

227: Home visits

“Soooo,” Rosa said after Scarlett had disappeared in a blinding flash of light, turning to Dean Godwin. “Come here often?”

The man’s lips curved into a subtle smile as the honest-to-gods archmage flicked back his cape and clasped his hands behind his back. “I find myself here from time to time, it would appear.”

“Yeah, I get that. Once Scarlett’s got her fangs in you, it’s hard to make your escape. Last time I tried, she battled through a swarm of demons just to tell me how stupid I am.”

Godwin raised a brow. “That sounds like an intriguing story.”

“Oh, for sure. I’ll have to compose a ballad about it someday, when it’s not liable to get me burnt at the stake for housing one of said demons inside my head.”

Rosa scanned their surroundings briefly, just to make doubly sure Scarlett wasn’t lurking nearby simply to scold her for her words.

After she was sufficiently convinced that wasn’t the case—she was *pretty* sure the woman hadn’t mastered invisibility yet—Rosa returned her attention to the Dean, motioning towards the mansion. “Shall we? I’m curious what you’ll be able to find with that fancy magic of yours.”

“Lead the way,” the man replied, stepping aside.

Rosa chuckled. She hadn’t actually had too many chances to interact with the old wizard during his previous stay at the mansion, but she’d gotten to know him well enough to understand that he had some appreciation for good humor. Scarlett had said he could be ‘eccentric’, but that’s just the way Rosa preferred it.

If you asked her, all wizards should go around wearing pointed hats while waxing poetic at dragons. The world would be far more entertaining if they did.

Picking up her klert, Rosa and Godwin crossed the courtyard and entered the mansion’s foyer. Inside, Rosa quickly shed her nice fur coat, draping it over a nearby chair—the people here always kindly returned her things to her room whenever she ‘forgot’ them—before looking around.

“Are you seeking something, Miss Hale?” The Dean asked, adjusting his black gloves.

“Waiting, more like,” she answered. She raised her hand, counting down on her fingers. “Three, two, one—”

Silence followed.

Rosa cleared her throat not-at-all embarrassingly. “Aand...one—”

A gust of wind swirled through the room as Fynn burst in from one of the connecting hallways, his hair disheveled, and stopped in front of them.

“You’re a bit slow today, Fynn,” Rosa remarked, tsking. “I can’t give you more than a seven for that. If we’d had a dragon on our hands, our dear baroness would already have been whisked away in its claws precisely six seconds ago. Looks like we’ll need to go back to square one with your training. Expect many early mornings.”

“Where’s Scarlett?” the white-haired youth asked, his expression focused as he disregarded Rosa’s teasing.

Building up his humor was still a work in progress. But she was confident she’d get him there one day.

“Scarlett decided to go on a little jaunt to Darkshore,” Rosa said.

Fynn frowned. “By herself?”

Rosa nodded. “By herself.”

He didn’t exactly look *ecstatic* about this news, but since his expressions usually ranged from “did you just throw a rock at me?” to “what’s a ‘swinger’?”, it could be challenging to fully gauge his reactions at times.

Fynn turned his attention to Dean Godwin. “Did you help her leave?”

“A pleasant day to you too, young Grehaldrael. And indeed, at the Baroness’ request, I aided her in her travels. However, the spell I cast allows her to return here at will, so your concern for your master is unnecessary.”

Fynn held the wizard’s gaze for a moment before responding with a simple “Alright”, then turned and left the way he came.

“It’s always intriguing to witness how similar those of the Grehaldrael tribe are,” Godwin mused, watching as the young man departed. “Perhaps it is the natural result of their innate ability to detect deceit. Quite fascinating.”

“Oh, right. You’d visited his tribe, hadn’t you?” Rosa asked. “So, they really were all like that, then?”

“To an extent. One of their elders once said to me, ‘Words are like gusts — too many, and the message is scattered’.”

Rosa furrowed her brows. “That’s a bit too philosophical for our Fynn.”

“That elder was nearly a century his senior.”

“Huh. Well, I guess everybody gets a bit poetic when death comes knocking.” She had experienced that type of introspection herself more times than she could count. “From what I’ve seen, Fynn’s siblings aren’t too different from him, at least.”

“He has siblings?”

Rosa looked at Godwin, noting a hint of surprise on his face. “Sure does. Four of them. They’re like little mini-Fynns, hair color and all. It’s been a while since I last saw them, though.”

“I see.” The man wore a thoughtful expression. “I’m pleased to learn that more of Grehalyr’s lineage has endured.”

Rosa studied him for a moment, contemplating asking a bit more about Fynn’s tribe, before eventually deciding against it. If she wanted to know, it’d be more appropriate to ask Fynn directly. She’d hesitated to broach the topic in the past, feeling she didn’t have much right given her own reluctance to divulge anything about herself, but she doubted he’d mind answering.

Steps sounded out behind them. Rosa turned to see Harriet, the young servant woman, descending the second-floor staircase to the foyer with a broom in hand. The woman could be a bit inattentive, so she didn’t seem to notice Rosa until reaching the bottom step.

“Oh, Miss Rosa!” Harriet exclaimed, then paused, her eyes widening as her gaze landed on the wizened wizard next to Rosa. “M-Master Godwin. It’s an honor to have you here again. Welcome back.” She curtsied awkwardly with her broom.

Rosa couldn’t help but smile at the somewhat cute sight. Apparently, the woman had been an admirer of some of his reputed ‘adventures’ since young, so she had been more than taken aback during his first visit.

“Harriet, was it?” Godwin greeted warmly. “It’s good to see you again. Your stain-removal remedy proved invaluable for cleaning my robes. My daughter found it exceptionally useful, and it even appears effective against some magical residues. I must thank you for it once again.”

A blush appeared on Harriet’s face. “O-Oh, it was nothing, really. I’m just surprised that your daughter would find such a simple trick useful.”

The Dean chuckled. “I am afraid I am at fault for that. Since her youth, she has insisted on cleaning my robes herself, and they often get stained on my travels. I did once try enchanting a device to perform such chores for her, but she didn’t quite take to it as I had hoped.”

“Maybe she enjoys having the opportunity to do something personally for you, Master Godwin.”

“Perhaps. With time, however, I have come to believe that she simply relishes the chance to scold me for my carelessness,” Godwin said with a resigned smile. “A father will always remain a soft target for his daughter’s critiques.”

Harriet nodded like a sage. “Absolutely. My father wouldn’t dream of contradicting me, and I would definitely make him rue the day he does.”

Rosa laughed. "I always had the impression you ran things at your house, Harriet, but to think you were such a little tyrant. Have you been taking lessons from our lady?"

The young woman's face flushed. "I don't know what you mean, Miss Rosa."

"I'm sure you don't." Rosa smiled. "By the way, have you seen Garside? Scarlett tasked us with finding him so that he could arrange a room for the Dean here."

"Master Garside is likely in the storeroom. He's been organizing all those items Lady Hartford brought back this time."

"Thanks, Harriet. You're a dear, as always."

The servant laughed. "Always with the compliments." She glanced at the chair where Rosa had left her coat. "I see you've 'misplaced' another of your coats, Miss Rosa. Shall I bring it to your room for you?"

"If you insist."

"Then consider it done!" Harriet cheerfully walked over and picked up the coat, then prepared to leave the foyer. "Enjoy your stay, Master Godwin. If there is anything, you can simply ask me or any other of the staff and we'll provide our service." Waving her broom with one hand while carrying the coat in the other, she departed the room.

Watching her exit, Godwin turned to Rosa with an amused expression. "Though I have not visited much, it seems this place is always lively. Is this the norm here?"

"Oh, without a doubt," Rosa said. "This is just a typical day for us. We haven't quite topped the excitement that came with finding a dead dragon on our doorstep yet, but just you wait. It's only a matter of time."

"Do I sense a hint of anticipation in your voice?"

"What else?" Rosa grinned. "I could compose hundreds of verses about the things that happen in just a week here. Give it a decade or two and I'll be the most renowned bard on this continent. It's inevitable, really."

"I look forward to hearing these future songs of yours," the Dean replied, glancing around a bit. "I believe Astrey's daughter also resides here, if I'm not mistaken. Where might she be at the moment?"

"I assume you're talking about Allyssa. So, you're familiar with her father, then? It's starting to feel like I'm the only one here whose family you *don't* already have a connection to."

"I have no ties to Baroness Hartford's family either, though I had heard of her father," the man said. "But I would not quite say that Arnaud Astrey and I are familiar with each other. Our paths have simply crossed on occasion."

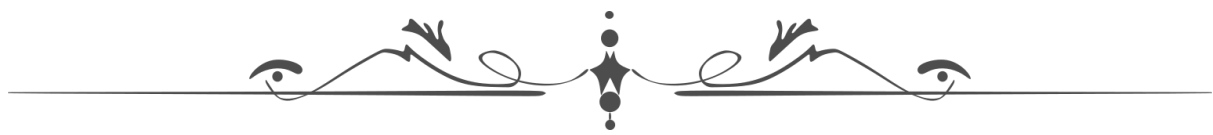
Rosa shrugged. "Well, the young'uns are busy in their little laboratory. Allyssa's been engrossed in her alchemy experiments these last couple of days, and Shin is bravely testing

the limits of his commitment as a friend and test subject. I doubt we'll see any sign of them before evening."

"Alchemy, you say?" Godwin stroked the white beard on his chin. "I had observed that the girl showed a particular aptitude in that field when I was here last."

"That she does." Rosa leaned closer to the man. "Although, just between you and me, her potions leave a lot to be desired in terms of taste."

"Consider my lips sealed," he assured her with a smile. Then he faced away from her, scanning the room. "Now, shall we continue with the purpose of my visit?"



"Take a seat, if you will," the old wizard told Rosa, gesturing toward the armchair at the center of the room, his preparations complete.

"Don't mind if I do," Rosa replied as she walked over and settled into the chair, her gaze sweeping across the room.

It was impressive how fast the man worked.

After delivering Scarlett's request to Garside, the butler had escorted them to an unused chamber in the east wing. There, Dean Godwin had quickly started readying the room while Rosa waited patiently in the hallway.

Now that she was seeing the results of his work, she wondered if the fellow hadn't been a master painter in his previous life. Every single one of the walls was adorned with glowing runes, drawn in faint fluorescent ink, and in each corner floated triangular devices, their light trails interconnecting in a mesmerizing dance that held Rosa's attention for a few seconds. At the same time, the room seemed encapsulated in a translucent curtain of energy, dulling Rosa's senses of the outside world.

"You've pulled out all the stops, I see," she remarked.

"Hardly. This is but the basic necessity to attempt something of this nature. However, I believe it will suffice for the time being."

Rosa simply shrugged her shoulders. "You're the magic man."

"One would certainly hope so." Dean Godwin produced a large brown blanket from the inside of his cape, offering it to Rosa. "For your modesty. I can also step out for a moment if you prefer."

Rosa smiled. "I think I'll manage."

The man turned around, and Rosa raised her arms as she shimmied out of her blouse, leaving her in only her undergarments for a moment before she draped the blanket over herself. It took her a while to find a comfortable balance between warmth and ensuring the Heartstone stayed visible, but she found a decent enough compromise eventually.

She idly wondered how Scarlett would have navigated this scenario if the woman had been in her shoes. Maybe she would have insisted on Godwin keeping his eyes closed throughout. It was an amusing thought.

As the Dean turned back to Rosa, his gaze briefly settled on the upper part of her chest, where a large, violet crystal sat embedded in her skin, pulsating softly like a living heart.

"Hmm, that is larger than I anticipated," he seemed to mutter to himself.

"Oi, my eyes are up here."

"Indeed they are, but they don't hold the same fascination as this, Miss Hale," he replied.

The man then reached into his cape and retrieved an assortment of white crystals, throwing them into the air, where they started orbiting around Rosa of their own accord. Several glowing runes materialized near her as well, and she was starting to wonder whether this light show was really necessary.

Finally, Godwin turned his gaze up and met her eyes. "Shall we begin?"

She nodded. "I'm ready when you are."

The man pulled over a chair and sat down opposite her, and with a wave of his hand, two of the crystals floated down to hover over Rosa's Heartstone. After a moment, their glow shifted through an array of colors before eventually settling on a hue matching the Heartstone.

"Baroness Hartford called this the 'Astralbane's Nexus Heartstone', a fusion between an Abyssal Vilewyrms heart and an Astral Soulstone," he said, consulting a peculiar metal tablet that he'd just pulled out. "Is that accurate?"

"Probably, yeah," Rosa replied. "She'd be more knowledgeable about it than I am. I just had it wedged into me; I didn't have much say in the matter. Fortunately, perhaps."

"It is certainly an odd combination. One wonders why such a fusion was even attempted. But from what I can see here, it does indeed seem to display traits typical both of demons and Zuver artifice."

"Is that good or bad?"

"Neither, I would say. It's distinctly unique. Hmm..." A pensive look crossed the man's face. "If I were to posit a guess, it would seem that the Vilewyrms heart has attempted to parasitize the Soulstone and its power, though their actual relationship appears to have settled into one that is more symbiotic in nature. Perhaps an adaptation of sorts. The heart simply

lacks the ability to completely overpower the Soulstone. Quite remarkable. Can you tell me where the Baroness learned this method?"

"Nope. I think you'll find that I'm not much more than a pretty face when it comes to these things."

"The Baroness did imply that you might not have many answers for me..." Dean Godwin furrowed his brows, seeming to grow absorbed in his thoughts. Meanwhile, Rosa experienced a subtle tingling in her chest, as if the Heartstone was aware of the scrutiny it was under.

"Oh? What else did she mention about me, if I can ask?" Rosa asked, her curiosity piqued. "Knowing her, it must have been nearly impossible to stop from heaping praises upon me."

"I believe we are both aware enough of the ridiculousness of that statement to disregard commenting on it," the man said as he continued studying the tablet in his hands.

"Of course, but a girl can dream, can't she? Who knows, it might have worked if you couldn't sniff out lies like Fynn."

Scarlett had shared that particular ability of the wizard's back when he first visited them.

Godwin did release a light chuckle at that. "No enchantment is necessary for me to simply recall the conversation I had with the Baroness. Now, please remain quiet for a few minutes as I focus."

"Understood."

Soon, he let go of the tablet, which promptly started floating by itself in the air beside him. He then produced a tool resembling a fountain pen that looked like it had forgotten it wasn't a tool of war, with a blade at the bottom that was far too long and sharp-looking for Rosa's tastes. The runes circling her shifted and were replaced by new symbols, and Godwin leaned forward with the instrument in his hand. "This may cause a slight discomfort."

The sharp tip of the unusual pen made contact with Rosa's Heartstone, sending a chill through her body. She remained silent, however, allowing the wizard to continue his work.

Time passed as the procedure continued—she didn't really keep track of how long—but eventually, the man reclined in his chair, his expression deep in contemplation. "The one who prepared the Soulstone, her name was Malachi, correct?"

Rosa shifted in her seat, finding a more comfortable position after remaining still for so long. "That's right," she said after having settled in again.

"It's regrettable that I was never given the opportunity to meet her myself. I must confess that the skill and expertise on display here surpasses much of what I've seen before. It's particularly impressive how she managed to harmonise the Soulstone with the Vilewyrms' heart. Given the complexity of Soulstones, especially compared to most contemporary creations, this is no small feat. I believe I can also detect traces of the Vile's Authority that was used to bind together this creation towards the end, but I cannot be certain yet. It appears tied to something beyond this room, but its exact nature eludes me. My assumption is that this

characteristic is something unique to an incarnate, though that in itself raises numerous questions.”

Rosa observed him thoughtfully. It seemed Scarlett had shared nearly everything about Anguish with him. “...Questions like?” she asked.

“I would not know where to begin, unfortunately. There are likely very few in the empire knowledgeable enough about incarnates to answer more than one of them.”

“That’s disappointing.”

Godwin nodded, releasing the pen-like instrument in his hand, which obediently remained suspended in the air like his other tools. “Indeed it is.”

“But it sounds like you’re quite familiar with this ‘Astral Soulstone’ thing, at least,” Rosa said. “I was expecting you to know less, to be honest.”

“Naturally. This is not the first Soulstone I have studied.”

“There’s more of them? Scarlett made it sound like this one was one-of-a-kind.”

The Dean crossed his arms. “They are exceedingly rare, so perhaps she was unaware that there were others. However, this particular Soulstone must have been considerably more powerful than those that I have previously encountered.”

“You’re saying Scarlett might have been mistaken? Perish the thought.”

“I take it such an event is a rarity?” he asked with a slight curve of his mouth.

“You could say that. I can count the instances on one hand.” Rosa adopted a similar posture to the man, arms crossed, eyes slightly narrowed. “Makes one wonder what her secret is, doesn’t it?”

Godwin met her gaze, his expression revealing little. “Any wizard worth their salt would be intrigued when faced with Baroness Hartford’s recent achievements.”

“Yeah? Enough to keep mum about any questionable activities they might encounter while collaborating with her? Say, like a bard hiding one of the six Viles inside her?”

The man pondered her for a moment. “No, I do not believe it quite reaches that extent for most.”

“No, I didn’t really think so either.” Rosa let out a light laugh. “So, mind if I ask what she has on you that’s got you going along with all of this Anguish business? Not that *I’m* complaining, but sometimes curiosity gets the better of me.”

Godwin’s eyebrow rose in slight surprise. “If the Baroness hasn’t shared that with you, it might not be my place to do so. However, I can’t rightly have you assuming that she holds something incriminating over me to ensure my cooperation.” The air around him turned more serious as he seemed to consider his words. “...Simply put, I’ve chosen to work with her

because I believe she may play a crucial role in the future of this realm, and because I am uncertain whether we can afford to lose her under the current circumstances.”

Rosa stared at him. “...Really?”

“Yes,” he said.

“That’s...unexpected.”

She wondered what concerns about the realm he might have that he deemed Scarlett indispensable. Rosa wasn’t surprised *that* Scarlett might play a pivotal role like that—rather, that almost felt like a given—but she simply wasn’t sure what kind of threat he was expecting.

Something related to the Hallowed Cabal, maybe? They certainly were a threat to the empire, but the entire realm? What, was he expecting another Vile to appear? Perhaps it was something related to that ‘Anomalous One’ that Rosa had overheard Scarlett and Anguish discuss before.

...It made Rosa feel somewhat left out, being seemingly less in the know than the man before her.

“Hey,” she began, eyeing him. “Just curious. How long have you known about my being an incarnate?”

“How long, you ask?” He stroked his chin thoughtfully. “I learned of it during my last visit here.”

Rosa laughed softly. “You’ve known longer than me, then.”

That *did* feel a bit unfair. She was among the last to learn about her own identity. But she supposed there had been few alternatives, considering Scarlett’s pact with Anguish.

“Anyway,” she continued, pushing those thoughts to the side. She brought up a hand and tapped the Heartstone on her chest. “I’ve got this now. I haven’t felt this free in years. You win some, you lose some.”

“I imagine it’s a relief to be free from the clutches of the Vile within you, and to even control it now,” Godwin said.

“Don’t you know it.”

“How was it before?”

“I don’t think you’d want to know.” Rosa’s gaze drifted to the various floating doodads around the place. “Honestly, I’d rather not dwell on it.”

“I see. Then I will not pry further.” While the man said that, his look instantly became more penetrating. “With that said, I do need to understand the current state you are in. The

Baroness assured me the Vile no longer possesses the capacity to escape its shackles. Would you agree with this assessment?"

"I would," Rosa said as she casually reached out to nudge a passing crystal.

"Do be careful with those," Godwin cautioned. "And you are certain the Baroness was right?"

"Completely."

The wizard's gaze lingered on her for a moment, then he nodded. "That is reassuring to hear. However, the Baroness also mentioned that, while contained, the Vile can still exert some influence if permitted. This means that it is not completely sealed away."

"You're not wrong there, but calling Anguish 'sealed' in the first place might be a bit of a misnomer." Rosa cocked her head to the side. "'Domesticated' might be more apt."

"Domesticated?"

"Yep. She still bites, but there's no power to it. Her fangs have been removed, so to speak. The worst she can do is probably try to talk my ear off now."

The man gave her a long stare. "...That is a very unique way to describe a Vile."

Rosa grinned. "I'm a very unique person."

"I can tell." He considered her for a moment. "Since you are the one in control, have you thought about pressing the Vile for information on how the Heartstone functions?"

"I have, but Anguish isn't exactly the cooperative sort. Scarlett had some success forcing her to talk, but I don't think I can replicate that." Rosa adjusted the blanket on her as it was about to fall off her shoulders. "And if you're hoping to get an audience with her, I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint. I'd rather not let her out."

Scarlett probably wouldn't like it if she came back and Rosa had let Anguish spill a bunch of her secrets while she was gone.

Godwin shook his head. "I had no intention of requesting such a thing. While it would undoubtedly be an interesting experience, it would probably be best not to converse with a Vile. My concern was merely what it implies that such a powerful demon can still communicate in this fashion."

"Well, she can only speak if I allow it. Same goes for when she's only talking to me."

"Do you ever grant her that freedom?"

Rosa nodded. "Sometimes you just want to gloat."

"...I must question your priorities, Miss Hale."

She gave him a wry smile. “So do I.” Her expression quickly sobered, though. “Although...there are times that I slip up. Where she can say a thing or two without me letting her.”

Godwin frowned. “That is concerning.”

“It might seem so, but I really don’t think it’s as big of a problem as it might sound,” Rosa said. “Pretty sure it’s more of a *me* problem than any sign that she might be able to break free. Even *if* she got loose, at this point, there’s not even much she could do.”

“When dealing with ageless existences such as a Vile, any uncertainty is concerning,” the man replied.

“It’s not an uncertainty. In fact, I *know* the issue is with me. Maybe I’m just too paranoid, or want to hear it, or whatever, but I can tell that the Heartstone won’t stop doing its job.” She met his eyes. “But if you think I’m losing my grip on reality, it might be safer for everybody if you addressed it right now.”

He observed her intently for a prolonged moment, his silence stretching on until Rosa began to question if he had just drifted off in thought. Finally, he spoke. “I initially found it odd when I heard that a relative novice like yourself could not only suppress a Vile but, as Baroness Hartford claims, even utilize some of its power. Even with the Heartstone’s assistance, did you not find it unusual that you managed this extraordinary achievement so effortlessly?”

Rosa looked at him, puzzled by his line of questioning. “Well, yes, a bit. But it felt natural, almost instinctive.”

“One does not simply ‘instinctively’ overpower a millennia-old entity, even with help.”

“Are you sure? Because that seems to be exactly what I did.”

“I am sure, yes,” Godwin touched a finger to his own chest, then gestured towards the Heartstone on Rosa’s. “It was only upon learning about the Astral Soulstone’s involvement that I began to suspect why Anguish hadn’t completely overwhelmed you.”

Rosa glanced down at the crystal, then back at him. “I feel like I’m missing a piece of the puzzle here.”

“Most likely,” he said. “Tell me, have you experienced any unusual events since the Heartstone was implanted in you? Strange voices or whispers, for example.”

“...You mean *besides* the ones coming from the ancient demon inside my head?”

“Besides those, yes.”

“Can’t say that I have, then. Those were from before the Heartstone’s time.” She looked at him uncertainly. “Ehm, should I be hearing something else?”

He regarded her for a moment, then shook his head. "I don't know. But it's highly unlikely that you would intuitively know how to wield an artifact as intricate and complex as that Heartstone."

"Alright...which means...?"

"Are you aware of the true nature of Astral Soulstones?" the man asked.

"I think we've already established that arcane artifacts aren't exactly my forte unless music is involved. Ask me about the structure of a ballad and I'm your gal, though."

A faint smile appeared on Godwin's lips. "Allow me to offer you a hint. It is in the name."

Rosa's eyes widened. "...You're telling me they're *actually made from souls*?"

"That they are."

She stared at the stone embedded in her chest, her face scrunching up at the thought.

"Does this revelation unsettle you?"

"I think anyone would find the idea of having a bunch of souls lodged in your chest a bit unnerving," Rosa said, trying to think back to if she hadn't maybe heard a whisper or two leave the thing on some occasion after all.

"You seem to have grown rather accustomed to harboring a Vile within you, at the very least."

She paused. "...Fair enough. But I do think having literal souls swimming around inside me *sounds* a lot worse."

"Perhaps," Godwin mused. "I personally don't believe it's a cause for excessive concern. The Astral Soulstones were crafted long ago by the Zuver, and the souls they house are likely no worse off within you than they were in the Soulstones themselves."

Rosa eyed him skeptically. "...You're *sure* about that?"

"Oh, not at all. I am merely guessing."

"...Great."

A chuckle left the man. "I do think that it is safe to assume their condition hasn't deteriorated since the transfer to the Heartstone. So no need for any undue guilt."

"If I start having strange dreams from now on, I'm holding you responsible."

"Feel free to do so. Anyhow, what I wanted to have said with this, Miss Hale, is that the 'intuition' you experienced in using the Heartstone likely stems from the souls within it. As I mentioned, this particular Soulstone was extraordinarily powerful, given its ability to

suppress a Vile, even a weakened one. This suggests that it either contained a remarkably high number of souls, or that some of those souls were exceedingly powerful.”

“Which would be better?” Rosa asked.

The man simply raised his hands in a shrug. “That is difficult to say. Only the Zuver themselves may have been able to answer that.”

“Why would they even have created the Soulstones to begin with? Who would willingly want their soul stored in a stone for all eternity?”

“Yet another question I lack the answer for,” Godwin said. “There are various theories. I presume you are familiar with The Severance?”

Rosa’s brows creased together. “You mean when the entirety of Zuverian civilisation just up and collapsed?”

“Precisely. There are those who speculate that the Soulstones were one of the Zuvers’ attempts to survive that inexplicable catastrophe. Why they would consider it a preferable alternative is beyond me, but it might imply that whatever they faced was even more dire.”

Rosa didn’t really know what to make of that.

“Do you know where the Baroness acquired the Soulstone?” the Dean asked.

“Malachi was actually the one who had it,” Rosa answered. “And I think I overheard Scarlett mention that Malachi got it from Mistress.”

“Mistress?” Godwin looked surprised at the mention of the masked woman. “So she was involved in this as well?”

“You know her?”

“I have met her once, but that is all. I do know she is a formidable mage.” The man seemed to grow lost in thought for a moment, but soon he returned his attention to Rosa. “Ah, but we are straying from the matter at hand. There is still much to investigate about your Heartstone, and time is limited. Hmm, perhaps we should explore some of the abilities you’ve reportedly gained from it.”

“Sure, but I’ll need my klert for that.” Rosa moved to stand, but Godwin motioned for her to stay seated.

“Allow me,” he said, gesturing with his hand towards her klert. It lifted from its resting place next to the door, floating across the room to her.

Rosa felt like rolling her eyes as she caught the instrument. “What’s the deal with you mages and always showing off, huh? Did you know Scarlett uses that pyrokinesis of hers to *write*?”

“Oh?” The man opposite her arched a single brow. “Write, you say? I will have to remember that one. It sounds like an enjoyable challenge, though perhaps through lumomancy instead.”

He cleared his throat. “And it is as my own master often said. ‘Why master an art if not to display it occasionally?’ As a bard, you must understand the urge to showcase your talents.”

Rosa had to admit he had a point.

Suddenly, he wondered if her influence might not be part of the reason why Scarlett was always so showy as well.

The thought was both alarming and oddly satisfying.

“Now, let us try to stay focused from here on,” Godwin said, bringing Rosa back to the present. “Please, demonstrate what you are capable of.”

With a confident smile, Rosa prepared herself. “Alright, but this stays between us. I plan to surprise Scarlett in the future.”