

## 208: All that's missing is a confessional

Raimond considered Scarlett silently for a few seconds, the man's expression hidden beneath the mask he wore. Scarlett wasn't sure whether it was the [The Deacon's Sunfire Visage] left by Deacon Emberwood or just another similar mask, but that didn't matter much. What mattered was that Raimond was bedecked in his full deacon attire, making no attempt to hide his identity anymore.

"So you did know who I was," he spoke, his usual levity absent from his voice. "I suppose I did have my suspicions, but I did not find them warranted, given your actions. Perhaps I'm growing rusty."

"Your identity is not as well-kept a secret as you may think, Deacon," Scarlett replied.

In her collaboration with Beldon Tyndall, the man had once hinted at recognizing Raimond. Sure, Beldon was essentially a repository of the empire's secrets, but Scarlett doubted he was the only one outside the Followers aware of Raimond's tendency to 'travel around'.

"It would seem so," Raimond said thoughtfully.

A thunderous roar sounded out as another demon emerged from the rift at the center of the space they were in, the earth practically quivering under its feet as the flames in the environment around them grew in intensity. The three Dawnbringer members displayed remarkable teamwork in dealing with the threat, though, having already dispatched two of the demons as they corralled their foes closer to the rift, unleashing brilliant explosions of light from their weapons.

Raimond's gaze momentarily shifted in that direction, observing the demons, then returned to Scarlett, looking behind her.

"Malachi, I presume?" the man asked, and Scarlett glanced back at the woman there.

Though Malachi's real expression was hidden by the illusion, her whole appearance screamed vigilance as she met Raimond's gaze.

"And Miss Hale as well," Raimond continued, looking at the bard who was being supported by Scarlett. "I did have my wonderings on what her role in this whole debacle was."

"You're one of Townsend's new associates, then," Malachi said. "The aging hypocrite should learn when to stay still."

"I see the two of you are not on the best footing. He did not have especially favorably things to say of you either, if that was a concern of yours. I won't pretend to be familiar with your history or led to you being where you are, but it hardly matters now. Other questions press upon us, like whatever phenomenon it was that I just witnessed you doing to Miss Hale."

"I suggest you find the answer to those questions yourself, or ask that god of yours if he is willing to share in his knowledge." Malachi surveyed their surroundings, her gaze scanning over the Dawnbringers and demons, then landing back on the unconscious Rosa. The woman

then raised [Ittar's Genesis], its dark interior aflame with a sinister red, and turned her attention towards the rift at the center. A moment later, Anguish's presence flowed out from her, and a new rift ruptured the air, swallowing her from behind.

"We'll cross paths again," she declared in a hoarse, severe voice, directed at Scarlett.

"Wait—"

Before Scarlett could even finish, Malachi vanished, the rift closing with her. Scarlett was left staring at the vacant space next to her.

Maybe that shouldn't have surprised her. She and Malachi weren't really allies, nor had they known each other for long enough for trust to be anything but a scarce commodity between them. But Scarlett hadn't been aware Malachi could create a new rift like that. She presumed it was because of the power the woman had siphoned from Anguish. Had she fled to the Blazes, then? Exactly how much of Anguish's Authority had she managed to get if she felt safe going there?

"I did not expect her to escape from an unstable interstitial space so effortlessly." Raimond sighed, drawing Scarlett's attention. "Nor did I ever expect to sense the presence of a Vile to ever emerge from a mortal like that. But today is a first in many ways."

He made no mention of [Ittar's Genesis], which suggested he hadn't recognized it after the artifact had absorbed part of Anguish's Authority.

"Baroness," the man continued after a couple of seconds, speaking the title purposefully. "I hope you do not take offense when I say that I am being generous in hearing you out. An explanation is in order."

"Perhaps, but these are hardly ideal circumstances," Scarlett replied.

"However accurate that may be, they will have to suffice. Malachi's departure means you and Miss Hale are the only sources for answers. I am sure you understand what that might mean."

She studied him carefully for a while. There wasn't a doubt in her mind that he was prepared to confront her in a fight, if necessary. Colluding with demons was a crime that led to entire families being persecuted, and worse. That she was a baroness might complicate matters somewhat, but the Followers held enough authority to address situations like that. And with the Dawnbringers present, making her own escape wasn't especially reasonable for Scarlett.

Despite this, Raimond had employed his magic to cloak Scarlett and the others' appearances, and even now, he had walked up close and spoke in lower tones, ensuring that no one could eavesdrop on their conversation. He was extending an olive branch, and it was up to Scarlett to reciprocate.

And she would, as long as she could be certain he wouldn't pose a threat.

"First," Scarlett began, "I need to know what your true purpose for being in Crowcairn when all of this started was."

The presence of the Dawnbringers tipped the scales in Raimond's favor in a direct confrontation. Scarlett still didn't quite understand why Raimond was here when he hadn't been involved in this questline in the game. Was he here for her, as she had started suspecting? His joining her party to also explore the Sunfire Shrine pointed towards that, but it seemed unlikely that he would have allowed things to progress this far if that were the case.

The man fell silent for a moment, regarding her, then he slowly shook his head. "I believe I was the one to ask for an explanation, Baroness, but very well. It is as I told you when we met. There was no lie there. My purpose in visiting Crowcairn was to inquire around on behalf of my superiors, although admittedly, I also happened to be one of those superiors."

"So you were aware that the Tribe of Sin might have an enclave here in Crowcairn?"

"No. That came as a surprise to all of us. However, it would appear that *you* were aware of it, Baroness."

"I had my suspicions."

"I wonder why that is."

Scarlett ignored that comment, eyeing the man. "If the Quorum was not aware of the Tribe's presence here, then why were you tasked to investigate Crowcairn?"

"Because we received a revelation from the Augur," Raimond replied. "It predicted that something of untold significance might take place here."

Scarlett paused, her eyes widening.

The *Augur* had predicted this? That definitely didn't happen in the game. Scarlett had almost assumed the woman couldn't receive any revelations outside of the game's predictions, as she hadn't prevented the heist on the Sanctuary of Ittar, nor did she seem to have been aware of Scarlett's involvement. That would even have made sense, since the fate of this world seemed fixed and few people could circumvent that. If that wasn't entirely true, it raised questions about the scope of the Augur's predictions. How much did the woman know, and what had she hoped to prevent? Anguish manifestation? Malachi supplanting a Vile? Or Scarlett pursuing her own agenda?

"In case you were perhaps suspicious, I did not know that you nor Miss Hale would be present when I first left for Crowcairn. I imagine you were as surprised as I when I first met you," Raimond said. "Now, I have been accommodating and shared my reason for originally being here. I believe it is your turn. We can disregard the reason behind the request you made of me, since I think it's more than clear why you needed my help. What you offered in return for that can also be delayed until later. What matters is the situation at hand, so let us start with that. While Malachi may have left, at least one individual directly responsible for a Vile breaching our realm appears to be cradled in your arms."

Scarlett glanced down at the motionless Rosa, taking a second to shift the bard so that she leaned against her shoulder. Then she looked back at Raimond. "Miss Hale was not responsible for the manifestation of the Vile's citadel."

“What I witnessed earlier seemed to suggest the opposite.”

Scarlett pressed her lips together. She didn't know when he arrived or how much he saw.

Raimond studied Rosa. “While I think I may already know the answer, I will still ask. What is she?”

“...An incarnate,” Scarlett said.

“I see.”

She didn't know what expression Raimond was making behind the mask, but he did not sound happy.

“Then did she work together with Malachi to manifest a Vile?” he asked.

“No,” Scarlett replied. “She was not aware of what she was, nor of what Malachi's aims were.”

“But you were.” Raimond spoke it as a statement, not a question. “You were familiar with the citadel because you had been expecting this. So, were you the one who made a deal with the Vile to bring them here?”

“Only a fool would make such a deal with a Vile.”

“True.” The man lowered his head in a small nod. “And if there is anything I have learned from my interactions with you, Baroness, it is that you are far from a fool. So, what *is* it that you did?”

“I devised a trap.”

“A trap?”

“Yes. Due to Miss Hale's condition, she has always been at risk of being recognized for what she is. The Vile who first discovered her was Anguish, and she has been tormenting Miss Hale for some time now.” Scarlett let some of her anger seep into her voice. “Since Anguish's existence threatened the life of one of my people, I decided that something had to be done to deal with the situation. That is why I came up with a means to cooperate with Malachi to temporarily imprison the Vile within our realm, drawing out enough of her Authority where she can no longer inflict further harm upon Miss Hale.”

Raimond stared at her for several seconds. “So your objective was truly to *trap* one of the six Viles?”

“Yes.”

“In order to safeguard Miss Hale.”

“Yes.”

“...And what of the hazards associated with such an undertaking?” the man asked. “Can they all be ignored for the sake of one person?”

“There were none.”

“I can think of several—”

“There were none *of note*,” Scarlett said, locking eyes with the man. “Persuading you of the truth of this statement is not a discussion I will indulge in at the moment. Simply know that I am not the type to gamble with people’s lives for nothing, much less my own. I understood what needed to be done to rescue Miss Hale, and I had a method that eliminated the risk of Anguish causing widespread damage to the empire. It was either this or allow one of my people to die an unnecessary death, and that is not something I would ever accept.”

“...You are as confident as ever, Baroness,” Raimond replied.

“Because I have reason to be.”

The deacon lifted one arm, the sleeve of his red robes dancing with the movement. He gestured ahead, to where the Dawnbringers were battling the demons pushing through the rift. “Pardon my saying so, but this does not look like a situation that warrants such confidence.”

Scarlett frowned. “...There were complications.”

“I surmised as much from your plea for my assistance. I assume our sudden arrival in Crowcairn was not part of the plan? What prompted this development? It seemed like an action performed by the Vile, Anguish, as you say, but it wasn’t simply a straightforward banishing of all intruders from the citadel, as one might initially assume.”

“No, Anguish would not have had the freedom to take such an action. Miss Hale was the one responsible for that.”

That seemed to genuinely surprise Raimond, as he fell silent for a moment. “...That sounds as if you are implying that Miss Hale could wield the power of a Vile.”

“In part, yes,” Scarlett said. “As I mentioned, I had reason to be confident. Anguish was, to some extent, under the control of Miss Hale. It was part of the process meant to permanently deal with Anguish. Depending on how much you saw earlier between Malachi and Miss Hale, you would know that these are not empty words.”

“...I will admit that I was left mostly perplexed as to what I bore witness to there,” Raimond replied. His attention seemed to shift to Rosa, whose chin partly leaned against Scarlett’s shoulder. Several seconds passed as he remained silent. “Although it does sound preposterous, I might indeed believe you. I am still left wondering why she would have us all brought here, however. She did not seem to have any connection to the villagers of Crowcairn when I first arrived here with her, and I did not take you for one of the Tribe’s sympathizers, Baroness.”

“I am not, and Miss Hale has no relationship to the Tribe whatsoever. It would seem she simply did not find the idea of a pogrom agreeable, and as such, chose to act with the new power afforded her to prevent the bloodshed that was about to occur here, even knowing it would obstruct my plans. She is not one to consider how helping members of the Tribe of Sin might look to the empire.”

Not that Scarlett was one to talk, given she'd had ample opportunity to end things and make her exit if necessary. Even if everything had gone to absolute hell and Anguish had been on the brink of fully manifesting with Rosa as her host, Scarlett could have invoked the Vile's name to buy enough time to eliminate Rosa. That would have prevented Anguish from lingering in the Material Realm and posing any threat.

Scarlett simply hadn't been willing to take that route. Even as a last option, she found it disagreeable.

Preferably, any solution that she *did* find would have involved both Rosa surviving and Anguish suffering unceasingly.

“...It would seem Rosa is much the same as she appears at first glance,” Raimond eventually said in a somber tone, before turning serious again. “And what of the villagers, then? Did they succeed in their attempt to escape? I presume they used the Sanctumbrum.”

Scarlett raised an eyebrow. That was not what she had anticipated him to ask next. “Most of them left, yes. Only their warriors remained, as far as I am aware.”

In most scenarios, admitting to essentially aiding imperial criminals to a member of the church—one of their leaders, no less—probably wouldn't be wise. Still, in this situation, there wasn't much else she could do. There were two avenues available to her to resolve this, and she was aiming for the best of the two. Besides, of everything she'd revealed to Raimond, this was hardly the worst.

“Assuming you have spoken no falsehoods, Baroness, I believe I have a general idea of the situation. For divulging this much, you have my thanks, regardless of your motivations.” His voice turned lower. “However, there are still many, many questions left. Chief among them is Miss Hale there.” He pointed at Rosa. “Her identity as an incarnate aside, if she still harbors one of the Viles within her, she presents a threat to everything around her. Once she awakens, what will prevent Anguish from wreaking havoc in this realm?”

Scarlett glanced down at the bard, studying the illusionary appearance. Rosa looked almost Allyssa's age right now, with short auburn hair and a thick blouse that covered the Heartstone in her chest. Any trace of Anguish was also gone for the time being, as was the strange new presence Scarlett had felt while she was outside Crowcairn.

Raimond wasn't wrong in asking what he did.

What *would* happen once Rosa woke up? Had what they did worked? Malachi had said that the current situation was complex, but that didn't tell Scarlett much. The fact that Malachi had just up and left suggested that there wasn't much more the half-demon woman could extract from Rosa right now, which was a good sign. The interstitial space around them was

still intact, though the black dome enclosing the space had gradually turned greyer as time passed, with what might be small cracks appearing in it. It probably wouldn't last forever.

Rosa had mentioned that her leaving this place might be bad, but Scarlett was pretty sure that wasn't true anymore. She wasn't sure *where* that certainty came from, but it was there, accompanied by a confidence that, regardless of Rosa's condition when the bard woke up, they could deal with it.

Scarlett looked back at Raimond. "If necessary, I will handle it," she declared.

The man stayed silent for a while, considering her. He cast a fleeting glance in the direction of the Dawnbringers. They held their own against their adversaries, but now even more demons had appeared through the rift, each stronger than the last, so even the three of them were starting to face issues.

"The other ones will likely arrive soon as well," Raimond said after a moment. "Along with your companion, Fynn, I suspect. I had him deliver the message for me, but Cadence is the only member of the Dawnbringers with an artifact enabling her to transport such distances in a short time. One could say we are fortunate she was the one to arrive first, as I doubt anyone else would have heeded my orders, even as a deacon."

He turned back to Scarlett, raising a hand to his face. Removing the mask, it revealed his handsome features beneath, though he wore a solemn expression. "I did not take your request lightly, Baroness, but you should know that providing any more assistance than I already have would be difficult."

"I do understand that," Scarlett said. That's why she would have preferred to keep him out of all of this. Even if Raimond himself could be reasoned with in this situation, the same couldn't be said for the Followers as a whole. "But you would have hidden our appearances without reason."

"Consider that one last favor between acquaintances," the man said.

"...Can I take that to mean this is as far as you are willing to go?"

Raimond furrowed his brow, and Scarlett tensed.

She was exhausted, nearly out of mana, and burdened by an unconscious Rosa. She wasn't in a position to face off against both Raimond and the Dawnbringers. Even if, by some miracle, she made it out from an escape like that, her involvement in all of this would have become known, and she would be hunted across the empire.

Honestly, she was probably more of a fool than Rosa for letting things get this far.

Yet, even knowing that, she found herself surprised by how unfazed she felt. Paradoxically, ever since entering this interstitial space to find Rosa, she had gradually felt more and more confident in herself. That confidence stemmed from that very same certainty that told her she could safely bring Rosa away from here. It was telling her that, even though she was completely outclassed if a fight were to start here, she *did* stand a chance.

And there was no danger to her identity if there were no witnesses.

The ruthlessness of that was slightly shocking, but she would be lying if she said she hadn't been thinking something similar since she first laid eyes on Raimond outside Anguish's citadel. The man was a potential ally, but he was also a potential threat. She'd always known that. As for where this strange certainty came from... She had a sneaking suspicion, but it wasn't something she could confirm right now.

As if to entirely stomp on her expectations, before her, Raimond raised a hand and ran it through his thick hair. "Let me pose this hypothetical to you, baroness," he said, meeting her eyes. "Say you were to completely overwhelm a certain debonair deacon after he has declared to his scarily competent fellows that he will handle you, and then make your daring escape. How probably do you think it is that he can retain his rather cushy position?"

Scarlett blinked, then the corner of her mouth lifted up in a small smile.