

Adelbern had finally reached his next destination. In order to remove the cursed items from the Inquisition's custody, a complicated web of informants, lookouts and messengers was needed. Only two people in the chain knew what was really going on. The one who stole the item, and the one who delivered it to the drop-off. Adelbern was the last person to put his hands on the contraband. An agent within the fort would sneak into the armoury between shifts, unlock the vault using the master key that the Absolver possessed, and sneak it away from the premises before anyone could find out.

The intense paranoia surrounding them was ultimately the fatal flaw in their security. None of the guards were willing to so much as enter the vault, never mind open one of the lock boxes and check that everything was in order. The biggest zealots in the organisation volunteered for vault duty – and they were the ones who believed that merely being close to a cursed item was enough to stain the soul. Thus, several things had already been taken and handed to Adelbern without notice. Only three people were fully knowledgeable about how and why.

Adelbern would then deliver the box to a designated target. Sometimes a stranger, other times a person that the Absolver needed to disappear. There was no guarantee that it would work out that way, but it was worth trying. It provided a convenient way to launder the items and pass off responsibility should something untoward happen. The first man had happily accepted the box when he learned that it offered immense power, the second never got there, and the third required a twist of the arm.

Adelbern bore the responsibility of approaching each individual and handing it off, all of them demanded a different strategy. Disguising himself as a hapless merchant and getting one of Derian's agents to purchase the dagger, despite the baggage that came with it, was his best work yet. Derian was so obsessed with compiling relics from the era that even running afoul of the Inquisition was a small price to pay.

Before he could enjoy a good rest inside of his designated safehouse – he was away on yet another errand. The Absolver had forwarded a letter asking him to pick up the next delivery early. It was going to be handed over at a small town between the Bend and the frontline. Adelbern saw no reason to delay, especially when Esther was doing her level best to drive him mad. He gathered fresh supplies and headed out to meet his contact.

The town was called Brookshoal. It had seen an increase in foot traffic thanks to the war, as many of the Federation's soldiers and supply convoys travelled through on the dirt roads. It had a population of only a few thousand people spread over a large area. It was entirely possible to walk the length of the main avenue without seeing anyone outside of peak hours. That made it a good place to conduct some shady business. Adelbern had used it many times before for transmitting messages.

They had used this location before. A small clearing on the outskirts of the town. Adelbern had shed his armour to try and avoid being pulled aside by the Federation's men. While not officially an active party to the ongoing war, there was no love lost between the two sides. He'd certainly be accused of being a Sull spy if they found him. Getting to Pascen while wearing it was extremely problematic and demanded that he take a much longer route to avoid the military build-up.

He broke through the trees and almost found himself sliding down the embankment that lay on the other side, just out of sight. A gentle stream ran through the area, shallow enough to be crossed on foot, but rocky and treacherous enough to require a bridge for anything larger. That artificial crossing was located further downstream. Nobody would be around to observe the meeting. Mart, a young Inquisitor from Blackwake, was waiting for him on the other side. Adelbern hopped across the

stones between, using them as islands by which he meant to keep his sock-clad feet dry. Mart was holding a small wooden box in his hands.

“I didn’t expect to receive a letter from you so soon, Mart.”

He nodded, “Aye. But the wheels are turning more quickly than I expected. The very moment I had returned to my hiding place, I was again given an order to deliver this to you. There is little time for comfort and rest.”

Adelbern reached out to take the box from him, but Mart hesitated.

“What’s wrong?”

“Ah, nothing.”

But Adelbern knew something was wrong from the moment that the wooden casket was passed into his hands. It was far too light to contain anything. Mart shifted his footing, “Do you ever look inside of these boxes before you deliver them?”

He smiled tersely and played coy, “No. I do as I am asked. Why?” The reaction his denial earned was what he expected. Mart’s face twisted for a brief moment, before returning to a mask of neutrality. He’d done something – he must have known what was inside the box. Mart wasn’t buying his denial. The talk about him being the Absolver’s right hand was too loud a chorus to be ignored.

The Absolver had made it clear what Adelbern needed to do if this happened. Mart wasn’t going to give him much of a choice. Adelbern saw the light reflecting from his dagger as the sun bore down on them. He was prepared, his left foot pushed back against the pebble covered ground as he swiped at him.

“What are you doing?!” he demanded.

“Don’t take me for a fool Adel, I know how this is going to play out! There’s a reason none of us know what’s happening here! You’re the only one who does, you’re going to pick us off when it’s time to be done with this foul work!”

Adelbern didn’t need to hear those words to know his desperation. He could see it in his eyes, and his actions. They both knew that Adelbern was a much better fighter. He had trained extensively for years on end at the Absolver’s behest. His weapon skills were significantly higher than the average Inquisitor. Adel drew his own knife and pointed it at him.

“I’m giving you one last chance to back off and give this up. There’s no reason to do this.”

“I’m not going to go down without a fight!” A fight which was completely unnecessary. If he had simply remained ignorant as to the true nature of his mission, he would have been relieved of his duties and assigned to a new post within months. Now that he had stepped out of line, things were going to end very differently.

Sensing that he wasn’t going to give up, Adelbern got serious. There was no hesitation in his movements as he closed in and swung with his dagger. Mart only just escaped before it plunged into his chest and dragged him to the ground. A counterattack was left wanting as Adelbern danced away with elegant footwork. The two Inquisitors hunched over, waiting for the perfect window to strike and draw first blood.

Adelbern moved first. The advantage of a knife or dagger was that it was easy to use. Getting some momentum and running at your foes was halfway to victory, but Mart didn't know that. He was too used to using longswords – training endlessly for the type of fight where both parties participated with respect. Mart put his dukes in an attempt to ward Adelbern away, but that was exactly what he expected him to do. The only correct course of action for dealing with a knife was to turn and run. It was simple for Adel to faint his initial strike and leave him wide open.

Mart cried out in pain as he felt the tip of the dagger slip between his ribs. Adel's free hand shot out like a viper and gripped his weapon, crushing his wrist until he could no longer hold it between his fingers. The knife clattered down onto the rocks beneath. His attempts to reach down and grab it were thwarted as Adelbern turned him around and kicked his leg out from under him, sending him falling into the river with a loud splash. Blood started to leak from the wound into the water.

On a second glance, the wound was incredibly deep. He'd bleed out without medical attention. Adelbern waded through the shallow water and pressed the sharp end of his knife into the flesh of his neck, "Who talked?"

With gritted teeth and defiance in his eyes, Adelbern knew he wasn't going to get the answer he was looking for. If the average Inquisitor was good for anything, it was loyalty; even the threat of bleeding out from his first stab wound wasn't going to be enough to pry his lips open. Adelbern reached down with his other hand and flipped open the top of the wooden box. It was empty.

"Very funny. You called me down here to try and flush me out?"

"That's right. If you were dead, I could get away with what I know – this is all because of that idiot; he was the one who talked. The one who took it..."

That was the fatal flaw with such a long chain of custody. One link could break and nobody would be any the wiser until disaster struck. Mart had figured that nobody was keeping tabs on what he was doing between jobs. He could send a fake letter to Adelbern and send him on a wild goose chase whenever he pleased. The Inquisitors were normally loyal enough to avoid such an issue occurring.

"Who sent you? John?" The knife was starting to draw blood. He couldn't go any further without cutting the artery in his neck. "You better start talking, or I'm going to start cutting."

"I'll gladly give my life for the sake of removing traitors like you. What you've done is unforgivable. God will strike you all down for this!"

Adelbern laughed bitterly, "Traitor? Do you mean to imply there's some kind of creed binding us all together, how can I betray that which I've never been a part of?"

"Gah! Bastard!"

Adelbern cleaned the blood from his blade with his glove and holstered it, "Don't get upset at me. You had two choices. Keep your mouth shut and do what you were told, or do something stupid like this." He stood and released Mart from between his legs. For a brief moment, he believed that Adelbern was going to let him get away with it. His eyes widened in terror as he gripped the back of his head and dragged him deeper into the churn.

"W-What are you doing?" he cried. He could barely speak through the pain of the stab wound.

"If you won't talk – then there's only one thing left for me to do."

Adelbern violently wrenched back on his head and dragged him under the water. Legs and arms flailed and scratched, trying to relieve the pressure pushing down on his body. He held his breath for as long as he could but it was a hopeless endeavour. The water was no place for a human man. His eyes and ears were disorientated by the rushing of the stream. A loud blare of static that prevented him from orientating himself. A rush of freezing water into his windpipe was the most terrifying experience of his life.

He was pulled back up. His mouth opened and desperately tried to inhale more air into his suffering lungs. Adelbern warned him for the last time; "Who did it?"

His last breath was wasted on a meaningless insult, "Fuck you."

Back down he went. The strength had already bled from his body, leaving the water around them tinged in a deep red. Adelbern watched as his eyes held open and his movements slowed to stillness, the only force being exerted on him being that of his hands and the flow of the water. Mart's last moments were filled with terror as his airways were choked and filled with cold water. Adelbern released him and allowed his body to float down the river, where it washed up against one of the embankments. Adelbern stared at the unmoving corpse.

What a mess.

He moved back to the box and inspected it again. Someone had opened it when they weren't supposed to; the lock had been forced apart and then put back together again. They must have taken the item with them too. With a grunt he moved back to Mart's body and got to his knees. He started to rifle through Mart's pockets in the hope that there was some other clue as to who was responsible. A blood-stained piece of parchment offered no answers. They were just his marching orders.

Adelbern knew that there was no purpose in revealing this to the Absolver. He would give him the same request regardless of his knowledge. Adelbern would be tasked with cleaning things up and finding what was misplaced. He had to follow the chain of custody until he found out where it had gone. There were greater implications to the matter too. If a militarist had caught wind of what was occurring, it could split the Inquisition in two.

Though the Absolver had personally selected a cadre of loyal soldiers to take part in the scheme, there was no guarantee that they couldn't suffer a crisis of conscience once they discovered the truth. He didn't feel anything for Mart. After all, he did just try to kill him. He took one last look at his face before resolving to find the person who had come before him.

"Your body is for the buzzards, and your armour for the next pawn. Goodbye Mart."