

156: 'Scholarly' research

Scarlett sat in her office, hunched over her desk, engrossed in the mountain of documents sprawled before her. The morning had slipped away unnoticed, and her eyes were starting to feel strained from the excessive amount of numbers and figures she had been pouring over.

The thick pile consisted mostly of reports concerning the barony and the family's current assets, as well as some preliminary estimations regarding how they could be employed. Evelyne had compiled them in preparation for the relief venture Scarlett had somehow convinced herself of getting involved with. The younger woman was currently looking into what options they had available on that front and had asked for Scarlett's input.

Scarlett herself would have preferred to avoid dealing with all this paperwork altogether, but she didn't really feel like she had the option not to help, considering it was her own idea in the first place.

That said, she couldn't deny the growing dread that her brain would turn to mush if she persisted any longer.

With a sigh of surrender, she pushed the documents to the side and reclined in her chair. There was a reason she had never wanted to work in something related to the natural sciences or accounting. Basic arithmetic was all well and good, but she had done enough internships in traditional office settings to never want to look at an Excel document ever again, and this was just that but without the conveniences. She much preferred her old work as an editor.

Maybe if she managed to survive the future catastrophes that would occur across the empire and lost her current wealth as a baroness, she could open an editing firm or something similar and take things easy. If she never found a way back to her own world, that could be a good plan C or D. This place wasn't so bad if you disregarded the secret evil organization and occasional rampaging dragons.

A small chuckle escaped her lips as she glanced around the office. For now, she would be satisfied with a short break. She didn't feel like leaving the office at the moment, though.

She rose from her chair and rounded the desk, ambling over to the bookshelf adorning the room's right wall. Her eyes scanned the array of titles on display. Though she had read a decent number of books here in her quest to familiarize herself with this world, she hadn't even scratched the surface of the collected sum of works within this collection. While books *could* be exorbitantly expensive in this world, they were no rarity. She imagined that most common households had at least one or two available. The empire had long been supporting several initiatives to promote literacy, a fact that hardly surprised Scarlett, considering some of the bureaucracy she often encountered whenever Evelyne sent her over more documents and forms to fill in.

One book, in particular, caught her attention. Its spine boasted a weathered, dark brown hue, dressed with black lettering.

The Red Witch of Destruction: Catastrophe Incarnate.

Rosa had mentioned this book during one of her earliest visits to the office. At the time, Scarlett had dissuaded the woman from reading it, and since then, she hadn't given it much thought. She already had a general idea of what its contents would be and didn't feel the need to learn more than that. Now, however, her curiosity was urging her on...

She reached out and pulled the book out from its place on the shelf. The cover was as dull and weathered brown as the spine, devoid of any illustrations. Most books around here lacked any visual imagery, apart from a few fictional works she had seen Rosa peruse on occasion. She assumed they had printing presses or some equivalent, but maybe it was more expensive to reproduce pictures.

Moving to the armchair in the corner of the room, which was primarily reserved for the bard when she read such works, Scarlett settled down and opened the book. She turned a page until she reached the preface.

In the annals of history, certain tales transcend the passage of time, etching themselves upon the collective memory of nations. Legends of heroes and villains, of love and loss, of triumph and catastrophe, weave a tapestry of human experience, capturing our imaginations and revealing profound truths about the world we inhabit. Among these tales, some recount the nefarious exploits of individuals whose names once evoked dread and destruction. 'The Red Witch of Destruction: Catastrophe Incarnate' stands as an authoritative volume, delving deep into the deeds and acts of one such individual: The Red Witch. A formidable pyromancer from a bygone era, she was an embodiment of malevolence that posed a dire threat to the empire and its very existence.

Drawing upon meticulous research and scholarly scrutiny, this treatise aims to present a dispassionate analysis of the Red Witch's destructive exploits. Its focus lies in meticulously documenting her unparalleled command over fire, which she harnessed as a tool to inflict widespread destruction upon towns and villages, resulting in catastrophic consequences for the empire's innocent populace.

"The Red Witch of Destruction: Catastrophe Incarnate" provides a rigorous examination of the furtive origins of the Red Witch's sorcery, situating her within the broader historical and sociopolitical context of the early era of the empire's existence. Through a careful exploration of archival sources and corroborative accounts, this scholarly endeavor aims to shed light on the factors that propelled the Red Witch towards her path of ruin and which might cause similar individuals to act the same in the future.

This academic exposition seeks to foster critical reflection on the ramifications of unrestrained power and the pursuit of personal vengeance. By examining the Red Witch's destructive legacy, this work underscores the inherent perils associated with the unbridled use of magical abilities, revealing the immense devastation that can be wrought when grievances give rise to an insatiable desire for perceived retribution. Moreover, it invites readers to engage in an intellectual discourse centered on the complexities of human nature, exploring its capacity for both darkness and redemption. It posits pertinent questions surrounding absolution and the enduring legacy of those ensnared in a cycle of malfeasance. The analysis contained within these pages is intended to serve as a catalyst for contemplation, urging a thoughtful examination of the fate that befalls those trapped in the inexorable grip of infamy.

Scarlett couldn't help but furrow her brows as she delved into the pages of the book. Despite its claim of being a scholarly work with an unbiased perspective, it certainly didn't hold back in depicting the Red Witch as an irredeemable villain. Even after flipping through different sections of the book to skim its contents, she found little related to the nuance and 'intellectual discourse' alluded to in the preface. At least not in relation to the Red Witch. Instead, the overall focus of the text seemed to be on condemning the woman for what the author hypothesized to be an unjust or misguided cause, driven by an insatiable thirst for destruction and personal vengeance.

What struck Scarlett as amusing was the fact that while the contents appeared to be at least a century old, the author still seemed to be working with outdated information and was unaware of many crucial details. The true motivation and identity of the Red Witch remained a mystery, as most complete records about her had been destroyed for unknown reasons. The book suggested that she might have been a noble or official in the Imperial Army who was deceived or manipulated by the Tribe of Sin—the group had existed in various forms since the empire's founding—before ultimately devolving into what was best described as a domestic terrorist.

Scarlett wasn't quite sure what to make of the book as a whole. It provided an alternative perspective on some of the information she knew from the game, but it fell short of her expectations when it came to learning about the woman herself. While she knew it was unlikely, she had hoped for a deeper understanding of the Red Witch's origins and her magic, as it could be relevant to her own progress, but she was mostly disappointed in that regard. In fact, she had likely learned more from a single side-quest in the game than from skimming through the book's pages. The supposed scarcity and deliberate destruction of previous records pertaining to the Red Witch piqued her curiosity, but that didn't provide much of an answer in and of itself.

Without realizing it, over an hour had passed while she flipped through the book when a soft meow suddenly pierced through her concentration. Her eyes darted up and across the room, landing on the desk at the far end, where a jet-black cat sat, its tail elegantly swaying, its gaze seemingly fixated on the large painting gifted by The Gentleman. Then, the cat turned its head, its amethyst eyes meeting Scarlett's.

For a brief moment, she almost leaped out of her chair to scan her surroundings, expecting to find the man in question somewhere in the room. But she quickly realized it was just her and the cat in the room. With that realization, her sudden tension eased slightly, and she observed the feline closely.

This marked the first time Empress had shown herself in front of Scarlett since the meeting with The Gentleman. The cat returned her gaze with equal intensity, emitting another soft meow.

Scarlett frowned for a moment, then remembered herself and inclined her head ever so slightly. "Welcome once more to my home, Your Royal Highness. It has been some time since we last met."

The cat meowed again, straightening her back and seemingly exuding an air of pride, before settling down on the table and beginning to lick her paw.

Scarlett continued watching Empress, wondering what the cat was doing here. She had heard that Empress had been appearing somewhat frequently at the mansion lately—the Loci still failed to detect when it happened—and she still didn't understand why. According to one of the servants, the cat had also been here when Scarlett was away in Windgrove. The servant in particular had made sure to provide milk at the time, according to Scarlett's instructions.

...It couldn't be that the cat was here just because of that, right?

No. Probably not. Empress would have access to better things than that.

But maybe it wouldn't hurt, just in case?

Scarlett looked at the cat. "Would you like me to prepare some milk for you?"

The cat paused in her grooming, lifting her gaze to Scarlett for a few seconds. Then, Empress stood up and, with grace and agility, leaped down from the desk, making her way towards the door. Scarlett looked in uncertainty for a moment before placing her book on a nearby table and rising from her seat. The door swung open as Empress approached it, and the cat snuck out. Scarlett followed suit.

In the hallway outside the office, Empress calmly approached the window overlooking the courtyard. With one smooth leap, she settled herself on the windowsill, finding a comfortable position to rest in.

Scarlett stopped, unsure what to do now. She had thought Empress wanted her to follow for some reason, but had she misinterpreted the cat's intentions? Had Empress really just been looking for a new spot to relax?

That's when something caught Scarlett's eye outside the window.

She froze.

Lying on the cobblestones of the expansive courtyard lay the hulking form of a ferocious-looking creature, its length stretching across nearly half of the space. Its dark black hide and scales reflected the afternoon sun, its sinewy and powerful limbs adorned with jagged talons that seemed capable of tearing a person apart effortlessly. Tattered wings, torn and frayed, lay folded against its side like ragged black banners, the thin membranes between its skeletal wing structure stretched and damaged.

Serrated teeth lined its snarling snout, frozen in a perpetual snarl, while two broken horns curved sinuously upward from its skull. A long gash marred its lizard-like neck, oozing black and red from a congealed wave of blood that dripped onto the stone beneath.

Scarlett stared at the scene before her, struggling to comprehend what she was witnessing.

That was a dragon. A *dead* dragon.

She shifted her gaze to Empress, who nonchalantly licked her paw from her perch on the windowsill, unfazed by all this.

What the hell—