

Dalston was abuzz with a bevy of news.

Word about the stalemate had started to spread quickly through the populace, as were the discussions being held between the respective governments about reaching a peace agreement. The Kingdom had captured the Bend; but at a great cost. They had lost significantly more men by going on the attack, and the death of Lord Forester had stunted their attempts to push forward onto more valuable territory. The wet weather that arrived thanks to the delay had made moving troops and supplies almost impossible. From the Federation's perspective, it was a great success. They had staved off a full-scale invasion from their most threatening neighbour and only conceded a small, economically unproductive area to do it.

For a general, it didn't matter which side of the bog they were on. It was easily defensible from both perspectives. It would be hard to attack, and hard to be attacked from. The line of contact remained in a position that advantaged the Federation. It couldn't have been what the Kingdom wanted when they picked a fight with them. They wanted to permanently shift the balance of power and put the Feggies on the back foot. To be a fly on the wall at the Inquisitor's fort at this moment. They must have been losing their heads over it. Their big, once-in-a-generation chance to make inroads had been brilliantly dashed by myself and the Federation's troops.

With Petty King John humiliating himself by crashing headfirst into a brick wall – the clout of the militarist within the organisation was at a moment of weakness. The Absolver was not going to let them forget about that failure for some time. It was a powerful bargaining chip when it came to the complex internal politics of such a body.

The other big story was about what happened in Pascen. True to what the mercenary had said in Bristwithe, somebody had talked and fingers were being pointed in every direction. The Amendment, the survivors, the remaining officials from the government, and Benadora had all leapt into the fray to try and have the last word on who or what caused the immense carnage that followed in the wake of our arrival. The simplest answer was one that none of them were willing to accept. Everyone bore a small piece of responsibility for the disaster. I did for killing the Branch using Stigma, Benadora did for directing me there, and the Duke did for taking that course of action. It was a series of events that nobody could have predicted. An honest attempt to stave off the giants and save the duchy had led to its demise instead.

Which was why I found Benadora's reaction so strange. I didn't like the idea of killing that many innocent people, but I was completely ignorant as to the consequences of our course of action at the time. I didn't make an informed choice to make people suffer. I still felt bad, but the kind of guilt that Benadora showed implied some kind of intent. All of this had been revealed to me by Cali's bartender friend, whom we visited to have a drink and cool down after a few days on the road.

"What a mess. I should have known that they couldn't resist capitalising on a big tragedy."

Lillian busied herself by polishing some of the dirty cups, "One of the Amendment's people tried to pin the whole thing on you. A lot of folks didn't believe it though. How could one man cause that much damage?"

"Well, I was part of the plan to get rid of the giants," I admitted, "But we did it with the consent of the Duke anyway. It was his order to go out there and sort it out in the first place."

She nodded gravely, "Ah. Some of the survivors came forward and said the same thing. It was the Duke's decision to try and end the giant threat, so none of the people involved in following his orders were worthy of blame. Not that it stopped some of them from turning you into a pariah."

Cali frowned, "What do you mean?"

"Some blowhard called Marcus came around a few days ago trying to wrangle a posse together. Said he's gonna' track Ren down and kill him for what he did."

I groaned, "Not that asshole again! Doesn't he know when to quit?"

"Clearly not," Cali replied, "I don't believe it will be much of a problem. Ren is more than capable of defeating them on his lonesome."

I nodded, "Yeah – when he comes around I'll just polish him off. His friends will flake out and run for it if they see me kill him in one shot."

Lillian grimaced, "He did have an awful lot of folks with him. I'd be careful. Even if the record is out there, people still like to believe what they want to believe. Spinning a convincing yarn about demonic corruption is enough to make people do whatever you want. I've seen it all before."

"I'll start worrying when he builds an army," I scoffed.

"If an army comes for Ren, I will defeat them!" Tahar declared confidently.

"They're just trying to whip folks up and cause trouble," Lillian said. Fads like this came and dissipated as quickly as they arrived. I doubted that Marcus could put together enough of a motley crew to trouble me outside of some pointless harassment. Given that many of the rumours about me were about my ability to kill dozens of people and destroy entire nations, he must have been having a hard time getting them together.

The bar was unusually empty considering the time of day. That suited me just fine. I want a little peace and quiet after so much hard work. Cali wasn't of the same mind. She was hoping for something exciting to happen soon. Lillian was eyeing us with a cat-like expression the whole time we were sitting next to one another.

"I hope that you've been taking good care of Cali, Ren."

"Huh? Cali doesn't need taking care of."

Lillian sighed, "Not like that. I know she can handle herself in a fight."

Cali was quick to shut her down; "If you mean to inquire about our relationship, I'm afraid that you will be left disappointed. Progress has been slow." Cali was so blunt about this kind of thing. She didn't care at all that I was sitting right next to her while she described me as some sort of personal project.

"I'm willing to meet Cali halfway," I elaborated, "But you know – being on the road isn't exactly the best place to start worrying about romance."

Lillian lived vicariously through other people's romances. As Cali's closest friend, she was very invested in seeing her find a partner who was willing to accept her eccentricities. She pouted and went back to work, "You folks are no fun. No fun at all."

"Fun is a luxury."

The discussion switched gears with the surprise arrival of Ryan through the front door. His eyes immediately landed on me. I could tell that something was up by the way that he approached us. It was nice to see him up and about again after the incident, even if he was one arm lesser for it. He

was still carrying his sword with him. The theft must have made him think twice about leaving it out of his sight for too long.

“Ren, you’re back.”

“We were only gone for a week.”

“A lot can happen in a week. You’ve heard it all already, right?”

I knew that Ryan wanted to speak with me. I put my drink down and stood from my seat, approaching and shaking his hand. “Nice to see you up and about again.” Ryan gave me a smile filled with courtesy before shifting his head in the direction of the door.

“Can we talk in private for a sec?”

“Sure.”

I followed him out to the front step of the bar and leaned against the wall as he tried to formulate his next words. He must have heard a million different conflicting opinions about my part in Pascen’s untimely end. As someone who knew me personally, he didn’t want to leap to an undue judgement without getting my side of the story first. I decided to make things a little easier for him and have the first word.

“This is about Pascen, isn’t it?”

Ryan couldn’t hide the uncertainty he felt with it dragged out in the open like this. He sighed and nodded, “That’s right. I’ve heard a lot of talk about it lately from the survivors. You know, I’m not one to just swallow every crazy ass rumour that someone comes to me with. I wanted to hear your side of things first.”

Benadora had been very busy trying to throw muck while I was occupied, and she’d intentionally targeted the people I knew to try and turn them against me. I shrugged and offered him a lame explanation, “The stories that the Duke’s people are telling are true. We were part of the expedition that headed out to solve the giant problem, but it turned out that getting rid of them just made an even bigger mess.”

Ryan was shocked, “I can’t believe it. It really was the Duke’s order...”

“What did Benadora say?”

“She didn’t contradict that version of events, but she did keep exaggerating your involvement in things. Says you wouldn’t use caution and that you just dived right in before they could experiment.”

I rolled my eyes, “Really? There was some mad fucking monster trying to murder us. We didn’t exactly have ‘time’ to sit down and talk things out.”

I recalled the nightmare I had experienced. The scenes of destruction that I wandered between, the blackened skies and purple dirt. It was the very image of a hellscape. That was my guilt speaking. It was trying to show me that my actions had serious consequences. I couldn’t get away from them by pretending that it never happened.

“You put this sword into the hand of someone else and they’d do the same thing that I did. Of course, I feel bad about the outcome, but I didn’t do it on purpose. I’d never intentionally destroy an entire country for no reason. I’m not that far gone. But the fact that we even have to talk about it in the first place – you’re right to be worried.”

“That’s fine man, I believe you. I’ve seen it first-hand. There’s a nice guy hidden beneath that gruff exterior.”

“I can’t say I appreciate Benadora trying to turn me into a villain. If she wants to martyr herself to feel less guilty, she can keep me out of it.”

Ryan was put off by learning that too; “I didn’t realise she was so torn up about it. She’s been visiting and talking with me a bunch to make sure that my arm is healing properly.”

He was not the most perceptive person I had ever met. I needed to meet with Benadora and give her a piece of my mind for dragging me into the mud with her. She was going to try and get me to go along with it, but I had no intention of doing so. I thought she was a rational actor, but it was clear that Pascen’s destruction had rattled her.

“Have you ever thought about turning a new leaf, Ren? You’ve got the power to do it.”

I laughed him off, “You’re a much better hero than I could ever turn out to be, Ryan. You do the selfless thing. You put yourself in harm’s way just for the sake of helping out. I don’t know if there’s a way for me to change the way I am. I’ve been living like this for too long to consider it.”

Ryan wasn’t going to accept such a dismissive answer. This was going to come up again in the future – I could feel it. We headed back inside and to the bar. Tahar, Cali and Lillian were engaged in a lively conversation about something. That came to a stop when we got into earshot. They must have been hiding it from me. There was only one subject which would be on Lillian’s mind; me.

“So where is Benadora hiding out these days? We need to talk.”

Ryan concurred, “Same. I’ll show you to her new place once you’re finished up here. She’ll probably be knee-deep in a pile of books right now.” Eager to sort out my business before the next relic came knocking, I polished off the last of my drink in record time.

Benadora had a lot of explaining to do.