

278: Who are you, again?

Scarlett's brow furrowed in deep concentration, her gaze fixed on the thick, square piece of parchment resting on her lap. Slowly, meticulously, she traced intricate patterns across its surface with her pyrokinesis, leaving behind faint, burnt lines as a complex array of intersecting sigils and runes gradually took shape under her careful guidance.

After what felt like an eternity, she finally finished, allowing herself a moment to relax as she leaned back to inspect her work. With a flick of her wrist, she used her hydrokinesis to whisk away a bead of sweat from her forehead, the sultry summer heat weighing heavily upon her.

To the untrained eye, the array might have appeared as nothing more than an elaborate doodle. However, it had taken Scarlett at least a couple of hours and several failed attempts to create something she felt was sufficiently precise. Even with her pyrokinesis offering far greater control than mundane writing implements, this task wasn't an easy one.

Satisfied with her handiwork, Scarlett raised her hand, palm upward. In an instant, a small pouch materialised, as if it had always been in the space there. She tugged at the drawstring, revealing a fine, shimmering powder within. With careful movements, she pinched a small amount between her fingers and began the painstaking process of precisely distributing it along the lines on the parchment.

Twenty minutes later, Scarlett completed this step to her satisfaction as well. The pouch vanished, replaced by a curious metal implement resembling a pen, its tip adorned with a softly glowing red crystal. Arlene had recommended using something like this tool over just imbuing the array with her mana directly, assuring her it would simplify the process significantly.

Channeling her mana into the pen, Scarlett gently pressed its tip against the power-lined array. The substance flared briefly before seeming to melt into the parchment, leaving behind a faintly glowing crimson trail. She traced the entirety of the complex design, imbuing it with arcane energies she only partially understood until the whole array pulsed with a subtle, ruby light.

Her task finally complete, Scarlett folded the parchment and tucked it away in her [Pouch of Holding]. She rose from her bench, brushing away any stray grains of powder that clung to her dress. Her gaze then swept across the lush garden surrounding her, bordered on all sides by towering hedges.

The Loci's garden had truly flourished into a verdant paradise. Vibrant, exotic flowers and peculiar plants lined well-tended gravel paths, interspersed with ornate benches and elegant statuary that Scarlett had added recently. The air was thick with the heady scent of summer blooms, despite the winter chill beyond the garden's borders. There were even butterflies and bees flitting from blossom to blossom. Scarlett had no idea where those came from, but they certainly added additional charm to the place.

Her attention turned to the centerpiece of the garden: the large, uncut emerald perched atop a pedestal surrounded by a circle of carefully tended flowers. The Loci pulsed with an inner

light, with the Ashenwraith heart that powered much of its abilities swirling and shifting like living smoke trapped within a crystalline structure beneath it.

With a gentle mental nudge, Scarlett reached out through her bond with the Loci. In the blink of an eye, she found herself standing before the emerald, her palm resting against its cool surface as she regarded its natural beauty. The Loci's nascent awareness responded to her touch, radiating a sense of recognition that, while not quite an emotion, hinted at the potential for something more.

Scarlett lingered for a moment before taking a step back. She enveloped herself in a cocoon of warm air with her pyrokinesis, then reached out through her bond again. In the next instant, she was transported to the mansion's back entrance, the sudden cold of winter trying to bite at her skin as her feet sank into fresh snow. Without breaking stride, she pushed open the mansion door and stepped inside.

The Loci had grown considerably over the past month or so. What had once been capable of only minor feats of spatial manipulation—like teleporting a certain cat around—could now transport Scarlett herself halfway across the estate with relative ease. It did leave the Loci temporarily drained, needing about an hour or so to recharge, but Scarlett still took a quiet satisfaction in doing it now and then.

There was an almost strange rush that came with suddenly finding yourself in a new location through magic that she couldn't quite explain. And she also liked to see it as providing the little house spirit with some opportunities for further growth and practice.

As she made her way through the mansion's decorated corridors, Scarlett encountered Garside. The grey-haired butler stood near an antique side table in the foyer with hands clasped behind his back, gazing out the window towards the courtyard when he noticed her approach. He bowed deeply as she approached.

"My Lady," he intoned, his voice as crisp and proper as always. "I presume you have finished your business in the garden? There is a matter I sought to bring to your attention."

"Garside. Your timing is impeccable, as usual," Scarlett replied, reaching into her [Pouch of Holding] to retrieve the parchment she had so painstakingly spent much of the morning working on. She held it out to the butler. "Place this in a suitable location in the estate's northeast corner, similar to the previous arrays we have discussed."

The old butler accepted the parchment with care. "I shall ensure it is positioned in a protected location, My Lady."

"Excellent," Scarlett said, continuing down a connecting hallway with Garside falling into step behind her.

While those arrays were far from her primary focus at the moment, she had been dedicating what spare time she could to practicing the 'simpler' magical constructs Arlene had taught her. This latest creation would join three others she had already positioned around the estate, forming the beginnings of a very rudimentary defensive network.

The arrays themselves weren't particularly impressive, capable of conjuring only basic fire barriers when triggered by an intruder's presence. However, they served as both practical exercise and a foundation for more ambitious plans. For the time being, Scarlett was only repeating what Arlene had taught her, but eventually, she intended to start implementing some of the runes that Thainnith's legacy had taught her, and she also wanted to integrate these arrays with the Loci itself, allowing the Idol-touched to channel and direct more potent magical effects through them.

Of course, scattering potentially dangerous magical traps across the estate presented its own set of problems. Scarlett had briefly considered setting up warning markers along the property's borders so members of the staff wouldn't accidentally stumble onto them, but doing so would kind of defeat the purpose behind having the defences. Instead, she had instructed Garside to inform the staff and guards about restricted areas, and attempted to convey similar instructions to the Loci so that it could remove those who treaded too close.

She still remained uncertain if it could comprehend such complex commands, though.

There was a nagging voice in the back of Scarlett's mind reminding her that Evelyne would likely disapprove of such cavalier experimentation inside their estate. It did give her pause for another moment, thinking that perhaps she *should* remove the arrays, at least temporarily. After all, they were unlikely to do anything against real determined threats like the Cabal.

She'd have to consider it a bit more.

The thought of Evelyne drew Scarlett's attention to the [Hartford Garnet Ring] adorning her finger. She had taken to keeping it on now, despite being unable to activate it. Whether it was from a sense of rebellion or a desire to send some unspoken message didn't really matter.

Pushing these musings aside, Scarlett turned back to Garside. "Has a meal been prepared?" she asked, suddenly aware of the gnawing hunger that had been building up all morning. Between her magical practice and work on the arrays, she was, quite frankly, ravenous.

Garside inclined his head. "It has, My Lady. However, you may wish to delay your meal somewhat. A guest has arrived requesting an audience with you."

A slight frown creased Scarlett's brow. An unannounced visitor? What, did they expect an immediate reception?

"Tell this person that they will have to wait," she said, a note of annoyance creeping into her voice.

She was at least going to eat first.

"I shall do so," Garside replied, then cleared his throat softly. "You may, however, wish to know that the individual in question is Miss Breeden."

Scarlett stopped in her tracks, turning to face the butler fully. "...Miss Breeden?"

Kat had come here?

Garside nodded solemnly. “Indeed, My Lady.”

For a moment, Scarlett’s gaze drifted longingly down the hallway towards the dining hall where her meal awaited. Eventually, she released a resigned sigh. It seemed lunch would have to wait.

“Very well,” she said, turning back to Garside. “Have her shown to the parlour. I will meet her there.”

“I already have taken the liberty, My Lady. She awaits you as we speak.”

“Of course you have.” Scarlett turned on her heel, heading down another corridor that led to the parlour.

It had been ages since she’d last seen Kat. The Shielder’s sudden appearance was puzzling, honestly, especially given the Guild’s current state of high alert. While not exactly angry about the impromptu visit—other than it delaying her meal—Scarlett couldn’t help but wonder at the reason behind it.

Soon enough, she arrived at the parlour. Garside stepped forward to open the door, and she swept into the room.

Seated on one of the plush couches at the center of the space was a tall woman dressed in simple, practical attire, with sun-bleached golden hair pulled back into a long braid that draped over one shoulder. Light blue eyes set in a fair-skinned face turned to meet Scarlett’s gaze, and a noticeable scar—angry red skin that hinted at an old burn injury—marked the lower right side of her chin.

A smile spread across the woman’s lips as she spotted Scarlett. “Well, look who it is,” she said, her voice carrying a hint of playful sarcasm. “It’s been a while, yeah?”

Scarlett studied the woman for a moment before crossing the room, Garside quietly closing the door behind her and remaining in the hallway. “Indeed it has,” she replied, her tone carefully neutral. “I had almost forgotten you existed, Miss Breeden, given how long it has been.”

“Oh, come on. It hasn’t been *that* long,” Kat protested. “What’s up with the cold shoulder?”

Scarlett settled onto the couch opposite Kat, smoothing her dress as she sat. “Much has happened in the last few months,” she explained. “So much so that you likely would not believe me even if I regaled it all. During that time, I have heard precious little from you, yet you expect me to welcome you with open arms when you arrive without prior word?”

“I see how it is,” Kat said, shaking her head slowly. “You replace me with the shinier, brighter younger generation and go around making a name for yourself. Then you forget all about your good ol’ pal Kat who helped you get where you are today just because she disappears off the face of the earth for a while.” She sighed noisily. “The world really isn’t fair.”

“It certainly is not,” Scarlett agreed simply.

The two of them regarded each other for a few seconds longer before Kat let out a light laugh. “Well, you didn’t kick me out for just showing up like this, so I’m going to assume you’ve still got a soft spot for me somewhere in that cold heart of yours.”

Scarlett clicked her tongue, though there was no real reproach in her gesture. “Are you aware that you caused me to suspend my meal? Most who attempted such a thing would live to severely regret it.”

“You know, you could just have come *after* eating,” Kat pointed out. “I wouldn’t have minded waiting.”

“I am not so rude as to treat a friend in that manner after not having seen them for months,” Scarlett replied.

Kat’s smile widened. “‘Friend’, huh? Well, thanks for that. It’s nice seeing you again, Scarlett.”

Scarlett relaxed her expression. “You as well.”

“By the by,” Kat said, gesturing towards the entrance with her thumb. “I couldn’t help but notice as I arrived — did you renovate the courtyard or something? It looked different. In fact, this whole place feels...weird, somehow.”

“The courtyard had to be reconstructed after it was disrupted in one of the Cabal’s raids, and then further damaged by the blood of an ashenwraith dragon,” Scarlett explained. “As for the other change you are sensing, that is likely the presence of the new house spirit that watches over the estate.”

Kat blinked, staring at her for a short while before letting out a bemused chuckle. “I see nothing’s changed while I’ve been gone.” Her smile faded as she fixed Scarlett with a deadpan look. “Are you actually being serious, though?”

“Who knows?” Scarlett answered, her tone deliberately cryptic.

“...That’s just mean.”

The ghost of a smile appeared on Scarlett’s lips. “You should not have caused me to miss my meal.”

To be honest, it surprised even Scarlett herself how genuinely pleased she was to see one of the first people she’d gotten to know in this world.

“But you just said—” Kat began, then stopped herself, shaking her head once more in exasperation. “Ah, whatever. My sincerest apologies, *my lady*, for so rudely imposing upon your time and preventing you from partaking in your midday repass.”

Scarlett arched an eyebrow. “You have become more eloquent.”

Kat shrugged, a hint of pride colouring her voice. “I read a few books when I had the time.”

“I believe you intended to say ‘repast’, however.”

The woman’s expression fell, and she waved her hand dismissively in the air. “Bah, same thing. Close enough.”

“Not quite, but I suppose I must commend your effort,” Scarlett said. Then she straightened, her expression growing more serious. “However, as agreeable as this reunion may be, I suspect you haven’t come all this way for mere pleasantries. What brings you here, Kat? I would have thought the Shields Guild would be keeping you more occupied than ever, given recent events.”

Kat’s demeanour sobered to match Scarlett’s. “It’s...a bit complicated,” she admitted, rubbing the back of her neck. “But you’re right, this isn’t *just* a social call. The Guild sent me, actually. We need to talk.”