



THE PRICE
OF
MERCY

Gloria Oliver

ALSO BY GLORIA OLIVER

In the Service of Samurai

Vassal of El

Willing Sacrifice

**The Price
of
MERCY**

Gloria Oliver

ZUMAYA OTHERWORLDS

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THE PRICE OF MERCY

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CHAPTER 1

I am a fool

Jarrin sat in his rented coach, waiting in line to enter the gate. The emperor's ballroom glowed softly in the night. Behind it, much farther off, was the palace proper. Nestled in the center of the city, the emperor's domain was like a small kingdom itself. The ballroom was at the farthest edge, a mere drop of all that was there.

More than three-fourths of the funds the baroness gave him were already spent—his reward for services rendered before he was summarily dismissed. Between the coach and his elaborate costume, he was about to make his life very difficult if he didn't succeed tonight.

The baroness's second gift had been an invitation to the ball and, if he dared use it, the possibility of gaining other employment. The problem was, he wasn't even sure he wanted to succeed, but hadn't been able to think of another course that didn't involve shame, poverty, or starvation.

The coach crawled through the gate.

Jarrin could just make out some of the guests as they exited their vehicles at the ballroom's entrance. Ladies and gentlemen wearing costumes of all colors, tall wigs and hats, tiaras, necklaces, rings but, most of all, masks to hide their identities, weaving an air of mystery and daring.

When his turn came, he forced himself to wait until the coachman got down and opened the door for him before getting out. With

feigned calm, he presented his invitation to the guards then sedately ascended the stairs to the entrance.

On this night, no introductions would be made, everyone seemingly oblivious to the identities of everyone else. A simple veneer, easy to see through in some cases, yet all would pretend to their fullest not to recognize anyone else. And somehow, here, he would have to make himself an opportunity.

A few couples swayed to the music in the cleared middle of the extensive room while others loitered about the heavily laden tables set up against two of the four walls. Steaming food and colorful drinks were set out as delicious temptations but a few steps away from those attending.

The light fragrance of roses filled the air from hundreds of scented candles held aloft by a dozen giant chandeliers. Too soon, though, it would be joined by the cloying aromas of heavy perfumes and perspiration.

Jarrin caught a glimpse of himself in one of the tall standing mirrors as he slowly made his way to the floor. Scarlet floor-length cloak, a black embroidered skirted coat with heavy cuffs and matching vest, black knee breeches, tall leather boots, blood-red shirt and cravat, black gloves, and a wide black hat with red feathers—the well-known rendition of the Crimson Lover. His dark hair was tied with a large ribbon and reached a little past his shoulders in back. His dark-blue eyes seemed to leap from the black mask around them. He was sure there would be a few others posing as the Lover tonight, but none would be as dependent on the message the persona conveyed as he would.

As if he possessed all the time in the world, he strolled the periphery of the room. In truth, now that he was here, he had no idea how to go about his purpose. How did you woo yourself a patron? How did you even choose one? He should have come dressed as a buffoon.

He spotted two of those in short order, although they were the most expensively dressed fools he'd ever seen. Emperor Drusnian, the re-unifier of the empire after the Age of Blight, had several representatives as well—his double chins and flaming red hair made him unmistakable. There were several other famous personages portrayed among the partygoers, as well as heroes and villains from pieces of literature—Dullain, Marquis Sablet, the Crooked Man.

The room filled quickly, the noise level rising over the music being woven by a group of twenty men and women on a slightly raised dais in a corner.

At one point, he paused at the sight of a new arrival. His old patron, the baroness, had finally arrived. Her stooped form and calculating eyes gave her identity away easily, especially to one who'd known her so intimately for so long. Still, it was the person at her side who drew most of his attention. It could be none other than his replacement—the baroness's latest protégé.

With a hard swallow, Jarrin realized he knew the popinjay. A year younger than him, Rillian was already a coveted performer, an exceptional violinist. They'd seen him perform less than two months ago at a lavish birthday party.

He'd lost track of the baroness during the festivities for a few moments when asked to render a reading. Now he wondered if that was when the wheels began to turn against him. Did Rillian approach her or she him?

He forced himself to turn away as they merged with the crowd. He had other business to attend to.

He'd circled the ballroom twice, the musicians starting in on the fifth or sixth long piece of the evening, when he spotted her. She stood by the end of one of the buffet tables, her back against the corner it made with the wall, as if to assure herself she couldn't be approached without her knowledge—or perhaps to shield her back. She was short and plump, dressed in layers of lace and silk of the lightest pinks and whites. Her stance was stiff, as if she were nervous or excited, and she was looking about as if searching for something. Perhaps that something was him.

Jarrin rubbed his suddenly sweaty palms on his cloak, realizing his moment was here. Proceeding at a calculated leisurely pace, he grabbed a glass of wine from a passing waiter as he approached his possible salvation.

She wore a half-mask made of feathers that curled around her face and matched those pinned to her curled brown hair. Surrounded by white, her dark-brown eyes stood out, and he saw them widen as she noticed his approach and his costume. He didn't let this deter him, knowing he had no choice.

“You seem thirsty, madam, would you care for a glass of wine?” He presented the glass to her with a flourish, as he’d seen the men do in the operettas the baroness liked so much. What he could see of her round face blushed, paled, then blushed again.

“Th-thank you.”

She reached to take the glass, and although she tried to avoid it, Jarrin made sure their fingers touched. The lady jerked the glass back, almost spilling the wine. Had he read her wrong after all? He felt uncertainty nibble at him, as it had the last several days, but pressed on. He tried to give her his brightest smile.

She blushed again, shielding her face with the glass as she took a large swallow. As she did, he noticed her finely cut earrings, bracelets, and necklace, half-hidden in feathers. From the baroness, he’d learned something of such things in the last year. Although not overtly large or showy, the cut of the stones and the settings spoke of extreme wealth.

“Is this your first ball?” He couldn’t tell her age, but thought it might be close to his own. She could have already been married for years and was here looking for fresher entertainment, or even just companionship.

“No...I have attended before.”

Jarrin thought he saw her eyes sparkle, as if at a hidden joke. They were large and expressive, and made him curious about the face beneath the mask. If all went miraculously well, perhaps he’d get a chance to see it.

“Is it yours?” Her gaze lighted on him, keenly intent.

“I attended last year...as a companion to one of the baronesses.” There, he’d said it. With any luck she would understand the message beneath the words and things might prove easier. From the way she glanced at his costume and at his face, then blushed again and drank more of her wine, he was sure she understood quite clearly.

Much to his chagrin, however, he found his own face heating up as well. He hoped his mask hid from view most of the embarrassment he felt at being what he was.

“I see...” Her voice was tight. She drank the rest of her wine in one gulp but made no move to run off. He hoped it was a good sign.

She grabbed another glass when a waiter waltzed by and drank part of it down. Perhaps she was as nervous as he was. Unlike her, though, he couldn’t afford to imbibe, no matter how tempting or helpful he

thought it might be. It was amazing how he could feel so totally alone in a room so filled with people.

“Would the lady care to dance?” He half-bowed and held out his hand.

She had opened her mouth to reply when trumpets sounded from across the room. Everyone grew abruptly silent, their attention turning to the golden doors on the far side. While all others could disguise themselves and perhaps for a time forget who they were beneath a thin veneer of anonymity, there would always be the one none would be allowed to forget.

“All hail the mighty Emperor Tremere the Fourth!”

The golden doors opened, and the emperor and his entourage swept into the room, a small dais and grand chair carried by servants behind them. Tremere was a short, stocky man dressed in tastefully cut rags of purple, gold, and silver. Jarrin was pretty sure his costume was meant to be that of the Wandering Beggar. Resteel had been a mighty monarch brought low, bereft of everything he held dear through his own foolishness. It was said he then wandered the world, seeking to atone for his unbecoming deeds and regain favor with Melak, the Crafter of All, by crying the virtues of the True Way to any who would listen. A rather interesting choice for a man in the emperor’s position. Especially since he was himself the living avatar of Melak.

The empire had seen better days in ages past but was still prosperous at this time, at peace. He caught a glimpse of the heir apparent, who wore a much more colorful and less reserved costume than his father’s. He also spotted the prince’s much younger brother and two sisters. He thought there was supposed to be a third daughter but couldn’t remember if she was currently at court or not, having been married off several years ago. One of those two, then, would be the one betrothed to Crevail, a duke in the far provinces. From the gossip around the baroness, the emperor heartily approved of the unusual match.

“Welcome, friends and patriots! Please indulge yourselves this evening. Leave all your cares behind. We of the imperial house will carry your burdens for you.” The emperor made a rolling gesture with his hand, and the musicians began playing again, the waiters once more making their rounds.

Jarrin turned to his prospective employer and found her staring intently at the emperor, her lips pressed into a thin line.

“Madam?”

The young woman blinked and looked away, then brought the glass of wine to her lips and drank it all. When she turned to him, her gaze was veiled, and a not so very convincing smile was plastered on her lips.

“You offered me a dance. I would very much like to accept, but not here. It is getting uncomfortably warm, don’t you think?” She took his hand in a strong grip, her chest rising and falling rapidly. “It will be much cooler and more private in the gardens.”

She turned away, and not wanting to offend her, he had no choice but to follow as she set her empty glass on the table and hurried along the wall. She led him outside through the first of the open glass doors, out into the imperial gardens that surrounded the ballroom.

It was, indeed, cooler there, the night breeze caressing them as the darkness swallowed them whole. Jarrin worried about colliding with trees or bushes in their continued haste, but the lady led him without mishap. Finally, out of sight of the open doors, she slowed to a stop.

Melak’s Eye floated above them, giving a semblance of light as Jarrin’s gaze adjusted. She’d brought them to a small open area with a cozy gazebo in the middle. Still holding his hand a little too tightly, she drew him into the dark interior. The heavy scent of roses and violets perfumed the air, a whisper of the music being played indoors teasing their ears.

He stood quietly as the young woman turned around to face him, waiting to take his cue from her. He felt his nervousness rising, knowing his testing was almost upon him and still wishing there were some other way.

“We can dance here.”

Her voice was low, guarded, as if she expected an objection. Instead, Jarrin raised the hand she already held and slipped his other around her waist, leading her into a slow waltz.

She was stiff in his arms at first, but as they rocked gently to the barely heard music and he asked for nothing else, he felt her gradually begin to relax. After a time, she sighed, as if letting the rest of her tension go. A moment later, she stepped in closer and hesitantly placed her head against his shoulder.

He found he liked the sensation of her leaning against him, the smell of her scented hair close to his face. The baroness never danced, feeling it was something only for the young.

They stayed that way through several pieces, as if neither one were eager to go further. Jarrin felt a little puzzled at this but wouldn't look at his own reasons for holding back. As for her, he knew naught of her and so possessed nothing on which to base her reluctance. Perhaps something as simple as being held was normally denied her. It might be something he would learn about with time.

Eventually, they migrated to one of the benches of the gazebo. He took off his hat as he sat and waited patiently. She wouldn't look at him, but when he took her hand in his she didn't resist. He caressed her fingers softly then worked his way up her arm, enjoying the feel of her skin. She shivered at his touch, but still she did or said nothing.

Although it shamed him, he was enjoying himself. For once, he was the instigator, not just reacting to a command, even if he possessed no more choice in the matter now than then. It was still different.

When he kissed her shoulder, tasting her, she gave a little gasp, yet she didn't resist when he gently turned her face toward him. Hesitating only a moment, he leaned forward and touched her warm lips with his own. A moment later, he felt them soften as she surrendered to him. It seemed the baroness had taught him well after all.

CHAPTER 2

Jarrin leaned back, chugging what was left of his warm watered ale. He put the mug back on the table with a sigh. What an utter fool he was. Sighing again, he scanned with sore eyes the dirty pub where he'd spent the night wailing over his fate. A thin old man slept by the dead fire, two patrons were awake and whispering to one another at a table, and a couple who'd drunk too much the night before sat hunkered over their tables asleep.

He shook his head, recalling again the previous evening.

After that first melting kiss, he'd grabbed his hat, presented his possible paramour with a deep bow and his card then took his farewell.

He could have had her! Or, at the very least, pleased her, shown her what he knew instead of running away like a besotted fool. A bigger buffoon of a poet there had never been.

Yet the moment had been so perfect, like something from a painting of one of the Masters—Krillion, perhaps—he just hadn't had the heart to soil it with reality. Instead, he'd made a living poem of something he couldn't write, for that power was gone, even though by doing it, he'd doomed himself to utter oblivion.

He sighed a third time, knowing he was only wasting the day sitting here, but he still possessed no idea of what he was going to do. Perhaps his bed at the boarding house would give him some respite, refresh him, so when he woke, he might find a way out of his predicament. Who knew, maybe she would still call for him. Maybe the air of mystery and

poetry would be enough to entice her to reserve his services for a short time. Or to at least be willing to see him again.

He didn't know enough about the lady to guess, never even having asked her name. She could pass him on the street, and he wasn't sure he'd even know her.

He would just have to wait and see.

The pub's proprietor was shaking the old man sitting next to the fireplace, as one of the barmaids threw open the shuttered windows to let in some of the growing morning light and air. Jarrin figured this was as good a time as any to be on his way.

"Master Theeson, Master Theeson!" A boy of about ten slammed the front door open, startling everyone inside. He spotted the owner and rushed for him, waving a piece of paper.

"Whoa, what is it, Ryk?"

"The emperor's guards are out and about! They're sweeping the streets! They were just at Mistress Hawkin's boarding house and are passing these out to everyone."

The boy held the paper out but was bouncing around too much to let anything be made of it.

"What does it say, Lessa, what does it say?" one of the awakened patrons asked, the rest looking on with growing interest. Jarrin supposed his leave-taking could be delayed a few moments longer.

"Give it here, already!" Lessa Theeson yanked the parchment from the boy's hand and read it out loud. "By the order of Emperor Tremere, all citizens are encouraged to come forth and give knowledge on the whereabouts or disposition of one Jarrin Lestrave. He has been duly charged with having committed treason against the state. Anyone found aiding or sheltering this criminal will also be charged with the same crime. Report any sightings or information to your local precinct captain."

"Melak preserve us. We have a traitor loose in the streets?" The pub patron's face had gone white.

"But does it say what he did? What he's being called a traitor for?" This came from his partner.

Theeson shook his head. "It doesn't say."

Jarrin stood frozen, his blood cold. He had been branded a *traitor*? He sat down, feeling suddenly dizzy. How could that be?

“I think we’re in for some excitement, then, don’t you?” The old man starting up the fire cackled. “Guards everywhere, people looking for this man left and right. Lots of thirsty patrons.” He grinned, gaps showing in his teeth. “Wonder if they’ll be offering a reward?”

“Like money?” The boy’s eyes shone. “Maybe *we* could find him. Mistress Hawkin knows what he looks like. If she tells us, we would have a chance!”

Nods wagged all around.

Jarrin felt his chest growing tighter and tighter. The woman did know him on sight, although he hadn’t met any of the other tenants yet. Word would soon get around, and surely, it’d only be a matter of time then. He had to get out!

He stood up once more, his gaze falling on his attire. He slumped back into his seat, panic nibbling at his mind. He was still wearing the costume from the ball. If he went out into the street like this, he would be remembered; and as soon as his description made the rounds, they would home in on him and capture him. He was no one, he had no one. Would they even listen to his protests of innocence, or just cut him down like a dog in the street?

His eyes widened with a flicker of hope. He did know one person of influence—the baroness. The flicker died. No, she’d been his employer, he her toy; she would never put her neck in danger for one such as he. And to be honest, he couldn’t expect her to. He had been marked a traitor to the realm. She could lose everything if he approached her. She would more than likely turn him in to prove her loyalty to the court.

No, he must rely on himself. But what was he to do? What did they think he had done?

Jarrin desperately cast his gaze about the room. More patrons came in, all abuzz with the goings on in the streets. Luck was with him for the moment, as no one seemed to be paying him any attention. Going out the front was pretty much out of the question. His only other options were the kitchen or the stairs.

Knowing he had a pressing need for less conspicuous clothes decided him. With as much nonchalance as he could muster, he closed his cloak about his clothes then got up and made for the stairs, his hat left behind, tucked out of sight beneath the table.

He stopped when he reached the top of the landing, not sure how to proceed from there. He flushed, realizing that not only had he ex-

changed sexual favors to survive in this city, now he would be forced to become a thief as well.

With a shaking hand, he covered his eyes for a moment and took a long breath. What choice did he have? None. So, he would just have to get on with it.

He reached for the closest door; it was locked. So were the next two. He was hoping one of the two patrons who'd slept downstairs actually had rooms—and no roommates.

One of the doors opened at his touch. He was partway into the room when he noticed a sleepy man sitting up in bed looking at him.

“Yeah? What do ya want?”

Jarrin froze for a moment then said the first thing that popped into his head.

“Haven't you heard? It's all they're talking about downstairs! The guards are flooding the streets looking for some traitor.”

“What? Why didn't you say so?” The man leapt out of bed, his nightshirt falling just short of knobby knees, and reached for a pair of breeches draped over a chair. “I'll bet once they catch him we'll have us a hanging.” He drove in one leg and then the other. “No, better yet, a beheading! We haven't had one of those in a while. Dang!”

Jarrin tried to nod and smile, although the whole idea twisted his insides.

“So, who is it? Who's the traitor?” The man hobbled toward the door as he slipped on his boots.

“They've got the details downstairs. The culprit was staying at the Hawkins place, and they're going to get a description of him from there.” Somewhere in the back of his mind he was awed he could say all this so calmly.

“Oh, I want to hear that!”

The knobby-kneed man raced out the door and down the hall. Jarrin stared after him, half horrified his gimmick had worked at all. If somehow he were able to prove he was innocent, would they kill him anyway so the riled-up citizenry could get its fill of sport? His innards twisted even more.

Stumbling further into the vacated room, he closed the door and leaned back against it, abruptly feeling exhausted and faint. With an effort of will, he shoved away from the door and studied his surroundings. Aside from the sturdy bed, a table with a chair, and a basin and

bowl, there was nothing else in the room except for a chest at the foot of the bed.

Opening it, he found some half-clean clothes and some not-so clean. Taking them all out, he selected a loose workman's shirt and pants. While they would cover his shirt and breeches, they would do nothing for the elaborate coat, waistcoat, and cravat. Taking those off, he folded his cloak around them like a sack. He left the costume sword at the bottom of the chest before covering it up with the rest of the clothes. He was sure the room's owner could get more for what he was leaving than what he was taking was worth.

He glanced around and made sure everything was as he'd found it, knowing deep down he was only trying to delay what must come next. Telling himself yet again he had little choice in the matter, he hurried to the door and strode back out into the hallway.

The heated buzz of lively conversation wafted up to him as he reached the landing for the stairs. Going down slowly, he peeked around the corner and saw the place was filled even more than before.

"Kicked me out of my place, they did! Full search, my ass—they just want to see what's in my larder."

Laughs rang around the room.

"Guess they'll be here soon, then. Seem to be moving pretty fast. Must want this fellow real bad."

Jarrin reached the bottom of the stairs, goose bumps making their way down his back. Time was running out. Looking at nothing but the floor, he started toward the entry to the kitchen. He needed to get out *now*.

"Do you think it had something to do with the fancy ball last night?"

"There was a fellow all dressed up in here who might have been there," the pub owner said. "Slowly drinking away his sorrows or something. He was sitting over there a minute ago. Where did he go?"

Jarrin reached the door and slipped inside the kitchen, the hairs on the back of his neck rising. The place was empty, the cook probably as eager to hear the gossip as everyone else. He hurried on through, grabbing a piece of stale bread on the way. At the back, as he'd hoped, was another door.

The rotting stench of garbage and more greeted him in the narrow alley as he set foot outside. The side of the building cut off what light

there was, keeping the area in a deep gloom. Jarrin turned right and made his way as quickly and quietly as he could away from the general area of the boarding house. If the hunt was as extensive and thorough as the gossip implied, he would need to get a lot farther away than he might conceivably manage. He needed to find a way to totally leave town. But how?

Once he felt it safe enough, he stepped out into the street, knowing the alleys would probably be one of the first places they'd expect a refugee to use. Down the way, he spotted a modest alchemy shop. Alchemy...magic! Perhaps one of the two could be used to get him out of his predicament.

He shook his head, passing the store by. He must be truly desperate to even consider *that* recourse. Though rumor said magic could do almost anything, no one trusted it much, not after the Blight. Magic and those who could wield it were heavily regulated. Supposedly, all found to have the aptitude were taken from their families and reared in government institutions, marked with some kind of sigil so all could be traced. He wouldn't be surprised if this store and any others like it were watched, and all patrons noted. If true, it would be the easiest way to go about getting caught. He couldn't take the chance.

Not knowing anywhere else to go, Jarrin headed west, toward the lower of the city's three tiers and the seedier part of town. He hadn't been in those areas since the baroness took him under her wing. If things hadn't changed too much, he might be able to find help there, if he could afford it. He made sure his moneybag was tucked out of sight, not wanting to tempt anyone unduly. At the time, he'd taken it with him to the party out of fear it might be stolen if he left it behind, since it was all he had to his name. He'd never expected it to turn out to be the wisest thing to do.

He was out of breath by the time he came close to the loosely manned gate to the third tier. The doors were still open, and from what he could see, the guards weren't any more alert than usual. If luck was with him at all, the news of the hunt wouldn't have made it this far yet, although it wouldn't be long before it did.

Not looking at the guards, their sheathed swords or loaded flintlocks, he forced a large breath into his lungs, locked his practiced non-committal expression on his face and strode forward as if he had every right to be there. His pulse pounded loudly in his ears, his heart beating

madly against his chest, the urge to bolt and run almost overwhelming. He shook from the effort to keep still and slow, wired from the suspense of knowing the guards could stop him at any moment for any reason and his life could very well be forfeit because of it.

He made it to the threshold.

He was trying so hard to keep the guards in his peripheral vision he missed seeing the jutting wood of the gate frame and tripped. He scraped his hands on the cobblestones as he used them to break his fall, his knees throbbing where they hit the hard surface. Yes, quite a dangerous traitor he was—couldn't even make it across a gate without tripping.

Hard laughter washed over him, making his face go red.

“Watch yourself there, citizen.”

Jarrin made himself get up quickly despite the throbbing in his knees.

“Sorry, didn't see it.”

This was followed by more laughter. Jarrin hurried on his way.

He veered from the main road and got out of sight as soon as possible. He followed the winding streets until he came close to his old haunts. The buildings grew dirtier, less well kept but still respectable. These were the Borderlands, where those with little could try to solicit from those who possessed more.

In his old spot, he found a toothless old beggar he didn't recognize who played softly on a flute for his pennies. As long as you contributed something, you were tolerated there; otherwise, the guard would be called to have you removed—the worst type of critic.

Jarrin continued past without slowing, the memories of his past existence depressing him even more than he was already. Harsh as that life had been, he wasn't likely to have it as good for sometime to come.

Following the road, he eventually neared his old place of residence. Trash lay on the streets, the building barely holding together, propped up by its brothers. The mixed stench of vomit and cheap wine was everywhere. A shudder trotted down his back. He'd hoped never to see these grimy walls again, every inch a sour reminder of times best forgotten.

He forced himself to go inside.

The well-worn rose wallpaper, the rusting two-candle chandelier dangling from the cracked high ceiling, the slight odor of mildew and

detergent—a never-ending war between two extremes. Jarrin shuddered, suddenly feeling as if he'd never actually left this place, and the last two years were nothing but a dream.

“Well, well, well. If it isn't the fancy poet.”

Jarrin tried not to flinch at the scratchy and familiar voice. He spotted the speaker to his right, leaning against the old but scrubbed counter, a stocky fellow with a balding pate and a sour disposition.

“Leave the boy alone, Ruffus. He at least paid, unlike some others I could name.” The short, thin owner gave the fellow a telling look from the counter's other side.

Ruffus looked away from her and threw Jarrin a scouring glance. “He's back, though, and not looking all that better for it, so maybe he won't be paying this time around.”

The owner frowned at him.

“How about I ask for *your* rent now, Ruffus? Since you obviously can't take a hint.”

“Some people just can't take a joke.” Grumbling, he turned away. His bulky frame made the worn stairs creak as he decided it would be better to get upstairs.

“Sorry about that, love. He's been having a streak of bad luck lately and has been taking it out on everyone else.” She made a dismissing gesture. “It's been a while, though. I figured you forgot all about us by now. Not that I'd blame you.” Her wrinkled, careworn face lost years as she gave him a smile. “What can I do for you?”

Jarrin tried to smile back, sure he fell far short of the mark.

“Does Lupe still live here?” He waited for the answer with bated breath, his one slim hope resting on the fact he might find his old acquaintance.

“Oh, you mean Lupin? Yeah, he's still here. Same shenanigans and get rich-quick-schemes as always. I think you might even be in luck, and he's still in.”

“Thank you.” He breathed a sigh of utter relief. It occurred to him he hadn't been the most courteous of people since he came through the door. “I hope you've been well?”

She gave him another smile.

“Always so polite, you are. As if anyone actually cared!” She laughed, but stopped as she noticed his quickly reddening face.

“Oh, come now, can’t an old woman have a little fun?” She leaned over the counter. “I’m as well as can be, and thank you for asking. Have missed you and your manners some, that’s for sure. Now, go on up before I decide to try to have my way with you or something.” She laughed again.

Jarrin colored even more, wondering what she would make of the profession he’d carried on with since he’d seen her last.

“Ah, yes, thank you again.” He gave her a half-bow and rushed up the uneven stairs, feeling her amused stare following him all the way.

Luckily, Ruffus wasn’t waiting for him in the upper hallway, so Jarrin was able to walk quietly down the mostly clean hall. He hesitated at the correct door, not sure Lupe would even remember him. Jarrin had helped him out once when he came home too beat-up and drunk to go up the stairs. As he’d put the man to bed, Lupe told him all sorts of things—people he knew, information he could get. At the time, Jarrin had chalked it up to drink and fever.

Now, the things Lupe had said he knew might be his only salvation, although if the man was so capable, why was he living here?

Jarrin felt his hopes withering, but he knew no one else to try. Donning his calm façade, he knocked on the door. There was no answer. He knocked again, this time a little louder. The third time, he knocked louder still.

“By the Master, hold off on that racket, will you?”

Jarrin hunched with relief at hearing the annoyed voice from within.

After some groaning and some stumbling sounds, the door creaked open. A lanky man with short-cropped black hair and bloodshot eyes stared at him, a mere stub of a lit candle in one hand.

“I’m sorry to bother you. You probably don’t even remember me, but...”

The man held up a hand.

“The starving poet, lived here a few years ago. Helped me out once, I believe?”

“Uh, yes, that’s me.” He was feeling more jittery by the moment. “Could we, um, could we talk somewhere private?”

Lupe scratched an armpit, eyeing Jarrin in a serious way.

“All right. Private, you say? Well, nothing more private than a man’s room, I figure. Come on in.”

He opened the door just enough to let Jarrin through. The room was barely wide enough for a bed and dresser. Jarrin knew of a few in the building that were smaller still. One of them had been his.

Lupe pointed for him to take a seat on the rumpled bed.

“Thank you.” Jarrin had forgotten how the smell of sweat could permeate a place.

Lupe leaned against a wall after setting the candle on a dish, still watching him.

“So, what can I do for you?”

Jarrin took a deep breath, telling himself again this was the only way.

“Back...back when I lived here before, you told me you were the man who could make anything happen. I need for you to help make something happen for me.”

This got him a raised brow.

“A little cryptic, but yeah, that’s me. Go on.”

“I need new papers. I also need a way to leave the city. I have to leave *now*.” Jarrin tensed for the questions he was sure would follow. He didn’t get what he expected.

“Okay...I suppose that’s doable.”

“So, you can help me?”

“Whoa, hold on, that depends. You willing to work to get out of here?”

Jarrin rose to his feet.

“Yes, I’ll do whatever is necessary. Just as long as I can leave.”

Lupe nodded. “Now the most important part—do you have any coin?”

At this, Jarrin hesitated.

“Yes, some. How much will I need?”

“You’re not wanting to fake a title or holdings, merely an identity. And you’re not trying to get into someplace, so it shouldn’t be too costly, depending on your definition and what you’ve got, of course.” Lupe gave him an inquiring look.

Jarrin took a deep breath. He had little choice if he wanted help.

“Four gold and some pennies—it’s all I have.” He removed his purse and spilled all he owned on the bed.

“I’m quite impressed, poet. That’s more than a lot of people ever see.” He reached for one of the coins and bit into it. “But don’t worry, I won’t need it all. I’ll take half for now and return what’s left if there’s

anything.” He picked up two gold and flipped them in the air. “With this, I’ll get you even better papers than I planned on before.” He winked at him. “Don’t worry, I’ll do you a good turn.”

That, Jarrin was finding very hard not to do.

Lupe turned to his dresser and started pulling out clean clothes.

“It’d be best if you waited here while I go arrange things. I’ve a feeling the less you’re seen out in public the better?” He gave him a sly smile.

Jarrin gazed unhappily at the close-set walls around him.

“Thank you.”

Lupe nodded. “I should only be gone a few hours. Maybe some sleep would do you good. Help pass the time, and you look like you need it.”

Jarrin stood and bowed. “I’ll try. And thank you again.”

“Don’t thank me until the deed is done.” Lupe gave him an uncharacteristically flowery bow then left.

Alone, Jarrin sat down on the thin mattress, hoping he was doing the right thing.

CHAPTER 3

Jarrin sat, then paced, then sat again. The time whiled away, but he possessed no way of knowing if it were minutes or days—the candle had long ago sputtered and died, leaving him in darkness. Footsteps clomped occasionally outside the door, each instance making his heart fly into his throat in both excitement at Lupe’s possible return and fear of betrayal.

Eventually, he tried to sleep as instructed, and although he did finally fall into a doze, every little sound startled him half-awake, so he got very little rest.

Sometime later, a knock on the door drove all thoughts of sleep out of his head, and he jumped out of bed. Before he could think on what to do or who it might be, the door opened. Jarrin practically sagged with relief as he recognized Lupe’s lanky form framed by the ambient light flooding into the room.

Lupe quickly stepped inside and closed the door, then fumbled in the dark for several long moments to bring out and ignite a candle. When the light first flooded the room, Jarrin thought the man appeared troubled, but when Lupe turned toward him his face was cheery.

“Today favor is shining upon you, my friend.” He removed a tattered envelope from his vest. “Your papers.”

Jarrin took the envelope eagerly. Inside was his new identity, his new life. He didn’t look at the contents, not quite ready to deal with the fact he would no longer be Jarrin Lestrave.

Lupe reached inside his vest again and pulled out a more officious and less bedraggled envelope.

“This is a letter of introduction to the caravan master for the Rumms family. They’ll be running a little shorthanded on the morrow, so if you’re willing to work your way, you’ll be able to go with them.”

Jarrin stared at the envelope in Lupe’s hand, his heart swelling with relief and gratitude. He took it with a trembling hand.

“It’s more than I could have hoped for. Thank you.”

“I took the liberty of getting you some clothes that fit properly. Those fancy ones underneath should more than pay for them. And I don’t think you’ll be needing them again soon anyway.”

Jarrin’s face colored. He’d never realized his costume showed from beneath the others at all.

“Thank you.”

“As soon as you get changed, I’ll take you out the back and tell you where you need to go. The caravan master will let you stay in the staging area tonight if you ask. He’s a softy, that one, though he don’t look it.” Lupe handed Jarrin a small sack, and from another pulled cheese and bread.

Jarrin’s stomach growled, his mouth watering, not having eaten anything since the bit of bread he took from the pub. Lupe laughed.

“Guess it was a good thing I picked these up too, eh?” His eyes danced.

Jarrin thanked the Great Crafter for the opportunity he had been given to help Lupe in the past. He’d never expected to have the favor returned or to need it so badly. He quickly changed clothes—it seemed Lupe had a good eye, as they fit rather well. They were nothing fancy, but good garments to travel in.

Lupe removed a bottle of wine from one of the dresser drawers.

“Sorry, no cups. We’ll just have to share.” He uncorked it and wiped the lip with his sleeve before taking a long draught. “Ah, that’s more like it!” He split the bread and cheese between them.

Jarrin wolfed down his share, his hunger roaring. The wine burned on its way down.

Once they were finished, Lupe gathered Jarrin’s former clothes and opened another drawer of the dresser. He pulled out a dark cloak then stuffed Jarrin’s clothes into the drawer in its place. He tossed the cape to Jarrin.

“You’ll be needing this as well. You don’t have that distinctive a look about you, but it’s better not to take any chances.”

He led the way out. Jarrin threw the cloak over his shoulders and pulled up the hood before following. The back way out was through one of the boarding house’s other rooms and involved shimmying down a tree outside one of the windows. Jarrin noted it was late afternoon.

“By the way, poet, I heard an interesting story while I was out and about today.”

Although the day was warm, Jarrin went suddenly cold all over.

“You did?”

“Ayuh.” Lupe leaned back against the trunk of the tree.

He was tempted to run, afraid of what the man had heard or suspected, but Lupe had yet to give him the location of where he needed to go.

“Seems the guard are out in mass looking for a traitor. Nobody’s talking about why this guy is one, exactly, but I happened to overhear a thing or two anyway.”

Despite himself, Jarrin was curious. If he could find out why they had marked him a traitor, perhaps he would have a chance to redeem himself.

“What did he do?”

Lupe lowered his voice. “It seems he deflowered the emperor’s youngest daughter last night.”

Jarrin gasped. He couldn’t help himself. He was being accused of taking the virginity of the emperor’s daughter?

“No! I never...She couldn’t have been...” The woman in pink was Melak’s Avatar’s daughter? How could such a thing be? And if fate could be so cruel, why did she tell them he did such a deed?

Despair flooded him as he recalled the evening. He’d left her his card! He’d given her all the information needed to point the guard straight to him. But how was he to know she was the emperor’s daughter? Or that she would accuse him?

Lupe stared at him, not looking surprised.

“I doubt Duke Crevail will take kindly to the news either.”

Jarrin stared at the ground, not believing how things could have gotten so bad. He was doomed, doomed! There was nowhere in the empire he would be safe, not with both the emperor and Crevail thirsting

for his blood. But her deflowering wasn't his fault. He'd done nothing to her!

"It does get worse."

Jarrin's head snapped up at that, not able to conceive how this could possibly be.

"What?"

Lupe didn't look at him, busily cleaning a fingernail.

"They're saying the Twelve have been called."

Jarrin felt a shudder wrack through him. The Twelve were after him? The emperor's secret guard?

Lupe glanced up. "They'll track any man they're set upon until the end of their days, but they can't cross the empire's borders. This fellow in trouble would do well to speed to Landianna as fast as he could possibly get there."

"I...I didn't know..." Leave the empire? Go to Landianna? Did he have a prayer? Jarrin's knees felt weak.

"I think I'll be going on a little sabbatical myself. A change of scenery will do me good. It's no time to be hanging about, not with all this trouble."

Jarrin realized he'd dragged Lupe into a lot of danger—too much for only a meager show of kindness.

"I'm...I'm so sorry." Never did he dream the emperor would call on the Twelve. He was no one! And he'd done nothing! "How can this be *happening?*" It only seemed to get worse the more he found out.

"They say Melak is not always clear in his plans. And I'm definitely not any happier about this than you are." Lupe's eyes were hard. "Take what I gave you and meet the caravan master at the Stag's Head by the gates. It will all be up to you and the Crafter after that. My debt is paid."

With that said, he shimmied up the tree and back through the window, never looking back once.

Jarrin gawked after him for several moments, not able to do anything else. The border was three provinces over. It would take weeks to get that far. He stood no chance.

Yet trying would be better than just giving in. Feeling more alone than he had his entire life, he turned and walked out of the alley, his shoulders bowed under an invisible weight.

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