

We sat and stewed in the kitchen for some time while Gerry worked his profane magic. Cali was probably ruminating over how boring the entire thing was, and Tahar was heading down a path filled with regret for engaging in such an unethical scheme. My mind was elsewhere. I trusted that Gerry would be able to find the answers that I was looking for. No, my brain was turning over because of Sakura. It was only then that I recalled that it wasn't her 'real' name. It was something that she had insisted on, a keepsake from the past.

The affixes she had gathered were just one part of the strength that she had displayed during our fight. Taking advantage of every system in this world was how one could stack the deck against the enemy, but some of them were more powerful than others. Levelling up was difficult, especially if you don't have a sword that can steal experience from defeated foes as mine did. Sakura wasn't just coasting on the raw damage of Veritas – she had done something else. She was stronger and faster than our first meeting a few months ago.

I traced a groove on the table with the tip of my fingers.

Sakura had levelled up to the extent where she could stand toe to toe with me. That was an unbelievable state of affairs. She must have discovered a way to exploit the system, or she had located a large number of high-level creatures that she could easily slay using her powers. If I could find out where that place was for myself, I could gather as much experience as I pleased and really ensure my future safety. Stigma would make it even more efficient. Sakura was a veteran RPG player – she knew how to take these numbers and manipulate them to their maximum possible effect.

Getting her to talk would be almost impossible. She wasn't going to give away a huge advantage to the likes of me without getting something in return, and that was if I could speak to her without her trying to cut my head off and steal my shit. If I could find out what she had done, life would be much easier.

My musings were interrupted as Gerry stepped through the doorway and dusted off his hands, "He's a tough nut to crack, that's for sure. I had to use all of my tricks to get anything out of him."

"What did he say?"

"He told me to kill him, but you know me – not the murderous type. When that didn't work he told me that he hid it inside one of his businesses in the town."

"He hid it outside of his own home?"

"Supposedly. Though you'll be better off not releasing him until you make sure that he's telling the truth. I didn't hurt him much, but people tend to make shit up when they think it'll give them a moment of rest. He gave me the address and told me where to find it. It's the third building on Greengrove; some kind of construction house."

Construction was a lucrative business. People always needed something built – be it houses or places of work. You could also expect to see them performing maintenance on local infrastructure and buildings.

Gerry continued, "He has a second office there on the first floor. There's a sword display hanging behind his desk, but you can open it up and there's a hidden compartment inside. He says you'll need a key to open it, but you don't need nothing like that."

"No sir, it'll be easy enough to pick."

“I’d recommend making it quick. I don’t want to keep this guy on my property for any longer than I have to.”

“Then you’d better hope he’s telling the truth. I’ll take him off your hands when I’m done and release him into the wild.”

“You’d better.” Gerry walked to the counter and placed his empty cup down for later. He was never going to find time to wash all of the pots and pans that had piled high there. He was too interested in his hobbies to waste his effort on something that would just be used and dirtied again later in the day.

I didn’t want to cause him any further inconvenience. I’d feel like a real piece of work if I was responsible for spoiling his well-earned retirement. We left the house and started walking towards the road which Derian had given up to us, with some further assistance from Gerry – who was more familiar with the town’s layout than I. The guards had already all but given up on searching for him during the night. The number of lanterns burning bright through the darkness had decreased significantly. It was a casual stroll down the lane and to one of Derian’s buildings.

It was a three-story, brick-and-mortar townhouse that had been converted into an office. The bottom floor had a pair of large barn doors that allowed materials to be loaded onto a cart and transported between locations. A single lock and chain had been wrapped around to keep thieves like me away. Cali and Tahar went back to watch as I considered which point of entry to tackle. The barn door proved an easier job than the residential entrance, so I undid the chain and pulled it aside, slipping in and closing it behind me.

Nobody was going to be in here at this time of night. I drew a match and illuminated my surroundings, hyper-aware of the risk that it brought if a guard passed by on the road. Quickness was going to be more useful than stealth. I hurried to the back of the bottom floor and ascended a set of bare wooden steps. There was a long corridor with four different rooms sprouting off. Most of them contained nothing but documents and spare equipment, but the last room on the left was locked. It was Derian’s personal office.

I had to laugh at how spartan it was in comparison to the one back at his mansion. There was a well-used rug on the floor, some small paintings to decorate things a little, and a much smaller and cheaper desk. Two bookshelves flanked the centrepiece – a thick glass case that contained a finely crafted sabre. Upon closer inspection I discovered that it was much less valuable than most of his horde; all out of consideration for people like me breaking in and stealing it. I pushed his chair out of the way and got up onto the cupboard below.

There was a keyhole on the bottom, hidden just out of sight. It was an awkward angle from which to attack the lock, and it took me much longer than I had initially anticipated. It wasn’t going to resist me completely. Cases like these weren’t designed for maximum security. They were more of a gimmick than anything else. If he wanted to keep it away from me he should have bought an expensive safe instead. The lock clicked and the tension caused the front panel to lift, revealing the false façade of the outward-facing display. The glass, red velvet and sword itself moved as one solid object.

“Fuck me.”

There was nothing inside, all of that anticipation was for nothing.

Derian had lied to Gerry to try and get out of this jam. I slammed the cabinet shut and quickly started to search every other part of the office, behind the paintings, beneath the floorboards, and inside the drawers. There was no sign of the item I was looking for. If it was a sword or a piece of armour, it'd need enough space to fit comfortably. It looked like this search was a total bust. I did one last go-over of the other rooms before giving up. I was just wasting time. Derian was lucky that Gerry was handling him and not me because I was starting to grow irritated with this wild goose chase.

Cali and Tahar converged on me as I exited the building and locked the door. "Did you find it?" Cali inquired.

"No. He's screwing with me. Let's head back and tell him the bad news."

I had a bad feeling, a shiver that ran down my spine – and that wasn't because of the chilly nighttime weather. I felt as if a pair of eyes were watching me as we headed down the same road. It was an instinctual reaction to something unseen. I couldn't shake the sense that something unhelpful was about to occur. I was always highly strung thanks to a lifetime of living as a criminal. Everything I did was in service of a deeply instilled sense of paranoia. I couldn't calm down if I didn't do my routine; that was why I always took such roundabout routes to get to where I needed to go. I always expected someone to be following.

It got worse as I surmounted the average life expectancy of a rogue. Suddenly everyone was expecting something of me. They came to me for advice and counsel. I was a veteran at the age of twenty-five. My behaviour became self-reinforcing as I ascribed that continued success to my methods. I scratched my neck and tried to calm myself, but my worst suspicions would soon prove correct as we approached the cottage.

Gerry was there. He was pacing back and forth out front, waiting for us. As soon as he spotted me he ran over and almost collapsed onto his knees in a blind panic. That stabbing feeling in my chest was only getting more inflamed by the second.

"Ren! Ren! You need to see this!"

I pulled him back to his feet, "What's up?"

He didn't explain. He grabbed me by the arm and dragged me to the garden, where Derian was kept inside of the shed. The door was open, but I didn't understand what he was so frightened of until I comprehended the sight in front me and stepped inside. Derian was limp in the chair, with even more blood running down the front of his shirt; so much blood that there was no way he hadn't been grievously injured in the time I was away. I would never ascribe this kind of action to Gerry. He was a consummate professional, and he was doing this for my sake in the first place.

"The mad bastard bit his own bloody tongue off!"

Dead.

I pulled his head back and opened his mouth, and true to Gerry's word there was now a stump where his tongue once laid. He had choked to death on his own blood while neither of us were paying attention. His eyes were glazed over and there was no pulse when I pressed down on his neck. Gerry was losing it.

"Fucking hell – I turn away for one minute and he goes and does this!"

It was a grisly sight; but the real surprise was that Derian had willingly done something like this. It didn't feel right. A nobleman like him wasn't going to throw his life away just to protect one singular item that he owned. He didn't have a personal attachment to it. Was that really worth killing himself to protect? I couldn't dispute the facts of the matter – Derian was dead, and my best shot of learning where it was had gone with him.

I kicked his leg and growled, "Shit. There goes my ticket."

"I'm sorry Ren. He was already cooked by the time I got here and noticed what was going on."

I couldn't hide the irritation in my voice, "It's fine. I didn't think he was going to do something this drastic either." Cali inspected the body in greater detail as I stepped outside for some air. I really had no options left now. Derian was the only one who knew where the cursed item was. He'd refused to give it up to me for a reason. Stigma appeared to offer some sage advice.

"If you were to find another one of my pieces, you could revive him; though the expense would be great." Now she was remembering important details. One of her powers was to revive the dead, but it must have been expensive just as she claimed. That was not something for an uneducated fool to trifle in.

"He's going to rot before we can do that, and liches aren't the talkative type."

Stigma clenched her teeth, "I understand. I'll try to focus my energy on locating it for you, but I cannot make any promises."

She disappeared into a cloud of black smoke and left me to think of my own measures to fix this. There was nothing I could do with Derian now aside from getting rid of his body. That meant finding the relic would be even harder. I only had a few options left open. Searching the mansion blindly until I found it, or trying to get information out of one of his servants. There were just too many places he could have hidden it. He could have dug a hole in his back garden and buried it in a wooden box; that'd take weeks of non-stop searching to find.

If Derian was searching for the best way to screw me over, he had found it.

Gerry came out to find me soon after to ask me a favour; "I know this wasn't what you wanted, but you need to move this body before someone comes knocking."

I sighed, "May as well. He isn't doing much good sitting in there."

We headed back into the shed and got him ready for transport. An empty sack was placed over his head, and we did our best to clean away the puddle of blood that had started to form on the floor. Once I was sure that he wouldn't leave a convenient trail of blood that led back to us – I hoisted him up onto my shoulders and carefully navigated him through the narrow doorway.

Gerry had a pointer for me; "There's a lot of good places to hide stuff around here. Just find a ditch out of the way and throw some branches over him – by the time they get to him you'll be long gone." I had to remind myself that we were talking about a dead body and not some stolen contraband. I was really far gone. I still wanted to give him a little money for his time and effort, but Gerry was already wise to my tricks. He jabbed his finger into my chest for emphasis, "And don't be leaving any money on the table while I'm not looking, Ren. I did a shitty damn job, you wouldn't pay a man for this kind of work."

"Okay, okay. But only because you'll chase me across the damn country if I do it."

It was the usually brisk farewell that I had come to know from him. I headed off with Tahar and Cali in pursuit, intent on dumping Derian's body in the nearest empty field and figuring out another way to find what he had concealed. I checked the pockets in his pants and jacket first to make sure that he hadn't written down any clues. No luck.

"Did he really kill himself?" Tahar asked. She was looking queasy from seeing his body.

"Gerry wouldn't cut his tongue out like that. Killing someone when you're just trying to get information is making a lot of trouble for yourself for no good reason. The guys that do stuff like that get caught fast because they can't help themselves. The guards prioritise murderers over kidnapers."

Derian had exposed himself as even more stupid than I expected. At least I didn't have to worry about killing him for the sake of pleasing Adelbern and the Absolver. We headed away from the middle of the town and found a good spot to place the body. I unceremoniously threw him into a ditch between two different treelines. He landed with a thud, kicking up a cloud of dirt and dust as he landed. Without modern investigative techniques, it would be almost impossible to pin this on us, unless Derian had already told one of his servants about the situation. Still – I could express some plausible deniability and blame someone else, like Sakura. She had attacked his mansion just a few days before his death.

"What an undignified death," Cali opined, "Would falling in battle not suit him better?"

"Derian isn't much of a fighter, Cali."

The sorry sight of his body thrown into a muddy wake was almost enough to make me feel the slightest tinge of sympathy, almost. I offered no prayer for him. We climbed back up onto the road and started to head back the way we came. I would have been glad to forget all about this idiot endeavour, but the job wasn't done yet. The only man who knew where it was just killed himself rather than tell me about it. I had enough speed to catch the previous mules without much trouble, this was different. Now the hard part was going to begin.

"What are we going to do now?" Cali murmured as we approached the centre of town.

"Since we can't get any more information out of Derian, we're going to have to move quickly. I don't want a relative or a new owner to throw out all of his possessions before we can find the relic. He must have hidden it somewhere – we just need to figure out where that is." I could state that objective all I wanted but it wasn't going to get me any closer to completing it. Things were increasingly looking like hunting for a needle in a haystack. For a rogue there was nothing worse. Time is money, and you didn't make much if you weren't working at max efficiency.

"I need a drink, and some sleep."

Sleep sounded very attractive at that moment.

