

Adelbern had a simple methodology for finding who had abandoned their duty. Inquisitors were normally very loyal – especially when it came to orders given by the Absolver personally. They would happily divulge information to him if he asked. He was good at spotting when people were trying to lie, and that defensive state of discourse would catch his attention right away. Adelbern would have liked for things to be easy, but he couldn't assume that the next person in the chain was the one who opened the box. Even if one of them suspected it was empty, they wouldn't have opened it for fear of being the one to break the taboo.

Learning which person had unlocked the box was going to be tough. Not even Adelbern knew everyone who was involved in the scheme. The Absolver was the only one who did, but returning to the Fort and speaking with him would give the culprit more than enough time to spill what he had learned to whoever was willing to listen. The Militants among their ranks would be more than happy to leap on such a salacious accusation. Adelbern had been burning midnight oil ever since. He was getting as little sleep as possible and resting only for as long as he needed to. It was utterly exhausting, but the damage would be great if he allowed the culprit to get away.

Mart was a chatterbox by nature. He had already revealed the identity of his contact to Adel once before. While that would normally require a report to the Absolver, Adelbern had let the offense pass for want of not making the long journey home or having to compose a letter. The man in question was a three-band Knight named Scot Weldon. Weldon had a positive reputation amongst the general body of the organization as an unbiased, dedicated and highly skilled operative. He never complained about his rank or position which made the officers love him to bits.

Weldon was the last 'flexible' agent in the pipeline. He was the one who visited an Anonymous collaborator on the border to retrieve the cursed relics. He'd then move to meet Mart at a designated location halfway between himself and Adelbern. He usually haunted the streets of a border town called Karst between jobs. But just because it was a border town didn't mean finding him was going to be easy. Even a small town could obfuscate someone or something for weeks on end.

The Inquisitors were explicitly instructed to keep a low profile. Scot would not be sharing his name and life story with every stranger who rolled by and bought him a drink, and he'd regularly leave the town and head somewhere else to help alleviate any suspicion about him hanging around. The Federation was rightly paranoid about spies crossing over the border and leaking information to the enemy; any level of doubt would see one thrown into chains and hauled away to the nearest cell for questioning. Even a storied liar would struggle to put together a convincing alibi in that situation.

Luckily for Adel, Scot was in town, and someone had even seen him on the outskirts. As he crested the edge of a bank by the road leading towards the border, he spotted a small camp that had been concealed between the trees. Scot was already staring at him like a startled animal.

"Adelbern?"

"Hello, Scot."

He scrambled out of his tent and straightened out his clothes as if Adel were there for an official inspection. For the time being he hadn't drawn a knife and tried to kill him on sight, so Adelbern gave him the benefit of the doubt and allowed him to clean up. Pots and pans were quickly taken from above the fire and thrown out of sight – though the laundry hanging from a wire connected to the trees was too embedded to be removed on short notice.

“There’s no need to worry yourself with that, Scot. I just dropped by to ask you a couple of questions about Mart.”

Scot ceased his frantic cleaning and sat down on an upturned log; “Mart? He stopped by a few days ago.”

“Was he behaving strangely?” When Adelbern saw him, he was struck by how nervous he looked.

“He seemed a little on edge to me, but I didn’t think much of it. Mart’s always been the highly-strung type. I knew him back when we were both squires. He might have burnt his dinner for all I know.”

Adelbern had a tough choice to make. He could reveal what had happened with Mart to the extent by which it would elicit the needed reaction, or he could continue to press Scot in his ignorance. Adel was getting a strong impression that Scot didn’t know anything. Mart might have thought that Scot was too stuck to the straight and narrow to disobey orders like he was planning to do. Showing his hand early might make things harder.

The simplest explanation for all of this was that Scot knew too – he would have been in contact with the previous person in the scheme. But there was also a strong possibility that the culprit left a note to Mart in the box after it was opened. It presumably contained the information about what was previously inside of it; that would mean that Scot was totally ignorant as he had not opened it himself.

“Did you find anything odd about the last package you were given?”

Scot exhaled and clapped his hands together, “I... did think it felt a little strange. The other boxes were much heavier, but I wasn’t about to go against the Absolver’s orders and open it to check.”

“That’s because someone opened it before it got to you.”

Scot’s eyes narrowed, “They did? Did they go against the Absolver’s wishes? Why?”

“I don’t know – they got curious. The fact of the matter is that it wasn’t in the case when I got my hands on it, and Mart seemed to know who had taken it. He wasn’t going to talk to me and reveal who that was.” Adelbern purposefully avoided talking about how he’d drowned Mart in the creek just a few moments later. Scot would never assume the worst anyway.

“So, is that why you came to see me?”

Another white lie was needed to push Scot over, “The Absolver made it clear that anything that happens to the cargo is my responsibility. I discharged Mart and came here to see if you know anything.”

Scot was torn, “I can only give you the name of the next courier. You can check my tent if you want, but I didn’t take anything out of the chest.”

“That’s more than enough. I don’t even know everyone who’s involved.”

“I can’t just let the Absolver’s will go unfulfilled, can I?” Scot hoisted himself up from his seat and smiled, “My other side is covered by a Knight called Eridus. He’s really good at jumping the border without getting caught by the patrols. He’s a pretty intense lad, the complete opposite of you.”

Adelbern was already familiar. Eridus was one of the most devout militarist Knights in the order, his zeal surpassing that even of the officers and Petty Kings who led them. He believed earnestly in the Inquisition assisting the Sull army and exterminating every person with even the faintest association

with those he deemed as co-conspirators. Putting aside the fact that the Inquisition was not numerous enough to turn the tides of a war between two nations, Eridus was not the type of person to assemble like-minded people. His foaming-at-the-mouth rants were things of legend, spouting nonsense to anyone who was willing to lend him a tired ear.

If anyone had gone against the Absolver, it would be him.

“Where is he?”

“You can find him in the Bend – he’s got a permanent place in the middle of the town. I’ll write his address down for you.” Scot retrieved a piece of parchment from his bag and scribbled down the number of the house that he was staying in. Adelbern accepted the paper and devoted it to memory in case he lost it along the way.

“Thanks Scot.”

“If you don’t mind, I could come with you. If there aren’t going to be any more deliveries until this is resolved...”

“It’s fine Scot. They’ll tell you to stay here anyway. I don’t see myself needing backup to track down where it is.”

Scot deflated and sat back down, “Oh. Okay. I really want to work with you though. I heard that you’re a firm hand with a sword.”

“Sorry. You know how things are. I can’t go anywhere without someone giving me an order. I’ll come back and fill in you in when everything is cleared up.”

Scot waved as Adel turned to leave, “Good luck.”

He didn’t need it.

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Just as I had desired, we returned to the inn, had a drink, and then went to bed. The moment my head touched the pillow I was out like a light. There was no time or energy left in me to speak with Tahar and Cali about what had happened earlier. I wanted to turn myself off and forget about it for a few hours. There were no bad dreams to be had – so I enjoyed a restful sleep until the morning sun broke through the curtains and stirred me back to wakefulness.

But that sense of unease did not let up. I could still feel it when I got out of bed, washed my face, and ate some breakfast. The ticking of the clock in the hallway was getting irritating. Tahar and Cali took their time getting ready because I hadn’t proposed anything for our itinerary yet. Returning to the manor and conducting another search would be too difficult. A previous break-in would mean that the staff and the guards would be keeping a close eye on anyone trying to get inside.

I exhaled and opened the window to get some fresh air. It was a mild, overcast morning. Tahar was already reclining back on her bunk and awaiting my next order, but I didn’t have one. I was stumped. The problem with being under such time pressure was that I couldn’t move on to the next thing just yet; I’d have to come back here eventually and finish my business. But an answer to my problem arrived from an unexpected place. Someone was knocking at the door to our room. I unlocked it and peered outside, believing that a guardsman had come to slap me in chains and haul me away for the previous day’s events. In reality it was the innkeeper.

“I have a gentleman in the tavern who says he’s looking for you.”

The watchmen wouldn't ask me nicely before arresting me, so I had to wonder who it was. The only people that knew where we were staying were Derian's agents. Had Philip arrived to accuse me of his disappearance? I waved him away, "I'll be down in a second." He nodded and left to go about his morning rounds.

"Would you like me to come with you?" Cali asked.

"I don't imagine it'll be anything exciting. You can if you want."

Cali did want to accompany me. We left Tahar to wake up on her lonesome and headed down the narrow stairs that led into the lobby. I had a few theories of who might have been calling for me, but none of them were even close to who was actually there. Sitting at the head of the table in the middle of the tavern floor was a ghost of a man.

Derian Rivers.

I blinked and then tried to rub the sleep from my eyes, but no matter what I did he remained there – smiling glibly as if to taunt me. The last time I had seen him he was about to void his bowels into a farmer's irrigation ditch. I was more certain than anything that he was dead. I checked his pulse myself. He was a stone-cold corpse. Some illumination was soon provided by Stigma, who appeared beside him and leaned down to get a 'closer' look.

"I believe I know which of my powers he's taken," she stated.

He held out his hand as if to invite me to a polite parlay, "Take a seat, Ren."

Cognizant that the walls were thin and people were sleeping, I restrained my natural reaction to the situation and did as he asked. The displeasure on my face was clear, but Derian was in no mood to gloat. He'd experienced something terrible by my hands, and whether he could withstand it did not change the fact that it was a stressful and painful ordeal.

"Back from the dead, Derian?"

He gave me a terse grin, "Yes – luckily. It came as quite a shock to awaken in an empty field with a bag over my head. I was only released when a guardsman wandered by and heard my calls for assistance. I have to say, it was a foolish gambit. I do not wish to experience it again."

"You know what I'm here for."

"The power to cheat mortality."

"Not necessarily, but I do want to take it off of your hands."

Derian steepled his fingers and sighed, "You might be wondering why you're still a free man at this moment, and not currently enjoying the hospitality of the local jailhouse?"

"I am."

"Don't mistake it for generosity, Ren. You have committed the gravest offense against me that a man could commit. If not for the plans I had already made – it would have been permanent. I hope you understand your position here. But I realised that turning you in to the watchmen was a shameful waste of an excellent opportunity. I have something that you want, and I have something that I need done. Is that not the basis of all civilised society? I'm offering you a transaction."

I scowled, "The next time you die, I'll just make sure that there's nothing left to stitch back together."

"And then you'll never learn where I've hidden the relic. I've played this game many a time before."

Stigma offered a silent explanation to me, "He's utilising my ability to re-forged the body. As you can imagine, it's very taxing on the spirit. He won't be able to do it for an injury more serious than the one he inflicted on himself. Anything more demands the consumption of souls, something that cannot be done without my absorption. This fool has no idea what danger he places himself in. Remove a limb and he will perish in his own fire."

But he wouldn't believe me if I told him that, so I couldn't use it to push him in the right direction. The fact of the matter was that Derian had pulled an extremely lucky scheme off – one that he wasn't even sure would work at the time. The reason he was so willing to kill himself was that he feared that we'd do the same regardless, and the power of the relic provided him with enough confidence to follow through. I stared at his mouth, noting that his tongue was discoloured.

Derian continued to preen regardless, "The big question was what I wanted from you. I seldom find myself in the situation of having such competent hands. I know for a fact that you have accumulated a vicious reputation as a warrior and killer. 'Blackvein' was something Philip heard over and over again while he was searching in the North. Your pale complexion is enough evidence that you are the self-same man."

"Do you want payback for the Forester affair?"

Derian's eyes sharpened, "Perhaps. But just one man cannot truly change the tide of war. As much as I may long for the days of Sull leadership over these lands, to ask of you such a thing would be a bout of madness. I do not intend to ask you the impossible; it would be a waste of good blackmail."

I was getting sick of him relishing in this, "So what do you want? Get to the point."

Derian's face twisted into a furious mask that eclipsed anything I had seen before; "I want you to find that fucking whore who stole my property, and bring me her fucking head." His knuckles turned white as she gripped the arms of his chair so hard that the joints started to creak in protest. More than being kidnapped, tortured and killed, Derian hated people taking his property more than anything else. To ruin his collection was an offence greater than any other.

"Really? You want me to find Sakura."

Derian tried to calm himself down, but the veins bulging in his neck told me that he was clenching his entire body as tightly as possible. "That's right. You kill her for me, and I'll forget that your transgression ever happened. Better yet, I'll hand the relic over to you as well."

"Even though you spent so much to get it?"

"A display's value is not found in the individual items, Ren. It is in their collective form, the history and story that it tells. She took a piece of my Agrion armoury, and that I cannot forgive. The entire selection now suffers because of one missing piece!" He slammed his hands down on the table and glared at me. He was losing his damn mind. I didn't know that Sakura's actions had such a negative effect on his mental state.

Before I could ask him any more questions, he grabbed his coat and stormed out of the tavern. It wasn't that he knew anything about where she was. That's why he was asking me. I decided that it wasn't worth the effort to chase him down. The watchmen were keeping a close eye on him. I didn't

believe for one second that he'd kept it to himself. He had a plan in mind in case I decided to go against him. I kicked the table leg and groaned.

I should have brainwashed him when I had the chance.