

182: A bard's perplexing meetings

Rosa gazed out of the carriage window, looking down at the bustling and packed streets of Bridgespell as the vehicle merged with the lively stream of urban traffic that traveled through the city.

She was sitting by herself in the cabin, which was an odd experience. This marked the first time she had ever been in an actual carriage by herself. It was also the first time she'd stayed at an inn that went as far as providing carriages for their guests' use around the city.

She'd been introduced to all kinds of fancy and novel experiences ever since coming under Scarlett's employ.

A grimace wormed its way onto her face, and she averted her eyes when she caught sight of a passerby sprouting tentacles from beneath their shirt, wriggling in the air above the person's head as if preparing to tear it off.

The visions had been less frequent lately, but when they did appear, they didn't hold back anymore. Her passenger was growing impatient.

She didn't dare hope that this trip would completely liberate her from its presence, but maybe she could finally get some answers. That was all she wanted at this point. To make sense of the mess that was her life.

Her thoughts drifted back to the earlier conversation with Scarlett.

She still didn't understand what was holding the woman back and dictating her actions on the subject, but there was no doubt in her mind at this point that Scarlett *did* know what was wrong with her. Not just that, but also how to *fix it*.

She trusted that Scarlett had reasons for keeping quiet and that the woman was working to help her.

That was why it pained her to go against Scarlett's wishes like this, but this was the one occasion she couldn't simply go along with things.

However, for once, it didn't feel like it was just because she was running away; she understood why Scarlett didn't want her to go alone. Rosa was apprehensive about doing so herself. But even *if* any of the others could help, and they would accept her once they learned what she was hiding, she couldn't bring herself to let them join. Because it *was* dangerous. And while things had been relatively calm lately, she sensed that it was only a matter of time until something snapped again, and they were far more likely to be hurt than she was.

Maybe she was being unreasonable. She knew for a fact that Scarlett had thought that. But this was one of the few decisions that was solely up to Rosa to make, and she wasn't willing to risk the others' safety, even if it meant increasing the risk to herself.

A morbid chuckle escaped her.

Maybe this was how it felt to rebel against one's old folks' decisions. There was an illicit sense of exhilaration about it, she had to admit.

The Golden Griffin Inn was situated in the Upper Ward of Bridgespell, closer to the western gate. From the maps Rosa had seen, her destination was located east of the city.

The carriage transported her to the Stoneway Ward, near the eastern gates, where she disembarked in a smaller market neighborhood.

With her klerl secured on her back and a pack strapped over her shoulder, she spent roughly fifteen minutes browsing for the necessary supplies for her journey. After that, she searched for a ride heading out into the countryside.

Eventually, she found a place that had a wagon passing through the city and picking up passengers, bound for a town half a day's travel called Flatgulf, not too far away from where she was going. Having paid her fare, she climbed onto the back of the wagon, placed her pack and klerl at her feet, and settled back in her seat as the pair of workhorses neighed and the vehicle began moving.

It felt like she was reliving the old days when she roamed from settlement to settlement by herself every other week, earning her bread minstreling away wherever she could. It was insane to think that not even half a year had passed since then; yet, it almost felt like a lifetime in some ways.

The thought filled her with both nostalgia and wistfulness. She didn't mind that way of life. Even if her circumstances had been different, she might have still chosen that path back then. But she knew that, if faced with the choice of returning to that lifestyle and having things stay as they were now, she would choose the latter eleven times out of ten.

The question was whether she'd even have that choice.

She could only wait and see how the dice would fall.

"You appear to have some weighted contemplations on your mind," a voice broke the silence before her.

Rosa blinked her eyes open, directing her gaze forward. She'd barely noticed him when she boarded, but a man was sitting opposite her on the wagon. He had an unassuming appearance, clad in a dark suit with a cape draped over his shoulders and a top hat crowning his head. A black cane leaned against the seat beside him as he scrutinized her with a pair of dull brown eyes.

She offered a courteous smile to the stranger. "Understatement of the century, that's for sure. Got more thoughts running through my head than a theatre troupe's got rehearsals. Don't rightly know what to make of it all."

The man let out a light chuckle. "That does indeed sound like quite the task. Where is your journey taking you to have your mind so occupied?"

"Crowcairn."

“Crowcairn, you say? It’s not often that place attracts the presence of your ilk.” He motioned towards the instrument at her feet.

Rosa glanced at the klert before returning her gaze to him. “You’ve been, then?”

He nodded. “I’ve traversed most corners of the empire. You could consider me somewhat of a wanderer by trade, if you will.”

“Yeah? Guess that makes two of us.” Some of the tension eased from Rosa’s shoulders as she leaned forward slightly in her seat, allowing the mire of worries that had besieged her mind to recede into the background. “That’s life as a bard, though. You never know where you’re going to end up.”

“There are some who prefer that way of life,” the man said.

“Don’t I know it. Used to think I was one of them.”

“I take it that does not hold true for you anymore?”

“Well, I’m still at sixes and sevens with that one.” Rosa absently started playing with a lock of her hair, twirling it between her fingers. “There’s this lady who’s got me leaning towards ‘no’ with the way she’s paying me in my current gig, but life’s not all about the solars, is it?”

The man reached up, lifting his hat from his head and placing it on the seat next to him with deliberate movements. “There are those who make it about that, but I suspect that your philosophy is the healthier one for your average person.”

Rosa nodded along. “Course, the same lady’s also giving me the whole royal treatment in just about every other regard as well, so I can’t really complain with all the perks she’s throwing my way.”

“it sounds as if this woman places considerable importance on your contributions, then,” the man said. “Is she your employer?”

“That she is. Though I can’t speak for any importance she’s placing on me. She’s a tough nut to crack, that one.”

He let out another soft chuckle. “I have encountered my fair share of such individuals in my time as well. It often requires some rather unique circumstances to get past such barriers. Nonetheless, I hope you manage to resolve those worries of yours.”

“That’s better than wishing me the worst. Thanks.” Rosa turned her gaze towards the front of the wagon, where the driver steered his pair of horses past a stall protruding a bit too far into the street, shouting a couple of expletives at the stall owner. “So that’s me, at least. Where are you heading?” she asked, returning her attention to her newfound conversation partner.

The man folded both hands in his lap, appearing contemplative. “That question carries numerous answers on my end, many of which I’m not at full liberty to divulge. However, you could say that this current outing serves as a minor detour for me. There is a certain business associate of mine, whom I managed to displease recently, who requested a favor. Precisely

what that favor *entailed* was rather nondescript and up for interpretation, and I suspect they understand that my assistance may not align with their ideal scenario. Nevertheless, I deemed I should at the very least assess the situation before I gave my response. This particular situation is one where there is some room for adaptability, even on my end.”

He smiled warmly at her. “But it seems that my involvement will not be necessary after all.”

Rosa let out a light laugh. “You could give my employer a run for her money in the art of speaking in riddles, my friend. I feel like I meet more and more people who think it’s the latest fashion to be mysterious nowadays. Did I miss out on some new fad, or do I simply attract the enigmatic type?”

The man shared her amusement, a small laugh escaping his lips. “Perhaps you do. If so, then it might be opportune for you to extend your gratitude to your employer for accustoming you to the trend early.”

“Suppose I should. But just between you and me, I wouldn’t mind if she dialed down the ‘mysteriousness’ just a tad. Would make things a lot easier working for her.”

“Such are the woes of employment, it would seem,” the brown-haired man remarked, gently shaking his head. He fell silent for a moment, his attention directed towards the street in front of the wagon. “...While Crowcairn is usually tranquil and calm this time of year, I’d still advise you to exercise caution on your journey. The roads are increasingly unpredictable these days, and there have been reports of rather unsavory individuals in the area lately.”

“Unsavory? In what way?”

“I am afraid I lack the answer to that.”

A slight furrow formed on Rosa’s brow. “Well, thanks anyway. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Perhaps it would be best not to visit that settlement on your own,” the man said.

Rosa shrugged. “Got no one else to bring.”

Yet another faint smile graced the man’s face. “If that is your decision. It is not my place to interfere, though I will confess to harboring a mild curiosity for how things will turn out. The current scenario is a rather unique one.”

Rosa gave him a puzzled look. What was that supposed to mean? “Not that I’m one to know the way you talk, but you’re slipping back into—”

“Now this is an intriguing development,” he suddenly interrupted her, his gaze still fixed ahead. “So this is the chosen path. Hmm. I will say that it is not the approach I would have personally endorsed, but that does not matter much at this juncture.”

Without looking, he reached for his cane, tapping its tip against the wooden floorboards once as he turned back to Rosa. “I will be taking my leave here. It was a pleasure conversing with you, and I wish you the best from here.”

The wagon rocked as it came to a halt outside a stable near the city gates. The man retrieved his hat, placed it on his head, and rose from his seat. Tipping it to Rosa, he disembarked the wagon with surprising ease, striding away down the block.

Her eyes followed him as he disappeared down the street, her mind pondering exactly who that man had been. She used to think Scarlett had a strange air about her at times, but towards the end, that fellow had definitely outdone the noblewoman in that aspect.

A few moments passed, and a couple of additional passengers climbed onto the wagon after speaking with the driver. Rosa shook her head to bring her thoughts away from the man's identity. It wasn't as if she was likely to ever meet him again.

When she returned her focus to the space in front of her, Rosa was met by the sight of a blond man donned in white robes looking straight at her.

"Fate certainly works in mysterious ways, doesn't it?" the man said, his white teeth showing in a radiant smile. "Here I was, lamenting that I had been unable to bid you a proper farewell yesterday, and who do I come across but the very woman whose charming countenance has been on my mind! Truly a serendipitous encounter."

Rosa blinked, shaking her head twice and squinting her eyes at him. "Mind helping me out here? I think I'm seeing things, because you bear an uncanny resemblance to a certain Father Abraham that I know."

The man chuckled. "I would certainly hope so, considering that I am said Father. The priestly kind, that is."

"Mind me asking what you're doing here?"

"I was about to ask you the very same question, Miss Hale. I would have assumed you to be with Baroness Hartford and her entourage at the moment."

"I took some time off to travel out into the countryside and pay a visit to an acquaintance. Scarlett's the dependable sort, so I think she and the rest will survive without me for a day or two, even if it might be hard."

Father Abraham raised an eyebrow, studying her. "As I said, fate, ever a capricious mistress, truly works in mysterious ways. Coincidentally, I too am leaving Bridgespell for a day or two, though my purpose involves my priestly responsibilities rather than a personal visit." His expression turned into a grimace for just a brief moment. "It was also the only salvation I saw at hand to deliver me from a horrifying trial enforced upon me by a colleague of mine. The temple received some disquieting reports that necessitated my attention, leading me to embark on this journey."

Rosa gave him a long look before bursting into laughter. Her amusement drew the attention of the only other passenger in the wagon with them, who was giving her a strange look.

If she had believed that the gods had ever cared or taken an interest in her, she might have thought that this was providence or some such nonsense.

“I’d wager my right pinky that Scarlett won’t exactly be overjoyed when she hears that I encountered you here on my return,” she said, dabbing at her eyes to rid them of tears.

Father Abraham’s expression shifted to one of mild hurt.

She gave him an assuaging smile. “Don’t worry, I don’t think she’s got anything against you. She’s just the type that takes a while to warm up to strangers.”

“I am sure that you meant that as consolation, but know that, for me, your words only serve to exacerbate the pain I feel,” the man said.

Another laugh escaped Rosa, and she leaned back in her seat as the priest looked even more upset.

Although she had no idea what to expect once she arrived in Crowcairn, she had almost dreaded the trip there even more, where she would be left alone with nothing but her thoughts and the visions that haunted her. But maybe it wouldn’t be so bad after all.