

Petty King John understood that he had been humbled, not by the actions of the Absolver, or by his own followers, but by his own refusal to heed the warnings that were offered to him. He fully accepted his responsibility in part leading to the deaths of two of his most promising understudies, and he also accepted that the same level of trust he enjoyed before the incident would not be afforded again so easily. Isolated by the people who once affirmed their support come what may, John secluded himself to his chambers within the fort while recovering from his injuries. How quickly his supposed friends fled once things became difficult or complicated.

What had he been working for all these years?

John was furious at how things played out. His position was always that the Absolver should take a more aggressive stance against the Federation and their refusal to counter the threats posed by the corruption, but that was not predicated on his removal. John was not attempting to launch a coup or a vain power grab for his own purposes. But over time the men and women who rallied to his side became increasingly obsessed with it as a vehicle for just that.

John found himself swept away by the tide. Flinching in the face of outside pressure would only make matters more unstable. What a hopeless person he became. Trapped in a cage of his own making, trying to put out fires that he was responsible for starting. He was surrounded on all sides by people who wouldn't last one second if he put them out into the cold.

He watched through the window as a collection of squires trained their swordsmanship in the yard below. The weather took a turn for the worse in recent weeks but that wasn't enough to keep the zealous from remaining diligent in their training. Every single one aspired to be a knight with dignity and righteousness. His musings were interrupted by the sudden arrival of Joseph. He looked a saddening sight with one arm wrapped in a sling and the swelling still plaguing his features.

"John! I think you need to hear about this."

John forgave his insolence in entering without knocking and nodded, "What's the matter? I haven't seen you in this much of a hurry before."

"Knight-Errant William has just accused the Absolver of misplacing the corrupted items within the armoury, and they went to check. It's been ransacked. All of them are gone!"

John stood from his chair in outrage, "They're gone?"

Joseph nodded, "I saw it with my own two eyes. They forced the vault keeper to open the door, and there wasn't a single damnable thing left inside."

There was no time to waste. John grabbed his sword and cape, rushing down the long, winding stairs to reach the area where the drama was now playing out. His mind was torn between two conflicting emotions. One was the abject fear of allowing such dangerous things to fall into the hands of innocent people, and the other was a looming sense of dread at the potential consequences of such a development. Whether the Absolver had a hand in this scheme or not, it would surely kickstart the infighting that he'd devoted his life to avoiding.

Knight-Errant William stood atop the marshal's stage with a gaggle of his fellow knights crowding him from below. He bellowed to them in words of anger and accusation – declaring that the Absolver had done everything but personally drive a dagger into the backs of their deceased comrades and forebearers. His bombast was silenced as the old wolf approached. He ducked out of the way as John stormed his way up onto the wooden decking and studied the rabble-rousing men.

“Petty King John, there is malice most foul, and from the very man who is chosen to lead our good order!”

John held aloft his hand and silenced William’s pleas, “To make such an accusation is grave, I hope that you understand you will bear the consequences should they fail to pass muster?”

William frowned, “Petty King Odera heard from one of the men that he was tasked with transporting an item from within the vault. He has solid evidence, and testimony to tie the plot to the Absolver. We cannot stand back and allow this to continue!”

John’s response was withering, “And where is Petty King Odera now?”

“H-He’s gathering his men, sir.”

John scoffed, “As I thought. Odera is a man who is only concerned with the act of war and not its avoidance. I will gather the others and see to it that the Absolver answers personally to our inquiries.”

Some of the men cheered, but others were not convinced. John’s name was besmirched by his actions, and by the words of those who were once his compatriots. His control over the militant wing of the order was slipping day by day. Soon he would no longer be able to exert influence over their decision making. Odera was the one who worried him the most. He fancied himself as the next Absolver and didn’t care how many taboos he broke to get there.

This was his last desperate attempt to avert the disaster that he knew was on the horizon. He could worry about the implications of the theft later, after he was assured that the order wouldn’t tear itself in two over it. He quickly motioned to Joseph and his other remaining loyalists to get ready for trouble using a signal only known to them. As they dispersed to prepare their weapons, John singled out one of the vault keepers from the crowd.

“Vault keeper, is it true that we have been robbed of our solemn collection?”

The knight closed his eyes and nodded, “It’s true, Petty King. There is nary a piece left to guard.”

“And how did they gain access to the vault?”

“I can only assume that one of our number used their keys.”

John was as superstitious as they came in the order. He’d been raised in a way that emphasized the immense danger that being close to the relics presented, but he always thought it was foolish of them not to keep a close eye on what was going on inside of the vault as well. It was an uneasy compromise made between the reformists and the senior members that no one man should be permitted to investigate the items inside.

The reason? The senior members refused to do their duty and stand guard if they were required to do so, which also led to a situation where the reformists were the only ones volunteering for the job. That was not allowed to stand – so instead of forcing the most zealous to do as their commanding officers asked, the reformists were forbidden from inspecting the cursed items unless in extraordinary circumstances.

John considered it a foolish agreement to sustain. There was no reason to doubt the sincerity of their fellow knights in such a manner. It was as if they were silently accusing them of plotting to steal the relics from the moment the debate was ignited. This incident would change nothing, only entrench the sides deeper into their respective arguments. The reformists would claim that this was

the result of their methods being rejected, while the zealous would insist that a reformist was the one responsible for stealing them.

Joseph was already back, breathless and without his sword or equipment; “Sir – the others are already here. They’re riding through the front gate now!” John resisted the urge to swear. It seemed that the information was already leaking from every pair of lips to any pair of ears willing to listen. The vultures were circling to pick the bones clean now.

John went out to meet them at the front door. Odera was at the head of the group, dismounting his horse and preparing to have his moment in the sun. John was not going to allow him to turn the proceedings into a circus like he desired. The Absolver would answer their questions, and a course of action would be settled upon if needed.

“John! I didn’t expect to see you out and about so soon,” he grinned – trying his best to sucker up to him before the fighting started.

“My injuries were not so severe to keep me confined to my chambers,” John replied, “I take it that all of you good men are aware of the most serious accusations that have been levied upon the Absolver.”

Odera concurred, “We have. One of my men personally confirmed that the vault is now empty.”

“Then we shall see the Absolver and demand answers. I can only hope that they are satisfactory.”

Odera was not going to cede control so easily, “And why should we not behead the man and be done with it?”

“You mean to kill the holiest leader of our order without asking any questions?” John roared, “To what does our oath mean to you?”

“We swear no oath to the Absolver! Only to what we think is just and right. The Absolver has a hand in this, I know he does. He is the only man with the means to concoct a conspiracy as wide-reaching as this! You simply serve to protect him from his rightful punishment, as you have always done!”

“Watch your tone, Odera. I will not stand idly by while you besmirch my name.”

Odera got closer to John with a threatening gait, “There is nothing left to ravage with my mere words, John. Your reputation lies in tatters as nothing more than an obstinate fool who does not even recognise the unsteady ground he preaches upon. We are not so blind as you believe. You have always stemmed our efforts for the sake of your coward’s peace.”

Insulting John directly was a daring manoeuvre. He commanded much loyalty with some of the other Petty Kings, and they would not condone any attempts to implicate him as a member of the conspiracy. Several disapproving faces emerged from the crowd and came between them before fists were thrown.

The loudest was Petty King Xander, “Stay your tongue, Odera! No one has given as much for our cause as John. Need I remind you of your station?”

A cowed Odera shied away from direct confrontation and backed up with a wagged finger, “Once we have our answers from the Absolver, you’ll see that I’m right. I promise you that.”

To see such an assembly of high-ranking knights was unprecedented. The last time every Petty King gathered in one place was for the death of the previous Absolver and the appointment of her

replacement. Curious eyes surrounded them as the lower knights revelled in their collective awe. The Absolver would not be able to make excuses before a show of force like this. John turned and led the group into the main building of the fort. The clatter of armour was deafening as two dozen men charged through the building and headed to the tower where the Absolver's study was located.

John knocked thrice.

"Come in."

John calmed his nerves and pushed the door open. Considering the circumstances, the Absolver was remarkably composed in the face of a full-blown rebellion by his own men. He sat at his desk with a beaming smile and motioned to one of the chairs as if welcoming any other guest.

"What a rare sight this is, the good Petty Kings of our order, all here in one place. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

John was forced to hold his hand outwards to prevent Odera from running in and making a fool of himself. He was nothing more than a rabid dog eager to bite at his master's heels. Odera wouldn't treat this moment with the gravity that it demanded or deserved.

"Absolver. A serious accusation has been levied at your feet. That you are party to a conspiracy that has robbed our vault of its relics and dispensed them into the hands of innocent people. What say you?" The others were silent as John laid out the charges. He said everything they wanted to say, cutting to the heart of the matter with the sober sense of duty that they expected from him.

The silence continued for some time as the Absolver steepled his fingers together and sighed.

"And if I were responsible for this offense?"

"You would be removed from your position."

"By what means? The Absolver's chair confers total power to the holder."

Odera stepped in, "You cannot hold the Absolver's chair without our support. A leader without men is no leader at all."

The Absolver laughed briskly, "Yet, even if that were to pass, the problem at hand would not be solved."

"Stop speaking in circles," Odera demanded, "We asked you a simple question. Were you, or were you not, part of the conspiracy?"

"No matter the answer I give – the wheel is already in motion. Spinning out of control with nobody to stop it. Throw me in a dungeon, take the head from my shoulders, and that which I have toiled for so long to achieve will come all the same. Just as you have already concluded that you must remove me from my position. I will not humour this with a response because it does not matter."

Odera was furious, "Do not think that you can avoid judgement with your fakeries and tricks!" But the rest of the Petty Kings remained still. The Absolver was a man they held in high esteem, even with their differences.

John took his opportunity to act, "Let us jail him, lock him inside of his chambers and keep a close watch. We will root out the co-conspirators and have our answers one way or another."

Yet another compromise, but no one knight was willing to stain their honour by executing him then and there. The Absolver smiled as a pair of chains were locked around his wrists and he was led away to be placed under house arrest. The others stared at John, in some disbelief that he would be willing to order such an extreme solution.

“Let us discover the truth together, and recover the relics before they can cause any harm.”

It was the rare objective that could unify an ambitious lot like this.