

# Chapter 1: The Little Thief

The winding streets of the upper city of Idrila would be confusing to any newcomer. The tall arched windows and stone walls of the buildings on either side seemed to be watching the wide cobblestone lanes. Shrubs and flowers lined the streets, gracing the otherwise barren city with splashes of vibrant blues, crimsons, and purples.

One bright summer morning a young boy trotted merrily down these very lanes. His clothes marked him as the son of a noble; red silk tunic over a white shirt and brown trousers, and polished leather boots. He was going to the market square in the lower city, for today was a rather extraordinary day. It happened to be the rare occasion when market day and a holiday fell on the same date. The holiday was because a certain band of traveling merchants, who brought strange and fascinating goods, came only once a year. Because of this, the farmers and field workers usually missed them. But today, they would all be in town at once, and everyone was very excited.

Cody O'Neill trotted happily through the upper town, passing the great stone buildings on

either side of the street. Most of the residents of these would already be at the market square in the lower city.

"Hello!" called a voice from his right, and he waved his hand in greeting to someone he guessed was servant girl hanging laundry. "Where are you off to?" she asked.

"Just to the market," replied Cody, and waved again and continued.

The sentries at the gates to the lower town also knew Cody well, and greeted him as he passed. One of them, a wiry, dark haired young man, called down to him as he passed. "You have y'self a good time out there, master Cody!" Cody grinned and hurried on.

He passed through the remainder of the city, and arrived at the market square minutes later. It bustled with activity, common people going from stall to stall, merchants calling their goods, and small children frightening flocks of birds excitedly. The foreign traders had set up their encampment just outside the enclosure of the town wall, and Cody headed there now.

The sight that greeted him was wonderful. The traders themselves were so different from what Cody was used to seeing that he spent a moment just looking at them. Some had skin as dark as fresh coffee. Some were small, and had eyes that

slanted like elves'. On tables and makeshift shelves, they had set up an assortment of goods, ranging from practical, such as spices and weapons, to totally fanciful, like gemstones and jewelry.

One particularly bright stone caught Cody's eye. It was deep orange in color, like flames in a blazing fireplace. The stone looked like it had been carved into the likeness of a dragon's claw, with scales and cruel, sharp talons. He stared at it, wondering dimly what kind of stone it was. Enchanted, perhaps? Although he wasn't sure he believed in such things as magic, the stone seemed to be drawing him in, asking - begging - to be taken.

This was the kind of thing that got Cody in trouble: he couldn't restrain his curiosity. A half-open door would attract him like a magnet, and an unattended trinket would somehow find its way into his pocket. This stone did just that. He reached out a hand to touch it...

... and the next thing he knew, he was being severely chastised by his aunt, his mother, his tutor, and - to his extreme horror - Lord Rodeg himself. There was no one else in the room. He wasn't sure how he'd gotten here, in the castle guard room, or what had happened since he touched that stone. At that, he noticed that the stone was lying distractingly on the table in the

corner. One thing he was sure of, though, was that he was in deep, deep trouble.

"Cody Ronan O'Neill, do you realize what you've done?" his mother said angrily. "If you were but a few years older, those traders would be screaming for your head!" Cody paled; it took a lot to make his mother angry like this.

"Cody, why did you take it?" Aunt Fiona asked. She, too, was clearly almost to the breaking point.

He hesitated, uncertain of what to say. He didn't remember taking the stone, or any of his subsequent actions, but he felt annoyed with himself and his accusers. "I didn't- I mean-

"Speak up, boy," said Lord Rodeg, "we don't have time for muttering."

Pulling himself together, Cody said, "I don't remember taking the stone, sir." The adults looked at each other oddly, and Cody was about to elaborate when Aunt Fiona replied.

"Cody, just tell us the truth," she said, "we'll understand." Rodeg huffed, clearly disagreeing with her. Cody felt an angry knot form in his stomach. He had told the truth!

"I've told you the truth," he said tightly, "and if you don't believe me then at least give me time to come up with a convincing explanation."

"Cody," said his tutor angrily, "this is serious. The traders know you're young, but they still want recompense for your actions, and rightly so!"

"What actions?" Cody almost yelled. "I touched the stone and suddenly I'm being accused of stealing?"

His mother was beginning to look unsure. It wasn't like Cody to tell such a lie, especially about something as serious as stealing. She opened her mouth as if about to say something, but before she could, Lord Rodeg said, "At the very least, you'll be kept under close custody until the matter is resolved." He walked out of the room with Cody's mother and Aunt Fiona following. Mr. Sullivan, Cody's tutor, remained.

Cody clenched his fists and said nothing; there was nothing to say, and the best he could do was hope that the truth would come out before too long.

He glanced out the window and grimaced, for the sun was low in the western sky, indicating that at least an hour had passed since he entered the market place.

Moments later, a soldier came into the guardroom. He took Cody by the arm, although lightly, and marched him away without a word. Suddenly, Cody felt awful; it was Connor, the

same, dark haired man who had wished him a good time as he'd left the upper city.

They exited the guard room and walked steadily through the castle, passing large windows, solemn portraits of long-dead nobles, and the occasional servant. Most of these latter seemed to ignore Cody and the soldier; but many of the younger ones were clearly startled and, in some cases, openly disgusted.

Cody's face burned with shame and irritation as they passed. He knew these people, and was close friends with quite a few of them. It was terrible to feel their eyes on him, judging - accusing, even.

Cody and the guard turned a final corner and descended a short flight of steps. They had reached the upper level of the dungeon. All the cells were empty, as far as he could see, and he dreaded spending the next several hours - days, perhaps - all alone down here. The other man gave him a small shove toward the first open door and Cody went willingly enough. He was too busy thinking to resist anyway.

The cell wasn't as bad as Cody had expected. Although it was musty, it was pretty clean for a such a place. Three of the walls were made of stone blocks but the fourth, the one with the door, was just metal bars stretching from floor to ceiling. In the wall opposite to the bars was set a

window, also barred, from which Cody could see the sky. It must have been the eastern sky, for it was already dark blue and spattered with stars.

He turned to ask his guard a question, but found that the man, after having locked the door and lit a torch, had left.

Cody sighed, wondering how long he would have to wait. To pass the time, he once again turned over the events of the past hour or so. Having tea with Mother and Mr. Sullivan? Check. Getting relieved of duties and walking through the city? Check. Passing the market square and seeing the strange travelers? Check. Reaching out to touch the orange stone? Check. Then ... his mother, Aunt Fiona, Mr. Sullivan, and Lord Rodeg furiously chastising him for an action he didn't remember committing.

He sat down heavily on the small cot, trying to push down his growing resentment. Only then did he notice how cold it was becoming. He was so used to thick blankets and roaring hearths when he went to bed that his body reacted strongly to the cold. He wrapped his arms around himself, trying to ward off the advancing chill, but shivers still ran along his skin.

Perhaps the stone was some kind of sleeping aid, for suddenly, Cody found himself waking with no memory at all of falling asleep. He blinked the tiredness from his eyes and saw what

had wakened him: a guard, a different one this time, had opened the door to his cell.

"Come," said the man, his voice somewhat strained. Cody stood and found himself stiff after his short sleep. He hobbled awkwardly after the guard, wondering how long he'd slept and what had transpired in the meantime.

The guard led him up the stone steps and through a series of dark hallways - which Cody guessed were the servants passageways - finally arriving in Lord Rodeg's sitting room. Cody flicked his eyes from one person to the next, going from Rodeg in his high-backed velvet seat to Aunt Fiona sitting rigidly on an ornate wooden chair and finally settling on his mother, who stood by the window in the western wall, fidgeting constantly.

For an awful moment, no one spoke. Cody felt his heart racing in his chest and his fingers twitching by his sides.

"You're pardoned," said Rodeg.

Cody let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

"We've returned the stone to them, along with some coin as recompense," continued Rodeg. "They relented when they found out you were just a little boy -" Cody stiffened at the word little - "but you still caused a lot of trouble." Cody



braced himself for whatever would come next, guessing there would still be some price for him to pay. "You'll be confined to your quarters for the next two weeks."

Cody previous relief evaporated, replaced at once by outrage. Two weeks? By then, market day would be over, the traders would be gone, and winter would almost have arrived!

"But, that's -"

"Cody," said his Aunt Fiona, suddenly very stern. "Lord Rodeg's decision is final. Now get going before dawn catches us all."

Cody, still furious, but taken aback by his Aunt's tone, nodded numbly and shuffled toward the door to the antechamber. He stepped out and the door closed behind him with a thud. He shivered in the drafty room, taking a moment to come to terms with his punishment. In hindsight, he supposed it wasn't an unjust punishment, but it had still shocked him terribly.

Behind him in the sitting room, the grown ups resumed talking after a few moments, but Cody didn't care to hear what they said. He left quietly and didn't look back.