

Ryan led us to the house that Benadora was staying in. She had somehow gathered the funds to purchase a property in Dalston and restart her research. How she found time to do that and spread ill rumours about me was a mystery. I had to promise Ryan that I wouldn't do anything impulsive when I saw her again. I had no intention of doing such a thing. The extent of her words still remained unknown to me. Ryan knocked on the door while we stood back and observed from a safe distance.

Benadora hadn't changed, but that was my fault for expecting anything. Her eyes immediately leapt to me, standing there with my arms crossed and my brow set. "Ryan, why did you bring Ren here?"

"He wanted to speak with you. Can we come inside?"

Benadora conceded and allowed us entry to her new home. There was no sign of her assistant, but much of the scenery was familiar to me. She'd been very quick to break her new lodgings in by covering it from head to toe in pieces of discarded paper and old books. I found a clear seat and took the weight off my feet while she fretted about the situation. Cali and Tahar stood at the side of the room and observed the standoff.

"Why are you in such a damn panic about this?" I asked.

She didn't answer me.

Ryan tried to get her to slow down, "Dora – he wants to talk to you about what you've been saying."

"I know!" she snapped, "That's why I want to hear your reasoning for bringing him here!"

"I can answer that," I cut in, "I heard that you were pinning the entire thing in Pascen on me, that hardly seems fair."

Benadora paused and turned on me with a worried expression. "You're the only one who isn't troubled by any of this. I accept my part in the disaster, but what about you? You remain blissfully ignorant as to the true impact of your actions."

I motioned to the well-used room we were sitting in; "Is that so? It looks like you're happily wasting your days doing the same shit you always did. It doesn't look much like repentance from where I'm sitting."

Ryan grimaced as he discovered the full extent of the bad blood that had been stirred between us while I was away. Her confrontational manner instantly put me in a very bad mood. She'd been dragging my name through the mud, spitting in my face and trying to convince me that it was rain. For all of her complaining about me not taking responsibility, she wasn't willing to take that step herself and make a difference.

"I'm... doing my best to help the people who we harmed. I've been donating my time, money and effort to getting them back on their feet."

I shrugged, "I don't see what that has to do with you accusing me of being the person solely responsible for it."

"I never said that."

"You might not have said that – but that's the conclusion that everyone I've spoken to reached based on your testimony. That means you either did it on purpose or you're too stupid to understand what you're saying."

It was an acrimonious reunion for us. While I was busy chasing cursed items across the continent, she was ginning up accusations that I had some kind of knowledge about what killing the Branch would do. This had rapidly mutated in the information vacuum that followed. It was easy to pin the blame on one person because people liked to believe in systems. If those systems could make bad choices, then it would undermine the harmony of their everyday lives.

“But goodness knows what you’re going to do when this infection progresses further,” she opined.

In response, I removed both of my gloves and slammed them down on the table, sending papers flying into the air as a gust of wind blew through. I held up both hands for her to see. There was no human skin left below my elbows. A harsh crest of jagged scales cropped outwards and cut it off before it could reach my fingers. They weren’t much larger than they used to be – but the texture and feeling were completely different. To belabour the point, I reached up and brushed aside the longer segments of my hair; revealing the ash-coloured horns that had started to sprout from both sides of my head. Ryan gasped at the sight, but Benadora was unmoved.

“I don’t think it’s going to get much worse than this. You should see the state that my feet are in.”

She shook her head, “There is still more to this transformation. The Blackblood Demons were described as taller than the other races, and sported more animalistic parts than their hands and feet.”

“I don’t much care. Going along with this is the only theory I have on how to stop the curse. Horns and scales aren’t going to stop me.”

Ryan walked up and got a closer look at my arms, “I didn’t even notice that!”

“Well, it only got really obvious a few days ago. Most of the time I’m wearing gloves anyway.”

“Man, I guess this is the sword’s fault, huh?”

“Right.”

Benadora retreated back to the main topic, “I never implicated you on purpose. I provided everyone with a clear and factual account of everything that happened during our attempts to stop the giants’ rampage. If they interpreted that account in a strange way – there is little that I can do to stop them.”

“You named the Duke, the ministers, the Amendment, yourself, and me?”

She nodded, “Yes. I did not omit a single detail. The people responsible for dispensing punishment decided that the incident was the unfortunate result of a well-meaning effort. They could not assign fault to any one party.”

“That doesn’t mean much when people think it was just me,” I grumbled. I wasn’t under the impression that they’d pose a threat to my health. I was too powerful for that now. It was just annoying and inconvenient to have people spitting curses at me or trying to pick fights as revenge.

“I don’t understand,” she said again, “Why are you so unwilling to accept your part in this? There are many people who also blame me as the one who ‘led the Duke astray’ with my hairbrained theories.”

I stood up, “A lot of people out there who didn’t deserve to die did, and maybe under this coal-black heart of mine there is some guilt festering in me. But you aren’t the person to make that

assessment, Dora. You don't know how I feel about it, and you can't boil it down into a bunch of fucking research papers."

Benadora released the breath she was holding and finally conceded, "I apologise then. I was... convinced that you were no longer sound of mind."

"I haven't felt any different at all."

Cali concurred from atop her emotionless perspective, "Indeed. Ren has been himself this entire time."

"One thing's for sure, I'm not going to be stabbing any more magic trees with Stigma. I should apologise to Ryan for getting his arm bitten off."

He held up his hand, "No apologies needed, man. Now that I have the full picture – I get what happened over there. Pascen destroyed itself trying to get rid of those giants, it's crazy. I didn't realise how destructive these swords could be."

Benadora jumped in, "No. Only Stigma, and only when used in conjunction with a Branch. It appears that it corrupted the 'roots' of the tree and pulled the very land asunder. At least, that's what I've theorised based on what we saw during our escape. I'd love to know what purpose the Branch serves if left untouched, but such information is tightly controlled by the Inquisition."

I was still irritated over what had happened while I was away but I understood why it had turned out like this. People were always quick to jump to conclusions when something terrible happened, and even if she had all of the evidence in the world – there'd still be some people who would stubbornly refuse to change their perspective. If I found out that she was lying to save her own skin, that was when the trouble would really start.

She retrieved a book from the table in front of me and flipped through to another page, "However, I did manage to uncover some more information about the Blackblood Demons thanks to the assistance of some local scholars. I'm not certain how much help it will be."

"Anything is better than nothing," I shrugged. It wouldn't hurt to know more.

"To boil it down to the most interesting parts, they were rather infamous for their immense power and strength, which dwarfed that of all other races. Despite those natural advantages – they were a mostly peaceful society split into two major nations on the east coast of the continent. The other nations feared their capabilities, and launched a genocidal war to rid the world of them and their kin."

"You're saying that this strength I have is because of the Blackblood transformation?"

"Yes. That's what I suspect. I also found a singular mention of Stigma being used in historical records from the time. It was a key weapon utilised during the war, but they make no mention of it killing the wielder. So, it seems that it was taken as a trophy by the Empire after the war had concluded but eventually cursed to be as it is now."

"That doesn't explain why I'm turning into one of them."

Benadora adjusted the tip of her hat and smiled as her scholarly side took over again, "If we look at the principles of conceptual magic and the motivations of the Blackblood people at the time, we can guess as to why Stigma acts as it does. Considering that the Blackblood were facing a war of extermination they may have believed that Stigma was the 'salvation' of their people. When that

kind of belief is widespread it may become interpreted in literal ways. As in, the reason Stigma transforms the wielder into a Blackblood is because it is intended to secure the survival of their species.”

Because there were none of them left, Stigma would turn its user into a Blackblood to fulfil its magically instilled legend. That meant it was completely disconnected from the curse that was threatening to kill me. That all hinged on Benadora’s assessment being correct. There was still a large amount of uncertainty to contend with. She picked up on my scepticism right away.

“I think the record is legitimate. It was extremely difficult to translate, and I’ve had the document independently assessed by an expert in the field. These pages are hundreds and hundreds of years old.”

“If you find out anything more, we can confirm it.”

She closed the book and placed it back down, taking extra care not to damage the extremely old and valuable item unduly. At least my visit had produced something more than a heated argument about how to feel properly guilty after accidentally tearing an entire tectonic plate to pieces. Ryan could rest easy now that I wasn’t about to rip her head off using my new clawed hands. He patted me on the back and released the breath that he had been holding.

“Okay, now that everything’s tied up – what are you planning on doing next?”

“Wait, mostly.”

Cali groaned in exasperation.

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The freshly promoted Warmajor Elise Xerces had started to regret the immense success of her operation to kill Lord Forester. She had not expected much at all when she dispatched Ren on a one-man mission to cut the head from the head before he could launch his march over the Bend. Ren had exceeded those expectations and then some. A week later and she had received an excited report from one of her spies that Forester had been stabbed and killed in his own tent, and nobody could figure out how or why it had happened.

A few weeks on from that and now the Kingdom were on their hands and knees, begging for a quick and easy truce that would protect them from the people’s fury. Thousands and thousands of men and women had died, only to claim an area of land that most of Sull’s nationalists saw as peripheral to their grand aspirations. The King had ordered a hard pause as they tried to reformulate a new plan, but the wet weather was the final nail in the coffin.

The Warmaster was so pleased with what had happened that Xerces had been bumped up two entire ranks and assigned the leadership of the entire area. She was already handling a similar number of men before the promotion, but her words had a lot more weight now that extra chevrons had been added to her uniform.

On the other hand, it meant that the Governor of Dalston, Brandon Jalski, believed that she had been made into his personal servant. He had visited the barracks no less than ten times since the disaster in Pascen, alternating between pleas to help expel some of the refugees for making trouble and demanding that she personally apprehend the people involved with its destruction.

Today was one such occasion.

"I've heard from some of my people that one of those culprits is here in the city right now. Why don't you take some of your men and throw him into a cell?" he spat, his face rose red from impotent rage. "They've started calling him Blackvein, it's a name fit for a villain of his sort."

Elise rubbed her brow irritably, "You do know that he's the man I commissioned to kill Lord Forester?"

Jalski stopped pacing and shook his head, "He is?"

"Yes. And I have reliable testimony from the survivors of the disaster that the duke of Pascen personally issued orders for an expedition to locate the source of their giant problem and destroy it. Are we going to arrest him as well?"

"He's dead, is he not?"

"That's what I mean. It was his decision."

Jalski would not be repelled that easily, he leaned into her desk and pressed his case.

"It's not a matter of justice, or finding the right person. There are a lot of people out there who feel betrayed by our lack of action. My first priority is to continue the social unity of our Federation, unease like this is not acceptable."

Elise was not amused by the insinuation, "If we drag any one person to the barristers – they'll quickly conclude that blame cannot be assigned. Your culprit will walk away a free man. Not to mention my personal distaste for that kind of manipulation. I will not be ordering my men to do any such thing, and you do not have the authority to do so either."

"I can make life very hard for you, Warmajor," he warned gravely.

"I'd like to see you try. This meeting is over."