

197: Unwanted companions

The world was nothing but a void of darkness around Rosa, stretching endlessly in all directions while simultaneously closing in on her from all sides, suffocating her. It felt as if she were a phantom, her memories of the past few years only a haunting dream. The last thing she remembered was...

Her eyes snapped open, and she beheld the sprawling chamber before her in confusion. Towering black walls reached up into nothingness, where the ceiling was lost to an infinite twilight of shadows, creating the eerie impression of standing at the bottom of an abyss. Glistening crimson veins of molten stone meandered through the floor, casting an unsettling dark-red luminescence that bathed the chamber in its light.

The air was thick with the acrid scent of brimstone. In the heart of the room, Rosa spotted Malachi, bent over a massive sigil etched on the floor in a grotesque pattern seemingly drawn with blood. At its center lay a small circle adorned with a collection of strange items, none of which Rosa recognized. Malachi's hood was down, revealing her disheveled silver-grey hair as the woman meticulously traced the final sections of the sigil near its outer border.

When Rosa tried to move, she discovered that both her arms and legs were firmly stuck in some invisible manner to a throne. A deformed creation fashioned from pitch-black stone and white bone, the throne stood perched atop a dais and seemed to pulsate with a sinister energy, as though possessing a life force of its own. At its base, just in front of Rosa's feet, a short pedestal held the Abyssal Vilewyrms' heart, an obsidian mess of muscle and crag that pulsed in rhythm with the throne, connected to strange tendrils extending to the crimson veins spread around the place.

This scene was alien to Rosa, yet it evoked an uncanny familiarity all the same. So did the ominous sensation that gnawed at her, feeding the fear and disquiet inside. Gradually, her confusion waned as she recollected more and more about her situation.

She closed her eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath and counting down from eleven. She reminded herself what her goal was and whispered a brief prayer to the gods, even if they had never listened to her before.

Then she opened her eyes and turned her attention to Malachi. She didn't know exactly *how* she had ended up here, but she understood the general gist of it. This was part of whatever ritual the woman had initiated to free Rosa from her passenger. She had agreed to as much when they were back on Malachi's farmstead.

The current circumstances themselves were different from her expectations, though.

She cleared her throat, the sound of the action traveling through the chamber as a concert of menacing echoes. "You never told me that ridding me of the thing inside me involved strapping me to a throne in a room that, to put it bluntly, could make even the most bloodthirsty of tyrant's coo in awe."

Malachi paused, one hand stained with crimson, and looked up at her. Rosa chose to avoid dwelling on *why* there was so much blood there for now.

“I’m surprised you’re awake,” Malachi spoke slowly, then returned her focus to her work. “I had assumed you would remain unconscious for the entire duration. And no, I did not tell you as much. It seemed unlikely you would have agreed if I had.”

Once more, Rosa attempted moving her arms, but it was as if they were part of the throne itself, attached to the winding pale boles comprising its armrests. “...Golly, I wonder why,” she muttered.

“When pursuing what we are, there is no room for senseless scruples,” Malachi said. “Rest assured, our endeavours will prove mutually beneficial. I intend to honor my commitment to rid you of the demon residing within you, ensuring that you emerge from this experience in a better state than before.”

“And what about everybody else?” Rosa couldn’t stop herself from asking. Even if she didn’t fully comprehend what was going on, feeling disoriented and lost, the immense aura pervading this place was undeniable. They weren’t talking about just her and Malachi getting hurt if something went wrong with what they were doing. The consequences weren’t confined to simply the woman’s old farmstead, and maybe not even the region. Rosa shuddered at the thought of how far-reaching the effect might be.

Had she made a mistake again by enlisting Malachi’s help? In not leaving the moment she realized demons were involved? Was this destined to be an even worse reprise of previous events?

“I have few concerns regarding the fate of others,” Malachi replied, wiping the blood from her hands onto her dark robes as she seemed to have finished the sigil. “But if it troubles you, so be it. No outsiders will be harmed by what we are doing here unless they interfere or you allow yourself to be wholly overtaken. And this blood hails from swines.”

“Oh, have you no shame about lying to the dear girl like that?” Rosa’s voice escaped her in a dangerously alluring tone.

Rosa’s eyes widened, and from deep within her, the distress she had been suppressing surged forth, sending chills coursing through her body which didn’t feel entirely her own.

“You didn’t even flinch,” her voice persisted, a sinister amusement lacing her words, and Rosa was helpless to do anything about it.

Malachi turned to her for a few seconds before walking into the center of the sigil. She bent down and picked up a peculiar black orb, marked by hints of red that appeared to writhe within. “I expected no less from a Vile, but do you not consider it beneath you to attempt to sow unfounded doubts in her?” the woman remarked without glancing back at Rosa.

Rosa wanted to respond, to say anything, but it was as if she were submerged in a sea of futility, while the being within her reveled in her inability to act. It exuded an aura that was as close to the embodiment of dread as Rosa could imagine, birthing feelings of terror and despair that made her skin crawl while she was trapped in her own body.

Now, more than ever, she comprehended why the demon was called Anguish.

“I feel sorry for dear Rosalina,” her puppeted self said, mimicking Rosa’s cadence with unsettling accuracy, yet interwoven with depravity. “To have no here for her except a deranged, fiendling ex-priest. It’s no wonder she’s in tears~”

Only then did Rosa notice the wetness on her cheeks, but she was powerless to wipe them away. Anguish held absolute sway.

Malachi’s head turned, and her piercing green eyes locked onto Rosa.

“What’s wrong?” Anguish asked with scornful glee. “Did you truly think I wouldn’t recognize who you are? *What* you are? Your tainted blood makes me want to wrinkle my nose even from here.”

Malachi remained silent for a few seconds before returning her attention to the mysterious orb in her hand. Green magic emanated from her hands, flowing into the orb before exiting and suffusing itself into the floor. “There are few entities as conceited as a Vile, but you are as aware as I that you are powerless within that vessel, Anguish. All that remains at your disposal are your words now.”

A soft, involuntary laugh escaped Rosa’s lips, and she found herself forming a twisted smile.

“That’s quite enough for me,” Anguish said.

“I’m sure it is.” Malachi waved her free hand through the air, sending a wave of green magic pulsing into the Abyssal Vilewyrms heart before Rosa.

A gasp left Rosa, and it felt as though the world became clearer as Anguish’s looming presence retreated slightly. She took several deep breaths, marveling at the satisfaction that came from something as simple as breathing, even though she had never *actually* stopped doing so.

“T-Thank you,” she managed to speak slowly between her breaths, head slightly slumping as she focused on Malachi.

“I prefer not to waste my time on pointless arguments,” the woman said, paying Rosa little attention.

“Yeah, well, still. Although...I’m not sure how long this peace is going to hold.” Rosa grimaced as she could already sense Anguish moving to the surface. A few moments of silence ensued, with Rosa observing Malachi’s actions as she tried not to think about the inevitable return of those uncomfortable experiences. “What exactly are you doing?” she asked.

Malachi extended a single index finger, running a long, sharp nail over the surface of the orb in her grasp, leaving behind colorful sparks across it. “I am attuning this Astral Soulstone, fitting it so that it can regulate the energies of a vessel capable of binding a Vile’s essence. It’s a delicate process.”

“And the ‘Astral Soulstone’ is...?”

“A Zuverian artifact. It was gifted to me by an associate of sorts, and it serves many purposes. In this case, it is primarily a power source, and the very object that allowed this citadel to take form in this realm and be sustained for as long as it has.”

Rosa’s gaze traveled over the dismal chamber they were in. She would have preferred if it *didn’t* take form in this realm. “This citadel...It’s hers—Anguish’s—home, isn’t it?”

“A facsimile, to be precise. A reflection that connects to the heart of Anguish, conjured through the link to the Blaze that is seared into your very soul. You’re currently acting as the conduit through which all of this manifests.” Malachi snapped her fingers, and a four-legged demon materialized from the shadows within the room. It approached her, carrying a peculiar metal tool in its jaws, resembling a mix between a hammer and a sextant. Presenting the tool to Malachi, it then escaped back into the shadows without sparing a glance for Rosa.

Before it would have salivated at even the sight of her. It seemed that even the most feared of creatures were now wary of her.

Rosa couldn’t quite appreciate the humor in that as much as she usually would.

“Is this all related to that incarnation stuff you told me about earlier?” she asked.

“It is,” Malachi replied, using the new tool as if it were a measuring device, pressing its flat head against the Astral Soulstone while adjusting some of the odd handles on it.

“Then, correct me if I’m wrong,” Rosa began, “but the way I’ve understood it all, right now, it’s only a matter of time before I’m entirely consumed by one of the cruelest and most dangerous beings in possible all of existence, potentially bringing devastation to the entire empire?”

“Essentially.”

“Well, it’s comforting to finally have a grasp on the situation.”

Rosa couldn’t fathom why she continued to maintain a facade of bravado at this point, but perhaps it was her last act of defiance against the entity that had tormented her for so long.

“Though if Anguish’s incarnation into the Material Realm becomes complete, it’s unlikely to be limited to just the empire,” Malachi added.

Rosa did not need to hear that. She was already battling with the thoughts of what her losing control would mean. The thousands upon thousands of lives that would pay for her years of cowardice and avoidance of the truth. All those who would suffer for her mistakes. Imagined screams echoed through her mind as Anguish seemed to taunt her from within.

“Then,” Rosa eventually said, the emotion drained of emotion. “Is there any way I can persuade you to simply end my life?”

Malachi didn’t even turn to look at her as she replied. “No.”

“Your goal is to harness Anguish’s power for yourself, right?”

“My goal is to *supersede* Anguish.”

“Even if that puts the entire continent at risk?”

“I fail to see how their fate concerns me.”

A weary sigh escaped Rosa. “...So, what must we do to stop Anguish? Where will that leave us? And what does your superseding her actually mean?”

“The first step entails confining Anguish’s existence to merely dwelling within you, severing her connection to the Blaze from which most of her power stem. With that link closed, she would be no more formidable than an arch demon, albeit a highly ancient one. While she is trapped within you, however, she is vulnerable, and so is her citadel. From there, we will strip her of her Authority and graft it to this reflection.” Malachi gestured to the chamber around them. “This will allow it to surpass its original in the Blaze of Anguish and eventually supplant it entirely and accept a new master. When I hold that Authority, Anguish will cease to be a threat, and I will be free to wield what was once hers as I see fit.”

Several seconds passed as Rosa simply looked at the woman. For all she knew, Malachi was literally insane, but she did seem convinced of her own words, at least.

“I harbor no ambition for dominion or the destruction of the Material Realm, unlike the other Viles,” the woman continued. “There will be no conflict in that regard, so our goals align quite nicely. As for you, Rosa, we cannot destroy Anguish entirely, as attempting that would simply return her to her Blaze, even with the severed connection. However, the process of stripping her Authority and my supplanting her will render her a mere husk with no hold over you. While her presence may linger, she will no longer possess the power to control or torment you as she has before.”

Rosa let the information sink in, uncertain how to take it. That *was* essentially what she came here for, but was this the way she wanted it done? How could she be sure this was the correct thing to do? Right now, there wasn’t anything about her situation which felt *good*. But if Malachi was telling the truth, that might simply be temporary.

And Scarlett had been the one to set her on this path.

“Not sure I like the idea of having the husk of a Vile inside me for the rest of my life, though,” she said.

“Fear not, dearest Rosalina, for that won’t happen,” her own voice responded, sending shivers down Rosa’s spine. “That woman’s words are nothing but the delusions of one so deranged that they can’t distinguish between folly and mania. But I do so enjoy watching ants scuttle about in futility, willing to offer their souls for even a taste of power. It’s especially gratifying when it all ultimately benefits me.”

“Your words carry little weight when you’re trapped within that girl,” Malachi stated, still focused on her work with the artifact.

Rosa struggled to resist, but her body erupted into a high-pitched peal of laughter that carried across the chamber, reinforced by the menacing atmosphere around them. Literally. It was as if there were dozens of voices laughing at once.

“You genuinely believe you have everything under control, the reins firmly in your grasp. I could not have asked for better entertainment before my descent to the Material Realm. I’m oh-so anticipating how long that composure of yours will last, and the expression you’ll wear when I pluck those eyes from your skull to add to my collection.” Anguish’s words dripped with an enchanting cruelty and a disturbing certainty, as though she had already witnessed what the future held and was merely waiting for its unfolding.

“Please tell me you can get her to leave again,” Rosa managed to press out after that, her voice trembling.

Malachi simply shook her head, her focus fixated on the now rapidly shifting colors inside the orb she was holding as she manipulated it with both hands. “That will have to wait.”

“Don’t you worry, pet.” Anguish had no issue wresting control back, almost as if she had allowed Rosa to speak. “There’s no need to fear little old me. After all, we’ve been together for so long, haven’t we? We’re practically family by now. So many adventures we’ve shared. So many engaging experiences. I still recall the first time I got to go out and play, all those years ago. What was the name of that village? Mapleshear, was it? Its residents were ever so friendly. I wonder if they would still remember you? Of those that remain, I mean.”

Rosa clenched her jaws as unbidden memories sprang up from the recesses of her mind that she never wanted to think about. “*Shut up.*”

“You wound me, Rosalina darling. And after I have waited for *so* long to have a proper chat. I feel like we should have introduced ourselves sooner.”

“I’d sooner duel ten dragons blindfolded with a spoon than engage in any conversation with you,” Rosa said.

Another of Anguish’s laughs left her body as the demon commandeered her body. “Your efforts to put up a front are futile against me, my dear. I can taste all those deliciously panicked emotions coursing through you. There’s no hiding from me.”

“It seems to me that you’re the one who’s afraid here, Anguish,” Malachi spoke up. “Spare us the wailing and be quiet.”

“You think *I* am afraid?” Anguish asked, forcing a treacherous smile onto Rosa’s face. “Oh, you’re adorably naive. Still ignorant of the true circumstances you believe yourself to have orchestrated. Still under the illusion that you are the one in *control.*”

For a brief moment, Malachi turned her gaze away from her work and to Rosa. “...And you are still trying to sow doubt and hesitation, I see. Pointless.”

“Is it not? Then why don’t you ask our lovely Rosa here who *she* thinks is truly in control?”

With those words, Rosa felt a new awareness expand within her, reaching beyond the chamber's walls to encompass the entire 'citadel' they were in less than a second. It was *vast*, overwhelming her at first. Then, under an external force, this newfound awareness narrowed its focus to a specific area near the citadel's base, where a red-haired woman and her entourage navigated a corridor filled with nightmarish demons.

Scarlett.

Elation, relief, anxiety, and dread swirled within Rosa simultaneously as she witnessed the noblewoman progressing even when faced with such a perilous path. There was no doubt about Scarlett's purpose here.

"Its quite delightful to see your reactions around that woman," Anguish spoke through her, earning a puzzled frown from Malachi. "It's been ages since a mere mortal has been able to contend with me as she has, and even longer since one has made me feel actual *frustration*." There was a subtle change in Anguish's tone, where the Vile's blithely sardonic demeanor disappeared, but it soon returned. "I can see why you're so drawn to her, Rosalina dear. It's even more entertaining when your half-blooded companion here isn't even aware of the *existence* of the true mastermind behind all of this. I can hardly contain the excitement I feel from thinking about how *fun* it'll be to turn that baroness into my obedient and malleable servant."

Suddenly, Rosa's perception shifted, and her view of Scarlett and the others was replaced by gruesome visions of the noblewoman writhing in agony, subjected to endless bouts of torture and punishments, all accompanied by Rosa's own twisted laughter.

"...What do you mean by that?" Malachi's voice cut through the disturbing images.

"Hmm, now you choose to listen to my words? I suppose I can enlighten you, seeing as it's almost pitiable to see you so unaware," Anguish mused. "Isn't it peculiar? How perfectly everything aligned for your quaint little coup d'état? How my incarnate conveniently found you at precisely the right moment, and how that pathetic excuse for a demon that clawed its way out of Malevolence's pits just happened to meet its demise in a manner so fitting to your schemes?"

"The convenience of certain events does not alter my plans," Malachi said, and as the disquieting visions Rosa had been shown slowly faded, she could see a scowl creasing the woman's face.

"Certainly not. Why, convenience played right *into* your plans," Anguish replied. "Or rather, your plans aligned rather well with convenience. You exude such confidence in your plans and display such perceptiveness in detecting even my concealed presence, yet you're utterly blind to how you're unwittingly dancing to someone else's tune. One must wonder whether your grand design will unfold as you anticipate."

Malachi's expression darkened. She turned her attention back to the Astral Soulstone one last time, making some final adjustments before placing it at the center of the sigil and rising to her feet. She started walking towards the throne, her glowing eyes locked onto Rosa.

"Did I strike a nerve?" Anguish asked through Rosa in a mocking tone.

Malachi halted in front of her, reaching out to grab her face with force, her sharp nails scraping against Rosa's skin and causing blood to trickle. Rosa wanted to cry out in pain, but Anguish simply continued her ridicule.

"Enjoy your laughter while you can, Anguish," Malachi warned, leaning closer and staring into Rosa's eyes. "It will be your last opportunity to do so."

With that, something flashed from the woman's hand and surged into Rosa. Just as when Malachi had expelled Anguish the first time, Rosa felt as if she were drenched by water from within, causing the Vile's presence to recede. This time, much further than before, though a part of the demon still remained.

Left gasping, Rosa could only sit there, sweat on her brow and traces of blood running down her face, as Malachi studied her with a dangerous expression.

"Were there any truth to her words?" the woman asked.

Rosa blinked, still trying to collect herself and organize her thoughts. Eventually, she managed a weak shake of her head. "Can't tell you when I ain't got much clue myself what she was talking about."

Nothing good would come from telling her about Scarlett.

"Who told you to come find me originally?"

"Some lady from the Talonborn Circle."

Malachi's gaze narrowed, but eventually, she withdrew and moved back towards the center of the chamber. "There is still work to be done before everything is ready. Do your best to stave off her return as long as possible. I would rather not endure any more of her nonsensical prattle."

In Rosa's mind, Anguish's laughter continued echoing, even as she felt the Vile backing off for the time being.

"Sure, I'll see what I can do..." she mumbled, more to herself than anything.

As her eyes lingered on the woman's back, she couldn't help but wonder who *was* actually in control here. Malachi, Scarlett, or Anguish? Knowing what she did about each of them, it appeared that all three were convinced they held the reins to some degree.

All she could do was hope that Scarlett was the one who actually did.