

## 203: The citadel's heart

Scarlett's eyes were fixed on the elevated platform and the throne on top of it across the room, where Rosa sat. Before the throne, atop a short pedestal, was the heart of the Abyssal Vilewurm, pulsating with a sinister energy.

Even from this distance, Anguish's vicious grin was clear on the woman's face, reveling in the situation. Her eyes bore a profound darkness within them that seemed to peer into one's very being.

Of all the thoughts and emotions swirling within Scarlett right now, a chilling rage surged to the forefront. That was just the expression she had anticipated from the demon when they finally met again. She had harbored some hope that Rosa would be the one in control once they arrived, but she knew there had been no guarantee.

"Oh, spare me the glare, Red~" the Vile taunted, her voice somehow resonating across the chamber and echoing in Scarlett's ears like a haunting melody. The words and tone resembled Rosa's, yet Anguish managed to twist and turn them in a way that made Scarlett's hair stand. "Our earlier heart-to-heart notwithstanding, this is the first time we meet face-to-face for some time. What do you think about my soon-to-be vessel? Rather fetching, isn't it? And it comes with such an endearing little persona. I know you certainly didn't keep her around for nothing."

It seemed like Anguish couldn't leave the ominous-looking throne she was on, but that didn't stop her from moving her shoulder and head as if showing off, her wavy brown hair falling to partially cover her face. The demon emitted a sardonic giggle, one that this time felt like it truly could have come from Rosa, and nonchalantly blew away the stray locks. "It's always a delight to assume corporeal form like this. I'll have to remember to express my gratitude to Rosa dear for lending it to me."

"Is...is that *it*? The Vile?" Allyssa whispered beside Scarlett, her gaze locked on Rosa with a disconcerted expression.

"It is," Scarlett replied, taking several steps into the expansive boss room, striving to maintain her composure as she surveyed the chamber. The oppressive aura in the air here was tenfold more suffocating than the one outside, and the dark walls and seemingly non-existent ceiling cast an ominous ambiance over the space.

At the room's epicenter, drawn onto the floor, with veins of molten rock crisscrossing through it, lay a sigil that occupied at least half of the chamber. Standing within it was a woman with disorderly silvery hair, draped in dark robes, her uncannily green eyes fixated on Scarlett and exuding an intensity that would make most anyone feel uneasy.

Malachi.

Scarlett's gaze lowered to the floor beside the woman, where several objects were scattered around key points on the sigil. Most prominently, a black orb beat with swirling colors at its center, intermittently pulsing energy into the ground beneath it and the crimson veins threading throughout the room.

The [Astral Soulstone] was almost ready. It appeared the ritual had progressed significantly.

“Don’t you think you are being rather rude, Red?” Anguish’s voice reverberated. “Aren’t you going to introduce yourself, or shall I do the honors?”

Scarlett’s attention snapped back to the Vile. “Cease with the farce, Anguish. And do not address me in such a manner.”

The demon simply laughed atop her throne, leaning forward with Rosa’s body as far as her movement allowed her. “I’m hurt. Is Rosalina the only one permitted to address you thus? And after we had been in a partnership for so long. But who am I to question you? You are the one who calls the shots, after all.”

“There has never been a partnership between us, and I suggest you stop testing my patience. You are swiftly dispelling any doubts I may have harbored about ridding this realm of your presence.” Scarlett stopped a short distance away from the edge of the sigil, shifting her focus back to Malachi, who was still scrutinizing her closely.

“Always so grave and serious. I suppose that’s one of the qualities I like about you,” Anguish remarked, reclining against her throne, its back crafted from the deformed bone of some demonic creature encased within black stone. “But I believe we are digressing. Our inquisitive fiendling acquaintance here seems quite intrigued by you and your companion, Baroness. I’ve already told her about you, but for some reason, she seemed to doubt the sincerity of my account. I do so wonder why.”

Scarlett locked eyes with Malachi for a moment, peering into the woman’s harsh, unwavering gaze.

“Allow me to introduce—”

“You’re that girl’s accomplice,” Malachi interrupted before Scarlett could finish her sentence, her words carrying a venomous threat behind them. “You were the one who sent her to find me.”

“Oh my, I do believe she has seen you through, Baroness,” Anguish quipped from the far end of the chamber. “But ‘accomplice’ feels too tame a descriptor. I would say ‘puppet master’ is a much better fit.”

Scarlett ignored the Vile, maintaining her focus on Malachi. She didn’t know exactly what fabrications or manipulations Anguish might have tried to fill the woman with, but it was clear that the demon’s intent would be to pit them against each other.

“It is true that I played a part in Miss Hale’s quest to locate you. However, I trust that you are wise enough not to believe a Vile’s words regarding my character.”

She glanced over her shoulder at Allyssa, who stood a short distance behind her now, crossbow in one hand and a vial of a gleaming silver liquid clasped in her other. The girl wore an anxious expression but seemed ready to act, keeping a watchful eye on their surroundings. That was good.

“Rosa claimed she was sent here by a member of the Talonborn Circle,” Malachi said, distrust unmistakable in her raspy voice. “It appears I was lied to.”

Scarlett turned back to her. “That was not a lie on Miss Hale’s part. The circumstances surrounding my involvement were rather convoluted, forcing me to act in a very circumlocutory manner in order to influence the situation. I was bound by a pact of non-interference with Anguish, restricting my movements. However, rest assured that my objective and yours do not clash directly.”

Malachi’s eyes narrowed. “Who are you?”

“If you’d only asked, I could have revealed that ages ago,” Anguish said.

Malachi’s head snapped towards the demon, and with a swift gesture with her hand, a wave of viridescent energy streaked across the room and struck Anguish. “Silence.”

The Vile’s head momentarily slumped, though her laughter continued resonating through the room. “Someone’s growing *tense*. I wonder how long that little trick of yours will continue working.”

As those words sounded out, the air around Anguish seemed to shift, somehow *lessening* in weight, and a moment later, she raised her head slowly, her expression suddenly weary and spent. “Cripes and buggerations, that feels dreadful,” she spoke heavily. “You’d think one’d get used to having your mind pinioned into a jar and your body played with like a marionette, but apparently not.”

Rosa.

“Rosa!” Allyssa exclaimed from behind Scarlett.

The bard managed a feeble smile as she sat limply on Anguish’s throne. “Great seeing you as well, Allyssa. Wished the circumstances could have been a bit better, but I didn’t have much time to prepare for guests.”

“Rosa,” Scarlett said in an even voice, focusing on the woman.

Rosa directed her smile at Scarlett. “Hiya, Red. Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes, always looking stylish with that tiara of yours. Guess that means there’s an army of charred demons trailing the hallways behind you. Call me peckish, though, but I’m not quite sure I like the ‘gift’ you arranged for me this time. I’ll be lodging a complaint to the higher-ups.”

“I am your superior.”

“Well, there you have it. Consider complaint lodged.”

Scarlett stayed quiet for a few seconds, observing the woman. When Anguish had been in control, the demon had exuded a menacing atmosphere full of power, but now, it looked like Rosa hadn’t slept for days. Scarlett had no doubt she would have endured considerable suffering under Anguish’s influence since it all began. “...I will take it into consideration.”

“You have been deceiving me, Rosa,” Malachi stated suddenly. “I’m disappointed.”

Rosa slowly shifted her gaze to the woman. “In my defense, you weren’t much better. I still can’t recall ever signing up for being bound to a cursed throne while we summon a demon to raze half the continent. Besides, technically, I never *lied*. I just danced around the truth a little. A truth I wasn’t entirely sure of myself, by the way.”

Malachi did not seem convinced or amused by the bard’s words, redirecting her attention to Scarlett. “You are a noble of the empire and the girl’s benefactor, I presume. I have banished Anguish for the time being, so speak. What is your purpose here? Why have you interfered with my plans?”

“I suppose I shall properly introduce myself this time,” Scarlett said. “I am Baroness Scarlett Hartford, and for the past six months, I have been Miss Hale’s employer. As for why I have interfered with your plans, I would say that is not an entirely accurate description of my actions. I merely acted to expedite your plans somewhat, and to alleviate the burden placed on my retainer.”

“Expedite...” Malachi studied her closely, a hint of recognition showing on her face. “You were the one who slew the Vilewurm.”

“That is correct.”

“So you are knowledgeable of demons, even having struck a pact with a Vile. You were aware of me and my plans, yet I’ve never heard of you. And that relic you are carrying...” For a moment, the woman’s gaze shifted to Scarlett’s hand, where [Ittar’s Genesis] was concealed beneath a piece of fabric. She then looked down at the base of the sigil at her feet, contemplating the Astral Soulstone at its center. Finally, she returned her attention to Scarlett. “You are no mere baroness. Are you affiliated with the Followers of Ittar? Or...with her?”

Scarlett arched a brow. She suspected she knew who Malachi was referring to. Logically, only one person should be aware of Malachi’s plans, and thus, coming to the conclusion that Scarlett was connected to her in some way wasn’t unreasonable.

“I assume you are referring to Mistress?” she said.

At that, Malachi’s eyes seemed to become an ever more intense shade of green.

“I do have some involvement with her, yes,” Scarlett continued. “It is not surprising that you are unaware of who I am, however. I only recently became active, and as you well know, it can be advantageous to remain beneath the attention of influential individuals.”

“I see. So, what is your purpose here?” Malachi asked bluntly.

Scarlett’s mouth drew into a line, working to restrain the part of her temper that disliked being talked to rudely. It was harder than usual when her anger at Anguish was pushing at the front.

“...It is quite simple,” she eventually answered. “I am here to ensure that Miss Hale emerges from these events largely unscathed and liberated from the grip of a Vile. As I mentioned, my goal does not directly oppose yours.”

Malachi frowned. “All of this, just for that?”

“That would depend. What are you referring to when you say ‘all of this’?”

The woman regarded her suspiciously for several seconds, then ignored answering as she motioned towards Rosa. “As you can see, the girl is fine. Anguish is trapped within her, and everything is proceeding as planned.”

Scarlett glanced at Rosa’s worn appearance. In what world did that classify as ‘fine’?

“I take issue with that statement,” the woman in question spoke up, raising a single finger from the armrest her hands were stuck to. “Though I doubt anyone’ll bother doing something about it.”

Scarlett considered her for a moment before turning back to Malachi. She wasn’t going to argue the point with Malachi. She had been aware of the predicament this would place Rosa in from the beginning, but it was a necessary sacrifice.

Malachi eyed her for a brief period. “...If that’s all you came to do, then I suggest you take your leave. Your presence is unnecessary, and the girl can come find you once we’ve finished.”

She clearly doubted Scarlett’s words, and perhaps with good reason. It *was* strange that Scarlett was here in the first place, a holy relic of Ittar in her possession and evidently having fought her way through the entire citadel. Not to mention how suspicious it was that Scarlett knew what she did.

If only it had been so simple that Scarlett *could* leaven things at that.

“Before you ask that I leave, there is something I must say.”

Malachi stayed silent as she watched her.

“I am aware of your general purpose here, and I do not care if you displace Anguish from her seat. She is my enemy, so that would only work in my favor and simplify matters greatly for me in the future. However, with that said, I feel compelled to issue a warning.”

“And what is that?”

Scarlett studied Malachi for a moment, then gestured towards the sigil drawn on the floor and the orb that served as its centerpiece. “The Astral Soulstone cannot be—”

“Scarlett!” Rosa’s cry pierced the air, and from the corner of Scarlett’s eye, something emerged from the shadows. She barely had time to react as a four-legged demon leaped at her, drool dripping from its maw. A sharp pain seared her right arm where its fangs tore through her clothes and the magical defense given by [Sidhe’s Flowing Garbs]. Just in time,

she activated the ability of her [Garments of Form], vanishing into a thin mist and reappearing a short distance behind the place where the demon had been about to slam into her.

Without hesitation, she conjured a barrage of attacks that assailed the demon as it landed a bit to the left of her original position, before summoning even more magic to target the demon that had aimed for Allyssa as well. Both demons emitted pained howls as her attacks pierced their defenses, their growls silenced as they recoiled momentarily. Allyssa stumbled back to Scarlett, having hurled the vial she'd held, coating one of the demons in the silvery liquid that clung to its body and trailed smoke from its searing skin.

“Malachi, stop!” Rosa shouted from her perch on the throne.

Scarlett's eyes darted around the chamber for any other lurking demons poised for an attack, but it was almost impossible to make out any movement against the pitch-black walls.

“Stop this, Malachi,” she demanded, narrowing her eyes at the two demons as they seemed ready for another assault despite their injuries. “Heed my words before you commit a mistake you cannot afford. There is something you must know about the Soulstone.”

Malachi raised a bony finger, thrusting it menacingly towards Scarlett. More growls echoed from the shadows around the chamber. “There is no reason for me to heed anything you have to say. I don't care about any connection you might have to Mistress. She is not my master, and it won't alter my plans. As I see it, your presence only poses a threat.”

“Malachi, if you don't stop, I won't help with the ritual!” Rosa's voice held a hint of urgency now.

“At this point, your assistance is no longer necessary, girl.”

“It is! You're underestimating Anguish's influence! Trust me, she still has more power than you expect!”

“She is not wrong,” Scarlett said, maintaining a gaze on Malachi. “Anguish may still pose a threat to your plans, which is something neither of us desires. Furthermore, there is another danger you are yet unaware of that may prove an obstacle to your goals.” She adopted a steely tone. “At this stage, surely you do not presume you are in complete command of the situation and fully aware of the present circumstances. My presence here attests to the contrary.”

“Listen to her, Malachi,” Rosa implored, though she was clearly straining herself to keep yelling.

Scarlett raised a hand, gesturing to the woman. “Allow me to handle this.”

A flicker of anger flashed in Malachi's eyes, but the woman actually paused, as though genuinely weighing the gravity of Scarlett's words. The demonic growls throughout the room subsided, and the two injured demons in front of Scarlett and Allyssa refrained from attacking, even though they appeared eager to do so.

Several seconds passed as Malachi considered Scarlett. Finally, she waved her hand and ordered the demons back. They seemed unwilling to obey at first, but then the woman must have worked her magic in some way as both whimpered suddenly and slowly began retreating to the corners of the chamber, vanishing into the shadows. Malachi then fixed her gaze on Scarlett. “Speak.”

Scarlett didn’t let her guard down, retrieving a healing potion to tend to the wound she’d sustained. It wasn’t severe, but it still hurt. She didn’t let that show on her face, though. “You are every bit as suspicious as I had heard, Malachi. I see you will not make this easy for either of us.” Once she’d addressed her wound, she continued. “What I was about to say, before you interrupted me, pertains to something you do not know about the Astral Soulstone’s role in this process.”

She pointed to the artifact that served as the power source for this entire ritual. It, along with Rosa herself and the Abyssal Vilewyrms’ heart, formed the components necessary to manifest a part of the Blazes within the Material Realm. The artifact held enough power to bring about this phenomenon as well as suppress Anguish’s presence inside Rosa, which placed it on a similar level to the core of an ancient dragon. You were unlikely to find any more powerful power sources in this world.

The fact that Malachi just so happened to possess it wasn’t a coincidence.

“There is nothing I do not know about this ritual,” Malachi said. “I have spent years studying the Soulstone for precisely this purpose. It will do what I want it to do.”

“I am not saying you are wrong, but consider this: who was it that gifted it to you?”

The woman’s brow furrowed, as if trying to decipher what Scarlett was getting at.

“If you are as familiar with that person as I am, you would be aware that she does not act without reason. Few individuals are as calculating as Mistress.”

“You think me a fool?” Malachi asked. “I have examined the Soulstone thoroughly for exactly that reason. As I said, it will do what I want it to.”

“And what you want is to seize the authority of a Vile,” Scarlett said. “I am not disputing that the Soulstone can accomplish this. However, I am here to caution you that there is more to it. While I am certain there are few as knowledgeable in matters of demonology as you, the Soulstone is a Zuverian artifact. Even if you had spent a decade studying it, I can assure you that your understanding of the artifact would not come close to Mistress’s comprehension. And while she may have a motive to aid you in our endeavour, I believe it is more likely her true interest lies in what happens after you have deposed Anguish.”

“...Explain.”

Scarlett eyed the woman. Good. She was listening, at least. Of the various scenarios this encounter could play out in, the simplest one definitely included Malachi cooperating.

“When Mistress originally handed you the Soulstone, what did she tell you was her reason?” she asked.

“That is none of your concern,” Malachi replied, her features tense.

“I disagree, but very well. I can speculate. She might have insinuated something along the lines of it being rather entertaining to see if your efforts would succeed or not, no? How it would be nice *if* one of the Viles were to disappear? It is no secret that Mistress is no friend of the Blazes’ rulers, after all.”

Even if the woman frequently dealt with demons and their kind, including Viles on occasion, Mistress was perhaps the farthest one could be from being their ally. Malachi had a cold disdain for demons in her own way, but it couldn’t be compared to the deep-seated grudge Mistress held. Even if Mistress did a good job of hiding it, in the end, Malachi’s fixation on replacing a Vile couldn’t hold a candle to what Mistress would do to achieve her goals.

“That is not something Mistress would have told you,” Malachi stated, though her expression did reveal signs of doubt.

“She would not, no.” Scarlett shook her head. “But I know her well enough to deduce as much. That is also why, much as I suspect you did, know to doubt her words. Unlike you, however, I do not need to spend years inspecting the Soulstone for potential traps to convince myself of their absence. I already know precisely what she desired in this context.”

It wouldn’t be out of character for Mistress to assist Malachi merely because she saw the chance to mess with one of the Viles. In fact, had that been her sole option, that’s probably what she would have done. But that’s not how the events unfolded in the game.

“You are beating around the point,” Malachi said.

Scarlett gave a slight nod. “True. I wanted to provide enough context for you to grasp the gravity of my words.”

“And you have succeeded in wearing down my patience. Speak your piece.”

“Then I shall.” Scarlett once more gestured towards the Astral Soulstone. “To summarize, Mistress has tampered with the Soulstone. It will still serve to accomplish your objective of supplanting Anguish and usurping her authority, as well as freeing Miss Hale from her influence. However, once you have assumed that authority, it will overwhelm you. The Soulstone will drive you to madness and cause the power to run rampant. With a new Vile at the helm but without any control, the Blaze of Anguish will become unstable and may very well collapse, with what remains of it subsumed into the other Blazes. Mistress recognized the opportunity to eradicate one of the Blazes from this world, and she did not hesitate to seize it.”

In the game, the last boss of Anguish’s citadel hadn’t been Anguish herself, or even Rosa. It had been Malachi after she completed the ritual and began absorbing the power of a Vile, losing herself and going berserk.

Malachi stared at Scarlett, the threat in her gaze unmistakable. For a moment, Scarlett thought the demons might launch another attack, but the woman didn’t move, simply remaining quiet for several seconds.



While Malachi was likely well-acquainted with Mistress and had collaborated with her on multiple occasions, Scarlett doubted she truly comprehended Mistress's genuine motivations. Few people did. All she would know is that Mistress had a bone to pick with the Viles, and as such, it made sense that she would help her with a design like this. But Scarlett did not think Malachi would simply dismiss her words, since they served to provide a better explanation of Mistress's actions.

The only problem with this was that Scarlett was essentially asserting that Malachi wouldn't be able to achieve her goal at all.

"Fortunately for you, however," she said, "I am willing to offer you an alternative."