

206: The village jester

Raimond gazed at Crowcairn before him, partially concealed as it was by an unnatural grey barrier shielding it from the outside world. The past day had been a relentless string of unexpected events, one after the other, but he had certainly not anticipated finding himself back here under these circumstances. It was but a few minutes ago that he had been locked in battle with the creatures of the Blazes alongside his temporary allies inside the manifestation of one of the six Vile's strongholds, yet now he was back where he started, without much information as to why.

The baleful area that had enveloped him and his companions before he was transported here left little doubt about the identity of the responsible party, but it offered no explanation. If the Vile's manifestation had already reached a level where it could perform those kinds of feats within the citadel, he did not think it would have limited itself to the mere removal of any intruders. There was indubitably more to it, and Raimond supposed he would have to work his head to figure out what that was.

To begin, he needed to learn what had transpired on Baroness Hartford's end of things. Her absence upon their return to the chamber where they split was not entirely surprising, but Raimond had hoped they would be able to catch up to her. Unfortunately, the demons had proved somewhat tedious to bypass without the Baroness, even with him using some of his more effective spells. They had also faced some challenges in navigating the citadel as effortlessly as she had.

Perhaps Raimond had been a tad *too* lax in his approach to the woman. Although he was now convinced her involvement in this whole scenario was far from simple, he had wanted to continue observing while he could still afford to do so. The details were still things he could only speculate on, as were the Baroness's motivations, and he did not like to decisively act under such circumstances. In this case, however, it might have been better if he had.

Turning his head, he contemplated the massive structure that loomed on the overcast horizon. The Vile's citadel still remained, and presumably, so did the threat it posed. Under normal circumstances, Raimond would have been concerned that his forcible expulsion from the citadel indicated an impending danger, and that it would be best to attempt a return there to oppose whatever its master was planning. However, he was not quite so sure that was the best course of action on his part now.

Looking back at the village of Crowcairn and the weakened Sanctum barrier that protected it, Raimond furrowed his brows. He couldn't speak entirely as to why, but he had a feeling that something significant was about to unfold. The Phantom Sanctum did block some of his senses, but he sensed a presence within that held a noticeable weight, though its nature was odd and unfamiliar.

As he pondered, the barrier itself trembled, fading and turning more transparent. It wouldn't be long before it was brought down entirely, and Duke Valentino's people gained full access to the village — a fact that boded poorly for Crowcairn's inhabitants.

For a brief moment, Raimond considered whether this was an opportunity for him to intervene and prevent unnecessary bloodshed where possible, but he quickly dismissed the

idea. He was all too familiar with the deep-seated animosity between the Tribe of Sin and the empire, fueled by centuries of fighting and conflicting ideologies. It would not be swayed by a single priest's words. Even if he were to make use of his authority as a deacon, he could, at best, stay the hand of some of the duke's men, but the villagers were unlikely to heed the counsel of someone they considered an irredeemable sinner. And he supposed they were right to, in a manner.

Though it pained him, his focus should remain on the matter of the Vile and whatever this presence he detected inside the village was. That had to be resolved before he had the luxury to worry about anything else.

A rift appeared in the grey barrier before him as it trembled once more, as if suffering a final, decisive blow, and moments later, the entire Sanctum began to dissolve into nothingness, as if a scar upon the world was being healed. With it gone, and Crowcairn's silhouette laying before him against the backdrop of the night, Raimond cast *Candlelight Insight*, allowing him to peer through the dark. He followed this with several casts of *Luminous Gaze* and *Luminal Projection*, conjuring magnified images that revealed diverse scenes from multiple angles.

Adjusting and configuring them for a few seconds, he took stock of the current situation.

One of the images shifted to reveal two of the knights who had been accompanying Raimond, their expressions marked by confusion as they looked around, standing beside a collection of small sheds and byres a few hundred meters from Crowcairn. Allyssa was not too far away either, and Raimond spotted Shin as well after looking around some. It seemed he had not been the only one transported away from the citadel.

Another image showed him a woman with silver-grey hair and three four-legged demons at her side, making her way towards the village. Malachi, Raimond presumed. He had been working under the assumption that she was one of the prime culprits behind recent events, so her presence *here* raised a multitude of questions, but it also lent weight to Raimond's suspicion that whatever was happening within Crowcairn was connected to the current ongoings.

Adding even more weight to this theory was the fact that he observed Baroness Scarlett herself, standing almost at the opposite end of the village from him. Magnifying the image to get a closer look at her expression, the woman did not seem confused over the situation, wearing a stern expression as she ran at a sedate pace towards the village before her.

As for Crowcairn itself, when viewed from above, the settlement appeared eerily devoid of life, with no discernible figures moving amidst its homes and streets. The epicenter of the village, where Raimond had seen its residents unveil the Sanctumbrum previously, as well as where the mysterious presence seemed to reside, presented itself as an inscrutable void in his magical scrying. He frowned in contemplation. Was this an effect of the Sanctumbrum then, or was that presence somehow responsible?

Even as he considered that he turned his attention to another image, showing him the encampment outside the village's reaches where the duke's forces had established their position during this siege. They were now advancing, weapons drawn, prepared to deal with their foes. Ready to face them, however, was a smaller group of black-clad individuals,

marking the villagers as they prepared to defend their fellows. The two groups soon crashed into each other, clashing.

In most circumstances, the outcome of such a battle might have been uncertain, or at the very least drawn out, but not in this case. Over the hills, behind the duke's men, Raimond noticed another group making its way towards Crowcairn. Though their numbers were modest, the glimmer of gold from their armor marked their identity.

The Dawnbringers.

With their arrival, the fate of the Tribe of Sin members seemed sealed. For Raimond, this could present an additional card in his hand, a means to perhaps maneuver this situation in a fashion that could prevent the most unfortunate of outcomes — or it could signify the opposite, depending on what commands the other deacons had given the Dawnbringers concerning his presence here.

For now, there remained a window of time before the duke's forces could claim victory and the Dawnbringers arrived. It would be wise for Raimond to use that window wisely.

Dispelling his spells for now, Raimond began moving towards Crowcairn in a light sprint. Soon, however, he noticed a figure he had failed to spot earlier, running in his direction at considerable speed. Casting *Luminous Gaze* once more, he studied the figure closer, realizing that it was the Baroness's ever-steadfast retainer, Fynn.

It was not long before the white-haired young man reached Raimond, stopping before him. A powerful gust of wind blew over Raimond, tossing his hair out of order.

“Why, I had been wondering where you disappeared to,” Raimond said as he smoothed his hair out, regarding the young man for a moment. Fynn looked as stoic as ever. “Was there a reason you sought me out under the current circumstances?”

Fynn nodded. “Scarlett has a request.”



Scarlett generally did not enjoy the act of running when she could afford not to—simply because it felt undignified—however, her concern for such matters was nothing but a faint echo in her mind as she hastened towards Crowcairn. She had already spotted Malachi, accompanied by some of her demons, approaching the village well before her, and there was no telling what could come from that. Despite the majority of Malachi's demons having been injured or killed back in the citadel, the woman remained dangerous. Dangerous and angry.

Even Scarlett, who was terrible at that kind of stuff, could sense the presence that had been inside the village. Most likely, it was Rosa and the Heartstone that now resided within the bard, keeping Anguish in check.

As Scarlett reached the village, she was slightly surprised by how empty its streets were. She assumed that some of the villagers were fighting the duke's forces, but she had expected to see at least a few moving about.

Making her way through the village and towards that presence she could sense, she kept a watchful eye around her. Although she liked to believe she could defend herself by now, an ambush could still prove dangerous. Unlike Malachi, she didn't have any demons to protect herself, and Fynn hadn't yet returned from finding Raimond.

Passing the empty homes around her and drawing nearer to the village's center, Scarlett came to a brief halt when she saw what lay before her. Similar to the Sanctum's barrier that had enveloped the village, there was a half-spherical dome concealing the area ahead of her. However, this one was a stark white, and unlike the barrier, which only felt slightly off when you looked at it, this one practically *screamed* that it didn't belong. It was like looking at a literal tear in the world, a wound upon the very fabric of reality.

A scowl formed on her brow. What *was* that? It shouldn't be something created by Anguish. Demons, while unnatural relative to this realm, didn't do things like *this*.

Then, was it caused by the Sanctumbrum? She knew the artifacts possessed a type of teleportation feature to the Tribe's homeland, but if this was that, it differed significantly from what Scarlett had been expecting from the game. It bore no resemblance at all to how the Kilnstones worked either, which was another form of Zuver technology fulfilling a similar purpose.

As she approached the strange dome, she hesitated for a moment and stopped in front of it. Even the prospect of entering it felt off. It was like there was something screaming inside her that *she* shouldn't get close to this.

But both Rosa and Malachi should be on the other side.

She looked around, but Fynn hadn't arrived with Raimond yet, and she doubted that Allyssa and the others would know to head here after what happened.

That meant she was on her own for now.

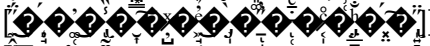


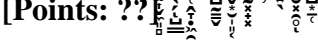
Summoning her resolve, Scarlett fixed her gaze forward at the white dome, then took her first step.

The sensation was every bit as discomfiting as she had feared. It was like stepping into a tub of ice-cold water, only the water wanted to distort your very being while also threatening to toss it into a blender. It felt as though she was momentarily severed from her physical self, at the mercy of this bizarre occurrence.

And then, after maybe not even a second of that, she found herself within a boundless grey and white void, stretching endlessly before her. Like the white dome itself, this space simply

felt wrong, decrying the natural order of things, targeting her in particular. And although there was no perceivable end to this place, *something* loomed in the distance, its attention fixed on her. An indescribable, overwhelmingly crushing pressure pressed down on her. Under its gaze, she found her body struggling for breath, and her thoughts ground to a halt.

Suddenly, windows of text appeared in front of her.

[Name: Scott Mett Hartford]
[Skills: 
[Traits:
[Dignified August]
[Supercilious]
[Cavalier]
[Call 
[Overbearing]
[Conceited]
[Third-rate Mana Veins]
[Mana: 
[Points: 

[Main questline "Rising action" has been dismissed]
[All current questlines have been dismissed]


[_____]

Her eyes widened. What—

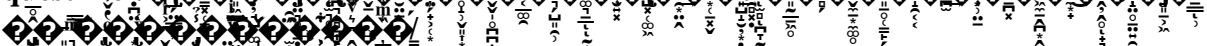
[Main questline has begun: Rising action]
{Conflicts are brewing as powerful factions have started moving on the continent of Tanrelia. The Tribute of Dominion stands as the focal point of these clashing designs, besting—

[Main questline "Rising action" has been dismissed]

[_____]

[Main questline has begun: Rising action]
{Conflicts are brewing as powerful factions 
[Main questline "Rising action" has been dismissed]

[_____]

[Main questline 
[Main questline "Rising action" has been dismissed]

[_____]

The pressure bearing down on Scarlett intensified as the text before her became increasingly distorted, growing more oppressive, as if dissecting her being. Eventually, it felt like her head was going to burst, and the small part of her that could still think clearly wondered if this was it.

Then, everything went black.

When she opened her eyes again, she found herself standing in the village, yet her mind could barely process her surroundings as she attempted to come to terms with what she had just encountered.

[Main questline has begun: Rising action]

{Conflicts are brewing as powerful factions have started moving on the continent of Tanrelia. The Tribute of Dominion stands as the focal point of these clashing designs, resting in the heart of the ruins of Beld Thylelion}

[Objective: Enter the ruins of Beld Thylelion before all others]

[Reward: Additional Skills Menu privileges]

[Failure: Demise]

[All current questlines have been resumed]

[Name: Scarlett Hartford]

[Skills:

[Greater Mana Control]

[Greater Pyromancy]

[Major Pyrokinesis]

[Greater Hydromancy]

[Superior Hydrokinesis]

[

[Traits:

[Dignified August]

[Supercilious]

[Cavalier]

[Callous]

[Overbearing]

[Conceited]

[Third-rate Mana Veins]]

[Mana: 2041/12063]

[Points: 36]

Almost as if to reaffirm their existence, system windows popped up in front of her. She stared at them, blinking. What had just happened? *Why* had it happened? *How*?

Had the system literally bugged out? And that thing that had been watching her...

Her breath caught when she noticed something different about her status window. There was a new skill there. A skill that she couldn't read.

...What did that mean?

Her attention was abruptly torn back to reality by several screams, and turning her head, she spotted a few black-clad Tribe members confronting three demons at the other end of the open area she was in, with Malachi standing behind them. They were in what Scarlett presumed was the heart of Crowcairn, a space enclosed by the white dome Scarlett had passed through, featuring a platform at its center. Groups of people, both adults and children, crowded around the platform, where a white portal hung in the air, with the villagers climbing onto the platform and disappearing into it at a quick speed. Next to the portal stood the Sanctumbrum, a black altar pulsating with energy as it powered all of this.

The space itself felt strange and unnatural, though not to the same degree as whatever void Scarlett had just been to. It reminded her of when she had been to Temisbrook Glade outside Elystead, the fairy forest that had served as an interstitial space bridging the Wandering Realm and the Material Realm. In this case, the Sanctumbrum had done something similar, forging its own interstitial space in the space immediately surrounding it.

Scarlett scanned the area, but she couldn't find Rosa anywhere. Most of the villagers seemed to have retreated through the portal by now, at least, but those that had yet to do so shouted and pointed in her and Malachi's direction, glaring and clutching simple weapons while clearly wary. The ones fighting Malachi to buy time, the actual Tribe warriors, were too busy getting mauled by demons to pay Scarlett much attention. Malachi herself briefly seemed to eye Scarlett before returning her gaze to their surroundings, as if searching for something.

Scarlett narrowed her eyes. Rosa wouldn't have had any reason to go through the portal, so was the bard somehow concealed? If she were, Scarlett would have little more chance of finding her than Malachi.

Her focus shifted back to the portal, watching as the last of the villagers stepped through it, leaving the area directly surrounding the platform empty. At around the same time, Malachi's demons dealt with the last of their opponents, leaving Scarlett and Malachi the only people left.

A few seconds of relative silence passed as Malachi's demons searched around, and then began tearing into their dead foes. Then, a figure emerged from the portal, stepping onto the platform. It was a tall woman with braided dark hair, dressed in clothes reminiscent of a pirate and with a variety of weapons hanging from her belt, including a small axe gripped in her right hand.

Riya, the Tribe's mad dog.

The woman surveyed the area, her gaze briefly touching on Malachi and the dead Tribe members being devoured by the demons. Then her gaze landed on Scarlett, and a smirk surfaced as she tossed her axe into the air, nonchalantly catching it as they locked eyes. After a couple of seconds, she directed her attention to the Sanctumbrum and, in a single fluid motion, slammed her axe straight into it, somehow cutting it nearly in half. A brilliant white light burst forth from the object, and Riya sent a wave in Scarlett's direction with her axe before retreating through the portal, which disappeared almost immediately after.

Everything shook around Scarlett, and for a moment, she prepared to exit from the space as it almost seemed ready to implode, but then the Sanctumbrum began to radiate a dark crimson as the temperature rapidly rose. Cracks fractured the ground, and lava seeped from beneath as the white dome above and around her began to adopt progressively darker shades. Scarlett glanced over at Malachi, who also appeared taken aback by this, but who also continued scanning the area like a hawk.

“Sorry about this one, Red,” a voice suddenly sounded out to Scarlett’s right. “This was kinda part of the deal to get her to help force the damn thing to activate.”

Scarlett had almost summoned several Aqua Mines out of instinct before she spun her head, discovering Rosa standing next to her. The [Astralbane’s Nexus Heartstone] emitted a soft violet glow in the woman’s chest as she eyed Scarlett.

The space around them continued to deteriorate, growing increasingly hellish as the temperature increased and pillars of flame burst up from some of the cracks. Scarlett had to step back to avoid one such eruption, noticing Malachi doing the same where she stood.

A scowl formed on Scarlett’s face as she realized what was happening. She looked to Rosa. “Are you aware of what you what have done?”

“Yepp. I’ve got a decent enough grasp of it.”

“...You fool.”

The bard chuckled. “Not arguing with that.”

Scarlett shifted her gaze to the center, where the platform had taken fire and the Sanctumbrum was starting to look like a molten piece of obsidian. By now, the artifact should have broken entirely, but Anguish had hijacked it. Its power was being used to open an interstitial space that linked the Blaze of Anguish to this place using Rosa.

Where the portal had been before, the air started to shift, gradually unveiling a dark red rift.

“You should probably book it while you still can,” Rosa said, observing the rift. “I doubt anything pleasant’s going to come out of that. Certainly not anything you sensitive lady types should have to see.”

“I came here to bring you back,” Scarlett replied.

“Then I’ll probably have to disappoint.” A small smile curved the bard’s lips. “Seems like I’m starting to make a habit of that, doesn’t it? Anyway, what’s keeping this place up and going is me, so if I tried to leave I’d bet you two stones to one that it’d collapse on itself before you can say ‘pulchritudinous brunettes’. Pretty sure Anguish was scared I’d immediately head back over to you guys after handling things here and have her exorcised to the Six Blazes and back, and I haven’t exactly been the host of a comprehension-defying demon for long enough to know the ins-and-outs of the gig that let me stop her from performing some of her tricks.”

Scarlett scowled. Rosa was saying that only Scarlett could leave. "... Was this truly necessary?"

"Probably not, no," the bard said.

"Then why—"

"But it was my choice, don't you think?" Rosa turned to lock eyes with Scarlett, her violet gaze meeting Scarlett's. "I mean it when I say that words *can't* describe how much I appreciate everything you've done for me. I don't blame you for anything you did to get us here. I doubt I could even *understand* half of it, and I genuinely wanted to let things play out according to whatever plan you had cooking, but... Well."

She gestured to the fiery chaos unfolding in front of them.

"We've both seen a scene like this before, haven't we? I just didn't want to see it play out again, with you and me being part of the cause this time. That's all."

Scarlett watched her silently for a moment, then shook her head. "You think this was preferable?"

She pointed towards the lifeless bodies of the villagers Malachi's demons had slain, currently in the process of being eaten. Malachi didn't seem bothered by what was happening in front of her as she stared in Scarlett's direction, brow furrowed.

"No," Rosa admitted, her face carrying a solemn expression as she avoided looking at the demons' feast. "But I also wasn't doing it for them. Not even for the kids and those who managed to escape dying in vain. Even if I were to say that I did it partly for you, I might be lying. Maybe, *probably*, I did it for myself." The woman shrugged. "Perhaps I wanted to experience what it was like to save people for once and actually *sacrifice* something. Plenty of people have gone around calling me kind over the years, but I can't rightly say I've ever done something that meant me giving something up. Always been too scared to. In a funny way, I *could* blame this on you, since you're the one who's given me the courage to do something different for once."

"...And are you truly accepting of the idea that you might be that sacrifice?" Scarlett asked, her tone grave.

"Nope. Tell you the truth, I'm scared stiff right now. Can't feel an ounce of bravery left in any of my bones. Probably used it all up back in the citadel. I can't deny that there's a part of me hoping you'll somehow find a way out for me in this situation as well, but if you can't... Well, that's the hand I've dealt myself." Rosa raised her hand and tapped the Heartstone residing in her chest. "You did a right ol' number on me with this, and it's mighty impressive, but it won't last forever if Anguish stays as she is. I can tell that much. However, she won't make it much further than this if I ain't around no more, so at least we won't have to be worrying about any countries being toppled over and razed anytime soon."

"This is why you are a fool," Scarlett said. "The sole reason I carried this plan out was to *ensure* your survival, Rosa."

The bard let out another chuckle at that. “I did say I wasn’t going to argue with you about being a fool.” After she said that, her expression suddenly turned serious as she looked in Malachi’s direction. The silver-grey-haired had started walking towards them, her demons trailing behind and the anger clear on her face as she maneuvered through the increasingly hazardous terrain. “Whoops, seems like I couldn’t quite manage to keep that veil up against her forever. Still a novice in that respect, unfortunately. I was *hoping* to avoid facing a pissed-off half-demon, but what can you do?”

Meanwhile, the rift forming above the burning platform had expanded to several meters in diameter, showing nothing but a dark void of shadows with indistinct shapes lurking within it. The first thing to emerge from it was a large, clawed hand that gripped the portal’s edge.

“Aaaand that’s the cue that we’re out of time,” Rosa said. “It really is high time that you made your exit, Red.”

Scarlett merely looked at her, then shifted her gaze towards the approaching Malachi and whatever demon was exiting out of that portal. “I believe I will be the judge of that.”