

## 256: Don't quit the grind

Scarlett and Rosa walked side by side across the wide forest clearing, following a worn dirt path that led to the quaint village at the clearing's edge. Rosa chirpily cranked away at the klert Scarlett had given her, humming an unfamiliar tune.

As they neared the low stone wall surrounding Freymeadow, Rosa's melody trailed off, and she glanced at the buildings ahead. "I'll admit, with the mess in the empire right now, I didn't really think we'd be back here anytime soon," she remarked casually.

"It would be unwise not to take advantage of the benefits this place provides, even in circumstances like these," Scarlett replied as they passed the wall into the village and were greeted by the wary yet curious looks of its residents.

"Can't argue with that, I guess. I know for sure you're not here to relax, at least. You couldn't sell me that lie even if you had a dragon's silver tongue and a wizard's charm."

Scarlett glanced sideways at her. "I fail to see what relevance a dragon's tongue holds here. They are not known for their eloquence."

At least not in this world.

The bard just shrugged with a playful smile on her lips. "Sometimes things just sound good, alright? Cut me some slack. I don't pick apart all the ludicrous things you say."

"Are you comparing yourself to me?"

"...No matter how I answer that, it's a trap, isn't it?"

"Hmph, perhaps." Scarlett faced forward as they continued through the village. "I wonder why it is that you cannot exercise the same caution in speech when we are around others."

"I'll have you know that I'm plenty careful around other people," Rosa said. "I just can't hold back from praising all your myriad virtues at times."

"I am sure," Scarlett responded dryly.

Their conversation died down as Rosa began waving her cheerful hellos to some of the villagers and children they passed, while Scarlett's thoughts returned to the current situation in Freybrook.

Although she had told Rosa that it would be wasteful not to visit Freymeadow while they could, it was true that finding time for it could prove hard from now on. The round trip alone was at least half a day, and just that morning, her mansion had been flooded with correspondence on a wide range of matters.

Some were official notices related to her barony and status as a baroness, which she assumed most nobles were receiving at the moment. Others were inquiries from acquaintances of Lady Withersworth, who somehow seemed to have already learned of the woman's involvement

with Scarlett's affairs. Additionally, there were plenty of people and groups who had started vying for her attention after hearing about the large supply of goods and resources that the Hartford barony had prepared, either unaware or indifferent that these were intended for relief efforts across the whole empire.

While most of these matters could be ignored, and Scarlett had personally incinerated countless letters after skimming them, others represented genuine opportunities that warranted consideration. Lady Withersworth had assured her she would help, but some issues would still require Scarlett's direct involvement.

Scarlett had also been engaged in numerous discussions with Beldon lately, where they strategised how to tackle the current string of attacks against the empire. Scarlett technically wasn't part of Mirage or its operations, but at some point, an unspoken sort of agreement had formed between her and Beldon that they would cooperate on this matter. Because of this, she'd been focusing a lot on how to leverage her knowledge and Beldon's resources to counter the Cabal's goal while carefully avoiding anything that would count as a direct confrontation.

At the moment, their plans centered on preparing for more attacks, investigating suspicious activity among the empire's aristocracy, and identifying likely targets. Beldon and Mirage as a whole stood to gain significant influence and resources from the aid he could offer to the empire's various factions on these issues, so Scarlett was also making sure to consider how *she* could harness that to her advantage.

Soon, she and Rosa reached the square at the heart of Freymeadow, the summer sun shining down on them brightly. On the far side of the area, sheltered from the heat, Arlene lounged on her porch, reading a book as usual.

As they approached, the raven-haired woman looked up, small wrinkles showing beneath her pale green eyes as they narrowed slightly.

"You're back," she said, closing her book.

"Indeed we are," Scarlett replied.

"Did you miss us?" Rosa asked.

"Actually, I was rather enjoying the calm," Arlene said, her gaze staying on Scarlett, particularly on her left hand.

Scarlett glanced down, her attention falling on the [Orrery of Dissonant Convergence] around her wrist. Was the woman studying that?

Before she could confirm, Arlene stood and stepped off the porch as a volley of threatening fire arrows appeared just behind her.

"Let's get straight to the lesson, then," she said, and Scarlett sighed inwardly as Rosa abandoned her by quickly stepping away with a far-too-amused grin.

Straight to business it was, then.



Later that day, Scarlett and Arlene sat on the porch, looking out across the square as they took an extended break after several grueling training sessions. At the square's center, Rosa sat on the edge of the wooden platform there, her legs swinging as she played her klert. Overhead, wisps of black and violet danced in sync to the faint music like enchanted phantoms.

Gathered before her were the village kids, who watched with rapt attention. They gasped in awe or squealed in surprise whenever the wisps drifted down close to them, prompting laughter from their peers.

"That retainer of yours is more dedicated than appearances would have one think," Arlene remarked breezily while focusing on the book in her lap.

Scarlett glanced at her before turning back to Rosa entertaining the kids.

"...True," she replied.

Even though it seemed like Rosa was simply having fun, she was also honing her skills in her own way. The bard had become pretty adept at wielding the Soulstone's power for harmless displays like this. However, Scarlett knew that Rosa was still hesitant to use it at other times. The woman also hadn't yet had the opportunity to truly let loose and see what her charms could do against an actual enemy.

"Perhaps she picked it up from her employer," Arlene continued with a light chuckle. "It still surprises me that you didn't leave after my first lesson. Stubbornness can be valuable, but you should be careful not to let it lead you astray."

"I will do my best," Scarlett said.

"That applies to Miss Hale as well."

"That will be harder for me to influence."

"Oh, I don't know about that. Though the two of you often seem to bicker, I suspect there isn't much she wouldn't do if you asked her."

Scarlett's gaze lingered on Rosa, who wore a wide smile as one of the children fell back when a wisp shot past them.

"...It is true that Miss Hale places significant trust in me. I believe she thinks she has much to make up for, both in her actions and as a person."

“Certainly, I can understand that.” Arlene nodded slowly. “Regret and self-doubt can be powerful motivators.”

Scarlett turned to study the older woman for a moment. She supposed Arlene would know that better than most.

The atmosphere shifted to a quieter tone as Arlene seemed to refocus on her book, its pages just barely out of view for Scarlett.

Scarlett continued watching the woman for a while longer. Soon, she raised her hand, eyes dropping to the Orrery on her wrist.

Earlier, she had tried to gauge the artifact’s reaction to Arlene and was surprised to find that it responded almost as intensely as with Rosa. At first, this had made her a bit concerned, but on reflection, it seemed reasonable, given how much she had interacted with Arlene and altered things from the game. Though trapped in this never-ending loop, the behaviour of the Arlene in front of her was very different from the one Scarlett knew in the game.

This did make her wonder if the woman’s final fate could also be changed.

She was in deep thought when Arlene suddenly looked up, meeting Scarlett’s gaze directly. “You’ve been studying me a lot today, I’ve noticed. Is there something you want to say?”

Scarlett hesitated before responding as Arlene’s eyes briefly flicked down to her left hand, narrowing at the Orrery.

For a moment, Scarlett paused. She’d been wondering whether the woman would notice the Orrery by herself or not. Did this mean that she had?

“Is that a new ring, perhaps?” Arlene asked.

Scarlett blinked, her attention shifting from the Orrery to the [Hartford Garnet Ring] on her middle finger. Was that what caught the woman’s attention?

She was silent for a few seconds. “...It is, yes. A family heirloom passed down through the Hartford family for generations.”

“Is that so?” Arlene nodded thoughtfully.

“Unfortunately, I do not know how to use or activate it,” Scarlett said. She had experimented with it back in Freybrook but without much success. After eyeing Arlene for a moment, she asked, “Do you perhaps have any idea?”

Arlene continued studying the ring, maintaining a neutral expression. “I’m no wizard, and far from an expert on artifice like this, but it seems to be enchanted with some sort of pyromantic element. Rather fitting for you, don’t you think? As for its use, it’s not uncommon for noble families to have artifacts that only certain members can activate. They usually require a passphrase or something similar.”

“A passphrase? I see. Then do you know how I could discover it?”

Arlene shook her head with a wry smile. “How could I know that? It would ruin the point, no? If there is a passphrase, you will have to ask whoever created the ring or the people who they passed it down to.” She looked up at Scarlett, regarding her wordlessly for a while. “Did the previous holder never share it with you?”

“...They did not.”

Even if they had, Scarlett wouldn't have remembered it.

Arlene's gaze remained on her, though Scarlett couldn't tell what the woman was thinking.

“Are there no records or family members you could ask?” Arlene eventually asked.

Scarlett's lips pressed together slightly. “...It is possible that my sister might know.”

“Then why not ask her?”

“I am not certain that is an option. Our relationship is...complex.”

“You don't think she'd help?”

Scarlett clenched her fists. “I believe she likely would. The issue is not whether she would help but whether *I* can bring myself to ask.”

Arlene arched an eyebrow, giving her a long, almost admonishing look. “Didn't I just warn you about your stubbornness?”

“It is not by choice that I am like this,” Scarlett replied, the words difficult to voice.

Arlene's forehead pulled together, clearly not fully satisfied with that answer. After a period of silence, however, she sighed and relaxed her expression. “Look at me, acting as if I'm an authority simply because I have taught you a thing or two. I never had a good relationship with my sister either. It didn't reach the point where I loathed the very idea of asking for her help, but perhaps it might have felt that way to her.”

From what Scarlett read in Arlene's sister's journal, she knew that Arlene had been strongly disliked by her sister when they were young. But she didn't get the sense that Arlene's sister *hated* her the same way the original Scarlett did Evelyne.

Arlene turned to look across the square, brushing a stray lock of black hair from her cheek. “But perhaps it might have felt that way to her,” she added wistfully.

Scarlett observed her quietly.

“...Do you resent your sister?” she found herself asking.

A flicker of surprise crossed Arlene's face as she looked at Scarlett. “...I don't, no. We have had our share of conflicts—some grave—so I can't say I like her, but I have never truly resented her.”

“Why not?”

Arlene took a moment to respond. “...Because she is family, I suppose.”

“And what if she did not feel the same?”

“Oh, she most definitely did not.” A self-derisive laugh left the woman. “That makes me the fool here, I suppose. But I never let that stand in my way. In a sense, I always pitied that part of her.”

Scarlett kept studying Arlene for several moments. Could that be similar to how Evelyne felt?

“Do you want your sister to hate you?” Arlene asked, a curious look in her eyes.

Scarlett considered the question. “...It would complicate things if she died.”

“I would think so, but that’s hardly an answer, is it?”

Scarlett frowned. “Then I do not know.”

A slight smirk appeared on Arlene’s lips. “The simple answer would have been ‘no’.”

“You did not ask me just so that I would lie.”

“I didn’t ask so you wouldn’t lie either,” Arlene said, tapping the book on her lap thoughtfully while observing Scarlett. “You seem like someone who struggles to sympathise with others. Is that right?”

“You are not wrong,” Scarlett replied slowly, trying to figure out what the woman was getting at.

“Do you know why?”

“...It is simply how I am.”

“And why is that?”

“Are you asking that because you expect a definitive answer?”

Arlene shook her head. “I’m asking out of curiosity, perhaps because you remind me of my own sister. I know that you can be self-aware, so why do you think you are the way you are? What events in your past do you think contributed to it?”

Scarlett’s frown deepened. As Scarlett, she couldn’t answer because she didn’t *know* her past. As Amy, she couldn’t answer because she wasn’t even sure how much of her *current* self was Amy and how much was Scarlett.

Arlene showed a gentle smile. “You can consider this the idle musings of a nosy teacher, but I suggest not worrying about these things until you can answer those questions.”

“And what if they cannot be answered?” Scarlett asked sharply.

The woman’s smile grew. “Then you create the answers. As my student, I’m confident you can do that much.”