

Since Sakura had done such a wonderful job destroying my Stormsteel armour, I left the pieces in the inn room and went bare-chested for the first time in months. It wasn't an ideal loss for me – hitting centre mass was one of the first things that most people would try to do in a fight. The cheap armour that I could buy from a blacksmith wasn't going to cut it. All of the threats that I now faced could easily penetrate it.

The first order of business the following morning was to replace the clothes that had been ruined during the fight. I needed a new sweater, undershirt and some new pants. Modern innovations like hydrogen peroxide weren't on tap for me to clean them with. It was easier and quicker to throw them away and buy some new ones. Since I'd just earned a bag of gold by selling my ancient weapon to Rivers, I decided to treat myself and buy something a little nicer than I usually did. Not that I had much of a choice. Every store I could find was higher end than I expected. Even the cheaper stuff that the local farmers would use had a premium put on top.

They could afford it. The war meant that trade between Sull and the Federation had come to a standstill; food prices had jumped and they had a captive market to exploit. Nobody was going to pay a rogue to smuggle grain or fruit through a warzone. It wasn't so bad as to cause a shortage – both nations had their own domestic production that could cover everyone. Some of the luxuries people enjoyed were on the chopping block. Sull was the primary producer of things like cheese and beef, while the Federation's low-lying breadbasket gave it immense production for the essentials like grain.

It took about an hour for us to find a store and for me to find something appropriate. We spilled back out onto the main road. Cali was impassive, "Have you made any progress on finding where he took the target?"

"I've crossed off two of the buildings, it's probable that he's keeping it within his home – displaying it for everyone to see and inspect would be problematic. Even though the Inquisitors aren't here; people still hold the same superstitions about what cursed items do. Even as a wealthy man it's a taboo most won't cross."

But obsession could lead you to strange places. It was irrational of Derian to buy the item from the middleman, something that would purely be for aesthetic enjoyment. Unless he was willing to bribe the watchmen with a lot of cash, and even that might not work. The fear that the Branch church had instilled into people over the years was deeply rooted. You'd be relying on the money overriding their ideology. It was a chance that I wouldn't take.

Derian Rivers was a collector. He wanted the item because it was of enough historical value to catch his interest. I had to presume it was a weapon or piece of armour, most likely forged in a similar style to Stigma and the other pieces of the collection that I had seen thus far. Stigma was closely associated with the East coast and the crossing between Sull and the Ashmorn Kingdoms. If Derian had a collection of Ashmorn stuff, then that'd be a big help. It'd fit in neatly and make it easy for me to find.

Both buildings I had visited didn't. That left his house, which was plainly yet another extension of the already burgeoning museum. These were going to be the things that he only showed to trusted guests. And what better way to curry some trust with a rich moron than spilling your blood on his nicely polished floors? I was crossing my fingers and hoping for Derian to get ahead of himself. My goal was an invitation into his house.

Failing that – it'd be old reliable. I'd have to break in. I wouldn't be happy about it. I wanted to know where it was before searching through such a large building. The Absolver and Adelbern had the expectation that I'd kill the guy and snatch it back easily enough, but they had clearly never killed someone like that before. A dead body was big, loud, messy and difficult to move. I couldn't just cut his head off and shove the pieces into the nearest wardrobe – not unless I was willing to bring a bucket and mop with me to cover my tracks.

Derian was also going to have servants in the building. They were all potential witnesses, and it was normal for one of them to wake the master of the house early in the morning. If there was no sound coming from his room - they'd quickly grow suspicious and get a key so they could investigate. Stealth skills or not, there was no realistic way for me to hide in a building with that many eyes looking for me. The plan would have to be meticulous. Contingencies on top of contingencies.

Stigma appeared besides Cali and leaned in, where both of them spoke the exact same words at the exact same time; "Why not kill him and be done with it?" Stigma almost looked offended that Cali had stolen her line. They were more alike than they cared to admit.

"Because I'll still have to look for it even if he's dead. Unless Stigma has some way of speaking with ghosts that I don't know about."

"I do not."

That would have been too convenient, even for her.

"I still do not fully understand these contortions you make for the sake of appearing civilized," Cali muttered.

"Do you know how inconvenient it is to be an outlaw around here? If they start putting posters up with my face on them, we can kiss goodbye to being allowed into the inns and shops. Not to mention the opportunists that'll start chasing me around for the bounty money."

Cali turned ponderous; "Hm. Perhaps we could accumulate a significant bounty on your head, and then turn you in for the reward. A jail break sounds amusing."

"You and I have very different definitions of amusing, Cali."

Tahar crossed her arms, "No hurting husband." I thought that was Cali's attempt at a joke, but when you combine her deadpan manner with an audience of one woman who takes things literally, it was always going to go down like a lead balloon.

With nothing else left to do, we returned to the inn. The moment we stepped through the doors, we were accosted by the sight of Derian's personal assistant. He was the one manning the gates when I visited his museum the day before. He must have been waiting for us to come back. I decided to have the first word.

"You're with Sir Rivers, aren't you?"

The man nodded, "Yes. Sir Rivers would like to extend his gratitude for your actions during the unfortunate incident yesterday. There was little need to risk your life in service of protecting his property, yet you did anyway."

Sure, keep believing that.

I peppered the air with false modesty; "Ah, there's no need to thank me, really."

“Sir River is inclined to disagree! He was rather upset that you took off without speaking with him again.”

“Ah. I was covered in blood, I thought it’d be better to stay out of the way and clean myself up first.”

“Regardless; he’d like to invite you to dinner. No need to buy a suit – he’s fine with casual wear. And feel free to bring your companions, the more the merrier, as they say!”

Jackpot. I had to stop myself from looking *too* excited about it lest I give the game away. I nodded and reached out to shake his hand, “I can hardly refuse an invitation like that. What time would you like to see us?”

“Seven. We’ll be waiting.”

With that done, he scurried away to do whatever other jobs Derian had hoisted upon him. As soon as he was out of earshot, I laughed at my own fortune. Sakura had unknowingly given me the perfect excuse to find what I was looking for. It was almost enough to make me forgive her for the attempted murder, *almost*.

“That sounds like a very tedious way to spend an evening,” Cali griped. She was never going to be happy with this job, but her patience was being tested. She’d only be pleased if we ran into Sakura again. I didn’t really want that to happen because if she was capable of injuring me, Cali was going to be even worse off. That prospective danger only made it more attractive to her.

“Rich people *are* tedious. We’re dealing with a guy that blows all of his money on old weapons and armour so people can come and gawk at them.”

More waiting. Cali and Tahar followed me through into the bar area and sat down at one of the tables with me. Even though this world was filled with video game stats and ideas, conveniences like instant teleportation and being able to skip time were beyond mortal ability. Every minute and every hour had to be spent for real. Normally I wouldn’t have cared – but now that there was an urgency to get things done, it was painful. At least I had several *years* of spiritual energy to keep me going. I couldn’t rely on finding powerful monsters like dragons all the time, so the need to search for more sources was still present.

Why were human lives worth so little? Considering the emotional toil it instilled to take the soul of another intelligent being, I would have hoped that the payoff was much higher. I could only hazard a guess as to the true reason. The larger bounties came from creatures who had a much stronger connection to magic. The giants and the dragon could utilize magic without a catalyst; humans had to rely on man-made tools to even get close to their full power.

If I found powerful magical enemies, that could lead to a wealth of soul energy to fuel Stigma. It would be an interesting line of thought to follow through on. I’d need to speak with an expert on the topic like Benadora to make any progress. I’d spent most of my life in the Federation and Sull, hopping the border and getting into trouble. I knew that there was so much more out there in the world around me thanks to my modern upbringing, but I couldn’t get there. There were no books easily available and the scholars were ferried away into the Amendment or private collectives.

Maybe I could get enough money together to go on a trip around the continent someday. I had grown curious about Cali’s home from the small snippets she would sometimes opine to me. They were rarely positive, but some of the anecdotes were so strange that I couldn’t wrap my head around them. It sounded like a very alien culture – and that interested me greatly. Cali wasn’t going

to be on board with it though. She had come to the continent to get away from her family. There was no love lost between them, at least from her perspective.

"I suppose we should make a few plans for this dinner then," I sighed, "I'm going to try and find where the item is. Hopefully he isn't going to host the damn thing inside of his old boathouse."

I ran down some of the important things to know with the rest of the team as we shared a few drinks. Sneaking into parties and cosying up to people was an art that most did not appreciate for its full complexity. Being a rogue was just as much about social engineering as it was breaking and entering. One of the first things I was ever taught wasn't reading or writing, it was how to project confidence to a stranger when you were somewhere you weren't supposed to be.

Being invited was intriguing. I could push my luck just that little bit more knowing I'd get away it. All I needed to do was keep my eyes peeling and find a window of opportunity to inspect his collection, and the item would be mine.