

THE DRAGON EATER

THE THARASSAS CYCLE

BOOK ONE

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

1

PETTY THEFT

S PIN'S VOICE ECHOED IN HIS EAR. "This is a bad idea, boss."
"Shush," Raven whispered to his familiar.

He needed to concentrate. Cheek and jowl against the smooth cobblestones, he held his breath and prayed to the gods that no one had seen him duck under the sea master's ornate carriage. The setting sun cast long shadows from a pair of boots so close to his face that the dust and leather made him want to sneeze. Their owner was deep in conversation with the sea master, the hem of her fine *mur* silk trousers barely visible. The two women's voices were hushed, and he could only make out the occasional word.

Raven rubbed the old burn scar on his cheek absently, wishing they would go away.

"Seriously, boss. I'm not from this world, and even *I* know it's a bad idea to steal from the sea master."

Though only he could hear Spin's voice, Raven wished the little silver *ay-eye* would just shut up.

The *hencha* cloth-wrapped package in the carriage above was calling to him. He'd wanted it since he'd first seen it through the open door. No, *needed* it. Like he needed air, even though he had

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no idea what was inside. He scratched the back of his hand hard to distract himself from its disturbing pull.

An *inthym* popped its head out of the sewer grate in front of him, sniffing the air. Raven glared at the little white rodent, willing it to go away. Instead, the cursed thing nibbled at his nose.

Raven sneezed, then covered his mouth. He held his breath, staring at the boots. *Don't let them hear me.*

A shiny silver feeler poked out of his shirt pocket, emitting a golden glow that illuminated the cobblestones underneath him. "Boss, you all right?" Spin's whisper had that sarcastic edge he often used when he was annoyed. "Your heart rate is elevated."

"Be. Quiet." Raven gritted his teeth. Spin had the worst sense of timing.

The woman — one of the guard, maybe? — and the sea master stepped away, their voices fading into the distance.

Raven said a quick prayer of thanks to Jor'Oss, the goddess of wild luck, and flicked the *inthym* back into the sewer. "Shoo!"

He popped his head out from under the carriage to take a quick look around. There was no one between him and the squat gray Sea Guild headquarters. It was time. *Grab it and go.*

He reached into the luxurious carriage — a host of *mur* beetles must have spent years spinning all the red silk that lined the interior — and snagged the package. He hoped it was the treasury payment for the week. If so, it should hold enough coin to feed an orphanage for a month, and he knew just the one. "Got it."

"Good. Now get us out of here."

A strange tingling surged through his hand. Raven frowned. *Must have pinched a nerve or something.*

Ignoring it, he stuck the package under his arm, slipped around the carriage, and set off down Gullton's main thoroughfare. He walked as casually as he could, hoping no one would notice the missing package until he was long gone.

"We clear?"

Spin's feeler blinked red. "No. Run! They've seen you."

Raven ran.

He didn't know how his strange little friend did it, but he trusted Spin. When his familiar's far vision worked, he was almost always right.

“Stop the thief!” A guard's voice echoed down Grindell Lane between the shops that loomed over Raven like jagged teeth in the dimming light. Passersby turned to stare, but no one intervened.

“Holy green hell, what's in this thing?” Raven clung to the package, his patched-up boots thudding down the cobblestone street. He said a brief prayer of thanks to El'Oss, the Old God, that Spin's special powers were working.

He shot a glance over his shoulder at the pursuing guardsmen. A miasma of fog mixed with smoke lay thick across the city streets, lighting the sunset in the green sky behind him gloriously in red and gold.

You're daft as a gully bird, Rav'Orn. Stealing a package from the sea master's carriage in broad daylight? Seriously? If the Thieves' Guild found out, they'd be after him again for stirring up trouble.

Still, he hadn't expected three guardsmen to come after him. *What in Heaven's Reach did I steal, the Hencha Queen's jewels?*

A woman lay slumped in the doorway of a closed tailor's shop ahead, The Knotted Purse, wrapped in a familiar blanket. Raven skidded to a halt. “Where are they?”

“About a block away. You're not as slow as usual today.” Coming from Spin, that was *almost* a compliment.

“Thanks.” Raven ignored his companion's snarky tone. He slipped his hand into his pocket and pulled out a single silver *croner* and dropped it into the roofless woman's hand, ignoring her unwashed smell. Not everyone had a bathtub or a river to bathe in, after all. “Get yourself something hot to eat, Scilla.” He kissed her cheek.

Scill'Eya's eyes lit up, and a smile cracked her weathered face. A single tear ran down her dirty cheek, revealing the ruddy skin underneath, and she nodded. “Nor'Oss bless you, Rav'Orn.”

Spin's voice chimed urgently in his ear. “Let's move it. They're hot on your tail, boss.”

But Raven was already off and running again, barreling down the street.

He glanced over his shoulder in time to see the roofless woman stumble to her feet and careen “accidentally” into the path of one of the guards, knocking him to the ground.

Bless you too, Scilla.

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The garishly painted buildings of the city's commerce district blurred into the darkening green sky as he sprinted down the central street of Gullton's main spine, the long, skinny, rocky protrusions carved out by the Elsp as she ran to the sea.

Rain slicked the cobbles, slowly evaporating into an earthy mist, equal parts water and manure. "Which way?"

"Go left! You're cutting it awfully close." Spin seemed almost as worked up as he was.

Raven swerved left and ducked under the skeletal beams of the new three-story wood-framed building that had replaced Landers' Pub. *Shame about that.* He'd found some of his best marks there. Rich folk from Peregrine Spine, easy pickings after a long night drinking.

He burst out of the other side onto Yorkser Lane and slammed full-on into a fruit vendor's cart, tumbling head over foot and sending apples flying everywhere. The package slipped out from under his arm to clatter across the street into the gutter.

Raven sat up and touched his pocket — Spin was still tucked firmly inside. "You okay?"

Spin was quiet. Whether surly or damaged, Raven couldn't tell.

Farking hells. He should just leave the cursed bundle and get out of sight, but it pulled at him again, making him feel queasy. *Godsdammit.*

Then he saw a little chunk of silver, spinning on the cobblestones. He grabbed it and shoved it back into his ear. It melded to him again.

"— coming! You need to haul ass."

Raven grinned. Spin was his usual truculent self — thank the gods. He sprang up and checked himself — no permanent damage, just a scrape on his left elbow. He snagged the package, wiping off the *urse* droppings as best he could, and took off again.

The vendor had pulled himself up off the ground, and now the man tried to grab him, missing the tail of his shirt by a hair. "Damned gully rat!" His face was red, his long stringy hair in disarray. "Watch where you're going!"

"Sorry!" He called back over his shoulder. In normal circumstances, he'd have stopped to help pick up all those apples, but he was a bit busy fleeing the law. "Spin, where are they?"

"I can't tell. You've got eyes. Use them."

“Seven hells.” Jor’Oss and his blasted luck had turned against him. Spin could see things he couldn’t, but sometimes the ay-eye’s mysterious ability just went away. *Of all the godscursed times ...*

He glanced over his shoulder. *No guards yet.* Turning back, he almost ran headlong into a carriage made from the frame of an old flitter — the flying machine’s rotor had been chopped off, and wooden wheels added to make it mobile again. Someone had decided to paint the thing gold, and the results were more hideous than elegant.

He pulled open the door and slipped through the cabin. The startled inhabitant — a wealthy woman from Peregrine Spine, by the look of her and her rich silk dress, screamed.

“Pardon me!” Then he was out the other side, leaving her and her carriage behind.

He ducked around the corner at Tuckins Street, running down the short, narrow lane toward the edge of his namesake, Raven Spine, where the cliff dropped off to the thundering waters of the Elsp thirty meters below.

“Good going, boss.”

“Just glad you’re still alive.” For all that Spin liked to cut him down to size, he was Raven’s only constant companion. *And friend.*

He stuffed the package down his pants.

“Nice to know you care.”

Raven grabbed the spume-slick railing that lined the plaza at the end of the street and vaulted over it with the ease of long practice. He landed hard on the other side and slipped over the edge, lowering himself onto the first of the rusty metal pitons driven into the slate-gray rock long before.

A flurry of blue wisps surrounded him as if he’d disturbed them, their light painting the cliff walls an ethereal blue, before floating up into the air over Gullton and catching the sea breeze.

Weird little things. He shook his head and continued down. Nimble as an *eircat*, he descended hand over hand, grasping the wet rods tightly.

He dropped the last half-meter to a hidden ledge, well below street level, and slid over to the widest spot with his back against the cliff. His chest heaved from the exertion. *Almost there.*

Someone slammed onto the narrow ledge, scaring the *hencha* berries out of him.

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He spun around to face the newcomer, and his left foot slipped off the narrow rock shelf, bits of it crumbling underneath him to fall into the river. He scrambled for something to grab onto, but his hands clawed at the slick walls of the spine without finding purchase. *Jas help me!*

A large hand grabbed his shirt, pushing him back against the rock.

“We’ve got company, boss.”

Tell me something I don’t know. Raven panted, looking down at the red rushing waters of the river, realizing how close he’d come to falling into that abyss.

He turned to glare at the intruder. “What in the green holy hell, Aik? You almost scared me to death. Literally.”

“You’re welcome.” Aik’s face was half-hidden in the dimming light, but the part Raven could see didn’t look very happy.

“That was close.” Spin’s voice was a mix of angry and scared out of his little metal hide.

“Quiet.”

“What?” Aik glared at him

Raven covered his pocket with his free hand, hoping Spin would get the hint. “I said ‘quiet.’ I need to think.” His breathing slowed. “I wouldn’t have *almost* fallen, if you hadn’t scared me in the first place —”

“You ran by me like the Queen’s own wrath was coming down on you.” Aik stared at him. “What did you do this time? You’ve got half the Guard after you.”

“There *is* no Queen.” Raven squeezed Spin in warning. They’d been through this before. If anyone else found out about him, they would take him away and probably treat him far worse than Raven did.

When he was sure Spin would stay quiet and not distract him, he turned his attention to his annoyed friend. “Besides, we were just out for a little exercise.”

“We?”

“I was. I needed to get out of the lair for a bit. It gets ... lonely down there.”

Aik raised an eyebrow. “That’s bullshit, and you know it.” Aik was both menacing and handsome in his City Guard uniform — a

smart black leather jacket with the double white stripe of a rookie on the shoulders. Adorable too — with his big ears that stuck out from his head like sails and made it hard to take anything he said too seriously, guard or no. But he was mostly annoying. Especially when he interrupted Raven in the middle of a heist.

He shook his head. “Really, it's nothing.” He tried to cover his stolen goods, but there was no way to hide the bulge in his pants.

Aik’s eyebrow raised. “Nice package. What’s in it?”

Raven groaned. “It’s ... I don’t know. I found it.”

“Found it? Where, exactly?”

Raven *knew* that tone. He never lied to Aik. Not directly. “All right, I took it. You happy?”

“Not even a little.” Aik crossed his arms, an impressive feat standing on the narrow ledge. “From whom?”

“From the sea master.”

“Raven!” Alarm flashed in Aik’s eyes.

“I had to.” The package *had* called to him — no other way to describe it. From the second he’d laid his eyes on the cloth-wrapped bundle, he’d known he needed to have it. *Not my fault.*

Aik pointed up the cliff face. “Take it back. Now.” He pleaded with Raven. “Tell them you made a mistake. You didn’t *mean* to do it.”

Raven looked away. They both knew he wouldn’t. Couldn’t. After the last time ... *And why should I? It’s mine.*

Far below, the waters of the Elsp, red with silt from the Heartland, rumbled through Adley Narrows, reminding him how close he’d come to falling.

“Remember what happened the last time I turned myself in, on your advice?” *And what almost happened.* He flexed his right hand; grateful it was still attached. “Besides, if the Guild finds out ...”

Aik growled. “Let the Guard worry about the Thieves’ Guild.” His expression shifted, sadness tinting the corners of his eyes. “You’re not fifteen anymore, Rave. One of these days, you’re going to get yourself into something so deep even I can’t pull you out.”

“Probably. But not today.” Raven flashed Aik one of his winning grins. “Come on down to the lair with me. You can try to convince me later.” He glanced up toward the street nervously. “I need to get out of sight until things cool down.”

Aik glanced upward. “Rave, I can’t ...”

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“Suit yourself. You can always tell them I gave you the slip.” *Probably for the best.* The last time Aik had visited him, they’d done more than talk. He’d regretted it ever since.

From the look on Aik’s face, he was thinking about that night too. He snarled, but his gaze lingered on Raven’s package. The stolen one. “Dammit, Rave ...”

“Come on, then.” He kissed Aik’s cheek, then turned and felt his way along the cool rock of the spine wall, sure Aik would follow. He always did.

Raven’s fingers searched for the narrow cavern entrance in the dimming evening light.

Aik did follow. He shuffled along the ledge behind him, letting out a long-suffering sound. The guard was loyal as an *auracinth*, and almost as big. He was also Raven’s only real human friend. “How do I let you get me into these things?”

“Because you love me?” He was not going to turn himself in again, risking hand and livelihood. No matter what Aik said or did.

Aik snorted. “Less and less.”

They both knew that wasn’t true. Still, there was no future in it, was there? *The thief and the guard? How would that even work?* Aik had his service career ahead of him, and Raven had an underground cavern full of stolen goods. A thief’s life, and one he was quite happy with, thank you very much. It was an old dilemma, as worn as Raven’s boots. “Coming?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“We all have choices.” Sometimes he regretted his, but he’d never tell Aik that. Raven’s fingers found the crevice in the black cliff face. He pulled the package out of his pants, holding it in front of him, and slipped inside. *I hope you’re worth it.*

A shower of pebbles fell into the gloomy narrows behind him. The oppressive rock walls squeezed him like a bug, scraping his shirt as he pushed his way through. It was a godsall narrow passage, but it was the closest entrance to the tunnels. *Don’t think about the tons of rock bearing down on you.* The other guards would never find it, and even if they did, those thick thugs would be hard-pressed to get through. Even poor Aik could barely manage it.

“You so love him.” Spin’s voice in his ear sounded less mocking than usual, almost wistful.

Raven didn't bother to reply. Spin could be a pain in the ass when he wanted to, which was most of the time. One of the reasons Raven loved him.

"Careful. Don't want to put a scratch on my pretty hide."

Raven grimaced. "Spin, shut down." He said it softly so Aik wouldn't hear. *A guy's gotta have some secrets.*

"Aw, Master of Thieves ... are you sure?" Spin hated being shut off.

"Now, Spin." Raven growled as he pushed his way through the narrow space.

"Yes, boss." The light in Raven's pocket went dark.

Raven sucked in his stomach and pushed on, blowing his lanky dark red hair away from his eyes. With one last push, he broke through at last and stumbled into darkness. The air in the tunnels was warm, still, and familiar. He was home.

Raven breathed a sigh of relief and set down the package to feel around for the candle and striker that he kept there for emergencies. Usually Spin lit the way for him, but today ... His hands touched something soft that squealed. "Aiiee!"

He jerked his hand back as the creature scurried away in the dark. *Farking inthym.*

"What's wrong?" Aik's forceful voice, amplified by the narrow passage, startled him

"Nothing. Just a rodent." They were everywhere these days. Raven's heartbeat slowed. He took a couple deep breaths to calm himself. *Nasty little creatures.* "You coming?" He felt around again, and his hand closed on the candle. *Gotcha.*

Aik grunted. "Yeah. Tell me again why I'm going along with this petty theft?"

"Because you're my friend."

He said it too softly for Aik to hear, but that, at least, was true. Aloud, he said, "Because you want to keep me out of trouble, and I'm not going back up there." That was also true.

He cracked the flint against the striker with enough force to light a spark. It took six tries, but at last the candle wick caught, illuminating the tunnel's dark, jagged walls. "And we have light —"

Aik popped out of the narrow gap and stumbled into him, slamming them both to the ground, pinning Raven to the tunnel floor and knocking the wind out of him. Aik's close proximity set

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off all kinds of alarms in Raven's head as he struggled to breathe. He gasped, trying not to panic.

"You all right?" Aik's blue eyes locked on him, the flickering light of the candle revealing a worried frown.

At last, sweet, musky air filled Raven's lungs. "Yeah. Just ... lost my breath."

Aik smelled ripe from a long day at work. Raven looked up at him in the golden light, and memories of Aik's touch surged through him like fire. He wanted to reach out and run his hands through Aik's short-cropped blond hair. To kiss him hard ...

Bad idea. Kissing led to love led to waiting for your guy to come home, and Raven wanted none of that. He squirmed out from under Aik, scrambling away from him as if he had the plague. He'd let himself get carried away with Aik before. *Never again.*

Aik's eyes narrowed, shooting Raven a *so that's how it's going to be?* look.

"Sorry." He frowned. *What am I sorry for?*

Aik got up and brushed off his jacket. "Farking hell, it's torn."

"You should have taken it off first. Didn't that happen last time too?" Raven rolled his eyes — Aik never learned. He got up and dusted off his own clothes, adjusting his trousers and avoiding Aik's gaze.

"You're an asshole."

Raven laughed harshly. "Tell me something I don't know." *You'd be better off without me.* He sighed and grabbed the candle and the package. "Let's go."

He managed one step forward before Aik hauled him backwards by his collar.

"What the hell?"

Aik pointed at the darkness ahead. "What in Heaven's Reach is that?"

Raven shook off his grasp and followed his gaze. At least a hundred pairs of tiny blue lights filled the passageway ahead of them at the edge of the candle's glow. *What in the holy hench?*

He held up the light to reveal a squirming mass of *inthym*s, little white noses twitching, pale pink ears pointing at him. At his stolen package. His stomach tightened, adrenaline rushing through his veins.

“Scat!” He stomped, and they scattered into the darkness, the blue lights of their eyes winking out. “That was creepy as hell.”

Aik stared at him, skin pale in the dim light. “What’s happening? First your mysterious package, then this ...”

Raven shrugged. “I don’t know.” The whole thing creeped him out. He sniffed the air, making like one of the little rodents. “Maybe they like your cologne.”

Aik rolled his eyes. “I’m not wearing any. Not that you’d care.”

Raven slapped his shoulder. “I really don’t. Come on. The lair awaits.”

He was eager to get back to his home, and away from all the strangeness. His neck tingled where Aik’s fingers had brushed his skin, but he pushed the sensation away and set off down the narrow passageway, not waiting to see if his friend would follow. Because of course he would.

Things had been weirder than usual lately in the caverns beneath Gullton. There’d been strange noises, glowing wisps floating through the tunnels, and blue eyes staring at him from dark crevices — eyes that disappeared when he held the light close. More *inthym*? Or maybe I’m losing my mind.

Like a child afraid of the dark, he was selfishly glad Aik was there with him.

The floors of the tunnel were smooth, the walls a deep black — not gray and flaked like the rock outside, where they’d been battered for thousands of years by sun and rain. Here, they sparkled in the candlelight, riddled with seams — fine cracks that ran from floor to ceiling.

The passage led into the heart of the spine, always about the same width and height, eventually turning east to follow it lengthwise.

They padded down it together in tense silence.

After a short trek, the tunnel branched into two, the faint suggestion of an ancient, hand-carved arch framing both entrances. Raven took the left fork without thinking, glancing over his shoulder at his friend.

Aik was quiet, a frown plastered on his face.

The horde of *inthym* had vanished, and the knot in Raven’s stomach loosened. *Creepy little fark.*

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“How do you find your way around down here?” Aik’s voice was clipped.

“Ah, so it *can* talk.” Silent Aik was better than angry Aik, he decided. “I don’t know. I just do.”

Raven veered right at the next fork, and the tunnel began to descend.

“It all looks exactly the same.”

“Not to me.” In his mind, he could see all the branching tunnels, one connecting to the next like the roots of a tree. After he visited a place once, he could navigate it forever. It was one of his talents, along with his ability to fade into the background — a trait most useful for a thief.

As they descended, the walls began to glow, the seams between the black rocks suffused with a blue light not unlike that of the wisps. At first it was subtle, but as they progressed, the light burned brighter, until the cracks fairly blazed with cold fire.

Raven sighed in relief. *Almost there.*

Aik followed him over a pile of rubble that nearly cut the tunnel in two, taking care not to further damage his uniform. “Don’t you ever get lonely down here?”

The question caught him off-guard. “Not really. I like it. No demands. No authority.” *No complications.*

His friend was lucky. He still had a home and family up above. Well, a mother who loved him, anyhow. *Mamma, what would you think of me now?* He shoved his jealousy and the familiar pain into the ever-growing pile of *things he didn’t want to think about.*

The burbling sound of water ahead snapped him out of it — it always made him feel welcome. This was *his* place, and no one else’s. “Come on. We’re almost there.” Raven licked his fingers, extinguished the candle, and dropped it into his pocket. The tunnel opened into a broad natural cavern, well-lit by the soft blue glow of the walls — a glorious collection of stalactites and stalagmites that formed fantastical columns and rows of dragon’s teeth. The tension in his shoulders eased. *Home sweet home.*

Once a calm cathedral of water and stone, the grand space was now Raven’s personal lair. He’d filled it with objects collected from the world above, shiny things that caught his attention and made it feel homier, including antiques from Old Earth. There were pots

and pans, ancient ceramic vases, gears and jewelry and even books — not so many of those, but they were the most precious of all.

Aik looked around, taking in the piles that covered the floor and the layers of things that hung from the black-rock pillars. “Still messy as a gully bird’s nest.” He reached out to touch the dark stone wall, his fingers eclipsing the glow from the cracks. “This place would be beautiful without all your junk.”

Raven saw it through Aik’s eyes and forced a smile. “It was empty and lonely when I found it.” *The night I ran away from Mim Aza. And Jimey.* “All this junk makes it feel like home.” He moved a stack of leather-bound journals out of the way with his boot, making room for Aik to reach his “bed”— a collection of pillows and blankets piled up in one corner of the cavern between two thick black columns.

Aik stared at him. “Sorry. I’m just tense. I shouldn’t be here.” He looked pointedly at the bundle in Raven’s hand. “Should we get to it?”

Raven’s heart skipped a beat, and then it sunk in. *The package.* “You can leave whenever you want. No one’s keeping you here.” He felt the tug of whatever was inside again. He was dying to open it to see the sea master’s treasure.

Aik glared at him. “You invited me, remember?” He picked up a silver-framed mirror from the flat top of a broken stalagmite which formed a narrow table. “What’s this?”

“Give that to me.” He snatched it out of Aik’s hands, and immediately regretted his harsh tone. “Sorry, it was my mother’s. It’s one of the few things I have left of her.” He glanced at himself in the mirror and frowned at the grime on his face and the faded scar across his right cheek. He did the best he could to wipe off the dirt with the back of his hand and then set the mirror down reverently.

“And this bit of junk?” Aik held up a piece of metal engraved with the words “*Spin Diver.*”

Raven forced himself to set the package down on his bed, ignoring its siren call. “That’s from the last Run. I found it out at the edge of Landfield.” *Along with Spin.*

Aik snorted. “You really believe that nonsense? Spaceships and angels and faraway planets? What are you, six years old?” Aik’s mocking grin made Raven’s stomach clench.

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"Of course I do. My mother told me all about it — her grandfather was there when it crashed." Raven's nostrils flared. "You've seen the fountain in Landfield, right?"

"Yeah, I've seen it. Just a bit of artistic wreckage — it doesn't prove anything." He dropped the metal fragment with a clang. "I mean, it just seems fantastic, doesn't it? That we all came from another world? Fairy tales for children." He bit his lip. "Silya believes it too. That we all came here in some flitter from another star. It's ridiculous."

"A starship. Not a flitter." *Should I tell him about Spin?* Raven pushed that thought away. *No good would come of it.*

He sank down onto one of his favorite cushions, stolen from a Market Day booth the year before — a deep royal blue embroidered with golden thread, probably meant for the household of one of the rich merchants who lived on the slopes of Heaven's Reach along the northern edge of the Heartland. His hand strayed toward the package, moving of its own accord. Angrily he pulled it back. He wanted to open it so badly. Perversely, that made him *not* want to do it.

"Starship, flitter, it's all the same." Aik picked up a metal spiral, shiny and silver, encrusted with strange red things that might have been gems, or glass. "What's this?"

"I don't know ... I found a few of them down here in the tunnels. I call them artifacts." He scowled at Aik. "You gonna pick through all of my things?"

Aik's cheeks turned a bright red. "Right. Sorry." He sank down on the bed, too close for comfort, his arm brushing Raven's. He put a hand on Raven's knee, sending a shiver up his leg. "I worry about you, all alone like this." He looked around the cluttered cavern, making it clear that *like this* really meant *in this trash heap*.

Raven lifted Aik's wandering hand and set it firmly on his friend's lap, acutely aware of his proximity. Of what he *really* wanted.

It irked him that Aik didn't believe in Earth. He'd seen a hundred things to convince him that the legend was real, but some people had their heads stuck in the sand. He hated that Aik was one of them.

Still, there was a way he could distract Aik *and* convince him about Earth, if he dared. Risky, but he trusted Aik.

He bit his lip. It was lonely, living down here. And he'd kept the secret for so long. *I can trust you, can't I?*

Decided, he put a little distance between them and pulled his familiar out of his pocket. "Spin, wake up. Full audio."

The circular piece of metal lit up, golden lights rolling around its edge. "Why'd you have to shut me off like that, boss?" Spin shifted from a flat disc to a silver sphere in Raven's hand.

Aik pushed himself away so fast he fell off the edge of the low bed. "What in the holy Heartland is that?" He stared at Spin. His eyes were as big as platters.

Raven grinned. "Aik, meet Spin, my familiar. It's what witches used to call their animal companions, back on Old Earth." He was proud of that, something he'd picked up in one of his books.

"Technically *You're* the animal, Boss." He extended a little silver tentacle to "see" Aik better. "Hello, Aik." Golden light flitted across Aik's form for a split second. "My, you are a big one."

"He says he's an ay-eye — that was some kind of smart machine back on Old Earth."

Aik rubbed the back of his neck, his gaze flicking from Spin to Raven. "What in the seven hells is it?"

"Him, not it." Spin sounded indignant.

Raven laughed. "Sit down, Aik. He's harmless." He pulled out the hearing aid from his ear and set it on Spin's side, and it melted back into the silver surface like candle wax.

"Seriously, what is that?" Aik's voice lost some of its edge, a little curiosity seeping in. "It looks like bad magic."

Raven shook his head. "It's not magic. It's technology. He's the pilot from the *Spin Diver* — on the last Run."

Spin slipped into what Raven called lecture mode. "Ship mind. Or Artificial Intelligence, serving at the pleasure of the ship captain, Sera Collins. The Master of Thieves here's not so good with science and facts — he has these delusions of grandeur ..."

"Delusions ..." Aik was even paler than normal.

"He means I think too much of myself."

That got a rueful chuckle from Aik. "He's right about that." His shoulders relaxed. A little.

"Hey." Raven didn't need his two friends ganging up on him together.

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“Still — technology is a *new wheel design*. Or those wires they strung from the old dam to the Temple for those new lights.” Aik crept closer, eyes locked on Spin’s perfect sphere. “Where did you find that thing?”

Raven’s familiar interrupted again. “Call me Spin, please. Or Mas Spin, as you folks say here on Tharassas.”

Raven shrugged. “Landfield. It’s a long story. Now do you believe that Earth was real?”

“I don’t know.” Aik shuddered, his eyes locked on Spin as if he expected the little sphere to explode. “Are you sure it’s safe?”

Spin shimmered, his version of a laugh. “I don’t think he believes you, Raven.”

Raven grunted. *Maybe I shouldn’t have shown him*. Sometimes his impulses went horribly wrong. Like the last time Aik had been in the lair. He slipped Spin back into his vest pocket, and felt the little familiar shift to accommodate himself to the tight space.

At least the whole thing had put some necessary distance between him and Aik. “So ... the package?” He needed to see what was inside. He looked down and found it in his hands again. *That’s weird*.

Spin’s feeler popped out to watch.

Aik gave it a wary glance but sat back down on the bed next to Raven, leaving half a meter between him and Raven’s pocket. “You can still take it back. Or give it to me. I can tell them I found it. No one has to know it was you.” Aik’s beautiful ice-blue eyes locked with Raven’s, and a shiver raced down his spine.

They’d never been more than friends, and never could be, though he’d let his guard down with Aik more than once. Aik was warm, and sweet, and gentle ... Aik was ... well, Aik. Beautiful. Loyal. Good. And a guard to boot. *We have no future*. “They’ll know. They saw me with it.”

“Still, if I take it back, and you lie low for a bit ...” Aik glanced nervously at Raven’s pocket, as if expecting Spin to climb out and attack him.

Raven rolled his eyes. Aik would get used to Spin sooner or later. Or he wouldn’t. “Maybe.” He traced the package’s square corners. “Don’t you want to know what’s inside?”

“I do.” Spin sounded impatient. “The boss here was acting really weird around it earlier —”

“Look who’s talking.” Raven glared at his familiar.

Aik stared at Spin warily too. “We shouldn’t.” But his gaze slid back to the package.

Do you feel it too? “What’s the harm?” Raven’s fingers itched to open it.

Aik looked up at Raven, searching his eyes for something.

Raven put on his best pleading look, the one that could melt the hearts of angry shopkeepers. The one he used to charm his way into bed with the more handsome ones. “Pleeeeeease?”

Spin chimed in. “Pretty pleeeeee?”

“That thing’s as annoying as you are. I can see why you like each other.” He held Raven’s gaze. “This is a bad idea, Rave. You’re more than all this. Smart and funny — if you worked half as hard at an actual job as you do at thieving —”

Not on my life. “This is my job. Besides, where’s your sense of adventure? Are you scared?”

Aik snorted. “Hardly. You’re going to be impossible until we do this, aren’t you?”

Raven grinned. “Yes I am.”

“Just a quick look, then we wrap it back up. Promise?”

“We’ll see.” Raven unwrapped the rough brown cloth eagerly, wrinkling his nose at the smell of *urse* manure from his tumble in the street. He pulled out the contents and whistled appreciatively.

Inside was a filigreed silver box, its surface a series of swirls and dots that ran all the way around it, creating the illusion of a seamless surface. He held it up, examining it in the blue cavern light. It was warm to the touch. “It’s beautiful.”

Spin’s golden glow bathed the box. “It’s pure silver, boss.” The familiar whistled, impressive given that he didn’t have a mouth.

Aik shot spin a worried glance and scratched his neck, his eyes narrowing. “All this trouble for a little metal box? Can I see it?”

“I guess?” Raven handed it over reluctantly. “I wonder what it’s for.”

“Maybe it’s not *for* anything.” Aik looked it over. “It’s very good work — probably from Dalney up north. They have fine metalsmiths there. A jewelry box for the sea master’s mistress?”

“Maybe. Wait, does she have one?” Gossip like that might be worth something on the street. His eyes remained glued on the box.

The Dragon Eater

Aik gave him a *like I'd tell you* look. The Guard kept secrets for a lot of powerful people. He turned the box over, peering at it more closely. "It's heavy, though. There must be something inside."

No telltale metallic clanking, No coin, then. Raven had hoped for something he could sell, but the little box would be too recognizable, too hot to unload it easily, and that would definitely put him on the Thieves' Guild's radar again. He had no desire to give them a cut of his earnings. He had an orphanage to feed, after all.

Still, if he could convince Aik to let him keep it, maybe he could sell it in the spring —

"Hey, look at this." Aik rubbed a raised spot on the side of the box.

"Let me see."

"Me too." Spin sounded almost as eager as Raven felt.

Aik handed the box back, his fingers brushing Raven's.

Raven ignored the touch. He ran a dirty thumbnail along the edge of the bump. It popped open, revealing a small lock. "Ah, now we're getting somewhere." The box hummed under his touch, and his desire to open it grew. "That's weird."

"What?" Aik's sour expression said he'd had his fill of *weird* for one day.

"Feel it."

Aik touched the box and raised an eyebrow. "Can you open it?"

Raven snorted. "*Can I open it? Does the Hencha Queen live in the Temple?*"

"Not currently."

Raven chuckled. "Fair enough. But yes, I can open it." He pulled his set of lock picks from his vest pocket and chose one small enough to prod at the innards of the fine lock on the silver box. He'd paid a locksmith good money for them. "Let's see. If I can just find the tumbler ..."

He teased the lock, feeling for the opening mechanism. It was nicely made — someone must have paid a lot of money for it. "There, think I've got it ..." The lock snapped open with a satisfying click. Raven lifted the lid.

Inside was a smooth purple ovoid about the size of two fists, nestled in a bundle of rich red *mur* silk.

Spin whistled. "Pretty. That and a copper *croner* will buy you a cup of coffee —"

What in the hell was coffee? “Spin, quiet.” Raven stared at the thing, frowning, and his heart sank. “What am supposed to do with this?” At least he could still sell the box. Eventually.

“What in the green holy hell is it?” Aik looked up at Raven, eyes wide. He made the infinity sign across his chest to ward off Jor’Oss’s bad luck.

“You mean *purple* holy hell?” He picked up the ovoid. It was warm to the touch, and it was vibrating. “I don’t know.” *Looks like an egg. But for what?*

Spin’s golden glow swept it. “Organic. There’s something alive inside. Might want to put it back in the box, boss.”

Raven held it up for a better look and felt a surge of need, a deep ache almost sexual in its intensity. “I ... can’t.”

“Rave, just put it away.” Aik’s voice was shaky. “Come on. You had your fun — ”

A loud *crack* echoed through the room.

The shell split apart in his hand, and something white uncoiled from inside, wrapping itself around his arm in a flash.

“What the seven hells?” Raven scrambled backward across the bed, shards of the shell flying everywhere as the thing slipped up his arm, fast as an *eircat*.

“Get it off!” Raven leapt up, shaking his arm wildly.

Aik laughed. “Calm down, Raven.” He sprang to his feet, trying to grab the little beast.

It slithered past his elbow, scales hot against his skin.

Should have listened to you.

Raven tried to shake the thing off, knocking Aik away in his haste. “Get it off me!” His vision turned red as his heart tried to pound its way out of his chest.

“Hold still. I’m trying to help.” Aik sounded exasperated.

The creature slithered up Raven’s arm, and he grabbed at it, managing to pull it off at last. He threw it against one of the grand columns that held up the ceiling of the lair, and it emitted a startled little *yip*. It would have been funny if he weren’t so terrified.

The creature slid down to the floor, but then it got up and shook its head, its blue eyes meeting his, and leapt at him.

He flailed around, trying to get it off again, but it was too fast. It scrambled up his leg like a mountaineer.

The Dragon Eater

“Raven, your heart rate is elevated —”

“Of course it is, Spin. Tell me something helpful!”

It ascended his torso and slipped onto his shoulder, wrapping its tail around his neck.

He tried to pry the godscursed thing off, but it was constricting his throat too tightly. He gasped for air and fell to his knees.

This isn't funny anymore. “Help me!” It came out as a hoarse whisper.

The creature forced its head into his mouth, cutting off his voice. Its warm scales slid smooth against his tongue.

Help me! His eyes pleaded with Aik, who had his short sword out but was blinking rapidly.

“I don't want to hurt you!”

The creature plunged into his throat on its way down to his stomach. It was a horrid sensation. He tried to breathe, to throw up, but both were denied him.

He grasped its tail, but it slipped out of his grip as the last of the creature disappeared into his mouth.

Aik was staring at him in horror.

“Boss, you have to cough it up.”

Not helping. Raven choked. He hacked and gagged, his eyes bulging as the creature suffocated him. He clawed at his throat, trying to make himself throw up, to expel the creature from his body.

Warmth flooded his trousers, but he was too far gone to care. *I'm going to die.*

Aik's stark-white face swam in his vision, fading away as Raven fell onto the hard ground of the cavern and blacked out.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J. Scott Coatsworth writes stories that subvert expectations, that seek to transform traditional science fiction, fantasy, and contemporary worlds into something new and unexpected. His writing, whether romance or genre fiction (or a little bit of both), brings a queer energy to his stories, infusing them with love, beauty and power and making them soar. He imagines a world that *could be* and, in the process, maybe changes the world *that is*, just a little.

A Rainbow Award-winning author, Scott's debut novel, *Skythane*, received two awards and an honorable mention. With his husband, Mark, he runs Queer Sci Fi, QueerRomance Ink, Liminal Fiction, and Other Worlds Ink. Scott is also the committee chair for the Indie Authors Committee at the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association (SFWA).

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