

Without my prompting, Tahar set about the repetitive task of heating up some hot water for me to clean off with. I needed it. The blood had dried into a distasteful collage of red and yellow. I sat on the bed and observed her deft hands as they repeatedly added more to the pot, before dumping it into the crude iron container the inn-keepers called a bath. The anticipation of relaxing in it made the cool air of the inn even more unbearable than usual.

But there was just one problem with this arrangement. Tahar was definitely going to try and bathe me. Even though I was somewhat capable of walking myself back to the inn, she never once let go of my arm for fear of me falling over and hurting myself; never mind the fact that I was essentially invulnerable to anything but the most dangerous enemies and situations.

In my past life being naked with a beautiful woman was no problem, if subservient to an innate sense of nervousness at the prospect. But our first act of consensual nudity being me asking her to clean my back wasn't what I had in mind. Cali was also steadfast in her position against the headboard of her own bed. She wasn't going to move to preserve my dignity. She didn't think that seeing a penis was that big a deal. It wasn't about what they thought, it was about how I felt. I could see the train oncoming, but there was no way for me to get out of the way before it smashed into it.

Tahar was happy with the temperature of the water. She placed the pot down on top of the hob and turned to me with a smile; "The bath is ready."

"Do you two want to step out for a moment?" I offered. Cali made no effort to move from her resting place. Tahar also remained where she was. Silence filled the air as both refused to budge. The standoff was broken as Stigma appeared in front of me and crossed her arms. The audience had expanded to three.

"My my, what a situation to find yourself in, Master."

I tried to stand up from the bed with a wobble in my legs; "Why the hell did I have to make a party with three people who don't care about privacy?" It was natural that we'd end up seeing some private parts on the road, living in close proximity in a tiny camp in the wilderness, but the appeal of an inn room was that I could clean myself without worrying about voyeurs in the treeline. My efforts were ultimately for naught as I fell back down onto my ass again. Somehow things had gotten worse since I started resting.

"You cannot stand up straight," Tahar observed, "Please, allow me to help."

"You're my not servant, Tahar."

She frowned, "But I am your partner. You are not forcing me to do anything."

Cali's face was unreadable, "It's nothing I haven't seen before..."

"Only because you barged into my room while I was getting dressed."

Cali was quick to put me in my place, "And on other occasions besides, you're not as subtle in the camp as you like to think, Ren."

"I *try* to stay out of the way though. Doing it on purpose is different."

Stigma was not helping matters by speaking into my ear, "Stop being a baby and get those clothes off." I missed the silent treatment already...

Tahar wasn't going to budge. She loomed over me with a patient smile one might give to a parading toddler. Every second I spent arguing was another second where the water was going to cool down and make things less comfortable. I wasn't ashamed of my body, if anything it had only gotten more presentable since my old life. I used to be a normal skinny guy but years of thieving and fighting, and now the stat multiplier, had filled out my frame to something more impressive. It was a normal level of embarrassment to have, one you'd feel getting nude in front of three women.

Once upon a time I would have been filled with ill-placed masculine bravado, but I was pushing forty years of existence by this point. Everyone thinks they can be the master of a harem, but should the scenario present itself a lot of those same people would flake at the first opportunity. With a deep sense of inevitability, I started to remove what was left. My socks, pants and underwear. The blood had leaked all the way down to my crotch, staining my formerly white briefs a deep shade of red. They were a lost cause. Blood tended to get everywhere when you were the one being injured. There was going to be even more on my back, sides and legs that I couldn't see.

Tahar's tribe had different perspectives on a lot of things – and nudity was one of them. The climate in their home village was incredibly hot, meaning that matters of dress were left down to practicality first and modesty second. There were two extremes on display during our visit; wearing as little as possible, or using a cloak to shade the surface of their skin from the sun. That was a choice that would be left down to the humidity in the air. Convincing Tahar to wear more than her usual garb was an immense challenge. The biting cold of the winter was the tipping point by which she eventually complied.

Even so, I could feel her eyes analysing my body. I tensed up and tried to ignore the lead ball settling into my gut. Her inspection provoked a similar response from my own brain. I started to comprehend the full scale of the changes that had occurred to my body. The pale skin, larger musculature, the dying skin where patches of dark scale had started to flourish. I was looking increasingly inhuman by the day. The tipping point had come. The skin on my hands was impossible to keep attached to my body. An exploratory itch unravelled more of it like old wallpaper. That decay started the onset of further decay, a chain reaction of itching and removing and itching...

By the time I was done screwing around a disgusting pile of skin flakes had accumulated at my feet. Just how far were these changes going to go? Benadora didn't offer much in the way of explanation as to what a Blackblood Demon really was. The horns and scales made me think of a reptilian appearance. There were no signs of a tail, but as the infected veins spread further towards my legs I started to notice a familiar development of matching symptoms. I could realistically expect more scales below the knee.

The real fear was what might happen to my little friend. I didn't mind having weird hands and feet too much, and the horns were a mild inconvenience more than anything else. The moment more significant parts of my anatomy started changing was when I'd really panic about it. There was no progress on that front, much to my relief. The idea of this kind of gruesome transformation happening to my genitalia wasn't a pleasant one.

"You don't need to fake enthusiasm for this," I grumbled as Tahar helped me off of the bed and towards the tub. It was a short walk from one side of the room to the other – a space barely big enough for three. It still beat sleeping in the woods. During the trip I obscured my crotch with my hand to try and protect what was left of my modesty.

"Enthusiasm?" she repeated.

“A state of being willing to do something,” Cali explained, turning a page in the book she had borrowed. She really wasn’t interested in spying on me.

“I am happy to assist my mate in whatever he needs,” Tahar insisted with her expanded vocabulary. She held her palms against my back as I hooked one leg over the edge and sunk down into the water. The blood on my chest started to break away and float to the edges as the heat separated them from my grease covered skin. The water level rose as my body displaced it upwards, and a strong shiver ran through me as the contrast between the steaming water and my chilly body hit in full.

I grabbed the small towel resting on the edge of the tub and dunked it into the water. The messiest area was my front. I scrubbed it down, making sure to exercise caution around the wounded area. The potion had done a good job of stitching it back together, but the skin was still vulnerable and rough activity could still cause it to split again. Tahar was not content to sit on the side-lines and watch me. She took the second cloth and started to rub down my back and shoulders.

It was almost relaxing, kicking back and feeling Tahar’s strong hands dig into my knotted muscles; but Cali was still in the room with us. The rim of the bath was high enough to prevent her from taking a look at what was going on downstairs. It was awkward. This was something that I usually did in private. Stigma had also decided that perching atop the bed and staring dead into my eyes was a good way to spend her time. She knew that it annoyed me; because she was already capable of seeing what I saw. There was no other reason for her to express any curiosity about it.

“Would you like me to do the front?” Tahar asked.

“No, I’m fine.”

I dunked my head into the water to clean the dirt from my face and hair. I could see the grease floating in the water as it separated from my skin. The water sloshed around me as I started to go over the fine details. My feet were covered in various sores, blisters and markings earned from years of travelling on the roads in poor footwear. It was extremely important to keep them clean because an infection down there could lead to losing a few toes and maybe the entire foot. I knew too many rogues who hadn’t exercised due diligence to risk it myself.

I was always extra thorough with the way I cleaned up. The opportunity to have a bath could be a rare one in certain places. Working in the Bend was especially problematic because of this; there weren’t a plethora of clean water sources to jump into when you needed to rinse off.

As I started to rub down my hands and fingers, the problem with my skin became apparent once more. It just came away from my body like wet tissue paper – revealing more and more of the inhuman claws that lay just beneath. The extent to which they travelled upwards towards my elbow joint was alarming. I hadn’t noticed how bad things were getting. But to leave the dead skin on top would invite problems in the future. It had to go.

And go it did. I made sure that there wasn’t a single patch of the stuff left to house a nasty bacterial infection. The black, almost purple hide that replaced it was tough and dry. The progression from skin to scale was gradual. This wasn’t something you’d see in my old world, to see it portrayed for real was disquieting. I held them in the air and flexed my joints. They felt different to what I was used to, but not so much to cause any problems with going about my business.

“I like them,” Tahar commented in a strange attempt to put a positive spin on things.

“That’s not really what I’m worried about. Nobody even knows what a Blackblood is; they’ll just write me off as someone from a place they don’t know anything about.” Where would these changes end? I’d ignored the posturing from John and the others about losing myself – but what if that kind of thing was what was waiting for me at the end of the process? That change was something imperceptible. I wasn’t arrogant enough to believe I could recognize my behaviour changing over a long period of time. From my perspective, everything I did was perfectly rational.

But what could be done about it? I was already in the process of trying to unravel Stigma’s secrets; hopefully on-route to freeing myself from the curse that she had afflicted me with. I could have asked Adelbern to try and move things along faster, but he was probably under the restrictions being put onto him by the Absolver. He was being cautious, which was how I usually liked to work. I’d rather have the cursed items eventually versus not at all.

With the water starting to cool down and Tahar still searching for ways to assist me – it was high time for me to get out and dry off. Tahar pulled me over the edge and held my back as I wrapped my towel around my waist to regain some of my modesty. A second, smaller towel was utilized to dry my hair and the rest of my body. Tahar’s cheeks were still flushed red as I ran the towel between the various nooks and crannies on my person. It didn’t leave much room for doubt that she found me attractive.

The feeling was mutual, as difficult as it was to admit. Tahar was very beautiful; but in a different way to Cali. She had sharp features that some may have described as handsome. Those same people may have found issue with her standing a few heads taller than them, though that wasn’t something I was particularly bothered with. Despite her immense strength and robust body, she still bore pleasing curves and a large chest. She was not shy about showing herself off.

One of the other things that stood out were her eyes. On Versia I had initially failed to notice that they bore a strong resemblance to those you’d find on an eagle. The colour was extremely strong, a bright orange-yellow that demanded attention. They were very, very good at seeing things through the grass. Tahar would often take off after prey that I couldn’t hope to see so we had something to eat over the open fire.

I was staring. I snapped back down to my business and hung the towel over the foot of my bed to dry. I knelt next to my bag and grabbed a replacement pair of underpants. Slipping my feet through, I pulled them up beneath the cloth around my waist with trepidation. My new nails were starting to get sharper. I needed to be careful, or think about filing them down later.

Even my still intact clothes were starting to move to the small end of the spectrum. I could feel them filling out in a way they didn’t before. My high strength stat was starting to really effect the way I looked. A trip for some replacements was going to turn into an entirely new wardrobe at this pace.

“Thanks, Tahar. I should be okay now.”

“Ah. Okay. Please do not be afraid to ask for my help in the future.”

We’d have to empty the tub later before we vacated the room, an irritating process where we dragged it downstairs to dump into the nearest drain. Even at a more expensive inn like this, there was no plumbing on site. Since businesses like this went through a lot of water, they were generally constructed in clusters around those drain entrances. It made things easier for the workers and guests to clean up once they were done.

“Now that you’ve finished flirting, I suppose I should ask what you plan to do about that Sakura girl,” Stigma asked from my right.

“I already said, didn’t I? If she gets in our way again, she’s dead.”

“How? Are you going to summon a spike and impale her properly this time?”

“She’s probably wise to that trick already,” I said, “We can’t take her lightly.”

“So you should track her down and be done with her before you worry about Rivers,” Stigma reasoned.

“I don’t even know where she is. It’d take way too long for me to find her in a town like this. I don’t have any contacts, and there’s no rogue presence to speak of. We’d be grappling in the dark for weeks.”

“It’s quite disconcerting when you speak to yourself like this,” Cali quipped. Stigma scowled and swatted at her with a ghostly hand – only to see it pass straight through her without causing any harm.

“Stigma’s just needling me about Sakura,” I explained, “She’s targeting exhibitions like the one I just visited, but there’s no guarantee she’ll be at any of them at the same time as us. Stopping her from getting any stronger would be nice; it’s just not practical. She’s going to wait until she’s sure that she can win.”

The rule of threes. She was certain that our next meeting would be the last. She was high on a heady mix of great expectations and cliché. When I was younger and more naïve, I thought some of the same things that she did. That illusion of a storybook journey came to an end soon after I became cognizant of my full identity. There was no rhyme or reason to some of the things that happened to me or the people I knew. That was life. A nightmare labyrinth of systems and individuals, all fighting against each other to get what they want.

I put myself in her shoes and thought back on everything that had occurred since I found Stigma. An inciting incident is what they’d call it, and then a series of coincidences that allowed me to navigate troubled waters. I’d lost a friend and made some new ones. I even had a neat and tidy objective to complete. None of that was really simple in practice. Just because I had made it this far didn’t mean I’d see things through to the end. All it took was one bad roll of the dice to meet an early grave.

Stigma wasn’t convinced, “It’s just something to consider, master.”

I couldn’t match what Sakura was doing without knowing more about her methods. She had some kind of plan in place to power level herself ahead of the competition. It didn’t matter to her if there was no clear reason to do it – she just believed that she was going to save the world one day. She had made a much better build than what I had stitched together from looted weaponry on Versia. In conjunction with her sword skills and Veritas; she posted a genuine threat.

They were force multipliers. I needed a few of my own.