

“Heh. That’s a hell of a change from the attitude you gave me the first time we met. Since when did you become so interested in being a hero?”

“I’m not. I’m only doing this for my own sake.”

Adelbern sighed, “I cannot pretend that I have an adversarial relationship with everyone in the Inquisition. For better or worse, there are good men and women there who strive to do the right thing. Wouldn’t it make me a hypocrite to criticise them for existing within a corrupt system?”

“Sure. But that’s not the point.”

“Allow me to be selfish as well. I do not wish to die, and taking the fight to the Inquisition is beyond my capabilities. I will lead you to where the Absolver is being held and do everything I can in that capacity. Any more I cannot guarantee.”

“Fine,” I concluded, “I can’t force you to do anything.”

“As payment – I’ll foot the bill for a set of horses. We need to get there quickly.”

“Where the hell did you get that kind of money?”

“I saved it. There isn’t much to spend my wage on when I’m wandering between the nations doing errands. I don’t have a home of my own, pay no taxes, and the Absolver ensured that I was generously compensated for helping him with this scheme.”

“Good for you, I guess.”

I turned to Cali and Tahar, who were watching with intent. There was no sign of hesitation in their eyes. They were going to join me for this ride no matter where it took us. That was something more important than discussions about intimacy or sex. The mark of a real relationship was the willingness to risk yourself for the other.

“We’ll come with you. It’d be strange not to see things through to the end after coming this far,” Cali nodded.

Tahar concurred, “Mates go together into the maw of dangers great and small. To live with you is just as much of an honour as it is to die with you.”

I chuckled, “Don’t worry. Nobody’s going to die with me around.” Heading over to the closet, I got down onto my knees and recovered a heavy wooden chest that was placed inside. It contained the breastplate that I’d stolen from Derian Rivers. I’d yet to consume it as the process tended to put me out on my ass for a few hours while my body adjusted. I couldn’t afford to risk it with the bounty on my head and other problems to handle.

“I’ll get some of our things ready,” Adelbern said, “You make whatever preparations you feel are necessary and meet me out front in two hours. I’ll haul your body all the way there if I have to.”

“I’ll be fine,” I insisted. Adelbern took his leave. I pressed the tip of Stigma against the plate and used consume. My body thrummed with a strange sensation as I felt the black taint of whatever was inside surging through my veins. The strength left my legs and I fell back onto the floor. A headache was coming on already. Tahar helped me get back to the bed so I could lie down for a while and collect myself.

She hovered over me with concern written on her face, but Cali was more invested in gathering her things and preparing for the journey across the border. That trip had been made much easier by the

unofficial ceasefire presently ongoing between the Federation and Sull. We could hop across the line without as much scrutiny as we faced before. Once the economic benefits of reopening trade became apparent, the appetite for war amongst the citizens would plummet to nothing. In the face of that they'd have no choice but to make a more lasting peace.

Considering the large advantage Sull sported in men and wealth, it was a significant victory for the Federal government. They maintained the defensive line in the Bend, only losing that and some other small settlements in the process. Sull's next attack will be just as difficult as a consequence. Sull would find 'losing' the war somewhat problematic as they tried to convince their people that capturing some swampland and a now mostly empty town were big gains in exchange for the lives of thousands of their men.

"Ugh. I hope this is the last time we have to worry about this bullshit."

Tahar stared at me, "Are you not worried about the consequences of completing Stigma?"

"A little – but if I'm going to be living with this ghost inside of my head and my lifespan ticking down, I'd rather be in a position where I can easily defeat some strong enemies to extend the clock. Without the cursed relics, I have no control over where this is going."

Stigma materialised atop the bed, "You're correct. Need I say that I will be extremely grateful to you if you successfully recover all of my memories."

I turned my eyes to the spectre, "And does that mean you won't take over my body or kill me in the process? That's all I really care about."

She smirked, "I know how to repay a favour. If our partnership does not end there, we will have to see if there are any other methods to break the curse and release me from your body."

"The only person who'll know is the Absolver and I don't imagine him being excited to share all of the details. He's probably doing this as some kind of weird experiment. Adelbern called him a scholarly type."

"Regardless – I would rather have my memories and emotions than not. Dare I say that I even feel a small flame of excitement within my soul. After hundreds and hundreds of years and countless failures, we will finally see where this sordid path ends."

I still didn't trust her, but I also didn't have a choice. We were stuck together whether I liked it or not. Hopefully consuming the rest of the relics would see her away from my mind's eye and return full control of my body. My media-savvy mind imagined her using her new power to take me over like some kind of puppet instead. She always had the air of a 'secret final boss' about her.

"Tahar, we should prepare for the journey. Ren simply needs to rest."

I held out my hand, "Grab my stuff too. I don't think we'll have time."

Cali and Tahar graciously accepted my request and started packing everything away into our bags. When the strength returned to my legs sometime later, they were almost done with their tasks. I inspected the chest plate and checked to make sure it wasn't going to be better than what I'd bought from Medalie. Unfortunately, the previous owners had done it no favours. The metal was brittle and flaking. It would probably break easily versus a blunt weapon. It must have been stored in an unsuitable place until it rusted.

Why go to so much effort to contain them when they could let them fall to pieces? I didn't understand the mechanics behind it. Did the curse confer them with some kind of supernatural durability? Or were they just completely unwilling to lay their hands on them once they were located and confiscated? I was assigning too much rationality to the Inquisitors again. The latter explanation was the most likely. They were stuck in their ways and never considered throwing them into a forge to melt them down. I could imagine the explanation they'd give – not wanting to release the curse inside or some other excuse.

There were still some things I hadn't taken out from my area of the room. I placed the chest plate back into the crate and closed it. I wasn't going to use it in the upcoming fight. I went from wall to wall and gathered up what was left over from Cali and Tahar's hard work, forcing them into my overstuffed travel bag.

While my journeys saw me to many amazing places, I'd still choose the static life over this. Living on the road could be fulfilling but also extremely tiring. You could never trust the weather, and sleeping in the woods left my joints with various nagging aches and pains. It was rare to find a spot that was really comfortable. Tahar's cooking was the saving grace; it was a huge improvement from chowing down on dried trail mix and stale bread.

I'd never overrate the importance of sleeping in a proper house again. Cali wouldn't like it. Hopefully, her emotional development would lead to a greater appreciation of the slower moments in life, instead of focusing entirely of the high-octane ones. I finished off my packing by taking my bedroll and forcing it on top.

"Ready to go?" Cali and Tahar were already at the door waiting for me when I said it. What a way to make a complete idiot of myself. One benefit of turning into a demon was that it made carrying a pack easier. More than a worthy benefit in exchange for my mortal soul.

Once we got out onto the street, Adelbern was waiting for us with a pack of jostling equines. White, brown and black in order. I was not used to dealing with horses at all. They were too expensive for me to use regularly. I'd rather spend my bars on food or inn rooms. Not to mention that they were always temperamental around me. I was scared of one kicking out and knocking me dead. Even my enlarged health bar wasn't enough to assuage my paranoia.

They were big, messy, and made a lot of noise. That was enough reason to stay away from them. Adelbern was wrangling all three into position like they were a pack of small dogs. He smiled as we approached and motioned to them.

"Here are our noble steeds."

"That was fast," I commented, backing away as one of the horses brayed at me.

"I have some connections of my own. The Inquisitors are always trading horses between the Kingdom and the Federation, so we have some friendly stable hands who make sure we can get around easily. I told him we had an urgent task to attend to and he gave me three, no questions asked."

"Someone's going to have to share, but I don't know the first thing about riding."

Cali stepped up, "I do. Allow me."

That left us with Tahar and Adel on their own, with me riding passenger for Cali. She easily mounted the saddle and took control of the reins, but I had a lot more trouble figuring out how to do the

same. She was forced to reach down and give me a hand as her impatience grew. Tahar and Adelbern were trained in how to ride, though there were no horses that I could see during our visit to her home village.

While I was struggling to keep my balance on top of the undulating back of a wild animal twice my size, Adelbern was trying to lay out some of the details about what we were going to do once we got there.

“Even if the factions are at each other’s throats, it’s going to be a serious challenge to get through the outer defences and into the fort. They have a clear line of sight down the bridge and across the river.”

“Woah!” I gasped. Cali whipped the reins and forced the horse to start trotting along, “Isn’t there a better time for us to talk about this?”

“You can hold my waist if you are having trouble, Ren,” Cali offered.

“But I’m so much bigger than you!”

“Leverage is leverage.”

It was embarrassing, but not as embarrassing as falling off of the damn thing and making a fool of myself. And it was fine if we were an official couple now anyway. I wrapped my arms around her stomach and held on as we picked up the pace and weaved our way through the denser parts of the city. Once we reached the more rural outskirts, we could speed up even more and put the beasts of burden to work.

Adelbern kept trying to talk to me over the thunderous sounds of their hooves clacking against the stone-paved roads. I couldn’t hear a damn word he was saying as we sped up. The rustling of the saddlebags and their pants of exhaustion only made the problem worse. He learnt his lesson eventually, but not before yelling over them in vain for almost an hour and getting nowhere.

Even on horseback, the journey was bound to be a long one. I settled in for an uncomfortable, crotch-busting journey.

John was watching the door to the Absolver’s room closely. He knew full well that some of the pretenders to his position would do anything to see the back of his rule on top. He was in a vulnerable position. Two of his men were posted outside of his door day and night – with no compromise given to those who wished to enter. Even the squire charged with delivering his food was kept under close watch, and it was tested for poison before every meal.

“Why are you so intent on protecting him, sir?” Joseph asked, looking out at the standoff occurring in the main courtyard. A deep sense of paranoia had taken hold of the men and women of the order. They were all waiting for the moment when someone decided to make their move and light the hay barn on fire. Armed with spear, sword and armour – it was as close to a war as the order had been in recent years.

“Allowing him to die under such circumstances will only hasten matters to an undesirable end. They mean to behead him with no investigation or scepticism. We may disagree on many things – but what if he was not the one to spirit away with the relics?”

“He refused to answer the question when they asked.”

“Indeed. Which is why he’s under house arrest until the time comes for answers.”

“Always by the book, even in a situation like this,” Joseph sighed.

“For what good does the book serve if one were to discard it at their own leisure?” John posited, “The ideals of the order are not merely a series of outcomes and results, they are a way of life that we must always strive to follow.”

Joseph heard this speech time and time again, he’d never understood what John meant.

“We’re judged by two measures once our lives come to an end, the things we achieve, and the manner in which we carried ourselves. Success is never certain. So if you wish to be lionised as a hero – the safest way is the one which exudes your best virtues.”

Joseph nodded. John always told him to figure it out himself, but hearing his elaboration on the lecture allowed him to grasp the true meaning of it. In an uncertain time like this, Joseph could only rely on being remembered for embodying the values of the Order.

John stared at the statue in the courtyard through the window, “Sir Erdrich never took the head of a great foe, and he never surmounted incredible odds – yet all the same he has a statue dedicated to him in the middle of our most trafficked area. He is the very model of what an Inquisitor should be. Righteous, upstanding, and humble.”

“What would he think if he saw us now?” Joseph said.

“I think even his legendary patience would be tested, as is mine. At a time like this, some of our number sharpen their knives and point them inwards instead of seeking the relics that we have now lost. The blame can be assigned once the danger is dealt with.”

The standoff below was getting rowdier by the second. The two lines shoved and jostled with each other for control of the doorways and thoroughfares. John had half a mind to go down into the pit and personally deliver a disciplinary beating to the ones responsible, but his own standing was damaged by his failure to defeat Ren Kageyama. What really angered him was how that loss served to enhance the rogue’s reputation. He was the man people projected themselves onto, a hero of the poor and downtrodden who could defeat any authority.

What a joke. They didn’t understand that the Inquisitors were the only ones stepping between them and untold chaos. The relics were too dangerous to be left alone, and in the hands of ambitious men they could cause immense damage. John wasn’t certain whether they afflicted the minds of their wielders, as even the untouched could be controlled by their base desires.

Ren was frighteningly rational.

Cold and calculating. He carefully weighed the odds of every decision he made, leveraging tiny advantages into big ones. He never picked a fight he knew he couldn’t win and always made plans in the event of things turning against him. Report after report from his men and the locals in the places Ren visited painted a grim picture. Now that he was separated by distance and time from their meeting in Dalston – he could appreciate the plan that led to his defeat.

That was his biggest mistake. John fooled himself into believing that he was above Ren Kageyama because of his birth and upbringing. He was a rogue, a thief, a murderer, and a survivor. Ren existed as he did because he was capable and intelligent. Lesser men would have curled up in a ditch and died before they ever came to his attention.

John changed his perspective after days of consideration, locked away and isolated within his chambers, nursing the injuries that Ren left him with. Ren wanted one thing and one thing alone, to

live another day. He was the purest expression of what a man could be. Everything else stemmed from that place of primal need. To live was to live for its own sake.

After a moment of relative calm, John's ears were suddenly beset with a chorus of panicked yells from below. A spike of anxiety was driven through his chest as several knights in the lower courtyard rushed to the scene from wherein the commotion had originated. He had a very bad feeling about this, something that only grew worse as another man was dragged kicking and yelling from beneath a nearby blind spot.

"We have to get down there, now."

Joseph grabbed his weapon and followed John down the long, spiral staircase in one of the stone towers that protected the fort. Through a small wooden door, they emerged into the mud-logged training area where dozens and dozens of armed Inquisitors were surrounding a prone body lying face first in the dirt.

"Clear a path, clear a path I say!"

John bellowed with all of the bombast that his lungs could muster. Some of the knights obeyed his order and allowed him to pass through and see with his own eyes what he feared the most. Someone had stabbed a squire through his neck, from which he now bled uncontrollably onto the floor. John needn't see the body any closer to understand. He was one of the militarist's men, slashed to death after an intense argument with a loyalist counterpart.

John surged with barely restrained fury. He swivelled on his heel and marched to where the culprit was now wrestled to the ground by several onlookers. For them, it was as if a raging bull was charging right at them, and they quickly released his arms and legs as one of the Petty Kings studied the bloodstained hands that had wrought suffering unknown.

"You dare turn your blade on another Inquisitor?" John roared. The commotion was silenced in an instant as his voice echoed from wall to wall. The young squire looked on in abject fear. There were no arguments to offer, not from his own mouth. The ones who witnessed the fight had something to say in his defence.

"He was the one who started it!" one of them yelled.

John paused as one of the men attempted to justify his killing.

"Don't you lay a hand on him, John!" another joined in. Their cries of indignation soon summoned a torrent of verbal abuse aimed at him and the other militarist members. He'd been made the villain in their eyes, and he had yet to pass his judgement on the crime. He allowed them to speak until there was nothing left to be said.

Silence returned.

John approached the prone perpetrator, "You all know what the punishment for murdering your brothers and sisters is - of that I am certain. If there is one ironclad rule that you must always follow as a member of this order, it is to never kill one of your own!"

The consequences of his next act were unknowable, but there was no reality in which he stayed his hand. John was the peacemaker, but nobody in the order believed more in the rules and principles that they followed than he. He considered himself a passive, impartial force. One who would always side with the rules as written and nothing more or less. The punishment for murder was death, a life for a life.

John drew his sword and stabbed it down into the squire's chest in one, quick motion. He cried out in pain as his bones were fractured and his heart punctured. Moments later he passed out from the pain and slipped away into the next plane.

His belief in those principles was not shared by the others.

The killing of the squire was the lit match thrown into the pyre. All of the bad blood that simmered for years between the two sides came to a sudden broil. Swords and spears were drawn on both sides and what started as a brawl in the yard soon devolved into an all-out battle for supremacy. Sensing a man aiming to separate his head, John swung out to the left and cut down another assailant.

Joseph pulled him back towards a calmer area before he was caught up in the riot, "John!"

In the view of the others, John was the one who ultimately crossed the line. He was a representative of one side who now stood in stark opposition to the other. In his own biases, he found comfort, and through those biases he lost his ability to understand why the others did not cherish the order in the ways that he did. As he reckoned with that fact, as he witnessed those who once stood side by side slaughter each other in a mad scramble for power, he found his faith shaken for the first time.

Into the courtyard's pillar-lined pathways they went, tumbling and tripping as an armada of pursuers sought to enact revenge on John for dispensing punishment onto their ally. Joseph beat them back with wild swings of his own, deftly dancing between probing, groping hands and leaving them with cuts and gashes. Neither man could think for more than a few seconds before a new threat emerged.

John ducked out of the way as an assailant leapt out from the stairwell and tried to split his head in two with a hand-axe. He brought his sword upwards and cut his left arm off below the elbow, sending a fountain of blood onto the opposing wall. Joseph yelled and dealt a fatal blow to another squire, slicing through his ribcage and pouring guts and viscera as he stepped back.

It was anarchy.

The sound of swords clashing rang out across like the warning bell. Inquisitors emerged from their quarters with weapons bared and allegiances to prove. Now was the time for their aggression to be justified and vindicated. Now was the time to let the blood pour and see who was left standing at the end of it.

"We have to get back to the Absolver, now!" John barked.

"Go on without me, I'll hold them off here!"

"Thank you, Joseph."

John clutched his sword tight and hurried to where the focal point of this conflict lay in wait.

