

213: Back to the city

After Scarlett's talks with Raimond, things progressed smoothly. Scarlett and her entourage lingered near the outskirts of Sir Home's camp while a steady stream of people arrived from Bridgespell. Some were the duke's men, others Followers, and a handful were Solar Knights and officials serving the crown. None Scarlett recognized personally, but they stood out nonetheless.

At one point, she found herself approached by individuals wearing featureless gold masks in white robes who were investigating the current situation. Those had been the Inquisitorial Auditors whom Raimond warned her about. Surprisingly, they weren't as bad as one might have thought, though perhaps her noble status might have played a part in that. She managed to sidestep a lot of their scrutiny, providing answers that adhered to the narrative she had decided to go with and which would align with Raimond's version of events. Mostly, that meant leaning on her cooperative relationship with Duke Valentino and her knowledge of demons to explain her presence and general actions when the citadel appeared.

The Auditors had tried to push her a bit on her previous experiences with demons, but she'd just referred them to that time she encountered one with Kat outside Ambercrest, which seemed to satiate their inquiries for the time being.

Once they ceased bothering her, Scarlett and her companions returned to simply waiting while recuperating their energy. It was somewhat fascinating to sit on the sidelines and witness the gradual expansion of the camp around them throughout the day as more people arrived to address the perceived crisis.

Which, in a sense, she supposed it was. But the crisis itself had already mostly passed.

She did not note that the Dawnbringers never seemed to return to the camp, however. In fact, most of the people stopping here were from the duke's men or from other factions, while most of the members belonging to the Followers of Ittar seemed to continue past the interim camp outside Crowcairn in the direction of Anguish's citadel. Presumably, they had set up their own base there.

It seemed Raimond had been right in that it would take a while for them to investigate the citadel itself. The man himself had vanished after their conversation, likely joining his people in their endeavour. Whether he was doing that under the guise of 'Father Abraham' or 'Deacon Abram' remained unclear.

While waiting for things to calm down, Scarlett delved into the journal she had discovered in the Sunfire Shrine — the one penned by Arlene's sister. It proved a decent enough pastime, and it saved her from having to engage in pointless conversations. She did not mind the company of Allyssa and the others, but it got somewhat tiring being cooped up inside a cabin with them for a prolonged duration, especially with some of the quirks she had acquired since arriving in this world.

At least it was a bit calmer than usual with Rosa spending most of the time asleep. The woman did wake up now and then, still looking about as exhausted as she had back in Crowcairn, engaging in some light conversation with the group, but that was about it. Scarlett

suspected that the others, particularly Allyssa, were intentionally avoiding heavy topics with the bard for now, which was understandable in the current setting.

Finally, after about a day of waiting had passed and towards the start of the second, Scarlett judged that things had calmed enough that their presence no longer mattered. New groups of people were still arriving, now ranging from more soldiers and priests to mages and wizards who had caught news of the citadel, but a certain order had settled over things. Sir Home and his people acted as the local guard, but it was clear that the Followers and the officials serving the crown were the ones in charge.

Before her departure, Scarlett sought out Sir Home to inform him of her plans. He wished her well, though she wasn't sure how sincere he truly was. He didn't have much reason to be too fond of her after what had happened with the Abyssal Vilewurm.

After settling any final matters that needed settling, Scarlett and her party set off in the carriage, heading back to Bridgespell. The trip itself was a slow but quiet one. Little was said, and what conversation did occur was mostly inconsequential. Scarlett did spot Rosa giving her the occasional long look when the bard wasn't sleeping, though. She understood that the woman wanted to have a talk, but it would have to wait.

Upon arriving at Bridgespell, the carriage navigated its way through the streets, entering the city as late afternoon approached. Although not surprising, the city was even more busy than usual. Scarlett imagined that Anguish's citadel and everything surrounding that was the cause. The structure could even be seen from here from certain angles, and it would no doubt have caused a significant commotion when it first manifested.

Scarlett had the coachman first take them to the inn they'd been renting out accommodations—the Golden Griffin Inn—before setting off by herself towards the heart of Bridgespell, where Duke Valentino's manor was located. When she arrived at his estate, the man wasted no time in meeting with her. A servant promptly guided Scarlett to his office, where the portly man awaited her sitting behind the desk that dominated the room. His cane leaned against the wall behind him.

“Baroness Hartford,” the duke said after Scarlett had entered. “Much has happened since we last spoke. I am starting to wonder whether your presence itself is a portent of things to come. It feels as if nothing but vexing matters has assaulted my senses since you arrived in the city.”

“Your Grace, it is good to see you are still in robust health,” Scarlett greeted him as she crossed the room and settled into an armchair opposite him. “And I would think my presence should be considered a good omen, if anything, given that I have assisted you in handling several of those matters by now.”

“And see how much good that has earned me.” The man motioned to his desk, which was covered in piles of paperwork and open letters. He then narrowed his eyes at Scarlett. “In comparison, you do not at all seem affected by the events I heard you took part in.”

While his tone carried a hint of annoyance, Scarlett couldn't exactly argue with him. Though she still *felt* tired from it all, that wasn't any excuse for her to ignore her appearance when visiting a high noble. In contrast, Duke Valentino looked as if *he* had been the one fighting

his way through hordes of demons just a couple of days prior, with a tired expression and a noticeable weight on his shoulders.

“I have been receiving constant reports from Captain Home and my men, but I still find it difficult to accept what I’ve read,” he said, studying Scarlett. “Tell me, you who witnessed it with your own eyes. Did legions of demons truly descend into this realm along with a structure hailing from the heart of the Blazes themselves? And was there truly an enclave of the Tribe of Sin involved? Here, in *my* domain?”

“Yes, it would seem so.”

The duke frowned at her reply. “The appearance of that blasted thing—the ‘citadel’ or whatever it’s called—is probably known to about every noble in the empire by now. There is no point in attempting to hide its existence.” He eyed Scarlett silently for several seconds, his expression grim. “So, tell me, Baroness. What do you want in return for keeping quiet about the enclave that was found in Crowcairn?”

Scarlett arched a brow. “You intend to keep its existence a secret?”

“Of course,” he replied curtly. “For as long as I can. I have enough to deal with as it is.” His frown deepened into a scowl, his voice laced with frustration. “You cannot tell me you would act any differently had an enclave been discovered within your fief. Especially if it was confirmed most of its members were successful in escaping after somehow conjuring one of the Six *Vile’s* strongholds into your domain.”

Scarlett considered him for a moment.

While people had recognized that the citadel had to belong to one of the Viles, it seemed no one was sure of which Vile yet, nor did they seem to understand how it had happened. When she’d spoken with Raimond, the man had seemed to think even the Followers would have trouble unraveling the mystery entirely. Even if they suspected that an incarnate had been involved, it would be difficult to learn more without finding any witnesses.

Still, Crowcairn’s true identity as a Tribe of Sin enclave would hardly stay a secret.

“His Majesty and the Followers of Ittar will no doubt be aware of the truth,” she said.

“Better them and those who know best to keep quiet and attempt to use this against me than half the damned empire accosting me in the months to come while I have a dozen fires to put out.” The duke glared at his cluttered desk, as if offended by its very existence.

Scarlett offered the man a polite, but small, smile. “I am of the belief that I only did my duty in aiding Your Grace with the current circumstances once they appeared. If I knew my silence on certain topics would have helped you even further, I would not have been averse to providing it without remuneration. However, if you are offering, it would be rude of me not to accept.”

The duke scoffed. “What is it you want? Gold?”

“Wealth is not something I lack. Instead, I would like to request a favor, to be traded in at a future time.”

“A favor?” His expression turned wary.

“Yes,” Scarlett said. “That should suffice.”

“...Very well,” the man eventually conceded. “I think I might have shared a similar sentiment before, but the perception you have currently garnered among noble circles truly could not be more misleading. There have been so many rumors about you going around these last few months that it has been difficult determining what is based in truth and what is simply some upstart baroness acting out of place.” Despite his harsh tone, Scarlett detected a hint of grudging respect in his words. “From what I have personally seen, not even the most generous of those rumors paint an accurate picture of you.”

“Thank you for your honesty,” Scarlett said calmly.

“That was not meant as a compliment,” he clarified, expression stern.

“I am aware.”

The duke stared at her for a second, then simply shook his head. “What reasons you have for allowing those rumors to fester is beyond me, but that is hardly the strangest thing I have encountered lately. I heard you also entered that citadel and did battle with the demons calling it home. Is that true?”

“It is.”

“So you are insane to top it off.”

“I prefer to consider it a delicate evaluation of risks and potential rewards.”

“Delicate, you say? Baroness, I have it on good account there is nothing ‘delicate’ about the manner in which you’ve dealt things.” A knock reverberated from the door, briefly catching the man’s attention before he turned back to Scarlett. “I had intended to hold a longer discussion with you, but it seems we will have to conclude matters here for now. There are other urgent affairs that require my attention. Perhaps a more extensive discussion can be arranged at a later time.”

The man started rising from his seat, grabbing his cane from behind him and supporting himself on it.

“For the duration of your stay in Bridgespell, you’re welcome to reside in this manor,” he continued as he circled his desk and headed towards the door at a steady gait. “The servants have been instructed to organize any accommodations you and your retainers wish for, if necessary. We do not easily forget those who lend us their aid in this house, even if I may wish we did at times.”

Scarlett stood from her seat and trailed him to the doorway, following him into the hallway where two attendants were waiting. She turned to look at the duke. “Before we part ways,

Your Grace, there is a lingering curiosity of mine. Has there been any news from Dame Leandra regarding her quest for the First Princess?"

The man's brows furrowed ever so slightly. "I lack the specifics, but it appears traces of Her Highness were discovered within the ruins you apprised Dame Leandra of."

"Is that so?"

Scarlett hadn't been certain what to expect in that regard. That the princess had ventured into those ruins did align with some of her suspicions, but it still caught her slightly off guard.

"Then I shall take my leave, Baroness. Until next we meet," the man declared as he began moving, his cane-supported stride down the hallway accompanied by one of the attendants.

"Until then, Your Grace," Scarlett said, watching him retreat. "Oh, and you can anticipate an invoice concerning the demon's part that was owed," she called out. "In addition, in case you harbored any concerns, I ensured to meticulously document the potions that were distributed to your retinue as well."

The man's walk paused momentarily, a faint grumble audible, before he resumed his course without glancing back.