

My prediction of one of the men running for the other camp and informing them of John's failure was right on the money, we didn't manage to make it past the ramparts while retracing our steps before coming face to face with a legion of heavily armed and very angry inquisitors. I drew Stigma and steeled myself for a gruelling battle, but Cali cut me off by firing a ball of flame into the crowd and sending them scattering. The ones who were lucky enough to avoid being set alight and boiled inside of their own armour were promptly struck down by a flurry of devastating arrow shots from Tahar.

So much for restraint, Tahar wasn't having any of it. The few that survived beat a hasty retreat, allowing her to retrieve the arrows that weren't snapped by the impact. I looked down and the scattered bodies with a frown.

"Sorry Adel, looks like we won't be able to avoid fighting after all."

He grimaced, "I hardly have a choice in the matter now. I've steeled my resolve, it is time to prove you wrong for once and fight my own way. Perhaps this was merely an inevitability. All it took is one person to split this order in two."

"I think that's true of most institutions. There's a lot of money and influence on the line, what self-respecting psychopath would turn down the chance at getting their own personal army?"

"Is this really the time to be chatting?" Cali said, "They're going to accumulate more men if we stay here and waste time."

"I thought you'd find that exciting."

"It is," she smirked, "But it is my understanding that you and Tahar will disagree."

Tahar was unusually blunt in response, "To die here would mean forgoing other exciting experiences in your future – Cali."

"I never said that I felt like dying."

Once Tahar collected the surviving arrows and placed them back into her quiver, we continued on our way. Those who had fallen back were quick to try and rally some of the other knights to stop us, which culminated in a surprising development as we approached the other building which we used to infiltrate the fort. A loud explosion ripped through the bottom floor of the wooden building, causing it to collapse into a pile of rubble and dust before we could cross over the walkway.

"Fuck – they must have known about the tunnel!" Adel cried.

"They clearly don't want us to leave the easy and bloodless way," I sighed.

"What a bunch of idiots – a lot of the supplies were still inside that building, and they just went up along with the tunnel."

Even as we spoke, two hundred or so Inquisitors hurried through the courtyard towards the front gate to try and stop us from escaping. Adelbern clearly believed that there was no other way out but through them, and it was likely that they'd destroyed, surrounded or concealed any of the other escape routes. The question became one of convenience. Was it safer to fight a smaller number of them in an enclosed space, or to fight more of them in the open where I could be supported from the rear?

"Just get in there and kill them, what the hell do you think those big numbers are for?" Adel roared.

“Alright. Keep me covered then.”

Burgeoning with confidence, we headed down the steps and into one of the side yards that connected to the front gatehouse. There were so many bodies just beyond the archway that there was almost no room for the inquisitors to manoeuvre. They were packed in from wall to wall like canned sardines. That meant that their number’s advantage would be competing against my endurance, rather than my ability to have multiple arms.

I drew Stigma and peered around the corner to make sure that they hadn’t spotted us yet. Cali and Tahar were ready and waiting to unleash their respective versions of hell onto the group of knights. Adelbern was an unknown element. He was a normal guy in most respects, relying on his training in physical combat rather than his raw stats or magical firepower.

“Lead me off, Cali.”

She braced her Halberd against the mud-laden ground and took aim at the group that waited for us in the courtyard. She pulled the trigger and summoned another fireball, lobbing it over their heads and landing it with a splash in the centre of the huddle. Men started to scream as their flesh was seared by the magical flames, with a lucky few reacting in time and putting it out by rolling in the nearest puddle. A majority were not so fortunate.

There was no time to reckon with the grim scene that she’d created. I charged into the fray with my sword held aloft and swung at the first standing target I found. No less than three men went flying through the air like ragdolls as the weight of Stigma and the strength of my body lifted them up and off of their feet.

Okay – that was an obvious difference.

I’d flung people afield before, but not three at once. There was no time to admire my home run when several other knights were bearing down on me with their arms drawn. Tahar started to unload a volley of arrows at various targets, making sure to prioritise the enemy bowmen before they could pin us down.

A sword flew in my direction, and under normal circumstances, it would have posed a threat to my health, but the statistical difference between us was so large that I could simply brute force my way through whatever techniques they tried to use against me.

“How would you feel about using my spikes?” Stigma inquired.

“Like it would be a waste of good soul energy.”

I pushed back against my attackers and swung out at them again. Once more they went flying through the air, sans some of their limbs and the structural integrity of their bones. I quickly came to understand that the boost to my strength was beyond my wildest expectations. They weighed almost nothing, so much so that it was hard to discern whether I was actually making contact with them when I attacked.

My job was to keep their attention while the others picked them off. Given that I was now taller, hornier and much more threatening than before, it wasn’t so tough to keep their eyes on me. This was the full form of the demon that they feared so much, the one which they locked away inside of their vaults for hundreds of years.

“Ryon Nagamu!”

With a mighty cleave I killed no less than six men in one go, the magically sharpened edge of my blade cutting through them like blades of grass. Blood flew everywhere, threatening to get into my eyes and blind me while I was still fighting. These outbursts of violence were complemented by more spells fired from Cali's halberd. Fire, thunder and explosive blasts rained down as she used her deft footwork to keep away from the horde.

Numbers were beneficial in a fight, but when crammed into close quarters like this the problem became one of visibility and access. Only so many of them could surround me at once, and they needed to get through me to strike at Cali and Tahar. Adelbern was keeping to his word and fighting some of them off alongside me. This was the first time since we'd met that I didn't feel like he was two seconds away from stabbing me in the back.

He was struggling a lot more than me. I dipped in and took care of some of his partners before he was overwhelmed. For all of my griping about Sakura's approach to doing things, she was onto something in thinking of this as an RPG. I was attracting all of the attention and keeping my party members safe.

Beyond that there was the reality that I didn't find this situation as stressful as I would have just a few months ago. Hundreds of knights didn't mean anything to me anymore, and the incredible bloodshed did not throw me into a murderous frenzy like what happened in Blackwake. Some of the younger Inquisitors were already peeling away from the frontline and making a run for it. That was the smartest thing they'd done all day.

"Turning on your compatriots?" one of the knights asked as Adelbern clashed with him to my left.

"I was never on your side anyway," he fired back.

Could they not think of a better time or place to indulge their little psychodrama?

Adelbern had the last word as he drove the tip of his sword through his chest, causing him to drop to his knees and clutch the wound. A firm kick to the face sent him underfoot of his allies, giving Adelbern some space to fall back before they swarmed him. He was clearly experienced with this sort of thing, and he had the instincts for it.

I didn't rely on such roundabout tactics this time. I was here to make myself look as big and threatening as humanly possible. I was a rampaging beast, cutting and dicing any who came my way and leaving them broken and battered in the dirt below. The armour did nothing to protect them. If the blade did not meet flesh, the bones inside would be shattered into pieces anyway. There was no method by which they could withstand my attacks.

They landed a few hits against my arms in the melee, but nothing that concerned me. Sakura's build was extremely powerful, and it was perhaps the only thing that could stop me now. It was too bad for the Inquisitors that I'd bound her with an oath of loyalty. There was nobody to come to their rescue now.

Cali was starting to be boxed in against the stairs. She stepped up and poked at them with the sharp end of her halberd, keeping them out of range for fear of being skewered through the chest. The problem with fighting a spear holder with a sword was evident. One of them got too close to her and received a glancing blow to the head, which clanged off of his helmet and sent him rolling down the steps in the process as he lost his balance.

I reached out and grabbed the collar of one man's chestplate with my free hand and tossed him aside to open up a path, my other arm was busy keeping them away with the tip of Stigma.

“This is a very impressive display of carnage, but I fear that we may be here for some time before it ends,” Stigma whined.

“Not much we can do about it when they’re guarding the last exit with their bodies!” I grunted, kicking a knight into the mud and stomping on his head with such force that it dented his helmet and broke his skull in one fell swoop.

One of the lieutenants cracked the whip from behind, “Come on, you miserable lot! Do you mean to embarrass Petty-King Odera by dying to this pack of rats?”

It was easy to shout orders from the back while everyone else died for your sake. Petty-King Odera was one of the warlike leaders who John spent so much time trying to collar. Now that the Absolver was rightfully accused of turning me into a demon, he was playing his hand and attempting to wrest control of the Inquisition from John. Slaying me and making big claims was the first step to legitimising himself in the eyes of the faithful.

I was going to spoil his party.

I grunted as one of my foes managed to slip through and force the tip of his sword into my forearm, but his eyes widened in fear as I used the tension of it sticking through my muscle to rag it from his grip and backhand him so hard that his neck snapped. He spiralled through the air and landed in a nearby puddle with a splash. What the hell was I even using the sword for? I could snap their bones like brittle twigs!

Not that I found a sick enjoyment out of doing that or anything.

The rest of my team had racked up their own fair share of kills, and the morale of the men we were fighting was starting to waver. Even in their immense numbers, they were still no match for the demon that stood before them. Without the leaders taking the front – they were more likely to make a run for it to preserve themselves. The last straw came as I separated a man’s head from his neck and kicked him into two pieces.

“Fall back, fall back!” one of the squires yelled.

“Don’t retreat, you craven bastards!” the senior knight demanded, but his threats fell on deaf ears. There was no loyalty amongst those who valued their lives. A huge number of the men ran from the courtyard and deeper into the fort, leaving only the truly zealous behind to survey the damage caused. Seven-dozen departed souls rested in a gruesome pile, a web of twisted metal and tangled limbs.

There was a lull in the fighting as we stared down those who remained. A man burst through the doors at the top of the battlements and stared down at the chaos with a look of shock on his features.

One of the knights turned to him and bowed his head, “It seems that the squires have fled, Petty-King Odera.”

He marched down the steps and joined his higher-ranking knights, “Surely they didn’t fall to this pitiful group of four?”

“They seem to have empowered the demon even further, sire. Allow us to dispatch of them.”

“It seems that we have no choice,” Odera sighed, “Very well. See to it that you honour the Inquisition through your victory!”

The fully armoured men drew their weapons in concert and made their way onto the field. I'd danced with a few senior knights like them before in Blackwake, but there were twenty or so bearing down on us this time around. Tahar didn't care one bit – she immediately struck one of them down with a brutally accurate shot to his chest. Her extra-large arrow crushed the metal inwards and forced the shards into his chest cavity.

Their own ranged options were being thinned by the second, and now they couldn't effectively pin me down using them without risking a complete wipe out. Losing all of their archers would ensure our victory in short order. Unlike the footmen most of them had elected to stay behind because they were less at risk. Tahar was doing her best to change that perception.

Another fireball landed in the middle of the pack, killing five men in one blow. Cali approached from behind and leaned against the halberd while pulling back on the bolt, "I'm out of powder now. I will join you in melee combat."

"Fine, just be careful. You don't have the same endurance that I do."

"Hmph. I should be telling you to stay out of my way..."

We launched into a second wave of battle against the more experienced fighters. The armour they wore was not going to protect them from Stigma's penetrative power, the raw damage it could deal was too much, and that was before the sheer force of the impact broke their bones on the inside.

"I'd appreciate a hand over here," Adelbern complained, pulling his sword free from another unfortunate victim.

"Oh, I thought you died already," I sighed.

"You'll have to try harder than this to kill the likes of me."

He was not joking around when he said that he was willing to kill his former allies to get out of here. He'd slain several of the lower ranking squires during the initial round of the fight, leaving them in a bloodied pile around his foothold against a nearby wall. He couldn't chew through them as I could, but he was putting up a strong effort.

"For sir Odera, we will slay you – fiend!"

"My name is Ren, actually."

They didn't find it as funny as I did. They charged at me with murderous intent – and didn't leap into the range of my attacks with reckless abandon like the last batch. These guys had the experience and the training to know better. This fight wasn't going to be decided by their numbers or stats, they had to utilise everything they knew to get the upper hand. The harsh reality was that it didn't matter. The difference between me and them was so extreme that I could finish this fight with my eyes closed.

Their eyes were filled with confidence, even after witnessing the devastation caused.

I was sick and tired of fighting my way through so many people, so I decided to take matters into my own hands and act a little recklessly to speed things up. I held Stigma tight and charged in, quickly stealing the initiative and closing the distance between us. I may have been less experienced with a sword – but I had also stolen my fair share of skill levels during my journey. Those Inquisitor officers I took down in Blackwake were chock full of good ideas. The only thing that mattered was whether I could hit them or not, and I very much could.

I clipped one of them across the neck, cutting into the artery and causing blood to run down his neck like a waterfall. Cali took advantage and poked at them from long range using the halberd. All of them were using swords, which gave her a significant range advantage. They'd risk getting a stab in the ribs for trying to close the gap on her. One of them wasn't aware. Cali stepped forth with a powerful thrust and slipped the long spike through his ribcage, forcing him down to the ground.

I found myself slipping into a battle-trance. My movements were instinctual and driven by an unfelt experience stolen from others. I parried, dodged and attacked with a level of sophistication beyond my station as a petty thief. Finding space for my feet was a challenge. The bodies of the fallen demanded the eye with their twisted expressions and outstretched limbs. Even the Inquisitors were struggling to find their footing.

I struck like a viper when one of them tripped up over a body, sweeping up from below and removing one of his arms as he fell. I spun around on my heel and hit another in the abdomen. Both them fell to the ground with fatal injuries. Between attacks I tried to find time to consume them and learn their skills, but the XP curve was increasing rapidly as I approached the more specialised levels of swordsmanship. It was funny how my strength allowed me to use a horse-killing broadsword like a regular one.

I drove it through a man's chest and hoisted him from his feet, dumping him out into the pile with a mighty heave. Cali decapitated one of the knights with a wide, arcing swing, and the last few stragglers were picked off from afar by Tahar. Odera was starting to look very nervous about how things were turning out for him.

Just as he started to think about turning and making a break for it, Tahar fired a majestic shot from across the way, weighed down with a sense of inevitability. Odera didn't have the chance to get out of the way before it pierced his skull and sent him flying off of the wooden stage which he was using as a vantage point.

What a nasty shot.

The remaining knights thought better of fighting any further and ran for it, leaving their weapons behind in the process. I exhaled and wiped the blood from my face. It was a shame that my horns were too large to fit inside of my helmet. I'd have to take Medalie up on her offer to forge some armour for my new proportions in the future.

Adelbern emerged from my left and stared at the damage with a shell-shocked countenance.

"God above. I can see why they didn't want anyone to have this kind of power."

I nodded, "I know I'm the one responsible – but I kinda' agree with you. Not sure if it justified murdering an entire race of people in a genocidal war though."

Tahar leapt down from the battlements and landed next to us. She closed her eyes and bowed her head to the deceased, "May they find peace in the next life."

After allowing Tahar to say her piece, we hurried out of the main gate and across the drawbridge into the exterior palisade. The entire fort was constructed in a multi-layered layout designed to protect against any kind of external attack. Adelbern peeled away and climbed into the gatehouse to start opening things up for us.

"I almost feel like this was too easy," I commented.

"Don't say that – you'll jinx us!" Adelbern yelled through the window.

There was a heavy grinding sound as the internal mechanisms pulled the wrought-iron gate upwards and through a narrow slot in the wall. Adelbern returned and led us through onto the bridge. A dirt moat ran around the edge of the fort, with wooden pikes embedded into the dirt to deter cavalry attacks.

Once we were on the other side, there was still some distance to go until we were in the clear. The Inquisitors had horses they could use to chase us down. We needed to get off of the roads and into the woods before they pursued us to try and reclaim Stigma. Given that the entire fort was in uproar since the Absolver's betrayal was confirmed, it was unlikely, but still worrying. Tahar released a sigh of relief as we passed through the treeline and returned to the ridgeline where we first scouted the area.

I clapped my hands together, "That's a job well-done!"

Adelbern gave me an exhausted laugh, "Only you could act so casually after doing something like that. You just culled the top ranks of the militant faction without breaking a sweat."

"You can thank Tahar for getting the guy in charge."

Adelbern sat down on one of the rocks to catch his breath, "Odera was always a slippery bastard. I won't be sad to see the back of him or his followers. They were some of the most abusive in the Inquisition. A reputation for rank brutality hung over their heads like flies around dung."

Tahar was pensive, "Still, to spill so much blood needlessly..."

"We did what we had to," Adel assured her, "If anything we meted out some small justice by doing what we did. They had thousands of victims between them. Once you pulled me down with you it became strikingly easy to unleash my anger on them, Ren."

I scoffed, "We're not exactly a bunch of justice-lovers. I've done nothing but break the law for my entire life."

"And now you have the chance to do something else. I take it that you won't waste such a golden opportunity."

I looked at Tahar and Cali and imagined all of the things I wanted to do with them that didn't involve killing people or sneaking around. Taking some time off to relax and explore this new relationship of ours sounded imminently appealing.

"And what about you?" I asked.

"Don't worry that horn-covered head of yours about me. I've been making contingency plans for some time, and I have more than enough of my wages saved to make them a reality. I'll go to where my skills are needed and put some of that idealism into practice for once. Perhaps a break from being an Inquisitor will lead me down a more interesting path."

"I'd say you've burned your bridges pretty well."

Adelbern took one last, forlorn look at the fort, which dominated both the landscape and the many years of his new life in equal measure. This was everything to him. These were the people who raised him and now they were the people who rejected him. His own place in the world was something he would need to reach and take for himself. Nobody would do it for him.

He stood from his seat and nodded to me, "I'll see you around. Try not to get into too much trouble without me."

"We won't."

He wandered off through the trees and beyond our sight. I had no worries about him, he was a survivor at heart as I was. We'd meet again eventually.

"Alright. Let's go home."