

196: Imposing presences

A silent tension enveloped the cabin as Scarlett and the others sat in the carriage while it traversed the countryside, making its way towards Anguish's citadel. Not many words had been exchanged since leaving the encampment. Occasionally, Allyssa would lean forward in her seat to peer out the window, gazing at the behemoth of a structure in the distance.

The closer they got to it, the more imposing its baleful presence became, bearing down on them like a suffocating shadow. But at the same time, the unnaturalness of the citadel grew increasingly evident, as the eerie aura enveloping it only served to cement its displacement compared to the space around it. A clear sign of the citadel's premature manifestation.

As their ride continued, their carriage escorted by a small group of knights riding alongside the vehicle, Allyssa was the one to finally break the silence. "When we arrive, what will we do?" the girl asked, her tone tinged with slight apprehension.

Scarlett considered her for a few seconds.

"...I have asked this before, but I feel I should pose the question one last time." This was one of those times when she disliked the distant quality that always crept into her voice. "I am aware that you have declined such offers before, but are you truly certain you wish to accompany me on this venture? This is one occasion where I would genuinely not fault you for choosing not to. The situation lies beyond the scope of your contract, and our destination may not be suitable for those who harbor doubts."

For just a moment, Allyssa's expression betrayed a hint of those very doubts, yet the look she gave Scarlett was one more of slight surprise and gratitude, as if those words were far from what she had expected but also what she wanted to hear. She glanced at Shin beside her, and the two exchanged a quiet conversation with each other before both turned back to Scarlett.

"To be honest," Allyssa began, "I'd rather not do this. Just looking at that massive fortress terrifies me, and I'm so confused about everything that's going on. It feels like it's all sailing over my head, even as the world might come crashing down any moment now." She paused for a bit, meeting Scarlett's eyes. "But the reason Shin and I joined the Shields Guild to begin with was because we were inspired by the actions of people like my dad and other Shielders — those who protected those unable to protect themselves. And although I might not be as smart as Shin, it doesn't take a genius to tell that whatever *is* happening right now is majorly dangerous with a capital M. Who knows how many people might get hurt?"

The young Shielder gripped the clasps of the bandolier on her chest, even as her countenance grew firm with determination. "Our Guild contract might say that we don't have to do everything you command, and yeah, sure, I think there's something in there about not having to follow you into unreasonable danger, but our Guild *pledge* was always about aiding those in need when we could and shielding them from harm. That includes both you *and* strangers. So, if there's any chance that where we're going right now might be connected to dealing with all of this—" She raised her arms and motioned around her. "—then I won't regret joining you. Not for one second."

Scarlett eyed her silently for a bit before offering a single “I see” in response. She wasn’t quite sure what she had expected, but it was welcome news to see that she had that confidence in her.

Allyssa offered a somewhat awkward laugh, accompanied by a small smile. “I say that, but I’m not sure I would have been as optimistic if I didn’t know you as well as I do.”

Scarlett raised a brow. “And what do you mean by that?”

The girl looked at her with a half-amused expression. “You’ve known what to do, even before all of this happened, right?”

Scarlett’s brow furrowed lightly, but before she could respond, Allyssa continued.

“It’s not exactly a *secret* that you don’t do things without planning them through, and I’ve yet to see a single occasion where you *genuinely* seemed at a loss. It’s to the point where Shin and I have more than one only half-joking conversation about if Ittar or something else is guiding your hand. And while I won’t claim that I always *like* the way you do things, it would be a lie to say that I don’t *trust* you. More than nearly anyone I know, even this doofus here.” She pressed a fist into Shin’s arm, who ignored it. “What I’m trying to get to here is that, if you were to say that whatever we’re about to do might somehow, even if just slightly, help stop whatever’s happening from happening, even if I don’t fully understand what that is, you’ll have my support. Because I know you don’t lie about things like that.”

Allyssa’s smile turned a little lopsided, and she might even have been a bit embarrassed, but Scarlett didn’t mind it as she simply considered the girl for a while. It wasn’t like she had been doing her utmost to hide her foreknowledge of these things, but it did surprise her a bit that Allyssa would have such implicit trust in it when they were in a situation like this. Or rather, that the girl would trust *her* so unquestioningly.

She shifted her gaze to Shin. “Do you share Miss Astrey’s sentiments?”

He shrugged. “I don’t have any dramatic declarations to do, but in essence, yes.”

His response earned him another—noticeably stronger—punch on the arm from Allyssa, though it didn’t seem to faze him.

Scarlett remained silent for a brief duration before speaking again. “In that case, both of you have my thanks. I will also give you my word that I will do what is within my power to resolve this situation.”

She turned her attention to Fynn, seated beside her. “Do you have anything to add?”

The white-haired young man simply shook his head. “I’ll follow your lead.”

“Very well. In that case, you have my thanks as well.”

“So, with that out of the way…” Allyssa said, and Scarlett turned back to the girl. “I know you prefer to keep things close to your chest and all, but could you enlighten us a bit more about what’s actually happening now?”

After considering her for a bit, Scarlett shifted her gaze out the window, where one of Sir Home's knights rode just a couple of meters from the carriage, his attention fixed forward as he held the reins of his horse. The glass of the window was sealed shut, and she wasn't actually certain he could eavesdrop on their conversation, but given the lack of soundproofing in the cabin, she didn't want to take any chances.

That did make her think she should probably arrange something like that in the future, though. There had to be enchantments like it. Maybe Evelyne had even considered as much when commissioning new carriages.

Turning her attention back to Allyssa and the others, Scarlett spoke. "I apologize, but I believe it is best to withhold certain information until later. However, I can share some of my suspicions with you, mainly concerning the nature of our destination. It is possible that the citadel we are currently approaching is an indication that a fragment of the Blazes is in the process of manifesting itself within the Material Realm, presumably through an anchor of some kind. As for the nature of the citadel itself, there is only one existence that I can think of with the power to sustain such a structure. We are likely dealing with one of the Viles."

Allyssa's eyes widened in shock at the news, while both Shin and Fynn's foreheads creased in thought.

"A Vile?" Allyssa blinked. "You're serious?"

"I am," Scarlett said.

The girl's lips tightened. "...I guess that explains why I almost can't stop myself from looking at the citadel even though it sends shivers down my spine. Dad always said demons are crafty. Still, a Vile... I can barely understand how that's possible."

"As I mentioned, it has likely managed to manifest itself here through a connection to an anchor that cements its existence within this realm, bypassing most of the limitations otherwise placed upon it. This would not be the first time in history an incident of this type has happened, rare as they are." Scarlett crossed her arms. "Fortunately, it would appear that the manifestation itself is only partial, indicating that the Vile's connection is incomplete. Nevertheless, its presence poses a substantial threat to the empire and its inhabitants."

If Rosa had been a fulfilled incarnate, Anguish would have been able to fully invoke her citadel and everything within it. However, preparing an incarnate took time. There was a reason Anguish had been residing within Rosa for so long, gradually wearing down the bard and tormenting her. What Malachi had done was force Rosa's incarnation prematurely, which meant Anguish was weaker now than she could have been.

Doing something like that would take a great deal of power, though, and it came with certain risks, such as allowing Anguish to establish her within this realm a lot faster than she otherwise would. By no means was this a surefire way of dealing with the Vile, a fact that both Scarlett and Malachi were well aware of. But they each had their reasons for setting things up as they did.

“We will need to enter the citadel and make our way to its core, where we are likely to find the epicenter of all this,” Scarlett continued. “Only by reaching that location can we hope to address the situation.”

“Will it be dangerous?” Allyssa asked, before frowning. “Never mind, scratch that. Of course it will be. My real question, I guess, is *how* dangerous it’ll be?”

“Though it is but a partial manifestation, a Vile’s citadel is intrinsically linked to their being and contains the essence of those who serve the Vile,” Scarlett replied. “Even if they may be weakened in their current state, there is no doubt that we will encounter demons within that structure who will serve as a genuine threat to us.”

“Do you think it’s something we will be able to handle?” Shin asked, his gaze fixed on her.

Scarlett looked at him briefly, also taking a moment to consider Allyssa and Fynn.

In the game, this questline wouldn’t typically be undertaken until reaching the late sixties in terms of levels. She doubted they were there yet. Allyssa and Shin would probably be considered somewhere in their forties by the game’s standards, which was typically too low for an instance of this caliber. However, the duo had demonstrated remarkable teamwork both between themselves and the rest of the group, proving that they could be useful even in places that should be too dangerous for them. With Scarlett in the mix as well, their party punched a lot harder than one would expect.

Not to mention that Fynn was a beast who had traded blows with foes far above his level ever since Scarlett first met him.

Together with Rosa, their group had confronted more than one foe in the sixty-range before, and while they’d often had some help, Scarlett *did* think it was possible to achieve similar results with what they had right now. Besides, the manifestation now had happened even earlier than it did in the game, which meant there was a possibility of the demons inside being weaker as well.

Furthermore, Scarlett possessed knowledge about their enemies’ weaknesses and rough numbers, along with strategies that would help them minimize the necessary confrontations.

She wouldn’t have pursued this course of action if she hadn’t thought it was within her capabilities, after all. She considered helping Rosa important, but she wasn’t so reckless as to endanger the whole empire on some huge gamble. Well, perhaps she was, technically, but at least it was a calculated gamble. And she had been running out of time.

She turned back to Shin. “Suffice it to say, I have confidence in our chances.” She gestured out the window and at the knights outside. “We also have these fine men and women to lend us their aid.”

If she were to make a guess, these knights were probably of a similar strength to Allyssa and Shin, possibly slightly weaker. They weren’t Solar Knights, but they would have their uses.

“If you’re confident, then so am I,” Allyssa said, with Fynn offering an agreeing grunt. Shin, though perhaps not as openly trusting as Allyssa, voiced no objections either.

The conversation came to a close there, and the cabin settled into a newfound, almost anticipatory silence as the carriage carried on. The silence persisted until they reached a point where the road diverged westward, away from their objective. Scarlett and her companions disembarked from the vehicle.

Six knights altogether had accompanied them — five mounted on their horses and the sixth serving as the coachman throughout the ride. Scarlett's original coachman had no experience of fighting and had understandably been unwilling to approach the citadel.

The structure loomed only a few kilometers away now, so Scarlett and the others mounted behind the knights for the final leg of the journey. Compared to the relative comfort of the carriage, horseback riding proved decidedly less enjoyable. Scarlett particularly disliked the need to cling to the person in front of her like some kind of baby throughout the trip. The fact that the knight was a woman only marginally mitigated the discomfort of this arrangement. To distract herself, she fixated her attention on the citadel, whose ominous and oppressive presence grew increasingly palpable with each passing moment. It wasn't she couldn't endure, but it did serve to fuel her scorn for Anguish even further.

She had been accumulating a store of irritation for the demon for some time now.

Her gaze focused on the citadel's center, where a colossal obsidian tower stood as the focal point of the entire bastion. That would be where Rosa and Malachi were right now. That was their final destination. Once they reached it, they could put an end to this chapter of events.

As they drew even closer to the citadel, Scarlett directed the knights towards a section at its base, where the inky black obsidian walls yielded to a massive gate. Its mouth hung wide open, extending a foreboding invitation to outsiders to venture into its depths. It was then that she spotted something unexpected. A solitary figure dressed in white, their blond hair billowing in the wind as they gazed in the direction of Scarlett and the others.

She blinked, doubting her eyes for a moment. But even at this distance, his form dwarfed by the megalithic structure beside him, Scarlett recognized that person.

What the hell was Raimond doing here?