

217: Findings

Scarlett wondered if reaching Beld Thylelion would truly allow her to learn more about the system, this whole ‘Anomalous One’ business, and what her presence in this world actually meant. Were there things waiting there that differed from how it had been in the game?

It was a distinct possibility now, it seemed. She was hoping that it was true, at the very least, but she was also hesitant to get her hopes up.

Regardless, she had already been determined to go since long ago. Even if the main quest hadn’t told her to do so at the threat of death, she didn’t want factions like the Hallowed Cabal reaching that place.

Returning her attention to Anguish, Scarlett studied the Vile for a moment. Anguish returned her gaze.

“...I suppose if that is the extent of what you know, then it will have to suffice,” she eventually said, not hiding the mocking tone in her voice. “I will simply have to obtain the remaining information on my own.”

Anguish sneered at her. “Always the proud one, are we? Though I will admit to being curious about what you’ll do. It would be a shame if things were to go awry, wouldn’t it?”

“You are overly optimistic if you believe you will be allowed to observe my movements as you have before.”

“Oh, no need to fret.” The demon showed a cold smile. “Even if Rosalina tries to keep me in the dark, I’ll learn what happens eventually. Unlike those fragile mortals, my existence won’t wither away in just a mere couple of generations. Rosa will draw her last breath eventually, so it’s only a matter of time before I am free to return to my domain once more.”

“That assumes your domain will remain yours for that long.” Scarlett shook her head. “But we both know that there is no such guarantee, is there?”

Anguish’s expression darkened a bit.

“On that note,” Scarlett continued, “now that Malachi carries part of your Authority, I imagine she will have limited control over the Blaze of Anguish. Will that be enough to face the other Viles? I am aware that they have been making moves to encroach on your domain after learning that you harbored an incarnate.”

Anguish regarded Scarlett for a few seconds with Rosa’s face, then shrugged her shoulders. “Who knows? That half-blooded thief may have stolen some of my Authority, but even I cannot determine how much. You shackling me inside this vessel limits most of my senses. But even if she had taken it all, she would not have been able to wield it as I can, nor would the denizens of my domain listen as they do me.” The demon’s smile turned sinister. “I’ve trained my pets well.”

“That does not surprise me, but nor does it answer my question.”

“Then you should have asked a better question.”

Scarlett gave her a pointed look.

Anguish brought her hands up in the air. “Very well, then what if I say it doesn’t matter? Even if my fellow Viles decided to cooperate in their assault against my domain—which they won’t. They’re more likely to start another Chaosforge War—they would not be able to take it all. A Vile’s existence is more about being wary of other Viles than anything else, and I haven’t spent the last millennium twiddling my thumbs.”

“Is that so?” Scarlett considered the demon for a moment.

Anguish seemed to be telling the truth, which meant her Blaze wasn’t at as much risk as Scarlett had assumed. Nevertheless, it would probably still be a significant blow to Anguish’s power base if the other Viles *did* lay siege to her domain.

Regardless, Scarlett was fine with either outcome. If the Blaze of Anguish succumbed entirely to the other Blazes, Scarlett would be rid of yet another enemy. If it survived, she had a potential ally in Malachi.

“And what about the reactions of the other Viles to your attempt at manifesting within the Material Realm?” she asked. “To what extent will they be aware of what transpired?”

“Worried that they’ll go after your precious bard?” Anguish replied in a mocking tone.

“If they were to do so, the consequences of their actions would be their own to bear. I am not concerned that any of you will harm Miss Hale again.” In the game, it had been made clear that once Rosa obtained the Heartstone, the Viles couldn’t touch her anymore. “However, it would be bothersome to waste time dealing with yet another boastful Vile, which is why acting preemptively, if necessary, would be preferable.”

The demon laughed at that. “Now you’re making me *excited*. I do hope one of my peers tries something now, if only so that I can see what happens.”

Scarlett’s eyes turned cold. “I am not interested in your perverse hopes. I am asking what the other Viles know about Rosa. Now, *answer*.”

A brief moment of pain flickered across Anguish’s expression, but she recovered quickly enough. “...I pity that Rosalina had to get involved with such a spoilsport. Fine. To answer your question, they should know nothing beyond that she exists, and even that wouldn’t have been a certainty if not for that rigid old prig acting out.”

“You are referring to The Gentleman,” Scarlett said.

Anguish’s eyes narrowed. “...I am not surprised you know of him, but there seems there’s more to it.”

“My connection to him is inconsequential to this conversation. I will say that you were far from the only one angered by his decision to expose Rosa’s existence to the Blazes. However, since that matter has mostly resolved itself, there is little point in wasting more

time worrying about it. Now, am I correct in understanding that, according to you, none of the Viles should have learned more about Rosa's identity despite the events in the citadel?"

The Vile stayed silent for several seconds as she eyed Scarlett. Finally, she shook her head. "They would only sense that I breached the Veil into this realm, but nothing more. Oh, certainly, their agents and pawns will be all over this to investigate what happened, but somehow I doubt *you* have made it easy for them."

Scarlett tapped her finger on the table as she considered Anguish.

The demon wasn't wrong there, at least. Few knew Rosa had been present during all that. In particular, it was a good thing she worked with Raimond to keep the Followers oblivious. Deacon Davenport of the Quorum was collaborating with one of the Viles, Malevolence, after all.

That said, it wasn't a secret that Scarlett herself had been involved, so she could probably expect a lot more people to look into her affairs in the future. But as long as their gazes weren't directly aimed at Rosa, that was fine. Scarlett might even be able to get Beldon Tyndall's help to manage some of that attention.

"There is another matter that still leaves me puzzled," she began, peering into Anguish's pitch-black eyes. "Your citadel still remains, even after your attempt at manifesting has ceased. Why is this?"

The demon seemed to find that question amusing. "What led you to think my manifestation has stopped? I am still speaking with you, aren't I, pet?"

Scarlett frowned. "What do you mean by that? You have lost your power and control over Rosa, and the incarnation itself was never fully realized. The Astral Soulstone would not have been able to sustain your incomplete manifestation for this long."

Anguish had technically still lingered inside Rosa after this questline concluded in the game as well, even if she hadn't been able to speak. There, it was made clear that the manifestation and the ritual surrounding it ended the moment you left the citadel.

"Perhaps that would have been the case if you hadn't bound me to Rosa and filched part of my Authority," Anguish said. "Thanks to what you and the half-blood did, my manifestation will persist until Rosalina draws her last breath."

A flash of anger entered Scarlett's eyes as she glared at the demon, but then she paused, actually considering those words.

After a while, a small smile appeared on her lips. "...I see."

While it might be somewhat disconcerting to hear that Anguish's manifestation was still technically ongoing, Rosa had already proven that the Vile held no power as she was right now. Meanwhile, this meant that Rosa would continue serving as an anchor that connected to the Blaze of Anguish, but the bard was the one in control of it this time.

Not only did that have several implications for what Rosa might be able to do through the powers the Heartstone gave her, but Scarlett also suspected that there were ways that *she* could use this in the future.

“I do so love it when you make that expression,” Anguish said with a smile. “What wicked schemes are going through your mind, I wonder? How will you employ Rosalina as your instrument this time?”

Scarlett’s expression darkened. She regarded the demon silently for several seconds.

“...I tire of seeing Miss Hale’s appearance debased by you. I have already learned what I need for the time being. Now, remove yourself.”

“And I thought we were having a rather pleasant convers—”

“This time I was not asking a question. Begone, Anguish.”

Rosa’s body recoiled as Anguish’s countenance twisted into another pained grimace, and the darkness swiftly faded from her eyes as the Vile’s presence vanished.

[Side-Quest completed: Altercations with a devil]

{Skill points awarded: 6}

[Side-Quest completed: Fettered and Bound — Anguish’s Fate]

{Skill points awarded: 8}

[Companion Quest completed: The Smiling Bard]

{Skill points awarded: 15}

[Quest completed: The Blazing Citadel]

{Skill points awarded: 12}

Scarlett stared at all the system windows that suddenly materialized before her, taken aback by how many there were.

She had been anticipating more quest completion notifications to pop up eventually, but this exceeded her expectations. This counted as completing *four* different quests?

Her eyes scanned the titles of the quests. Two appeared related to Anguish, which was perhaps understandable, and the final one was the one Scarlett had been waiting for ever since leaving Crowcairn. The companion quest, though...

Her forehead creased together in thought.

She hadn’t even been *aware* that the game still counted Rosa as a literal companion. Companion-related quests could be completed, yes, as she’d seen when she helped Fynn with his trial before, but those had never been explicitly referred to as companion quests by the system.

Was it because this marked the end of Rosa's main questline in the game? That would make sense, but Scarlett had skipped much of what would otherwise have been part of that questline. Although she supposed this wouldn't be the first time that the system only cared about the end results rather than everything that led up to it.

Nevertheless, this represented a considerable influx of skill points for Scarlett. Even more than she had been hoping for.

With a thought, she summoned her status window.

[Name: Scarlett Hartford]

[Skills:

[Greater Mana Control]

[Greater Pyromancy]

[Major Pyrokinesis]

[Greater Hydromancy]

[Superior Hydrokinesis]

[~~Superior~~]

[Traits:

[Dignified August]

[Supercilious]

[Cavalier]

[Callous]

[Overbearing]

[Conceited]

[Third-rate Mana Veins]]

[Mana: 12084/12084]

[Points: 90]

90 skill points.

More than she'd ever had before. It would almost have been enough to upgrade her pyrokinesis skill once more if that upgrade hadn't been locked at the moment. However, it *was* enough to upgrade both her hydrokinesis and one more skill.

If she brought her hydrokinesis up to the same level as her pyrokinesis—and got enough training in with it—she could finally explore more of what the skill was capable of beyond just her Aqua Mines and the occasional water work.

The notion excited her, and it made her look forward to the next time she could return to Freymeadow, where she could more freely practice her magic under Arlene's guidance. Maybe if she could also—

“Ehm, I know I am ravishingly captivating and terrifyingly enchanting, but it's a bit much to be struck *literally* wordless just by looking at me, don't you think?” a voice interrupted her thoughts.

Scarlett blinked, dismissing the system windows to return her attention to Rosa. The bard was giving her a funny look, studying her with a smug smirk.

“...Apologies. My mind was elsewhere.” Scarlett mentally chided herself for allowing her focus to slip. “Do not misunderstand. My brief lapse in attention had zero connection to you.”

“Sure it didn’t.”

She shot the woman a narrowed-eyed glare. “It did not.”

Rosa raised her hands theatrically. “I’m not arguing with you.”

“Your grin implies otherwise.”

“I can’t be held accountable for my mouth,” Rosa said. “That thing’s got a mind of its own, and not once has it bothered consulting me about its life choices.”

Scarlett’s thoughts and musing related to the system and her skills quickly retreated to the back of her mind as she released a single sigh at the bard’s carefree demeanor. Then she relaxed her expression and observed Rosa for a few seconds. “Setting aside your mouth’s ‘rebellious nature’... How are you?”

Both of the woman’s eyebrows rose up. “We’re back to that again?”

“Considering you just hosted one of the six Viles,” Scarlett said, “and at my request... I think the question is justified.”

The bard eyed her for a moment. Her earlier smirk faded as she looked away, scratching at the back of her head. “It felt weird. I’ll give you that. Always does. Uncomfortable. Claustrophobic, even. But this time I was the one in control, so...it wasn’t that bad. It *did* hurt when you spoke her name, and I’d rather not have to endure that again, but I could if I had to.” She shrugged. “All in all, I’m okay. Not much worse than earlier.”

Scarlett nodded. “That is good to hear.”

She’d had some slight concerns that it would have been a difficult experience for Rosa. Since all of this was new, Scarlett still wasn’t familiar with what it all meant.

There was a moment of silence between the two of them, but Rosa soon turned back to Scarlett.

“So...,” the woman began. “That was some heavy stuff you talked about with Anguish.”

“Yes. That it was.”

“I think I might even have overheard some of the things you didn’t want me knowing about.”

Scarlett considered her quietly for a bit. “...Perhaps it is best if you do not dwell on it too much.”

A lighthearted smile graced Rosa’s lips once again, even as her eyes held a hint of unease. “Sure. I’ll just pretend that I *didn’t* hear you talking about literal gods possibly hunting you down, or whatever this ‘god-slayer anomaly’ thing is, or that Anguish somehow considered

you and it to maybe be on the same level. Why would waste any time thinking about all that? No need to induce unnecessary stress, right?”

“That is precisely why I suggest not dwelling on it for the time being.”

“Might be just a *tad* late for that, unfortunately,” Rosa said. The woman paused, her expression growing more serious. “...Look, I get it, okay? Whatever those secrets of yours are, it’s clear they go far beyond even what I had imagined. I understand why you might hesitate to trust and involve someone like me in...well, I don’t know. But if things are bad, you know I’d help no matter what, right?”

“It is not a matter of trust, Rosa—” Scarlett began, but cut herself off. After taking a breath, she continued. “...I am aware that I can rely on you. I had already planned to properly utilize your abilities, but knowing that I have your support is reassuring.”

“Okay, I’m starting to have second thoughts when you say it like *that*, but I suppose it’s too late to go back now.” Rosa flashed her another brief smile before shifting her gaze to vacantly look into the space in front of her. “Still... You’re not going to tell me what all that was about, are you?”

Scarlett observed her for a few seconds. “Will you fault me if I do not?”

For some reason, there really *was* a reluctance to share those secrets with Rosa, a reluctance that hadn’t been as present with Arlene. Was it a hesitation about revealing her true identity to someone who could actually remember it, or was it something else?

A while passed before Rosa’s reply came. “No, I don’t mind.”

Scarlett’s eyes lingered on her, uncertain of the truth behind the woman’s words. They sounded sincere, and Rosa *had* promised to be more transparent with Scarlett, but such promises held no guarantees when it came to things like this — especially considering Scarlett herself was still blatantly keeping secrets.

Eventually, she moved her attention away from Rosa and let her gaze drift across the room. For now, she decided to let it be. Rosa and her relationship had always been built on a certain level of deception, but that didn’t diminish the trust Scarlett placed in the woman.

“It seems you have become more adept at controlling Anguish through the power of the Heartstone,” she said, revitalizing the conversation on a new topic.

“The ‘Heartstone’?” Rosa’s voice echoed beside her.

Scarlett glanced back at the bard. “Yes. That is the name of the artifact now embedded within your chest — the Astralbane’s Nexus Heartstone.”

“...That name’s a bit excessive, don’t you think? Why didn’t you choose something more charming, like ‘Rosa’s Rollicking Crescendo Crest’.”

“...I did not choose the name,” Scarlett said.

Even if she had, that was a *terrible* name.

Rosa's brows furrowed together. "Didn't you literally create it on the spot before thrusting it into my chest—thanks for that, by the way—like some kind of drunken tavern-ruffian? You're telling me it already had a name?"

Only now did Scarlett realize how odd that must sound. She had grown so used to all items having names provided by the system that she hadn't even considered how *strange* that actually was.

"...That is how it was referred to in the texts describing its creation," she said. "I did not come up with the concept on my own."

Rosa turned to look at her, giving her a look that definitely held more than just a hint of suspicion in it. Eventually, though, she seemed to accept the explanation and leaned back in her chair, once more letting her gaze wander. "Well, whatever. I suppose I can live with that name, even if it's a mouthful."

"So was yours."

"No, my name had *alliteration*. It rolls off the tongue. Yours is all serious and boring."

"Once again, I did not choose the name."

"Someone's gotta be held accountable."

"...Let us end this conversation here before I begin considering taking it back from you." Scarlett shook her head. "I am curious. What is it like having an artifact within your body?"

"I'm just going to pretend like you *didn't* just casually threaten my life. And as for the artifact... Well, I can't say it's *not* strange having a rock stuck in my chest." Rosa touched a hand to where the crystal was situated under the fabric of her blouse. "I can feel it pulsating where my heart should be beating. It's supposed to do that, right? Nevermind, don't answer that. I'm just gonna go with 'yes'. Not sure I'm mentally prepared to know whether my real heart is still there or not." She grimaced. "It'll also be hard to forget the pain from when you inserted the blasted thing."

"I am starting to suspect that you are holding a grudge."

The bard tilted her head to the side for a moment, wearing a thoughtful expression. "Maybe a teensy weensy one?"

"...That is understandable."

"Hey, don't beat yourself up too much. You've still got your grudges against me, and I'm pretty sure those outweigh this one by a pretty wide margin." Rosa fell silent, a grim expression suddenly emerging on her face. "I just realized something. From a certain point of view, this could be considered a gift from you to me."

Scarlett eyed the woman, anticipating this to not go anywhere good. "...And?"

Rosa looked at her. “And have you *seen* this thing?” She pulled down the top of her blouse, revealing the upper half of the Heartstone and the skin around it. “It’s huge! Gargantuan, even. You could buy princesses with this.”

Another sigh threatened to escape Scarlett’s throat as she massaged the bridge of her nose. “If that bothers you, then simply do not view it as a gift. There is no need to overcomplicate matters.”

“No, no, you don’t understand. I’m morally obligated to you now. I won’t even be able to hold a tiny grudge without feeling bad.”

“At the risk of sounding blunt, is that not already the case?” Scarlett asked. “I would have thought me removing Anguish’s hold over you would have trumped something of this level.”

“Yes, but that was a *serious* thing,” Rosa replied in an aggrieved voice.

Scarlett stared at the woman. “...I do not believe I will ever fully comprehend what goes on in that mind of yours.”

“Ugh, just forget it.” Rosa slumped back in her seat. “Guess I’ll have to live with not teasing you about that anymore.” She sighed. “At least I got a gem big enough to buy a few castles out of it. If anyone ever asks what you’ve done for me, that’ll be my answer.”

“Please do not boast about that.”

“You’re asking the impossible.”

Scarlett closed her eyes, suppressing the urge to make certain comments within her heart heard.

Was it too late to reconsider the whole Anguish thing?

After having taken a few moments to compose herself, she opened her eyes again and looked at Rosa. “Returning to more serious matters, the Heartstone has granted you control over Anguish, but that should not be the extent of its powers. Have you noticed any other effects?”

A contemplative expression crossed the bard’s face. “Kinda? Fairly sure it did *something* funny to my mana, for once. But there are still things I haven’t figured out. It’s intuitive, yet not at the same time.”

“Unraveling its workings is unfortunately beyond my ability to assist you with,” Scarlett said. “I only knew that it would be a means of freeing you from Anguish’s hold, but the artifact’s exact mechanics remain a mystery.”

In the game, Rosa just received all the Heartstone’s effects and buffs instantly. But that was usually how skills and items worked in games. It wasn’t surprising that things functioned differently in this world.

A chuckle escaped Rosa. “We’re lucky that I’m your resident genius bard extraordinaire, then. I’ll have this thing figured out in a jiffy.”

“I am sure. One avenue you might explore is harnessing the Heartstone’s power with your charms. I suspect that might yield results.”

“Really?” Rosa glanced down at the table, where her kleret was lying. “Hmm... Suppose I might as well give it a whirl.”

She picked the instrument up, placed it in her lap, and then began playing it. It produced a soft melody that drifted across the room, carrying with it an air of expectation. The space in front of them soon shimmered with a gentle blue light, as if riding on the coattails of an invisible ghost.

Scarlett didn’t recognize this particular charm, but even as she continued watching it, it didn’t appear to serve any tangible purpose. It was just a not-so-fancy light show, from the looks of it. Maybe it was something Rosa had come up with when she was bored.

Glancing towards the bard, Scarlett noticed Rosa wearing a focused expression as she continued playing. Several minutes elapsed without any change, the charm remaining where it was, suspended in the air. Then, finally, a shift occurred.

Scarlett detected that strange new presence emanating from Rosa, and the bard’s charm transformed. The charm’s blue light turned darker and thickened, coiling into a dense cloud of dark violet shapes that churned like tiny elementals.

Rosa blinked, stopping her music. The charm promptly vanished.

“Okay... That was strange.”

Scarlett nodded. “Indeed.”

It was much what she had been expecting, though. In the game, the Heartstone unlocked various new abilities for Rosa. She was curious to see how those would manifest in this world.

The bard resumed her playing, and a candle at the opposite end of the room beside the bed suddenly ignited with a tiny flame. A few seconds later, the flames shifted to a deep violet hue carrying dark black undertones and almost doubled in size.

“This is...nifty,” Rosa said, continuing to manipulate the charm with her song. “Nifty *and* creepy. Feels like if I continue with this, we’ll have the door knocked down by priests ready to haul me off for being a witch practicing the darkest of arts.”

“While I believe that might be exaggerating, it is true that certain groups may not look kindly upon this if they learned its origins. The prudent choice might be to exercise caution when using this ability.”

In the game, that hadn’t really been a concern, but this world was far more complicated. It wouldn’t hurt to be careful.

“That does remind me,” Scarlett said, turning to Rosa. “Deacon Abram expressed his desire to speak with you when the opportunity arises. I am not certain about the precise nature of the discussion, but ensure that you act with caution when the time comes for that as well.”

Rosa halted her music once more, casting a glance at Scarlett that held mild confusion. “Deacon Abram?”

“Father Abrahm.”

The bard’s expression turned into one of surprise. “Wait, what?”

Scarlett stared at her.

Right, Rosa hadn’t actually personally met with Raimond at any time during the events in the citadel, and she was unconscious when he arrived in Crowcairn. Scarlet also hadn’t filled Rosa in on any of the details about those events yet, so to her, the priest was still just ‘Ray Abraham’.

“There is much that you missed while you were away,” Scarlett said. “Perhaps it is time for me to brief you on the specifics.”