

Adelbern has spent the past three days searching for Eridus. The twisted woods of the Bend were the perfect place to conceal oneself from any pursuers, which was why it boasted such a foul reputation as a hive of villainy from across the two great nations that sandwiched it. Criminals could always flee here and find a patch in the wilderness to inhabit, and most of the locals wouldn't ask too many questions. That caused Adelbern no end of problems because nobody knew who Eridus was or where he was hiding. He'd needled just about every single person who was willing to speak with him and had gotten nowhere. He was starting to worry that the knight had already moved back into the Kingdom and was making a rush for the fort.

Worst of all – the atmosphere in the swampland was playing hell with his allergies. Adel whipped out another clean napkin from his armour and cleared his nose. Now that he was back in Sull territory, he was forced to wear his Inquisitor armour. It was helpful for extracting testimony from a certain kind of person, though others feared the appearance of Inquisitors. The town's makeup had been changed radically by Sull's initial purge, but ridding it completely of the criminal element was simply impossible without serious social change. Where some saw danger, others saw an opportunity. Ren would call it a captive market for thievery.

"Ren would be real helpful right about now," Adel muttered to himself as he observed the front-facing façade of an empty building. He knew a thing or two about getting information out of people. His contacts in the Bend would be a fantastic help. Adelbern did not envy Ren's station in life, but it did provide him with some skills that he'd love to have for himself.

This was the first time one of the Absolver's plans had gone awry and Adelbern was at a bit of a loss on how to resolve things. He didn't boast the boundless strength that Ren did – despite his intense training. There were some things that couldn't be replicated just through hard work. After all, the entire purpose behind this project was to discover the mysteries behind Stigma. That was what Adel suspected at least. Adelbern shook his head and walked down the road towards one of the outposts that Sull had established within the town to try and maintain order. Though much of the chaos that had happened following the fighting was their fault in the first place. It made Adelbern shudder to think about how many innocent people got caught up in the massacre. The Inquisitors that accompanied that campaign had also participated in the killings.

The town was an empty husk of what it used to be. Even the short journey down to the temporary lodgings showed many scars of what had happened. Some buildings had been demolished or burned to the ground, and other debris had been left scattered across the streets with little regard for the people who lived there. It was a grave injustice that he could not abide. But despite all of his righteous anger at what they had done – there was nothing he could do to rectify it. He was but one man and he did not possess the incredible strength that Ren did. He had to choose his fights carefully.

Two men were stationed outside when he reached his destination. They saluted him as he passed through the gate and entered the courtyard. Several tents had been pitched to provide lodgings for the soldiers. There were two fire pits tucked between the many large boxes filled with supplies. Adelbern weaved his way through the maze in search of one person specifically. He had asked them to keep an eye out for Eridus.

"Charlie!"

The young Inquisitor peered up from an open box of potatoes with a look of shock on his features. He straightened out his dusty blonde hair and bowed to his senior knight, "Adelbern. I didn't expect you to be back so soon."

“Well, I didn’t either. But I haven’t heard a single word about where our mutual friend might be. I was hoping that you’ve had more luck than I.”

Charlie smiled, “As it happens – some of the others have been talking about him lately. Someone claims to have seen him in town a few days ago. I think he’s still here, somewhere.”

Adelbern found it hard to disguise his frustration, “Don’t you have anything more specific than that? I’ve already spent a few days wandering around like a fool. Half of the people don’t wish to speak with us, and the other half have nothing helpful to say.”

“Ah. I have some experience with the people in the town. They weren’t happy about how the Sull troops handled the initial invasion. Petty King Hadara was not happy to see such a cold reception, though I believe he was mistaken in thinking that they would have been pleased to see us...”

Adelbern knew Hadara was thick-headed at the best of times, but Charlie’s statement implied that he was mostly unaware of what the troops under his own command were doing. Not that he would have been upset had he learned the full measure of what had happened while he wasn’t paying attention. Perhaps the evidence staring him in the face in the form of those angry citizens wasn’t enough for him to put the puzzle together.

“That’s nothing new. I swear these Petty Kings aren’t in control of their own contingent most days.”

Charlie led Adelbern away from the food crates and to somewhere they could discuss the matter more discreetly. Charlie has received a harsh crash course on internal Inquisitor politics from Adelbern when he was a simple squire, and those words had not yet faded from his mind. He could not act under the presumption that the others had pure intentions. Many of them were spiteful and petty, and would do anything to line their own pockets and curry influence. Adelbern couldn’t evade becoming a participant in the game, not after the Absolver picked him out to be one of his personal fixers. In turn, Charlie felt like he owed Adelbern a helping hand. It was only right to respond when someone showed him kindness. It was a harsh kindness, but kindness nonetheless.

He sat down on his cot and stretched his arms out, “Jeeze. They’re really running us ragged trying to get this place in order. I’ve seen enough vegetables to last a lifetime.”

“Weren’t they planning on launching the next offensive soon?”

Charlie scoffed, “That was before the conditions on the ground changed. It’s almost impossible to cart supplies through this swamp right now with how deep the mud is. Losing Forester really threw everything into disarray.”

“That was why they killed him,” Adelbern nodded – concealing the fact that he had played a key role in his death. It already felt like a lifetime ago that he gave Ren his assistance and snuck him into the war camp with some spare armour.

“The war hawks back home are losing their heads because the King is talking about making peace. Easy to get so worked up when you aren’t the ones fighting at the front. I don’t know how much longer the army can keep going. I think it’ll be easier to get over the border and do our jobs if they aren’t fighting.”

Adel chuckled, “They think they’ll win in the end and have free reign over the Federation. It’s just not happening, no matter how hard they push the King to launch a full invasion.” He found a seat on an empty cot and held out his hands, “What did you hear about our mutual friend?”

“Some of them have seen him skulking around town – but he never stops to speak with anybody. He heads down to some of the shops, buys some food, and then heads off to lord knows where. He was here yesterday so if you’re worried about him making a run for it, that doesn’t seem to have happened yet.”

Adelbern was relieved to hear it. If he was the one who had absconded with the relic, there was still a chance for him to retrieve it. Though the death of Mart would require the induction of another Knight to their scheme, and that would cause a delay on their next action. The problem was locating him in the woods.

Charlie had the answers he was looking for, “Since I knew you were going to ask, I got an opinion from some friendly locals about a good place to set up camp. Since the water levels are higher than usual the number of appropriate patches has decreased significantly. They said that searching north-east of here where the elevation is higher would be your best bet.”

Adel jumped up, “You’re a hero, Charlie. What would I do without you?”

Charlie nervously scratched his head, unused to such high praise; “Thanks, but I’m only doing my job. Why wouldn’t I want to give a hand to one of the Absolver’s personal agents?”

“You’d be surprised. There are some amongst our order who dislike his style of leadership.”

Charlie had heard it before, but it still didn’t seem real that there were those who would doubt the actions of their supreme leader. It was said that the Absolver was chosen by the Branch, and the order had continued to respect that legacy even as the church collapsed. In the early days it was even said that the Absolver cultivated the growth of Branches across the continent and banished evil forces in the process. At the same time, Charlie had always found immense comfort by whittling away the hours in the order’s library. Even some of the senior members lacked his knowledge on the order’s long and storied history. It disappointed him that some took their duty with such a sense of frivolity.

Adelbern had never given him that impression. Charlie respected him and the straight-forward approach he took to protecting people from corruption. Adelbern wasn’t interested in building a cadre of followers or taking power for himself. He was a model Inquisitor through and through – even if the others didn’t agree with him.

“I’m sure that the right minds will win out in the end,” Charlie declared resolutely, “Especially with a person like you guiding us on the true path.”

Adelbern’s smile was forced, “Of course. I have to be away quickly. There’s little time for me to waste at the moment. We can speak again soon.”

“I won’t keep you then. Good luck, Sir Adelbern.”

Adelbern had never for a second considered himself a leader. He didn’t command the loyalty of men like the others, nor did he have any interest in doing so. What kind of leader was he? He was nothing more than the Absolver’s personal fixer. He didn’t make decisions on his own. He wasn’t worthy of respect. He pulled his hood upwards as a light shower started to pour even more onto the already waterlogged town. The few people out on the streets ran for cover, leaving him as the sole figure making his way down the main avenue. Hell, when he thought about it, Ren was a more inspiring figure than he was. Despite his anti-social behaviour – he still forged his own path, and that was something that made people willing to stick with him. Being willing to use that ‘charisma’ or good

will to make a difference was irrelevant. Famous people inspired others to take on their ideology just by their mere presence in the public eye.

His footfalls became heavier and more laboured as he passed over the wooden planks and sunk his feet deep into the heavy bog that had started to form. It was going to take a long time to search the area and find his man. If he didn't, then the Inquisition would fall to pieces. He was not certain whether that was a good thing or not. The wealth and resources that they boasted could be a serious problem in the wrong hands, and the war hungry parts of the Inquisition were definitely the wrong hands.

That was the one thing he was certain of.