

Before I could break into Derian's manor and search for the item, I needed to do a little more groundwork first. Scouting the patrols of the local watchmen was key. That would determine their reaction time if something went wrong. They took a while when Sakura stole the axe, but that meant security was going to be tighter than usual. In line with my suspicions, several guards would pass by the compound with some regularity. I also walked the edge of the fence, looking for a good way inside. The garden was the most obvious point of entry. It provided plenty of cover, would be dimly lit during the night, and prevented too many witnesses from seeing what I was doing.

The other thing I was on the lookout for was the staff's routine. When and where the gardeners could be found, and at what times of day the shifts changed. I marked it down in my head as a gaggle of maids left the front gate early in the morning. They were on a staggered shift pattern. That meant there'd be less staff in the building during the off hours, as the ones not in residence went home to manage their own affairs.

The biggest sticking point was the layout of the manor itself. I had only seen a rough view of what was really inside. In a bigger city or town there were more avenues to getting the information you wanted. A disgruntled employee or an easily bribed city official could let slip more details about the floorplan of the building. If that failed – fellow rogues would be willing to part with their own knowledge in exchange for a fee if they had robbed the same place before.

This was all made more difficult by the fact that people around here knew everyone. A stranger lurking around the perimeter of the manor's fence was bound to elicit a bad reaction, especially given the racist treatment some of the other residents had given me, based on their blind assumptions about where I came from. It was a recipe for trouble. A scouting operation that would have taken an hour or two in Blackwake was triple that length here as I tried to keep my face away from their watchful eyes. Paranoid residents were better at identifying criminals than the guards were...

With my homework done and a plan of attack broiling inside of my head, I turned back and headed down a different lane to the one I arrived through. It was an instinctual effort to avoid people pinning down where I was going. Derian's manor was unusual in that it was surrounded by several other smaller homes and properties. Most of the nobles tended to cloister in exclusive developments areas away from the unwashed masses. The relatively small size of the town probably contributed. This was a sparsely populated area surrounded by farmland.

I had to admire the careful craftsmanship behind the houses I saw along the road. These white-walled, thatch roofed cottages were much sturdier than what you'd find up in the north. That came with a significant expense though – you'd need to save up a hell of a lot of cash to buy one of those. I kicked a large rock down the lane and chuckled. I had enough money to buy one of them now thanks to Derian. It was just that I didn't need it. I still had a lot of travelling to do before I could think about settling down and calling it good.

But there was something else that caught my attention, or rather, someone.

My eyes nearly popped out of my head when I saw someone familiar roosted outside of those small cottages by the road. With his wire-like hair and stern frown, he was an unmistakable presence. It was an old acquaintance of mine, Gerry Fontaine. When I was getting my feet wet in the world of roguery, he was one of the senior members of our informal guild. He usually liked to haunt places like Blackwake, yet here he was – brushing leaves off of his porch like the old man he was. Time hadn't been necessarily kind to him. His stature had shrunk significantly from what I remembered, and his face bore the scars of age with little grace.

If my bug-eyed reaction was attention grabbing, his was even more so. He pointed a long, bony finger at me and yelled at the top of his lungs; “And you can just fuck right off, Ren!”

I couldn't let that one slide without stopping by and chatting with him. “Nice to see that you haven't lost any of that charm of yours,” I snarked. He had a mouth like a sailor and a temperament to match. Any of the kids who were tutored by him had a stunted vocabulary of vulgarities and expletives.

He waved his broom like a deadly weapon in my face, “You're the last lad I expected to see down here. Don't be causing me any trouble now.”

I pushed the bristles aside, “I won't. Well, maybe I will, but it can't be any worse than what Sakura's doing right now. She's making a list of enemies a mile long.”

It took him a moment to catch my meaning. There was only one criminal who matched that description, “That girl who's robbing folks? She's riled up the nobles into a right old tizzy. What did I tell you about keeping bad company?”

“I took it to heart. I have a pair of very competent companions, for your information. What the hell are you doing here?”

“This is my house, you stupid bastard.”

I laughed it off, “I know it's your house – I was wondering why someone like you would pick a town like this. Did you even have the money to buy this place?” He leaned the broom against the front wall and dusted off his hands.

“It's a complicated bloody story. The short of it is that a distant relative of mine kicked the bucket, and his house got passed down to me. Not this one, mind you; it was a house up in Blackwake. It was way too big for the likes of me, so I sold it and moved to where the property taxes were low. It turned out that this was the best spot.”

“It's very nice,” I said earnestly.

“It's well bloody boring is what it is!” he barked, “But I suppose an old man like myself doesn't have much business working as a rogue anymore.”

“I'm not sure about that, Gerry. You know how things are.”

“Yeah – they might be forced to do it, but they shouldn't. Thinking about all of that shit I used to do makes my knees ache.” His eyes looked up and down my body, “What's with this new getup anyway? You look like you're about to go fight in the wars.”

I nodded, “Ah. A lot of stuff happened recently. I can't really get by on my usual rogue work at the moment, so I upgraded and started taking some merc jobs instead.”

“Good for you, lad. I always say that you should take opportunities when they come to you, it's a damn shame none of them bloody listen to me.”

“That's because it's the only good bit of advice you hand out.”

“Ah, shut up.”

We shared a hearty laugh. While I wouldn't describe us as friends, nor would I describe him as a mentor, he was someone who had offered me some good pointers back when I was just getting

started. In a lifestyle where everything was done on the basis of transaction – those kinds of people were rare company indeed. He was an old school rogue who put a lot of stock in the principals that were shared around. He would have blown a gasket if he learned what Bell had done back in the Bend; and not just because some of his friends would have died in the crackdown he triggered.

“I’m happy to see that you’re doing well Ren. You were always the smartest one from that flock, weren’t you? And you look as chirper as you ever have!”

“Chirper?” I tried to kick down the smile on my face in response.

He shrugged, “I don’t really know how to describe it. You seem happier with your lot. Didn’t you say that you made some friends? There’s nothing more valuable on the road than some good friends – you know. It’s a bloody shame that finding a trustworthy rogue is like scrying for dry water...”

“Just don’t tell the old gang that they’re both ladies, yeah?”

He punched me in the arm, “You’re a dirty dog! I knew you’d weaponize those looks eventually.” Gerry slowed down for a second and took another look at me, “Actually – you’re looking pale. Is everything alright?”

“Oh, yeah. Nothing serious as far as I know.” He accepted my statement as it was and moved on. Gerry understood that everyone had a secret or two to keep, and it wasn’t worth arguing over just to find out the truth. Along similar lines, it was considered poor rogue etiquette to ask someone if they were working on a job while out in public. He knew I was casing Derian’s house just from my proximity to the place – but he lived by those rules even now that he was retired.

“Well, if you say so. Is one of them your other half?”

“Not at the moment, it’s purely professional.”

“Clock’s ticking lad. Don’t end up like me! Spending so much time working for money that you don’t relax and enjoy life from time to time.”

“That’s something you can only say when you’ve got the money to pay your way...”

He closed his eyes and nodded, “I guess that’s true. I’ve started to lose some of my perspective in the last couple of years – all that rogue stuff feels like it happened in another life now. I might have been the one who believed in the creed the most, but that doesn’t mean I think all of them should stay in the mud. I care about ‘em. And that’s why I want everyone to get their fair share.”

“The problem is that nothing’s fair in the Federation.”

“Heh, right.”

“Anyway, I’ll get out of what’s left of your hair and go back to what I was doing. It was nice seeing you again.”

“I wish the feeling was mutual! Take care.”

With one last parting jab, I departed from his carefully tended front garden and continued on my way. It was a genuine surprise to see an old senior of mine in a place like this. Most rogues never got the money together for a nice place, or they died too early to worry about it. I’d somehow stumbled into a significant amount of money. No, that wasn’t right – it was because of how I ended up connected with Stigma. This sword was the reason why I was put into a position to make that kind of cash in the first place.

I refocused on my task. Derian had the item hidden somewhere and I needed to find it. That required breaking into his property. It was annoying that things had been kicked down the road again, and I was sure that Cali wouldn't be happy about being left out, but she wasn't a thief. I couldn't ask her to sneak into the building with me. If everything went well, nobody would even know I was there until they discovered that the target was missing. Hopefully it would go better than the last time I broke into a mansion. I didn't want to owe Cali too many favours for saving my ass.

The last thing I needed to do was make sure all of my tools were in order. I hadn't used them for a while, and the metal pieces could break if they managed to slip into a bad spot in my pack. Picks to get inside, a mask to cover my face, and a bag to hold my ill-gotten gains; just in case I found something else worth stealing while I was inside.

But as I would soon discover – this was not a simple matter of theft.