

PROLOGUE

The Heist

JAMES CLAY LAID on the thin wool blanket, staring up at the ceiling as winter sunlight filtered in through the cracked window. Sleep had eluded him once again. Stig's words from the previous week haunted his days and nights.

"For your outstanding bill," the bar owner had growled.

The previous week had been an absolute nightmare. After Stig and the landlord's ill-tidings, James had forcibly confined himself to his bed on the floor, sick with withdrawal. Even now, his fingers twitched for a glass of whirl, but his vow to never taste alcohol again remained firm.

For someone who had been raised on false promises, keeping his own came naturally. He saw for himself what could happen to those who did not. Yet with all the will James Clay had, he failed the one person who mattered. Vows, he learned too late, weakened after every sip of alcohol.

He could always count on his life getting a lot worse, yet when the landlord threatened him with an eviction notice the day after Stig's unannounced visit, James found himself at a loss for what to do.

"For your outstanding bill," echoed Stig's words.

His little sister, who was a mere sixteen years of age, woke with a start. Her arms flung out wildly to smack the vestiges of her nightmare away. Stig haunted her too.

James sat up, licked the sourness of sleep from his teeth, and surveyed his sister's sniffling form at the opposite side of the dingy one-bedroom apartment they could no longer afford. The small pile of rags he had concocted into a makeshift bed for her had long since lost its comfort.

"I'm sorry," had become James' customary morning greeting since the attack.

Rosemary rolled onto her side to face him. "I don't like being threatened, Jimmy. I don't like you being threatened. You're all I have."

"I know."

"That was all the money I had saved," came Rosemary's watery retort. "Everyone around here already knows what happened to us. They heard me screaming when Stig broke down the door. They heard me, but they didn't come en' help. Mr. Alvyn wants us to leave by weeks end. Where are we going to go? Can't he see we're victims?"

James folded his legs under his body on the cold and dirty floorboards. He wanted to say, "Everyone who lives in the Hovels is some kind of victim," but instead he rested his hands on his knees and cleared the weariness from his voice.

"We'll get through this. We always find a way."

The whites of Rosemary's eyes were bloodshot. "They fired me, Jimmy. They fired me for having skinny fingers, but then they went en' hired two foreigners. Split the salary they were giving me between them, I bet. It's not fair. I was good at washing. The steam never bothered me."

James' hands shook. He had a constant headache that made him sluggish and irritable, but Stig's shakedown gave him the resolve he needed to stay sober. "I'm going to see about a job today. Should fetch enough money to get us out of this place. We'll go someplace warm. How about the Kingdom of Marzhan or Vorroco?"

James didn't know if the job he spoke of would be as fortuitous as he described, but he promised his sister all the same. If he promised it, he would keep it. He had to.

Rosemary sniffled. Her voice, which was normally a soft melody, was thick with mucus. "Who you going to steal from this time?"

"Rosemary," James grumbled. "You know I've only ever stolen from people who can afford to lose a bit."

"And if you fail with this job, those goonies you call friends are going to come for us. I know how this works, Jimmy, en' I want out."

"I'm getting us out!" James' hands shook and he was glad Rosemary was crying too much to notice. More calmly, he added, "Just give me some time."

Rosemary went quiet, and then in a voice harmonious and full of sorrow, said, "Time collects debts, too." She pulled a blanket of decaying fabric over her tearstained face. The same wine-colored hair as James' own poked out from the sheet in thin lockets and lay limp on the dirty floor.

James smoothed down his scruff of a beard with calloused fingers, slipped on black trousers, and laced together the secondhand leather boots the docks made him use for part time work. They still smelled like putrid fish, but he hardly noticed. The Hovels smelled worse. Over his soiled sweater, he donned a pewter-dyed winter coat full of holes before giving his sister a terse, "I'm off to Hops Street to see about that job. Be back tonight."

Rosemary didn't reply. She hadn't said much to him over the past week, but that was mostly because James had been a trembling sack of flesh and bone on the floor and she a wailing one.

Much of the capital had been destroyed during the Reaping several decades before James was born, when the strict, militarized government known as Guild Nation collapsed. The severely damaged areas had been rebuilt as tall and narrow, red-bricked housing for lower-income citizens. Called the Hovels, it was a place overrun with crooks, addicts, Guild Sympathizers, and the disenfranchised like James and Rosemary, who had no one to care for them and nowhere else to go.

He ducked under a line of clothes strung between two buildings, bypassing babies with chubby cheeks who wailed at their mothers from beaten up prams. A gaggle of women huddled together in the dirty street. Every day they gathered in the same spot to gripe about which new jobs were outsourced to foreign workers. Rosemary was well on her way to joining them.

Hovels excluded, James liked living in Rydén. Other parts of the bustling city were nice. There was history in the capital, and families with surnames that could trace their lineage back generations. Having emerged as an epicenter for internationalism after the war, scores of trade businesses and organizations made the capital of the United Democratic Federation—or UDF as the nation was often shortened to—a highly desired place to live.

While the city grew around those pockets of growth, the Service Quarters remained the true heart of the nation. As the oldest area in the capital and comprised of the most important of places, it was also the most expensive.

The Service Quarters housed the Headquarters of the Constabulary Force, a government task force simply referred to as the CF. There was also Core Clinic, Yarrow Academy, and the Hive, a newspaper owned and operated by Elvira Waxworth. Then there was the infamous Guild Square, an old set of brick city manors once owned by high-ranking Guild officials.

Days ago, a man like James would have been able to walk the streets of the Service Quarters without much fear of being accosted. These days, however, he and everyone like him had to lay low from the CF, for the Prime Minister had announced his retirement after fifteen years of service. The United Democratic Federation was entering a new phase.

Vagabonds and thieves were placed under surveillance for every kind of election, but for one of this prominence, they were rounded up and arrested for the smallest infraction. All eyes would be on the capital from now until the election. The government wanted to keep the streets clean and the city safe until the scrutiny eased. A waste of resources.

As James walked, he contemplated his impending meeting. Only fools planned a heist in the midst of an election. A lock of oily hair fell into his mouth. He spat it out. This was a job he desperately needed. Ricky Dickson promised it to be a good one and Ricky Dickson was not one to embellish words. The man was a crook, but he was honest about the crooked jobs he offered.

Once on Hops Street, he passed bar after bar with his head firmly cast down. His hands trembled, imploring him to stop for a drink. He shoved them into his pockets and mustered on. Covertly checking to see if a constable tailed him, he turned a corner into a dirty side-alley that reeked of garbage and smoke.

Ricky was already there, leaning against the brick wall of James' former favorite bar and smoking a handmade roll of tobacco. Two streams of smoke exited his nostrils. A crinkled newspaper was folded in the bend of his arm.

"Jaimsie," Ricky greeted lowly. Balding and unhappy about it, the petty thief once spent five years in prison for nearly killing a woman during a botched robbery. "Thought you might have ducked out of this one."

James grabbed the roll and took a drag. The smoke burned the back of his throat and swirled around the inside of his lungs. A splash of cheap whirl normally followed. His body nearly convulsed when it didn't receive the drink.

"You smell like piss, Ricky."

"You don't smell of roses neither. Speaking of roses...how is your sister? Heard she paid your debts."

James itched to punch Ricky in his pocketed face. He handed the roll back and spun the conversation to the heist. "What's the job?"

"It's a big one."

"You know I'm the best. This job better be worth the risk."

“You’ve been starving yourself again,” observed Ricky. “Giving all you got to your little sister, eh? Must have been a real shock to her. There she was, supporting you both with a steady income, and then bam! She’s outta work and you’re outta work, and Stig comes knocking.”

James’ jaw clamped shut. Ricky was an observant man. From a single meeting, the petty thief knew just how desperate he was to have a job. His and Rosemary’s lives were in danger of starvation. Any food he managed to get went straight to his sister, who was well on her way to becoming a skeleton.

“Docks haven’t been hiring since summer,” James admitted at last. “It’s been rougher than usual.”

Ricky puffed on his roll. “Escapes me why the poor are always grouped under one broad classification. Poverty...it’s got levels, Jaimsie. Once you find yourself at the bottom, it’s nigh on impossible to climb up without help. Do you think those in the middle or upper class know that?”

James’ jaw loosened a bit more. “All I know is that dirt has more going for it than we do. Are we going to talk about the weather next or this life-altering job you mentioned yesterday?”

Ricky glanced up the side-alley for eavesdroppers before handing the newspaper over. “Have you read the paper today? Front page is always full of rich folks.”

James let the newspaper unfold in his grimy hands. A photo of the most famous girl in the nation stared back. Woman now, James mentally corrected himself as he scanned a shapely chest and wide hips.

Though bestowed with feminine beauty, thick, masculine eyebrows were the most prominent feature on her face. Voluminous black hair was swept into a bun at the back of her head, as it had been for the past three years, but a few loose strands dangled around her pale neck. Large eyes the color of diluted gray appeared purple from the light exploding from the reporters’ flashers.

The headline read:

FROM CADET TO CONSTABLE: THE COUNTDOWN BEGINS!

In small print below the caption of the young woman was a short description. James read it quickly.

Zenetra Noire, 19, beginning her last year of CF training.

He scanned the normal jargon that rehashed the Noire family history, something the papers always did to fill the front page, until the last few sentences, which were set as questions for the readers to ponder, caught his attention.

Has Zenetra Noire set her sights on her late grandfather's position as Commissioner of the Constabulary Force? Or will she take over Noire Transport, a company her mother built from the ground up and whose father currently runs? Better yet! Does she dare dream of a position like her great-grandfather, the venerated first Prime Minister of the United Democratic Federation, Áki Noire?

"Zenetra Noire," James said dumbly. "You want to rob the Noire family? What are you smoking, Ricky?"

"Is there a problem?"

"There sure is! Áki Noire ended the Guild. He led this nation out of a brutal regime that sought to eradicate all magic from the world and here you are plotting to rob his only living descendant." James folded up the paper and the image of the pretty constable-in-training disappeared into the creases. "No way, Ricky. The Noire family has been through enough."

"You talking 'bout that family curse?" Ricky drew a long puff from his tobacco roll and blew smoke out from black-pocketed nostrils. "My, my, my. Is James Clay afraid of getting caught in the crossfire? Rich folks do have the wildest entanglements."

Tragic events had plagued the Noire's, but James held no illusions of there being an actual curse on the family. Zenetra was the heart of the nation. She had been on the cover of newspapers and magazines since birth. The Hive had a field day with the Noire sisters after the murder of their mother, and then again when the elder sister went missing eight years later. Zenetra was the sole heir of a dynasty of hard work and tragic ends.

“If you don’t do the heist,” Ricky said languidly, “someone else, someone not as gentlemanly as you, will do it. Then there really will be a family curse.”

James’ spine straightened in defense. Ricky was coercing him into doing this job. “Do you know anything about the inside of that estate?”

Ricky examined James with pocketed nose up. A cloud of burning air hung between them. “They’ve got a vault somewhere in the family mansion,” he revealed after a pregnant pause. “Word is Orton Abelard buries money like a dog buries a bone. He’s let almost every employee go, save for his house steward, two butlers, a housemaid, a cook, the groundskeeper, and a handful of hired guards. All of them live on site and hardly venture out. It’s like a prison, that Noire Estate.”

“Surely he doesn’t hide the money from his daughter.” James glanced down to the crinkled face of the youngest Noire. “It is Zenetra’s company, after all, even if he is the one who runs it. Orton Abelard married Xareen Noire but never inherited her fortune. Everything went to their daughters.”

The burning bud came dangerously close to the paper as Ricky said, “Abelard’s in control of it, though, and with the way he pinches money, I bet his daughter will be the same. They have become the most reclusive family in the nation.”

“They don’t like the fame,” James offered intuitively. “It’s brought them nothing but misery.” He looked at the picture of the unsmiling rich girl in the newspaper and thought ironically of Rosemary. Ashes from Ricky’s cigarette fell onto the headline. James brushed them off before the paper ignited. “People are vicious creatures, Ricky. Viscous. They latch on to others and don’t let go until a person is ruined. Orton Abelard is just protecting his only remaining daughter.”

“They’ve retreated from society, Jaimsie. Zenetra Noire hadn’t been spotted for six years until she joined the CF for training.”

Ricky closed his mouth as a drunkard staggered around the corner. The man took off his raggedy coat, set it on a tin garbage can, and unbuttoned his trousers. The alleyway filled with the sharp scent of piss, but Ricky and James were so accustomed to the sights and smells of this part of the city that they barely took notice.

Once the drunkard staggered back into the main part of Hops Street, Ricky returned to the subject at hand. “Zenetra Noire is set to inherit an exuberant sum on her twentieth birthday, Jaimsie. That’s in a few months.”

James watched Ricky acutely for any sign of falsity. “How much money are we talking?”

“One hundred million tollárs. That’s enough to travel around the world on a first-class airship a thousand times. Enough to buy a small city. She’s set to inherit the rest, which is rumored to be ten times as much, on her twenty-fifth birthday.”

James whipped the newspaper open so fast a corner of the front page tore. Zenetra Noire didn’t look so pretty anymore. “One hundred million? That’s almost criminal! I can’t even afford a loaf of bread.”

The roll of tobacco was nothing more than a stub. Ricky flicked it to the ground and stomped it out. “We need you to get inside that estate and monitor the situation so the rest of us can make our move without complications. Think you can manage that? We want to do this before the start of spring.”

It was never that clear cut.

“You just need me to scope it out?”

“That’s it,” said Ricky. “And get Abelard out of the way when it goes down. The girl shouldn’t be a problem. She lives in Guild Square with that old butler of hers and hardly visits the mansion.”

The job wouldn’t seem so bad to a novice, but James knew better. This was tricky business. He would be the first person caught if things went wrong. It required more of his time than any of the others involved in the heist. He had to survey and scout, get inside the actual estate and map the mansion room by room, dodge the

inhabitants and time things down to the second. Somehow, he had to find the vault, too. All said and done, this was going to be one bang of a headache.

“How much of the cut do I get?”

“Five of us are doing this heist, including me,” said Ricky. “We’ll each get twenty percent. Sound fair?”

“No,” James said. “I’m doing all the work. I want thirty-five.”

“You’re out of your mind!” wheezed Ricky. “But you’re right. Take twenty-five or I’m finding someone else.”

“You drive a hard bargain, Ricky.” James allowed himself one last look at the photograph of Zenetra Noire and decided. “Fine. I’m your man.”

A yellowed finger tapped James’ chest. “Don’t mess up.”

James swatted the disgusting appendage away. “Aye,” he huffed. “I know what I’m doing.”

After popping up the collar of his jacket, he slid the newspaper into the fold of his armpit, stuck his hands into hole-ridden pockets, and made for the main part of Hops Street. He was careful to dodge the puddle of filth the drunkard left behind and absently noted the forgotten coat still draped over the garbage can. It was more threadbare and soiled than his own.

“Jaimsie,” Ricky called out. The end of the alley turned orange for a fraction of a second as he lit up another roll.

James stopped next to the drunkard’s coat and frowned. “Yeah?”

“If you do mess up, mess up good enough not to get any of us caught.”

“Aye.” If the heist was to happen before spring, James needed to start planning immediately. He turned away with a sour, “See you soon.”

The bells tolled the arrival of the city tram, a free but crammed public transportation vessel. It was the slowest vehicle Noire Transport had ever created and wasn’t convenient enough to ride except when travelling

long distances. Noire Mansion was too far to walk, so James elbowed his way onto the back of the public vehicle and hung half in and half out as it crept through the city.

An hour later and bruised in his sides from all the sharp elbows that assailed him, James hopped off in front of an almost empty Eastwood Park. Ahead of him wound Noire Lane, a private street that dead-ended up a hill. Noire Lane housed many impressive buildings, including the architecturally astounding Noire Mansion. James could see the enormous building in the distance, with its peaked roofline and massive stone walls the color of white lace sitting solid and regal at the top.

Pulling out the newspaper from his jacket lining, he scanned the image of Zenetra Noire again. An idea percolated. He and Zenetra were near in age. Bypassing the estate's security would be tricky but if he played it right with her, he wouldn't have to get inside to get the money.

He could get the money brought out to him.

Hearing a distant bell tolling the arrival of another tram, James shoved the paper under his armpit once more and caught a ride back into the main part of the capital. It was risky entering the Service Quarters, what with all the constables looking to toss people like him into a cell, but it was necessary to scope out Zenetra Noire's known locations if his plan had any chance of working.

He got off near Guild Square, where five-story high rectangular manors squeezed together to form one solid block of bricks. They had all been whitewashed since the revolution, with only the doors painted different colors to signify them as separate structures.

James heard music blasting from behind a pea-green door. The singer's voice sounded so much like his mother's that he nearly tripped over his own feet. A curtain brushed aside, and then the face of an aristocratic woman with high cheekbones and a pointed nose peered out.

He picked up his pace and passed each door with mounting unease. He did not belong in Guild Square, not even to walk through it, and anyone who bothered to look out their window would be able to tell.

The street was lined with expensive roamers. Like the city trams, they were transportation vessels on wheels, but unlike the trams, roamers traveled much faster. There was a certain freedom granted to those who could afford a roamer, with a type of luxury only a small percentage of people had. When James spotted a roamer of gilded opulence parked outside a manor house with a black door, he knew immediately to whom it belonged.

He tried not to stare at the roamer, as he had seen it often enough in the papers, yet could not stop himself from slowing his pace to admire it. The beautiful black and gold vessel reflected his scraggly image. Though he did not know how to drive, he desperately wanted a roamer of his own.

Zenetra Noire had caused quite a stir when she moved to Guild Square. James remembered it was all anyone talked about, including Rosemary. The Hive had alluded to there being disparege between Orton Abelard and his daughter—encouraging it even—but the story fizzled out when it was announced that Zenetra had moved into the old manor house with the black door so that she would be closer to the CF.

“She’s going to be another great one,” James recalled Rosemary saying. His sister was probably right. Zenetra would be another great something.

He continued through the quiet neighborhood, took a corner out of Guild Square, and found himself on a bustling street. An imposing white tower loomed across the way.

The white tower was James’ main source of nightmares. It was the Headquarters of the Constabulary Force, a building arresting in sight alone. Nine stories high and with a two-level basement meant for archives and evidence, it was a building full of sharp angles and even sharper investigators. There was a rumor circulating the Hovels of there being a third level in the basement that held Guild Sympathizers. Though James was not a member of the magic-hating group, he hoped the rumor held no basis of truth.

Zenetra Noire was somewhere inside that towering building. It had been announced three years ago that she would be joining the force as a trainee. To “keep her options open,” James remembered one headline reading.

The newspaper Ricky gave him said Zenetra was now in her last year of training. That only meant it would be more difficult to trick her. He had to play his act well if he had any chance of getting close.

Estimating the walking distance between Guild Square and the CF headquarters, the wheels in James' conniving brain began to turn. He went to cross the busy street. So distracted by his plotting, he failed to see the speeding roamer until it was too late.

Tires squealed. A roamer with a steel front and a white cabin swerved. James glimpsed the whites of two wide eyes behind glass before a side mirror clipped him. He stumbled back onto the sidewalk clutching his arm. The newspaper dropped to the ground.

Several roamers honked, one blaring so long that James' ears rang even after it stopped. A few people in tailored suits who had seen what happened gave him a once over, decided he was either fine or wasn't worth the effort to help, and continued on their way. A pair of constables standing across the street spotted him. Their eyes narrowed in suspicion.

James massaged his injured arm and watched the constables from under red lashes. His newspaper had fallen onto a patch of slush leftover from the last snowfall, making the ink bleed through the pages.

The constables began to cross the street.

Embarrassed and in danger of being arrested, he turned to flee into Guild Square when a long-forgotten voice shouted his name.

“Jim!”

James froze. A breath caught in his chest. He was sixteen again.

At the end of the street stood a man whose gloved hand rested firmly on a cane. He was well into his sixties and wore a dark jacket with a stiff collar, a stark white tunic that was buttoned up so tightly James was sure it was strangling, and shining black leather boots. The man pulled a brimmed black hat down over his face and made a beeline for James. He limped as he closed the distance.

“Captain Inglehart.” James’ voice cracked uncharacteristically with emotion. The constables walked by with a polite nod to the well-dressed captain. “You don’t know how good it is to see you.”

Captain Levy Inglehart stopped a foot from James, his stare piercing. “My word, lad. You look like you’ve seen better days.”

James blinked back tears and cleared his throat. “I’ve fallen on hard times but I’m on the up and up. Just looking for work.”

Captain Inglehart’s eyes flitted over James’ shabby state. “This must be a sign then. My winger had baby number three and I’ve just been called in for a time-sensitive rescue operation. You remember the way around a Kahiki, don’t you?”

James was instantly thrown back to the first time he had seen Captain Inglehart’s airship. Did he remember the way around a Kahiki? That was laughable. Buttons and levers, and a wheel that went *tuk-tut, tuk-tut tuk* when it was free to turn at will. Warmth from firestones and the crew who teased him as he watched the kukoo’s float around in the balance barrels. The porous rocks had fascinated him at the time. Setting them with firestones produced a gas strong enough to make a ship fly. What sixteen-year-old wouldn’t be impressed by that?

“I remember.”

“Good,” said Captain Inglehart. “You were always a smart lad. Would you want to work for me again? You know I pay well, and who knows? This could turn into something more permanent.”

“I—”

“You just said you were looking for a job,” Captain Inglehart recapped, boring holes into James’ face. “I’m offering one, but I need to know your answer now.”

James gulped. He had so much to do for the heist and little time to spare. “How long will it take?”

Captain Inglehart regarded James keenly. “Don’t know. A week or two, I should think. Is that a problem?”

They wanted to do the heist before spring, Ricky had said.

“So we would be back well before spring?”

“Quite.”

Just as when he had been a lad of sixteen, James felt trapped in the captain’s leveling gaze. “I’ve to make sure my sister is looked after, you see. We’re about to be kicked...we’re about to be in-between places.”

Captain Inglehart’s gaze softened. “Homeless, huh?”

James felt vaguely embarrassed to have his misfortune spoken so easily by someone he admired.

“I forgot you had a sister.” Captain Inglehart rubbed his salt-and-peppered beard. “How old is she now?”

“Sixteen. Same as me when I was your mucker.”

“I know a place that can offer your sister room and board for work,” said Captain Inglehart. “A tavern by the docks. Owner is a close, personal friend. Thistle would make sure your sister is cared for while you’re out with me.”

“Thistle?”

“Maude Wood. We call her Thistle on account of her bristly personality. You’d like her.” Captain Inglehart patted James’ shoulder. “So? What say you?”

“That sounds perfect.”

Captain Inglehart came very close to smiling. “You’ll take the job?”

He weighed the heist against the captain’s offer. There was plenty of time to plot after returning and if James was being honest with himself, he knew he couldn’t afford a single meal until after he collected his twenty-five percent. He and Rosemary would both starve to death well before the heist would take place. Spring was an awful long time to wait for a payday.

“I need half the pay upfront,” James admitted. “Then I’m your man.”

Captain Inglehart adjusted his stance. The cane lifted off the pavement and dipped back down. “If I give you half upfront, then I need some kind of insurance that you’ll show up.”

“Name it.” There was a hint of desperation in James’ voice he was sure the captain noticed.

“You have your identification booklet on you?”

James nodded.

“Come with me.” Captain Inglehart pointed the end of his cane at the white tower across the street. “I’m about to meet with Commissioner Fokle. Register as my winger and it’s a deal.”

“Meet with—?”

James worried at the frayed edges of his jacket sleeve and grimaced. Ricky could have tailed him from Hops Street. He would surely be labeled a rat if he was seen entering the Headquarters of the Constabulary Force in broad daylight alongside a reputable captain.

He was good at spinning stories, though. He had to be in order to get food handouts and free glasses of whirl. Spinning Ricky around until the pocketed-nosed man was dizzy would be a cinch.

“Sure,” James agreed. “Lead the way.”

“Good lad!”

Captain Inglehart slapped James’ arm and limped his way across the street. At the bottom of the stairs to the entrance of the tower, where a metal statue of Sebastian Noire stood sentinel, he tapped James’ shin with the end of his cane.

“Say, Jim,” muttered Captain Inglehart. “You aren’t in any trouble, are you?”

James did not fancy the idea of lying, but the heist was his way out of the city so he settled on a half-truth.

“Not yet, I’m not.”

“You let me know if you need some help, won’t you?”

James could have hugged the man. “You would be the first person I’d go to if I needed help, Captain. I trust you more than I trust myself.”

Captain Inglehart smiled at that. “I trust you too, lad. Family takes care of family, and you’re an Inglehart. You remember that when times get tough.”

A weight lifted from James’ shoulders. Captain Inglehart’s sentiments meant more to him than a twenty-five percent share of the Noire fortune.