

Halfway through our journey and we were making good time.

Adelbern wanted to move even faster – but I correctly pointed out that we, and the horses, could only go for so long before needing to rest. It would become more and more difficult for us to continue at that pace until it made the trip slower overall. We pitched a camp by the road and settled down after a long day. We were already over the border and moving south of Blackwake. The fort was another day's travel from our position.

It was a cold evening. Adelbern peeled away from the fire to look out across the nearby lake. He didn't hear me approach from behind until I spoke up.

"Don't you think it's about time for some honesty? I get the feeling this is going to be our last ride."

"I have no intention of this being a suicide mission."

"That's too bad – you know just as well as I do that anybody attacking that fort has a deathwish."

I approached the rock he was sitting on and looked out across the moon-touched water, reflecting the full body that hung in the sky above us. The stars were plain to see on such a clear night.

"I already told you everything there was to know."

"Bullshit."

"It's true. I don't know the Absolver's true motivations, nor do I know what will await us when we arrive at the fort. I can only offer you tales from my past life, and perhaps a scant justification for my participation in this Inquisition."

I grumbled, "Don't you have a problem with all of the horrible things they've done?"

"I do. For every just and capable knight in the order, there is another who stands only to enrich themselves and abuse their authority. When I first joined I was blinded by the promise of adventure. I believed that the righteous path was the one I had to take thanks to my reincarnation. Surely, I'd become a hero worthy of taking the lead position in this story, I thought. I quickly learned just how misguided I really was."

"How?"

Adel took a deep breath and explained, "During one of my first external jobs as a squire – the man I was tasked with attending to came across a man being robbed by the side of the road. We rescued him from the bandits, but as I turned to continue on our way, he knocked him to the floor and took his money anyway. He said that people didn't appreciate the hard work that we did, so that it was fine for him to take his due compensation."

"Bloody hell."

"And that was only the beginning. In comparison to the evil that some of them do, he is a saint. Merely a symptom of a rotten system. Free from accountability, drugged on his own authority and power, and taught from the moment of his enlistment that the innocent were not to be protected. They were just another faction for us to be wary of."

Adelbern stood from the rock and knelt down by the water.

"And then what?"

“The Absolver promised me that we’d see a change in the organisation, that he needed my ability to do so. I was nothing more than a passive observer, a cog in that great corrupting machine. I could do nothing alone to change the nature of a beast so large and unwieldy. I agreed to his terms and became a pawn in this game, if only to seek my own forgiveness for becoming trapped by the lifestyle they offered.”

I laughed, “You don’t need forgiveness from the likes of me. I get it.”

“You may not believe it, but the only thing I have harmed directly is my own ego. But perhaps inaction is a sin all its own. Where would I be now if I had stopped that knight while he robbed that man? We certainly wouldn’t be standing here having this discussion.”

“You’d be a more just man, but maybe a dead one.”

“That’s it, isn’t it? Everything in life is guided by that decision. I couldn’t leave the order without finding myself on the streets as an orphan, and I needn’t say to you how difficult that is.”

“Wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy,” I nodded.

“That’s the terror of money. You need it – and the people in charge will ensure that you can’t live without the job they give you. All it takes is necessity to turn a man into a monster.”

“I’m pretty familiar with being a monster, if not through what I’ve done, but from the way my body’s been changing lately. I’ve got horns hiding under my hair.”

“Yet that is the same reason you no longer need be one. You have the power and the ability to break free from the past that defines you. The only thing you need is the courage to take that final step.”

To me, admitting that Cali and Tahar were important was that final step, but consuming the rest of the cursed relics and potentially breaking my curse would go one further in protecting us from any future threats. It was going to be a difficult task even with my superhuman abilities. The Inquisitors weren’t mere bandits or town watchmen given a few hours of training. They spent their entire lives training for combat and there were thousands of them waiting in the wings.

“What I wanted to know was what you’d do if you couldn’t hold your place at the Inquisition anymore? Would we be willing to fight back and protect yourself?”

He shrugged, “I honestly don’t know, which is why you shouldn’t rely on me to protect you this time. We may stand toe-to-toe with someone I care about and I might hesitate. Allow me to suffer the consequences of my own mistakes alone. You have two people who are waiting for you to emerge from the wilderness.”

Adel nodded towards the light that bled out between the trees. It was where the campfire was burning, and where Cali and Tahar were getting everything ready.

“It’s not like you’ll listen to me – but you shouldn’t take them for granted. You have a chance to start a new life right there, if you manage to pull this off and get the rest of the relics from the Absolver.”

I sighed, “I won’t take them for granted. This is the first time I’ve felt like I could make something of myself since I came here. Every other rogue would do the same thing, it’s just that having something to lose isn’t a sensation I’m familiar with.”

That was what I was worried about the most. Adelbern was right. I had the power to protect them from whatever tried to get in our way. It had been so long since I had people who made me feel that

way that I'd almost forgotten the benefits of being connected with others. Not to sound too sentimental, but they helped me rediscover a piece of myself that was lost in the transition. The human side which sought out affection and held high hopes for the future.

Adel stood from his place and stretched out his arms, "If the Inquisition dissolves because of this there isn't much I can do about it. I am only one man with limited influence. I will worry about what the next step is once that happens."

"I'm sure a lot of mercenary companies would be happy to take you on, given your experience."

"That depends if I feel like putting myself into the line of duty once more. I have a feeling that I may sour on wielding a blade by the time we are through."

We returned to the camp and enjoyed a meal cooked by Tahar. I briefly considered spending some cash on high quality ingredients before we entered the fort and tried to find the Absolver. They could provide us with temporary buffs, but I realised that pushing my own stats even further than where they already were was of limited utility. I checked my stats.

Ren "Blackvein" Kageyama
Level 78 Dark Knight
[Cursed]
HP: 400/400
Strength: 155
Intelligence: 167
Endurance: 170
Perception: 180

It would not be an exaggeration to describe myself as one of the strongest human beings on the planet at this moment. The nickname had stuck in the minds of the people who knew me, and my class designation changed to something that I hadn't heard of before. Dark Knight sounded like an appropriately ominous description considering the powers I'd accumulated. As my transformation into a Blackblood continued, so would the stat multiplier increase.

I was starting to understand why the other nations feared them so much. I was capable of causing immense damage and fighting off dozens of people all on my own. How much worse would it be if you were facing down an entire army of them? Though to that end, it was clearly within their power to defeat them in a war and mitigate their impact.

"Life really would be so much easier if we could easily determine whether they're good or evil," Adelbern mused as we sat by the fire.

"That sounds pretty terrifying to me. Imagine having someone capable of reading your mind or intent like that."

"But we can – what about the stat window?"

"What about it?"

"It's an easy way to ascertain someone's strength and you can use it without them even knowing. Obviously, there is a taboo about doing so in polite company, but what if you're dealing with someone who you don't mind offending? You can hinge your entire decision-making process based on it. I've been doing it for years."

"I guess, but that seems more surface level than seeing their thoughts or desires. It just makes me wonder why we even have these things in the first place. Isn't it odd how you can exceed the limits of what a human is capable of, but normal people are still as fragile as someone from Earth would be? Even you can't withstand a serious injury and you've been working as an Inquisitor for years."

"Who knows? But some of the magical creatures you can find are extremely dangerous and have high statistics, perhaps it's meant to serve as some kind of warning from whatever mad God created this place?"

"I never thought of it like that," I admitted.

Profound topics were put on hold while we ate the meal that Tahar prepared for us. It was a healthy serving of cooked deer meat, edible plants as a side and seasoning, and some vegetables that we brought along for the trip. There was no chance of us going hungry before the battle. Tahar could feed a party three times the size on her own without compromising.

"The food here is better than the damn fort," Adelbern griped, "You would think that they could offer better meals at a static location."

I dug my fork into the meat and shook my head, "Not when you're feeding thousands of people. They're going to have to make sure that it's cheap enough."

"Eh. I don't buy that. They have an entire division of Inquisitors and associates that gather meat and work on the local farmsteads. It where they send some of the troublemakers to do hard labour, but it's also an effective way to curry favour with the local citizenry who see it as a charitable deed."

"And all they demand in return is their unconditional loyalty."

"There is no such thing. If the people have no reason to place their faith in the Inquisition, they will move on from it and find a new ideology to wrap themselves in. It works better than any heated blanket."

"You say that like the Inquisition isn't dogmatic."

"If we were speaking in terms of the total membership I would argue that it is not. Unfortunately, a large proportion of the firmest believers hold the top ranks in the organisation. I have met just as many people who see it as a job as I have who believe it to be a holy duty."

"I'll take your word for it."

We finished off our meals and turned in for the night. Soon we'd see whether Adelbern's claims held any water.

"It doesn't look like anything's going on inside."

Two days later and we had finally reached our destination. The Inquisitor's base of operations, a fort with more names than planks of wood used in its construction. I'd only seen it on the horizon a few times before, perched atop a large mound of dirt constructed hundreds of years ago. The fort that rested on top was more modern, having slowly expanded in size and scope as the Inquisition did. There were dozens of wooden and stone towers looking down into a large ditch that surrounded the hill.

The fort itself was gigantic, easily the biggest building in the country besides the castle of the King. Towering stone walls were layered one after another. Each one contained a set of buildings and a

small courtyard for outside activities. Adelbern went to great lengths to describe the layout of the place before we arrived. Seeing it in person put into perspective how tough of a job that was.

Adelbern shook his head, "It can only be seen with experienced eyes. Out front – there are no men watching the main gate. Other positions have been left abandoned too." On a second look, he was right. There was far less security than I would have expected. A small plume of black smoke rose from one of the courtyards.

"What do you think happened in there?"

"They fractured. At the least – the militarists and the loyalists are going to be fighting for control of the fort. I imagine that some of the opportunists with followings of their own are also doing their best to further the chaos. It is every man for himself."

"Some good that dogma did," I snarked.

"I never said it would glue us together."

We dipped back down behind the wood-line and considered our options.

"Do you need me to make a hole?" Cali asked.

Adelbern rebuffed her offer, "No. There are several passages that lead into the fort that we can use, normally they are intended to help break sieges and move supplies, but for us they will serve as the best infiltration point. One of them leads directly to the tower we are looking for."

"What tower?"

"The one where they're keeping the Absolver. One of my people on the inside says that John has taken control of the area and is keeping him under guard."

Adelbern had disappeared for an hour while we hid in waiting. He was finding a way into the fort and speaking with one of his friends to get that information.

"I thought John couldn't stand him?"

"That's true, but John loves process and tradition more than he has a distaste for the Absolver. He'll want a full investigation performed before hanging him from the battlements. I don't imagine he will be able to do so given the chaos happening inside the walls."

"And what about the relics?"

"The Absolver has contingencies on top of contingencies. I'm certain that he has already moved them to a safe place, and there are a lot of those in a fort so large and unwieldy. There is no realistic prospect of them being discovered through a blind search. He will use that fact as leverage against them."

"Almost sounds like a plan I'd come up with..."

"I will follow you," Tahar asserted, "On the path which you believe to be the best."

Adelbern offered a suggestion, "There are too many knights for us to fight alone. Our best course of action is to sneak inside through one of the hidden entrances and make a run for the Absolver. So long as we keep them from spreading the word about our presence, we should make it there before any alarm is raised, if at all."

I wouldn't plan based on the assumption that everything was going to go the way we wanted it to, but Adelbern was thinking on a different level to me. He was used to having free access in and out of this place, so he couldn't conceptualise the different ways we could break in and out without being seen. It was highly likely that someone was keeping an eye on these secret routes knowing that such a plan could be pushed into motion. It would be down to us to find and disable the lookouts before they could fight back.

I took a deep breath and turned to my partners, "Are we ready to do this?"

"I'm always ready," Cali declared.

Adelbern took that as affirmation of his plan and led us down the side of the hill. We stuck close to the concealment of the surrounding woodland to get close without exposing ourselves to the battlements above. It took us almost ten minutes to get from one side of the compound to the other, where a smaller palisade concealed a wooden building. Inside that building was a cellar door that led underground.

It was a tight fit, especially for Tahar who was under the consistent threat of smashing her head against the packed-dirt ceiling. I'd fallen victim to something similar lately as my height increased by a fair few inches. Adelbern led us along until a patch of light leaked down from the exit door. He clambered up a wooden stepladder and forced the rusty hinges open. He peered out to check for any watchers, before stepping up and out. I went next, then Tahar, and finally Cali. I had to take her Halberd from her so that she could scale the side with both hands.

We were left in a storeroom of some description. Creates dominated the floor space. Adelbern held us up as he dipped into one of them and started to pull out the various pieces of his armour.

"You keep that in here?"

"When I'm going in and out for the Absolver I like to give the impression that it's for official business. I walk out of my quarters in my armour and leave it here for later."

When he was finally finished putting his bra on, we headed through the door and into the corridor outside. I was immediately struck with just how claustrophobic this place really was. For a fort that housed thousands of people, it sported a relatively small footprint. Every single square inch of space was used to its maximum to make that happen. Swinging Stigma between these narrow walls was going to be impossible.

"Where the hell is everybody?" I whispered.

Adelbern chuckled, "My friend said that they've all started neglecting guard duty to wait on their side of the fort. It's a standoff. It's not like anyone but us is stupid enough to launch an attack on this place anyway."

I wouldn't describe us sneaking in through the storeroom as an attack. The ideal scenario was for us to find our way to the Absolver without having to deal with the Inquisitors at all.

"I've seen people break into stupider places for less," I commented. Adelbern ignored my sage wisdom and tried to get his bearings.

"It shouldn't be too problematic to go this way. Stay close."

This would have been a hell of a time for him to reveal that he was leading me into a trap this whole time, but it was becoming obvious that both he and the Absolver had invested too much into making

me this way just to kill me here and now. The Absolver wanted the same answers that I did. He wanted them so badly that he was willing to rip his organisation in two for the sake of getting them.

It was a good thing that Adelbern was with us, because every single corridor we moved down looked the exact same. We were so deep into one of the buildings that there were no windows or significant landmarks to orient ourselves with. Adelbern could only do so through the grace of taking this route hundreds of times. He was capable of noticing the small details that distinguished each area from the last.

As we ventured further into enemy territory my anxiety about being caught started to worsen. Adelbern was breaking every single rule of how not to get seen when moving through a place like this. It was astonishing that there wasn't a single guard to be seen, or even any squires attending to the building.

"Where is everyone?"

"This building doesn't get many visitors even when things are normal, with all of the internal fighting going on there's no reason for them to come here."

Our path abruptly ended with a winding staircase.

"We can go up to the next floor from here and move along one of the battlements to reach the Absolver's chambers. He's either in his office or his bedroom. John will have placed him under house arrest, so I'm leaning towards the latter."

"They'll definitely be keeping watch then."

"Then we'll have to knock them out. I brought my blackjack just in case."

Adelbern proved his point by pulling a nasty looking club from his other sheathe. I didn't need a clubbed weapon to knock someone out cold with my boxing skills, but it was good to know that Adel was going to do his bit to get us through undisturbed, even if it was safer to kill them in the first place. Since he was doing me a favour I decided to let it slide for the time being.

The temperature of the air took a harsh turn for the freezing as we left the lower floors and headed up to the exposed battlements that ran along the building's edge. It was evident that all of the warm air was being trapped inside on the bottom, while the others floors lacked any kind of insulation. That would go some way to explaining why nobody was hanging around.

The only reason they'd want to stand guard here was if they were forced to by a superior. With anarchy descending over the order – nobody was doing it out of the kindness of their hearts. There was an amazing view from up here, and I had no intention of sticking around to enjoy it when the weather was so poor.

Across the battlements we went until another building loomed overhead. A stone and tile roof protected us from the wind, and a short wooden bridge leapt the gap between the walls and the tall tower that stood next to them. Adelbern got his blackjack ready and approached the door. He knocked thrice and stepped to the side as someone appeared to open it. With a crack of his left arm, the squire fell to the ground with a nasty lump on the back of his head.

"Are you sure you're not trying to kill them?"

"He put his killing intent into that attack," Cali added.

“Spare me the comedy double-act,” he groaned. He reached down and pulled the unconscious man out of the way so that we could move through without disturbing him. The interior of this new building was much nicer and warmer than the last one. These were the living quarters, or at least an area important enough to warm through with regularity.

“Just the one?” I murmured.

“There’ll be more in the corridors beyond. Get ready for a fight.”

We took the stairwell to the left and ascended up two floors before getting off. Even my worst predictions weren’t enough to prepare me for the sight that lay down that long corridor. At least two dozen Inquisitors were mulling around and keeping a close eye on the points of entry. A flurry of movement as sword and spear were drawn and pressed into a wall formation that blocked the pathway completely.

“I don’t believe that my blackjack is going to break through that.”

“You think?”

“I can blast them,” Cali offered.

“No. Let’s save that for a rainy day. Leave this one to me.”

I grit my teeth and chastised myself for thinking of something so stupid, but I was filled with newly misplaced confidence.

I took a deep breath and charged.