

207: Names

Malachi didn't even so much as give Scarlett a glance as the woman approached them, her demons slowing down to trail a few meters behind. Scarlett moved to stand in front of Rosa, but the bard stopped her with a raised arm, shooting her a meaningful look.

Frowning, Scarlett stepped aside, keeping close attention to Malachi and the demon that was emerging from the rift.

Rosa greeted Malachi with a smile that could have put any seasoned salesman to shame. "By that expression of yours, I'm guessing that you're not hap—"

Malachi's hand shot out, gripping Rosa's throat. Her gleaming green eyes pierced the woman. "*Return us to the citadel.*"

Scarlett started moving again, but Rosa motioned for her to stay back, even as Malachi's nails dug into her skin. Rosa held the woman's gaze. "Believe me, I would if I could, genuinely. Unfortunately, I think the ship's already sailed on that one."

A small grunt of pain left her as blood trickled from her neck.

"*Malachi,*" Scarlett said.

The woman turned her head slowly, meeting Scarlett's eyes.

"Release her."

Malachi remained silent for several seconds. "...This. Was this part of your schemes? You intended to work with the Vile from the start, and you had this girl carry out your commands."

"If that were true, I would not have aided you against Anguish's archdemons. The current circumstances are far from ideal for me as well, Malachi. They would not be improved any by us confronting each other here."

The woman's eyes narrowed, then shifted back to Rosa. "You *will* return us to the citadel. The ritual is not yet complete."

"Sure, just give me a moment," the bard replied. "I'll just mosey on up to the demon living inside my head and ask her to bring us all *back* to the place where she was about to be robbed of all her power. I'm sure that'll work out just dandy, with a pretty bow on top."

Malachi's expression darkened, and for an instant, it seemed as if she might unleash her anger at Rosa then and there.

"Tell you what," Rosa said before Scarlett could try anything to remove Malachi. "If you bring Scarlett out of here, I'll see what I can do to weaken Anguish before she completely returns to her domain. You managed to siphon off at least some of her Authority, right?"

Scarlett blinked. Malachi had still managed to steal some of Anguish's power? So the ritual wasn't *entirely* interrupted?

"I don't know all that much about demons," Rosa continued, "but I bet you'd prefer going up against an enraged Vile with a limp than one without. I'm still just getting the hang of the intricacies that come with having this stone lodged in my chest, but Anguish has placed enough of herself inside me that it'd definitely affect her if an inexperienced greenhorn started mucking about with things and accidentally tore a soul or two."

Malachi paused, her expression growing contemplative.

Scarlett, however, did not like what she was hearing. Her attention spun to the bard. "Rosa, I am warning you only this once. Do not even dare do anything of the sort, understood? And you, Malachi." She turned to the other woman. "This is your last warning as well. Release her."

Malachi showed no sign of acquiescing at first, and even as Scarlett kept a watchful eye on the rift at the center of this space, she mentally prepared herself to fight Malachi for real this time. The woman's watchdog demons snarled at Scarlett.

"I think this is the kind of situation where you salvage what you can," Rosa told Malachi, awkwardly nodding while caught in the woman's grip. "Besides, seems our guests are starting to arrive. Clock's ticking."

The demon making its way out from the rift had finally emerged entirely. Its grotesque, horned visage was shrouded in a swirling maelstrom of crimson and obsidian, with molten lava-like veins coursing through its onyx skin. Its eyes, ablaze with malice, seemed to set the fiery landscape around it ablaze as its gaze turned to the three of them, another claw in the rift behind it signifying more of its kind arriving soon.

Scarlett was pretty sure this wasn't even an archdemon, yet its presence was much more powerful than the ones they'd faced in the citadel. Since the interstitial space they were in was close enough to the Blaze it called home, the demon's power wasn't suppressed.

Presumably, the same went for Malachi's three demons, all of whom spun on the spot and charged at the new arrival without needing a command. The demon was over twice their size, however, and let out a thunderous roar that caused all of their movements to slow.

"How about it, Malachi?" Rosa asked, ignoring Scarlett's previous words.

Malachi scowled, looking between Rosa and Scarlett for a moment before reluctantly releasing the bard. Rosa gingerly massaged her neck with a sore smile. "I'll take that as a yes."

"You will not," Scarlett said.

"Sorry, Red, but we *are* running out of time, and I don't think there's much else you can do at this point. I would love if it wasn't like that, but you're not in charge right now."

A miserable wail left one of Malachi's demons as the larger demon tore off its front leg, with the other two sinking their fangs into its shoulder and leg. Another demon emerged from the rift, its appearance similar to the first, but boasting a pair of massive limbs reminiscent of charred bat wings folder over its shoulders.

"Then I will be assuming charge," Scarlett declared, shifting her focus to Malachi. "You were able to drain some of Anguish's Authority? Do you still possess the artifact I gave you, or was it left behind?"

The woman seemed indifferent to the fate of her minions, simply studying Scarlett with an icy stare. "I have it," she replied, gesturing through the air, conjuring forth a green energy that slowly coalesced into [Ittar's Genesis]. The crystal sphere's surface had morphed into a deep black, streaked with slimmers of an ominous red, exuding an entirely different air from before.

"In that case, you will be disregarding Miss Hale's words just now," Scarlett said.

"Scarlett, it's fine, I brought this on myse—"

"It is far from 'fine'," Scarlett cut Rosa off before the bard could finish. The anger she had been suppressing bubbled to the surface. "I *will* not permit Anguish to deprive me of one of my most valuable assets, nor will I allow you to do the same. Not after the considerable time and investment I have made to bring you to this point. I do not care for your thoughts on the matter, be they reasonable or not. I, for one, do not feel like a reasonable woman at present."

Malachi continued eyeing Scarlett for a few seconds, then turned to Rosa. "I will agree to a pact with you."

Scarlett raised her hand, a flame flickering above it as a threatening tone infused her voice. "*Malachi.*"

"I have no reason to heed the words of someone who is powerless in the current situation," the woman said, without looking back at her.

"I know Anguish's *name*."

Malachi froze. She turned to Scarlett, her earlier rage resurfacing. "You dare lie—"

"*Machrelzi.*"

The woman's expression went blank, and she stood completely motionless.

Scarlett studied her.

Even in this world, Malachi was probably a unique case. A half-demon, half-human, accepted by neither side. While her human features were outwardly predominant, that didn't mean her demonic attributes were limited to just her peculiar eyes. Like any demon, she possessed a true name bound to her demonic half. Its influence over her probably wasn't as strong as on a true demon, but it wasn't something she could ignore.

“Wait, what did you do?” Rosa asked, staring at Malachi as the woman didn’t move for several seconds.

“I spoke her name,” Scarlett answered, glancing over at the battle happening by the rift. Another of Malachi’s minions lost a limb, attempting to engage both the demons, while more shapes moved in the shadows on the other side of the rift. “I suppose you would not be aware, but a demon’s name holds a certain power over them.”

“...And you know *Anguish’s*?”

“I do, yes.” Scarlett looked at Rosa. “...I believe you know better than most that do make contingencies where possible.”

The bard’s eyes widened, her hand reaching for the violet Heartstone on her chest. “S-She knows you’re not lying, and she’s...*uneasy*.”

A vicious smile appeared on Scarlett’s lips. “I am glad.”

“What does this mean? I was prepared to...you know. But, now...?”

“It means that I have saved my most valuable card until last, because it was the most uncertain one.” Scarlett shifted her attention to Malachi, hoping the woman would soon snap out of it. “I do not know how to properly wield it against a Vile, other than temporarily restraining her actions, and I had wished to avoid relying on such uncertainties entirely. With Malachi’s knowledge, however, and some of Anguish’s own Authority, it should provide us with means.”

Another wail from one of Malachi’s demons pierced the air as it was torn in two, its body thrown and discarded through the rift. Soon, there would be nothing left to keep the arriving demons’ attention from Scarlett and the others. She doubted either she or Malachi could put up a significant fight at this point. She didn’t have much mana left, even after having downed more mana potions than advisable, and was approaching mana exhaustion. And while Malachi could prove a threat to most ordinary people in melee combat, actual demons were likely another story.

Scarlett glanced [Ittar’s Genesis], still grasped tightly in the woman’s hand. Would its mana-storing function still work after being corrupted like it had? Probably not. Even if it did, Malachi would be needing it. Scarlett also wasn’t convinced that these fully manifested demons would succumb to her magic as easily as the weakened ones in the citadel had. Not to mention that she had no idea how many demons were waiting to go through that rift.

Suddenly, Rosa jerked, bending over with arms clutching her chest. The air around her grew darker, and Scarlett found herself stepping closer to the woman.

“S-She’s fighting back now,” Rosa stammered out, grimacing. “Gods above, that *hurts*. It’s a lot harder keeping her down now that the rift is here. I’m not sure how long I can keep this up, and — oh.”

Another demon had climbed out from the rift, and now all three of them redirected their attention towards Scarlett and the others, as if on Anguish's command. Malachi's two demons, who were clinging to their bodies, had been completely forgotten.

That was when, finally, something changed with Malachi, and the woman seemed to return to her senses. Her eyes blinked before narrowing at Scarlett in a glare that could kill. "*How do you—*"

"How is irrelevant," Scarlett said, preparing herself as the demons began to move. "What matters now is that we take action. We can use Anguish's name. Simply tell us the *means*."

As she spoke, she summoned a set of fire barriers and aimed them at the demons, aiming to stall them for the time being. Her eyes unconsciously traveled to the edges of the dark dome that surrounded them, wondering what was taking Fynn so long.

"You truly know her name?" Malachi asked.

"I do."

"What is it?"

"I will speak it when necessary."

A demon's name was their weakness, but its power waned with each utterance in close succession. Scarlett also couldn't ignore the possibility of Malachi pulling some sort of betrayal if she shared too much too soon.

The woman did not look happy with her answer, but she would have to deal. "...With her name, it will be possible to summon Anguish by force and fetter her to Rosa much more thoroughly than now. Without any preparations, I cannot speak for the results, but what Authority I already possess may be enough to siphon more of it. I'm unsure if the girl can handle it, however."

"Simply do it," Scarlett spoke through gritted teeth, her mana rapidly depleting as she was forced to conjure more and more flames as a barrier. Now a fourth demon had even appeared, and despite the inferno that was burning away at their forms, the demons advanced, forcing Scarlett to intersperse more precise attacks along with her barriers, targeting the weaknesses highlighted by the [Charms of Apperception] and trying to pierce through their defenses.

Beside her, Rosa clutched Scarlett's clothes, still bent over and showing a pained expression. "What she said. I'm willing to give it one last shot. It can't get much worse than this."

"It can," Malachi said, stepping even closer to the bard with [Ittar's Genesis] in one hand, the other grabbing Rosa's hair to lift her face up. Seeing this annoyed Scarlett, but there wasn't much she could do at the moment.

"Keep those demons occupied," Malachi instructed her, as though an incoming demonic horde *wasn't* her problem. Then, locking eyes with Rosa for a moment, she touched [Ittar's Genesis] to the [Astralbane's Nexus Heartstone] nestled in the bard's chest.

Scarlett would have liked to claim she could follow what the woman was doing, but she couldn't. Nor could she spare the attention. She was doing all that she could to hold these demons back as it were.

And *of course*, as she thought that, another demon climbed out of the rift, releasing a cracking bellow that resonated across the area and shook Scarlett's bones. This one was larger than all the earlier demons, exuding a sinister atmosphere. Still not an archdemon, but Scarlett's [Charms of Apperception] didn't work on it, suggesting it was more powerful than a level 65 monster from the game.

Malachi's eyes gleamed with a brighter shade of green as a viscous, viridescent energy enveloped her. Within [Ittar's Genesis], a dark ember of red flickered, momentarily infusing the half-demon woman's aura with Anguish's baleful essence, even as the Vile's presence surged forth from Rosa.

A wicked smile crept across Malachi's lips. "She is trying to weasel her way free."

Scarlett felt Rosa's grip tighten on her clothes.

"Now, speak her name," Malachi commanded.

"**Astarothos**," Scarlett uttered the single word, her tone dark. "Get back here. We have unfinished business."

The name seemed to carry a weight unto itself, echoing through the air like the haunting whispers of a nightmare. From within Rosa, Anguish's aura grew more than tripled in strength, and Scarlett *felt* how her declaration bore unspoken intent. Even as shivers ran down her spine from the harsh presence beside her, she felt how Malachi harnessed that intent, shaping it in ways that were outside Scarlett's understanding.

A groan left Rosa, and the bard looked to be in even more pain than when Scarlett had implanted the Heartstone in her chest, yet she didn't scream. Malachi's brow was furrowed in deep concentration, and Scarlett studied them for the brief moment that she could afford to.

This was going to take longer than she had hoped.

The world had already started spinning around her as her mana was running dry, and she could only eke out the last of her stores to keep the demons occupied for a little bit longer. Still, they advanced with long steps, two of them now taking flight under the power of their bulky, leathery wings. By now, Malachi's demons had already been completely dealt with.

Scarlett realized she might not be able to stop the demons for much longer.

That was when she noticed a figure she was certain hadn't been there before, standing a few meters to her left. Adorned in resplendent red robes with golden lacework and a gold mask that almost seemed to glow. Brilliant blond hair flowed over their shoulders as they regarded her, and then they turned their attention to the demons. Behind the figure, several spinning nimbuses of light took shape, like tiny galaxies, and beams shot out at the demons. Taken off-guard, the demons were struck in places where Scarlett had already weakened their defenses.

Two of them died instantly, their heads reduced to ashes. Those were the ones Scarlett and Malachi's demons had wounded the most, but even the other demons had parts of their bodies pierced through and obliterated by the sudden attacks, causing them to stumble and release inflamed cries in an alien tongue. The strongest demon, however, got away with only a minor hole in its shoulder, sending a glare in the direction of the attacker.

"An exemplary job, as ever, in standing your ground alone, Baroness," the masked figure said. While their words were laudatory, however, their voice carried a certain distantness. More nimbuses appeared behind them, firing at the demons, along with other spells that took shape. The demons who had been closest to Scarlett, including the two that had taken flight, were either forced to the ground or pushed back for now. "It seems my presence alone won't be enough to turn this tide, however."

Even as the demons retreated momentarily, two more emerged from the right, at the same level as the strong one. With that, the demons began pushing forward once more, completely ignoring the damage they sustained and focusing on reaching Scarlett and the others.

The masked figure, *Raimond*, glanced to the side, eyeing a spot on the dome that enclosed this space from the rest of Crowcairn. He then looked at Scarlett. Even from beneath the mask, it felt as if he was contemplating them, both her, Malachi, and Rosa. Finally, he motioned with his hand, and the air shimmered around Scarlett as if a veil of some kind fell over her.

When she glanced down at her hands, she noticed that they looked slightly different. Turning her head, she saw that both Malachi and Rosa's appearances had completely changed, with the former looking like an older lady with black hair and the latter like a teen who had suffered a serious wound, leaning on the older lady.

A moment later, a bright light exploded from the spot on the dome that Raimond had been considering, and three radiant figures appeared. Clad in masterfully crafted armor of whites and golds, emblazoned with a symbol of the sun on the breastplates, each of them wore expressionless white masks resembling stoic visages with closed golden eyes.

Dawnbringers.

Their sudden appearance here actually surprised Scarlett slightly.

Not even a second after they arrived, each of the three figures moved. With a speed that rivaled a Solar Knight like Leon's, they arrived before the demons, facing them head-on and blocking their path. One of the Dawnbringers, carrying a long sword almost twice their length, cut off the arm of a demon and forced it back several steps. Then they turned their head to look at Raimond, before staring before staring in Malachi and Rosa's direction.

Although their appearances were hidden by the illusion, the nefarious presence of a demon as powerful as a Vile was unmistakable.

"Allow me to handle it, Cadence," Raimond declared. "For now, I'll have to ask your aid in stemming the breach that we have before us."

The name sparked a flicker of recognition in Scarlett's memories, and the Dawnbringer in question quickly refocused their attention on the demons. Another decisive slash with their sword caused an intense light to stream forth, cutting into two of the demons at once. The two other Dawnbringers were equally committed to their task, beating back their adversaries.

Scarlett turned to meet Raimond's gaze for a short moment, then she spun around to assess Malachi and Rosa's conditions. Shrouded in the illusion that concealed her appearance, it was hard trying to make out Rosa's expression, but even to Scarlett's untrained senses, the bard's presence felt like a complex fusion of Anguish's, Malachi's, and Rosa's own, resembling a tumultuous tempest of conflicting energies.

Then, as if some switch had been flipped, it all dissipated abruptly. Rosa's grip on Scarlett's clothes weakened, and Scarlett almost fell over herself as she hurried to catch the crumpling bard. Next to them, Malachi slumped slightly, an exhausted sound leaving the woman.

Scarlett frowned. "What happened?"

Did it work? If so, was that all? She still had business with Anguish, so she had been hoping to interrogate the Vile in a controlled environment if possible.

"It is...complex," Malachi responded slowly, her illusionary appearance hiding her expression. She held up [Ittar's Genesis], its black surface burning a brilliant dark red at its center. There was a seriousness in her tone as she continued. "I did obtain more of Anguish's Authority, but there were limits. I suspect you will personally wish to deal with the rest."

"Baroness," Raimond's voice echoed from behind them. "I believe we should have a discussion."

Scarlett turned to face the masked man as he approached, the gravity behind his words evident. She gave a nod. "I believe you are correct, *Deacon Abram*."