

## 211: Napping dialogues

Having slipped away from Crowcairn unnoticed under Raimond's invisibility spell, Scarlett and Rosa had managed to make their way to the encampment. Upon arrival, they'd found most of Sir Home's forces had left to search the village after their victory over the Tribe members they had fought. Only the injured, some officers, and their exhausted mages remained.

While seeking a suitable place to rest, Scarlett realized that her carriage was still at Anguish's citadel. Thankfully, Sir Home and his men had returned not long after, apparently having been asked by the Dawnbringers to delay their investigation of Crowcairn for the time being. It hadn't taken too much work to convince the man to lend her a couple of able-bodied soldiers to retrieve both the carriage and the horses her group had originally taken to reach the citadel.

From there, even though Scarlett had wanted nothing more than to find the nearest empty spot and fall down on the ground, she'd left Rosa in one of the soldiers' tents and spoken with Sir Home about what had happened, providing him with some info about the events in the citadel while being vague on some of the details for now. She would wait to fully explain things until she had finished her talk with Raimond.

Allyssa and Shin, accompanied by the knights who had ventured into the citadel with them, also met up with Scarlett in the camp. Fynn joined them eventually as well, after apparently having concluded things on Raimond's end of things. The interstitial space had closed down, like Scarlett expected, and the deacon himself had informed Fynn to return to Scarlett while he attended to some other matter.

As for Rosa, the woman had promptly fallen asleep the moment Scarlett had found an unoccupied tent for her. Not that Scarlett could blame her. She had also taken the opportunity to get some rest after finishing her talks with Sir Home and while waiting for Sir Home's people to fetch the carriage. Once it arrived, she had immediately relocated to its cabin—which was both more private and better insulated against the weather—along with the others. Fynn had carried Rosa, placing the sleeping bard in the cabin's corner, while the others made themselves as comfortable as they could with blankets and pillows retrieved from the trunk.

Sir Home's people were still moving about the camp, preparing for potential attacks and worried about the citadel that was still looming on the horizon. Scarlett understood their concern, but she wasn't going to let that affect her at this point. She'd even informed Sir Home that the biggest threat had likely passed, but it made sense for him to continue being on edge. That was his prerogative. Hers was to finally get some rest.

After settling into the carriage, more than tired from all the recent events, Scarlett had drifted in and out of sleep as what remained of the night passed. It was harder than she had hoped to actually get some proper rest, both because a carriage was far from her preferred sleeping accommodations and because there was a lot on her mind, but some rest was better than nothing.

It was after the first light of morning began to break, with the sun rising slowly in the east, that she stirred once more, still weary but in marginally better condition than before. Across from her, she found Allyssa's eyes meet hers in a doe-eyed gaze.

Glancing to the side, Scarlett found that Shin was also wide awake, engrossed in a book he was holding in his hands. Why he would choose reading over resting right now was a mystery. At least Allyssa looked like she had been sleeping until not that long ago.

Beside Scarlett, Fynn sat with closed eyes, presumably immersed in his meditation. Next to him, Rosa remained fast asleep.

"Fynn," Scarlett spoke quietly. "Is there anyone within hearing distance?"

The white-haired youth's eyes shot open, and he furrowed his brows. "No," he eventually replied.

"Good." Scarlett looked out the carriage window. She had intentionally positioned the carriage at the back of the encampment, facing away from Crowcairn and the citadel. No one would have reason to come here. "I suppose we should have a conversation," she said, returning her attention to Allyssa and nodding towards Shin. "Have you shared anything with him yet?"

"No, I haven't." Allyssa shook her head, her blonde locks swaying with the motion. "We *did* have a short talk that touched on some of it, but I waited with anything important. Don't worry, I got him to give his word that he'll keep quiet even after you tell him."

"Is that true?" Scarlett asked.

Shin glanced up from his book, meeting her eyes before giving a deliberate nod. "I'm convinced it's not something I *should* keep quiet about, but if Allyssa already agreed to it, so will I."

Scarlett looked at Fynn, who made no comment, indicating he wasn't lying.

"I assume whatever we're going to discuss is related to Rosa's sudden return and the Vile responsible for all of this," Shin said, directing a slightly critical look at Allyssa.

The girl's expression stiffened, and she averted her gaze.

Scarlett moved the blanket covering her lap to the space between her and Fynn while producing a flask of water from her [Pouch of Holding]. "You are correct. I will be frank. Miss Hale was being possessed by that Vile."

Shin paused, his eyebrows rising as he shifted his focus to Scarlett, then to Rosa in the corner, covered by blankets.

"Miss Hale's temporary absence was to rid herself of the Vile's influence," Scarlett continued, taking a sip from the flask. "In the process of doing so, the Vile attempted to use her to manifest within the Material Realm, leading to the citadel's appearance. I have been aware of the Vile's presence inside Miss Hale since I first employed her and had taken into

consideration that something of this nature would occur, which is why I had already made several precautions to ensure no harm befell those uninvolved. Much of our recent activities here in the Bridgespell area have been connected to that.”

Shin stared at Scarlett for several seconds. “You’re saying you had plans for dealing with a *Vile*?”

“Yes.”

“...And that citadel appearing was part of those plans?”

“Yes.”

The young man turned to Allyssa. “And you *agreed* to stay silent about this?”

“Yeah, maybe I did,” Allyssa said, though it was just slightly too obvious that she was trying to avoid eye contact with him now.

Shin sighed, closing his book as he brought a hand up to rub the bridge of his nose. “Allyssa, we’re *Shielders*. It goes against Guild code to do things that threaten civilians. Anything that involves a *Vile appearing* definitely falls into that category. If your dad or anyone in the Guild hears about this, you know what’ll happen, right?”

“Well, if it’s dad I don’t think we would have much of a problem.” Allyssa shrugged.

“Leandro’s another thing, but we just have to make sure no one else hears about it. You’ll stay quiet, and so will I, so that shouldn’t be too hard.”

“Allyssa...”

“We’re supposed to help those in *need*.” She finally met Shin’s gaze. “And Rosa was clearly in need. I know that you know that Scarlett knows what she’s doing, and I trust her. I was there when she confronted that *Anguish* thing, and yeah, sure, it was terrifying, chaotic, and I’m still confused about how it ended, but I don’t think Scarlett would risk innocent lives without having some way to stop it.”

Shin’s gaze stayed on Allyssa for a bit longer, the disapproving expression remaining on his face, though Scarlett got the feeling that he was doing it more for show than anything else. Eventually, he shifted his attention to Scarlett, scrutinizing her for a few seconds. “...The ridiculousness of what you did aside, this isn’t too different from what I would expect from you.”

“Hey!” Allyssa exclaimed. “What’s with the difference in treatment? You’re not gonna grill her as well?”

“She’s still our employer, and I know that you don’t actually *want* me to grill her,” Shin replied, now keeping his focus entirely on Scarlett. “So, the citadel appearing and our ascent of it was part of your plan. I assume you had some method of purging the Vile from Rosa, but you didn’t want your involvement in it to get out, which is why you stopped Father Abraham and the others from joining you at the end. How does that connect to our abrupt exit from the citadel and materialising outside Crowcairn?”

“That’s something I’d like to know as well,” Allyssa said. “What happened with you and Rosa on that throne?”

Scarlett observed the pair for a few moments before answering. “As you both know, Crowcairn was one of the Tribe of Sin’s enclaves, meaning its residents were covert agents who had infiltrated the empire to gather information and carry out actions furthering their cause.”

Allyssa’s expression turned uncomfortable, while Shin looked serious. “Yes.”

“They were also complicit in summoning the Abyssal Vilewurm, the demon we vanquished with Sir Home and his people,” Scarlett said. “It, in turn, was the perpetrator behind an assassination attempt on Duke Valentino and his son, which is why he asked for my aid in locating it. Knowing this, it should come as no surprise that Crowcairn and its residents would be considered nothing more than reprehensible criminals from his perspective. However, despite their allegiance and their involvement in the assassination attempt of a high noble, many of the villagers themselves were non-combatants, including the children. Therefore, when the Vile revealed to Miss Hale that Crowcairn and most of the people there faced annihilation by the duke’s forces, she opted to use the Vile’s power to aid their escape. Up until that point, events had proceeded within my expectations, but this was where that changed. I presume our exit from the citadel was Miss Hale’s way of ensuring no one was left behind while she helped the villagers flee, but I cannot be entirely certain.”

“T-That’s...” Allyssa looked over at Rosa.

“...What happened in the village, then?” Shin asked.

“The details are perhaps best left for another time when Miss Hale is awake, but if I were to summarize, other than those who chose to resist the duke’s forces directly, most of the villagers succeeded in fleeing to their homeland with her aid,” Scarlett answered. “And while it proved far more complicated than I had wished for, the Vile’s manifestation was halted, and the situation has deescalated.”

She considered both of the Shielders. “Any questions?”

There was a brief silence, and then Allyssa spoke. “How long has she had that thing inside her?” she asked.

“For a long time,” Scarlett replied.

The girl’s lips pressed into a thin line. “So the reason it’s always felt like Rosa was hiding something, the reason she sometimes had that sad look in her eyes... It was because of this?”

“It was, yes. Do you fault her for that?”

“What?” Allyssa’s eyes widened, then she shook her head. “If I had something like that inside me, I’m not sure I would have told anyone either.”

“And what of using the power of a Vile to save members of the Tribe of Sin?”

The girl fell silent. "...Honestly, as long as things still worked out in the end, then that doesn't really matter to me. I felt uneasy about the whole village thing to begin with, and I don't see Rosa as the type to just let people die because of which group they're working with. Especially not if some of those villagers were kids and, you know, not *actual* Tribe members."

"And what if Miss Hale saving them was not purely out of altruism?" Scarlett asked.

Allyssa blinked. "What do you mean?"

"...Never mind," Scarlett said, dismissing a thought that had crossed her mind regarding something Rosa had mentioned. "As for whether they should be considered actual members of the Tribe of Sin, I am not certain that is a matter that is up to you to decide. But disregarding that, can I presume your lack of comment means you have no objection, Thornton?"

She turned her attention to Shin, whose brow was furrowed in contemplation.

"I'm familiar enough with the circumstances to say much, which I suppose is a yes," he answered.

There was a brief silence after that, as Scarlett considered whether there was anything else she had to tell them right now.

"What would it have been like?" Allyssa suddenly asked, her gaze fixed on Rosa. "Having a Vile inside you, I mean. I can't even imagine it."

"I am certain it would be horrifying at times," Scarlett replied. "However, if you desire specifics, you will need to persuade Miss Hale to share her experiences herself."

Allyssa continued to observe the bard for a moment longer before eventually turning around, peering out the window. "You mentioned the situation has calmed down. I assume that means the danger has passed. You're not asking us to go back *there*, after all."

Scarlett followed the Shielder's gaze, her eyes falling upon Anguish's citadel looming on the horizon. "...Indeed, it appears matters have been resolved on that end. Miss Hale's condition, while not ideal, seems stable."

At least if she were to trust the woman's words and believe that Malachi wouldn't have left before finishing things. It was a bit of a disappointment, given Scarlett had neither received any system notification from the system yet—when *were* those things going to show up?—nor any loot since they were transported away from the boss room where it might have been. She even had to give up [Ittar's Genesis], which hurt.

In the grand scheme of things, though, she had likely gained considerably more than she lost. The primary objective behind this entire endeavour had been achieved, after all. Rosa *was* still alive, and the woman now possessed the [Astralbane's Nexus Heartstone]. If Rosa could master its power, it would have been more than worthwhile for Scarlett.

Still, though...

She considered the imposing obsidian structure that stretched towards the sky.

It *was* strange that the citadel remained. She could think of several possible explanations for it, some bad and some good, but she had no way of determining which was true at the moment. It would certainly be intriguing if the citadel somehow became a permanent fixture here from now on. That would undoubtedly garner a lot of attention among certain factions within the empire.

Perhaps Scarlett could get her hands on whatever information the Followers of Ittar and other groups gleaned upon investigating the place. It could prove useful to see what perspective others would have on this.

The conversation between Scarlett and the two Shielders didn't continue after that point, and they all more or less returned to what they had been doing before. Shin resumed his reading, while Allyssa studied Rosa for a while longer before snuggling up under a blanket of herself and going back to sleep. Scarlett was planning to get more rest later, but for the time being, she simply sat there and pondered everything that had happened and what lay ahead.

Given the current circumstances, and the arrival of the Dawnbringers—Sir Home had confirmed that the duke was sending reinforcements as well—Scarlett had no intention of leaving until all parties were convinced that the situation had stabilised. It might look suspicious if she departed too soon. There would probably also be more people who were curious about what she encountered inside the citadel.

She wasn't sure how much time had passed when there was a sudden knock on the carriage door. Peering through the window, she saw no one, but the cabin door soon opened by itself. A spectral veil of shifting colors came into view, fading and revealing Raimond as he gracefully climbed inside.

“Greetings, my good friends. I am heartened to see that you all seem relatively hale, considering things.” Dressed in his resplendent deacon robes, he offered a warm smile to them all before looking at Allyssa. “Mind if I take a seat?”

The girl stared at him for a moment, briefly glancing down at his clothes, then shifted to sit closer to Shin.

“My thanks,” Raimond said as he settled down opposite Scarlett. Despite his demeanor, weariness was etched on his features. “Please excuse my most haggard of appearances. The situation has become rather involved, and I've had to brief some of my colleagues on the latest developments to avoid them considering sending someone to commit clericide—a word I just came up with and whose meaning I suspect is self-evident—on my humble self. It was not the most delightful of experiences.”

“Your colleagues...?” Allyssa eyed him. “Are you talking about those people we saw earlier in golden armor?”

Raimond chuckled. “No, unfortunately not. Or perhaps fortunately. Time will tell.” Scarlett noticed his gaze momentarily shift to the slumbering Rosa, then he cleared his throat while adjusting his sleeves. “Now, you'll have to pardon my forwardness, but there is a matter I

must discuss with Baroness Hartford that involves topics of utmost secrecy among the Followers. Would you mind if I ensured some privacy between the good lady and myself?"

Allyssa gave him a quizzical look, while Shin simply nodded, and Fynn remained in his own world.

"Excellent!" Raimond reached into his robes, producing a diminutive object. It resembled a triangular pyramid, with inscriptions running along its grey surface. A faint golden glow traveled from the man's hand into the object, and suddenly, all ambient noise around Scarlett disappeared. "There we go, that should do it," he declared.

Scarlett arched a brow. She should look into getting a similar trinket for herself. Beldon probably had an idea where she could acquire one.

Shelving that thought for now, she directed her attention back to Raimond.

The earlier warmth in his smile still lingered as he met her eyes, but it now held a subtle undercurrent of something else. "Well then, Baroness. Shall we pick up where we left off?"