

Master of Thieves

Loki Renard

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Chapter One

It was a blazing hot day in Kelashin. Heat rose off the ground, transforming the city into a wavy mirage of mortar and stone. It was precisely the sort of day you on which you wouldn't want to have to run around in bare feet on hot sand. There were plenty of people going about bare foot on the sandy streets however, for in between the copper plated roof tops and the never ending revelry of the upper classes much of the city was occupied by the poor and the lowly, not that they counted for anything.

Kelashin was the best city in the world. Everybody knew that. The palace that rose in twisting blue spires towards the endless heavens was the most impressive and wonderful palace in all the known lands and the stinking sprawling city itself was filled with all the wonders of the world. It was home to the richest merchants, the most powerful politicians and the most beautiful starlets. It was a city of aspirations and dreams - and the occasional slave. Seated on high rock above the Waygone river, Kelashin was a bastion of knowledge and culture amidst the arid desert plains that surrounded it.

On that most sunny of sunny days, Rayna found herself perched on a ledge of the Thieves Guild. A slight figure dressed in ill fitting black rags, she picked her way carefully across the thin ornamental plane. Her olive skin was covered in a fine dusting of mud and sand, and her bold green eyes glittered between long dark lashes. Rayna did not consider herself beautiful, but she was undeniably striking.

Biting her lower lip and frowning in concentration, she edged her dusty boot further along the ledge and tested it. These ledges were surely not intended to carry a person's weight, in fact she'd heard rumors that they would collapse if an intruder tried to use them to gain access to the inner sanctum of the guild. Rayna was banking on the fact that she was significantly smaller than the average man and so far, she'd managed to survive.

Four stories up, she had quite a view of the city over the high walls that surrounded the guild compound. It was tempting to take time out to glance about the place, but she reminded herself that she needed to avoid detection at all costs, not because she wasn't allowed in the Thieves Guild, as an apprentice she certainly was, but because getting caught in the middle of yet another stunt would result in another unpleasant punishment.

Rayna was perhaps the most unfortunate of all the apprentices. She should have been a very good thief like her mother and her grandmother before her but it seemed to all that the fates had determined that she should take after her father quite heavily. Her father, suffice to say, had not been a thief. He had been a charming traveling musician who had engaged in a brief, ill advised tryst with Rayna's mother and continued on his way, neither knowing or caring about the baby girl who had entered the world nine months later.

Raised by her mother, Rayna had only ever wanted to be one thing – a thief. Her earliest memories were of clinging to her mother's skirts amidst a sea of good humored men and women

who were bedecked with the prettiest jewelry and gold. The life of a thief was a good one, Rayna thought, and the tales that her mother's colleagues told her in her early years only bolstered her romantic dreams.

There was only one obstacle to Rayna's joining the guild – her mother. When Rayna was seven or so, her mother had abruptly left the guild and refused to speak of why. She forbade her only child to follow in her footsteps and Rayna had found herself apprenticed to the local seamstress instead of the guild.

“Damn!” Rayna swore as the edge of the ledge crumbled under her boot. She moved her foot back smartly and pressed hard up against the wall, hoping that the ledge wouldn't collapse entirely or worse, that somebody below would notice the small rock fall and come and investigate. At this point it would be better to die than to be caught mid theft.

She wiped the sweat out her eyes with the back of her sleeve, cursing the dark color of her clothes. She knew she'd be standing out against the sandstone like a sore thumb in her black clothing, but it was traditional, and she liked to follow tradition sometimes.

Thieves almost always wore black. From the lowliest apprentice to the Master of Thieves himself, a man Rayna much admired, they kept a slick and neutral appearance. The exception to this rule, an exception Rayna was evidently ignorant of, was if they happened to be on a job, in which case they usually wore clothing appropriate to the occasion. Stealthy night jobs called for deep blue clothing that blended with the night shadows. A raid on a stately home might very well call for proportionally stately robes.

When one was robbed by the Thieves Guild, one was robbed professionally. One was left with the sense that although one had been relieved of one's possessions, there had been some honor in the exchange. A thief stole what you owned, but they did not leave an unseemly mess and they never did anything terribly socially awkward, like getting caught.

At the age of twenty, Rayna had secretly abandoned her dull career as a seamstress and joined the Thieves Guild. It was late in life to become an apprentice, but given her lineage there was no doubt in anyone's mind that she belonged there.

Rayna did not know at first how incredibly ill suited she was to the trade, but the fact soon emerged when her instructors began to teach her the arts of thieving. There were sneaking classes and purloining classes and fleeing drills and all of those skills needed to be mastered completely, but poor Rayna could barely manage to so much as pick the pocket of a straw dummy.

Her failure as a thief need not have been such a big deal. There were many positions needed in the guild and she could easily have spent her working life acting as a lookout or bringing the other thieves oranges at half thieving time. Unfortunately for Rayna, and the guild at large, she would not accept her own inability and insisted on practicing her skills unceasingly – usually on other members of the guild.

It was in these endeavors that she learned one of the not so secrets of the guild. If you want to enrage a thief, steal from him. If you want to enrage him doubly, do so badly. After a few failed attempts on her instructors, Rayna had decided that she was ready for the big time. After all, repeated failure could only ever end in success, right?

“This time,” Rayna promised herself.

She crouched on what remained of the ledge, clinging to the crumbling plaster with tense, strong fingers. The item she had in mind would surely prove to everyone that she deserved to be a proper member of the guild.

Peeking in the lattice that covered the window of her target, Rayna spied the prize. It was nothing really, just a bauble. Ordinarily it wouldn't have caught her eye. But less important than what it was, was who it belonged to. The shiny blue glass ornament was owned by Peta, the sister of the Master of Thieves himself and second in command.

Rayna didn't know Peta very well. She didn't know any of the thieves very well, let alone those in the upper echelons of power. She knew she was taking a risk, but that was all she could do now. There had been too many failures, too many mistakes. A grand triumph was necessary. To have stolen something from such a highly ranked member of the guild would be to have demonstrated one's skills undeniably. Like many who lack talent, Rayna was unable to discern the fact that she lacked talent and was convinced that if she only kept trying she would one day succeed.

Slipping a thin metal wedge out of her sleeve, Rayna began quietly levering the lattice away from the window. A thrill of nerves ran through her lower belly as she glanced down for a moment and saw the sheer drop below the ledge. Thieving was fun, she thought to herself recklessly.

Restraining a small giggle of glee, she popped the lattice out of its frame and propped it carefully up on the ledge. There was still glass in the frame beyond, but she had a plan for that. Using the same thin metal bar she began scraping away at the mortar between the wooden frame and the stone wall. The noise seemed very loud, but she didn't see anyone looking up at her.

Progress was slow and laborious and the sun beat down on her shoulders. Sweat dripped into her eyes and stung them unpleasantly but eventually the window loosened and Rayna was able to lower it carefully into the ledge along with its lattice.

Now entirely unimpeded by obstacles, she stretched out her cramped legs, felt them crumble beneath her due to being rendered entirely useless from having the blood cut off from them, and fell head first into the room.

“Took you long enough.”

A voice. A voice that should not have been there. Rayna shut her eyes. As if shutting her eyes

would help the fact that she was busted. Really busted.

“Who are you?”

The voice didn't seem all that angry, which reassured Rayna considerably. It seemed neutral if anything, as if having people fall through the window did not at all concern the owner of the voice.

“My name is Rayna,” she said timidly, opening her eyes a sliver. Her suspicions as to the owner of the voice were confirmed as she found herself looking at Peta, a dark haired, beautiful woman who instantly made her feel ashamed of her very existence.

She was wearing black, like Rayna, but Peta's short black dress matched with the long leather boots she wore made her look sensual and alluring. Rayna's dusty rags made her look like she'd been set out for the garbage man to collect.

“Rayna...” Peta sounded thoughtful. “You look familiar...”

Rayna had a fair idea of why that was. She looked like her mother enough that people who had known her occasionally did a double take. She wasn't about to inform the sister of the Master of Thieves however and bring further shame on her mother's name.

Peta snapped her fingers and pointed at her. “Aya's kid?”

“Yes Ma'am,” Rayna admitted.

“Wondered what had happened to you,” Peta said, poking Rayna with the toe of her boot. Rayna remained on the ground, hoping that staying down might earn her some measure of mercy. “You joined months ago I heard. There was some excitement.”

There was silence for a moment, a silence laden with significance. The guild had been excited to welcome Rayna. It was anticipated that her apprenticeship would be short, but as the days and weeks went on and Rayna continued to fail repeatedly, the excitement had waned and where she had once been treated with some deference by the instructors, she was now treated just like any other failing apprentice – harshly.

“I've been having some... trouble...” Rayna explained lamely.

“How is your mother?” Peta asked conversationally as she walked across the well furnished room.

“She is tolerably well,” Rayna replied politely. Her eyes widened as she saw Peta pick up what could only be described as a birch rod and turn back to her.

“She's a good woman,” Peta noted, “the best, actually,” she said as an afterthought.

“Yes,” Rayna agreed, feeling shame seep into her very core. The look of admiration that people always got when they spoke about Aya was in Peta's eyes. It made her own failure all the more terrible.

“It's obvious she didn't teach you a damn thing,” Peta added somewhat sharply, turning a fierce brown gaze on Rayna. “You made more noise than a dog in bins.”

“She didn't want me to be a thief,” Rayna shrugged.

Peta cocked her head to the side. “She must have changed her mind, as you're here.”

Rayna made a non-committal noise.

“Hm,” Peta mused, stretching a hand out to Rayna. Rayna took it and was pulled to her feet. Standing, she now realized that though Peta certainly seemed larger than life, she was not all that much taller than her. Her swept back and pinned up hair added a few additional inches though, creating the illusion of size. Rayna knew that she must be at least ten years her senior, but there were not many signs of age on the woman's face, her skin was smooth and it looked beautifully soft. When she moved, Rayna caught the hint of a vanilla scent.

“I'm really sorry,” Rayna apologized, hearing her words ring lamely in her own ears.

“What for?”

“For uhm, breaking in...”

“No, I mean what were you here for?” Peta regarded her steadily with a stern gaze.

“For the blue bauble thing,” Rayna pointed to it.

Peta's expression changed from stern to confused. “Why on earth would you risk your neck for some colored glass?”

“Because I wanted to prove I could do it,” Rayna mumbled towards her feet. Having to explain herself was far worse than just being yelled at and beaten.

Peta walked to the window and looked out of it. When she turned around, she looked fiercely angry.

“You little fool! You almost killed yourself!”

She strode towards Rayna and took hold of her. Rayna knew why she was angry, she was angry because there would be hell to pay if Aya found out Rayna had got herself dead at the Thieves Guild. Aya had carved out a fearsome reputation in her time, and though the regard she was held in by the guild had far more to do with their respect for her than their fear of her, there was no doubt that they would not want to bring Aya's ire down upon their heads.

“Ow, lemme go!” Rayna tried her best to squirm out of Peta's grip, but the woman held her ear like a vice and twisting and wriggling only made it hurt more.

“I don't think so,” Peta said grimly, dragging the slightly smaller, much scrawnier figure over to a stool in the corner. The Thieves Guild took itself seriously, and it took its training seriously. Apprentices judged to be lacking in enthusiasm or skill were harshly punished, and if that didn't take, well, there was always the bottom of the river – at least, according to the stories passed around the halls.

Rayna didn't really believe that Peta would toss her into the river to drown, but as the strong woman yanked her pants down and bared her she rather wished that she would. Anything had to be better than yet another beating on her already lined hide.

“Damn kid. How much trouble have you been in?” Peta swore, frowning at Rayna's rear end as Rayna see-sawed back and forth over the stool. Lesser young ladies would have been mortified being bent over like that with their lady parts exposed, but Rayna was hardly one to be mortified, especially as she was more than accustomed to the position she found herself in. It seemed that barely a day went by that one instructor or another wasn't finding fault with her and dragging her off to be punished.

Craning her head over her shoulder and looking in a large gilt framed mirror hanging on the wall Rayna saw her own behind displayed and looking for all the world as if someone had been running small carts across it all morning. There were a few dark lines and between them, blotchy pink red marks.

Rayna shrugged. “They like to take out their frustrations on me, what can I say?”

Peta's eyes met hers. “Is that so. You're simply a poor victim of the system, are you?”

“Absolutely. I never had a chance. My mother didn't love me enough and my father never attended a single dance recital,” Rayna said in pitiful tones.

“Save it for a judge, kid,” Peta said, snorting back what might very well have been laughter. Rayna held her breath and hoped that she was being sufficiently charming. Charm was pretty much her only weapon. She was useless at climbing and swinging, and armed robbery was completely out of the question. She barely knew the pointy end of a dagger from the non pointy end and there wasn't a single instructor still willing to teach her after one of them almost lost his ear.

“But you are the judge, Ma'am, you are the judge, jury and executioner,” Rayna said with wide, earnest eyes.

Peta's eyes remained locked on her bottom for a long moment and Rayna felt herself begin to squirm with embarrassment. There was getting beaten and then there was just hanging about the place half clothed in front of powerful people.

“When did this happen?” Peta asked eventually.

“Uhm, some this morning,” Rayna tried to remember as best she could. “And some yesterday evening.. and some yesterday morning.. and I think maybe the day before that...”

Peta held up her hand to stop her. “I see,” she said.

Rayna held her breath. Maybe the fact that she was so marked would save her. Maybe Peta would take pity on her. Maybe she was a really nice woman after all.

“OWW!” A sudden cut of the rod across the spot where her bottom and thighs met dissuaded her of that notion.

“You're an utter wretch,” Peta lectured her. The anger was back in her voice, and this time Rayna really didn't know why.

“Yes Ma'am, I'm sorry Ma'am,” Rayna agreed. There was no point arguing. Peta was probably right anyway. She was a wretch.

“Oh for the gods' sake, you're too pathetic to beat,” Peta put down the rod and yanked Rayna up to a standing position by the back of her shirt.

Feeling entirely confused, Rayna rubbed her backside and waited to see what might happen next.

“You look so much like her,” Peta said, her hands on her hips as she glowered at Rayna.

“Yes Ma'am,” Rayna agreed neutrally.

“Perhaps that's where the similarities end,” Peta said harshly.

Forcing down her rising anger, Rayna nodded blankly. “Perhaps.”

“Pull your pants up and get back to your studies,” Peta said looking thoroughly disgusted. “Try to do your mother proud.”

“Yes Ma'am, thank you Ma'am.”

Hurriedly, Rayna pulled her pants up and scurried out of the room through the door that Peta opened for her. Her face was a perfect mask of contrite mortification and her rear end stung quite terribly, but there was joy in her heart as she began picking her way down the stairs towards the lower regions of the building.

Her hands were stuck firmly in the pockets of her ill fitting pants, pants that were so large they could have fit an extra person inside them and inside one pocket, with her fingers wrapped around it tightly was a thick volume detailing the history of the thieves guild and a ledger of all

their exploits. It was worth far more than its weight in gold. Rayna had swiped it and stuck it inside her pants when Peta was raging about her incompetence and staring out the window at the crumbled ledge.

It had been something of an impulse. Finding herself in the grip of another humiliating failure, Rayna had sought to redeem herself somehow. At first she had determined to take the bauble, but she was certain Peta would notice it missing. There were a great many other trinkets of value in the room, but the moment she laid eyes on the book, she knew that she had found something of real value.

“Not a thief, huh?” Rayna whispered to herself with a little giggle.

It was her first significant triumph and she allowed the thrill to run through her unabated. Let them think she was stupid and slow. Let them think she was foolhardy and untalented. She no longer wanted to show them that she belonged among them, she now knew she did.

As she hurried down the stairs, she heard the rumbles of deep manly voices and immediately scuttled to the edge of the stairs to allow a small party of men to pass. She saw as she glanced up from under her lowered lashes that these were the very highest ranking of the thieves. They were big and tall and they smelled of meat and incense.

Laughing uproariously at some joke, they barely noticed Rayna as they passed by, but Rayna noticed them. She took note of all three of them, the youngest was a strong looking man with long flowing hair he was obviously proud of. He had a handsome, hawk like face and his hands were covered in gold and silver rings. He looked like the sort of fellow who would be severely put off his game by a pimple or a bad hair day. The next member of the party was lined with his age. He wore long robes in the old style and though he spoke softly the others listened to him intently.

The third member of the party was by far the most interesting however, for Rayna was certain that he was none other than the Master of Thieves himself. She had often seen him from afar, when he addressed the guild she hung on his every word and she read his writings over and over, even when they were little more than holiday memoranda, but this was the first time she had ever been this close to him.

Rayna found herself holding her breath as he passed by, not seeing her at all. She was insignificant in comparison to his magnificence. He was dressed in a black shirt open to the waist that revealed a bronzed, muscular torso and tight black pants that further showed his powerful physique. His light brown eyes, eyes so light that they were almost golden almost made her gasp aloud in admiration. Unlike many of the thieves who wore finery to denote their prowess, the Master did not wear any jewelry aside from a thick gold chain around his neck. He did not smile, but his high cheekbones gave him an expression of good humor.

Rayna felt a thrill of excitement as he strode by her so close that she could reach out and touch him. For a moment she thought his gaze fell on her, but he moved on so quickly she could not be sure. Lowering her head, she doubled her pace down the stairs and made her way quickly out

of the guild to her little apartment.

Chapter Two

"You don't visit me anymore," Aya pointed out with the wounded dignity innate to all mothers of adult children.

Rayna sat stiffly on a small, overstuffed chair with a cup of tea in one hand and a plate with biscuits on it in the other. Her mother was aging now, she had developed a stoop that made her look much shorter than she was and she had a matronly paunch that made her rather barrel shaped. It was hard to believe that this gray haired old woman who now pottered about amidst her plants all day was once the most feared thief in the city.

"I have been busy," Rayna explained.

"Too busy for your old mother," Aya replied testily.

"But I'm here now, and I have news." Rayna couldn't explain why she was so nervous. Her mother was elderly now and she certainly no longer held the sway she once did. Still, she didn't want to upset her. She desperately wanted her approval.

"Oh yes?"

"You might not like this, but it is what I want." Rayna dodged around the issue, trying to think of the best way to give her mother the news.

Aya's wizened lips drew together in pursed disapproval. "Well, let's hear it."

"I think I am going to be accepted into the guild."

Aya was silent for a long time. When she did speak again, she sounded exceedingly frail. "I told you I did not wish that life for you, my child."

"But it is all I have ever wanted mother. I have been serving an apprenticeship... in secret."

"So you have lied to me." Aya's eyes glittered bitterly.

"I have to find my own way in the world, mother," Rayna implored. "I want you to be happy for me."

"The guild is not what it once was. It is not what it was under your grandmother," Aya replied. "They let anyone in these days."

"Not anyone, mother, they barely let me in," Rayna said.

"I bet. They've probably forgotten who we are," Aya said, immediately offended that the guild

she professed to loathe did not remember her.”

“Believe me mother, they have not forgotten. They all speak highly of you.”

“Hmph,” said Aya, slightly mollified, “Well I don't want you in it. That's no life for a lady.”

“It was a life for you,” Rayna pointed out.

“Yes, and what did it get me? A lonely old age, that's what it got me. I accumulated wealth and goods and lost them all and what do I have now?”

“You have me mother,” Rayna reminded her patiently.

“ A daughter who disobeys me! A daughter who does precisely what I tell her not to! What kind of a daughter is that? I am a most unfortunate creature!”

Theatrics aside, the harsh tone in her mother's voice wounded Rayna deeply. With a great effort in civility, she placed her cup down carefully and the little plate of biscuits too.

“I love you mother,” she said, drawing the stiffly resistant old lady into a hug.

“May the gods watch over you, foolish girl.”

The guild was in an uproar. Rayna sensed it before she arrived early the next morning. There was far more activity than usual and though nobody paid her any mind or bothered to speak to her at first, it was easy to know what had gone wrong. The whispers were all around and they all held one message.

The book had been stolen. The book!

Rayna's stomach clenched when she first heard the news. Surely Peta must know it was her who had taken it? She had, after all, chiseled out the window to get into the room and been in there for quite some time before the tome went missing.

Was she truly such a pitiful person that the possibility that she'd taken the book not crossed Peta's mind for a moment? For a moment Rayna was almost offended, then she realized that her facade of incompetence had been incredibly effective.

As the hours went by and the mystery of the missing book was still not solved, the interrogations began. Everyone was questioned as to their whereabouts and those without solid alibis were then questioned by the Master himself. The process took all day and the business of the entire guild was brought to a stand still.

Rayna had plenty of time to think, both of the book she had purloined and of the meeting with

her mother. She had been angry, but Rayna could not allow her mother's anger to control her. Whatever beef she had with the guild was surely her own affair. All Rayna knew was that in her heart she had always been drawn here, here where men and women lived free by the merits of their own wits in a place viewed with morbid curiosity and outright fear by most of the population.

Officers of the guild worked their way through the thieves, determining whether or not their alibis were solid or whether they could perhaps have been responsible for the theft of the tome. Rayna almost escaped the questioning entirely but she was eventually called in as an afterthought when she couldn't verify where she'd been.

The questioning was being held in the Master's official chambers, which were a fairly grand affair with tall columns and a brushed stone floor and a big chair with a lion's head on the top that the Master sat in looking typically masterful. It was hard for Rayna not to have a certain cynicism about the whole affair now that she knew how easily these thieves could be tricked by an inept apprentice, but an audience with the Master was something she would not have passed up for all the world.

She went in demurely with her hands clasped in front of her and in spite of her adoration, stood as far away from the great man as she could. It was clear that he was not in a good mood and he cut a very intimidating figure scowling with his thick brows. She was pleased to note that Peta was not in attendance.

"I don't think we need bother with this one," the elderly adviser murmured to the Master. He spoke too softly for Rayna to hear him, but she could read his lips quite clearly.

The Master looked towards her and she met his golden gaze with one of blank perfection even as her heart pounded in her chest. She felt his eyes sear through her for a long moment, then glance back at his adviser.

"Aya's daughter," the elder prompted him.

"Do you know anything of this matter?" The Master barked the question at her. She found him much less attractive today. When he scowled and looked angry he struck her as little more than an overbearing brute like all the other overbearing brutes in the guild.

"I know so little about any matter," Rayna replied, playing dumb perfectly.

He stared at her keenly once more, as if he found something about her especially curious. "I've seen you before," he said eventually.

"My mother..." Rayna began to explain, but he waved her words away.

"No. I saw you yesterday. On the stairs."

Rayna's heart skipped a beat. He had noticed her after all. Was the jig up already?

“Yes,” she admitted.

“What were you doing there?”

“Peta sent me down them,” she answered truthfully, artfully deflecting the actual question.

“Why did she do that?”

“Because she was done beating me.” She answered the question directly, meeting the Master's eyes.

He snorted with laughter and the tension was broken. Apparently there was no need to discuss why Peta was beating her, Rayna's reputation for incompetent failure evidently went before her. She found herself staring at him as the good humor transformed his features entirely and made him incredibly attractive once more. The way the corners of his eyes crinkled with genuine warmth made her think that he must be quite kindly in private. It was a pity his role required him to spend so much time growling at people.

“Very well. Thank you Rayna. Give my regards to your mother.”

Just like that, Rayna was dismissed. She left the chambers solemnly, but inside she was dancing with pure glee. She had fooled them all. She had executed the perfect crime, thieving from thieves. For the first time since she had set foot inside the guild, she felt like she belonged. The others didn't realize it yet, that was all.

Now all she had to do was execute the second stage of her plot - returning the book. She had no desire to actually keep it after all, and if they never knew she'd taken it then they'd never appreciate what an excellent thief she was.

She rushed home, tittering to herself the whole way and retrieved the tome. She didn't have massive pockets in the pants she was wearing that day, but she found that the book fitted neatly down the back of the pants she was wearing and when covered with her tunic, was not at all visible to others.

Making her way back to the Guild with supreme nonchalance, she bathed in the atmosphere of panic. She had created this. She, who they said couldn't steal candy from a baby had stolen an irreplaceable treasure from them all.

Word was going around that there was to be a meeting. She wouldn't be invited to it most likely, which worked for her, because it gave her a chance to make a grand entrance for the book. She sat quietly in a corner and smiled to herself, wondering how best to rub her triumph in everyone's face. Perhaps she would throw open the doors of the meeting hall holding the book aloft. Would that be over the top? Maybe it would be better to calmly walk to the front of the hall and place the book in the Master's hands. Now that would be awesome, she thought to herself, grinning broadly. She hoped Peta would be there, the woman's words from the previous day still stung.

She'd see who the real wretch was when she realized how badly she'd been fooled.

After running several scenarios through her head, Rayna arrived at a decision. Her entire body tingled with excitement as she sneaked into the meeting hall and secreted herself in the small space under the wooden podium. When the meeting reached the height of its anxiety, she would pop out and surprise them all. That would be the best trick ever. Nobody would talk about Aya after this, they'd be too busy talking about her.

The space behind the podium was dark and cramped, but Rayna crammed herself into it with glee. Her resolve didn't falter once, not even when the minutes began to drag into hours and still nobody arrived for the meeting.

She was losing feeling in her feet when the doors to the hall were finally thrown open and thieves began to stream in. Rayna pricked up her ears at their mutters of discontent and anger. The book was more than just a record, it was their history, and very incriminating history at that. It could go very badly for the guild if the records of their misdeeds fell into the wrong hands, like the hands of the authorities.

She heard a few of the men growling about the fact that Peta had been entrusted with the book.

"Can't trust women to guard anything," one unseen thief said.

"But they'll take yer for all they're worth," rejoined another with a guffaw.

In the darkness of the podium, covered by the golden cloth that laid decoratively over it, Rayna rolled her eyes at the men and wondered how her mother had ever put up with the casual misogyny. Maybe that was why she now loathed the guild so much. It made Rayna feel decidedly stabby and she had barely been in the place twelve months.

For a time chatter ebbed and flowed around the room and Rayna found herself growing impatient. When on earth were they going to get on with it?

Finally a hush fell over the room and Rayna heard sure footsteps heading directly towards the podium. The Master had arrived. The floor bent slightly beneath her as he stepped on to the podium and she saw the shadow of his legs through the fabric. He was so close, close enough that she could reach out and touch him.

He began addressing the thieves, but Rayna was not listening to his voice as it rumbled deeply above her. A mischievous impulse had caught her and she lifted the bottom of the cloth slightly and reached for his boots.

What Rayna did next was not remotely wise. Indeed, if she'd taken a moment to think about it, she would have realized that what she was doing was undermining her grand entrance rather severely. She did not think about it though, the mental image of having hobbled the Master of Thieves in front of his guild was too strong.

With fingers nimble from years of sewing, she set to work deftly untying the laces of his boots. She frowned in concentration as she did so, doing her best not to tug on them and alert him to what she was doing.

Unfortunately Rayna had forgotten something. Specifically, she had forgotten that whilst her hands were stuck out from under the cloth, they could be seen. The Master must have looked down at some point in his address for before Rayna could even untie his boots all the way, she heard a bellow of surprise, the cloth was yanked away and she was dragged out from her hiding place by the scruff of her neck.

Blinking in the light, she found herself dangled before the assembled guild and a very unimpressed Master.

“What the devil!”

“Uh.. I...” Rayna stammered. It turned out that up close, the Master of Thieves was very intimidating indeed. His eyes bored into her and his lips set in a hard, thin line. He looked very angry indeed and thoroughly merciless. She could see now that the lines that had crinkled so kindly around his eyes were part of many other lines, and some light scars that traced across his olive skin. Held this close to the Master, she could see the story of a hard life tracing across the hard planes of his face.

“Rayna!”

It was Peta who spoke. She was standing near the podium and she came forward now, glaring intensely.

“What mischief are you making?” The question was almost growled at the unfortunate Rayna.

Beyond the siblings, there was a rumbling amongst the thieves. Some were laughing a little at the unexpected intrusion, others seemed almost as put out as Peta and the Master.

‘I.. well... I...’

“Enough! You have shown this guild disrespect,” the Master cut her off in mid sentence.

Squealing with surprise and outrage, Rayna found herself being expertly handled right over the podium. The Master's large hand pressed down on the back of her neck, making it impossible for her to wriggle away. She was going to be thrashed, she knew that. She didn't know whether to be relieved or mortified that she would be facing the guild rather than mooning them all when the Master's palm thundered down across her backside.

She tried not to look at the assembled thieves, there was outright lechery and satisfaction on many of the faces. Behind her the Master raised his hand and dealt a hard blow to her bottom. Instead of a loud slapping noise however, there was nothing but a dull thud as his strong hand

met her backside.

“What the devil?” The Master growled the epithet once more, hooking his fingers in her britches.

Rayna's face grew red. This was not the sort of reveal she had planned.

“By the gods!” The Master cursed as the book was revealed, held neatly against Rayna's derriere by her pants.

“It seems the mystery has been solved,” he announced, lifting the book aloft.

From her position across the podium, Rayna saw the reactions of the entire guild. For a moment there was nothing but stunned silence. Then someone chuckled. It was enough to set the entire room off. In a matter of seconds, everyone was caught up in gales of laughter. For some it was amusement at seeing the Master bested by a slip of a girl who was barely an apprentice, for others it was sheer relief at knowing that the book had never strayed outside the guild itself.

“You and I need to talk, little girl,” the Master spoke softly into Rayna's ear as he lifted her off the podium and stood her up. She took the opportunity to raise her pants again and nodded quickly. She noted that there was one person in the room who was not laughing or even smiling – Peta. Peta was glaring at her with pure venom.

“The matter being closed, this meeting is adjourned!”

The Master dismissed the guild, but kept a hand on Rayna's shoulder in case she should think to go anywhere.

Rayna found herself lead out of the meeting hall and up the stairs she'd passed down the previous day, but this time instead of feeling herself very small and insignificant indeed, she was glowing with triumph. She'd made the impression she wanted to make and though she'd have preferred to have had her pants on at the moment when it became clear she wasn't a bad thief after all, things had gone fairly well in her estimation.

“So you deceived us all,” the Master spoke to her, snapping her out of her self congratulatory reverie.

“I guess,” Rayna tried not to smirk, but it was hard.

There was a smile in the Master's eyes as he opened the door to his private chambers and motioned for her to enter.

Rayna could hardly refrain from jumping from glee. Twenty four hours ago she was barely worth a second glance from this great man. Twenty four hours ago she was nothing but an embarrassment to the guild and a blot on her lineage. Now she was being given a private audience with the Master himself. The other apprentices would have lopped off their right legs for a chance like this.

The Master closed the door of his chambers and turned his full attention to Rayna. Under the intensity of his gaze, she felt the urge to giggle. He really was incredibly handsome, those high cheekbones, those amazing eyes, eyes that made you feel as if he were looking deep inside you, as if all your secrets were revealed to him.

His body wasn't bad either. His shoulders were broad and she knew from the way that his dark shirt was unbuttoned that his chest was both muscular and smooth. The Master had something of a reputation as a rake and Rayna could see why women threw themselves at him. Even she was gazing at the thick dark curl of his hair and wondering what it would be like to run her fingers through it, to...

“Well, what shall we do with you, little girl?”

Rayna felt a flash of anger at his laconic drawl. “I'm not a little girl. I'm a woman,” she informed him tartly.

“Compared to me you are little,” he pointed out with smooth logic. His lips still curled into a smile and Rayna knew that although there was more than a hint of trouble in his words, he had been amused by her theft. “And you have gotten yourself into quite a lot of trouble.”

“Is that not the point of the guild?” Rayna asked artfully, ignoring the diminutive terms he was using to describe her for the moment.

His smile grew broader. “Perhaps so, but there is still an order to things and you, my dear, flouted that order. Peta will not be pleased.”

“If Peta is too blind to see when she is being robbed in front of her nose then Peta's displeasure would best be directed at herself,” Rayna said stiffly.

A muffled gasp of outrage outside the door confirmed her suspicions, Peta was listening. She had been twice shamed by Rayna's little stunt, once in having lost the book and again in having lost it to an apprentice notorious for her poor skills.

Rayna looked pointedly toward the door and was gratified when the Master opened it.

“Rafe, you cannot let her speak like that!” Peta entered the room complaining.

“Like that? You mean like the truth?” Rayna said snidely.

Peta shot her a look of pure violence and for a moment, Rayna wondered if she was getting out of her depth.

“You will regret that,” Peta promised.

“Ladies, ladies,” the Master said, opening his arms expansively. “Let us not bicker.”

"I'm not bickering," Rayna said, earning herself something of a sharp look.

"She deserves to be punished," Peta said.

"I have received nothing but punishment for failure since I arrived here. I will not be punished for my successes," Rayna replied eloquently.

"We cannot have apprentices going about clinging to ledges and swiping our things in order to prove themselves, can we?" The Master spoke fairly mildly, but a sudden anxiety gripped Rayna. She wasn't actually going to be punished was she? She drew herself up and spoke stiffly in her own defense.

"What others do is not my affair. My honor was impugned and I was forced to redeem myself. I arrived here later in life than most and was treated most harshly by instructors who expected too much of me too quickly. What was I to do? Crawl about under the lash like a slave? I will not submit to that again. I have proved myself the equal of any other thief and I will not be punished like a rude apprentice."

Her speech delivered, Rayna fell into what she hoped was a dignified silence.

"You do not determine your rank," Peta sneered at her.

"Who shall determine it then? You? You who I have already bested?" There was a slight touch of contempt in Rayna's tone as she spoke to Peta.

"I believe that is my role." The Master spoke softly, commanding attention not with the volume of his voice but with the weight of his words. "You, Rayna, are full of pride. Be careful."

"And you, Peta," he said turning to his sister. "Are being a sore loser."

Rayna was forced to hold back laughter again. Peta looked thoroughly crestfallen at her brother's censure.

"Rayna did not intend any malice in her prank it seems, she simply wanted to prove herself. Have you forgotten what it is to try to prove yourself?"

Peta mulled the question over for a time then admitted that perhaps it was not necessary to punish Rayna after all.

"Your mother will be pleased," she said, now trying to make amends. "I will send word to her."

"No!" Rayna spoke too quickly and too sharply, drawing quizzical looks from both Peta and the Master.

"Why not?" The Master inquired.

“She, uh...” Rayna tried to think of a good lie.

“She doesn't know you joined, does she?” Peta's voice was full of renewed glee.

“None of your business. Keep your nose out of my affairs or you'll regret it.” Rayna spoke aggressively, too aggressively, for she found herself brought up short by a hard slap to her rear from the Master himself. The hard jolt of pain shocked her right out of her arrogant frame of mind and cowed her instantly. Her bottom blazed with a quick fire and though she loathed to rub it in front of these people, the immediate stinging and prickling made her very uncomfortable. Worst still, the Master was now censuring her.

“Watch the way you speak to her. Prank, or no prank, she outranks you.”

“Sorry,” Rayna muttered, avoiding his gaze. She did not like being told off by him, not at all.

Peta did not reply, but she looked somewhat mollified.

“We will not intrude in your family affairs,” the Master went on to reassure Rayna. “But from this moment on, you are a member of this guild proper. That means you follow the rules of the guild and never, under any circumstances, steal from another member. It also means you respect the hierarchy and your place in it.”

Rayna stared at the floor, feeling lectured like a school girl. So much for getting more respect once she proved herself.

“Do you understand?”

“Yes Sir,” Rayna muttered petulantly.

“Now you sound like a little girl.”

Rayna looked up and saw that the humor was in his eyes. He was teasing her on purpose to stop her sulking.

She smiled a little and he reached out and squeezed her shoulder, sending an unintended frisson of excitement through her body.

“You need prove yourself no longer,” he said kindly.

“Thank you Master,” Rayna dipped into a demure curtsy, making him laugh out loud.

“Now that I like. I wonder if we can introduce that guild wide?”

“I'm not curtsying to you, brother,” Peta muttered with a half smile.

“But the men would look pretty practicing their curtsies,” Rayna pointed out to their amusement.

“Why don't you show us how pretty it would be, Rafe?” Peta laughed.

“Yes, why don't you show us,” Rayna joined in the teasing cheekily.

There was silence for a moment as the Master shot her a look and she wondered if she had gone too far. It was certainly not her place to tell the Master of Thieves to curtsy like a woman.

“Perhaps it is best that you two are at one another's throats. The chaos that would ensue should you join forces is unthinkable,” he said eventually.

Rayna breathed a sigh of relief. “No fear of that, Master,” she promised.

“Not now that Rayna will be working under me,” Peta said significantly.

“Under you? Is there something wrong with your undercarriage? Need your axles greased?” Rayna unleashed the full force of her cheek on Peta, much to the amusement of the Master, who threw back his head and roared in laughter at the jest.

“Never you mind my axles, young lady,” Peta said haughtily, shooting Rayna the sort of look that said she'd be sorry.

“I apologize Ma'am,” Rayna curtsied to Peta with an exaggerated curtsy that found her halfway to the floor before it ended. It did not seem to impress Peta very much at all.

“Why do I find your displays of deference so very unbelievable?” The Master asked, amusement twinkling in his eye.

“Because leadership has made you hard and cynical,” Rayna replied.

“Is that so?” He chuckled, shaking his head at her. “You are quite something, little girl.”

“If you call me little girl again...” Rayna began the threat, but the words caught in her throat as the Master's expression changed from humorous to stern. He did not so much as say a word to her, but Rayna was left in no doubt at all that if she finished the sentence she would regret it.

“You may go, Rayna, and count your blessings,” Peta dismissed her.

“Thank you Ma'am, Master,” Rayna bobbed into yet another curtsy and rushed out of the room before somebody grabbed her and beat her to within an inch of her life.

Chapter Three

Being a full member of the guild meant one thing – work, and lots of it. Rayna barely had time to celebrate her triumph before she was assigned to a group with a job. To her consternation, Peta really was the team leader, which meant doing as she said.

To Rayna's relief, Peta seemed to have put aside any animosity and when she was working, Rayna discovered that Peta operated with a cool demeanor that she rather admired. The other thieves clearly respected the Master's sister, which helped Rayna accept her authority with some grace. Petty personal issues inside the guild were one thing, but they certainly couldn't be allowed to bleed over into the real world, where a thief depended on his or her guild mates for life and freedom.

“Today we relieve the port of a shipment of spices,” Peta informed the team she'd assembled in the courtyard. There were ten thieves in all, and two large covered carts each drawn by two fine Arabian horses.

Peta ran over the plan in precise detail, the time they would arrive at the port, the time the port guard changed over, the deception that would be used to gain access to the shipping containers carrying the valuable spices. Spices were an excellent commodity for the thieves, not only were they of extremely high value having been shipped from the far reaches of the world, but they could also easily be repackaged and sold through commoners at the markets of Kelashin without any risk that their source would be traced.

Rayna found herself rather admiring the resourcefulness and acumen of the thieves. Stealing might be strictly wrong, but the amount of planning that went into an operation in order to ensure that those who were robbed were not aware of the fact they were being robbed until long after the fact was quite impressive. In this operation the thieves would pose as hired transport and make use of the spice company's own men to load the goods onto the carts. All they needed to do was to ensure that the owners of the business did not make an untimely appearance and spoil the plan. That was where Rayna came in as lookout.

Rayna was very pleased to finally be working as a full fledged member of the guild and she felt a definite thrill of pride when Peta gave her a small bundle of plain white robes to wear as lookout.

“Do good, kid,” she said with a wink.

“Yes Ma'am,” Rayna promised quickly. “I will.”

They moved out of the guild in dribs and drabs. A contingent of thieves with carts would undoubtedly draw attention and make their activities very easy to trace. So instead, one of the horses from each team was unhitched and ridden separately out of the guild first, then the carts were covered with dark skins and driven out of the guild with just one horse. The dark skins would later be removed and the second horses added to draw the spices. The rest of the team left

the guild by different entrances at different times so as not to draw attention. The guild was always under watch by the authorities so precautions were taken to assure that no evidence could ever be reliably be traced back to them. All in all it took several hours to move the entire team out of the high walled compound.

Peta and Rayna left last. Peta was dressed in a very pretty dress covered in shining sequins. She looked for all the world like a fine lady about to do some shopping in the markets. In her plain white robes, Rayna was dressed as her lady's maid and she followed her beautiful Mistress out of the gates of Kelashin.

It was a beautiful day in the city and Rayna almost skipped along, she was so happy and full of pride. There was just one blot on the otherwise brilliant horizon, a sense of love sickness for the charismatic Master of Thieves. The few minutes she had spent in his company had touched Rayna so deeply she couldn't get him out of her head. Oftentimes she found herself day dreaming, his smile floating in her imagination.

It was useless though, she had no further reason to cross paths with the Master. They moved in completely different circles, he in the higher echelons of power, she with the other lookouts and minor thieves.

She was puzzling on this problem when they stopped suddenly. They were standing beside a high retaining wall that looked out over the city, and most importantly, over the entire port of Kelashin.

“Wait on the wall for the first whistle, then proceed down and give the all – clear.” Peta gave the instruction quite crisply and Rayna nodded smartly and clambered up the wall. Peta then turned and began sauntering down towards the port and was soon nothing but a small figure in the distance.

Keeping watch was not difficult, but it was important. Even the best thief did not have eyes in the back of their head. A good lookout meant the difference between pulling off a heist and spending the rest of your life in jail.

Rayna did her best to pay attention, but her attention drifted almost immediately. People came and went below, nobody to be concerned about however, nobody in the employ of the law. Rayna's mind soon began to wander back to the Master, to how it felt when he'd laid his hands on her however briefly. A slow warmth spread through her lower belly as she gazed across the roof tops and the sparkling waters of the port.

A few hours later she was still humming to herself softly when she was grabbed by the back of her shirt and pulled forcibly off the wall. By the grace of the gods she avoided slamming her head into the rocky dirt when she landed rather heavily on the ground.

“What the hell?” Rayna sat up gingerly, dusting herself off and making sure nothing was permanently broken.

“Get back to the guild,” Peta growled. Her face was white with anger.

Looking into the furious face of her leader, Rayna realized why she was in trouble. She'd missed the whistle. She hadn't given the all clear. She'd fucked up completely. No wonder Peta looked mad enough to kill. To have missed her cue was unforgivable.

“I'm sorry, I don't know what happened,” Rayna stammered as she got to her feet.

“Get. Back,” Peta said angrily. She was no longer dressed in her fine robes, she was now in the simple black shirt and britches that marked a thief on the job.

“Yes Ma'am,” Rayna took to her heels immediately, cursing herself. Her mistake had been unforgivable. She had put the entire team at risk. Peta was going to kill her. She deserved to be killed. If they decided to dump her in the river she couldn't very well argue with that.

She ran the whole way back to the guild, images of her fellow thieves having been dragged off to jail and beheaded flashing through her mind. By the time she arrived back, tears were running down her face, she was so upset and worried.

She skidded through the front gates and came to an abrupt halt. The carts were there, fully loaded with spices. The entire port team was there too, looking smugly pleased with themselves. It looked almost as if they'd been waiting for her.

Wiping her eyes on the back of her sleeve, Rayna looked around in confusion.

“What...”

A hand descended on her shoulder from behind and Rayna turned around to see Peta standing behind her with an undeniable smirk on her face.

“There was no whistle, it was a joke, kid. To teach you to pay attention.”

Rage rose inside Rayna as the team laughed heartily at her expense. All her anxiety and sorrow and remorse was channeled into one thing – anger. As the red mist rose, she let out a cry of rage and punched Peta right in the stomach. The Master's sister bent double, gasping for breath.

A rumble of surprise went around the group. To lay hands on an officer of the guild was a serious offense. Rayna didn't have time to contemplate what a serious crime she'd committed though, because without missing so much as a beat, Peta straightened up and cuffed Rayna's ear hard.

Things became a bit of a blur then, somebody grabbed someone, someone tripped and before anyone knew what was happening, Peta and Rayna were on the ground doing their level best to beat the heck out of one another.

The thieves stood around entirely aghast. Scenes like this did not often unfold, certainly not

between female members of the guild anyway. Fighting was strictly forbidden for both genders.

Rayna was squealing in pain and doing her best to bite Peta's thigh when a large, strong hand descended on the back of her shirt and for the second time that day she was yanked up and away. Flailing about wildly, she found herself thrown over someone's shoulder and taken away from the fray. Peta was helped up by the thieves who had been watching the fight and Rayna saw with some measure of satisfaction that her make up was a hell of a mess, as was her hair. That would probably annoy her more than any physical damage. Peta hated to look bad, especially in front of her men.

Dangling over her rescuer's shoulder, at first Rayna was not sure whose back she was looking at. A stray blow had closed one of her eyes, ruining her depth perception and the taste of blood in her mouth had her far more concerned than the identity of who had pulled her away. It wasn't until they entered the main building and he began taking her up the stairs, taking them as lightly as if he wasn't weighed down at all that Rayna got an inkling.

"Excuse me," she bumbled, tapping on the man's back.

"Yes, little girl?" The familiar rumble replied.

"Oh dear," Rayna said, watching as a spot of blood from her nose landed on the Master's nice linen shirt. Lucky it was black, she thought.

"Oh dear indeed," he said dryly.

He said nothing more and they repaired to the infirmary, where the Master turned her over to the medic's care then stood watching with a difficult expression on his face as a nurse fussed over Rayna and cleaned her up. Most of the injuries were superficial, Peta evidently hadn't tried to do any serious damage.

"She'll have bruises, but she's fine," the doctor said once he'd examined her.

"Good newbs!" Rayna said through her fat lip, grinning rakishly. She was feeling quite a lot better now. Hitting Peta had felt bloody wonderful. It was worth the bruises she'd sustained to have done it, she reckoned.

"Good newbs indeed," the Master said grimly.

Rayna wondered if he planned to simply stand about repeating what she said and tacking an 'indeed' on to the end of it all day.

"You," he said, taking the initiative and saying something of his own accord. "Are trouble, young lady."

Rayna grinned a bloody grin. "I know," she replied thoroughly unrepentantly. The adrenaline was still rushing through her veins, making her stupid and reckless.

The Master folded his arms over his chest and glared down at her. She didn't like it when he glared, he looked scary when he was angry. His entire face transformed from benevolence to something far darker and wild.

She found herself recoiling with a little squeak. "I'm sorry," she apologized quickly.

"You will be," he promised her harshly.

Rayna's lower lip trembled as tears threatened to spill out of her eyes. As quickly as the sense of triumph had swept over her, it was replaced with a sense of fear and sadness. She didn't want the Master looking at her that way. His displeasure alone hurt more than anything Peta had done to her in the course of their scuffle.

"I will be goob," Rayna promised earnestly.

She saw him fighting to maintain his angry expression and was relieved. He didn't totally hate her after all.

"You will. Steps will be taken to ensure that," he promised her. She didn't know what he meant, though it seemed inevitable that another beating was in her future. She didn't really care about that anymore, she'd been thrashed so many times before that another rod across her behind wasn't going to make any difference at all.

"Come," he motioned to her.

She followed him to his chambers, where Peta was waiting. To Rayna's ire, Peta had cleaned up quite nicely. She hadn't suffered any real damage at all, mostly because Rayna hadn't really wanted to hurt her, she told herself.

As Rayna looked at Peta, she came to something of a chilling revelation. Peta hadn't intended to do her any real damage either. The split lip, the black eye, the bloody nose, they were nothing. If she'd wanted to hurt Rayna she could have done so quite easily. There were stories, dark stories about jobs gone wrong and Peta had been at the center of many of them. It wasn't possible to say for sure that Peta had killed a man, but there wasn't a thief in the guild who would dare cross her.

"It would seem, my fair ladies, that we have a problem," the Master said smoothly.

Rayna admired his calm demeanor. She knew he must have been frustrated, it did not do him any good to be seen sorting out what would certainly be regarded as women's squabbles.

"We do not have a problem, Rafe. We have a junior who does not pay attention, who does not respect the authority of her leaders and who has broken the code of the guild," Peta said coldly.

"A lack of discipline?" The Master posed the question to his sister. Rayna stood silently as they talked about her like she was not there.

“I do not think so. She has been disciplined more times than anyone can count. It is a wonder she can sit at all,” Peta said. “It is simply in her nature, I believe.”

A hollow feeling was growing inside Rayna as she listened. There could only be one outcome from a discussion like this – expulsion.

The Master cast a glance in Rayna's direction briefly, then turned his attention to Peta as she continued speaking.

“If it were not for her lineage she would never have been accepted at all. How much longer can she be allowed to cause chaos in the name of her fore bearers?”

A flush of hot embarrassment crept up Rayna's cheeks. The words were true.

“Rayna, would you wait outside for a moment please?”

The Master spoke gently and Rayna nodded, hiding her face so that he would not see the tears that were brimming in her eyes. She stepped out of the Master's chambers and stood in the hall, bruised and still bloody from her encounter with Peta.

Peta was right, she thought. She didn't belong here. She was not one of them after all. They only tolerated her out of respect for their memories of her mother. With her head hung low, she began walking down the stairs. She would leave voluntarily rather than suffer the shame of expulsion.

“What the hell are you doing, girl?”

Rayna stopped halfway down the stairs and saw that the Master was standing at the head of them looking utterly furious.

“I was leaving... because what Peta said is true,” she sniffed.

The Master let out a long sigh. “I am beginning to think so. It is certain that you do not listen, do not do as you are told and take matters in to your own hands in direct disobedience.”

“I was trying to save you the trouble...”

“You were told to wait outside. You were not told to expel yourself from the guild, were you? What gives you the idea that you have the right to make such decisions?”

He was coming down the stairs towards her now and she shied away from him, expecting a beating. He looked angry again, very angry and he was speaking very harshly indeed. She was surprised when he took her hand in his and lead her back up to his chambers.

“You need to learn to listen and do as you are told,” he lectured her as he ushered her back into the room, where Peta looked for all the world like a cat that had been wallowing in cream.

Whatever the Master had said to her, it had cheered her up considerably.

“Rayna you will obey Peta and make amends as she sees fit,” he ordered, nudging Rayna towards his sister.

“Yes Master,” Rayna agreed humbly.

“Peta, don't let me have another of these matters to settle again,” he warned his sister darkly before turning on his heel and striding out of the room, apparently thoroughly disgusted with the whole affair.

Left to Peta's tender mercies, Rayna focused her attentions floor-wards. She was thoroughly embarrassed and humiliated. Her first day on the job could not have been worse if it had ended with her head being lopped off.

“Well that was interesting,” Peta said with surprising good humor. “You're lucky he likes you.”

Rayna looked up in surprise and Peta laughed.

“As if you haven't noticed.”

Rayna shook her head. Peta was probably messing with her again. She seemed to take delight in taunting Rayna and winding her up, probably in revenge for the whole book fiasco.

At that moment the door opened and the Master put his head around it. “Rayna. Dinner. Tonight.”

The door closed and he was gone again.

Peta laughed aloud at Rayna's stunned expression. “You two are idiots.”

Silence fell for a moment, then Rayna found it within herself to apologize. “I'm sorry I hit you, it was totally unacceptable,” she said humbly.

“Yes, it was,” Peta agreed.

Another long moment of silence, then Rayna felt Peta's fingers take her by the chin and her head was raised so that she was forced to look Peta in the eye.

“You've got balls, kid,” she said with a half smile. “Don't lose them.”

Rayna was confused. Did Peta actually like her? Did she hate her? It was almost impossible to tell. One moment she was saying nice things, the next she was busting her lip open.

“I don't understand you,” she admitted.

Peta smiled and patted her cheek lightly. "You don't need to understand me. You just need to be a good girl and make my brother happy."

"What? There's nothing between us, we've barely even spoken," Rayna pointed out.

Peta shook her head. "There is plenty between you. Even a blind beggar would see it."

Rayna tried to hold back a smile at the news but failed miserably.

"When you're my little sister in law you'll have to watch yourself," Peta teased her. "And remember. I'm still not done with you for this little incident. Once Rafe's finished with you, it will be my turn."

Rayna simply blushed and giggled, shaking her head. She didn't even hear Peta's threat, she was too caught up in the idea of marriage. Such an eventuality was surely too wonderful to think about.

Chapter Four

When Peta released her, Rayna ran home before dinner to prepare herself. She thanked her lucky stars that her mother had the foresight to apprentice her to a seamstress. Thanks to her, she had several dresses perfect for dinner with the Master of Thieves. She'd never had much excuse to wear one of the pretty evening dresses before, but now she spent over an hour pouring through her wardrobe and choosing the best dress for the night ahead.

Finally she decided on a black silk satin dress with a ruched panel at her waist that defined her slim figure and fell slightly below her knees. The top of the dress had a slightly low square neckline that hinted at her cleavage, but did not display all her charms. The only problem, she thought, were the short cap sleeves. Did they make her look too young?

She frowned in the mirror as she untied her ponytail and brushed her shoulder length hair out before putting some perfume in it. It fell in a nice glossy curtain around her shoulders. With her hair down she definitely looked more feminine, she thought to herself as she applied a little rouge to her cheeks.

It was unfortunate that her face was a mass of bruises, but that couldn't be helped. Foundation helped minimize the worse of the bruising, but she wouldn't have won any beauty contests.

Her nerves grew increasingly as dinner time drew nearer. She arrived at the guild as late as possible so as not to have to hang around and wait for too long. If her appearance in the mirror hadn't been enough to assure her that she looked good, the response she got from her fellow guild mates would have been more than enough. Her appearance drew definite attention from the guards posted at the main entrance and then from the men practicing in the open courtyard. A wolf whistle made her blush as she hurried into the building, half wishing she'd just worn her usual plain clothing.

"Well look at you," Peta greeted Rayna as she hung around in the foyer wondering whether to go up the stairs or not. "You clean up pretty nice, kid."

"Thank you," Rayna replied, feeling silly and nervous.

"Go on up, I'm sure he'll be ready for you," Peta encouraged her.

Rayna went up the stairs with more trepidation than if she were going to a beating. She would never have dared to imagine that the Master would be interested in her, he seemed so above everything. She hesitated to knock on his door, as if knocking on the door would wake her up from this lovely dream she was having. Reaching out her knuckles, she tapped gently, barely making a noise.

"Oh for gods sake," Peta snapped from behind her, making her jump. She had not noticed that she was being followed. She had been too full of her own thoughts, and Peta was a master thief,

capable of following someone around all day without them noticing her.

Peta reached around her and rapped on the door. "Rafe, your date is here!"

Rayna thought she would faint when the door opened and the Master smiled down at her. He was dressed in his usual attire, though she saw from the crisp creases in his pants that he must have dressed freshly for their date. She saw his eyes widen slightly as he looked at her.

"You look wonderful," he said sincerely.

"Thank you," Rayna blushed.

"Do come in," he gestured for her to enter. "You stay out, little sister," he cautioned Peta before shutting the door. Rayna heard the brief cackle of Peta's laugh as she drifted back down the stairs and left the couple in peace.

"She sure is something," Rayna said tactfully, glad that Peta had given them something to talk about.

"Yes she is," the Master agreed. "As are you."

Rayna blushed once more, feeling her ears tingle with heat. She was glad that she had stopped to put foundation on, it was the only thing from stopping her lighting up the room like a red light house.

"Thank you for inviting me," she said lamely.

"Not at all, it is my pleasure," he replied smoothly, taking her hand and pressing his lips to the back of it.

Rayna's heart caught in her throat. He liked her! He really liked her.

"I thought we might eat in, does that suit you?"

"Of course," Rayna replied. She would have eaten anywhere with him. She was locked in a state of doe eyed adulation that made every moment with him seem utterly magical. She didn't understand why he was interested in her though, surely she was everything he disliked, someone who was a bad thief, who broke the rules of the guild.

"You look troubled," he said, keeping hold of her hand as he drew her down to sit next to him on a love seat. Having his hard, muscular body so close to her made her head swim.

"I am not troubled," she shook her head. "I am confused."

"What confuses you?"

“My presence here,” Rayna said honestly.

“You intrigue me,” he answered her unspoken question. “There are not many female thieves in the guild and those that are depend largely on blatant use of their feminine charms. Not you though Rayna, you're of the old school.”

He was looking at her with approval, approval that made Rayna glow.

“I'm actually pretty new,” she pointed out.

“I mean your style is old school,” he smiled at her literal interpretation of his words. “You do things that the others wouldn't think about doing, things that wouldn't so much as cross their minds.”

“Like stealing the book?” Rayna looked at him underneath her eyelashes.

“Like stealing the book,” he agreed wryly. “You've got spirit Rayna, that's something to be treasured. It's dying out.”

She frowned as she thought about that. Was he right?

“My spirit gets me into trouble,” she pointed out.

“Perhaps I like trouble.”

He spoke the words in a low, desirous rumble that sent her stomach spinning with excitement.

“Look at you, pretty in your little dress but still covered in scraped and bruises,” he said with low amusement, tracing the line of her jaw gently with his fingertips.

He bent his head towards her and took her lips in an unexpected kiss. She had wondered for a long time what it would be like to be kissed by the Master, what it would be like to be taken in his arms and as his strong hand slid down over her back and drew her closer to him and her lips parted to allow him to enter her mouth, her curiosity was sated.

His passion overwhelmed her as he pulled her tightly against his body, plundering her mouth with his tongue whilst his hands ran over her body, feeling every inch, every curve. She quickly discovered that he was as masterful in his private affairs as he was in his public life. He had her entirely locked down, bent to his will as his lips played over hers, taking her, teasing her, leaving her with no question as to who was in charge. When he finally released her from the kiss, she lay breathless in his arms.

“I've wanted to do that for quite some time,” he said with the air of a man who has achieved a goal he set for himself.

“Is that so?” Rayna said with an arch of her brow.

“Oh yes,” he assured her.

“Do you always simply take what you want?” She smiled as she looked at him under her eyelashes.

“Usually,” he said with outright arrogance. “I am after all, a thief.”

She studied his face for a long moment. “And what do you do once you get it?”

He smiled slightly in acknowledgment of her shrewd question.

“I treasure it, my dear,” he purred, nuzzling her ear.

“I could get used to being treasured,” Rayna mused aloud.

“You should be treasured, you are a rare beauty, one who is as beautiful on the outside as she is brave on the inside.”

His compliments made her giggle with glee. At last she was understood for what she truly was. At last her independence was being valued rather than decried.

“So sweet when you smile,” he said stroking her cheek. “Come, let us eat.”

What followed was the most wonderful meal of Rayna's life. The food was exquisite and the bubbly wine served to make her quite light of spirit. They chatted quite amiably together, sharing various tales from their lives and pondering the current political climate. It was a most stimulating conversation and Rayna was pleased to learn that he was much more than a handsome face and a strong body, he was a keenly intelligent leader.

At the end of the meal the Master laid down his fork and declared it was time to 'attend to their business'.

“What business?” Rayna asked, thoroughly confused.

“The business of teaching you a lesson, my dear,” the Master said, standing and extending his hand to her in gentlemanly fashion.

Rayna kept her hands firmly in her lap, suddenly wondering what she'd gotten herself into.

“What do you mean?” She was suspicious in the extreme.

“Well,” he said, rolling up the sleeves of his black shirt and exposing his strong forearms. “I mean that today you attacked my second in command. That is a wrong that has yet to be righted.”

“But.. you.. but... dinner...” Rayna stammered.

“Come along,” he said, reaching over and taking her hand. She found herself being guided up from the table and back over to the love seat. This time, instead of sitting next to him, she was pulled directly over his lap into a position that she found both horribly childish and unbearably intimate.

“What are you doing?” She craned her head around to look at him.

He smiled at her. “I am teaching you the lesson you need to learn, little girl.” His palm came down over her bottom with a light stinging slap then laid there, covering her cheeks with its warmth.

“But you said we were having dinner,” she complained.

“And we have had dinner, have we not?” He seemed amused by her and Rayna was left not at all sure what to do with herself. She had been thrashed many times before, but always over a stool or wooden horse by instructors and always when they were angry with her.

Being taken over the Master's lap was an entirely new experience. She could feel his powerful thighs supporting her slender frame and his body heat was a comforting warmth against her stomach and side. Even the hand on her backside carried with it an undeniable intimacy.

“As you well know, I am quite taken with you my dear Rayna, but I will not tolerate misbehavior in my house.”

He was lecturing her, but strangely she felt no hot flushes of anger or guilt. The weight of his hand on her bottom was doing strange things to her loins and she found herself actually arching her hips towards it.

He chuckled, noting her movement. “Oh Rayna, you are a natural.”

“A natural what?”

“A natural miscreant,” he replied, slapping her bottom with a sharp slap that made her yelp.

Those were the last words he said for a time as he set to warming her backside over her dress. The thin silk satin did not offer a great deal of protection, especially as she had eschewed underwear in an effort to avoid the appearance of lines under her clothing.

The pain was not terrible and though she yelped and squirmed about, if pressed Rayna would have soon admitted that she was enjoying the experience a great deal more than she probably should. The warmth seeped through her bottom to her loins and made every slap send a jolt of pleasure through her lower belly.

She tried to hide her arousal, but there was no hiding anything from the Master. Even before he

slid the scrap of her dress up over her round cheeks he seemed to know what she was feeling. Once or twice his hand dipped between her thighs and slid up them, stopping just short of her soft lips.

Letting out a groan of pleasure denied, Rayna writhed over his lap.

“Such a naughty girl,” the Master growled in low tones.

“I believe I am atoning for my sins,” Rayna reminded him.

“Oh you will never atone for your sins, you are a natural born sinner,” he purred, slowing baring her bottom to his gaze and pressing her thighs apart with his hot palm. For a moment his eyes feasted on the slick evidence of her arousal and she was left dangling there, entirely consumed by her own lust. If this was what the Master considered punishment, she could barely imagine what he would do in the name of pleasure.

She was thinking smug thoughts along those lines when the Master's hand suddenly came down harder than it had before, branding a hot print into the tender skin of her behind. She cried out in pain and tried instinctively to buck off his lap, but he secured her with one arm around her waist as he began spanking her harder and faster than she'd ever been spanked before.

In the waves of pain, Rayna's arousal disappeared immediately. There was no room for arousal, or even for anger. There was only the hard slapping that filled her body and her mind as the Master spanked her bottom to a dark red state with his bare hand.

Gasping for breath and yowling in pain, Rayna thrashed around helplessly. There was no way she could keep still and he didn't require it of her the way some of the instructors did. He was more than capable of holding her in place whilst he dispensed his own brand of justice and Rayna was left with no choice but to accept the penalty he had decided for her.

When more slaps than she could count had landed and she was almost hoarse from her protestations of pain, the hard spanking stopped as quickly as it had started, leaving her crying tears of pain and outrage. He held her as she cried, rubbing her sore bottom gently, an action that gave some small measure of relief but which could not hope to erase the past few minutes of pain she'd endured at his hands.

“There, all done,” he murmured softly.

She did not reply, she was far too choked up to do so and she wouldn't have known what to reply anyway. Earlier that day she had felt ashamed enough to leave the guild of her own accord. Now she was so sore she almost wish she had. Shock was setting in as she realized what he had done. He had lured her in and softened her up and just when she'd least expected it, he'd unleashed the full force of his power on her behind.

“You bastard,” she muttered through her tears.

“Excuse me?”

He sat her up on his lap, making sure the weight was mostly on her thighs, not on her very sore bottom. She saw that his thick dark brows were drawn together in a frown and realized that if she didn't watch herself, the punishment might not be over after all.

“You tricked me,” she whimpered pitifully.

“I did nothing of the sort,” he disagreed, drying her tears with the corner of his handkerchief.

“I thought we were having dinner.”

“And we had dinner,” he pointed out logically.

“But only because you wanted to hit me.”

He chuckled. “If I want to hit you, I don't need to feed you first, silly girl.”

“You pretended to like me,” Rayna said, her voice cracking.

“I do like you, you little fool,” he said, drawing her closer and pressing his lips to her temple.

“Part of liking you is enforcing the rules. You need rules.”

He seemed so sure on that point that Rayna smiled in spite of herself. “You don't think there's any hypocrisy in a thief enforcing rules? All we do is break the law.”

“Not at all my dear,” he said, stroking her hair. “If rules can be enforced then they should be. We exist because society has laws that cannot be enforced. Our rules are natural laws, laws that can and will be enforced, even on your pretty hide.”

“Hmm,” Rayna said, thinking about that.

The Master held her as she thought and Rayna soon found herself leaning against him, feeling the strong shelter of his body holding her. She very much liked the way it felt to have his arms around her, even if it meant that her bottom also burned. The punishment was definitely a damn sight better than what Peta would have meted out if she'd managed to get her hands on her, Rayna was sure of that.

“Will Peta be appeased now?”

The Master gave her a look. “You think I spanked you to appease my sister?”

Rayna smiled a little. “Peta was not pleased. I think that if she did not think justice would be done, she would take it into her own hands.”

Tracing his thumb over her swollen lower lip, the Master shook his head. “I think she already

took matters into her own hands.”

“That is also true,” Rayna admitted, resting her head on his shoulder.

“Fortunately you're a tough little thing,” he said with his characteristic good humor.

“I am,” Rayna agreed.

There was a brief silence, pregnant with desire as he gazed down at her. “Rayna...I want you.”

“You have me,” she said, puzzled.

“I want all of you,” he said, sliding his hand down between her breasts, over her stomach to rest on her lower belly.

Enjoying his desire, Rayna squirmed against him. “And if I won't let you have all of me?”

“Then I'll take it,” he growled against her ear. “And I'll take out the fact that you made me take it on your ass.”

The threat only served to thrill Rayna. She giggled and nipped lightly at his nose. “I don't think you will. I think you're just a big softie.”

He arched a brow. “Clearly I didn't do a good job on that bottom of yours.”

“Oh you did!” She assured him before he could turn her over and add to the previous punishment.

With her pressed against his chest he relented and kissed her with long, gentle kisses filled with yearning. Outside the window, the moon was rising high in the night sky.

“I don't want this to end,” Rayna sighed.

“Who says it has to?”

She smiled a soft, sad smile. “All things end, Rafe.”

“Look at you taking liberties with my name,” he said, tapping her nose gently.

“I think the rule is that if someone sticks their tongue in your mouth you're allowed to use their first name,” Rayna informed him. “It's on page 49.”

“Is it now?”

“Oh yes. It's one of the more obscure rules, but its definitely there.”

“How interesting.”

Caught up in their respective yearnings, yet frustrated with the notion that they could not be fulfilled until they were joined as one in the eyes of the guild, they lay together, watching the full moon rise.

“I want you to be mine. Forever,” he whispered into her ear.

“And I you,” she confessed to the white blaze of the moon. “But I have already caused so much trouble. This place isn't part of me like it is you.”

He turned her in his arms and gazed down into her moonlit face earnestly. “You were born to it Rayna, whether you were here or not. Since I laid eyes on you on those stairs I haven't been able to get you out of my head.” His eyes blazed down at her passionately. “I want you, and I shall have you.”

The possessive note in his tone thrilled Rayna to her core. She had felt the same way, since the first moment she'd laid eyes on him she had wanted nothing more than to be in his arms.

“I must be mad,” she muttered.

“Why? For feeling what I feel? You were made for me Rayna.”

She looked into his eyes to see if he was merely feeding her a line, charming her again, but he met her gaze evenly and she saw that what he said was true.

“If you will not consent to be with me, I will have to kidnap you and hold you here,” he threatened silkily, tracing his fingertips lightly up and down the back of her neck in a way that made her shiver with pleasure.

“Very well, but there is one obstacle in all this. One I am not sure even you can overcome.” Rayna confessed.

“And what is that?”

“My mother.”

Chapter Five

“Rafe? That weedy little boy? Rayna, you can do better.”

“They don't call him Rafe now mother, they call him Master.”

“I remember him. Always dropping his lock picks,” Aya shook her head with her lips pursed.

“He doesn't drop his lock picks anymore, mother,” Rayna said patiently. She was rather pleased with the way the visit was going. Her mother appeared to have accepted the fact that she had joined the guild against her wishes. She was less than pleased with her daughter's choice of mate however.

“Does he still have that sister of his? Nasty little piece of work that one.”

“Yes, Peta is his second in command.”

Aya made a groaning sound. “It's a wonder you haven't all been arrested and hung with that lot in charge.”

“They're quite good actually mother, it's been 38 months since the last arrest.”

“So you're all sitting on your behinds not getting anything done, I'll warrant,” Aya snapped. “I tell you girl, in my day we knew how to get our thieving done.”

“Perhaps you should come back and show everybody how its done,” Rayna suggested.

“I'm not setting a foot in that place,” Aya refused.

“Why not? What happened?”

Aya's gaze was set on some point in the distant past. “I was disappointed,” she said direly.

“By what?”

“Don't you ask me by what, I don't need to explain myself to you!”

“I want your blessing, mother.”

Aya shook her head at her daughter. “You don't need my blessing child. You've always done as you've pleased.”

Rayna buried her head in her hands and wondered if there was any creature on earth more hard headed than an old thief.

Her mother was not the only determined yet slightly unbalanced woman Rayna had to contend with. Rafe's desire to make her part of his life had other issues associated with it, in particular, one rather difficult issue named Peta.

"I'm not finished with you, you know," Peta remarked conversationally one day, a good week after their fight had taken place.

"What do you mean?" Rayna wriggled in Peta's grip, for the woman had grabbed her by the back of the shirt and was holding her prisoner.

"I mean I am not finished with you. I told you I would deal with you after Rafe was done with you, didn't I?"

"Well yes, but I thought..."

"Yes, I know you thought," Peta's eyes glittered at Rayna. "You thought I might have forgotten."

"No, I thought that seeing as I'm shacking up with your brother you might not kill me," Rayna said bluntly.

Peta snorted. "I won't kill you, silly girl."
"

"Well thank the gods for that."

"I'll beat you until you can't sit for a month."

Rayna looked at her, entirely horrified. "But I was already beaten. Twice! First by you, then by your brother."

"I hardly laid a finger on you kid, you pretty much got away Scot-free," Peta disagreed.

"I couldn't see out of my eye properly for a week!"

"Your eye looks fine and it's not been a week yet, you little liar," Peta gave her a shake.

"What do you want, Peta?" Rayna asked, tired of the intimidation. Whatever was wrong with Peta, it wasn't any kind of fun to deal with. The woman clearly loved her brother, but she swung between being a fairly decent person with a functioning sense of humor and an outright madwoman hell bent on revenge for slights large and small. The tricky thing in dealing with her was that you never really knew which Peta you were dealing with at that moment. They both resided behind the beautiful face she'd been blessed with.

"I'll see you later tonight, after you've dined." Peta let her go without any further explanation.

"Your sister is going to kill me tonight." Rayna mentioned causally at dinner.

Rafe put down his fork and gave her a dour look. "What have you done now?"

"Nothing!" Rayna protested. "Why does it always have to be me having done something?"

"Because it usually is you having done something," Rafe pointed out.

"Well its not. It's Peta wanting her revenge for the other week. She's going to kill me."

"She's not going to kill you," he shook his head at her.

"She's insane I think. She's happy and then she's mad. Happy. Mad. Happy. Mad." Rayna waved her knife in front of her face, smiling on the upswing and frowning on the downswing.

"Did it ever occur to you that perhaps her happiness and madness might be related to how much grief she's getting from a future sister in law?" Rafe remarked dryly.

"I don't give her all that much grief," Rayna disputed.

"I beg to differ. You targeted her from the outset, made her look ridiculous when she lost the book, made her look ridiculous again when the book was found and then you made a mockery of her by hitting her in front of her men. Mark my words, little girl, if it were anyone else who'd done what you'd done, they'd be at the bottom of the river by now."

"Don't call me little girl," Rayna objected sulkily, ignoring his point in favor of petulance.

"You're behaving like one," he said sternly.

To disprove his point, Rayna flicked lentils from her place across the table at him.

"I see someone is going to go and see Peta with a very sore behind," Rafe said, standing up and coming around the table for her.

Squealing, Rayna jumped up and went in the opposite direction, keeping the table between her and her increasingly irate fiance. Rafe didn't appreciate it when she complained about Peta, and he certainly didn't appreciate it when she gave him attitude. He loved her, but he still regarded himself as Master, both in their professional lives and in their private lives.

"Rayna. Stand still," he commanded.

"And let you catch me? Are you insane?" She continued dashing around the table this way and

that avoiding him with nimble steps.

“RAYNA!” He bellowed at her, losing his temper.

“Don't yell at me,” she replied, not at all impressed with the volume of his voice.

With a growl, he made a dash around the table towards her and was almost quick enough to catch her. Almost. With a squeal of misbehaved delight, Rayna skipped away behind the loveseat, then zoomed back to the other side of the table before he could grab her.

Their little game went on like that for some time, and Rayna began to realize that there was a flaw in her plan. The longer she evaded him, the angrier he became, but also the more tired she became. It was quickly becoming a matter of stamina and though Rayna was nimble and fleet of foot, she was certainly no match for Rafe when it came to stamina.

Rafe saw her beginning to slow, but instead of grabbing her, he began to toy with her in much the same way a cat toys with a mouse.

“Getting tired are we, little girl?” He taunted, coming towards her at a walk.

Gasping for breath, Rayna tried to throw him off her path by hurling a cushion from the love seat at him and darting under the table.

“Leave me, you brute!” She squealed dramatically.

“Oh no, you've brought this on yourself,” he said with grim enjoyment as he laid hands on her ankles and dragged her out from under the table unceremoniously. If she hadn't spent the past several minutes running about like a mad thing, Rayna might have had the energy to wriggle out of his grasp, or at least attempt to. As it was, she could only gasp for breath over his lap.

“You disobedient little wretch,” he lectured, yanking down her pants and slapping her bottom hard in accompaniment to his words.

“Ow, its why you love me!” Rayna appealed to his emotions, but Rafe was having none of it. It didn't take much for Rayna to get too big for her britches and he was equal to the task of cutting her down to size with a good, sound thrashing.

“I certainly love you, but this misbehavior you seem to need to indulge in won't be tolerated, my dear,” he said slapping her upper thighs for good measure. They had not been subject to nearly as many thrashings as her bottom and were much more sensitive, a fact he capitalized on when he wanted her to really pay attention to him.

“Okay, okay, I'll be good,” she promised.

“No you won't,” he said, slapping her lower cheeks with hearty slaps that made them jiggle

pleasingly.

“Well I'll try!”

“We'll see, won't we,” he said, continuing to belabor her very deserving behind with hard smacks.

In between all the smacking and the yelling, it was hard to hear the knock at the door. One would have thought that the noise inside the room would have easily traveled outside the door or even to the entire guild, but the Master's chambers were exceptionally well made and barely any sound escaped them at all.

So it was that in the middle of being held over her future husband's knee and spanked like a wayward brat, the door to the chambers opened and Rayna found herself looking at a very unlikely figure indeed. Her mother. Peta was behind her, smirking wildly of course. If there was any misfortune to befall Rayna these days, Peta was usually behind it.

Rafe stopped beating her immediately and all four stared at one another.

“It would seem,” Rayna's mother said after uncomfortably lengthy consideration. “That things are not as badly run here as I had imagined. Carry on.”

She shut the door again and Rayna and Rafe looked at one another.

“It would seem I have your mother's blessing,” he winked down at her, slapping her bottom hard.

“No, Rafe, no!”

It was too late for pleas though, armed with her mother's explicit approval, Rafe set to tanning Rayna's hide with gusto. He did not let her off his lap until he was well satisfied that she would only take food off her plate to eat it for quite some time to come.

“What are you doing here, mother?” Rayna asked. She stood nonchalantly leaning against a wall whilst her mother took tea with Rafe and Peta. Everybody else was sitting, but that was only because everybody else could sit comfortably.

“I can come here as I please, this is still my guild,” Aya informed her. “Besides, Peta invited me.”

“Indeed it is, you are always welcome,” Rafe agreed.

“What a nice young man,” Aya commented, biting into a lovely thick piece of Turkish delight.

“Yes, he's absolutely bloody charming,” Rayna sulked.

“Rayna!” Three voices barked her name sharply.

“It was being raised without a father. She's always been completely wild you know,” Aya confided in Rafe and Peta.

“That's not true, mother!” Rayna was rather put out with how events had unfolded, but still secretly pleased that Aya had deigned to return to the guild, at least for tea.

“Oh yes it is. You've always run about doing as you please.” Aya shook her head and sighed a long suffering sigh.

“I believe you,” Peta said, sipping her tea. “She actually hit me the other day.”

“She hit you?” Aya's voice rose with surprise.

“You told my mother on me?” Rayna shook her head at Peta, who was smiling seraphically.

“Well its a wonder she's still in one piece,” Aya said sagely. “If I recall you were always rather talented in the martial arts, Peta.”

“I'm not done with her quite yet, but I intend to leave her in one piece.”

“But no marks, we want her to look nice for the wedding,” Rafe interjected.

“Agreed, no visible marks,” Peta agreed. “She'll be wearing a long dress though?”

Rayna got the distinct impression that she was being teased by the three of them and decided to take it with good grace. Her mother was here, speaking quite cordially with her future husband and if it made it easier for them to take shots at her in order to break the ice, then so be it. She would martyr herself in the name of social harmony.

“Shall I stay here, or would you like me to go and flay myself in preparation for your tender mercies, Peta?”

“Oh come and sit down, Rayna, I will attend to you later,” Peta smiled a sickly sweet smile.

“Yes, do come and sit Rayna, you're hovering like a fly,” Aya agreed.

So Rayna found herself sitting on a very sore behind and making small talk. If there was a hell, she was in it, she decided. It was almost a relief when it was determined that she should go with Peta and serve the rest of her penance.

“Come on kid, I haven't got all day to kill you,” Peta said when Rayna came down to the courtyard walking gingerly.

“That's your idea of a joke, is it?”

“It is,” Peta said, smiling. Rayna thought she was enjoying herself far too much.

“Okay so what do you want to do? Are you going to beat me? Spank me? Whip me?” Rayna stood, thoroughly defeated and awaiting her fate.

“We'll start with the whip, I think, and then see how I feel,” Peta said, uncoiling the long bull whip that hung at her side.

Rayna was not sure if she was truly serious and she never found out, for Peta looked over her shoulder and gave a scream of surprise. Turning to see what all the fuss was about, Rayna saw a tall, grizzled old man standing at the entrance of the Thieves Guild. She found herself squinting at him, he looked very familiar in some respects. The line of his jaw, the breadth of his shoulders. Could it be...

“Father!” Peta dropped the whip and ran towards the elderly figure with her arms outstretched.

Rayna watched as the old man gathered his daughter in his arms and hugged her for all he was worth. She felt a pang of jealousy, wondering what that might feel like. She had never felt her own father's arms around her.

“Him,” Aya almost hissed the words and though she was old, a venomous spark lit in her eye that transformed her into something far more vital, far more dangerous. Rayna did not know where her mother had appeared from, it seemed almost as if she'd risen out of the sand itself. Even at her advanced age, the woman still had a trick or two up her sleeve.

“Leo, you old snake,” Aya called, hobbling forwards.

The old man shaded his eyes and peered in her direction. “Aya, is it you? I thought you were forever gone from this place.”

“I have returned,” Aya said with a note of triumph in her voice.

“Just in time to watch her daughter get trounced,” Peta said snidely, earning herself angry looks from both Rayna and Aya.

The old man's eye fell on Rayna. “This must be your girl. She has her mother's looks, and that's a compliment,” he said quite courteously.

“Don't you go spouting with your silver tongue, Leo,” Aya lectured him, looking thoroughly pleased in spite of herself.

“I understand you're to marry my boy,” Leo addressed Rayna.

“Yes Sir,” Rayna said politely.

“What charming manners too. I wonder where she got them from? Certainly not you, Aya.”

With that the brief peace was gone and the bickering between Aya and Leo started anew. Rayna stood back and watched it happen. There was a good deal of good-natured ribbing going on, but there was something else too, a deeper undercurrent that she sensed, but did not understand.

“Father!” Rafe finally appeared from the innards of the guild and embraced his old man. “Come in, come in all!” He was beaming with pleasure.

“It seems you live for another day,” Peta told Rayna, ruffling her hair affectionately.

Thoroughly confused, Rayna didn't even bother trying to reconcile the hair ruffling with the threat of whipping. Peta clearly lived almost entirely in her own world and her actions probably made some form of sense there.

Leo had put his arm around Aya, much to Rayna's surprise and was leading her into the main building as if the place belonged to them. In a sense, it did. They were the old guard, the people who had worked their entire lives to ensure that the guild continued to thrive.

Rayna, Rafe and Peta followed them in, giving them space in which to have their conversations. Much had been taken from these old thieves, but much still abided. In the shade of the guild they enjoyed a brief respite from the rigors of old age as they relived the days of their youth.

“Actually, you can come with me now,” Peta tugged at Rayna's arm as they reached the top of the stairs and pulled her into her chambers.

“Didn't think you'd ever want me in here again,” Rayna said dimly, foolishly reminding Peta of the prank that had set this entire chain of events into motion.

Peta gave her a look of warning. “You won't take anything, will you, little sister?”

“No, I won't,” Rayna promised. “As long as you don't hit me. I've been hit enough for a life time.”

“If only that were true,” Peta said with mock woe in her tone.

“Seriously,” Rayna appealed to Peta's better nature. She wasn't entirely sure that she had one, but it was worth the long shot. “Please don't hit me again.”

“Oh I'm not going to hit you,” Peta shook her head at Rayna as if Rayna were panicking over nothing at all. “When have I ever really hit you anyway?”

“Well there was that one time...”

“The time you hit me first in front of my men? That was something of an exception. Come and

sit down.”

Peta was sitting on the end of her bed and patted the coverlet next to her. With no small measure of trepidation, Rayna sat gingerly next to her, thankful that the coverlet was filled with the softest down.

“It's time you knew your history, you're clearly wildly ignorant of it,” Peta said, picking up the tome that Peta had stolen all that time ago and placing it on her lap.

“I am not ignorant!”

“Yes you are. You don't know why you weren't raised here as you should have been and you don't know why I didn't simply hurl you back out the window the moment you fell through it.”

“Because of my mother probably,” Rayna rolled her eyes. “Everything is about mother.”

“Hush, and read,” Peta had opened the tome to a short passage and pointed to it. Dutifully, Rayna began to read.

'On this, the thirde day of the fourth monthe, Mistress Aya left the guilde. Master Leo has taken her place.'

Rayna shrugged. “Right, mother left. I knew that.”

Peta cuffed her lightly around the ear. “She didn't just leave, she was the leader and she was deposed by my father. She could not stand working under him and she declared that her daughter would never serve under our family.”

“Why?”

“Because Aya always was full of pride. Because she could never bring herself to submit to another.”

Rayna thought about that and decided it was probably true. She'd chosen seamstress as a profession for her daughter because it would allow her to be independent from men.

“Well she seems happy now. She didn't stop Rafe beating me.”

“Perhaps she has seen the error of her ways,” Peta said with some humor. “Like her wayward daughter who after being raised to be independent disobeyed her mother's one instruction and ran directly back to the bosom of the guild she left behind.”

“I am not an error!”

Peta smirked a little. “You don't remember us, do you?”

“What? I know who you are!”

“Yes, you know who we are, but you don't remember us from earlier days.”

Rayna shook her head, puzzled.

“We knew you well, little sister. You were always getting into trouble, even then.”

“Is that why you were mad at me when I broke in here?”

“I was angry because you were clumsy and inept. You would not have been if you were raised in the guild as you should have been. It was not your fault. If anyone deserved the thrashing it was that foolhardy mother of yours.”

The pieces began to fall into place. That was why Peta had not beat her within an inch of her life when she had come crashing through her window. That was why she had barely earned a single cut of the rod. Peta hadn't just seen some idiot apprentice on her floor, she'd seen the little brat that had been taken away when she was still young by a bitter, power hungry mother.

“Did Rafe know me too?”

Peta laughed at some secret memories. “You adored Rafe. He was grown by then, but you would follow at his feet and tug at his britches and demand that he show you what he was doing. You annoyed the hell out of him, but he missed you when you were gone. We all did.”

“Oh,” Rayna said, understanding at last the hollow feeling she'd felt growing up. She wasn't missing a father she'd never known, she had been missing the family she'd been taken away from. “Why the hell didn't anyone mention all this before?”

Peta shrugged. “Your connection with our family could not be allowed to stand in the way of your training. You were already so far behind, we thought it best to let you find your own way. We knew you a very long time ago, Rayna, at first we did not know if you were genuinely here to join us, or if you perhaps had some dark purpose.”

“Dark purpose,” Rayna laughed. “How do you know I still don't have some dark purpose?”

“Your mother is taking tea with father for the first time in years, unless your dark purpose is to once again to divide the guild between two old fools who can't agree on one lump of sugar or two, I'd say your purposes are murky at best,” Peta smiled, looking completely human for once.

Rayna now saw why she had behaved so apparently erratically. She'd been caught between the desire to welcome a long lost friend and the need to keep a hell raising apprentice in line. From the moment Rayna had crashed through her window Peta had been working behind the scenes, not only ensuring that Rayna stayed alive long enough to find love with the Master, but bringing the estranged Matriarch and Patriarch of the guild back together in time for the nuptials. Far from

being a madwoman, Peta was an extraordinary conspirator. Rayna was rather glad she wasn't actually on her wrong side, Peta would be a powerful adversary indeed if she chose to be.

“Thank you, Peta,” Rayna said.

“For what?”

“For not killing me. For being patient with me.”

“Yes, well. It hasn't been easy,” Peta said, leaning over and dropping a kiss on the top of Rayna's head. “I'm glad you're back.”

“So am I,” Rayna smiled, feeling her heart fill with satisfaction and love, not just the romantic love she had for her Master of Thieves, but the love she had for the family that had been created out of an old conflict, and for the guild that brought them all back together after all these years.

“So am I.”

The End

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