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Opening extract from

The Poison Boy

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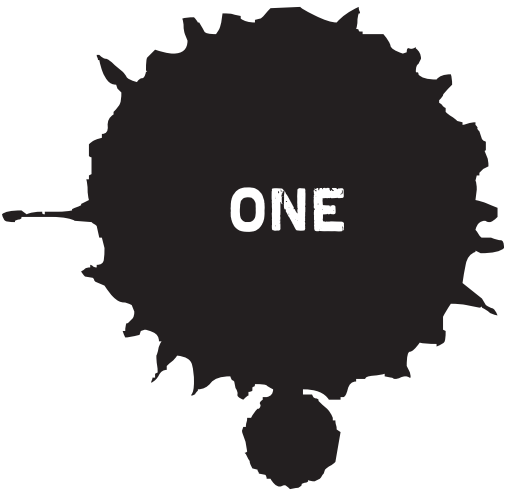
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When the door crashed open, Dalton Fly was holding his breath in the shadows, his back pressed against the cool marble of a thick pillar and his eyes pleading with a playing card. That lucky Jack, spattered in Bennie's blood, had somehow saved his life. He couldn't leave it. From where he was hiding, Dalton could see the Jack's face staring at him, smudged in red. It was lying face up at the edge of the rug near the fireplace, perhaps a dozen strides away, Dalton thought. He blinked and his vision smudged and blurred again; everything was a wash of swimming shapes for a moment. He rubbed his eyes. There was blood on his

hands and under his fingernails.

Dalton was sure of one thing: two men had come into the room and they had pistols; he heard the click of a cap drawn back to shoot.

'Kite almighty!' one of them said as he saw Bennie Jinks, ghosted.

Bennie was face down, a bag of bones in a bloody lake. He had coughed himself inside out. He was still leaking in great scarlet pools. He was only twelve. Whatever he'd been eating had pulled his guts to pieces.

There was a long pause. Dalton's sight sharpened, his heart hammered and his poisoned belly stung. He dropped slowly to a crawl, careful not to slip in all the wet. There was a lot of blood for such a tiny, curled-up boy and Dalton was soaked in it. It was in his face and nose, on his teeth and under his tongue. It was bitter and it was dark; his hair was thick and black with it. He felt sick again.

He heard the creak of the men's leather boots as they stepped forward slowly with pistols aloft. One of them crouched by Bennie, his knees popping, and touched the little boy's shoulder.

'He's still warm.'

Dalton peered at the contents of the tasting table, now flung across the thick rug. There were scattered bowls and plates. Two gold-trimmed cushions had been spun away; a chair lay on its back. The smoky flame of a candle shuddered, making thick shadows wobble in the grey archways. Perhaps Bennie had thrashed around, scream-

ing and gurgling as he choked. The crash and clatter of the devastation must have echoed through the halls and galleries.

'Dreck!' one of them swore, kicking something aside. 'What a mess. The marcher needs to see this.'

There was further movement. Dalton wondered whether their pistols would be down yet. His hands shook madly. Bennie's blood was cooling on his clothes and skin, his spit and guts were getting sticky. There was a chance now, Dalton thought. If the men were moving beyond the bulk of the table, searching the space near the windows at the far end of the room, he could stay in a low crawl and make it to his lucky Jack with a scramble and a stretch.

He began to move forward, struggling to focus again. There was a silver jug on its side, rolled in deep red with a blur of bloody fingerprints. From somewhere outside came the endless low tolling of bells. Church bells clanging over and over.

The Jack was still winking impassively at him. Dalton moved slowly, hand over hand, trying not to breathe. He needed that card.

'What was it? The wine?' one man asked the other.

Dalton heard him lift a stopper from a bottle. He began to inch forward into their line of sight and glanced upwards. They were only a few strides beyond the table of food; two hazy silhouettes in the shadows. All they had to do was turn round, he thought, prickling with fear, and he was stagged.

'Kite knows. The wine, the fruit, the olives . . .'

There was a pause again. One man was examining the table closely now, his wide back hunched. Dalton tried to remember what it was he and Bennie had last tasted; what it was that had killed Bennie; where the poison had been hidden. He moved forward again, crawling slowly.

'Something's killed him . . .' the voice said. 'The kid's coughed his whole belly on to the floor.'

'Ah, dreck,' said the second. 'My boots are covered in it.'

Around Bennie, food was scattered. Dates, olives, fruit, two pale cheeses half wrapped, and wine. Dalton knew he'd been drinking wine; he could taste it through the blood on the back of his teeth. He didn't usually try the wine. He wasn't old enough and neither was Bennie Jinks. Oscar shouldn't have sent them.

He moved forward again, lifting each hand carefully. His palms were sticking to the rug. Little square jellies, dusted with sugar, were cast across the table cloth. Bennie still held a twisted end of it in his little red fist. The lucky Jack seemed to grin. He was nearly there. Dalton reached forward, dripping and shaking. He was very close. His muscles burnt.

'Kite!' one said suddenly, through gritted teeth. 'Where's the other boy, the older one?'

Dalton's heart dropped. His belly hollowed itself in fear. He heard one of them take a step but didn't dare look.

'What's happened to him?'

Dalton touched the edge of the Jack with the tips of his

fingers. His stomach tightened. If they turned, he was as good as dead.

'He's not here.' This voice came from close by. A curtain was swept open and allowed to fall again. They were searching the room.

Dalton eased the playing card towards him, drawing it in slowly. There were more bootsteps. He swallowed hard. He had it. He tried to crawl backwards, to find the safety of the shadows again but his legs wouldn't behave the way he wanted them to.

'Who is the missing one?' said the voice from further away – beyond the table near the windows, Dalton guessed.

There was another pause and a shuffle of papers as one of them checked the tasting arrangements.

'It's a kid called Dalton Fly. Just another one of Oscar's boys.'

The men had come together again and were both huddled over the papers. This, Dalton knew, was the best chance he'd have to get back into cover. He willed himself to move and began a trembling retreat towards the pillar. On the floor where he'd crawled he'd left a great red smear. He pocketed the Jack, trying not to weep with fear and relief. He was hidden again, hugging the shadows of the huge trunk of marble that rose to the painted and patterned ceiling.

As he made it to his feet, he caught a sudden blurred sight of a mad demon, wild-eyed and foul, sneering directly at him. He caught his breath and raised his bloody

hands instinctively. Then he saw it was himself, in a gold mirror, one side of his face darkened crimson-black and shining, as if dipped in tar. His hair stood on end. His teeth were red. He looked as if he'd been cut into ribbons. But he was still alive.

'We could have an impostor here,' one of the men said. 'The mistress could be in danger.'

'Possible.' There was an uncomfortable silence. One of them spat.

Dalton edged around the pillar and saw the door to the room was open just a crack. If he was quick, he thought wildly, and was able to run without slipping or being sick, there was a chance he could escape while they were thinking.

'The boy could know nothing,' one said. Dalton heard him leafing through the papers again. 'He's only fourteen. They're just children.' There was a pause. 'Hang on . . .' he added, his voice hardening. They'd seen something: the red trail on the floor, leading straight to the pillar. There was the click of another pistol cap being drawn back; both were ready to fire.

Dalton swallowed but the hot lump in his throat wouldn't move. His feet were cramping. There was movement in the room. They were approaching. He looked again at the door that might deliver some sort of escape, shaking his head to clear his sight. There was a sharp burn in his stomach that wouldn't shift. The door was only a dash away, he figured; he could be there as they raised their pistols, and through before they blew his back into bits.

He patted his lucky card, safe now in his coat pocket, and sent up a pointless prayer for Bennie Jinks. Then he made a run for it.

Two guns exploded with sharp cracks and the door frame at his shoulder shattered into knotty fragments. A rush of panic consumed him and he cried out in fear – then he was running, wild and gasping.

The corridor was long, high-ceilinged and very dark. There was shouting. He crashed through a heavy door into the room beyond. A square of pale moon lit the floor near a grand fireplace. Beyond a long dining table was a second door, and he made for it. Behind him there were more shouts. Dalton knew it took some time to reload the pistols; Oscar had shown him once.

He crossed the room, pushed open the door and sprinted down a long gallery, wide windows with heavy curtains giving snatched glimpses of the city below. He could get his bearings now. Down below he thought he could make out Greengoose and the Sixteen Fountains; the opera house; the city dropping down and away towards the plains, the lazy river widening. Above, half a white-faced moon.

He reached an open hall with a marble floor full of stuffed birds on pedestals, peering at him like nightmare creatures. A curved stairway with a blue carpet led upwards. Suddenly, from his left, a door burst open and a second group of men ran towards him. A broad black figure in silhouette was leading them, a wing of dark riding cape rolling around his shoulders. Someone was

bawling a battle cry. Fear propelled Dalton Fly up the stairs, three at a time. At his back was the clap of a pistol shot and a shouted curse.

He rounded the stairs to a landing and ran headlong, mouth gaping, arms pumping. There was another pistol shot, and with it, the acrid stink of burnt shotpowder and smashed plaster. He thrust open a door, stumbled across a fireside rug, vaulted a bed, crashed through a bathroom sending glass vials of sweet-smelling preparations spinning and then somehow, somewhere in the half dark, Dalton came to a panting stop in a dressing room with a city view.

Madness drove him. He was sobbing, partly for Bennie Jinks, ghosted in some foreign Upper-Circle mansion, partly for fear of being blasted open with lead shot.

'Dreck!' he swore, tugging at his pocket, looking for the lucky Jack. He scanned the room as his fingers worked. He was squinting and blinking, trying to get his eyes to focus. Then, with the card held tightly in his trembling hands, he begged it for help. Blackjack Gannet, mighty King of the Poison Boys, could always be counted on in desperate times.

'Where next, Gannet?' he asked the card, his voice a scratchy growl, his throat burning. The Jack stared at him with its one eye, mute. 'Don't let me down, Gannet. Where next?'

Outside, a warm wind rattled the window in its frame and Dalton heard the bells again. There were hundreds of them clanging out across the city, their dull roll deep and

slow. Dalton wiped the sweat from his eyes. What was going on out there? He drew his face close to the window, careful not to smear the glass. It was a clear night with stars. He could see a good portion of city roofs below him; domes and galleries, walkways and squares stitched and jumbled together. It seemed as if every church bell in the city had joined in the mournful choir of endless, echoing tolling. He'd never heard anything like it; as if the whole of Highlions had been plunged into mourning.

Dalton blinked, thinking.

Oscar had warned him and Sleepwell about this. Everything was about to change. 'When the old man finally dies,' Oscar'd told them, 'the city will fall to fighting itself.' War would break out. Many would die. 'Good times,' Oscar had said, with a wink, 'for poison boys.' Perhaps this was it, Dalton thought, listening to the bells. The Duke was dead.

A light wind rattled the sash again. Dalton peered at the Jack, his vision still a glassy blur, then put the card away. He had the fierce fear of the hunted in him.

'Right then,' he croaked.

Blackjack Gannet had spoken. Dalton wiped his hands as clean as he could get them, yanked open the sash window, his breath ragged and wheezing, and climbed out into nothingness.