

The Loyal Thief of Morrow

When they were children, Amarie had said to him, "Meet me in the woods. Once you get to the widow's cottage, go east. Keep going until you think you're lost, then go a little further. That's where you'll find me."

That evening, while the sun set, Keiran left the city of Morrow and followed her instructions. He found her where she said she'd be. Only after he swore an oath of secrecy did she show him the first thing she'd ever stolen. A pocket watch. Gold and ticking and engraved with a name he didn't recognize. Not knowing what to do with it or wanting to get caught with it, he climbed the birch tree and looped the chain around a branch.

Ten years passed. Since then, she had taken it down without telling him and sold it to a fence. She brought the money to a wandering apothecary who offered her hope in the shape of a glass vial. With the promise of a full recovery for her aunt who lay in bed with chills and sweats, she ran home where she served the tincture in a cup of tea. As the days got longer, she watched for signs of improvement, but they never came.

On the first snow fall, Amarie buried her aunt, and, after the debt collectors claimed what was theirs, she was left with nothing.

Desperation enlightened her. The pocket watch didn't fall into her hands by some miracle and the miracle of evading the guards was not beginner's luck. She was good at the art of charming valuables from loose pockets and from behind shoddy locks. A thief she was, so a thief she became.

She joined Keiran soon thereafter in his endeavors to survive as a guttersnipe. Even when her aunt was alive, she never cared whether or not he was a flat-footed orphan or that he seemed to lose track of his morals on occasion when it benefited them. She only cared that he knew how to have fun and knew people who could get them into places where they shouldn't be. Their friendship turned into a partnership, and a profitable one, until one day, she looked at the horizon and began dreaming of what riches lie outside the walls of Morrow.

She still returned to the city every cycle or two of the moon with her jacket pocket full of rare jewels from beyond the sea. He would agree to sell them for her, now and again, but would never admit that he missed their little talks in the woods.

On a clear day, Keiran rode east of the widow's cottage, cutting a trail through the yellow leaves. He saw her before she saw him. Lost in thought but not unaware, she leaned against a shedding birch. The wind sweeping through the trees loosened strains

of dark hair from the low bun at the nape of her neck. She tucked them behind her ear as she turned to him.

He said as he dismounted, "I hope I didn't make you wait."

"Only long enough to appreciate the turn of the season." The suede of her boots and the silk lining of her coat told him enough about her recent success. She looked him up and down, scowling at his uniform. "Red is not your color."

"I didn't join the royal guard for the uniform." From the saddle, he unhooked a leather satchel, heavy but silent, the coin stacks inside wrapped in leather to prevent the tell-tale clinking of gold. He went to hold it out to her but hesitated. The way her hazel eyes captured the sunlight made him reconsider how much gold he counted out. .

"Do you still go by Arabella?" he asked.

She laughed. "I haven't heard that name in a long time."

"Cynthia. Leona. Maria. Claire. Anna," he guessed.

"Getting warmer, Keiran. Or do you go by some other name now, too?"

He didn't answer. He held the satchel out to her, and she took it, asking, "How much?"

"Thirty-one imperiums." Seventy percent of what he told her he sold it for and what the brooch was worth on a day when the merchants were too busy napping on their piles of foreign gold.

She wrinkled her freckled nose. "You promised more."

"I did," he admitted. "That was before I learned the snow in the mountains melted early and our well-off, northern neighbors traveled south ahead of schedule. Market's flooded."

"This one was particularly difficult to get a hold of."

"So you said."

When she first asked him to find a buyer, she told him about her card game at the famous tavern in Selbek. The Road's End, as it was called, was known for being overly crowded, so much so that anyone sitting at the farthest tables from the bar received cups of dregs because the barmaids would holler and point and send sloshing tankards across the room on a sea of fumbling fingers. After several nights of tailing her opponent, the one with the dragonfire brooch, Amarie sat across from him at a table of eight. His thick brows bunched together more and more as each hand passed, as he

tried to figure out how a girl like her amassed the pile of gold on her side of the table. He refused to lose, and she knew it. It was only a matter of time before he unpinned the brooch from his lapel and added it to the pot. At that moment, an ace fell out of her sleeve. Her opponent erupted, spewing curses and throwing his tankard at her. She ducked. It hit the sailor behind her. The sailor stood up, fists up. By the time the fight started, she had wiggled out of the hands trying to catch her and bolted towards the exit, sliding over tables and knocking over tankards as she did. She lost her pursuers easily enough and paced around her safe house, an abandoned manor near the harbor, until she heard the specific knock given to the barmaid before the card game. The barmaid hurried in, trying to catch her breath, the brooch in hand. She paid the barmaid handsomely for her efforts.

Amarie weighed the bag of gold before shouldering it and turned from Keiran. She walked back to her horse grazing nearby.

He called after her, "Do you have plans tonight?"

She answered over her shoulder. "Not with you."

He snorted, feeling like a fool for thinking the answer would be different this time.

She nudged her horse forward, giving him a smirk as she rode away. Under the yellow leaves, he watched her until he could no longer see her through the trees or hear the hoof beats of her horse, then he mounted his own horse and started towards the city with an identical satchel containing more than his thirty percent cut.

He hadn't lied to her, but he wasn't entirely honest. The mountain folk of Norwyn did come down from the mountain early, eager to clog the streets of Morrow and spend the gold they hoarded all winter, but he didn't sell the brooch to a fence or a merchant.

While standing guard at the prince's welcoming banquet for their northern friends, he overheard a particular conversation from one guest to another. Later, when he no longer wore the blood red of Morrow's crest, he approached the Norwyn noble and convinced him to buy the brooch for nearly double what he told Amarie it was worth. He pocketed fifty-nine of the ninety imperiums he sold it for.

It wasn't the first time he deceived Amarie, and it probably wouldn't be the last. She was always a good thief, but he was a better one.