

194: Apparitions

Scarlett peered through the carriage window at the vast dome encompassing the entirety of Crowcairn, murmurs of bewildered reactions rippling through the contingent of the duke's men outside. It was not a sight one saw every day, even in this world of dragons and magic. Its greyish hue possessed an eerie luster, as though it repelled the very sunlight that tried to touch it, offering only a distorted and colorless glimpse of what lay inside.

The villagers of Crowcairn had activated the Sanctumbrum. They were no longer bothering to keep their existence a secret.

A few meters from the carriage, Scarlett saw Sir Home, clad in armor atop his horse, staring at the barrier with a grim countenance. His lips moved, forming inaudible words, but eventually, he grabbed the reins of his horse and pivoted around, sweeping his gaze over his troops.

“Our foe has revealed their hand!” he declared, his voice carrying over the large group gathered before him. While Scarlett couldn't be certain if all of them were as elite as the force assembled to confront the Vilewurm, there were more people now than there had been then, including a lot more mages. “I do not have to be the one to tell you that this is no natural occurrence, but nor is it the work of demons! Its origin, however, is something almost equally sinister, for this is the doing of our empire's most ancestral enemy, the Tribe of Sin!”

Several eyes widened at the news, and flashes of anger flickered across the faces of the soldiers and mages here. Everyone in the empire knew of the recent attacks by the Tribe, and there were few who considered them anything less than a scourge upon these lands.

Scarlett supposed she couldn't fault their reactions, given the Tribe's track record.

“Mages, prepare yourselves. This barrier is formidable, but that does not mean it has to be impenetrable. We shall commence our assault forthwith. The rest of you will begin fortifying our position.”

Sir Home guided his horse alongside Scarlett's carriage, their heads at the same level as he peered through the window after she opened it, letting the cool air inside. “Baroness Hartford, it appears we finally have an answer as to the identity of our perpetrators. I must admit, I didn't even consider the possibility of the Tribe's involvement. Now that I see it before me, though, it's painfully clear.”

Scarlett regarded the man. “I presume you have previous experience with the Tribe, Captain?”

He nodded gravely. “That I do. I fought against them in my youth and during my time as a Solar Knight. It's been many years, but this isn't the first time I've seen one of their accursed ‘Sanctums’.”

“Are you confident that your current forces will be enough to breach it?”

“I cannot say for certain, but we have no choice but to try. I’ve seen them breached before, so there is hope. Leave this to us, Baroness, and conserve your energy for now. We will strive to forge a path forward.”

With those words, the man steered his horse away and began issuing more commands to his people, directing their efforts as they began setting up their defences a short distance away from the edge of the Sanctum’s barrier.

“Is it really the Tribe of Sin who’s responsible for this?” Allyssa’s voice sounded out, and Scarlett turned to look at the young Shielder sitting across from her in the carriage cabin.

“It would appear so, yes.”

Allyssa gazed out of the window towards Crowcairn, her face reflecting a mixture of emotions. She still seemed to struggle with coming to terms with what Scarlett had discussed with her before. “So, does this mean they’re holding the villagers hostage?”

Scarlett raised an eyebrow. “That is unlikely.”

“Why’s that?”

She studied the girl, considering how to best present the situation.

“It’s probably one of their enclaves,” Shin said from beside Allyssa. “Am I right?”

Scarlett glanced at him for a moment, then nodded. “That does seem to be the case.”

Allyssa turned to him. “Enclaves?”

“One of the Tribe of Sin’s communes. In the past, they have often established covert settlements across the empire and other nations to gather information. Sometimes, they even assimilated entire villages like this one.”

“What? That’s ridiculous. How could people miss an entire village belonging to the Tribe?”

Shin shrugged. “I don’t know. It probably varies. Sometimes, the Tribe’s been there for a long time. Other times, no one thinks to look. For some reason, it’s not common knowledge. Every recent source I’ve seen mention these enclaves said they were a thing of the past, though.”

Allyssa stared at him for a few seconds, then shifted her attention back to the grey barrier veiling Crowcairn. “Are you seriously telling me that every single villager there might be a member of the Tribe?”

“It is a plausible conclusion, given the circumstances,” Scarlett said.

Allyssa looked to her. “What about the children? The elderly?”

Scarlett met her eyes. “Were you under the impression that Tribe members materialized out of thin air and faded into nothingness when their purpose was complete?”

The girl pressed her lips together, sitting in silence for a short while before glancing back at the barrier. "...So, what will we do from here?" she eventually asked.

"Precisely what Sir Home said," Scarlett replied, following her gaze. "We will be conserving our energy while he and his men prepare to reach the village."

In the game, the Phantom Sanctums had not always been something that the player could pierce through, but there were *some* events where they could be breached. With the people Sir Home had with him now, and the relatively small size of this barrier, Scarlett imagined that they had at least had a chance to succeed. Eventually.

Her attention drifted to the distorted and obscured image of Crowcairn within the Sanctum.

The rapid progression of events compared to the game had forced the villagers against the wall and meant they had to unveil their trump card early. This also meant that they lacked the freedom or resources to interfere with Rosa and Malachi as they would have in the game once they discovered what was happening on that front.

In that respect, this situation was almost ideal for Scarlett. Malachi had done her a huge favor. She couldn't have planned it much better herself.

There really wouldn't have been much reason to complain, if it hadn't been for that irksome feeling at the back of her head. The one that told her this situation was anything *but* perfect and left her with a sense of annoyed distaste for the current circumstances. She couldn't help but wonder whether this was yet another twisted manifestation of the original's strange obsessions and personality, or if it was something that originated from *her*.

At this point, it was hard to tell.

Time passed as they remained in the carriage, continuing to watch as Sir Home and the duke's men busied themselves. Some of the guardsmen who had been brought along were working on establishing a camp and erecting some basic fortifications facing Crowcairn, positioning a few wagons as a primary line of defence, and digging shallow trenches in front of them. Scarlett and her carriage were situated closer to the back relative to the village, safe from the worst of the noise.

Positioning themselves on a slight hill overlooking the area, mages began methodically casting spells in an orderly fashion under the command of one of the knights. It was a deliberate onslaught of spells—fire, water, earth, and various other magical schools and affinities—that slammed against the Sanctum's barrier in a gradual progress. No doubt, the mages would exhaust themselves of mana before the barrier gave in, but with over a dozen mages working at it, they might be able to wear it down if they had the rest of the day.

Eventually, Sir Home approached the carriage once more, his focus fixed on Scarlett. "Baroness Hartford," he greeted her somewhat awkwardly. "I've dispatched men to request further supplies and heavier ordnance from Bridgespell. If we're fortunate, we will have more mages and possibly even siege weaponry available before nightfall. That said...it just occurred to me that in our earlier conversation, I failed to consider whether you might possess some knowledge or information that could aid our efforts."

“I am afraid that I do not. While I have read of the Tribe’s capabilities and their Sanctums, this is the first time I bear witness to it myself. I know of no particular weakness that could expedite its collapse in this case.”

“I see.” The knight captain did seem slightly disappointed, but he did not let it show too much. He turned his head, surveying the soldiers milling about. “I suppose it was too much to hope for. No matter. We’ll press on, may Ittar mark my words. The Tribe will not escape after sullyng our lands and committing their heinous deeds, even stooping to fraternizing with demons.”

Scarlett considered the man thoughtfully.

Things were a race against time now, for both sides in this conflict. If the Tribe members were given enough time, they could escape relatively unharmed, leaving Sir Home—and the duke, in extension—with little to show for it and limited information about what the Tribe had been up to in the area. However, if Sir Home could bring down the Sanctum’s barrier before that, the Tribe were the ones who would be at a disadvantage.

As for the exact timeframe, Scarlett couldn’t say. The Sanctum was a temporary measure the villagers had erected while preparing their escape. That much probably stayed true from the game. But how long those preparations were, and their exact costs, weren’t details she had any knowledge about. Even had she known it from the game, she wasn’t sure such precise time durations translated well into this world.

“If anything, I commend your dedication, Captain,” she eventually said, turning her attention back to Sir Home. “I apologize for not being of any help in this regard, but if there are any further questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to ask. I will be here.”

“Very well,” the man replied, bidding her farewell with a nod before returning to his duties.

As the gradual assault on Crowcairn’s barrier continued, Scarlett and her party remained in the carriage, listening to the sounds of occasional spellcasting outside. Fynn took the chance to meditate, while Shin immersed himself in a book, and Allyssa closed her eyes to rest.

Despite the lack of much sleep over the past two days, Scarlett didn’t feel as tired as she thought she would have. That was a welcome surprise though, since she had neither the time nor the opportunity to relax at the moment. Attempting to sleep only led to her mind being flooded with distracting and useless thoughts.

The sudden jolt of Fynn as he rushed towards the cabin door caught them all off guard, as he tore it open and leaped outside. Soon, cries of warning echoed across the camp, and Scarlett turned her attention to see several black-clad figures with white markings on their faces emerge like ghosts from the grey barrier surrounding Crowcairn, heading directly for Sir Home and his forces.

Soldiers standing amidst the fortifications they’d prepared met some of the attackers with swords and shields in hand, but with over two dozen Tribe members pressing on, a few managed to break through, targeting mages who were in the middle of recovering from their magical assault. Sir Home and some of his knights rushed in to block the Tribe members, and

the knight captain took on three of them by himself, but the attack was so sudden that not all their defences could respond as quickly as needed.

Inside the carriage, Allyssa and Shin both started moving as if to help, while Fynn stood guard in front of the vehicle, with a pair of ethereal claws formed above his knuckles. Scarlett scanned the area, ensuring that none of the Tribe members were heading their way before relaxing slightly.

She wondered whether the villagers of Crowcairn were aware of her association with the Cabal, or if she would be a complete unknown to them. The latter seemed more likely. That meant that, since *she* was the one skirting the line of what her agreement with them allowed, these Tribe members would be well within their right to target her for the time being. Because of that, she did actually show a bit of caution in this situation.

She couldn't just stand idly by doing nothing, though. That would be far too suspicious. To avoid drawing attention, Scarlett started using her magic to destabilize those of the Tribe members who were too close to her and aid those of her allies who appeared in need. Still, she kept it relatively subtle and restrained.

Not that she needed to do much in the end. The skirmish ended up being a brief one, and even before Allyssa and Shin had the chance to fully join in, the Tribe members began picking up their own and retreated to the Sanctum. In their wake, they left behind a few injured—possibly killed—mages. However, in return, Sir Home and his people had succeeded in cutting down six or seven assailants, making it a bit unclear which side suffered the heaviest losses.

Scarlett watched as the Tribe members soon disappeared inside the Sanctum, the grey barrier allowing their passage where it would deny any outsiders. She then shifted her attention to the camp, now in a state of mild disarray. Nonetheless, Sir Home swiftly got control of the situation. As Allyssa and Shin busied themselves helping out where they could, the knight captain briefly approached Scarlett to assess her condition before urging her to exercise caution in case of potential future raids. From there, he began hollering a cascade of orders to his men as they got to treating the wounded and resuming their earlier activities.

Shortly after, Scarlett returned to the carriage on her own, with Fynn opting to remain outside and play the role of the watchdog for the time being. That was when it happened.

In an intangible wave of pure violence, the sensation penetrated her very core, compelling every fiber of her being to cry out as if violated. It lasted for but a heartbeat, but its origin was unmistakable for someone like her who had encountered something similar before. Echoed cries of distress and fear from the rest of the camp confirmed that she wasn't the only person who experienced the same unsettling feeling.

As she moved to look out the window, Fynn was already there, looking up at her with a serious face.

“I am aware,” she told him, turning her gaze to the horizon, away from Crowcairn and its direct surroundings.

There, rising like a nightmarish apparition against the backdrop of the grey sky, stood a citadel crafted from pure obsidian. Its colossal spires pierced through the clouds, their jagged edges seemingly torn from the very fabric of reality. Even a mere glance at them provoked something within to coil in displeasure. Bathed in an unholy crimson aura, the citadel exuded an otherworldly agony that felt nearly tangible.

Yet, even as it loomed there, blanketing the landscape with its oppressive presence, the dread fortress appeared only partially real, as if it straddled the boundary between the infernal abyss whence it came and the land it now tainted. Its walls pulsed with a sinister energy, casting grotesque shadows that appeared to writhe and whisper in hushed, blasphemous tongues that carried across the considerable distance separating it from Scarlett.

Shackles that had been wrapped around her being for far too long suddenly relinquished their grasp, and Scarlett glanced down at her left hand, where a fading purple crest slowly faded away.

Returning her gaze to the harrowing spectacle on the horizon, a mixture of anticipation and apprehension churned within her.

Anguish's citadel had finally clawed its way into the Material Realm, and the stage was set for an overdue encounter with its master.