

S. D. TOWER



THE ASSASSINS OF TAMURINN

One

The people of my village cast me out when I was eleven. Or at least I believed I was eleven, for neither I nor anyone in Riversong knew the day or place of my birth, much less who brought me into the world.

It happened because of three sewing needles, the shiny steel kind you can buy in any town marketplace. I was supposed to take them to the priestess at the Bee Goddess's shrine, half a morning's walk from the village, so she could have her turn to sew for her family. Foster Mother wouldn't have sent me if anybody else had been available, but as it happened I was the only one she could spare. Annoyed at this, my aunt Tamzu said, "It's an insult to the priestess to send this wretched child to her, but I suppose there's no help for it."

Not to be outdone, Aunt Adumar added, "And, Lale, when you talk to the priestess—pay *attention*, you worthless girl! When you talk to her, keep your eyes on the ground. Don't gawp at her like a dead moonfish, and don't scratch and spit and pick your nose."

"I'll be very respectful, Auntie Adumar," I said. I was careful to sound glum, because if I appeared happy about my errand, she'd

find some way to take it away from me. Actually, I was delighted to be going, because the priestess lived near a bee cave some three miles from Riversong, and I'd have a whole half day free of my interminable chores. So I quickly pulled my raggedy brown cloak over my smock, and Foster Mother gave me the scrap of leather with the three needles pushed through it and told me to go. Aunt Adumar aimed a swat at my bottom as I went out the door, but I dodged it.

Young though I was, I was acutely aware of how precious the needles were. I clutched them tightly and told myself I wouldn't open my fingers for *anything* until I stood in front of the priestess. Then, full of this resolve, I tramped through the village, past the fish-smoking racks and the breadnut plantation, until I came to the path that led into the forest.

The wet season wasn't far off, and a steady, lukewarm drizzle began to fall as I passed into the green gloom beneath the leaves. Around me, enormous gum trees rose from thickets of fern and brush and soared toward a gray and stone-smooth sky. I must have looked very small among those gigantic trunks, trudging along the path as the drizzle darkened my long auburn hair to a deep reddish brown. I was a lean-limbed, lanky little creature in those days, slender of foot and slim of hand, with green eyes under thick lashes.

But I didn't look exactly like the villagers, although their eye and hair color resembled mine. My complexion was pale and creamy, like the dust that powdered the forest paths in summer, while theirs was darker with a bronze cast. Aunt Adumar said my skin showed I had northern blood, which accounted for my deceitful tongue. I didn't know if northerners really were deceitful, because I had never met one, but Adumar was right about the tongue. Out of necessity, I had become an accomplished liar almost as soon as I could talk.

All went well until I reached the ford at Hatch Creek, which wasn't far from the Bee Goddess's shrine. But there I discovered that the rain had turned the ford to a rushing torrent, and I knew the

pebbly bottom would be treacherous. If the current tumbled me into deeper water and I had to swim for the bank, I might well let go of the needles. Fearing this disaster, I used the biggest of the three to pin the leather to the thin fabric of my smock, under my cloak.

But despite my apprehension, I managed the ford without difficulty and went on toward the shrine. By now the rain had stopped, and although my stomach was growling, I felt quite light-hearted; perhaps that was why I neglected to make sure the needles were safe. Whatever the reason, I'd walked some considerable distance before I again felt inside my cloak for the scrap of leather.

It wasn't there. Both it and the priceless needles had vanished.

At first I was only a little frightened, because I knew exactly where I'd been. Retracing my steps toward Hatch Creek, I scanned every bit of the sodden path. I knew I couldn't miss seeing the leather, because my footprints in the thin mud showed exactly where I'd walked. And it couldn't have blown into the undergrowth beneath the trees, because there was very little wind.

But the leather was nowhere to be found, and my heart began to thud with apprehension. By the time I reached the creek, with no sign of the needles, I was on the edge of panic. Fighting tears, I stopped on the bank and examined my smock again. Broken threads showed where I'd pinned the leather holder, so I realized it had pulled from the worn fabric and slipped out of my cloak. But I hadn't found anything on the path, so where had it gone?

Into Hatch Creek. The needles had fallen into the water when I was crossing, and the rushing stream had carried them away.

My stomach turned over. I had to find them, I *had* to. My village was so poor and so far from any real marketplace that its women had to share the same set of needles, and they'd only had these for two months. Moreover, they'd had to collect every coin they possessed to buy the things from the peddler, who was the only one we'd seen in almost a year. And now my family would have to replace the wretched things, and I couldn't imagine how we'd do that. Even if another peddler showed up, he'd only sell for money, not barter, and we had no money.

Swept by waves of terror and despair, I began a feverish search downstream from the ford. The Hatch was thick with silt and running fast; it foamed around boulders, sluiced past fallen tree trunks, and boiled through tangles of sodden brown leaves. The leather would look exactly like one of those leaves, and I knew that unless the Water Lord sent me a miracle, I would never find it.

But the miracle did not occur, and by late morning I had searched all the way to the sand spit where Hatch Creek rushed into the waters of the Wing, which was a real river a hundred paces wide. As a last, forlorn hope I poked along the spit's sandy margin, but found only creek rubbish and a dead eelpout, half eaten by crabs. I was almost worn out, and a hopeless foreboding had replaced my earlier panic. But there was nothing more I could do. I'd lost the needles, and that was that.

With no reason now to go to the priestess's house, I stumbled away from the Wing and began to retrace my footsteps homeward. From the sand spit to the village was a considerable distance, and as I approached the halfway mark my steps dragged more and more slowly. Finally my misery became too much to bear, and I stopped and sat down on a flat red rock by the path. It had begun to rain again. The heavy drops made the fallen leaves on the path rustle and twitch, and in my sodden cloak I must have looked much like a wet brown leaf myself.

I sat on my rock and wept. Out of habit, though, my sobs were almost silent, for I had learned early not to let my crying attract attention. But eventually reality intruded. I snuffled, stopped weeping, and wiped my nose with the back of my hand. When I got home and they found out what had happened . . . what would they do to me?

I put two fingers into my mouth and bit them hard, so that I wouldn't burst into tears again. I could not imagine how Foster Father would punish me for what I'd done. But it would have to be dreadful, because I'd injured not only the family but the whole village by my . . . by my what? My misfortune? That was what it really was. But they wouldn't see it that way, especially Aunt Ad-

umar. Adumar would think I'd thrown away the needles out of spite. And it might not be just Adumar who thought so. A lot of people in Riversong didn't like me. I was from somewhere else and had no ancestors; I was an extra mouth in a hungry village; I didn't listen when adults spoke to me; I fought with the other children; and I had a reputation for always being in trouble, or causing it.

Yet I couldn't put off going home forever. I stopped sniveling and peered through the distant leaf canopy at the sky. I couldn't see the sun, but midday must have come and gone, so I'd missed my chore of preparing the noon meal. That would normally be punished by a switching of my legs and no food for the rest of the day. But I suspected that the switch was nothing compared to what awaited me when they found out what I'd done.

Maybe I won't go home, I thought miserably. / could go back to the Wing and drown myself. No one would miss me. If they could trade me for the cursed needles, they would.

The worst of this was its truth, for to the villagers I was far less important than the slivers of steel I'd lost. I was a nobody; the aunts had assured me of this many times. No one knew who my mother was or who had fathered me. Of my arrival in the village I'd been told only this: I was just barely old enough to take solid food, when I was found in a waterlogged pole-boat that grounded early one morning in the Wing's shallows near the fish traps. With me in the boat were an elderly man, recently dead, and a woman far too old to be my mother. Unfortunately, the woman was aglow with water fever and so sick she couldn't speak. She died the same day, taking any knowledge of my origins and ancestry with her.

After the old woman expired, the question remained of what to do with me. (I later pieced this together from scraps and fragments; nobody ever told it to me all at once.) The chief shrine within the village was that of the Water Lord, and its priest was pious and influential. He knew a little sorcery but not enough to call up the woman's idu-spirit, assuming it was still loitering around her corpse, so he resorted to a day's meditation on the matter.

Finally emerging from the shrine, he informed the villagers that

the god obviously wanted me to survive. First, the deity had grounded the boat before it was swept into the rapids downstream. Second, it was clearly the Water Lord who had kept me from catching the old woman's fever, since he had jurisdiction over that particular illness. So, in the priest's opinion, failing to take me in would be dangerously disrespectful, though he acknowledged that no one really wanted me—nobody had anything to spare for an extra mouth, especially when the owner of the mouth couldn't begin to repay her keep for three or four years.

Nevertheless, the god had spoken or at least muttered. So, after much discussion and argument, I went to live with a man named Detrim, who had under his roof his three sisters, his wife, and his four children. His wife, my foster mother, called me Lale, which is a southern word for "Lucky" and seemed fitting because of my unlikely survival. However, the name was also a play on the word *leyell*, which in the local dialect meant an agile green hawk that liked to thief fish from the smoking racks. My earliest task, at four years old, was to guard these racks by shooing the robber birds away. Now that I was eleven, I was aware that the pun on my name was no accident. To my family and the village I was as much a thief as the little green hawk.

This fresh offense would only confirm their opinion of my character. Perhaps I really ought to throw myself into the Wing, but I knew that doing so likely wouldn't kill me. I was a strong swimmer, and it would be hard to let myself sink. Although, if I jumped in at the village and went through the rapids, the rocks might do it. . . .

But even in my distress I knew I'd never kill myself. Someday, when I was grown up, I'd get away from Riversong. And somehow—I wasn't sure exactly how, but I'd manage it—I'd become rich and famous. Perhaps I'd marry a Despot's son and when he succeeded his father I'd be the Despotana.

And perhaps I might even find out who my mother and father were. If I killed myself, I'd go to the Quiet World without ever knowing about them or about my ancestors. I didn't often wonder

about my origins, but I now realized that I wanted to stay alive long enough to discover who I really was.

Very slowly and very reluctantly, I got up from my rock and drew the wet cloak about my thin shoulders. Then I set off for home—if that was the word for it—in the steady tepid rain.