

I still wasn't entirely happy with Benadora, but we had cleared the air enough that I didn't feel the urge to throw her out of the window for throwing me under the wheels. She was right about one thing – it didn't really matter what she said about the events in Pascen, people were going to draw conclusions that were in line with their already existing biases. Derian Rivers was not the only Sull sympathiser in the Federation; many common people believed in the righteousness of the Inquisition and had been raised that way from birth by their relatives.

Throwing 'corruption' on top of an accusation was a very easy way to rile people up. In the aftermath of the chaos in Pascen, there were many fraudsters and power-chasers who were revelling in the chance to take advantage of people's loss.

I had a list of things to do before I got back onto the road and found out what Adelbern had been getting up to. Some nasty glares weren't going to deter me from going out in public. My newly embellished reputation was a double-edged sword. There was hatred, but also fear. Nobody was willing to take a chance of plunging the dagger into my back at the moment.

First, I needed to find out where Medalie had gotten to. I had my fingers crossed that she hadn't died during the chaos because she was the best blacksmith I knew. Whether she believed the stories about me destroying Pascen was another matter entirely. Secondly, I wanted to know what the situation was on the border with Pascen. Sakura had implied that it was where she had grinded a huge amount of experience to try and catch up with me. Lastly, I needed to run through my usual routine and buy supplies for the trip.

Medalie was first. If she was anywhere, it was going to be 'Iron Avenue,' the lovingly nicknamed district where a lot of the metalworking industry was located. There were always open buildings and stalls available for new business owners. Medalie wouldn't be sitting on her laurels while there was money to be made. Even a Stallin needed to eat, though the urban legends were that they saved a lot of money by being half size.

The thick smog and smell of burning coal made me cough the moment I stepped into the area. No wonder these folks had a shorter life expectancy if they had to work in these conditions for hours every day. I resolved to make my visit short and sweet before my lungs turned as black as my fingers. Iron Avenue was a busy place. The sound of people speaking was worsened by the clanging of hammer meeting metal. It was a negative feedback loop of being louder to be heard. A two-for-one special on lung cancer and hearing loss.

"Do you think that Medalie has established a store here already?" Cali asked as we weaved our way through the throng of customers and carriers.

"She isn't going to sit idly by, tragedy or not. She's a working woman."

"That may be true, but the money required to establish a business of your own is significantly higher than working for someone else."

"Okay. Then we just ask someone if they've seen a Stallin woman in town and we'll get pointed in the right direction. There aren't that many of them in Dalston."

I made things easier and did just that by stopping by a blacksmith's booth and asking him for Medalie. He happily pointed us in the right direction. Medalie's new place wasn't on the main road where the prices were high, she was tucked away in one of the side streets. The benefit of this was that you could easily purchase an entire building for the same money as a single patch in the market.

Medalie was confident that the quality of her work would attract enough customers to make the difference redundant. For high-end pieces, it was a wise strategy.

We came to a stop outside her door, "See? Easy as that!"

Medalie was loud and proud with the wooden sign that hung above the door. A steady stream of smoke emerged from the heavy-duty chimney that was located above the back side of the house. The door was open, so we stepped inside and found ourselves in a makeshift showroom. Various pieces of armour and weaponry were on display for potential customers, in all shapes and sizes too. I could hear Medalie working away in the back, presumably where the forge was installed. Moving past the counter, there was another room that wasn't being used for anything, and a semi-covered area beyond that encroached into what used to be the garden.

Medalie was there, covered from head to toe in sweat and working hard at manipulating another piece of metal into shape. I allowed her to finish before bothering her. She slid the heated metal into a bucket of water and turned to face me with a strange look.

"Ren? I didn't expect you to come knocking."

I gave her a pained smile and held up to pieces that were left of my chest plate, "I'm afraid it isn't just a social call."

Medalie winced and took the shards from my hands, "What in god's name did you do to this? Stormsteel has an armour value higher than pretty much anything you can find!"

"It does, but that doesn't stop a legendary sword from cutting into a fracture and splitting it in two."

"Only you could find a way to break something this tough. Do you cause trouble, or does it just come naturally?"

"Naturally."

She shook her head and laid the pieces out on her bench. Sakura had split it into three pieces. A smaller one that had come from the bottom edge where her sword impacted it, and two large halves. Medalie was quick to scrutinise the damage that she had caused by running her fingers along the cuts and surface.

"They did a serious number on this thing. There are fractures on the surface of the plate too. It's a lost cause, I'd need to re-do it from scratch."

"Money's not an issue," I assured her, "I just need some skilled hands."

Medalie sighed, "I'd love to give you the good news but I'm afraid there's a problem. This thing is shattered. There are still bits missing between these shards you picked up, and if I stretched out what's left to make a new plate – it'll be thinner than I'd be comfortable with."

"Can you do anything about that?"

Medalie hummed and scanned the various pieces of ore and leftover metal that she had in her workshop. None of them seemed to satisfy her desire for an appropriate replacement, "Nah. None of these are going to do the job. We need something tough to latch these pieces to."

"Something tough?"

“Your armour is only as strong as the weakest link. If you don’t have anything good to re-forge it with, or secure it into place, it’ll just fall to pieces again when you fight something threatening.”

I sighed and ran a hand through my hair as I pondered the conundrum. I didn’t have anything nearly as effective as Stormsteel on hand, nor could I purchase it in large enough quantities from the local markets. What little had made it across the border from Pascen was extremely expensive. The giants were gone too, so I could dip into that well again to collect some for myself. As I paced back and forth between the workshop and her dining room, something caught my eye. There was a large piece of blackened bone placed to the side.

I ran my hand across it and shouted, “Medalie, what’s this crazy bloody bone you’ve got here?”

She poked her head through the door and rolled her eyes, “Oh, that thing. Someone from the border dropped by a few days ago and demanded that I turn that into something he could use. I got as far as trying to chip a piece off before I told him it couldn’t be done.”

“You don’t work with bone?”

“No, not much. But I was willing to give it a go. He called it Vicebone. Said that he pried it off a dead animal near Pascen’s border. I guess he took it from one of those crazy fuckin’ animals that attacked the refugee convoy. Makes sense – those things didn’t want to go down no matter how much you hit ‘em.”

“Why is it still here?”

Medalie scoffed, “He got really pissy with me for saying it wasn’t doable. He left it here to try and convince me otherwise. I’m not touching it until he comes back and takes it.”

The biggest shock of this meeting was that Medalie had not mentioned the events in Pascen unless they were relevant to the job. I had half expected her to take me to task based on all the rumours that were circling around. She was fairly close to the centre of the situation, so I could only assume that she knew enough to avoid assigning blame to me alone. I reached over and ran my fingers along the spine covered ridge of the skull that had been brought to her. It was some kind of twisted mockery of a common wolf.

Medalie explained in more detail, “That thing would make an amazing piece of armour if it was usable. It’s got good impact resistance, and the only way to make a hole in it would be to drill it with an industrial machine.”

“So, it’d make a good base for re-forging my Stormsteel armour?”

Medalie nodded but had a word of caution, “Sure. But paying for that kind of work is beyond me or you. The guy only snagged this opportunistically, he said that the rest of them were too tough for him to fight and skin. You’d need to collect a hell of a lot of pieces to put together a good armour set.”

What she meant was that drilling it was too pricey and beyond our influence. If I wanted her to base my new armour off of the Vicebone, I’d need to go there myself and collect pieces that would fit without needing that additional work.

“I was planning on heading out that way soon anyway. If I find some good pieces that you can work into some armour, I’ve got the gold to pay for it.”

Medalie smiled, “It’ll be an intimidating sight, not that you need any help scaring people away.”

“Eh?”

She pointed to my head, “You look like walking death! I can tell that you’ve gotten even paler than the last time I saw you.”

She was right, and I hadn’t even shown her the changes to my hands or feet. I laughed it off, “I guess I do.” We returned to the forge and Medalie sat down in her spot. Cali was inspecting some of her works in progress while we spoke.

“I can’t say it’ll work perfectly, but you’re a bloody madman – so I fully expect you to show up in a few weeks with a bag full of them.”

I picked up the pieces of my shattered armour and slipped them back into my bag. It was a shame that I couldn’t replace it right away. If these monsters were as threatening as the stories implied, the armour I could buy from the bargain bin probably wouldn’t protect me from a direct hit. I walked over to a bin of second-hand pieces that Medalie had purchased to melt down and found something that would stop basic weapons from stabbing me in the chest.

“Do you mind if I take this?”

Medalie inspected the one I had picked out and nodded, “No charge. I was going to melt it down for metal but the alloy is seven different kinds of chuffed. Didn’t even notice because I bought the entire lot in bulk.”

I didn’t have a reason to turn down a free temporary replacement; “Thanks a lot.”

“Just make sure you come back and pay me properly. I’m a bit curious about how that bone armour is going to turn out.”

As was I.

“Alright. I’ll come back with some pieces and we’ll see how it works.”

I hadn’t gotten what I wanted out of our meeting, but there was a clear path for me to follow for the time being. I was going to the border to try and earn some levels anyway, so why not upgrade my armour while I was at it? We headed back out onto the road and I took a second to consider our next task.

“The prospect of facing such terrible creatures is very appealing,” Cali grinned.

Of all the people in the world, only Cali would find that appealing.