

190: Beneath the surface

Too many questions to count flooded Rosa's mind as they made their way back from the swamp under the shroud of night. It felt like the answers to most of them remained just out of reach, as though she could extend her hand to finally make some sense of things.

But maybe that was just wishful thinking on her part.

As Rosa quietly trailed behind Malachi through the undergrowth, she mentally counted down from eleven while vigilantly keeping watch on the demons lurking in their surroundings. What she truly wanted to do right now was return to Scarlett and the others, ensure their safety, and ask what they were doing in that cavern. But, at least for now, Malachi wasn't allowing that. The woman had some goal in mind, and now Rosa was part of her plans.

Whether that was a good or bad thing was still up in the air.

One thing that Rosa could say was that her initial wariness about all of this had grown ten times over, and there were more doubts than certainties in her mind now.

The only thing that had prevented her from resisting Malachi earlier and crying out like a drunken banshee back in the cavern was Scarlett's behaviour. Rosa would bet one year's worth of fine-course meals back at the woman's mansion that Scarlett had anticipated tonight's events. Knowing her, it was more likely that a dragon would offer its neck to some random farmer's kid than the woman just coincidentally appearing exactly where Rosa and Malachi found themselves.

It also seemed far too convenient that a large group of people decked out in armor and weapons just so happened to accompany Scarlett and kill the Abyssal Vilewurm that Malachi apparently wanted something from.

Rosa's rational side told her it was foolish and naive to think Scarlett had orchestrated all this solely for her, but another part of her couldn't help but entertain the possibility with some gratification. Even though, from Scarlett's perspective, it was entirely possible that it had only been a pragmatic calculation.

The purpose of it all was something Rosa still pondered, though.

Her gaze fell upon the robed figure of Malachi as the enigmatic woman continued forward through the swamp without uttering a word. Whatever the woman had extracted from the Vilewurm had to be special, given the trial they had almost gone through to obtain it. Although Malachi never said it outright, Rosa was convinced they would have had to battle that humongous demon themselves had Scarlett's group not already dealt with it.

Once more, she suppressed the feelings that arose at the thought of *anyone* going to such lengths for her, regardless of the underlying motives.

Finding happiness in such matters was neither a luxury she could afford nor deserved.

The journey back to Malachi's farmstead took a while, but Rosa was surprised that she didn't grow as tired as she would have expected, nor did the cold bother her much. It was strange, in a way. She hadn't realized it, but it had been the same when they traveled to the swamp. In fact, she had been feeling better than ever since being able to sleep peacefully through the previous night.

Her assumption was still that Malachi was somehow responsible for this change, somehow affecting the entity inside Rosa and its ability to influence her. The how was a conundrum, but it was a welcome development nonetheless.

It was still dark when they first caught sight of the farmstead in the distance, though if Rosa were to guess, they were only a couple of hours away from sunrise. As they approached their destination—a pack of ferocious demons still flanking them just out of view—she noticed a lone figure standing in the center between all the buildings, silhouetted by the weak moonlight. The effects of Malachi's earlier potion had started to wear off, making it harder for Rosa to see clearly in the dark.

Malachi appeared unconcerned by the presence of the person and continued forward with her demon entourage, and Rosa cautiously followed suit, eyeing the stranger.

The individual was a middle-aged man dressed in plain attire, with an unassuming appearance that would blend into the crowd at any tavern. His thick hair was slightly disheveled, as though he had just risen from bed without bothering to look it over, but he wore a grim expression as his gaze fixed on them.

The demons remained hidden in the shadows, just out of sight, as Malachi halted in front of the man. Rosa positioned herself slightly behind and to the side of the woman.

“There's a problem with the demon,” the man stated in a deep-toned voice. “I can no longer sense the pact I made with it.”

Rosa just barely concealed her surprise at the man's words. Although she wasn't expecting him to be your ordinary Joe, given his presence here at this time of day, who started a conversation by announcing they've made a pact with a demon?

It would take a certain type of crazy to even make one to begin with.

“I am aware,” Malachi replied in her own raspy voice. “I've just returned from investigating the matter. The Abyssal Vilewyrn has been killed.”

The man's expression darkened. “...How?”

“It appears the duke's men were responsible, with some assistance. Unfortunately, I arrived too late to intervene.”

Rosa glanced at the woman's back. Things were slowly becoming clearer and clearer. Given Malachi's connection with demons in general, Rosa had been curious about the woman's relationship with the Vilewyrn.

The fact that these two seemed to be more involved with something of that magnitude than simply knowing of its existence didn't spell good news in *any* language.

Perhaps it was a bit late at this point, but Rosa was now seriously questioning whether she had gotten herself in over her head.

The most pressing concern on her mind now was the nature of the relationship between Malachi and the man in front of them. Judging from how Malachi had sent her demons to extract something from the still-warm cadaver of the Vilewyrms, though, the woman probably didn't actually think there was anything 'unfortunate' about their late arrival to that place.

The man's gaze suddenly shifted to Rosa, narrowing as though he had spotted something that offended him. Several seconds passed as his eyes lingered on her, and she was beginning to wonder if she had something on her face when he finally redirected his attention to Malachi.

"You assured me they wouldn't be able to locate it while it stayed near the Basin," he said.

"I *said* it was unlikely," Malachi replied, seemingly unfazed by his abrasive tone. "There was always a possibility, depending on who they had assisting them. The crucial aspect was that it was the optimal location for the Vilewyrms to establish a foothold in this realm."

The man scrutinized her, clearly dissatisfied with that response. "...We are now left without its strength, but that isn't our only concern. A priest of Ittar arrived in the village yesterday. He's been asking questions."

"That does sound problematic."

Rosa's eyes widened slightly before she could regain control of her expression.

She only knew of one priest who fit the description.

The man didn't seem to notice her reaction. "We need your help. Removing him would cause suspicion. I need you to ensure he leaves and forgets about this place."

Rosa looked at Malachi, apprehension growing within her.

"Hmm." The woman crossed her arms. "And why should I do that?"

The man stared at her. "We have an agreement."

"Not one that concerns errant priests strolling into Crowcairn. If the sun god's followers wish to investigate things, it's not my concern. I've already provided the aid I promised regarding the Abyssal Vilewyrms."

"And now it is dead."

"A regrettable turn of events, but irrelevant."

He took a step closer to Malachi, but as he did, a trio of snarling demons emerged from the shadows to confront him. He paused momentarily, his gaze shifting to the creatures, before

returning to Malachi, who appeared unperturbed. “You will also be affected if the duke or the Followers come.”

“Perhaps, but I won’t be staying here for much longer,” Malachi said. “I have found other pursuits to occupy my time with now that the Vilewyrms is gone.”

“You—” The man stopped as an ensemble of snarls and growls from the shadows joined those of the three demons near him. He stayed quiet for a few seconds before turning away. “Do not expect further hospitality from us, *witch*. The Truthful and Aspirants have persevered in these lands for generations, and we do not forget.”

With that, he departed the farmstead, passing by the demons without a word.

“So I’ve heard,” Malachi commented as he left. She then turned her gaze back to Rosa, studying her intently for several seconds. Rosa felt, not for the first time, as if those emerald-green eyes gleaming in the dark were staring *into* her.

“...Is there something you wanna say?” Rosa asked after a while.

She doubted Malachi cared much about her overhearing the conversation; otherwise, the woman wouldn’t have continued it so casually. While Rosa didn’t feel entirely comfortable knowing that whatever she had just heard was likely tied to some very shady business, she had already been aware that Malachi dealt with demons.

That didn’t mean she couldn’t make use of the woman.

“You seem to be growing rather impatient,” Malachi said.

Rosa blinked. “What do you mean?”

She hadn’t even said anything. It wasn’t like the woman could read thoughts, right? That’d just be Rosa’s usual luck of the dice, if everything she’d been thinking this past day had been overheard by some mad lady.

“It’s no surprise that the suppression wards couldn’t keep you away forever, but I didn’t expect you to worm your way past them this quickly. I only just noticed.”

“What are you talking about?” Rosa turned her head, scanning their surroundings, although she didn’t actually think she would spot anything. It didn’t feel like the woman was addressing her, which only left one possibility.

“You even managed to evade her attention. Quite impressive.” Malachi reached into her dark robes, retrieving a peculiar hand mirror set in a small circular frame of silver, where it could rotate at its center. She held it out in front of her, and Rosa observed her own reflection.

A face adorned with a sprinkling of freckles and framed by disheveled brown locks revealed a pair of violet eyes.

Nothing else.

Malachi maintained her silence for a few moments, then spun the mirror in its frame, unveiling a different reflection. “It’s time to stop hiding.”

In this altered image, Rosa’s visage underwent a transformation. Her eyes were replaced by two inky orbs of darkness, resembling a void that threatened to engulf everything in its depths. Her features sharpened, taking on a more menacing appearance, and her lips curved into a sneer-like smile, a sight that had sent shivers down her spine on countless occasions.

“You’re more perceptive than I anticipated. That’s too bad, considering you forced me to come out prematurely,” a voice, both amused and sinister, spoke.

Rosa instinctively brought her hands to her mouth as it moved of its own accord, uttering words that sent a bone-chilling sensation coursing through her very being.

It was at that moment she felt it — how *close* the entity was, how close it had been all day. She had mistakenly thought it was *calm* after yesterday, simply waiting. That it was further away.

She’d been wrong.

A gasp escaped her as Malachi’s hand clamped onto her jaw, the woman’s slender fingers grazing her chin as their eyes locked. Now, it was not only Rosa’s distorted reflection that bore a deranged smile; Malachi’s face mirrored the sinister expression. “A pleasure to make your acquaintance, *Anguish*.”

“Oh, don’t you fret.” Rosa’s lips formed the unnerving words against her will. “It won’t be for long.”

“No, I’m sure.” A sickly green glow emanated from Malachi’s fingers, and suddenly Rosa felt as if a bucket of water doused her from inside.

Malachi released her grip on Rosa, who collapsed to her knees, gasping for breath. Her knuckles dug into the earth beneath her, but she felt relief as her control seemed to have been restored.

“It seems we don’t have much time, so we will have to get to work,” Malachi declared, standing before her. The woman’s countenance seemed almost unhinged as she gazed up at the fading moon, with a pack of demons gathering around her in the vicinity. “We have a Vile to supplant.”