

We weren't going to get anywhere by asking random people on the street. In fact, that was more likely to end up with us dead in a roadside ditch than any closer to answers. There were no preachers out on the streets, and that was because there were a lot more guards around. The Count had already decided to take his own action it seemed, and crack down on people gathering in public.

My only course of action was to talk to the man who owed me a favour, Redd. I knocked on the door to the house. It peeled open slightly, a paranoid eye peeking out through the crack, "Are you a guard?" the young voice asked.

"No. I'm a friend of Redd. Is he here?"

The door opened wider. The boy stood behind it quivered slightly, "N-No. He left to go shopping a few hours ago but he never came back."

The hair on the back of my neck stood up, "What? Do you think he's in trouble?"

His voice jumped, "Redd can look after himself! But I am a little worried – there are so many guards..."

"Damn it. That's the last thing you want to hear. If they picked him up somewhere..." Udo bit his lip and paced around.

"They'd take him to the town square, that's where they usually round up the people who got caught," the boy explained.

The cat girl ran out from a room behind him, "Erik, why did you open the door!" She skidded to a halt in front of us. "Ah! It's you again!"

"Yeah, it's us. We're looking for Redd. Let's go check the town square."

"Let me come with you!" she asked, "I won't get in the way, and I know the city better than you!"

"I can't stop you, but it might be dangerous. Make sure you save your own skin first and ours second."

"Okay."

We hurried towards the town square with the young girl leading the way, "What's your name, by the way?"

"Cassie!"

We could already hear something of a commotion happening from the square as we approached. A huge crowd of people clogged the arteries of the city, forming an impassable wall. "What the... there's so many people here already!"

"I have a bad feeling about this."

“Follow me, I know another way around.” We took a hard right and ran down alleys and roads until the crowd thinned out. We finally managed to push our way through the people and spill out into the courtyard. What we found was something that barely resembled a public execution. A makeshift wooden stage has been built in the middle of the square, and atop it stood a man who wailed a chorus to the rowdy people.

“Ladies and gentlemen! Today we bare witness to the people’s justice! While those lazy, fat nobles sit atop their ivory towers, we will be the ones to deliver ourselves from evil! We have captured these heretics, and now judgement is upon them!”

Knelt on the stage were several people, bound by rope and at the mercy of their feelings. Among them was Redd. I didn’t blame him for the sour look on his face. There were a few guards standing around, but they weren’t interfering. There were too many people for them to handle. That, or they wanted to let them get away with it. The other people on the stage we all Beastkin. An array of different animalistic features, like ears and tails, set them apart from half of the gathered audience. The rest were Beastkin themselves.

“These heretics are trying to destroy our way of life, trying to corrupt our great tree with their filthy vermin blood!”

This was a powder keg waiting to blow.

“Let’s go interrupt the proceedings,” I said to Udo. “These people are craven, they’ll back down easily enough.”

“They will feel emboldened by the crowd,” he contested.

“Udo, what do you see in the crowd? It’s a fifty-fifty split, and I’d bet good money that all of those Beastkin are just as angry about this as we are.”

Cassie stayed back as Udo and I stormed up to the stage’s steps and ascended them. Nobody came in to try and stop us, the man backed away as we crested the steps and took command of the stage. “I’m going to stop you right there,” Udo said with menace, “What good is the judgement of a man with bloodlust on his mind?”

The crowd was disquieted, they rumbled and murmured as the celebrations were spoilt by our arrival. Redd was shocked to see us, I gave him a reassuring smile. “Everyone has their own perspective, and that man there is the gracious host of several orphans.”

“Lies and prattle!”

“As if you’re one to talk, you’re a murderer in preacher’s clothing.”

The crowd’s divisions had been enflamed, “Yeah, that’s right!”

“Show that human who’s boss!”

“What authority do you have to declare these people criminals?” Udo prodded, “From your blather, they could just as easily have committed the crime of being non-human.”

“What authority do you have to declare them innocent?”

Udo’s eyes flashed with dangerous intent, his thumb landed on the hilt of his blade – he slowly pushed the sharp edge into the sunlight for everyone to see. “I have no more authority than you, that is to say – none.” The statement was clear. The mob leader would make his case, or lose his head. The threat of violence had finally caught the attention of the guards, who stood to attention. What kind of circus were these guys running?

The crowd was at a boiling point now. The Beastkin weren’t going to sit back now and let them kill several of their own. “What reason do you have to stake your life for theirs?” he asked arrogantly, “You are no Beastkin.”

Udo stepped closer, “No, we are not. Yet we will still stand for what we think is just. Release these people immediately.”

“Yeah!”

“Let them go!”

“You guys don’t need to do this!” Redd cried out, “Just get out of here, I can handle it myself!”

“You call this having it handled?” I asked, “You’re about to be murdered by a mob, Redd.”

The mob leader, now with the wind taken out of his sails, realized that he’d put himself into a dangerous situation. If we didn’t kick the crap out of him, some of the crowd would instead. “Violent criminals, the lot of you! We’ll be celebrating on the streets when all of you animals are put down by the Count!”

“You’re a man who hides behind other people’s inaction. Save yourself the embarrassment and get out of here.”

The man turned tail and dashed to the stairs, leaving us the victors. The crowd gave a mixed reaction, but with his retreat the tension had been wound down significantly. It worried me that so many of them were willing to believe that these people were heretics or criminals based entirely on his word alone.

I cut the prisoners free with my dagger. Redd stood up, rubbing his raw wrist with a scowl, “Damn it. I should have been more careful.”

“Don’t blame yourself Redd, the Count’s gone mad. He’s trying to track down some kind of cult. It’s probably why there are so many guards everywhere.”

Redd looked away, “Right. I guess I owe you two favours now.”

“I only get one for saving your life?”

“Don’t push your luck.”

Many of the people in the crowd dispersed. It was mad to me how they could assemble so quickly and casually for a lynching, and then leave just as quickly. This was the world we were

living in now, where might made right and indifference was a powerful weapon. The guard weren't going to do anything.

Redd scratched the back of his head, "You can probably see why us ward folk don't trust the guard anymore. They just sit back and let people do whatever they want!" A few of the Beastkin at the foot of the stage jeered in agreement. "A few years ago stuff like this would never happen in this city, but now it's all gone to shit."

"There was nearly a battle in the cathedral this morning between the church and the guard, the Count is pushing his weight around – and he has plenty of that to spare."

Udo got to the point, "We decided to look into things ourselves. They haven't done a good job of building a trusting relationship between us. Ren says you're the man to speak with when it comes to the city."

"Sure, give me a minute to catch my–"

"Brother!" Cassie nearly killed Redd by tackling him off the stage. Thankfully he caught himself before he tipped over the edge and broke his neck.

"C-Cass, what are you doing here?"

"We were super worried about you! Don't give me that! What would the other kids think if you got killed?!"

Udo was still on edge, "I do not feel safe here, let's continue this discussion somewhere else."

"Good idea."

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It was a tense walk back to the house. Redd ushered us inside and led us to a cramped living room full of chairs and couches. Redd sat down and sighed, "So you want to know what's going on around here? I can do that much for you."

"What's all this cult business about?"

"It's not really a cult. This has been an ongoing fight for hundreds of years. We used to be an equal to the Church of the Tree."

"We?"

He shrugged, "We can't rely on the church for salvation, so a lot of folks down here in the wards were raised to be members of the Commons of the Beast. My parents were members, and their parents were members too. Although there 'ain't much to worship about it these days. It's more like an underground army, sticking together to keep each other safe. Since a lot of ward dwellers are Beastkin, they're associated with it fairly or not."

"That's why they call you heretics."

"Yeah. The weird thing is that the texts behind both branches are the same, it's not a matter of disagreement or perception. We have the same deities, the same stories and histories. Recently

there's been a concerted effort to deny the involvement of the Beastkin in the continent's path to how it is now. The Beastkin were often members of the Commons, as that part of the legend refers to the origin of their people."

"I know how that can feel," Udo murmured, "They created that division themselves and blamed the oppressed for it."

"The Commons and the Tree are always bickering, but it's never been this bad before. And now that the Count and the Guard are involved, the entire thing just got a lot messier. You said he was trying to convince the church to take action?"

I crossed my arms, "What I'm about to say never leaves this room."

Redd nodded.

"A few days ago, the High-Magister allegedly gathered the best mages in the country and summoned seven outworlders, then forced them to take the seven swords from the cathedral."

"What? Seriously? So that's why..."

"That's why the church and the guard having been fighting each other. The guard wants custody of the swordsmen, the church wants to keep the relics for themselves."

The puzzle pieces finally snapped into place for Redd, he pointed to me and Udo, "You two."

"Me and Udo are two of those people. He bust into the cathedral this morning with an army and demanded that we help him hunt down a 'cult.'"

Redd's face wavered between shock and awe, he pointed to the sword on my back, "So that's... Stigma!" I pulled it from my shoulders and unwrapped it slightly, showing him the rune work along the edge of the blade. The tension was building. I was worried that he'd leap down onto his knees and start worshipping it on the spot.

He tugged at his own hair, "I can't believe I made you use *our* sacred sword to hunt Razorback!" Stigma laughed in my mind.

"Come again?"

"That is Stigma, the legendary blade wielded by one of our greatest prophets! The man who led the Beastkin to the new world! Who spread the plague of blood to ensure their ongoing survival!"

"...It is pretty good for hunting too."

"If anyone finds out about this, I don't just need to worry about being labelled a heretic, I'll be killed on the spot!" Redd stood from his chair and searched through a nearby cabinet, eventually pulling out a thick tome bound in red leather. He shoved it into my hands, "Promise me you'll read this at least."

"What is it?"

“It’s the book of the Commons. A *slightly* redacted history of the continent and how it relates to the great tree. People love to embellish things a little, but it’s mostly accurate. You could find the same in any Tree book in the cathedral.”

“Uh, sure.”

Redd regarded Stigma again, “I never thought I’d see it for myself! Most of us were in despair at the thought of the Tree keeping hold of it forever. I can’t believe that you were the one wielding it!” He turned to Udo, “And I assume you have a sword of your own?”

“I do.”

He sat back down in a flurry of movement, “All of those swords have their own stories. But the swords of shadow and light have been instrumental in the conflicts of the past. To say you are in danger is a grave understatement. If anyone were to find out... they would do anything to take the swords for themselves.”

“I don’t think they’d get very far,” I mused, pulling up my sleeve for Redd to see, “Stigma has her own security system built in.”

“Still, they won’t know that. They can only consider their idiocy after they’ve killed you to steal it.”

The conversation died down. We’d had an eventful hour. I could hear the sounds of the children stomping around upstairs. “It’s nearly time for me to make those little monsters dinner. Would you like to stay for an hour?”

“If you’re offering, I want to stay well away from the Cathedral right now anyway.”

“Great! You can enjoy the fruits of your labour, we’re having Razorback.”

“Those expensive Razorback ever killed.”

He laughed, “It almost feels blasphemous to eat it.”