

THE
PRICE
OF
THORNS
TIM SUSMAN

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For Kobalt

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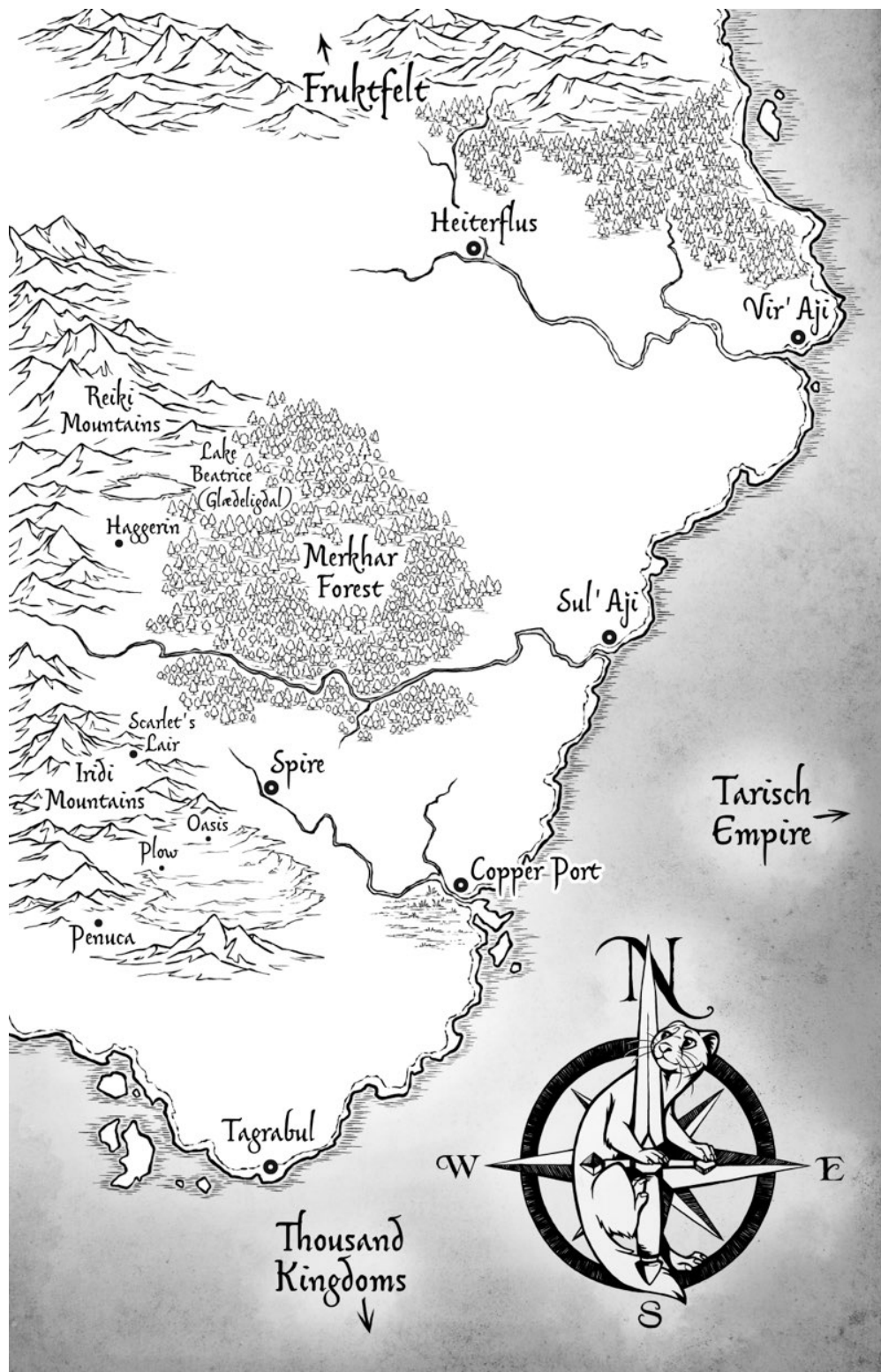
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THE THIEF

THE WHEEL

The spinning of the great wooden wheel Nivvy was lashed to had become a familiar disorientation, rightways up and upside down blurring together until he couldn't have pointed up even with an unbound hand. He could hear well enough, though. "Give you a penny if you get him in the head," said the slightly darker-skinned boy who'd just spun the wheel, walking back to the slightly lighter-skinned one cupping a tomato in his hand.

"Inira," Nivvy prayed under his breath, "please just send these dirt rats away so's I can finish working at these bonds, and I promise I'll make you proud. I can get out of this. I can—ah, shit."

Even spinning as quickly as he was, he could track the lanky farmer boy's arm as it wound back and then shot forward, releasing its missile. It was going to miss him, no, the wheel was bringing him around to—

The tomato smacked Nivvy on the temple, bursting into juice and seeds that spun into his eyes and hair. "Oy!" he yelled as the boys laughed. "That one wasn't even rotten!"

He'd had food thrown at him in his childhood when he'd ventured out from the Shallows into the city proper, but it had always been rotten (usually fish). Even in the well-to-do parts of Copper

Port, fresh fruit and vegetables were expensive. Here in a little farm town on the edge of a desert, where somehow they grew tomatoes and radishes (the other things that had been thrown at him), they should, Nivvy felt, be even more selective about what they threw. With his hands bound, he gave vent to his frustration. "Wasting perfectly good food like that. Y'oughta be ashamed!"

The spinner had just handed a penny to the thrower, and now they both turned to stare at him. The wheel turned in that jerky way it had, speeding up as the rocks tied to his feet descended and slowing as it tried to lift them around the other side. "Reckon he's right," the thrower said to the spinner, and stooped to the ground, rummaging in the dirt.

"No, no I'm not." Nivvy spoke quickly, sideways as the wheel's momentum tried and failed to make one more revolution. He started to spin back the other way slowly, an easier target. "One of my faults, you see, I—hey! You! Uh—farmer boy! Sign says you're not to throw rocks!"

The lighter-skinned boy had straightened up with an egg-sized rock, or, if the gods were smiling, a clump of earth, in his hand. "Don't see nobody here minding the sign," he said.

"When Kingsley comes to set me loose, I'll tell him." Nivvy knew that there were times in his life when it would be better for him to stop talking, but so far, he had not managed to recognize a single one of them before it happened.

"Oh aye? What name will you give?" The boy hefted the rock.

Clump of earth. Clump of earth. Nivvy had a strong belief in the power of faith, but it had been sorely tested of late. In this backwards town with one inn and a profusion of young farmer boys with identical dirty faces, huge hands, and simple brains, he had won-

dered more than once if this experience was a test of his faith or a mockery of it.

He'd settled upright again, barely rocking from side to side as he sorted through the farmers' names he'd heard in his two miserable days here. "Janin's boy."

The boy and his friend exchanged grins. "All the better. He'll get the blame for it. Two filthy birds with one stone." He cocked his arm back, and Nivvy squeezed his eyes shut, not to avoid seeing the stone, but to protect them.

It hit him on the nose, and it was a sharp stone as well as a heavy one. The boys' laughter faded with their footsteps as blood trickled down from both inside and outside Nivvy's nose, mixing with drops of tomato juice. *Faith*, he thought, *must be that Inira is teaching me a lesson here. Perhaps I am not skilled enough to release myself from this wheel.* He had been avoiding this thought, spurred on by the minimal success of having worn through one of the many strands of rope with his fingernails over the course of an entire day. *Consider it learned, my Goddess! Sometimes I do need help. If you send someone to release me from this wheel, I'll never again think so much of my skills that I underestimate someone's cleverness just because they happen to be riding along Nowhere Road.*

He occupied himself for a few moments with venomous thoughts of revenge against both the merchant's wife who had felt the compulsion to check on her jewelry after a perfectly ordinary burst of lightning, and against Kingsley, the innkeeper and de facto lawman of the town. For a theft in which all the stolen goods had been recovered, banishment was usual in every civilized town Nivvy had known. But the good citizens of Plow had built a wheel like they'd heard of in stories from the long-ago times, the kind of thing nobody in civilized towns had done for hundreds of years, if they ever actu-

ally had—stories were just stories, after all—and having built it, they were all very excited to use it, no matter Nivvy's very sensible and logical arguments to the contrary.

The thoughts of revenge helped distract him from the tickling of the blood and the metallic taste of it. It would dry eventually, if the sun remained out, and there was no indication that it would do anything but. His tongue, in fact, was already thick and dry, and licking the blood from his lips just made it sticky and foul-tasting. Blood and tomato juice made a terrible concoction. He sighed and went back to working at the rope binding his hands, because that was better than doing nothing for the remainder of the day.

A shadow fell over him. He flinched instinctively; nobody was supposed to touch him directly, but he'd already experienced how effective the sign was when Kingsley wasn't around.

"So this is what I've been reduced to," a harsh female voice said to his left.

He turned his head until it hurt, enough to see a red velvet dress frayed and mended in several spots, with dirty lace at the collar and cuffs. The neck and chin above it were white as porcelain, but not porcelain that was sitting in someone's cabinet waiting to be liberated from its pristine prison. They were more like porcelain one would find in the back of some peddler's cart, a mismatched set dusty and cracked, not worth the trouble it would take to shout, "Guard coming!" to distract the peddler as you swept the pieces under your cloak. To one side of the neck, Nivvy could see strands of black hair, but the woman's face was hidden in shadow.

This was not the kind of person he expected to see in Plow. Even the nobles he'd been stealing from had been on their way from one better place to another, and though this woman's better days were clearly well behind her, she still dressed and spoke well enough to

mark her, like Nivvy, a stranger in this town. "Aye, well, we've both been reduced, then," he said. She wasn't throwing anything at him, and that was a good thing.

"I presumed that your natural state was not being covered in your own piss and blood." Her voice had a haughty tone fractured with notes of uncertainty, and an accent he couldn't place. Northern, maybe. She brought a hand to her nose. "Oh, and you've soiled yourself worse than that."

He couldn't throw back stones at the boys, but when someone lobbed words at him, those he could return. "You get up here for half a day and then an entire night and then half of another day and you see how long you stay pretty and clean. Anyway," he said, "not all that soiling is mine."

"Do you think that makes it better?"

"Depends on whether you're asking after my predicament or my self-control," he said. "And what business have you with either?"

"I'm in the market for a thief. I was brought here to find one, but I wasn't expecting to have to hire a thief who's been caught and humiliated. There must be more to the world than this."

Odd thing to say. "I was only caught," Nivvy said with affected confidence, "on account of a freak lightning strike that panicked a twitchy merchant's wife an' made her run out to check on her precious horse."

He would've gone on, but the woman gave a small sniff and turned. Her footsteps carried her behind the wheel and out of his sight and then stopped. She'd wanted to make a great show of leaving but wasn't sure enough to follow through. Or perhaps it was a test of his abilities. Either way, he stayed quiet until he heard that threadbare dress rustle.

Quickly, then. "I reckon you'll likely head to Penuca then, that being the nearest town with a Thieves' Guild, and there you'll find as many thieves as you might need. But if you had gold to pay a professional thief, I wager you wouldn't be trudging through shit-strewn roads on the edge of the desert looking for one. So you'd likely..." Here he paused for a spate of coughing that did nothing to help his throat. "...walk around seedy back alleys asking after un-guilded thieves and end up robbed or with that pretty throat slit."

Nivvy smacked his lips and hoped that had convinced her. He didn't have many words left in him.

Another farmer's boy stormed up, indistinguishable from the rest. "Oi!" he yelled. "You been telling tales 'bout me?"

"Janin's boy?" Nivvy rasped.

"Aye, and what's it to you? I never done nothing to you." Unaware of the irony, the boy stooped to pick up a clump of earth. Definitely just a clump of earth.

"Begone," the lady said. "I am speaking with this wretch."

"No skin off me back," Janin's boy said. "You can speak while I teach him a lesson. He got two ears, ain't he?"

"I said *begone*! May your skin erupt in boils that attract spiders!"

She stepped in front of Nivvy, so he couldn't see her face, but she stood tall and regal. One arm came out as though she were going to throw something at the boy, and then she simply extended it commandingly. Janin's boy, who could see her face, flinched when she cocked her arm, but when no spell or rock came forth, he threw his missile at her.

It struck her on the hip. She dropped her arm and he laughed, at which she picked up the object (it was a rock, definitely a rock) and threw it back at him.

He watched the rock land a good ten feet in front of him and five feet to the left. "Whore," he jeered back at her, and walked off in the direction of the inn.

"That was a good curse," Nivvy said sincerely.

The woman's posture sagged. "It didn't work," she said. "None of them do anymore."

Now, with the hood of the cloak settled back, he had a clearer view of her features. Fine porcelain in disrepair, aye, that described her well. Her jet-black hair would likely be striking when properly coiffed so that the stray hairs didn't frame her face like grasping tendrils; her eyebrows were thicker than was proper for a lady, at least in his experience of ladies dressed in finery. Her pale skin showed red at the top of her high cheekbones where the sun had borne down on her, and a filigree of lines on her brow and at the corners of her mouth marked her as older than Nivvy probably by two decades, if not more. That mouth, thin and severe, parted to reveal teeth that would have been perfect if not for the yellowing. "When are you due to be released?"

"Midday tomorrow," he said. "If Kingsley remembers."

She considered the wheel. "If you accept my commission, I'll release you now and we can be quit of this town before anyone's the wiser."

Since parting ways with the Thieves' Guild a year or so prior, Nivvy had been searching for that one job that would make his reputation anew, one that would let him either return to the Guild triumphant or (in his wild dreams, but such things had been told in stories) found his own. In the course of that search, he had listened to many proposed jobs for an independent thief and found that generally what distinguished them from Guild jobs was that they paid much less. In the few cases where the payment felt sufficient, said

thing was guarded by the kinds of large groups of well-armed paid murderers that Nivvy generally preferred to meet in nightmares, because at least then a body could wake up with no more damage than sweaty nightclothes. So by and large, when people asked him to steal something for them, especially people who didn't look like they could pay for his quality of thieving, his response was a polite but firm "take a walk into a wave." However, exceptional circumstances allowed for a rewriting of rules, and besides, this woman had an air about her, something different than the usual unwashed unscrupulous undesirables he'd spent most of his time with over the last year. "What's yer job, then?"

The woman lifted her pointed chin and spoke formally, as though reciting. "My name is Bella and I have need of a good thief. Failing that, I could use a merely competent thief, and—"

Pride overrode the complaints of his throat. "I'll have you know that I am an uncommonly talented thief."

She arched one eyebrow up, which drew his attention to its thickness. "What is uncommon about your talents?"

"No, it's an expression. It just means very talented." Her eyes widened and traveled up from his to the leather bindings that lashed his hands to the wheel. "All right, yes, but look, you know the Tarisch Empire, across the eastern ocean?"

"Yes," she said slowly.

"My second job for the Guild, I stole the jeweled brooch of the emperor's daughter from the topmost tower of the royal palace. Now, the palace itself is in the midst of a compound full of armed guards, and the tower stands two hundred feet off the ground, so I says to myself—"

"I'm not interested in the details of your exploits."

"Well, I stole it, is the point, and they didn't catch me."

"It's conveniently far away," she said. "Which Thieves' Guild could I apply to to find out the truth of that?"

He looked away from her. "It'd be at Copper Port."

"I don't know that place. Is it far from here?"

Her tone was light; she was toying with him. "Go on with what you want, then," he said. "Maybe it's more difficult to nick than Princess Chakali's brooch."

The eyebrows lowered and her feet shuffled. The confidence she'd demonstrated up to that point faltered slightly. "I need you to help me steal a kingdom."

Deference battled with the need to set someone straight, and it was a short, quick battle. "See, the problem with that," Nivvy said, "is that kingdoms are big. People notice when they go missing. And I've never tried to stash a kingdom under my cloak or cross a river with one, let alone sell one in a free town somewhere. I imagine it might be done, but—"

"Funny," she interrupted him. "I knew a fellow once who wagged his tongue like that. He was so proud of it I had it cut out of his mouth and hung from the palace gates where everyone could admire it."

Nivvy shut his mouth quickly. His tongue might be dry and sticky with blood and tomato, but he still very much preferred it remain attached.

Bella went on. "The kingdom is mine by right. It was taken from me a long time ago, but I have recently...found a way to restore myself to the throne. But I need—it will be easier with assistance."

"Speakin' seriously and not tryin' to be funny," Nivvy said, "T'other thing about big things like kingdoms is they tend to be guarded quite well. Steal even the princess's brooch, you might get a flight of crows after you. No great shakes for an accomplished

dodger and scarpermaner such as yours truly. Even got a cantrip or two myself. But the really important royal family things, like crowns and scepters and thrones, they've got end-of-days magic around 'em. Earth splitting; monsters out of stories, like dragons, amassing; entire armies gettin' turned to stone. And not even a stone like marble where you might at least make a nice statue; no, they say when the wizard Gibberfit was defending Ivernia from the invaders, he turned them to sandstone, and they wore down in one generation."

"Gibberfit was an idiot," Bella said. "And anyway, that kind of magic is rare."

Nivvy had not seen any of the aforementioned magic in person, nor known anyone who had, but they showed up often in stories, and he did have some experience with magic. "Aye, that kind of artifact is rare, but that's where you tend to find 'em these days. And any kind of dealing with wizards is dangerous. Mate of mine, Marzin, he tried to steal from a wizard and got turned into a toad."

"How unfortunate," she said in a bored voice.

"You've no idea! I carried him around in a box to make sure he didn't get crunched up or stepped on. Least he could talk, even though after a while he mostly talked about how different bugs tasted."

"You won't get turned into anything," she said.

"I agree, but mostly because right now I don't see as I'd be interested in tryin' to steal a kingdom."

"You haven't heard what I'd pay you."

This was the part where they named their price, which was never as appealing as they thought it would be. He'd been paid three gold crowns for his part in the brooch job and never seen anything that rich again. Not even the ruby crown job had paid that much, though there had been other benefits to that one.

She cleared her throat. "I can offer you one hundred gold crowns."

He couldn't help it; he laughed out loud, hard enough that the wheel listed to one side and then slowly rotated back. His laugh turned into a dry cough that stung his throat. "A hundred!" he said when he recovered his speech. "'Zbells, if you had that kind of coin you'd be wearing a nicer dress, milady."

The unsure expression hardened on her face, and her lips pursed into an even thinner line. "I will pay you from the treasury when the kingdom is mine."

"Ah ha ha, payment on completion," Nivvy said. "That's a refrain I know well. I prefer to hold to the Thieves' Guild requirement of half payment before the job starts."

"If I had fifty gold crowns, do you think I would be standing here in filth talking to an even filthier wretch?"

"I don't know, milady," he said. "It's a problem, it is. And by the way, your feet look very lovely, and you've sidestepped the worst of the filth, I see."

"I'm not certain I have," she snapped.

"All right, even if I did take your word..." He paused to cough again. The bitter tomato taste was getting worse the more it dried out. "We both need to be cleaned up, we'll need food and other supplies, I shouldn't wonder, and where's all that to come from?"

She drew herself up. "I see," she said. "Well, perhaps Penuca will hold a thief willing to take a little risk for the prospect of a great reward." Without waiting for an answer, she turned and strode back behind the wheel again.

A great reward. More than the gold, a thief who helped a queen regain her kingdom would certainly be a figure of stories. The far-off dream of heading his own Thieves' Guild did not seem quite so un-

attainable to such a figure. Those louts in Copper Port would have to swallow their pride and welcome him back. And oh, he could see his uncles again, head held high.

But...what were the chances that a true queen, deposed and in want of a thief, would find herself in Plow, of all places? She'd go to Copper Port; she'd go to Spire.

Unless she'd been guided by Inira. Unless this was the answer to Nivvy's prayer. What did his uncle Foli always say? "When the tide brings you a silk scarf, grab it, because the tide can take it away again." Even if a kingdom wasn't in his future, she could be the way to a more modest goal of his. Cleaned up, she could get him back into a Thieves Guild, if not the Copper Port one exactly.

"Wait!" Nivvy called out.

"No, I don't think I shall," she said. "You've made your position very clear. I wish you luck in finding a patron who can hold to your guild's rules."

"The thing is," he said, and coughed. "The thing is, I might take immediate release from the wheel in place of some of the coin."

"I couldn't ask you to lower your standards," she said. "I don't want to hire someone who takes work that's beneath him. I want someone worthy of the job."

"How can you know I'm not unless you give me a chance?" he said. "How am I supposed to prove myself bound to this infernal punishment?"

For several seconds he waited, but she neither took a step away nor spoke. With every silent second, Nivvy's bravado retreated. Don't beg, he told himself. Nobody will respect a thief who begs. "I'll do yer job," he said finally, in a soft, husky voice. "If you believe it can be done by a thief, then I believe it can be done by me."

When finally she did speak, she regained her dry, confident tone. "I will trust in the spell that brought me here. I fully believe that within one month, our wheels will have turned, and we shall be in far better circumstances." She walked around to the front of the wheel, gave him a not-altogether-reassuring smile, and reached for the nearest binding.