

I was back outside of the mansion that same evening, this time with Tahar and Cali in tow. Both of them had gotten more than a little bored with sitting inside of the inn – and Tahar’s protective instincts had come back in full force after steeling her resolve and shooting down one of the Inquisitors. I wasn’t going to bring them inside of the compound, but they could help by serving as lookouts for me.

“There are a lot of guards on patrol around here now thanks to Sakura. I need you both to keep your eyes peeled and alert me using these if they show up.” I reached into my pocket and handed them both a small firecracker like explosive. It would sound a sharp crack when lit that could easily be heard through walls and ceilings. I hadn’t used them in a while since I worked alone so often.

“I will watch the East side,” Tahar nodded.

Cali tipped the brim of her hat, “I will take the opposite end then.”

“Just try to keep out of sight. They’ll pull you aside and start asking questions if they see you spying on the roads. Doesn’t help that they’re paranoid about Sull spies too. This place isn’t even a strategically important town.”

“I will do my best,” Cali affirmed. She was the one I was worried about the most. Cali had picked up a few tricks from me during our travels, but she wasn’t able to use any of the techniques that I could that would allow her to make an easy escape if something went wrong. I had to trust that she’d err on the side of caution on this occasion, something I only just then realised was a hopeless endeavour. Since when did Cali do things cautiously?

Perhaps that was an unfair assessment; she had been getting better about that sort of thing.

I slipped the black mask over my head; “Alright. Hopefully it won’t take me too long to find this damn thing, it’s freezing out here.”

I turned and headed towards my entry point. Most nobles would erect large fences and walls around their homes with varying levels of effectiveness. Derian had made a schoolboy error and installed a fence that made it extremely easy for me to get a foothold and climb over. No number of pointy bits were going to help when the ascent was so simple. I wrapped my hands around the bars and started to shimmy my way up. My enhanced strength made it so that my arms didn’t even ache while supporting my full weight.

I was careful to avoid making too much noise. Clattering a piece of armour against an iron bar was something that happened a lot with less experienced thieves. You could hear that for miles around in some remote places, so you had to exercise caution. This wasn’t a race. I had all the time in the world to make sure that nobody saw or heard me. On the other side was the back garden. At this time of night, none of the gardeners would be present.

I released my hold on the fence and fell down onto the other side. I wasn’t going to enjoy searching the entire place for the cursed artefact, but I had to do it. I kept a low profile and headed for the back door. Through the window I could see the rear room that connected to one of his private collections. My cold hands struggled to retrieve my lockpicking tools, not assisted by the changing shape and texture of my fingers beneath the gloves.

There was a rattle as I slid the pieces of metal into the groove on the back door. Security was always outwards facing, and most modern lock designs were easy to break through with a little know-how. They always surrounded their homes with tall fences and lots of armed guards – but none of them invested their money into making their doors harder to get through. The lock clicked as I applied

tension in the right place. The door swung open, nearly striking me in the head as I slipped the tools back into my bag. I stepped inside and closed it behind me.

I had already searched the room in front of me. For the sake of making things simpler, I had already considered where Derian might have been hiding the pilfered item. He wouldn't place it in a random drawer on the bottom floor; it had to be somewhere that he felt was secure enough to keep it away from my grubby little mitts. People like Derian thought they were smart, but they always ended up acting in the exact same way. There'd be a safe behind a painting in his office, or it would be in a locked box atop his bed. I had seen all of it before in every possible permutation. Placing it inside of an 'obvious' spot would actually make my job harder. There was a benefit to obscurity.

I stayed light on my feet and headed through the door to my right. I had some idea of the building's layout after studying it from the outside. The biggest risk were the staff members who were still inside the building. I had a wooden club that I used to knock witnesses out and buy some time, but they would get back up again before I could search where I needed to and raise the alarm. During most burglaries I didn't bother using it.

It was another sitting room, this one intended for more private meetings. There were doors on all sides to keep the discussion from spilling out to unwanted listeners. The door straight on would presumably lead into the kitchen and staff rooms, as that was where the chef entered from during our dinner with Derian the day before. That was the single most dangerous place to go when flying blind. They'd be awake, burning the midnight oil and taking care of what needed to be done. As long as I stayed in the areas that Derian frequented, I ran less chance of running into one of them.

The only other door led into one of the corridors. The bowels of the house were where you could access many of the smaller rooms and chambers. Derian would ensure that all of these spaces were appropriate for a visitor to enter. Just to be sure, I walked up to some of them and checked if they were locked. If a door was unsecured, he probably wasn't keeping the item in there. All of them were. That meant I had to go upstairs.

It was human psychology that perceived the first and second floors as a place of safety. The sound of feet meeting the steps could give an early warning as to an intruder's presence. It also offered a feeling of privacy that the ground floor could not. This was the sanctuary of the building's owner – locked away from staff and visitors alike. The cleaners and maids would have to be careful about where they went up here.

I could hear voices speaking from below me as I reached the apex of the stairs. I had gotten out of the way just in time. The biggest question left hanging over me was where Derian's private quarters were. It was likely that he would have an office up here separate from his bedchambers. Only the worst kind of workaholic liked to sleep surrounded by documents and papers. I did the same test over again with the doors on the left wing. Many of them were still unlocked. I nearly jumped for joy when I finally found one that resisted my efforts to open it. It was in a prime location to have a view over the garden.

It was an elementary task to lockpick it open. Furnished wooden walls and plush red carpet awaited me on the other side. A large desk dominated the centre of the room, while bookshelves stuffed to overflowing with papers and books ran down either side. It was a mess. I leapt into action and started searching the places that were the most obvious. There was nothing along the top of the bookcases, nor inside of the drawers at the bottom. It was rammed full with even more paperwork, budgeting books and other mundane things.

I left the desk for last. Derian hadn't skimmed on this thing, but I recognised it right away. This was a desk made by the Wentworth Company, working out of Blackwake. They were very popular amongst the upper classes thanks to their detailed engravings made to order designs. Derian had requested a curvy floral arrangement. The reason I knew what it was wouldn't make him happy, not one bit. The desks were not secure places to keep your stuff. They had a critical design flaw that allowed me to unlock each drawer just by sliding a piece of metal between the gaps and lifting upwards on the bar holding them shut.

The first drawer contained a dagger, not the thing I was looking for, but I took it and placed it into my loot bag anyway just in case it was worth something. The one below it was empty. I moved to the other side and pushed his leather chair out of the way to give myself more room. Again, it only took a matter of seconds to open them. But once again they were both empty. I had searched pretty much everywhere I could think of. There were no paintings on the walls to hide a safe.

My last-ditch effort was to move back to the middle of the room and pull aside the silk rug that had been placed there. I was hoping to see an unsecure wooden plank, a hint towards another potential hiding place – but I was frustrated by no such discovery. I polished off the rest of the room by checking the corners and beneath the furniture. Nothing.

“Can't you sense this thing?” I whispered to Stigma.

“Only when we're so close that it would be useless, I'm afraid.”

I had hoped that consuming more of the items would have strengthened that ability. My hopes were ultimately in vain. I threw my hands up and declared the room empty. There was no point wasting any more time here. I moved everything back to where it was when I entered and moved to leave, but at that moment I heard something bang against the door. A loud crack rang through the thin glass of the window behind me. One of them had popped their alarm at the exact same time. I reached down and grabbed the handle – the door was still open but there was something blocking it on the other side.

I heard Derian speaking to me through the wooden barrier; “I knew you'd do something like this! Don't take me for a damned fool. I invite you into my house, and this is how you decide to repay my generosity?”

I remained silent and considered my options. He must have called the guards already. I looked back to the window and the chair placed next to it. I could break through and escape using the balcony, but I still didn't have what I came for.

“I already know it's you – don't try to hide it. I had my suspicions as soon as you got injured during that fight. Nobody ever does anything for no reason!”

I rolled my eyes and walked back up to the door, “I take it you figured out what I'm looking for.”

“Yes – though I don't know how you found out about it, not unless that white-haired cretin leaked the information to you. A classic scam. Selling something valuable and then sending someone into the house to steal it back. I'm not letting you take a piece of my collection when I rightfully paid for it.”

“I wonder if the Inquisitors would agree with that perspective, considering that you're illegally holding a cursed item and all.” Derian sputtered in shock. He didn't want me to know that much about what he had purchased from Adelbern. “Looks like your love for the royals doesn't extend to following their rules.”

“You’re wasting your time. It isn’t here – and the guards are already on their way.”

What Derian heard next was the clatter of my feet against the floor, followed by the loud smashing of his office window. In a fit of rage, he realised that I was trying to escape using the balcony! He hastily ordered his servants to remove the shelf blocking the door and barged through to see the damage for himself. The only thing he felt was the sting of a wooden club wapping against the back of his head. He fell to the floor like a sack of bricks as one of the maids screamed and ran for safety.

“Take a nap, you fucking prick!”

I hadn’t gone through the window just yet. I still needed answers about where he had hidden the item. I grabbed him by the collar and dragged him over to the destroyed window. My demonic strength made manhandling him pathetically easy. I could lift his entire body weight just using one arm. After I jumped through with him dangling over one of my shoulders, I retrieved a length of rope from my bag and tied it around his mouth to stop him from making any noise.

Looks like we were going with Cali’s plan after all.