

## Carion Crown



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## Fateful Lot

My escort, one of an army of dour black-clad clones that tromped automatically through the Ardis Department of Constables, surprisingly unhanding me a step before reaching the station's heavy front doors. The first thing I'd learned after my utterly dispassionate arrest and processing was that not only did no one here care that I'd committed a crime, no one especially cared about my reasons. Or me at all, in fact. Every patrolman I encountered—a difficult number to guess considering their identical uniforms—went about his duties with the same malaise. It was like the whole department suffered from a reoccurring boil, the habitual lancing of which had changed from a matter of medical care to a routine chore.

Wherever we were going, at least it wasn't the crushingly boring communal cell I'd spent the night in. Soon after arriving, I'd quickly confirmed what I'd long suspected: a life behind prison bars was not for me, especially if habitual tooth-grinders and sobbing drunks to flank your sleeping pallet were fixtures of all jailhouses. Regardless of the noise, I must confess that it was the first night in months where I hadn't worried about having my throat slit in the dark. Still, I'd prefer not to repeat the experience. The clone-constable hadn't seen fit to speak more than my name before rousing me and marching down the hall. I'd followed silently with curious dread, not expecting any answers out of this solidier ant, but also not expecting

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any real danger. I'd figured wherever we were headed had to be better than a day of listening to the petty tragedies of addicts and failed pickpockets.

I was wrong.

Brass rivets seemed angled to reflect the morning sun's already piercing rays directly into my eyes. The strange contraption of polished wood, shining filigree, and sturdy wheels appeared at once both ingenious and maniacal, descriptions also fitting its occupant.

"Ah, there we are at last," came the bored voice, hiding a hint of a witch's cackle. "I thought they might have lost you wherever they keep you hooligans filed away."

I'd kept Ms. Kindler waiting, apparently. She sat there grinning in her wheeled chair, a much more compact device than the bath chairs that typically carried swaddled invalids from quack to coffin. I resisted the urge to smack the wrinkles from her condescending look.

"Funny how often spirit hunting leads to petty theft," she went on. "You've been up to quite a bit of mischief, my dear. I'd have thought you would have learned your lesson after your last trespass turned out so poorly."

The sound of my own gritting teeth sent a shiver through my sneer. I started down the steps, barely restraining myself from sending her chair rolling down ahead of me.

"Manners, young Lady Cylphra," she tutted. "Your freedom didn't come cheap. At the very least you can repay me by wheeling an old woman home."

As furious as I was at the woman for sending me into the den of that nightmare at Barttley Manor, and for indirectly contributing to last night's arrest—from a certain point of view—the chains of my upbringing tightened mercilessly and dragged me back up the steps to my elder's aid. As I took the handles on the back of her chair I took some measure of satisfaction in knowing how many stairs and rough cobbles lay between here and Kindler's home, and the foreknowledge that we'd be hitting every one.

To her credit, Kindler minded her tongue on her backward avalanche down the station stairs, and we were soon holding up foot traffic on Willowbank Avenue. Nearly half of our journey passed in silence before she returned to her musing.

"I was awfully surprised to hear you'd been arrested—a clever girl like you."

Her voice needled my patience. "You're awfully well connected for an old lady. Lots of grandkids, or are they all just admirers of your stories?"

"Spend your life doing favors for others and they'll do favors for you when you no longer can. It's an arrangement that's played out quite well for me this far." She waited a moment before adding, "And admirers. I'm quite good, you know."

The semi-peace of our silent stroll broken, I had to know. "Did you know about Barttley?"

"Yes." The word was flat, unapologetic.

"And you sent me there anyway?" I sped the chair over a particularly deep pothole, taking a moment's bitter pleasure in her gasp of surprise.

"Don't fuss," she said, readjusting her dark sun hat. "You obviously came through it. Barttley's mostly molded away, and sometimes it's useful to have firsthand accounts of old news—even if the worms have gotten at most of his sanity. He's dangerous to all the right people out there in his rot."

"He tried to rip me apart!" I protested.

"You're the one who went chasing after corpses, and you're upset that you found one? If Barttley bothered you so, then why are you here? Why didn't you just go home?"

Her questions' validity made them all the more frustrating, and good answers didn't leap to mind. "I'm no coward," was all I could come up with, and it sounded weak and hollow even as I said it—especially knowing how often the urge to flee had gripped me in the past days.

"No, you're not, are you." Her candid response surprised me and we wheeled on in silence for several minutes. I could tell something was percolating under the bonnet bobbing in front of me and I eyed it suspiciously, increasingly unsure of what to make of its wearer.

"So you obviously turned up something in your visit with Mr. Barttley. What did he have to say about your ghost?"

I told Ms. Kindler of my encounter at Barttley Manor, of the horrible patchwork dog-thing, my discussion with Mr. Barttley, how he tried to attack me, and how I inexplicably wound up face-down in the mud outside. I ignored her chuckle and went on, telling her how I tried to warn Lord Halboncrant and was thrown out, only to encounter Prince Lieralt outside. Finally, I explained meeting with Rarentz Troidais, how he'd come by the dagger that had once imprisoned the prince's soul but had since pawned it, and how I'd been trying to recover it when I was arrested.

Ms. Kindler listened but didn't remain quiet as I told my story, interjecting that Lord Halboncrant hadn't been found dead, as I'd expected, but had vanished entirely, the same as both Lord and Lady Geirais. She also frequently interrupted to ask clarifying questions as I went on, not only about what I'd discovered, but about what I thought of certain things or how I felt in situations. At some point during the discussion I started to feel as though I were being interviewed for a job—one I was relatively sure I didn't want.

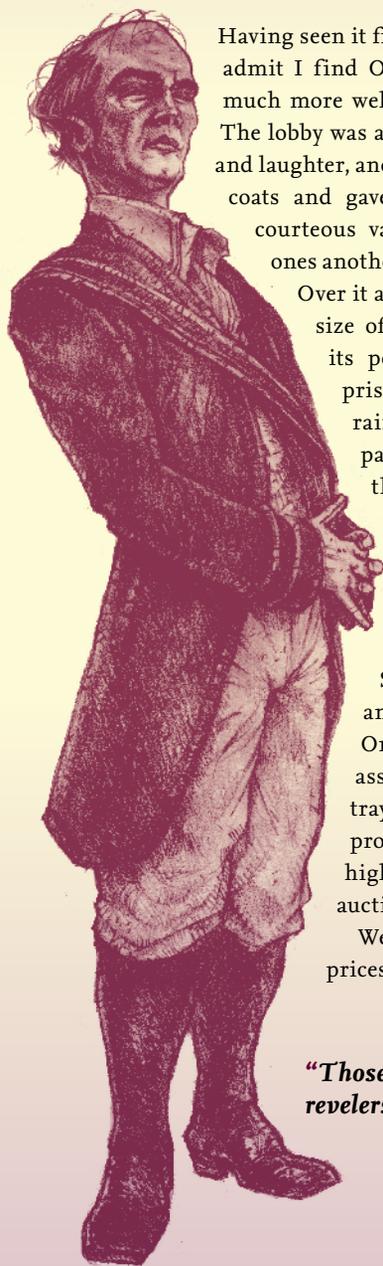
By the time everything was said I was dragging the wheeled chair up the steps of Ms. Kindler's earwig-infested porch. As she unlocked her door I mumbled something by way of thanks and turned to take my leave.

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“Where do you think you’re off to?” Kindler said as she wheeled herself inside. The condescension that had vanished midway through our walk had crept back into her voice. My look back and half-shrug were apparently all the comment she needed, as she didn’t wait for more of a response. “Come in, Ms. Cylphra. You have some studying to do.”

“Excuse me? What for?” I was thoroughly perplexed, and didn’t really have the time to visit with the old woman any longer—not that I had any clue as to how I might get the prince’s dagger after the previous night’s debacle.

“There’s work to be done before tonight,” she said, rising shakily to her feet. “As I said, it’s funny how often spirit hunting leads to petty theft.”



Having seen it from both sides, I have to admit I find Omberbain’s Auctioneers much more welcoming from the front. The lobby was abuzz with conversations and laughter, and while men doffed their coats and gave stern instructions to courteous valets, ladies cooed over ones another’s gowns and coiffures.

Over it all hung a chandelier the size of a modest sailing ship, its pearl fixtures and glass prisms scattering miniature rainbows across the wood-paneled floors and walls, the colors playing like sprites over portraits of dour strangers and displays of heavily polished but entirely virginal armaments.

Servants in the black and orange livery of Omberbain’s circled the assembled nobles with trays of refreshments and programs detailing the highlights of the evening’s auction.

Were it not for the reserve prices fixed near so many of

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the fine items on display, one might have mistaken the scene for a gallery opening or reception in some noble’s private showroom. In truth, though, those assembled weren’t revelers. They were vultures. The objects on the block this evening weren’t pieces of art, after all—they were heirlooms and antiques, family treasures carted in from the collections and lives of those who had committed the greatest sin a member of the Ardis aristocracy could: they’d gone broke. Now came the scavengers to gape at the corpses of whole houses laid bare, pecking and mocking the most intimate parts now that the innards had spilled into the open. Many of these gawkers were less than a half-step away from the same fate themselves, come not to buy but to mingle with the rest, all sharing in the communal lie of their worthiness and privilege.

All my reasons for forsaking this rose anew, leaving a fresh taste of bile in my mouth. Of course, now that we were there, the crowd wasn’t entirely made up of vultures—there were now vultures and thieves. I much preferred being in that latter camp.

No sooner had I pushed Ms. Kindler’s wheeled chair through the door than a tick detached from a circle of vultures. A greasy man wearing an orange-and-black sash like a royal commendation, he flung his arms wide in greeting as he came toward us, the few hairs on his oily pate clinging desperately to their places. “Lady Kindler, as I breathe, what an unexpected pleasure! Let me be the first to welcome you to Omberbain’s.”

I halted the chair abruptly, trying not to bowl the man over as he rushed forward. Ms. Kindler cursed, and I knew it wasn’t for my awkward handling. Around us, several of the nearer conversations had quickly paused and renewed with a new topic. Although Ailson Kindler might not be widely known by appearance, she was surely known by reputation, and extra attention would not make our task this evening any easier.

“Farbass Omberbain, my word—so flattering of you to remember an old woman,” Kindler said as our host came to a halt just before us. I must admit I was impressed. There was a shaking wistfulness in Kindler’s voice I’d never heard before, the exact tremble one would expect from a dowager with a foot in the grave. Even more impressive was how it came through the gritted teeth of an utterly false smile.

“My lady, how could I forget? Omberbain’s wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for you. You will always have a seat of honor in our hall—though I dare say, not a discount.” He chortled breathily at the obviously well-used joke. Ms. Kindler affected a mindless coo in response.

“Will we have the honor of you calling tonight’s auction, Mr. Omberbain?” she asked. “You inherited your father’s skill, if I recall, and I’m sure you’ve improved upon his technique in the years since he passed on.”

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“Oh, you flatter me, your ladyship. I don’t know how much of an honor it is, but yes, I’ll be overseeing the evening’s bidding. With Mr. Baldermol as my ringman.” He nodded vaguely to a stiff gentleman standing by the doors leading into the auction hall, an unfortunate figure with a face that appeared to be mostly chin.

I let my attention wander from the conversation, as I obviously wasn’t a part of it. No surprise considering the uniform Ms. Kindler had dressed me up in. Scanning the group casually, careful not to make eye contact with any of the nobles present, I tried to distinguish any potential hurdles to our plan—anyone who seemed likely to play hero when the chance arose. No one in the crowd fit the profile, but I was chagrined to see the auction house wasn’t entirely defenseless. To the contrary, in fact. I’d expected two, maybe four aging watchmen, mostly serving as stage dressing to imply the rubbish up for auction had some significance and value. Instead, at least eight footmen that I could see chafed in their formal wear. One openly adjusting his jacket revealed a heavy baton slid into his orange cummerbund. Already looking bored at their posts, these guards certainly didn’t carry the air of professionals, but they might still complicate matters. My confidence in not spending another night in the constables’ lockup was not increasing.

“We’ll just have to see,” Ms. Kindler said noncommittally. It wasn’t her words, but her repetition of the sentence that drew me back to the conversation.

“Well, do keep us in mind. An Ailson Kindler original tale would fetch top coin, and as you’re a friend of the house, I’m sure we could come to an arrangement regarding our percentage.” Mr. Omberbain hurried on excitedly, the color of gold almost evident in his eyes. “But don’t answer me now. Just think it over during the course of the auction. We’ll talk afterward.”

Some new arrival blessedly caught the greasy auctioneer’s attention. “Lady Kindler, if you’ll excuse me. Do enjoy the evening’s events, and good luck in your bidding.” He leaned close to her level, whispering conspiratorially, “We’ll talk later.”

Ms. Kindler smiled vapidly and nodded, putting on a fine show even as she reached back to touch my hand. I took that as my cue to see to our escape in case Omberbain’s attentions returned to us.

“Man’s breath smell’s like a river trout,” Ms. Kindler groused as I wheeled her to the rear of the decadent lobby, hiding behind the statue of a stag-horned knight that had won relatively few attendees’ consideration. I couldn’t help but chuckle. “Fetch a program, dear,” she said, “and let’s see what we’re in for.”

With little trouble I waved over a servant who handed me a lavender handbill. Beneath a colophon bearing a

stylized “O,” two even columns listed the lots on the block that evening. While interesting pieces of artwork, items of especial worth, and the names of dishonored former honors dominated much of the space, several larger lots also listed attractive particularities. The second lot after the evening’s intermission included multiple pieces of display weaponry. Amid the showpieces and weapons of imaginary heroes ran the most understated description on the page: “barbarian dagger with gemstone.”

“It’s this one here or it’s none of them,” I said, leaning to show Ms. Kindler.

She made her own examination and nodded. “The timing should be manageable if this is the one. That Baldermol fellow Omberbain pointed out, he’ll be the one to watch. Keep a careful eye on him and you’ll manage fine.”

“I’m still not sure I have the talent for this. It’s really more my brother’s forte.”

“Oh, should we fetch him then? If he’s here, you really should have introduced him.” Kindler looked up at me archly. Her sarcasm dropped as quickly as she’d summoned it. “You’ll do fine, girl. No getting squeamish now. Let’s find our seats.”

For two of the most fantastically dull hours of my life, Ms. Kindler and I sat in the lavish auction hall in silence, watching nobles dicker over niceties they’d likely have to auction themselves in a few short months. Aside from Mr. Omberbain’s florid descriptions and speedily slurred bid calling, the bargaining transpired in silence, adversaries staking increasingly ludicrous sums, more desirous of the prestige of winning than the actual items on the block. For most of the time, though, I kept my attention fixed on the craggy Mr. Baldermol and his mysterious role in the evening’s business. He and Omberbain shared a language of glances, nods, and gestures I found utterly mysterious. Even as the auction house’s owner announced a twenty-minute intermission and invited the assemblage to partake of refreshments in the lobby, I had little more insight into the gentleman’s duties than I had when I entered. As I rolled Ms. Kindler back into the lobby, I let her know.

“Little time to worry about that now,” she said, waving my concern away. “We’ll make do.” She pointed toward a dimly lit hallway leading deeper into the building. “The house keeps offices and meeting rooms this way. Let’s see if we can find one to our liking.”

I wasn’t concerned that anyone was going to miss an elderly lady and her maid, and so made no disguise of our intentions, strolling away from the muttering assemblage. Once in the shadowy hall a few yanks on sturdy door handles revealed a packed cleaning closet, a locked office door, and finally a cramped meeting

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chamber. It was an impersonal side space, likely for agents to discuss their employers' business, in which a half-dozen high-backed chairs circled an antique wooden table. Little effort had been made at decoration, aside from a few sizable frames that looked empty in the gloom, and a sideboard bearing two sturdy candelabra and a pocket flint.

Ms. Kindler nodded her approval and we rolled inside. Before I had finished lighting one of the candles, she had already produced a thick fold of parchment and was quickly opening it square by square. I could feel the first dull thrum of a headache beginning behind my eyes as I scanned the unfolded sheet. Dozens of elaborate symbols wound unevenly across the page, their shapes straddling the line between letters and diagrams. Their complexity aside, each figure appeared to writhe and readjust upon the page, and focusing on any one only seemed to make it lift away like a fleck of dust floating in one's eye. It could have merely been a trick of the poor light and the wavering candle flame, but I knew the truth: magic hated me.

When she'd originally produced this folded-up spell—which she'd been using as a place marker in some massive tome—Ms. Kindler had subjected me to something of a refresher on arcane theory. I'd had some instruction in the field in my youth, but the combination of my own impatience and my brother's easy talent had soured me toward the subject completely. Since then, I'd had enough mishaps with would-be wizards and magical devices to realize the arcane arts held me in similar regard.

I opened my mouth to again protest this part of our plan, but Ms. Kindler—likely anticipating my complaint—cut me off. “You'll be wanting to fetch him now, we haven't much time.”

Restraining most of my grumbling, I found a false smile and went back into the lobby. It took me several minutes to locate Mr. Baldermol, long enough to leave a fluttering sensation in my gut out of fear that he'd departed early and the entire evening had been for naught. Finally, though, I found him emerging from a washroom and approached him, to his obvious surprise. I didn't say much, and he said even less, but I let his imagination fill in the innuendo as he curiously followed me back to the meeting room.

Letting him enter before me, I could sense his confusion as he saw the old woman sitting there in the candlelight, smiling up at him pleasantly. He straightened, obviously reassessing the situation. I brought the handily placed twin to the pewter candelabrum on the table down on the back of his head before he had time to excuse himself. With polite quietness he crumpled to the ground and I closed the door behind us. In the hall beyond a muffled echo announced that the auction would resume in five minutes.

“Alright, girl, we'll have to do this quick,” Ms. Kindler said, pulling the magical document close to the table's edge. I was done complaining at this point, and I resigned myself to the coming failure or success.

“Look closely at the face,” she went on, trying to be helpful but just putting me even more on edge. “That's the most important part. This will all be rubbish if you can't picture the face just right in your mind.”

I did what she said, taking in Mr. Baldermol's unhandsome features, imagining how they would look were they not half flattened upon the wood floor. With them set in my mind, I turned to face the page.

As expected, the symbols seemed to scatter as I looked at them, as though each line was written in ants rather than ink. Concentrating as best I could, I skimmed the page one final time, mouthing the complex and variable syllables as best I could remember. It was like reading a page in Kelish. I could make the sounds passably, but the meanings were utterly lost on me. Oh well.

I began and the sounds spilled out, varying from guttural gibberish to lilting murmurs. Although she couldn't unleash the page's magic for me, Ms. Kindler was obviously reading along, and rather than speaking the words was humming a sigil or two ahead of me, noting the syllables of each complex sound like a music instructor punctuating the beats of a song. My speed would have probably made the most inexperienced apprentice laugh, but I deliberately captured each symbol before continuing my steady pace.

I was shocked when a glow like ghost light began rising from the ink upon the page, a faint light that leaked up through the runes as though they were more than just strokes upon a page, and instead miniature windows letting in a radiance from somewhere else. I hesitated between sounds, but Ms. Kindler's touch on my elbow spurred me on. As I went on, the light intensified slightly, playing over the symbols as I read them. I had expected this, and in the moment's thrill sped up my reading, hoping to complete the page while the power remained present. The sounds came swiftly, and energy spilled from the words, exaggerating their shapes and crisscrossing the page. Nearing the end was like an avalanche. I was barreling through the words, speaking the sounds before I was entirely sure of the symbol I was looking at. It seemed to be working, so I went on.

Then something went wrong. It was immediate and unforgiving. The light spilling from the shapes was more than just a gentle glow. It was fire. I knew immediately that I'd lost control, and the ghost light tracings that had elaborated and enhanced the symbols upon the page lost their shape, spilling over the parchment like a sheet of flame, consuming ink and page and meaning in a blazing breath. The parchment was gone.

I gasped as though someone had smacked me, but aside from that could do little more than gaze at the empty table. Outside in the lobby, an echoing voice announced the end of the intermission.

“Don’t you have someplace to be?” Ms. Kindler asked.

I looked at her, puzzled. She was smiling her condescending half smile, and in response, all she did was tap my hand. What I looked down at wasn’t my hand, but a wrinkled, furless bear’s paw; a giant weathered thing, a man’s hand. The big scarred hand of Mr. Baldermol, in fact, poking out of a gentleman’s jacket. I couldn’t help but laugh and touched my face. It still felt like mine.

“Yes, yes, you’re the complete picture—and quite a sight at that. But it’s not going to do us a lick of good if you don’t get moving.”

I jumped as Mr. Omberbain hissed in my ear, “What’s wrong with you. Pull it together!”

I straightened my posture—or rather, Baldermol’s posture—and cast my eyes across the stiff-looking crowd. From my place standing before the stage I had a view of every seat in the house. Well, every seat but one. Ms. Kindler in her wheeled chair was nowhere to be seen.

On the stage behind me, Mr. Omberbain threw himself into an extravagant description of the next item up for auction. I’d stood through several of these now, trying my best to emulate the real Mr. Baldermol’s actions, acknowledging bidders and trying to take cues from Omberbain as best I could, but obviously I wasn’t grasping some vital aspect of my duties. So be it. All I had to do was last a few items more.

It took the better part of an hour before finally Mr. Omberbain announced our reason for coming that night.

“The next item for bidding is a true treasure, my friends: an exotic piece, cut from the wild mountains of the north, forged with the ferocity of the barbarian tribes, and wielded by many a savage queen. Don’t be fooled by its designs in gold and gemstone—even though they show delicacy and detail of the highest mastery—this fine dagger is much more than just a display piece, its razor-edged blade sharpened upon the hearts of a hundred virgin sacrifices. The bidding opens at 500. Shall we have 500?”

The bidding went swiftly, the blade fetching just over 900 gold pieces at the end—a paltry sum considering many of the ludicrous amounts bandied about that night. It wasn’t surprising, though—the dagger wasn’t a stylish

piece one might display upon a desk or in a sash. Rather, it would probably just get hoarded into a curio case, another piece for the servants to dust. It was small, though, so without surprise the auction’s winner stood to receive his winnings. Delicately, Mr. Omberbain handed the blade down to me upon a tasseled amber pillow.

How could anyone not know this diabolical thing for what it was? No sooner had I touched the pillow than my blood seemed gripped, pulled toward the blade. Had I some cut, I imagine my gore would have leapt right out of me and arced to the dagger, which would have drunk up every drop. It was thirsty—for blood, for life, for something more, making its unholy desires obvious in the obscene crimson glinting of its ruby hilt.

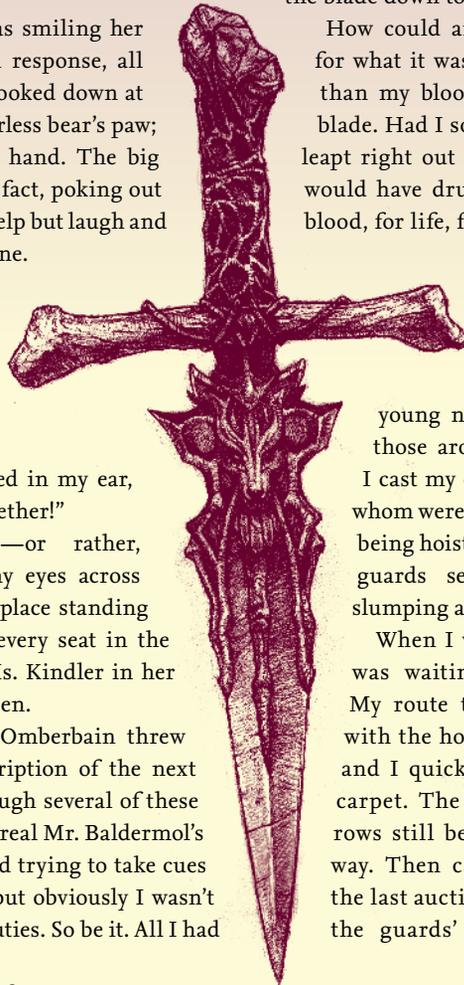
Swallowing hard, I marched Baldermol’s figure stiffly toward the dagger’s new owner, a pudgy young nobleman bobbing his head proudly to those around him. I tried to be nonchalant as I cast my eyes over the rest of the crowd, most of whom were directing their attentions to the next lot being hoisted onto the stage. Even the well-dressed guards seemed bored with the proceedings, slumping at their posts.

When I walked by the row the dagger’s owner was waiting in, no one immediately noticed. My route to the lobby door was unobstructed, with the house’s main doors waiting just beyond, and I quickened my pace up the aisle’s long red carpet. The murmur of confusion started in the rows still before me, and several eyes shifted my way. Then came a less than courteous call from the last auction’s winner. That was enough to catch the guards’ wandering attentions, and as they tried to suss out the source of the commotion, I folded the pillow into a sheathe around the dagger and broke into a full run.

The rows of perplexed and aghast nobles raced by me, shouts rising along with several gentleman making overtures of boldness. The guards had drifted from the doors over the course of the evening, and by the time they had their batons drawn I’d already be past them. The doors to the lobby opened wide, agreeably swinging out so I might sprint through unimpeded.

A barrier of brass and hardwood wheeled directly into my path, moving intentionally and obstructing most of the door’s opening. From her wheeled chair, Ms. Kindler’s narrowed eyes fixed on me as I charged toward her. She raised one liver-spotted hand and called out in a surprisingly firm voice.

“Stop, thief!”



***“How could anyone not know this diabolical thing for what it was?”***