

Lynn Flewelling created the world you are about to enter in her highly acclaimed Nightrunner series and will explore it further in a forthcoming trilogy. She assures us, however, that no prior knowledge, passports, or inoculations are required to read this story.

The last glow of sunset faded to purple on the horizon across the broad bay. Up the beach in the distance, the lights of sprawling Khouimir twinkled like a cloud of fireflies against the vastness of the Zengati desert.

In this gentle, failing light, the brown young men sprawled comfortably around a fire in a sheltered circle of dunes might have been mistaken for a group of merchants' sons, smoking kif and sharing tales away from the heat of the city. All of them, that was, except the lighter-skinned Skalan man who commanded his companions' attention just now. Tonight it was his turn to amuse the group.

"The best assassin I ever knew?" Fourteen pairs of dark eyes followed the young foreigner who called himself Mijar—in their tongue, "stranger."

A frown creased Mijar's sunburned brow as he threw another stick of driftwood onto the fire and set-tied back against the bleached log he was using as a backrest. "I don't know if I want to talk of that." "Come on, Mijar!" his companions urged, offering him cups of wine and the stained kif pipe. What performer didn't like to be coaxed?

This new guild mate of theirs was a middling assassin at best. He was quick and silent, spry as a *mirka* when it came to housebreaking, but he wouldn't kill children or women, no matter how much was offered, or use the slow poisons that brought agony to the victim and well-placed fear to those who witnessed the death. No, it was his stories of the strange lands he'd traveled that had quickly endeared him to the others in the months since his arrival in Khouimir. His heavily accented voice was as sweet as a priest's, his thin, plain face wise and innocent as a child's as he spun out his tales. Who knew if he spoke the truth or not? It didn't matter. The man was an artist of words.

Mijar took a long pull on the pipe and his strange blue eyes glazed a little. For a moment he seemed to be listening to something—the murmur of the waves, perhaps, or the distant tinkle of mule bells.

"The best assassin?" he said again, and sighed. "I suppose that would have to be Raven, back in the city of Rhiminee where I was born."

"He called himself after an animal?" young Tahan asked, all attention as he leaned forward in the firelight.

"Lots do, in Skala: Farren the Fish, Eelmouth Wil, the Rhiminee Cat. I was called Skut the Mouse back in my thieving days. It was the fashion."

"Does such a name have significance?" asked bearded Zaghar, the eldest of the gathering.

Frowning, the foreigner took another deep pull at the pipe. "With him, it did."

Beautiful Rhiminee glitters like a wizard's illusion on her shining cliffs, but for those of us who lived in the shadows of the lower city along the harbor front, life was hard, brief, and ugly.

I was a whore's castoff, abandoned so young I could scarcely remember my mother's name to curse her. The closest thing I ever had to a protector was a thief named Tym. He was a mean bastard, but he kept a bargain and paid what he promised. He was one of the best, Tym was, but he got killed all the same, shoved off a roof during a job.

I wasn't quite eleven when he died, but by then he'd taught me enough to fend for myself. I was beaten, bugged, starved, and pilloried more than a time or two, but still came up every morning in one piece and breathing.

Skala went to war with Plenimar again about then—I remember because that made for lots of drunken soldiers to roll. I did well for myself at that and as I got older and stronger, I began to think life might have more to offer a fine fellow like myself, if I could only find out what. I hadn't counted on it being the assassin's guild. They found me, rather than the other way 'round, but that's how it works in Rhiminee. You don't just walk into a tavern somewhere and say "Sign me up." No, they keep an eye out and make their own choices.

I'd never given any particular thought to being a snuffer. I avoided fights when I could, and never thought of killing anyone until one foggy spring night when a drunken noble dragged me into an alley for a quick

bit of in and out. I struggled and he started slapping me around, hard enough to make my ears ring. If the bugger had punched me properly, I might have answered in kind, but something about being slapped as if I was some cheap whore to have against the nearest wall—I don't know. Something in me just let go. I got my belt knife free and did a little in and out of my own on him with it. Afterward I jumped off a wharf to wash off the blood, but I felt all clean and free before I ever hit the water.

Two nights later an older boy tried to bully me out of a fat purse I'd cut, and without even thinking about it, I drew steel again. He was too quick and smart to get killed, but I opened his arm up in good shape before he got free of me. I laughed like a loon when it was all over. It wasn't much of a victory, but it made me feel strong.

That same night a stranger with gentleman's clothes and a hangman's smile invited me to "join the choir," as he put it. I accepted on the spot.

The assassins of Rhiminee have a fine house hidden away in a poor section of the city. From the outside you'd take it for a tenement, ripe for burning, but inside there are clean little rooms for everyone to kennel in, and bigger ones with proper furniture and wax candles.

It was all run by a blond rail of a man we called Master, and he ran it well. He kept the guild small, no more than fifteen people or so, and made sure we all knew our business—work quiet, no fuss, never be seen. We were the best, and in great demand. Our members got called out for jobs in all the great cities of

Skala and Mycena, Plenimar even, when there wasn't a war on. There was plenty of work that way, and it kept folks on the move, not too visible around town.

Those first couple of years I was with them were the best of my life. For the first time I had enough to eat every day, a safe billet every night, and companions who kept their hands to themselves. Even small jobs paid in gold, and most of what they used me for didn't even call for any killing. I got to be a lookout, a pickpocket, a jilt. Tym's lessons served me well.

I was the youngest in the house, and they made a pet of me, especially Master. He took me along to plays and gambling houses with my pockets well-filled, all dressed up like a gentleman's son.

Mijar paused, looking around at his audience through the wavering blue cloud of kif smoke. "If I ever loved any soul in this life, it was Master. He taught me my lessons himself: how to kill quick and quiet with knife or neck wire, poisons, hand fighting—just like a real father would. Bilairy's balls, I'd have walked over fire for him if he'd asked me to! But he never would, not him. I never once saw him angry, even.

"Things went on like that for better than a year. It wasn't like it is here, with all your chieftains and courtesans and sneaky lordlings having each other killed just for fun and spite. No, Skala's a civilized land, and Rhiminee the most civilized city I've seen. That meant less work, of course, but when we killed someone, it meant something! It made you proud, even if it wasn't you done the job."

We lost people from time to time, as you'd expect in our line of work. One night in early summer Master told us to be on the lookout for new recruits. I made up my mind to find him the best new man who could be had. Sort of my way of thanking him for all his good treatment.

It was a hot summer that year, deadly hot. Tempers run high in that sort of weather, and there were more killings than usual. It wasn't too difficult to observe a few, if you knew where to look as we did.

Right off, I ruled out brawlers and jilted lovers. Anyone can kill if you get him mad enough. No, I wanted someone with a cool head and a taste for killing. Maybe because I was paying such close attention, I soon picked up a rumor of just such a killer. No one had seen this fellow, but it was said that he left his victims with a special mark of some sort, one after the other. In fact, there seemed to be a new one every couple of days, regular as the butcher's cart.

So I took my search to the dead houses and sure enough, I soon learned that the Scavenger Guild had been finding bodies of men with their chests slit a certain way, just below the breastbone, though they'd been killed by strangling. Not robbed, by all accounts, just killed, cut, and left. These particular corpses turned up in the worst neighborhoods down by the harbor, so maybe they had nothing worth the taking anyway, but there were already over a dozen when I first found out about them. That seemed like a lot of killing for one man, and a lot of work for no profit. Some folks whispered it was some necromancer at

work, but when I finally saw the cut on one of the bod-ies, it was nothing special, just a shallow slit under the breastbone.

"And this was your Raven?" Tahan broke in impatiently.

Mijar nodded. "Yes, he was my Raven."

It took me nearly three weeks but I found him at last. I must have watched a dozen killings, but finally, just before dawn one day, I came across a dark form bent over a guard of the City Watch. The bluecoat wasn't quite dead yet—I could hear him wheezing— but my assassin had the guard's tunic open and was making that cut of his. He bent low over the man's chest and I thought I could hear him whispering to the bluecoat as he died.

Then he whirled around all of a sudden, looking down at my end of the alleyway. A little blood had gotten on his face, and he still held the knife, but he didn't seem too worried about getting caught. In fact, he winked in my direction and took a moment to cut a lock of the dead man's hair. While he's still at this, he calls out, "Come out, friend, and show yourself. It's time we met, don't you think? You've worked so hard to find me."

"I've found my man," thinks I showed myself, but kept well out of reach until I could gauge his mood.

"A boy! Just a sweet lad, you are!" he exclaimed, and you never heard such a pleasant voice. I could tell then that he was a foreigner, though he was well spoken. By the cut of his coat and boots, I guessed he was a merchant, or at least passing himself off so. I couldn't quite place his accent then, but now I'd know him for a northern Plenimaran. How he got himself into Rhim-inee in those days, I never did learn. Perhaps because he was so ordinary, someone you wouldn't look twice at—plain as a mud bank, mild in his manner, quiet in his ways. You never saw anyone with such a knack for going unnoticed.

I made my offer to him with the body going cold at our feet, and he said yes, pleased as a man with a free round in front of him. "I like to kill," he told me, shaking on it. "Take me to this Master of yours, and I'll swear the oath, any one he likes."

And that's-how I brought Raven into the Rhiminee assassins guild.

Master was delighted and soon declared him as good a snuffer as he'd ever seen. He was like smoke in the dark, Raven was, unseen and silent. Except for his hands, he wasn't a big man, or all that smart, as it turned out. But he was strong, and a natural stalker. When he strangled, he used only his bare hands. He told me once that he loved the feel of a man's throat, the thicker the better. He even put his hands around my neck now and then, teasing. "No meat on you, Skut," he'd say, then add, "Yet!" and laugh 'til tears stood in his eyes. Simply knifing someone was no fun at all, according to him, unless it was a woman. Everyone has their quirks, perhaps more so with folks in our trade. Raven, though, was the most mild-mannered, businesslike assassin you ever met. He didn't even rob the bodies. The fact was, he didn't seem to care about any of the usual baubles and comforts the rest of us rooked away, or even whores or taverns. He kept his room neat and plain, with just the furniture that had been there when he came, and was quiet and polite with the other members.

I was the one he took to, mostly. Raven was good to me, as good as Master was. He wasn't much of a talker, but he used his pay to buy me little things he knew I liked. I tried to do the same for him, but he never seemed to want anything beyond the basics. He didn't even take much to sweets. I asked him once what his favorite food was, and he just smiled and shook his head.

Raven had only two habits that stood out, aside from his love of strangling, and only one that struck anyone as odd. He wouldn't kill a child, no matter what the price. He told Master this the first time they met, and repeated it often. That wasn't a problem; there wasn't much call for child killings in Skala anyway, and we had a woman, Spider Marta, who took care of what few came our way. She was kind in her work, but Raven hated her on sight. Master tasked me with keeping the two of them apart. Raven could not abide a child killer.

No, the real problem we had with him was his habit of cutting chests and collecting hair. I was out with him on his first guild job and got a firsthand look. He strangled the man down, then took out that wicked sharp knife of his and made the cut. He wouldn't let me watch what he did after that, but pushed me away and bent over the body, making a low sniffing noise. I began to guess, then. I'd heard of assassins who got hard in the cods when they killed, so I figured Raven was one of these, and ashamed for me to

see. After a moment he cut his hank of hair and tucked it away.

"Why is it you do that?" I asked about the hair, pretending like I hadn't noticed the rest.

"To remember them by," he said, all smiles, same as before.

He kept at it, too, until Master had a stern talk with him about making a show of things and leaving identifying marks. Sometimes our clients wanted things showy, but then it was their choice what was done. The bits of hair might go unnoticed, but Raven's cut was just too regular for safety.

"You're a great snuffer, an artist, and artists have their pride," Master told him, calm as always. "But this has got to stop, for your sake and ours. You don't want to get us into trouble, now, do you? What about Skut here? You wouldn't want to bring the Watch down on his head just to satisfy your vanity, eh?" That seemed to get through to him. He swore on the Four he wouldn't do a thing that would hurt "the sweet boy," as he always called me.

If he harbored any ill feelings about this curtailing of his style, he took it out on his victims. On our next job he broke the man's neck—twisted the head right around so the poor bastard was looking out over his own ass when we left him. The next time he slammed the man's head against a stone wall until the skull was pulped like a melon, breathing hard and snuffling all the time.

He was different after that, not happy like he had been before. In fact, as autumn went into winter, he got so low-spirited we were all worried for him. He'd fall into black moods after a job, and hole up in that bare little room of his to sulk.

That was a harsh winter, the worst in years. We were up to our asses in snow, and how the wind blew! It put a damper on business for a few months, and we all started to feel a bit sulky ourselves.

One bitter cold night I woke to find Raven sitting on the edge of my bed, resting one big hand on my chest, right over that spot he favored. It scared the piss out of me, until I saw the sadness in his eyes.

"I like to kill, Skut!" he said, and the quavering of his voice nearly broke my heart. I knew he meant killing in his own special way. To tell you the truth, it made me a bit nervous, this habit of his, but he was my pick, my recruit, and my friend, too. I hated to see him so miserable.

"Well," I whispered, hoping to Bilairy I was doing right. "Maybe you could do a few on your own, if you get my meaning." That lit him right up. "Only keep it quiet!" I warned, not entirely comfortable with the gleam this put in his eye. "Dump 'em in the harbor with rocks on, for hell's sake. You don't want Master hearing of spare bodies lying about with your mark on them."

I thought I'd fixed things up right. We could have changed his name to Lark, cheerful as he was after that. On the job he killed to order, neat-handed as a Helm Street tailor. I never knew when he slipped out on his own, or how often, except that some mornings he seemed in higher spirits than usual. If I worried about anything, it was that he'd freeze to death, out on his own some night. We lost Marta in one storm. By the Four, you never saw such a winter.

Rhiminee hardly ever had much snow, and none that ever stayed long, but that year it fell and fell, and the winds blew it up into drifts high as houses. I re-member watching children sliding down drifts from second-floor windows. The snow stayed on like that until the spring rains, and then it melted down like dirty sugar loaves. That's when I got the first inkling of how wrong I'd been in my judgment of Raven. Bodies showed up in those melting drifts, and more floated up through the breaking ice in the harbor. They were found in cellars that had been buried all winter long, in alleys, under bridges—upper and lower city alike. There are always some like that, left over from murders in the long dark months, but nothing like this! A regular plague of corpses—sometimes five or six a day all during the thaw.

It was soon clear to even the most thick-headed Watchman that a good many of them had met the same end. These were all men or sturdy youths, and all had wounds on their chests. Most of them were from the poorest parts of the city, men who wouldn't be missed. No one thought to count up stabbed women, but Marta was among them, I have no doubt.

But all that came out later. This was early days yet, but as soon as I heard the first rumor of it, I was off to the deadhouses to see for myself. It was Raven's work, all right—the missing hank of hair and the bruises on the throats told me that. But the neat-handed work was gone. Some showed only a deeper cut than usual, but others were hacked open, brisket to balls. Some had their cods missing altogether, and their guts carved out.

It was the snow, you see, that had let him kill so many without getting caught by the Watch, or us. Master would never have stood for it.

So I trudged back to the house with lead on my heart, wondering what I was to tell Master, and what would become of Raven. Even I had to admit there was no question of keeping him on. He'd gone too far.

I should have known that Master would have heard the same rumors and had the same thoughts, even without all the facts in hand. The house was deathly silent when I got back, with all the bold assassins lurking about the hall like whipped dogs.

Master was furious, they told me. He'd called Raven into his chamber nearly an hour before. One of the older snuffers had just stolen up for a listen, and she was still up there, too. The Master angry? Nobody wanted to be in Raven's boots.

"Neither would I," I thought, but guessed I soon would be. I'd brought him in. I'd set him loose. And still, all I could think of was his gentle voice, calling me his "sweet boy." Too low-spirited to hear more, I crept up to Raven's room.

Even after all these months, it hardly looked lived in and all of a sudden the emptiness of that room made me feel odder than anything I'd ever seen. To think he could have done all that, without me having the least idea or him saying anything! Then I thought some more on what I'd seen at the deadhouse, what he'd done to those men, and the strength went right out of me. I had to sit down on the bed to keep from falling over. Killing's one thing, but I never heard of anything like this. And from him who seemed so plain and simple, like this room I was sitting in.

I looked around again, trying to make sense of how a man could be so different than he seemed. It was then that I spied a little tuft of hair sticking out of a seam of a fat pillow at the head of the bed. Curly red hair.

It never occurred to me to wonder what he did with all those hanks of hair he cut. I slashed that pillow open with my knife and what should spill out but more hair, all in little hanks of every color and texture. Hardly a bit of the original stuffing was left when I'd finished dumping it all out. How many had it taken, to fill a pillow up like that?

Then I was slipping and sliding through it and racing for Master's room. It wasn't something I thought about or decided. I just ran. Everyone else was still downstairs, of course, so I burst in alone on such a scene—

He'd killed Master straight off, of course, and the old woman who'd gone to look, too. Maybe she went in, or he heard her outside the door—who knows?

One look and I finally knew what those cuts in the chest were all about, and his name. Or thought I did. All along, even in the early days, he'd been cutting out some parts of their innards and eating it. Eating the dead, like a raven. He'd cut my dear, kind Master open like a deer and pulled him all to pieces on the carpet.

The woman lay on her face, the back of her gown stained in a dozen or more places. Just stabbed, as always. It was only men he ate of.

I tell you this now like I stood gaping, but in truth I must have taken it all in at a glance, for Raven was ready, and grabbed me as I came in. By the Four, he was quick. He got those big hands around my neck and shut the door before I could so much as squeak. I wished now I'd thought to call for the others, but it was too late.

Raven held me from behind for a moment, his rank breathing heavy against my left ear. Then he turned me slowly to face him. I've never looked into such eyes, and hope I never do again. It looked as if they were nothing but black holes in his head. His chin and hands were all smeared with blood, his lips crusted with it. I remember wondering how he'd managed to get himself cleaned up, all those nights he went out to hunt in the snow. I never saw so much a spot of blood on him.

His hands tightened around my neck, and he slowly pulled me up until I was balancing on my toes.

"How old are you now, Skut?" he asked, glaring at me with those black eyes.

I don't know how I had the wit to lie, but I did. I shaved a full year and a half off and swore up and down I was still twelve. He must have seen the new beard coming in on my cheeks; Bilairy knows he was close

enough, but suddenly he eased up and I was his sweet boy again. He petted me and chaffed my neck, all apologetic.

"Why?" I blurted out, starting to cry as I looked over at what was left of Master.

He looked so surprised. "I like to, Skut. You know that," he says.

"But why eat their guts?"

All of a sudden he was angry. "Not their guts, boy. Their souls! You have to suck out the souls." Saying this, he stroked my hair, his fingers all sticky with blood while I thought of those snuffling noises he used to make over the bodies, and how wrong I'd been yet again.

For a moment he seemed his old self, all gentle and kind as he wound a strand of my hair around one bloody finger and said, "And you have to remember them, every one of them."

I thought just for a second I might reason with him, but he grabbed my throat again. About then I remembered that my knife was still in his room, lost among his remembrance tokens. His hands closed tighter this time, the mad darkness back in his eyes. "Twelve, Skut? Not quite so young as that, I think—"

I don't remember the others bursting into the room, only being able to draw breath again. I don't remember much at all the rest of that spring, not even laying poor Master to rest, though they tell me I wailed like a woman until they dosed me with sleeping draughts.

So I don't know why a roomful of the best assassins in the Three Lands couldn't bring down one man, or how Raven escaped. But he did. With Master killed and the whole city talking about the murders, everyone figured he'd left Rhiminee, maybe even left the country. Gone back to wherever he came from.

I did, too. But all the same, once my mind began to clear I kept waking up in the dark, thinking there was a big hand on my throat and a voice by my ear, whispering, "Not quite so young as that, sweet boy."

Night after night it happened, sometimes, until I hated going to sleep.

After that, with Master and Raven both gone, it felt like I was numb drunk inside, but still moving around like my regular self anyway. I stayed on at the house, and kept at my work as well as I was able.

Then came a summer night when I heard that voice awake, coming to me from a dark alleyway down by the harbor. Only this time I think I heard, "Not so young at all, sweet Skut."

Let me tell you, I ran! And when I finally fetched up, I found myself a good long way outside Rhiminee, so I kept on going.

For a moment the only sounds were those of the waves and the crackling fire. Kif smoke hung heavy over the circle of men, but no one was dozing.

"How can you call this creature an assassin?" Zaghar finally demanded. "He was a lunatic, a monster, and a careless one, at that!"

Mijar gazed up at the thin crescent moon that was rising overhead. "What is an assassin? You and I, we do it for pay. We earn our gold and spend it on pleasures. For Raven, killing was the pleasure. How many times did he tell me outright, 'I like to kill'? He killed for the sake of it, not caring if he got paid or caught or praised. Master said it best; he was an artist.

"And I'll tell you something, else. All these miles and years away, gods help me, I still hear him now and then in the darkness, whispering to me. All these years, and I'm still standing there with those hands around my neck, knowing I'm about to die. Whatever else he was, Raven was the best snuffer I ever knew. And I hope never to meet his like again."