

John dragged the Absolver down to the front courtyard after the battle ended.

He hoped that the men who stood guard there succeeded in preventing Ren Kageyama from escaping, but he also understood that the dark strength which now resided in him was far beyond their mortal comprehension. Stigma – the cursed blade that bore one-thousand teeth, was now complete. There was little beyond his means with such a power.

What awaited them was so much worse than he anticipated. John had not seen such a grisly pile of bodies in many years, not since the Inquisition's active participation in the previous war. This was not the result of two armies clashing though, this was all the consequence of one man standing alone. There were almost two hundred dead collectively, some stabbed, others bisected, burned, or trampled by their own allies during the scramble.

An ignoble death that was at odds with their just purpose. John's anger could no longer be contained. It burned inside of him and bubbled up to the surface, twisting his expression into one of incandescent fury.

"Surely you understand what this means, Absolver."

The old scholar warbled a weary laugh across the yard. John felt his brow twitch as he displayed a callous disregard for the men and women he was meant to lead and protect. How could he stand there and laugh at the sight that lay before him? Odera and his people had been slaughtered for naught. Ren had escaped from the fort, and would be well positioned to do the same to others as well.

"I couldn't have imagined it, not in my wildest fantasies. The stories were true! The Blackblood Demons were capable of such incredible things. This is the proof!"

"You've unleashed a monster. Is that all you have to say for yourself?"

There was no doubt in his mind and no hesitation behind the grip he held on his sword. He had seen enough. The Absolver must have lost his mind long ago – driven to the brink of madness by the knowledge that eluded him, and potentially corrupted by his study of the cursed relics in the process. To him it was the only reasonable explanation. He did not wish to think ill of the Absolver like that. He had to have been corrupted, changed, because the Absolver he knew would never do something like this.

"Do you understand why they exterminated the Blackblood Demons, John?"

"I don't see how it matters. If they were capable of doing this, the mortal men of this world could not stand aside and allow them to pose such a threat."

He laughed again, "Oh, you'd be mistaken, my friend. I did not tell them everything I scribed from our records. The truth was much different. The Blackblood were actually a peaceful society. They needn't fear what lay in the dark, their strength provided security and prosperity. Why would any intelligent being act aggressively when left wanting for nothing?"

"Yet they were destroyed anyway."

"Aye. The paranoia of the surrounding kingdoms overcame their reasoning. They believe earnestly that only a war-like race could boast such strength, that their appearance and power designated them as nothing more than bloodthirsty brutes. Thus – the greatest tragedy of our age was set into motion, and they were wiped from the continent."

John drew his sword and prepared to do what was necessary.

“The most intriguing part was the account from a soldier who worked closely with one of the generals on that campaign. He documented the rage that his superiors felt as the Blackblood Demons refused to fight with all of their strength. Even to the end, they restrained themselves. They were a kinder people than the likes of us.”

“Goodbye, Absolver.”

“...Goodbye, John.”

John’s sword glimmered in the evening light as it came down across his neck. His body fell limp to the ground, his head rolled into the piles of other bodies that were brought about by his hand. John released a mournful cry and cast the bloodied weapon aside.

“Why?” he asked vainly, “Why did you do this?”

His last words rang in his ears. That story held significance to him, but John could not parse it. The Absolver was a mysterious man even to the people who claimed to know him. Did he wish to believe in the kind nature of humanity even when they were the strongest? How did the devastation that Ren leave behind prove that point?

A small group of knights emerged from the palisades and watched.

“They’ve escaped. Give these men their rightful burial, please.”

It was not an order – it was a plea. An appeal to what the order was founded on in his eyes. Nobility, justice, and comradeship. They leapt into action and cleared away the nearest bodies. John wandered the site of the battle for nearly two hours, picking through the discarded weapons and occasionally reuniting an Inquisitor with their lost limbs. His dry lips whispered prayers of salvation.

An injured Joseph made himself known, “Sir, are you okay?”

He shook his head.

“The rest of the council have been informed of the Absolver’s death. Once the dead have been buried, they’d like to request an emergency meeting with you.”

“I see. I will be there, just give me a moment.”

“Yes sir.”

It was time to rebuild, but first – the diseased limbs would need to be cut away.

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I really did make out like a bandit in the end. All of that stress and danger, in exchange for more money than I’d ever seen in person, two women who were interested in being my partners, and enough physical strength to blow away anything short of a full-sized dragon in a fight. After completing the long and boring journey back to Danton, I was left at a loss as to what to do next. We rented a room at the inn and tried to decide on what we’d do next as a group.

“I’d like to take a break from adventuring for a while,” I said, “We can buy a place with the money we earned and see how things pan out. The Inquisitors that are left over might try to come back at us, so laying low will be to our advantage.”

Not that it was easy to hide with a crown of extremely distinct horns poking from my head.

Tahar and Cali agreed to my plan and we set about making it a reality the day after. Some snooping around the district where Ryan lived quickly turned up a good deal on a three-bedroom, two-story house. I knew that we'd have to vacate it at some point so that I could go eat some more living creatures, so I didn't want to put all of my eggs into one basket and have it sucking up tax money from my wallet like a leech.

I'd almost describe the end to this leg of our journey as anti-climactic, though how does one truly dispense with an institution consisting of thousands and thousands of people? The Inquisition was in trouble, no doubt, but it was just as much as possibility that they would still be around in a few decades, as it had survived for hundreds of years before. The split would weaken them significantly – so I could relax a little inside of the Federation's borders.

My reputation was starting to get out of control. People would always come up to me in the bars and ask about my misdeeds or offer to buy me a drink. The horns weren't much of a problem, as I expected, since there were some other demi-human races on the continent. The most I dealt with was some confusion about why I'd grown them out of nowhere. Ryan and Benadora were the only ones who knew the real reason.

It took some time for Stigma to appear before me again. Cali and Tahar were busy tying up some loose ends of their own, and I was enjoying a quiet evening in one of the local parks. It was a nice day, and taking the opportunity to sit down and think about things was badly needed. Just under a year ago I was a common thief, now I was 'Blackvein' Ren Kageyama – bane of the Inquisition. It was no exaggeration to say I was a living legend.

Her body was more solid than before.

"You sure seem happy with yourself, Ren."

"Is that so? And what happened to calling me master?"

"I think we're a step beyond continuing that particular façade. That was something the incomplete me did to endear me to the men who claimed the sword. All the same – they see a naked woman and lose their sense of reason."

"I assume there's something you'd like to share now that things have settled down."

She crossed her arms beneath her bare chest, "Correct. I believe now is the appropriate time to make proper introductions. I cannot have you calling me 'Stigma' when there's a perfectly good name given to me by my Mother you could use instead."

I laughed, "Alright."

"I am Petryth, and as you already know – I was the last Princess of the Empire."

It came as something of a shock to discover that the Absolver was correct in his research about who 'Stigma' really was. A piece of history, the last member of the Imperial royal family to be executed after the collapse. None suffered a crueler fate than her. I could not comprehend the torment it must have been to have her spirit split into different pieces. The mere act of corrupting my soul with pieces of hers was enough to knock me out.

"Since you died a few-hundred years ago, I suppose that there's no chance of us finding your old body. I half expected you to snatch mine back there and take over for good."

She seemed offended by the suggestion; “I understand why you may be under that misconception, and I believe that it would be possible for me to steer you like an unwieldy puppet, but that is not an appealing option for me or you. I have a clear vision of my own body from that time. At the very least I would like a female body to match.”

That was a relief, if it was true. I kept thinking that she was going to do something terrible using my body, but I would feel the same way if I were in her shoes. Nobody wanted to have a body that didn't align with their self-image. Dysphoria wasn't a well-known phenomenon in this new world but there was something instinctual about it.

“That's all well and good, but I don't have a single idea of where to start.”

She sighed, “I know, neither do I. Apologies – it seems that I will continue taking space in your spirit for the time being. At least now you do not run the active risk of death by having me here.”

“I still need to get some years back, right?”

“Yes, but your new strength should make it child's play. I have to admit that I'm impressed with how you survived this particular ordeal. I was beginning to think that none of the men or women who wielded me would have the wits to evade their end as you have.”

“Thank you.”

Petryth sat next to me, “I do believe there is a method to create a new homunculus body, but the knowledge on how to do so has long since been lost. The Inquisition was ruthless in tracking down and exterminating those with deep knowledge of dark magic.”

“We'd need to find that information for ourselves then.”

“I don't mean to send you on a wild goose chase. I am well aware of how unlikely it is for us to find it. I've waited a very long time to be whole again. I shall not look a gift horse in the mouth. For now, I will enjoy having my memories and emotions back in one piece. If we happen to come across a lead, so be it. I have already asked much of you.”

“Well, you did kinda' save my life back at that battlefield. I think we're about even.”

That was all she had to say. Petryth disappeared and left me alone again.

At least she was realistic about the chances of us finding a way to make her a new body. The peace didn't last for long before Ryan emerged from one of the side streets and spotted me taking a rest. The one-armed warrior hurried over to where I was and greeted me cheerily.

“Howdy neighbour!”

“Hey Ryan. How's your arm doing?”

“A lot better now. Benadora did some really amazing stuff to keep the wound from getting infected, the stump is as clean as you can get it.”

It had been a while since we had the chance to catch up. He sat down next to me and talked through some of the recent developments that were going on with him. He was still working hard to keep himself homed and fed. The injured weren't given a free ride in this world – they were expected to find work they could do, and if you couldn't, they were left to starve. Ryan was lucky that the extent of his injuries didn't stop him from getting a slower paced job.

“...That’s enough about me. I heard you’re taking a break from the mercenary game?”

“Yeah. I got everything I wanted out of the Inquisition. The sword is done, and my soul isn’t actively leaking out of every orifice. I can take a few months to cool off and wait for everything to blow over. I still need to go and gather some more energy though.”

The active leakage of my spirit was plugged, but I’d still lost a lot of it already. I wouldn’t live a full life unless I could replenish what was lost along the way. If only I could have stayed behind and consumed all of the Inquisitors that were lying dead back at the fort, but getting out of there in one piece with the others took priority over that selfish urge.

Ryan laughed, “I wouldn’t be able to sit still if I was you. Everyone is talking about how you basically cracked the Inquisition in two. They all want you to do work for them!”

“The pay will have to be pretty damn good to get me off of my arse now.”

“I guess. You want to spend some time with those two beauties you dragged along with you.”

I shook my head, “Trust me, there’s nothing scarier than having to navigate this minefield after years of avoiding getting attached to people.”

Ryan patted me on the back, “I guess that’s the one thing I can hold over you right now. Make sure to savour every second of it – I think making relationships with people is what makes life worth living. I know that you’ve been dodging it for a long time.”

I really didn’t know where I was going to take things with Tahar and Cali. The latter of the two was the most puzzling. Cali was a black box compared to Tahar. Emotions came and went without her making so much as a noise about them. It took something special to earn a single crease on her brow.

“Let’s hang out and get a drink sometime soon. I’ve gotta’ go and complete a little job.”

“Sure.”

He hopped up from the bench and walked away.

No matter how long we spent in town, I couldn’t seem to calm my nerves. A pervading sense of paranoia sunk into my bones. That was only natural, we’d spent months and months under the constant threat of being killed, placed into situations that would sound suicidal to anyone else. I could only cross my fingers and hope that the feeling would pass in time. I didn’t want to shy away from my promise to Cali and Tahar because of it.

I followed Ryan’s lead and started to walk back home. Several of the people out in the streets stared at me as I passed by, partly due to my ‘demonic’ appearance, and partly because of my newly varnished reputation as a man who could kill several Inquisitors without breaking a sweat. Normally I would have felt paranoid about such auspicious circumstances – but none of them could actually hurt me.

Tahar and Cali didn’t have that benefit though. I did my usual routine of taking a roundabout route to my house to make sure that nobody was following me. The last thing I needed was for some asshole to find our address and get some funny ideas about burning the place down with us inside it. Tahar was waiting for me in the living room when I stepped inside, wearing something more casual than her usual hunter’s gear. It was odd seeing her without that wolf’s pelt slung over one shoulder.

Cali was sharpening her halberd in the corner, "She's been waiting for you for the past hour."

"You don't need to wait by the door for me."

Tahar huffed, "I can do as I please. I was worried about you."

I patted her on the shoulder, "There's no need to worry that much about me. I doubt anyone in this city can so much as scratch me."

I worried enough for myself without Tahar joining in.

Cali was adjusting to the slow life a lot better than I expected, though she did occasionally swing by the Warmajor's office to see if there was any close work she could do. Given that she could fight dragons and even worse besides – it was unlikely that she'd find an opponent that could pose a threat either. I placed Stigma against the wall and took a seat. Domestic bliss, is this what they called it? At least this time it didn't come at the blunt end of a brainwashing flower's pollen.

Tahar sat beside me. She'd been trying her best to showcase physical affection with me. Touching my leg, hugging me, or just getting close when I was lounging around the house. She was pretty comfortable to lean against. I never said it to her face, but I enjoyed feeling her muscles tense up whenever I shuffled around.

Finding a bed big enough for three was tough. Cali had not yet submitted to her feelings and tried anything overtly sexual with me, though Tahar had no qualms about getting a head start on that front. I was surprised to find that the two women got along like a house on fire. I originally feared that they'd be at each other's throat once the realities of a three-way relationship settled in.

It sounded insane to say it out loud to myself. There was a point where I'd nearly given up on doing anything more than surviving to the next day, but now I had two partners, a house, and enough money to sit back and relax. The only thing left for me to do was to replace the soul energy that Petryth had drained from me during our initial bonding. Now that she was 'complete,' any energy we gathered would remain inside of my body until it was used, either to extend my lifespan or as power for one of Stigma's abilities.

My first thought was to investigate the area where Pascen used to stand. A defensive line had been built by the Federation to try and prevent the monsters that roamed there from crossing over into occupied territory. They sounded troublesome for normal fighters. For me, they sounded like a good meal. Powerful, magic-drunk creatures like those could potentially provide a bountiful well of energy for me to use without running into legal problems like I would killing other intelligent beings.

"I hope you don't regret coming along with me for this ride."

Cali sighed, "Do you honestly believe that I would have come this far if I felt any regret?"

"When we first met you didn't even know what regret felt like."

Cali smirked, "But now I do. Would you not agree that developing my emotional maturity was worth undergoing this journey? You were the first person to ever take it seriously, thank you."

Tahar was also firm in her commitment, "When I was offered to you as a reward for slaying that great beast, I believed that there would be nothing that could deter me from becoming your mate. I am thankful that you allowed me the space to understand you first. Many would consider seeing your less desirable side a bad thing, but now I know that you were doing it for my sake."

I shied away as four eyes bared down on me. It wasn't every day that I had someone earnestly compliment me for something. There was still more to learn about these two, but I was beginning to come around to having them by my side for a very long time.

We shared a comfortable dinner together as the sun set and retired to the bedroom. Cali insisted on sleeping half-naked, and while I was no prude, it was odd given that we hadn't done anything intimate yet. I pulled the curtains closed and sandwiched myself between them.

But after a few minutes, I felt a stray hand worm its way towards my crotch.

"Cali?"

"I'm not letting Tahar get ahead of me," she whispered.

So much for that.

My first time with Cali was an interesting experiment. A woman who'd never experienced a relationship like it, and one who saw sexual contact as a means by which she could force herself into dangerous situations. I anticipated her acting like a 'dead fish' before getting into the swing of things, but I couldn't have been further from the truth.

Cali was a light touch – and a very loud screamer.

Tahar quickly woke up and slapped her around the head with one of the pillows for screwing me without warning her first. Cali's stamina waned in due course, and we settled down for a second time to sleep our late-night exercise off.

But I did not dream of a brighter tomorrow. I opened my eyes and found myself in an unfamiliar bedchamber. The sounds of chaos and bloodshed leaked through the tall window to my left. A figure stood there and looked out onto a towering spire, a gigantic palace made from black stone. Fires rose on the horizon and obscured her from view. I understood what I was seeing.

I stood up and approached her to get a closer look.

"Is this one of your memories?"

Petryth shivered as another scream of a dying soldier echoed through the palace, "I remember this moment vividly. I was standing right here, on the balcony outside of my room, given the worst possible view of what was happening down there. I was too young to comprehend it. I'd never seen such wanton violence with my own eyes."

The sight below was not unfamiliar to me. It was one of the battlefields I picked through in the process of being created. Hundreds of soldiers fought viciously over a small chokepoint at the end of a bridge. Arrows and other projectiles rained down from the sky and sent men scattering to the winds with each impact. This was the fall of the Empire. I was in truly rare company to know a woman who experienced it.

"I hope for your sake that you do not grow complacent with your new power, Ren."

"You should know by now that I'm the last person to think that way."

She sighed, "Yet I have seen time and time again that people are incapable of concealing their true nature once they got their hands on power like yours. It is entirely possible that you will change, and that change will lead to your ultimate demise."

“I’m sure you and the others will be there to pull me back.”

Petryth’s form was similar but different – the minor details that defined her incomplete self were now banished, replaced with a face that matched her original appearance. She was still beautiful and still had a gaze fearsome enough to freeze the blood in my veins. It was the first time I’d ever seen her wearing any clothes. A long red dress tumbled down her body and draped onto the floor below.

“I am not an appropriate judge of character. I was not responsible for the crimes that doomed me, but I stood by and allowed them to happen much the same. So long as I believed that they would protect this Empire, this foolish, pointless Empire...”

There was nothing that I could say in response. There were too many mysteries behind Petryth. Any words I could offer would be cold comfort. She’d lost everything. Her body, her sanity, and her homeland. She and I were more alike than she’d prefer to admit.

“We won’t be staying here in Dalton forever,” I said, “One day we’ll go out again and try to find some more answers, and maybe a body for you.”

She closed her eyes and shook her head, “I doubt that we will find anything of use. A thousand years have rolled on since this battle. Our story is all but forgotten.”

“I don’t think that the Absolver is the only one who studied this period. This is the defining event of our era. It set in course the movements that shaped the continent as it is today.”

“Then we will disagree on that point. Through your eyes I have seen the truth. No Empire stands forever, and the memory of man is as fickle as it ever was. My advice to you? Enjoy this peace while it lasts.”

Her gaze was sharp like a dagger. We faced off against each other as the battle continued outside.

“I will.”

Our meeting came to an end.

Slipping back into a subconscious state rendered me incapable of thinking about what she said to me. My dreams were a mixture of past events and future probabilities. They merged and blended, twisting into new twisted shapes that defied logical explanation. I found myself at the foot of a great hill, and at the top stood a tree that glowed white with divine energy.

A branch.

I approached the tree and studied it carefully. Branches reached skywards, coiling around and around in a carefully constructed dance. I was not alone. I could feel the presence of someone else looking down on me from an unknown space. For a moment I believed that I caught a glimpse of them, peering through the veil and taking a risk, but when I turned they were gone. A lingering sense that this was supposed to mean something started to build in my mind.

But if my patient observer was not willing to make themselves known, there was little I could conclude. I recalled some of the other vivid, nightmarish visions triggered by my connection with Stigma – the bubbling froth of violence and rot that robbed me of rest.

I was awake. The morning had not yet arrived.

I carefully extracted myself from the bed and walked over to the window, peering through the curtains and down onto the street. A drunken man was struggling to stay standing at the house

across the road. Even though he could barely stay straight, a thrum of paranoia kept me stuck into place. I stood and observed him for some time before he found his footing and shambled away out of my view.

I closed the curtains again and exhaled. It was a long night yet to come.