

## 161: Disconcerting news

The continued discussions with Dean Gowin went relatively smoothly, all things considered. Scarlett and he went over what to do with the deceased dragon lying in her courtyard, as well as the remaining items from Abelard's mansion that hadn't yet been sold off. The Dean agreed to have Elystead Tower acquire a significant portion of it at a premium price. Furthermore, the archwizard showed keen interest in getting his hands on the keys to Abelard's mansion that Scarlett had used to activate the portal in Lord Withersworth's cellar. Since she no longer needed them, she had agreed to sell them in exchange for some additional favors from him.

For one, she had taken this chance to inquire more about magic in general and gain insight into what he knew about pyrokinesis and hydrokinesis that could be of help to her. Although the man hadn't witnessed her abilities firsthand, he had apparently heard of Scarlett's rather unorthodox use of magic from Adalicia and had some tips for her. Additionally, he had promised to immediately help with the dragon's disposal and to make arrangements for the Loci.

At some point in their discussions, Empress had seemingly gotten bored with it all and left. Scarlett didn't really think the cat needed her supervision, and she doubted Empress would cause any damage, so she didn't pay it too much thought.

Upon concluding their dealings, Dean Godwin proceeded to follow Scarlett to the mansion's courtyard. Several staff members were occupied with cleaning up what they could of the dragon, which primarily included removing the blood that was seeping into the stonework and storing it in temporary magic containers brought from the city by other members of the staff.

There, Scarlett had observed as the man used his magic to cut the dragon into smaller, more manageable pieces—he was kind enough to warn those faint of heart to leave before he started, because it had *not* been a pleasant sight—that he then stored away with some sort of spatial spells. From there, he would use his connections to ensure the dragon's materials were properly harvested, and in accordance with their agreement, he would return them to Scarlett before it was decided what exactly would go to Elystead Tower.

With the courtyard cleared from the giant carcass, the staff was left with an even more significant cleanup task. Scarlett had instructed the head servant, Marlon, to hire whatever extra help they needed and inform them they would be getting a bonus, and after that, she had taken Godwin to briefly introduce him to Evelyne before guiding him to the back of the estate, where the Loci was located.

One of his first requests had been to analyze and inspect the artifact now that their discussions were over, and since he would also be helping her enhance it, she left him there like that. She had offered to assign some servants to assist him, or perhaps find an experienced mage in Freybrook who could lend a hand, but the Dean had declined her offer. Apparently, he preferred working alone.

Following that, Scarlett had decided to seek out Fynn, and she had just arrived outside his quarters in the eastern wing of the mansion. Raising her hand, she prepared to knock on the door, although she anticipated him to already be aware of her presence.

As expected, the door swung open after a single touch of her knuckles against the wood, revealing a head adorned with disheveled bright-white hair and a pair of clear yellow eyes peering through the opening. Fynn met her gaze with a searching look, tilting his head to the side. "You don't usually come to my room."

"There was something I wished to briefly inquire with you about," she said, peering over his shoulder and into the room. "May I enter?"

He opened the door further and stepped aside to allow her inside. Scarlett crossed the threshold into the room. The space was decently large, but it didn't possess any notable features aside from the furniture that had been provided to Fynn when he was assigned the room. As far as she was aware, he didn't have any hobbies or particular interests other than training and doing his job.

Her eyes landed on the center of the room, where a collection of candles had been arranged in a circle, facing one of the open windows. Only three of the candles were lit.

"Have you been performing more of your meditation?" she asked, turning to face Fynn. She still wasn't sure what this 'meditation' of his actually signified.

The young man closed the door behind her and walked over to the candles, and the remaining candles flickered out from a gust of wind. "Yes, I've been trying to improve my control through the ancestors' guidance. They won't allow me to proceed to the next step unless I can do it completely without their help."

"The next step?" Scarlett knitted her brow. "Are you perhaps referring to gaining access to the second section of the Howling Gale's Haunt?"

He paused, as if considering it for a moment. "Maybe? They didn't say. They just don't like me using their power too much."

She regarded him curiously. "I was not aware that you had been relying on them and borrowing their power to that extent."

Fynn gave her a strange look, like she'd said something odd. "I haven't. They don't have any power to give."

"Did you not say a moment ago that you were using their power?"

He nodded. "I am."

"...But they do not have any power to give?"

"There is a difference in their power and my power, isn't there?"

Scarlett brought a hand to the bridge of her nose as she released a small sigh. “Fynn, I hope you realize that this is precisely why Allyssa finds you difficult to understand at times.” Lowering her hand, she studied him for a few seconds. “If I were to posit a guess, I presume that when you say you are using your ancestors’ powers, you are in actuality referring to utilizing the powers they once *possessed*, relying on their knowledge of how to do so. But in reality, it is your power you are drawing upon to achieve it?”

He nodded once again, as if that much was obvious. “Yes. I thought you already knew that.”

She shook her head. “I am not as familiar with the workings of your ancestors as you are. If I were, I would not have asked these questions.”

A look of realization appeared on the young man’s face. “Ah, um...sorry?”

Scarlett held up a hand. “There is no need to apologize. However, I suppose you cannot simply ask your ancestors whether the ‘next step’ is related to the Howling Gale’s Haunt and how close you are to reaching it?”

She wasn’t certain they would be able to tackle the next section of that place as they were now, but she could always make additional preparations if needed. It wouldn’t surprise her if someone like Godwin was willing to accompany her on a trip like that.

“I don’t think they’ll answer. They don’t like you very much,” Fynn replied.

Scarlett blinked, and a scowl involuntarily appeared on her face. “...I see.”

She really disliked those ancestors. Based on what she’d heard of them, they were assholes, every single one of them.

Now that she thought about it, it occurred to her that they probably wouldn’t even allow Fynn to enter the Howling Gale’s Haunt if they believed she had unfairly stacked the deck in his favor. Bringing an archwizard along might be out of the question.

That was frustrating.

“I’ll let you know if they mention anything about it,” Fynn said.

Scarlett pressed her lips together. “...Very well.”

He eyed her for a moment. “Was there something else you wanted to ask about other than that?”

“Yes, there was.” She looked around the room. “I had a meeting earlier with one of the empire’s most prominent wizards, discussing potential collaborations between myself and Elystead Tower. You may have sensed his presence. He is currently examining the Loci in the back garden.”

“I did, yes. He has an heirloom from my people.”

“Indeed, he does. It would appear he was familiar with your tribe from before, so perhaps you have even encountered him yourself.”

Fynn grew a thoughtful look. “I don’t recognize him, but he has an old scent. The elders might have known him. They’re the only ones who could have given away one of our heirlooms.”

Scarlett studied him. “You do not mind that he has it?”

The young man shook his head. “It’s not mine.”

“But it once belonged to your tribe.”

“It doesn’t anymore.”

“...I suppose you are right.” Scarlett crossed her arms over her chest. “Anyhow, that is not what I wanted to inquire about. I wanted to know if you detected another presence during my meeting with the wizard. A woman we have encountered twice before: Mistress.”

Fynn nodded. “I did. She has an unpleasant scent. You told me she wasn’t bad, though.”

“That is not entirely true, but she is not our enemy, at the very least. However, that does not mean you should not be cautious around her,” Scarlett said. “What I want to know is this: during your time working under me, have you ever sensed a presence similar to hers near us?”

The other Viles must have learned about Rosa’s existence somehow, and she wanted to make sure she wasn’t the reason behind it. Fynn *should* have been able to detect any ordinary demon that might have kept tabs on them, and those were the ones most likely to manifest in the Material Realm while remaining hidden.

The white-haired young man seemed to think about it for a few seconds, seemingly uncertain of how to answer. “...I have,” he eventually said.

Scarlett paused. “When?”

“Sometimes... I feel like I can smell something similar from Rosa.”

Her eyes widened.

He had...sensed Anguish’s presence in the woman? She didn’t think he *could* do that. It had never come up in the game or their conversations. Besides, a Vile would be better at concealing itself than regular demons.

“...Why have you not informed me of this before?” she asked, her tone growing serious.

He met her gaze with a look that radiated sincerity. “I thought you knew. You and her are the same. You always seem to be lying in some way, and the way you interact with her makes it seem like you know what’s wrong. When the scent is strongest, she always seeks you out, and it disappears.”

Scarlett frowned. There was a lot to unpack in those words.

First of all, why did Fynn believe she acted differently than Rosa in that regard? *She* didn't think there was much of a difference in her interactions with Rosa compared to the others, if you disregarded the woman's distinct personality. And this was Fynn they were talking about. He was the last person she would have expected to notice any subtleties in her behaviour.

Secondly, there was the bit about lying. "What do you mean when you say that we are always lying?" she asked.

Fynn gave her a long look. "You don't know?"

She sighed. It felt like he was saying that a lot today. "It depends on what you mean by that."

"...There is a sense of falsehood in almost everything you say. Both you and Rosa," he said deliberately, as if he was searching for the right words. "At first, it confused me. It smelled like you were lying when you weren't, but at the same time, it was different from when you actually lied. It took me a while to realize it was more like you were pretending. I didn't understand that either, but it made more sense than before. I thought you were doing it on purpose."

Scarlett stared at him. Was that how she came across whenever she spoke in the original Scarlett's manner? Like she was acting? Pretending?

And he thought Rosa was doing the same?

She pressed a hand to her forehead, frowning. Considering how Fynn's ability worked, she could somewhat understand why he might get confused when faced with her, who was basically a forced mix of two separate personalities. But Rosa shouldn't be like that.

The woman was keeping a lot of things hidden, yes, but it had to be an exaggeration to say that it seemed like she was acting all the time, right? Scarlett had seen enough moments—both in the game and in this world—where the woman had been entirely genuine with her emotions. Rosa's cheerful persona might serve as a coping mechanism of sorts, but that didn't mean it was entirely fabricated.

Nevertheless, it was to the level where Fynn could tell something was wrong, at least. That meant Rosa *had* to be keeping more things bottled up than even Scarlett had previously suspected.

She refocused her attention on Fynn. "You said she seeks me out when the presence is more noticeable? When does this happen?"

"Usually during the evenings and nights," the young man replied. His brows furrowed. "She's strange at those times. I've followed her, and she won't notice anything unless you get really close. It's like she's hiding her fear."

Scarlett's frown deepened even further.

Rosa often visited her office in the evenings and nights. Scarlett had never quite understood why that had become a thing in the first place, though she had assumed it was partly because the bard simply enjoyed her company. However, there had always been hints of something more, though delving deeper into the matter and asking Rosa had never been an option.

But if Rosa *did* seek her out when the signs of possession grew stronger, and it subsided in Scarlett's presence....

Could there be side-effects of the possessions that she didn't know about? She couldn't recall the Rosa from the game ever mentioning anything about it, but the woman was notoriously reticent about her inner demons...

And it was true that Scarlett had always felt like there was more to Rosa's actions and behaviour at times than she could tell. She wouldn't put it past Anguish to inflict as much torment as possible on her potential incarnate before being able to seize control completely.

Without even noticing, a familiar, cold rage had wormed its way up inside Scarlett as she considered the implications of this news.

Say what you will about Rosa's personality, but Rosa was one of *Scarlett's* people. To discover that the bard might have endured even greater stress and suffering than she had originally believed stirred something deep within Scarlett, and it reminded her far too much of when she had lost control with Gaven or when Garside had been injured before her. Before that mess, she had never realized she could be this protective of those close to her.

She turned her gaze towards Fynn.

"Do not bring any of this up to the others," she said. "Is that clear?"

He nodded in affirmation. "Yes."

"Good. Then I will thank you for bringing this to my attention. I will handle it accordingly. If there is something else abnormal that you notice in the future, even if you believe I may already be aware, do not hesitate to inform me."

"Anything?"

"I would ask that you use a measure of personal judgement, but if you are uncertain, tell me."

"Okay."

Scarlett sent one last look around the room, then she turned around and prepared to leave. "Be on guard for any other presences like Mistress or the one inside Rosa in the future as well. If one appears, and it is neither of the two, you are to immediately inform me and be prepared to defend or apprehend it."

"Mm. I understand."

"Good. Then I will leave you to your meditation for now."

Scarlett departed from Fynn's chambers without any further words as she began walking through the mansion's hallways, her head filled with thoughts of demons and Viles. Where were things going to go from here?