a waking giant, gradually revealing the chamber beyond. Along with it came a voice that Scarlett was intimately familiar with, yet felt completely discordant in its tone.

“And look what we have here. If it isn’t the star of the show. Welcome, Baroness. We’ve been expecting you so~”

Scarlett’s blood simmered as she heard those words, her eyes landing on the figure seated on a throne at the far end of the room, bearing Rosa’s appearance.

Anguish.