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## Introduction

Finding a character you want to write about again and again is always a thrill for me. I say “finding” rather than “creating” because when such a character emerges on the page, he (or she) slowly reveals his personality, strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes. He matures and develops like a child, over time enriching the experience of both the writer and the reader. He almost has as much input into his stories as the writer, until it nearly becomes a situation where the writer turns into a secretary, merely taking down dictation from the character.

For me, Brendell has become such a character. I have always been fan of such fantasy authors as deCamp, Pratt, Leiber and others from the late 50's to early 70's, and I believe Brendell would have felt quite at home with the Gray Mouser. But while there are precedents for rogue characters in fantasy or science fiction (Laumer's Retief and Harrison's Stainless Steel Rat for example), his immediate spiritual ancestor is not from fantasy at all. When I was first investigating the Brendell character, the fictional template that came to mind was Jonathan Gash's Lovejoy, the antiques dealer/detective who has become so beloved by mystery fans. If Lovejoy were placed in a more primitive world, what would he have become? I believe you will soon read the answer.

Brendell is an apprentice thief to the Thief's Guild, and as such he is often taken advantage of ... by his Guild and by his clients. One loyal reader complained that, after the first four stories appeared, Brendell had not yet become a journeyman, the next logical goal for anyone involved in a trade union. I know people in trade unions and their apprenticeship can be a long and arduous process. And while Brendell lives in a fantasy world, it is a world that has its own rules which must be adhered to, a world that has slowly become exposed and developed from one episode to the next. Does Brendell finally earn his long-desired journeyman's card? That will be revealed later in this book.

Many of these adventures have appeared earlier in various e-zines. Brendell made his maiden journey in the pages of the late, lamented *Eternity On-Line*. His presence in the premiere issue is an honor I take some pride in. It is not often that a beginning writer is published in the first issue of any magazine, and while I had placed a few stories previously, it *was* the first e-zine story I received any compensation for. Before *Eternity* closed its web site, five different Brendell stories appeared there; in order “Slipped Disc,” “Contract Flaw,” “Rites of Tenure,” “Thief of Hearts,” and “Scepter Fidelis.” None of these stories is still available on the ‘net (at least not to my knowledge and certainly not legally). Three other Brendell adventures have appeared elsewhere; “Guardian Angle” (in *Tavern Wench Journal*) “Statue of Limitations” (in *The Wandering Troll*) and “Tiny Losses” (in *Twilight Times*). Except for some middling “tightening up” to which I and most other writers are prone, I have left the previously published stories as they originally appeared. The other stories are new for this anthology.

The challenge in doing a continuing character is keeping the stories fresh while maintaining the internal consistency demanded by the character and his world. Most of the stories are essentially mysteries, magic is involved in about half of Brendell's adventures. Brendell survives and conquers by using his wits and talents learned at the Thief's Academy, not by strength or skill with weapons. The stories are presented in roughly chronological order, which is not the order in which the stories were originally written. There are a dozen tales total in this volume (Brendell for some reason doesn't lend himself often to stories under 5,000 words. He is a talkative sort after all).

What lies ahead for who I like to think (I have delusions like everyone else) is the Internet's favorite thief? I believe that is hinted at in the Epilogue, also new for this volume. I hope you enjoy Brendell. I have had a wonderful time chronicling his adventures and I for one wish to spend more time with him. I hope you will as well.

Travel well.

—Patrick Welch, January 2002

## Slipped Disk

Dachne's best inn, the Maid and the Unicorn, was unusually quiet for an early afternoon. Two wayfarers were engrossed in a conversation near the hearth while the saloonkeeper and several farmers were contentedly gambling the day away. Even the serving wench was more attentive to her hair than to her customers. Which suited me perfectly.

I sat in a darkened corner sipping my wine while waiting impatiently for my client, Freik. Nestled in my satchel, the jewel pressed against my leg ... the jewel I had been commissioned to steal. I was eager to transfer it to its new owner. In exchange for a considerable amount of gold, of course.

"Why not just bring it to my establishment?" Freik had complained when I explained the arrangements. "Because I do not trust you," I replied honestly. Signed contract or not, I had learned long ago that a thief who wishes a long and profitable career trusts no one. Even, on occasion, himself.

Thus the Maid and the Unicorn. Still not a perfectly safe location, but a public one and neutral as well. Or so I thought.

Freik entered fifteen minutes late. His attempt at disguising himself was laughable; the cowled cloak only called more attention to himself. Yet the others in the inn paid no notice as he made his cautious way back to my table. He seemed only slightly reassured when he saw I was alone. "You have it?" he asked immediately, taking the chair across from me.

"I wouldn't be meeting with you if I didn't," I replied evenly. "Do you?"

He pulled a satchel from his pocket and emptied 50 gold crowns on the table. "Let me see it."

"Put those back in your purse first," I said, nodding at the currency after counting it. After he complied, I opened my own satchel and withdrew the jewel. It was a red ruby as large as a man's fist; I could understand Freik's desire to own it. I held it out long enough for him to see it, then returned it to safekeeping. "We will now set our purses on the table. I will take yours, you will take mine. Then you leave and our business is concluded."

Freik nodded and obeyed. "Just one second," I seized his hand as he was seizing his hard-bought property. I opened his satchel and poured its contents on the table. A shower of lead coins tumbled out. "I see you must have made a mistake and taken out the wrong purse," I said casually even as I increased the pressure on his wrist.

Freik grimaced and nodded quickly. "Yes, yes, so I did. Here," he fumbled in his cloak, "this is the right one."

Still clasping his wrist, I opened the new purse with the blade of my knife. Gold coins glittered within. Nodding, I released his hand and took my payment. "A pleasure doing business with you, Freik," I said, quite sincere. "If you ever require my services again, you know how to contact me."

Freik favored me with a grimace, then rose and left hastily. I stifled a laugh as the door closed behind him. Such an amateurish ploy to cheat me of my payment! I had noted he pulled the satchel with the gold from his left pocket, yet he pulled the second from his right. I could have done the same to him, of course, but that was against Guild rules. Honest thievery under contract was one thing; cheating your patron was quite another. Besides, the gold was more valuable to me than any jewel.

I was still savoring my wine and dreaming of my new fortune and ways to enjoy it when a man

approached my table. He must have entered while Freik and I were in negotiations because I had not noticed him before. And he was a man I, or anyone, would have noticed. He towered before me, nearly as tall and wide as a pony. Yet the voice that emerged was surprisingly soft and high. "You are Brendell, I believe? A member of the Thief's Guild?"

"Yes." I saw no reason to lie since the man obviously knew who I was.

He studied me like a woman perusing fruit at a market. "You don't look like much of a thief," he snorted.

In truth I do not. Except for my long, curling hair, I am about as nondescript as a person could be. Watery blue eyes, thin lips and nose; hardly handsome or notable in any way. Which was an asset in my profession. "You are here to insult me?"

"Of course not. I have a business proposition to discuss."

"Then sit. Buy us both some wine."

He shook his head. "Not here. Too many know me here. There is another tavern down the street..."

I glanced around the nearly empty establishment. There could be few places more private than this. "I am currently employed. I cannot accept any commissions at the moment," I fabricated smoothly.

"That is not what Freik said."

I felt a chill. "Freik? The name is unfamiliar."

"Really." The smile he gave was far from inviting. "Freik is the man who left your presence just a few short minutes ago. They," he nodded at the two men by the fire who were now watching us intently, "will attest to that."

*This is proving to be a most interesting day.* "Since you know that, you must also know I was under a legitimate Guild contract and in his legal employ. You must be the man from whom I stole the jewel."

He nodded.

I finished my wine. "In that case you must also know I cannot steal it back for you. Conflict of interest. There are other Guild members you can hire..."

The man, who I now knew was Greymark, shrugged. "I was impressed by your work, if not by your success. I have a different proposition in mind. Again, I cannot discuss it here." He gestured. "Come with me. I have no animosity towards you. I have contracted thieves in the past myself."

I noted that the two "wayfarers" were purposely approaching our table. They were doubtless under contract as well. *Assassin's Guild?* "I had planned a sabbatical," I said gaily, rising. "I hear Parinphal is most lovely this time of year. But," I glanced at the two men now standing behind Greymark, "if you insist."

I continued chatting as we left the inn and started down the street. "It's not often that I find employment from one of my providers. I will have to thank Freik the next time I see him."

"You will see him soon enough," Greymark said with a snarl. "Down here," and he shoved me roughly into an alley. We found Freik, held motionless by two other men, at the end of it. Confident I wasn't going anywhere, Greymark walked up to Freik. "You are a coward and a fool, Freik. Trying to take something of mine. Using a petty thief."

"I'm no petty thief!" I retorted instantly. The remainder of my riposte was cut off by the unmistakable pressure of a sword pressing against my back.

Greymark glared at me, then returned his attention to the merchant. "Now where is it?" He searched my erstwhile employer. He tossed away the satchel of worthless coins, then smiled as he withdrew the ruby. "There is no law against stealing back my own property," he grinned at Freik.

"Actually there is," I pointed out. "Unless you are a licensed member of the Guild..."

"Enough," he waved me silent. He approached, opened my own cloak and saw my knife hanging at my side. He withdrew it and admired the heavily inlaid handle. "Your sigil I take it?" he pointed to the sleeping dragon engraved with silver thread in the ebony handle.

I had selected the symbol for good luck. It was meant to ensure that my victims would be as lax in their watchfulness as the resting creature and make my task considerably easier. The sigil was as unique as my signature ... and as well-known. "Of course."

"A most unfortunate occurrence," he said as he walked up to Freik. "We have witnesses that saw you and the deceased arguing in the inn. About some sort of contract or payment I believe." One of the men holding Freik pressed his hand over the latter's mouth while Greymark waved my blade before his eyes. "He left, you followed, cornered him in this alley and killed him like so." He drove my blade deep into Freik's stomach, then pulled upward, slitting him open like a fish. Freik was allowed to collapse lifeless on the ground, my dagger still buried within him. Greymark used Freik's cloak to wipe the blood from his hands, then returned his attention to me. "Most unprofessional, Brendell. A violation of Guild rules, I believe."

He was quite correct on that. "It is also a violation to interfere with a contract once it has been successfully completed," I took pains to point out.

"But it wasn't. I have my property," he said and held up the ruby mockingly. "Now here is my proposition. You perform an assignment for me or we will go to the authorities." He glanced once at the dead man. "Murder is a crime here in Dachne. The argument. One of my men finding your knife near the body. Careless of you." His men rolled the murdered merchant over, removed my blade, cleaned it and handed it to Greymark. "A beautiful weapon," he said. "It will be your payment for successful completion of your contract."

The sword in my back was becoming increasingly uncomfortable. I took a step forward ... and was immediately seized. "Enough," I said, offering only a token struggle. "What is it you want me to steal?"

"A most interesting bauble," Greymark began.

I threw another limb on the fire in a futile attempt to keep warm. Nearby my horse nickered sadly. I hate riding and avoid it whenever possible. Now it showed in every aching muscle. "You couldn't live in a village like a normal man, could you, Coberan?" I muttered.

Thanks to the Guild and its libraries, I knew where Coberan lived; a manor deep within the Elgin forest. The Guild was always eager to provide information to its members ... at a fee, of course. They were far less willing to provide assistance or protection against Greymark beyond promising that Greymark would have difficulties finding a Guild member for future gainful employment. "Then what am I paying dues for?" I had argued with the secretary. He had only shrugged and suggested I take it up at the next meeting. Whenever that was.

It certainly would be well after I had to return with the jewel or find myself accused and wanted for the



murder of Freik. Not that I couldn't avoid Dachne; I didn't want to. Greymark had broken the rules. Freik may have provided additional employment; at least a reference or two. Then Greymark had stolen *my* knife, one I had paid dearly for. Greymark had to be taught that one does not steal from a thief. Worse, the money I was spending for the horse, use of Guild resources and miscellaneous was coming from *my* purse. This was not acceptable.

And I had to spend the night in the forest! This galled me the most. A Guild member should never have to endure such an indignity. I was trained to open locks, avoid guards (human and otherwise), lift purses, bribe, impersonate, counterfeit. Not how to build a campfire. Like I said, not acceptable.

I munched glumly on rock bread and salted pork and stared into the fire, planning. The information gleaned from the Guild had been thorough ... as far as it went. The floor plans of Coberan's estate were clear and easily memorized. I knew that Coberan was reputed to be a dabbler in arcane arts. I knew that the "bauble" Greymark craved—an obsidian disk etched with gold and diamond runes—was locked within Coberan's secret library. The disk itself was reputed to have powers of its own. More troubling was the rumor that Coberan employed demons to guard his property.

"This cannot be verified," the report had stated. "However, there have been no contracts successfully completed on the Coberan residence. We recommend all Guild members consider this carefully when negotiating an agreement with a prospective employer."

For the Guild, such a pronouncement was the equivalent of a 100-foot sign screaming "Hands Off."

"Good advice," I whispered. "Wish I could take it." Instead I threw a few more logs on the fire, curled up within my blanket and tried to get some sleep. Tomorrow I would go to work.

From my perch high in the tree I looked over the sylvan setting that was Coberan's estate. The three-story stone estate was surrounded by a wide vista of well-groomed grass. A brick-inlaid lane ran invitingly up to the oak and mahogany front door. Visually the building was as threatening as a firefly and as inviting as a whore.

I knew better. I knew there was a cellar below where Coberan kept tools of torture. I knew a contingent of assassins lived within the residence. And for his seemingly unarmed fortress to resist the efforts of the Guild for so long could only mean he indeed had otherworldly resources available. "Assassins by day, demons by night." I had no interest in avoiding demons. Which meant only one course of action was open to me.

Guards were already awaiting me when I walked up brazenly to the front porch. "Is Mister Coberan here?" I greeted them pleasantly. "I have an issue I wish to discuss with him."

One stepped forward, weapon drawn. "Master Coberan speaks to no one. Be on your way."

"I've come a long way. I really need to speak to him. Tell him it's about the Disk of Gnarunia."

I was still finishing my sentence when the guard pressed his sword against my throat. "What do you know of the disk?" he demanded.

I gurgled a reply.

My captor nodded to his comrade, who immediately went inside. He remained, his sword still pressing perilously against my jugular. If he sneezed or hiccuped he would kill me instantly. We stood thus for a seeming eternity, he not moving, me not daring to. Finally the other returned. "Bring him to the library. The master will interview him there." They searched me roughly, found no weapons, then shoved me

inside.

The sword in my back guided me down the long hallway, past the dining and sitting rooms (and I was relieved to see that the Guild's maps were accurate about those at least) straight to the library at the far eastern corner of Coberan's domicile. Coberan was seated at a desk, several tomes open before him, as we entered.

Coberan looked up from his work and studied me reluctantly. He was an old, frail man, no threat to me or anyone. His charges were. "What do you know of the Disk of Gnarunia?" he demanded in a deceptively strong, deep voice.

"Why, nothing," I replied, which was almost the truth. "I was sent by my patron to inquire if you would like to sell it, that is all."

"And who is your patron?" I told him. "Yes, Greymark. Of course, it is always him. And he wants to *buy* it?" He laughed. "As if the disk would ever be available for *any* sum!" He nodded to his guards. "Take him to the stocks. We'll torture him later."

"Wait," I protested desperately as the guards dragged me from the room. "My patron is prepared to offer you a princely sum. 200 gold crowns! Or if that is insufficient..." The rest of my arguments were lost behind closed doors.

I was quick-marched to the basement, where I was treated to a close-up view of various instruments of persuasion while being pushed towards the cells in the back. They stripped me, searched my clothing, found nothing, then chained me to a wall and locked the cell door. They were laughing and telling jokes among themselves—about my fate most assuredly—as they left me to my own devices.

I had several. The leg and arm irons were uncomfortable but loose; I was easily able to find the lock pick I had hidden within my own flowing locks. With less than a minute I was free to roam within my cell.

I decided personal congratulations were in order. One of the first Guild lessons was that a manor, business, palace or whatever was designed for protection from *break-ins*. Once you were in, getting *out* was much easier. Not that my approach was one my instructors would have recommended, granted. "But it worked," I said to the rat eyeing me hungrily in the corner.

Now it was time to get dressed. But not in my own clothing. I easily picked the prison lock and stepped into the narrow stone corridor. I was fortunate no others lingered here; Coberan's well-earned reputation effectively deterred uninvited visitors. I crouched behind the heavy wooden door separating the two rooms and peered through the keyhole. One guard was keeping languid watch. *Perfect*.

It was more difficult from the opposite side and I had to be more alert, but within five minutes I had picked this lock as well. I reached under the sill and sloooowly pulled the door back, watching the guard all the while. He, however, was more interested in his noontday meal and paid no attention as I was able to open it enough for a small object to get by. Like a rat.

I padded back to my cell; luckily my roommate was still there. "Here, kitty, kitty," I cooed as I approached it. It looked at me, snarled, then darted past me out of the cell. "Not that way," I told it as it ran into an open cell. I chased it from there and a third as well before it finally got the idea and ran straight toward—and past—the chamber door.

I was right behind it, although I stopped at the portal. Once again I watched the guard through the keyhole. He jumped as the rat raced past, swore, then turned and noticed the door was ajar. Swearing again, he rose and briskly walked towards it, removing the keys from his belt as he did so. I pulled the

door back just a few inches farther and held my breath. *Come closer, sweetheart*, I ordered silently.

He did. I brought the door back another foot. He approached another foot also, placing himself well within the doorway. Which is when I jumped up and slammed the door shut with all my strength.

I was rewarded with a gasp and a loud crack of flesh and bone against wood. The guard was stunned but still on his feet when I reopened the door, but not for long. I grabbed his sword and knocked him out, then pulled him back inside, shutting the door behind me. Quickly I undressed him and, for good measure, chained him in my erstwhile cell. He was bigger and taller than I, but his uniform fit well enough. And the helmet would hide my features adequately.

On the way out of the catacombs I stopped long enough to finish his lunch, lock the door to the final chamber, hide the keys (this took less time than it sounds; the food was almost gone). I even found a quill and some parchment, which immediately inspired me. After jotting a quick note, I walked confidently into the next room. The guards in there were surprised to see me. "Where are you going?" one demanded.

"Bathroom," I said curtly, not turning to look at them. I continued right past them, up the stairs and onto the first floor. It was time to steal the Disk of Gnarunia.

The manor was bustling with guards, but none paid me any attention as I made my way directly and confidently toward the back of the building. I reached the library and knocked on the door timidly. "What is it?" Coberan demanded from within.

"The prisoner," I explained as I entered brazenly. "We found a note we thought you should see." I walked up to his desk and handed him my hastily scrawled message.

"Couldn't this wait until we question him?" he complained. He grabbed it roughly and opened it. "Duck. What does that..."

I brought the flat of my sword down on the top of his head just as he was looking up. He collapsed with a satisfying thud across his desk. I ripped his silk shirt into shreds and bound and gagged him to his chair, then walked over to the library wall on the right. According to the Guild, the secret door to the secret room was accessed through here. Somehow.

Even though I was sure no guard would have the courage to interrupt us, I locked the library door anyway, then studied the shelves which contained the hidden entry. A sliding book perhaps? A lever attached to one of the ornamental bookends that were so pervasive? I returned to Coberan's desk but a quick search told me nothing. Then I studied Coberan. Old, feeble, and much shorter than I. Anything higher than the fourth shelf would be difficult for him to reach, and stooping, at his age, was surely a painful endeavor. I returned to the shelves and concentrated on the third and fourth shelves. I stripped two shelves of books and other objects; nothing. Then a globe caught my eye. I spun it idly and was rewarded with a soft click; the top opened and I was presented with two small levers. I pulled the left and nothing happened. I pulled the right ... and the panel next to me slid open softly. I had found the Disk of Gnarunia.

I entered the small chamber. The walls were covered with heavy black velvet curtains; candles burned everywhere. I ignored most of the other items because I saw my intended almost immediately; on a table directly in front of me rested an engraved obsidian disk. Next to it stood a small demon. "Hello, how are you today?" I said.

"Ssstopp," it hissed, its four eyes focusing on me. Its tail curled up and four taloned arms waved threateningly. "You not belong here."

"I'm sorry, I must have gotten lost. Where am I? Say, is that the Disk of Gnarunia?" I pointed to it.

"Come no clossser." It took one step toward me then stopped, waving its arms in what seemed to be demon frustration.

*Why doesn't it come after me?* I sidled to my right five or six feet. It tried to follow, but stopped well short. "You can't go any farther, can you? Is Coberan afraid you'll steal the silverware?" I asked, approaching but remaining well out of reach. It hissed in frustration and affirmation. "Nothing personal, but I really need that disk. I hate to do this, but..."

"Doo what?" it snarled, now even more frustrated.

"I have my own demon. Brocephus, take care of this for me."

"Brossephuss? I do not know that name."

"You don't know anything, you butt-ugly excuse for a demon," a voice called from elsewhere in the room.

The demon turned to the right. "Who iss that? Who dare enter this sssanctuary?"

"Your master, fool. Bow down and pledge your allegiance now!"

The demon turned to the left, to the right again. Yet two of his eyes remained fixed on me. I remained fixed exactly where I was. "I sssee you not. Sssshow yourssself. I demand it." Its tail slammed against the table and for a second I thought it would be knocked over.

Again the voice responded from an indeterminable direction. "Be glad you can't see yourself. You are one ugly critter."

"I demand you sssshow yourssself!" it screamed.

"Then look behind you, brain of stone," the voice mockingly called.

"Yesss," it roared, turned and grabbed for ... nothing. Which gave me enough time to leap forward and seize the disk. When it turned back, I was once again beyond the range of its invisible tether.

"Thanks," I said, showing it the disk. "I'm leaving now. Don't worry; I'll take Brocephus with me." I was trailed by a stream of harmless insults and curses as I left the room.

I chuckled as I closed the secret panel; ventriloquism had been one of my electives at the Guild Academy.

One more thing to do. The disk fit uncomfortably within my uniform, but to escape I needed a diversion. And a room filled with books in a home within a forest and protected by a moat of grass provided a perfect one. An oil lamp rested unlit on Coberan's desk. I removed the top, then scattered the contents of the reservoir across several shelves of books. The candle on his desk provided the flame. While the books began to smolder I untied Coberan; I had no interest in killing the man, but I hit him once again with my sword to make sure he would stay unconscious. I threw several more books into the flames, waited until the conflagration was suitably initiated, then walked calmly to the door.

Taking a deep breath, I opened it and raced into the corridor screaming. "Fire!" I yelled at the first guard I saw. "There is a fire in the master's library!" I grabbed his arm and pointed behind me. We both could see smoke beginning to seep out the door. "I'll get the others," I assured him. "Help the master."

The man looked at me for a second, prepared a question, then changed his mind and raced for the library. I continued racing the other way, down the hall, yelling "Fire!" at the top of my lungs. One guard tried to stop me. "Who are you?" he demanded even as he started towards the back of the manor. "Just assigned last week," I panted, wresting away from his grasp. "Fire!" I continued as I ran past him. Past the dining area. Out the front door. Down the winding lane into the sanctuary of the woods.

My horse and supplies were waiting patiently for me. I threw off and hid the guard's uniform. In my saddle bags lay the hooded robes of a priest, complete with a false beard. I donned the disguise and started back towards Dachne.

"Tell me what this says."

I was sitting with the Guild archivist in a private room off the library. My journey back had been uneventful except for my encounter with a farming family who asked me to bless their cattle. I mumbled some mumble and made silly motions with my hands and they left satisfied (and provided a suitable donation for my church). I was relieved to find a package waiting for me in my room at the Eight Knights Inn; its contents would make my continued existence less problematical. Now I was using the services of the Guild to discover exactly what Brendell had wrought.

"Most interesting," the squire offered as he rubbed his chin to emphasize the difficulty of his assigned task. "These runes are quite ancient; the language one that has long been buried in time and forgotten."

I was confident he was providing this information to justify his exorbitant fee. "I thought as much," I assured him. "But can you translate?"

"We may have the resources," he said after a suitably long ponder. "At the Guild we spare no effort or expense to assist the endeavors of our membership."

*Spare me the sales talk.* "I need to know soon, tonight if possible. The fee is immaterial." I almost choked on the last.

He nodded, satisfied. "Wait here." He left, only to reappear within minutes with a ponderous tome. "I believe we will find our solution within these pages," he said. Dust flew as he set the book down on the table and I sneezed involuntarily. "Catching a bit of a cold, are we?" he asked offhandedly as he began to peruse the parchment. "Ah, here we are," he said. "The glyphs of ancient Myotaca. A most interesting culture, but," he added, peering over his looking glass at me, "I suspect you are not interested in its history."

"Just in these runes."

He snorted; an academician disappointed in his student's lack of enthusiasm. I had heard that snort often during my academic career. "Let me see." He looked at the disk, back at his book, the disk, the book ... you get the idea. Then he clapped his hands and smiled. "Yes, I have it. Most unusual, however."

"Indeed, what does it say?"

"The diamonds merely form various constellations of the heavens, mostly decorative I would think. The silver symbols are another matter. Basically they mean 'boundaries,'" he pointed from one symbol to the next, "'forbidden' and 'travel.' Loosely translated, it says 'From within these walls you may not stray.' Most curious." He favored me with a raised eyebrow. "You do know that the Guild is interested in artifacts such as this. Unless your acquisition is contracted for, we would be happy to make you a fair offer."

*For one-hundredth its real value.* I shook my head, then studied the disk for several minutes. "Answer me this."

He listened, nodded, wrote on a small piece of parchment and handed it to me. "May I ask why?"

"No." I managed to smile as I paid him much more than I could afford. "I want it to be a surprise."

My next visit was to a smith. The Guild often used him to evaluate merchandise or occasionally purchase uncontracted items. In this instance I needed his trade skills. "You may be destroying the value of this piece," he explained after I told him what I wanted.

"I hope so. Can you do it? Today?"

"Of course." More gold crowns exchanged hands. But when I left I was ready to meet Greymark.

Two guards led me into Greymark's inner office. I had gone straight to his residence and vociferously demanded an audience. The merchant was very surprised to see me. "You actually have it? You actually have the Disk of Gnarunia?"

"Of course. I always fulfill my contracts."

"Let me see it."

I made to reach into my jerkin but my arms were immediately seized by the two guards. "I'm not going for a weapon," I complained sharply.

"Let him go," Greymark ordered. They obeyed reluctantly but kept their own weapons ready as I removed the disk and handed it to him. An expression between love and greed flashed across his face as he admired the obsidian treasure. "The Disk of Gnarunia," he breathed. "You actually were able to steal it."

"I *did* graduate third in my class."

"Indeed." He gazed into the disk. "The wonders you and I shall accomplish," he whispered. Then he returned his attention to me. "I am most pleased with your success, Brendell. It just so happens I have another assignment for you."

"I think not. I find your patronage, in fact your very presence, unpleasant at the least."

His eyes turned to ice. "Are you forgetting something? Your unfortunate encounter with Freik? Your dagger found near the poor deceased's body?"

"Oh, that." I smiled and opened my jerkin so he could see the dagger hanging safely at my side. *My* dagger. "I arranged to have it stolen while I was gone. The Guild was most happy to cooperate, especially since I offered Freik's ruby as payment." I winked. "You should find that's missing as well."

His face darkened and he trembled in muted rage. "In that case I have no further use for you. Guards, kill him."

One raised his sword but his taller companion stopped him. "We are not under contract to do that, Master," he said. "We are here to protect you from harm. This man is not threatening you. However," he smiled, "we can negotiate a contract acceptable to the Guild that will allow us to carry out such an order."

"No need," Greymark said after a minute's consideration. "I will handle it myself." He set the disk

carefully in front of him. "If you had only known what this is, Brendell, I doubt you would have ever brought it to me. This is a bridge to the other worlds. You are about to witness an event that very few have. I assure you it is not one you will survive."

He began to make arcane gestures over the etched plate while speaking syllables of some forgotten tongue. At first nothing happened, then I thought I saw the surface of the disk begin to cloud over. It was not my imagination; the air above the disk was darkening, then beginning to smolder. A shape was forming with the roiling cloud, a shape that slowly grew both in size and definition. Greymark grinned at me. "You are about to enjoy a first-hand experience with the Netherworld, Brendell."

"No, thanks; I've already had one." I rose slowly, waiting for the guards to stop me. But they were as entranced and fearful as I. "One thing you should know, Greymark."

"What is that?" His eyes never left the growing cloud before him. The burning shape was coalescing into a creature of fangs, talons, wings and glowing eyes. Within seconds it would be fully emerged.

"I took the liberty of altering that disk. Instead of 'forbidden,' it now reads 'permitted.'" Then I bolted towards the door. Greymark's screams followed me until I was far from his residence.

The Maid and the Unicorn was particularly crowded that evening. The favored topic of conversation: the unusual events which had occurred in the residence of the merchant Greymark earlier in the day. Still I had found a small table in the back of the room and was enjoying my wine when someone I recognized entered. It was the tall guard who had been at Greymark's earlier that afternoon. He saw me and walked over.

"That was a nasty trick you pulled on Greymark today," he greeted me with a grin. "Was that part of your contract?"

"It was a rider I added on my own. By the way, thanks for getting back my dagger."

Thief Guild member Phardoun shrugged. "The ruby was more than fair compensation."

"I was surprised to find you still there. Nice disguise."

"Yes, it was effective, wasn't it?" He grabbed a nearby serving wench and ordered a bottle of their best wine. "I was still doing research for the Guild, just in case another contract was taken out against Greymark," he explained, then frowned. "Guess that is unnecessary now."

That news disturbed me. You always hate to lose a prospective employer, even if only for another Guild member. "So Greymark is no more?"

He laughed. "You might say there's more of him, scattered all over the room like he was. That was one very angry demon he summoned. Once the carnage was complete, the creature returned to ... wherever. We destroyed the disk immediately after." Our wine arrived; he graciously filled up his tankard and mine. "To commerce," he toasted.

"To commerce," I agreed. Fortunately, my classmate was thirsty that evening, and rich as well. For old time's sake we drank and sang old college songs and lifted purses long into the morning.

## Contract Flaw

The cat eyed me with suspicion and curiosity. It knew I didn't belong here but it hadn't determined if I were friend or foe. So it maintained its perch next to the hearth, content—for now—to watch.

Now a dog would be different. As a professional thief, I dislike dogs intensely. And while my Guild offered extensive training in handling canines, I had yet to find a circumstance where their advice actually worked.

A cat, however. No one used watch cats unless they were magically enhanced, which was doubtful. Still it troubled me that I had not been informed there were animals in this residence. A small detail, true, but small details can lead to large and unpleasant consequences. What else hadn't I been told?

Time enough to worry about that later. The fire was small but provided sufficient light so I could admire the many treasures in the vast library. The merchant/Baron Mardou was not shy in displaying his riches; the room was littered with silver and golden artifacts, rich paintings and tapestries, jewel-encrusted goblets and many other temptations. Those, however, were not part of my contract. And no matter how I might wish otherwise, I was obligated and permitted to retrieve only one object.

A large portrait of the Baron hung prominently on the west wall. Guild records disclosed that behind it was a small safe. I approached it cautiously, then pulled on the lower left corner and the painting swung away from the wall. As promised, a recessed panel protected by a metal door and lock was revealed. I picked the lock within seconds and opened the door.

And was greeted by an eruption of sand and pepper. I fell back sneezing violently, desperately rubbing the sand from my eyes. My foot caught the leg of the table behind me and I fell, knocking it and the urn on top over with a terrific crash. The cat screeched and ran from the room while I huddled on the floor, still sneezing, still trying to regain my sight.

I could hear loud voices and approaching guards as I managed to regain my balance. I searched the room for a place to hide, but I had not the time even if a prospect had been available before two guards burst into the room, swords drawn. And there I was, still sneezing, still helplessly rubbing my eyes, standing next to the open safe. Brendell, apprentice thief, had been caught.

"Alert the Baron, then the authorities," one commanded. His comrade left; he remained with his sword drawn and pointed at my heart. "Do not move," he ordered.

"I can't help it," I protested, sneezing again to punctuate my excuse. I nodded at the safe. "That was a cruel trick. Clever, though," I admitted.

The guard grunted.

"Do you think I might sit?" I tried to smile while spitting sand. "I hurt my knee when I fell."

The guard, not much of a conversationalist, just shook his head.

"Look, you could put your sword down. It must be getting just a bit heavy right now. I'm not going anywhere anyway."

"No."

"Suit yourself. I for one am going to make myself comfortable." And I sat cross-legged on the floor.



We remained thus for a good ten minutes, he avoiding all my attempts at conversation, me still ejecting pepper from my nose at a noisy rate. Finally I heard the sound of more voices and footsteps approaching. Four men entered; two were dressed as guards, one was a constable. The tallest, and angriest, had to be Mardou.

"What is going on here?" he roared. "Why was my repose interrupted?" Then he noticed me. "And why is that man still alive?"

"I saw no reason to kill him," the man guarding me replied. "He has no weapons, he is no longer a threat. And we have caught him in the act."

"So we have," the Baron said, stroking his goatee as he walked over and studied me, then looked at the open safe and laughed. "Our little surprise worked quite well, I see. Now," he pulled out a blade and dangled it before me, "which of my competitors hired you? Andessey? Basille? The Caluga Cartel?"

"I can't tell you that," I replied after another sneeze. "That is privileged information protected by thief/client confidentiality."

"You will tell me or you will die!" he said, his three chins quivering as he brought his knife closer. "I shall kill you in any event."

"You cannot do that, Baron," the constable spoke for the first time.

Mardou turned and stared at the officer. "What are you saying? He broke into my house. He was caught trying to steal my property. And you say I have no right to kill him?"

"Until I arrived you could have done anything you wished. Now that I am here, however, we must follow established protocols." The constable shrugged. "I am sorry, Baron, but that is the law."

"The law?" The Baron threw up his hands. "How can there be a law for thieves?"

"Actually I am bound by a number of rules and regulations," I offered. "I cannot steal from my own clients or accept later employment from my contracts, for example. That would be conflict of interest. I can only steal what the contract stipulates. Personal violence beyond self-protection is not permitted. If I am..."

"Shut up!" the Baron said, then glared at the constable. "Is what he's saying true?"

"If he's a member of the Guild, yes."

"I have the contract with me," I offered quickly and reached towards my pocket ... and stopped immediately when the guard's sword was thrust within inches of my nose.

"Search him," Mardou said.

The guard complied roughly and removed my lock picks, my dagger and the contract. I had nothing else. He handed his spoils to his employer. The Baron read the contract quickly. "There is only one name on this. Brendell. Is that you?"

"Yes."

He pointed to the bottom. "Why is your employer's name missing? Why isn't it signed?"

"That is only a copy to protect his or her anonymity," I explained. "The original, signed contract is in Guild archives. Only those with proper credentials may access it."

The constable took the paper from the Baron and read it. "This is a valid Guild contract."

"So what do I do now?" Mardou asked, his hands trembling in frustration. "You say I can't have this man killed. You say someone is out to steal my property and I can't force him to tell me who or what? I can't do anything?"

"I will take this Brendell with me," the constable said, trying to calm him. "The Guild frowns on members who fail their contracts. Their punishment will be quite harsh. This may not prevent his employer from hiring another, however. You may have to increase your security."

"That is not how I do business. I will have him killed now! That should discourage the Guild."

"The Guild does not take violations of business law and accepted protocols lightly," I warned Mardou. "They have been known to place open contracts on those who kill or otherwise unjustly harm their members."

"I will be forced to arrest you, Baron," the constable added.

"May your daughters work the streets," Mardou said. "Get this creature from my sight. Braft," he looked at the guard guarding me, "you and I have much to discuss. And wake the kitchen staff. I fear I shall enjoy no more rest this evening!"

"My dagger," I protested as the constable seized me. "I paid dearly for it."

The Baron picked it up and briefly admired the weapon. "I suppose I have to return this as well?"

"Yes," the constable nodded. "It is evidence. All Guild members have signature designs on their daggers. It is further proof this man is who he says he is."

The Baron sighed. "So be it. But you," he glared at me, "you and I are not finished."

I ignored his threat as the constable ushered me out of the manor, onto the streets and into the waiting arms of other officers. I also ignored their chuckles as they shackled me and threw me roughly into the back of their cart. Instead of protesting, I snuggled back into the straw piled within and permitted myself a slight smile. On the whole everything had gone quite well. I had left with part of what I was under contract to obtain. Tomorrow I would begin stealing the rest.

"The Guild frowns on its members getting captured during the completion of a contract."

"Of course. And I appreciate your assistance in obtaining my release."

The Guild Secretary shook his head. We were seated in his office reviewing the evening's events. "And you knew about the safe! Yet you still opened it."

Thanks to the Guild's archives, I knew nearly everything I needed to know about the Baron. "It was necessary for my plan," I sneezed for emphasis.

"Your plan, yes. You seem to have a unique talent for planning Brendell. After the fiasco with Greymark, I would have thought you would adopt the traditional methodology you were taught at the university."

The merchant Greymark had become a memory mostly through my efforts. Murder, no matter how justified, was not considered an acceptable Guild practice. After all, you can't obtain additional contracts from a corpse. "This is a most unusual contract. It requires unusual means."

The Secretary looked at the form in front of him and nodded reluctantly. "Yes, it probably should not

have been given to an apprentice such as yourself."

"I didn't ask for it."

"But you were the only member immediately available." He placed the original document back in his file. "I trust our intervention will no longer be necessary."

"I hope not."

"So do I, if you intend to earn your journeyman's card. Is there anything else?" I shook my head. "Then good-bye." He returned his attention to the mound of official Guild business piled on his desk while I made a hasty exit.

The meeting with the Guild had gone better than anticipated, I decided as I walked down the waking streets of Lynnwall. Contacting the branch office of the Guild had been easy enough despite the early hour and a representative had me out of jail almost immediately. The mark on my record would be easily expunged ... if I was successful in my assignment. "Which means it's time to go to work," I prodded myself.

I found a street vendor and left with a warm roll and flask of tea, then found a comfortable tree across from the Baron's expansive bazaar and sat down to wait. Within 15 minutes the merchant arrived, surrounded by a train of guards and assistants. I suppressed a chuckle while they wrestled with the lock to the great wooden doors protecting his establishment; I could open them in seconds. Instead I waited patiently, sipping my tea and nibbling on the nearly tasteless roll until the Baron was officially open for the day's business. Then I strolled confidently inside.

His establishment was a total assault on the senses. The rich sweet scent of cinnamon, cedar, blackwood incense, bouquets of numerous flowers, perfumes and ointments was nearly overwhelming. Exotic birds, chimes, bells, musical instruments and human voices attacked the ear while the eye was bedazzled by countless objects ranging from the most exquisite to the most mundane.

An attractive woman saw me and approached. She was clad in layers of colorful silks and satins; on her forehead a diamond set in jade gleamed invitingly. "Might I help you, sir?" she asked in a calming yet enticing voice.

"Perhaps. I recently experienced a most unfortunate misunderstanding with my paramour. I thought a bauble of some such might arrange a truce."

She nodded knowingly. "Yes, in affairs of the heart, the true path is often revealed through the glow of jewels. It just happens that we have recently received a shipment of most fabulous wares from the mines of Zangea. If you would follow me." She led me through the maze of aisles and wares to a display of gold and silver ornaments. She selected a most stunning brooch. "This particular piece was designed specifically for us. The emeralds and jade are absolutely perfect, the setting is solid silver intertwined with ebony. A gift such as this would surely thaw the coldest heart."

I admired it for several moments. "And the cost?" She told me. I immediately turned my attention to the simple stone bracelets nearby. "It's the thought that counts," I said, choosing one.

Her reply was interrupted by a familiar voice. "What is that thief doing in my establishment? Get away from him, woman!"

She stepped back, then looked at the Baron, confused. "But he is a customer, my husband."

He towered over us, seething. "He is no customer. He is a thief!"

"I am merely here to purchase something for my lady," I lied.

"You will purchase nothing! You are not welcome in my establishment!"

I tried to placate him. "Look, about last night..."

The Baron stopped me with a glare. "You should be in jail or dead!"

"I was only trying to fulfill a lawful contract."

He jabbed his finger into my chest. "You will stay away from my wife, my estate, my business. Or you will die."

I ignored the threat and turned to his wife. "How much is this bracelet?" She told me and I counted out the appropriate coin. Then I spoke to the Baron. "As I tried to tell you last night, once I have been deterred in the pursuit of my contract, I am required by the rules of the Guild to abandon the same. Anything you see that you own is forbidden to me." I paused. "And by the way, Baron. The lock to this establishment can be undone by any trained pick within minutes. I'll prove it to you tomorrow morning." I then nodded to his wife. "Good day, madam," and walked out of his establishment.

I was smiling as I ambled down the street. I had told him the truth. Just not all of it.

Later that afternoon I returned to the Baron's domicile. I scaled the tall tree across the street and admired my handiwork. Armed guards, a dozen in all, marched around the grounds. I was confident at least that many were inside. Just as I had expected, the Baron had increased his commitment to the Assassin's Guild, an expensive commitment at that. Anyone trying to enter the grounds through the gate or the towering trees would be caught immediately. That, of course, was not how I planned my access. Instead I followed the tunnels below—tunnels I had learned about courtesy of the Guild library—and broke into his home once again. This time I was not there to take anything. But I did leave something behind.

True to my word, I was waiting at the Baron's establishment the next morning. The Baron frowned when he and his entourage arrived. "You! I have told you to stay away from me and my property!" He nodded and two of his guards started towards me.

"Before you do anything rash," I said and shook my head. "Baron, you have many rare and valuable wares in this building. Are you truly sure it is safe from thieves?"

The Baron's eyes darkened even more. "I commissioned the finest locksmith available to create that door!"

"This door?" I pulled the handle and it swung open. I had unlocked it as soon as I had arrived.

The Baron's temper was beyond boiling now. "Impossible! You have broken into my establishment!"

"No, just opened the door is all. Here, I'll show you." I took out my picks, closed the door and locked it again. "Check for yourself." The Baron nodded and one of the guards tugged on the door. It didn't move. "Now, with just a few practiced movements," I said, bending over the lock, "we'll have you inside in," I stepped back and opened the door, "no time." I winked at him. "Any second year Academy student can do this."

The Baron stared at me, at his open establishment. "I paid a fortune for that door!" he moaned.

"Every lock can be opened. After all, that's what they're designed for. Now you *could* hire a wizard to attach a closure spell, but then he would have to come every day to remove it. Very costly. I suggest you

employ a small contingent of guards to patrol this area at night. Otherwise.” I shrugged. “I have things to do. Good morning, Baron.”

“Hold, please.” His wife approached me, holding a familiar object. “Did you not purchase this yesterday?”

I glanced at the stone bracelet. “Yes. Unfortunately my beloved would have none of it, or me for that matter. I wanted to return it but since you were closed for business...”

She glanced at her husband. “I found this in my room last night.”

Suddenly the Baron realized what had happened. “You broke into my house again!”

“Not ‘broke in’ exactly. The door to the fruit cellar *was* open...”

“Guards, kill him now!”

I held up my hand. “As I told you, Baron, I cannot take anything from your home or business. Actually I’m trying to help you. If I, a mere apprentice thief, can enter your properties so easily, just consider your imperilment at the hands of a *master* thief. You may want to hire additional guards.”

As I walked away I could hear the heated discussion between him and his entourage. I knew the Assassin’s Guild would be delighted to provide the service—at a significant fee, of course.

Later that afternoon I received a message at the inn I was staying. I smiled; the Baron was reacting just as I had hoped. Tonight would prove most interesting.

The great gaming hall of Lynnwall was bursting with the rich and influential of the city. I wandered around admiring the lavishness of the displays put on by both the establishment and its patrons. *If only I wasn’t still under contract*, I sighed mentally as I catalogued so many riches which could so easily become mine. But what was an honest thief to do? I tingled in frustration and avarice as I searched through the crowd for the Baron.

He wasn’t difficult to find. He and a small party of strangers were enjoying the fortunes of the Carnum wheel. I found space on the opposite side of the table so I would be in clear view and waited.

It didn’t take long. The Baron was warming his chips on the chest of one of the richly clad women with him—presumably for luck—when he saw me. His demeanor changed immediately. “Thief!” he roared and pointed at me. “There is a thief in this establishment!”

Those next to me immediately backed away. Several guards and hall personnel approached me quickly but after a brief conversation they stepped back. I smirked as one went over to the Baron and held a hurried discussion. He did not enjoy the news. “You let known thieves in your hall?” he protested above the din of the spinning wheel.

“Tonight he is merely a patron,” the hall representative explained. “He registered as a Guild member when he entered. Do not concern yourself, he will be under our constant surveillance.”

I decided it was time to enlighten the good Baron, so I approached. “I am sorry to see my presence so upsets you,” I said. “Just for your information, there are at least five other Guild members here this evening, each of us courting the favors of Madame Fortune.”

“That is correct,” the hall representative said. “They come here often. As long as they register, they are welcome to enjoy themselves.”

"Just so you know, we are under certain restrictions," I added. "We are not permitted to wager on games of cards or dice or any pastime where we physically might have any control over the outcome. But at the Carnum wheel, my talents can have no more effect on the path of the ball than yours."

My explanation appeased him not. "Your presence disgusts me. Since I cannot have you ousted, ply your skill at another table," he said coldly.

"There is no other Carnum wheel."

"I am a regular patron here." He turned to the hall representative. "I want this creature removed from my presence immediately!"

"That is quite true, and we do value your patronage," the man tried to placate him. "However this man is also a member of a Guild. It would be detrimental to our business if the Guild learned we had evicted one of its members merely for enjoying what all our customers are entitled to."

The Baron's eyes narrowed. "I cannot entertain myself in this man's presence. If you will not remove him, I will remove myself. Yours is not the only establishment in Lynnwall." He gestured to his entourage. "Come." The crowd parted like a good haircut as he led his train out the building. After an appropriate delay, I followed.

The Baron was correct; Lynnwall *did* have other gaming establishments. By the end of the evening I had visited all of them. The scenario at each was similar; enraged accusation, quiet confrontation, immediate frustration, loud threats and an abrupt leave-taking. I was smiling, and a bit intoxicated, when, late in the morning, I headed towards my inn.

I didn't get there. I was passing an alley near my temporary residence when two men jumped out, grabbed me and pulled me back in the darkness. One clasped me tightly, a hand over my mouth, while the other opened my cape and pulled out my dagger. He waved it before me. "The Baron is displeased with you," he said, bringing it closer. "He has ordered you to leave him be. Apparently you do not take orders very well, Brendell."

He hit me in the stomach for emphasis. I was allowed to fall forward to my knees, gasping for breath, where I was treated to a close view of his boots, even closer when he kicked me in the face, rattling my teeth and my senses. My assailant bent down beside me. "The Baron has asked us to give you his best regards. You will not be troubling him again." He brought up his huge hand...

...which was immediately seized by a huger hand.

The carnage was rapid and total. The shadowy figure forced my attacker's hand back to an impossible angle, driving him to his knees. My savior swung something, there was a loud crack, and then the first assailant fell forward and collapsed. His comrade released me and tried to flee, but only traveled two feet before he was rammed into the wall. He slid silently to the ground, unmoving.

"Stand up, Brendell. You're safe now," the remaining figure ordered.

I did so slowly, still clutching my stomach and gasping for breath as I was helped out into the well-lit street. "What took you so long?"

"I had to wait until they attacked you. I had to be sure you were in danger," my hired member of the Assassin's Guild shrugged.

"And them?" I pointed to my silent assailants.

"Scabs," he said and spit in disgust. "We had told Mardou we could not simply kill you because of accepted Guild courtesy and practices. Especially since you weren't threatening him or his property. The Baron has always had a violent temper. Apparently it has not calmed over the years." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "He has committed a most serious breach of contract."

"Indeed." I rubbed my sore ribs and grimaced. "I thank you most kindly for your assistance. If there is anything I can do..."

"There is. Appear at the Baron's estate tomorrow morning. Our representatives will be holding most serious discussions with Mardou. We will need you as evidence." He grimaced as he glanced back at what he had wrought. "Them as well, unfortunately." He returned my dagger. "Be prompt," he ordered, then returned to the alley to do ... whatever.

I smiled through the pain as I returned to the inn. My contract was almost completed.

Promptly at sunrise I was standing before the Baron's gates. Even more guards were present, but these men were marching outside brandishing signs condemning the Baron. "I'm here to see the Baron," I told one.

"Go on in," he said and pointed toward the open gate. "We will do nothing to stop you."

I walked calmly inside the estate, through the front door. Loud angry voices emanated from one of the rooms. I followed them and found myself once again inside the Baron's study. Two men in Assassin's Guild uniforms—one my benefactor from the evening past—were standing before the humbled Mardou, berating him endlessly. They turned when I cleared my throat.

"You!" The Baron was surprised and apparently not pleased to see me. "You have ruined me!"

"You are Brendell?" the Guild representative I didn't recognize asked.

"Yes."

"He is a thief!"

"And a recognized and honored member of the Guilds," he scolded Mardou. He studied me. "You were attacked last night?"

"Yes."

"Threatened and beaten by non-Guild members?"

"Yes."

"I can corroborate that," my contract employee said coldly.

The first glared at the Baron. "You have breached your contract, Baron, by hiring scab labor to perform the lawful and licit duties of the Assassin's Guild. All agreements between our parties are immediately null and void. We will no longer provide our services to you."

The Baron stared at them in shock and fear. "But, you cannot. You cannot *do* that! I will be at the mercy of every petty thief in the kingdom!" He pointed at me for emphasis. I smiled shyly in response.

"You should have considered that before you broke our agreement," the Guild members said almost in unison. "Our pickets shall remain in place at both your residence and business until *we* decide your punishment has been adequate," one concluded.

"I am ruined!"

"Perhaps there is another solution," a soft voice called. We all turned and found his wife standing in the doorway.

"What are you doing here, woman? This is none of your business," the Baron said and grimaced.

"This involves *my* livelihood and well-being as well," she flared at him. "My husband has been under much stress since this thief," she flung the epithet at me with a wave of her hand, "broke into our residence. The laws have offered us no protection whatsoever. My husband has become a desperate man."

"I *told* you both I was forbidden to steal anything..."

"Enough!" she waved me silent. She walked over to the Guild officials. "You say you will enter no longer into signed security agreements with my husband. Will you enter into such with me?"

The Guild agents looked at each other, frowned, then held a whispered conversation.

"This cannot be! My business, my wealth is *mine*. You have done nothing to earn any of it!" the Baron said, pointing at his wife.

"And you were not a Baron until you married me," she replied coldly.

"If your wife is indeed a business partner of yours, the Guild would be comfortable accepting contracts under her aegis," one of the agents said.

"This is unacceptable!" The Baron stood, stared in rage at each of us. I received more than my fair share. "You are all trying to ruin me. Destroy me and my business!"

"I am trying to *save* it," his wife said calmly. "I am trying to save our home, our possessions. Our marriage." She emphasized the latter.

The Baron's eyes still held their fire, but it was quickly cooling. There was a long silence before he spoke. "I will be undone if I do not accept your terms. So be it. Woman, you may make any agreements you deem necessary. I can see I am no longer needed here." He rose and staggered from the room. He stepped around me as he made his way out the door and up the stairs.

"Brendell, your presence is no longer required," the senior Guild officer said.

I nodded and left as well. When I returned from breakfast there was a note for me demanding a meeting at two that afternoon. I was instructed to go in disguise.

I entered the Crested Falcon wearing a wig and long, flowing dress and veil. I saw my employer seated at a small private table in the far corner; I approached and nodded in greeting as I took the chair across from her.

"You did very well, Brendell," the Baron's wife smiled. "Much better than I had any right to expect."

"Stealing his peace of mind was much more difficult than I thought." I rubbed my ribs ruefully. "And more painful."

"My husband does have a bit of a temper."

"So I've noticed. So how is he?"



"He will manage, he will adjust. No longer will he treat me like so much property, you can be assured of that."

"Yes." For a moment I basked in her smile, her eyes, the diamond in her forehead. And her character that was as strong and intricate as the jewel she wore. In some ways I admired the Baron—his success and business acumen. But under his new working relationship, I felt pity for him as well. "So our business is concluded?"

"Indeed." She handed me her copy of our contract, now signed and dated as fulfilled. Along with a hefty satchel. "And the cost is most reasonable, even if payments to the Assassin's Guild have been quite steep. But I suggest you stay away from Lynnwall for quite some time to come."

"Understood. Good day, my lady."

She nodded and left. I carefully counted out my payment of 75 gold crowns. I quickly subtracted expenses: room and board and miscellaneous, Guild dues and service fees. Which left me a total of ... 13 crowns. I shrugged and smiled. I never claimed to have become a thief merely for the money.

## Rites Of Tenure

"Good morning, students."

"Good morning, professor," four happy voices and one very frustrated one responded. Mine was the latter.

"I think I know most of you from undergraduate classes," Professor Grimmire smiled as he perused the class list. He paused. "Brendell, is that really you?"

All eyes turned to me. I smiled shyly and nodded.

"Well. This class is Methodology 417, Successful Contract Planning and Completion. You should all find this class interesting and practical." He paused. "Especially you, Brendell."

My classmates giggled as the Professor continued his introductory lecture. I was surprised how quickly I reassumed my classroom mode of attentive eyes, enthralled smile, blank mind ... it had been three years since I had left the university, presumably never to return. But then I had been summoned by a Guild secretary while I was looking for employment in Gazwader. I had assumed she had a contract to offer; instead she informed me that because of my spotty success in the field the powers that be had determined I should return for one more credit course.

I was furious. "I've been successful with every contract I've been given!"

"With mixed results," she had responded coldly. "One long-standing client was slain due to your direct actions. You were caught opening a safe during your last assignment. I don't think those qualify as successes."

I bit my tongue. In both cases I felt my actions had been necessary. "And if I don't?"

"You will never earn your journeyman's card."

So that's why I found myself sitting in a stuffy classroom listening to the droning voice of Professor Grimmire. My mind snapped back to attention when I heard him say, "Please study chapters one and two for our discussion tomorrow. Brendell, I need to see you after class."

My fellow classmates eagerly closed their texts and scurried from the room. I approached his desk reluctantly. "Yes, Professor?"

"I've studied your records, Brendell. Your career thus far has been, how shall I say, unique?"

I assumed that was an insult. "You always taught us, Professor, that we must be prepared to improvise."

"On the contrary. If you plan carefully—and I will teach you that—improvisation should be unnecessary. But I'm not here to debate the efficacy of your methods. I shall do that later. I have determined who will be my teaching assistant for this term. That would be you."

I suppressed a groan. I had planned to use my required stay at the university as an unpaid leave. Now I was going to have to *work*? "Thank you for showing such confidence in me," I lied.

He pointed to a pile of materials on his desk. "You will handle the workshop component of Introductory Property Reallocation and Disbursement. I suggest you go over this information tonight as your first class is tomorrow at nine. Later I will have another assignment for you. That is all."

I staggered from the room under the load of books, papers and whatnot. It was raining when I got outside. The dark clouds suited my mood perfectly.

I looked out over the sea of unfamiliar faces looking back at me. *Novices* I muttered under my breath. *Do you all really think you will graduate?* Each year the Thief's Academy attracted a large enrollment of eager young men and women committed to entering the exciting and rewarding field of thievery. By the end of the first year only a handful would remain. The Guild, after all, could only obtain steady employment for a limited number of members. Still the tuition underwrote the operation of the school.

I cleared my throat and tried to look as officious as I could. "Good morning, class. My name is Brendell. I will be leading the workshop section of Professor Grimmire's introductory course." I glanced down at the list of names and set it aside. "I will not be taking attendance. You may come to any of these sessions you wish." The last was greeted by a universal sigh of relief. "Unfortunately I am required to give you three tests. The professor has requested I give you the first one next week." I held up a sheet of paper. "I have made out the test with answers already. Most of the material is covered in your texts. Today we shall review the first chapter of the book. After class, if anyone has further questions they can see me in my office."

Later that afternoon I sat back in my chair, propped my feet on my desk in my office, actually a converted closet, and smiled. Every student had stopped by, ostensibly with some meaningless question or another. In truth each was reconnoitering. I had expected it, I would have been disappointed if they hadn't. "You're all so painfully obvious," I whispered. But then what else was I to expect from simple freshmen? *Had I been that naive at that age?* I shuddered away the thought. Instead I whistled happily as I went about setting my bait and traps, then locked my office door behind me. I had an appointment with Professor Grimmire.

"Thank you for joining me, Brendell." We were seated in the Gray Fox, a favorite inn for University personnel. He had invited me out to dinner and an "important conversation" as he had put it.

"Umm, sure," I mumbled between bitefuls of roasted stallion in wine sauce. "It's quite good," I nodded towards my rapidly diminishing meal. "Thank you."

"I can't have my assistants working for me on empty stomachs now, can I?" He toyed with his own meal. "You know, Brendell, I'm quite pleased you decided to attend this semester."

"Uh uh."

"Yes, you're just the person I need to assist me."

"Um."

"With your help I shall satisfy the remainder of my tenure requirements."

I looked up. "Um?"

He sat back and folded his hands. "It's one unfortunate aspect of the academician's life. We often have so much to do at the Academy we must by necessity forego the true nature of our calling. One I have been remiss in doing far too long."

I took a quick swallow of wine and reluctantly set down my fork. I suspected one syllable responses would no longer suffice. "Which is?"

"Thievery of course! The policy of the university is 'Thieve or Leave.' I have a contract which I must fulfill; otherwise I will be ousted from the department." He smiled. "Which is why I had you brought back

to the school."

My meal immediately lost its appeal. "You had me *brought back*?"

He nodded, still smiling. "I needed someone who has shown talent, been successful. Yet I couldn't ask a qualified journeyman. An apprentice, however. Yes, Brendell, you are the perfect candidate for our little assignment."

I poured myself another glass of wine before responding. "And if I refuse?"

"You won't pass my course and you'll never qualify for your journeyman's card." He filled his own glass. "It's quite simple really. Help me succeed and you pass immediately. No more classes, no other assignments, no questions asked. I think it's quite a fair arrangement."

*Fair for whom?* "And what is your contract?"

He reached inside his coat and handed it to me. "Nothing terribly difficult I would think. We may be able to complete this within the week. After we finish here we'll reconnoiter tonight."

It was a legitimate contract, with thief, client and contract filled, signed and notarized. Two of the names I recognized. "Why bother? We have the name. Surely the Guild library..."

"Tut tut. First-hand knowledge is always the most reliable. After we finish we shall visit our contract."

Which we did. A carriage deposited us one block from our intended: an usurer who underwrote and insured shipments of valuable merchandise to far foreign lands. The skies were darkening rapidly as we made our way down the clean cobbled street. In a short time we were standing outside the walled residence of our intended.

"How fortunate," and my professor rubbed his hands gleefully. "Yon tree stretches well over the parapets. Scale it and tell me what you see."

I looked up. The tree was easily climbable from our side and one large limb hung out invitingly above and over the wall. Too invitingly. "Wouldn't it be better just to open the gate? Or return in the morning in disguise?"

"Come, come Brendell. Tree climbing is one of the most basic methods for obtaining intelligence. Surely you know that."

"So does the Assassin's Guild. I can only assume that this domicile is protected by their forces."

"So what of it? Let's not dally. Up the tree with you."

I looked at the tree, then Professor Grimmire. "Give me your belt first."

"My belt? Why?" Still he complied.

"I didn't know I was going tree climbing today or I would have come better prepared," I said, slinging his belt over my shoulder. I jumped, grabbed the lowest limb and hoisted myself up. A few more minutes and I was perched on the limb that led over the wall and into the domain of our contract. I hesitated.

"What are you waiting for?" he called out softly. "We can't be standing in the street all night."

"In a minute." I hooked his belt and mine together. One end I secured loosely around the branch, the other tightly around my ankle. Not the way I would have preferred it, but it was better than nothing.

"What are you doing?"

"Just a bit of insurance." I stood and began to inch my way forward, making sure my shackled foot stretched far behind me. The belt slid reluctantly along the branch as I progressed.

"That is ridiculous, you'll take all night. Just get out there and observe."

I ignored him. Instead I continued slowly, moving above the wall, then onto the other side.

"What do you see?" he asked. "Are there guards?"

"Nothing yet." I took another step. "I can see the grounds." Another step. "No guards as yet." Another step. "I think..."

That's when the branch gave way with a crack and a crash.

I was flung forward as my perch loudly tumbled to the ground, immediately followed by the barking of guard dogs. The belt around my ankle tightened as I flew out in the air, then it stretched taut and swung me back painfully toward the tree, where I managed to grab the stub of the limb and pull myself up and over. I didn't have time to dawdle, the dogs were closing fast. I cut through the belt with my dagger then retraced my steps and jumped over the fence to the safety of the other side. My landing, however, left much to be desired.

"What happened?" Professor Grimmire panted behind me as he trotted and I hopped down the street back to our waiting carriage.

"What I was afraid of," I muttered between gritted teeth. "They had sawn the limb nearly off. Once I put my weight on it, it collapsed."

We heard voices shouting angry orders as we turned the corner and reached our waiting carriage. "Move it," I ordered the driver as I clambered in behind the Professor. The driver snapped his whip and we were sent careening within the cab and down the street. I glanced out the back window and saw a group of angry and frustrated guards looking our way. I cursed softly. *Now they knew.*

"That was most enlightening," the Professor said after catching his breath. "Now we know they have guard dogs."

I rubbed my throbbing ankle and grimaced. "We could have tossed a bone over the wall and learned that."

"First hand knowledge, Brendell. It is always the best. Well." He patted my hand and smiled. "On the whole I would say this has been a most successful evening."

I glanced down at my ankle, which was swelling rapidly. *Successful indeed.*

"Good morning, class." It was the following week and I was now walking with only a slight limp. Fortunately Professor Grimmire had been too busy with regular assignments to engage in any more nocturnal escapades. I wasn't sure if I would survive another.

"Good morning," they responded.

"As I promised, today is our test. Have you all prepared?" I suppressed a grin as they shared knowing glances among each other. "Yes, sir," their voices rose in near unison. "Excellent. Please get paper and quill ready. I will read the questions and you will write your answers in the order given. Are you ready?"

After a moment all smiling faces nodded. "Question number 1: what village am I from?"

The faces unsmiled. There was an immediate buzz of consternation among the class. "Hey, that isn't on the test!" one husky lad in a red jerkin called out from the back of the room.

"It isn't? And how would you know that?"

"Because, because." He stopped, then glared at me. "Because we stole your test, that's why!"

"Yes, I know. Which is why I took the liberty of changing it."

The students gaped at each other, guilt written on every face. "How did you know?" the brunette wearing the gorgeous silver broach asked. I notice things like that.

"Quite a lot of reasons, actually. One, I had put bootblack around the lock to the door. There were marks in it when I opened it. You better start practicing your lockpicking skills more stringently." I suppressed a grin when all eyes turned to the lad in red. His face soon matched his clothing. "Two, I had tied a very thin string to my chair and desk. It was broken."

"Someone cleaning your office could have done that," one protested.

I ignored him. "I had set a small vase on a pile of books so the base overlapped the bottom right corner. When I returned it did not. Fourth, and most obvious, the test was returned to its hiding place *upside down*." There was a collective groan from the class at that. "And finally," I grinned, "you told me just one minute ago."

"This is a trick," the boy in red raged. "You *knew* we were going to steal that test. In the real world..."

"This *is* the real world," I interrupted. "Sir, what is your name?"

"Algorph."

"Algorph, and the rest of you, there are two types of thievery. One is overt theft. You don't care if the owner knows his possession has been seized or not. That is relatively easy. The other is clandestine theft, where the owner *must not know* his possession is no longer under his possession. That type of contract is much more difficult because you must do everything in your power to delay that realization as long as possible." I let the book I was holding fall on the desk. "You have all failed this test. Class dismissed."

"Wait," one lad sitting by himself in the back protested. "I didn't steal anything. I didn't cheat!"

"Then you fail because you lack the courage to do what thieves must do. Class dismissed."

The students muttered among themselves and favored me with dark glances as, one by one, they filed out of the room. One lagged behind, however.

"That was an unfair trick," Algorph said as he stood near the door.

"The world is unfair, Algorph. Especially to a thief."

"That is not a revelation, Brendell." He started out the door, then paused. "And to answer your question, you come from Mistmourning." Then he walked quickly out of the room.

I shook my head as I watched his retreating back. He reminded me so much of me when I was an undergraduate. I hated him.

The following afternoon Professor Grimmire summoned me to his office. "I've had over a dozen students in my office protesting your teaching methods, Brendell," he greeted me brusquely.

I shrugged. "I never claimed, or asked, to be a teacher."

"At least string them along awhile longer. We can't flunk out my entire class before half the first term is over. Otherwise they will be entitled to refunds. Anyway that's not why you're here. Later this afternoon, you and I must enter the lair of Mestikof."

Mestikof was the name of the usurer and the contract. "You and I, Professor?"

He nodded. "Absolutely."

My ankle twinged at the thought of our last episode. "Perhaps it would be better if I went alone," I offered.

"Nonsense! Granted, I may be a bit rusty at climbing trees, but that should not be necessary for this little adventure."

"And how do you propose we obtain entrance?"

"Quite simple really. A method tried and true." I groaned mentally as he told me. This afternoon promised to be a disaster.

Which it was. "I don't understand; tax assessors are *always* permitted entrance to a home or business," Professor Grimmire raged as we walked down the street away from the Mestikof residence.

"There were two of us. Two is almost always too many." I could have said more but refrained.

"We *must* get into that residence. We must reconnoiter!"

"Use the resources of the Guild library," I said. "Surely he and his residence have been studied for future contracts." The Guild collects and—for a fee—provides voluminous information on all the rich and famous. I have found it invaluable in the past.

"That information is not always up to date," he said and snorted. "I can't *believe* they denied us access!"

We had approached the home dressed most officiously, with officious-looking documents to match. The guards, however, had informed us brusquely that the assessor had been there just two short months ago. Apologizing vigorously for the unnecessary visit and putting all the blame on some poor incompetent secretary, we had hurried out the gate before they became more curious. Or, worse, became concerned.

"We need to go as someone Mestikof will want to see," I said. "You always said that the disguise should match the prospect."

"I don't recall ever saying that."

"I must have read it in the book."

"I *wrote* the book, Brendell." The professor paused at the corner. "This is getting most frustrating."

"Let me go back in a few days. In a different disguise. It isn't necessary that you are involved directly in every aspect of contract completion is it?"

He stroked his fake goatee. "No. And I *do* have plenty to do at the school right now. Like trying to

appease your students. So be it. What is your plan?" I told him. "That *might* work. Fine. Keep me appraised." Then he boarded our waiting hansom and left, leaving me to find my own way back. I cursed softly as I began walking. My ankle was starting to act up again.

"You are Algorph from Komera?"

"Yes," I said to Mestikof, handing him the documents that supported my contention. It was now three days after my last visit to his residence. This time I had come as a merchant requesting a meeting with the usurer. I had been ushered into his study almost immediately.

The bald man glanced at my support through thick lenses. "According to this you have a shipment of silks and spices bound for Genavre leaving on the 'Lady Astora' at the end of the week."

I nodded. "And a very valuable shipment. Which is why I want to insure it."

"Quite understandable. Ocean voyages are fraught with dangers. Pirates, storms, reefs, monsters. A prudent decision. We should be able to handle this little assignment. Let me see." While he began to calculate figures I gazed around his study. Nothing ostentatious to be sure; a few paintings on the wall, shelves full of books in the back. And over the fireplace a simple carving of a man and woman embracing. Which was what the contract called for.

I pulled out my own pad and quill and pretended to doodle. Actually I was making a very crude sketch of the statue. "A gentleman named Oginan recommended you. A business associate I take it?"

"Oginan?" He ruminated as he worked. "Not a name I recognize. But I do work with so many. I am pleased he was satisfied with my service. Just as I'm sure you will be." He glanced from time to time from my fake bill of lading to his own figures. Then he sighed and sat back. "This should cover your investment adequately." He smiled and handed me a piece of paper.

I accepted it and placed it among those in my brimming satchel. "These figures look most acceptable. Once we sign the contract my coverage is immediate, no?"

"Absolutely."

"Then give me a day or two to talk this over with my co-investors. I don't believe there should be a problem."

"Excellent." He rose and offered his hand. "I look forward to doing business with you, Algorph."

"As do I." I accepted it and shook heartily. "Thank you for your courtesy. I can find my way out."

He nodded and returned his attention to his business as I left the study. I *did* find my way out, but only after wandering the ground floor, seemingly lost and confused, for about fifteen minutes. Finally a friendly serving wench shooed me out of her kitchen and pointed me towards the front door. I took the hint and was soon on my way back to the Academy. Later that day I posted a message to Mestikof expressing my regrets but I had found another who would insure me for less. That, I was confident, would allay any lingering suspicions.

"Most excellent work, Brendell." Professor Grimmire set down my sketch of Mestikof's home and first floor layout. "What about the guards?"

"I saw none inside his residence. I'm sure that changes during the evening."

"Then we shall attack while the sun beams down to light our path to fame and glory!" He rubbed his



hands vigorously. "This is most exciting, Brendell. Most exciting!"

I refrained from telling him that excitement was exactly the *last* reward I desired from a contract. Instead; "I would prefer the evening. There are few guards, and the dogs can be avoided with proper care."

"I will consider that. Let me study this information for a few days. When we meet again I will have a plan guaranteed to assure our success."

I groaned as I left his office. Fortunately I had my own plans ... and I had much more confidence in them.

My class looked upon me with deep trepidation. With good reason; it was mid-term and I was to assign each of them a practicum project to complete within two weeks' time. I set a pile of cards on my desk. Individual assignments were written on each. One in particular was very important to me.

"I'm glad to see you are all here today," I greeted them. Their response was far from warm. "Thus far in this course we had dealt with the theoretical aspects of thievery. Both Professor Grimmire and I are firm believers in the practical application of the knowledge and skills you have gained in this class."

"What knowledge and skills?" a voice muttered from somewhere. The class tittered but quieted immediately at my glare.

"That is something each of you will have to discover for yourself," I said coldly. I took my pile of cards and walked into my circle of charges. "Each of these assignments is designed to teach you some aspect of thievery." I stopped in front of one young lady. "Please pick one."

She complied, looked at it, paled slightly but remained silent. I continued thus until I reached Algorph. "Your turn," I held the cards in front of him.

"Does it really matter?" he sighed. "Just give me the top one."

"Fine." I made an effort to pull it out and dropped all my cards on the floor. "Sorry." I collected and restacked them and handed him the one requested. Then I completed my rounds and returned to my desk. "If you have any questions, you may see me in my office. Otherwise class dismissed."

I had barely reached my little home away from home when Algorph was knocking angrily on my door. "What is this nonsense?"

"Nonsense? Let me see." I accepted my assignment from him. "Seems pretty straightforward to me."

"The others were told to steal objects, lift purses, pick locks. You have me doing this!"

I shrugged. "I don't care how you do it. The professional thief must utilize a multitude of skills. Not necessarily his own."

"You did this on purpose, didn't you? The dropped cards."

Of course I had; I was going to force the card on him except his request had eliminated that possibility. But I wouldn't tell him that. "Just do a good job. I expect this completed on time."

He nodded coldly and left. I didn't realize until later I had made an enemy for life. At another time, another place, I would come to regret that.

"I'm afraid you will have to do the climbing." Professor Grimmire and I were standing in the back of the Mestikof residence. I was armed with a long piece of rope and grappling hook. His "tried and true" plan involved his creating a diversion while I used my armament to climb the roof, gain access to the

residence, steal the statue and leave. In broad daylight. While doubtless Mestikof was at work in his study.

"Why don't we start a fire or something, get everyone out of the building?" I complained.

"No reason to cause any more damage than necessary, Brendell," he scolded me. "The Coberan estate nearly burned to the ground."

I had used fire as a diversion during that assignment. It was the first I learned of how thorough a diversion it had become. "You'll have to make sure Mestikof is out of his study."

"Do not fret. I do a marvelous drunk. Performed on stage actually. Give me a few minutes and begin your assault." Then he left me to my own thoughts.

Which were far from pleasant. Storming a building in broad daylight. Ridiculous. "Tried and true indeed," I muttered as I hoisted myself onto the wall surrounding the estate. It was wide enough where I could stand and swing the small hook easily. Fortunately the residence was only two stories. Whether I could swing it far enough to wrap it around the chimney so I could climb up to the roof remained to be seen.

"Hey, mister, what'cha doing?" a small voice called out.

I stopped swinging the rope and looked down. A lad of about six was staring up at me. "Chimney sweep," I said quickly. "I have to clean out that chimney," I pointed. "Should you use a ladder?"

"Don't have one long enough."

"Couldn't you go inside? Climb out through the window. That's what the chimney sweep does at my house."

"My equipment might get dirt in the home. If you don't mind, I'll just do it the traditional way." I grunted as the grappling hook arced in the air, thudded uselessly off the roof and fell to the ground. Muttering curses I began retrieving my rope.

"Where's your broom? I don't see your broom."

"It's on the other side of the fence." I tried to gauge the distance. More rope, I decided.

"What if you break a window or something? Will you get in trouble? I broke a window once. My mother spanked me."

I looked from the chimney to the child. It was hopeless. "Perhaps you're right," I agreed, climbing down from the fence. "I'll go inside and climb out the top window." I patted him on the head. "Thank you for the sound advice." I draped the rope and hook over my shoulder and waited on the corner. About twenty minutes later the professor joined me.

"That was most enjoyable," he said, beaming. "The performance of a lifetime! I had every guard trying to persuade me to leave. Well, where is it? Where is my statue?"

"I couldn't get it," I said. "Some kid saw me. There was no way I could break in."

He glared at me. "Brendell, that is most unacceptable! I provided you an ample diversion, ample time."

"Was Mestikof there?"

"Mestikof? I don't know; I assume so."

"Tall, thin, bald as an egg and glasses thick as ham hocks?"

He frowned. "I'm not sure. There were so many mingling about."

I shook my head. I would have been caught in any event. "Listen, Professor, too many thieves spoil the stew. Perhaps it would be better if only one of us perform the actual theft."

He frowned. "I don't know, Brendell. I am not as limber as I used to be."

"Then let me do it. Sub-contracting is still an acceptable practice is it not?"

"Yes," he said after due consideration. "But the plan must be mine! Or, at least one I approve of," he finished softly.

"There is nothing wrong with your plan. Unfortunate circumstances is all. You cannot expect unattended children to be wandering around people's homes after all. I can succeed after dark I am sure."

"What about the dogs?" he asked as we made our now-familiar way down the street.

"Let a few cats loose in the yard. Right out of your textbook."

"The guards?"

"Guards have to sleep. No problem if one is careful."

"You haven't *always* been careful, Brendell," he reminded me. "When can I expect completion?"

"We should let them relax, become comfortable, less concerned and alert. Some evening next week I would hazard."

"All right then," he said as a carriage stopped for us. This time I made sure to enter first.

I towered before the nervous brunette. "Your assignment, please." She handed me the card along with a beaded purse as prescribed. "Now you did steal this, you didn't just buy it?" I asked.

"Yes sir, no sir," and she shook her head emphatically.

"Very good." I went onto my next student. Unlike most sessions, everyone in class was here, with some object sitting next to them. I gave most of them only cursory glances as there was only one student I was concerned about. "Algorph?" I paused before him.

He removed the cover from the object on his desk to reveal a stone carving of a man and woman embracing. I glanced at my drawing on the card, then at the result. "Excellent, Algorph. In fact," I turned to the entire class, "you all did an excellent job. I am quite encouraged. Professor Grimmire will be presenting your final exam in two weeks. Now unless there are specific questions about the test, I will dismiss class for the remainder of the term so you will have more time for your studies."

That was greeted with cheers and a stampede of happy students heading out the door. I tossed the collection of purses, ornaments and miscellaneous into a basket and repaired to my office. The purses, as I had expected, had been emptied of all save a few coins; none of the jewelry would fetch more than the cost of a small meal through any legitimate intermediary. I set the statue on my desk and compared it to my sketch and my memory. Not a perfect counterfeit to be sure, but it should suffice.

The following morning I set a package on Professor Grimmire's desk. "So you have been successful, Brendell." He rubbed his hands in delight after opening it. "You must tell me the details!"

"Not much to it," I said and shrugged modestly. "A few alley cats lowered over the wall took care of the dogs. I hopped the fence, threw a rope up to the second floor balustrade, climbed up and went inside. The noise outside attracted the interest of the guards, which gave me opportunity to enter Mestikof's study and replace the statue with a copy I had made. Then out the way I came."

"Why did you have a counterfeit made?"

"First, to allay suspicions if any guards or Mestikof became curious. I also thought Professor Oginan might find it amusing the next time he visited Mestikof." Oginan had taken out the contract on Mestikof.

"Not very likely," Professor Grimmire said. "I doubt the Professor has seen Mestikof more than a few times in his life."

The information didn't surprise me. "If I ask, why did he give you this contract then? The statue is not particularly valuable."

"Professional courtesy. As a professor here at the academy, I am only an honorary member of the Guild. The chances they would give me a legitimate contract are as rare as a Phoenix egg." He smiled at my stare. "We do it all the time, whenever one of our members must meet his or her practical requirements."

That information allayed any of my lingering doubts. "So I am done? Our agreement is satisfied?"

"Most assuredly." He opened his grade book. "You have passed my course with a," he wrote with a flourish, "B. I would have given you a higher grade but you did not follow my instructions exactly. I do trust our little escapade, along with your course work, has taught you the value of using accepted methodology during contract execution."

"Absolutely. And I thank you, Professor."

"I will pass this information onto the Guild," he said absently, dismissing me. "They will determine what other requirements you must meet to earn your journeyman status. Good day."

That evening I enjoyed myself in the student lounge, dining and wining on what little I had been able to earn from my classes' efforts. On the whole I was quite satisfied. The professors need never know that I had never returned to the Mestikof residence; they were in possession of the counterfeit, not the usurer. Not a true contract completion to be sure, but then, it hadn't been *my* contract. And under the circumstances...

A familiar voice greeted me. "You lower yourself by dining with students."

"Good evening, Algorph. Have a seat. Let me pour you some wine."

Algorph remained standing. "No thank you. I only share wine with company I enjoy. Why did you give me that assignment? It was for you, wasn't it?"

I nodded. "I told you; thieves use every resource available to them. You were available to me. You did an admirable job, by the way. Perhaps you have found your true calling."

"That carving cost me dearly. Money I could not afford to pay."

His complaining was becoming wearisome. "Shouldn't you be spending this evening studying? Professor Grimmire's tests are most demanding." *That* I knew from first-hand experience.

"I will not be pursuing my degree here. I have decided thievery is not a profession I would prefer to

enter."

"Not everyone has the mettle to be a thief. Have you made any further career decisions?"

"Yes," and he gave me a withering stare. "I will apprentice for the Assassin's Guild. I hope someday our paths cross again, Brendell."

"Good luck to you," I said sincerely. "If you don't mind, I would like to finish my meal while it is still warm." He snorted and finally left me in peace. I wondered briefly how many other students I had discouraged from my profession, then shrugged the thought aside. The less competition the better.

## Statue Of Limitations

"Most impressed, most impressed indeed," the master of Harjung beamed as he shook my hand. "The Guild was right about you, Brendell."

I blushed as my arm was nearly torn out of its socket. To be truthful, the Thief's Guild had chosen me for other reasons, but Tijor Bhen and the council of Harjung didn't need to know that. "It was a most ... interesting assignment."

"Yes, I'm sure it was. Please, you must tell me how you accomplished it!"

Again I smiled shyly, but this time not from modesty. Guild members are by necessity private about their methods. But then again this particular contract was by no means a standard one. I debated, then decided the Guild would not be angered if I revealed at least some of the story. "I really must be leaving; my transport departs within the hour. And," I pulled out my purse, "I have yet to be compensated."

"That we shall rectify immediately." The council master fumbled a few minutes opening a nearby safe—one I would have unlocked within seconds—and pulled out a sack of gold coins. "For a job well done," he handed it to me.

I quickly counted them and dropped them into my own purse. "Now if you have some wine, I will briefly recount the details." He did, a most excellent vintage by the way, and therefore I did. Later that evening, safely aboard my ship and out to sea, I sat in the small lounge with a flask of plebeian wine and reviewed my fabrication. Once Bhen and the rest of the council learned the truth, they would be angrily contacting the Guild. I knew I would be in for a session with a Guild Secretary, so I decided to rehearse for the inevitable.

It was a contract nobody wanted, the Guild Secretary of the Ravenshead office had explained as she sat me down in her office. "What the council of Harjung is requesting is, well, probably impossible."

"Then refuse it." I had been summoned from nearby Talonrest and was still tired from my ride.

"That is not Guild procedure and you know it, Brendell. Every client, if they have the funds, deserves our best efforts."

"And yet you are hiring a mere apprentice?"

She smiled for the first time. "The Harjung council need not know that. We will merely explain afterwards that the contract is too difficult for anyone to succeed."

This was not going in any direction I wanted to follow. "Is it particularly dangerous? Is magic involved? Assassin's Guild?"

She shook her head. "The object is the problem. They want us, you, to steal the Weeping Nun."

"I'm sorry, never heard of it."

"It is chiefly of local interest. You can research our archives if you wish. But do it soon; your ship sails for Harjung this evening."

I sighed. The Guild charges for its assistance. If, as my superior was saying, this was a fool's errand anyway, there was no need to increase my expenses. A fool took the contract from her desk and placed it in my satchel. "I'll read it later," I said. "And thank you."

I managed to hide my anger until I was outside. Again the Guild was taking advantage of my apprentice stature! The Baron Mardou, Professor Grimmire and now this. As my boat set sail I vowed that if the Guild expected me to fail, I would fail in the grandest manner possible. Which, in hindsight, was exactly what I did.

I was ushered into the offices of Tijor Bhen within an hour of reaching Harjung. He was startled by my appearance, obviously expecting an older thief, but became all business when I handed him the contract. "We must have that statue," he began, slamming his fist on his desk. "It must grace our village, our courtyard!"

"Yes, you should," I said. *Now tell me why.*

Instead he asked, "What are your plans? How soon will it be here?"

"I have to do some reconnaissance first. There are several approaches I'm considering but I have to determine which will be best." Actually I had no plans, having spent most of my voyage in the company of a most delightful and eager serving wench.

"So you will be leaving for Cardinaul soon?"

*So that's where it was.* "Within the hour."

"Then may the beneficence of Our Lady Wisteria lead your every step." Within minutes I was out of his office and searching for a stable. Less than twenty minutes later I was following the well-worn path to the village of Cardinaul.

I found the Weeping Nun almost immediately after finding the hamlet. The difference between the respective towns startled me. Although Cardinaul was no larger or more strategically located, its prosperity was evident everywhere. Shops that circled the town square were gaily painted and festooned with banners and ribbons, their windows promising a vast array of rare and expensive wares inside. No less than three inns were available for weary travelers, as well as several taverns. Unlike Harjung, the streets were crowded with people, mostly well-dressed. The streets themselves were brick, not the dirt and rock common in most villages. Capital, thy name is Cardinaul, I thought as I found a stable to bed my horse. I returned to the village square and studied the statue of the Weeping Nun, placed prominently in its center. It was easily thrice my height, although not much wider, and apparently carved from granite. A small moat surrounded it and I noted several people tossing in coins, probably for a blessing. Making a counterfeit, a ploy I've used successfully in the past, would be futile.

I was walking to the back of my intended when a friendly passer-by stopped me. "You are too late, my friend," he said. "She will be crying no more this day."

"She cries?"

"Of course. Every day when the sun is high. Like clockwork she is. A most beautiful sight, most beautiful."

"Then I shall return on the morrow," I returned his smile. "Traveling all this way, I would certainly not want to miss that."

He nodded. "That is what they all say, and most delighted they are when they witness the holy event. Praised be Our Sister."

Later that evening I relaxed in one of the inns. Crowded it was, and not just with the residents. Clothing and accents told me that most of the patrons were from elsewhere. Which meant something in Cardinaul

had attracted them and I was confident the Weeping Nun was the reason. I considered my options. Now I knew why the Guild was cautious about the contract; outright theft was impossible. It would take a team of men, equipment and horses to haul it away. And what use would the statue be to Harjung? Once it was discovered, the good citizens of Cardinaul would demand its return. After another hour of consideration I could come to only one conclusion: the citizens of Cardinaul must *give* me the Weeping Nun.

The growing din from outside woke me much earlier than I desired. I looked down from my room and saw a crowd amassing near the statue. If I hurried I could probably still find a good place to stand. Instead I enjoyed a leisurely breakfast and left the inn well before noon.

By now the village square was bursting with the curious and the faithful and I tingled with greed as I made my way amongst them. If I wasn't under contract, I could have easily come into possession of a wealth of jewelry and purses. Since I was, I could only admire and sigh in frustration.

I noticed a group of red-robed men standing off to one side near the moat. They were engaged in casual conversation, ignoring the growingly-impatient crowd around them. I also noticed that it was getting increasingly warm and uncomfortable, that some among me had neglected to bathe, that flies were beginning to gather. If something didn't happen soon, I was going to have to return to the inn and relieve myself.

Suddenly trumpets blared from behind us. Everyone hushed as the men in robes made an arc near the statue. I turned and saw the crowd parting as another group of brightly-clad men started a procession to the statue. The leader was an old man wearing a tall white hat and carrying a golden staff; his retinue were clad in the same red robes as the men now standing at the moat. No one said a word as they made their slow way to the Weeping Nun. The leader turned and stepped forward, his followers fanning out behind him. Then they stood silent and waited.

The crowd was waiting as well, as silent and still as well-behaved schoolchildren. And waited and waited. I noticed a drop of sweat on the end of my nose and began to wonder when it would fall when I felt a slight tremor.

It wasn't my imagination or my breakfast. The leader suddenly raised his staff, then abruptly turned and pointed it at the statue. And the crowd gasped and screamed as the statue suddenly began to weep.

It only lasted a minute, but there was no question. Water streamed from her eyes, down her robes, into the moat below. The crowd was silent throughout the spectacle, then broke into cheers and tears. Their work done, the robed entourage made their slow way back through the rapidly dispersing crowd. I lingered, watching as the faithful approached the moat, knelt before it and prayed. I was growing impatient when the last of the pilgrims finally left, leaving only a small group of the robed men to remove the offerings from the moat. That was when I approached.

"Hello, wayfarer," one greeted me. "Have you come to honor Our Lady Wisteria?"

"That is the name of the statue?"

"Indeed. It is the pleasure of our order to serve her."

"I see." I looked up at the statue. The heat had already dried her completely. "Does she do that every day?"

"Yes. Each day she weeps for our sins. Are you a believer?"



I blushed. "I follow a different path."

My comment troubled him not at all. "As long as it leads to your salvation, you are indeed blessed and welcome."

"I thank you for your kind words," and I handed him a gold coin. "For your order and your continued good work."

"Thank you. May Our Lady smile upon you always."

*We'll see.* I looked up at the statue one more time, but could learn nothing helpful from here. Which meant that later I would have to go there.

It was late the following evening, well after the pubs had closed and self-respecting people had gone to bed, that a non-self-respecting person left his room. I couldn't go through the lobby since I was dressed in black and carrying a long rope, so I lowered myself over the front porch and down into the quiet streets. I quickly made my way to the Weeping Nun and walked around the moat. Trying to throw the rope up and over would be nearly impossible, so I tied one end around my waist, then waded into the moat and wrapped the remainder around her. Then it was a simple matter of pulling myself up, finding some purchase, loosening and then flipping up the rope, then climbing up some more.

Well, not that simple, not on the smooth surface with wet shoes. I almost slipped once and when I bounded briefly off the statue I heard a muffled boom. That's when I realized the statue was not stone at all, but metal. And hollow.

Still I reached the top of Our Lady in little time. I hung before her severe countenance, clenched lips, beak nose, heavy eyebrows. "What is your secret, young lady?" I whispered as I ran my free hand along her features. Then I found it beneath her jutting eyebrows. Slits, hidden from view, over each eye. Large enough for me to insert a finger and feel the smooth, hollow interior.

I was smiling when I started back down. Even my eventual fall into the moat didn't dampen my excitement because now I knew how I could steal the Weeping Nun.

One week later I returned to Cardinaul. Actually it was my third trip, since I had made a brief visit the night before. This time I was dressed in humble brown robes, ragged growth of beard, rope belt and woven sandals. I made sure to arrive early before the crowds gathered, but not so early that the brotherhood of Our Lady Wisteria wouldn't be present. I found them making their benedictions before the statue and preparing for the upcoming ritual. Which would be quite different this day.

I took a deep breath, then ran up to them. I was markedly sweating and out of breath when I reached them. "Good friars, good friars, I have fearful news," I said between gasps.

They looked at me as if I was some stray dog invading their garden. "What is this? What are you saying and who are you?" one demanded and approached.

"Danger, great danger," I said. "Something dire is about to happen. I must talk to your leader."

The man frowned. "My name is Koros and you shall talk to me. You haven't answered my question. Who are you?"

"Brendell. Of the order of the Most Holy Thistle. I have traveled long to warn you."

"I do not know that order."

"We are far from here."

Koros sniffed. "And what is this danger you are babbling about?"

"I don't know. Not totally," I added quickly as he began to turn away. "I had a vision of an evil darkness striking Cardinaul. A curse has been placed upon you, I fear."

"A vision, you say. A curse. Are you sure it wasn't something you ate?" And he laughed.

"I was sent by my order to help you. My leader insisted upon it."

"You are not being very specific."

"Visions are never specific, as you well know."

"Yes." He looked back at the village square. Already the people were gathering to witness the daily miracle. "We can't have you running around alarming the good people of Cardinaul with tales of your 'vision.' You will stay with us until the ceremony is over, then you can talk with our leader."

"Thank you, thank you," I said and knelt at his feet.

"Stand," he whispered. "There is no reason to call attention to yourself."

"Yes, master." I rose and allowed myself to cry in appreciation.

"Stay near me," and he elbowed me in the stomach. "And be silent."

I nodded and followed him as he returned to the rest of the now curious monks. Yet we remained silent as the expectant crowd grew and the sun climbed toward midday. I was beginning to regret my choice of apparel when Koros whispered harshly, "Stand straight and be quiet. The ceremony is about to begin."

So it was. Again I heard the trumpets and saw the procession approach us. I waited until everyone had taken their positions, then I turned to my benefactor. "Master, I can feel it. The evil! Something terrible is about to happen."

"Shut up. You can take your concerns to our leaders after we are done." Another elbow to my ribs convinced me to obey.

Once again I felt that slight tremor, once again the old man turned from the crowd and pointed his staff at the Our Lady Wisteria. Once again the people gasped as she began to weep for their sins.

Then their gasps turned to screams as they realized that what flowed from her eyes was not clear tears but an angry red liquid.

The monks stared in amazement as the moat around her began turning red as well. "My vision," I let my scream join with the others, "my vision was correct. The Weeping Nun is becursed!"

The monks huddled in stunned confusion even as the square began to empty, the onlookers fleeing in fear. "What is happening?" the old man with the scepter asked anyone in earshot.

"My vision didn't lie. A great evil has struck Cardinaul," I yelled.

He glared at me, then looked at the monks. "Who is this man?"

"He claims he is Brendell, from the order of the Most Holy Thistle," said Koros.

"I had a vision..." I began but was cut off.

"Not here," the old man said. "In private. Come."

No ceremony now; we walked quickly and directly to a tall brick building at the edge of the town square. No one spoke until we were seated inside around a large table. "What is this all about, Koros?" the old man asked.

"I have no idea, Mayor. This," he turned to me, "Brendell insists he was sent here because of some vision."

"I dreamed your village was cursed," I confirmed.

"Ridiculous," the old man said. "How can a geyser become cursed?"

*So that's their secret.* "Not the geyser," I said quickly. "The statue."

"But why would our statue become cursed? How?" The old man shook his head. "This makes no sense at all."

"You saw what happened," Koros said. "Something is not right."

"Obviously." The old man sat back and sighed. "And what do we do about it?"

"My vision," I offered.

The Mayor glared at me. "Now what?"

"Part of my vision. I saw myself in the company of a tall dark figure. Now I know it was referring to My Lady Wisteria."

"What are you saying?" the Mayor asked, leaning forward.

"That I must remove the Weeping Nun from your village. Only then will the curse be lifted."

"This is ridiculous," and the Mayor sat back with folded arms. "I do not believe in curses."

"It matters not what we believe," said Koros. "You saw what happened. The people panicked. The word will spread. *They* will believe unless we take immediate action. I do not necessarily believe in visions either, but Our Lady has protected us. Now we must protect Her and Cardinal. What this Brendell proposes just might accomplish that."

"And if we don't, our visitors won't come back," the Mayor mused. "Our prosperity will be ruined."

"The geyser will still be here. You can commission another statue," I said.

The old man rubbed his chin. "Yes. It will be expensive but it can be done." He slammed his fist on the table. "And it will. Koros, do what is necessary. Brendell," he looked at me and for the first time smiled, "thank you for your courage."

The leaders of Cardinal were as good as their word. Early the next morning the monks were busy with block and tackle. I came from my room to find the moat drained and the base of the statue already loosened. A sturdy cart and team of horses waited nearby. I watched as the Weeping Nun was raised and secured to the cart, revealing the geyser and the dirt around it that had been stained by the dye I had poured into the statue through its eye slits two nights previous.

"That soil is cursed as well," I said and pointed. "Dig it up and place it in barrels so the enchantment can be totally removed." They obeyed and within the hour I was ready to leave.

"You are a brave man, Brendell," Koros said as I sat in the wagon eager to leave. "Please give my heartfelt regards to your order."

"I will, and thank you. I am sure you will have nothing further to worry about." With that I gave a whistle and tug on the reins and I was on my way from Cardinaul in possession of the Weeping Nun.

Tijor Bhen was ecstatic when I made my slow way into Harjung three days later. "You've succeeded, you've actually succeeded!"

"Of course," I smiled shyly. "What shall I do with it?"

"We will put her in our town square, of course," and his eyes gleamed with avarice. "Soon our village will be filled with pilgrims coming to worship at the feet of the Weeping Nun!"

*Not if you don't have a geyser. Not if you don't remove the curse.* "I'll leave that up to you," I said as I got down gratefully from the wagon. "Let us conclude our contract. My ship leaves this afternoon."

Which we did, and I did. And two days later I was summoned again to the Guild headquarters in Ravenshead. "What have you done, Brendell?" The secretary greeted me not at all warmly.

"I fulfilled my contract." I gave her a puzzled smile. "The Weeping Nun sits in the square at Harjung even as we speak."

"You were supposed to *fail!*"

My smile became even more puzzled. "I don't understand."

"Why do you think we used a mere apprentice for this assignment? The people of Cardinaul have granted the Guild many lucrative contracts in the past. Thanks to your interference, their prosperity is now ruined!" Then she sighed. "Perhaps Harjung will make up for that."

"Not very likely." And I told her what I had done.

When I finished her frown was even deeper. "Then I will be hearing from Tijor Bhen very soon."

"I would expect so. What will you tell him?"

"What can I tell him? The contract was fulfilled. There were no other conditions." She slammed her fist on her desk. "But don't think for one minute that the *Guild* will consider it fulfilled."

I groaned as I left her office. The payment was mine. Yet it was not going to help me achieve my most cherished desire: my journeyman's card. As I made my way to the docks to wait for my ship arriving that evening, I wondered if that same serving wench would be aboard. I could only hope.

## Thief Of Hearts

"Your resumé looks quite impressive," the agent for my prospective employer smiled. "Third in your class, five successful contracts. I can see why the Guild suggested you."

I forced myself to remain calm, to ignore the slat of the chair pressing into my back. I've always hated formal interviews; better a contract come directly from the Thief's Guild Secretary or the employer himself. Working through an intermediary was never pleasant. "I am quite confident I will be able to fulfill whatever duties your client requires."

"Yes," the representative said. "Most impressive. However, as I'm sure you can understand, this is a most delicate matter that requires the utmost care in determining the proper emissary. We are currently interviewing two other applicants. I would be remiss if I did not offer them the same time and consideration I am giving you."

"Of course." I forced a smile. "I will be staying at the Dragon's Nest for the next few days. You may reach me there for further discussions or to finalize the agreement."

"Thank you." He shook my hand perfunctorily and I left his office. Once outside I let my smile turn into a frown. *Two other applicants*. Rare was the client who asked the Guild for a choice in hirelings. Which meant this was a major undertaking. One, I was certain, that would qualify me—finally—for journeyman status. *If* I was hired.

I walked out into the teeming streets of South St. Tius glumly. I had spent two days traveling here at the Guild's bequest and my expense. I may have refused if I had known I was competing with others for the contract. With nothing to do but wait and mope, I headed towards the inn near my temporary residence.

I was brooding into my third glass of wine when a husky female voice whispered in my ear, "Buy a lady a drink?"

"Love to." I turned. "Where is she?"

Amedelya laughed that tinkling liquid laugh I remembered so well from my school days at the Thief's Academy and took the seat next to me. "Let me, then," she said, signaling for the barkeep. "This is courtesy of that gentleman two seats down from us."

"Should I give him my regards?"

"Probably not. He doesn't know it yet. So," she continued after we were served, "what brings you to St. Tius?"

"I would imagine the same thing that brought you—a possible Guild contract."

"Ridiculous, isn't it? Why do they need to interview three?" She shook her blonde curls in frustration. "It's so aggravating sometimes. Because you're a woman they don't think you're qualified."

One thing Amedelya *was* qualified. Class valedictorian, journeyman status within two years of graduation. If I was competing with her for the contract my prospects were bleak. "So who else is interviewing?"

"No idea." She finished her wine and laid several coins on the bar. Then she hugged me and kissed me lightly on the cheek. "Good luck, Brendell. If I don't get the contract I hope you do." I watched her pause briefly and converse with a stranger before leaving. Probably lifting another satchel I decided and

returned my attention to my wine.

She wasn't. Within seconds strong hands seized me and ripped me from the bar. "Where is my purse, thief?" It was the stranger she had just talked to.

"Your purse? I don't know what..." My protest was interrupted by a knife on my throat.

"The lady said she thought she saw you lift it when you came in. And now I find mine is missing. Let us see." He reached in the left pocket of my jerkin. Nothing. Right pocket ... and he smiled as he pulled fourth an unfamiliar satchel. "This is mine," he said, dangling it before me.

*Amedelya*. "Are you sure?" I asked brightly. "That is a common looking purse. No identifying sigil or initials, just a plain leather pouch. It *could* be yours. It could be that gentleman's over there. It could in fact be mine. Can you *prove* it's yours?"

"This is *mine*," he said.

"There is an excellent way to find out." All eyes were watching us now. "Ladies and gentlemen, apparently there is or was a thief amongst us. This gentleman insists I lifted his purse. Is anyone else missing any valuables?"

I watched as hands hurried into vests and pockets. "My bracelet is gone!" one woman screamed. Two other men yelled in rage when they realized they had been victimized as well. "This is most distressing." I showed my intense concern. "Perhaps our innkeeper can explain why he allows petty thieves into his establishment."

"You stole my purse!" my accuser snarled through gritted teeth.

"But if I indeed stole your purse, would it not be logical I stole the others as well?" By now we had a crowd of interested onlookers around us. He nodded reluctantly. "As you can see," I continued as I emptied each of my pockets, which indeed were empty, "I have no other possessions on me. Except," I grabbed his satchel from his startled grasp, "my *own* purse. I suspect that perhaps the real thief is someone else. Perhaps someone who has already left this establishment."

There was a muttering among the crowd as they considered my arguments. They assuaged my accuser naught. "I know that is my purse!"

"Fine. Then let us go to the authorities and let them make their decision."

"He doesn't have *my* purse," one man noted. "Or my bracelet," the woman added.

"He gave them to someone else, an accomplice," my knife-wielding friend protested.

"Such a complicated plot just to lift a few purses, earn a few coins? My experience has been that thieves prefer to work alone. But tell me this; are you a visitor to our fair city?"

The man frowned. "Yes, why?"

"I would hate that a stranger to St. Tius leave under the impression we are but a lawless group of ruffians eager to prey on the unwary. Let me give you *my* purse. This won't compensate for any money that was taken but at least you will have a purse. And, hopefully, more pleasant memories of your stay here."

The crowd cheered at that. The man looked at them, then at me. Then, reluctantly, he sheathed his weapon. I presented his satchel to him grandly. "And let me treat you to a glass of wine as further

compensation for this little misunderstanding.” He agreed to that as well.

Others in the crowd thanked me and congratulated me on my warmth and understanding. I endured it all with a smile while I seethed within. Amedelya was going to regret this. Somehow. When I returned to my inn much later than I had planned there was a message. The Guild wanted to see me.

"Almost caught stealing a mere purse? What kind of professional are you, Brendell?" The Secretary for the St. Tius office was enraged.

"I guess I'm a bit out of practice. How did you hear of this?"

"Another of our members was there. This is most distressing."

*Amedelya perhaps?* I wanted to ask but couldn't. "No harm done. No authorities were called."

"I don't see how we can in all good conscience consider you for this assignment," he said. "We will be withdrawing you as an applicant tomorrow."

I felt a terrible sinking feeling in my income. "That hardly seems fair. Shouldn't the client be allowed to make up his own mind?"

"Failure reflects on the Guild. This is too important a contract to entrust with someone who can't even lift a purse in a bar without being caught!"

I choked back my protest. Explaining the circumstances and Amedelya's involvement would only brand me more incompetent and a traitor to Guild honor as well. Indeed they would reward her for her creativity. "This will not go on my record?" I asked instead.

"The fact you have been withdrawn from consideration, yes."

I winced. My journeyman card was becoming more and more an unreachable dream. "Are there any other contracts up for consideration in St. Tius then? Since I am already here? One," I gritted my teeth, "a simple apprentice thief may be able to complete?"

"I will keep that under advisement." He slammed shut his register. "Good evening, Brendell."

Later that night I sat in my room and stared at the ceiling. Somehow I was going to have to repay Amedelya.

But I didn't have to look for her; she found me the following day. I was having a small lunch in the Dragon's Nest when she entered. The glow in her eyes told me everything I needed to know, but she insisted on telling me anyway. "I got the contract!" she breathed excitedly. It was a magnificent sight and I breathed excitedly as well.

Then my anger returned. "Much easier when you remove the competition."

She patted my hand. "I'm sorry, Brendell, I really am. But you were the only one I was worried about." She shrugged, another magnificent sight. "A girl must do what a girl must do."

"I wish you the best." At least I could be sincere about that.

She brushed back a stray blonde curl. "I suppose I should treat you to lunch. I owe you that at least."

"Unnecessary. As you say, a girl must do and so forth."

"At least let us enjoy more wine." She signaled the serving wench, who returned quickly with a full flask. "So what will you do now?" she continued after filling our tankards.

"Stay here for a few days, see if another contract becomes available."

"Would you be interested in working for me?"

I glanced up from my meal. "Work for you? Subcontract?"

"Exactly."

This was a surprising turn of events. Subcontracting *was* done; I had while helping Professor Grimmire at the Academy. But not often. "What will the client say?"

"No need for him to know. And he won't care as long as we are successful."

I ruminated. I wouldn't get credit towards my journeyman's card, that was certain. "Half a pie is better than nothing," I agreed finally.

"Actually I was thinking ten percent. But the payment is substantial and I doubt it will take long."

*I won't even recoup my expenses.* But I had no solid prospects either. "I couldn't eat half a pie anyway. When do we start?"

"Tomorrow. Meet me at the Queen's Boudoir in the morning." Then she left. And left me with the bill for our wine.

It was raining and my wrap was doing a poor job of keeping me dry while I waited outside the inn for Amedelya. I was having second thoughts already when she finally appeared a good twenty minutes late. "Where are the horses?" she greeted me without apology.

"What horses?"

"You expect us to *walk* all the way to Castle Blackhorn?"

"Is that where we're going? You never told me."

She paused. "Oh, that's right. I'll wait here; go to the stables and get them."

Muttering curses, I slogged through the streets and negotiated what was an obviously unfair fee for the rental. I was as wet as a fish by the time I returned. "I'll take the one you're riding," she decided after studying the animals. "You will carry the supplies." And we were off. And I still had no idea what it was we were going to steal.

I soon discovered why she had subcontracted me. "Setting up camp is not suitable work for a woman," she sniffed when we stopped for the night. She remained perched on a log and performing her toilet while I collected wood, built the campfire, prepared our dinner, fed and brushed the horses, cleaned up our utensils, gathered water, pitched her tent. "Aren't you going to tell me about the contract?" I panted after I was finally finished with my nightly labors.

She made a moue. "I don't know if that's necessary. Suffice it to say that we are going to the Castle Blackhorn. What we are seeking is hidden within."

"And you have a plan to break in?"



"Absolutely."

"Which is?"

"They're going to *invite* us in."

Three days later we arrived. The castle sat on the fork of a river; surrounding it was a small village made up mostly of tents and small wooden buildings, the homes and businesses of the people who worked for the ruler of the fiefdom. We noticed soldiers everywhere as we rode slowly through the squalor, private mercenaries, not Assassin's Guild members. Whoever lorded over this realm must have felt secure in his power to blatantly display his contempt of the Guild so openly. It also meant that whatever small protection our Guild membership provided when dealing with fellow Guilds was non-existent.

Amedelya wrinkled her nose in disgust. "Don't these people ever wash?" she muttered. The townspeople watched, curious and suspicious, as we wended our way among the scattered tents and huts. It was obvious by their behavior that visitors were rare here.

I could see why when we were approached by armed guards. "What is your business in Castle Blackhorn?" one demanded harshly. Four others stood behind him, bows drawn and aimed.

"My brother and I," Amedelya nodded at me, "are traveling minstrels here to entertain the good people of Blackhorn with a most amusing performance of juggling, song and dance."

"You are not dressed like minstrels," the guard said.

"Such finery is inappropriate for traveling. But if you can show us somewhere to change into our working apparel, we will be delighted to provide a demonstration. For free, of course," she added with a smile.

The guards held a brief conversation, then the first stepped forward. "Follow us," he said, then turned and immediately started walking through the forming crowd.

"Traveling minstrels?" I whispered. "That is your plan?"

"Look at this place. A merchant or traveler would have difficulty gaining access to that," and she pointed at the foreboding castle which dominated the landscape.

We stopped before a simple mud-and-straw hut. The guards went inside, within minutes the family which lived there was outside. "You may use this to do what is necessary," the lead guard said coldly.

"Get my things," Amedelya said and dismounted. I dragged her baggage off my exhausted mount and followed. The hovel smelled just like the village; rotting meat, dirt, poverty and despair. "Try not to touch anything," she sniffed as she inched carefully along the dim interior. I found a small table and hoisted her bag on that. It creaked but held. She opened her bag and perused the contents. "Wear this," she said, handing me a colorful vest. "Oh, and you'll need these," and she handed me three balls.

"For what?"

"For juggling, of course," she replied while choosing her own apparel.

"I don't juggle."

"What?" She stared at me. "You took that class! I remember when you signed up for it. Every other elective was closed."

"I dropped it two weeks later." I tried to play catch with two balls, but they soon succumbed to my

clumsy fingers and gravity.

"That's wonderful," she muttered while she removed a mandolin packed carefully within her clothing. "I told them you were a juggler. Well, just what *can* you do?"

I threw one ball in the air, let it bounce off my head. "I guess I can be a clown."

Which I became. A crowd quickly formed when we stepped outside. Now clad in a flowing skirt slit up to her waist and a flowered silk blouse, Amedelya introduced The Magnificent Brendell to the expectant horde. I began with one ball, no problem; two balls, a bit challenging; three balls, impossible. I let them bounce off my hands, my chest, my nose, my noggin as the crowd alternated between disgust and amusement. Then I put the balls away and mimed the exact same routine. This time the laughter of derision turned to laughter of amusement as I improvised. I ended by pretending to heave seven balls into the air, then huddled on the ground helpless as they were imagined to crash around me. When I arose and brushed the mud off my clothing I was treated to heartfelt applause.

Now it was up to Amedelya. I kept time with a tambourine while she sang, accompanying herself adequately on the mandolin. Occasionally I walked among the crowd holding out my tambourine for any donations. I even put in a few coins myself so they would get the hint, but the residents of Blackhorn remained oblivious to the concept. One of the guards, however, left and I saw him enter the castle just beyond. He had returned by the time we completed our performance and approached Amedelya.

"The Master extends his invitation for you and your brother to join him this evening for a private performance. Please get your equipment and follow me."

"We are most honored," Amedelya said. She gave me a sly wink as we gathered our belongings: *told you so*. Within a few minutes we were welcomed into Castle Blackhorn itself.

"Now what?" We had been ushered into a massive bedroom to repose and prepare ourselves. Since we were brother and sister, our host saw no reason to give us separate rooms. Our accommodations were quite austere for a castle, the only ornamentation a portrait of a hawkish-looking female. I had noticed other paintings of the same woman scattered throughout the castle as we had been led here. The guards had ignored all my questions about her, about their master, about the castle in general, so I had finally admitted defeat and kept my mouth shut until now.

"I suggest *you* work on your act. It might amuse the yokels but not a lord and his entourage. Meanwhile *I* plan to enjoy a bath."

I winced. I thought I had improvised quite effectively. "I meant what do we do to fulfill the contract?"

"After the residents go to bed, we'll begin. I have thorough diagrams of the castle from the Guild libraries. I have a pretty good idea where we have to go."

"And where is that?" I tried not to look while she undressed, then wrapped herself in a towel. I didn't succeed all that well.

"The wine cellar."

The lord of the manor greeted us warmly with a sumptuous feast and flattering guests. He made sure that Amedelya was seated on his right while I was shunted below the salt. She played up to him well, laughing at his jokes and allowing him an occasional caress or view of her ample décolletage. Meanwhile I tried to initiate conversations with those around me but they remained steadfastly interested in their plates. Finally I decided rudeness was called for. "I notice the mistress of the manor is not dining with us," I said to the

wench on my left. "Is she away on a journey?"

She wiped away most of the stew on her mustache before replying. "Our poor Lady Robinfine died of the Blight this past winter. Her passing has most distressed our lord and his followers. His crown jewel he called her, the star of his life. We have been praying he would take another as his paramour but that has not come to pass." She glanced towards the head of the table. "As yet."

*Did Amedelya know this?* I glanced at the couple on the dais, eagerly engaged in a whispered conversation, then at the faces around the great table. The local women were attractive in their own way, hearty working stock, could probably outdraw a draft horse. But all paled in the glow of my partner's beauty. I felt a tremor in my stomach, one not caused by the greasy food I was eating. I would have to find a way to pass along this interesting bit of intelligence.

But not as yet. The lord clapped his hands and servants immediately sprang forth to remove our plates. I had just enough time to stuff a roll in my pocket for later when he spoke. "And now, my friends, followers and subjects, tonight we are going to be treated to a most unusual and stimulating evening of entertainment. May I present the lovely Amedelya and her assistant, Bandle."

I shrugged; I've been called worse. I began my routine but discovered quickly that all eyes were riveted on the lord and my partner. Which probably was just as well. Maybe it *was* the grease that was upsetting my stomach. I cut my performance short and cleared my throat. "Ladies and gentleman, dames and lords, I would now like to introduce you to the songbird of the Northern skies. A woman who has entertained in castles and capitals both near and far. My own lovely sister, Amedelya."

The applause was immediate and thunderous as she stood and bowed to the crowd. Her voice echoed well within the dining hall as she roughly negotiated a selection of ballads and several bawdy dance hall songs. The crowd and their lord were totally enthralled, however, and awarded her a standing ovation when she finally set down her mandolin. I made my way to the front and joined her on the third encore. "Was I that good?" she whispered as she smiled and bowed anew.

"No, but they don't seem to mind. We have to talk. Let's get out of here."

"Not yet. The Lord and I have much to discuss."

I glanced at him and forced myself to smile. He was an imposing figure, made even more so by his lavish robes and handsome throne. But I noticed more in his eyes than simple lust or appreciation of Amedelya's ample beauty. Cunning, and a hint of knowledge I did not like. "Fine. I'll meet you in our quarters. Be careful." And I left her to the further ministrations of the crowd.

The moon was high in the sky and I was already pacing the room when she finally arrived. "Enjoy yourself?"

She shrugged and started removing her work clothes. "It was bearable. The Lord, I think, was a bit too eager in showing his appreciation. Nothing I'm not used to."

"Or encouraged? You are aware his highness lost his wife last winter? That perhaps he's looking for another?"

"Really? No, I wasn't. I assumed he was a typical married man doing what typical married men do." She quickly donned her work clothes: leather pants, dark blouse and cotton vest. "Matters not now." She sat heavily in a chair and sighed. "We'll wait half an hour to give them time to fall asleep. Then we sneak downstairs to the wine cellar. Do you have any charms on you?"

"Charms? No. Why?"

"The Guild claims our lord might be a dabbler in the mystic arts. If true he may have supernatural guardians at work." She shrugged. "It's probably just a rumor."

I groaned. I don't like demons much. "And what else haven't you told me? I still don't know what we're after."

"Why, his crown jewels of course."

Sneaking through a darkened castle, one possibly guarded by demons; I shook my head and cursed softly as I followed Amedelya through the unfamiliar building. Making my way quietly through darkened buildings I was used to. I was *not* used to relying totally on someone else, someone who continued to provide as little illumination on our task as possible. How were we going to escape? How would we transport our prize? Just some of the little details I would have liked to know.

But I was also willing to give Amedelya credit. She wouldn't want to be caught either. And thus far, I had to admit, her planning had worked wonderfully. I would file away the traveling minstrel gambit for use at a later time ... if there was one.

"It's this way, I think," she whispered, grabbing my arm and bringing me back to the here and now. She opened the door cautiously and we found ourselves in the kitchen. The full moon provided ample light so we could see the doors leading into the dining hall, the rear entrance and one along the left wall. "That goes to the cellars," she nodded towards the last. Each of us grabbed a sharp kitchen knife as we softly went to, then opened, the door. There were no lit torches here, but she was prepared. She lit the candle she was carrying and within minutes we found ourselves in the wine cellar.

Amedelya set her tapir on a convenient table and studied the collection of bottles and casks. "Now, which one is it?"

"They surely wouldn't be foolish enough to place a crown in a cask full of wine," I offered. "The wine could damage it."

"Unless they wrapped it in canvas or something. But you're probably right. Let's look for an empty cask first." Which we did ... and found none. "Guess we'll have to empty them all," she mused. But after spending another ten minutes wading through rivers of wine and reaching into cask after cask we remained unsuccessful. Amedelya cursed. "It *has* to be here. There is no other possibility!"

"Is that what they told you? That it was hidden in the wine cellar?"

"Not exactly. But it can't be anywhere else. This is the only place the script could refer to!"

My confidence in her began to waver. "Exactly what does it say?"

She frowned. "It doesn't say *anything* exactly. Here," and she reached into her tunic. "Tell me what you think."

I studied the small scrap of paper. It had apparently been ripped from a journal since it was in script, not calligraphy.

"ord Blac  
rown jewe  
ine cask"

was the only writing legible. "Lord Blackhorn and crown jewels are clear enough," I agreed.

"And 'wine cask.' It can mean nothing else!"

I considered it another minute. Then my brief conversation with the subject during the feast struck me. "Do you know if this castle has a crypt?"

"Of course. What castle doesn't?"

I was convinced I was right as I returned the note. "I was told that our host referred to his departed wife as his 'crown jewel.' I don't think that note refers to a wine cask. It refers to Lady Robinfine's casket."

She studied the sparse writing, then me. "Are you sure?"

"If the crown jewels are hidden in a wine cask somewhere else we may never find them." *But Blackhorn referred to his wife as his 'crown jewel.' Why would our client want us to find a coffin?*

Something else troubled me as well. "Don't you think it odd we've seen no one on our way here? In a castle this large, there should be night guards, wenches in the kitchen, servants cleaning. I'm beginning to reconsider this contract."

"Nonsense," and she shook her head emphatically. "I don't quit on an assignment no matter how difficult. If you're right we'll find the jewels and we will be gone." She removed another paper from her pocket and perused it. "The crypt isn't far. We can get there from here." She retrieved her candle and we were on our way.

We arrived shortly. Unlike the other rooms, the crypt was well-lit by hundreds of candles. The lord must still be in mourning for his wife I decided as we made our way down the twisting stairway. Lady Robinfine's sepulcher stood in the center of the room; there were no others. It was surrounded by fresh flowers and even more candles.

"I think you're right," Amedelya offered as we approached. On the lid of the sepulcher the serene smiling face of Lady Robinfine stared sightlessly at us. "She was beautiful, wasn't she? Let's get this lid off and complete our contract."

Whoever had carved the stone had taken liberties with the countenance echoed in paintings throughout the castle, but I held my tongue. I had more pressing concerns. "Hold. Something is not right. This has been too easy."

"You worry about the wind, Brendell," she hissed. "You are under my employ. Now help me remove this lid." Using our knives to loosen it, we soon had it slid over enough to reveal the beautifully carved wood and gold casket within. "Good. Let's open this, get the jewels and get out of here."

I stopped her. "Unusual place to keep jewels, don't you think? Why would the lord, who so obviously worships his late wife, keep his crown jewels within her coffin? *She* was his crown jewel, after all. Would he be willing to commit sacrilege every time he felt it necessary to display them?"

She weighed my arguments. "You're right," she agreed reluctantly. "This is not as it seems. Let's close this up and leave."

"And not fulfill your contract? What will the Thief's Guild say, Amedelya?" Lord Blackhorn's voice came from behind us.

We turned and stared at him. He was standing at the bottom of the steps, completely at ease. That bothered me. "You. You hired me," Amedelya realized.

"Yes. And I expect you to fulfill your contract. Now *open that coffin!* Or they will destroy you." Suddenly columns of smoke began appearing around us, columns that were quickly solidifying into demons armed with fangs and swords. Within seconds they would be on us.

"I think not, Lord Blackhorn," I yelled as I shoved Amedelya away from the coffin. Then I lunged forward and lifted its lid.

A scream rose from somewhere, maybe it was from me. I saw *something* rise out from the coffin, felt *something* envelop me, enter me, permeate my body, my soul. For a few seconds I saw through another's eyes, thought another's thoughts. Then I felt intense surprise, alarm, sudden despair and overwhelming resignation. And then the unknown presence disappeared and I was again Brendell, although quite the worse for the experience.

That's when I realized the screams were not from me. Lord Blackhorn now sat huddled on the steps, his face in his hands, sobbing uncontrollably. Amedelya stared at him, then at me. "What happened?"

I noted the demon guards were beginning to dissipate, the lord's control over them broken. Just as he was now broken. "I'll tell you later. Get us out of here."

Lord Blackhorn made no effort to stop us as we ran back up the stairs; his plans and his dreams were now mere dust. The guards were surprised at our early leave-taking, but they had never been informed of Blackhorn's intentions so they allowed us egress. Still we rode as hard as long as we dared before finally pitching camp.

"What did you do, Brendell?" Amedelya asked after we had finished a small lunch. This time she volunteered to cook.

"I destroyed Lord Blackhorn's dreams. And I suspect I saved your life."

"How so?"

"I believe that when Lady Robinfine died, the lord imprisoned her soul within her coffin." *He certainly imprisoned something in there.* "I think his plan was that you would open that coffin. When you did, her soul would be released to possess you. That changed when I opened it instead. Apparently she did not want to, or could not, take control of a man. I suspect my actions released her irrevocably to the other world. Lord Blackhorn realized that, which is why he let us go." *To love a woman that totally, that hopelessly.* Could I ever love anyone that way? I shuddered at the thought.

Amedelya considered my explanation, then laughed. "I can understand why she wouldn't want to be a *man.*" Then she frowned. "But how did you know?"

"I did not. I just knew that if he was so insistent, *you* could not be the one to open that coffin."

She ruminated another minute. "I would have gotten that contract no matter what, wouldn't I? I'm sorry, Brendell."

I shrugged. "I would have done the same to you." Which was possibly true.

"Thank you anyway. For your help and for saving me." We ate in silence for a long time before she spoke again. "We make a good team, you know."

"It was ... interesting."

She poured herself a goblet of wine, then remembered to pour me one as well. "What are we going to

tell the Guild? A failed contract will not look good in our dossiers."

I raised my eyebrows. "We? *I* will tell them nothing. My name is not on the contract. Any agreement we had was verbal only." I allowed myself a slight smile. "Surely the Guild would question why a journeyman would require the assistance of a mere apprentice."

The sudden fire in her eyes shamed our campfire. "Brendell, you can't do that to me. My failure is totally *your fault!*"

I winced and steadfastly ignored the rest of her harangue, then her pleading, then her enticements. It promised to be a trying ride back to South St. Tius.

## Scepter Fidelis

I sat inside my small cell and studied my surroundings. As promised, the brig was bare of all save a small cot and bucket. This was not how I, Brendell, apprentice thief, had planned to spend my ocean voyage! There was little I could do as yet, however, to remedy my circumstances. With nothing better to do, I reviewed the events of the past few hours, events which had totally disrupted and forever changed my planned itinerary.

The angry voices and vigorous pounding on my stateroom door would have been enough to wake the dead. I wasn't as fortunate; I groaned as I staggered from my bed to answer the commotion outside. My ship was three days out from Pylia and I had yet to gain my sea legs. The last two days I had spent lying in bed ... when I wasn't leaning my head outside the porthole. I opened the door a crack and peered out at the collection of guards hovering beyond. "What?" I croaked.

"You are Brendell?" one asked.

"Yes."

"You are under arrest. Get dressed." I staggered back as the armed guards surged into my tiny room.

"What is this about?" I asked as I began searching for my clothing. Arguing with the Assassin's Guild was a fruitless endeavor.

"Later." The guard whom I had to presume was the leader turned to two of his comrades. "You two search his room. You," he turned back to me, "come with us."

"And delighted I am to do so!" Perhaps it was the shock of their intrusion, but I was beginning to feel better than I had in days. Well enough, in fact, to add a few potentially useful items to my wardrobe. I ignored the curious and angry stares of my rudely awakened neighbors watching from their staterooms as I was led down the hall. My guides were going to tell me nothing so planning was currently a fruitless exercise. Instead I maintained my innocent smile and whistled mindlessly as we wandered aft and upwards, onto the deck and then into the Captain's quarters.

The Captain was waiting for us. Even at this late hour he was impeccably dressed in his stiff pressed uniform. He was seated regally behind his desk and before him was a leather-bound folder. I was pushed into the chair across from him. The guards remained standing. "This is the man?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," the guard leader responded.

The Captain studied me, a hunter gauging its prey. He spoke in soft, calming tones to foster unguarded optimism before he buried the knife. "You are Brendell? A member of the Thief's Guild?"

"As you well know, since you have the manifest before you." I felt it time to let my anger erupt. "And I demand to know why I was so rudely roused from my quarters."

"It's really quite simple. According to these august gentlemen, you have stolen the Scepter of Ghonea."

*The Scepter of Ghonea.* His words chilled me. "I don't know what you are talking about."

"Come now, Brendell." The Captain offered a warm, encouraging smile. "You are a professional thief. Only a professional thief could steal the scepter. Just tell us where you hid it and we can all enjoy the rest of our voyage together."



"Really, Captain, do you think I would be so foolish as to register as an honored Guild member if I were in truth aboard to steal this 'scepter?' Or anything else for that matter?"

An unexpected yet remotely familiar voice rose from behind me. "Actually it would be in keeping with your methodology, Brendell. You once said the best disguise is often no disguise at all."

All of us turned to the speaker. "You know this man, Alorgh?" the guard leader asked.

Alorgh grinned at me. "Yes. I had the unmatched pleasure of being in one of his classes during my stay at the Thief's Academy. By proclaiming his profession so openly, he could be hoping to divert our suspicions."

"So good to see you again, Alorgh," I nodded. "I am pleased you have chosen a profession more in keeping with your limited talents."

His knuckles whitened as he grasped his sword, then he relaxed. "I think you shall feel differently very soon. Once we find where you have hidden the scepter."

"It shall not be very soon at all as I did not take it. You are right in one respect; parading myself so openly *could* deflect suspicion. Although the Captain will agree that it is common Guild protocol and courtesy to identify ourselves to each other. But think. Why would I steal the scepter *now*? We have at least two more weeks at sea. That is a long time to successfully hide such a large object in such limited space."

My further arguments were interrupted by a knock at the door, followed by the entrance of two more guards. They held a whispered conversation with the head guard, who expressed his displeasure with a snarl. "Then go back and search again! This is a professional thief we are dealing with. Alorgh, go with these men. Perhaps what you learned at the Academy will be helpful."

The three nodded and left. The Captain favored the guardsman with a frown. "They found nothing?"

"Thus far. But we know he only had a few minutes to break into the room and steal the scepter. He could not have had the time to hide it safely." He glared at me. "You didn't expect us to discover your thievery so quickly, did you?"

If I had stolen it he wouldn't have discovered the theft *at all*. "How was the act accomplished?" I asked instead.

"I would like to know that myself," the Captain offered. "The scepter was under guard, was it not?"

"Yes." I noticed that the guard's haughty tone had changed dramatically. "We were keeping it in the small library off the King's stateroom. There was a guard at the door and we checked the room every 15 minutes." He smiled weakly. "We saw no reason to maintain a man within the room because our contingent is small and we must be concerned with the physical safety of King Zenora. We believe he," he pointed at me, "crawled in through the stateroom window and took the scepter while no guard was in the room."

I nodded as it is exactly what I would have done. Although I would have done something else as well. "His royal highness must be quite upset."

The guardsman glared at me. "Not if we retrieve the scepter. Which we will."

"Well, you won't get it from me because I am not the perpetrator." I stood defiantly. "If our little conversation is concluded, I would like to go back to my stateroom."

"You shall remain here until we have cleared up this little matter," the Captain said. Then he turned to the guard. "I trust you will be able to offer more evidence than suspicions based on this man's profession."

The man's response was interrupted by another knock and then the return of three guards. Their cheerful demeanor immediately darkened mine. "We found this," and Algorph displayed a ruby ring proudly, "It is His Majesty's and was kept with the Scepter."

*Why didn't you find it the first time?* "I never saw that before."

The head guard nodded. "I think this is sufficient proof. We demand he be tortured until he tells us where the scepter is hidden."

The Captain frowned. "I'm afraid we are ill-equipped for that. We are, after all, a passenger ship. And I do not like thieves who practice their craft on my ship." He slammed the folder shut. "I have a very simple policy, anyone who breaks the law aboard my vessel must walk back to port. After we wrap them in chains, of course." He grinned at me. "If you can hold your breath long enough, you might reach shore."

*If I stole the scepter and if you kill me, you may never find it,* I told them.

"I believe that punishment would be too merciful," the head guard offered. "The dungeons of the King are fully equipped and our men are masterfully trained in the art of information retrieval. You do have a brig, don't you?"

"Of course." The Captain sat back and sipped at a goblet of wine. "But my ship is crowded and I am understaffed. You will have to supply the guards."

"That shouldn't be necessary. Men, search him." I was jerked roughly to my feet and eager hands began stripping me, searching through pockets, shoes, trousers, whatever. They succeeded in finding what I wanted them to find and proudly handed my lock picks to their leader. He nodded in satisfaction as I feigned frustration while redressing.

"Hold." Algorph approached. "One of the few things Brendell taught us was that a thief should always carry two sets of lock picks. And I suspect," he began running his fingers through my long curly hair, "that he hid another set," he stepped back, triumphant, "here." A new set of picks now dangled in his hand.

So you weren't sleeping in class after all, I thought darkly as I was led outside and back down into the bowels of the ship. Within minutes I found myself standing in a four-by-eight foot cage in a darkened, otherwise bare room. Only the moonlight seeping in from the porthole illuminated my new residence. Algorph grinned as he slammed and locked the metal door. "I promised you we would meet again, Brendell. I so do hope you enjoy the rest of your journey." Then he laughed and followed the remaining guardsmen out of the room. They were kind enough to lock the outside door as well, leaving me alone and safe ... and righteously irate.

So much for the past. What little information it offered did not make for pleasant contemplation. Another thief was aboard the *Lady Medina*. And he or she could not be a member of the Guild. For one, they would not have put me in jeopardy. They would certainly *have not* stolen the scepter so early on our voyage.

The Assassin's Guild leader was correct, successfully hiding the scepter for over two weeks on a crowded vessel would be difficult at best. Yet whoever had performed the theft had also planned very carefully. How did they know I was aboard? Was my presence an unexpected benefit they had

immediately taken advantage of, or something they had known and prepared for from the beginning?

The latter particularly troubled me. For *I* was under contract to steal the Scepter of Ghonea.

I decided those conundrums could be answered at another time. First I had to gain egress from my new accommodations. I cursed as I tugged at a particularly stubborn button on my jerkin. Algorph was correct, I told my classes to carry at least two sets of lock picks at all times. My long, untamed locks had proven a successful hiding place in the past, but thanks to him I would have to find another. "You should have taken the advanced courses, Algorph," I muttered as I finally undid the recalcitrant fastener. Unlike the others, this button was attached with strong thin wire. I straightened it and within minutes had fashioned a serviceable pick. Another minute and I was standing outside my cage. "If I'm going to have to spend the remainder of the voyage here I better get a refund," I said to no one.

First I listened at the door but could hear nothing. Which did not mean a guard wasn't posted on the other side, although if the Assassin's Guild contingent was as small as they professed, I suspected they would rely on the brig and locked door to keep me at bay. Still I had no intention of leaving that way. I padded softly around the bare interior and quickly proved to my satisfaction it was indeed bare. I sighed, there was nothing more I could do this evening. I returned to my cell, closing and locking the door behind me. To sleep, perchance to dream.

I was awakened by the clash of metal on metal. I groaned as I slowly unwound. The cot was sufficient only for a pre-adolescent ... a short one at that. Algorph stood proudly on the other side, a tray in his hands, a grin on his face. "Good morning, Brendell! I hope you enjoyed your repose."

I stood slowly, trying to stretch out the knots in my body. "Have you found the scepter yet? I'm innocent, you know."

"Don't move." I remained by my cot while he unlocked the door, then opened it wide enough to push the tray inside with his foot. "You know what, Brendell?" he said as he relocked my enclosure, "I don't care. Just seeing you here is nearly ample reward for all that you did to me."

Truth be told, I had been unkind to him during our shared stay at the Thief's Academy. Any reparations on my part would have to come at a later time, however. "Since you were such an attentive student, you should realize that I would have never stolen the scepter in such a manner. To place myself at such open risk."

Algorph merely broadened his smile. "I've studied your career, Brendell. I know how you refuse to do what is ... expected. Actually this is *exactly* how I'd expect you to steal it. But we will find it."

"Really?" I balanced myself on the cot and the tray on my knees. There was no silverware so I had to enjoy my gruel using my fingers. "Where have you searched so far?"

"The storage areas of course. You travel rather light, don't you?"

"No self-respecting thief would hide stolen property in his own baggage."

"We've checked it *all*." He frowned. "As yet it remains unfound. But that will change." Then he glared at me. "Enjoy your repast, Brendell. It is all you shall eat this day."

I finished my meal in silence and handed him the remains through the cage. He checked to make sure I hadn't stolen either of the two articles, then strutted from my room. Once again there followed the unmistakable sound of the locking door.

I continued to lick the pasty mess from my fingers as I considered. I had absolute confidence in the

Assassin's Guild. If they couldn't find the scepter, it wasn't where they were looking. Could the thief have left ship, perhaps rendezvoused with another? If so I was doomed. Dispensing with that possibility, I weighed others. Theft by a member of the Royal entourage? Perhaps, although the Guild would put them under intense scrutiny as well. I doubted the act was committed by a Guild guardsman as they were notoriously apolitical and committed to their employer. *Unless* one was a thief in disguise, a difficult role considering the status of their patron, that possibility led nowhere.

Which meant the thief was either a passenger or crew member and still on board. Which meant the scepter remained as well. My only option was to find it before the guards did or before we reached port. I sighed. I had much to do that evening.

I began screaming for attention a suitable time after night fell. After fifteen minutes of non-response I stopped. No guard had troubled me the previous evening and I was convinced none would trouble me tonight. Within seconds I was out of my cell. Since the *Lady Medina* was a passenger ship, the portholes were more generous to allow escape in case of fire or attacks by pirates or sea dragons. Once I was able to reach it, it was a simple matter of opening it and climbing outside, where I found myself dangling with both hands over the side of the ship.

This wouldn't do. I pulled myself up, then managed to scuttle to the porthole above mine. I peered in and found I was outside an occupied room. I cursed softly and looked around me. Above the ship was curving outward, scaling that would be impossible without additional equipment. Fortunately that wasn't necessary. I deeply appreciated the small ledge that ran along the side of the ship, presumably to simplify exterior maintenance. I sidled along that past several more portholes until I found one fronting a darkened room. Once again I used my sliver of wire to undo the latch and I crawled inside.

It was just a storage room. I grabbed a mop, opened the door and began whistling as I made my way down the hall. This time of the evening there were few people about, passengers only. I nodded and pretended to push my partner as they sidled by to their staterooms. But while my mop might get me past them, it would not dissuade the Assassin's Guild. Which meant I had to get a better disguise.

Fortunately I knew right where to get one. Before embarking, I had studied the plans of the ship thanks to the resources of the Guild libraries. It was that research that had convinced me to make my own attempt at the scepter *after* we had landed in Coronobo. The laundry room was aft on the fourth deck, the opposite direction of the King's quarters and his Guild protectors. I proceeded there directly, stole and donned a server's uniform without difficulty and within minutes was breathing fresh sea air.

There were few strollers out this evening. One area of the deck had been festooned with tables to encourage passengers to enjoy the sights and briny chill of a moon-lit ocean, but few were taking advantage of its entertainment value. I approached one well-dressed couple and bowed. "May I get you and the madam anything?"

The man toyed with his glass. "Another flask of wine, I suppose. Make sure it's better than the last."

I nodded and approached the man stationed at what sufficed for the bar. "More wine for the gentleman and lady. Our best, if possible."

He snorted and began filling a flask from the keg behind him. He paused as he handed me my order. "Wait, I don't recognize you."

I shrugged. "Usually work in the kitchen. They asked me to fill in tonight because a regular waiter took ill." I knew that on such voyages the young often bartered their labor for passage. I would be considered just another temporary helper by the professional staff and studiously ignored.

"We hardly need additional help, thanks to the Guild and that theft," he sighed. "The King's entourage never leave their staterooms and the other passengers are too alarmed to spend more than a few hours up here. We haven't even opened the gaming tables since it happened!"

I commiserated with a nod and returned to my patrons. "On the house," I presented their wine grandly. "I do wish there were more passengers up enjoying the view."

The woman snorted. "Thanks to the King's guards, we can rarely leave our cabin. This has become a most distressful voyage!"

"They still haven't found the scepter?"

"I just hope they do, and soon! Ruining our trip like they have. They actually interrogated us for three hours. Three hours! As if we could have anything to do with something so ... disdainful." She sipped her wine to remove the taste of the unpleasant thought.

"They've searched our rooms, ransacked our belongings; I would complain to the Captain but it would do no good," her companion added morosely.

"It is most unfortunate," I agreed. "Let us pray they find it soon."

"The Guild couldn't find their way to an outhouse," the dame said and snorted. "And now we travel in fear of our own possessions!"

"I suspect the thief was only interested in the scepter. You should have little to worry about." I decided I had learned all I could from these two. "If you'll excuse me. Call me if you need anything else." I quickly returned to the bartender. Two other waiters were also there standing and chatting. None of us had much to do. "Do you mind if I leave early?" I asked him. "I've already put in a full day below decks."

He shook his head. "Go, we don't need you." The other waiters complained almost good-naturedly as I set my apron on the bar. I nodded good-bye and made my way aft, where I found a group of brawny crewmen hauling a net into the ship. "Need any help?" I asked them.

One turned and chuckled when he saw me. "You want to dirty that nice white uniform with the smell of fish?"

"We throw back catch as small as you," another remarked and they all laughed.

"So that's what you're doing, catching fish?"

"It's how we get fed," the first said with a touch of bitterness. "The Captain gives all the food stored on board to the guests. We have to fend for ourselves. Watch it, mates. All together now." One heave and the net came crashing onto the deck, sending its cargo slithering and splashing everywhere.

I lifted my feet as several large fish slid by. "So you have nets out all the time?"

"For the most part." Only the one crewman deigned to converse with me, the others busy snagging and sorting their harvest. I watched with interest as one man grabbed a rope hanging over the side and began pulling it up. At the end was a jug, which was immediately seized and opened. He took a hefty swallow and passed it around to his mates. My new-found friend got his turn, then looked over at me, cautious but also sociable. "You won't tell the captain about this."

"About what?"

He winked. "He doesn't want us to drink on board. Which is why we keep our grog *off* the ship. The ocean keeps it cool."

"Really?" I considered the possibilities. "So you must have ropes hanging all over."

"Not at the bow. The jugs would break against the side of the ship. Would you like some?"

"No, thank you. Enjoy." I yawned expansively. "I'm sorry, must be getting tired. It's been a long day. Don't worry, I won't say a word to the Captain." I quickly returned below decks, hid the uniform with the mop in the closet, then headed back to my cell. I still had no idea who had stolen the scepter, but now I suspected where it was.

The remainder of the week I spent planning my next excursion. Algorph greeted me each morning with a sneer and more cold gruel. His conversation was increasingly abrupt and I imagined the Guild was coming under growing pressure from the King to solve the crime before we reached port. Even though no guardsman ever checked on me during the day, I still remained safely locked in my cage while my nocturnal excursions I limited to getting something to eat.

Except for one. In the storage hold was a crate being shipped to a Mr. Marghandi in Coronobo. I had packed and sent it myself. My initial plan was to retrieve it in disguise when we landed. Now it held two items I needed, a walking stick and wooden globe. I breathed a sigh of relief when I found them unharmed. Inside one was a gold-plated rod nearly a foot long, within the other a faux-ruby ball. Once put together they were a passable counterfeit of the real Scepter of Ghonea. I placed them safely within my jerkin and headed back to my cage. I hoped to have a use for them soon.

The rain tore around me, clawing at me like an angry cat while the wind threw me against the side of the roiling ship. I cursed the gods as I dangled over the side of the *Lady Medina*. I had wanted it to storm, but not *this* mightily. But time was growing short; Algorph had warned me we would reach landfall within the week. And this was the first bout of bad weather we had enjoyed.

The escape from my cell had been more difficult, but I found the top deck basically deserted when I reached it. Even the crew fishermen remained below and the few on duty were easily avoided as I made my way aft. Along the railings I found a series of ropes lashed securely and dropping down into the ocean. Somewhere on the ship, I was sure, dangled a rope that held the stolen scepter. The question was where.

I studied the ropes before me. Would the thief have attached the scepter to one of them? Doubtful as this crime had been too well-planned for him (or her) to allow mere chance to ruin him (or her). There was one place and one place only where someone could hang a rope over the ship and risk nearly zero chance of discovery. Which meant I had to go over the side.

Which I did. Which was why I was dangling in the wind and rain as the storm raged about me. From the satchel on my back I grabbed a spike, pounded it into the side of the ship, pulled myself over to it and looped the rope around it. Then I pulled out another spike ... pound, pull, loop; slowly but steadily I moved around the boat until I was at the rear of the *Lady Medina*. Above me the staterooms on the first two decks jutted out majestically. The lower three decks were recessed and relatively flat. A rope hanging from, say, a porthole in these lower decks could not be seen by anyone *unless* they were dangling outside at the end of an increasingly slippery rope.

At least here, under the overhanging decks, the rain and wind couldn't reach me. But it also meant I couldn't rely on the storm to drown out my pounding. I attached one more spike, tied the remainder of the rope to it, then attached the rope looped over my shoulder to that. I descended until I was below the last line of portholes and looked across the rear of the ship. I smiled as I saw it, a rope hanging innocently

below one of the lowest portholes.

All the rooms were dark so I was able to traverse the distance quickly. I pulled the rope out of the water and discovered a canvas-wrapped package at the end. A few more minutes of work and I started my journey back. For the first time during this voyage I was a happy man.

Algorph noted my change in demeanor the following morning. "Is your gruel particularly delicious this day?"

"Exquisite." I slurped my fingers clean. "Have you discovered the scepter as yet?"

"No," he said with a snarl. "But once we have you within the King's castle I'm sure the information will flow freely." He grinned. "Enjoy your last hours, Brendell. After tomorrow, you have so few left."

Which told me the *Lady Medina* would be reaching port tomorrow. With one less passenger, if I had anything to say about it.

I grimaced as I studied myself in the small mirror. The fisherman's hut was small and ill-equipped, but it would have to do. My midnight swim ashore had been an invigorating two hour journey avoiding the flotsam and jetsam—and occasional boat—that littered the Coronobo harbor. Then I had chosen a home secluded from the others so I would have more time to prepare myself. After that it was merely a matter of waiting, first for the man to make his way to the beach and boat, then his wife to leave at sunup to spend the next hour or so in the marketplace of the nearby city. Which would give me time to clean up and make my disguise.

First went my hair. I hacked away at it with a kitchen knife, then evened it with the fisherman's razor. Mixing some coal dust in water darkened it considerably. Not the best transformation, but it would have to do until I could retrieve my possessions. The beard, the result of my imprisonment, I kept, merely trimming and darkening it. In the back of a closet I found a long ragged overcoat. I couldn't wear the owner's clothes but the coat would hide my own still-soaked and filthy attire. He also had a worn hat, which I immediately confiscated as well.

Finally there was the matter of money. Mine was still on ship. I ransacked their belongings and found a small horde of gold coins hidden in a box underneath a loose floorboard. It was, I was sure, all they had and I cursed as I took it. I hate stealing from the poor, and not for the obvious reasons. My own childhood was one of poverty, a reason, I suppose, why I had chosen my profession. If things work out well, I promised the absent owners as I left, you will have this returned. And much more.

I had reserved a room in the luxurious Wayfarer's Inn under my own name before I set sail, but I couldn't go there. Farther from the harbor, in a less prosperous area, rested the Barking Seal, where Mr. Marghandi had a room waiting. The clerk paid little attention as I registered. I gave him a gold coin to assure that my baggage from the ship would be brought to me. Several purchases and a welcome bath later I felt like a new man. In many ways I *was* a new man. I now sported short blonde hair, a fashionably knotted goatee, velvet cloak and handsome walking stick. Immediately I went to the Wayfarer's Inn to enjoy a late breakfast and the chaos Brendell had wrought.

I was savoring a cup of tea when the King's entourage entered. The monarch swept into the lobby like a ravenous tide, usurping all available help while continually chastising his guards. Several followed the ruler to his rooms, the others left unhappily. I was sure they were returning to the *Lady Medina* in one more futile attempt to find the scepter. After leisurely completing my meal I returned to my own quarters, but not before leaving a note with the desk clerk. I still had much to do this day.

"You should be meeting with my commander or one of the King's emissaries, not with me." Algorph sat

reluctantly across from me in an inn near my lodgings. It was near midnight and already the crowd around us was thinning. Less chance to be overheard, less chance Assassin's Guild members could arrive unnoticed.

"This could greatly help your career, returning the Scepter of Ghonea to its rightful owner and all."

He frowned before nodding. "You have it, then?"

"I have it *now*. I just want you to know I did not steal it." *Not the way I intended anyway.*

Algorph laughed. "We knew that all along. Not your style. If anything, I would have expected you to make an attempt *after* we arrived at Coronobo."

I winced. "So why did you imprison me?"

"We needed your help. But we certainly couldn't ask for it. What better way to catch a thief than to use another thief?" He leaned forward. "So tell me, who really took it?"

I sipped my wine, which had turned bitter with this new-found knowledge. Now I had been used by both my employer *and* the Guild! This was turning into a most disastrous contract. "I suspect you know. There was one other passenger missing from the original list when you docked was there not? One with a stateroom at the rear of the ship, lowest deck?"

He nodded. "He used an alias of course. Probably disguised as well."

"And probably climbed overboard to a waiting ship once we reached harbor." One fact still troubled me. "How did you know I could break out of that brig?"

"If you wouldn't have had your own resources we would have eventually provided you some. The fact you didn't seem to suffer from your limited diet convinced us you were successful. Where did you hide the pick?"

Another disturbing revelation. So clever *I* was! "You should have stayed at the Academy longer, Algorph. That subject is covered in the third year. Now, are my terms acceptable or not?"

"I believe so. If not to the King at least to our Guild. Either way you will receive your compensation. Tomorrow at ten, then."

"Tomorrow at ten. You have my belongings, I assume?"

"Yes."

"I would like them sent to the Barking Seal before then." He nodded and left me to finish my wine alone with my thoughts. Which were darkening considerably with every passing minute.

Just after sunrise there was a knock at my door. I found my chest waiting outside. Within the hour I had removed the last vestiges of my disguise and dressed in my own clothing. Brendell, apprentice thief, was ready to go to work.

Promptly at nine I presented myself to the residence of the man who had signed my contract. The servant was surprised at my unexpected demand for a meeting, but reluctantly led me into a small waiting room. After a good twenty minutes he returned to guide me to the study in the back.

I didn't recognize the man waiting for me but I didn't expect to. The Guild had handled all arrangements of the contract, and if I would have seen him on board the *Lady Medina* he would have been disguised.



Still I held out my hand and greeted him as warmly as an old comrade. "Mr. Ormandelan, so nice to finally have the pleasure."

He accepted my handshake reluctantly. "And you are Brendell? What is it you need to speak to me about?"

"The contract." I pulled it from inside the vest. "The simple matter of the Scepter of Ghonea. I believe you owe me 80 crowns."

He looked at the contract and frowned. "Oh, yes, the Scepter. I do remember. But I'm afraid that agreement is null and void." For the first time he smiled. "For you did not steal it. And it is already on its way to its rightful owner."

I feigned outrage. "But I was under *contract!* Who else could have accomplished the deed?"

Ormandelan grinned shyly. "Why, me, of course. By the way, why are you still alive?"

This time I let real anger enter my voice. "You are aware, sir, that you have broken a bona fide Guild contract? We do not accept interference from our own clients."

"Do you think I could trust the theft of something as valuable as the Scepter of Ghonea to a mere apprentice thief? No, you were necessary, but only as a diversion. Which you did quite well, I must admit."

"Yes, planting that ruby ring in my room was a nice touch. After the guards left the first time doubtless. But why is the Scepter so valuable? The gold, the jewel, not really worth that much."

"What the Scepter *represents*, you fool! It is the symbol of the legitimacy and ultimate power and divine right of the ruler of Bhandivi. For too long it has been in the possession of a usurper." He smiled as if he had realized his greatest fantasy. "No longer. That incompetent King will be quite surprised when he returns and discovers the people have rallied around their true heir to the throne."

I shuddered; *politics*. "I hope they are paying you well. The Thief's Guild is not an enemy you should cultivate."

Ormandelan laughed. "Do you think I care about your petty Guild? Once King Zenora is permanently dethroned, I shall return in triumph and reclaim my rightful position as a leader in the court. Your Guild cannot touch me."

I waited until his humor had cooled. "I must admit, from a professional's viewpoint, that you performed quite well. For an amateur. Tying the scepter in canvas and hanging it from your stateroom window, indeed that *did* confuse the Assassin's Guild. It never occurred to them that the scepter was not on board the ship."

The pride in his voice disappeared. "How did you know that?"

"Because I found it." I pulled out my dagger and set it on his desk. "Note this sigil." I pointed out the sleeping dragon etched in silver on the handle. "You will find this engraved on the bottom of your 'Scepter of Ghonea.'" His eyes widened in fearful awareness as I continued. "You have the counterfeit I had made. I have already returned the *real* scepter to the King." I winked. "I wouldn't be making travel plans for Bhandivi anytime soon." When I left he was shouting orders to his startled staff. But not for long; I passed a cadre of the King's guards on my way out.

I sat on my bed and carefully counted out 20 gold coins. It was more than thrice what I had stolen from

the fisherman, but it was only a pittance compared to what the King of Bhandivi had given me. I would deliver the gold personally that evening.

"You should feel like a hero," Algorph had told me after paying me and retrieving the true scepter. In truth I did not. I had been used, first by Ormandelan, then by the King and the Assassin's Guild. Worse, I had failed in completing my contract, even though the Guild would not punish me for it. "You will never become a journeyman this way," I scolded myself.

I shook the thought away. Such dark ruminations were uncalled for. I had been handsomely rewarded and, indirectly, saved a kingdom. If only I wouldn't have had to cut my hair...

## Diary Case

The full moon was a silent sentinel as it cast its reflection into the library of Alos Stinh. On one hand it was a blessing as it gave enough light for me to navigate the unfamiliar room. However, I would have preferred a bit more darkness, being as I was there to steal the man's diary. And the orb's resemblance to a giant eye did nothing to calm my nerves.

My client, Meriz UllMerr, had been quite specific and expansive on what he wanted retrieved, so I considered myself well-prepared for this assignment. All I need do was open the drawer to a nightstand and take the leather-bound book. Simplicity itself, especially since I had so little difficulty entering the Stinh manor. No guards, he had assured me. Nothing to be concerned about. So why was I concerned?

"This is unprofessional, Brendell," I scolded myself under my breath. Still I favored the moon with an angry glare before proceeding to the front of the room. The nightstand was exactly where UllMerr had told me. One locked drawer and the book inside. I withdrew my picks and within seconds the lock was open. I pulled on the drawer...

...and immediately something enveloped my hand. I tried to step back, to pull away, but it was as if my arm was embedded in a wall. No, not a wall. The air around the nightstand suddenly began to glow, a cloud appeared and slowly solidified. And I found myself staring at a demon whose mouth was clenched firmly over my wrist.

"Nice doggy," I said and tried to smile. "And what is your name?"

It looked at me with its eight eyes and said nothing.

"I don't suppose I could apologize and you'd let me go? I promise I won't take anything." Again, no reaction.

Obviously it wasn't going to cooperate and I wasn't going anywhere. Which left me only one option. And I began to yell as loudly as I could.

It took a good ten minutes but I finally heard muttered curses and approaching footsteps. Then the door opened and an old man carrying a candle entered. "What is going on down here? Ah, Szzyll, I see you've caught yourself a mouse!" He glared at me. "Couldn't this have waited until morning?"

"I don't know if your pet would have gotten hungry before then. Tell him to let me go or I'll start screaming again."

"Please. The hour is late and I need to get my sleep." Stinh made his rickety way to his desk and sat behind it. Then he studied me. "You are a professional thief I take it?"

"A Guild member in good standing. Now would your please tell your pet to let me go? He's drooling on my sleeve."

"All in good time. Tell me, who hired you?"

"You know I can't tell you that. Client confidentiality." My back was beginning to ache from bending over and I shook myself to relax my muscles. "Look, I won't hurt you."

"Little fear of that. Not with Szzyll holding you. Still, you are correct. I am being a poor host. Szzyll, release him."

With that the demon opened his jaws and I nearly fell as I stepped away. I shook my hand to relieve the numbness while I tried to hide my anger. UllMerr knew about the demon. Had to. So why hadn't he warned me? "That's a nice little watchdog you have there. Does he do tricks?"

"More than you might imagine. What is your name?"

No reason to lie. "Brendell."

"So. Brendell. You were sent here to steal something of mine." He pointed at the nightstand. "My diary I assume."

No reason to lie about that, either, and I admitted as much.

"Odd he or she would want that. Not when there are more valuable items here." He sat back and folded his hands. "This is indeed a conundrum. I now have an enemy sending thieves to threaten my wealth and peace of mind. This will not do, I fear. An example must be made."

*That* I did not want to hear. "If you know anything about the Thief's Guild, you'll know that once I am thwarted in pursuit of a contract I must abandon it. You have nothing more to fear from me."

"Perhaps. But then he may just hire others. No, this will not do. Your employer must be shown in no uncertain terms that I will not be trifled with. Szzyll."

I stepped back but there was no place I could run or hide, no way I could defend myself. The demon sprang at me and all I could do was watch helplessly as he actually grew in mid-air until he was large enough to swallow me whole.

Which in a sense he did. Suddenly I found myself enveloped in an unearthly, oily mist. Sounds, colors and smells were slightly muted as if I were suddenly viewing the world from within a foul, opaque mask, and I could sense the presence of another in my mind. The demon had enclosed me as thoroughly as a well-fitted jerkin.

"Now that that's over, Brendell, I ask you again. Who is your employer?"

"I can't..." The rest of my statement degenerated into a yelp of pain. It was if my entire body was on fire, courtesy of Szzyll. It only lasted a few seconds but it was sufficient to drive me to my knees. It took me several minutes to catch my breath, regain control of my racing heart and stagger to my feet. That was not an experience I wished to endure again—*could* endure again. "Meriz UllMerr," I said through clenched teeth.

"The nerve!" and he slammed his fist on his desk. "I've actually invited that man into my home and he hires you to steal from me?"

Now I knew why UllMerr had been so precise in his instructions. *But why hadn't he warned me of the demon?* "This is unnecessary, Stinh. As I told you, I have to abandon my contract."

"Now you have another contract. You are going to steal something from UllMerr. Szzyll will see to that."

I groaned mentally. Memories of my forced indenture to Greymark came unbidden. "You realize a thief is not allowed to steal from his employer?"

"Breaking the rules of your Guild is the least of your concerns, Brendell. Or should I have Szzyll offer encouragement?"

I shook my head quickly. "If UllMerr employs magic as well, I might need help."

"Szzyll will help you. Unless, of course, you try to go back on our agreement. Then he will kill you."

"I could use this." I opened my satchel tied to my waist and held up a leather-bound book. "I was going to replace your diary with this copy I made. I could give this to UllMerr to put him off his guard."

"Let me see it." I handed my fake to Stinh. "Yes, that might have fooled me. Until I opened it, of course." He handed it back to me. "I have a better idea. Take my real diary."

"Really?" I walked back to the cursed nightstand, all the time looking over my shoulder at Stinh. Taking a deep breath, I opened the drawer. Szzyll made no protest as I removed the diary. I looked at the two books. Yes, I had made a decent copy considering I had never seen the original. I put one in my satchel and the other back inside. "But UllMerr will surely read this. Your secrets..."

"Hardly secrets," he dismissed my concern with a wave of his hand. "A few minor spells is all. I don't even know why he would want it, except perhaps to embarrass me. And he won't keep it in any event, no matter what might happen to you. Behold," and he opened a desk drawer and removed a small medallion. "Attach this to the inside of the book. Anyplace will do. It is a magical tether. I can retrieve my diary any time I please."

I dutifully attached it to the inside cover and returned the book to my satchel. "Now what am I supposed to steal?"

"Szzyll will tell you that when you get to UllMerr. Now I suggest you be off. Do not try to cross me, Brendell; Szzyll can see and hear everything you do. If you are not back in two days, he will have to end our working relationship."

Later that night I ruminated before my small campfire. I could reach UllMerr by the following afternoon. What still puzzled me was why. Why hadn't UllMerr told me the truth about Stinh? Meanwhile I could feel the presence of the demon down to my very soul, an oily darkness that even made my light meal tasteless.

"Magicians," and I uttered a curse. Perhaps it was my fault. Perhaps more thorough research in the Guild archives would have warned me, although what little I had done had sorely failed to prepare me as I found not the slightest hint Stinh was a magician. And I had to presume UllMerr was as well. But this wouldn't be the first time a client had not been totally forthcoming. And I had signed a legal contract. One I had to fulfill somehow, because the Guild frowned upon failure. But until I rid myself of the demonic presence, that would be impossible. And I sadly suspected the only person who could help me was my untrustworthy employer.

So I was far from happy when I reached UllMerr's manor early the following afternoon. His servant led me into the library to wait, but I had little interest in the wine or fruit that was available. The presence of Szzyll was becoming increasingly unbearable but I knew I couldn't do or say anything to UllMerr. I was certain Stinh's warning was no empty threat.

UllMerr arrived with a great smile. He must have been eager to see me because he was clad in a flowing blue cape. "So you have returned! Where is my prize?"

I patted my satchel, reluctant to say anything.

"Indeed. Then let me relieve you of that." Abruptly he made a gesture and uttered some unfamiliar phrase. Just as abruptly I felt something pulling at me, a force that could not be denied. No, I realized

almost immediately. Not at me. At Szzyll. I could see a cloudy shape flowing slowly from me, could feel the demonic presence leaving as well. It was over in seconds, leaving me tingling as if I had just jumped into ice cold water. I stared at UllMerr. "What did you just do?"

"I just removed an unwanted interloper. Unwanted by you, at least."

I continued to stare at him as realization slowly dawned. "That was it all the time, wasn't it? You didn't want Stihn's diary. You wanted his demon."

"Very good, Brendell." UllMerr poured himself a hearty portion of wine. "Very perceptive. Some wine?"

I shook my head. My initial apprehension was quickly being overwhelmed by anger. "You could have least told me. That the contract was a sham."

He chuckled and stroked his goatee with a ring-encrusted hand. "Come now, Brendell, would you really have signed a contract if I had told you the truth? Stealing a demon is very difficult. Only with the proper magic and equipment"—and he pointed at his robe—"is it even possible. Fortunately for you, I possess that power. Much more power than that fool Stihn ever suspected."

"How did you know that Stihn would ... cooperate?"

He shrugged. "I didn't. Frankly I suspected he would have killed you immediately. But I would have just kept hiring thieves until he did just what he did to you. Nothing personnel, just the cost of doing business."

I shuddered. Using the Guild like that was beyond comprehension. UllMerr would have to pay. I fought to keep my voice level. "What about the diary?"

"Worthless. Oh, it has a few spells the initiates might find useful. Nothing of interest to me. Which," and he paused to open a drawer and remove a satchel, "brings up an interesting point." He pulled something from it which I recognized immediately. "This contract you signed. It says nothing about a demon."

"It does mention the diary," and I patted my satchel.

"Does it, now? Tell me what this says," and he handed the document to me.

I skimmed it. Now my anger changed to cold, righteous rage. "What did you do, UllMerr? This contract mentions some medallion. You and I both know the contract we signed specified his diary."

"A simple spell, at least for someone like me. The wording on all copies of the contract has changed. And it is still perfectly legal." He took a hearty gulp of wine. "You have not completed your contract, which means I owe you nothing. And I will be more than willing to tell the Guild that if you try to object."

"Stihl knows it was you. He will merely send another demon."

UllMerr laughed. "Hardly likely. Controlling even one demon is nearly impossible except for the most powerful magician. He was fortunate to obtain the services of Szzyll. He is powerless now. Which is as it should be." He finished his wine with one swallow. "Now I need my rest. Szzyll and I will have a lot of work to do tomorrow. Good day." With that he left the library.

I sat in stunned silence. I had risked my life, had done everything a lying employer had asked, to complete a contract. *And now he was even refusing to pay me!* Totally unacceptable. I was debating whether to steal one of the golden goblets when an armed servant entered to encourage my exit.

I spent the early evening in the nearby forest staring at my campfire and considering my options. With the demon gone, I had no fear of Stinh. I could easily get rid of the book with its magical tether in my satchel, but I wasn't sure I wanted to. And UllMerr. He had to be taught once and for all that one does not cheat an honored member of the Guild. And I knew just how to do it.

"You returned just in time, Brendell," Alos Stinh greeted me. Once again we were seated in his library. "Otherwise Szzyll would have had to punish you."

"That is not going to happen."

He paused, his pipe halfway to his mouth. "What are you talking about?"

"Szzyll is no more. UllMerr has him. It. Whatever. Turns out that's what he wanted all along."

Stinh paled. "Impossible! UllMerr does not have that power. Szzyll!" And he made some awkward movements with his hands.

I smiled as nothing happened. "We were both used, Stinh."

"No!" He pounded his desk, which proved a mistake as he had forgotten he still held his pipe. It shattered, sending pieces of clay and charred tobacco everywhere. "I must have Szzyll! You must get him back!"

"No. I told you before, Stinh, that I cannot steal from former employers, no matter how badly they treat me. I will not break Guild protocol. However, I did leave a special gift for UllMerr that you might find useful."

He frowned even as he swatted out the glowing embers on his desk. "What are you talking about?"

I patted my satchel. "The tether you had me place on the book? I've removed it and attached it to something that UllMerr uses frequently. A blue robe."

Stinh's eyes widened, then he slowly smiled. "Of course. He must wear that when he practices magic to protect himself. And I will be able to sense when he is doing so. Most excellent, Brendell! I can see I have a bit of planning and work to do so I can properly accommodate my guest."

"I was hoping as much. Now if you'll excuse me," and I rose, "I'll just put this back and I'll be on my way."

Stinh paid little attention as I took the book from my satchel and swapped it with the book in the nightstand, deep as he was in dreaming about his upcoming encounter with UllMerr. Still I didn't hesitate; I rode long into the evening and only slept for a few hours before continuing on to the nearest Guild office in nearby Cormanden Cove. I still had work to do.

"That is most disturbing," the Guild secretary said. I was seated in her office and had provided a brief description of my dealings with Meriz UllMerr. "We will have to interview him, of course, but I suspect we will be refusing any future contracts with him."

"There may be not be any if Stinh is successful." *I'm sure he will be.*

"Indeed. So," and she held up the diary. "What do we do with this?"

"That's proof I *did* fulfill my original contract. It does contain some magic spells and such. I was hoping the Guild archives might pay for it." At about a tenth of its value, I thought darkly. But since UllMerr

wasn't going to pay me—would soon be unable to—the Stinh diary might earn me something for my efforts. Stihn never suspected that I had never taken his real diary with me when I went along with Szzyll to see UllMerr, had instead switched it with the fake I had made. I had switched them back when I left his manor. By the time he realized it...

I shrugged mentally. Cormanden Cove was not the first town I would have to avoid. Just another cost of doing business I was certain UllMerr would say.



## Symbol Logic

It was a pleasant fall day, the leaves beginning to fall, the ivy turning brown on the many stone buildings on campus, a breeze as crisp as fresh lettuce. Groups of eager students were scattered around the courtyard, some studying, some merely enjoying each other's company. I made my way along the familiar walkways trying to hide my disgust.

I had spent too much time at the Thief's Academy, first as an undergraduate, then as a reluctant assistant to Professor Grimmire. I had vowed never to return, especially after the second time. But then the Rally was something even I could not ignore.

I had traversed a third of the quadrangle when an attractive coed approached. "Can I help you, sir?" she said with a bright smile.

I returned it. She was, after all, pleasant to look at. "Perhaps. I am searching for the Counsel Hall."

She put a finger to her lips. "I could give you directions, but the University is large and confusing to strangers sometimes. Let me take you there." With that she put her arm around my waist and began leading me in a direction I knew well. We reached it within a few minutes and she smiled at me again. "Here we are. I do hope you enjoy your visit."

"So do I," I said as I removed her hand ... and my purse, that had somehow found its way into her grasp. "You shouldn't steal from a fellow thief," I scolded her mildly. "Second year?"

"Third," she said and blushed.

"I had a string tied to it," I explained. "Something you might consider," and I handed her *her* purse.

"Thank you, sir. Sorry, sir." Head down, she hurried away. I chuckled as I climbed the steps. Later she would open her purse and discover I had removed one gold coin. Fair payment for the lesson I had just taught her.

Inside, the great hall was aswarm with my fellow Guild members. I saw Professor Grimmire in deep discussion with a few older men. Fellow academicians or master thieves? I wondered as I quickly went to the other side of the room. I had no interest in reacquainting myself with my former instructor. Odds were he had yet to discover the trick I had played on him, but I saw no reason to take the risk.

I helped myself with a glass of punch and was standing alone and searching the room for familiar faces when a familiar voice greeted me. "Brendell!"

The greeting was unkind and I turned reluctantly. "Amedelya, so good to see you again."

"You nearly cost me my journeyman's card," and her eyes flared with vehemence.

"I also saved your life," I said, recalling our shared adventure in Castle Blackthorn.

"Perhaps," she said, but her anger remained.

"So I take it you're here for the competition?"

"Of course. And I plan to win it. Since I won't be burdened by you."

"I wish you the best."

I had hoped that would end our conversation, but she had one more dagger to bury. "I'm surprised you're here. With all the journeymen and masters engaged in the contest, you just might find yourself a contract or two. Simple ones, of course."

"You may be right." I bowed. "If you'll excuse me, I think I see Garrose over yonder. Been years since we've spoken." I hurried off without saying goodbye. Obviously I had made a life-long enemy of Amedelya. Unjustified, I felt, but also in a way understandable.

But Amedelya was correct in one regard at least. The competition sponsored by the Thief's Guild occurred every five years. The challenge was different each time, but the reward—to be honored as the outstanding thief among all Guild members—was impossible to ignore. I recognized several master thieves and many journeymen as well. With so many engaged in the contest, there *would* be contracts open for mere apprentices like myself. And against such august competition, my chances at success would be minimal at best. A smart thief would take her advice and use the time to enrich his own purse.

I've always lacked common sense as well. I instead spent the remaining time sipping punch and giving perfunctory greetings to those who acknowledged me until a bell rang out. All conversation in the room ceased, all eyes turned to the small stage and the four figures seated there.

The dean of the university rose. "Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. And welcome all of you to the 35th Acquisition Rally." Cheers broke out and he held his smile until the tumult diminished. "First, let me introduce our panel of judges." Again polite applause as each professor was named. "Now, before we begin, let us sing to our beloved alma mater!"

Voices rose in rough harmonies as we stumbled through the words of the school song. Even I was fighting back a tear when the dean finally waved us silent. "This year's competition will be a bit different than the last," he began. "As those of you who have participated before know, we customarily select and hide some object on this very campus to simplify rating and so forth. This time, however, your instructions and objective will be quite different ... and far more challenging. The prize, however, remains the same," and he held up a golden bowl. "Our champion will have his or her name engraved upon the Braznell trophy for all the world to see and admire."

*Braznell.* The familiar name made my heart quiver. The thief of all thieves, the man who had single-handedly raised our profession to recognized Guild stature. To be associated with such a genius, even peripherally, was high praise indeed. Again cheers rang out and I noticed several men and women being heartedly congratulated, people, I assumed, who had already earned that honor. The dean set the trophy aside, then reached down and placed a pile of sealed satchels on the table. "Inside these are your instructions," he began. "Each of you will be given one. I know you are all busy men and women and are eager to begin. Please approach the table in an orderly fashion and we will distribute them."

I held back out of deference to my superiors, biding my time with glasses of punch until the queue had thinned. I was beginning to feel the effects of the drink when I finally made my way to the judges. I was reaching for one of the few remaining satchels when Professor Grimmire happened to look up from his writing and saw me. "Brendell! What are you doing here?"

I smiled shyly, my hand poised inches from my target. "I'm here to participate in the contest."

"I think not!" and he slammed his book shut emphatically. "This competition is not open to apprentices."

"I am a member of the Guild," I said after I recovered from my surprise. "The contest is open to all members I believe."

"Not this time," and the professor turned to the dean and whispered something.

The dean looked at me. "You are a provisional member only, Brendell. Only journeymen and above are allowed to compete. Especially this year."

I stepped back. "It was never that way before."

"This year it's different. This year there is more at stake. We cannot have a mere apprentice jeopardizing this undertaking." The dean studied me closely. "Unless you can convince me to change my mind, you are forbidden to participate."

I considered his remarks. "And if I can?"

He shrugged. "Then I for one will grant you the opportunity. Gentlemen?" The others at the table eventually nodded, albeit reluctantly.

"Thank you, sir. And professors." I nodded and left. *To come all this way and not be invited to play?* I sat outside under a tree and considered. If I had to convince the dean, then convince him I would.

Two days later I was standing nervously in the dean's office. His secretary had deterred me as best he could, but I was finally given two minutes of the dean's time. "What is this about?" the dean asked as soon as I was granted audience.

"You told me that if I could convince you, I would be allowed to join the Rally."

"Yes, and I regretted that decision as soon as I made it. I've looked over your service record, Brendell. I'm beginning to wonder why we graduated you."

"I've succeeded in nearly every contract I was given," I said, biting back my anger.

"I would hardly call some of the results 'successes,' but be that as it may. You say you're here to convince me. How?"

I reached in my satchel and pulled out a scroll. "This has the instructions for the Rally. I stole it from Professor Grimmire's home."

He recognized it immediately. His face turned red just as quickly. "You had the audacity to steal from one of *us*? How *dare* you!"

"That's what you taught me to do. Among other things."

"Yes, so we did." He looked at the scroll a moment longer. "And what if I still refuse permission?"

"I currently have no pressing engagements. I hear Hawk's Hollow is quite pleasant this time of year."

Hawk's Hollow was the site of the Rally. He considered my remarks, then suddenly smiled. "Exactly what Braznell would have done were he still with us, I suspect. Fine." He returned the scroll. "Go ahead, Brendell. I won't wish you luck because I want you to fail. Especially because you stole from Professor Grimmire. But I won't stand in your way, either. Good day."

I left his office, then breathed a sigh of relief. But I didn't have anymore time to congratulate myself. My fellow thieves already had a two-day head start. By mid-afternoon I had a horse and was on my way to Hawk's Hollow.

Hawk's Hollow was a good week's journey from the Academy and by the time I arrived I was tired and hungry and desperately in need of a relaxing bath. The outdoors and I do not get along and I was becoming much more proficient in making a camp than I had any desire to be. Still I lingered at my small

cooking fire and read the stolen scroll one more time before I made the final miles into the city.

Our target was one Albenzer Herradiu. The gentleman had hired a Guild member to retrieve a valuable bauble. When the contract was completed, however, the landowner not only refused payment, but turned her over to the authorities as a thief. The laws in Hawk's Hollow are quite harsh and all Guild efforts were futile. She was hanged amid much ceremony as an example for the good citizens of the city.

Understandable the Guild was outraged and that reparations had to be made. Our charge was to steal a "gold sign." Whatever that was. Jewelry perhaps? Coins? I suspected the instructions were deliberately obtuse because the Guild's goal was to ruin Herradiu. There was nothing more to the instructions, no details on the residence, no mention of guards or magic or anything else save the name Hawk's Hollow. In a normal contract I could have consulted the Guild Archives and obtained additional intelligence, but as this was a contest, it would be up to each thief to gather necessary knowledge for him/herself. Which was fine, since I did not want to invest any additional money on this venture anyway.

After reading the scroll once more, I threw it into the fire. In the event I was caught, I didn't want to give Herradiu any warning about his predicament. Then it was time to don a disguise. Since I had every intention of obtaining lodging and a bath, I made do with the humble attire of a farmer. I left the week-old beard intact, packed my few belongings and was on my way.

Hawk's Hollow was bristling with activity as I made my way toward it's center. The town rested on a river and its docks were busy loading grain from the large estates surrounding it. One of those estates, I knew, belonged to Herradiu. The center of the town was devoted to commerce, so I had to travel on until I found an inn and stables. Actually three inns, since the first two were unexpectedly full for this time of year. Most of the visitors, I was confident, were my fellow thieves.

After a welcome bath and brief nap, I walked back to the city proper to explore. I noticed quite a few richly dressed merchants and a surprising number of friars and similar ilk. On one corner I chanced upon Amedelya strumming her mandolin, a hat filled with coins at her feet. Once again she was using her minstrel routine as a means of entering Herradiu's residence. I dropped a lead coin in her hat but she ignored me as I passed.

The intelligence, however, was worth the small price. If she was still in Hawk's Hollow, it meant that the golden whatever had yet to be stolen. Fortunately it was harvest time, so I went down to several of the local inns and inquired about which estates might be looking for field hands. The owner of the third eyed me critically. "You look a bit scrawny to be cutting and baling wheat."

"I'm wiry," I said. After I overpaid lavishly for my wine, he gave me the names and directions to the farmholds beyond the city. One of which was Herradiu's. By late afternoon I was talking with the foreman of his estate.

"I'm not sure I should be adding new men," he told me as we stood outside watching the field hands at work. "We've had a great deal of difficulty lately with things disappearing."

*I bet you have.* "Surely a manor as large as this must enjoy Guild protection." Large it was. Herradiu's home rivaled a small castle in size and his fields stretched far beyond the horizon in all directions.

"We have no use for the Guilds. We protect our own."

Such arrogance deserved to be rewarded. I looked at the men toiling in the fields and wondered how many might be fellow Guild members. Probably none, I decided. Journeymen and master thieves would not want to use such plebeian disguises.

I didn't particularly relish being a farm hand, either. Growing up in Mistmourning, I spent many hours toiling in our small field and otherwise helping out as best I could. It gave me a severe aversion to physical labor, one of the reasons, I am certain, I had entered my chosen profession. "If there have indeed been problems, I would be happy to help with security."

"I think not. A stranger? No, you will work in the fields and that is that. Grab a scythe and get to work."

I whistled as I walked into the thriving fields of wheat. Step one was accomplished. Now I had to get into Herradiu's home.

That night I sat awake in the barracks that were provided for the seasonal help. Every muscle ached from my long day wielding the scythe and I was still unsure whether to be pleased or disappointed that after only an hour my long-forgotten skills with the tool had resurfaced. I fought to ignore the snores erupting from those around me while I considered. The Rally was still ongoing. With the head start my competitors had enjoyed, more than one master thief had entered and made off with Herradiu's property ... a supposition supported by my foreman's statement. Now I regretted having burned the instructions; perhaps there was a clue there I had overlooked. But I had memorized nearly every word and I couldn't uncover one.

Was the desired object particularly well hidden? Or something so overt and ordinary that it would be easily overlooked? The more I considered, the longer I was kept from sleep by the cacophony of my roommates, the surer I was that the "gold sign" was something mundane. How that conviction would help me, however, remained as elusive as my rest. One thing was certain: I wouldn't find the answer in the barracks.

But I didn't find it outside, either. As soon as I opened the door, I was greeted by three guards. "Where are you going?" one asked, a sword in his hand.

"To the outhouse."

"Gaz, go with him."

A shorter man, also armed, grabbed my arm and began leading me away. "Thank you," I said cheerfully. "I'm not sure I could have found my way."

He grunted but said nothing else as he led me to the outbuilding, then back.

"Don't come out again," the first guard said.

"I won't," I said and went back inside, seething. There were no windows in the barracks and no other door. And the small fireplace offered no exit either. Which meant I had no way of avoiding the guards. Which meant my current disguise was going to be of little help.

So the next morning I proceeded to get myself unemployed ... after enjoying a hearty breakfast, of course. It wasn't difficult as I just made sure to loll around with my scythe any time the foreman looked my way. After a severe scolding, he took me off the payroll.

As I ambled past the vast wooden manor, I noted the patrol of guards resolutely on duty. They were inordinately busy dealing with the many traders making deliveries, loading wheat and other goods and so on. I enjoyed the shade of a nearby tree as I watched. No one paid any attention, involved as they were with the rigors of commerce. It would be easy enough, I decided, to don the guise of a merchant and gain entrance. But I also knew that had already been done ... more than once. And if no master or journeyman thief had yet to discover our prize in the manor, then I was growing more and more

convinced that it was not there.

So it was time to explore. Herradiu's holdings were vast indeed. Beyond the fields of wheat was the grazing land for cattle, horses and sheep. There were men working at the corrals, men working at the barns and a lone shepherd watching his flock. I decided the latter would be more approachable and amenable to conversation, so I plodded up the hill. "Hello," I called out when I got within range.

He turned, startled at my approach. "What do you want?" He was dressed in light brown robes, and even from my distance I could see the rough cloth moving. Fleas, I realized, a common affliction for those of his profession. He held a light brown wooden Shepherd's Crook, which he raised and pointed at me. He repeated his question.

"Sorry. I'm a stranger here and got lost. I'm looking for the Herradiu estate."

"Down the road," he pointed with his staff. In the sunlight it almost glowed and I had to look closer to make sure it wasn't made of metal. Not metal, just well-worn wood that had been bleached and backed by the sun until it was nearly yellow. *Or gold.*

"Thank you," I nodded and started in the required direction. But only a short way. As soon as I was out of sight, I scaled a convenient tree. Fortunately it was a fruit tree, so I had something to eat while I watched the shepherd perform his duties. Which appeared to be nothing more than stand and watch his flock.

The afternoon dragged on and I was soon losing any taste for apples when he finally gave a whistle and started down the hill. Obediently the flock followed him as they made their way back to the pens. Then the shepherd entered one of the vast barns. When he returned he was no longer carrying his crook.

I was convinced then. "Gold sign" had to refer to his staff. One that looked like—yet was not—gold. A crook that was the sign of his profession.

I stayed at my perch well into the evening. I was relieved to see that the guards were more concerned about protecting the manor and the field hands in the barracks. And rightfully so. A simple matter, thus, to break into the barn and make off with the crook. And the next day I was returning to the Academy.

"So how did you know this was what we wanted?" asked the dean.

"Several reasons, actually." I tried not to blush as I sank deeper into the plush chair in his office. "The fact no master or journeyman thief had found it convinced me it was not in the manor, and that in all likelihood it wasn't a valuable item one would expect. The clue, while vague, did fit the object. And, honestly, I took a chance."

The dean nodded as he admired the Shepherds Crook sitting on his desk. "Very observant. And very well done. We will send messengers immediately that the competition is over. You will be able to stay for the ceremonies I presume." I tingled as I nodded in agreement. "Excellent. In that case our work is done. Please do not speak to anyone about this. The announcement of the winner is always a surprise."

I could hardly hide my pleasure as I left. Only later did I learn how prophetic his last words were.

It was nearly two weeks later that we were convened once again in the Counsel Hall. The topics of conversation dealt either with frustration or speculation on who the winner was. For my part I kept to the sidelines, speaking only with nods and waves. It would be so much more dramatic, I thought, to maintain my secret as long as possible.

So I remained in the back as inconspicuous as possible while the dean and judges made their slow

entrance to the front. They waited until the crowd quieted, then the dean stood. "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you all for joining us on this most auspicious occasion. We are pleased to announce that our Rally was a huge success. We understand this was perhaps more difficult than most, but you will be delighted to know that a significant portion of property has been rightfully reallocated to the Guild. For those who may be interested, the open contract upon Mister Herradiu remains in effect."

I gnawed nervously on a fingernail. As an apprentice, I was not allowed to undertake such contracts. But let the others destroy the man. I was more concerned with what was to follow.

"Now I know you are growing impatient," the dean continued. The undertow of conversation ceased immediately. "We are most pleased to announce the winner of our Rally. A man we have all known and honored for years. Master Thief Theru Mnene, please come forward."

The applause that erupted drowned out my own gasp of surprise. *Had I been wrong?* I felt like I was falling into a bottomless canyon as I watched the crowd part to allow him passage. I had heard his name before, of course. Theru Mnene had been a successful thief for decades. The white-haired man who made his unsteady way to the dais, however, could never have successfully stolen a coin off a floor, let alone a protected artifact. The emptiness I felt was slowly being replaced by rage as I watched him receive congratulations from the dean and judges, then from my fellow Guild members. I managed to work my way out of the hall without anyone paying undue attention. Then it was a matter of biding my time.

One hour later I was back in the dean's office. He had been expecting me because the golden crook was still on his desk. "Why did you lie to me?" I asked even before I sat down.

"I did not. You did indeed steal the required item."

"Then why did you give the prize to Theru Mnene?"

"I told you at the very outset, Brendell, that this Rally was closed to apprentices. Can you imagine the uproar among the Guild if a provisional member were allowed to win?"

I gritted my teeth, knowing he was correct. "Then why did you choose Mnene? Anyone with eyes could see he is physically unable to pick his nose, let alone a lock."

"Theru Mnene has enjoyed a long and successful career as a master thief. More importantly, he has long been a supporter and benefactor of our academy. He deserves this honor. More so than you ever will."

"So he bought his reward."

The dean frowned. "There is no reason for anyone to know the truth. It will accomplish nothing. And if you attempt to slander Mnene, I assure you you *will* regret it. If you truly desire to become a journeyman, you will keep this discussion between us."

"Of course." I rose stiffly. "I will be leaving tomorrow."

"A wise decision. There are many contracts out there looking for an apprentice to complete. Good day, Brendell."

I was true to my word; I *did* leave the academy the following day. But not before doing something the night before.

The Breznell Trophy remains in its honored position in an enclosed showcase in Counsel Hall. It is adorned with the names of the winners of the Rally, including Theru Mnene. But there is one addition not

easily noticed, a sleeping dragon carved on the base. One very similar to the sigil that adorns the handle of my dagger.



## Tiny Losses

"Is the wine satisfactory? May I offer you something to eat, Brendell?"

"The wine is quite good. Thank you." I swirled the excellent vintage in the golden goblet and nestled even deeper into the comforting leather chair. I was ensconced in the manor of Cyran D'Nell and totally enjoying the wealth and charity of my new employer. Evidence of his fortune surrounded me, from the tapestries on the walls to the gold and silver works of art that littered the tables and shelves. A virtual treasure trove of enticements that made my nerves quiver at the possibilities.

Unfortunately they were denied to me, as he and I both knew. I was working for him and Guild rules prevented me from plying my trade on him either now or in the future. But then, Guild rules were the reason I was here in the first place. "Should we discuss your situation now?"

"The morning will do. I am sure you are quite tired from your journey." D'Nell was an expansive man, both in girth and largesse, and I felt myself taking an immediate liking to him. Which was a pleasant change, since quite often my clients are on the distasteful side. But then, I wasn't under contract to steal for him.

Which made it quite unusual, and I had told the Guild secretary the same in Thuria.

"Quite true, Brendell," and he played with the contract on his desk. "We would not normally honor such a request."

"Then why are we?" I knew it had to be more than just D'Nell being an occasional client. The Thief's Guild will work for nearly anyone as long as they pay. Previous employment does not assure future protection except from the specific Guild member hired.

"Someone is stealing from Cyran D'Nell, and that person is not a member of our Guild. There are no contracts involving him currently. Which means a scab is the thief. And we cannot allow that!"

I nodded in total agreement. It is vital our Guild protect the reputation of our profession. There would always be the occasional amateur or Thief Academy failure plying our trade, and one of our obligations is to catch and discourage every one we found. Whoever was stealing from D'Nell was not an honored Guild member. Therefore he or she had to be stopped. "So my task is?"

"Discover who is breaking Guild rules and prevent them from doing it again."

"Does D'Nell have any suspicions?"

The secretary shoved a satchel across his desk. "Most of the information we have in the archives is here, as are our past discussions. I would rather you approach this assignment with an open mind, however. Any preconceptions might lead to your overlooking the real culprit."

I nodded and took the package. "I will study this tonight and go to his manor in the morning."

"Excellent, Brendell. The Guild thanks you for your assistance in this important matter."

I nodded and returned to my room at the inn to read. I discovered D'Nell had carved himself a small empire made by insurance, banking and usury. He owned a vast manor in the Bantakia forest, one protected by a contingent of the Assassin's Guild. Quite rich, which made him an inviting target for any thief. Beyond more personal information and estate floor plans, however, the report was vague. The Guild secretary had been almost too dedicated in preventing me from forming any preconceptions, but I

saw his point and agreed. If D'Nell was hiring me to be a security consultant, then it was best I gathered most information on my own.

So the following morning I was on horseback making the long journey to the manor. It wasn't difficult to find. The road leading to it was wide enough for four wagons. The building itself jutted literally from the side of a mountain and spread out into the surrounding forest. One outbuilding held the stables, while another served as the living quarters for the household staff and contingent of Assassin's Guild. I was greeted by three of the latter long before I reached the manor proper. I identified myself, then waited patiently while one was dispatched to check my credentials. The others refused my efforts at light conversation, which didn't surprise me. Even though we are fellow Guild members, our respective memberships often find themselves in conflict.

Soon enough I was given clearance, which didn't please my guards overmuch. I was led to the stables so my mount could be tended to, then to the manor proper. And, within minutes, to a meeting with D'Nell.

Our session was degenerating into casual conversation when there was a knock at the door and a teen-age girl entered. D'Nell greeted her with a wide smile and massive hug. "Brendell, let me introduce my daughter, Chorista."

She looked at me with wide, blue, disapproving eyes. I knew she was D'Nell's only child, his wife having died in childbirth. He had never remarried. "What is he doing here?" she asked, refusing to speak to me.

"He's here to help me solve a minor problem."

"I don't like him. He smells funny." And she snuggled against her father for protection.

"He rode a long way to meet me," he said, stroking her hair. "You should treat our guests a bit more civilly."

She wrinkled her nose. "He should at least bathe."

"I'm sorry, my lady," I said, biting back my anger. "Your father and I had to meet immediately. I have not had time to clean up. I will take care of that now. Master D'Nell, could you have a servant show me where I'll be staying?"

"Of course." He rang a bell and almost immediately one of the many liveried staff entered. A brief conversation later I was being led from the room while father and daughter still huddled together.

Later that evening I relaxed in a feathered bed with satin sheets and considered some of what I already knew from the report. D'Nell claimed someone was stealing from him, constantly and in small amounts. He had a vast staff, including the Assassin's Guild. Unless a master thief had taken out his own contract, the culprit almost had to be at the manor. Would I have to investigate everyone? I hoped not because this contract was not that lucrative. I decided D'Nell and I would have a long discussion on the morrow.

Although that soon proved difficult. D'Nell spent his entire breakfast meeting with his staff to give instructions for that day, ignoring me completely. So I tried to strike up a conversation with his daughter, who was seated next to me. She, however, was more interested in making sure her eggs were cooked just so and sent them back three times before they met with her satisfaction. The servants wouldn't talk beyond a mere yes or no, so I finally contented myself with eating ... not an unpleasant way to pass the time. Everyone was fed and the dishes were removed before D'Nell first spoke to me. "Come, Brendell. Time you earned your keep."

I followed him obediently to the back of his manor. Here the home abutted the nearby cliffs and I quickly

learned why. The rear held a large loading area, and already there were carts filled with cargo waiting to be unloaded. There was a contingent of armed Assassin's Guild members as well and I wasn't certain if they were there to protect the goods being unloaded or to watch the many servants milling about.

"This is our warehouse," D'Nell said unnecessarily. "Everything we are paid to protect is brought here until it is time for later shipment."

"This is where the thefts have taken place?" I asked as I tried to avoid the laborers scurrying around us. With their master here, I was certain they were working more eagerly than normal.

"No, in the vault itself. This way." We strolled past table after table of clerks inventorying the shipments until we came to a large wooden door attached to the very side of the mountain. Another contingent of guards stood before it. "Let us in," D'Nell said.

"Wait," I said, stopping one from unlocking the door. "Let me." I pulled out my picks and within seconds I had the door open. "Not the most secure lock available," I said to D'Nell, who stared at me with anger and respect. "Could be part of your problem."

"We'll see," and he brushed past me. "Close and lock it behind us," he said to the guards. I shrugged and followed him into the vault.

Which I discovered to be a natural cave. There were more clerks in here as well, plus still another contingent of guards. There were torches on the wall and candles on the table, so there was enough light to deter anyone from hiding successfully in the shadows. Goods were scattered everywhere in bales, boxes and crates. Along the walls, shelves held even more wealth. The clerks sat at tables busily inventorying piles of jewels and coins. Standing behind them, one for each clerk, an armed guard watched. Every man working in the room was naked. "*This* is where the thefts have occurred," D'Nell said.

I looked at all the wealth in this room and shivered. If only I wasn't under contract! "Tell me, what has been taken and when did it happen?"

"A variety of items actually. I have the complete list in my library. We noticed the losses beginning about four months ago."

I walked over to one of the shelves. This one held open bag after open bag of gold coins. There was as much wealth here in open display as in a small kingdom. Of course, most of it wasn't D'Nell's, but that hardly mattered. I picked out a coin and admired it for a second. Then I noticed a guard start toward me so I dropped it immediately. "How did you discover the theft?"

"We continuously inventory what we have in here. Absolutely necessary for our clients," and he pointed at the men hard at work at the tables. "First it was a few gold coins. Then several rings and small gems. Several items a month."

"And have they," I nodded at his help, "been questioned?"

"The Assassin's Guild has been most thorough in that respect. Both their members and my staff, but their attempts were fruitless."

I noticed the mark of the lash on the back of one of the clerks and nodded. The Guild was quite effective in their inquisitions. "Mind if I look around?"

"I'll come with you."

I shrugged as I wandered to the back of the room. I was, after all, a professional thief, so I understood his concern even if I didn't appreciate it. The cave itself did not stretch that deeply, and the back area ended at an imposing wall. "Is there another entrance?" I asked as I rapped on it.

"No, which is why I chose to build here. And that wall is quite solid."

"So it is." We continued our tour, interrupted only by the continuous click of metal on metal. I paused in front of one of the walls. There was a small hole, much smaller than my hand, carved into the rock. "What is this?"

"Air hole. For ventilation. The vault door is quite tight."

I bent down and looked into it, but I saw no light from the other end.

"It's cut at an angle," D'Nell answered my questioning look. "It goes down so rain won't enter. Just so you know, that wall is over ten feet thick."

"How often do you inventory?" I asked as we walked away.

"Nearly continuously. Anything that is not shipped out is confirmed at least twice a month."

"Is it possible the items were merely misplaced? There is so much here."

D'Nell stopped so abruptly I almost bumped into him. "Let me explain something to you," he said coldly. "I hired you because you are an expert in your field. I am an expert in mine. This may look haphazard to you, but I assure you it is not. I and my men know where *everything* is. Except, of course, what has been stolen."

I blushed. "Sorry. I think I've seen all I need in here."

D'Nell merely nodded. He was still angry when we reached the vault door. He knocked five quick raps. Someone on the other side knocked four times. He did the same and within seconds I heard a click and then the door swung open. It was shut and locked immediately after we left.

"Are there guards posted all night?" I asked as we made our way back through the warehouse.

"Of course."

"Inside the vault?"

"Not necessary. The vault is locked securely and the chamber is thoroughly checked each morning when we open. No one could hide in there all night and escape. The door cannot be opened from the inside. There is no other exit."

He was right about that. If there was no other entrance, then the thief surely had to come in through the guarded vault door. "I would like to be here in the morning when you open, if you don't mind. Maybe I'll see something you missed."

"Of course." All residual anger was gone from his voice. "Do you have any suggestions?"

"You could double or triple lock the door. But unless the Assassin's Guild is somehow involved, that's all I have for now."

He nodded, a bit disappointed. "If you'll excuse me, I have other work to do. You have free reign of my manor during your stay. You may talk with anyone you wish."

"Thank you. I think I will explore a bit. If I find anything, I'll let you know immediately."

With that he left me to my ruminations. Which were many. I walked outside and found some shade under a spreading tree. The loading area was still busy, and probably would remain so throughout the day. That would be the most obvious place for the thefts to take place. At least, that's where *I* would. But D'Nell insisted they occurred within the vault itself. *And why just a few items, and at different times?* That's what confused me the most. A master thief would have made one major heist and be gone. The thief *had* to be someone who worked for D'Nell, someone who was on his staff. Unless there was an impostor on the Assassin's contingent, I could discount them. They were as honor-bound by their Guild's rules as I was by mine. A clerk? They certainly had the opportunity, but they were also well-supervised. Perhaps there was more than one, working together. But even that didn't answer my final question: *how?*

Getting more frustrated by the minute, I decided to take a walk. It turned into a long one. I wanted to see the cliff for myself, and I was already sweating and hungry by the time I made my way around the front of the manor to the mountain proper. I soon satisfied myself that it was secure. Steep, high and wide; no one was going to get in from the top and none from the back. And I knew from the Guild report that there were no tunnels running anywhere under the manor.

So much for the obvious. I headed toward the stables but stopped when I met one of the guards. "How are you today?" I greeted him.

He frowned, unsure how to treat my civility. "Why do you ask?"

"Actually I have a lot to ask. Master D'Nell told you why I'm here?"

"We were informed." His hand never left the hilt of his sword.

"Have you been here since the thefts started?"

"No. Our contingent was only assigned in the last month."

"All of you?"

"Yes."

I could sympathize with his frustration. It was their duty, after all, to prevent such annoyances as thievery. "Have there been any thefts since your arrival?"

"Yes." He admitted it with utmost reluctance.

"How often are you rotated?"

"Every month. We have always done so. Master D'Nell has always insisted upon that."

"Thank you," and I left him to his solitary duty. D'Nell was wise to do that; even if a thief was posing as a Guild member, it would do him no good when sent elsewhere. Now I was convinced no one from that Guild was involved.

After I left the stables I was convinced no one there was, either. But at least I was assured my mount was being treated well. I gnawed on a fingernail as I walked back to the manor to eat something more filling. The more I considered, the more I was convinced that D'Nell's staff would have little or no opportunity to be involved. Only a small group were directly involved with the banking activities and they were closely watched.

The kitchen staff was more than willing to prepare me a light lunch, but I hardly noticed it as I ate. Right now I had no idea how the thefts were being done, let alone who. And I suspected D'Nell would have little patience waiting for an answer. *And if he is unhappy, my Guild will be unhappy.* I decided to avoid my employer the remainder of the evening. Perhaps I would learn something the following morning.

Which I did. I learned just what I expected: no one could hide in that vault all night and leave undetected. I was there when they opened the vault. I followed a team of naked guards, who lit the torches and thoroughly searched the chamber before allowing the also-naked clerks to enter. I even checked the back wall once again but I found absolutely nothing to suggest it wasn't solid and secure. I also endured a thorough search myself when I finally left. Again, standard protocol, and I applauded D'Nell's attention to detail. So what detail was he missing?

Deciding I needed something to inspire me, I took walk in the woods behind the estate. There were gardeners about but I ignored them. I just wanted to find a quiet place to think, but an angry yet familiar voice caught my attention. I followed it to a clearing, where I found a number of pens filled with small animals and one frustrated young lady. "Good morning, Chorista. Is this your menagerie?"

She turned her attention from the caged rabbit and immediately favored me with a frown. I was beginning to believe it was her favorite and sole expression. "Oh, its you. What are you doing here? Why isn't there a guard with you?"

"Your father gave me free reign of the place, you know." I knelt down beside her. "We have a most perplexing problem to solve."

"The thefts?" She shook her brown tresses adorned heavily with jewels. "You will never find him."

"Really? You know I'm a thief myself."

"He told me," and she wrinkled her nose. "You can't be a very good one."

"And why do you say that?"

"Because you haven't found the thief yet!" Her voice was heavy with exasperation and contempt.

"In time." I turned my attention to the animals around her. "Are these all yours?"

"Of course. I catch them and train them."

"Really?" I poked my finger in the cage and stroked the nose of the rabbit. "What did you train this one to do?"

"You can't train rabbits, silly."

"So you mean, say, horses? Dogs?"

She laughed. "Yes. Horses and dogs."

"You caught all these?" There were nearly a dozen cages with various animals around us.

"Most. My father bought me the rest. He buys me about anything I ask for."

Memories of my own impoverished childhood arose unbidden. "Must be nice to have a father like him. Get you anything you want."

"He *doesn't* get me anything I want!" and her lower lip trembled in frustration.

I didn't want her angry at me, not with a doting father at her beck and call. "I'm sure there must be a reason."

"He's selfish! He can be a very selfish man."

It was time to change the subject. "So, Chorista, which one is your favorite?"

"Rosebud," she said with a touch of pride.

"Rosebud. Is that the rabbit's name?"

"Not the rabbit! This is Rosebud." She opened another cage and pulled out a ferret. It scampered up her arm and rested on her shoulder. Then it noticed me and chittered.

I held out my hand so it could sniff me. "Hello, Rosebud," I said softly and petted it. It grabbed my hand and gnawed lightly on my thumb, then jumped back and hid behind Chorista. Then it turned its attention to a bauble in her hair and began trying to unloosen it with its paws.

"Rosebud, stop that!" and she slowly but firmly pulled her pet off her shoulder. Then she glared at me anew. "You scared her!"

"Sorry, didn't mean to." I stared at the ferret, who stared just as openly back at me. "Well, you obviously have a lot to do here and so do I if I'm going to find that thief."

"You aren't smart enough."

"We'll see. Perhaps I'll see you at dinner tonight."

"In that case I'll eat in my room."

I laughed and left her to tend to her pets. I now had an idea and plans of my own, but they would have to wait until later that evening.

Dinner became a strained affair almost immediately. D'Nell was expecting me to have some solution and Chorista was favoring me with a dark stare. I suspected she was not joining us under her own accord, but at least she was here. Still the meal was excellent and I prolonged my announcement so I could enjoy as much of it as possible. When she asked permission to leave, however, I knew I couldn't wait any longer. "You'll be happy to know, Master D'Nell, that I have taken care of your thievery problem."

"Really?" Somehow D'Nell managed to smile and frown at the same time. I noticed out of the corner of my eye that his daughter had returned to her seat. "Who was it? How?"

"I really don't want to say now," and I nodded at her. "It's a bit ... troubling. But you can be assured there will be no more thefts."

"That is most excellent news!"

"If it's true," Chorista added and snorted.

"It is. I just have one thing to do. Then I can leave tomorrow."

"Make sure he doesn't take anything, father. You know thieves can't be trusted."

He gave her a doting smile. "I am well aware of his talents, princess. You can go if you wish."

"Thank you." She gave her father a kiss on the cheek. She favored me with one more glare as she left.

D'Nell leaned forward eagerly as soon as the door closed. "So, what is it? What do you have to tell me?"

"I suspect magic. But I have to confirm my suspicions."

"Magic?" He scratched his chin. "What type of magic?"

"I want to be sure first. But I've seen it before. I need your permission to do one thing."

"Of course. What is it?"

"I need to stay in the vault tonight."

I sat huddled over the single candle I allowed myself. It was cold in the cave, cold and damp and all the wealth inside failed to warm me. D'Nell had needed a lot of persuading. So had the Assassin's Guild. Outside the locked door they waited, eager, I was sure, to find me trying to steal something.

If I was wrong, of course, I would look like a complete incompetent. I just had to hope the person I suspected would find the challenge too enticing to avoid. So there I sat in the stillness, with only the slight hiss of the candle giving any sound.

There was no way to tell how long I waited except for the ever-shrinking candle. Then I thought I heard something. I held my breath and strained to listen. Yes, I definitely heard something. A scratching sound that echoed around the chamber so it could be coming from anywhere.

But I knew. I was seated at a table right across from the single air channel carved through the cavern. The scratching sound was getting louder, followed by an occasional titter. "Come on," I whispered. "Prove me right."

Another minute and a furry head popped out of the small vent, followed by an equally furry body. "Hello, Rosebud," I greeted the thief.

She recognized me. She allowed me to pull her from the inlet and curled up in my hands. There was a leather leash tied around her, but I let that be. Instead I placed her on the floor and stepped back. Satisfied, she immediately made her way to one of the shelves and quickly scaled it. Then it was on to one of the piles of gold coins. She grabbed one, put it in her mouth and started back down. Then I intercepted her. "Sorry. Take this one." She protested, but when I offered her a disk, one that contained a special message, she obediently seized it and started her journey back.

I could leave as well, but I wasn't ready to. Instead I sat in the near darkness, heavy with depression. On one hand I had to admire Chorista's cleverness. Training the ferret to steal small jewels and coins, one of the few animals that could negotiate the narrow air vent. *Yet she had just about anything a person could want!* How could I tell her father that his own daughter was stealing from him? A daughter whom he loved more than anything in the world.

Of course I couldn't. But I could make sure she didn't do it anymore. At least not this way. I went to the door and knocked the prearranged signal. I had one more task to complete.

"You say that will stop it?" D'Nell pointed at the metal grating I had placed over the ventilation channel. The one previously unguarded entrance to his vault.

"Yes. It will cancel the magic tethers that have been placed on the items."



"But who? Why does it have to be there? Is it strong enough?"

"'Who' could be anyone. You receive valuables from all over the world. Your clients receive valuables from others. I've seen magical tethers work in the past." That, at least, was the truth. "The magician can use it no matter how far away or how well-protected the object is. This charm will prevent that."

The charm was actually made earlier that morning by a smith in the nearby village. He had wondered about the design I had selected—a sleeping dragon, one similar to the sigil on my dagger—but was willing when a suitable payment was made. And it was necessary that the grate look like something more than just a grate.

He gazed at it once more. "Will it be strong enough? Does it need to be recharged or anything?"

"No. Just makes sure it stays there."

He stepped back, still suspicious. "How do I know you are telling the truth?"

I was losing patience. "You have a signed Guild contract. If something disappears again, it will be a simple matter to complain to them. You will get your fee back and I will be punished most severely. Is that proof enough?"

"Yes, I suppose it is." D'Nell led me from the vault. "Tell your Guild that I will wait a month to see if you are correct. If so, I will pay the fee then."

I could have argued but my heart wasn't in it. D'Nell had done enough business with us that he wouldn't try to cheat me. Unless he learned the truth. "I'll be leaving then. I'll inform my Guild of our arrangement."

"Excellent. Your horse is waiting for you." With that D'Nell returned his attention to the business around us. I started toward the stables.

I was deep in thought so she had to call my name three times before I turned. Chorista was standing by a tree with Rosebud on her shoulder. She beckoned me over, then held up the disk I had given Rosebud to deliver. "That was a cruel trick," she said as soon as I got within earshot.

"And yours was quite clever," I said in all honesty.

She allowed herself a smile. "Yes, wasn't it? I make a good thief, don't I?"

I decided to tell her the truth. "No, you don't. You're too impatient. If you had waited a week or so, I would have been gone and you could have continued. Probably for years since your father would have lost all confidence in my Guild. But I knew you couldn't resist the challenge I gave you last evening. I'm sorry, but you'll have to teach Rosebud a new trick."

Her eyes flared fire. "I hate you, Brendell. I just want you to remember that." Then she turned and stalked away.

I drove my horse harder than I needed to as I left D'Nell's estate. The Guild wouldn't complain about my arrangements because they would be paid. And I had completed another successful contract, putting me one step closer to my journeyman's card.

Chorista however. I shook my head. If she learned patience, could control her greed, she would make an excellent thief someday. Whether she was a member of the Guild or not.

## Guardian Angle

At the Thief's Academy, they taught us every lock has a key. Which only makes sense, since the ability to retrieve your valuables is a prerequisite for any storage device. Then again, I thought as I studied the wooden cube in my hand, the Academy taught many things that had later proven to be questionable at best ... at least in my experience.

I held the cube higher so the moonlight could illuminate it fully. No cracks or seams of any kind. Yet when I shook it gently, something rattled inside. Not something actually. A ring, my client had assured me, an old and valuable ring I had been contracted to steal.

I cursed softly as I set the cube down on the desk. *Think, Brendell*, I scolded myself. *This has to open somehow*. Yes, I could just steal the box. But that would mean the owner would know the ring was gone. If I removed the ring and replaced it with something small—like the pebble in my pocket—the odds were my actions wouldn't be discovered for weeks, perhaps longer. And that would be better for both my client and myself.

I ran my fingers along the cube, pressing aimlessly at one point then another. Nothing. I tried twisting, pulling, pressing ... to no avail. I bit my lip in frustration. I had already spent two hours sneaking into the manor and avoiding the obvious traps. I couldn't come this far and be defeated by a simple puzzle box!

I studied the cube anew. I had tried the sides. *Perhaps the corners*. Not at all confident, I dutifully rapped each corner of the cube on the desk, then again held the enigma up to the moonlight. And found a small crack running along one side.

Small indeed. Too small to get any purchase. So I withdrew my dagger. I had paid dearly for it, and I briefly admired my sigil, a sleeping dragon etched in silver on the handle. At first I tried inserting the knife point, but the crack was too narrow. One slip, which was almost inevitable, and I could accidentally slash my wrist. Or worse.

Fortunately my dagger was no ordinary weapon. Part of the price had involved a special feature I had insisted upon. I pressed down on the second of three silver studs at the base of the handle. There was a soft click, which meant the catch had been disengaged. Now the blade easily slid back into the handle, leaving only the tip exposed. I was able to force that into the small slit without overly damaging the cube or risking my own health. Seconds later the cube was open and, as promised, the ring was free. A mere matter, then, to replace it with the pebble, close the cube and return it to its rightful position on a nearby bookshelf. And Brendell had completed another contract.

"Excellent, Brendell, excellent," said Lord Sidean as he admired the ring. I had hurried to his manor the following morning, since there was no reason to enjoy the hospitality of Port Anzamor any longer than necessary. He was an old man, as dry and frail as a strand of dead reeds. He was not accustomed to being roused from his slumber soon after daybreak and he was still clad in his white dressing gown. "This will become a most enjoyable addition to my collection," he continued after a long sip from his golden goblet.

"I am pleased you are satisfied," I said as I squirmed in the uncomfortable chair. The Lord was oblivious to most common pleasantries. When I arrived he had ignored my suggestions for breakfast and was now unwilling to share his wine. "My ship shall be leaving this afternoon. If you will pay me I shall be on my way."

"No hurry, no hurry," he brushed my request aside with a wave of his hand. "Your services have been exemplary. I just may have another contract for you."

*Another contract?* I shivered with avarice. For someone like myself, just beginning his career as a professional thief, contracts were few and far between. *If it is as simple as the last one ...* "I might be interested," I said, fighting to keep my voice disinterested.

"I hoped as much. Although I dare say this adventure may be hazardous."

"Really? A fortress guarded by Guild Assassins?"

He sipped more wine; I swallowed involuntarily. "No. A crypt."

My stomach churned. My last visit to a crypt had been most unpleasant, involving a lord determined to bring his deceased wife back to the living. "And what is inside this crypt that is so valuable?" I had no intention of stealing a sarcophagus.

"A most valuable ring. A mate to the one you've just obtained, in fact. It is on the finger of the sole person entombed inside."

I considered for a moment. "It sounds easy enough. Why do you expect it to be dangerous?"

"There are rumors, nothing more than that I am sure, that the crypt is guarded by a demon."

*Of course.* "Thefts involving magic require additional compensation. As you would know from the Thief's Guild fee schedule."

He nodded. "And I will do more than that. Obtain the other ring for me and I will pay you four times what I owe you now. Or," he shrugged, "you may refuse the contract and our business is concluded."

*Four times?* But I could be dealing with demons, my common sense argued. We will receive 100 gold crowns if we succeed, my business sense responded. We should be content with what we have, my common sense replied. We will receive 100 gold crowns if we succeed, my business sense responded. Stated in those terms, there really was no decision to make. "Tell me everything you can about this assignment," I said and sighed. Common sense has never been my strong suit.

Five days later I was again ensconced in a room in the Port Anzamor. Lord Sidean had provided a wealth of information, but when demons could be involved there can never be enough information. And what I had learned from the Guild libraries had been troubling indeed.

"They appear to be more than rumors," said the Guild archivist. Immediately after agreeing to take the contract I had left Port Anzamor and made a hurried journey to Glenhallow, the nearest town with a Thief's Guild office. For their normally outrageous fee they had agreed to research the Crypt of Cynamond, which is where I would find the ring. What little enthusiasm I had built for my task was rapidly eroding under the scolding gaze of my researcher. "According to our records, no less than five contracts have been entered into by Guild members. They have all failed."

That was not what I wanted to hear. "And why is that?"

"We have no idea since subsequent reports were never made. We can only assume the worst."

"So you are saying demons *are* involved?"

The archivist closed the annals. "I can't say for sure. Rumors do not interest me. And I lack the information to offer other alternatives. You may consider arming yourself with charms and spells."

I suppressed a laugh. I had yet to see a charm or spell accomplish anything remotely positive. "Perhaps

I'll just cancel the contract."

What little concern had been in the archivist's eyes vanished. "You do not have that choice, Brendell. You have entered into a legitimate Guild contract. To resign now would virtually guarantee that you will never be considered for journeyman."

I shivered. "Tell me one thing. Who had hired the other members?"

When I left the offices I was deep in thought. Their employer had been Lord Sidean. And in every instance, the contract had been signed after a successful engagement involving another theft.

The moon was full. Not what I would have preferred, sneaking around an overgrown graveyard as I was. Finding the crypt was simplicity itself since it was the only one among the scattering of tombstones and other small monuments. Lord Sidean had assured me there were no guardians outside the crypt, and my three nights spent in reconnaissance had confirmed that.

Yes, I could have done this during the day, which would have been better for my nerves. Unfortunately this small graveyard was near the main road into Port Anzamor. Between the travelers, the nearby shepherds tending their flocks and a caretaker committed to ensuring the crypt was eternally free of bird droppings, I had no real choice.

So here I was, standing in the moonlight and knee-high thistles, a rope and hook draped over my shoulder, picking the lock to the Crypt of Cynamond. Any first-year student at the Thief's Academy could have accomplished this, which did not fill me with confidence. The door opened easily and without protest, another bad sign. This entrance was used, and frequently. Suddenly the thought of renouncing the contract—and my future as a journeyman—was gaining appeal.

I shook my head. I had come this far. And the thought of 100 crowns remained an overriding argument. Someday, I scolded myself as I walked into the crypt, I'm going to have to learn to control my greed.

From the outside, the crypt appeared no larger than the room at my inn. The long stairway, however, made it clear that most of it was hidden underground. Another fact Lord Sidean had neglected to tell me ... if in fact he knew the truth. I lit my oil lamp, then covered it so only a sliver of light escaped. The walls were stone and otherwise featureless. The steps, however, were free of dust. Someone—the rumored guardian perhaps?—was an excellent housekeeper.

I crept down the long sloping stairwell, pausing occasionally to listen for any sound coming from the darkness below. I estimated I was a good fifty feet below ground when the stairway led me to another door. It was open slightly and light seeped in along the side. Another bad omen. I doused my lantern since I had no more need for it and entered.

I found myself in a vast circular room. The floor was sand, the stone walls festooned with lit torches, tapestries, paintings, various weapons and other works of art. There were footprints in the sand, but I had no intention of approaching the crypt that way. Too easy to hide a pitfall. Instead I searched the ceiling for something strong enough to hold my weight. My initial plan was to use the rope to approach the sarcophagus from above, then drop down like the proverbial spider.

My initial plan almost immediately proved useless. "Took you long enough," a familiar voice rang out, and Lord Sidean stepped out from the shadows.

I set down my lantern and rope, my surprise being rapidly replaced by righteous anger. "You could have made it easier. There's a passage from your manor to this crypt, isn't there?"

"Of course."

"And these are your possessions?" He nodded. "Then why the charade?"

"Because you were successful stealing from the Earl of Thannoban. Which makes you a threat to me."

Now I was beyond anger. "You've used the Thief's Guild in the past. You know that I am forbidden from ever taking a contract to steal from a past employer. Since I am *not* a threat, I demand you pay me so I can be on my way."

"I don't trust thieves, Brendell. No matter what your contract may say. Now if you want your payment, you have to steal the ring you are obligated to steal." He pointed to the sarcophagus. "It's right in here. Fulfill your sacred contract. If you can."

I studied the sarcophagus resting invitingly 20 paces away. What game are you playing, Sidean? I wondered, but I didn't see any option. Since I hadn't planned to open the sarcophagus this way, I was unprepared. I looked at the collection of objects on the wall and selected a sword to use as a lever. I approached the sarcophagus and wedged the blade under the lid while standing as far back as I could.

Unlike my last adventure in a crypt, the danger did not arise from the coffin. Instead there was a sound like muted thunder. I turned. And found the guardian I had been warned about standing behind me.

It was dressed all in leather, its face totally concealed by a mask. It held a sword much larger than mine in one hand while a large dagger dangled at its waist. "I guess it wasn't a rumor after all," Lord Sidean said, then chuckled.

Whatever I was facing was much larger than I was. And, I surmised immediately, a much better swordsman since I am execrable at best. We stood staring at each other for several minutes. Or at least I was; I had no idea what it was doing. Except waiting. But I knew I wasn't going to leave the crypt without a battle. "Come now, Brendell," Lord Sidean mocked me. "Surely you aren't afraid of my guardian now, are you?"

"I'm glad you find this amusing," I said between gritted teeth. I took a few steps to the side, hoping I could get it to circle around me so I could make a dash for the stairway. No such luck. It followed me, keeping itself solidly from my one known way of exit.

Reluctantly I brought up my sword and held it over my head. *Why hadn't I taken fencing as an elective at the Thief's Academy?* I scolded myself. It felt like I was holding a tree trunk. With nothing better to do, I swung with both hands at my enemy.

Our blades crashed together and it took all my strength not to drop my weapon. I staggered and received a slight bit of satisfaction to see the guardian stagger as well. Encouraged, albeit briefly, I swung for his legs.

And had to jump back as its blade just missed my kneecaps. A distraction, I decided. *Maybe if I could get it to converse.* "You know, this isn't really necessary. I'm only following your master's instructions. I won't take anything. Promise."

The guardian was unmoved. Or perhaps deaf. I made a half-hearted swing, which it parried easily. *Why don't you press the attack?* I wondered as I took several more steps to the side. Again it remained adamantly in front of me. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Lord Sidean. He was enjoying himself immensely. I toyed with the idea of going after him, then dismissed it. I was reasonably sure the guardian would intervene before I posed any real threat.

"On the contrary, Brendell, this is entirely necessary," Lord Sidean answered for his protector. "Now get on with it. The hour is late and I must get my rest."

I crouched and my opponent immediately adopted a similar position. I made a feint toward its right arm, then had to jump back as his longer blade nearly reached mine. No style points for you, I scolded myself.

And none for my foe, either, I realized. Maintaining my guard, I took a step back. The guardian retreated on step as well, apparently preferring to counter-attack. "I hope you brought your supper, Lord Sidean. We could be here all night."

"No matter. You'll die in the end in any event."

I made another swing at the guardian's head. Again our blades clanged together and again I almost lost my weapon. This is ridiculous, I thought. This guardian was evidently the slayer of five Guild members, yet it was fighting like a rank amateur. It was almost as if I was fighting...

I took a deep breath. If I was wrong, I could be dead within seconds. I lowered my weapon ... and was relieved to watch the guardian do the same. "I'm not a swordsman," I said to Lord Sidean. "Let's see how good your guardian is with daggers." I dropped my sword. When the guardian did the same, I knew I had to be right. At least I had better be.

I withdrew my dagger. As expected, the guardian did also. Its knife was much longer than mine, but I suspected it did not have the special feature mine had. I pushed the center silver stud in the handle. "Our battle is over," I said, then immediately plunged my dagger into my stomach.

Even though the blade slid easily into the handle as it struck my leather jerkin, the force of my blow drove me to my knees and knocked the air out of me. I gasped for breath and it took nearly a minute before I was able to stagger to my feet.

Which was more than the guardian could do. As it had throughout our battle, it mimicked my movements to the very end. Now it was lying unmoving on the sandy floor, the haft of its blade sticking out from its stomach. There was no blood, but already it was beginning to dissipate like a melting candle.

I turned to Lord Sidean, still standing at the far side of the crypt. His face was now as pale as his robes. "Interesting trick," I pointed to the rapidly disappearing guardian. "Not a demon, but a magical construct. One designed to copy exactly the movement of its foes. Too bad," I held up my dagger so he could see the receded blade, "it didn't have a knife like mine." *And fortunate for me I am not a better swordsman.* "Now, Lord Sidean, I demand my payment. Unless you care to summon another one. Which will only suffer the same fate."

He was leaning against the wall for support. "I don't have 100 gold crowns," he whined after he finally collected his thoughts.

I approached the sarcophagus. "I figured as much, since you never expected, or planned, to pay me. Or the other thieves you had hired. No matter. I suspect I will find adequate compensation in here." With very little effort, and no interference from the now shattered and terrified Lord Sidean, I opened the lid. Inside was no rotting corpse, however. Instead it was nearly bursting with gold and jewels and silver and other treasures. The wealth he had accumulate, or had others steal for him, and entrusted to his guardian to protect.

I pursed my lips. "Let me see." I rummaged around and finally selected a ruby necklace, onyx bracelet and several gold and diamond rings. "This should be adequate compensation for both what you honestly owe me and the treachery you have shown." With that I closed the lid and started towards the stairway.

The I paused and turned to him. "You know, Lord Sidean, you have betrayed me and my Guild in a most distasteful manner. Your utter disregard for contract law must not go unpunished. I will be making a complete report on this incident, including all the details of your 'guardian.'"

His face, already white, managed to achieve several deeper shades of pale. "What are you saying?"

"Once I make my report, every member will know where you keep your wealth and how to defeat your guardian. And because of your treachery, I suspect the Guild will put out an open contract on you and yours. I suggest you find another place to keep your wealth, or another type of guardian. Better yet, an attachment of the Assassin's Guild. They are quite expensive, I hear, but consider the alternatives. I would hazard within a week, every enemy you have made and every member of my Guild will have an interest in acquiring your possessions. Good night. Enjoy your rest."

He didn't try to stop me as I made my way up the stairwell and to my awaiting steed. Although as one bow to safety I did not stay in Port Anzamor that evening. Within two days I had made my extremely thorough report to the Guild. My predictions were correct in all aspects save one.

It took less than a week before the raids on the Crypt of Cynamond had begun.

## The Claws Of The Dragon

The rapturous aromas of baking bread, simmering meats, boiling vegetables; the continuous din of clanging pots, slamming doors, scurrying staff; the nearly overwhelming heat emanating from overburdened ovens and hearths: all these I ignored as I perched on the small three-legged stool and concentrated on my task. Master Chef Horsjeld had been most specific in his instructions for peeling potatoes. Hold the tuber in your left hand, thickest side down. Take a sharp knife and insert it just under the surface at the top. Holding the knife steady, begin turning the potato while raising it slowly. If done properly, you were rewarded with one continuous coil of skin and little wastage.

I glanced down at the bucket in front of me. My efforts proved I had not taken cooking classes at the Thief's Academy. Indeed, each resident was gouged and scarred as if shaved by a spastic barber. I sighed, held up my next victim and began the process anew.

"Bikken!" It took three repetitions of my assumed name and a whack from a ladle before I turned. Chef Horsjeld was towering over me, his red face in stark contrast to his white uniform.

I winced, dropped my knife, began rubbing the back of my head. "What?"

"You're taking too much time," he said and pointed at my unimpressive pile of naked potatoes. "The Lord and his guests expect a feast tonight, not a midnight snack! I need those," he nodded at the pile of innocent tubers beside me that was as tall as a young child, "ready within the hour."

"I am trying." I hung my head, properly chastised. "It's just that..."

"No excuses!" He grimaced. "I don't care how you do it, just get it done."

"Yes, sir." I watched him storm away, then attacked my assignment with increased vigor. Peel and potato flew everywhere and the result of my carnage was a finished piece one-third the size of the original. But at least I was faster. I grabbed another, renewed my assault, and under my breath cursed every curse I knew. Each was aimed at the Thief's Guild.

I, Brendell, apprentice thief, was not in the domain of Lord Bandikane by choice. I had been in Port Challort seeking employment when the local Guild Secretary summoned me. By now I should have been wary of any direct meetings with them, considering how they had abused my status as apprentice in the past. But I had no option. He met with me immediately upon my arrival, his demeanor leaving no question on the seriousness of our upcoming discussion. "Brendell, you have an assignment," and he threw a bulging satchel at me.

I caught it as it bounced off my chest. "Really? It just so happens I have almost finalized an agreement..."

"This takes priority," he interrupted my fabrication. "This is official Guild business."

I forced myself to smile eagerly, but I was seething inside. Official Guild business meant little or no compensation. "May I ask..."

"No. Read that first. In your room," he added quickly when I began to remove the satchel's contents. "Return that to me tomorrow. I will answer what I can then." With that he turned his attention to the paperwork on his desk. Obeying his silent dismissal, I muttered a soft curse and padded from his office. That evening I spent with a bottle of cheap wine, a small fire and the Guild's gift. It did not make for entertaining reading.

The events in the kingdom of Bandikane had begun over a year ago. Apparently Master Thief Alanzac



had somehow heard that the lord of the realm possessed dragon claws, which, it was rumored, gave him nearly magical powers. Now Master Thieves enjoy privileges a mere apprentice like myself can only dream off. While we are allowed to steal the occasional purse or jewel to provide funds during our endless search for contracts, the Guild discourages us from thievery for thievery's sake. Otherwise it might put our profession in a bad light.

Master thieves, however, are free to pursue any item they desire if they are not under contract. And Alanzac decided to pursue the claws. Since this was a discretionary assignment, the Guild learned of it only by accident. Master Thief Wysco had come to Alanzac's estate on a prearranged visit. When he learned the master had yet to return from a project, he was initially furious, then curious. He discovered Alanzac's journal in the library and read of his plans, then immediately contacted the Guild. Alanzac had left nearly four months previous; it should never take a Master Thief that long to complete an assignment. With the Guild's knowledge and permission, Wysco went to Bandikane to investigate. Three months later, a journeyman thief was commissioned and sent to learn what had happened to the long-absent Master Thieves. She did not return either. And now they were sending me.

I was in the Guild Secretary's office immediately upon opening the following morning and threw the satchel on his desk. "I am only an apprentice," I said, not trying to hide my anger. "If two Master Thieves cannot steal the dragon claws, then how can I?"

"We don't want you to steal them," he replied. "We merely need information. On the castle. On Lord Bandikane, any information you can provide for the Archives."

"So I'm just there to reconnoiter?"

"Exactly. We need you back, Brendell. You must tell us what has happened at Lord Bandikane's realm so we can stop it."

That much I understood perfectly. The Guild prospers on its reputation for success and client confidentiality. If it became common knowledge that a prospect had thwarted the best efforts of three Guild members, public confidence in our abilities would be shaken. And that would be bad for business. "What else can you tell me?"

He sighed. Precious little, I'm afraid. Lord Bandikane does not commission the Assassin's Guild, so they are of no help."

I frowned. "I would think the Guild would be quite upset about that."

"On the contrary. Lord Bandikane's neighbors are fearful of his intentions, so they have invested heavily in Guild representation. The arrangement has been quite lucrative for the Assassin's Guild."

"Are our members locked away in some dungeon, kept chained within the castle walls?"

"We do not know. We suspect..." He paused and sighed. "...the worst."

I shivered at that, even though I had expected that response. Thieves are not always treated warmly by their hosts. Still one question remained. "And what if I can return with the claws?"

He slammed his fist on the desk. "Perhaps I didn't make myself clear, Brendell. You are to obtain information *only*. Once we know what we are up against, you can be sure the Guild will obtain them." Then his voice softened. "However, if by some fortuitous chance you *do* steal the claws, I can guarantee the Guild will immediately grant you journeyman status." He noticed my involuntary smile and grimaced. "You may have all the confidence in the world in your abilities, Brendell, but I caution you once again.

Three thieves who are much more qualified than you may ever be have failed. You know your contract, Brendell. Please fulfill it."

So that's why I was toiling in the kitchens of Castle Bandikane. I had researched the careers of Alanzac and the others before I left. Alanzac preferred the guise of a successful merchant, one which normally gained him access to the rich and powerful. Wysco liked the least ostentatious; a juggler perhaps, or traveling friar. I wanted to be as interesting and notable as a fly speck, so I had arrived as a farm lad seeking fame and fortune in the big city. Horsjeld's kitchen had a (quite understandable) high turnover in help, so I was able to find immediate employment. But I certainly wasn't enjoying it much.

"Are you finished, Bikken?" the head chef's voice shattered my reverie.

I looked at the wreckage around me. I had toiled mindlessly while I had recalled the events of the past month. The mound of unaltered potatoes was seriously diminished, those in my bucket seriously wounded. "Almost."

Horsjeld clucked as he studied my progress. "I can only hope you sheared your sheep with more care than you peel potatoes, Bikken."

"Yes, your ... chefness."

He sighed. "Bring them to me when you're finished. We can always dice them I suppose."

Later that afternoon Horsjeld assembled us in the kitchen. I was exhausted and wanted nothing more than to get some sleep. Most of the staff felt the same way. The chef, however, had other plans. "Our guests will be arriving soon after six. I expect each of you to be cleaned up and clad in server's livery before that. This is a very important occasion; I expect, no *demand*, that each of you perform to the best of your abilities. Whatever transgressions our Lord may overlook you can be assured *I will not!*" With that cheerful news we were dismissed.

I suppressed a smile as we slogged to our quarters outside the castle. I had been in Bandikane's domain for nigh on three weeks, yet the demands of my position and Horsjeld's watchful eye had provided little time for intelligence gathering. Tonight, however, would be different. It would be my first opportunity to see the Lord in person, as well as areas of the castle beyond the kitchen, pantry, fruit cellar and staff living quarters. I had to stop myself from whistling as my comrades in food preparation and I primed ourselves for the evening's festivities. Brendell was finally ready to go to work.

And work it was. Lord Bandikane had apparently invited every dignitary, merchant and land owner in his realm to partake in the celebration. Of what I had no idea. Some, the ladies in particular, sported diamonds and gold and jewels in outrageous display, and it was all I could do to stop myself from shaking in avarice. The great hall was nearly bursting with long tables which groaned under the weight of the culinary delights Horsjeld had so diligently prepared. Above them all, reposing regally on the balcony, Lord Bandikane and his Lady observed their charges.

I wished to observe as well. The number and placement of the tapestries, the locations of various doors, stairways and windows leading to and from the room, any nook or cranny where a thief might hide. These and other details were the sort of intelligence the Guild would expect in my final report.

But the demands of the guests allowed little time for that. As Horsjeld had promised, the horde began arriving promptly at six and made immediate demands for wine, food, wine and more wine. The Lord and his Lady did not make their entrance for nearly two hours and by the time they arrived to glowing pronouncements and thunderous applause, most of the guests were firmly inebriated, Horsjeld was firmly incensed and the serving staff firmly exhausted. "Insufferable louts! We may as well be serving entrails for

all it matters to them," he raged as a continuous stream of help brought in half-consumed platters of food and left with more flasks of wine.

"At least his worship and our Lady will notice," I tried to commiserate as I scraped the wreckage of a picked-at pheasant into the trash.

"They are no better." He looked at the fowl, one someone had spent several hours preparing, and grimaced. "Why I continue to try to elevate their tastes? It is like trying to teach the tide." He studied the commotion around him like a farmer surveying a flooded field. "It didn't use to be this way."

I shrugged and hurried off with more wine; I should learn more among the party-goers than in the kitchen in any event. But as the evening continued, the atmosphere became increasingly un festive. The entertainers were ignored or physically abused, arguments broke out among the guests and several became involved in a curtailed duel. Attempts at conversing with the attendees were abruptly dismissed with demands for more wine. Above it all, the Lord and Lady remained aloof and uninterested, as if they were being forced to attend a very bad play.

Finally midnight arrived. The Lord and Lady stood, bowed and departed abruptly to a handful of applause, but by this time most below were too drunk to notice. Almost immediately soldiers arrived and began escorting the guests to the doors. The staff was left to deal with the carnage.

"A most enjoyable evening," I offered as I helped one of the serving wenches clean off a table.

She snorted as she bent over a tray. The front of her livery bore the stains of cruder guests who had rudely sought her attention. "You should have been here before, Bikken. These halls used to echo with laughter, be filled with sunshine. No longer. Not since our Lady has arrived."

*Really?* "And when did this wonderful event take place? I imagine the wedding must have been spectacular."

"Not at all. Our Lord went on an expedition about three harvests ago and when he returned the Lady and her daughter were with him. We know nothing about her." She sighed as she placed another ruined goblet on her tray. "She has been a blight about the kingdom of Bandikane and all who dwell within her borders."

Further conversation was interrupted by the arrival of Horsjeld. "Quit dawdling. The hall must be cleared and everything cleaned and stored within the hour! We have much to do tomorrow."

I should have been exhausted, but as I lay on my cot later that evening, the information offered by my cohort continued to echo within me, demanding attention like a persistent child. What it meant and how it could assist me I knew not. I was still frustrated when I finally fell into a fitful sleep.

Two days later, Lord Bandikane held a hanging. For a change the kitchen was still as the Lord demanded everyone attend. So there we stood, clad in our uniforms and shivering in the drizzle while our Lord held forth in the center of the courtyard. I noted that except for a few villagers, family of the accused I assumed, only castle staff was present.

Lord Bandikane stood proudly before us in full regalia. At his side was not his wife but his step-daughter. I guessed her to be about 14, shy and awkward as any young teen and embarrassed by the attention. If she was destined to inherit the features of her dame then it would be best that she marry young. It was the first time I had seen her during my prolonged stay at the castle and I wondered why. Behind them and framing them was the castle gallows. By the activity of the workmen, I gathered the equipment had been in regular use.

"Ladies and gentlemen, my loyal servants," the Lord began in his bullfrog voice, "once again the prosperous lands of Bandikane have been threatened by those who would endanger our freedom and way of life. We have been set upon by assassins, conspirators, thieves and criminals, all dedicated to bringing ruin to our glory and honor that is the envy of the world. Yet once again the diligence and watchfulness of your master has prevailed; once again the evil that threatens us has been thwarted. The justice and vengeance of the kingdom of Bandikane shall now be meted out." He turned and nodded to the men at the gallows. "Servants, please begin."

We stood, shivered and watched in silence as the prisoner was escorted to the gallows by two guards. His hands were bound behind him, his legs shackled in irons. A leather mask with only slits for the eyes covered his head. Lord Bandikane waited until the noose was in place before continuing. "Alstance of the kingdom of Bandikane, you have been found guilty of perdition and plotting against the state. It is the judgment of your Lord that you have earned the ultimate punishment. No longer shall you threaten the peace and tranquillity that is the right of every subject who dwells within my domain. Chief Executioner, give him the reward he has earned."

There was a scream then, not from the accused but from a small group of villagers. I turned my head as the lever was pulled. I suspected now the fate of my own Guild brothers. The kitchen staff was unusually quiet as we fulfilled our duties the rest of the day.

It was not that way in our barracks. As we lay in our cots, the room was filled not with the usual whispered conversations and snores, but loud chaotic chatter. "I *knew* his family. He and his kin have always been loyal to the crown!" one voice called out. "Loyalty?" another said with a snort. "How can one be loyal to a tyrant? One who continues to raise taxes until there is little to eat but dirt, little to wear but rags?" "Peace and tranquillity he says," came a third opinion. "What peace? I hear another farm was attacked, its livestock killed, just a fortnight ago. He tries to blame the rebels, but those cattle were torn apart!"

I tried to ignore them while I thought about the day's events. I had always understood the danger of my profession, but I had never fully appreciate it until I saw those gallows. Yes, my life had been threatened more than once, but I had always felt confident I could escape. *But if Lord Bandikane ever learned of my true intentions...*

I forced my gloom aside. Instead I tried to reconcile what I had learned first-hand about Lord Bandikane with the information available from the Guild libraries. They had characterized him as pompous and self-centered, uncaring perhaps but not consciously cruel. A self-styled scholar with an interest in the occult, although there was no evidence he was a practitioner. A bit of an adventurer. A man who roughly three years ago went on a journey and returned with a wife and step-daughter. *A man who possessed the dragon claws.* A man who had gradually transformed into a cruel, despised despot.

A loud voice interrupted my ruminations. "Shut up, Halrod! The Lord has spies everywhere!" The din of conversations dimmed, to be replaced by unintelligible whispers. I grimaced. *So that is it.* Now I understood why all my attempts at ingratiating myself had been greeted with stone ears. *They think I might be a spy.* Which meant in all likelihood a *real* spy was in our midst. It was time, I decided, to fulfill my contract.

I left the parlor satisfied with my reconnaissance. This late there were few palace staff to worry about; the guards, not as many as I would expect in a castle, were concerned about the exterior and even the cleaning staff had returned to their quarters. I was on punishment detail, a result of accidentally spilling a kettle of boiling stew at the feet of Horsjeld. My reward was to finish cleaning the kitchen and dining hall by myself. Which was just what I wanted.

I was headed toward the great library when a voice stopped me. "What are you doing here?"

I turned and spied a young female silhouetted by moonlight streaming through one of the arched windows. "Your highness," I said and bowed. "I am most sorry. I am new here and I became confused. Could you tell me where the kitchen is?"

"Your highness?" Lord Bandikane's step-daughter giggled. "Funny, I don't *feel* like a highness. But you didn't answer my question. "What are you doing here?"

"I became lost," I mumbled and hung my head. "I was ordered to clean the kitchen and great hall. It has taken longer than I thought."

"My father does not like strangers skulking around his castle at night. We have been besieged by thieves lately. Perhaps I should tell him."

I felt my heart sink and my throat tighten as if there was a noose around it. "I am no thief, your ladyship. I merely work in your kitchen."

"Good!" The coldness and suspicion in her voice vanished instantly. "Then fix me something to eat!"

"It would be my pleasure." I led her to the kitchen while cursing silently. There would be no more investigating this night. "What would you like?" I asked as I showed her a chair. "We have some fresh vegetables, some bread."

"I don't like vegetables. What are those over there?" And she pointed to a pile of cages where rabbits slept unmindful of their awaiting fate.

"Wild hares for tomorrow's dinner."

"I'll have one of those."

I have some experience preparing wild game, even if not by choice. I soon had the animal dressed and the oven heating. Now it was a matter of waiting, so I sat across from her. "Quite late for a midnight snack," I said, trying to initiate a conversation while fighting the anxiety I still felt from meeting her.

"My step-father does not feed me often. I have to fend for myself." Then she studied me. "What is your name and where do you come from?"

"I am called Bikken. My family are farmers to the north. I came to the castle because..." I paused, as if the memory was painful.

"Because?"

I cleared my throat. "I come from a large family. It was becoming difficult for my father to feed us all. I thought it time to go off on my own. Lighten his burden." In some ways I was telling the truth.

"Burden. Yes, we are all burdens," she said with a bitterness and understanding far beyond her years. "That is what I should do; leave Castle Bandikane. If only I could."

"But you are a princess! You are young; soon you will have royal suitors from all over this land."

"I don't *feel* like a princess. I feel trapped, like yon rabbits. You are lucky, Bikken. You are no slave, you can leave this land any time you want. I, however..." She stopped and shook her head.

I could not help but feel compassion for her. In this cruel kingdom I could easily feel compassion for

anyone. "Surely patience will win out. In a few years you will have the freedom to do as you wish, and the power to go with it."

"If only it were true. The Lord likes me not. He treats me most cruelly."

"Then your mother..."

"My mother cares not a whit!" She slammed her fist on the table and her eyes glowed with anger. "I am an encumbrance to both of them. If only someone could help me."

We sat in silence then, waiting for the oven to do its duty. I maintained mine until she finished eating. "What kind of help are you seeking?" I asked as I dumped the remains in a bucket.

"A hero!" she breathed, then chuckled. "Someone who can take me away from all this."

"I don't know if 'hero' is the right word," I began cautiously. "But I must admit I have been considering my decision to come to Castle Bandikane. I might enjoy a brighter future elsewhere."

"Take me with you!"

"The Lord would surely come after us."

"Not if you slay him!"

"No, no," I shook my head emphatically. "I am not a murderer. But there might be a way to dissuade him."

"How?" In the dim light her eyes glowed red with excitement.

"We would need a diversion. Get the Lord away from the castle for a few days."

She frowned. "That would achieve nothing. The Lord insists I travel with them everywhere."

*But if I can obtain the claws ...* "Still a diversion would be helpful. And when you return then we could arrange for your escape."

She sat back and considered. "It might be possible. I overheard my mother and he discussing a possible trip to the southern territories. There have been reports of rebels there. I might be able to encourage them to do it soon." She grinned. "I have never seen the southern territories."

"If you can, perhaps I can help you."

She smiled smugly. "I will take you at your word, then. And I must be off to bed before they begin to worry." She started to the door.

"Wait. You have not told me your name."

She turned and smiled. "No, I haven't. Good night, Bikken."

I returned to the barracks an hour later, my labors complete and with much to consider. Did I have an unexpected ally, or had I doomed myself to the gallows? I fell asleep knowing the answer to that question would come soon.

Which it did three days later. Horsjeld gave us the welcome news that morning. "The Lord and his Ladyship will be traveling to the south of Bandikane this afternoon. We have much to prepare for their

journey. Here is what we must do.” He then passed out assignments; some to search out wild game, some to prepare rabbits and chickens, some to shop the markets for the freshest vegetables, some to bake an array of breads and desserts. I was given my usual task of peeling potatoes, which bothered me not. Indeed I was whistling as I took my accustomed seat on my accustomed stool.

The day disappeared in a cloud of smoke, heat and curses from the always demanding Horsjeld. Still even he was smiling as the supplies were finally loaded and the caravan led by the Lord and his Ladyship disappeared through the gates of Castle Bandikane. My comrades in cutlery were cheering as they returned to the kitchen; with the master away, their duties would be greatly eased. I joined them but for entirely different reasons. Soon I would be able to complete my assignment and leave the castle forever.

I began that night. My barrack mates decided to make a rare visit to the village outside the walls. Despite their offers, I pleaded exhaustion and illness and remained, waiting patiently for nightfall. There were a few of the cleaning staff when I entered, but since I wore the same livery they paid me little mind. Indeed it offered me added opportunity to visit each room on the ground for since they assumed I was dusting or whatever. By the time I felt it necessary to return to the barracks, I had enough information to satisfy the Guild and myself the dragon claws were not hidden on the first floor.

The second evening was different. Again my comrades visited the village, again they stumbled back under the influence of wine. I waited patiently until all the laughter, curses and moans had turned into snores, then I sneaked away and entered the castle. The serving staff was gone but I proceeded cautiously anyway. Most of the guards had accompanied the Lord and Lady, the few remaining easily avoided. This time I ascended to the third floor. The second floor was devoted to guest lodgings and administrative offices. If the claws were in the castle proper, I was sure they would be hidden in the private rooms of the ruler.

The first room was Her Ladyship's and I was stunned by its starkness. A simple bed, a small dresser; no full-length mirror, no elaborate curtains or tapestries or artifacts, no collection of jewelry and finery. Except for the small and simple wardrobe in a closet, I would have suspected a homely maid slept her. Certain this room did not contain the claws, I went to the next, which I assumed would belong to the Princess. But that room was empty. I shrugged; if what she said about her parents was true, they may have trundled her off to rooms down below.

The Lord's bedroom was next ... and more in keeping with what I expected from royalty. A silk-covered canopied bed dominated the heart of the room while an elaborate covered two-thirds of the east wall. Trophies from successful hunts festooned the walls, while a far bookcase was cluttered with vases, carvings and other souvenirs from his (now less) frequent expeditions. I scanned through the bookcase but, not surprisingly, no dragon claws there. If they were that valuable, they would be well hidden.

But I didn't want to spend all my time searching for them, so I went on to the study next door. Not too promising, either, just a bookcase on the east wall holding a small selection of volumes and the desk in the center, bare of everything save an inkwell and quill. The drawers were unlocked but only parchment was inside.

I went back outside and was proceeding further down the hall when a mental alarm rang. I paused, returned to the study, then counted my steps between the door of the study and the door to the Lord's bedroom. It's a habit we are taught at the Academy in Introductory Surveillance—counting your paces between rooms when reconnoitering. I had done it almost by instinct and the numbers weren't adding up. In the Lord's room, there were roughly five paces from the doorway to the east wall; in the study, the west wall was right against the doorway. Yet I had counted 12 paces between the two rooms. Which left more than enough space for *another* room. A hidden room.

I immediately returned to the study. The west wall *appeared* solid enough. But then I appear to be a simple kitchen servant. I walked to the desk and tried to move the inkwell, but it wouldn't budge. However, it *did* turn. And seconds later a section of that suspect wall slid aside, revealing a small alcove. And resting on a small stand, two ornately carved dragon claws made from silver glowed in the moonlight.

I was at the threshold and ready to retrieve them when I paused. Something just wasn't making sense. If I, a mere apprentice, could find the claws with such relative ease, then surely a *master* thief would have them before completing breakfast. And I had all the confidence in the world that Alanzac and Wysco would have required no expedition by the Lord to find this room. The dark irregular stain on the floor convinced me, but to make sure, I went to the bookcase, retrieved a volume and tossed it in the hidden room. As soon as it hit the floor, the sliding wall immediately slammed shut. As it sped by the end of my nose, I could see the sharpened steel that lined it. At least one of my peers, I was certain, had fallen victim to the Lord's trap.

Yet the alcove had been small and there remained enough space for another hidden room. But not here. I immediately returned to the Lord's bedroom. His great dresser occupied all but three feet of the east wall. I stood in front of the bare section, knocked on it ... and was rewarded with a soft click as the wall swung open. *Another trap?* I doubted it; the Lord was vain and extremely self-confident. And he would want to access this room whenever necessary.

No moonlight could enter here, so I lit a candle and edged inside. This room was bare as well, but on the back wall was a safe. I suppressed a smile as I retrieved my picks and quickly opened the lock. Lord Bandikane had put too much faith in his clever trap. I reached in, expecting to retrieve the dragon claws. Instead I pulled out a parchment document.

No, not parchment. Something older, something that felt like hide. Or cured human skin. I studied it in the dim light. The runes I couldn't decipher but the handwriting was clear enough. A simple paragraph with two signatures at the bottom, declaring that the holder of this document would have total and continual mastery over ... I whistled softly. *The dragon clause.*

I could have escaped then. I could have taken this treasure and fled the castle, at least partially fulfilling my contract. But now I had additional obligations. To the Princess who had helped me. To my Guild members, who had died trying to retrieve this contract. And nagging questions remained, questions that had to be answered. "You are a fool, Brendell," I cursed myself even as I studied the parchment which was not parchment, trying to memorize every detail. An old adage from my Ethics class came unbidden and unwelcome to mind: "Curiosity kills the thief." Instead of taking my own advice, I returned the document to the safe, then made my way back to my barracks. The following day I found an excuse to visit the village. I still had work to do before the Lord returned from his southern sojourn.

Lord Bandikane and his retinue returned four days later to cheers and fanfare. He made a formal and ornate oration about the continued good fortune and prosperity of his domain and particularly the peace and good-will he had enjoyed among his southern subjects. No reference was made to the rumors that had preceded him, rumors of unexplained and particularly vicious attacks on several farmholds and livestock. Instead he declared there would be a ceremonial feast later that evening, news that sent Horsjeld into a panic and me into a depression. Another long afternoon of peeling potatoes awaited.

Horsjeld was startled when I later volunteered for the clean-up crew. "Are you sure, Bikken? I was actually going to compliment you on your performance today. I think you've finally grasped the technique of proper potato peeling."

I blushed and grinned modestly. One unexpected benefit of my chosen career: you obtain skills and



knowledge on a variety of fields. "I have had plenty of opportunity to rest over the past few days. I would like to put myself to the further service of His Lord and Lady."

"So be it." Several of my crewmates, present as punishment, gave me curious glances as, later that evening, we removed the remains of the repast. I ignored them even as I continued to whistle cheerfully while clearing away flagons and plates. I dawdled as much as possible and even volunteered to finish up the last several tables myself, a wish greeted with relief and heartfelt gratitude from the others. I watched from the kitchen door until the last was out of sight, then rushed back to the great hall and up the stairs. There was one sure way I knew to get the Lord's attention.

My journey was interrupted by the Princess. She stepped from the shadows on the second floor and intercepted me. "So, Bikken, are you ready to help me now? Or have you forgotten our agreement?"

"Not at all, my ladyship. In fact I was looking for you. Meet me behind the kitchen in half an hour. I will have two horses ready."

She frowned. "I like horses naught. There is a stream and small clearing west of here. I will meet you there."

"It *is* nightfall," I cautioned. "And I am not familiar with that area of Bandikane. I might not find it."

"No need to worry. *I* will find you." With that she turned and started up the stairway.

I suppressed a shudder as I gave her an appropriate head start. If what I now suspected was true, I had no doubt she would be as good as her word. Ten minutes later I made my way to the Lord's study.

I opened the hidden door, stood at the threshold and held my breath. There would be no turning back; if I was wrong, I was dooming myself. "But I'm not," I said and leapt into the alcove.

Even with my foreknowledge I felt the blade on the door's edge brush my jerkin as it flashed by. Then there was a resounding thud and I was left in total darkness. I reached down and fondled the silver dragon claws. Valuable indeed, but not as valuable as the document in my satchel, the document I had stolen and replaced the night previous. I leaned against the wall and relaxed. It shouldn't take long.

It didn't. I heard the uproar of angry voices, the stomping of feet, then a loud click and the door slid open. Standing before me, tired and outraged, stood Lord Bandikane. Next to him, expressionless, stood Her Ladyship. I suppressed a chuckle as he glared at me for several minutes. The Lord was short and stocky and, clad, in his nightclothes, his face red with rage, he resembled nothing less than a rooster. He finally gained control of himself and his snarl was replaced by a smug grin. "So, once again my trap has foiled a member of the Thief's Guild. You are a member, are you not?"

"Of course."

"You appear unhurt. The others were not as fortunate." He shrugged off his disappointment. "It matters not, my subjects always enjoy a good hanging."

"Don't go to any trouble on my account." I walked confidently from the hidden room, even brushing by him on purpose. "I won't be here that long for you to make the arrangements."

His outrage flared anew. "You dare enter the sanctity of my domicile, then challenge me? You are correct, whoever you are, you won't live long enough for a hanging!"

"Brendell, My name is Brendell." I turned my attention to the Lady. Her closeness made my skin crawl. A sinister darkness seemed to surround her, effusing the very air with palpable evil. She gazed in my eyes

and I suddenly felt like a bird staring at a snake. I shook my head and returned my attention to the Lord. "Aren't you going to call your guards?"

He laughed then, a hearty, terrifying laugh. "I have no need for guards. Madnizaroc, destroy him!"

I watched with awe and fear as the Lady began to change. An opaque cloud suddenly surrounded her as she began to shrink and lengthen at the same time. Her skin and clothing slowly turned into green scales; her face grew into a long snout, pointed ears and fangs; claws erupted from her hands, wings from her back. The dragon Madnizaroc had returned.

"Before you do anything foolish," I said, reaching into my satchel, "I just want you to know I have this." I proudly brandished the contract with the dragon clause before them. "Madnizaroc, prevent the Lord from pursuing me." I turned and ran from the room. Seconds later, the Lord's screams followed.

With the commotion erupting from inside Castle Bandikane, it was not difficult to avoid the panicked guards and flee the grounds. True to my vow, I traveled west and soon found the small stream. I followed it until I found a clearing. I made a campfire and waited.

The nervous whinny of my steed alerted me. Then I heard thrashing in the underbrush and within minutes the Princess appeared. For someone who eschewed horses, she had made very good time. But then I knew she hadn't walked, either. "Good evening, Madnizaroc," I greeted her.

Her eyes glowed red and not just from the campfire. "Good evening, Brendell. Thank you for waiting."

"Your disguise is no longer necessary. You can shed it if you wish."

"Thank you." Again I was treated to the unholy transformation as my horse neighed and bucked in terror. After a few minutes, her full, terrible beauty was on display. She curled herself around the campfire and gazed at me. "Thank you for freeing me from that evil Lord Bandikane."

My horse continued to paw the ground, a response I appreciated fully as I could feel the waves of evil that flowed from her, evil that was nearly overwhelming. *If one were in its presence continually ...* "You had been under his control for, what, three years?"

"Yes, a most trying and painful experience. What he made me do..." She shook her great scaled head. "Now, with your continued assistance, perhaps I can be free forever!"

"And how would I accomplish that?"

She jerked her head up, her eyes flaring briefly. "Destroy the contract! The cursed document the magician tricked me into signing. Only *then* can I be fully free."

"Yes, the contract." I pulled it out, idly read it, then returned it to my satchel. "It is quite harsh and demanding."

"Brendell, you must..." Then the anger and demand in her voice faded into pleading. "What I was forced to do I deeply regret. I had *no choice!* But you are a man of honor, Brendell. You have the power to free me. You *owe* me."

I pretended to consider her remarks. "that is true. Your assistance was invaluable. I assume you had offered it to my fellow Guild members as well."

"To one at least. But I was hampered in what I could do. As you should know."

"Not warning them about the trap. But, as you say, you had no choice." I sat on a log across from her and sipped some wine. "It wasn't necessary to kill Lord Bandikane."

She emitted a puff of satisfied smoke. "Your instructions were open to interpretation."

The answer I expected. I reached into my satchel and removed a scroll. "You may destroy this," and I tossed it to her.

"Thank you," she hissed. She gave it a cursory glance, then snorted a small burst of fire. The document immediately turned to ashes. Then she inched closer, until her great snout towered inches from me. "You have been most generous. Unfortunately for you, I am not." And she reached for me.

"Stop!" Her eyes glazed over in shock when she found herself suddenly unable to move. I rose so I could look her in the eye. "You see, Madnizaroc, I knew the Lord would check his safe on his return, so when I stole the dragon clause, I replaced it with a copy. It's just as easy to make *two* copies as one."

She roared then, a great bellowing roar followed by a stream of angry fire. But that was directed to the heavens, not at me. "You *tricked* me, you *lied* to me!" she raged, thrashing her tail and scattering the campfire across the clearing.

"Yes, and I have a task for you. I want you to fly directly to Mount Perjheus and wait for me."

"Mount Perjheus?" Her eyes clouded over as she understood my order. "But there is nothing there! Just snow and glaciers. No humans, nothing to hunt!"

I no longer felt compassion for the creature, only fear and disgust, emotions that made my command easy to justify. "There are rabbits and mountain goats, I hear. A more suitable diet for a dragon than helpless livestock or farmers, don't you think? Now *go!*"

Roaring with helpless rage, she uncoiled her body, spread her wings and leapt into the sky. I waited until the beacon of angry fire she spewed disappeared into the night sky before I finally relaxed. I should have felt elation; I had completed the assignment and now the Guild would surely grant me journeyman's status. But I couldn't shake the despair I felt for Lord Bandikane. I understood now why he required so few guards as Madnizaroc was more than equal to any army. And I also understood his change of character. Her constant presence had been his undoing; the darkness of her soul had begun to permeate his as well, slowly changing him into the evil equal of her. *And I could have prevented his death.* I cursed myself for understanding that much too late. The dragon clause was indeed a curse, one I would be burdened with for perhaps the rest of my life. I went to sleep troubled by dark dreams and dragon screams.

"Congratulations are in order, Brendell," the Guild Secretary said after finishing my report. "You have more than fulfilled your assignment. I am proud to say you are now a full-fledged Guild journeyman."

It was nearly a week since I had fled Castle Bandikane. The Secretary had been pleased, although a bit surprised, to see me. "Thank you. And the contract?"

"Our archivists have already studied it and confirmed your assumptions. It will be retained in the Guild vaults. Only you will be permitted access to it."

I felt great relief at that. The Guild was not above selling its treasures to the highest bidder. And I certainly could not travel with it. "There is nothing more?"

"No. Unless you are interested in a contract that just came across my desk."

"Not presently. I believe I need a slight vacation after this."

"Understood." He closed my report. "In that case I wish you well. And, again, congratulations. The necessary paperwork will be completed and forwarded within the week."

I nodded and left. Outside, the sun glowed warmly on the sleepy town of Port Challort. I wondered briefly if it was shining on Mount Perjheus as well, then forced the thought aside. Instead I went to a nearby inn for food and drink. Still it took me three flagons of wine before I could congratulate myself. Brendell, apprentice thief, was no more. "Journeyman thief, I whispered, two words I thought I would never hear spoken together. Now all I had to do was become a *master* thief.

I shrugged. Time enough to begin that journey in the morning. I grabbed the serving wench and ordered another flagon of wine.

## Far Site

"More wine." At least that's what I tried to say. By now my tongue was as cooperative as a laden jackass, a beast I now identified with quite strongly. The serving wench understood well enough, however, and my empty flagon was quickly replaced with a brimming one. And it wasn't like there were many customers mid-afternoon. Merchants were busy tending their stores, farmers tilling their fields, bakers baking, smiths smithing, my fellow thieves thieving, rulers doing ... whatever they do.

And I, Brendell, was sitting in this nearly empty tavern trying to drown the memory that I had just sentenced a man to death.

Death doesn't bother me. It happens, it's an occupational hazard. My actions have even lead to the death of others before. But in those few instances the outcome had not been planned, although usually quite deserved in my mind. This time however...

I cursed softly as I fingered a gold coin, one of many the Guilds had awarded me for my efforts. Such a simple contract. And now an innocent man was going to die.

As usual, the Thief's Guild negotiated the contract. Now that I had finally achieved journeyman status, contract offers were more plentiful and rewarding. That fateful afternoon the Guild Secretary had even given me a choice of assignments. So I really have no one to blame but myself.

The Guild had been contracted by a Lord Rabolin about a matter, as he stated it, "of most urgency." It had taken a good three weeks by ship to reach his domain in the Seafall provinces and once I arrived I regretted it immediately. The Lord's "realm" consisted of a small fishing village perched on the tip of a peninsula, a few fields, a stand of timber. The self-styled monarch dwelt not in a castle but in a simple home just outside the village proper. Still, a contract is a contract and the reward was ample. Dragging my small trunk behind me—the village was too small to even have a stable—I trudged up the road, sought entrance, introduced myself and was soon ushered into the presence of Rabolin himself.

Rabolin was tall and thin to the point of emaciation. The velvet robes and headgear he deigned to wear in poor imitation of a *real* monarch made him appear like an animated coat rack. No train, no group of advisors or sycophants, and still he demanded I bow in his presence and remain thus while he reposed in his throne, actually a simple wooden chair. "You are Brendell of the Thief's Guild?" he asked in a voice that needed oiling.

"Yes, your majesty." My knees were already beginning to ache from the wooden floor. "I have the contract with me."

"And you are a *good* thief?"

"The Guild would only send the best available for a mission of such utmost importance." I almost gagged on my obsequiousness.

"Excellent!" His vigorous assent threatened to unseat his threadbare crown. "There is a wizard named Ensten who dwells in the village of Foxhaven. He is in possession of a most wondrous instrument, a Far Glass. That is the object I wish you to obtain."

A *wizard*? That had not come up in my discussion with the Guild. Little had, in fact. The Seafall provinces, stuck as they are on a remote northern peninsula, are uniformly poor, sparsely populated and uninteresting. The Guilds, including mine, maintain little or no presence in the region. Rabolin had been forced to spend over a month traveling to the nearest port where a Guild outpost was available, which

spoke of the importance of this assignment to him. However, he had been vague during negotiations. Nothing unusual about that, but my subsequent research in the Guild archives had been fruitless because of it. "A wizard you say?"

"Yes. Most powerful. You have successfully dealt with magic in the past I take it."

"Yes." *Unfortunately.*

"Good." He rose, allowing me to do the same. I was certain I would be limping for the next few days. "Then be off with you. I want the Far Glass as soon as possible."

"Can you tell me what it looks like? Can you provide a map? At least a horse?" I pointed to my trunk beside me. "I will need this if magic is involved."

"I can't tell you about the glass except that it exists. As for a map, just follow the sun. You will come upon Foxhaven eventually. A horse? Let me check my stables." Two hours later I was leading a recalcitrant mule out of Rabolin's lands and into the woods beyond. Limping west.

Mostly west anyway. The few farmholds I stumbled across were uniformly friendly and surprised to meet a solitary traveler. Starved for company and perceiving me as no threat—which I wasn't, being under contract—I found myself enjoying their hospitality at every turn. So what should have been a three day's journey nearly trebled. Yet I was in uncommon good spirits and uncommonly well fed when I finally reached Foxhaven.

Which was as unaccustomed to visitors as the countryside. There was no inn, but the proprietor of the tavern was willing to accommodate me, even if what he offered was little more than a pallet on the floor. After storing my trunk in a back room, I joined him over a flagon of wine.

"And what brings you to our village, Bikken?" he asked after generously filling both our glasses. His eagerness to converse with someone from the outside world was almost painful to behold.

I could have given my real name but saw no reason to. And this alias had served me well in the past. "I'm somewhat of a scholar," I began. "I have heard rumors that a most powerful yet benign wizard dwells in the area. I have traveled many arduous miles to meet and study with him."

"A wizard?" He picked at his teeth and grunted with satisfaction as he removed a bit of breakfast. "I fear those tales are untrue and your trek in vain. We have no wizard here. Can't imagine why a wizard would *want* to be here, actually."

"Really? That is most distressing." I sipped my wine, unsure if I should be relieved or disappointed. "No one named Ensten lives in Foxhaven?"

"Ensten?" The man broke into laughter. "Oh, indeed, Ensten graces Foxhaven. But he is no wizard! A madman, a dreamer perhaps. A gifted tinkerer some might say. But certainly no wizard!"

This was heartening news. Magic and I do not get along. "So the rumors are true! Would he be willing to see me?"

"I can't speak for him, of course, but he seems friendly enough. His house is at the end of the path leading south of the well. You should have no difficulty finding him."

We spent the remainder of the evening drinking the local wine while I regaled him and those who joined us with marvelous tales of the world that lie far beyond Foxhaven. Some of them were even true.

The barkeep had been right, I decided as I stopped at the boundaries of Ensten's home. The man was indeed mad. The house stretched in all directions as if it had seeped from the ground. Rooms branched off of rooms; gables and metal poles, some topped by metal figurines, festooned the roof; building materials ranged from brick to wood to straw. Outside, various devices of unknown function spun, squeaked and hummed. On top of a tall tripod, a wheel with wooden arms turned merrily. Another, a tubular device made of hammered metal, groaned and hissed steam. I touched it and jerked away, then began blowing on my singed fingers. Somewhere inside it a fire was burning, I realized. *Mad indeed.*

Donning my most sincere smile, I walked to the front door and knocked. Silence. I knocked again. This time I was rewarded by a clanging and clattering, a muttered curse, finally approaching footsteps. The door opened and a scarecrow of a man peered out. He was wearing a leather apron and gloves and nothing else. His white beard blended with his white hair so that only his nose and eyes were visible. "What do you, oh it's you! And late, I must say. Well, don't just stand there, bring it in! Follow me." With that he turned and abruptly started walking.

"Bring in ... excuse me. Sir. Ensten!" I chased after him but he ignored me until we reached a room at the rear of his home.

"Put it there," he said, back still turned, as he patted an empty table. "I just don't understand why it takes so long."

"Ensten. Sir." I tugged on his arm until he finally looked at me. "I'm not who you think I am. I haven't brought anything for you."

He frowned ... I think. His unkempt hair covered his brow so thoroughly it was difficult to tell. "And why not? My order was clear enough. Don't tell me you don't have my supplies."

"I don't even know what you are talking about. My name is Bikken. I am not ... whoever."

"Bikken." He sampled my name as if it were an unknown fruit. "You're not here with my supplies?"

I shook my head.

"Cursed be they! I need those materials!" Muttering, he turned to another table, this one overflowing with all sorts of unrecognizable objects and began working at something. "How can they expect me to complete his?" he said over and over as he toiled away.

I waited silently a good five minutes, expecting at any time for him to question me further. Then I realized; *he's forgotten all about me!* I cleared my throat loudly and stomped my foot. No response. "Ensten." Ignored anew. This time I repeated his name and tapped him on the shoulder.

"What? Who?" He turned reluctantly and saw me again for the first time. "Who are you and what are you doing here?"

"Bikken. Like I told you, my name is Bikken."

"And you brought my supplies?"

"No. I know nothing about your supplies."

"They lost my order again? What idiots! Cotton. Flour. Coal. Lard. Salt. Paper." He enumerated each on a finger. "Do I have to write this down or can you remember?"

"You better write it down," I said weakly.

He harrumphed and seized a quill, then scribbled on a bit of parchment and handed it to me. "And don't dawdle. I need these immediately."

"I'll see myself out," I said since he was already back to his labors. If he had mistaken me for an errand boy I wasn't going to enlighten him. Not now at least. Instead I found my way outside, but not before I had given most of the house a cursory study. The chaos of the back room was echoed everywhere; books piled upon books, drawings and observations scrawled on parchment and tucked away in other books and nooks and crannies; bits and pieces of odd machinery; animals and plants stuffed in glass jars. How he could retrieve anything was beyond my comprehension. Yet, by accident, he had discovered the ideal method for thwarting me. How was I to find an object of which I knew only the name amongst the flotsam and jetsam piled everywhere? Somewhere in Ensten's belongings was the Far Glass and I would need his help to find it.

So I gladly retraced my steps to Foxhaven and its one store. Once I explained I was on a mission for Ensten, the owner gladly filled the order. "Ensten didn't give me any money," I apologized after we had piled sacks of staples on my protesting donkey.

"He will pay me, he always does. Even if I have to remind him occasionally. So, you are his new assistant?"

"For a short time anyway."

He grinned. "That is usually the case. Be forewarned. He can be quite demanding as well as forgetful."

Not a revelation, I decided as I led my mount back to Ensten's squalor. But becoming his assistant was a much better ruse than any I had thought of.

It also quickly proved to be more strenuous. The merchant had been right, Ensten *was* demanding. Upon my return he immediately dispatched me to the kitchen to stow the supplies. Done with that, I eventually found him working with a black powder. He had run a thin trail of it across a table and I watched as he put a lit candle to one end. The powder sizzled, then burned itself up and out almost immediately. I cleared my throat and he finally noticed me.

"What do you think?"

"Of what?"

He pointed to the ashes. "Of my fire salt."

"I don't know. What does it do? What is it for?"

"It *burns* of course!"

"I saw that. I mean, what do you use it for?"

He struck a finger on his lips. "I don't know. I haven't gotten that far."

"Could you use it to, say, light a campfire?"

His eyes brightened. "Yes, perhaps it could. Get me some wood. Tinder."

I returned quickly from my expedition outside with an armload of wood, twigs, straw and dried leaves. "Where should I put this?"

"Put what?" He looked up at my burden and frowned. "Why are you bringing that into my house."



"I thought we were going to build a campfire."

"In my *house*? Why would we do that when we have a fireplace?"

*He doesn't remember!* "To see if we could light it with your fire salt."

He clapped his hands. "Of course! Thank you for reminding me, uh, whoever you are."

"Bikken."

"So you are. Bring that here."

In a matter of minutes we had assembled a tidy pile of wood on the floor. Ensten sprinkled his fire salt on it, then ran a small trail a few feet away. He reached for a candle but I stopped him. "On the trail, you won't have a lighted candle with you. You'll have to use flint and steel."

He nodded vigorously. "Excellent observation. Get some."

"Where?"

He pondered. "Try the kitchen."

I did but found none. Rather than wasting the whole afternoon, I went to my trunk and rummaged through my gear. "Here," I said when I returned.

He took them, bent over the powder and began striking stone to metal. After a few tries the sparks sent the fire salt ablaze. Except for a brief puff of smoke, however, the wood remained unlit, the powder burning itself out too quickly to ignite it. Ensten showed no disappointment in the failure, however. "No matter. Maybe we'll try again tomorrow. Is my supper ready yet?"

Apologizing profusely I raced to the kitchen. By the time I had something prepared, he was involved in another project and didn't want to be disturbed. He didn't speak to me the remainder of the evening.

I quickly fell into Ensten's routine as I adapted to my unexpected role of assistant. He rose at dawn and ate whatever I had prepared. Then he moved onto one of his experiments. Sometimes he needed help gathering material, moving something, putting something together or taking it apart. Other times he completely ignored me and I was left to my own devices, merely checking occasionally to learn if I was needed.

I had no idea why I did most of what I did, mainly because Ensten rarely explained. Once I found him outside near a cage of pigeons. He was holding one and wrapping something around one leg. A moment later he released it. The bird hovered momentarily, then headed south. I favored him with a raised eyebrow. "It's how I correspond," he said. "A friend of mine in Kestyia has expressed interest in my fire salt. I was just sending him the formula."

"Wouldn't a ship be better?"

"Not here. Not as fast or reliable. Unless, of course, the bird becomes another's meal during his journey." He never mentioned the fire salt again.

So basically I had free reign to explore the Ensten household. But my more thorough investigations only confirmed what I expected from my first day; I had no idea what I was looking for and there were just too many arcane objects about. In hindsight I should have catalogued what I uncovered for further use, but I never expected the Guilds to have any interest in Ensten. Which later proved unfortunate to the

extreme.

Meanwhile I was becoming increasingly frustrated. I *had* to convince Ensten to show me the Far Glass.

Which he finally did. Near the end of my third week In Foxhaven I was cleaning up after breakfast when I heard Ensten call for me. I went outside and found him laboring over a new contraption. He had taken a thin wooden frame and wrapped cloth tightly around it. A string was tied to the center and led to the spool he was holding. He held the object up so the wind filled it like a sail, then released it. It dropped straight to the ground. Cursing, he tried again. Same result. He waved me over. "Bikken, I think we need to increase resistance." He handed me the contraption. "Hold this over your head and run towards yon hill."

Raising his latest invention behind me, I began loping toward the hill. As the string played out, the cloth-covered frame *did* climb higher in the sky, until it was a good four feet above my head. Then it suddenly began spinning wildly and crashed into the ground.

Ensten trotted up, beaming like a child. "It's working. My flyer just needs something to balance it." He looked at me. "Bikken, your shirt."

"My shirt?" I frowned but removed it.

He tore it apart, then tied a strip of cloth to one of the corners of his flyer. "Yes, this might do. Now, Bikken," he handed the thing to me, "run as fast as you can!"

I complied, all the while thinking about my ruined shirt. This time the results were much more satisfactory. His invention rose slowly but steadily, climbing ever upwards like a squirrel fleeing a dog. The cloth billowed and his flyer steadied high above us, its only tether the string that ran taut to the spool Ensten held. "Marvelous!" he yelled. "This is just marvelous!"

Indeed it was. And it provided my fatal inspiration. "It is unfortunate we can't observe it more closely," I said. "It's so high, we can hardly see it."

"You're right. Fetch the Far Glass."

"The Far Glass? What's that?"

He snorted. "Have you learned nothing in all these months? The Far Glass. It's in the East Room, I believe."

"Of course. And what does it look like?"

"Know you nothing? A brass tube. Glass on both ends. Now hurry and get it!"

I hastened to the room and after burrowing among boxes and piles of papers and paraphernalia I did find it. *Finally!* I returned and gave it to Ensten. He in turn handed me the spool. "Hold it steady. Don't drop it." He then held one end of the tube to his eye and peered into it while I struggled to keep his flyer aloft. "Amazing! Yes, this is most satisfactory!"

I let him observe for about five minutes before clearing my throat. "Could I watch it?"

"Of course."

We swapped and I brought the tube up to my eye. And gasped. His flyer suddenly appeared miles away, not just feet. "What?"

"I said you're looking through the wrong end."

"Oh." I turned the Far Glass around ... and gasped again. The flyer now appeared just a few feet away. I could make out the pattern on the cloth, the strip from my shirt, the string and the frame. I could almost *touch* it, it appeared so close.

I didn't realize how long I peered into the Far Glass until Ensten gave a grunt. "I think that's enough for now." He began reeling in his invention.

"This is amazing," I said in awe.

"My flyer? Yes, isn't it?"

"No, this," and I held up the Far Glass. "Have you made others?"

"Just the one."

"But you can make more?"

He shrugged. "I have my notes. If I ever wanted to, I suppose. But why? My flyer is much more interesting, don't you think?"

I helped him put away his new miracle, made us lunch, tidied up and basically stayed out of his way the rest of the day. Now I had the Far Glass. Now I could fulfill my contract. But I wasn't convinced I should. I slept little that evening.

I left the following morning. I explained I had to go to Foxhaven for more supplies, which troubled him not at all. He never noticed my donkey was laden with my trunk. With the Far Glass safely nestled inside. I was certain Ensten wouldn't notice my absence or his loss for quite some time, but I had greater concerns, so that evening found me nearly a third of the way back to Lord Rabolin. I spent that night staring at my campfire and the glass tube in my hand. Such an innocent looking device, I thought. And so dangerous. Armed with these, lookouts could spot an approaching thief from miles away. Or an approaching army. Why Rabolin wanted it so badly I knew not. But I did know he couldn't have it.

Two days later I led my mount into Rabolin's fiefdom. I had avoided all farmholds this time as I wanted this over with as quickly as possible. I sauntered up to the Lord's residence, knocked, and within minutes was ushered into a small room to wait his royal entrance. It came with as much pomp as he could muster. Which wasn't much. "What took you so long?" he asked after he took his throne. This time I did not honor him by kneeling. "It's been weeks!"

"A most difficult theft," I began. "The wizard had placed many traps around his lair and particularly the Far Glass. Only by employing the utmost cunning and caution was I able to accomplish the deed. But I warn you, wizards do not appreciate thievery. Some have been known to attach magic tethers to their property. If he ever learns you possess this," and I held up the Far Glass, "you could find yourself in grave danger."

"I will be the judge of that." He held out his hand and I gave him his prize. He pondered the brass tube for a moment. "How does it work?"

I pointed. "Just look through it."

He complied. And roared with rage. "What travesty is this? This is no Far Glass! You appear to be six inches tall!" He removed the tool from his eye to confirm my height. "This is not the Far Glass."

"Yes it is. It does exactly what it's name implies. It makes objects appear far away."

"Impossible! This is not what my sources told me!" He hurled the tube at me. I caught it and placed it in my belt. "You have failed!"

"No I have not! This is your Far Glass. And I expect my payment!"

He began rocking in his throne as if it were trying to unseat him. "You will receive no payment from me. And I shall complain to your Guild!" If he had the wherewithal, I was certain he would have ordered my immediate execution.

His impotent rage was entertaining but I had to maintain my own facade. "You refuse to honor this contract?" I held up the document.

"Absolutely!"

"Then *I* will complain to the Guild. And *they* will not be kind!" I displayed my rage until I left his manor, then breathed a sigh of relief. I had taken a great gamble, but I was also honor-bound to do nearly everything possible to fulfill my contract. For the most part I had. And I *had* given him the object of his desire. My Guild, I was convinced, would understand my ruse once I explained it to them. Now it was merely a matter of waiting in this barren paradise while avoiding Rabolin until the next ship came.

"Gentlemen, thank you all for coming. I realize this is most unusual, but this is a most serious matter we must discuss."

It was one month to the day since I had brought the Far Glass to the attention of my superiors. I had expected them to take it off my hands and preserve it in the safe confines of the Guild archives. I had *not* expected them to order me to remain in Port Andergauz at their expense while they contacted other Guilds to arrange an emergency meeting. Or for me to be the guest of honor.

Now, as I looked at the circle of stern faces studying me, I regretted anew my decision to take the Rabolin contract. My own Guild Chief's final remarks broke my brooding. "Now, Guild member Brendell will explain the threat he has uncovered."

He nodded to me and sat. Clearing my throat, I rose on shaky legs and held up the Far Glass. "I was commissioned to steal this object by Lord Rabolin. He called it a Far Glass. As each of you will discover, it indeed lives up to its name."

It was passed among the Guild chiefs and representatives while I continued my explanation. I noticed some were amused, a few openly admiring. Two, one in particular, showed their intense displeasure most openly. "So I felt it in the best interests of the Guilds that this object be kept in our hands," I concluded as the innocuous brass tube completed its journey. I was ready to stop but my audience was not.

"You say this man Ensten made this?" the Assassin's Guild chief asked.

"Yes."

"And he can make more?"

I shrugged. "If he had a mind to. I suspect he wouldn't. I doubt he would care to."

"But he did make notes?" my own superior asked.

"Most definitely. Nearly indecipherable, however. And the way he stores them, finding his notes on the

Far Glass, or anything for that matter, would be a minor miracle."

"I don't believe in miracles," the Assassin's Guild chief said. "Do we have any cause for concern about this Rabolin?"

"He's been dealt with," my leader assured him. Indeed, the Guild had sent a representative and obtained payment for my broken contract. At my insistence it was a token payment only, but enough to discourage others from breaking Guild agreements.

"I say Ensten must be stopped." The Assassin's Guild chief pointed at the Far Glass. "That weapon is a threat to every member of my Guild."

"I concur," my chief said.

"Please, gentlemen." The Captain's Guild representative seized the floor. "This is a most wondrous object! It will be an invaluable aid to the safe passage of all my men and the passengers and goods they convey across our treacherous oceans! We will be able to observe and prepare for pirates, reefs, sea monsters and other dangers long before we are in danger ourselves. I must protest! We need this Far Glass!"

"Your points are well-made and will be duly considered," my chief said. "Are there any other questions or comments?"

"What other potential threats did you observe at Ensten's?" the leader of the Miner's Guild asked me.

"None, actually." I discussed the odd objects on his house and in the yard, his flyer, his fire salt and a few others. "I'm not sure what most of them did or even if they functioned properly. I'm not sure Ensten does, either."

"Enough!" The Assassin's Guild chief slammed his heavy hand on the table. "I demand a vote now. We cannot delay any longer!"

"Agreed. Miner's Guild?" my chief nodded at him.

"We see this as no benefit to us. We abstain."

"Smith's Guild?"

"I concur. It is at most an amusement."

So around the room they went. "And I say no," my leader concluded. "That leaves two against, one for and four abstentions. The matter has been decided."

"Excellent." The victorious Assassin's Guild chief smiled. "We will send a contingent to Foxhaven immediately."

That was when I began to realize what I had really accomplished. "Wait. A contingent to Foxhaven? For what purpose?"

"Our meeting is over," my leader said and glared at me. "You may leave us now."

"No." I rose shaking my head, as if that would somehow drown out what I was hearing. "You can't do this. Ensten is no threat. To the Guilds, to anyone. He's just a gifted but lonely and possibly mad old man. You can't *do* this!"

"What we do is for the good of the Guilds, as we have always done," the Assassin's Guild chief said. "Order must be maintained. Ensten threatens that order. What must be done shall be done. Now leave us. Now!"

Out of the corner of my eye I saw two silent guards starting toward me. Taking a deep breath, I bowed and staggered from the room. Once outside I collapsed in a chair. *For the good of the Guilds*. Those words echoed in me like thunder in a canyon. What I had done was for the good of the Guilds.

What I had done was sentence a harmless old man to death. A generous pile of gold coins jangled in my pocket as I left the Thief's Guild headquarters. I had been paid well for my actions, much more than what Rabolin had contracted. I had been congratulated by my own Chief and assured that my journeyman's status was now firmly and irrevocably official.

None of that mattered. There was no way I could reach Foxhaven before the Assassins, no way I could warn a harmless old dreamer. *No way*. The sun was now high; our meeting had started at sunrise and lasted far longer than I had imagined. I needed a bath, I needed a meal, I needed to rest. First things first. I headed for the nearest tavern.

When I woke up, my mouth tasted like mud. I quickly realized why, I was lying face down in an alley. After a mental reconnoiter, I found my aches and pains could be attributed entirely to the wine. A physical one was far less assuring. My coins were gone. So was the key to my room at the inn, even the brass buckles on my boots. Someone I had met at that inn had treated me most unkindly. Perhaps even the owner.

No time to worry about that now. I staggered to my feet and out of the alley. The sun was just rising so few were out to admire my wavering progress back to my inn. After a brief discussion, they let me back into my room, which I found had been thoroughly ransacked. No matter. The condition of my room convinced me my unseen visitors weren't professional thieves, and they hadn't found where I had hidden the majority of my wealth. I cleaned up, had a brief breakfast, then went on a purchasing expedition. Perhaps I could do nothing for Ensten, but I had to do *something*. By mid-afternoon I was on a ship bound for Kestya.

"You say your name is Bikken? That you are here on the request of Ensten?" From across the table, Baron Vincin studied me over his golden goblet of wine. Once I had arrived in Kestya, finding him had required little effort. Mentioning Ensten to his servant had gained me an immediate audience. Now we were seated in his spacious dining hall and I was being rewarded with a most excellent vintage. "I confess I do not understand the reason for Ensten's largesse. We have corresponded but never met."

*You are his only confidante I knew about.* "Ensten had always expressed great admiration for you. He was confident you would want to continue some of his experiments."

"Yes, most assuredly. I have found his fire salt most intriguing." Then his eyes darkened. "You insist upon speaking of Ensten in the past tense. Why is that?"

It had taken me five weeks to reach Kestya. By now Ensten *was* past tense. "I am afraid my former master has fallen prey to a most serious illness. The healers can do nothing for him save control his pain." I shuddered and allowed a tear to fall. "A great man..."

"Indeed." He opened the satchel I had brought and began removing its contents. During my voyage, I had spent hours sketching from memory the many devices I had observed at Ensten's. Except for the Far Glass. "These drawings are helpful but incomplete," he said after a silent perusal. "You have no notes? You have no further knowledge on how they work or what they do?"

"Ensten kept his notes in a code known only to him. They would be worthless to anyone else." I smiled weakly. "I was only with him a short time. He rarely explained the purpose of his apparatus."

He studied me anew. "I don't believe you. I believe you stole these. How much do you want for them?"

I maintained my facade. "Serving the wishes of my former master is reward enough."

He grunted, satisfied. "If any of these prove as interesting as his fire salt, then you have done me a great service, Bikken." He rose. "I hate to be rude but I do have other engagements. Please stay and enjoy the wine. I will have food brought if you wish."

"No need. Now that you have relieved me of this obligation, I must be leaving as well."

He nodded and left with my satchel. I filled my goblet and sighed. Relieved? No, I was far from relieved. I had just committed a grand crime against the Guilds. If discovered, I would at best be thrown out in eternal disgrace. *And if the Assassin's Guild ever learns of my treachery...*

I finished the wine, then returned to my inn and removed my disguise. One thing was certain, I would be unable to use the name Bikken again. A small price to pay if Baron Vincin was successful.

It took well over a year, but the Baron was. He called his invention gunpowder.

## Epilogue

I let my horse graze and rest while I sat on a fallen tree and looked at the valley below. Mistmourning. How many hours had I spent here in my youth, playing with friends or hunting for mushrooms or sledding down its gentle slope during the winter? From here the village looked no different than when I had left nearly a decade past to seek my fortune at the Thief's Academy and beyond. *I* had changed. Taller perhaps, several wrinkles and scars, gray beginning to appear in my hair and beard. Well-earned I would say.

Not all the memories flooding back were welcome, however. The many hours spent in the fields or barns, working with my siblings so our family could somehow survive. How many times had I gone to bed hungry because my father had spent what little money he had on seed or animal feed? As soon as I could I left, as much to escape as to lessen the burden I placed on my family.

This was the first time I had been back. I had seen so much of the world, yet, despite everything, I felt my heart swell as I watched the small river meander through the valley and tiny village surrounding its banks. *Time to go.* I got on my reluctant mount and made my slow way home.

Our farm was on the outskirts of the village. I rode up to find the fence falling apart and my old home in serious disrepair. I tied my horse to a post that looked relatively stable and knocked on the rickety door. "Alous, are you home?" I yelled. "Father?"

I heard a scuffling from inside, then the door creaked open. My father stood there and gazed at me nearly without comprehension. "Who? Brendell, is that you?"

"Yes, Alous, it is. May I come in?"

He stepped aside and I walked in. I glanced around the main room and fought back a tear. There were only a few bare wooden chairs and one table leaning against the wall for support. The curtains were filthy and moth-eaten. My father's cloths were in similar condition. "What happened?"

"The king's assessors," he sighed. "Come, have a seat. It's been so long. You must tell me everything."

I did so, all the while trying to keep the shock and pain from my voice. Only after I provided a severely curtailed account of my career did I ask, "Where are the others?"

"They've all gone, Brendell." His hand shook as he rocked slowly in his chair. "They left like you did." There was no recrimination in his voice, just resignation. "Mistmourning held nothing for them."

I digested this news like a poorly-prepared stew. *All gone.* I knew my sisters would have married and moved on, but surely one of my brothers ... "Who is working for you now?"

"No one." Again he spoke without emotion. "I cannot afford help. And even if I could, the assessors would take the money anyway."

"But you *have* money. The money I've sent you."

He forced a smile. "That was your money, Brendell, not mine. I've never touched it. I was saving it for you."

*Never spent it.* I had sent a portion of every contract to him, coins, several jewels and rings. "It was for you, father. I didn't need it. There should be enough for you to hire help, put this house back together."



"I'm afraid not, son." He looked at me and I could see tears. "It was stolen."

"What?" My despair reached new depths. "How? Who?"

"I don't know. I went to the market. When I returned, someone had ... taken it."

My despair was being quickly replaced by quiet rage. "Where did you keep it?"

"In the kitchen, under a loose board."

*Of course. The first place a professional thief would look.* "Alous, I have some money. I want you to take it."

"Brendell, I can't." He quieted as I counted out 50 gold coins and set them on the table.

"No arguments. These are for you. Spend them wisely, don't let anyone know you have them."

He looked at the pile of wealth, then at me. "You're leaving, aren't you?"

"Yes. I have something to do." My smile hardly hid the rage I felt. "But I will be back. Soon, I hope. And I'll help you get our house back together." I patted his hand. "Please, buy some food. Some clothes. This is your money now, father, not mine."

I stayed long enough to show him a better place to hide his money, then I rode off. Hannis Bay was the nearest town with a Guild office and I pushed my mount hard to get there as quickly as possible. During my journey, I tried to understand what had happened. *Someone* had taken out a contract. On me, on my family? I've made enemies, an inevitable result of my chosen career. It could have been one of my contracts. It could even be one of my Guild members, since a simple trip to the Guild archives would tell them everything they needed to know about me.

Then I thought about my father. Living alone now, abandoned by his children, his wife long since deceased. *And never once touching the wealth I had sent him, spending not one coin to better his life.* It was not me someone had victimized, it was my father. And I vowed that deed would be avenged.

I had to wait an hour to meet with the Guild secretary, which did nothing to lighten my mood. "What can I do for you, Brendell?" he asked when he finally deigned to see me.

"I want to know who took the contract out on me."

He frowned. "Whatever makes you think someone would do that?"

"My father was robbed. Either it was done by a Guild member or it was done by a rogue. Neither can be tolerated."

"You know I can't provide that information, Brendell. Contract information is confidential between thief and client."

"Even if a Guild member is the victim?"

"It doesn't matter. Protocol must be maintained, no matter the situation. Otherwise the trust and respect we have worked so long to establish will be destroyed."

What troubled me the most was that he was right, and reacting just as I had feared. "Then *I* wish to take out a contract."

"That we can do." He opened a drawer and pulled out a blank contract. "You will be the client I assume?"

"Yes."

He grabbed his quill and dutifully made a notation. "And who is the contract on?"

"Whoever stole from me."

He set the quill back in the inkwell. "If you can't be more specific, Brendell, I cannot help you. Only a master has the right to take out an open contract. Until you reach that status, the Guild's hands are tied."

"The Guild encourages theft among its own members?"

"This matter is personal and therefore not the concern of the Guild. You may lodge a complaint at our next chapter meeting, but I suspect it will be ignored."

I bid him leave and stomped out of his office. Later, over my campfire, I stared at the flames. All during my career I had obeyed the rules of the Guild. I had been taken advantage of more than once during my apprenticeship. Even now, as a journeyman, my Guild status meant next to nothing.

I sighed. I had already broken Guild rules in my dealings with Ensten. I would go back to my father, help him get his home and affairs in order. Then I would complete my very personal contract.

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