

“If you’d like to give me a hand. I’m afraid that this bookshelf is very heavy, and my frail bones are beyond their prime.”

The Absolver had quietly led us through the now abandoned halls of the castle until we reached an unassuming study room tucked away at the back of a long corridor. He was smart enough to store his dirty laundry outside of his own personal chambers, instead choosing to conceal the relics in a location where none but himself would be able to find them. I did as the man asked and easily pushed the heavy wooden furniture aside like it weighed nothing. Behind it was a concealed tunnel that led into the deep dark. The Absolver reached over and took a small lantern from the table, lighting it and ducking under the flagstones.

“Are you sure that this place is secure?”

The Absolver harrumphed, “Don’t go doubting me now, Ren. We can turn around and leave if you aren’t willing to believe me. These tunnels are a secret known to a select few and navigating them without a guide is supremely difficult. It was the best place to hide them considering that we wanted to move them from the fort within a few days of taking them from the vault.”

True to his word, the tunnels quickly expanded outwards in all directions – weaving between chambers and stone walls in an elaborate web of secret passageways intended to confuse potential invaders. The Absolver made relatively short work of the task given their complexity, leading us into a room with no doors or windows.

“This is one of many spaces concealed in the empty gaps between the battlements and other rooms. They’ve been used for hundreds of years to host secret meetings between conspirators, or to hide away what should remain unseen.”

Though now it had been turned into something of a second study for the Absolver. A desk, bookshelves, and piles and piles of parchment showed that this was where he conducted the secretive elements of his research project, away from prying eyes. It was dark and dingy at best – with no natural light being allowed to enter the room from the outside. A pile of suspicious boxes was unceremoniously dumped on the other side.

“So I suppose that those crates contain the rest of the relics, then?”

“They do.”

I walked over and hoisted one of them onto the table, opening the lid and peering inside. It was a black-iron rapier of some variety, done up in the style I’d become so familiar with during my hunt for them. A quick scan confirmed that it was the real deal.

“I still don’t get why you decided to do all of this.”

The Absolver sat down on his chair and crossed his arms, “Aside from my own curiosity?”

“That’s not a convincing enough reason for me. People have motivations that they’re not willing to admit to strangers. Why would you be any different? You’ve jeopardised your life and the existence of the order all for the sake of finding out how this sword works.”

“It’s romantic, is it not? When I became the Absolver of this mighty order – I felt nothing but excitement coursing through my veins. Oh, to imagine the wonders that I was now free to see and experience, the knowledge I could gain! I soon discovered that it was as they said. The grass was greener from the other side.”

“So you went fuck it, let’s burn it down.”

He shook his head, “No, no. I don’t mean to cause such a fuss. I knew that they’d respond poorly to any suggestions I offered with the aim of modernising the order. I am not blind to the way that the common people perceive us and our mission. There are simply too many vested interests and bad apples amongst our members to make meaningful change. By trafficking the relics to you, I achieved two disparate goals. I showed them that there is a way to destroy them, and I wanted to see what happened when this great enigma was finally brought to a close.”

“I do hope that you aren’t trying to entrap Ren,” Cali said pointedly, “I’ve grown rather fond of him, after all.”

“I will be upfront with you. I do not know what will happen when all of the cursed relics are combined into one. It is ultimately your decision whether to walk this path. You can leave if you wish, or take as many of them as you desire.”

My perspective was simple and my resolve long since set into stone; “I didn’t come all this way to turn back. This might be the only chance I get to collect all of these things in the same place.”

Tahar offered her own opinion, “I am also worried, Cali. But Ren’s assessment is correct. We may never be presented with a chance like this again. If completing Stigma is the key to breaking the curse...”

Cali’s gaze was dark with jealousy, “Very well. I will allow Ren to do as he wishes – however, I am making my stance clear to the woman inside his head. If she does anything to take Ren away from us, I will personally rip her from his brain and ensure that she suffers a death most foul.”

Cali didn’t like to mention the fact that someone was living inside of my body. It was an awkward thing to bring up in discussion, though she’d learned pretty much everything there was to know through osmosis as we spent so long in such close proximity together. It was more than a little humbling to have her express possessive feelings instead of letting things settle as they were.

It did make me think though, this was hardly the explosive confrontation with the Absolver that I was expecting when I first learned about his plan. He was only interested in finding the answer to his most pressing question, unravelling the mystery of what Stigma was and how it worked. None of the other relics in the collection captured his eye in the same way. They were already well-known and explored for their form and function.

Adelbern hefted the final box onto the table and sighed wearily, “It would have been much easier to do this from the start.” He’d remained mostly silent during our initial confrontation. He must have talked this plan over with the Absolver dozens of times before. I wondered to what extent the Absolver was willing to share the details with him.

“Are you sure the Absolver doesn’t just have a love of the theatrical? Piling them up on the table and getting it over with all at once doesn’t seem to have the same weight behind it,” I joked.

“I thought that you of all people would know that the most significant events often occur in the most boring ways.”

“I suppose that’s true.”

Adelbern made extra sure that he was wearing his gloves before picking the items out from their boxes and laying them out for me. An errant touch with the surface of your skin was enough for Stigma’s shards to infect the body and mind. The woman of the hour was watching with rapt

attention as each part of her was carefully extracted from their hiding places and presented to us. Weapons, trinkets, and pieces of armour alike. All of them had been cursed by the dark wizard hundreds of years ago and scattered to the four corners of the continent. They never expected anyone to reunite them like this. There were four more items for me to consume. Another book, an open-faced helmet, a magical focus, and a catalyst without its bolt.

Even though this was the only thing on my mind for so long, I found myself hesitating now that they were all within reach. Each one would grant me a new power and bring me a step closer to fully transforming into a Blackblood, and potentially give Stigma more power over my body. People were like that, always wanting something until they were a step away from getting it. Taking a chance on this was better than living on borrowed time. Aside from the ultimate fate of dying to soul decay, it played hell on my mental state. I was always worrying about it even when I tried to relax.

“Is there a special process to this?” Adelbern inquired.

“No, not really. You just touch them with the sword and use [consume.] But it plays havoc on my body when I do it, so I don’t know how long it’s going to take to get through all of them. I might just black out.”

“Everyone else is too occupied fighting over who gets to rule the rubble. We should have time to complete the process without being interrupted.”

I turned to my companions, “Keep an eye on these two. I don’t want anything stupid happening if I do pass out.”

Adelbern shrugged, “So little trust, even when we’re friends.”

“You’ve got a funny definition of friends, Adel.”

“I couldn’t kill you if I tried.”

“Maybe if you stab me fifty times while I’m asleep.”

“What’s to say you won’t wake up after the first and pop my skull like a grape?”

Where was he planning on stabbing me, the little toe? Insane HP pool or not – I doubted I could survive getting something shoved through my brain. I gave each item a once over to see what effects they would have. All of the previous relics came with a power that I could use by burning my soul energy away, not that I’d found much use for most of them given the high price associated with them.

They provided me, in order, with the following skills: the ability to darken an area around me, the ability to curse someone and shorten their field of view temporarily, the ability to sink into areas of shade and travel a distance based on how much energy I used, and finally the ability to enrage someone. A handful of useful and powerful techniques, none of which I could use because of the high price. Unless completing Stigma stopped the clock from ticking down I couldn’t see myself using them.

“I’m just allowed to consume all of these things then? You’re not going to ask me for a favour, what’s the catch here?”

The Absolver displayed his grimy teeth, “I have already asked much of you through my experiments. The only thing I ask of you is to be permitted to see Stigma’s true form.”

This guy was leading me on again. I couldn't believe that he knew nothing about what Stigma truly did to the host when it was complete, but how would he know if the main sword was never complete in the first place? Who would have lived to tell the tale and put it into the records? Why did they add a mechanism to Stigma that allowed it to reconstitute the Princess' soul, was it the result of the legends that people told about it?

I was starting to think that nothing, in particular, would happen at all.

But regardless of what I thought, the opportunity was right in front of me. If there was one thing that this difficult second life had taught me – it was that one could never be too comfortable in turning down something when it was free.

Adelbern was grave, "If you're going to do it, I'd suggest that you hurry. There's no doubt that one of John's men is a turncoat and is already spilling everything to the zealous inquisitors as we speak. They'll be desperate to catch us. If you are caught at an inopportune time, myself and the Absolver will be the least of your worries."

"Yeah – you're right."

I'd psyched myself up enough. I drew Stigma from the scabbard and held the tip of her blade against the first relic on the left. With Tahar and Cali on watch for any funny business from the Absolver and Adel, I cast [Consume] for the first time. A jolt of pain ran through my body as the red cursed markings on the helmet glowed bright red for a second before fading away. I staggered back and clutched my arm.

"It never gets any less painful," I complained. Powering through was my only option. There was no pain relief on hand. I grit my teeth and went in for the next. Again, it felt as if someone was hitting me around the skull with a hammer. The tome lost its cursed markings too. The Absolver was enraptured by the sight of the power transferring between the objects of his curiosity.

I was already struggling by the time we reached the third. It felt like I was going to pass out at any moment. I carefully placed Stigma above the amulet and absorbed it, bracing myself against the table to prevent a humiliating fall. I moved quickly on to the last piece of the collection. An air of anticipation started to build, but I sensed that even a moment's hesitation would see the job left undone before my body gave up.

"Consume."

I couldn't help but release a colourful collection of profanity as the final and most agonising pain wracked my body from head to toe. The horns that sprouted from my head felt like they were physically moving outwards and growing, so quickly that I could perceive it. The rest of my body was expanding outwards with no regard for how it felt.

"Ren!"

Tahar was already at my side trying to make sure that I was okay. There was a pressure building inside of me, building and building and building. I couldn't contain it. I cried in shock as a black mass shot outwards from my body and engulfed the entire room, including the people who were inside of it. They formed into savage, red-tinged spikes as if to surround me like a shield.

An inky blackness surrounded me on all sides. I was too out of wits to control what was happening.

Stigma. I'd dropped her on the floor right in front of me. The ominous red runes were shining brightly through the supernatural cover of shade. She was there, standing over me with a smile.

“Are you still there, Ren?”

“This fucking hurts!” I gasped.

Her smile fell.

“I can feel it all coming back to me now. Let me take control of things. You might hurt them if you’re not careful.”

I had no say in the matter. Stigma reached out using my left arm and took hold of the sword, seemingly unaffected by the chaos currently being wrought within my physical body. She did it with a deftness and level of control that was far beyond merely freezing me in place or stimulating the nerve under my skin. She was doing this for me without my say-so.

“Focus Ren, bring it all back inside.”

I grunted and tried to follow her instructions to the best of my ability. My body was rioting against me. My transformation into a Blackblood demon was accelerating at a dangerous pace. My musculature and bone structure changed beneath my armour and clothes, pulling apart stitching and presenting me with a gallery of discomforts. The savage horns that crowned my head were far too large to be hidden by my hair now. I stared at the tips of my fingers as the nails poked outwards from my now-ruined leather gloves.

I needed to ground myself in the moment. I took a deep breath and forced my mind to focus not on the pain, but the fact that Tahar and Cali were in the room with me, potentially harmed by my actions. The darkness started to recede back into the pores of my skin, which was even paler than before. The destruction wrought by the sudden outburst of dark energy was immediately evident.

The room was completely demolished. Books and cases had been tossed everywhere, and the walls that surrounded us had been punched through revealing what lay beyond. Despite this – all of my spectators were unharmed, if only physically. Adelbern looked like he’d crapped his britches from when he saw those black tendrils shooting towards him like a bullet.

“What in God’s name was that?” he cried.

“Is everyone okay?” I croaked.

Tahar and Cali emerged from behind the upturned table to get a closer look at what had happened to me. The look of surprise on their faces, even Cali’s, told me that it was significant. I reached up and clutched the heavy ivory horns that jutted outwards from both sides of my head, sweeping backwards in an arch and ending in sharp points. I stripped away what was left of my gloves and noted that the hardened scales now ended at my elbows.

“Wonderful! Wonderful! You’re the very image of what was described in the texts!” The Absolver cheered, “And to think that I even saw an emission of dark magic with my own eyes in the process. It’s everything I was expecting and more!”

Tahar helped me to my feet, though instead of being face-first with her chest, I was now much closer to her height. My clothes were completely ruined, but at least the armour was so form-fitting that I couldn’t use it anymore.

“How does it feel?”

“Normal,” I shrugged. With the pain gone and the process complete – I started to wonder what the fuss was about. Stigma was standing atop a pile of demolished bricks with a smug smile on her face. She was even happier about this than I was, “Alright Stigma – what’s the verdict?”

She twirled a lock of her hair, “You’ll be very happy to find that the process of soul-death has been paused with the completion of my spirit. It seems that I was draining your energy to prevent myself from fading into nothing.”

“So, I don’t have to worry about it anymore?”

“If you refrain from utilising the sword’s powers, you can live for however long you please – though it should be said that you still only have eight years of energy left within your body. You will need to collect more to recover what was lost.”

I adjusted my hair to keep it out of my eyes, “Alright, better than nothing.”

It was a lot better than nothing, it was exactly what I was hoping for when we came to the fort. The clock had stopped, and now I just needed to find some powerful enemies to kill so that I could live a full and fruitful life. Perhaps I could even go the extra mile and grow Ryan a new arm while I was at it.

Stigma crossed her arms, “I’ll regale you with my own story later. You should get out of here before they realise what you’ve done.”

She was much more even-tempered than before, confident in herself even. Now that I understood that she was missing memories and emotions, some of her behaviour in the past was put into a new context. She could only react in so many ways to what I did. Now that the pieces were back together, her range of emotions were more natural and subtler. That cool malice in her voice that came to define her during our journey was brought to the forefront.

The Absolver was furiously scribbling down more notes onto one of the disturbed papers, with no regard for the exposed state that the room was now in. Adelbern rolled his eyes and pulled him back to his feet, “Is now really the time?”

“There is never a bad time to engage the mind.”

We would have to agree to disagree. There was a vanishingly small chance that nobody heard the horrible noise that we were making, and these formerly secret chambers weren’t so secret anymore now that the tendrils had smashed the walls to pieces.

I checked my status screen.

Ren “Blackvein” Kageyama
Level 80 High Dark Knight
[Cursed]
HP: 750/750
Strength: 302
Intelligence: 264
Endurance: 290
Perception: 312

Fucking hell. I was starting to get the picture of why the Empire was so worried about the Blackbloods at the time. Those stats were out of control and completely contrary to how a small, sentient race should be. An army of them could easily defeat almost anything that came their way.

That paranoia drove the traditional enemies on the continent to join forces and wipe them out. Yet the Absolver made no mention of them fighting back. I turned to the old man, who was still knuckles deep in writing down another document instead of paying attention.

“This war with the Blackblood, how many people died in it?”

His quill hand stopped, “Millions.”

“And how were those casualties split between the sides?”

“You know – that’s a strange question to ask. One of the records I studied made a passing mention of how strange they found it. Despite their immense power, the Blackblood Demons never sought to dominate the continent like the Kings feared. Perhaps that strength brought them security and contentment, rather than revealing their worst nature. When the time came for them to defend their homeland they strived to do nothing more than what was necessary. Because they held back, they were destroyed.”

“So even through all that, they didn’t turn into the monsters they claimed they were.”

“That is not for us to know, Ren. I’m sure that they were just as fallible as you or I. Now, what do you intend to do?”

I chuckled, “Leave, for one thing. I think it’s about time I headed back to Danton and made use of the money I’ve accumulated on this wild goose chase of yours.”

He shook his head, “No. I mean to ask, what do you intend to do with me? Kill me? Hang me from the battlements?”

Was he expecting me to mete out some paltry vengeance against him? It was my own fault that I picked Stigma from the battlefield in the first place. He never intended to give it to me. There was nothing that I could do to him that was worse than the fate awaiting him in this fort. If John did not possess the nerve to kill him for his crimes, somebody else filled with ambition would. I couldn’t bring myself to care.

I could credit him for putting his cards on the table instead of screwing me over, at least.

I grabbed the sword and slid it into my sheathe. Now that I was looking again, Stigma had also changed significantly. The hilt was more ornate, and the glowing red rivers that flowed down the blade were brighter than ever. Now it really looked every bit the demonic sword that it was rumoured to be.

“Do as you please. I got what I came for.”

There was no objection from Cali or Tahar. Adelbern sported a more pensive expression.

“I might have to come with you for a while. I don’t think there’s a place for me in the Inquisition anymore.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“John knows that I was collaborating with the Absolver on this. I won’t be spared any judgement by the others once the dust settles. As you said, I waited and waited to see this chaos come to be, but in the process, I became nothing more than a cog in the machine. No better than the people I claimed to despise. My hand is forced. I will be killed if I remain here.”

“I can’t stop you.”

He couldn’t resist cracking one of his usual friendly quips; “Ah. You don’t need to worry about me collecting my things. I never kept them here in the first place.”

“Then let’s go before they catch us. Even with these stats, I don’t like our chances of winning against so many Inquisitors.”

But as I’d soon learn – that statement was too little too late.