



LORR *and* DISORDER

ROBERTA ROGOW

“Basher,” I said, “I’m going to need some backup. Care to come along?”

“Where to?”

“Warehouses. Someone’s putting the arm on the Vikk-shop Franchisees, shaking them down and making them sell bad merch.”

Basher glowered at Teedo, who was calling for another round. “Anything to put a spike in *his* shoes.”

I was about to leave when I saw something that stopped me cold. Devon Delrey came in, and right behind him were the two hardbodies who’d been following me around all day.

I nodded towards them. “Know who they are?”

Basher gave them a onceover. “Seen them on the Waterfront. They’re off a ship from the south, one of Ishka Kunine’s, I think.”

“They were on my tail all day,” I said. “I led them straight to the Assassin’s Guild Hall.”

ALSO BY ROBERTA ROGOW



THE SAGA OF HALVAR THE HIRELING

Murders in Manatas

Mayhem in Manata

Mischief in Manatas

Menace in Manatas

Malice in Manatas

Madness in Manatas



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and

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**ROBERTA
ROGOW**

ZUMAYA OTHERWORLDS

2019

AUSTIN TX

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LORR AND DISORDER

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❧DEDICATION❧

*To John Betancourt and Carla Coupe,
who invited me to play in their sandbox,
and let me have it when they decided not to
use it themselves.*



A PRIVATE MATTER

“IT’S UNSANCTIONED, AND I WANT IT STOPPED!”

Master Assassin Fee M’Farr stated firmly. He pounded on my desk for emphasis.

“I don’t stop things,” I reminded him. “I’m an Independent Eye. I watch and observe. I ask questions and make conclusions and report. That’s what *I* do. What *you* do about it, that’s *your* business. According to the Posts I saw last week, Marla Lily was found dead at the foot of the stairs in the house owned by Trader Drina Vikk. City Guard declared it a tragic accident. End of story.”

I leaned back in my chair and observed Fee M’Farr. He doesn’t look like an Assassin. He looks more like a successful grocer who’s sampled more than a little of his own wares—round face, snub nose, good-size belly. That is, until you notice his eyes. They’re the giveaway. They’re like two chips of granite, gray and cold.

“Not according to the Dark One who took care of Lily,” M’Farr said. “There are a few discrepancies in that report.”

“Discrepancies?” A very big word for a very big lie. “Like what?”

“Like no bruises on the body, other than the one at the back of her neck that killed her.” He shifted in the wooden chair I keep for my clients—unpadded, and not very comfortable to sit in. I don’t want my clients to wait around and chat. Tell me what you want me to do, then let me do it. That’s how Pola Drach does business, and I’ve been doing it long enough to get a good rep. You want an Eye, you come to Drach.

Of course, the Guilds have their own people to investigate Guild problems, but there are some things folks don’t want the Guild to mess with—family matters like who’s cheating on who, or who’s dipping into the family coffers. In that case, there aren’t too many options. There’s The Brain, but she’s too higher-up to handle little things like straying spouses. And there’s Basher Bob, if you need muscle. I do the job clean and quiet, and I don’t make a lot of fuss about it.

I looked M’Farr over again. “And you know this how?”

“Any time there’s a death that’s not absolutely due to bad health, I want to know about it,” he admitted. “I make a nice donation to the Temple every month to ensure the Dark Ones keep me informed. Something like this happens, it’s bad for business.” He’d said the forbidden word aloud. No one else in Lorr would speak so casually about loss of life.

“I see,” I said. “If word got out that someone actually got murdered without the help of the Fatsos, then peo-

ple might start wondering what they're paying you protection for. That would definitely hurt your bottom line." I could be just as crass as he was.

M'Farr glared at the reference to the Honorable Guild of Forgers, Assassins, Thieves, and Swindlers as rendered by the common folk of Lorr.

"You've got a smart mouth, Drach," he gritted out.

"I know," I said, with my blandest bland smile. "I also know there's more to this than you're telling me. But a job's a job, and the Guild is good for it. I charge a silver a day, plus expenses."

"Here's three silvers. That'll cover you for three days." He laid out the coin. "And I'll want a tally of those expenses when you're done."

"Am I working for the Guild or for you?" I asked as I reached into the desk for my standard form. I like to get it down in writing. It saves the fee of an advocate if the client isn't happy with what I find out when I'm Eyeing.

M'Farr shifted in the chair again.

"You're working for me, personally," he said. "This is a private matter. I don't want the Guild in on it. Not yet, anyway. If it turns out this is about some amateur trying to save a bit or two, *I'll* take care of it. If it's a pro, then it becomes something for the Guild to handle."

"I'll still need a badge," I reminded him. As an Independent, I don't carry one.

M'Farr reached into a jacket pocket and came up with a round token with the Guild's Sigil on it—a sword crossed with a pen.

"How far do I dig?"

I may not have access to the Big Black Box that holds all the Admin records, but I can go pretty far. I have a few resources the City Guard can't use, even if they wanted to.

"Just find out who did it, and leave the rest to me," M'Farr ordered.

I handed him the form, he signed, and he was out the door into Clothiers Alley, mingling with the rest of the shoppers, just another citizen going about his business. After all, business is what Lorr is all about, and mine is just another service industry.

I leaned back in my chair and thought for all of two minutes about whether I was doing the right thing, getting mixed up in a Fatso Guild matter. Then I scooped up the coin. I have rent to pay on the office, small as it is—one room in Clothier's Alley behind the choicest boutique in Lorr. I also have to pay rent on my digs on Entertainment Row, I have my food bill at Fletcher's, and there's the fresh potting soil for Ficus. M'Farr's coin is as good as anyone else's.

ii

So, off to work. No one better than a clothier to tell you the real dirt about the Upper Tier. I strolled around the corner to Jake and Holly's, my landlords and the top-flight dressmakers in Lorr, to see what they had to say about the Vikk clan and Marla Lily's connection to them. They owe me a favor or two since I got the goods on a little pin-holder who was pinching their best designs and peddling them to their chief rivals down the Grand Boulevard. Last I heard, the kid was running a loom some-

where in the southlands near Pangkot, Jake's designs were safe, and Holly could charge top coin for an exclusive.

Jake waved me off as soon as I mentioned the name Drina Vikk.

"Don't talk to us about that old miser! She's the one behind the Vikk-shops. Ruining business! Undercutting the Merchants' Guild! She even sells clothing without the sanction of the Clothier's Guild!"

"And she's never bought another dress since her Dearly Beloved Olber passed to Eternal Rest twenty years ago," Holly added bitterly. "Not from us, not from anyone. She just remakes her old ones, over and over. And her daughter Kaisrin, the one who's espoused to Devon Delrey, doesn't come to us, either. She prefers that dowd Gieranch." She made a face to express what she thought of her rival's designs.

"What about this Marla Lily? Clothier's model?" I looked around their shop, They didn't seem to lack for customers. Two stout women fingered skirts displayed on a bench, and two slimmer ones watched as a very slender young beauty pirouetted before them, exhibiting a sheer blouse that didn't quite reveal what was underneath.

"She said she was," Jake said slowly. "She worked for us, and sometimes took a job showing goods at private parties. Word was, she was looking for a patron and moved in on Teedo Vikk." He nodded meaningfully.

I nodded back. I've seen Teedo around in the bars and Licensed Houses. He's known as a player, likes a good time when his mother lets him have the coin.

“How’d they meet?” Considering that Elder Vikk wasn’t shopping at Jake and Holly’s, and daughter preferred elsewhere, it would seem that Marla and Teedo weren’t exactly fated to connect.

“Like I said, Marla got hired by some of our colleagues to show their new styles,” Jake said. “There are private parties where the new clothes are displayed. Teedo likes to go to them, to see what’s new—not the clothes, the ones wearing them. For instance, Selva Delrey is one of our top clients. She had Marla display our designs at one of her little gatherings. Good sales for us, and a new patron for Marla.”

“And we don’t mean Selva,” Holly added. “Elder Vikk may be a straightlaced Conservationist, but Teedo’s not.”

“So, Teedo meets Marla,” I summed up, “Teedo takes up with her. Why take her home to meet Mam?”

“No idea,” Holly said with a dismissive shrug. “Once she landed Teedo, Marla Lily was gone from Clothier’s Alley. That was about three weeks ago. I suppose she thought she’d landed the big fish.”

“She landed *something*,” I said. “Thanks for the input, friends.”

Holly looked me over. “You know, Pola, you need to brighten yourself up. We’ve got a new line from the weavers in Flatlands, some kind of new wool their boffins came up with, and a new dye, too. It would match your skin perfectly. Honey-gold, made up in a slim skirt, a fitted jacket. It would show off the curves...”

She stopped, warned by my frown. I don’t want to be noticed. I’ve got a whole wardrobe full of drab dress-

es, tatty skirts, blouses with lace that's just a touch dingy. When I'm not pretending to be an office drone, I prefer trou to skirts—easier to get around in, and better if I have to do rough work, although, to be honest, I try to stay away from that. My usual work depends on my fitting into the crowd.

When you look at me, you see a slightly dumpy, not-quite-middle-aged female with honey-gold skin and green eyes, just like any of hundreds you'll see in Lorr toting their groceries home from market, scribbling away in offices, running small shops, and taking care of children while parents are scribbling in offices and running small shops. Oh, I can dress up for an occasion, but most of the time, an Eye has to be invisible. An unattractive female is as good as invisible in Lorr, and that's the way I like it.

"I'll think about it," I told Holly. I might buy the outfit, but not today. Once in a while, I have to put on a show. A new suit might come in useful, and if this assignment worked out, I'd have the coin for it.

iii

Next stop was more difficult. I had my token from the Guild, but that might not be enough to get me into the Dark Ones' Temple. I spent a bit on a carrier-ride to the end of the line, then had a goodly walk to the Final Shrine halfway up Dark One's Hill, where the bodies of the deceased are kept before disposal.

It's a stark box of a building—no curlicues or paint, just the bricks and blocks and a simple red-and-white sign over the front door. No one likes to think about what's inside a Dark One's Temple. Death is the great evil, the

one thing in Lorr that's never spoken of, to be avoided at all costs. Dark Ones deal with it every day, one way or another; and it marks them, inside and out, more than the dark-blue robes and plain blue trou and jackets they wear.

I got the usual guff from the Dark One at the door when I asked for an interview with the Medico who'd written the report on Marla Lily, but in the end, the token got me ten minutes with a smug, supercilious long noodle named Eldo Kelvin in a bare cell of a room that reeked of what they douse the bodies in before they take them to the Burning Pits—a sickly-sweet soapy smell mixed with the musk of incense from the Temple. No chairs, not even a bench to sit on. Just him, and me, and four walls, ceiling, and floor.

He strode in, long robe flapping, long nose sniffing, set of lenses perched atop said nose, long hair flying in all directions.

"If you are here to question my findings in the matter of Marla Lily, then let me remind you I am a qualified Medico," he snapped before I had a chance to say a word.

"And just what *were* those findings?" I snapped back. "Where's this report?"

"I turned it over to the City Guard," he said haughtily. "As per routine. And they ignored it. Ignored it!" he repeated, radiating indignation. How dare a mere City Guard ignore the report of a qualified Dark One!

"Post said the death was accidental," I said.

"Pah!" Kelvin glared at me through his lenses. "I am not blind. If I say there were no bruises on the body, there

were none. That woman did not fall down those stairs. She was placed at the bottom of them deliberately. I noted the lividity of the limbs, the placement of blood engorgement...

"Cause?" I did not utter the forbidden word.

"A blow to the back of the neck that severed the spinal cord...here." He pointed to the back of his own neck.

"With what?"

"That is difficult to say. There were no characteristic marks of any particular blunt instrument, such as a cane or club. A very strong person could have done it with a hand, of course. I have seen demonstrations of the skill."

So have I, and it's a specialized one. It's part of Guards training, hand-to-hand combat for use in restraining obstreperous prisoners. Most folks don't bother with that kind of skill. The average citizen of Lorr depends on a stout cudgel for self-defense. I usually carry a small one myself, just in case I run into something unexpected while I'm Eyeing.

"Medico Dark Kelvin, please tell me exactly how and why you were called to the Vikk house." I laid it on thick, giving him his full title.

"And who desires this information?"

"I ask on behalf of Master Assassin Fee M'Farr. He's hired me to make sure Marla Lily's demise was, indeed, accidental."

Kelvin sniffed at me, but that might have been his reaction to the ever-present deadhouse reek of rotting meat and incense.

“It was my turn on the rotation for night duty,” he said. “A message was sent from Striver’s Hill guardhouse via comm. They had been summoned to the house of Master Merchant Drina Vikk. There had been an accidental death in the house. The family servant demanded that the body should be removed as quickly as possible.

“I took the skimmer to said house, where I was let in by said servant, who provided me with the ritual basin for washing.

“I was then shown the body of a young woman dressed in an evening gown, lying at the foot of a long flight of stairs. The servant informed me this was a Marla Lily, a guest in the house, and that she had fallen down the stairs in the night.”

“And you didn’t accept this?”

“I do not accept hearsay evidence,” Kelvin said. “I make my own conclusions. I turned the body over and examined it carefully.”

“And you concluded...?”

“As I stated in my official report, the woman was killed by a blow to the back of the neck. How many times must I repeat this? I have work to do, I cannot stand here and waste time!”

“Conservationist, are you?” I commented.

“My beliefs are not under discussion, Eye Drach. I sent my report to the City Guards and they ignored it. I also sent a copy to Master Assassin M’far.”

“Who pays you to keep him informed,” I summed up. “Well, Kelvin, he’s paying me to do the same. Is there anything else you may have noticed? Something inconse-

quential you didn't put in your report? For instance, what was the manner of the chief servant towards you?"

Kelvin had been about to leave, but stopped in his tracks. "His manner?"

"Was he upset? Did he look pleased, unhappy, distressed?" I pressed him. Dark Ones don't usually notice anyone or anything around them, but I was taking a chance this one might have something for me that wasn't in the reports.

Kelvin looked blankly back at me. "He was a servant, dressed in a servant's livery. He held the basin with both hands..." He paused. "It nearly slipped out of his hands," he said thoughtfully. "The servant's hands were wet."

"Odd," I said. "He wasn't the dishwasher, was he?"

"The chief servant, as I said. He behaved as though it was granting an honor he should lead me into house, even for such a distressing errand as mine."

"And you didn't speak to anyone else? None of the family came to observe the body?"

Kelvin sniffed again. "Hardly, Eye Drach. Only we Dark Ones are allowed into the presence of the Dead, and even we must wash before and after touching them."

"That's what I thought."

"And one more thing," Kelvin added. "My observations are very thorough." He cleared his throat, meaningfully. "I had to cut."

"Oh?" I didn't like the sound of that.

"The female was with child," he said.

"That wasn't in the report," I pointed out.

“It was not pertinent to her decease,” Kelvin said sniffily. “She would have had the child in six months had she not been killed.”

That put a new face on things.

“Medico Dark Kelvin, I thank you for your very valuable time, and I hope you have a pleasant day.”

He didn’t bother to return the wish. He strode off, robe and hair flapping. I decided not to bother looking at the late Marla Lily. Doing so wasn’t going to give me any more than what Kelvin already had, which was enough to make me wonder just who in the House of Vikk *didn’t* want Marla Lily dead.

iv

There was one more stop to make before I actually tackled the House of Vikk—the touchiest of the day.

I have a spotty relationship with the City Guard. On the one hand, I spent a year in the Guard, so in one sense, I’m one of them. On the other, my term ended badly, with recriminations on both sides. I happened to see something I wasn’t supposed to, and I reported it to my superiors, the way I was supposed to; and I found out that there are times when it’s better not to speak up.

For once, the Founders were with me. I got to the Guard House at the base of Admin Hill at turn-of-shift, and nailed Captain Sara Atterson as she was heading out the gates of the compound into the plaza. She had told me not to present my findings to our superior officer. Now, she’s a captain, and I’m on my own. That’s the way it goes in Lorr.

“Oyo, Captain Atterson! How’s business? Got time for a brew?”

“Eye Drach, I always have time for a brew, but not always with you. What do you want?” Atterson didn’t even break her stride, heading for one of the stands that sold clet, snacks, and brew to the guards.

“Can’t I have a sit-down with an old friend?” I steered her to the nearest food stall. “Brew or clet?”

“I’m not an old friend. We spent a term together before you were canned, and I don’t have any information for you,” Atterson snapped. “And I’m not ready for brew. Clet for me.”

She accepted the mug offered to her. I loathe clet, can’t even stand the smell of it. I got a mug of brew.

“What kind of information would I need from you?” I hefted my mug and took a sip. Not bad stuff, for road-side brew. “And why do you think I want it?”

“The Guard on patrol in Shopper’s Row spotted Master Assassin Fee M’Far in Clothiers Alley,” Atterson stated. “M’Far doesn’t buy from Jake and Holly, and doesn’t need anything from the Clothiers Guild. Guard Gilles is an eager young sprout who takes his job seriously. When he sees something or someone strange on his beat, he reports it immediately to his superior, who just happens to be me.

“So I start to think. What has happened recently that would send M’Far into a snit? And I think about that female found dead up on Striver’s Hill, and I think maybe someone’s poaching on Guild territory, and Master Assassin M’far wants to find out more, but on the quiet. You

have an office in Clothier's Alley, behind Jake and Holly's Boutique. So, you are looking into the passing of Marla Lily. Like the Math Master at the Academy used to say, 'That's been shown'."

"Better rein the kid in, then," I said. "If he reports everything he sees when he's on patrol, he might see something he shouldn't. He might wind up like me, an Independent Eye." I took another sip of brew, and let it go at that. No use getting muzzy this early in the day. "Who took the call on Marla Lily?"

"Striver's Hill Patrol," Atterson said with a shrug.

I knew what that shrug meant. The City Guard isn't paid all that much. The householders on Striver's Hill don't want to shell out for extra protection from the Fatso Guild, so they pay the local patrol to step up their watches.

"What do *you* think?" I asked.

Another shrug.

"Not my affair," Atterson said. "Guard Master says it's an accident, Master Merchant Drina Vikk says it's an accident, it goes down in the records as an accident, unless someone comes up with something better."

"And if someone does?"

"The case is closed." Atterson slammed down her mug. "It's a private matter, Drach. Don't interfere with Guard business."

"It's Fatso Guild business now," I reminded her. "Anything useful I should know about the Vikks?"

"Only that Master Merchant Drina Vikk is a nasty piece of work, and you'd better watch your step with

her, Eye Drach. And Merchant Teedo has an eye for the ladies—”

“That I know,” I said. “And Commander Affrey Vikk is the pride of the Aerial Corps. Elder sister Kaisrin is linked into the Delrey clan, who run most of the money that goes in and out of Lorr. Anyone else?”

“The youngest, Betriz, is said to be champing at the bit to take over from Elder Vikk, but it’s the mam who runs the business, and she isn’t about to let go. And that’s all I can tell you, Pola Drach. Thanks for the clet.”

And off she went, swaggering down the road, leaving me with the bill and two empty mugs.

So, now I knew a little bit more than I had before about the Vikks, but that didn’t help get me into the Vikk house.

I headed over to the News Posts in front of the Central Guard House to see if there was anything I should know before I tackled Striver’s Hill. Post One had a notice about volcanoes up north disrupting weather conditions, and a statement from the Autocrat of Pangkot protesting imposts on goods coming from the south. Post Two had an announcement about a new Council appointment, and a rehash of the eternal conflict between the Craftsmen’s Guild and the Merchants. There was a crowd around Post Three checking the latest figures from the Bankers’ Guild on the money market, and another around Post Four commenting on the judgment of a certain music critic, who was being snarky about the latest singer at the Opera. I skipped Post Five—I don’t

bet on the races, and watching two bruisers whack each other bloody isn't my idea of fun.

That left Post Six, the one that holds the gossip-sheets, and where people leave anonymous hints as to evil-doings amongst the highborn with low tastes.

What I found were a lot of scurrilous rumors about various Guild-Masters and their expensive habits, who was seen at this or that Licensed House of Pleasure, and one tidbit buried under two or three other tidbits asking "Has the sudden friendship between two brothers-in-law ripened or soured because of their mutual interest in a Clothier's model?"

That gave me something to consider as I made my way across Lorr to Striver's Hill.

v

I thought that last bit of gossip over on the carrier-ride across town to Striver's Hill, the district where the Vikk clan had established itself some twenty years before when Olber Vikk took residence in a house built by a formerly wealthy merchant who'd had the bad luck to lose his fortune to pirates.

You can tell who's up and who's down by their position on Striver's Hill. The Delrey house is right at the top, a grand mansion that towers over the rest of them, as befits the most prestigious bankers in Lorr. The Vikk house is midway down the hill. I can't tell whether it's grand or not. It's surrounded by a wall—concrete plastered over brick, topped with spikes, penetrated by two gates. One is an elaborate wrought-iron masterpiece with an entwined D/O monogram—for Drina and Ol-

ber—meant for invited guests and other gentry. Farther along the wall is a plain wooden door marked “Deliveries”, which does for the rest of us.

Striver’s Hill is not a good place for Eyeing. I couldn’t find a likely nook in the blank face of wall that separated the houses on either side of the curving road. There were no handy food stalls to lounge at, no peddlers to chat up, not even a tree to lean against. No one walks up Striver’s Hill casually. There was a country-looking fellow with a handcart delivering foodstuffs to one or another of those hidden houses making his way down the hill, but I was the only other person in sight. Even the servants hid behind the walls.

To make the point clearer, along came one of those pesky Guard patrols—one fresh-faced young recruit, one hardened vet.

“Are you lost, Friend?” the younger Guard asked politely while the older one gave me the onceover, trying to peg my status.

I have prepared a good excuse for just such an occasions.

“I was sent by my Guild to deliver a message to the Merchant Bruno residence, but I must have taken a wrong turning,” I said.

“Not on this street,” the younger Guard told me curtly. “Go down the hill, around, and up the other side.”

“Take care, woman,” the older Guard added.

“I’ll do that. Thank you, Guardsmen.” At least, *I* had been polite. Maybe I looked out-of-place on Strivers’ Hill, but he didn’t have to be nasty about it.

I headed back down the hill while they watched to make sure I did. It was a long, hot slog, and I decided I couldn't take a chance I'd be nailed Eyeing. I'd have to get into the Vikk house somehow, but doing it would take a little time.

It was getting towards sundown, and I wanted to learn a bit more about the Vikk-Delrey connection before I tackled Drina Vikk. It's always better to know more than your adversary thinks you do.

vi

I headed for Entertainment Row and my digs. I stopped at the one of the market-carts along the way to pick up a round of cheese and a small loaf of sweet bread for my evening snack. Fletcher's Food Shop provides most of my meals, but Fletcher closes his ovens after the Silver Moon sets, and I sometimes get hungry waiting for him to open in the morning.

I have two rooms—a bedroom that faces the inner yard where the loo and wash-house are, and a sitting room that faces the street, furnished with a table where I can have my meals, a large chair with an alcohol lamp where I can read and write my reports, and a stand for Ficus near the window so it can observe the street below. Once in a while I open the window and let Ficus get a chance at pollination, but I don't really want Ficus to pollinate. I know that, once pollinated, Ficus will produce one seed, then die.

Some of the Conservationists will argue that I'm keeping Ficus from completing its appointed mission, and I admit it—I'm being selfish. I want to keep Ficus with me for as long as I can. It's something alive in my life, and

there are the added benefits, which I prefer to keep to myself.

I smelled the warning it projected before I opened the door. I had my cudgel in my hand when I entered.

Master Assassin Fee M'Farr sat at my table, reading my private report-book. I didn't bother with a "How's business?"

"What are you doing here?" I yelled. "How did you find this place?"

M'Farr grinned nastily. "I'm an Assassin, remember? Just because I don't do it now doesn't mean I can't. I was trained by Master Kudos himself."

I wasn't impressed. "I don't care if you were trained by the Founders of Great Memory. This is my home, and you are invading it. What do you want?"

"I want to know why you're not at the Vikk house," M'Farr snapped.

"Do you want me to do this job or not?" I shot back. "I'm a professional. I do the job the way I think it should be done. If you didn't want me to do it, you should have let one of your own people investigate. You've got plenty of spies on your payroll."

"I told you, this is a private matter. I don't want the Guild involved, not yet."

"Then let me do what you're paying me to do."

M'Farr grimaced. "You're wasting my money, buying clet for the Guards."

I made an exasperated noise. "You and the Guards Patrol should get together on this. One of their rookies spotted you in Clothier's Alley. Now you tell me one of the Fatsos spotted me with my Guards contact."

“Don’t call the Guild that!” M’Farr’s face grew red with indignation. “We’re the Honorable Guild of Forgers, Assassins, Thieves, and Swindlers, and don’t you forget it! And I expect a little more action than I’m getting right now.”

“Eyeing isn’t active,” I told him. “What I’m doing now is mostly thinking, and what I’m thinking is that I’m going to have to find another set of digs if this one is known. There are a few people out there who may not appreciate what I’ve found out about them and will take it out on me. They may even try to uproot Ficus, and that would really make me unhappy.” I didn’t elaborate. I also didn’t tell him that Ficus isn’t exactly defenseless.

M’Farr got up from the table. “What are you going to do now?”

I put down my net bag with the bread and cheese.

“I’m going to water Ficus. I’m going downstairs to Fletcher’s for my dinner. I’m going to make the rounds of the bars and brothels, chat up a few people, and see what I can find out about Marla Lily that might make someone want to kill her. And maybe tomorrow, when I’ve got my facts straight, I’ll try to get into the Vikk house. If I’m really lucky, I’ll have a word with Master Merchant Drina Vikk.”

“And then what?” Fee needled me.

I didn’t rise to his bait. “And then, I’ll tell you what I find out, and what I conclude. Come to my office tomorrow at sundown. And don’t come here again!”

“I’m an Assassin, Drach. I go where I want to go.” Before I could stop him, he went through my bedroom,

out the window into the yard, and disappeared into the growing dusk.

“I guess an Assassin isn’t going to go in and out the front door,” I told Ficus while I put the bread and cheese into the cold-box under the washbasin and sluiced the day’s grime off my face and neck. I dabbed some water on Ficus’s leaves, too. “You’ll be all right. I don’t think Fee M’Farr is going to send anyone to uproot you. At least, not tonight.”

vii

I decided to dress for a night of bar-hopping in an almost-new black wool jacket trimmed with steel beads on the collar and cuffs, worn over a red linen shirt, and black wool trou. I hooked the gopherwood truncheon on my trouser-belt, popped my best flip-brim felt hat onto my head, and began my rounds with Fletcher’s and a hearty meal of roast beast, root-veg, brew, and local gossip.

Then it was down Entertainment Row, where the most popular bars were doing their usual best to separate rich people from their coin. It was all routine for a summer night in Lorr. Entertainers, Licensees, Beggars, and Thieves were out in force, assisting in the distribution of wealth, as the Education Masters at the Academy put it. Reps from most of the better Guilds were out for a night’s fun and games, badges on display so folks could tell who was who and act accordingly. Merchants, Seamen, Clothiers, Craftsmen, Grocers—even a gang of giggling Mothers, away from the kiddies for an evening—all mingling by the light of the colored lanterns that swung overhead

in the breeze wafting from the estuary at the mouth of the river, cooling the air from too hot to pleasantly warm. I spotted the Guards, keeping things calm, getting between a couple of young Aerial Corps jokers and some Beggars who were a little too persistent.

I checked in with some of the Licensees, but no one wanted to discuss Marla Lily. It's not a good idea to think about the deceased, especially the ones who meet their end by violence.

I headed down towards the bridge that leads across the river to Flatlands, where most of the mechs, techs, and office drones make their homes. The bridge entry marks the boundary between the respectable parts of Lorr and the Waterfront. The carrier rails end at the bridge, and the docks begin there. The company wasn't select—fewer Guild badges on view, more Thieves and Beggars, and a lot more Aerial Corps, spending their pay. The Licensees aren't classy, the Entertainers were more raucous, and the brew is pure river-sludge.

At the end of the row is the most notorious of the Waterfront District taverns. Smokey Joe's is a long, low building with a blank facade, sprawled alongside the river.

I nodded to the doorkeeper, Sneaky Pete, when I entered. He nodded back. Pete and I have long acquaintance, no problems with me. I don't start trouble, and I prefer not to take part in any rough stuff that may go down if someone else starts it.

The noise and smell battered my sensory nerves as soon as I entered. I checked out the clientele and spotted the one person I hoped would be there.

Basher Bob, a big dark-skinned dude in black leather jacket and heavy trou, was sitting at the bar with his favorite female, a red-headed popsy called Velda,

“Oyo, Drach.” He lifted his glass in greeting. “How’s business? I hear you’re on the Vikk case.”

“Now, who told you that?” I asked, accepting a brew from Barkeep Joe. He knew my tastes, always had a mug for me. I stay away from jack, especially the kind you find at Smokey Joe’s. I think they distill it from sundew pods.

“Word gets out.” He winked at me. “Take a word from someone who knows, Drach. Stay clear of the Vikks.”

“Got you good, did they?” I took a cautious sip of the brew. Smokey Joe’s varies, depending on whose batch is on tap.

“Something hinky going down,” Basher said with a meaningful look at the far corner. “I keep out of stuff like that.”

“Unless you’re paid in gold,” I muttered.

I looked casually around and saw what he meant. Two gents not of a sort likely to be seen in Smokey’s sat at a table trying to look like they belonged. In full dress, with toppers? Not on your Nellie Bly!

One was a portly type, red-faced and piggy-eyed, with a growing tum. The other could only be called “A Gentleman of Distinction”—elegant, slender, and carefully groomed, with a head of pale hair and a harried expression, as if he wondered whether his purse was safe.

Well, well, well, I said to myself. *Teedo Vikk and Devon Delrey. What are you doing in a place like this?*

Devon got up and left, and Teedo beckoned to one of the Licensees posing at the bar. I didn't think much of his taste—she wasn't especially young or pretty, but then, by the time they got to working at Smokey's they wouldn't be. He made his negotiations, and the two of them headed to her crib just as Barkeep Joe let out a yell.

“What the...? What's with this coin?” he yelped.

“What's wrong with it?” Manager Joe, a skinny rat-faced specimen in a well-worn dress suit, came out of his cubbyhole of an office, where he sits and watches the action.

“It's supposed to be a silver, but it's going blank!”

Everyone in the bar crowded around the barkeep and watched as the coin in his hand lost its shine and went dull, turning from a Silver to a Bit in a minute or two.

“Where'd you get this?” Manager Joe frowned down at the coin.

“I don't know, it was in the till with the rest of the take.”

Manager Joe's frown turned into a ferocious scowl. “Every coin gets tested,” he ordered. “And this goes to the Council tomorrow!”

I finished my brew and headed back to my digs. Both Gold Moon and Silver Moon had set, and mist was rising from the river. The bridge was ahead, but no one was near it. The carrier transporters had left for the night; the guards were out on patrol.

I forgot the first rule of Eyeing: be ever watchful. Instead, I was thinking about what I'd seen and heard during the day.

Then I got a whiff of something I knew wasn't river water—more like the kind of soap used for hard scrubbing, with a dash of incense musk. I whirled around, swinging my truncheon, just in time to avoid a *whap* on the back of my neck. The truncheon connected, and I heard a satisfying smack as wood hit flesh. There was a yell and the sound of retreating footsteps.

I peered through the growing river-fog, but all I could make out was a dim form that disappeared into the mist. Someone had just made a big mistake. When someone tries to stop me from Eyeing, I know I'm getting close. I just wasn't sure what I was getting close to!

viii

I didn't waste too much time next morning on the usual stuff—slosh some water over the face and tip the excess into Ficus's pot, comb the hair into some kind of order, pick out a respectable-looking outfit for a visit to the Vikk mansion. I chose a nice, neat gray set—trou and jacket, lapels picked out with silver embroidery, pale ivory lace-trimmed shirt underneath. No truncheon today, just my sapper in the jacket pocket in case someone got too friendly. Black flip-brim, and I was ready for work. I don't use facepaint—don't need it or want it. Business-like, that was the effect I wanted.

I took the carrier back to Striver's Hill, hoping not to run into those Guards from the day before. This time around I rang the front gate bell, like I belonged there.

It was answered by a geezer in old-style livery, a black tailcoat the likes of which hasn't been seen in Lorr since

the Merchant's War twenty years ago. He looked me up and down through the bars of the iron gate and demanded, "What do you want here?"

"I want to speak to Master Merchant Drina Vikk," I said. "I have a message from Master Assassin Fee M'Farr."

"We do not do business with Master Assassins," the geezer said.

"Master Assassin M'Farr thinks differently," I told him, showing my badge. "And he has sent me to ask some questions about the demise of Marla Lily."

"That was an accident," the geezer insisted. "There are no questions. It has been decided, and the matter is closed." He tried to do the same to the gate.

"There are still questions to be asked," I stated. "And if I don't ask them, I'll have to take the word back to Master Assassin M'Farr that I was denied entry. And that would be—unfortunate."

I let him think that over for a while.

Behind me, I heard the squeak of wheels. A pedishaw tooled up, drawn by a stout fellow in a red uniform, carrying a woman in the most stylish of morning dresses. The geezer opened the gate to let her inside, and I took advantage of the opportunity to follow her in before he could close it.

I found myself in a paved courtyard, flagstones with a tidy border of bricks. The house was in the form of an open square, the wall forming one side, and a central core flanked by two wings the rest. A set of shallow steps led up to a carved wooden door, just ajar, where I could see a female servant carrying something from one room to another.

“Now, Servant, I want to speak with Master Merchant Drina Vikk,” I repeated, more forcefully..

The passenger in the pedishaw stepped down and looked me over. She was a little older than me, tall and angular, with a sour expression that spoiled her otherwise pretty face.

“Why do you wish to speak with my mam?” she asked.

This must be Kaisrin Vikk, espoused to Devon Delrey. I wondered if she knew where her spouse was last night?

Aloud, I said, “Master Assassin M’Farr is upset that an unfortunate incident occurred in a house that was under his protection. He sent me to reassure Master Merchant Vikk it wasn’t done with his approval, and it won’t happen again.”

I smiled ingratiatingly, laying it on thick. “He is grateful for the donations Master Merchant Vikk makes to the honorable Assassins’ Guild, and he is taking steps to see that her franchisees are not inconvenienced by unsanctioned thieves.”

“Follow me.” Kaisrin led me up the walk to the front door. The servant tried to protest, but she snapped, “Baroney, I will take this person to see my mam. You do not have to be present.”

“I’m always present,” Baroney said, and he followed us into the house.

I took a gander at the surroundings—a large hall, raised roof, lots of wood paneling, paintings of people long dead and gone, including a lifesize portrait of the late Olber Vikk in his full Merchant’s Guild regalia, looking as if he’d just swallowed a sour fruit.

The hall floor was set with black and white slabs of stone. One spot looked slightly brighter than the rest, right at the foot of the staircase.

“Is that where it happened?” I asked, nodding at the clean spot on the floor.

Kaisrin gave me a look as if to say *Ghoulish person, to mention the Dead!* Aloud, she said, “That is where the unfortunate Marla Lily was found.”

“Who found her?” I asked.

“I did,” Baroney spoke up. “I heard a noise and came to see what was happening. She was lying right there. She was...gone.”

“How did you know that? You didn’t, um, touch her, did you?”

Kaisrin let out a squawk of disgust. “One does not do such things!” Now she *really* had me pegged as a lowlife.

“I see the spot’s been scrubbed,” I observed.

“I did that once the unfortunate remains were removed,” Baroney said.

A door at one side of the staircase opened, and a female emerged. *This must be Betriz*, I thought. She was about ten years younger than me, a shorter, paler version of Kaisrin, dressed in the outfit worn by office drones and senior Academy students—dark skirt, white cotton shirt-waist with a lace collar, hair braided and coiled up out of the way.

“This person is here to see Mam,” Kaisrin explained. “From the Guild.” She didn’t have to say which Guild—the Fatsos are the only one that doesn’t make a big deal about what they really do.

"Mam isn't seeing anyone," Betriz reported.

"She'll see me," I said firmly. "Master Assassin Fee M'Farr sent me. *Personally*," I added.

"I will ask her, then." Betriz let her sister pass through the door, leaving me alone with Baroney.

We eyed each other, sizing each other up. I pegged him as one of the old-style servants, almost part of the family. He had me down as an underling, not worth the time to talk to.

"This is where it happened," I repeated after a minute or two of uncomfortable silence.

"Yes." He wasn't going to waste words on me.

"How did she come to fall?"

"I couldn't say."

I persisted with the questions, whether he'd answer them or not.

"Was she going up the stairs? Down? What was she doing upstairs anyway? Isn't that where the sleeping-rooms are?"

"Master Merchant Drina Vikk's private quarters are directly above us," Baroney admitted. "Merchant Teedo Vikk has a suite in the South Wing." He pointed to the side of the house that would get the most sunlight. "Junior Merchant Betriz has rooms upstairs."

"Was Marla Lily heading for Teedo's private suite?" I asked, with a wink and a leer.

"That is not for me to say." But his face said it, all right, and he didn't approve, not one bit.

"Servant Baroney," I began again, "please think back to the night that Marla Lily suffered her accident. Was there anything unusual? A quarrel, for instance?"

“There was a family dinner,” Baroney said at last. “Merchant Teedo announced that he and the female known as Marla Lily were about to formalize their union.”

“That must have pleased his mother,” I said, with another wink.

“That creature did not belong here,” Baroney said fiercely. “She was wastefully extravagant. She asked for more food at dinner!”

“Did she?” Considering Master Merchant Drina Vikk’s reputation for thrift, that’s not surprising. Teedo didn’t get his bulk at Mam’s table, that was for sure!

“Merchant Teedo should not have brought her here,” Baroney said.

“She was going to be part of the family,” I reminded him.

“That would not happen!” Baroney snapped, just as the door reopened.

“Master Merchant Drina Vikk will see you now,” Kaisrin announced.

I walked into the dragon’s den, head high, heart beating. *She’s rich, she’s clever, and she’s got more clout than you, but she’s just another female*, I told myself. I only hoped I could believe it.

ix

Master Merchant Drina Vikk was short and tubby, but her personality seemed to fill the square little room that served as the headquarters for the entire Vikk-shop enterprise. She had a beaky nose set into a round face, a little bow of a mouth that was usually folded into a disapproving pout, and a pair of blue eyes that drilled into

me. She wore a rusty-black dress in the frilled and furbellowed style of twenty years ago, with a little lace doodad covering her graying hair. She sat in an armchair at a small table near the window that looked out on the back garden, where someone was busily weeding vegetables. No merely pretty flowers for the Vikks—everything in the place was meant to be used, and had been well used for a long time, judging by the tears in the carpet and the scratches on the table.

Junior Merchant Betriz and her sister slipped into the room and stood behind their mother, with Baroney next to them, a solid immovable object for me to batter with my irresistible force.

Master Merchant Drina Vikk looked me over. “Who are you, and what do you want with me?”

I gave her my blandest smile. “I am Independent Eye Pola Drach, and I am here at the request of Master Assassin Fee M’Farr, because he was truly distressed that something had occurred in this house, and he wanted to assure you that it was not something he sanctioned.”

“Oh?” Elder Vikk put a world of meaning into that one syllable. “What you mean is, Master Assassin Fee wants to make sure I don’t withdraw my support for his Guild.”

“I see you don’t waste anything, especially not words,” I said. “That is quite true. After all, Elder Vikk, why should you continue to pay for a service that has clearly not been provided? If the unfortunate female in question did, in truth, fall down the stairs, then there is nothing more to be said; but if, as the Dark Ones insist, she did

not, then the question remains—How did she pass from life, and by whose hand? Master Assassin Fee wants to assure you that whoever did this was in no way connected with his Guild.”

“And why would anyone question the demise of that female was an accident?” Drina said, stubbornly clinging to her original statement.

“Well,” I said slowly, “for one thing, no one seems to have heard her fall. That’s a very long flight of stairs, Elder Vikk. Someone falling down it must have made some noise. According to the Dark One who examined her, she was already gone when he got there. She must have been there for some time. Yet no one roused the house when she fell? Very odd, don’t you think?”

“We do not keep late hours in this house,” the old female pronounced. “We dine at sundown, and do not waste fuel on artificial light.”

That explained Teedo’s evening expedition, I thought. Aloud, I said, “Junior Merchant Betriz, did you hear or see anything out of the ordinary that evening?”

The girl glanced at her mother, then squeaked out, “Nothing, Eye Drach. We had dinner, and then I read to Mam, and then we went to bed.”

“What about Marla Lily? Did she accompany you up the stairs?” I asked.

“There was no need,” Elder Vikk said, scornfully.

“In that case,” I pointed out, “how could she have gotten up the stairs in the first place? It appears to me, Elder Vikk, that she was deliberately killed, and by someone in this house.” I laid it on thick, watching the old

female wince at the vulgarity of my language. Deliberately using terms like *death* and *killing* is just not done, not in Lorr.

“Deliberately?” she echoed. “Why?”

I shrugged apologetically. “For one thing, Elder Vikk, you might not be too pleased at your son’s choice of a life-mate.”

“Teedo is a fool, easily seduced by a pretty face. The matter could have been resolved in other, less unpleasant ways.”

“Are you aware, Elder Vikk, that Merchant Teedo has been seen in some, um, unpleasant places?” I went on. “With some very odd companions. Including, Merchant-Banker Kaisrin, your spouse?”

Kaisrin stiffened at that piece of information. “My spouse’s activities are none of your concern, Eye Drach,” she said loftily.

“Probably not,” I said. “But his name has been linked with Merchant Teedo’s in a Post Six notation, and a Clothier’s Model was cited as a mutual acquaintance. If you thought that Marla Lily was attempting to separate your spouse from yourself, you would have had a good reason to kill her.”

“That is absurd!” Kaisrin snapped. “Devon is not going to separate from me, no matter what evil-minded gossip says.”

“Of course not,” added Elder Vikk. “He knows where his bread is buttered. Banking is all very well, but the real money is in the shops. Devon Delrey may not be the

brightest wick in the chandelier, but he's not about to step away from the Vikk stipend."

"And then there's someone else," I said slowly. "Maybe someone who has the good of the Vikk family at heart, even if he, or she, isn't actually a part of it by blood." I looked at Baroney.

"How's your arm, Servant Baroney? It looks a little stiff. Been walking by the river, lately?"

"What are you saying?" Elder Vikk's eyes narrowed. "Servant Baroney has been with me for years. He was my Dear Olber's companion when they did their Guards service together in the Merchant's War. He would never, ever stoop to anything that would hurt the Vikk family."

"Maybe, maybe not," I said. "But you might think about where he was last night when someone tried to attack me the same way Marla Lily was killed. Meanwhile, accept my condolences on the loss of a prospective relation."

"You may leave!" It was an official order, and it was obeyed. I nodded and stepped aside, so Baroney could let me out of the room. I wasn't going to have that ex-Guard behind me again.

He opened the front door to let me out.

"She would have destroyed the House of Vikk with her mindless extravagance," he said.

"Possibly," I said. "But like Master Merchant Vikk said, there are other ways. She could have been bought off."

"More expense," he grumbled. Then: "What are you going to do?" he asked, a note of fear in his voice.

“I’m going to do what I’m being paid to do,” I said.
“I’m going to report to Master Assassin Fee M’farr.”

And off I went, down Striver’s Hill, leaving him open-mouthed behind me.

x

The Master Assassin was right on time.

“What do you have for me?” he demanded.

“Servant Baroney did it,” I said bluntly. “He’s an ex-Guardsman, he knows how to kill by hand. He must have come up behind her and done it short and sharp. Then he laid her down at the foot of the stairs and sent for the Dark Ones.”

“How do you know?”

“A few things didn’t quite add up, even after taking Dark Kelvin’s findings into account. No one admits to having heard anyone fall down those stairs. Marla Lily was in evening dress, and had no reason to go up the stairs if the dining room was on the main floor. Nothing you can take to the Guards, though. You can’t arrest a man because his hands were wet when he handed the Dark One a basin.”

“Wet hands? What’s that got to do with anything?” Fee sputtered.

“He’d handled the victim,” I reminded him. “Of course he’d wash his hands afterward. And he still smelled of the soap and incense used to purge ill-luck. Oh, yes, Master Assassin, this was definitely a private killing, nothing for the Guild to worry about.”

Fee considered what I’d said, then put down another silver.

“That’s for handling things quietly,” he said, and turned to go.

“Just one more thing.” He turned back to me. “You know, Master Assassin, I was wondering just why you picked me for this little job. Like I said yesterday, you’ve got plenty of investigators in the Guild, and you’ve probably got a few of the Guards on your payroll as well. So, why me?”

“And then it came to me—I’m known for one thing no one else handles. None of the other Eyes will touch Domestics.. So, then I start doing some basic arithmetic. Marla Lily’s little package was well on its way before she even met up with Teedo. The only conclusion I could come to is that Marla Lily was one of yours, and so was her offspring-to-be. I’m sorry for your loss, Master Assassin.”

Fee’s cheeks reddened, then paled. “Marla Lily was more than just ‘one of mine’. She was the best, and the brightest, and I really cared for her. We weren’t espoused, but I trained her, and she was dear to me.”

“She was working Teedo,” I guessed. “My guess? Something to do with the funny money that’s going around? The Forgers must be having a fit.”

“That’s Guild business,” Master Assassin Fee snapped. “If Marla Lily was killed because of the false coin, the Guild will take care of it. I just wanted to find out whether or not she’d been tapped, that’s all. Now I know she wasn’t, so it’s finished.” He slammed the door on his way out.

I sat back in my chair and fingered the coin in front of me, waiting for it to turn. When it didn’t, I pocketed

it and went to Jake and Holly's. Now I could buy that nice suit, the one that matched my coloring. I felt I'd earned it.

If you enjoyed the sample, you need not stop there!

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