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**CALLIE
HART
QUICK
SILVER**



HODDERSCAPE



THE CLIMB

“Y’KNOW, there’s really no need for all this *violence*.”

It was common knowledge in Zilvaren City that to lie to a guardian meant death. I knew this in a firsthand, painful way that most other Zilvarens did not. Almost a year ago to the day, I’d watched one of the queen’s men clad in beaten golden armor gut my neighbor for lying about his age. And before that, and far worse, I’d stood silently in the street while my mother’s throat had been split wide open, spilling jets of hot, peasant blood into the sunbaked sand.

As the handsome guardian’s hand closed around my neck now, his beautifully engraved gauntlet reflecting the glare of the twin suns overhead like a golden mirror, it was a miracle I didn’t crack open and yield my secrets like a piece of overripe fruit. His metal-tipped fingers gouged deeper into the hollow of my throat. “Name. Age. Ward. Spit it out. Low-tier citizens aren’t permitted in the Hub,” he snarled.

Like most cities, Zilvaren, the Great and Shining Banner of the North, was fashioned after the shape of a wheel. Around the city’s outer limits, the different spokes—walls designed to keep people

contained in their wards—towered fifty meters high above the shanty towns and overflowing sewers.

The guardian gave me an impatient shake. “Answer quick, girl, or I’ll have you dispatched through the fifth gate of hell directly.”

I groped loosely at his gauntlet, nowhere near strong enough to break his grip, and smirked, rolling my eyes up toward the bone-white sky. “How am I s’posed to tell you...anything if I...can’t...fucking...breathe?”

The guardian’s dark eyes simmered with rage. If anything, the pressure he applied to my windpipe intensified. “You have any idea how hot it is down in the palace cells during reckoning, thief? No water? No clean air? The reek of rotting corpses is enough to make the high executioner vomit. You’ll be dead within three hours, mark my words.”

The palace cells *were* a sobering thought. I’d been caught stealing once before and had been sent down there for a grand total of eight minutes. Eight minutes had been enough. During reckoning, when the suns, Balea and Min, were at their closest and the afternoon air shivered with heat, being trapped belowground in the festering sore that passed as a prison beneath the immortal queen’s palace would not be fun. And besides, I was badly needed *above* ground. If I didn’t make it back to the forge before dusk, the deal I’d spent hours brokering last night would fall through. No deal meant no water. No water meant the people I cared about would suffer.

Much as it irked me, I submitted. “Lissa Fossick. Twenty-four. *Single*.” I winked at him, and the bastard squeezed harder. Dark hair and blue eyes weren’t common in the Silver City; he *would* remember me. The age I’d given him was real, as was my pathetic romantic status, but the name I’d provided wasn’t. My *real* name? No way I was handing that over without a fight. This bastard would shit himself if he realized he had *the* Saeris Fane in his grasp.

“Ward?” the guardian demanded.

Gods alive. So insistent. He was about to wish he’d never asked. “The Third.” ☉

“The Thi—” The guardian shoved me down onto the blistering sand, and super-heated particles scorched the back of my throat as I accidentally breathed them in. I sucked my next breath in through the sleeve of my shirt, but filtering out the sand that way only did so much; a couple of grains always worked their way through the fabric. The guardian staggered back. “Residents of Third Ward are quarantined. Punishment for leaving the ward is...is...”

There *was* no punishment for leaving the Third; no one had ever done it before. Those unlucky enough to find themselves scraping out a living in the dirty back alleys and stinking side streets of my home usually died before they could even *think* about escape.

Standing over me, the guardian’s anger shifted into something closer to fear. It was then that I noticed the small plague bag hanging from his belt and realized that he, like thousands of others in Zilvaren, was a Believer. With a panicked lurch, he raised his foot and brought the sole of his boot crashing down onto my side. Pain stole my breath as he brought up his boot to kick me again. This was far from my first beating. I could take a shit-kicking as well as the next downtrodden scammer, but I didn’t have time to accommodate Madra’s fanatical followers this afternoon. I had somewhere to be, and I was running out of time.

With a quick twist and a forward lunge, I grabbed the guardian just below his knee—one of the only places he was unprotected by his heavy golden armor. The tears came in quick and hot. Believable. I gave a solid performance, but then again, I’d had a lot of practice. “Please, Brother! Don’t send me back there. I’ll die if you do. My whole family has the rattles.” I coughed for effect—a dry hack that sounded nothing like the wet, congested cough of the almost dead. But the guardian had probably never even seen someone with the rattles before. He stared down at the point where my hand closed around the material of his pants, mouth gaping open in horror.

A second later, the tip of his sword punctured my shirt, right between my breasts. A little weight on the hilt of his weapon and I’d

be just another dead thief bleeding out on the streets of Zilvaren. I figured he'd do it—but then I watched as he processed the situation and realized what he'd have to do next if he killed me. The dead were left to rot in the streets of the other wards, but things were different in the tree-lined, leafy walkways of the Hub. Zilvaren's well-heeled elite might not have been able to keep the sands borne on the hot westerly winds out, but they wouldn't tolerate a diseased plague rat rudely decaying on one of *their* streets. If this guardian killed me, he'd have to dispose of my body right away. And from the look on his face, that hazardous task was one he didn't wish to undertake. See, if I was from the Third, then I was far more dangerous than any normal, run-of-the-mill everyday pickpocket. No, I was *contagious*.

The guardian ripped the gauntlet and glove from his hand—the hand he'd used to half-choke me—and dropped them to the sand. The burnished metal released a sustained hum as it hit the ground. It sang in my ears, and just like that, all of my plans went up in smoke. I'd been caught lifting a tiny scrap of twisted iron from a market stall. I'd weighed the odds and considered the risk worth it, knowing the small ingot would earn me a tidy profit. But this? So much precious metal, tossed to the ground like it meant nothing? This, I couldn't resist.

I moved with a speed the guardian wasn't expecting. In a lithe, explosive maneuver, I sprawled forward and grabbed the gauntlet, targeting the larger of the two pieces of metal. The glove was stunning, skillfully made by a true master. The tiny circlets of gold looped together to form a chainmail that was notoriously impenetrable by blade or magic. But the weight of the gauntlet, the solid amount of gold that comprised the piece of armor—it was unimaginable that I'd ever hold that amount of gold in my hands again.

"Stop!" The guardian lunged for me, but too late. I'd already snatched up the gauntlet. I'd already shoved it over my hand and jammed it onto my wrist. I was already sprinting toward the Hub wall as fast as my legs could carry me. "Stop that girl!" The guardian's bellow

bounced around the cobbled courtyard, his command echoing loudly, but no one obeyed. The crowd that had gathered to watch the spectacle when he had first captured me had dispersed like frightened children the moment I'd uttered the word "Third."

A recruit underwent formidable training before being accepted into Queen Madra's guard. Those who were selected for the grueling eighteen-month program were repeatedly half-drowned and had the tar beaten out of them via every martial arts system recorded in the city's dusty libraries. By the time they graduated, they could tolerate unimaginable amounts of pain and had mastered their weapons to the point that they were unbeatable in a fight. They were machines. In the barracks, on the training floor, I wouldn't last four seconds against a fully trained guardian. Queen Madra's pride demanded that her guard be the best of the very best. But Madra's pride was a hungry thing and quite insatiable. Her men not only had to be the best. They had to *look* the best, and a guardian's armor was no light thing. Yes, on the training floor, the asshole who'd caught me stealing the iron would have bested me in short order. But we weren't on the training floor. We were out in the Hub, and it was reckoning, and this poor bastard was trussed up like a feast day turkey in all that ceremonial armor.

He couldn't run, weighed down with all of that metal.

He couldn't even *jog*.

He sure as hell couldn't fucking *climb*.

I took off toward the eastern wall, pumping my arms and legs as fast as my aching body would allow. Launching myself into the air, I hit the crumbling sandstone hard, the oxygen wheezing out of my lungs from the impact.

"Ow, ow, *ow*." It felt like Elroy had taken a mallet from the forge and swung it right into my solar plexus. I didn't dare think about the bruises I'd wake up to in the morning—provided I *did* actually wake up. There wasn't time. I jammed my fingers into a narrow gap between the hefty sandstone blocks, bared my teeth, and hauled

myself up. My feet scrambled for purchase. Found it. But my right hand...

The gods-cursed gauntlet.

Such a *terrible* design.

The gold clanged, the resonance of the metal a siren's song as I slammed it against the wall, attempting to catch hold of something to help pull myself up. My fingers—deft, slim, made for picking locks, unlatching windows, tousling Hayden's thick hair—wouldn't be enough if I couldn't bend my wrist. And I couldn't.

Fuck.

If I wanted to live, there was nothing left for it. I'd have to drop the gauntlet. But that was a preposterous thought. The gauntlet weighed at least four pounds. Four *pounds* of metal. I couldn't just walk away from that. This gauntlet was more than a piece of stolen armor. It was my brother's education. Three years' worth of food. Tickets out of Zilvaren, south, to where the reckoning winds that buffeted the dry-boned hills were twenty degrees cooler than here in the Silver City. We'd have enough money left over to buy a small house if we wanted to. Nothing fancy. Just something weatherproof. Something I could leave to Hayden when, not *if*, the guardians finally caught up with me.

No, dropping this gauntlet would cost me something far more valuable than my life; it would cost me hope, and I wouldn't surrender that. I'd rip my arm out of its socket first.

So, I went to work.

"Don't be ridiculous, girl!" the guardian hollered. "You'll fall before you even make it halfway!"

If the guardian went back to the barracks without his gauntlet, there would be consequences. I had no idea what those consequences would be, but they wouldn't be pretty. They could cut off the asshole's hands and bury him up to his neck in the sand to bake in the reckoning's heat for all I cared. I was going home.

Pain sang from my fingertips, up my arm like a rope of fire, blazing in my shoulder as I pulled myself up, kicking with my feet,

leaping up the wall. I aimed for a section of the stone that looked worn but stable. Or as stable as I could hope for. If you gave it enough time, the wind ate everything in this city, and it had been grinding its teeth against Zilvaren for thousands of years. The sandstone was deceptive. The city's structures and walls looked sound but were far from it. One hard kick had been known to bring down an entire building in the past. It wasn't as if I was overly heavy, but that was neither here nor there. I was risking life and limb by slamming myself into the brickwork.

My stomach bottomed out as I sailed through the air...and then clenched tight as a fist when I impacted with the wall. Adrenaline soaked my blood as three miracles happened in concert.

First: The wall held.

Second: I grabbed a stellar handhold with my left hand.

Third: My shoulder *didn't* come out of its socket.

Footing. Footing. Foot—

FUCK!

My heart wedged itself in my throat as the sole of my left boot slipped against the wall, setting my whole body swinging.

Below me, a genteel, feminine gasp parted the silence. Guess I *did* have some spectators after all.

I didn't look down.

It took a moment to still myself and a handful of strained curses before I felt confident enough to breathe again.

"Girl! You're going to kill yourself!" the guardian shouted.

"Maybe. But what if I don't?" I shouted back.

"Then you'll have wasted your time anyway! There isn't a fence in this entire city stupid enough to buy a stolen piece of armor."

"Ah, c'mon now. I think *I* might know a couple!"

I didn't. No matter how tight things were, no matter how many families starved and died, not one resident of Zilvaren would dare to deal in something as dangerous as the gauntlet I had wedged onto my forearm. But that didn't matter. I wasn't going to try and sell it.

“I won’t pursue you any further. You have my word. Drop the gauntlet, and I’ll let you go!”

A bark of laughter ripped out of me. And they said guardians had no sense of humor. This one was a fucking comedian.

Another jump. Another staggering jolt of pain. I calculated the trajectory as best I could, making sure to aim for the least pitted section of rock each time. At last high enough above the streets of the Hub, I allowed myself the luxury of a moment to collect myself. If I moved the armor to the other wrist, would I drop it? More importantly, would I be able to hold on to the wall with my weaker arm while I performed a swap? There were too many variables to calculate and not enough time to do so in.

“How do you think you’re getting down the other side, child?”

Child? Hah! The gall of the bastard. His shouting was quieter now. I was fifty feet up—close enough to see the top of the wall. Far enough from the street for a bristle of cold sweat to break out across the back of my neck when I looked down.

The guardian raised a good point. Descending from the wall would be just as perilous as the ascent, but the Undying Queen’s whipping boy down there had been born into a good home. He grew up in the Hub. His parents didn’t lock their door at night. That man had never even *considered* trying to climb the walls that protected him from the ungrateful, infectious rabble on the other side of it. I’d spent half my life running the tops of these walls, slipping from one ward to the next, finding ways into places I had no business being.

I was good at it.

Moreover, it was *fun*.

I completed the rest of the climb in under two minutes. The gauntlet slammed into the tiny dune of sand shored up along the top of the wall. As I heaved myself over the ledge, particles of quartz in the sand began to vibrate, jittering in the air a millimeter above the sandstone as the gold came alive.

I froze, the breath trapped in my lungs, caught off guard by the peculiarity of the sight.

No. Not here. Not now...

The gauntlet whispered, rocking rapidly as I brought myself up to straddle the wall. The particles of quartz rose up, up, up.

She sees us.

She feels us.

She sees us.

She feels us.

She—

I slammed my hand down on top of the gauntlet, and the piece of stolen armor stilled. The glinting specks of quartz fell back into the sand.

"I'll find you, girl! I swear it! Drop that gauntlet or make an enemy for life!"

At last, there it was—a tinge of panic riding the guardian's plea. The truth of the situation had caught up with him. I wasn't going to fall to my death. Neither was I going to accidentally drop the armor he threw to the ground in disgust once he'd realized he'd touched a plague rat.

I'd slipped through his bare fingers, and there was nothing he could do about it beyond shouting threats up at a ghost in the sky. Because I was already gone. The idiot below wouldn't be the first enemy I'd made out of one of Madra's men, but I wouldn't be giving him another thought. I was far more concerned with all of the incredible things I was going to forge with his impressive gauntlet.

But first, I was going to melt the glorious thing down to slag.



GLASSMAKER

“No. Absolutely not. Not here. Not in my furnace.”

Elroy glared at me like I was a four-headed serpent, and he didn't know which one of my heads would strike him first. I'd upset the old man a million different times, a million different ways, but this disapproving look was new. His expression was one of equal parts disappointment and fear, and for the briefest of moments, I questioned my decision to bring the gold into the workshop.

Where else would I have taken it, though? The loft over the tavern where Hayden and I had been sleeping these past six weeks was infested with cockroaches and stank worse than a sand badger set. We'd found a way into The Mirage through a damaged section in the cracked slate roof. We were quiet when we crept in there to sleep amongst the rotten, long-forgotten wine crates and moth-eaten stacks of heavy, folded canvas, and so far, we hadn't been discovered. But my brother and I weren't stupid. It was only a matter of time before we *were* found out, and the proprietors of the public house evicted us from their attic space at the end of a blade. There'd be no time to collect our belongings. We didn't *have* any belongings aside from the clothes on our backs. Hiding the gauntlet

there would be folly. Elroy's workshop was the only place I could take it. No matter what, I needed to use the furnaces. I didn't have a choice. If I didn't melt down the metal and make something else out of it (*very* gods-cursed quickly), the gauntlet was a millstone around my neck that would wind up getting me tortured and killed.

"It's bad enough that I had to tell Jarris Wade that you weren't here an hour ago. He was furious. Said you'd broken some trade agreement with him. But then you show up here with *that* thing. What the hell were you thinking?" The despair lacing Elroy's voice made me regret showing it to him. "Why did you take it in the first place? We'll have Madra's vipers scouring this place with a fine-toothed comb, searching for it. When they find you, they'll flay the skin from your bones in the square for everybody to see. Hayden will be right there next to you. And me? *Me*? Even if they *do* believe I had nothing to do with this, they'll take my hands for even allowing that thing under my roof. How am I supposed to make a living with no hands, you stupid, *stupid* girl?"

Elroy's business was glass. With an abundance of sand at his fingertips, he'd made it his life's work to become the best glassmaker and glazier in all of Zilvaren. Only those living in the Hub were rich enough to afford windows, though. And there were people who lived in the Third who sought other items that could be forged in a hearth. Once upon a time, Elroy used to make illicit weapons for the rebel gangs who fought to overthrow Madra. Rough-edged swords made from scraps of iron, but mostly knives. The blades were shorter and required less steel. Even though the pig iron was of the worst quality, it could still be honed into an edge sharp enough to send a man to the makers. But as the years had passed, life as an insurgent within had grown untenable.

Fresh food was impossible to find. In the streets, children clawed each other's eyes out over a heel of stale bread. The only way to survive the Third now was by barter and trade...or by whispering secrets about your neighbors into a guardian's ear. As a resident of the Third, if you weren't dead or dying, then you were hungry, and

there wasn't much a starving person wouldn't say to quell the ache of an empty belly. After too many close calls to count, Elroy had declared he wouldn't be hammering out any more of his vicious, needle-like knives and told me I wasn't welcome to forge them in his fires anymore, either. We were to be glassmakers and nothing more.

"I'm stunned. *Stunned*. I just...I can't even comprehend—" The old man shook his head in disbelief. "I can't even *begin* to fathom what you were thinking. Do you have any idea what kind of doom you've brought down on our heads?"

When I was little, Elroy had been a giant of a man. A legend amongst even the most dangerous criminals that ran the Third. Taller than most, broad, his back muscles straining beneath his sweat-stained shirt. He'd been a force of nature. A pillar of rock hewn out of a mountain. Immovable. Indestructible. It was only recently that I'd begun to understand that he was in love with my mother. After she was killed, little by little, piece by piece, I'd watched him wither away, becoming less of himself. Becoming a shadow. The man that stood before me now was barely recognizable.

His calloused hand shook as he pointed at the polished metal glittering like sin on the table between us. "You're taking it back is what you're gonna do, Saeris."

A huff of laughter escaped me. "The forgotten gods and all four fucking winds know that I'm *not*. Not after everything I went through to get it. I nearly broke my damned neck—"

"I'll break your neck if that thing isn't out of here in the next fifteen minutes."

"You think I'm just going to walk up to the sentry post and *hand it over*—"

"Don't be ridiculous. Gods, *why* do you have to be so ridiculous? Scale the wall again and toss it back into the Hub once the Twins dip. One of those inbred bastards will find it and return it to the

guardians without a second thought. They won't even realize how much the damn thing's worth."

Gritting my teeth, I folded my arms over my chest, trying to ignore how prominent my ribs felt beneath the fabric of my shirt. My skin prickled with sweat. I was losing moisture I couldn't afford to part with. I'd left my water ration hidden inside a wall in the attic back at The Mirage—hadn't been able to risk someone trying to jump *me* for it while *I* was picking pockets—and the workshop was hellishly hot, as per usual.

I couldn't count how many times I'd passed out at the bellows here. I had no idea how Elroy survived it. For a moment, I gave the man the respect he deserved and considered his demand. And then I fantasized about what a cool breeze from the south might feel like, and the delirious weight of a full stomach, and how blissful a feather bed might be, and what a future for Hayden might look like, and my affection for the man who once loved my mother dwindled into insignificance. "I can't do what you're asking me to do."

"Saeris!"

"I can't. I just can't. You *know* we can't go on like this—"

"I know that struggling to scratch out a life here is better than bleeding out in the fucking sand! Is that what you want? To die in the street in front of Hayden? For your body to rot in the gutter like your mother's, stinking and picked over by the crows?"

"*YES!* Yes, of *course* that's what I want!" I brought my fist crashing down on the table, and the gauntlet jumped, a cascade of rainbows leaping up the walls. "Yes, I want to die and ruin Hayden's life. *Your* life. I want to be made a spectacle of. I want everyone in the ward to know me as the glassmaker's apprentice who was stupid enough to steal from Madra's guard and got herself killed for it. That's *exactly* what I want!"

I'd never spoken to Elroy like this before. Ever. But the man had experienced loss after loss at the hands of the city's guardians. People he'd loved, dragged from their beds and executed without trial. His