

199: Behind the reflection

If there was one aspect of fighting demons that made them a pain to face, more so than any other enemy, it was the fact that they simply refused to give up. Scarlett had been prepared to fight through hordes of demons while navigating Anguish's citadel, yes, but did they really have to be so *tenacious*?

Maybe it was because they knew that their demise merely meant a return trip to the hellish Blaze they hailed from. That, and having a master that likely conjured up unspeakable forms of torture for those who failed for her own amusement probably served as decent motivation.

All that Scarlett knew for sure was that each and every single demon that obstructed her path as she advanced through the citadel refused to yield. As long as they possessed a single mobile appendage on their various fiendish frames, they would continue being a nuisance. They fought on, even when all they had left was a freaking *femur*. She had known demons could be notoriously resilient, but there had to be limits. She never wanted to witness another demon, resembling a cross between a troll and a wretched, disease-ridden dog, dragging itself across the floor, desperately—or perhaps maniacally—trying to strike Fynn with what remained of its charred leg. It was almost pitiable in how cursed it looked. The annoying thing was that even such an attack could pose a threat since a demon's mere touch could carry a corrosive element to it.

She had already lost count of the number of demons she'd had to reduce to literal ashes to get them to stop. She was pretty sure her sense of smell had succumbed to the acrid fumes left behind by all their bodies, not even counting the suffocating miasma that hung in the air in some of the citadel's chambers. Without Fynn's wind magic, she could scarcely imagine how she would have managed.

These were the things that never came through as important when you were just running through a dungeon while looking at your character through a computer screen.

Needless to say, Scarlett was not enjoying their journey through Anguish's citadel. Most of the demons they encountered were manageable when it came to their strength, even when they appeared in swarms of dozens. Scarlett's party of eleven proved a very efficient counter against most of the threats, but it did come at the cost of far more resources than she had anticipated.

Allyssa, for one, was rapidly depleting her stock of potions and alchemical mixtures, having made good use of her various concoctions to keep groups of demons in check. Meanwhile, in addition to Fynn, Scarlett and Raimond had been the main damage dealers, expending mana in the thousands to cast their magic and deal with the large demon numbers. Scarlett's hope of conserving her supply had been dashed early on.

Taking that into consideration, she had to admit that having Raimond and the knights on her side made things considerably easier. She still thought that she could have handled it without their help if necessary, both because she would have been able to wield [Ittar's Genesis] more liberally and because the smaller numbers would have meant they could bypass more of the encounters. The demons, while numerous, were mostly at a level where her pyrokinesis was

more than enough to neutralize them as long as she had the mana, which is what [Ittar's Genesis] would have provided.

Nevertheless, she appreciated the assistance for this part. If she could make sure that neither Raimond nor the knights got in her way later, this would even have been the ideal approach. However, this was assuming Raimond wasn't plotting something with his presence here, and that the Dawnbringers or some other Followers of Ittar faction weren't waiting to rush in and make a mess of things.

By this point, Scarlett and the others had been exploring the citadel for just under an hour. They had just dealt with another wave of demons blocking their path through a corridor that could best be described as belonging to a game that was a fusion between Doom and Castlevania. Following that, they reached a wide chamber that, thankfully, appeared unguarded. No mini-bosses or other mobs materialized out of thin air even as they had scouted the space.

With their group taking this opportunity for a short breather, having regrouped in the chamber's center, Scarlett considered the paths open to them from here.

As with any dungeon that was larger here than in the game, navigating Anguish's labyrinthine base with her foreknowledge proved a bit of a challenge. She knew that generally, up was good and down was bad. There were certain routes less likely to be infested by demons, such as narrow passages and staircases hidden behind grotesque imitations of paintings. Still, the citadel was an architectural mess, devoid of any real rhyme or reason behind why it was constructed the way it was. It seemed content to mimic the general idea of human structures but didn't care much beyond that.

That said, there were ways of expediting their progress, which Scarlett had been on the lookout for. And now, it seemed they had finally struck gold.

Her gaze fixed on a lone opening in the chamber wall, shrouded in inky darkness similar to the citadel's main gate. The opening was encircled by more of those eerie human wall sculptures that dotted the citadel's inside. There were other paths in this chamber, each consisting of simple doors that looked much less ominous. This one practically screamed 'trap'.

And that was exactly what Scarlett was hoping for. Anguish was a Vile, after all. While the demon took a perverse delight in tormenting just about anyone, the arrogance that came with her powerful existence also meant that Anguish occasionally played 'fair' and offered rewards of a sort to those who took risks and survived. Or those who were simply lucky enough to not be killed. At least, that was how it worked in the game, and Scarlett suspected the same held true here.

After everybody had been able to rest for a bit, Scarlett gathered the others around her as she approached the concealed path. The knights regarded it with caution, while her own party members looked at her with expectation.

She met all their eyes. "For now, all of you will remain in this chamber while I venture through this veil."

Their expressions shifted from caution and slight curiosity to surprise, and some of the knights stared at her as though she had lost her mind.

“Is that a wise decision?” Shin asked, studying her closely. He was familiar enough with Scarlett to recognize that she had a reason for saying that, and was probably asking what that reason was.

“It is a safer alternative than all of us entering together,” she replied.

“From your words, one could almost fall under the impression that you know precisely what lies on the other side of that veil,” Raimond said. The priest carried a strange glint in his eyes.

“I have some notion of it, yes.” Scarlett nodded. “I will not go into details now, however. Simply know that none of you should cross that threshold until I return. Understood?”

The man placed a hand on his chin, holding a thoughtful expression. “Clear as the pools of Rellaria, most likely.”

“Yeah, but...” Allyssa seemed uncomfortable with the prospect, but that was expected. Fynn and Shin remained silent, and though the knights appeared the most apprehensive, none of them had challenged Scarlett’s commands since they entered this place.

“Good. Then we will reunite soon,” she said, promptly stepping through the dark shroud. It felt a bit like walking into an actual shadow, though how *that* felt she couldn’t really describe. A moment later, she found herself in a simple corridor.

Compared to the other spaces in the citadel, this place was almost tame in its general decor. The walls and ceiling seemed crafted from literal obsidian, illuminated by crimson lights emanating from wall sconces. The entire right wall comprised a massive, excessively polished silver surface, functioning as a mirror reflecting the corridor with a ghostly, otherworldly light.

It was precisely the space Scarlett had been hoping it was.

She observed her own reflection in the mirror, considering it for a few seconds. Her long, dark-red hair was slightly messy, she realized, and her expedition attire, while practical, gave her the air of an adventurer rather than a noblewoman. Though the steely and imperious gaze present in her amber eyes probably dispelled much of that illusion.

Bringing out a comb from her [Pouch of Holding], she began reordering her hair as she moved deeper into the corridor. At the far end was another opening, concealed by yet another dark shroud. After a few seconds, however, she stopped as she heard a noise behind her. Spinning around, she found Raimond had just stepped through the veil she came from. The blond priest was adjusting his white robes with both hands as he turned his head, surveying the corridor in its entirety and examining the mirror to his right.

“I distinctly recall instructing you to remain behind,” Scarlett said.

“Ahem.” Raimond cleared his throat and shifted his attention to her, offering a somewhat wry smile. “Yes, and I happen to recall responding to that instruction in the rather positive

affirmative as well. I had no intention of defying your wishes in that regard, had it not been for that dreadful scream we heard shortly after you disappeared.” He gestured at her with one hand. “However, it would appear we were incorrect in assuming that the scream originated from you, thankfully.”

Scarlett arched a brow. “So you followed me because you believed I was in danger.” This was just what she had come to expect from Anguish. The Vile liked to play her tricks. “Did the same apply to the others?”

Raimond extended his arm in an almost apologetic gesture. “I could hardly restrain them after what we heard. You have some devoted retainer in your employ, Baroness. However, it appears that despite my swift entrance after Fynn and Allyssa, I am the sole person who has joined you on this side. That leaves me somewhat concerned about the whereabouts of the others.”

Scarlett’s eyes lingered on the priest for a moment before she turned around and resumed her course down the corridor. “They are indeed loyal, yes. And I have faith that they trust in my judgement, so there is no need to fret over their safety.”

She could hear Raimond’s steps behind her as she began moving to catch up.

“Well, I may not fully understand the basis for your confidence,” Raimond said, “but who am I to doubt your word? For now, it appears as if we must navigate this situation on our own, however. Although it might seem somewhat inappropriate given the circumstances, I must admit to harboring some contentment about that, as there is a matter I’ve been eager to discuss with you.”

“Of course there is,” Scarlett replied, stealing a quick glance at their reflections in the mirrored wall to her right. Raimond’s robes flowed gracefully around his feet as he walked with a grace that was wholly unnecessary in the current setting.

“I imagine you might already have an idea of the topic I want to address,” he continued.

Scarlett nodded. “I do,” she said, reaching one hand towards her [Pouch of Holding] at her waist. Raimond’s reflection looked at the mirror and the man appeared to admire himself for a moment, waving cheerfully. *That* was definitely inappropriate given where they were, but she supposed that *was* something Raimond could have done.

“Then, let me begin by saying—”

With a mental command, Scarlett activated the ability of her [Garments of Form], a mist forming around her as she teleported behind Raimond. Unlike what the man’s reflection might have one believe, the priest himself had been in the midst of drawing a knife and thrusting it towards the spot where Scarlett’s neck had just been. There was a brief moment of surprise to his movements when she simply disappeared.

Feeling the warmth of [Ittar’s Genesis] as he held it in her left hand, Scarlett allowed its power to course through her as she raised her other hand and conjured an array of Aqua Mines around Raimond. They exploded in a burst of steam, knocking the priest to the ground.

But she didn't stop there.

Unrelenting, she drew upon the mana stored within [Ittar's Genesis] and summoned a blazing bonfire that consumed Raimond entirely, its flames burning with the ferocity of a forge. Scarlett watched the display with an emotionless expression as Raimond's features transformed within the flames, becoming sharper and more jagged, revealing his true form. The demon howled and tried to stand in order to lunge at her, even while enduring her fiery onslaught, but she conjured even more Aqua Mines and detonated them to keep the demon at bay.

In just a matter of seconds, the demon's physical form was reduced to a crisp, and its essence was banished to the infernal realm it called home.

Had that been the real Raimond, Scarlett suspected he would have lasted a lot longer.

As she allowed her flames to dissipate, the scent of burnt flesh filled the air, and silence settled around her. She turned her attention back to the mirror, which still displayed Raimond's uninjured and innocent appearance, standing beside her own reflection as it gazed back at her.

It was smiling.

Meeting its eyes, Scarlett raised her hand once more, pulling even more mana from the artifact in her left hand. A swarm of Aqua Mines appeared all over the corridor, aimed at the silver mirror. As they detonated all at once, hundreds of cracks formed in the metal, warping it. After a brief moment, the entire mirror shattered into countless glimmering fragments that faded into nothingness. On the other side was a corridor identical to the one Scarlett was in, with her reflection still standing there, alone now, and its smile even wider.

"You certainly are a tricky one to catch off guard," her replica spoke, mimicking Scarlett's voice and mannerisms with uncanny precision, although it didn't quite match the unsettling smile. "What if he had been the real one? Poor priest, he would have been slain by his ally in cold blood without any inkling as to why."

"Did you truly think that would be enough to fool me, Anguish?" Scarlett asked, her voice cold.

Anguish, wearing Scarlett's appearance, shrugged, her smile fading and being replaced with the same impassive expression Scarlett often wore. "I believed it to be convincing enough, yes."

"As I have already stated, my people are loyal, and they know when to trust my judgement. Even had they heard my scream, they would not have come."

Fynn, in particular, would probably have stopped anyone who tried after she had given the order she did.

Anguish clicked her tongue in a manner that felt all too familiar to Scarlett. "I suppose that is something I should have considered. I have always practiced diligence in ensuring that my

pets are kept on a tight leash, and from what I have observed, you are much my kindred spirit in that regard. One does not have to look any further than Rosa for an example.”

“Miss Hale is not a ‘pet’.”

“Oh, but she very much is. Do you not have her at your beck and call, ready to carry out your every command? You have trained her well. Even better than I managed, despite all the years I spent with the girl.”

“I suggest you consider your next words very closely,” Scarlett said.

“And why is that?” Anguish asked, giving her a knowing look. “That is how you secretly consider her, is it not? A convenient tool, one who does your bidding while conveniently serving as a decent replacement for carrying healing potions everywhere. I can tell as much.”

A frown found its way onto Scarlett’s face. “Your attempts at provoking me are serving to do nothing but strength my resolve to climb this place and deal with you personally.”

At that, Anguish burst into a sudden, echoing laughter that felt utterly incongruous with Scarlett’s appearance. Then the demon’s expression changed, taking on an alluring yet dangerous air. “I’m merely calling it as I see it, dear,” she said, her tone markedly different. “I have been watching you and darling Rosalina since you first met, witnessing every exchange, every stolen glance, and all those intriguing little interactions of yours. I understand the nature of your relationship better than Rosa herself. While it may appear outwardly as a relationship of mutual respect between an aloof noble and her whimsical bard, we both know that’s *far* from the truth. Oh, sweet Rosa may think she knows you, but the poor girl is blissfully unaware of how much she’s being led by the nose by you, isn’t she?”

Scarlett’s brow furrowed deeper with her frown. “That is enough of that.”

Anguish stared at her for a moment, seemingly surprised. Then she let out another warped laugh. “Could it be? Are you genuinely unaware of what I’m talking about, or are you continuing the charade even in front of me? Considering you are the one who orchestrated this entire situation without telling Rosalina even the teensiest bit about it, it would be truly *rich* if it were the former.”

“There was little choice in the matter,” Scarlett said. “Arranging for Miss Hale’s meeting with Malachi would not have been possible had I made her aware of the circumstances. Have you perhaps already forgotten the pact we had between us? You did not appear to have much care for it when you sent your toy count to pester me in Windgrove, so it would not surprise me to hear that your memory is failing you after all this time. Unfortunate for you, I would say. I have heard that there have been rumors circulating to start investigations about his involvement with certain groups in Ambercrest. It would seem you are at risk of losing another pawn.”

Scarlett had received an update from Beldon a few days earlier, informing her that his men had found suspicious activity related to Count Soames in the city. They had also long since begun planting ideas in the right places.

“‘Miss Hale’, you say, even after all this time.” Anguish remarked, showing no concern about what Scarlett had said related to the count. “So formal. I feel sorry for our dear Rosa. But I digress. You should know that what I am referring to isn’t *just* how you manipulated Rosa like your puppet here in Bridgespell. From the moment you met her, you’ve subtly ‘guided’ her, influencing her with vague words and unspoken promises of a help you knew Rosalina dearest wouldn’t even dare hope for, exploiting the vulnerabilities left in her broken, pitiable heart. Even I had to marvel at the precision with which you molded her to suit your purposes. It was truly something to behold, and yet another reminder why humans should never be underestimated when it comes to their capability for exploiting one another.”

Scarlett went silent, absorbing Anguish’s words as she looked at the demon who wore her face. It was...disconcerting that she couldn’t entirely disagree with the Vile’s statement. She had, in many ways, manipulated Rosa based on her knowledge of the woman from the game. While she did not personally think she had done a particularly good job of it most of the time, from an outsider’s perspective, it might be a different story.

What made her the most hesitant about it all was considering whether she should feel remorse for her actions or not. After all, she had a justifiable enough reason, didn’t she? If anything, she had done the only thing she could. The alternative would have been to leave Rosa to her fate, potentially damning the woman and unleashing a Vile into the world without resistance.

Still... She *should* feel at least a twinge of guilt, shouldn’t she? The question was, did she? It was genuinely hard to tell, as with most relationships she’d formed as Scarlett in this world. The line between where she *cared* for something and where it was simply useful to her felt blurry. Rosa should be in the former category, but why were things still complicated?

“You know,” Anguish continued. “When I originally agreed to that awfully cute pact of non-interference of yours, I thought you were nothing more than a mildly interesting mortal who might amuse me for a while as I continued preparing my incarnate. But watching you through Rosalina’s eyes, I have grown increasingly impressed by the breadth of knowledge within your possession, and the ruthlessness with which you ensure that your desires are met. I’ll even admit to some disappointment that I could not see things through your eyes so that I could witness *everything* you’ve done, even the sinister little secrets you hide away from Rosa.” A dark, menacing smirk emerged on her face. “But what perhaps intrigued me the most was the source of all your knowledge.”

“Having you stuck in my head does not sound like an appealing prospect, so I am glad that was not the case,” Scarlett said and raised her hand. “Not that it matters any longer. I tire of this conversation. I had intended to ask you questions regarding the current happenings in the Blazes, but I believe I will save that for later, after I have reached the top, and you are at my full mercy.”

Just as she was about to conjure forth her fire to deal with the copy standing before her, Anguish uttered a single sentence.

“You are an Anomalous One, aren’t you?”

Scarlett stopped, fixing her gaze on the demon. “...What do you mean by that?”

Anguish's smirk grew. "Oh, you're asking me? But *you're* the omniscient one, aren't you? Always traipsing around, flaunting your superiority over other mortals. It is only a matter of course that you should know what I'm referring to."

Scarlett narrowed her eyes. "You are testing my patience."

"I do so try." The Vile chuckled. Then a few seconds of silence passed as Anguish regarded Scarlett. "...It is impressive, truly, how subtle it is. Even I, after months of watching, have only begun to discern hints of the fate that swirls around you, rewriting itself according to your whims. It's as if the very laws of reality have chosen to work differently for you. Only once before have I witnessed an example of the same that has been so *profound*, and it was quite different."

"You are referring to the fate-defiance of the Hallowed Cabal," Scarlett said.

"No, I am speaking of something beyond what mere mortals like them could achieve. I am speaking about that which the Cabal's devouts cling to in their desperate dream of 'a perfect world'." Anguish seemed to find that amusing. "That entity is an entirely different breed, and like you, it adheres to different rules than the rest of us. An anomaly that even those high-handed gods had to fear. In comparison, its followers are insignificant ants, and their attempts to imitate its abilities are laughable at best. That is why it makes one wonder how *you* are accomplishing something similar." Her gaze bore into Scarlett. "Perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps you're *not* just a mere mortal."

Those words felt more like a threat than anything else the Vile had said during this conversation, and Scarlett almost instinctively prepared for a confrontation even though Anguish was in no condition to attack her.

"It makes me even *more* eager to make you serve me," the demon continued, twisting her features more and more as her smile simply grew. It was unsettling to see the face that Scarlett had become used to as her own in this world looking back at her in that way.

"Those words hold little weight when coming from one currently trapped within one of us 'mere mortals'."

"Oh, we'll see for how long I remain trapped. I'm certainly not lacking for entertainment while I am, though. My precious Rosalina and I are finally enjoying this opportunity to chat. We're having a splendid time, I assure you. I'll be sure to convey your greetings~"

With that, the skin of the clone before Scarlett began to melt away, and Anguish's cursed laughter echoed through the space.

"I trust that we'll meet again soon," were the Vile's parting words, and Scarlett clenched her teeth, fighting to contain the anger that had built up inside her.

Her gaze shifted to the far end of the replica corridor, where a single spiral staircase was, a shortcut leading upward.

She was so going to give that demon hell.