

G.L. : Run

Benji's feet hit the ground.

The morning wasn't cold, but he was chilled to the bone. The package in his left hand weighed heavily against his palm, a burning sensation spiking his fingertips every step he took. He kept turning back, feeling the air around him, preparing for any change in the space he had left. The royal bakery was his only escape; he'd taken far longer than he'd meant to, and he was going to cross paths with the daily guard.

He grabbed a wayward apron- dirty, by the smell of it, but necessary. He stuffed the book in the main pocket, taking a moment to grab the nearest package of flour and plant his fist in the middle of it. He could feel the snowfall of ground wheat scatter around him- he inhaled, and it caught in his lungs, choking him momentarily. He poured the open package behind him, covering his footprints effortlessly.

A sharp trill sounded to the left of him- a cat's meow. Fate was on his side. He grabbed a piece of uncooked fish from the counter and threw it into the midst of the flour, to the kitten's delight. That would explain the mess. He placed the bag back where he'd found it, and continued out the door, bowing slightly to the kitten. If he made it out alive, he'd come back to give the little blessing treats every chance he got.

He joined the morning procession of cooks and sous chefs toward the market, ducking into the middle of the crowd. A sharp alarm sent chills down his spine. In the moment where everyone was distracted by the pulsating blare, he ducked beneath a stall table and pulled off the apron and wrapped it around the book.

The steady 'thump' of boots- more specifically, guardsman's boots- invaded his senses. Benji passed his sleeve across his face, praying the flour had dispersed from his features during his mad dash through the market. Otherwise, it would be a dead giveaway- especially taking into account his pitch-black hair. A shout resounded behind him. He didn't have to look to know who it was meant for.

He somersaulted out from beneath the table, and ran- ran, with all his might, toward the other side of the market. There were few guards, this he knew, who could navigate the South Markets like he did. The young thief ducked beneath the billows of smoke, staying as close to the ground as he could as he ran. The loud clank of metal connecting upon metal shuddered through his sensitive ears.

"Teyl," he hissed, ducking into one of the shops, "Teyl!"

"Benji?" The question came from the far corner of the shop. The metalworker's daughter paused, hammer raised above a half-formed sword.

"I got what I was looking for," he whispered, sliding down the doorway, curling in a ball beneath the windows, "but I've got a tail." He could almost see Teylie's eyes roll as she pulled her gloves off and set them beside her on her workbench. Benji crawled towards the back of the shop, past where the young lady had begun to rifle through a chest of her father's old, disused clothing.

“You’re being dramatic again, Benji. It’s not like the guards are-” they were both silenced by a loud, echoing creak- a sound they both knew well- the announcement of the shop door opening. Benji threw himself behind Teylie’s supply of firewood. He would smell like pine for weeks.

“*Ma’am?*” They both winced. Anyone who knew Teylie knew how she reviled being called ‘ma’am’.

“Minute, please!” She shouted, then bent toward the wood so only Benji could hear, “use the back exit, and lock the door behind you.” She dropped a sooty mass of clothing on his head. The gentle ‘clink’ of a key sounded beside him on the floor.

Benji unfolded the items and forced the sneeze back into his throat. He could hear Teylie sidle into the entrance of the shop. She would probably put her gloves back on and resume her work, even as the soldiers swarmed into her already-cramped workspace. Of course, they’d never make it closer than more than six feet from her. It was difficult to intimidate a woman who wielded a hammer in one hand, and a glowing, burning-hot, half-sharpened sword in the other.

“Ma’am,” The whooshing sound of a blade slicing through the air caught Benji’s ears. Instantly, a pair of boots stumbled backward.

“Teylie,” she enunciated, “just Teylie, please.”

“Ma- Teylie- have you seen any suspicious individuals pass by your shop today?” He paused, as though to continue.

“I see six of them in my shop right now.” She slammed the hammer against the raw metal in front of her, far harder than she’d needed to. “But I assume you mean an individual of higher suspicion than the captain of the royal guard.” Benji continued changing. He raised an eyebrow. The Captain? He’d rarely captured such a degree of attention.

“A thief, actually.”

“A thief?!” Teylie chortled, “Surely you don’t mean the scrawny fellow I sent away shortly before you arrived? He was a young’un, childish features, repugnant stench, general air of terror surrounding his features? I rather thought he’d soiled himself by the time I’d turned him away from hiding in Mr. Lee’s cart.” Benji rolled his eyes.

“Which way did he go?”

“He went thataway,” she opened the door of the shop, Benji’s chance to leave. He lifted his body to a low crouch, settled the book tight against his side. He readied himself to run, key grasped tight in his hand. A thread of uncertainty settled in the bottom of his stomach, coiling itself around his lungs as something- or, rather, someone, impacted the wood of the back door.

Benji’s eyes flickered to the book in his arms. He took a piece of coal from the ground next to the woodpile.

It was two days after Benji's disappearance that Teylie found the package. He never reached the safehouse, and it wasn't the guards that got him. There would've been a public arrest if they had. Someone would've known. Instead, he'd disappeared silently, instantly, and completely, as though she'd only imagined her encounter with him in her shop. It worried her, more than she liked to admit.

The terrible feeling had taken hold of her chest shortly after he'd left. She'd gone after him shortly later, inquired as to his whereabouts, tracked him down, but he'd disappeared. A beggar wore his shoes, and a guard said they'd lost his tracks at the end of an alleyway.

She'd returned to her workshop, after that, and turned the sign around, from 'open' to 'closed'. Something was very, very wrong. She began to restack the wood at the back of her shop- it helped her think- and that's when she saw it. It had taken her all that time trying to find out what he'd stolen when it had been in the back of her shop all along. He'd even left her the clue of knocking three pieces of wood off the stack- he knew how organized she was- he knew she'd come look at it eventually.

She unwrapped the small item from where it was wedged between two smoke-dried pieces of wood and curled her lip at the smell emanating from the apron it was wrapped in. She didn't know what scared her more- the item in the fabric, or the fact he'd left it for her. He knew he was going to get caught. What could be so important that he'd trade his freedom for weeks, even years- of imprisonment? As she unwrapped the fabric, a piece of coal dropped to the ground. Then, she saw the writing.

The symbols were scrawled in charcoal- faded, but legible. Teylie didn't need any explanation- she knew who they were for. She copied the code hurriedly onto a piece of paper, and threw the apron into the flames of her workshop's furnace. It belched smoke at her, consuming the fabric once and for all. Teylie looked back at the book. Time seemed to slow. Temptation flooded through her chest as she stepped forward, the front cover of the book pinched between the fingers of her left hand, the note absorbing the sweat from her right. It was as though every secret Benji knew was going to crawl from the pages before her. She should just close it- it wasn't for her to read. And yet, she pried the covers open further- she kept looking- reading, searching for some kind of sign.

As soon as she'd seen the embossed signature, curled delicately in a lady's writing, every intention of reading the volume fled from her veins. She slid the note into the frontmost two pages and closed the cover with a snap, the guilt seeping into her chest. She knew what this was, and the last thing she was going to do was imagine what, exactly, had gotten into Benji's mind to think he could actually steal it. The problem wasn't getting it out of the palace- she'd known people who'd accomplished the feat. It was staying alive afterward. She tied the twine tight over the paper that covered the leather-bound pages.

"You're in deep, Benji," she whispered to the empty air in front of her, "too deep."