

205: Settlements

Rosa was used to not feeling in control. She was used to feeling like she was barely hanging on, clinging to the mast of a flimsy raft that was her life, caught in the turbulent waves of circumstances beyond her power. She had grown used to this feeling, but she had never been able to grow comfortable with it. That's why she had always been running away in some way, both from people, her past, and the uncertain future ahead of her.

The dark void stretching endlessly around her, its oppressive emptiness threatening to suffocate her, was just another manifestation of this seemingly uncontrollable fate of hers. This was how it looked when Anguish was in control, and Rosa couldn't deny that it terrified her to the core.

But, for once, that fear didn't matter. Because, for once, even if the one in control wasn't her, she was the one *in charge*.

Gradually, the darkness began to recede as Rosa harnessed the strange, newfound power that was now a part of her and reined in her surroundings. Whispers carried across the void, carrying unheard voices and incomprehensible sounds with them as the space shifted and moved, like a maelstrom with her at its center. The darkness attempted to evade her, slipping through her grasp, but it wasn't completely successful. It was bound, shackled by unseen threads running through everything, waiting for Rosa's bidding. Despite the emptiness around her, Rosa had an awareness of things now that seemed almost paradoxical in how it functioned.

The world became clearer as she started regaining control of her body, Anguish's influence retreating to reside within her in whatever nook the demon dwelled. Rosa found herself in the heart of a village shrouded in the dark of night.

Crowcairn.

She had only visited the settlement briefly while searching for Malachi, but she still recognized it from what she had seen from Anguish. She was close to the heart of the village, where there was a large open area with buildings surrounding it, lit up by several torches. At its center stood a wooden platform, atop which lay a strange object, crafted from dark black stone and carrying a presence that basically screamed at Rosa's senses.

It was a sight that felt all too familiar to her after the times she had spent with Scarlett.

Groups of people were scattered throughout the space, including a few elderly individuals, mostly adults, and a small number of children. They all seemed to be waiting for something, seemingly prepared to leave with bags around them and crates stacked in front of the platform. Moving about between the surrounding buildings were the occasional person dressed in black, armed with weapons at their side and with painted faces.

Rosa hadn't doubted Scarlett's words about the villagers being members of the Tribe, but seeing it firsthand like this was different, leaving her with conflicted feelings. But that didn't matter. In the end, she wasn't doing this for others.

Don't you think you're being rather stingy with that newfound power of yours, Rosalina darling? And after I agreed to help you keep those stained hands of yours somewhat clean.

A haunting voice sounded out inside Rosa's mind, sending shivers down her spine and reigniting the fears that hid within. She closed her eyes for a moment, summoning what willpower she could to force those emotions down and ignoring the demon for now. Opening her eyes again, she looked around.

A couple stood only a few meters away, gazing up at the dark sky with grim expressions, seemingly unaware of her presence. The woman was clutching a bag filled with various tools and everyday trinkets, while the man held a large hammer, his fists clenched. Above the village, the grey dome encompassing Crowcairn shone with a pale light, as though struggling to hold on beneath the visible stars.

Anguish had used her power as a Vile to bring Rosa here. How wasn't entirely clear. Even if the demon had to submit to Rosa for the time being, Rosa herself didn't fully comprehend the extent of all Anguish's abilities. It was all she could do to just ensure that Scarlett and the others weren't harmed when she had allowed Anguish to take control for a short moment.

That alone had felt nearly unimaginable to her, even just a short while back. Yet, strangely, Rosa was confident in what she *could* do, if not so much in what she couldn't do. Whatever Scarlett had done to her felt like it had opened a dozen new eyes within her, each perceiving something different, and none which she could truly explain.

Her eyes drifted down, landing on her blouse, where a hole had been torn through the fabric just below the neckline, exposing a violet, crystalline heart pulsating softly with an indescribable power. Rosa *felt* those pulsations reverberate throughout her body, like tiny ripples spreading outward. When Scarlett had implanted it there, it had hurt like the high seas, but now, it was calm.

Rosa chuckled softly to herself. Its appearance matched her eyes, almost like color-matched jewellery, 'gifted' by her boss. Wasn't that a funny thought? Though she somehow doubted Scarlett had done it intentionally.

The fleeting mirth granted to her by that thought quickly faded as she refocused her attention on the villagers, catching sight of a face she recognized stepping onto the platform to converse with one of the other villagers. A middle-aged man dressed in black, with an unassuming appearance and a mop of disheveled hair. Two sickle-like weapons dangled at his side as he crossed his arms. He was the same individual Rosa had seen meet with Malachi, discussing their partnership regarding the Abyssal Vilewurm that Scarlett had killed. It seemed like he held an important role in the village.

These innocent, defenseless, and untainted souls certainly are fortunate that they have you here to 'rescue' them. Perhaps you should cast off that veil I wove for you and reveal yourself. I'm sure they would be overjoyed at having your help.

Rosa winced upon hearing Anguish's voice again. Knowing that she could actually shut the demon up now if she wanted to didn't make hearing it any less unpleasant.

“Why don’t you go back to staying quiet about your presence like you used to,” Rosa replied in hushed tones. “Besides, unless you *want* me to immediately find Scarlett and Malachi so they can go back to turning you into a third-rate fantasm in my head, maybe *don’t* annoy me any more than you already have by making the past decade a living nightmare for me, kay?”

A sanguine laugh echoed within her head in response. *Oh, I don’t believe I need to be concerned about that. You’re far too soft-hearted for your own good, dear.*

“I’m not,” Rosa replied, her gaze momentarily resting on a young girl who tugged at her mother’s clothing and pointed at the grey dome above. “I’m just selfish.”

Of that, I am well aware.

“So, what can we do here?” Rosa asked, shifting her focus back to the platform at the center and the odd black artifact sitting on top of it. Somehow, she felt like its presence resonated with a part of her, though she didn’t understand why. “How can we save these people?”

Well, the most straightforward way would be to deal with those who are here to harm them. With my help, that would not be an issue. Simply let me out for another minute or two, and I’ll have it solved for you without you needing to lift a finger.

“Not happening.”

Grouch.

“The ones in black may have already made their choice, but the others are ready to leave. That means they already know of a way, doesn’t it? And you know what it is.”

I do.

“Then tell me,” Rosa said.

What’s the rush? Why don’t we take this opportunity to get more acquainted while your precious baroness is missing? I’m sure you’re curious about your new abilities, and who best to help with that than little old me?

“You’re stalling.”

Even now, Anguish was working to loosen the constraints that chained her. Scarlett’s method to suppress the demon was incredibly powerful. Rosa could tell that much, but she could also tell that it wouldn’t endure indefinitely against the power of a Vile, however limited it might be in this realm. Right now, Rosa was basically serving as a beacon for Anguish.

But that was fine. Rosa didn’t need all the time in the world; she just needed *enough* of it. After that, she already knew of a way of stopping Anguish from causing any harm. The demon had lost the moment she went up against Scarlett. Now this was just a scramble for her to preserve as much of her power as possible.

Rosa’s thoughts inevitably returned to Scarlett and the woman’s expression when Rosa had let her down earlier. It really had stung, seeing that face. Scarlett had done a lot to get her this

far. But it had been an eternity since Rosa had enjoyed the freedom to make any important decisions that were different from just ‘run away’, and she felt like if she was finally going to be rid of this thing inside her, she should be the one who chooses how it was done. And if she messed up, at least it wouldn’t be on Scarlett.

“Now,” Rosa said, trying to conjure some of that steely resolve Scarlett always had when she spoke in her voice. “Tell me what we can do.”



Scarlett stared at the weakened grey barrier before her, which revealed a fuzzy view of Crowcairn on the other side. The Phantom Sanctum that encompassed the village was still standing, but it was growing thinner. Captain Home and the duke’s forces’ continued efforts had clearly made an impact.

She surveyed her surroundings. After Anguish had broken free, Scarlett had found herself transported here, alone, standing at the border of Crowcairn with rolling hills extending behind her. Why she had arrived here in particular remained uncertain, but she had a decent enough hunch. Rosa had likely leaned on Anguish’s power to teleport them away from the citadel in order to save the village, and it was probably the bard’s doing that Scarlett ended up *outside* the barrier, with Rosa presumably being inside.

If Scarlett were to hazard a guess, Malachi and the others were probably not far away.

A scowl crept onto her face. She thought she might understand Rosa’s reasons, but it had still thrown a wrench into her plans. The entire reason she had embarked on this whole quest was to rid Rosa of Anguish, and now that process was only halfway complete.

What could she even do from here?

A flicker of movement in the dark drew her attention, and she turned her head to the left to see Fynn racing towards her from around the Sanctum’s barrier.

“Have you seen any of the others?” Scarlett asked as he reached her, bringing a powerful gust of wind in his wake. Now wasn’t the time for lengthy explanations of what had happened.

“Some of the knights were in that direction,” Fynn replied, pointing back over his shoulder.

Scarlett’s frown deepened. She turned her head, gazing into the distance where Anguish’s citadel loomed on the horizon, its black walls and towers almost melting into the night behind it. That meant those inside the boss room weren’t the only ones who had been transported. Did Rosa not want anyone to get stuck in the citadel?

Suddenly, the barrier behind her shuddered. Looking back at it, Scarlett saw it momentarily turning more transparent as a ripple moved through the dome.

She glanced at Fynn. “Can you sense Malachi nearby?”

He scrunched his nose, focusing for a moment before nodding. “Yes.”

Malachi was likely trying to dismantle the barrier, then. Scarlett wasn’t quite sure how the woman could do that, but it wasn’t like she knew everything about her capabilities. Had Malachi also concluded that Rosa was inside? It would make sense for her to be pissed off right now.

That could be bad, depending on what she would do.

Scarlett contemplated their options as she examined the barrier before them. It shuddered once more, trembling as its power visibly waned and it grew more see-through. It seemed like it wouldn’t last much longer.

If Rosa aimed to do something about Crowcairn, it would undoubtedly be linked to the Sanctumbrum in some way. Anguish wouldn’t have enough power to teleport an entire village of people while outside of her citadel, and while Rosa might serve as a conduit to the Blazes right now, the incarnation wasn’t complete.

The question was what Scarlett should do from here. Now that they were no longer inside the citadel, would Malachi even be able to perform the ritual again? Could they make their way back? Or was there an alternative course of action?

Her brow furrowed in thought, she watched as the barrier trembled from another blow to it, beginning to flicker.

“Fynn,” she finally said, and the young man looked at her seriously. “There is something I must ask of you.”