

City of Lies, by Lian Tanner (The Keepers #2)

Chapter 1: A message from the museum

The scream woke Goldie Roth from a deep sleep. She sat bolt upright, thinking for a moment that she was back in the terrible events of six months ago, with the city of Jewel on the brink of invasion and her friend Toadspit about to be murdered in front of her eyes.

Then she heard Ma's quiet voice in the next room, and she knew that Pa had had another nightmare. She slipped out of bed, threw a dressing gown over her shoulders and hurried into her parents' room. 'Pa?' she said. 'Are you all right?'

Pa smiled weakly up at her from a knot of bedclothes. 'Sorry to wake you, sweeting,' he mumbled.

'Your father had a bad dream,' said Ma. 'But it's gone now.' And she too smiled, though her knuckles were white and her fingers trembled.

It pierced Goldie to the heart to see them trying to pretend that nothing was wrong. She unknotted the bedclothes and tucked them around Pa's shoulders, wishing there was something more she could do. 'Were you dreaming about the House of Repentance again?' she said.

Pa flinched. He and Ma glanced at each other, and a world of pain and sorrow passed between them.

It was a little more than ten months since the two of them had been imprisoned in the dungeons of the House of Repentance. They had never told Goldie what had happened to them there, but she could see the scars that were left behind.

Pa had dreadful nightmares. Ma had a cough that sounded as if it would tear her lungs out. They were both too thin and, even now, long after their release, they had an exhausted look about them, as if something was gnawing at them from the inside.

Goldie wished that they would talk to her about it. But they never did. Instead, they sighed and changed the subject.

'A— A message came for you today, sweeting,' said Pa, struggling to sit up. 'Where did I put it? It was from the Museum of Dunt.'

This time it was Goldie who flinched, although she hid it so well that her father didn't notice. Memories flooded through her. *Toadspit – his whole body plastered in*

mud – turned towards her and laughed. A warm canine tongue swept across her face, and a deep voice rumbled, ‘You are as brave as a brizzlehound—’

With an effort, she dragged herself back to the present. Pa was fumbling for a scrap of paper that lay on the table beside the bed. ‘Here it is.’ His forehead creased. ‘It’s from Herro Dan and Olga Ciavolga. It seems that they want you to be the museum’s Fifth Keeper!’

Fifth Keeper of the Museum of Dunt ... The familiar longing welled up inside Goldie so suddenly and so strongly that she could hardly breathe.

She said nothing, but Pa must have seen some echo of it on her face. ‘Do you— Do you *want* to be Fifth Keeper, sweeting? Because—’

‘Because if you do,’ interrupted Ma, ‘we wouldn’t stop you.’

‘We wouldn’t dream of stopping you!’

‘It’s just—’

‘It’s just that it’s such a big responsibility,’ said Pa. ‘We’re worried that it might be too much for you.’

‘And—’ Ma gripped Goldie’s hand. ‘And you’d have to be away from home such a lot.’

She began to cough. Goldie patted her gently on the back and tried not to think about the Museum of Dunt, and how much – how *very* much – she wanted to be Fifth Keeper.

‘Of course,’ said Pa, chewing his lip, ‘it’s possible that Herro Dan and Olga Ciavolga really need your help. If they do—’

‘If they *need* you, then you mustn’t hesitate,’ said Ma. She tried to let go of Goldie’s hand, but didn’t quite manage. ‘Your father and I talked about this earlier.’

‘We did,’ said Pa. ‘And we both agreed. If they need you, you must go!’

Goldie could hardly bear it. They were doing their best to be fair, but she could see how much they hated the thought of her being away from home for even a little while.

And so she forced every scrap of longing out of her voice and said, ‘They don’t *really* need me. They’ve got Sinew and Toadspit to help them.’

Pa frowned, wanting to believe her. ‘Are you sure?’

‘You’re not staying home because of us, are you?’ said Ma, still clutching her hand. ‘You mustn’t do that. We want you to be happy.’

A warm canine tongue swept across her face—

Goldie smiled. ‘I *am* happy,’ she said. And because she was a trained liar, she sounded as if she meant it.

She sat with her parents until they drifted off to sleep again. Then she tiptoed back to her room, pulled on her smock, woollen stockings and jacket, and slipped out the front door.

Ten months was not such a long time really. But to Goldie – hurrying through the silent Old Quarter towards Toadspit’s house – it felt like a lifetime. Ten months ago she had worn a silver guardchain that tied her to her parents or to one of the Blessed Guardians. She had never been anywhere alone, and was almost as helpless as an infant.

But then she ran away and took refuge in the Museum of Dunt. And in the months that she spent there, she grew up. More than that, she became an accomplished thief and a skilled liar. She learned the Three Methods of Concealment, and the First Song, and how to act with a steely courage, even when she was almost overwhelmed with fear.

The lessons fed some deep need inside her, and the museum quickly came to feel like home. The only thing missing was Ma and Pa. *They* were locked up in the House of Repentance, imprisoned by the Fugleman, the leader of the Blessed Guardians.

And why were they imprisoned? —

Goldie turned the corner onto Gunboat Canal. ‘Because of me,’ she whispered.

In the Jewel of ten months ago, running away was a crime. The Fugleman could not get his hands on Goldie, but it was the easiest thing in the world to pluck Ma and Pa from their beds and drag them before the Court of the Seven Blessings. There they were tried and sentenced for being the parents of a criminal child.

It was my fault, thought Goldie. *Everything that happened to them was my fault.*

It had rained earlier in the night, and the footpaths of Gunboat Canal were slick with mud. Goldie stopped outside Toadspit’s house, took a deep breath, and threw a pebble at the window above her head. Then she slipped back into the shadows and waited.

She had lied when she told her parents that the Museum of Dunt didn't need her. The museum *did* need her, to help guard the dangerous secrets that lay within its walls.

But Ma and Pa needed her too, and she could not leave them.

She wrapped her fingers around the enamel brooch that she wore on her collar – the brooch that had once belonged to her long-lost Auntie Praise. But the little blue bird with its outstretched wings brought her no comfort.

Pa thought that there had only been one message from the Museum of Dunt. He was wrong. In the last few months Goldie had had more than a dozen messages, each one asking when she was going to take up her position as Fifth Keeper.

Tonight she would reply.

Never.