

Eridus had proved an elusive foe for Adelbern to find.

But he finally found him, after days of endlessly wandering the swamps, he finally found him, in a tiny camp cleverly hidden away between the trees. Eridus was there, in his armour, feasting on a meal that had been cooked over an open fire. The heavy fog and tree coverage meant that spotting the smoke from a distance was almost impossible.

Adelbern and Eridus were unfortunately acquainted already. The two had come up through the ranks together and had spent their earliest years within the Order's foster care system. In search of a place to call their own, they both became squires and eventually took up the sword. Eridus always resented Adelbern for his talent – and the animosity only grew when he became the Absolver's personal fixer.

He didn't even get up from his seat as Adelbern emerged into his camp. There was no need to. He knew Adelbern too well to expect a sneak attack. He wouldn't harm someone without them doing wrong by him first.

"And to what do I owe this honour of seeing your face here, Adelbern?"

The German native offered him a disarming smile, "I'm not here to play around. You and me both know what this is about. You broke the orders that the Absolver gave us, and I want to know what you did once you found out."

Eridus laughed, "And if I have done something of ill intent – what do you mean to do about it now? The gate is open and the horse has bolted, as they say. He came to me with a startling piece of information. One that threatened to upend the very nature of our order and threaten the Absolver's position in power. What else was there for me to do but send a strongly worded letter, and the evidence, to a friend of mine back at the castle?"

That was what Adelbern was most afraid of. Eridus hadn't waited and bided his time. His zeal drove him to alert the first person he could think of, surely a member of the militant faction who were chomping at the bit to be rid of the Absolver as soon as possible. He bit his lip and mulled on the disaster that was now brewing.

"Would you mind explaining to me why the Absolver is removing the cursed relics from our care?" Eridus asked.

Adelbern exhaled, "He found a way to destroy them, to rid them of the curses they held."

Eridus shook his head, "You and I both know full well that we needn't do anything more than throw them into the nearest fire. There is no purpose in this secrecy. I respect the Absolver and everything he has done for us, but this I cannot abide. To potentially unleash this madness upon the people once more, after so many lost their lives to contain it in the first place..."

Adelbern crossed his arms, "So you understand their true nature well enough? I always saw you as the most dogmatic of our generation, Eridus. Even so – why do you persist in this behaviour? Whatever the methodology, isn't destroying and containing this darkness our solemn vow?"

Eridus threw his empty bowl to the ground and stood up with a furious scowl; "Don't sell me that pack of lies Adelbern. I knew from the start that you never really cared for our mission."

"You think that I dedicated years of my life to a cause I do not believe in?" Adel responded sternly, unmoving and unflinching.

Eridus shrugged, "Is that not the same for many of our brothers and sisters? For some, this is nothing more than an occupation – no different from selling their swords on foreign battlefields. They're a disgrace to those who came before us. They spit on their graves and convince themselves that they are the most righteous amongst us."

Adelbern had no intention of smashing his head against this particular brick wall. These debates were a regular feature of their time in training together, with Eridus wholeheartedly buying into everything he was told. He thought of himself as the only one who saw the true way of things, never realising that he was the one being manipulated. There was no grand purpose to any of this. It was just superstition designed to allow this shambling corpse of an organisation to continue on; enriching those on top while everyone else spilt their blood, sweat and tears for nothing.

Even now, with the prospect of permanently ridding the continent of the very things he hated so much, Eridus refused to see the bigger picture. He refused to accept that this methodology could really work because it went against his principles. This was what the Absolver was always afraid of. The organisation that he led was pulling itself in two different directions. Those who believed in the ends, and those who believed solely in the means.

"You'd refuse to destroy the cursed relics just for the sake of those old wife's tales."

"I see no reason to discount the teachings that have been passed down to us for hundreds of years."

"I'm sorry to break it to you Eridus, but even the longest-lasting traditions and ideas may be based on faulty logic or an absence of evidence. The only way to 'fall' to corruption is to touch the relic with your bare skin, and I doubt that the effects are as severe as claimed."

"I do not need to hear your excuses. Even if that were the case, The Absolver's deception has shown me that he is not to be trusted. How can we be expected to follow a leader who is not forthright with his intentions?"

"John and the other Petty Kings are no better. They've been agitating to join the war for years now."

Eridus was growing frustrated, "Because it serves our function. The Absolver should have never accepted the status quo! Corruption festers in the Federation because we fail to act!"

"Regardless – we are not an army. We are not capable of fighting such a conflict at scale. The Order never has, and never will be, bodies for the crown to throw into their wars. This supposed offensive will stall and fail, and we will be left to bury our dead, swallow our grief, and rebuild from the damage caused."

Eridus had heard enough, "The righteous path will protect us. Search my camp and begone."

Adelbern accepted his offer and walked into the tent. There were several objects inside, including his cot and storage for food and weapons – but no sign of the cursed relic that he was meant to deliver. Mart must have talked and handed it over to him. Or not, this was a tangled web that had been woven beyond his awareness. The co-conspirators could be numerous. The end result was the same. If word got out about the Absolver's plan it would be civil war within the Inquisition.

Adelbern was extremely thorough with his investigation. He had picked up a few tracking skills from a hunter within the Inquisition so that he could follow people. He cast the spell and followed Eridus' footsteps around the perimeter of his camp until he was satisfied that there was nothing hidden nearby. Eridus remained silent during the search.

Adelbern returned to the campfire and glared at his counterpart, "Do as you wish, then. Our purpose is moot by your actions."

"Are you not here to kill me?"

"I see no reason to. If you wish to die, then put your words into action and pledge your sword to those you claim to support. There will be much blood spilt, so at least show the decency to let some of it yourself."

"I will not harm my brothers and sister, no matter what I think."

Adelbern laughed so loudly that it caught the zealot entirely off-guard. It was booming, echoing through the swamp like magic-fire. He found himself leaning forward from his perch instinctually like a prey animal preparing to flee. Adelbern took almost a minute to compose himself again. Eridus had never seen him laugh like this in all the years they had known each other.

"No harm? Surely you can't be that foolish, Eridus! The people you so idolize have no intention of following such a creed themselves. You have condemned potentially thousands of your comrades to their deaths. The evidence you provided will be used as a justification to tear this Inquisition in two!"

"I am certain that they will do the right thing."

"The right thing for themselves, perhaps. If there is one thing I have learned in all of these years, it's that there is no such thing as certainty. The intention of all of this was to maintain that delicate peace, come what may – because the Absolver does not begrudge those who think he is treading the wrong path. He is a man of learning and good sense. Now those with their ceaseless ambition will do what they please."

Adelbern's explanation was wasted on Eridus. He didn't understand what mortal danger he just placed every member of the Inquisition into. Eridus saw him as nothing but a lackey for the Absolver, and not someone with his own motivations and reasonings. The simple fact of the matter was that he may have just started a split in the Order, the likes of which hadn't been seen for hundreds and hundreds of years.

Adelbern's feelings were clear for Eridus to see but they would not move his stone heart so easily. The two men would agree to disagree on this point, all the way until the full consequences were staring them in the face. Adelbern scoffed and turned his back in disgust. There wasn't a second of hesitation from him. He sent them all the evidence they needed to turn the Inquisition on its head.

"Do you have anything else to share, Eridus?"

"No. I do not."

"Then your job is done. There will be no more packages sent through us, we have much bigger problems to worry about."

Eridus groaned, "Fare thee well, Adelbern. Remember not to cry wolf too often, lest others let your cries go unanswered."

Adelbern stormed away with purpose. This was the moment that everything hinged on. Someone had discovered their plan and sent word to the militants. It was like throwing a lit match into a barn filled with powder kegs. Whether they believed the accusation fully or not was of little impact. They had been waiting for this excuse for a long, long time. They were not going to let it pass by without making plenty of noise.

Adelbern needed to find Ren as quickly as possible. He was going to miss his chance to get the rest of the relics if they decided to move them away from the fort. Historic precedent gave the Petty Kings plenty of reasons to squabble over their ownership, and that drive would be even greater now that the Absolver was outed as the one who was moving them across the border. He could only imagine the spittle-flinging rage that some of them were feeling, and the joyous glee of the others.

But getting Ren meant running all the way back to Dalston. It was a stroke of good fortune that the fighting was starting to wind down between the Federation and Sull. Hopefully collecting the final piece of Stigma was all Ren needed to hear to try and bust the front doors down. If not, Adel had no earthly idea how he was going to convince him. Attacking the Inquisitor's base of operations was a suicidal tactic that in any other circumstance he'd try to avoid.

He'd cross that hill when he came to it. There was going to be more than enough time to consider those questions during the journey back. There was nothing he, as one man, could do to avert the oncoming disaster now. He could only cross his fingers and hope that the Absolver had a backup plan in place, as he always seemed to have.