

Thievery, and Other Nuisances

Nearly a century ago, my forefathers left their land to set sail for a new and glorious horizon.

Maybe “left” isn’t the most appropriate term. “Were forcibly ejected from” probably suits the situation better. And perhaps they didn’t “set sail for a new and glorious horizon” so much as “float aimlessly around the ocean for a while due to a total lack of navigational equipment.”

Perhaps some context is necessary here.

Once upon a time, there was a nice little city filled with nice little people. All of these people were honest and worked hard to make a living, right up until the moment that one of them realized that taking someone *else’s* hard earned living required much less work. And then the city had a problem.

The problem expanded as more and more people who had never felt suited to honest work began to steal instead. Before long the city’s tiny jail was clogged with thieves and the police were helpless. Thefts began to happen so often that they had become positively irritating. A man walking down the street in those times would be braving hundreds of pickpockets and dozens of thugs. It was not uncommon for an honest citizen headed for home to find that he had been relieved of their house key, only to learn that it didn’t matter anyway because someone had taken the door as well.

“If you ask me, we should just ship them all off to some deserted island somewhere, and let them rob each other, and leave us alone,” one honest citizen mumbled to another. This sentiment spread until someone answered, “Well, why not?”

A desperate government grabbed hold of this desperate idea, and soon agents were sent to find an island suitable for the mass dumpage of criminals. When none could be found, a suitably island-shaped barge was built. The criminals were rounded up, shoved onto their new home, and pushed out to sea. As the good people watched the vessel shrink and disappear, neither knowing nor caring where it landed, they breathed a sigh of relief and hastily forgot about the whole ordeal.

Meanwhile, the barge's inhabitants survived, which is a key skill for any thief. A critical piece of their survival in this strange new world was the ability to adapt. After all, cramming a slew of criminals into a confined space and putting them on a strict diet of rainwater and fish is not exactly a formula for success. After only a few unpleasant altercations which ended with the offending parties being ejected from the vessel, a sort of unofficial code was formed. As there is not much else for a bunch of sea-borne thieves to do, the code was centered on thieving. Theft became a sort of game on the odd little barge, where no possession was safe. The fastest learners soon became the richest, albeit very briefly. It wasn't so much a case of common ownership as the fact that, at any moment, one's possessions could cease to be one's own and begin to be someone else's.

The best thieves were soon determined as they rose to the top of their floating world. This new upper class consisted of two groups. The first was the men and women who had the vigilance to retain absolute ownership of their original possessions and the skill to steadily add to their wealth. The second group was of the most frightening, large, and cruel miscreants. As the barge's inhabitants were all fast learners, this crowd was avoided almost instantly. In return for being left alone, the crew hardly ever stabbed anyone without cause.

The citizens of the little seafaring nation began to construct a somewhat stable existence, and the world's first theftocracy was formed. As the years passed connections were forged and families were formed. The offspring of nimble-footed thieves were born with their sea legs. And underneath it all, the barge floated. As life flourished above it, the vessel drifted, each day bringing it closer and closer to something new.

The floating nation had produced its third generation when land was first glimpsed. There was a brief period of panic as two generations born at sea came to grips with the unsettling sight of firm land; by the time the last of the thieves disembarked onto the strange beach, half of the barge had been set on fire and the rest had been trampled.

And so the community found itself having to completely rebuild for the second time. It was quickly decided that the new thief empire would be constructed on the tops of the nearby mountains instead of on the sandy beach. Two main reasons drove this decision: one, that almost all of the thieves were more comfortable on high ground than low; and two, that the younger members of their society had taken an extreme disliking to the sensation of sand below their feet, and it was quite hard to conduct business when half of the assembled are jumping from foot to foot with very unprofessional grimaces on their faces. Once the houses were built on the mountain's peaks, there was a fleeting phase of awkward shuffling as everyone tried to steal a house from everyone else. When the homes were done, they built a proper school where the littlest thieves could be honed.

After someone noticed lights in the valley, a gate was added as well.

That night a search party was sent to observe the outsiders. The scouts returned two hours later, their arms full of loot. They reported that the people who lived in this little settlement had

unbelievably untrained senses and that the thieves had only needed a minimum of stealth to infiltrate the place. This statement was followed by a silence as every member of the crowd was drawn to the same conclusion: these people would be incredibly easy to steal from.

The scouts ended their report by declaring this town's name to be Silversong. As thieves are both highly competitive and passionate about precious metals, they quickly named their village 'Goldendale.'

This was the world that I was born into. In fact, this was the world I was made for.

My name is Katarina Bodkin, and I'm a thief.

My father was a thief, my grandfather was a thief, and I have my suspicions about my great-grandfather. I was born into to one of the most respected families of Goldendale, as close to royalty as this town could get. I graduated at the top of every class I ever intended, including History of Larceny and Stealth 101. I once managed to procure test answers from under my sleeping professor's pillow in a locked and barred room surrounded by bear traps. As a result I was given the highest grades ever seen in Lock Picking and Booby Trap Avoidance, as well as an A+ in Withstanding Interrogation when no one could get me to tell them how I did it.

I had been among Goldendale's best and brightest for years, but my biggest accomplishment had yet to come. It was only a matter of days before I began my seventeenth year and could undergo the legendary rite of passage of every young thief: my first raid on Silversong.

My people have been stealing from Silversong since those first scouts discovered the place. We soon worked out exactly how often we could steal from the village without being caught, and it was smooth stealing from there. Now thieves would slip into the sleepy little town and take as many possessions as they could without drawing suspicion. If the citizens of

Silversong even noticed the petty thefts, they chalked the disappearances up to too little sleep, a family member, or the cat.

This has worked incredibly well for the thieves. We were able to gild our homes with the lost jewelry we managed to confiscate and we feed our children on Silversong's leftover bread. All we had to do was keep a low profile and let the forest's wild foliage keep our homes well hidden.

The entire town of Goldendale was waiting for my first raid; they knew that this was when I would apparently show what I was truly made of and blow everyone away. This was the perfect opportunity to start my life of crime. If only I hadn't found crime so *boring*.

I'd realized that I didn't possess the passion for theft that seemed to burn in everyone around me at a fairly young age. It was true, I could scale a wall and pick a lock with the best of them, but it gave me no pleasure. *Sure, I can kill a man with a toothpick*, I kept thinking, *but why?* I was always very careful to hide these thoughts from my fellow thieves. After all, I could crack a safe with my toes, but I didn't want to appear *weird*.

So I was not looking forward to my big day, despite whatever I said to the contrary. I just couldn't see the *point* of it all. I got no rush from thinking about taking some trinket from a bunch of oblivious idiots who had, from what I could make out, all the trained senses and defensive skills of a tomato. I looked out my window towards the distant lights of Silversong and sighed. Some life of crime.

In the days leading up to my first raid, many who had gone before me had words of advice. My older brother Derek was the first.

“You’ve got to think carefully about what you’re going to bring back, because that’ll always be your first prize,” he told me one morning over breakfast. “Look at Donny Larkins. He panicked, and brought back a little cat made of china. Now he’s got that hanging over his head for the rest of his life.”

More senior members of the community gave me more typical advice. They warned me to stay with the group, move quickly, and to never be seen.

“That’s got to be the most important one. Take care that none of those people ever catch sight of you,” growled my ancient History of Larceny professor. “Those idiots haven’t found us yet, and we intend to keep it that way.”

After a few days of well-wishers repeating all the same advice to me, I was ready to be done with the whole affair. I didn’t have to wait long. Just when I was beginning to think that I was going to explode into a puff of aggravation and stress, the day of the raid arrived.

I donned my standard black cat suit, received a few last-minute wishes of luck, and joined the other members of the raid party at Goldendale’s outer limits. The party’s leader hurried through the standard pre-raid instructions (stay with the group, be fast, don’t get caught), and we were off through the woods, towards the town that was soon to become the scene of the crime.

As we approached the village, I could already sense how different Silversong was from Goldendale. One was the way that no one in the village made any attempt to conceal their presence but let their feet slap against the ground and coughed with reckless abandon. Another was the fact that many of the houses appeared to have no more protective measures than a single lock. I was completely taken aback by the feeling of total carelessness that permeated the town.

This feeling intensified when I drew close enough to examine the townspeople themselves from behind a carefully selected bush. I had never seen people so obviously untrained; their bodies hung loose, their muscles untrained. I could not believe how much they had neglected their bodies.

These people also appeared to be almost totally unaware of their surroundings. No one checked around corners before they passed or glanced behind them to make sure they weren't followed. I even saw one man trip, actually *trip*, something I didn't think I'd ever seen in my entire life. I hadn't tripped when I was learning to walk. The most ridiculous part was that no one even tried to take his wallet while he was down. I turned an unbelieving face toward my nearest comrade, who shook his head and mouthed, *I know!*

And yet, as shocked as I was at this scene, there was another emotion struggling for dominance in my brain. I felt almost... envious. I was fascinated by these people. Their apparent lack of concern for their own welfare was intriguing. I wanted to know exactly how they obtained such a sense of peace. And then I wanted to take it for myself.

I realized that I had been staring for slightly too long and glanced up. My nearest companion was gesturing to me. It was time to move. We crept through the underbrush to a line of structures. I knew that I had to choose a building, find a way in, and take something, whatever I deemed most valuable, from inside. I chose a house at random, signaled to the others, and then took off through the shadows. When I reached the building, I almost snorted in disbelief. The idiots had actually left the window open! Without a moment's hesitation I leapt headfirst through the window. At the last minute my attention was seized by an object which was resting on the far side of the windowsill, and I faltered midair. My concentration shattered, I had to make a hasty recovery in order to avoid tumbling to the floor. With the ease that came with years of

practice, I corrected my position in midair and landed softly on the ground. After ensuring that no one had been alerted to my presence, I turned my attention back to the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

Sitting on the windowsill, giving off a mouth-watering scent, was the most magnificent pie that I had ever seen. This wasn't saying much, considering that the only other pie I'd ever seen was in a (stolen) book. Goldendale believed in a diet that could sustain and preserve the fitness required for thieving, and desserts were not a big part of a healthy thief's regimen. This was a policy that I had always supported. Right up until the moment that I saw that pie. The book hadn't done it justice.

I was snapped out of my pastry-themed revelry by the sound of approaching footsteps and I hastily began searching for a hiding place in the room. A bakery, I realized. I'd read about those too. This one had everything: a spice rack, pots, pans, sacks of flour, a huge oven... and a pantry. I reached the pantry door just as a hand began turning the handle of the bakery's main entrance; by the time the door had opened I was safely stowed away between a barrel of apples and a mop that had seen better days. I crouched in the darkness and listened as the room was filled with the distinct sound of bustling. The woman began to hum. *The baker*, I thought.

I was so preoccupied with speculating about the individual who could create such a beautiful pie place that I barely had any reaction time when the pantry door began to open. I scrambled up the pantry's shelves until I reached the ceiling. Then, bracing myself against a wall, I watched as the door swung open to reveal a large but intelligent-looking woman. I held my breath and watched the woman grab an apple from the barrel. I breathed a sigh of relief as she turned to leave. I didn't know why I had worried. These people never looked up. I was safe. There was no way she would- the woman's head whipped back around and she looked into the

shadow which hid me from view. She gazed into the shadow intently for another moment, then left, slamming the door behind her.

As soon as the woman was gone, I dropped to the floor, my heart pounding. It was time to get out of here-now. But first... I looked around for something to take. I gazed longingly at the pie, but disregarded any thoughts of taking it almost instantly. It was too conspicuous and object, and difficult to carry besides. I looked around, and my eyes found a small cookbook. I concealed it in a special pocket and grabbed a small decanter as well. Taking one last pining whiff of the pie, I dove back out of the window.

As I rejoined the others and continued back to Goldendale, the raid leader asked me what I'd taken. I waved the decanter and grinned, while pressing the book closer to myself. For reasons I couldn't explain, I did not want the others to know about the cookbook.

That night when I got home, I read the entire cookbook twice.

I visited the village for every raid after the first one. For one thing, I needed ingredients. I was determined to make a pie if it killed me. But there was another reason. The Silversong way of life captivated me. From what I had been able to piece together from several eavesdropped conversations, the villagers were so carefree because no one tried to stab or steal from anybody else. They walked the streets with such a lack of vigilance because they *could*. They even had a jail where they put anybody who tried to steal! It was crazy! The more I learned about this world, the more I desired it.

Between raids I was also trying to become a baker. It was hard work with no further instruction than a little book and equipment no more complicated than some scrounged materials and a wood fire. All I had accomplished so far were some runny blueberry muffins, and I couldn't think of any way to further improve my skills. As far as I knew, no one in Goldendale

baked. They were strictly scavengers. Goldendale lived off of what they could grow, pick, shoot, or steal. Muffins never entered the equation.

As I spent more time in the village, I became more and more agitated. My only distraction was my baking, and that was going nowhere fast. My dreams were haunted by the life I could never have and that perfect pie that I could never accomplish...

One morning, I woke with a start. I had a plan. I needed help baking, and I was going to ask the baker herself. I was going to be seen.

I started scheming immediately. I needed to do this before I lost my nerve or someone got suspicious. Meeting with the baker wouldn't be an issue; I'd seen the woman several times since our close encounter; I'd even learned her name: Mabel Blanche. No, finding Mrs. Blanche was not a problem. Clothes weren't a problem either. On my next raid a particularly convenient clothesline catered to my needs perfectly; the clothesline was one of the villagers' concepts that I could never comprehend, but I was in no position to complain.

Now I stood before my open window, preparing to jump. The only thing holding me back now was my own connection to this place, to this world. This connection had grown weaker and weaker every time I had seen that other town... but was I ready to break it entirely? After all, I was planning to do the thing my forefathers had been most against from the start... making contact with Silversong. I paused for a moment.

It was worth it. I was doing this for peace. For freedom! For pie!

After all, if a decent slice of pie wasn't worth fighting for, what was?

I leapt out of the window and landed softly on the ground far below.

I hiked down to the village in the valley and stopped at the main gates. I had to force myself not to scale the gate; if I was going to appear as a normal young woman, than I would

have to behave as one. And I had never once observed a single girl in this town scale anything. I would have to wait till dawn. And so I waited.

The gates opened just as the first rays of sunlight flooded the valley. I quickly swept through them in my new, and rather cumbersome, skirts. Trying to remain as inconspicuous as possible, I made my way to the place where I knew the bakery to be. I was still congratulating myself for passing up so many opportunities to pick pockets as I halted in front of the bakery's main entrance. I took a moment to savor entering a building through its front entrance. Then I stepped out of the street... and into a whole new world.

The bakery was a billion times better from this side. There were all manner of treats glistening in their glass cases: cookies, cupcakes, and even a towering wedding cake. A thousand wonderful scents threatened to overwhelm my stunned nose. Every countertop gleamed, every surface was spotless; this was the moment when I knew, without a doubt, that it had all been worth it, just for this.

Mrs. Blanche was the most singular woman I had ever met, exactly the sort of person I expected you had to be to make a pie like she made. She was quite a striking person; a statuesque woman with cutting blue eyes, covered with flour from head to toe. She had thrown me an apron the second she rested those piercing eyes on me. Before the I could say a word, the woman had told me I was hired, and set me to work icing a cake.

This was just a harbinger of things to come in the adventure which was Working for Mrs. Blanche. That night, after a solid day's work, Mrs. Blanche handed me the key to the spare apartment above the bakery without ever asking if I needed a place to stay. I went to sleep and was woken abruptly the next morning for another day's work. This was how I spent the next few weeks of my life; I would be roused at an ungodly hour every morning and would work at the

bakery until sundown. Mrs. Blanche would often pass the time by telling the most outlandish tales or advising me on a difficult dish, often while chopping fruit at a speed that would make a master pickpocket nervous.

I was happier here with Mrs. Blanche than I had ever been among the thieves. Mrs. Blanche had contributed more to my education in three weeks than six tutors had done in my entire childhood. In my second week I'd even accomplished a pie which almost rivaled Mrs. Blanche's.

But I was also growing more anxious by the day. Thieves did not forgive easily, and I was sure they wouldn't let me leave without a fight. Before long I began to jump at shadows and I would lie awake at night, listening for any indication of an intruder. I was staring out of the bakery window one night as I washed dishes when I finally saw what I'd been expecting for weeks. There, barely visible in the retreating light, was a group of dark figures moving at the edge of the valley. The bowl I had been scrubbing clattered to the floor.

I dove after it, my heart pounding. I estimated around half an hour before the thieves would be on my doorstep. I tried to devise a strategy, but some noise was making it hard to focus. The noise, I realized, was Mrs. Blanche. "So I expect you'll be going tonight?"

I tried furiously to remember what we had been talking about. I failed.

"What?" I asked.

"The Summer Ball," Mrs. Blanche replied. "I should think you would be excited to see the entire town turn up; every other girl here is."

"Why on earth," I snapped, my brain still stubbornly refusing to function, "would I want to be around a town's worth of people-" I stopped. Why not, though? What was the number one rule of thieving?

Never be seen.

Twenty minutes later I was running towards the town square in a dress that I'd *procured* from a shop that had closed early for the festivities. I promised myself that I would return it, but tonight was an emergency. As I tore down the street I wished I could stop to enjoy the beauty of the dress, and as I reached the brightly lit square I wished I could enjoy that, too. But there was no time. Some very angry former associates would be here in a matter of minutes.

I leaned against a wall in the shadows and tried to catch my breath- working in a bakery for three weeks had done nothing for my physical conditioning. I jumped when I heard a voice behind me. As I turned, I recognized one of my companions from my very first raid. My blood ran cold.

"Katarina," he hissed, "What are you doing here?"

"I'm not going back," I replied, hoping I sounded braver than I felt, "I don't want to be a thief anymore."

He looked at me of equal parts confusion and anger. "What will you do, then?"

Giving the most rebellious tone I could muster, I said, "I want to bake pies."

I took a step closer to the lights of the town square.

The thief's expression turned instantly to one of fear. "Don't go into the light, Katarina.

You do not want this. If they see you, everything will be over."

"That," I grinned, "is exactly what I want."

With one last look at the stunned thief, I rushed into the midst of the crowd, grabbed the most handsome boy I could find, and began to dance. This had exactly the effect I had hoped for. I could instantly feel the weight of dozens of pairs of eyes upon me. After all, a strange,

nameless girl in a fantastic gown dancing with the puzzled but satisfied son of the mayor was a sight worth seeing.

As I twirled around the square with my new partner my trained eyes could also detect several shocked and infuriated faces among the bushes. There was no going back now. There would be hell to pay once I was out of the spotlight. But I was willing to bet that I could stay in the spotlight for quite some time. Smiling, I turned my attention back to my handsome dance partner.

“Do you like pie?”