

TRAITORS UNSEEN



BY DAVE DOBSON

A TALE OF THE INQUISITORS' GUILD

© 2020 by Dave Dobson
All Rights Reserved
First Printed Edition

1

STING THEORY

Crenn's voice was death-sentence serious. "You understand the plan, Emerra? This is important. Can't mess it up." He looked up and down the alley for a second time, but we seemed safe from prying eyes.

"Yes, Inspector. But it wouldn't hurt to go over the details once more. I want to get this right. You've cleared it with the High Inquisitor?"

"Yes, Sophie ordered it. I have her written approval here." He pulled out a folded sheet of parchment. "There's no issue with this. It's just that only a few of us know, because it's sensitive. We think Hollick has a spy in the Guild."

That made sense. And if the Chief had ordered it, then I was sworn to obey. "She'll be at the Wounded Wren?"

"Yes, on Tower, by the wheelwright there, the one with the painted wagon out front?"

"I know it. I walked by yesterday, after our shift, to make sure."

"Well done." He put a gentle hand on my shoulder. "I'll be nearby, close enough to come if you need me, but I'll try to stay inconspicuous, hidden if I can." Crenn stood. "I'd do this myself, except I'm pretty well known, and you're brand new. I don't want us recognized. Shout if there's trouble. I'll be near." He reached

into his satchel. "Here's the money. The coins are marked, as we discussed. Go ahead and count it, so we've double-checked."

He handed me a leather pouch. I undid the knot and loosened the drawstring. It was full of gold sovereigns. I counted them into my hand while he watched. Twenty total.

"Weren't there twenty-two? In the original set?"

"That's right. We kept two back at headquarters so that we'd have something to use if we needed an augury."

"I thought money didn't work well for auguries."

He smiled. "You paid attention in class. Good. You're correct that money doesn't usually work. But these were the stolen goods, recovered from Jobur, intended as payment to Hollick. They are the connection between her and the crime. They'll work for an augury in this case, if we need to track the money."

"And the dagger? Will she want that?"

"No. Jobur said he took the dagger just for himself. We can use that in an augury too, if we need to. The money is what Hollick wanted. Payment for protection, past due, plus extra for the delay. That shopkeeper is lucky that Jobur just robbed her and didn't kill her. Hollick doesn't know he took twenty-two. We got to Jobur too fast. Twenty will be fine, more than Hollick probably expects."

I checked for the mark on a few of the coins. It was there, below the neck of the stamped image of Prelate Jeroch, the leader of Frosthelm. Four tiny holes in a line, two sets of two. They were notched into the gold, no more than tiny specks. I held the coins for a moment. They were small, the size of a thumbnail, but each of them was three months' wages for a provisional inspector like me. I was looking at an amount it would take me five years to earn. More than I'd ever seen at once by far. My mother, a cobbler, earned her pay in coppers, silvers at most. A cobbler's daughter earned even less. My father was away now, following the Brigade as a porter, and when he came home, all he usually had was stories and trinkets, not money. I doubted we ever had a gold sovereign in the house during my whole life.

"That is a lot of money," I said.

"It sure is. That's why this is important. Hollick controls most of the criminal activity in the dock area, and if we can figure out who she's bribing, we might be able to shut her down. We think she's turned someone in the Guild. It could be she's reached the Guard too. That would explain her success, and why she's been so hard to catch."

I returned the coins to the pouch and hooked it over my belt. I wasn't in uniform today. That would have been foolish, as it would have ruined my assumed role as a low-level courier for the thief, Jobur. I had shabby enough clothing to pass as that, I thought. All my off-duty clothing was faded and patched, though patched well. I'd grown up with needle and thread in my hands almost before I could talk. And I didn't buy anything I didn't need. I sent my wages home. My mother and my brothers could use the money far better than I could, especially with my younger brother's illness. I had the Guild dormitory as a home, and for a silver a week, I was housed and well-fed. Now that I was through the training program, and a provisional inspector at last, I was proud to be able to help my family.

"All right then," said Crenn. He patted my shoulder again. "It's not hard. Just get in, find her, hand the money over, and get out. Talk as little as possible. Ask someone if you need help, but you've seen the sketches, and she should be obvious. She's usually near the back, at the table by the kitchen door. You'll do fine, Emerra."

"Thank you, Inspector, and thanks for trusting me with this. It means a lot to me." I set off down the alley. He rearranged his satchel on his shoulder and pulled his warding rod around his hip for better access. I didn't think we'd run into sorcery, but he always carried it regardless of his task. It was a mark of honor, really. There were only a few in the Guild talented enough with magic to use the rods. I had not been one of them.

Crenn was a good partner and a good mentor. I was lucky. He was the most senior inspector at his rank, below only the High

Inquisitor, Sophie Borchard, and her two Inquisitors, Arbus and Finn. I had learned a great deal from him in my first two months on the job. Our class of apprentices only had five graduates, and the other four had broken into pairs, leaving me the odd one out, looking for a partner. Crenn's long-time partner had just retired from the Guild, so he volunteered to take me on. A great opportunity for me.

I looked back down the alley, and he was still there, leaning against the wall. He was older than many inspectors. Around fifty, I thought, based on the year he'd graduated from training, but I hadn't asked. A long career, with many successes and much respect in the Guild, all earned. Just a few years ago, he'd solved the violent murder of a baroness, one of our highest profile cases in a long while. Baroness Ilstia's death had been the talk of the city. Crenn had earned high praise, including a commendation from Prelate Jeroch himself.

Crenn saw me looking. He nodded to me, and I nodded back. I rounded a corner, out of sight. He would follow, but I needed to get some distance first.

Sixth bell rang out from the clock tower across the city. This late in the year, the sun would set soon. I could already see the sky dimming and the shadows growing long. I walked a few more blocks. This district, between the city's two market squares, was called The Kidney, supposedly for its curved boundaries, but I'd never seen a strong resemblance. It was prosperous, but not overly so – a mix of shops and taverns with modest homes tucked in wherever they could fit, often on the second stories of the stone and timber buildings. The streets were narrow but not oppressive, and the frequent colorful signs for businesses gave it a friendly cheer. I liked the neighborhood, although it was a step or two above my family's station.

It was cold, and I wished I'd brought my scarf, but I hadn't been able to find it. I was intensely conscious of the weight of the pouch at my belt. The twenty small coins weren't heavy, but they bore

down on me. If I messed this up or lost the money somehow, I'd be in terrible trouble. Unlike Crenn, I didn't have a long record of able service to fall back on.

I pushed those thoughts away. I needed to focus. Keep it simple, speak as little as possible, get in, get out.

I walked a long way, making a few turns to get myself onto Tower street. Around me, the shops were closing down, although the taverns and inns were lively. I saw the people of Frosthelm heading home, or meeting friends, or finding a meal. It was a nice time of day, and most were happy and relieved to be done with the day's work.

I could see the painted wagon ahead on the right. Marlon Bellwether's Carts and Transport, it read. Nearly there. Behind the wagon, I could see the sign for the Wounded Wren. A carved bird with a sagging wing, painted brown with white spots, and gold letters underneath. It looked like a nice place, at least from the outside. I had not gone in the day before. I'd worn nondescript clothing then too, and I left my brass Guild ring back in my room, as I had tonight.

There was a tall woman outside the door. She had a sword at her belt, and she was dressed in a leather jacket over padded leather trousers. Light gear, but good protection. The left side of her head was shaved close, with black stubble standing out against white skin. The top and right had straight black hair swept to the side, hanging down to her jawline. She had three black dots on her cheek, either painted or tattooed. I couldn't tell in the dimming light. I moved past her to the door, but she held out a hand.

"No riffraff in here. Move along."

"I'm here to see Hollick," I said.

"She's no need for the likes of you. She's a discerning type."

Not really. I knew for a fact she associated with a number of morally challenged individuals, Jobur among them.

"I've got a payment for her. Jobur sent me."

"Show me."

I considered. I didn't want to reveal how much I had. I didn't even know if this woman actually worked for Hollick, or the tavern, or was just accosting people on the street. I didn't think she'd start anything with the streets this busy, but there weren't any guards nearby, and I had no idea how far away Crenn was. Too much of a risk.

"It's for her only," I said, looking the woman in the eye. "Turns out I'm discerning too." I shook the pouch so that it jingled. I thought that was worth the danger. There would be no reason to suspect that it held gold rather than lesser coins.

The woman laughed. "All right. But let me check you for weapons."

That was fine. I was unarmed. Part of the plan. I spread my legs apart and held up my arms. The woman patted around my legs and sides, running a finger around in my boots and at my wrists. She squeezed my knee. "You're a cute one, you know. Come find me if you want, after." That was not happening. She held out a hand. "Name's Lissa. Figured I should tell you, now that we're so friendly."

I smiled, small and false, and shook her hand. "Nice to meet you. You finished?"

Lissa put a hand on my shoulder. "Only if you want me to be." She grinned.

"Hold that thought," I said. "Business first." I pulled away, and she let me go.

She laughed again and pulled on the door handle. The door swung open, and I stepped through.