

Path of Beasts, by Lian Tanner (The Keepers #3)

Chapter 1: The captive city

It was night-time when the three children entered the city of Jewel. Ragged and filthy, they clung to the shadows, their feet making no sound on the cobbled paths.

They had been gone for weeks, torn away from home without the chance to say goodbye, and they were bursting with impatience to see their parents. But they carried secrets with them – secrets that would get them killed if they were caught by the wrong people. And so they stopped and listened at every corner.

They saw no one, but the hair on the backs of their necks prickled and their faces were pale with tension.

This was not the city they had left behind. Fear hung over the streets, as thick as fog. The light of the watergas lamps seemed to tremble as it spilled across the deserted footpaths. The houses, with their locked doors and tightly drawn curtains, held their breath.

The children crept deeper and deeper into the city, until at last they came to the Bridge of Beasts, where it crossed the Grand Canal. They paused there, watching for any sign of movement. Then they slipped across the bridge one by one.

They were close to their homes now, and eager to keep going. But the last few weeks had taught them the value of caution, and they paused again.

It was just as well they did. Somewhere nearby a boot struck the cobblestones. Immediately, Goldie gave a hand signal and all three children pressed into the shadows at the end of the bridge. Toadspit wrapped his fingers around the hilt of the sword that he carried at his side. His younger sister Bonnie gripped her longbow. But Goldie shook her head fiercely at them, and they did not move again.

The five men who came swaggering up the middle of the boulevard were clearly soldiers, although their uniforms and haversacks seemed to be made up of bits and pieces from a dozen different armies. They carried rifles slung across their chests, and their eyes and teeth gleamed in the gaslight. They looked as if they owned the city and everything in it.

Goldie had been expecting something like this, but still it was a shock to see such men on the streets of Jewel. She found her hand straying towards the sword on Toadspit's hip. Her breath quickened ...

No! She jerked her hand back. The wolf-sark, the battle madness that she carried so unwillingly inside her, lay just below the surface. If she drew that sword she would be lost. She had almost killed someone last time the wolf-sark took hold of her. She would not risk it happening again.

She swallowed her anger and prayed that the soldiers would pass quickly.

But the soldiers seemed to have no intention of passing. One of them, a tall man with red side-whiskers that curled almost to his chin, leaned his rifle against the canal fence and took biscuits and a water canteen from his haversack. His companions copied him.

Toadspit touched Goldie's hand, tapping out a question in the quick, subtle movements of fingertalk. '*Go or stay?*'

Goldie chewed her lip. She and Toadspit could easily slip away without being seen. If they *really* wanted to, they could probably steal the biscuits out of the soldiers' hands and leave them wondering where their supper had gone. But Bonnie had not had the same training and might well be spotted.

'*Stay,*' she signed.

The men lounged against the fence, throwing biscuits at each other and guffawing at the tops of their voices, as if they wanted everyone in the surrounding houses to hear them and tremble. They reminded Goldie of the soldiers that she and Toadspit had encountered deep inside the Museum of Dunt, behind the Dirty Gate. *Those* soldiers were the remnants of an ancient war that only survived within the museum. They carried pikes and swords and old-fashioned muskets, and spoke in the accents of Old Merne.

But these men were modern, and their scrappy uniforms suggested that they were mercenaries, whose loyalty could be bought and sold. Goldie wondered what they had done with the city's militia. And where was the Grand Protector? *She* would never have allowed mercenaries on the streets of Jewel—

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a street-rig clattering over cobblestones. The mercenaries hastily shovelled food and drinks back into their haversacks and grabbed their rifles.

'What sort of idiot drives around after curfew?' growled the red-haired man. 'Anyone'd think they *want* to be stuck in the House of Repentance!'

'They're coming this way,' said one of his companions, and he strutted out into the middle of the road.

Spoked wheels rattled towards him. An engine roared, and headlights pierced the shadows that surrounded the children. Goldie dared not look at her friends, but she could feel Bonnie as tense as a wire beside her, and Toadspit, balanced on the balls of his feet, ready to run. If the mercenaries turned around now ...

But the men were strung across the boulevard, blocking the path of the approaching street-rig. For a moment, Goldie thought that it wasn't going to stop. It rumbled towards the soldiers at a steady pace, bathing them in light. Its horn blared twice. An angry voice shouted something incoherent. The mercenaries raised their rifles and took careful aim at the cabin behind the lights.

With a squeal of brakes, the street-rig skidded to a halt. The engine died. The shout came again, but this time Goldie heard it clearly.

'How dare you? How *dare* you? Remove yourselves from our path immediately!'

The mercenaries didn't budge. 'Out of the rig,' said the red-haired man in a bored tone. 'Come on, make it quick.'

There was a mutter of voices and, to Goldie's relief, the headlights snapped off. By the time her eyes had adjusted, two people were stepping down from the street-rig – two people wearing the heavy black robes and black boxy hats of the Blessed Guardians.

A shiver of loathing ran through Goldie. It was more than six months since the Blessed Guardians had been banished from the city. The Grand Protector had put them on trial first, for treason and cruelty. Then she had thrown every single one of them out of Jewel, with a warning never to return.

But here they were, back again.

Goldie touched Toadspit's hand. '*Leave now, while they're busy,*' she signed.

Toadspit nodded, and murmured in his sister's ear. But before they could move, the two Guardians swept past the mercenaries and marched straight towards the end of the bridge.

'Hey!' shouted the red-haired man, striding after them with his side-whiskers bristling. 'Where do you think you're going? There's supposed to be no one on the streets at night. That's our orders.'

The Blessed Guardians stopped, not five paces from where the children crouched. One of them, a man with pale skin and protruding eyes, raised his eyebrows. 'The curfew doesn't apply to *us*, you fool!' he said, in a high, grating voice. 'Go and carry out your orders somewhere else.'

He turned to his companion, as if the mercenaries had already gone, and waved his hand at the canal. ‘This place will do as well as anywhere. It is tidal here, and the levees are open. The – ah – rubbish will be swept out to sea before morning.’

‘But what if it is not?’ said the second Guardian, a woman, in worried tones. ‘If someone sees it, it could cause trouble.’

Goldie’s heart pounded against her ribs, and her fingers crept to the bluebird brooch that was pinned inside her collar. The Guardians had only to turn their heads, and she and her friends would be discovered.

‘If someone *sees* it,’ said the pale man, ‘we will simply convince them that they did *not* see it.’ He laughed. ‘And if they persist in their error, well then, I believe there are still plenty of empty cells in the House of Repentance.’

Behind him, the mercenaries muttered to each other. The red-haired man clearly resented being called a fool and, when the Guardians turned to walk back to their street-rig, he blocked their path.

‘The way *I* see it,’ he said, ‘no one on the streets means *no one* on the streets. Nothing in our orders about making an exception for people in funny hats.’

His friends sniggered. The pale man sighed, and spoke slowly, as if he was dealing with very small children. ‘Listen carefully. I am Guardian Kindness, and this—’ he nodded to the woman at his side ‘—is Guardian Meek. We are here on the Fugleman’s business. Remember the Fugleman?’ His voice was sarcastic. ‘He is our leader. He is also the Lord High Protector of this city. Which means that, while you are in his employ, he is *your* leader as well.’

Goldie felt Bonnie’s cold hand slip into hers, and knew that they were all wondering the same thing. If the Fugleman, the worst traitor in the history of Jewel, was truly in charge, and calling himself Protector, what had happened to the real Protector?

‘It would not be wise,’ continued Guardian Kindness, ‘to hinder us. In fact, you would do better to help. We have a certain parcel that we need to dispose of. Please get it out of the rig and bring it here.’

The red-haired man snorted. ‘You want us to do your work for you? I don’t think so!’ He began to walk away. The other mercenaries followed.

‘You *will* bring it here, if you know what’s good for you. We are the servants of the Seven Gods and they will not be kind to those who oppose us.’

Something in Guardian Kindness's high voice made Goldie's skin crawl. She flicked her fingers to ward off the attentions of the Seven Gods. So did the red-haired man. But he kept walking.

The youngest of the mercenaries, however, hesitated. 'What sort of parcel?'

'It is just some rubbish that we wish to dispose of,' said Guardian Meek quickly. 'It won't take a minute to throw it in the canal. A strong fellow like you—'

'Leave it!' snapped the red-haired man, over his shoulder. 'It's their business, not ours. We're not taking orders from *them!*'

'It is apparent,' said Guardian Kindness, 'that you do not understand your proper place—'

He was interrupted by the very ordinary sound of a man clearing his throat. It had an immediate effect. The Blessed Guardians snapped to attention. A chill ran up Goldie's spine. She heard the hiss of Toadspit's indrawn breath, and felt Bonnie's nails dig into her hand.

The door of the street-rig swung open. An elegant boot appeared, followed by an immaculate trouser leg. A cloak, blacker than the blackest of nights, fell around that leg in perfect folds. A sword glittered in the lamplight.

It was the Fugleman.