

67: Budding schemes

Scarlett gaped at the scene before her, as Fynn jumped out of the window that had just been broken. A gust of wind swirled across the courtyard as the young man touched down next to the person who'd flown out of the window.

"What is the meaning of this?!" Scarlett cried out, rising from her seat as she looked towards the person lying on the ground. A large patch of flowers had been flattened by broken glass and the person's fall, but the surrounding flowers stopped her from seeing much of their figure.

Fynn turned to her, but then his head almost immediately snapped back to the person beside him at the first sign of movement.

As he lashed out at them, the person on the ground had somehow already made it half up to their feet and managed to stumble away from Fynn's attack, crushing even more of the colorful flowers under their feet as they stepped back. Their head was covered by a dark hood, and two knives flashed into their hands from out of nowhere.

Scarlett took a quick breath at the sight. So this was an intruder? Had the Cabal made their move?

Fynn let out a low growl as he jumped after the figure, the winds pushing over the flowers under him as he moved. But once again the other figure managed to dodge the blow, side-stepping under it and coming closer to where Scarlett and Rosa stood.

Scarlett lifted her hands, and felt Rosa raise her instrument behind her, as she got ready to help deal with the situation. That's when Fynn dived in once more. The young man was acting fiercer than Scarlett had ever seen him before. As he swiped out towards the intruder again his left hand grew an indistinct green light around it that formed claw-like shapes. Scarlett stilled at the sight, and the hooded intruder only barely managed to step out of the claws' range.

Since when could Fynn use [Claws of Tempest]?! She thought it would take him far longer to learn that.

Though she was surprised by the sudden development of Fynn's abilities, Scarlett soon had to return her attention to the intruder as the person tried to dodge yet another swipe from Fynn, but was forced into the path of the young man's other hand which also sported claws now.

The intruder suddenly turned into a hazy streak of red, and Fynn's claws tore through the light red fog left behind as the person reappeared a few meters away, closer to the edge of the courtyard.

Scarlett's eyes widened. She recognized that ability.

Fynn had already reset his sights on the person, like a predator locking onto its prey, and was about to jump after them once again when Scarlett yelled out.

"Halt! Fynn, stop at once!"

Fynn had already started moving, but was soon met with a thick wall of water. Smashing right through it, his entire upper body became soaked as he awkwardly seemed to try and arrest his sprint, turning to Scarlett with a confused expression. He didn't look quite as ferocious now, at least.

Scarlett refocused her attention on the intruder, who had looked like they were about to turn around and make a run for it up until now. At a closer look, it was clear to her this person wasn't a part of the Hallowed Cabal. While they wore a dark hood that covered much of their face, their outfit was a simple mix of thick, dark fabric and leather armor, with an assortment of small knives hanging off their side. From their build, it was clear that this person was a man, and the outlines of a beard could be seen under the hood.

Scarlett lowered her hands as she gestured for Rosa to do the same.

The man in the hood seemed to take this as a sign, as he too lowered his knives and placed them inside his belt.

"Gaven Ridley, I presume?" Scarlett asked just loud enough that it would reach the man.

"Huh, so you *were* expecting me," a rough voice sounded out from the person. "I was starting to think I'd been tricked. This sure is a one-of-a-kind welcome."

Scarlett held back a sigh, looking toward the broken window and the ruined flowerbed. "This is not how we commonly greet our guests."

"He's a guest?" Fynn asked, visibly bewildered as he frowned at Gaven. "But I sensed him sneaking around inside. He didn't smell like any of the others. He smelled bad."

"...You sensed me, eh?" Gaven asked.

Scarlett cringed inwardly at how her previous talks about being secretive about certain things with Fynn clearly hadn't produced much result. "So you saw fit to destroy one of the windows of my residence?" she asked, locking her gaze on the white-haired young man. He froze, his eyes shifting to the window in question, and what remained of it in the ruined flowerbed.

"Oh, ehm, I..."

"Never mind," Scarlett said, probably not completely successful in hiding the irritation in her voice. She heard how the doors to the mansion were slammed open, looking to see some of the servants come running out and down the stairs. For now, she ignored it and turned her attention to the hooded man. To *Gaven Ridley*. One of the companions in 'Chronicle of Realms'.

"And you," she said, her voice ice cold. "You believe it acceptable to creep into *my* home without my **explicit** permission? Did the thought of contacting me prior to coming not even occur to you?"

Clearly, Mirage had done their job when it came to *finding* Gaven, but they apparently hadn't given him clear instructions when it came to meeting with her. She certainly hadn't anticipated him to try and sneak into her mansion.

In fact, *she* had been expecting Mirage to contact her again *after* they had found him to inform her of when the meeting took place. But apparently, that was too much to expect.

Was it just her being stupid when she expected others to act like reasonable people and *communicate* with each other in situations like this?

Gaven simply shrugged his shoulders. "I wasn't exactly planning for the boy over there to find me."

"You should wish yourself fortunate that he did," Scarlett said.

If she had found herself being surprised by a hooded stranger in her home, she probably wouldn't have held back. Although she wasn't entirely certain she could really take down Gaven—he had one of the highest evasion stats in the game, among other things—it sure as hell wouldn't have been pretty, for either of them.

"I take it you are indeed here to with me, then?" she asked him.

"Me?" Gaven crossed his arms. "You're the one who called."

Scarlett just shook her head at the whole situation. Two of the mansion's servants soon came running toward her. It was Marlon, the woman in charge of the female servants, and a brown-haired young man named Gilbert.

"My Lady!" Marlon cried out as she held up the hems of her dress so that it didn't come in the way of her feet. "Is everything all right?!"

The woman's eyes turned, in something halfway between a frown and a worried expression, to Fynn and the wrecked window, as well as Gaven that still stood some distance away. While the man's hood covered much of his face, which looked pretty suspicious, the belt he'd worn with weapons on it had now been hidden beneath his clothing.

Scarlett looked around the courtyard as a few more of the servants exited the mansion, including Garside.

"I am unharmed," Scarlett said to Marlon, then pointed to the side where broken glass was scattered. "Have someone clean that up, and ensure there is no glass inside as well."

Marlon glanced at both Gaven and Fynn one more time, but soon bowed her head. "Of course my Lady."

When Garside neared, along with a couple other servants trailing behind him, Scarlett turned to look at the old butler. "Garside, contact a glazier to repair that window. And inform the staff that an accident occurred, but that the matter has been resolved."

The man furrowed his brows as he seemed to take in the situation, but nonetheless, he lowered his head. "As you wish, my lady."

Scarlett turned to the archway that connected the two wings of the mansion that enclosed the courtyard and looked past the garden that was between the building itself and the stone wall

that encompassed the whole estate. It didn't seem like the hired guards had noticed what was going on.

"In addition," she added, turning back to Garside. "Inform the guards that henceforth, they will be patrolling the grounds regularly and report any suspicious matters directly to me. I also want you to inquire into employing more men to increase the shifts."

The good thing about having Fynn around was that he was great at detecting suspicious things, but as they weren't at the mansion twenty-four seven, it might be wise hiring more guards, no matter how weak.

"I will do so forthwith, my Lady," Garside responded with a firm tone. "But, if it's not too bold of me, may I inquire into what has happened here?"

The small gathering of servants that stood before her now, including Rosa, were giving her curious looks.

"There was a misunderstanding between one of my retainers and a guest. It is nothing any of you need to bother yourself with further than that. That includes you as well." Scarlett locked her gaze on Fynn, before turning back to the servants and gesturing with her hand. "Now, you may all leave. Those that have work to do should commence it immediately."

The servants got to moving, and even Fynn—who had an expression that seemed to be a mix between confusion and embarrassment now—hesitantly started walking back towards the mansion. Scarlett would have to talk with him later, but for now, she turned to Rosa, who had stayed uncharacteristically quiet throughout the entire proceedings. "We will have to interrupt our previous conversation here, it appears. I apologize for the disturbance."

The bard returned a smile. "No, it's fine. Looks like you've got a lot on your plate."

Scarlett turned to Garside, who was also yet to leave. "I will be in the parlor next to my office. Inform Molly and all others that I do not want to be disturbed for the coming hour, and that they should refrain from entering the east wing other than to address the broken window. This includes Fynn and the other individuals temporarily under my employ."

This probably looked pretty suspicious, but it was better than anyone overhearing things. Fynn's hearing, especially, was an issue.

"Your words are our commands, my Lady," Garside said gradually. "But...is it entirely safe?"

She looked at the grey-haired man for a moment, then gave a slow nod. "It is."

"I see. Then I will ensure that your commands are followed to the letter." The butler bowed and turned around as he started moving towards the mansion, passing by a couple of the servants that had already started picking up some of the glass scattered about the courtyard.

Scarlett turned to Gaven, who hadn't moved an inch. "Then, shall we talk?"



"Gaven Ridley," Scarlett said the name once more as she sat on a red leather couch in the smaller guest parlor that was located close to her office in the east wing. The man in question sat opposite her, now with his hood down.

The room they were in was relatively simple, with a large table placed in its center, surrounded by several expensive-looking armchairs and couches. There were a couple of bookcases lining the walls, and a wall looking out over the eastern part of the Hartford compound, but the remainder of the walls were mostly covered by several different kinds of paintings.

Gaven Ridley himself was quite similar to what Scarlett remembered from the game. Other than his attire, which looked much like what one might expect from a rogue-like character in a setting such as this, he had a head of flowing thick, dark-brown hair that parted to the sides and reached to his neck. In addition, he had a surprisingly well-kept beard and light-brown eyes that had been looking at her with a somewhat amused gaze for quite some time now.

A fact that only *slightly* annoyed her.

"I will not delve further into the fatuity of attempting to sneak into my home without my prior knowledge. I presume you were contacted by someone about my desire to meet with you? But they did not tell you how and when?" Scarlett asked.

"Yeah, some pretty shady individuals came and made me an offer I couldn't refuse," Gaven said with a shrug. "I assumed anytime would be fine. But your kind don't often take well to working with mine, so I make it a habit to not let unrelated people notice me. Most of the time, I don't get caught."

"You did this time, however," Scarlett pointed out. "Perhaps that will teach you to be more heedful in the future."

She almost wished she could give Mirage a bad review on Google or something like that for bad customer service. This made her somewhat worried that her other request to them would be handled even worse. but considering how the request itself was relatively simple, there shouldn't be a high risk of that.

Gaven smirked. "Heh, maybe I will. I'll have to wait and see." He leaned back on his couch, folding one leg over the other. "So, what's a lofty baroness like you want with someone like me?"

Scarlett tapped her finger against the armrest next to her, not bothering to hold back the cold gaze she was studying the man with. While Gaven had been a companion in the game, his personality didn't mesh the best with Scarlett's. Not to mention the fact that he *was* technically a criminal. But he was also necessary for her plans.

"It is simple. I want to hire your services," she said, locking eyes with the man.

"I kinda figured as much."

"Then I assume that you are interested in the prospect, considering you are here."

"Depends." He smiled. "What do I get out of it? And what do you want me to do?"

"You will be compensated handsomely for your labor," Scarlett said. "Both money and enchanted equipment are on the table. The work itself will vary, although I can ensure you that I will only assign you tasks I believe you are able to handle."

"Like?"

"Locating certain items of interest, as well as certain individuals."

"Hmm." He turned his head as he thoughtfully studied the paintings in the room. "Would any of these items of interest happen to already have an owner?"

Scarlett gave him a long look, then a slow nod. "Some of them, yes."

A roguish smile grew on his face. "Then I'm listening."

[Quest completed: Hire companion's services — Gaven Ridley]
{Skill points awarded: 3}

Scarlett briefly glanced at the small window of text that appeared in front of her, before returning her attention to the man opposite her. "To start with, when you contact me in the future, you are to do so through the guards at the front of my estate. I will ensure that they know what to do so that you are escorted directly to me. In addition, I advise that you wear more inconspicuous attire for such visits from now on."

Gaven gave a short nod. "If you say so, boss."

Scarlett frowned slightly at the easygoing tone, but decided to let it go for now. "Now, for the first task I would have you perform. I believe you should be familiar with the city of Bridgespell?"

Gaven raised both eyebrows at her words. "I *am*, yeah. But I have to wonder why a baroness like you would know something like that about little old me."

"There is much that I know. If you were to stop and demand an explanation every time a matter surprises you our conversation would not move fast," Scarlett said.

He blinked, then a smile grew back on his face once again. Pulling out a thin knife with a circular hole at the bottom from nowhere, he started spinning it around his finger. Scarlett felt her eye twitch at the sight.

"So, what is it you want me to do in Bridgespell—agh!" he pulled his hand back as his knife dropped onto the couch beside him, red hot as it seared the leather on the furniture.

"While I do not expect you to maintain the same standards of decorum as my regular attendants, I would advise you to be conscious of your position," Scarlett's voice was hard as she conjured a mass of water around the knife to cool it down. A small cloud of smoke trailed up in the air as a faint burnt scent spread around the room.

With her vision enhanced by her [Charms of Apperception], Scarlett had noticed that he didn't have any defenses up at the moment, which is why she had decided to teach him a little lesson with her pyrokinesis. It was only recently that she'd learned that it wasn't only limited to creating fire, but that it could also use be used to heat up certain objects. And this had seemed like such a satisfying opportunity to test the ability.

She definitely wouldn't do something like this to her other employees, though. She was very particular about her abuses of power.

Gaven looked at her with a mildly surprised face as he held his left hand in his right. But he didn't look angry.

"Right, I get it, *my Lady*," he said, giving an exaggerated bow with his head.

Scarlett decided to let it go with that. "As I was saying," she continued. "Having grown up in parts of the city, you should be familiar with the different districts there. In particular, the Lower Ward."

She gave him a small smile as he now gave her a wary look. She was purposefully trying to overplay how much she knew in order to get him to trust her even more later down the line, but she was fully expecting him to be doubtful of her this early on.

"I have also heard that your name is one that is currently on the lips of several of the local syndicates, meaning there is some difficulty for you to move readily through the city."

Gaven frowned. "If the first job's in Bridgespell, it's not an issue. Those people wouldn't be able to find me even if they knew I was there."

Scarlett shook her head. "The first job is not in Bridgespell itself. That would be for a later undertaking. No, the first thing I want of you is to prove your worth."

"My worth?"

"Yes. I will provide you with the location of a certain abandoned ruin near Kilsfell. I expect you to find it, explore it, and return with an item held deep within this ruin."

"That's...certainly a unique way of proving one's worth," Gaven said. "But what about payment?"

"For a simple matter such as this, your payment will be any valuable items found during your delve, excluding the item I require."

Gaven knitted his forehead. "How do I know it's worth it?"

"I believe someone as capable as you should be able to determine that yourself when you are there."

He crossed his arms as he seemed to consider it.

"Although I doubt it will come to pass," Scarlett added. "If you are not satisfied with the payment after having finished the task, I will compensate you further upon completion."

Now Gaven grinned. "Then I'm your man."

"I expected as much," Scarlett said coolly. "In addition, there are preparations that you will have to complete along with this task. I will arrange for transport through the Kilnstones so that you can travel between Freybrook and Bridgespell, but you will have to arrange disguises and anything else that may be necessary for you to be able to openly visit the city without encountering complications."

He caressed the beard on his chin as he grew a contemplative expression. "And what exactly is this for?" he asked.

"You will learn that after you have completed your first tasks."

He grew quiet for a second, before speaking again. "How much time would I have?"

Scarlett leaned her head to the side as she considered it for a second. "I believe two weeks is a reasonable period of time. After that, I expect you to have returned to me with both matters concluded."

He let out a laugh. "Then we shouldn't have any issue at all." He leaned forward and held out his hand over the table with a smirk. "I believe we have a deal, don't you?"

Scarlett eyed the dirty hand for a moment. "It appears we do," she said, not putting forth her own. Gaven didn't seem to mind as he pulled back into the couch.

"What about an advance?" He rubbed his thumb and index finger together. "Preparing these things will cost some."

"You will be provided two thousand solars. No more."

"Two thousand, eh?" he said slowly. "I'll probably make do then."

"I would hope so," Scarlett said. "Any further questions?"

Gaven shook his head.

"Good. Then let us discuss the details."