

Chain, Link, Fence

Steven Piziks

"What," the fence asked, "am I supposed to do with that?"

Kordel would have ground her teeth, but her jaws were already aching. "Buy it," she said evenly.

The fence merely snorted.

Kordel flared her nostrils and shot a glance at the statue on the table between them. The silver figure of a man about ten inches high was chained to a miniature table with gem-encrusted bonds. One improbably proportioned part of the man's anatomy speared skyward. His head was thrown back in what was either a shudder of ecstasy or a grimace of agony. Since he was alone on the table and his hands were chained down, Kordel rather imagined it was the latter.

"What'll you give me for it?" Kordel said through still-clenched teeth.

The fence barked a short laugh that echoed slightly about the spartan white walls of his seemingly empty shop; a wise fence kept his merchandise out of sight. Two heavy velvet curtains obscured the back room while a single window threw a hard square of light on the stone floor.

"Look, Kordel," the fence said, ignoring Kordel's glare, "you stole the statue of Sybaritus from the temple downtown. Very nice. A feather in your cap, and all that."

"Any temple with a back door deserves to be burgled," Kordel muttered.

"But," the fence continued, wagging a thin, bony finger, "this piece is . . . unique. If word gets out I have it, I'm going to have a bunch of murder-minded cultists on my hands." He steepled his fingertips. "Why don't you try pulling out the gems and melting it down?"

"I thought of that four fences ago," Kordel snapped. "But the thing isn't pure silver—only gilded. And the gems are barely semi-precious."

"Figures," the fence snorted. "A fake statue for a false god." He picked idly at the gilding, then noticed which part he was picking at and quickly dropped his hand. "I've never understood the Sybarites. Marks, all of them. They 'contribute' huge sums of money for a ritual orgy when they could get the same thing up the street for one-third the cost—and that without boring mumbo-jumbo to a god Anya Nightbond created for her own profit." He clucked his tongue. "I don't understand the attraction."

Kordel shrugged. "They think that sex with the presence of the god—drawn down into the statue—is better than without it. They also believe that without a weekly ritual, they'll become unable to have sex at all. Since they believe it's true, it becomes true. And Anya cashes in on their belief."

The fence lifted an eyebrow. "How do you know all this?"

"I attended their rituals," Kordel replied matter-of-factly. "Part of casing the job."

The fence gave her a sidelong glance and opened his mouth to ask a question.

"I wouldn't," Kordel warned. "I'm already in a bad mood."

The fence cocked his head, considering pro and con. Con carried the day. He picked up the statue instead and hefted it. "Whatever possessed you to steal this thing, anyway? You must have known it's a piece of junk."

"I made a bet."

"A bet?"

"I bet I could steal the statue of Sybaritus and make at least a hundred silver from it."

The fence snorted again. "I hope your stake wasn't valuable."

Kordel licked her lips and glanced away, fixing her gaze on the velvet curtains. "If I lose," she said quietly, "I have to turn myself over to the city guard."

"Uh-oh. Who did you bet with?"

"Bernard of Marthia. He bet his family jewel."

The fence made a face. "Old B.M.? What did he do? Trick you into drinking whisky?"

Kordel remained silent.

"Well," the fence said with resignation, "I think the city guard is going to be very happy in a couple days. And I'm going to lose a good client."

"Look," Kordel said desperately, "why don't you give me a hundred for the statue and quietly drop it down a deep hole? I'll pay you back later."

The fence's eyes went flat. "If it comes to that, why don't you just leave town to avoid paying up?"

"I gave my word!" Kordel flared back. "There are principles involved here."

The fence nodded. "Exactly. If anyone linked the sale to me, my career would be over. Sorry, Kordel. The statue is valuable only to the cult. You've lost."

"You're wrong!" Kordel angrily snatched up the statue, stuffed it into a large pouch—it made an interesting bulge—and strode for the door. "There must be *someone* in this city who'll buy it."

"Not a chance," the fence called after her. "No one but the cult will touch the thing."

Kordel halted. She stared for a long time at the door in front of her. "You think so?" she said without turning around. "No one but the cult?"

"No one," he replied firmly.

Kordel grinned over her shoulder at him. "I think you're right." And she vanished into the street.

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"What," the fence asked, "am I supposed to do with that?"

"Buy it," Kordel said gaily. "And stop sneering. It's an act designed to bring my selling price down."

The fence sighed and picked up the object, a large emerald this time. "What happened with your bet?"

Kordel grinned. "You're fondling the prize."

The fence looked up in surprise. "I'm holding Bernard's family jewel?"

"It's not a family jewel any longer," Kordel said.

"Obviously," the fence agreed, screwing a jeweler's lens into one eye and peering at the emerald. "This gem is flawed. How did you win? I would have sworn no one would buy that statue."

"Emeralds are always flawed," Kordel replied smoothly. "And I didn't sell the statue."

"You didn't?" Again the fence looked up in surprise, but the effect was rather ruined by the jeweler's lens. "Then how did you make a profit?"

Kordel leaned against the table. "Do you have any idea," she drawled, "how much money you can make holding a god for ransom?"

The fence thought about that, then laughed aloud.

"Nightbond tried to bargain with me, if you can believe it," Kordel continued. "But I told her if she didn't give me a thousand silver, I'd send her a pile of slag and her profitable little rituals would come to an end. I had her god by the—"

"I see, I see," the fence interrupted. "Now about this emerald . . ."

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A sultry voice wafted into the shop as the fence peered out the window. "Is she gone?"

"She's gone," he replied.

The curtains to the back room rustled aside and a dark-haired woman slipped unctuously into the shop. A mail overlay clinked against her black leather corset, and a small cat o' nine tails rustled at her belt. "The emerald, please," she said, unfolding her hand.

The fence took up his customary place behind the table. "First my fee."

"Of course." Anya Nightbond reached into a black leather pouch and stacked several silver coins on the table with fluid grace. "Two hundred for the emerald and two hundred for your trouble."

"I like doing business with the clergy," the fence remarked as he dropped the emerald into Anya's supple hand. "Especially the wealthy clergy. Who's next?"

Anya toyed thoughtfully with the gem. "Gilroy the Smuggler takes dares if he smokes enough seer's weed. I'll give a bundle to Bernard of Marthia when I return the betting emerald to him."

The fence nodded. "Just out of curiosity," he asked, "Kordel demanded a thousand silver from you for the statue. How much did you tell your congregation she wanted?"

"How much would *you* pay to rescue your sex life?" Anya purred. Then she sauntered out the door.