

## 188: Staring into the abyss

Scarlett wrinkled her nose in disgust as a disturbingly large mosquito burst into flames a few centimeters from her face, the smell of burning reaching her moments later. At the same time, her left foot sank into the wet soil, forcing her to steady herself against a nearby tree as she pulled her soaked leg loose.

If she disliked trekking through damp forests after a recent rain shower, it was nothing compared to her disdain for walking through a literal swamp in the middle of an army of insects.

This had been far less revolting in the game.

Using her hydrokinesis to remove some of the water that had seeped into her shoe, Scarlett shook off the dirt and muck with a scowl as she continued making her way forward with the other members of her party and the procession of Duke Valentino's men, their path ahead illuminated by the occasional covered lamp carried by a knight.

Another insect, the size of half of Scarlett's pinky, flew near her again, only to be reduced to ashes by her pyrokinesis.

She didn't care if they were supposedly 'harmless' or if it was a waste of her mana. She wasn't letting any of those creatures near her.

A twinge of jealousy sprang up as she watched Fynn effortlessly weave through the swamp's underbrush a few meters ahead of her, seemingly unnoticed by the insects that swarmed around among the trees, as he almost appeared to blend in with his surroundings.

Next time she came here, she wouldn't take a step outside before she got her hands on an artifact or item that repelled bugs or something like that. Preferably something that helped keep her clean and dry as well.

At least she didn't seem to be the only one who disliked their current environment; Allyssa and several of the duke's men who weren't wearing heavy plate armor—she presumed they were mages and the like—wore uncomfortable expressions as they moved forward through the swamp, swatting their hands left and right.

The only silver lining was the temperature. Despite being in the middle of the night in December, it wasn't too cold. The Liverline Marsh might only be at the edge of the Faywild Basin, but it still held some of the more supernatural features that the Basin did, including the fact that winter never truly seemed to arrive here.

Scarlett narrowed her eyes as she started to make out signs of their destination ahead, where her enchanted glasses allowed her to make out a dark body of water through the trees.

After a few more minutes of insect-incineration and swamp-trudging, Scarlett halted as the procession reached the bank of a small lake.

“What the—”

“By Ittar...”

Several muffled exclamations echoed among the group as they looked out over the water.

Encircled by mostly swamp, the lake appeared like a blot on the land. The water had a gloomy, purplish hue and seemed as thick as honey, with black vegetation creeping out from it and over the shores, slowly spreading into the trees. A putrid smell hung heavily in the air, assaulting Scarlett’s senses. On the opposite bank, a tall cliffside overlooked the lake, featuring a single cave entrance in its face.

“Baroness, do you know what’s happened here?” a deep voice sounded out as Sir Home approached her, wearing a serious expression as he eyed the strange lake. Scarlett wasn’t sure how far out he could see without the aid of an enchantment item like hers, but those knights holding lamps were aiming the light towards the bank and at the black seaweeds and other plants emerging from the lake water, careful not to let the light spill too far.

“I presume this is not normal?” she said, turning to the man.

He shook his head. “It has been some time since I last entered the Basin, but I have never seen anything like this.”

“Then it appears we are dealing with something different from what we first expected. I know of no dragon that has this sort of effect on their surroundings, after all.”

Scarlett was perfectly aware of the reason the lake looked like this, but that wasn’t something she was going to share at this moment. Besides, he would figure things out quickly enough once they encountered their target.

She pointed towards the other end of the lake. “I do not know if you are able to see it, but there is a cliffside with a cave on the opposite bank. It is likely that our quarry resides there.”

Sir Home’s forehead creased together as he seemed to consider her statement before turning towards a nearby knight and ordering them to take some samples of the water for examination. He then looked back at Scarlett. “We’ll continue making our approach as soon as we have confirmed this does not pose an immediate threat to us. Meanwhile, I recommend that you stay back, Baroness.”

For now, she followed his advice, stepping back among the trees—and the accursed insects—with her party as she watched the captain and his people move about. They were keeping relatively quiet, but they were also supposedly using spells that masked their presence so that a dragon wouldn’t notice them unless they got too close. Scarlett wasn’t sure how effective those spells were—the Cabal’s Adepts used something similar in their missions—but she trusted that it was at least better than nothing.

Eventually, Sir Home seemed satisfied and signaled to Scarlett that they were moving again. She and the rest of her party readied themselves as the duke’s men cautiously circled the edge of the lake—each member prepared for a fight—and approached the cave situated on the other end.

Despite knowing how unlikely it was at this point, Scarlett couldn't stop herself from scanning the swamp around them, wondering if she might spot Rosa somewhere near this place. If things went as they had in the game, the bard would likely come to this place along with Malachi sometime soon. Malachi was a master of concealment, though, so it was possible that even Fynn would have difficulty detecting them at a distance, much less Scarlett.

She was hoping they hadn't arrived yet, at least, if they were indeed coming here. Malachi was relatively powerful, but even with Rosa's assistance, it remained uncertain whether they could confront a foe this strong by themselves. Scarlett also wasn't quite sure how she would even interact with them in a believable manner right now.

As the procession approached the cave entrance, Sir Home and his people halted outside it, with Scarlett and her group trailing slightly behind. The captain's attention was rested on a set of stones positioned next to the entrance, their surfaces carved almost to resemble altars with traces of blood and deep claw marks on them.

Feeling that it was safe, Scarlett walked up to him along with her party. He turned to her, his gaze heavy. "These were made by people."

Scarlett glanced over at the stone altars. "It would appear so."

"Someone or something has been collaborating with the dragon in some capacity. This means that the attack against His Grace might have been premeditated."

"While I have not heard of many dragons that cooperate with humans, it appears that we are facing an exceptional situation."

The man frowned as he shifted his attention back to the cave entrance. The passage seemed to extend deeply into the cliffside in a gradual curve, obscuring Scarlett's view of what lay beyond. "Is the dragon inside?" he asked.

"That is not a question I know the answer to," Scarlett replied. She glanced over at Fynn, whose brows were furrowed in a scowl. "What do you sense, Fynn?"

The white-haired young man shook his head. "I can't tell. There are too many scents, and the lake has an overpowering influence on this total area."

"I see." Scarlett turned her attention back to Sir Home. "Then it would seem you will have to determine the answer for yourself."

The knight captain gave Fynn a brief but thoughtful look, then he headed over to his men, issuing sharp orders as they changed their formation to prepare for entering the cave.

Scarlett's focus returned to Fynn as he stepped closer to her, speaking in a quieter voice. "I can sense a presence here, similar to what Rosa and that Mistress lady. The lake and this cave are filled with it."

"It is good that you remembered to inform me about it, but this time, that in itself does not pose a threat. It is to be expected, considering what we are dealing with."

“If you say so.” Fynn’s scowl eased a bit as he continued to keep a vigilant watch on their surroundings.

Scarlett eyed him for a few seconds. “You cannot sense any trace of Rosa, can you?”

He paused, meeting her gaze, eyebrows lifting slightly. “No. Why would she be here by herself?”

“Because she can be a thoughtless and self-sacrificing fool.”

Scarlett asked Fynn to keep an eye out for Rosa just in case, then she and the others retreated a bit as Sir Home and his dragon-slaying contingent started entering the cavern. Scarlett opted to stay about thirty meters behind them, a distance allowing her to observe the unfolding events without being too close in case something happened.

It could be problematic if the ‘dragon’ was away for the time being and returned now, but she had enough confidence that Fynn would at least be able to tell if a new presence like that appeared.

The notion crossed her mind that such thoughts were akin to tempting fate, but she had no belief in superstitions like that.

Although that didn’t stop her from glancing back over her shoulder from time to time, just in case.

As they ventured deeper into the cave, a deep growl reverberated throughout the place, its echoes resonating off the damp walls.

Shin strengthened his grip on his sword and shield, Allyssa reached for the vials in her bandolier, and Fynn adopted a combat stance. Scarlett tightened her lips, her eyes fixed on Sir Home and the others as they looked around, cautiously advancing with weapons raised.

Now there was no doubt left whether their quarry was home or not.

Scarlett continued to watch as the group of a few dozen or so disappeared around a corner, followed by a roar that seemed to shake the entire cave and penetrate into her very bones.

Sir Home’s authoritative voice carried over the commotion as spells erupted and knights ran into battle.

Scarlett and her companions remained where they were, listening to the sounds of the ensuing combat, gauging the situation.

Their foe certainly sounded fearsome, and occasional cries of pain pierced the air, but the duke’s men had healers with them. For now, it didn’t seem too bad.

An agonized scream reached them, accompanied by a tremor that shook through the cavern, as if something massive had crushed the stone.

Alright, scratch that.

“Shouldn’t we...help them?” Allyssa asked, a conflicted expression on her face.

Scarlett observed the girl. Earlier, Allyssa had seemed anxious about confronting a dragon, but now she appeared more concerned about *not* doing so.

“Would you prefer if that were you?” Scarlett asked, and Allyssa met her eyes with slight shock. “They were well aware of the peril associated with this mission, and that it is their duty to face this adversary. Our role was completed the moment we led them to this cavern.”

The young Shielder fell silent, and they remained in their position for a while longer, surrounded by the clangs of combat.

More screams, some a tad too similar to death throes, reached their ears as the minutes ticked by. Yet, judging by the accompanying roars, it seemed that the duke’s men were not the sole victims.

Eventually, as there were fewer screams and more normal fighting, Scarlett decided it was time to assess the situation herself. She carefully began moving forward, the others following her with slight surprise, and rounded the corner to see how things were going.

Before her sprawled a vast cavern, its jagged walls glistening with moisture and adorned with twisted, luminescent fungi that cast an eerie, ever-shifting glow, painting the chamber in unsettling shades of sickly blue and ominous purple.

Engaged in a fierce battle, Sir Home and several other armored figures stood defiantly with swords and shields in hand before a monstrous creature, towering nearly to the cavern’s ceiling. It easily dwarfed the dragon that Empress had left in Scarlett’s courtyard, standing at almost double the size. Its imposing serpentine form was covered in purplish scales and uneven spines that cast menacing shadows as it moved, with one massive wing that was half-folded, veined with strange patterns that seemed to pulse with a sinister energy. On the ground lay another such wing, cut off and damaged from numerous attacks.

Its elongated skull boasted wicked, forward-curving horns framing a pair of piercing crimson eyes that seemed to bore into the depths of one’s soul, and its maw was filled with rows of razor-sharp teeth.

At first and second glance, most would probably mistake this presence for that of a strange breed of dragon. That illusion was broken, however, by its open mouth. It revealed a void of nothing, as if peering into an abyss of living darkness. Scarlett’s skin prickled as a billowing, viscous dark light coalesced into a deadly breath before that void, which the creature prepared to unleash upon its foes.

This was an Abyssal Vilewurm. A demon birthed from the depths of Malevolence, the Blaze of consuming shadows.

Sir Home shouted a terse command as three of the mages at the back of the cavern cast a spectrum of spells, erecting an intricate web of barriers to shield their comrades. The man himself summoned forth golden light from his sword that formed a protective bubble around him for a short moment.

Scarlett instinctively stepped back behind the stone wall as the Vilewyrms released their attack as an undulating sea of shadows, but luckily, it didn't reach their location. After a tense pause, she peeked around the corner once more to continue observing the fight.

Over half of the duke's men were strewn across the floor in some shape or form, some motionless, others writhing in pain or simply unable to move. Scarlett estimated that maybe a third of them were likely beyond saving, while the fate of the others hinged on the outcome of this battle.

The Vilewyrms, in comparison, had lost one of its wings, and its massive form bore grievous wounds that oozed a dark, ichorous substance that was spread around the cavern in black spots.

A couple of explosions erupted as more spells struck its scales, accompanied by javelins of stone launched by the mages' spells. Simultaneously, the knights surged forward, focusing their aura into their swords and aiming their strikes at the creature's lower body. The Vilewyrms responded by slamming one knight into the cavern wall with a powerful foreleg while also lunging towards Sir Home with its gaping maw.

The seasoned captain deflected the entire assault with his large shield — an impressive feat of strength, given his adversary's size. Nonetheless, the sheer force still sent him tumbling several meters back beneath the behemoth's weight.

The confrontation continued in this manner for a while, each side slowly whittling away at the other. Scarlett and her party remained a safe distance away, watching the spectacle unfold. She could tell that Allyssa wanted to help out, but Scarlett was unwilling to risk her team's safety against something like this, especially when Rosa wasn't present.

Cold-hearted, perhaps, but she never claimed to be a saint. She had her priorities.

That said, it wasn't as if she intended to abandon *all* of the duke's men to their fate. That would be foolish, considering the Vilewyrms could go after her group next. She kept a close watch over the battle, studying the demon's condition and capabilities.

A few more of the knights succumbed to its relentless onslaught, but in return, they severed the Vilewyrms' remaining wing, heavily damaged one of its eyes, as well as grievously wounded its left foreleg. However, the duke's mages appeared to be running out of mana, their spells becoming sporadic as some of them drank mana potions and Sir Home began bearing the brunt of the demon's attacks.

Both sides were nearing their limits.

Finally, as Sir Home hid behind his shield and the Vilewyrms flung him into the cavern wall with one of its blows, preparing to finish him off once and for all, Scarlett saw her chance to act.

"Fynn," she uttered the word.

The young man sprang to action.

“You may assist those who require it,” she instructed Allyssa, gesturing for Shin to do the same. “Simply be mindful of how many potions you use.”

While she wasn't short on money, for some reason the thought of presenting the duke an invoice when she got back made her smile inside.

Perhaps this world was starting to twist her more than she thought.

Leaving that thought aside, she stepped forward and raised her hand. The [Tiara of Benediction] appeared on her forehead along with the [Fireguard Knife] and the rest of her equipment.

Just as Sir Home managed to force himself off the ground and weakly raised his sword and shield to confront the approaching Vilewurm, a blazing sea of flames erupted between them like a barrier.

The Vilewurm roared in agony as its already wounded head was engulfed by the sudden inferno, forcing its large body to a halt as it pulled back. Its maw opened and a small burst of shadowy flames burst forth to clash with Scarlett's red blaze, their confluence creating an otherworldly spectacle as they appeared to devour each other until nothing remained of both.

That was when Fynn reached the creature. Like a person-sized cannonball, propelled by invisible winds, he launched into the Vilewurm's flank with his ethereal claws out. Despite his comparatively small size, the demon staggered momentarily from the blow, and Fynn tore open an existing wound on its scales.

This assault was immediately followed by an onslaught of Scarlett's making. Aqua Mines, fire arrows, spheres of fire, and a barrage of attacks converged on the Vilewurm all at once. Scarlett didn't hold anything back, eating through her mana supplies as she lit up the entire cavern.

This wasn't about conserving mana. It was about dealing maximum damage as swiftly as possible.

For a brief period, Scarlet alone assailed the demon with a flurry of attacks that outnumbered even the combined efforts of the mages. It was clear the Vilewurm was caught off guard by it all. While not as intelligent as many other demons, it clearly recognized the danger, despite Scarlett's individual attacks lacking significant power. It knew that its already precarious situation had worsened.

It responded with a series of guttural roars and growls, shifting its massive frame to address these new threats. Tendrils of ichor emerged from the cavern's stony surface where its equivalent of blood had dripped, reaching for the bodies of those who had fallen. Scarlett recognized this as a late-stage mechanic from the game, however, and countered the tendrils with her pyrokinesis, burning them to a crisp as Shin and Allyssa aided in rescuing the fallen.

The Vilewurm fixed its remaining eye on Fynn, lunging at him with its gaping maw. In its weakened state, however, it proved too sluggish to catch him immediately. The white-haired young man evaded as it also swiped a colossal foreleg towards him, tearing off several chest-sized scales in the process.

That was when Sir Home reentered the fray, joined by a pair of mages who had downed mana potions. They unleashed a fresh wave of spells, adding to Scarlett's barrage against the demon.

With its health gradually dwindling down and its capacity to retaliate diminishing, the Vilewyrmling seemed to realize how this would end.

It opened its maw once more, gathering a colossal wave of dark energy within the abyss inside its throat. The energy this time was so potent that it seemed to drain the life from the surroundings, including the Vilewyrmling itself, forming a concentrated mass of darkness that continued to build up.

An idea ignited within Scarlett.

She ceased all of her attacks abruptly, casting the cavern into relative darkness. Then, she conjured a small, fiery sun within the Vilewyrmling's open maw. She pushed it through the encroaching shadows and into the abyss that resided within the creature.

She was surprised when the abyss seemed to *push back*. Along with the gathering dark mass that ate away at her fire, the abyss almost threatened to swallow her attack then and there.

But the Vilewyrmling was exhausted from a grueling battle.

She wasn't.

Pouring every ounce of concentration and strength into the miniature star she had conjured, she intensified its brilliance. The flame's hue transformed into a searing crimson, challenging the Vilewyrmling's power with the intensity of a raging forest fire condensed into a single point.

Then something budged.

Her fiery inroad pierced the Vilewyrmling's defenses, tearing into the abyss within. And the demon *screamed*. It was a heart-rending noise, as if its very core had been ripped apart. The shrieks resounded throughout the chamber, forcing Scarlett to cover her ears even as she maintained her magical assault.

The Vilewyrmling shut its maw, its entire form trembling, a brilliant light radiating from beneath its battered scales. In one final, cataclysmic convulsion, it collapsed onto the stone floor, smoldering from within.

Silence descended upon the cavern. Those of the duke's men who were still standing turned their gazes towards Scarlett, Sir Home included.

She kept her eyes on the fallen Vilewyrmling for a moment longer before shifting her attention to the knight captain.

"Well," she spoke in a voice that carried across the space between them. "It appears as if we have successfully accomplished our objective. Congratulations might not be in order, considering the injuries your men have sustained, but I believe the duke will be quite satisfied. No?"