

219: Visit in paradise

Scarlett drew glances from the mansion's servants as she trailed behind Empress through the halls, the cat pausing for some pats and attention along the way. The servants appeared mostly bewildered by Scarlett's presence as Empress insisted on their grooming, but none seemed able to resist the cat.

One girl, presumably a new hire since Scarlett didn't recognize her, *did* look particularly uncomfortable under Scarlett's gaze, but Empress was nothing if not unwavering in her demand for others to service her.

It ended up taking longer than necessary to navigate through the mansion, but Scarlett refrained from voicing any complaints as they finally exited through the back part of the estate. Using her pyrokinesis to stave off the chill, she followed Empress as they made their way to the hedge garden where the Loci was held.

A blanket of thin white covered most of the estate, extending towards the training grounds and stopping at the stone walls. The garden, at first glance, seemed no different, its outer edges adorned with snow-covered paths and bare hedges.

However, as Scarlett followed Empress deeper into the garden, signs of life began to emerge. The hedges sprouted green leaves, and the snow yielded to well-maintained gravel. Colorful, peculiar flowers lined the paths as the air warmed, allowing Scarlett to ease off her pyrokinesis.

Empress proudly led the way to the garden's center, revealing a spacious area with a small gazebo at one end and a stone pedestal at its heart. Atop that pedestal was the Loci, a large, uncut emerald surrounded by vegetation.

Seated on a bench nearby was a seemingly ordinary man in a top hat, with a dark cape draped over his shoulders and a stylish cane beside him.

The Gentleman was gazing out over the garden with a small smile, undisturbed by Scarlett and Empress' arrival. Scarlett paused for a moment as Empress continued forward, leaping onto the bench beside the man and settling down to lick her paw.

"It has been some time since I last bore witness to another house spirit in this realm," The Gentleman remarked, his eyes fixed on the Loci and the array of flowers that grew at the base of its pedestal. "They often require very particular conditions to flourish. Although I probably should not be, I am gladdened to see that you have made good use of the gift my dear companion left for you."

Scarlett glanced at the Loci. From it, she could sense a slight recognition. Or perhaps not recognition, but acceptance. While the artifact lacked true consciousness, it undeniably responded to The Gentleman's presence.

"We harnessed the ashenwraith dragon's heart with the assistance of Dean Warley Godwin from the Elystead Tower to provide it a power source," Scarlett said as she began approaching the man.

“I did find the craftsmanship familiar. Dean Godwin is a talented wizard indeed.”

“That he is.”

The Gentleman finally turned his gaze towards Scarlett, his smile growing slightly and turning polite. “It would seem you have had quite eventful days, Baroness.”

Scarlett met his eyes, nodding slightly. “I have.”

“A most exceptional and unexpected chain of events, if I may say so myself.”

“I will not argue with that description.” She considered him for a moment. “...I recall seeking your help when Miss Hale left for Crowcairn alone.”

“You did, yes.” The Gentleman rested his hand on the crown of the cane beside him. “And I had considered accepting your request, given that some of my earlier actions caused inconvenience to you and your retainer. However, upon closer inspection, it seemed the path forward had already been chosen, rendering my interference unnecessary and wholly unwanted.”

Scarlett frowned. “Chosen? By whom?”

She had sought his help out of concern that something would happen to Rosa before they could manifest the citadel and deal with Anguish. Until now, though, she hadn't actually been certain if he had done anything.

The man seemed to ponder her question for a moment before shifting his gaze across the garden, once again appreciating the colorful flora that had sprung up because of the Loci's influence. “All who walk this land are victims of the strands of fate that govern this world, but that does not mean that our choices are meaningless. There is meaning in the smallest of actions and the largest of decisions. Who ‘chooses’ what is one of many never-ending questions that permeates all that we are, but I personally find it the least important one.”

Scarlett's frown deepened. He was avoiding giving a direct answer, then. She followed his gaze, surveying their surroundings briefly. Finally, she returned her attention to him. “What is the reason for your visit today?”

“To apologize,” The Gentleman said, offering yet another, fainter, smile. “While I may not have expressly promised you my aid, I feel that I still let your expectations down to some extent.”

Beside him, Empress emitted a long meow.

The man glanced at the cat. “My dear companion here also nagged at me for what she perceived as an offense at one of her temporary attendants. She has grown rather fond of you, Baroness.”

Scarlett looked at the cat, which gazed up at her with clear amethyst eyes. “...Thank you, Empress.”

The cat meowed in response. Then she rose, stretching her body with her paws in front of her before leaping off the bench. She looked at Scarlett and then back to the bench, emitting another meow.

“I believe she is offering you her seat,” The Gentleman said.

Scarlett raised a brow, eyeing the cat. She stepped forward, taking a seat where the cat had been lying.

Empress appeared content, turning around and striding towards the pedestal at the garden’s center. Scarlett kept her eyes on the cat as Empress stopped in front of the pedestal, sitting down and gazing up at the Loci as if awaiting something.

At the back of Scarlett’s mind, through her connection to the Loci, she sensed some movement from the artifact, as if it was responding to an unseen force.

Suddenly, the cat was perched on top of the pedestal, jet-black fur pressing against the Loci.

Scarlett blinked. The transition had been imperceptible. She’d sensed the Loci drawing substantial power from the dragon’s heart embedded at the bottom of the pedestal, yet that was all. Empress had been on the ground before the pedestal one moment and atop it the next, as though the spaces had momentarily merged.

Scarlett hadn’t realized the Loci had reached a stage where it could manipulate space to this extent. Giving it the dragon’s heart had accelerated its development, but she had expected it would take far longer for it to acclimate to the new power source and perform feats like this. Admittedly, the action seemed to have taken a lot out of the Loci, but it was impressive nonetheless.

As for how Empress knew how to utilize this ability, somehow that didn’t surprise Scarlett. After becoming acquainted with the cat, that only felt fitting.

“It is always fascinating to witness the interactions and adaptations the residents of the Wandering Realm experience in this realm,” The Gentleman said beside Scarlett. “I look forward to seeing how it will further develop. The core of an adolescent dragon is undeniably powerful and could prove beneficial in many ways. However, even such a potent item has its inherent limits, though I suspect you won’t let that hinder your future efforts.”

“You are not wrong,” Scarlett replied, watching Empress, who was seemingly at ease beside the Loci. The Loci, in turn, exuded a sense of what was perhaps best described as ‘tense anxiousness’ through the bond.

It was a slightly absurd sight, seeing a cat essentially using a large gemstone as if it was a pillow, but so was the thought of that very same cat being capable of slaying dragons.

A momentary silence settled upon them, with Scarlett expecting The Gentleman to continue speaking. When he remained quiet, she took the initiative herself.

“Earlier,” she began, eyes remaining on Empress. “you spoke as if aware of my experiences in Crowcairn. Can I assume you are informed of everything that transpired?”

She didn't actually *know* how The Gentleman acquired information, since it was never explored in the game. It just was. Scarlett didn't think he was omniscient, but she also doubted he got all of his intel from spying on people.

"I would never dare to claim to know everything about anything, Baroness," the man replied. "But I do have a general grasp of the events, as well as the circumstances culminating in them. This marks the first instance of a Vile being barred from their own Blaze and having such a significant portion of their Authority taken from them. By a 'mortal', no less. The Blazes are destined to be in a state of disarray for some time, it would appear."

"Do you have any insights into what comes next?" Scarlett asked, turning to him.

"I can venture some calculated conjectures."

"Such as?"

The Gentleman bestowed only a small, polite smile. "Likely not far from the suppositions you might entertain, Baroness."

Scarlett furrowed her brow. He *definitely* had some clue about what she was, *and* what she knew.

Once more, she turned her attention away from him to take in the garden's vibrant hues. Beyond the hedges, the tops of the bare trees outside the estate were visible, yet within the garden, it felt like the height of summer.

"During the events in Bridgespell, I had the opportunity to converse with Anguish herself on multiple occasions," she revealed.

A light chuckle left the man next to her. "Rare are the times a mortal could make that claim in the past few centuries, I dare say."

"She told me about an entity called the 'Anomalous One'," Scarlett continued.

There was a brief silence. "...The 'Anomalous One', you say? A curious topic for a Vile to discuss."

"Are you familiar with it?"

Through the corner of her eye, Scarlett watched The Gentleman's profile as he took a few seconds to answer. "I am, yes."

"Then are you aware that I am also an Anomalous One?"

At that, the man turned to her, his eyebrows slightly raised. Scarlett turned to meet his gaze.

Making such a statement when she still didn't fully understand his motivations was risky, but she found it unlikely that he *wouldn't* already be aware. If Anguish could tell that she was an Anomalous One, then so could he. Scarlett was more likely to get a direct answer by not beating around the bush.

He regarded her quietly for a while before speaking. "That does indeed align with some of my observations."

"And what observations are you referring to specifically?"

"Oh, I can assure you that the list is rather extensive."

"But of course, you have no intention of sharing it," Scarlett said.

Another polite smile was her response.

She wanted to shake her head. It felt like she could understand what it must have been like for Rosa when they had their talk. She wouldn't be getting any detailed answers from this man, but perhaps she could at least do some further probing.

"Then do you at least have an inkling about what the Anomalous One is?" she asked.

"That is a question that has been pondered by many minds throughout history," The Gentleman replied. "However, it remains much a mystery to most all."

Scarlett considered him for a moment. "Have you encountered it yourself?"

"You are as aware of its sealed nature as I am, Baroness. No one can have a face-to-face meeting with it."

"The Hallowed Cabal and Tribe of Sin routinely tap into its powers, however."

"Granted, but it is not the same as a direct encounter. There are still devouts who channel divine magics of gods long gone, yet those gods remain just as deceased. What the Cabal and Tribe harness is the lingering imprint of the Anomalous One's existence in this world, not the entity itself. Thainnith's seal is quite thorough."

Scarlett narrowed her eyes at him. "Are you certain?"

He studied her in return for a few seconds. "Do you have any reason to believe otherwise?"

She stayed silent as she mulled over his question. Somehow, she got the sense that his visit here today wasn't *only* to offer his apologies.

The two of them considered each other for a while before she finally answered. "I do not."

It was probably best to stay quiet about her suspected run-in with the Anomalous One and its apparent interference with the system.

The Gentleman continued scrutinizing her for a few seconds longer. "I suppose I have no choice but to take your word for it," he eventually said. Then he picked up his cane and rose from the bench. "Now, I believe I have allayed my companions' concerns about my manners enough, and thus, I'll take my leave. If you wish, you can extend my most sincere felicitations to Miss Hale for her newfound freedom and peace of mind. A woman as admirable as her deserves that much."

He beckoned for Empress as he began moving, and the cat raised her head to look at him before leisurely leaping down from the pedestal and walking up next to him. Both turned to look back at Scarlett.

“You should probably not expect our paths to cross again anytime soon, Baroness,” The Gentleman said as he tipped his hat. “I will be quite occupied from hereon, and I suspect much the same will hold true for you in the near future. Nevertheless, I wish you the best of luck in your upcoming endeavours, and in Beld Thylelion.”

Empress meowed.

“Ah, yes, and Empress wanted me to inform you that she finds it rather comfortable to have a warm place to relax at this time of year, so you *can* expect to see her here on occasion,” the man added. “I would have attempted to dissuade her from bothering you too much as I have before, but I am afraid that is a lost cause on this occasion.”

“You are always most welcome in my home, Empress,” Scarlett said, looking at the cat.

Empress seemed quite satisfied with that reply as the cat turned around with her tail held high, moving to leave the garden.

The Gentleman tapped his cane on the ground as he made to follow. “Till next we see, Baroness.”

“Until then,” Scarlett replied.

She watched as the pair soon disappeared among the hedges, leaving her alone. At the back of her mind, the Loci almost felt relieved.

She guessed she couldn't fault it.