

## 204: Heart to heart

“An alternative?” Malachi said slowly, sounding skeptical.

“Yes,” Scarlett replied. “An alternative. A trade of sort, you might call it.”

The woman’s gaze sharpened. “For the Astral Soulstone, I presume?”

“Yes.”

“How convenient. For you.”

“Quite the opposite, in fact.”

There were various different ways this questline could end depending on the player’s choices in the game, and Scarlett had spent a lot of time trying to figure out what the best outcome would be. Or, more accurately, the one that would benefit Rosa the most.

Considering that Anguish could never *truly* be killed, the bard would have to live with part of the Vile inside her no matter what happened. But that wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, as long as you played your cards right. The best way of ensuring it wasn’t that Scarlett was aware of was by using the Astral Soulstone, which the player could obtain from Malachi after beating her in her final form. However, that would be challenging for Scarlett’s party, which is why she had been looking at alternatives.

The one she had come up with and decided to pursue wasn’t an actual option in the game, but she was reasonably certain it would work. It required some sacrifice on her part, but she believed it would be worth it in the end.

Raising her left hand, she held up the still-concealed [Ittar’s Genesis]. “I am not sure if you recognize what this is, but no doubt you can sense the power it contains. If you use this along with the Soulstone, making this artifact the core of the ritual, it is possible to circumvent the side-effects that the Soulstone would bring. It may not be the optimal solution, but it is better than losing control of yourself, no?”

[Ittar’s Genesis] was undeniably a powerful item. This there was no doubt about. However, even then, it could only hold a charge of 20000 mana at once, which, while impressive, was nowhere near enough for a task of this magnitude. It couldn’t compare to what the Astral Soulstone or an ancient dragon’s core could provide as a font of pure power.

That said, [Ittar’s Genesis] *was* a divine artifact, touched by the power of a literal god. It also showed potential in converting demonic energy, it seemed. Even if the actual power within it wasn’t on the same level as the Soulstone, the *potential* of such a high-grade artifact was a quality unto itself. While Scarlett doubted it was the best solution, she still thought it could work. When Warley Godwin had been working on the [Obedience’s Solitude Loci] at her mansion, she’d taken the opportunity to learn more about this type of power source from him for exactly this kind of reason.

Of course, she wasn't thrilled about the prospect of losing one of her most powerful assets for combat, but it would be a worthwhile sacrifice. She had to ensure Rosa had access to the Soulstone, and there would be more ways to solve her mana problem in the future. Scarlett had already prepared some things for when she would next meet Arlene, for example.

Besides, [Ittar's Genesis] had been a double-edged sword since the start.

Malachi seemed to consider her words for a while, glancing down at the fabric that hid the crystal sphere in Scarlett's hand. "...That is assuming your claims are correct."

"True. There is the possibility that I am lying, but everything I have said until now has been reasonable, has it not? Gambling that you would be able to discern a trap hid by Mistress would not be wise, considering the circumstances. I would also like to note that, while it is only Miss Astrey and me here at present, our group's numbers were not limited to just the two of us. If my goal were simply to obtain the Soulstone, I would have aimed to take it from you by force once you began the ritual."

Scarlett could potentially take on Malachi's boss form if Raimond and the others were here, but that situation was a powder keg waiting to explode. This solution involved fewer risks when it came to others' reactions, not to mention that she *was* curious about what would happen if Malachi succeeded in carrying out her plan. Establishing a cordial relationship with the possible new ruler of one of the Blazes that *didn't* involve unspeakable acts of evil could be beneficial in the future.

"So, what do you say?" Scarlett asked, watching Malachi.

After remaining silent for a while, the woman finally answered. "Fine."

She snapped her fingers, and another of her demons trudged forth from the shadows at the corner of the room. Behind Scarlett, Allyssa's bandolier and flasks rustled as the Shielder shifted, but the demon didn't appear poised to attack. It stopped in front of Scarlett, saliva dripping from its fangs and hunger evident in its eyes as it looked up at her expectantly. She raised a brow, but then tied the fabric around [Ittar's Genesis] and placed it on the ground. The demon began dragging it towards Malachi, crossing the sigil lines drawn on the floor with what *looked* like blood.

**[Mana: 5157/12063]**

Scarlett had made sure to transfer some of the mana from the artifact to her [Depraved Solitude's Choker] so that she wasn't entirely defenseless *if* Malachi tried something.

A slight gust of wind brushed against her legs, and suddenly the demon paused, turning towards the entrance. It started growling, a noise which was soon joined by several others like it coming from the shadows spread around the place.

A slight smile crossed Scarlett's lips as she heard another sound from behind her. A moment later, a powerful wind blew through the chamber as Fynn suddenly came to a stop beside her, ready for combat. Malachi and her demons seemed ready for another attack when Scarlett raised her hand in the air.

“Wait, Fynn. These are not our enemies,” she said.

The white-haired young man maintained an intense gaze on Malachi, his eyes also darting towards the edges of the room.

“Was there anything that held you up?” Scarlett asked, casting a brief glance at him.

He remained silent for a few seconds longer before turning to her and nodding. “Several powerful demons appeared and blocked the path on my way back. They were annoying to get past.”

“I see. And what of the others?”

“I didn’t see them, but I think they got back to where we split up before me. They might have taken a wrong turn after that, though.”

Scarlett nodded. Fynn would have an easier time tracking them than the others. It seemed odd that Raimond’s group would have been faster than Fynn in getting back to the first chamber, but perhaps that could have been due to Anguish’s interference. If Fynn had spotted Raimond on his way here afterward, though, it suggested it would be some time before they caught up.

Seemingly reassured that Fynn’s arrival didn’t herald an immediate confrontation, Malachi ordered her demons to quiet down as [Ittar’s Genesis] was delivered to her.

“It might be wise to conceal its appearance,” Scarlett suggested, considering Allyssa’s presence.

The silvery-haired woman gave her a short look, clutching the artifact in her hands for a moment before kneeling at the center of the sigil. She placed [Ittar’s Genesis] next to the Astral Soulstone without a word, using a nail to tear holes in its fabric. Green light began to emanate from her hands, seeping through the holes and into the artifact.

There was not an ounce of hesitation about what she needed to do, it seemed.

“How long will the preparations take?” Scarlett asked.

“The Soulstone will still serve as the catalyst for the ritual, and that is nearly ready,” Malachi answered, her gaze fixed on her work. “I merely need to ensure that this...*new* artifact takes on the role as the core that will maintain the process. It should not take long.”

“I see. I imagine working with an artifact of this nature is not a challenging task for you, given your previous occupation.”

At that, Malachi paused, her gaze briefly shifting to Scarlett. Then she returned to her work.

While waiting, Scarlett redirected her attention to Rosa, who appeared to be growing increasingly worn and afflicted on the throne. She wanted to exchange a few words with the woman, but that could wait until this situation had been dealt with.

A few minutes of tense silence followed as Malachi wrapped up her preparations. Scarlett began to wonder how much time they would have had left to reach the boss room before it was too late. It was probably good that they had split up like they did.

Allyssa seemed anxious as they waited, while Fynn kept his usual stoic demeanor, keeping a vigilant watch on their surroundings, as though expecting any of the demons lurking in the shadows to strike at any moment.

At one point, Scarlett asked him to attempt closing the door to the chamber, but that had proven impossible. It didn't budge, no matter what he did. Fortunately, Raimond and the others hadn't arrived yet.

That's when Scarlett noticed a shift in Rosa's presence at the far end of the chamber. The atmosphere around her changed, and that damned grin reappeared.

Malachi had regained control.

"Prepare yourselves," she told her companions.

"I must admit, I'm disappointed," Anguish's voice carried across the chamber. "I had hoped that you would tear each other apart while I was away so I could be greeted by something eye-catching for once, but I suppose that was too much to ask for, especially when our dear Baroness is involved. I did anticipate more resistance from the half-blood, however. It seems you are rather easily persuaded."

An almost overwhelming pressure descended upon all of them, and for a moment, it didn't look as if it was Rosa seated on the throne, but one of the Viles themselves.

Scarlett clenched her teeth as she resisted the pressure, glancing over at Malachi, who stared at Anguish with a mixture of disbelief and rage. For all the woman's experience with demons, she clearly *had* underestimated how much power Anguish still held within the citadel.

Although Malachi had been the final boss in this dungeon, that didn't mean Anguish just sat idly by and did nothing.

"I'll have to teach the two of you a lesson in humility. We can't have you misbehaving; proper decorum is expected from guests, after all. I am quite certain you will become more cooperative once those fleshy vessels you call bodies have suffered slight tearing, especially you, Baroness."

The space in front of Anguish's throne shifted and trembled as two figures materialized.

The first took on the form of a towering monstrosity, standing several meters tall. It was draped in tattered, smoldering robes that concealed its true form, with bones protruding and revealing hints of charred, decaying flesh. Its eye sockets blazed with pernicious crimson flames, casting an eerie glow over its concealed visage.

The second figure was a serpentine behemoth with scales as dark as the abyss, rendering it nearly invisible against the chamber's tenebrous background. Its eyes, however, gleamed

with a sinister intelligence, radiating an almost palpable sense of the torment it sought to inflict upon everyone before it.

“Allow me to introduce two of my oldest playthings,” Anguish declared. “Do be careful not to rile them up too much. They tend to be oh so testy.”

The [Infernal Marrowgeist] and [Serpent of Shadows], these two were the partial manifestations of archdemons, and they served as Anguish’s personal guards.

Scarlett had been anticipating their arrival. In fact, she had counted on their and Anguish’s assistance to handle Malachi in case the woman proved uncooperative and too much to handle. While Anguish may have claimed to desire a fight to the death between them, the Vile would probably have prioritized getting rid of Malachi in such a scenario.

Malachi’s demons all emerged from the shadows at once, over a dozen of the savage creatures howling as they lunged at these new adversaries. The Infernal Marrowgeist extended long, wicked bone claws from beneath its robes, which seemed to scorch the very air as they slayed towards the demons focusing it.

Meanwhile, the Serpent of Shadows melded into the surrounding darkness, momentarily vanishing. Suddenly, Fynn moved from Scarlett’s side and dashed for the rightmost wall of the chamber as he leaped into the air. He swung two sets of ethereal claws at seemingly empty space, revealing the archdemon’s form. His attack, however, failed to penetrate the serpent’s scales. With an almost imperceptible flick of its tail, Fynn was sent hurtling across the room, only narrowly catching himself, his conjured claws gouging into the floor.

Some of Malachi’s demons seized the opportunity to pounce at the serpent and sink their fangs into its body, but they also struggled to pierce its defense.

“Exercise caution and remain towards the rear,” Scarlett told Allyssa, who had already begun sifting through her bandolier to find suitable concoctions to aid in the situation. She was probably using up the last of her reserves now.

Scarlett turned her attention to Malachi, who had paused her work on the Astral Soulstone and [Ittar’s Genesis] at the heart of the chamber. “How much longer do you require?”

Malachi scowled, glaring up at the archdemons. Perhaps she was trying to figure out how Anguish could have summoned two archdemons with her power being restricted. For once, Scarlett didn’t have the answer herself. All she knew was that Anguish had done the same in the game.

“*Malachi.*”

Finally, the woman tore her gaze away from the archdemons and focused on Scarlett. “...Not long, but I must reach the girl and the Vilewyrn heart.”

“I will handle that. Have you completed the work with the Soulstone? I need it.”

Malachi’s emerald green eyes narrowed for a moment, shifting from Scarlett and in Rosa’s direction. “...I see.”

She extended one hand, running a nail over the surface of the Soulstone, causing the black orb to sparkle with colors and emit a pulse of energy that spread through the crimson veins etched across the chamber's floor. She then used the same nail to cut her other wrist without a hint of pain, letting dark, half-red blood drip onto the Soulstone, where it was instantly absorbed. "It's done."

With a thought, a mist enveloped Scarlett, transporting her next to Malachi where she picked up the Soulstone. It felt heavier than it looked, and she paused for a moment as distant whispers brushed her mind.

Dismissing it for now, she turned her attention to the two archdemons. The Infernal Marrowgeist had half a dozen demons hanging off its robes, its bony claws splitting another demon's legs clean from its body. The Serpent of Shadows attempted to reach Malachi and Scarlett, but it could only merge into the chamber's shadows and was repeatedly assaulted by Fynn, who could cross the space in just a few seconds when boosted by his wind magic.

Not that he was *beating* the archdemon. Fynn already bore the marks of significant injuries, his white hair and clothes stained red with blood. Without Rosa or Raimond's healing, he wouldn't be able to keep up the fight for long, but at least he was keeping the Serpent occupied along with Malachi's demons. Allyssa had also begun tossing flasks that erupted into small bursts of light, leaving glowing pools of liquid in their wake that lessened the shadows in the chamber.

Scarlett started moving closer to Rosa, employing her magic to aid in the battle where she could. Her hydrokinesis worked to smother some of the flames that the Infernal Marrowgeist was invoking, though it proved markedly more difficult doing the same with her pyrokinesis against this foe. Instead of wasting too much time on that, though, she placed more of a focus on targeting the Serpent of Shadows to lessen the burden on Fynn. Malachi's demons weren't anywhere as powerful as the Marrowgeist, but they were tenacious and numerous, and their fate didn't concern Scarlett. The same didn't go for Fynn.

For a brief moment, the Serpent shifted its focus to her after being hit by several Aqua Mines and fire arrows. It reared back, revealing a maw reminiscent of the Abyssal Vilewurm's breath attack. Instead of unleashing a billowing abyss of darkness, however, it released a dozen tiny slithers of shadows that began crawling across the chamber like mini-serpents.

There were too many for Fynn and the demons to handle, so Scarlett briefly turned her attention to them. These dark serpents proved agile, however, making it challenging for Scarlett to finish them off. They aimed for the sigil drawn on the floor, and Scarlett realized they were aiming to disturb it. Immediately, she drew deeper from her mana reserves to conjure more attacks, producing numerous tiny explosions that resounded throughout the chamber.

Fortunately, she managed to eliminate the last of them without entirely exhausting her mana, but that had left Fynn taking the brunt of the Serpent of Shadow's assault while she did so, causing him to sustain even further injuries.

"It's complete," Malachi's raspy voice called from behind Scarlett.

She looked back at the woman, who had now covered the wound on her wrist and was leaning over [Ittar's Genesis].

"Good. I leave keeping the archdemons occupied to you," Scarlett said.

Malachi rose unsteadily, her eyes glowing an even stronger shade of green as she uttered a chain of unintelligible words that left an unsettling feeling inside Scarlett. Around the chamber, all her demons suddenly grew slightly in size, letting out ferocious roars as they intensified their attacks.

Scarlett glanced briefly at Fynn, seeing that the Serpent of Shadow now became more occupied with the demon's assault. She then turned her attention to Rosa.

It was time to move. A mist enveloped her once more as she employed the short-range teleportation ability of her [Garments of Form]. A moment later, she appeared at the base of the raised dais beneath Anguish's throne. Above her, Rosa sat, looking out over the chamber with a ruler's confidence.

The Vile controlling the bard turned her gaze downward, eyes of pitch-black darkness locking onto Scarlett in a twisted grin. "Here for the next installment of our one-on-one chat, I take it? I've been eagerly anticipating it."

Scarlett looked back over her shoulder, confirming that neither of the archdemons was approaching the throne. Her eyes traced the veins that ran through the floor, connecting the sigil at the center with the pedestal holding the Abyssal Vilewyrms' heart in front of Anguish.

As long as that was functioning properly, no demons should be able to act near the throne. Anguish clearly had a means of partially bypassing that restriction, but Scarlett doubted the same went for the archdemons. Otherwise, they already would have.

"Ignoring me? I'm hurt, Baroness. I was sure you were looking forward to this as well."

Scarlett raised her gaze to meet Anguish's. "Only so that I could silence that mouth of yours once and for all."

"Oh, stop. You'll make me blush." Anguish's grin grew. "The more I see of you, the harder it is to contain my desire. I am practically exuberant at the mere thought of what sort of servant you'll make after we've corrected that overweening personality of yours."

Scarlett stepped onto the dais and approached the throne, her eyes fixed on the demon. "Were I not so repulsed by your mere existence, I would have commended your confidence. That said, I expected nothing less than unwavering arrogance from you until the end."

"Coming from you, that's almost a compliment."

"It was not meant as one."

With the Astral Soulstone in one hand, Scarlett reached out with her other and seized the Abyssal Vilewyrms' heart. It felt revolting to the touch, a blend of obsidian stone and muscle

with black slime oozing from it, pulsing with a foul energy. The tendrils connecting to it tore with ease, and she held it and the Soulstone before her.

For a moment, the presence of both seemed to react to each other, the heart pulling towards the Soulstone, sensing and desiring its power. Scarlett granted it what it sought.

As the Soulstone made contact with the heart, a kaleidoscope of colors burst forth on its surface, resembling tiny fireworks and their embers, battling for supremacy. Amidst this display, a faint ember of dark violet emerged, gradually growing before finally enveloping the entire orb's surface. Thin black tendrils then emerged from the Vilewyrms heart, snaking across the Soulstone and drawing it within itself. The heart began to crystallize, shifting to the same shade of violet as the Soulstone as slime dissolved along with the sinew and muscle.

### **[Astralbane's Nexus Heartstone (Unique)]**

{An astral-bound relic of profound power, wrought and pulsating with the whispered secrets of the Astral Soulstone and the malevolence of the Abyssal Vilewyrms core. These opposing forces unite in an intricate dance of temporal equilibrium}

"You intend to put *that* into poor Rosalina? You truly are heartless," Anguish said, far more glee present in her voice than what was appropriate given the circumstances. Did she have something up her sleeve?

Scarlett regarded her. There was a moment of hesitation within her as she saw the appearance of Rosa, with the faint freckles and wavy brown hair, but the dark eyes and mocking smile left no room for doubt. She could apologize to the bard once this was over.

With determination, she thrust the newly created Heartstone into Rosa's chest. It penetrated both clothes and flesh, finding its place like a key in a lock. The darkness vanished from Rosa's eyes as she let out an excruciated scream filled with pain, but Scarlett could only step back and watch.

The Heartstone began pulsating with an intense light, in sync with Rosa's agonized cries, as it adapted to its new host. Gradually, it settled into a rhythm resembling a heartbeat.

Rosa's head drooped over for a few seconds. When she finally raised it again, her eyes were back to their normal violet hue, meeting Scarlett's gaze.

"I hate you, Red..." she muttered without strength.

"I will take that into consideration the next time we are negotiating your pay," Scarlett said.

"Bold of you to assume there will be a next time," Anguish suddenly replied in Rosa's voice, a hint of darkness seeping back into the woman's eyes.

Rosa froze, fear tingeing her expression.

"Calm, Rosa," Scarlett hurried. "You are the one in control now. You simply need to learn how to wield that control."



She looked back at the two archdemons, who were gradually gaining the upper hand. One of Fynn's arms hung limp at his side, and Allyssa, along with several of Malachi's demons, grappled with the mini-serpents crawling across the chamber.

"You can start by attempting to banish those," she said, turning back to Rosa.

The woman blinked, looking past Scarlett. She tentatively raised her arm, now free from the throne's grip, and motioned towards both archdemons. The air surrounding them shifted, and then they were gone. The demons clinging to them fell to the floor, disoriented by the sudden happening.

Wide-eyed, Rosa stared at her own hand while Scarlett observed her closely.

On its own, the Abyssal Vilewurm's heart would have been enough to suppress a weakened Anguish and offer Rosa the chance for a more ordinary life, but it wouldn't have been enough to completely free her. The Vile's presence would still linger to some extent, haunting her, and she might even still lose control at times. With the Astral Soulstone's power added into the mix, however, Rosa would have complete rule over the demon within her, granting her a freedom she hadn't experienced for years. And since they were still inside the citadel, where Anguish's power as a Vile in the Material Realm was the most potent, Rosa could harness some of that power as well.

"Malachi," Scarlett called out, never taking her eyes off Rosa. "You may commence with the ritual."

Rosa finally looked away from her hand and up at Scarlett. "Is it... Is it really over?"

"Soon," Scarlett replied. "Once Anguish has been stripped of her authority, she will no longer have the power to reverse this, no matter how much time she is given."

Some of the darkness returned to Rosa's eyes, and the woman's mouth curved into a slight smirk. "Always so confident. I believe there's a saying about pride and the fall, pet."

The smirk faded soon after, replaced by a grimace and worry as Rosa regained control.

"It may take some time for you to fully acclimate to it, but believe in yourself," Scarlett said. "As for you, Anguish, I have questions to which you hold the answers."

She still wanted to know more about what this 'Anomalous One' business was that the Vile had mentioned in their previous conversation, and the movements of the other Viles.

"Oh, I'm more than willing to provide those answers," Anguish replied. It was only a matter of time before Rosa could completely suppress the demon if she chose, but for now, Anguish still managed to worm her way to the surface when she wanted, it seemed. "But I wonder if our darling Rosalina wants us to waste precious time on that when there are far more pressing concerns to address, don't you think? Although maybe you don't want her to know about those."

Scarlett frowned as a hint of confusion clouded Rosa's features. "Ignore her words, Rosa. She is trying to sow discord."

“True, I do so love to sow discord where I can, but regrettably, that’s not my current objective,” Anguish continued, her voice insidiously melodious. Rosa’s face displayed an unnatural blend of confidence and worry as the Vile spoke. “I’m simply concerned about how our beloved Rosa will react when she learns of all the innocent blood spilled by the schemes made to bring her here. She’s not as unfeeling and callous as a certain baroness, so who knows how hard it will affect her?”

“What?” Bewilderment became the ruling emotion on Rosa’s face as she looked at Scarlett. “What does she mean by that?”

Scarlett’s frown deepened. “As I said, pay her no mind. You should be more aware than anyone that she thrives on lies and manipulation.”

“A fine one to talk,” Anguish retorted. “I wonder, how many lies have I told compared to you? How *much* have I manipulated? To me, it appears *I’m* not the one Rosalina should be wary of. But if you find my words hard to believe, then perhaps I should simply show you, dear.”

Rosa’s eyes changed again, this time filling up with darkness entirely, though it was a lighter shade than before. When they returned to their normal state, Rosa sucked in a deep breath and stared into empty space for a few seconds before turning to look at Scarlett. “W-What’s happening in Crowcairn right now?”

Scarlett paused, and she could have sworn that a slight flicker of black remained in Rosa’s eyes, as if mocking her.

“Scarlett, what’s *happening* there?” the woman asked again.

“I can answer that for you, dearest,” Anguish spoke up. At this point, Scarlett was starting to suspect that Rosa was *letting* the demon speak, despite the obvious discomfort it caused her. “You see, those villagers were engaged in a rather particular partnership with Malachi. However, her betrayal, combined with the actions of our Baroness here, would have inevitably terminated that partnership. Ordinarily, one might expect the inhabitants of Crowcairn to seek vengeance for that, but since that could have proven inconvenient for the Baroness’s grand design, it was more expedient for the duke’s men to resolve the matter of the unfortunate villagers. Dead men can do little to prove a nuisance, after all.”

“Anguish, you—”

“Is that true?” Rosa interrupted Scarlett, the bard giving her a long, earnest gaze.

Scarlett didn’t know what to say to that look. The situation in Crowcairn was unfortunate, but there was nothing Scarlett could do about it at this point. If the duke’s men hadn’t breached the Sanctum’s protective barrier around the village yet, they probably would soon. Whether the villagers could escape in time remained uncertain.

“It was not due to actions that the duke’s men went there,” she eventually said.

“But it’s true that they’re going to kill the villagers?” Rosa asked.

“...They belong to the Tribe of Sin. According to imperial law, they are criminals.”

“Not every crime deserves a death sentence, especially for an entire village.”

“That is not how the empire sees it.”

Rosa gazed at Scarlett, and several seconds passed in silence. Then, a shift in the chamber’s atmosphere as a mass of power surged around them signaled the onset of Malachi’s ritual.

“They’re really going to kill *all* the villagers?” Rosa asked.

Scarlett locked eyes with her, remaining silent for a moment longer.

The Tribe of Sin was adamant about their creed. Even if the duke’s forces chose to show mercy, the Tribe would not allow themselves to be captured. They would either flee if they could or fight to the last capable person.

“...The children will likely be spared,” she eventually answered.

Rosa’s expression fell. Even for people she didn’t know, and those affiliated with a group that vehemently opposed the empire and everything it stood for through acts of terror, Rosa couldn’t help but display compassion.

Suddenly, Rosa jerked, and a surge of red and black power emanated from her, surging towards the center of the chamber as she wore a pained expression once more. Scarlett turned to find Malachi at the heart of the sigil now, serving as the epicenter for this phenomenon.

“You know, we could save those people,” Scarlett heard Rosa say behind her, but she immediately knew that Rosa hadn’t been the one to utter those words.

Her head snapped back to Rosa, who was gritting her teeth and slumped against the back of the throne. “No, Rosa. Do *not* listen to her.”

If something happened to alter the scenario now, there was no telling what would happen. There was nothing like that in the game, so Scarlett wouldn’t be able to predict any outcomes or know the correct response to things.

“Are you comfortable letting the blood of even more people stain your hands when you had the power to prevent it, Rosa?” Anguish asked. “Are you comfortable adding the name of yet another village to the list? Will you let your cherished Baroness bear that responsibility *for* you?”

“*Silence*, Anguish,” Scarlett snapped. She moved closer, leaning over to look into Rosa’s eyes, focusing past the specks of darkness present there. “Rosa, they are not your responsibility, nor would it be your burden to bear. Their deaths are far from certain. You cannot trust her, so please, **don’t do anything stupid.**”

For a brief moment, Rosa’s irises cleared entirely, and she stared straight at Scarlett in surprise. Then, she released another pained cry as Malachi’s ritual continued, leaning forward

and clutching at the Heartstone lodged in her chest, her face becoming obscured from Scarlett's view.

A few seconds passed, and then a small laughter escaped the woman. It was not the eerie, twisted laughter of Anguish, but a soft, melancholy one.

"...You know, Red, you're probably the most remarkable yet bewildering person I've ever met. Since I first laid eyes on you, I've been consistently amazed and awed at the ease and confidence you deal with things, always ready with a plan and a dozen for anything that might pop up. I don't think you'll ever really understand what knowing you has meant to me, truly." She raised her head, a couple of tears trailing down her cheek as she met Scarlett with an honest, genuine smile. "But, just this once, I think you kind of deserve to experience what it's like when things *don't* go exactly according to your designs."

"Rosa, wai—"

"Don't worry, I'll try not to do anything *too* stupid, even if I am going to have to disappoint you. I'm sorry, Scarlett."

Then, Rosa's eyes flashed completely black, and the chamber filled with the overwhelming and all-encompassing presence of an unshackled Vile and the ruler of the sixth Blaze: Anguish.