

181: The pot and the kettle

The gallery Scarlett was in hummed with murmurs as a gavel rapped against the wooden podium at the center stage. A poised man dressed in a refined suit stood there, overlooking the gathering.

“Final call, ladies and gentlemen. The decision rests upon a precipice, and this is your last chance. Going once, going twice, sold! To the astute bidder with the impressive eye, this precious amphora goes to you for thirty-three hundred solars!”

With a deliberate motion, the auctioneer’s gavel struck the podium once more to signal the end of the bidding, and a row of applause sounded out as a pair of employees ascended the stage to carry off a tall vase with a narrow cylindrical neck and two handles at its mouth.

Scarlett tapped a finger against the armrest beside her as her eyes trailed it for a moment—she imagined Garside might have liked that vase, considering the collection he had in his quarters—before returning to the auctioneer.

She was currently sitting in on one of the auctions carried out by the Golden Gavel. It was the same establishment she had visited when she first arrived in Bridgespell and through which she was auctioning off her Zuverian artifacts. Although there wasn’t anything in particular she wanted to buy here today, she’d had some time over in the afternoon and decided it could be interesting to attend.

It had turned out to be a bit of a disappointment, in her opinion.

Not only was it excruciatingly boring to sit here and wait for them to unveil each piece, but the selections presented didn’t even hold anything that caught her interest. That vase had been the closest it came to something she *might* want, if only as a gift to her butler, but she didn’t even know if he would like it. Besides, three thousand and three hundred solars was a decent sum to just throw away for most normal people.

At least she could take some solace in the fact that the items she had provided and which had been shown until now had fetched decent enough prices. She was already fifteen thousand solars richer, and there were still a lot of her items slated to be auctioned off in the coming weeks.

As the auction continued, Scarlett observed the proceedings half-attentively, making some casual mental notes on the bid prices. Most of her time was spent thinking about other matters besides the auction, though.

As a guest who had contributed several notable pieces, the Golden Gavel had arranged an isolated seat for her, and she appreciated not having people giving her looks all the time. While today’s auction likely didn’t draw an extensive nobility presence as the featured pieces didn’t command astronomical sums, and therefore it was unlikely that many here would recognize her, Scarlett’s presence had a tendency to attract people’s attention with just her general demeanor.

When the auction drew to a close, Scarlett motioned for Fynn, who had been standing behind her for the entire duration, and the two of them took their leave. She hadn't bought anything, so there was no need to bother picking any items up and they could immediately slip out a side exit to evade the main throng of departing attendees as they left the auction house.

When they arrived at their carriage that was waiting for them, Allyssa, Shin, and Rosa were already standing by. The trio had been allowed to spend their time however they wanted this last hour, and judging from the laden pack Shin was carrying, the two Shielders had busied themselves buying supplies and books. Rosa was carrying her kleret, so perhaps the bard had spent the time in a nearby tavern or the like.

They climbed into the carriage as it took them back to the Golden Griffin Inn, where they were staying. Once there and having entered the section that had been arranged as their accommodations, the members of the group split up.

Scarlett had decided that they wouldn't be spending this day exploring any further dungeons, given they had spent the past several days doing exactly that, including the Sunfire Shrine that they had cleared the day before. They had exhausted themselves pretty well in that time, so some extra rest might do them well.

As the others left for their respective lodgings in the inn, Scarlett remained in the foyer as she noticed Rosa lingering. She could tell from the woman's expression that she had something to say.

They looked at each other for a moment, then Scarlett turned away from the bard. "Follow me," she said, exiting the foyer.

Rosa wordlessly trailed behind her as they reached her room, where Scarlett walked over to the table in the corner and settled into one of the two seats, signaling for Rosa to do the same.

A moment of silence hung in the air before Scarlett spoke. "Is there something on your mind?"

Rosa didn't answer for a while after sitting down, the woman's gaze aimed down at the neck of the instrument she had in her lap. Finally, she looked up and met Scarlett's eyes. "So... About me taking those couple of days off to visit an acquaintance of mine. That offer still stands, right?"

Scarlett regarded her for a few seconds. "Are you certain you wish to address that matter now?"

Another moment passed before Rosa answered. "Yeah, I think I am."

"Very well. Then I see no issue with it." Scarlett rested one arm on the table's surface, continuing to watch the bard. She had been waiting for this moment to arrive, so there was no way she would say no at this point. However, there was one thing that concerned her.

"...Do you intend to go by yourself?" she asked.

“That’s the plan, yeah. It’d be a bit ridiculous to bring someone else along just because I’m taking some time off to visit an acquaintance, wouldn’t it?”

Scarlett couldn’t fully suppress the frown that crept onto her face. She discreetly placed her left hand on her lap to shield it from the woman’s view. “I would prefer if you did not venture by yourself to a location you have not visited before, even if it is to see someone you are familiar with. You should take Allyssa and the others with you.”

“And leave you by yourself?” Rosa’s amused laughter echoed across the room. “With your paranoia, I’m surprised you’d even suggest that. I feel like leaving you on your own is just another disaster waiting to happen. Before I know it, I’ll be returning to Bridgespell only to find a pack of dead dragons sprawled in the streets, with you standing over their lifeless corpses like the proud dragon slayer you are. Then you’ll nag at me about how tedious the cleanup is going to be.”

Scarlett chose to overlook the slight jab at her personality. She didn’t want this conversation to derail like her talks with Rosa often did. “In that case, Shin will stay with me. However, you should at the very least bring Fynn and Allyssa.”

A faint, searing pain emerged on the top of her left hand as the seal from her pact with Anguish made its presence known. While it clearly wasn’t entirely governed by intent—otherwise, she wouldn’t even have been able to do this much to begin with—it at least had some sense that she was trying to help Rosa.

As for Anguish herself, the Vile would have seen through Scarlett’s actions ages ago. But she wouldn’t be able to do anything for the time being. At least not directly. Still, it wouldn’t surprise Scarlett if Anguish had done what she could to put Rosa in a mindset where the woman wanted to do this alone.

That wasn’t what Scarlett wanted. The place the bard was going wasn’t safe. Without Scarlett present to ensure things went as they should, it was hard to predict exactly how things would go. It might still work out, but leaving that up to chance left Scarlett uneasy. This wasn’t even a case of her being controlling. It was Rosa’s safety they were talking about.

“It’s better if they stay here,” Rosa said.

Irritation welled up within Scarlett at the woman’s stubbornness, and Anguish’s role in all of this. “Fynn and Allyssa are more than capable of assisting you on your trip. They have also proven themselves trustworthy. Do not allow your own pride and anxieties to cloud your judgement on this matter.”

The room fell silent.

Rosa blinked, staring at her.

Scarlett drew her mouth together. That had not come out quite as she wanted.

“How about this?” Rosa said, giving her a confident gaze. “I’ll check and see if Father Abraham might be interested in a brief countryside jaunt. You’ve mentioned that he’s a trustable enough fellow, and I wouldn’t mind spending an extra day or two talking with him.”

Scarlett paused, her jaw set. She hadn't even been aware that Rosa considered that as an option.

The woman would rather involve a priest she had only met a couple of times than seek assistance from Allyssa and the others? Was she really that scared of revealing her condition to them?

"No, I cannot allow that," Scarlett said.

Raimond might be a priest, but she didn't want him getting involved in this. Sure, it was entirely possible that he could provide valuable help in this situation, and that he wouldn't do anything to Rosa even if he realized she was a potential incarnate, but that wasn't a risk Scarlett was willing to take.

Not to mention all the question marks it would raise from the man when he considered how Scarlett was connected to it all.

Rosa shrugged. "Then it's best if I go on my own, isn't it?"

"On the contrary. I will be asking Fynn to—" Scarlett's words were cut short as the seal on her left hand burned against her skin and something tugged at her from within. She gritted her teeth, trying not to let the pain show, though Rosa's brows had already furrowed in worry.

Internally cursing Anguish, Scarlett wished Rosa could have showcased her usual deference for her opinion this time. She sensed how the pact was actively straining at her being—maybe even her soul, whatever that was—and compelled her to keep quiet.

This sensation reminded her of the time she'd forged that pact with the demon outside Ambercrest and how it had attempted to enforce the deal on her. This time, however, it was more potent and felt more malicious in its intent.

After a moment, she managed to shrug the effect off as the seal on her hand calmed down, but she could tell that it would return in full force if she were to push things further.

Rosa was watching her closely, lingering concern etched on her face, before she finally spoke. "I think it's best for us all if I go alone."

Scarlett locked eyes with the woman, wanting to chide her for her irrationality, but when their gazes met, she noticed the determination in them. It wasn't something she often saw in the bard. Her eyes widened as a realization dawned on her.

Rosa wasn't doing this simply out of a desire to keep her condition hidden from the others. The woman was worried about their safety. She was thinking that having them come along would be dangerous for them, and maybe even for Scarlett.

And she might not be entirely wrong.

Silently, Scarlett observed Rosa, some of the earlier irritation beginning to recede beneath the surface. While she still didn't want the woman going by herself, trying to convince Rosa otherwise at this point would be difficult.

“...Can I take that as a yes?” Rosa asked, cautiously studying her.

Scarlett stayed quiet for a while longer before giving a reluctant nod. “If that is what you wish.”

The two of them sat there for a few minutes, neither speaking. Eventually, Rosa started rising from her seat. “Suppose there’s no point in worrying for nothing and delaying things for longer than necessary. I’ve already packed what I need, so I’ll be heading out immediately. Be back in a day or two.”

Scarlett hesitated before responding. “...Good luck. Ensure that you do not do anything foolish, and prioritize your safety. Remember to bring all the equipment I have given you.”

Rosa’s mouth curved into a grin. “Always.”

As the woman left the room, Scarlett’s eyes remained fixed on the door, deep in thought. Last time she had entrusted a matter to chance and delegated responsibility to others, it hadn’t ended well. It had been her mistake that time, but she wanted to avoid something similar happening again.

Several minutes passed as she sat in contemplation when a soft meow emanated from her right.

She turned her head towards the chair where Rosa had sat before, finding a jet-black cat with clear amethyst eyes lying there. The cat’s tail swayed through the air as it regarded her with an inscrutable gaze.

A fleeting sense of bewilderment brushed Scarlett’s mind, before a certain thought floated up to the forefront. It made her earlier frown return, but then she had an idea.

“Empress,” she began, meeting the cat’s eyes. “Could you convey a message on my behalf?”