

I didn't know how long I was unconscious for. I was thankful that it wasn't possible to worry while being asleep, because I would be. The chances of me being transported to somewhere safe untouched were slim to none. MY entire body throbbed in pain. What had happened the previous day was real, and I could feel it.

I peeled open my eyes and prepared for the worst. I was in a room. It could not be described as a five-star hotel room, nor was it merely a cell to keep me on lockdown. The door was heavy and barred by locks and iron bars, but the furniture and general cleanliness of the room communicated that I was important to them in some way. Because I was capable of drawing one of the swords from the altar.

Before I passed out from the pain, I remembered hearing the voice of a woman reaching out to me. I didn't see her amongst the throngs of soldiers, and she wasn't one of the people who came with us. I'd figured out that much. We were all fish out of water. Like one of those light novels my brother used to like reading, I was never a fan of them myself. Who was that woman? And where did she come from?

I swung my legs out of the small bed. I was immediately off balance. Whatever had happened to me when I grasped the sword had played havoc with my body. There was a small wooden dresser on one side of the room. On top of it lay the sword in question, bound with heavy tarp and thick rope. The soldiers were smart enough to not touch the thing themselves, leaving the dangerous work to someone under duress...

I carefully walked over and held out my arm, but recoiled when I saw the state it was in. The veins were visible from under my skin as they'd turned a deep black. There was no mirror so I couldn't see the true extent of the damage that it had caused. The sword had injected something into me, and I was not eager to find out what it did.

I jumped as the locks on the door clunked open one by one, and the iron bar was dragged aside. I quickly hobbled back to the bed and got on my back. I closed my eyes and pretended to sleep. The footsteps that came through the now open door told me there was only one person with me. I made an act of waking up thanks to the noise.

It was the priest. He was a lanky and skinny man, with rounded glasses perched on the tip of his nose. He bowed his head slightly. "Good morning."

Pleasantries after nearly killing me with a magic sword. The nerve of this man was unending. My voice was dry and raspy, "I want some answers, please. What is all this??"

He smiled and spread his arms, "I am Low Magister Centhus. And I have the great pleasure of being the owner of this grand temple. We are currently seated in the City-Commune of Argyle Bay. You have been chosen by the High Magister to fulfil a mission of great purpose."

I had little patience for his world building exercise, "No. I mean what the hell is wrong with my arm?" I held it out for him to see. He hummed under his breath and pushed up his spectacles.

"Ah, that. Well, to properly explain that – you'd need to learn a little bit about the history of those swords you pulled out."

"I don't care, give me the short version."

His smile fell just a little bit, "Well, each sword is imbued with a great and mighty power. Each roughly focusing on a school of magic. The sword you chose, its name is Stigma."

The sword on the table, that giant lump of iron and steel – began to shake and rattle, yet the priest continued with his tale anyway. I glanced over to it, unsure if I was just seeing things. Then it came to a stop.

“...That is to say – many men have tried and failed to wield its power for themselves. Indeed, in every version of the legend of the swords, the dark knight has always perished before the anointed battle. They are often known as ‘Blackvein’ by the people who meet them. I can see now that this part of the legend is true.” He leaned over and pulled up my sleeve, tracing the corrupted vessels with his finger.

“So the sword is going to kill me?”

“Not necessarily. Legends are legends. They are changed, warped, retold, and remade to fit the purposes of those who tell them. To rely on past precedent of a tale older than myself and you would simply be foolish. No one truly knows how they died, nor what Stigma can do.”

“This is death sentence. I’m not a fighter, I’m a student.”

The priest did not disagree, “I’m sure you heard my own objections to the idea. The High Magister has become convinced that a prophecy from within the libraries of the Deep Tree is the answer to an incoming threat. Prophecies can be... messy at the best of times, but now he even goes so far as to forcefully enact them himself.”

“So why are we here?” I asked, mindful of the others who were with me.

“The prophecy stated that warriors from another world would release the sacred swords and deliver us from evil. The High Magister - in his zeal, gathered the greatest root magicians from across the land and delved into the great tree. Plucking seven souls and bringing them here.”

“And I was one of them?”

His tirade sped up as he became increasingly upset about the situation, “Yes. He then gathered soldiers from the local garrison and assembled them within my temple. Despite such an act being expressly forbidden! All for the sake of forcing you to release the blades. They would not question his orders, but I sense a great level of unease from all of them.”

“Did you feel uneasy locking me in this room?” I quipped, looking at the heavily guarded door.

“There was little I could do for your injury. So in the interest of keeping you and Stigma safe I put you in here.”

“Did you touch it?”

“No. As you can see, we have bound it as well as we can.”

“So I’m just a human guinea pig for you people?” I scowled.

“A... guinea pig? The guards would not touch the infernal thing after what happened to you.”

“Never mind,” I stood up out of the bed and stretched myself out. With all that had happened I didn’t feel quite as horrible as I expected. My throat hurt pretty bad though, I screamed myself hoarse when the sword had gotten its hooks into me.

“The swords are esoteric pieces of weaponry. They are bound to the person who touches them until the moment they die. And as much as I like to think better of my people, there are some who would gladly

commit acts most foul to have the swords for themselves. So please refrain from sharing such information freely.”

“I’ll try not to shout it from the rooftops.”

“Good!” His eyes lit up, “Ah! I didn’t even ask you for your name – how rude of me!”

I sighed, “Ren. Ren Kageyama.”

“What a strange name.”

“Yours isn’t normal to me either.”

Centhus took a moment to collect his thoughts. I walked over to the sword and finally worked up the courage to put my hand on it again. The covering did its job, or I’d become so used to the pain that it didn’t feel like anything to me anymore. Pain is meant to tell us when we’re in danger, and I’d never felt anything as painful as when I touched that sword for the first time.

I wrapped my hand around the blade and another around the handle and tried to lift it, but it was very heavy. The thought of me somehow using this to defeat a great evil was laughable, in fact it was so laughable that I started laughing out loud at how hopeless I was. “There’s no way I can fight using this thing! It’s huge!”

“*Seek astarus*,” Centhus’ eyes glowed a bright yellow for a moment, before fading back to their normal stone grey. “Ah. That would explain it.”

“What was that?”

“That was magical sense, it’s a variety of spell that every man, woman and child in this world knows and uses. It allows us to assess the qualities of people and objects. I’m sorry to say that your abilities are extremely sub-par barring your intelligence, which is very good.”

“You can tell how smart someone is by looking at them?”

“Yes. The best demonstration would be for you to use it yourself. They say that common spells are a combination of will and word. If you will it and speak it, it will be so. The words for the self-sense spell are *seek ortarus*.”

I picked up on the subtle difference between the two. *Astarus* for targeting something or someone, and *ortarus* for looking inwards. But casting a spell had to be more complicated than speaking some magic words and wishing really hard.

“I will leave you with that for now. There will be time for teaching later. The seamstress has left some fresh clothes for you in the wardrobe – feel free to help yourself.” I did not thank him, nor did I say goodbye as he bowed out of the room much in the way he had entered. He did not re-lock the door as a sign of trust, but I didn’t trust him in return. There were too many unanswered questions. I couldn’t tell what his own reasons were for doing this.

I opened the wardrobe to see what hand-me-downs I’d be given as a replacement for my dirty school uniform. I was surprised to find a modern dress shirt in black silk. I took it in my hands and looked for the hidden catch, the thing that gave it the medieval edge I was expecting. These were not dirty rags; they were finely stitched with modern techniques. A piece of asynchronistic clothing to add further mysteries to the pile.

There was also a long trench coat in a similar shade, with a big collar and deep pockets. This was a practical piece of work. I remembered that Centhus had named the city we were in as a bay – so this kind of long coat would probably be in style on the town. Perfect for keeping the cold weather out when out fishing or walking the roads. It wasn't my kind of thing. But I wasn't going to throw it out for no good reason. It was probably cold outside. To complete the ensemble there were a pair of grey trousers. Nothing out of the ordinary about them.

I took them out and lined them up on the bed. I didn't want to start adventuring in my school uniform if I could help it. But I didn't want to throw it out either, so I swapped them and put the uniform back into the wardrobe for safe keeping. I rifled through my pockets and pulled out my phone, which to my complete lack of surprise had no signal. My cursory investigation of the room showed no signs of plug sockets either, so I'd be saying goodbye to it soon enough.

I tried to send a message to my mom, but it wouldn't send. Frustration. I turned it off and put it back and cast it from my mind. That was a dead end if I'd ever seen one.

I held out my hand and focused on the shirt I'd been given, "Seek ortarus!" Nothing. I took a step back and tried to consider his words again. Will and word. I had the words, but not the will? Centhus managed to gleam information about my strength and intelligence just from casing that same spell on me, so what would I want to know about this shirt?

My brother's obsession with light novels came to mind again, he loved role-playing games. What about how much protection it offered? What if other magic had been cast on it that gave it special abilities? My imagination ran wild for that brief moment.

"Seek ortarus," I said again. This time with confidence. A small window of blue light appeared in my vision as the colours of the world turned to grey for a second. This must have been what Centhus was looking at when he scanned me.

Ren's Black Silk Shirt

A modern shirt given to Ren Kageyama. Crafted by the temple's seamstress.

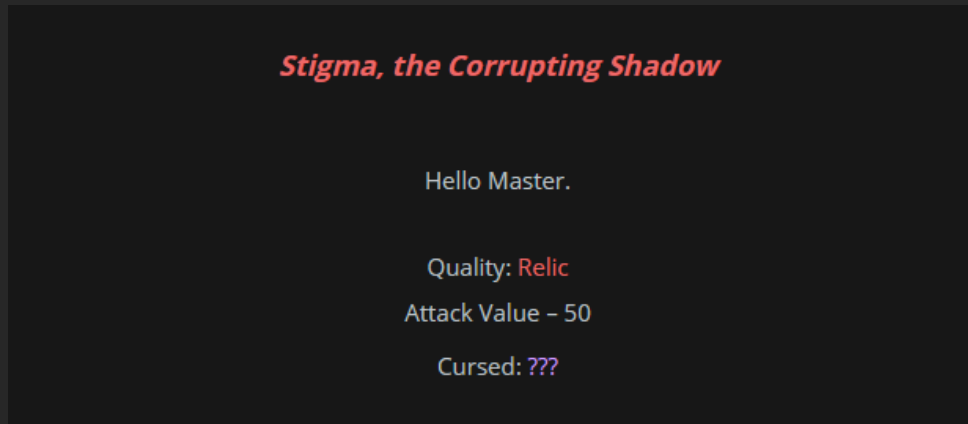
Quality: **Rare**

Defence Value – 2

There was an additional section below it, but no information was listed in it. I assumed that it must be for something else. I checked the other two items, but neither had anything interesting to tell me. It was odd how each item came with its own description, a story of how it came into my possession. The defence value was the most important part. But I needed a scale of reference to see just how protective they really were. A piece of armour would do nicely.

I donned the clothes. They were ill-fitting on my scrawny frame, but not bad enough to make them unusable. I wish I had a mirror so I could see how I looked. As I paced around the room, my eyes passed upon the sword on the table. Dare I?

I walked over and tugged at the tight ropes knots holding the bundle together. After blistering my fingers and some colourful language, I managed to release the sword to the world once more. I carefully pulled away the tarp, making sure not to touch it again. The sword was long and wicked. With a twisted iron hilt that surrounded the hand of its wielder. It's black iron blade had a vague purple tint to it when positioned under the light. There was a large red gem embedded into it, a menacing red eye that peered out through the darkness. "Seek ortarus." I hoped that its item window had some answers for me.



My eyes narrowed, was the sword trying to communicate with me?

"Yes, yes I am."

I spun around and backed away. There, in my room, was the naked woman who was there when I passed out. She had a Cheshire's grin, a mouth full of teeth that bordered on sharp. Her red eyes cut right through me. She stretched out with no regard for her own nudity and let out a lackadaisical yawn.

"I was worried that you didn't want to see *little old me*. It's rude to tie up a woman without her permission," she purred.

"Who are you?"

"Oh come now Master, surely you've figured out that much," the tips of her sharp nails poked at my cheeks as she took a hold of my face, "I am Stigma. And you are my *knight*."