

Rose grit her teeth as she flew through the dilapidated building. The walls were smeared with symbols written in blood, and the only source of light came from the occasional flickering bulb in the long, twisting hallway. Her side still ached from the last Knife of Vengeance Paul had swung his mallet into, but she wouldn't let that slow her down. They were en route to stop another execution, and this time Rose wouldn't fail. A jolt of fresh pain nearly made Rose stumble and fall to the ground, but she clenched her jaw.

The Noisebomb's ears twitched as he followed her, bringing up the rear even though he could fly far faster than Rose. "THEY'RE STARTING THE CEREMONY," Chad's ears twitched again. Up ahead Paul paused, tightening his gloved hands around the pole of his makeshift weapon. "Which way?" He asked, looking first left, then right. Rose didn't stop, she flew on ahead of him, taking the right hallway. Paul wanted to tell her to stop--to slow down, she could feel that much, but she knew every second counted.

Instead Paul charged ahead, trying to run faster than she could fly.

"They're in the boiler room--" Rose rasped, feeling beads of sweat beginning to gather along her forehead. Another flash of pain and suffocation hit her. She could almost hear the chanting. The careless hero they were rescuing was trapped, bound by a rope of energy that crackled and burned the flesh it touched. Rose bit down hard on her cheek, trying to remain calm as she felt the sparks of fear mixing with the gleeful malice and superiority that she knew belonged to the monstrous Knives.

Rose halted by the door that led to the stairwell, and yanked open the door as she telekinetically pulled at the atoms surrounding it. The door flew off its hinges, slamming against the wall behind her. A flicker of surprise from Chad at the forceful action made her pause, and she took a moment to catch her breath, trembling beneath her scratched body armor. Paul stopped to stand beside her, looking down at her through his goggles in concern.

"W--we have maybe...ten minutes--" Rose croaked. "But th--the torture 's already beg--" She squeezed her eyes shut as she felt the bite of a cool blade run across her back. "Begun." Her head throbbed, and she fell silently to her feet, stepping back to lean against the wall behind her.

"coMe on...let me....ke...the l--..." The sound of Paul's voice was muffled when it reached her ears. She looked up at him, trying to slow her anxious breathing. His lips were still moving, but she couldn't hear a word of it. Her ears hummed, and a high-pitched ringing replaced all other noise. Rose remained flat against the wall, snapping her gaze to Chad. His mouth opened, but instead of his voice, a low thumping sound filled her ears.

Rose turned her gaze ahead to stare at the open door. She felt like she was floating, but her feet were still firmly planted on the ground. An orange gloved hand pat clumsily at her shoulder in reassurance, but she could hardly feel it. The thumping grew louder and faster. Blood rushed to her ears. She blinked, and the pitch-black stairwell came into focus again when she saw Paul run toward it. Rose's eyes widened and she gasped. Pointed teeth began to take shape in the door frame, and Rose lurched forward.

She tried to scream for him to stop, but her voice was nowhere to be found. Her hand grabbed for her throat, and she tried to warn him again. She lurched forward, trying to grab onto him, but she was too slow. The teeth grew, and the doorway shifted, snapping shut around him. Rose slammed against the shut mouth, wincing as the teeth scraped against her armor. She

stumbled back a step and turned, making a grab for Chad.

The floorboards splintered and cracked beneath him, and in a matter of seconds, wood was flying everywhere. Rose shrieked, raising her arms to shield her eyes as she saw a mouth burst up from the ground. An aching *huNGer* filled her, almost crippling her. She leapt toward him, arms extended to try and grab him away. Her hands found his wrists, but before she could pull him to safety, the mouth snapped shut around her forearms, swallowing Chad whole.

Pain erupted throughout Rose's body. An agonized scream finally cut through the thumping that filled her ears as the teeth cut through her body armor and dug into her flesh. Her legs gave out from under her and she began to spasm in pain.

"RoSE! ROSE!"

Rose's body heaved as she tried to catch her breath, opening her eyes to see Paul. He was seated next to her on the edge of her bed in her dimmed bedroom, holding her wrapped wrists as she tried to claw at the air. "Rose," he repeated. "Rose, are you with me?" It took her a moment to register she was in her office. Her hysterical sobs continued as she wrenched her arms free to throw them around him.

"I th-th-thgk--" she struggled to speak with a shaky voice. "Th-thought y-you were--*d-dead*--it ate you--itateyouandChad--" Her words came out in a rush, but the feeling of Paul's warm arms around her brought her some reassurance.

"Shhh," he soothed, worried and confused. "I'm not dead...Chad isn't either...he won't *kiLL* me--*any* of us...we won't let him."

Rose's throat felt raw, and her voice sounded hoarse. "God--" She whimpered in a high-pitched voice. "I hate this--*I hate this*--"

Paul's hand pet gently over her hair, and he tried to provide a source of calm for her as he took a few deep breaths. "Okay...that's the end of it...we're not taking you to Dark Astoria anymore...I don't want you going there--not if it's hurting you this much."

"It d-doesn't matter--if I'm there or not--I can still *feel* him--I still feel him *now*!" Paul's other hand rubbed down her back, and he tilted his head down to look at her.

"Then I'll thread you somewhere else! Somewhere *far* away where he can't *find* you." Rose shook her head, squeezing her eyes shut as she clung to Paul. "I--have to be here--to stop him from eating more spirits--" She turned her face up. "J-just...don't let me go back th-there alone, ok--" Her eyes met his, and her heart stopped.

The face of the Sentinel was staring down at her, its eyes glowing and burning into hers. Rose screamed, struggling and pushing against Paul's torso to get away from him. His grip tightened, locking her against his body. The jaw dropped open, revealing a mouth of fangs. Strings of saliva hung toward her as its great maw lowered over her face, biting into her flesh.

Rose screamed, sitting bolt up from her laying position on the couch. Paul was seated on the coffee table across from her, a stricken look on his face. Rose panted, looking around wild-eyed until her gaze came to rest on Paul. "Rose--I couldn't wake you--are you okay?" He extended his hands toward her and she shrieked.

"NO! DON'T *TOUCH* ME! GET AWAY FROM ME!" Paul froze, a hurt look flashing across his face. She ignored the look, scrambling up over the back of the couch to drop to her feet. Her knees gave out, and she fell to the floor in a trembling heap. She wrapped her arms around her head, squeezing them painfully tight as she shut her eyes.

“Rose!” Paul jumped to his feet, circling around the couch. He nearly dropped to one knee to make sure she was alright, but her scream stopped him.

“*GET AWAY FROM ME--*” Paul froze, dropping his hands to his sides. Rose curled into a tighter ball on the floor, gasping for ragged breaths in between her loud sobs. Paul remained where he stood, wanting desperately to pick her up and reassure her that everything was alright. Her cries became whimpers, and she tangled her wrapped fingers into her hair as she clutched her head. “What’s happening to me?” She asked in a frail, quiet voice. *deSPaiR* enveloped her, settling over her in a thick blanket.