

184: Malachi

It took Rosa well over thirty minutes to reach the place the blacksmith had told her about, even when she'd tried maintaining a brisk pace to keep her warm in the chilly night temperature. She found herself thinking it might have been worth keeping Father Abraham around simply for him to act as a human lantern. It would certainly have helped her avoid the few near-tumbles she made on the way.

The first sign of habitation she spotted was a decaying old fence that seemed to enclose a large field to the right of the road, though it was hard to see how far it stretched in the dark. What was apparent from what she could see, however, was that the field hadn't been cultivated for a considerable time.

Eventually, the road led her past an aged farmstead that looked like it hadn't seen any traffic for the last few years or so. Still, it was the first home Rosa encountered, and the blacksmith had made no mention of going past it, so she veered off the beaten path and headed towards it.

As she approached, her gaze swept across the farmstead. A stone well marked the center, and rusty tools lay piled beside an old barn. If this was where that Malachi person lived, Rosa doubted they were a farmer.

That brought up some questions about what such an individual would be doing living in this remote location. The elderly woman who'd told Rosa about Malachi had also warned that the person was dangerous. In what way was a mystery. It could range anywhere from being a knife-wielding maniac to a terrible cook.

She didn't really know what to expect. But the whole situation had her on edge.

It didn't help that the unsettling atmosphere of this place gave her the feeling that something could jump out at her at any instant. The farmstead didn't just feel abandoned. It felt *forsaken*. At first, Rosa had thought it was the visions playing tricks on her senses, but now that she was getting closer, the more that impression solidified.

She halted as she caught a flicker of movement between two buildings. Whatever it was had a tail, but was it just her imagination, or did the tail have spikes?

Normally, she would write that off as another product of her visions, but this place made her hesitant about dismissing it like that.

Though it would be just like her 'freeloader' to exploit that uncertainty and use it against her.

Reaching over her shoulder, Rosa unstrapped her klerl and gripped the wooden instrument tightly in her hands. She stood alert, ears cocked for any strange sounds. After a while, she started moving again, slowly making her way towards the structure that looked to be the main building. When she reached it, she extended her hand to knock on the worn planks of its door.

Then she waited.

Unsurprisingly, there was no immediate response. Even if someone was home, a knock at the door might not rouse them from their slumber. She tried knocking again, this time with more force. For once, she didn't mind a touch of rudeness.

Strangely enough, she felt more exposed standing here in front of the house, waiting, than she had standing out in the open.

A few more minutes elapsed as she tried knocking for a third time. She was starting to worry that the inhabitant either wasn't here or that this wasn't enough to catch their attention.

"And who are you?" a raspy voice suddenly sliced through the night's silence.

Rosa almost jumped from shock, spinning around to face a figure draped in dark robes, a hood covering their head and most of their features in the darkness.

For a passing second, she squinted her eyes to confirm whether this figure was real or not. Then she shook her head and wore a smile. "You practically startled me out of my skin, but hello there. Fancy meeting someone else in these parts. I'm Rosa, and I was looking for the person living here."

The figure, a woman, it seemed, regarded her from within the shadows of the hood. Rosa saw hints of what was a smirk forming on pale lips. "A strange woman arriving at my abode in the dead of night is a rare occurrence. Especially one so young... And *bright*."

"Erm, right..." Rosa glanced around, examining their surroundings. "A bit of an unconventional greeting, that, but I guess I've heard worse. I take it you're Malachi?"

"I've been called that," the woman answered. "What brings you here?"

"I think I might need your help," Rosa said.

"My help?"

"Yes. I have a...unique problem, and I've been told you might know more about it. I'm more than willing to pay, if that helps any." Rosa reached into her pack and pulled out a pouch that clinked from the coins in it. Scarlett was generous enough with her pay, and Rosa had been able to save up a decent sum lately now that she didn't have to worry about covering basic expenses. "Just name the price."

Malachi studied her for a while. "Follow me," the woman eventually said, turning around and walking away.

Rosa briefly looked back at the door she'd been knocking on before taking a few hurried steps to trail after her.

Malachi led her around the building's exterior and towards a smaller side barn. With a loud creak, she pulled open the wide doors—Rosa would *definitely* have heard it if the woman had come from here—before entering. The barn's interior was so dimly lit that Malachi's dark attire blended in with the shadows, making Rosa tread carefully as she followed.

Coming to a halt in front of a hatch in the floor, Malachi leaned over and pulled it open, unveiling a dark stone stairwell descending into obscurity. Rosa strained to peer down into it, but could barely see anything.

“Don’t dally. Come,” Malachi instructed, beginning her own descent down the stairs.

Rosa hesitated, a frown creasing her forehead. Following a mysterious and potentially dangerous hooded figure down a dark stairway wasn’t her idea of good fun, or anything good, really. It got her thinking that maybe she should have borrowed those enchanted glasses of Scarlett’s that let one see the dark, but it was too late for regrets now.

If she was devoured by a concealed monstrosity lurking in the shadows, at least she’d die blissfully ignorant of how it happened.

With what she felt was a reasonable measure of reluctance, Rosa gingerly took her first step down the staircase, then proceeded from there. Her hand searched for the cool touch of the stone wall as a guide and soon found it, tracing her descent into the darkness. In her other hand, she clutched her kleret and the strap of her pack as it got dark enough that she couldn’t see anything at all, feeling her way forward while listening for the sounds of the woman ahead.

Finally, her feet reached a level surface in what felt like a hallway of some kind. A burst of light erupted as a door swung open in front of her, and she saw Malachi stepping into a room of sorts. The woman glanced back at Rosa as if waiting for her to catch up.

Rosa followed her into the room, only to halt abruptly.

It resembled a spacious underground chamber, hewn from stone and illuminated by the emerald glow of green crystals embedded in the walls. Along one end stood several tables cluttered with an assortment of strange sharp tools and instruments, bordered by rows of odd-glass enclosed containers. And within those containers was the stuff that haunted Rosa’s visions.

Creatures adorned with dark scales of purple and crimson, sporting sharp and menacing features, along with rows of teeth capable of rending flesh. Eyes of pure malice, flickering an intense blood-red as they looked in her direction, fixated on her presence as though anticipating fresh prey.

They embodied everything the tales had described and more. A sight Rosa had never wished to encounter firsthand like this. Demons.

She’d already taken a step back without realizing.

“Don’t mind them. They bite, but not through glass,” Malachi spoke as she began crossing the room and pulled back her hood, revealing a thick, disorderly bun of silvery grey hair.

“They’re part of my projects.”

“...Projects, you say? That’s a pretty unique hobby, if you ask me.” Rosa kept her cool as her gaze darted between the imprisoned demons. Five in total, each stared at her as if she were a piece of raw meat. It was unnerving. The question nagging at her was whether that glass was

enough to stop them from reaching her? And why had Malachi brought her here before anything else?

The looming uncertainty of exactly how much danger she was in weighed heavily.

“So they tell me.” The woman stopped beside a table with books and parchments spread across it, picking up a half-empty glass with a milky white liquid and downing it. She then turned her attention back to Rosa.

Rosa avoided showing her surprise when she saw the woman’s full appearance.

Malachi wasn’t as old as she would have thought from the raspy voice and grey hair. Though, while not overly aged, faint lines marked her face. What caught Rosa’s attention, however, were the woman’s eyes. They were a clear emerald green, and they were *glowing*.

“None of this should be too surprising to you, given your distinctive constitution,” Malachi said.

Rosa’s train of thought halted abruptly. She shifted her focus from the caged demons, locking her gaze onto the woman. “...You can tell there’s something wrong with me that easily? What do you know about that?”

“The connection between you and the realms beyond the Veil is exceptionally potent. It’s intriguing.” Malachi pivoted away to a different table, filled with what mostly appeared to be a collection of cutting implements. Rosa paused for a moment as the woman picked up an object resembling a sextant equipped with multiple lenses. She adjusted it and directed its gaze at Rosa. “I wonder why, hmm...?”

“Veil?” Rosa eyed her closely, trying to decipher everything she heard in her head even as she kept the conversation going. “What Veil?”

Malachi lowered the tool and regarded her for a couple of seconds. “You lack learning.”

“I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t.”

The woman clicked her tongue and strode over towards the nearest demon-occupied container. Inside resided a four-limbed creature that could best be described as a grotesque fusion of a hyena, a lizard, and an armory’s worth of daggers for scales. Rosa instinctively took another step back when Malachi opened a small hatch in the glass and, with swift movements that she could barely follow, reached inside to grab the demon’s head.

The demon struggled, but it almost looked pitiable with how easily the woman overpowered it, dragging it towards the container’s edge. Its body was forced against the glass as Malachi pulled its head through the hatch and aimed it at Rosa.

“What do you see?” the woman’s raspy voice demanded.

The demon continued to squirm and twist its body, but even as it performed its futile attempts to escape, its fiery red eyes never left Rosa for even a second as dark, viscous saliva dripped from its jaws.

“I asked a *question*.” Malachi pressed into the demon’s scales with long nails, and it let out a piercing wail that assaulted Rosa’s ears, reminding her of some of the things she’d heard in her visions.

“*I-Incarnate. Incarnate. Incarnate!!*” the demon howled in a voice that cut like knives.

Malachi stilled for a moment. “...*Incarnate*, you say? Interesting...” The woman forced the demon’s head back through the shaft and released her grip. With an almost careless motion, she sealed the container and turned her attention back to Rosa, giving her a scrutinizing gaze.

A shiver coursed down Rosa’s spine as those gleaming green eyes studied her intently. She was unfamiliar with the term ‘incarnate’, but she could start piecing together the fragments of understanding from her previous experiences.

The most relevant question right now was what this information meant to the person before her.

“It would seem fortune has favored you not to encounter any other demons, or you likely wouldn’t be standing here right now,” Malachi said. She gestured towards the demon behind the glass, which was still gawking at Rosa. “If this one had the opportunity to squeal, half the Blazes would be after you within a fortnight. But not to worry, it won’t be telling a soul or non-soul while confined here. The same goes for all of them.”

Rosa lapsed into a brief silence, swallowing as she considered her situation and the implications of Malachi’s words. Instinct had urged her to run from the moment she arrived, but her mind was saying to stay. *This* was finally her chance to learn more, and this person was clearly more knowledgeable about her circumstances than anyone else she’d met.

Barring Scarlett, maybe, depending on how much the noblewoman was keeping quiet about. But Scarlett had wanted her to arrive here. The woman had *orchestrated* it. Rosa trusted that meant whatever she was looking for *had* to be found here, with this Malachi person.

But Scarlett had also been concerned for her safety. That also had to count for something.

“Why would demons be after me?” Rosa eventually asked.

She suspected she knew. Or maybe she always had. Maybe she’d simply never wanted to look her problems in the face enough to notice.

Malachi shook her head, strolling back over to the tables to return the sextant to where she picked it up. “To not even know what you are. Surviving thus far, concealed from capture or endless servitude, is a remarkable feat. Though I suppose the presence that accompanies you is the cause for that. It cannot touch you itself yet, and it trusts no one else to do so for it, so it’s kept you hidden like a dragon guarding its hoard.”

Rosa took a step forward. “You can tell it’s there?”

“Yes.”

“Then you know what it is?”

“*What*, yes. Ordinarily, *who* would be more of an enigma, but not after recent events.” A disturbing smile grew on the woman’s mouth.

Rosa inched closer. “...And *who* is it?”

As the words left her lips, something stirred inside. As if its name was called, she could *feel* her passenger focusing its attention on her. The entity had been surprisingly calm until now.

However, no nightmarish visions enveloped her surroundings. Everything in the underground chamber remained unchanged. The presence inside was just watching...

Waiting.

“That knowledge remains for me to know,” Malachi slowly answered, her smile growing slightly maniacal. “And a truth you must earn.”