

Eyes of a Thief

To err is nature, to overcome error is glory. – George Washington.

He knew it was time to leave when he caught himself counting the drops sliding down the wall. The waning moon had just crawled into the sky, and its white light left a bright pattern on the floor as it shone through the bars of the narrow window. The air of the dungeon was stale, and the space enclosed by the rough, uneven stone slabs was always cold and moist. That was what came from building something below ground, he thought lazily. He got up and stretched, his fingers barely grazing the window's bars. The window was just below the cell's ceiling, but to someone standing outside on the street, it was right above ground level. His handcuffs were heavy and uncomfortable, they were digging into his wrists, and for a second he considered getting them off. He knew it would take him a few seconds, at most. Technology didn't tend to impress him. He shrugged carelessly and decided against it. It wasn't strictly necessary, and there was no sense in showing your advantages before you needed to. He had learned that as a thief. He sat back down, casually leaning against the wall and resting his arms on his knees, and waited. There was no wall opposite him: instead, there were metal bars with an opening section, which acted as a door when needed. So he saw the glow of torches reflecting off the walls of the hallway almost at the same time as he heard voices and approaching footsteps. He smiled. This was when the fun began.

The captain of the guards scowled at the man sitting half hidden in the shadows, and his sneer only deepened as the thief leisurely rolled onto one knee and got up, a half-sarcastic smile playing on his face. He wasn't particularly happy about the fact that this criminal was taller than

him. The captain was a short man, and he was sensitive about his height. And, of course, the man leaning on the opposite side of the bars knew that.

“Jack.” The captain tried to put as much contempt as possible into his voice as he pronounced the thief’s name.

“Hullo, cap’n.” Raised eyebrow. Cheeky grin. The captain fought back the urge to slap him, and stayed at a distance. He’d already broken the rules and gone too far when arresting the thief a couple of days ago, and Jack’s nose was still caked with a layer of dried blood in testimony of that encounter.

The thief stood with his head slightly cocked to one side, studying the captain with a look of vague amusement, obviously seeing everything that was going through his mind. The captain tried to bestow him with a look of utter disdain, but secretly wondered how Jack managed to look so unconcerned. The thief was also at least a decade younger than him, only in his mid-twenties, and that made his attitude even more infuriating. Like most criminals, he had long, dirty, matted hair, and wore simple, loose clothes made from rough cloth. Jack’s hair had once been a light brown, before it had been covered with a layer of dirt, and his clothes were all black. But what always really attracted the captain’s attention were this thief’s eyes. They were dark, deep, and unpredictable. The eyes of a thief. The captain growled, suddenly wondering why he felt like this sarcastic peasant was in charge.

“Didn’t get so lucky this time, did you?” He spat, deciding that he had had enough. “They looked through your case today, Jack. Didn’t even bother with a proper trial this time; after all, you’ve had one each time you’ve been arrested,

and you've always been found guilty before. The judge even remembers convicting you to a lifetime of work in the mines last year..."

"Then, remind me...if it was a lifetime sentence, why did we go through that unpleasant and embarrassing scene of you trying to arrest me *again* the other day?"

"...You've managed to escape before, but not this time."

"Yeah, I think you said that last time too... And the time before that..."

"It's over, Jack! It's a death sentence! You're as good as dead."

"I had no plans to die any time soon."

"You are a notorious criminal wanted in over twenty cities. Everyone is tired of you and your thieving. No one even wants to hear you try to deny you're a thief..."

"Me, deny it? Why would I do that?"

"Do I look stupid?! I remember the Scarborough incident..."

"Oh, yes! Scarborough..." Jack threw back his head and laughed. "I almost got you demoted, didn't I? Look, it was nothing personal, I was just trying to survive... Isn't that what everyone does?"

The captain brought his face right up to the thief's, barely keeping his anger in check.

"You are one of the lowest, most selfish people I have ever met. At the trial today, there wasn't a single person who could say anything good about you..."

"Well, I'm not begging you to write my eulogy, if that's what you're hinting at."

“Must be sad, knowing no one will even care when you’re executed tomorrow...”

Jack met his glare, not impressed.

“You can kill me, cap’n, but please don’t pretend like I should be awed by your speeches. That’s just plain ridiculous.”

The captain’s patience broke. He slammed the back of his hand into Jack’s face, and the thief fell backwards. He rubbed his jaw, pretending to look shocked and hurt.

“Hey! That’s not very polite, is it, sir?”

The captain cursed under his breath, storming away.

“We’ll see if you’re still this cocky tomorrow.”

Jack laughed quietly, and shook his head.

“Always a pleasure talking to you, too. Distraction, cap’n. First tool of a thief.

Will you never, *ever* learn?” He grinned, fingering the keys he had slipped of the captain’s belt, and ignoring the salty taste of blood and his throbbing cheek.

“Mission accomplished. What a surprise.”

Jack pulled his handcuffs off, and quietly unlocked the cell door, humming to himself. This town’s security so ridiculously lax, it was almost insulting. A combination of laziness and arrogance, he decided: they were too sluggish to guard their prisoners properly, even if, for example, they arrested a notorious thief, and too proud to send said thief over to some other town. Jack looked up and down the hall. Everything was quiet for now, but there was no knowing how long it would take the guards to realize the keys were gone. And this time the thief knew there would be no quarter: he was a marked man. If he were caught, he would be killed on

sight. Jack smiled. What would the fun be otherwise? He headed down the hall, towards the “secret” back exit. He found it amusing how well he knew the dungeons, but not surprising, seeing as he’d escaped from them so many times. The captain could act like this time was different, but then again, he always did. “As good as dead, eh?” Jack shook his head, and rolled his eyes “I don’t have plans to die.” He did have plans to get out, perhaps move to another city for the time being, steal more valuable stuff from some pompous nobles... He was suddenly distracted from his thoughts by a slight movement he saw out of the corner of his eye. Anyone else probably wouldn’t have noticed it, but as a thief he had trained his instincts and reflexes to be as sharp as possible. In the dim light, he could make out the figure of a small boy huddled by the bars of a cell. Jack paused for a second. He’d seen the boy brought in a few days ago. The kid couldn’t be more than five or six years old. The guards had said he’d been arrested for stealing bread, although he’d probably been forced to do so by his parents. “Get a move on!” Jack’s instincts screamed, “You’re wasting time! The guards could raise the alarm any second...” The boy looked up at the thief, and for a second their eyes met. And Jack saw so much pain in the clear, innocent eyes of that child. So much suffering. So much fear. Jack frowned; “A child’s eyes shouldn’t look like that.” An urgent voice suddenly cried out in the distance, and was followed by the sound of running feet. Someone had raised the alarm. Jack looked down the hall, annoyed, but not worried. He still had just enough time to get out, if he left now. The thief jogged towards the exit, feeling a brief flash of relief and satisfaction as he retreated into the safety of the shadows, but then something stopped him and he glanced back at the dark cell. And at that moment Jack knew that he would never be able to live with the memory of those eyes. He turned back, unlocking the door with his quick fingers, and pulled the boy to his feet.

“Come on, kid.”

The echo of the footsteps and voices was even louder and closer now, and the thief could actually feel the small heart beating next to him. Jack raced down the hallway, herding the boy along by his side. Maybe they could just make it... “Or maybe not,” Jack observed, catching the boy as he tripped on a flagstone. Ahead, where the corridor turned to the right, there was a narrow window high up in the wall. It wasn’t barred, since it wasn’t inside of a cell. Jack was too big to climb through, but the boy... If he could get out, at least one of them would be safe. Looking behind him, the thief could actually see faint torchlight appear somewhere at the end of the hall. He scanned the window again, calculating distance and time. People said that Jack had never done a day of honest work in his life. The thief smiled. He was pretty sure he was strong enough for this. Heaving the boy up, he shoved him through the window onto the street, hissing:

“Go! Quickly! Be careful!”

Jack caught one last glimpse of those scarred, grateful eyes before they disappeared into the night. The voices were incredibly close now, and he could hear guards closing in from the right, too, although the thief couldn’t see anyone yet. Jack looked around him. He could probably hide, and chances were no one would find him. But...if the guards saw the boy was missing, they would start looking for him. On the other hand, if Jack could create a good enough diversion... He reached over to a stand where guards kept their weapons, and gave a sword a couple of experimental swings. At the end of the hallway, a group of guards burst through the door. Jack laughed.

“Let’s see how much time I can buy you, kid.”

Ten years later, two boys are sitting on the beach near a large estate. They come here often, to listen to the restless lapping of the waves and enjoy the quiet breeze. One of them is the son of a noble. The other is a poor orphan, his adopted brother. They are both smart, young, and strong, and eager to leave their mark on the world. Talking about their classes and schoolwork, their discussion turns to philosophy. The noble's son asks: is one good act enough to redeem a person? His adopted brother knows it is. He has seen a person's heart changed in an instant. He saw it one night in the eyes of a man everyone calls a dead thief. In the eyes of a man he knows to be a hero.