

LIVIA BLACKBURNE



MIDNIGHT
THIEF

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LIVIA BLACKBURNE

HYPERION
LOS ANGELES NEW YORK

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For Mom and Dad

This job could kill her.

Kyra peered off the ledge, squinting at the cobblestone four stories below. A false step in the darkness would be deadly, and even if she survived the fall, Red Shields would finish her off. She stared a few moments more before forcing her gaze back up. The time for second thoughts had passed. Now she just needed to keep moving.

The jump ahead was two body lengths long, so Kyra backed away from the ledge. Ten steps, then she drew a breath and sprinted forward. She pushed off just before the drop, clearing a gap of three strides before softening her body for the landing. There was a slap of soft leather on stone as she hit the next ledge. The impact sent a wave of vibrations through the balls of her feet, and Kyra touched a hand to the wall for balance.

Too hard, and too loud.

Silently cursing her clumsiness, Kyra scanned the grounds, looking for anyone who might have heard her. If she squinted, she could make out faint outlines of buildings around her—some as high as her ledge, some even taller. The pathways below were lined with torches that flickered, casting shadows that played tricks with her vision. Since she couldn't trust her eyes, she listened. Other than the wind blowing across her ears, the night was silent, and Kyra relaxed. Tucking away a stray lock of hair, she set off, dashing deeper into the compound.

Two days ago, a man had come to The Drunken Dog, introducing himself as James and asking for Kyra by name. He'd moved with a deliberate confidence, and his gaze had swept over the room, evaluating and dismissing each of its occupants. When Kyra had finally approached him, James laid out an unusual offer. There was a ruby in the Palace compound. He wanted her to fetch it for him, and he was willing to pay.

"The Palace is guarded tight," Kyra had told him. "If you want jewels, you'll better get them elsewhere."

"This ruby's got sentimental value," he'd replied. Kyra didn't consider herself the most astute judge of character. But she also wasn't an idiot, and she'd swallow her grappling hook before she'd believe that this man would do *anything* for sentimental reasons. The pay he offered was good though, and the job an intriguing challenge. The Palace was a far cry from the rich man's houses Kyra usually raided, with their handful of sentries guarding two or three floors. The Palace's massive buildings were patrolled by so many guards it was impossible to walk the grounds undetected. Rumor had it that even the rooftops were closely watched.

Which was why Kyra was neither on the ground nor on the rooftops. Instead, she balanced on a ledge outside a fourth-floor window, darting from shadow to shadow. The moon had not yet risen, and darkness concealed her from the Red Shields below. Unfortunately, it also hid the ledges from her own sight; the boundary between stone and air was easy to miss. From time to time, she slid a foot out to check her position, tracing her toe along the edge to fix the border in her mind.

Yes, she could die tonight. But as Kyra crept through the darkness, her doubts faded against the excitement of a challenging job. Those who knew her understood her skills. They knew she had no fear of heights and never lost her balance. But not even Flick, the closest thing to an older brother she had, understood the sheer joy that came over her every time she raced through the night. There was something about the way the darkness forced her to rely on her other senses, the way her body rose to the challenge. Her limbs silently promised her she would not fall, and by now she knew she could trust them.

The buildings across the path gave way to a courtyard with three trees, and Kyra slowed her pace, counting windows as she passed. The seventh from the southwest corner, James had said. These outer palaces were guest rooms for country noblemen visiting the Council. They were built securely but emphasized comfort more heavily than the fortresslike inner compound. And thus, they had glass windows instead of shutters, making it easy to see that the bedroom inside was dark. A minute fiddling with the latch, and the pane swung open on greased hinges. There was a shape on the bed, snoring in the loud and punctuated way of men who had indulged too much in rich food and drink. Kyra wondered for a moment what it would be like to get fat, to eat so much and work so little. No matter. Tonight, the nobleman would share some of his bounty.

She started with a dresser next to the bed, coaxing open the top drawer. Silk caught the dry skin on her fingertips. Apparently, the nobleman had a penchant for embroidered silk handkerchiefs. Not the jewelry box she sought, but Kyra took one and slipped it into her belt pouch. After checking the rest of the dresser, she moved to the desk. The latch gave easily to her pick, but there was nothing inside but documents and seals.

The sleeping nobleman shifted, and Kyra dropped to the floor. He rolled over, snorting loudly before his breathing once again settled. Kyra counted ten breaths, then went to the chest, taking care with the hefty cover. The top layer was fabric. Soon, she was up to her elbows in velvet night-ropes, but still no ruby. If there was a jewelry box, it almost certainly would have been in the dresser or the chest. James had assured her that the nobleman wasn't the type to hide his jewelry. Could he have been mistaken?

She combed the room again, feeling along the floors and walls for trapdoors, even running her hands over the bed's thin mattress. Still nothing. Kyra bit her lip. The moon was rising, a thin crescent above the horizon that announced the coming dawn. She'd already stayed too long. Taking one last glance around the room, she crept back out the window.

Getting out was harder than coming in. Her limbs were slow from a night without sleep, and her nerves were frayed from being so long on her guard. By the time Kyra reached the meeting spot two blocks outside the Palace, the sky was visibly lighter, and she was in a considerably worse mood.

Two men awaited her at the street corner. They hadn't seen her yet, and she took a moment to study them. The first was solidly built, with a stubborn jaw and brown hair curled close to his head—Flick. When Kyra had first told him about the job, he'd listed all the reasons she should refuse, from the dangers within the Palace to his suspicions about James. Her friend's arguments had been more reasonable than Kyra cared to admit, but by then she'd already decided. Since Flick couldn't dissuade her from going, he'd insisted on escorting James. The two men had watched her cross the wall a few hours earlier, and now they awaited her return. Kyra felt a twinge of guilt when she saw the tense set of Flick's shoulders. He'd been worried.

Behind Flick, Kyra recognized James. He was slimmer but taller, with pale coloring and a wiry, athletic build. He exuded confidence, studying everything around him with languid readiness. His expression was impossible to read.

Both men's eyes flickered to her hands as she came closer, then to her belt.

"It in't there," she said, answering their unspoken question. Perhaps her voice was sharper than it should have been, but she was tired.

There was a brief silence as the two men digested her news. Finally, James spoke. "What do you mean?"

"I flipped the whole room—the dresser, desk, the chest at the foot of the bed. No jewelry box."

"You searched the entire room?" James raised an eyebrow.

Kyra spat on the ground. "Look, unless he sleeps with the rock in his smallclothes, it wasn't there."

"Maybe you went to the wrong place."

There was a hint of derision in his voice, and it galled Kyra. Trying hard to control a flush of anger, she reached into her belt pouch for the handkerchief she'd taken from the noble's dresser. She flicked it at James, who snatched it out of the air with surprising quickness.

"This handkerchief's got the fatpurse's initials embroidered on it. See if it matches your mark."

Kyra made no effort to hide her frustration as James inspected the embroidery. Payment for the job depended on handing over the jewel, so she'd taken a long and dangerous night's work for nothing. She felt a hand on her shoulder. Flick, knowing her temper, was silently warning her not to push anything too far. Kyra gritted her teeth. James studied the handkerchief, after a while not even looking at it, but through it. Finally, he looked up, and his demeanor abruptly changed.

"Very well," he said, voice now smooth and agreeable. "Mayhap he didn't bring the stone to the Palace." James untied a pouch from his belt and tossed it at Kyra, who almost didn't react quickly enough to catch it. "That's the agreed-upon price, plus some extra. I believe this will cover your

effort.”

Without another word, he turned and walked away.

The Drunken Dog was an establishment that awoke at night and slept during the day. Every evening the small tavern brightened with the clink of flagons, loud talk, and the occasional song (often led by slightly inebriated Flick). But come sunrise, the place dimmed. Pale sunlight shone through the small windows but couldn't match the warmth of the Dog's evening revelry. By the time Kyra and Flick walked into the main dining room an hour after dawn, only a few stragglers remained.

Brendel, the new talesinger, was packing up his lute. He raised his hand in greeting. "Ho, Flick, will you be here tonight? I'll be playing 'Lady Evelyne and the Felbeast.'" Brendel was a journeyman and for his masterpiece—the work that he hoped would promote him to a master—he was putting the popular legend to song.

Flick grinned. "Let me sing the felbeast, and I'll grace you with my presence."

A man in a corner booth raised his flagon in Flick's direction. "Felbeast? With them long lashes and pretty eyes, Master Flick should be singing Lady Evelyne."

As the men roared in laughter, Kyra slipped past Flick and sat down at an empty table. After the noise died down, a woman's voice called from the kitchen. "Kyra! Flick! Have you eaten yet?"

Despite her exhaustion, Kyra smiled. It didn't matter when or in what condition she walked into the dining room. That was always the first question Bella asked.

"No, Bella." Flick's voice carried a tragic air that rivaled Brendel's best performances. "We haven't eaten in weeks. What's left?"

There was a pause as Bella took inventory. "I have some leftover lamb stew and a few rolls. It should be enough if Flick reins in that greedy maw of his."

Flick pantomimed a knife to his chest and sank into a chair. A plump woman, brown hair streaked with gray, carried out a tray with a basket of bread and two bowls of hot stew.

"What mischief have you two been stirring up?" Bella placed the food in front of them and wiped her hands on her apron. Kyra slouched into her chair, hoping Bella wouldn't notice her unkempt hair and dirty clothes, but Bella grabbed a rag from a nearby table and brushed the dust off Kyra's back. "I see this girl's been working."

Flick broke off a piece of bread and dipped it in his stew. "Kyra had an adventure last night," he announced, ignoring Kyra's warning look. Bella's forehead creased with concern, but a whistle sounded from the kitchen. As Bella rushed to tend the kettle, Flick dug through his bowl and started picking out turnip pieces.

"I don't understand," Kyra muttered, half to herself.

“You’re wondering why he gave you the coin?” said Flick. He’d made a pile of turnips on his bread plate and absentmindedly pushed them toward Kyra, who dumped the pieces into her own bowl.

“He was only supposed to pay me if I brought the stone,” Kyra said.

“The ruby didn’t exist.”

Kyra started at the certainty in Flick’s declaration. Flick chuckled.

“Ah, Kyra, fearless thief. Able to outclimb a squirrel on any tree and outrun a mountain lion in total darkness.” He tugged her ponytail. “Take your eyes off the ledges once in a while. You might actually see something.”

Flick was insufferable when he decided to play smug older brother, but today she was curious enough to humor him. Kyra crossed her arms. “By all means, Grandfather. Share your wisdom with me.”

He flashed a quick grin before hunkering down over the table. “Kyra, think about it. Say you pull in a thief to nip some fatpurse’s trinket. You offer her decent coin, but still, you’re paying less than what the trinket’s worth. The thief comes back empty-handed, swearing she couldn’t find anything. What’s your first thought?”

“You think he’d suspect I kept the ruby? That’s silly. If I could find someone to buy jewels, I’d be living in them fancy houses, not cracking them.”

“You know that, and I know that. And maybe even James knows it’s near impossible to find buyers these days. But there was a lot of coin at stake, and James wasn’t suspicious at *all*. I know. I was waiting with him at the meeting place. When you didn’t show up on time—”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

He shot her a stern look. “As well you should be. But when you didn’t show up on time, he didn’t get suspicious. Didn’t react at all. He just...waited. And you saw how he was when he was asking you questions. Any idiot could tell he didn’t really care.” Flick’s expression turned serious. “Looking back, I’m an idiot myself. I was so sure you’d break your neck in the Palace that I plain overlooked the other ways things could have gone wrong. You were lucky, Kyra, no thanks to me.”

“I can take care of myself,” Kyra said automatically.

Flick laughed. “Better than I would have imagined a lass of seventeen ever could.”

“So I’m seventeen now?”

He made a big show of looking her up and down. “By height alone, I’d wager you were twelve, but wasn’t seventeen Bella’s last guess? Something about you gaining the poise of a young woman? You really should just pick a birthday—let Bella bake you a cake once a year.”

Kyra rolled her eyes. The real version of events was less poetic. She’d started her womanly bleeding three years ago, and she’d been the same height for the past year. Based on these signs, Bella recently declared that Kyra was seventeen. Kyra decided to let Flick keep his version of the story.

“So what do you think James wanted?” she asked.

“It’s a puzzle, but I’ve got a feeling you’ll see him again.”

Flick stopped as Bella dropped off some warmer rolls. “Wait, Bella.” Kyra fished into the pouch James had given her and pushed a handful of coins into Bella’s hand. “You’ve fed us too much lately. The older woman looked at the money dubiously.

“I didn’t steal anything,” Kyra promised. “Right, Flick?” Technically, she’d nipped a handkerchief, but she decided to let that slide.

Flick folded his hands behind his head, amused. “For once, she’s right. Better take it, Bella. You never know how long it will be before Kyra earns another honest coin.” He jumped back in his chair to avoid Kyra’s slap.

Bella dropped the money into her apron, and Kyra sighed inwardly with relief. Bella paid her employer out of her own pocket for meals she gave away, and though the cook would never admit it, Kyra knew she was struggling to make ends meet. News of barbarian raids in the outer villages was becoming commonplace these days, and as supply lines into the city slowed, all of Forge’s inhabitants tightened their belts. She worried that softhearted Bella was too generous for her own good.

“What did that strange fellow want with you?” Bella asked.

Kyra hesitated, not wanting to hide anything from Bella, but uneager to face her reaction. “He wanted me to nip something from the Palace compound.”

The dish Bella was clearing froze in midair. “The Palace?”

Kyra sheepishly related the rest of the story, and the older woman shook her head. She turned an accusing eye on Flick. “And you let her do that?”

“Bella, you know as well as I do that Kyra does what she wants.”

Bella shook her head. “Are you determined to rush to an early death, Kyra? It’s all romance and adventures until you realize you’re not immortal.” She picked up Flick’s empty stew bowl and returned to the kitchen.

Kyra stared after Bella, momentarily cowed. Bella’s only son had been lost at sea years before she started working at The Drunken Dog. Word was that he had wanted to see the Far Lands for himself.

“Mayhap she’s right,” Flick mused. “Me and the other lads—we do a few raids here and there to make ends meet, but this is all you do. And you keep taking more risks. It’s really not good for a lass. Just one mistake at the wrong time—”

“You’re right, Flick. I’ll change my ways. Why don’t you find me a young man who’ll marry a lass who spent her childhood begging on the streets?”

Flick threw up his arms. “Just think about it.”

“I already have. I can’t get odd jobs around the city like you. I can’t make enough as a serving lass to cover my lodging, and I have no intention of marrying right now. And you know I need more coin for the gutter rats.”

As Kyra scooped up the last of her stew, Bella returned from the kitchen. “Speaking of gutter

mice, Idalee was here looking for you.”

“Idalee?” Kyra asked. “She doesn’t often come this far in.”

“I sent her back with some stew. She didn’t say where she’d be, but I assume you can find her?”

Flick glanced at Kyra. “You fixing to look for her?”

Kyra suppressed a yawn. “She’s probably wandering the city right now. I’ll catch a nap and find her this evening.”

Kyra dreamed she was climbing. But instead of the Palace walls, she scaled a rock face in a hot, sandy landscape. The sun beat down on her hands and face, and though her arms grew weak, she never quite reached the top. It was late afternoon when Kyra finally woke. The cliff face lingered in her mind, but Kyra had long given up on making sense of her dreams. Instead, she dressed to go into the city. Idalee was probably done with her rounds for the day, and if Kyra left now, she would have a good chance of finding her.

As Kyra stepped out the front door of The Drunken Dog, a sharp voice called to her.

“You, girl. In the trousers.” Kyra turned out of habit, then regretted it when she saw the speaker was scarcely older than a girl herself, dressed in a gown that cost more than a year’s takings for Kyra. Her fingers were adorned with jewels, and her wrists and neck were ringed with trader charms—basilisk scales, love stones—the type of fanciful trinkets that honest folk ignored and the wealthy squandered their money on. The girl and her two shieldmen were clearly out of place in the dusty streets outside The Drunken Dog. She probably found it romantic to be exploring such a neighborhood. If the girl’s carelessness got her in trouble here, it would be the folk who lived here who paid for it.

The girl gestured imperiously to Kyra. “Carry my bags for me.”

Kyra hesitated. She had no respect for a spoiled nobleman’s daughter, but her shieldmen looked mean. People skirted around them, clearly glad the girl had focused on Kyra instead of them.

“Well, hurry up,” said the girl.

Kyra could hear Flick’s voice in her head, telling her not to do anything stupid. “Mayhap milady could have her soldiers carry her bags for her.”

The girl rolled her eyes. “I’ll pay you. Don’t pretend you don’t need the money.”

Kyra stiffened. When she finally replied, her voice was low and steady. “I’m sorry, milady. I in’t your packhorse.” The girl’s eyes widened, and Kyra ran for an alleyway. Once around the corner, she shinnied up a pole and pulled herself onto the rooftop. She peeked over the edge to see the nobleman’s daughter still staring in the direction of the alleyway. Not one to push her luck, Kyra backed up and hurried on her way.

The city of Forge took the form of several concentric rings. At its center was the Palace compound, with the Fastkeep at its heart and the outer compound surrounding it. The wealthy, or

“wallhuggers” as some called them, formed the first ring outside the compound walls, taking advantage of the security the Palace provided. Outside that ring, craftsmen and merchants set up their shops, relying on the wealthy to keep them in business. The Drunken Dog, where Kyra rented a small room, was slightly outside the merchant ring—far enough from the Palace to avoid the authorities’ notice, but close enough to the markets to cultivate its diverse mix of patrons.

Kyra skirted along rooftops, heading away from the merchant district until she reached the outermost ring of the city. This area also had houses and shops, but the buildings were less clean and the streets less orderly. Gradually, the carpentry of the houses became more run-down; the piles of trash in the street grew larger and more numerous.

She climbed down and continued at a brisk pace, pausing periodically to drop a coin into an outstretched hand. Kyra felt her nerves tingle, her awareness sharpening out of habit. Every landmark had a memory attached. At one street, the baker’s wife passed out scraps after sunset. One road over, behind a wooden fence, there was a space where a small child could huddle while others ran past.

It was on these streets that Flick had found her a decade ago. She’d been suspicious of him at first. The boy’s clean face and untorn clothes immediately marked him as an outsider. Though, at fourteen he hadn’t yet reached his full height, he was still nearly twice her size. Kyra had scowled and slipped into one of her hiding places, but he returned the next day.

“Your hands look small. Can you reach between the slats of a fence?” he asked her.

Kyra checked to make sure the other children were in view before moving closer. Flick told her that a lady had dropped her purse behind a locked fence. It was just out of his reach, but if Kyra would help him get it, he promised her half the pickings. It was simple enough, and surprisingly, the boy was true to his word. After that, he kept coming back with more ideas. He learned about Kyra’s penchant for climbing into high places, and she learned that he roamed the streets because his mother was becoming too ill to care for him. In time, Flick started bringing Kyra food even when there were no jobs.

They became business partners of sorts, and eventually friends. It was Flick who took Kyra to The Drunken Dog and introduced her to Bella, Flick who told Kyra that she could stop living on the street if she made enough money. Somehow, Bella convinced the owner of The Drunken Dog to rent a room to Kyra, and in hindsight, it was a good thing she had. Most of the children from Kyra’s younger days were gone. Kyra had no idea where they were or whether they were still alive.

“Griffin feathers, milady? Bring you good luck.” A small boy with stringy hair thrust a tattered bunch of feathers at her.

Kyra almost walked past him, then sighed and turned around. Everything about the boy betrayed him as new to the streets, from the way he failed to blend in, to his carelessness in addressing strangers. She took the boy’s trinket and rolled it between her fingers. “You new at this?”

Confusion flashed across the boy’s face. “Just a quarter copper each, milady.”

Kyra handed it back to him. “You can’t take chicken feathers and say they’re from griffins. People in’t that dull.”

The boy jerked his hand back. “You in’t never seen a griffin before.”

“No, but I’ve seen a chicken. Look, the traders can say anything they want about their goods, and folk won’t argue with them. But nobody’ll believe you went across the Aerin Mountains. You’ll end up with your money taken if you’re lucky, or flogged and pilloried if you’re not.”

Real fear flashed through his eyes, and Kyra’s annoyance gave way to pity. She shook her head and handed the boy a coin. “It’s clever, I’ll give you that. You out here alone?”

The boy hesitated, then gave an unconvincing shake of his head.

“Come with me. I’ll take you to some others.”

She continued on her way. If he’d refused to follow, she would have let him go, but she heard the boy fall into step behind her. As the streets grew narrower, the buildings crowded together so the upper stories hung over the pathways, blocking much of the already waning sunlight. As a child, Kyra had never noticed the smell of garbage and sweat, but now she wrinkled her nose and walked faster.

Eventually, Kyra heard children shouting in the distance. She followed the sound until the alley opened into a secluded courtyard. Fifteen pairs of bare feet pounded the hard-packed dirt. The children had dust on their faces and tears in their clothing. Their game tonight was a new one, with rules Kyra didn’t recognize. But like the other games, it involved a lot of running. Running was the easiest way to stay warm.

Kyra edged closer, and several children broke away from the game, shouting her name. She smiled and squeezed a few shoulders as they gathered around. “I’ve got someone new for you,” she said, finally turning to acknowledge the griffin boy. “Show him how things work.”

“We’ve seen him around,” said a girl with knobby arms and tangled black hair. “He didn’t want to talk to us.”

“Now he will.” Kyra gave him a push toward the others before turning back to the black-haired girl. “You come looking for me, Idalee?”

“Where were you last night?”

“Working.” She paused for a moment, reminded of James’s mysterious behavior. “Why’d you come to The Drunken Dog?” In many ways, the area around The Drunken Dog was safer than Idalee’s usual haunts, but Kyra worried about her wandering away from her friends.

“Lettie’s sick again.”

Kyra frowned. Idalee’s younger sister was constantly ill. “Take me to her?”

As the girl pulled her down a side street, Kyra couldn’t help noticing how Idalee had matured since their first meeting. Two years ago, Kyra had been in the neighborhood when she heard shouting. She ran up just in time to see a skinny girl charge an older boy headfirst, knocking him down and pounding at him with remarkable ferocity. The other children were in an uproar, and Kyra picked up more than

few bruises pulling the two apart. It took some work to sort things out, but eventually she pieced together that one of the older boys had tried to take Lettie's supper. Despite the tongue-lashing that Kyra delivered to all involved, she couldn't help but admire Idalee's spirit, and tiny Lettie reminded Kyra of her own childhood in the streets. While Kyra would never admit to having favorites, she found herself spending more and more time helping these two.

Idalee led her to a dead end, where several boards had been placed in a crude lean-to. It was too small for both Idalee and Kyra to fit comfortably, so Kyra pushed aside the cloth covering its opening and peered inside. Someone shivered underneath a pile of blankets. "Lettie?"

The form shifted and a small, round face turned toward her. The child's normally large eyes were half closed, and Kyra could tell from Lettie's raspy breathing that something wasn't right. Every time the child took a breath, she winced. Kyra put her hand on Lettie's forehead. It was warm to the touch.

"Can she walk?" Kyra asked Idalee.

"A bit, but you've got to go slow, and she coughs if you walk too fast."

"Well, I can't carry her all the way," Kyra muttered. She thought for a moment. "Why don't I take Lettie back with me? I'll bring her to a healer tomorrow."

Though Kyra's landlord might not like that plan. Last year, Kyra had let Idalee and Lettie stay with her during a blizzard. When Laman discovered them, he'd pulled Kyra aside and made it clear that he had no intentions of turning The Drunken Dog into an orphanage. Well, Laman didn't need to know, and Bella wouldn't say anything.

Idalee nodded. "Come on, Lettie, you're going home with Kyra." She coaxed her sister out of the blankets and tied a small gray cloak around her neck. Lettie coughed but didn't complain. The little girl whispered a question as she took Kyra's hand.

"What?" Kyra asked. Lettie always spoke in a barely audible tone. Kyra leaned closer and laughed.

"Well, I don't know if there's any more stew, but I'm sure Bella will have something equally tasty tonight."

As Idalee had predicted, Kyra and Lettie's walk back to The Drunken Dog took quite a while. The tavern was already filling with a lively after-dinner crowd when they returned. Brendel had set up in his favorite corner and was tuning his lute in front of a brightly colored painting of dragons and dryads. Kyra remembered that he was going to sing "Lady Evelyne" tonight.

"Lettie, do you want to hear the talesinger?"

Kyra guided Lettie to a table, then ducked into the kitchen to fetch some food. Lettie's eyes opened wide at the chicken pie Kyra brought out.

"Don't burn your tongue," Kyra said. Lettie gripped her spoon with an eagerness that made Kyra suspect her warning was useless. As they both dug in, Brendel strummed a few chords and cleared his throat.

"Good evening, good gentlemen and ladies." There were some good-natured heckles from the

audience, which the young talesinger acknowledged with a charming grin. “I’ve always loved the tale of noble Lady Evelyne, and I know many of you do as well. Tonight, I am honored to play for you the first act, which I just finished penning”—he made a show of counting on his fingers—“seven hours ago.”

As the laughter died down, Brendel launched straight into the opening chords. He sang of the felbeast—the giant bear-creature that ravaged the countryside long ago. Kyra glanced nervously at Lettie during one of Brendel’s more convincing growls, but the child, fascinated by Brendel’s quick-moving fingers, seemed unfazed. Then the talesinger switched to a softer melody. In a high falsetto, he sang the part of Lady Evelyne. She wept for her people and wondered if the carnage could be stopped. The noble lady gathered her courage, bid good-bye to her family and betrothed, and entered the forest to confront the felbeast.

“That’s how we know the ballad in’t true,” said a familiar voice at Kyra’s shoulder. “A real fatpurse would have sacrificed a servant girl instead.”

Kyra turned her head.

Behind her, James inclined his head in greeting. “Good to see you again. Join me for a flagon?”

T H R E E

Brendel's song washed over Kyra as she scrambled to gather her wits. "Right now?" she asked.

He gave her a mocking smile. "Unless you're eager to hear the ballad."

Kyra jerked her head toward Lettie, who was so engrossed in Brendel's performance she hadn't yet noticed James. "I can't leave her alone."

"She'll be fine. Keep her in view while we talk."

Kyra scanned the room, hoping to see Flick in the crowd, but he wasn't there. For a moment, Kyra considered telling James that she really did want to hear the rest of the ballad. But then, what was she afraid of? The only thing James had done so far was overpay her. Kyra schooled her features and nodded. Lettie barely acknowledged Kyra when she tapped her on the shoulder and told her where she was going.

James led her to a nearby table. As Kyra slid onto the bench across from him, he beckoned to a serving girl and ordered two mugs of ale.

"I trust you got some rest this morning?" he asked.

"Aye."

The ensuing silence was interrupted by the serving girl returning with the ale. James pushed one mug toward Kyra. She wet her lips but didn't drink.

"How long have you been in your current trade, Kyra?"

"About eight years." Kyra wrapped both hands around the mug. The chill seeped into her palms and made her shiver.

"Is it a good living?"

She hesitated. "Why are you asking?"

"Of course, I apologize for my rudeness," he said smoothly. "You're right to be suspicious. I'm asking because we were impressed with your work last night."

"Who's 'we'?"

"We're looking for someone with your skills. Your agility, how you can move without being seen. You searched the compound for longer than you'd planned without getting caught, and you kept your head when you couldn't find the loot. I see your skills have served you well in your current way of life."

"I'm a thief," she said curtly.

"A thief," he echoed. "How much coin do you make, as a thief?"

"Enough." She didn't quite succeed in removing the defensiveness from her voice.

James scanned the dining room. “Enough to feed yourself and pay for decent lodging.” His tone made the sentence seem more a question than a statement. Kyra felt an uneasy stirring in her stomach. Did he know she was short on coin? She wasn’t in danger of being evicted, but recently it had become much harder to pay her lodging. The entire city was suffering from the attacks in the outskirts.

James continued. “Why does someone with your talents have to scramble for rent?”

So he did know. What else did he know about her? “We’ve got to be careful,” she said.

“Wallhuggers get suspicious if there’s too much going on.”

“Then why not move to less-guarded homes?”

“If someone can buy guards to watch his trinkets, he’s got more than his fair share. I in’t fixing to steal someone’s bread money. And even with the wallhuggers, we need to be careful what we take. I won’t risk my neck for a jewelry collection when nobody in the city buys stones anymore. Folk are scared, ’cause of the raids.” Kyra paused and shifted her eyes to his face. “Actually, I’m wondering who you’d lined up to take that ruby.”

“Ah, the ruby.” James met Kyra’s gaze, the corners of his mouth lifting as if sharing a private joke. “Pity you couldn’t find it.” He might as well have admitted flat out that the ruby had never existed. “We deal mostly with the wallhuggers,” James continued before Kyra had a chance to think further. “If you worked with us, you wouldn’t have to worry about taking someone’s dinner. You wouldn’t have to worry about coin at all. We take good care of our own.”

“How good is that?”

“How’d you like to own a house in the city?”

“A house?”

Just the thought made her mouth go dry. Only the nobles and merchants owned property. What he was offering was impossible. Though with the way he’d paid her this morning...

“You still haven’t told me who you are,” she said.

“We’re a group who takes opportunities as we see them.” He chose his words carefully, picking his way through his sentence like a jeweler selecting stones. “Sometimes we cooperate with others; sometimes we pursue our own plans.”

“And your plans don’t always agree with the Palace,” Kyra finished.

“The Palace serves money and privilege. They uphold the laws because the laws suit them. The rest of us have to fight to control our fates.”

Several factors suddenly came together. James’s words and appearance—his quickness and the aura of quiet lethality that surrounded him—brought some old stories into Kyra’s mind.

“The Assassins Guild,” she blurted.

His lips curled into a smile. “There are some in the city who call us that.”

Images flitted through Kyra’s mind. A secret band of men who exercised power in Forge’s underworld. Deadly assassins who killed with impunity. “The whispers are real, then? The Guild is

back?”

“It depends on which stories you’ve heard. We’re not murderers for hire. We just do what’s needed to reach our goals.”

“And what are those?”

“As I was saying, the city favors those who are born into power. But not all in power use it well, and not all with money deserve it. We act as a...balancing force. To make sure that those born outside the Palace walls don’t get trampled by those born within.”

She snorted. “Are you trying to tell me that the Guild is some kind of talesinger’s hero? The stories can’t all be false.”

His smile was quick and tight. “In case you haven’t noticed, the Palace’s got armies at its beck and call. They need more convincing than mere words and a handshake.”

Kyra shook her head. “Your goals are too high-thinking for me. I just do what I need to get by.”

“You say that, but your actions say otherwise. Didn’t you just tell me that you only steal from the rich? But you don’t have to share our goals to help us. The benefits for you would be more immediate.”

Kyra noticed she had begun to lean away from him. Perhaps he noticed as well, because he continued. “We don’t need you as an assassin. You’re too small. I’m guessing you’re useless in a fight, despite your speed.”

Though she recoiled at the thought of killing for hire, she bristled at his dismissive tone. “Then what do you want me for?”

“The strengths you’ve built over the last eight years. We need someone who can get in the Palace without being noticed.”

“If you want me to get something for you, just hire me.”

“It can’t be job by job. You’re good, but we’ll need to train you further. You’ll need to gather information from the Palace without raising suspicions.”

“What was wrong with the way I cracked the Palace last night?”

Now he looked amused. “I apologize again. I was unclear. We know you can crack the outer Palace compound. What we need is someone who can do the same thing, but in the Fastkeep.”

Kyra let her breath out with a hiss. “That’s dangerous.”

“You don’t strike me as someone who’d worry about that. You’ll be well compensated, of course.”

“What’s the point if I’m dead?”

“Are you refusing my offer, then?”

Kyra opened her mouth to say yes, but no sound came out. Despite the insanity of what he was proposing, she was intrigued. There was no reason to completely refuse him now. “I’ll think about it,” she said.

“Very well,” he answered. “See Rand over there?” He gestured toward a redheaded man drinking

at one of the other tables. She nodded.

“If you change your mind, tell him. He knows where to find me.”

“The Assassins Guild?” asked Flick. “I’d think assassins would be too busy killing people to be secretly running the city.”

Flick bounced Lettie higher in his arms as he and Kyra weaved between horses, people, and wagons. Lettie was weaker today, barely moving as she snuggled into Flick’s shoulder.

“He says they’re not assassins for hire,” Kyra explained again.

“What do they do, then, bake sweet buns and feed orphans?”

She’d had the same doubts, but somehow it was annoying to hear them from Flick. Kyra scowled. “You’re not a plum citizen yourself.”

He ignored her jab. “What exactly is it that James wants from you?”

“Same things I’ve been doing—raiding and fetching. He didn’t go into specifics.” She took a deep breath. “I could use the coin.”

Flick was silent for a moment. “How far behind are you?”

“I’m paid up on my lodging now with what James gave me. But I’m still going from job to job. I don’t like that.”

He frowned and shifted Lettie’s weight to his other hip. “Mayhap I could help.”

“No, you can’t. You’ve got your own money troubles. Why are you arguing so much, anyway? You’re usually the first to hatch something against the wallhuggers.”

He didn’t argue her point, but after another pause, he spoke again. “Maybe we can figure something else out. I don’t trust him.”

They stopped in front of a cottage. “This is Miranda’s house,” Flick said, freeing one arm to knock on the door.

“How do you know her?”

“She hired me and a friend once to patch up her wall.”

A small woman with silver hair and wizened hands answered.

“Flick!” Miranda beamed and reached up to give him a hug. Kyra rolled her eyes when they weren’t looking. This was typical for Flick. Gets hired to do one odd job, and on their next meeting, the woman greets him like a long-lost son. Flick was always trying to get Kyra to meet new people, and some introductions took better than others.

“This is my friend Kyra,” Flick said, lightly pushing her forward. “And this”—he patted Lettie on the head—“is our patient.” Lettie smiled shyly and clung to his chest.

The odor of dried herbs hit Kyra as she entered. She looked for the source and spotted shelves of jars along the walls, carefully labeled in precise handwriting. Some of the jars—mint, dandelion root, willow—Kyra recognized. Others looked to be from across the Aerins, which was intriguing. Not

many healers could boast such rare herbs. One empty jar read SEAWEED-NYMPH GROWN. Another, labeled GRIFFIN TAIL, had a few tattered feathers at the bottom. Kyra noticed that they didn't look anything at all like the chicken feathers the boy in the street had been selling. Meanwhile, Miranda was listening to Lettie's breathing, looking at her tongue, and occasionally asking Kyra questions.

"Her lungs are weak," the healer finally said. "I can give her herbs, but the best thing would just be to keep her warm." Miranda mixed some herbs with water and started it boiling on the stove. "It will cost more than usual, I'm afraid. Medicines are scarce since the Demon Riders started raiding the countryside."

"Demon Riders?" Flick asked. Kyra leaned in to hear better. News of the barbarians was becoming too common for comfort.

"I've not seen them," said Miranda, "but I *have* gone out there to help the injured. The survivors talk of folk who ride on the backs of giant beasts."

"How bad are the raids?" asked Flick.

"They come quickly, they leave quickly. They go mostly for livestock, but they're brutal to those who resist them. It's a horrible sight to see." Miranda sighed. "I help those I can, but many are beyond help by the time I get there. The caravans don't travel as often since the raids started, and they've raised their prices for all their goods. Rare ingredients are all but impossible to come by. I could have saved some from infection if I'd had dryad hair, but the Far Ranger caravans no longer come here. They come too far, traveling over the Aerin Mountains, to risk losing it to barbarians."

"Dryad hair?" asked Flick. Like Kyra, he was skeptical of the fantastical stories from across the mountains.

"One of the best remedies I know," said Miranda. "Nothing on this side—herbs, roots, animals—comes even close. But the supply has just trickled off." Miranda removed the boiling pot and poured its contents through a cloth, straining out the leaves. "But enough of this. We'll scare the child. Just be careful if you leave the city." She transferred the potion into a leather flask and handed it to Kyra. "Have her breathe the fumes whenever she has trouble."

"Come here, Lettie." Kyra opened the flask and stuck it under the girl's nose. The child obediently took several deep breaths. "Feel any different?" Kyra asked.

Lettie nodded. "It hurts less."

Kyra scrutinized the girl, surprised that the herbs would work so quickly. But there did seem to be a difference. The tension was gone from Lettie's face, and she no longer winced with each breath.

"This potion should be good for a week," Miranda said. "Would you like some herbs for more batches? It would be four coppers per measure."

"How much would we need?" Kyra asked.

"We could try three weeks' worth and see if she improves."

Three weeks' worth would be twelve coppers. Kyra did some calculations in her head. If she

bought the medicine, would her money last until she found another job? It would be tight, but she could probably do it. She pulled out her coin purse and paid the healer, thanking her again as they left.

“Why don’t you go back,” Kyra told Flick as they stood outside Miranda’s house. “I’ll take Lettie straight to Idalee. I don’t want to keep them apart too long.”

“You know your way from here?”

“Well enough.”

Flick straightened, a sly grin on his face. “Well then, I might stop by the wool district on my way back.”

Kyra raised an eyebrow. “You still courting that merchant’s daughter? She’s a mite above your station, don’t you think?”

“Above my station? I’ll remind you that I am the son of a nobleman.”

“*Bastard* son.”

Flick raised his arms in an exaggerated stretch as he walked away. “I’m still closer to the wall than you.”

Kyra watched him go, buoyed slightly by his good spirits. Flick hadn’t seen his father since his mother died. She’d been a merchant’s daughter as well, but was thrown out by her family when they found out about her affair with Flick’s father. She managed to get by for a while as his mistress—until she became ill and the nobleman lost interest. Any mention of his father used to send Flick into low spirits, but it seemed that even deep wounds healed with time.

Kyra tied the medicine to her belt. “Want to try walking?” she asked Lettie.

Their progress was slow, but they weren’t rushed for time, and it was interesting to explore a new part of the city. These streets were quieter than the ones around The Drunken Dog, the houses more spread out. As they walked, Kyra thought over James’s offer. Flick was right. There was something unsettling about James. But still, the thought of interesting work and regular coin was tempting.

Ahead of them, the road narrowed into a footbridge. Two Red Shields stood at the bottom of the steps, and Kyra suppressed her usual instinct to run. It was unlikely that they were after her, and backing away would just draw attention to herself. One of the Red Shields, an ugly fellow with a rust-colored beard, stopped her as she and Lettie came closer. “Bridge toll. One copper.”

“Toll?” asked Kyra.

“One copper. Is it your ears or your head that’s slow?”

She knew better than to respond to his insult. “I in’t heard of any bridge tolls,” she said.

The other Red Shield, a stocky man with a wide nose, came closer. “New orders from the Palace. This past week,” he said with a smirk.

It was a farce. The Red Shields were lining their own pockets, and they didn’t care if Kyra knew. She was wise, she’d pay the toll and be on her way. But she was low on coin already after buying the girl’s medicine.

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