

Charging headfirst into a shield and spear wall wasn't my brightest idea, but I was too deep to turn back and accept Cali's smarter idea now. What kind of idiot would I look if I did something like that? No, it was better to risk life and limb for the sake of my own dumbass pride. Still – there was one thing that I could rely on, my ability to take hits that would kill a normal person.

With a roar I pushed forth and met the steel wall that awaited in the corridor, my strength unsettled their feet and caused the entire formation to quiver and waver. A few of their blades knicked at my flesh, and if I was completely human it would have been a serious issue. But I wasn't human. I was a Blackblood Demon, who sported an insane stat multiplier that let me tank hits like a monster.

A wave of false confidence spread from the Inquisitors who believed that those stab wounds were enough to end me. I quickly proved them wrong by wrapping my fingers around the sides of one of the shields and pulling it back, with the man holding it still attached and throwing him over my shoulder like a bag of cats. He flew several meters down the hallway and landed with a thump.

With a gap opened in their defensive strategy, there was nothing they could do about me diving in and dismantling them. I didn't need to use Stigma. I cracked bones and tossed them around because they weighed nothing to me.

One foolhardy fellow tried to stab me with a short sword. I twisted his arm until it snapped like a twig and threw him onto the ground before moving on to the next. Some of the ones waiting at the back thought twice and made a break for it before I could reach them.

I grunted as a lance was buried into my shoulder. I ragged the wooden shaft away from his grip and forced it back into his head, knocking him out and causing him to flump to the floor. I was starting to accumulate a collection of injuries at a rapid pace but none of them were deep or damaging enough to stop my rampage.

The narrow width of the corridor was perfect for fighting against a group of enemies or turning a numerical disadvantage into something more equal, but it also meant that they couldn't bring all of their weapons to bear against me.

There was a limit throughput by which they could add fresh bodies to the bloody brawl. I lifted another above my head and threw him as a projectile weapon with some serious force, bowling over three others and leaving them sprawled out on the floor.

"Protect the Absolver at all costs! They're trying to get him free!"

Adelbern, Tahar and Cali watched on in awe.

"Shit. I didn't realise he was this strong," Adel bemoaned. From his perspective, it was as if he'd unleashed a hungry tiger against one hundred defenceless puppies. My choosing not to use my sword only furthered this belief in his mind.

It was carnage. Blood, discarded weapons, removed armour pieces – they all flew from wall to wall as I grappled and punched out with hand and foot. In a war of attrition, there would only be one winner. That was me, the man with the biggest health bar and the most damaging attacks. I punched through another Knight's guard and cracked his head against the stone wall.

I forced myself backwards and crushed another against the opposite side. I was simply too strong for them to pin down in numbers, even in defiance of the laws of physics.

There was no reason to this. This was the rawest possible demonstration of how this world could work when you pushed against the boundaries. The strength of a dragon rested in me – allowing me

to fight on and on without suffering from the effects of my injuries. Eventually I was out of people to battle with, as the rest had backed away to a more defensible position by the door we were aiming for.

A few seconds later and I understood why. John parted the defensive wall and surveyed the damage with a grim look on his weather features. I should have known that he was going to be here, waiting in the wings to put a stop to our schemes.

He snapped his fingers, "Leave them to me."

"But sir—"

"I said leave them to me! Get the injured to a room and see to their wounds, now!"

John stood alone before us as the other men backed away, dragging their unconscious comrades with them. If he was a more reasonable man than I knew him to be I would have considered it a selfless thing to do. I made no moves to stop them from retrieving the already defeated. This was between me and him, but his eyes were focused on Adelbern, who now had nowhere to hide with the true depths of his treachery revealed.

"I knew you had something to do with this, Adelbern."

He shrugged, "You needn't lay the blame at my feet. You already have the ringleader in your custody, do you not?"

John glowered, "So it's true, my worst fears have come to pass. He was the one responsible for all of this, for the men we lost in Blackwake and more besides. But I do not understand why you work with him. For what purpose do you follow his orders?"

Adelbern shook his head, "There is no point in explaining my reasoning, to the point that there is no reasoning. When the Absolver orders a lowly knight like myself to do as he demands – there is no will in the world that is enough to resist him. I rely on the Inquisition to live as I do. To refuse his order would be to cast myself into the wilderness."

"You gutless worm!"

Adelbern was scorning, "Then consider this an order of gutless worms! A collection of refuse and bandits that grow fat suckling from the teat of a holy mission long since gone. If you think that I'm the single person here who only places faith in what we can earn, then you are in for a rude awakening, Sir John."

John addressed me next, "And you?"

"I'm here for answers. They're right behind that door. We could walk through and have the full truth laid out for us, if that's what you're willing to accept."

"And if you kill the Absolver?"

I scoffed, "Kill him? Half of the knights in this fort want his head on a fucking pike! Don't pretend that you aren't going to kill the bastard yourself once this mess blows over. I'm not touching a hair on his head until he explains why he gave me this sword."

John released a weary sigh, "I know I cannot stop you. It is too late for that now, and with the order divided there shall be no unity by which to defeat you with. Yet I must ask myself if I'm willing to betray my oath and leave him to you."

“Then come into the room with us,” I suggested, “Surely you wish to hear what he has to say as well.”

The power had gone to my head at this point. I didn’t give a single shit what John thought about this. Without him I could easily kick the door from its hinges and get to the Absolver regardless. There was no way for him to put a stop to this. He didn’t have the capacity to come up with a sophisticated plan and his focus was on trying to keep the Inquisition together.

He refused to answer.

What was he calculating at that moment? In the face of someone like myself, what could he possibly hope to do? He understood implicitly that I could kill him and the Absolver. Since we were already inside of the fort, he believed that we could easily get out in the same way.

That was not necessarily the case, but I wasn’t going to correct him. If the rest of the knights learned about my presence it might have been the one thing that could stop them from fighting and facing me in a united front.

That was a fight I couldn’t win. Every mortal’s durability had a hard limit, and my physical sturdiness did not extend to my mind. Being struck with a sword was disorientating and painful. It clouded the mind and stopped you from making rational decisions. I was dangerously close to blacking out after diving into the fray. Prolonged torture may have broken me.

Taking his silence as a rejection of my kind offer – I marched up to the door and tugged on it with all of my might. The rusted iron hinges came loose, and so did the entire wooden structure. Dust and stone unsettled by the movement rained down on top of me. I threw it away and marched inside with the others in hot pursuit. John remained by the door and watched from there as I finally came face-to-face with the man behind all of this.

The Absolver.

This was far from the dramatic reunion that he was planning. His decrepit form hunched over on the edge of a king-sized bed. His hair was ivory white, and the presence of a heavy set of robes only served to enhance the curvature of his back. I rounded the side of the bed and addressed him directly.

“Absolver, how nice to finally meet you.”

He smiled wearily, revealing every crease, wrinkle and fold that marred his face. Each one told a tale of its own. This was a man who’d seen more than most. Even his voice trembled back and forth as if it were placed under great strain.

“Oh. I’ve been looking forward to this for a long, long time. Imagine my surprise when Adelbern told me that a simple thief was the one who marched the destined path. Perhaps it was my mistake for handing Stigma over to one who did not possess your survivor’s quality.”

John scowled as he so glibly revealed the truth, “So it was you. Is that your admittance?”

“Punish me as you will, my only desire is to see this great project through to completion. To understand the true nature of Stigma and our collective history is to move forth into a bold new era. Ren. You are the one who has been chosen to see this through to its logical conclusion. You are the one who will complete Stigma and uncover this last, great mystery.”

I laughed, “Oh, is that so? And what happens to me when I do? I’m starting to get a bad feeling about putting all of these pieces together.”

Revealing his crooked teeth, he batted away my question, “I know not. The records that detail Stigma’s existence before my ascension to Absolver were in an awful state. So much so that I departed on a lengthy study of the original texts, retranslating them from scratch to ensure their accuracy. Stigma has only ever been shattered. To reunite its pieces is unknown to all.”

“You did all of this just to sate your damnable curiosity?” John scoffed, “And what of the men and women who died as a result of your actions?”

“Blame me not for the sins of our ancestors, John. From the very moment that this order was founded in the fledgling years of the Kingdom, they knew perfectly well that this quest of theirs was one that existed only to spill blood and accumulate wealth. How many thousands have perished on this crusade? And for what? To protect people from a non-existent corruption!”

I cut in, “Sorry, I’m not interested in the order’s drama. I want the facts – and you’re the only person who has them. Tell me before I start losing my patience.”

The Absolver laughed, “Of course. I doubt we have the time to start this particular discussion from the beginning. Allow me to make things easier for all of us.”

This wasn’t a good place to be doing this, but John remained still with his arms crossed.

“You’ve lost your mind,” he concluded, “These are merely the ramblings of a madman. How can one hope to swim against the current on so much of our history and practice?”

The Absolver rose from the bed and frowned, “How much of that practise have you tested for yourself, Sir John? Why are you so confident in the assertion that these cursed relics have some kind of effect on the mortal mind?”

“I am not foolish enough to try.”

“And therein lies the problem. I can forgive those amongst us who take an optimistic view of humanity and their cousins, but to ignore this fact is simply too much for me to bear. When you give a man power you reveal his true nature. His selfishness, greed, and malice come to the surface and are expressed in violent and innumerable ways. Much like myself, I suppose. For every person who took that cursed power and abused it – there were a dozen others who died in silence, having retained their better nature. Do you intend to deny them that?”

John was not going to do that; “Nay. That is worthy of my admiration.”

I stepped in to get things back on track, “Alright. Tell me what the fuck is going on, please.”

The Absolver retrieved a pair of round spectacles from the nightstand and slipped them over his cauliflower ears, “To tell the full story would take an age – so I shall illuminate you all of the necessities. I have been researching the true nature of Stigma since I ascended to this position. The tomes that explore its history and purpose were forbidden to be seen by the majority of our order. Many erroneously believed that merely knowing that information could corrupt the mind.”

“I wouldn’t argue, given what you’ve done,” John said disapprovingly.

“So deeply invested in this endeavour that I was, that I even retranslated many of them. It was no small feat. The twisted hands of ideologues and zealots do not care for the accurate record of facts. They are merely another weapon to be wielded against their enemies.”

I prodded him as a way of speeding things along; “Alright. So what did you find out?”

“To begin with - Stigma is the legendary sword once wielded by the Blackblood Demons of the Eastern Kingdoms. Every great hero and conqueror from their history was connected to the lineage of the weapon. It held great significance to them.”

“I already figured out that much.”

“The Blackblood Demons were feared for their martial prowess and immense strength. The surrounding kingdoms feared what may have come about had they united under one banner and sought to conquer the continent for themselves. Thus – they launched a war of extermination. Despite their strength, the Demons refused to act ignobly to the very end. Atop the bodies those who participated in the genocide pondered if there was ever any true threat from them, as they were as content as one could be.”

I connected the next dot, “Stigma was taken across the strait as a trophy.”

“Correct. Though the Mad King had no intention of using their legendary weapon, it was nothing more than a trophy to him. It laid dormant within his great vault for decades until the collapse of the Empire. And that is where a particular lady steps into the tale.”

The ghost that was living in my head.

“She was the Mad King’s daughter – but her true name is lost to time. She is his one and only daughter, might I add. Popular legends about him having several children were born of a mistranslation which accused her of committing enough grave crimes for the shoulders of eight. As punishment, of which merely death would not suffice, they summoned a dark mage from the South and tasked him with meting out an appropriate sentence.”

“They split her spirit into pieces, and put them into different objects?”

Stigma materialised behind the Absolver and listened intently as her background was revealed.

“That’s right. The human spirit is too heavy with emotions and memories to hold form within a small vessel. Each of her states of being were carefully extracted and split into separate identities. Her anger, love, rationality, joy, sadness. Each was entombed into a relic, which then turned them into the cursed items that we know today.”

“Did she really commit those crimes?” I asked.

“Who is to say? In the fervour that surrounded the empire’s collapse – there were those who sought to excise any memory of the events that preceded it. She may have been a great evil, or nothing more than an innocent bystander. Afterwards, they were bequeathed to different individuals, families and organisations across the continent so that they would never be assembled into one place again.”

“At least until the Inquisition hunted them down.”

“Indeed. From there the history is much clearer and mostly irrelevant to the questions on your mind. This was the fruit of two decades of study.”

“Why am I turning into one of them?”

The Absolver stood from the bed and walked over to me, his frail hands sweeping aside my hair and exposing the black horns that jutted from my skull. His eyes finally came alive as he bore witness to something that he could only imagine before. This was living history. The last living example of a Blackblood Demon. Me.

I pushed him away in a huff. He’d ruined my life even more than it was already, and now he was getting touchy-feely with me too.

He cleared his throat and beheld his handiwork, “That sword represented their hopes and dreams, the future that they sought together. They believed in the promise that it held. It was theirs. They declared that only a Blackblood should be capable of wielding it, and that it would exist to propagate their species into the future. That was something that became stronger as their end neared and the war stretched on. A wish that manifested in an unusual way.”

“So that’s why I look like this?”

“Yes. That is why. Stigma is for the survivors of their people – and when there are no people left, it creates them. A wonderful weapon from a wonderful era, sullied again and again by undeserving hands. I believe it is a great injustice that this history is not appreciated more.”

John was not convinced in the slightest by any of this, “You’ve turned him into a demon! Do you have any idea how much damage this man has caused? Your duty is to protect the innocent from harm!”

“I’m more of a scholar than I am a warrior, many captains of this great ship were; and they all sought absolution from the unknown with different levels of zeal and purpose. I always knew the truth. These heretical practices and items do not corrupt the heart of man. When a great power is placed into mortal hands it merely reveals their true nature. The realization I had then was that most men are rotten to the root. Self-interested, aggressive, unprincipled. And then we have you.”

“I’m not your pet project,” I snapped spitefully. My life was never that great before I found Stigma, but living under the constant threat of withering away into nothing under the dark magic that influenced it had played hell on my mind.

“No. No you are not. In fact, you are the last man I’d be willing to entrust Stigma to. Yet here we are. You stand the victor, we both know that you could easily kill every single man and woman in this fortress with nothing but your bare hands. That is the power that led us here, that led to the destruction of the Blackblood people.”

John was outraged, “You spout your lies like bile, Absolver! Do you mean to say that the entire existence of our crusade has been a mere lie?”

He drove the knife deeper; “Mere it is not. It is a grand, wonderful lie – one carefully constructed to allow the Inquisition to maintain its wealth and influence. All that is left for us to do is, is to complete this journey and see where the path leads. What will happen when all of her pieces are brought back together?”

John pushed me aside and threatened him, “No you won’t. This experiment of yours is over with.”

“I’m not the person you have to worry about, John. I am but a frail old man these days. The only recourse you have is to prevent me from speaking. If you are willing to cut me down here and now, then I will consider it the natural course of things.”

I rushed in to try and stop John before he gutted the man and sent his secrets to the grave, but there was a moment of hesitation as he drew his sword, one which provided me with the chance to pull him back and clock him with a punch that sent him tumbling to the stone floor. His sword clattered down with him, untainted with the blood of his leader. John spat blood from his mouth. An expression of mournful despair covered his features and suffocated his will, "I trusted you. But even after you reject me, I cannot bring myself to kill you. Why?"

The Absolver offered a sincere explanation, "John. You've always been a man who recognised the reality of what we are, and where we are headed. Fundamentally decent in a way that few others can hope to match. While they stand out there braying and fighting for control of this battlement, you remain steadfast in your dedication to the principles that this order was founded upon."

"I don't need your kindness, not now."

What a sorry sight John was, curled on the floor without hope in the world that surrounded him. I could not bring myself to feel bad for him. He was a man who relished in the existence of a system that killed thousands of innocent people without a thought spared to the bereaved they left in their wake. He was perhaps the best of a bad lot. If I were given the choice, I'd deal with none of them.

The Absolver was so confident that John wouldn't touch him that he turned his back and faced me instead, "I suppose we ought to seek out the rest of the cursed relics and see this project done before they understand what has happened."

This guy was a slippery customer. I couldn't trust a word that he said - but I needed to find out where he'd hidden them. I played along and nodded, following him as he stepped through the door. After a second of catching his bearings and readjusting to the environment outside of his gilded cage, he tottered along with us in tow. John was so demoralised and concerned for the well-being of his men that he made no effort to stop us from leaving.

The Absolver had given him a way out. A single chance to silence him and leave the relics lost to the hands of men. John stumbled at the last hurdle. Despite his feelings about the Absolver and his betrayal, he refused to kill him when the opportunity presented itself. He was a coward at heart; a wretched, worthless creature who couldn't do what was necessary to see his goals through. If I was in his shoes there would be no hesitation.

To regret was a better fate than to lose something important to you. Stigma floated behind me with a pensive look. We'd see the end of this chapter come what may. I just hoped that I'd still be in control of my own body when we got there.