

Getting him down from the balcony was an ordeal. Even with my strength, it was hard to position myself in a way where I could easily keep a grip on him while climbing down back into the garden. I could already hear the guardsmen yelling and hollering as they tried to find out where I was. They made the mistake of bringing lamps with them, which illuminated their positions in the dark from a significant distance. It was a simple task to manoeuvre my way back over to the fence where Tahar was waiting for me.

“Catch!” I tugged on the back of Derian’s collar and flung him over the spiked-covered fence like he was a bag filled with feathers. He flipped in the air and came back down again into Tahar’s unprepared arms. I climbed over and reunited with my new best friend. She was very confused as to why I had brought a man with me and not the thing I was looking for.

“Why did you bring him?”

“I couldn’t find it – and he claimed that it’s not in the house. We’re going to have a chat and see if we can’t learn where it is.”

“Isn’t this... risky?”

“It’s too late to be worrying about that now. He might have already given my name to the watchmen. Let’s go get Cali and make ourselves sparse before they find us.” I took Derian off of her hands again and hoisted him over my shoulder. It would take a few minutes for him to come back around again after such a hard shot to the head. This was a first; I had never kidnapped the master of the house before. Desperate times called for desperate measures. I needed to find out where he had hidden the item. We marched behind the trees and stayed away from the main road. There were dozens of guards fumbling in the dark in a poor effort to locate us. They were never going to find a master thief like that.

While the remote location of the house was good for keeping people away, it also meant that it was extremely hard to find someone after the sun set. We could keep low to the ground, hiding beneath tree and brush. We just had to tread carefully and keep a watchful eye on what was coming up. It was slow going but soon we had reached Cali’s perch. I dumped Derian onto the ground and took a moment to catch my breath.

“We’re doing your thing instead, Cali.”

She looked at the unconscious body resting in a puddle at her feet, “I take it that he’s concealed it somewhere away from the mansion?”

“Yep.”

“Do you know how to interrogate someone?”

“Nope. Never a bad time to learn though!”

I dragged Derian to a nearby tree and made sure that his binds were secure. His eyes flickered open, and a second later he started to struggle against his rope cuffs. He cried out in a failed attempt to draw the attention of one of the guards – but we were in the middle of nowhere. Nobody was going to wander this deep into the farmland by random chance. They weren’t paid enough for that. I considered my next words carefully.

“Shut the fuck up, before I gut you like a fish.” Derian’s face was so good that I wished cameras were invented. I was never going to replicate such a pure expression of fear. “There’s nobody here but us.

I'm going to keep this nice and simple, you're going to tell me where you hid that thing you bought. You know the one. If you start yelling I'm going to gag you again. Understand?"

He nodded frantically. I reached around the back of his head and untied the knot. He clenched his jaw and tried to work the muscles back to life. I had only tied him up for a few minutes, he was acting like it had been days. "Who do you think you are? First, you come into my home and eat my food, and now you see fit to kidnap and steal from me?"

I tugged on the edge of my belt and drew attention to the knife sheathed there; "That doesn't sound like the location of the cursed object to me, Derian." He swallowed and averted his eyes as he tried his hardest to come up with a solution by which he could come out on top with his body unharmed and his possessions unstolen.

"Who put you up to this, I can pay triple what they are!"

"Nobody's paying me shit. I want it for myself, and don't expect an explanation as to why. Are you going to save us all the time and effort and spill the beans? Or do I have to get serious and start doing things we'll both regret?"

Derian was torn between survival and greed. His attempts at bribery had failed and he had little else to offer me other than the information that I sought.

"It's about the sword, isn't it? I'll give it back to you! I won't even ask for the money back!"

I came down on top of him with a leather-clad boot to the chest. He wheezed and cried out in pain as I compressed his lungs and prevented him from breathing in. The bark on the tree behind him started to crack and strain. "I'm the one asking the questions here, Derian. If you do that again – I'll make it a lot worse than this."

I released him. He fell to the floor and clutched the dirt between his knuckles. Thoughts of class warfare and intentional humiliation were racing through his mind. The frustration wanted to bubble over and come outwards at me as a barrage of insults and accusations, but they were useless and he knew it. Derian couldn't consider me as someone with their own motivations and reasons. Everything I did was just a ploy to extract more and more money out of him.

"If he refuses to cooperate, I could scorch him a little," Cali offered. She leered over him, intentionally emphasising the menace in her otherwise picturesque features. Derian squealed and curled up into a ball. That might have worked on a predatory bird, but all three of us had enough frontal lobe development to see him.

"This could be over and done with Derian. All you need to do is tell me where it is. You do that, and I won't touch a hair on your head."

He continued to hide away in his ball, "Fuck you, and fuck your whore of a fucking mother!"

I gasped theatrically, "Such strong language for a high-class gentleman! I think it would work much better if you weren't cowering like a scolded child. Where the hell did you put it? Why are you trying so hard to conceal it from me?"

"Because it's my property!"

"That's not enough of a reason. You have a lot of property already, what's wrong with sharing?"

Tahar was very uncomfortable with this kind of interrogation. She turned and walked away so that she didn't have to witness it. For all she knew, Derian had done little wrong aside from getting in my way. She was right. I had no evidence to suggest that Derian had committed any particular crime. I still wouldn't feel sorry for him. Everyone suffered the occasional humiliation or injury. His resistance to answering my questions was starting to elicit some suspicion from me.

I pulled him back to the tree and jabbed him in the nose. Even though I did my best to hold back, it started to bleed down onto his already ruined shirt. He was starting to look a real state after being dragged through the mud and assaulted. I didn't give up. I pounded him again with a left and a right. He held up his hands and weakly tried to stop me from hitting him any more.

"Stop! Stop! Please!"

I grabbed him by the front of his shirt and slammed him back into the tree, "I'm not stopping until you talk! I need that thing and you're wasting my time. I've killed people with more to give than you, so don't test my fucking patience!"

Derian refused to offer me what I wanted. I beat him black and blue – running the risk of someone finding us based on the sounds he was making. His face became increasingly unrecognisable as I did everything I could to make him hurt without knocking him out or killing him. Eventually, I was rubbing up against the point where I was comfortable continuing. It looked like a tiger had mauled his face to pieces. He was completely drenched in his own blood, which poured down from a glancing cut above his brow.

Cali stared at him impassively, "It appears that our methodology is not working. Any more and he will be able to speak."

"Bastard. What the hell is so important that he's keeping it a secret in this kind of situation?"

Derian mumbled some nonsense deliriously. His consciousness had been affected. It would take him some time to come back and speak again. "He said it wasn't at the house, but I don't know what other property he owns. For all we know he could have buried it in that huge garden of his. We'd never find it."

"Can Stigma help?"

"I already asked. We'd have to be really close for her to detect anything. Being buried underground would make it even harder."

Stigma took that as her cue to appear before me. She studied my handiwork and tittered, "There is one other thing you could do. If you use my powers on Derian – you can turn him into a helpful little thrall. He'll spill any secrets you want him to."

That raised an eyebrow. The thralls I had seen in Blackwake were useless, mindless drones that wandered around the premises and only conducted manual labour. Stigma noticed my scepticism and explained further.

"The fool who originally possessed that power used it as a blunt instrument. He lobotomized them, not aware of the loyalty that the underlying spell carries with the target. He believed that allowing them too much autonomy would be dangerous. For that purpose, there is the vow of loyalty; but even the thralls are capable of more than just mere labour."

Then the question was how much energy it could take to cast. I didn't want to spend a lot just to get the information I could retrieve the old-fashioned way. I mulled it over, "How much time would it

shave off of me?” It couldn’t be too much. He had brainwashed dozens and dozens of people without ill effects.

“I’m afraid that it is not cheap. What he didn’t know at the time was that each thrall further drained his lifeforce and magical energy. The rapid expansion of his cult had started to endanger his life, even though this spell is more energy efficient than others you would find that serve the same purpose.”

“Give me a number.”

“For a single question, two months’ worth.”

That was pretty pricey. If I could get Derian to talk without using the spell, I could try it for two months straight and still come out with more than I’d lose if I had given in and utilised it. I exhaled and paced the clearing to try and clear my head. It was so tempting to do it the easy way – but the easy way would mean two months less to sort out the curse that was slowly killing me. It wouldn’t be simple to get those days back.

Stigma offered more information, “The spell is self-replicating. When you cast it, the mechanism is internalised within the target’s brain and spread through their consciousness. This function requires significantly less magical energy than a normal alteration spell. If used on too many people it will consume more than your body can intake, and lead to your death.”

“And the vow of loyalty?”

“A promise to not betray you or bring harm unto you, Master. Though given the desire to protect this particular secret, there is no guarantee that he will give you the answer if you use it. It is much weaker than the enthralling spell.”

I grunted, “Why does he have to be so stubborn? Most nobles would have pissed themselves by now.”

Cali was just as stumped as I was. Despite her words in favour of torturing him to get an answer, she wasn’t experienced in doing so. She had nothing else to offer on the ideas front. The more I stared at him, the more I started to think that I’d done too far too fast. I’d beaten the hell out of the guy and gotten nothing for it. What else could I do short of killing him? I didn’t have any tools that I could use to make him really hurt. I reached into my pouch and retrieved a small healing salve – I’d split a larger potion into several small vials just in case we needed them. I forced his bloodied mouth open and poured it down his throat.

He gagged and struggled, but he was too weak to push me away. It worked quickly. The swelling on his face started to recede, and some of the cuts I had caused with my knuckles stitched themselves back together. Finally, I retrieved a rag from my pouch and wiped away most of the blood on his head. It’d be suspicious if we had to move him somewhere else. It would keep him from dying too. I was worried about hitting him too hard.

“What are we going to do, Ren?”

I waved my arm, “Give me a minute – I’m thinking.”

He wasn’t talking. I didn’t know why, but he had a lot of grit for a silver spoon slurping noble. There was no way he was so dedicated to his weapon collection that he had decided to stake his life on it; that was a level of obsession that very few people broached. There was something else to this. He must have wanted to keep the power of the item for himself. It must have provided him with

something that he wanted. I should have approached this problem with more care. I'd played my hand too early, he knew that I wasn't going to kill him when I didn't know where it was. I didn't want to spend two months trying to pry the truth out of him. I could use the thrall spell on him and be done with it already. Two months was a lot, but I still possessed several years to play with.

Tahar broke through the brushes and spoke, "The watchmen are moving further into the town. We should be safe to move now." The patrol pattern had already passed us by. They'd be searching fruitlessly for Derian in the town for hours on end. That meant we could relocate to somewhere more appropriate.

Gerry.

Gerry knew a thing or two about getting information out of people. It was a stroke of chance that he lived nearby. He wouldn't want to help if it brought a bunch of heat to his home though. I needed to convince him that he wouldn't be pinned as a co-conspirator. But what would I do if he refused? I couldn't ask him for tips on how to torture people. I didn't have time to worry about it. I just needed to plough ahead and try something.

"Alright. I have something. A friend of mine lives near here, he's a lot more... persuasive than I am."

Derian lashed out at me with a weak punch, but he was so weak that he fell back down against the tree and hit his head in the process. "Fuck you! I'm going to get the inquisitors to string you up, you piece of shit!"

"If you have enough strength to speak, it'd be better for you if you used it to tell me where the cursed item is. What is it? Armour, a weapon? That's why you wanted it in the first place."

His words were slurred as his mouth was still struck numb and filled with blood; "I'm not telling you anything. If you're man enough to kill me, go ahead and try. You'll never find out where it is."

I stole his breath with another gut punch, "Don't think you're free to piss me off, Derian. I'm very stubborn, I'll turn every building you own upside down if I have to." He doubled over and clung onto my leg as he hacked and wheezed. I grabbed the rope and re-gagged his mouth. I also slung my mask over his head to keep them from identifying him at a distance. Tahar handed me my sword and I considered our next move. Getting to Gerry's house from here was going to be tricky. The guards had moved on, but witnesses were an ever-present concern.

"Take his other arm."

Cali dragged him up. His legs were too unstable to support his weight, which made the return trip to the nearest road a serious pain in the ass. He kicked up dust and dirt as he repeatedly tried to wriggle away from our iron grip. Even if he did get free, I could just chase him down and knock him out again. I briefly considered doing just that and making life easier for us. Eventually, he calmed down enough to stop making things so hard. It was a nerve shaking trip to Gerry's cottage. I hadn't felt this vulnerable in some time. Derian claimed that he'd already turned over my name to the guards, but I doubted they took much notice of it if he didn't allege a specific crime. Nobody had pulled me over yet.

We successfully navigated our way to Gerry's cottage without seeing any sign of the guards. The old man was already waiting out front, trying to see what all the racket was about. His face dropped like a rock when he saw me waltzing up with a barely conscious, blood-covered baghead on my arm. He rolled his eyes and stepped back from the white picket fence, allowing me to dump my hostage down onto the path and out of sight of the main road.

"I thought I told you to stay out of bloody trouble. The whole town is going mental trying to find you right now!"

I kept my voice low, "It's kind of a life or death situation, you know? Between you and me, making some noise is preferable to dying."

Gerry looked at Derian, "Is this guy gonna' squeal? Why the hell did you bring him to my bloody house?"

"He can't see shit. I beat him black and blue, and the hood's on backwards."

We were both avoiding saying each other's names. Gerry had slipped right back into his old ways the moment I showed up. Derian remained mostly still on the ground as we tried to hash out a plan of action. "Listen, I can't get this guy to talk no matter what I do. You're the only guy I know that could possibly get this kind of information out of him. I'll pay you for it, if that's what you want."

Gerry waved me off, "I got my share and packed it up years ago. I don't need your damn money."

I was asking for way too much of a man who got out of the business already. We both knew it. But Gerry was a consummate rogue from birth to grave, it would be a cold day in hell if he refused to help a fellow out with a little job. With his skills we could be done within hours. Then I could dump Derian somewhere remote and pretend the whole thing never happened.

"Who is it?" he asked, not willing to take the mask away and reveal his identity.

I leaned in and whispered his name, "It's Derian Rivers."

"Are you kidding me? Why the fuck are you picking a fight with him?"

"He has something that I need. I wouldn't have sacked him and dragged him here if it wasn't important. He's not content to let this end with him losing a little property. I just need to hear a yes or a no, I won't judge if you send me packing."

Old habits die hard. Gerry had a lot of pent up resentment for the rich, just like I did. Without another word he helped me hoist Derian up onto his feet and escorted us through the house. We passed through his living room and kitchen, coming out through the back door into the other garden. Houses out in the country had a lot of space to stretch their legs. Gerry had a large shed at the back.

He pulled the doors open and ushered us inside. Several tools were propped up against the wall, like shovels, trowels and pitchforks. It was dusty and more than a little spartan. The perfect place to tie someone up and squeeze them for information. There was enough space for everyone to fit inside comfortably, but Tahar once again elected to stay out of the way.

Gerry nodded, "They won't check in here, and we don't want to make it too comfortable for him." He moved behind one of the shelves and retrieved an old wooden chair. Derian sat in the centre of the room while he planned his first moves. He brought out even more rope and tied his hands and feet to the chair so that he couldn't try anything stupid. The bag wasn't going to be removed until we were done.

"Are you awake, son? You must have heard what we were talking about."

Derian nodded slowly. I reached up the backside of the bag and removed the rope from around his jaw. I nearly forgot that I gagged him again. Gerry started to pace the shed, using the sound of his

footsteps to build a sense of dreadful anticipation. There was so much more to the art of information gathering than beating someone. Using sound and psychology was just as effective, if not more so. People would make up all kinds of things if they thought it would spare them some pain. Derian jolted back to life as he started to address him, "My friend here wants to know something, and you know what that is. If you tell us, there's going to be no trouble. You'll get untied and sent on your way, presuming what you say is the truth."

Derian remained completely mute, only releasing haggard breaths.

"I'm not an unreasonable person. I've talked with a lot of blokes who think that being obstructive is the way to go. This game of ours is already over. You're tied up on a chair and you have no idea where you are. The only question is how much time are you going to waste hoping that somebody comes to find you?" The silence was deafening. This was going to take a while, but Gerry was more patient than I was. He knew how to play. As long as it didn't take him two months, I'd come out having saved some time. Those small advantages were things that you had to covet. They added up, if you kept passing on them you'd regret it one day.

"You can go take a spell inside if you'd like. This'll take me a while."

"Alright, I'll leave it to you."

Not wanting to cramp his style or get in the way, I walked back into the house and sat down at the kitchen table. Tahar had already elected to do the same. Cali was hesitant to follow me but eventually chose to do so. We sat there quietly for some time, hearing the faint voices speaking down at the end of the garden. This was by far the most stressful thing I had made Tahar do.

"Are you okay, Tahar?"

I was almost insulted by how much my concern seemed to surprise her; "I'm fine. I know that not everything you do is... noble. I am protecting myself from a bitter memory more than anything."

"I'm not saying you have to sit there and watch it. I'd be far gone if I expected anyone to find it tasteful." Modern me knew better. This was an uncivilised world in the most literal sense of the term. My expectations of rights and wants did not align with reality. The only law was that which existed to protect the powerful and their property. Anything more than that was seen as arbitrary.

"Would your friend be upset if I made some tea?" Cali asked.

That was the fastest change of topic I had ever experienced. I looked around the kitchen and noted just how messy the place was. Gerry hadn't picked up a single good habit since becoming a homeowner. I remember glancing into his pack once, it was like looking into the abyss.

"He won't mind if you make him a cup too – if you can even find the stuff you need in here."

Cali accepted the challenge and started searching. The clatter of pots and pans provided to perfect cover for some of the noises trying to break in through the back door. I could only cross my fingers and hope that Gerry would prove himself as the man for the job.

