

SKY CHASERS

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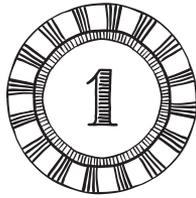
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Southern France, March 1783

I WAIT TILL MIDNIGHT. On the last chime of the church clock I'm off, flying over the cobblestones on tough-as-leather bare feet. The town, Annonay, lies quiet. Shutters are closed, candles snuffed out. The breath of the place sounds like a person fallen asleep. It's exactly how I want things, just me and the stars and the promise of a few coins for my troubles. They call this part of town the Nest, because it's dark and twisty like an animal's lair. Decent, law-abiding folks don't come here. You wouldn't either if you had a choice. Not that the dark scares me—it's daylight that's dangerous when you're a thief.

Tonight, though, I'll admit I've got a touch of the nerves. I'm sweating despite it being a cold March night. All because I've got myself roped into doing a job for someone else—a

client, if you will—who cornered me outside the Café Les Ailes at dusk.

“Are you Magpie?” was the woman’s opening pitch. She looked me up and down with queer pale eyes like a dog bred for rounding up sheep.

Hand on hip, I stared right back. And what did she make of me, I wondered, a girl with skin browner than most?

“Why? Who’s asking?” I said, because I never trust a stranger who knows my name.

“I’m Madame Delacroix. I was told I’d find you here, with your . . . *bird*.” She meant Coco, my tame cockerel, who sat as usual in the bag I’d made for him, which I wore slung across my chest. “I’m also told you’re the best thief for miles around. If it’s true, then I’d like you to do a little job for me.”

To be clear, I’m not a hardened criminal—not a murderer or a horse thief. I’m a pickpocket, a fingersmith: a loaf of bread here, a coin or two there. Just enough for me and Coco to get by. I take what rich people are foolish enough to leave unguarded, so the way I see it, I’m teaching them a lesson, and there isn’t anything criminal in *that*. I’ve worked by myself for myself as long as I can remember. It’s simpler that way.

Yet all she wanted, this Madame Delacroix, was a box fetched from inside a house on the Rue des Centimes. In her plain black frock, she looked respectable enough, like

a governess or a nun, which made me wonder why she couldn't go and fetch the box herself.

"Sorry, lady, I'm not for hire," I told her.

Which didn't seem to please Madame Delacroix. She had a way of making me feel like she was staring right inside me. I prickled all over. I didn't trust her, I decided, and went to walk away.

"What I'm after is kept inside that valuables box," she said, a plea creeping into her voice. "Do at least consider my offer."

And wouldn't you know it, when she opened her fist—she had gloves on, the leather nice and soft and worth a bit—there were five gold coins sat in her palm. FIVE!

Well, of course I had a sudden change of heart. "All right," I said quickly. "I'll do it."

She glanced at Coco. "Without the bird. He'll be too noisy."

"No, madame, he doesn't make a single sound." I wasn't lying, either. Since I'd rescued him from a cockfight a few months back, he'd mostly slept and eaten worms and grown new sleek feathers where the old ones'd got ripped out. Never once had I heard him crow.

"Without the bird," she repeated.

I didn't want to leave him; nor did I want to lose those five gold coins.



So here I am, heading for the river just like Madame Delacroix told me to. I've left Coco tucked under a hedge near the place where I'm to meet her later with the box. Part of me is excited, thinking how tomorrow morning I'll actually pay for breakfast. I might even buy a chestnut cake from that fancy pâtisserie called Lancelot's on the Rue Antoine.

It doesn't stop the nerves, though; my hands have gone clammy. And I'm having doubts about those five gold coins. This job must be bigger than I reckoned on—why else would Madame Delacroix pay such a *whopping* amount?

Once I'm over the bridge, I pull a scarf up over my face so only my eyes are on show. I take a deep breath. It's cold tonight, the stars icy bright, the sky dark as velvet. A clear sky is a good omen. Time for any niggly thoughts to get gone and for me to concentrate.

Take the first flight of steps you come to, Madame Delacroix had said.

I count sixty of them. The steps bring me out on a road that swings sharp left and flattens out. I stop for a quick breather. And to listen. Just to be sure I'm alone.

Once I'm walking again, I start to notice the houses. In

this part of town, they're bigger and grander than the streets I live among in the Nest. They've got driveways for carriages, rose gardens, gates. My target isn't the biggest house in the road, nor the smallest. To be honest, I'm surprised at how ordinary it looks next to the others. I'm guessing a family lives here, not that I asked. It's best not to know who you're thieving from. You don't want to get the guilts.

Crouching behind the gatepost, I check: Way in? Way out? Dogs? Guards? People still awake? I can't see any signs of life from here.

Once I've got the measure of the place, I slip through the gate. The drive is long, the gravel crunchy underfoot, so I walk on tiptoe until I reach the front of the house. It's deadly quiet, lights out, the glass at the windows black where the shutters haven't been closed. A couple of steps lead up to a side door. This must be the way in. And there it is, the rosemary bush Madame Delacroix mentioned. Her instructions, I admit, are as sharp as you like. It's the perfect bush to crouch down and hide behind, and with a good view of the door.

Yet before I can even reach the bush, the side door opens. I freeze. *Mais non!* This isn't in the plan!

"Hurry up, Voltaire," says a boy's voice, nudging some

sort of animal outside. “You do your business while I close the shutters, all right? Be quick!”

A dog. Someone’s letting a dog out! In a flash, I drop to the ground.

The boy stays in the doorway. “What is it, old chap? What’ve you seen? Is someone there?”

I keep stone-still. *Sloppy work, Magpie*, I tell myself, the nerves creeping back, *you’ve not even got inside and someone’s sensed you*.

Yet the dog doesn’t bark or growl—it . . . *quacks*. Really, it does. I’m stunned. And overcome with such an urge to laugh, it’s a job not to snort, and though I pinch my nose, it doesn’t help much.

“What’ve you found, Voltaire?” the boy asks.

I’ve got to risk a look. Parting the rosemary branches a little, I glimpse a duck. A real live *duck*. And a fine specimen too—the green-feathered kind that roasts up nice and crisp. The boy with it is a solid, healthy sort with dark hair tied back off an honest-looking face. Which again makes me wonder about this job, what his family have done to upset Madame Delacroix. It must be bad for her to hire a thief like me to help put it right.

Silently I shrink back into the bush. I wait for the boy and his duck to go inside again. Then when all is clear, I count to fifty before crawling to the door. It’s locked, the

key taken, though that's hardly a problem. An old hairpin from my pocket and some fierce concentration should do the trick. With a click, the door opens.

Inside, there's a passage: I follow it deep into the house. The flagstones are smooth, almost warm beneath my feet. I pass through a kitchen where the smell of food—meaty, garlicky—makes my mouth water, though I mustn't let it distract me. I'll grab a handful on the way out if I can.

Upstairs, Madame Delacroix said. Top of the house. You're looking for a study in the attic.

Up a flight of stairs, I join another passage, this one carpeted and lit by candles. It seems to run the length of the house. Trouble is, though the doors are all shut, some of them have candlelight leaking underneath. I hear coughing and low voices, which means people are still awake. Not so good. My heartbeat picks up. I can't afford to hang around.

At the end of the passage is the staircase I'm looking for. This one's small and curved, leading up to a second story—the attic. I'm relieved to find it. The candlelight doesn't reach this far, nor do the voices, so the darkness is oily-thick and silent. I hurry up the stairs.

At the top there's just one door: one room. Even in the dark, the quiet feels different; it's the thick, book-muffled kind. I smell leather, candles, and ink, and as I creep across the room, paper crunches under my feet.

A valuables box, Madame Delacroix said. Red leather with gold patterns on it, locks on the front. On the top, the initials: JM.

Right now, though, none of that detail is helpful. It's so dark in here I can't even see my own nose. Nor can I read, so I'll be guessing at those initials.

Hands out in front, I feel my way around the room. There's no sign of a box. I'm beginning to lose hope when I jab my toe on something hard. The pain makes me scream—a big silent *waaaaa!* I hop on one foot, rubbing the other.

Then I realize. What I've walked slap-bang into *is* the box. Crouching down, I feel it properly. It's leathery with locks on the front, just as Madame Delacroix said. I grin: I've found it.

No time for congratulations, though. I've got to get this box outside. It's not heavy, but it's awkward as heck to carry—it's all sharp corners and too big to sit on my hip. Yet with the devil's luck and silent footsteps, I'm downstairs in an eye-blink.

As soon as my feet hit the ground floor, I start running. I don't stop for food. Once I get those five gold coins, I'm going to buy a whole box of chestnut cakes from Lancelot's.

I'm nearly there. Nearly at the back door. I can already

feel an icy draft. It's just down these steps and around this next corner and . . .

I skid to a halt.

The boy and his duck are here, their backs to me, staring at the door.

"I locked it, I'm sure I did," the boy is saying. "Good job you wanted to relieve yourself again, Voltaire, or this would've stayed unlocked all night."

He's suspicious. And I'm panicked. He mustn't see me! Swinging my fist at the lantern just above my head, I knock it to the ground with a crash. The passage goes instantly dark, but now there's glass everywhere.

"Stay where you are! Don't move!" The boy sounds more scared than I am.

I rush for where the door should be and go smack into him, catching him off-balance.

"Oh no you don't!" the boy cries.

Suddenly he's holding the other side of the box. I wrap both arms around it, clinging on.

"Let go!" I hiss.

"You let go!" He yanks it toward him. I yank back twice as hard.

There's a *crunch-ping* as the lock on the box's lid springs open. Then the whole thing tips and paper—a right

waterfall of it—pours to the floor. I cuss under my breath. *Bring me the whole thing unopened*, Madame Delacroix had instructed.

Well, she'll have to make do, I decide. Letting go of the box, I grab handfuls of paper, stuffing them down my frock.

“You can't take those!” the boy cries, guessing from the rustlings what I'm doing. “They're important to us!”

But I need to take something, to prove I've been here. Especially if I want paying. I move faster.

“You mustn't steal them,” the boy pleads. “I beg of you.”

Someone with a candle comes down the passage toward us. “What's all this frightful noise?” It's a woman's voice.

I lunge for the door. Like I say, it's not in my nature to dwell on the people I thieve from. All I think now is *run run run*.