

## Museum of Thieves, by Lian Tanner

### Chapter 1: Separation Day

Goldie Roth hated the punishment chains. She hated them more than anything – except perhaps for the Blessed Guardians. As the heavy brass cuffs snapped around her wrists, and the weight of the chains fell on her shoulders, she stared sullenly at the cobblestones.

She knew what would happen next. Guardian Hope would quote something at her. Something stupid from the Book of the Seven. Guardian Comfort would probably quote something too, and they would both look pleased with themselves.

Yes, here it came. Guardian Hope tugged on the punishment chains to make sure they were properly fastened, then she raised one plump finger. ‘An Impatient Child,’ she said, ‘is an Unsafe Child.’

‘An Unsafe Child,’ said Guardian Comfort, folding his hands piously in front of him, ‘Puts All Other Children at Risk!’

*All I did was try and hurry a little bit,* thought Goldie. But she said nothing. She didn’t want to get into more trouble than she already was. Not today. Oh no, *definitely* not today ...

She squinted out of the corner of her eye at her classmates. Jube, Plum, Glory and Fort were looking anywhere but at Goldie, hoping that her trouble wouldn’t rub off on them. Only Favour was watching, her eyes serious, her hands flicking together and twitching apart in the small, secret movements of fingertalk.

To the Blessed Guardians, it probably looked as if Favour was picking at the threads of her smock, or twisting the links of her little silver guardchain. But to Goldie, the words were as clear as glass. ‘*Don’t worry. Not long now.*’

Goldie tried to smile, but the weight of the punishment chains seemed to have dragged all the happiness out of her. ‘*This was supposed to be GOOD day,*’ she signed fiercely. ‘*Now look at me!*’

‘Was that a *scowl?*’ said Guardian Hope. ‘Did you *scowl* at me, Golden?’

‘No, Guardian,’ mumbled Goldie.

‘It *was* a scowl, colleague,’ said Guardian Comfort. The morning was hot already, and he had pushed his heavy black robes away from his shoulders and was mopping his forehead. ‘I *distinctly* saw a scowl!’

‘Perhaps the brass chains are not punishment enough,’ said Guardian Hope. ‘Let me see. What can we do that will make the lesson more memorable?’ Her eyes fell on the little blue enamel bird that was pinned to the front of Goldie’s smock. ‘That brooch. Where did you get it?’

Goldie’s heart sank. ‘Ma gave it to me,’ she mumbled.

‘Speak up! I can’t hear you.’

‘Ma gave it to me. It belonged to my auntie Praise.’

‘The one who disappeared years ago?’

‘Yes, Guardian.’

‘Disappeared?’ said Guardian Comfort, raising an eyebrow.

‘Praise Koch went missing,’ said Guardian Hope sourly, ‘the day after she Separated. She was too bold, of course, like her niece here. Without a guardchain to protect her, she probably fell into one of the canals and drowned. Or was kidnapped by slave traders and carted away to a life of misery and despair.’

She looked back at Goldie. ‘This brooch is important to you and your family?’

‘Yes, Guardian,’ mumbled Goldie.

‘And I suppose you think about your *bold* aunt when you are wearing it?’

‘Yes— I mean, *no*, Guardian! Never!’

‘I don’t believe you. Your first answer was the truthful one. You should not have such a trinket. It sets a bad example.’

‘But—!’

Guardian Hope jerked at the punishment chains. *Clank clank clank*, they went. Goldie bit off her protest. Any other day she would have argued, whatever the consequences. But not today. *Not today!*

Briskly, Guardian Hope unpinned the blue brooch and slipped it into the pocket of her robes. Goldie watched that hopeful little bird disappear into darkness.

‘And now,’ said Guardian Hope, ‘we must be on our way.’ Her mouth twisted in a sarcastic smile. ‘We must not be late for this *important* ceremony, must we. The Grand Protector would be *sooo* disappointed.’

She set off across the Plaza of the Forlorn, with Goldie stumbling beside her. *Clank clank clank*. The other children tagged along behind Guardian Comfort, their guardchains attached to his leather belt. Everyone they passed stared at Goldie, then quickly looked away again, as if she was diseased.

People were used to seeing children chained, of course. Every child in the city of

Jewel wore a silver guardchain on their left wrist from the moment they learned to walk until their Separation Day. Whenever they were outside the house, the guardchain linked them to their parents, or to one of the Blessed Guardians. At night it was fastened to the bedhead, so that no one could break into the house and carry them off while their parents were sleeping.

But the punishment chains were different. The punishment chains were fastened to *both* wrists. They were far heavier than the little silver guardchains, and they clanked shamefully so that everyone knew you had displeased the Blessed Guardians. Which was a *very* dangerous thing to do ...

As they approached the Grand Canal, Goldie heard a dull roar ahead of them. Guardian Comfort stopped and **inclined** his head. ‘What’s that? Is there danger awaiting us, colleague?’

Guardian Hope shortened the punishment chains even further and dragged Goldie along the narrow street to the next corner. Goldie gritted her teeth and tried not to think about the blue brooch.

‘No danger,’ shouted Guardian Hope. ‘It’s merely a crowd.’

Guardian Comfort ushered the rest of the class up to the corner, and they all stared at the throng of people walking along the boulevard that ran beside the Grand Canal.

‘Where are they going?’ said Guardian Comfort. ‘The markets aren’t until tomorrow.’

‘I imagine they’re going to the Great Hall,’ said Guardian Hope. She raised her voice. ‘To witness this *Separation* ceremony. This *Abomination!*’

Several of the passersby turned to see who had spoken. When they saw the two Blessed Guardians, they seemed to shrink a little, as if the mere sight of the black robes and black, boxy hats made them afraid.

Goldie felt a spurt of anger. She hated the way the Guardians made everyone act as if they were smaller than they really were. She shifted her hands so that Favour could see them.

*‘Tomorrow I go catch brizzlehound,’* she signed. *‘HUNGRY brizzlehound. Put in sack, bring back to Guardian Hope. “Oh Blessed Guardian, here is gift to thank you for years of tender care. Please open without caution!”’*

Favour’s face remained blank, but her eyes laughed. *‘Won’t work,’* she signed. *‘Brizzlehound die of fright when see Guardian Hope’s ugly mug.’*

‘I don’t know what the Grand Protector can be thinking of,’ muttered Guardian

Comfort, peering at the crowd. ‘Lowering the Age of Separation from sixteen to twelve! If she had any sense she’d *raise* it! To eighteen. Or to twenty!’

‘The Protector is a fool. She believes that the city is safer than it used to be. She thinks it’s time for a change,’ said Guardian Hope. She and Guardian Comfort looked at each other and snorted rudely. Then they stepped forward into the crowd, dragging the children with them.

People quickly made way for them, and before long they were walking in a large space. It was as if, thought Goldie, there was an invisible line drawn around them that no one wanted to cross.

‘Look at them,’ hissed Guardian Hope. ‘They avoid us as if we were dogs. They don’t know how lucky they are, having us to protect their children!’

‘Perhaps we should remind them, colleague.’

Guardian Hope nodded thoughtfully. ‘Perhaps we should.’ She raised her voice. ‘It must be obvious to any *thinking* person, colleague, that the Protector is making a *serious* mistake in lowering the Age of Separation. Do you not think so?’

‘I *do*, colleague. A *very* serious mistake.’

‘Jewel is as dangerous now as it ever was. It is only the vigilance of the Blessed Guardians that keeps the children safe. Take away that vigilance and we will go straight back to the bad old days! Has everyone forgotten how *terrible* those days were? Have they forgotten the *drownings*? The *diseases*?’

‘Purple fever,’ said Guardian Comfort, shivering dramatically. ‘Suppurating heart scab. *Plague!*’

The people within earshot looked at each other uneasily.

‘Have they forgotten the slave traders?’ said Guardian Hope.

*Have you forgotten your brooch?* whispered a little voice in the back of Goldie’s mind.

Goldie’s eyes widened. All her life she had heard this voice, like a whisper from somewhere deep inside her. Sometimes it got her into trouble; sometimes it got her out again. She had never told anyone about it, not even Ma and Pa. Not even Favour.

*She’s not going to give it back,* whispered the voice. *And you might never get this close to her again.*

Goldie glanced down to where her right hand was pressed against Guardian Hope’s robes. *Uh uh*, she thought, mentally shaking her head. This was *definitely* one of those getting-into-trouble times. Imagine the fuss if Guardian Hope found the brooch gone!

*She'll think she lost it*, whispered the little voice. *And besides, it's Separation Day.*

Separation Day! The day when Goldie's silver guardchain would be removed forever! From now on she would be allowed to walk the streets by herself, without being tied to one of the Blessed Guardians. It was like the beginning of a new life.

Maybe the little voice was right ...

Guardian Comfort leaned towards Guardian Hope. 'I am reliably informed,' he said in a loud voice, 'that the slave traders' ships lie just over the horizon, waiting for us to lower our guard! Natkin Gull, Old Lady Skint, the infamous Captain Roop. What can a twelve-year-old do against such monsters, tell me that?'

A man on the edge of the invisible circle muttered, 'The Seven Gods protect us,' and flicked his fingers anxiously. Goldie flicked *her* fingers too, just in case.

The Seven Gods of Jewel were not kindly deities. They were violent and unpredictable (except for Bald Thoke, whose main problem was a strange sense of humour). Worshipping them was a tricky business. You couldn't ignore them, because Gods don't like to be ignored. But calling on them for help was risky. If they were in the wrong sort of mood they might well rain down balls of fire, when what you had actually asked for was warm weather for ripening the mangos.

So, like most people, Goldie called on them in times of trouble. But at the same time she flicked her fingers, which meant, 'Don't worry about me! Please go and help someone else!'

She certainly didn't want Great Wooden and his immortal companions taking an interest in her now. She didn't want anyone else watching her either. Luckily, everyone in the slow-moving crowd was staring straight ahead, trying to make themselves small and unimportant so that the Blessed Guardians wouldn't pick on them for anything. No one was watching *her*.

Goldie thought of the little blue bird, lost in the darkness of Guardian Hope's robes. She thought of Auntie Praise. *Bold* Auntie Praise! She drew in a deep breath. She pushed the cuff of the punishment chain as high as it would go up her arm, so it would not clank or get in the way. Then she slipped her hand into Guardian Hope's pocket.

She had always been good at moving quietly. Now she felt her way through the darkness as silently as a falling leaf. The treacherous chains remained quiet. Guardian Hope strode beside her, scowling.

Goldie's fingers touched outstretched wings.

And suddenly she got the feeling that someone *was* watching her. Her hand froze,

still in the pocket of the black robe. As innocently as she could, she looked around. She couldn't *see* anyone watching. It was just an ordinary, frightened crowd. Except ... except for one particular spot that her eyes seemed to slide across ...

*Look harder*, whispered the little voice in the back of her mind.

Goldie looked harder. She saw a flicker of black that didn't seem to belong to any of the people around it. For some reason it was hard to fix her eyes on it. The light sort of ... *slipped* past it, as if it was too unimportant to worry about.

*Look harder.*

And then Goldie saw him. A tall thin man wearing an old-fashioned black coatee with sleeves too short for his long arms, so that his wrists stuck out at awkward angles. He was keeping pace with the little group of children and Guardians, and staring straight at her.

When he saw her staring back at him, his face went blank with surprise. He ducked behind another man and disappeared into the crowd.

The strength came back into Goldie's fingers. She closed them around the little blue bird and eased it out of Guardian Hope's robe. Its wings seemed to flutter in her hand, as if it was thanking her for its freedom.

Despite the weight of the punishment chains, a wave of excitement welled up inside Goldie. It was Separation Day. An hour from now, she too would be free.